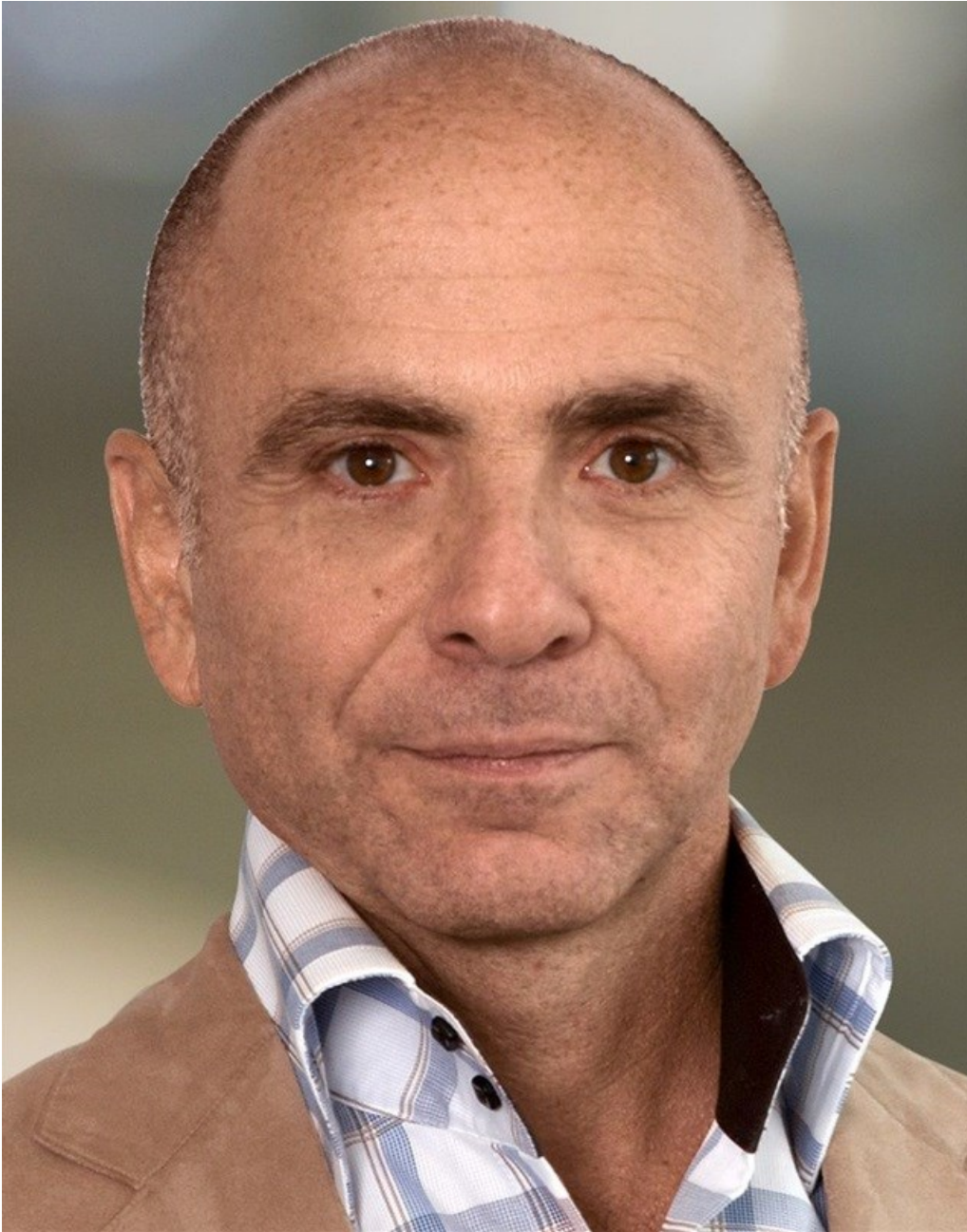


Why are businesses so obsessed with Gen Y?

By [Shlomo Ben-Hur](#)

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A lot has been written about millennials, not all of it complimentary. *Time* magazine in May 2013 described them as “lazy, entitled narcissists who live with their parents”. While this may be a sign of the old guard taking aim at the new, in general there does seem to be more focus on the negatives than the positives.



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But do millennials (also known as Generation Y, those born between the early 1980s and early 1990s) deserve the bad rep? They are the fastest-growing organisational population globally, yet how well do businesses really understand them and what are their perceptions based on? What data are there to back up these perceptions?

One thing is certain: the environment in which people grow up influences their behavioural norms and, consequently, how they view the behaviour of others. People tend to measure performance relative to their own expectations, and this alone is an important consideration when evaluating generational differences.

The Management Research Group tried to look beyond the mythology of the generation gap to identify the exact ways in which motivational characteristics vary. To do that, they conducted a global study of generational differences involving more than 23,000 leaders across Europe, North America and Asia-Pacific. Some of the findings are surprising, others not, and others were perhaps simply the product of a generation that has grown up against a backdrop of global terrorism and unprecedented economic turmoil.

The data measured intrinsic motivation: the areas in which people derive an internal feeling of satisfaction and personal fulfilment. It did not measure behaviour, so the findings do not describe what different generations do in a given environment. Intrinsic motivation gets much closer to the truth of the individual, measuring characteristics that are more stable over time and likely to reflect the person more than their context.

The results

First, let's look at the differences between the older generations – baby boomers and Generation X (mid-1940s-late 1970s) – or rather, the similarities, for there are relatively minor differences between their median values in intrinsic motivation. This is a little surprising, considering both the span of time that these generations cover and the degree of change in world affairs. It suggests that it takes a lot to change motivational DNA, or at least that the factors that influence motivational drivers were not necessarily experienced during this period.

Generation Y, meanwhile, differs far more significantly from its predecessors in terms of its motivators. Millennials have higher expectations of achievement, so they want accelerated growth and career progression. Interestingly, there is strong evidence to suggest less originality in this generation than the stereotype might suggest. For example, millennials are more motivated by a world that is safe and predictable and less by environments that require them to innovate.

This flies in the face of preconceptions about this new, technologically immersed generation. Perhaps we should be asking ourselves whether they are truly the originators, or merely the consumers, of innovation?

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However, the most dramatic difference is on the 'structuring' scale. This measures the extent to which the individual enjoys working in a manner that is meticulous, precise and systematic. The results also indicate less enjoyment from assuming command or from working in a more autonomous, self-reliant manner. These point strongly toward a preference for more democratic, inclusive decision-making processes and a facilitative approach to leadership.

Practical steps

So what can businesses do with this information? First, they should appreciate that motivation evolves slowly over time, so what people find personally rewarding and fulfilling in their early 20s compared with their 50s is likely to be different. Some of these motivational drivers are simply the preferences of the young vs the old. Plus, people change, so leaders need to be careful not to create a fixed concept of millennials. They might be completely different 10 years from now.

However, we've drawn practical insights and objective evidence about how to lead, manage and motivate employees across generations from this research, and leaders would do well to act on the following guidelines:

- A faster pace of progression and learning is important. Millennials have very high expectations of achievement, both in extent and pace.
- Foster a more inclusive and democratic environment. Newer generations work best when they collaborate and exchange information and ideas continually.
- Avoid a 'command and control' approach to leadership – it doesn't work.
- Set clear expectations from the outset. Providing context, explaining method and defining objectives will make a positive difference.
- Provide ongoing support. Although previous generations might interpret supervision as micromanagement, millennials are more likely to interpret it as support.

Develop an understanding of motivational characteristics. By being aware of their own expectations and biases and using a methodical approach to measuring motivation, leaders can try to bring the best out in others irrespective of their generational origin.

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