

It's a myth that baby boomers have a stronger work ethic than later generations

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There is no truth to the popular belief that members of the so-called baby boomer generation have a greater work ethic than people born a decade or two later. This is according to a team of US researchers led by

Keith Zabel of Wayne State University in Detroit in the US, who completed a comprehensive analysis of relevant studies. The findings are published in Springer's *Journal of Business and Psychology*.

The economic success of the United States and Europe around the turn of the 20th to the 21st century is often ascribed to the so-called Protestant work ethic of members of the [baby boomer generation](#) born between 1946 and 1964. They are said to place work central in their lives, to avoid wasting time and to be ethical in their dealings with others. Their work ethic is also associated with greater job satisfaction and performance, conscientiousness, greater commitment to the organization they belong to and little time for social loafing.

These aspects are often contrasted with the skills said to be needed to thrive in the modern 21st century workplace, such as collaboration, problem solving and the ability to embrace technology and to perform nonroutine and interactive tasks.

The media and academia often suggest that baby boomers endorse higher levels of work ethic than the younger so-called Generation X (born between 1965 and 1980) and Millennials (born between 1981 and 1999). The jury however is still out on whether or not such a generational difference actually exists.

Zabel's team therefore compiled a dataset of all published studies that have ever used a US sample to measure and report on the Protestant work ethic. Studies included in the meta-analysis had to mention the average age of the people surveyed. In all, 77 studies and 105 different measures of work ethic were examined using an analysis method stretching over three phases. In the process, each phase offered more precise measurement of generational cohorts.

The analysis found no differences in the work ethic of different

generations. These findings support other studies that found no difference in the work ethics of different generations when considering different variables, such as the hours they work or their commitment to family and work. Zabel's team did however note a higher work ethic in studies that contained the response of employees working in industry rather than of students.

"The finding that generational differences in the Protestant work ethic do not exist suggests that organizational initiatives aimed at changing talent management strategies and targeting them for the 'very different' millennial generation may be unwarranted and not a value added activity," says Zabel. "Human resource-related organizational interventions aimed at building 21st century skills should therefore not be concerned with generational differences in Protestant work ethic as part of the intervention."

More information: Keith L. Zabel et al, Generational Differences in Work Ethic: Fact or Fiction?, *Journal of Business and Psychology* (2016). [DOI: 10.1007/s10869-016-9466-5](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10869-016-9466-5)

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