

Research Space

Working paper

**Problem-solving skills and employability traits amongst
Generation Y and Millennials in developed economies**

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Problem-solving skills and employability traits amongst Generation Y and Millenials in developed economies**Simon O'Leary**Regent's University London, Inner Circle, Regent's Park, London, NW1 4NS, UK.
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Abstract: In a rapidly changing world where new technologies, mass communications, alternative energies, shifting economic balances of power and genetic engineering are just five of a multitude of global developments and trends, it is perhaps not surprising that those born into, or growing up within, such an environment develop different characteristics compared to those from earlier times. The degree of generational shifts in attitudes and approaches to life are open to debate but evidence appears to exist that changes do occur at both an individual and broader generational level. This study suggests that a particular shift has evolved in the approaches by Generation Y and Millenials to problem-solving and that this has an impact on their individual employability. It also has implications on the training and development programmes and processes that employers offer, and there are also lessons to be learnt for education and training practices generally.

Keywords: Problem-solving; Employability; Generation Y; Millenials; Traits.

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1. Introduction

A generation has been described by Strauss and Howe (1991) as a cohort of people that span a phase of life and whose boundaries are fixed by peer personality. Definitions of what constitutes a member of Generation Y vary but birth dates typically range from the 1980s to the early 2000s, and the same group has also been named Millennials by Howe & Strauss (2000). Therefore, at present in 2013, it includes many of those currently in higher education and those who started work around the time of, and since, the millennium in 2000.

This cohort has already been a rich source of study in both the USA and in the UK. Cole, Smith & Lucas (2002) addressed the impact of Generation Y on the American workplace and their work explored a variety of issues and aspects, including attitudes to work and leisure and the impact of new communication technologies. Shaw & Fairhurst (2008) based their work in the UK and looked into learning styles and expectations of this group, as well as the impact of key issues such as new technology, to inform the evolution of graduate development schemes.

The aim of this research is to assess how such attitudes and traits within Generation Y and Millennials are manifested in the workplace and to explore what this could mean in terms of individual employability traits, including problem-solving skills, as well as for recruitment and career development purposes. The study is based in part on secondary research from previous studies, reviews and assessments, together with primary research based on the experiences and observations of managers in three different sectors (restaurant, teaching and law) in employing, working with and observing Generation Y and Millennials in the working environment. The case studies are based in the USA and are referenced using the initials of the observer: RM is the manager of a restaurant, FE is a teacher and MC is an administrator in a court. Further details are provided in Appendix I.

2. Generation Y and Millennials

The attribution of common characteristics to a large group is of course open to debate as a range can be expected to exist in any group and examples can usually be found at either end of whichever spectrum is being explored. Indeed, the existence of Generation Y and Millennials is to some extent disputed and some argue that there are no generational differences (Johnson & Lopes 2008). Nevertheless, despite the spectrum of features in any group, others seek to find the centre-of-gravity of such characteristics and studies such as those by Broadbridge et al (2007), Glass (2007) and others have identified a number of traits and characteristics within Generation Y and Millennials that deserve consideration.

2.1 New technologies

Generation Y and Millennials have witnessed the rapid introduction and growth of several key technologies; personal computing, the internet and smartphones to name just three. Martin (2005) suggests that this has significantly affected the way that the group learns and processes information, and this clearly would have an impact on how they ought to be taught, trained and developed. In addition, an apparent ability to multi-task quickly (Freifield 2007) may have in part been influenced by these new technologies.

One of the benefits of the new technologies, in combination with a greater freedom-of-access to information especially in the developed economies, has been the readier and quicker access to information generally, particularly that which was previously difficult to find or practically not available. On the other hand, the reliability of such information is often questionable and the instant aspect of such access, particularly when combined with an almost constant connection and attention to such services, could also diminish the development of practical problem-solving skills as has been observed in two of the case studies:

- **Just snap your fingers:** FE observes that changes in our perspectives have a lot to do with how easy it has become to live. Consider the 'instant' aspect of our lives such as, for example, the microwave can heat the food in three minutes, the drive-in fast food restaurant,

the bank ATM for instant cash and 24/7 access to entertainment. Such ease of access perhaps results in us not thinking about things enough and working out solutions for ourselves.

- **Google it:** RM wonders if technology has diminished our abilities to problem-solve and has noted an over-reliance in Generation Y and Millennials on the internet to provide instant solutions rather than thinking through and developing their own, even in relatively simple tasks such as constructing flat-pack furniture.

Clearly, there are great benefits in the new technologies for both individuals and for organisations and technology trends are here to stay and to evolve even further. However, there are also it appears potential unintended impacts on the development of those who grow up in, or are born into, such an environment.

2.2 Personal characteristics

Some contradictions exist in attempts to determine if Generation Y and Millennials display common characteristics. Martin (2005) describes Millennials as confident, independent and entrepreneurial and yet also as socially active, collaborative and team oriented. It has also been highlighted how the more structured parenting of this group, compared to previous generations, can be expected to have influenced their personal characteristics and that their resultant desire for clear direction and management (Glass 2007) has to be balanced with another desire for freedom and flexibility in undertaking their roles. Several of the case studies highlight examples of these:

- **Character education:** FE notes that her school emphasises character education, where the focus is on educating students on how they should act or behave in certain situations and, although this often starts at home, it does not in all cases and so it is left up to our institutions and businesses. In a similar vein, RM recalls what a teacher relative of his experienced with students being upset with their grade even though they may have spent only 20 minutes on it as opposed to the two days' work required. For him, this attitude can also be seen in the restaurant industry over the last decade and, while some are hard workers, many are less willing to make the same effort. A similar development in terms of character education in the UK has been the introduction in schools since 2000 of Personal, Social and Health Education classes (Ofsted 2010).
- **Rewards linked to effort:** RM observes that many of the younger working generation have the attitude to only do exactly what is asked rather thinking up better ways or trying to go further. By its very nature, the working hours in the restaurant trade are outside of the normal office 9-5 schedule and extended hours are common. Those who are able to cope with that are rewarded by picking up the extra work and typically make more tips for example. However, many of the younger workers want to share the rewards without putting in the extra effort.
- **Over-parenting:** There are many reasons why the parents of Generation Y and Millennials may have been more protective of their children than prior generations, in part due to health and safety reasons and in part due to improved economic circumstances allowing them to do so. The issue is whether it extends into over-protection and therefore impacts on development. RM observes that many Generation Y and Millennial graduates often arrive without ever having had a part-time job and do not yet know how to act in a work environment and how to approach handling people and situations. This reflects itself even in simple tasks such as turning up on time in the correct attire, and extends into meeting deadlines for tasks given.

Clearly, individual characteristics will vary greatly even within a large group such as Generation Y and Millennials but it would appear perhaps inevitable that the changes in both their micro (parenting) and macro (society) environments will impact on the overall resultant characteristics of any group of people.

2.3 Developed economies

Some researchers argue that generational changes are cyclical, with Howe & Strauss (2000) suggesting that similar traits reappear every four generations. This may in part be linked to economic development in that, once economically developed, an individual's desire and incentive to contribute further may diminish and, once a broad cross-section of society adopts this mentality, there is a noticeable impact at a generational level. Similarly, once essential needs are satisfied, some of which may have been achieved through collaborations and teamwork, the focus may turn toward individualistic aims and needs over and above collaborative or broader society concerns.

- **Finding a compromise:** MC notes that many court cases are a result of a lack of commitment to solve problems or find compromise and resorting too readily to the law even on relatively minor issues. FE even notes the ease of divorce could in some cases reflect a lack of commitment to working toward completing a task. RM observes that many Generation Y and Millennials appear more likely, or possibly confident, than prior generations to challenge authority and this includes following orders in the workplace.
- **Expectations of performance:** RM notes that many young managers from Generation Y and Millennials are often overly keen to delegate all manual tasks and want to be seen to be above hands-on manual work even when it is to help out a situation and to help the team as a whole, an often essential ingredient in running a successful restaurant.

When researching into performance review processes at the corporate level, Ruiz (2006) notes that there a disconnect developing between what is recorded in performance reviews and the reality of how employees perform, with the Vice President of Compensation at Charles Schwab & Co. indicating that, of the three possible ratings available for employees, the bottom one is never assigned. In other words, everybody is considered at least adequate or satisfactory and some are designated as high performers. The difficulty with this is that a satisfactory rating can start to be seen as virtually a failure as those who, in normal circumstances, are performing satisfactorily can see that those who most would agree are performing poorly, are rewarded the same, thus demotivating the very people who may be putting in their best efforts to reach their goals.

3. Problem-solving

An interesting area of study is to explore how the new technologies and the development of personal characteristics within Generation Y and Millennials has impacted on their approaches and attention to problem-solving in developed economies compared to prior generations.

- **Everyday survival skills:** RM considers the attitudes of Generation Y and Millennials towards problem-solving and believes that their commitment to, and confidence in, problem-solving has been diminished, perhaps due in part to over-parenting and in part to not being directly taught problem-solving skills. This even extends to relatively simple tasks such as repairing a flashlight and figuring out that both the batteries and the bulb need to be checked. This may however also be a reflection in developed economies today to replace household items rather than repair them, particularly when the costs of repairs and replacement are of a similar order. RM also notes that some Generation Y and Millennials often do not use their initiative enough and need to be told exactly what to do and exactly where to find something. RM notes that it may be the everyday basic survival skills of Generation Y and Millennials that may have been compromised, the result being a lack of ability to work around or through problems or challenges such as basic repairs and, later on, larger issues.
- **Someone else can sort it out:** MC observes that Generation Y and Millennials are often expecting somebody else to solve their problems for them and cites examples of both frivolous and trivial cases brought before the court, and also the often unfortunate court battles over children between parents in divorces. In each case, the court may indeed be the best and only place to resolve the issue, but it may also demonstrate a lack of ability to effectively problem solve.

Useem (2005) highlights that the military tackles issues such as these by training recruits on how to make good decisions when the information is limited, with the Marine Corps utilising a "70% solution" where, if 70% of the information is available, 70% of the analysis has been done and there is 70% confidence in achieving the objective, then that is enough to move ahead, the logic being that a less than ideal action, executed swiftly, stands a reasonable chance of success and that the worst decision is to make no evaluation or decision at all. Similarly, the senior officers do not offer immediate solutions but let those in training figure out their own approaches, learn from any mistakes, and hence develop their problem-solving skills.

4. Employability

Recent articles by one of the authors of this working paper contain close to 100 references on various employability studies and reviews (O'Leary 2012 & 2013) and conclude in part that content, capability and character are the three key factors for developing student and graduate employability; content being the accumulation of relevant hands-on knowledge and networks, capability being the direct application of that content in a relevant employer context, and character being the ability to work effectively alone and in teams.

4.1 Content, capability and character

To forge a link between academic study and later employment, the content of the curriculum needs to be considered closely. Of course, the academic and scholastic content is key but so is the role of individuals in society. Perhaps the implications of what studying a particular topic has for the development of skills or traits that would help an individual's employability in later life would be advantageous. Some subjects already address such issues and there may also be a need to train and develop the trainers and developers along these lines.

Developing an individual's general capabilities to be effective in employment requires them to have not only academic knowledge but also the ability to apply that knowledge in a meaningful and practical way. Such skills and understanding evolve progressively, not only through the curriculum, but also through experiences in team games, in sports, in work experience, in clubs, in orchestras, in acting and other activities, as well as at home. Developing an appreciation of the context within which to apply an understanding of a issue is important in problem-solving and hence important in employability.

Sufficient content knowledge and the capability to meaningfully apply that knowledge, together with other skills, to manage situations and tasks, are important aspects of enhancing an individual's employability, but they need to be reinforced with having the personal characteristics of being trusted to both work alone and with others to manage tasks, issues, projects and situations as necessary to effect the best results overall in the circumstances available.

4.2 Training and development

Understanding differences in people can of course be important in developing suitable approaches to the training and development of this cohort (Glass 2007), bearing in mind that this group is understood (Terjesen et al 2007) to place great emphasis on personal development and continuous learning, and that friendship groups are believed to be particularly important and closely bonded amongst Generation Y (O'Reilly 2000). These issues may well have contributed to Hira's (2007) assertion that that Generation Y employees tend to be relatively high-maintenance once in the labour force.

5. Conclusions

The academic research and case studies suggest that, as in all probability with every generation, Generation Y and Millennials display some distinct characteristics, many that can be considered generally positive but also some less positive features as well. One important factor appears to be

the ability to problem-solve in a flexible and positive manner, and this in itself is an important aspect of future employability.

- RM outlines that many Generation Y and Millennial employees would benefit from learning more about problem-solving, as it is a basic survival skill and requires initiative, experimentation and, often, perspiration. There may these days be instant access to information and solutions but learning to problem solve through trial and error is an important skill to develop.

This working paper is an initial appraisal of a major issue and further research, including an evaluation of case studies in other countries, is required to develop an understanding of the many facets of problem-solving and how Generation Y and Millennials approach it compared to prior generations. The suggestion at this stage is that developing abilities in problem-solving could be an even more important part of graduate training programmes than it may have been previously.

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7. Appendix

Further details on the case studies are outlined below:

- RM is the part-owner and manager of an upscale downtown American restaurant, has been in the restaurant business for over 20 years and experiences first-hand Generation Y and Millennials coming into the workforce.
- FE is a seasoned American second-grade teacher who has directly witnessed the changes in students over the years as new technologies such as the internet have evolved and developed.
- MC is an American Clerk of the Circuit Court who has regular interactions with, and inevitably observes interactions between, Generation Y and Millennials and their prior generations.