

Lily Klau

Beyond the Generational Divide: What the Evidence Says About Work Values

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## **Introduction**

Generational differences in the workplace have become one of the most frequently discussed topics in organizational behavior. Popular accounts claim that Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials, and Generation Z hold distinct expectations about work, requiring organizations to adapt leadership and human-resource practices to each cohort. Yet research on generational differences in work values (what people seek and prioritize in their jobs) produces mixed and often contradictory results. This literature review evaluates whether generational distinctions in work values are supported by empirical evidence or whether apparent differences can be better explained by alternative factors.

## **Work Values: Definition and Importance**

Before diving into generational claims, it is essential to define what work values are and why they matter for organizational behavior. Work values represent "the outcomes people desire and feel they should attain through work" (Twenge et al., 2010, p. 1119). These stable evaluative standards function as goals achieved during work processes or resulting from work outcomes, and guide employment preferences (King et al., 2017 p. 93). Within the literature, researchers commonly group work values into four categories: extrinsic values (tangible rewards such as income, status, and advancement), intrinsic values (inherent interest, learning, creativity, and task significance), social and altruistic values (interpersonal relationships and helping others or society), and leisure values (work-life balance and free time) (Twenge et al., 2010; Kalleberg & Marsden, 2019). Work values shape employees' perceptions of workplace preferences, exerting a direct influence on employee attitudes and behaviors, job decisions, and problem-solving approaches (Twenge et al., 2010). They are central to understanding employee motivation because they explain what outcomes employees seek from their jobs and what rewards will

effectively motivate their behavior (Kalleberg & Marsden, 2019; King et al., 2017).

Understanding work values has practical implications for organizations, as research has found that congruence between individual values and organizational offerings predicts job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and retention (Stiglbauer et al., 2022). If generational differences in work values exist, organizations would need to tailor their human resource practices accordingly.

### **The Generational Hypothesis: What People Claim**

The generational theory, rooted in Mannheim's concept of generational consciousness, suggests that individuals born during the same historical period share formative experiences that shape their values throughout life (1952, as cited in King et al., 2017). Stiglbauer et al. (2022) explains that generational differences are presumed to exist because each generation "develops in a unique historical, social, and cultural context, which shapes its work-related values and attitudes." There are four distinct generations currently making up the American workforce: Baby Boomers (born 1946-1964), Generation X (1965-1979), GenMe or Generation Y or Millennials (1980-2000), and Generation Z (born after 2000). Popular and scholarly accounts attribute distinctive work values to each cohort. Baby Boomers, who grew up during a time of economic prosperity, are characterized as hard-working and career-oriented, with strong organizational commitment. (King et al., 2017). Generation X, shaped by high divorce rates and economic uncertainty, is described as skeptical of authority and valuing work-life balance and job security (Lyons & Kuron, 2014, as cited in Van Rossem, 2022). Millennials or "Generation Me" are portrayed as particularly individualistic and self-focused, expecting meaningful work but also prioritizing leisure time and flexibility (Twenge et al., 2010). The newest cohort, Generation Z, is said to demand even greater flexibility and self-development (Stiglbauer et al., 2022). Although widely accepted in management practice, the empirical evidence for such

extensive generational differences is, as subsequent sections will demonstrate, surprisingly limited.

### **The Methodological Problem: Why Most Studies Get It Wrong**

A fundamental challenge with generational research is distinguishing cohort (generational) effects from age effects and period effects. As Kalleberg and Marsden (2019) explain, in a cross-sectional study historical periods don't vary and "age is equal to time of survey minus year of birth so differences in work values by age could reflect aging, generational differences, or some mixture of the two" (p. 45). This age-period-cohort (APC) confound means that at any given point, anyone who is the same age is born in the same year, so they're in the same cohort (Schröder, 2024; Kalleberg and Marsden, 2019). Consequently, studies collecting data at a single point in time are unable to determine whether observed differences are due to age, generational membership, or historical period. For example, a hypothetical study finds that 30-year-olds value work-life balance more than 55-year-olds. However, this difference could arise because the 30-year-olds value balance more because of their generations formative experiences (cohort effect), because all 30-year-olds value it more regardless of when they were born (age effect), or because economic and cultural conditions made everyone value balance more than they did in earlier decades (period effect). "Existing studies often use data from only one cohort, from only one age group, or from only one time period. These studies can therefore not disentangle the three effects" (Schröder, 2024, p. 899). Evidently, the APC confound creates a substantial challenge among the literature. Twenge et al. (2010) acknowledged this limitation, noting that "the ideal design for a study of generational differences is a sequential cohort design...which begins data collection at a young age and follows several generations

longitudinally as they move through their working lives" (p. 1119), however failed to use this ideal design in their own study.

Additionally, Van Rossem (2022) identified a conceptual measurement problem: different generations may perceive the same work value labels differently. Through qualitative interviews using repertory grid technique, Van Rossem found that while generations did not differ in how much they valued "meaningful work," they merely conceptualized it differently. "For Generation Y, meaningful work denotes varied work...For Generation X members, meaningful work necessitates 'autonomy'...For Baby-boomers, for work to be meaningful, work should involve social contacts" (p. 2940). This finding suggests that "asking respondents belonging to different generations how much they value for example meaningful work, is in a way comparing apples and oranges, since meaningful work may mean different things to different generations" (Van Rossem, 2022, p. 2912). Therefore, standard survey research may systematically misrepresent generational similarities and differences by assuming shared interpretations of value constructs.

### **What The Research Actually Shows: Alternative Explanations**

Despite widespread claims of generational divergence, most empirical analyses reveal minimal or no cohort effects once age and historical context are controlled. Schröder (2024) reported that work importance varies fifteen times more by age than by generation (p. 904). In a forty-year U.S. dataset, Kalleberg and Marsden (2019) likewise found "few if any meaningful differences" among Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Millennials (p.56). Stiglbauer et al. observed nearly identical priorities for development, stimulation, and fairness across all four generations, emphasizing that generational labels explain little beyond random variation (p. 1). Even Twenge et al. (2010), a study often cited as evidence for cohort change, acknowledged that

observed shifts were modest and gradual rather than distinctive differences (p. 1117).

Collectively, the empirical research reveals that work value differences are largely not due to generational factors but instead reflect other factors.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, the literature provides little evidence for strong generational divides in work values. When age and historical context are taken into account, cohort effects largely disappear. Methodological and measurement issues, especially the age-period-cohort confound, have often turned small or ambiguous findings into broad stereotypes about distinct generational personalities. For organizations, this suggests that policies should focus on universal motivators such as fair pay, meaningful work, and good leadership rather than designing practices for specific generations. Future research should use long-term and mixed method designs to better understand how work values change over time and to move beyond simplified generational labels.

## References

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