

Life in a US tourist region: Perceptions of the multigenerational workplace

Michelle Brodke (Bowling Green State University, U.S.A)

Swathi Ravichandran (Bowling Green State University, U.S.A)

INTRODUCTION

The demographic profile of developed nations is changing dramatically (Vollset et al, 2020). In the U.S., birthrates are declining, leading to fewer young people who are available to work in the travel and tourism industry (Naumov & Pillmayer, 2024; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024). As a service intensive industry, these changes will negatively impact travel and tourism unless a more diverse workforce is employed. That is, more older people will need to be recruited into and equipped to serve the industry (Ravichandran et al, 2015). However, generational differences can present challenges. Often older generations and younger generations adopt negative perceptions of each other (Rudolph & Zacher, 2015). To ensure job satisfaction, retention, and, ultimately, effective customer service, different generations need to obtain situation awareness. Rather than accepting stereotypes, management and workers need to understand and embrace what different generations want from work to preserve effective work performance.

In the US, four generations are in the workforce. Although different scholars use slightly different dates of birth to define the generations, the years adopted in this research are typical (Ng & Perry, 2015). The oldest generation is called the Boomer generation. These people were born after World War II with birth years from 1945 to 1965. Their current workforce participation rate is higher than previous generations at their age. The next generation is called Gen X with birth years from 1965 to 1980. The oldest members of this generation are preparing for retirement while the youngest are moving into their highest earning years. Following Gen X are the Millennials with birth years from 1981 to 1994. They are either in their highest earning years or positioning themselves to move up in organizations. Finally, Gen Z (born 1995 to 2012) is entering the workforce with its youngest members still of school age. They are the smallest generation to enter the workforce.

When generations hold perceptions that jeopardize a culture where all generations feel valued, customer service can suffer (Rudolph & Zacher, 2015). Customer service is critical to every industry, particularly tourism as a service intensive industry. Building organizations where workers feel like they matter is important to job satisfaction, retention, and, hence, service quality (Hackman & Oldham, 1980; Rudolph & Zacher, 2015). Therefore, revealing perceptions across the generations provides situational awareness. When shared perceptions are revealed despite generational differences, workers realize they have more in common with each other, closing the perceived distance between workers. When differences in perceptions are revealed, it can instigate conversations about accommodation of differences and/or ensure equitable treatment. Therefore, present research tested whether different generations indeed held different perceptions of what they want from work to identify differences and commonalities across the generations.

METHOD

Participants: Data were collected at three events in northern Ohio, U.S.A: a one-day, regional business symposium in 2023 and 2024 and a continuing education offering by the same region's economic development organization in 2025. Eighty-seven (87) working people participated in total; there was no overlap among participants at the three events. Due to the nature of the events, the only demographic data collected was the self-reported generation to which participants belonged (15 Boomers, 18 Gen X, 27 Millennials, and 27 Gen Z employed adults). The target audience of each of these events was owners and employees of businesses in the region of Ohio, USA encompassed by Shores & Islands Ohio (the official destination marketing organization for Erie and Ottawa counties in Ohio). Shores & Islands Ohio describes the region as follows: "Each year, nearly 11 million visitors experience our region's world-class attractions, breathtaking lake views, welcoming accommodations, and incredible dining, supporting countless locally owned businesses along the way" (Shores & Islands

Ohio, 2025). The region includes three islands in Lake Erie that cater to fishermen and boaters, four water parks, and one internationally recognized amusement park.

Procedure: After a presentation on the changing demographic mix of Ohio's working population, participants self-identified the generation to which they belong. They were given color-coded stickers to identify the generation to which they belong, and those stickers were used to represent their perceptions of their own and other generations. Seven topics were presented on posters to participants. These topics were derived from scholarship on the forces impacting the current workforce (e.g., Barhate & Dirani, 2022; Gallup, 2016; Pichler et al., 2021) as follows: 1) Public Engagement was defined as employer encourages tours, job shadowing, and/or informational interviews; 2) Focus on Employees' Strengths was defined as employee skills are used to the best advantage; 3) Internal Engagement was defined as employer encourages mentoring and information sharing across units; 4) Appropriate Pay was defined asking participants to consider market rates; 5) Flexible Work Schedule was defined to include flex hours and/or remote work; 6) Promotion Opportunities was defined as employer has lateral (across departments or units) and/or upward moves, and 7) Retirement Programs was defined to include US-specific forms of supplemental savings (Included 401K, 403b, 501c programs) and pensions.

For each topic, participants expressed their perception of how appealing the topic was to each generation. Each of the topics had designated spaces where participants' perceptions were captured for each generational group (see Figure 1). For example, a woman aged 65 is a member of the Boomer generation denoted by yellow dots (see Figure 1). If she believed that the Promotion Opportunities topic appealed to Gen Z, then she would place her symbol in the Gen Z area for that topic. Next, she would consider each of other generations including her own. By placing a dot next to the generation for a given topic, she indicated that she believed the topic appealed to that generation. If no colored dot was placed, then she indicated that she did not believe the topic appealed to a given generation. Thus, participants provided their individual perceptions of their own generation and then provided their perception of the other three generations. Completing this exercise took approximately 15 minutes at each event.

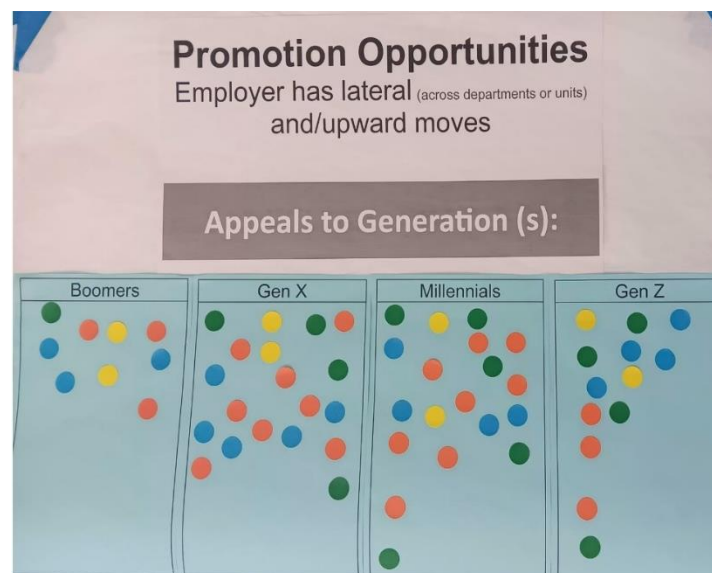


Figure 1. Example Poster of Responses to Topics

FINDINGS

Data about the generations' perceptions of the seven areas were tabulated enabling comparison of each generation to all the other generations' perceptions of that generation. As seen in Table 1, 47% (n=7) of all Boomers (n=15) perceived public engagement to be of interest, but just 7% (n=5) of participants from Gen X, Millennial, and Gen Z (n= 72) perceived that public engagement would be of interest to Boomers. In tests of two proportions, it was revealed that Bomers were the least well understood by the other generations. Of the seven areas, six of them showed statistically significant

differences in the proportion of Boomers who believed the topic was of interest versus the proportion of all other generations who believed that topic was of interest to Boomers (See Table 1). Additional differences were detected: a) Boomers, Gen X, and Millennial generations' interest in Internal Engagement was significantly underestimated by all other generations ($p < .05$); b) Gen Z's interest in retirement programs and appropriate pay was significantly underestimated by all other generations ($p < .05$); c) Millennials' interest in focusing on employee's strengths was underestimated by all other generations ($p < .05$).

Table 1. Comparing Boomers to All Other Generations

Generation	Public Engagement*	Focus on Employee Strengths*	Internal Engagement*	Appropriate Pay*	Flexible work Schedule*	Promotion Opportunities*	Retirement Programs*
Boomers (n=15)	47%	73%	67%	80%	33%	60%	87%
All other generations (n = 72)	7%	26%	24%	49%	3%	22%	85%

Note: * Next to focal topic indicates $p < .05$ in a two-proportion test for the topic.

IMPLICATIONS

The findings highlight a critical need for tourism organizations to reassess assumptions about what different generations value at work, particularly as labor shortages intensify in the tourism industry. Misperceptions, including underestimation of older generations' interest in key workplace factors, suggest that employers may be overlooking effective recruitment and retention strategies at a time when a multigenerational workforce is essential for sustaining service quality (Naumov & Pillmayer, 2024; Rudolph & Zacher, 2015). Tourism businesses should therefore adopt data-informed, generation-inclusive HR practices that emphasize factors impacting the current workforce make-up. Academically, these results underscore the importance of continued empirical investigation into generational perceptions, moving beyond stereotypes to understand how cross-generational awareness influences organizational culture, employee satisfaction, and ultimately customer experience in tourism settings (Ng & Perry, 2015; Pichler et al., 2021). However, the data are limited as they did not capture work context, job characteristics, individual attributes, or demographic data beyond generational membership. Future studies could survey generationally diverse samples representing the breadth of the tourism segment and include variables such as job type, conscientiousness, and emotional labor to disentangle the effects of individual and context factors that impact success in the tourism and hospitality industry.

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