ANALYSIS OF GENERATION Y WORKFORCE MOTIVATION USING MULTIATTRIBUTE UTILITY THEORY

Ian N. Barford and Patrick T. Hester

This article explores the difference in assigned levels of workplace motivation and happiness between federal government workforce members of Generation Y versus Generation X and Baby Boomers. Thirty hypotheses were tested, and 11 were found to be statistically significant. Generation Y does assign different levels of importance and partially assigns different levels of happiness to the five motivational factors examined in this study: responsibilities, compensation, work environment, advancement potential, and free time. Advancement potential and free time were rated the highest factors when compared to Generation X and Baby Boomers. Sample size was small due to limited availability of workforce members. This study represents the first attempt to explore motivational factors for the Generation Y workforce within the federal government.

Keywords: *Baby Boomers, Generation X, Generation Y, Motivational Factors, Utility Measurement*

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FREE TIME
ADVANCEMENT POTENTIAL
WORK ENVIRONMENT
COMPENSATION
RESPONSIBILITIES

Introduction

Researchers, supervisors, and human resource professionals have long struggled with perfecting management strategies for employees. The three most prevalent working generations currently are Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Generation Y. To understand Generation Y's employment motivations and attitudes, two ideas must be discussed: (a) a working definition of generation, and (b) an understanding of preceding generations' motivations and attitudes.

Several prevalent definitions of "generation" exist. Kupperschmidt (2000) defines a generation as an identifiable group, or cohort, which shares birth years, age, location, and significant life events at critical developmental stages. Palese, Pantali, and Saiani (2006) categorize generations as those born within the same historical timeframe and culture. Crumpacker and Crumpacker (2007) add that birth rate, along with historical events, defines each generation. These groups develop a unique pattern of behavior based on these common experiences (Kupperschmidt, 2000).

Further exploration of literature shows that two common elements distinguish a generation: the birth rate and significant life events (Crumpacker & Crumpacker, 2007; Kupperschmidt, 2000; Smola & Sutton, 2002; Cennamo & Gardner, 2008; Sayers, 2007). When the birth rate increases and remains steady, that signifies the beginning of a new generation. When the birth rate of a newly formed generation begins to decline, that marks the end of a generation (Crumpacker & Crumpacker, 2007). Each generation has its own set of significant life events. Each generation shares the same experiences, or is aware of them, as they advance and mature through different stages of life—although not every person in a generation personally experiences these defining events (Crumpacker & Crumpacker, 2007). Caution is given to stereotyping individuals based on generational values and characteristics (Weingarten, 2009).

The eldest of the current working generations, referred to as the Baby Boomers, were born between the years 1946 and 1964 (Egri & Ralston, 2004; Smola & Sutton, 2002; Westerman & Yamamura, 2007; Dries, Pepermans, & DeKerpel, 2008; Crumpacker & Crumpacker, 2007; Hubbard & Singh, 2009). Baby Boomers experienced significant life events that shaped their values, including the social revolution of the 1960s, the women's movement, President John F. Kennedy/Martin Luther King Jr./Senator Robert F. Kennedy assassinations, U.S. landing on the moon, the substantial role of television within society, the Vietnam War, the Watergate scandal, and high inflation of the 1980s (Dries et al., 2008; Crumpacker & Crumpacker, 2007; Weingarten, 2009).

Baby Boomers are classified with such values and attributes as team orientation, optimism (Hess & Jepsen, 2009), and expecting the best from life (Smola & Sutton, 2002). Prior to the 1980s, this generation knew of prosperity and fortunate outcomes (Kupperschmidt, 2000) being the center of their parents' world (Crumpacker & Crumpacker, 2007), similar to the prosperity that Generation Y has been accustomed to (Shih & Allen, 2007). During the recession in the 1980s, businesses downsized and reorganized, which conveyed to the Baby Boomers that a lifetime career with one organization might not be a certainty (Mirvis & Hall, 1994). Because of this, Baby Boomers were characterized as free agents in the workplace (Kupperschmidt, 2000), described by Crumpacker and Crumpacker (2007) as highly competitive micromanagers, irritated by lazy employees, with a positive demeanor towards professional growth.

The middle cohort of current working generations, referred to as Generation X, was born between the years 1965 and 1979 (Egri & Ralston, 2004; Smola & Sutton, 2002; Crumpacker & Crumpacker, 2007), and it has the least amount of people of the three generations under review. For this generation, the life events that had a profound impact were the Iranian hostage crisis, Iran Contra scandal, introduction of HIV/AIDS as a pandemic, oral contraceptive pills, the 1973 oil crisis, the impeachment of President Richard M. Nixon, introduction of computers and the Internet, and the Cold War (Dries et al., 2008; Crumpacker & Crumpacker, 2007; Weingarten, 2009). As Generation X matured, so did technology (Cennamo & Gardner, 2008).

This generation grew up with both parents in the workforce, or in a divorced household, and as a result, many were latchkey kids, becoming independent at a young age (Crumpacker & Crumpacker, 2007; Weingarten, 2009). Smola and Sutton (2002) describe this generation as experiencing social insecurity, rapidly changing surroundings, and a lack of solid traditions. Generation X carried the trend of distancing themselves from companies just as the Baby Boomers did (Dries et al., 2008), making them distrustful of organizations (Westerman & Yamamura, 2007). Generation X entered the workforce competing with the Baby Boomers for jobs during the 1980s' recession, which made many of these individuals cynical towards the older generation (Crumpacker & Crumpacker, 2007).

The newest generation to enter the workforce was born between the years 1980 and 2000 (Weingarten, 2009; Cennamo & Gardner, 2008; Sayers, 2007). Although authors differ as to when Generation Y either begins or ends (Smola & Sutton, 2002; Kupperschmidt, 2000; Hess & Jepsen, 2009; Westerman & Yamamura, 2006; Crumpacker & Crumpacker, 2007; Broadbridge, Maxwell, & Ogden, 2007; Sayers, 2007), prevalent literature agrees on Generation Y begin-

ning in 1980 (Smola & Sutton, 2002; Weingarten, 2009; Crumpacker & Crumpacker, 2007; Essinger, 2006) and ending in 2000 (Clark, 2007). Other terms associated with Generation Y are "Millennials" (Howe & Strauss, 2000), "Net Generation" (Shaw & Fairhurst, 2008), and "Generation Next" (Loughlin & Barling, 2001; Zemke, Raines, & Filipczak, 2000; Martin, 2005).

The momentous events that Generation Y experienced were the fall of the Berlin Wall, the induction of music television (MTV) into society, Columbine High School shootings, 9/11 terrorist attacks, more frequent natural disasters, and the obesity epidemic (Dries et al., 2008; Crumpacker & Crumpacker, 2007). Sujansky (2002) writes that this generation has seen more substantial life-changing events early on than preceding cohorts. Possibly the most significant difference this generation possesses over others is the integration of technology into their daily lives and the omnipresence of how technology has always been in their world (Oblinger, 2003; Martin, 2005; Weingarten, 2009). Martin (2005) describes Millennials as independent, confident, and self-reliant. This may be due to the extensive protection and praise given to them throughout their formative years (Crumpacker & Crumpacker, 2007).

In business, Generation Y exhibits the propensity for working in teams while being collaborative, results-oriented individuals, and having an ardor for pressure (Shih & Allen, 2007). Unfortunately, Generation Y followed their two previous generations and have partitioned themselves away from organizations (Dries et al., 2008), knowing that lifetime employment at an organization is very unlikely. Generation Y expects to change jobs often during their lifetime (Morton, 2002; Kim, Knight, & Crutsinger, 2009), especially if their talents are underutilized (Kim et al., 2009; Weingarten, 2009). Millennials want lifelong learning (Alch, 2000), expect on-the-job training (Morton, 2002) to stay marketable (Sayers, 2007; Holden & Harte, 2004; King, 2003), and proactively plan their own careers and professional development (Westerman and Yamamura, 2007; Kim et al., 2009; Zemke et al., 2000).

Generation Y aspires for a work/life balance (Crumpacker & Crumpacker, 2007; Zemke et al., 2000) to achieve professional satisfaction and personal freedom (Sayers, 2007). Generation Y is almost automatic at multitasking with technology as if it's an extension of their being (Freifield, 2007; Kofman & Eckler, 2005; Rowh, 2007; Loughlin and Barling, 2001), and may change a job task considerably to create a more appealing outcome (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). They need clear directions and management assistance for tasks, while expecting freedom to get the job done (Martin, 2005) via empowerment (Morton, 2002). However, this cohort despises micromanagement, becomes irritated with laziness,

and abhors slowness (Weingarten, 2009). To some, Generation Y's work values and attributes paint a picture of being high maintenance (Hira, 2007). Twenge, Zhang, and Im (2004) describe Generation Y as having a "high external locus of control," which further exemplifies their confidence inside and outside of the workplace. However, Crumpacker and Crumpacker (2007) note the need for constant approval and highlight Generation Y's emotionally needy personality.

A heightened government retirement of the Baby Boomers is almost certain in the next several years, which will leave employment gaps that Generation X and Y must fill. Barr (2007, p. D01) reports approximately 60 percent of the 1.8 million government employees will be eligible to retire over the next 9 years. The Office of Personnel Management expects many of the Baby Boomers (about 40 percent) to retire from the government. Retention of the newly hired Generation Y workforce is critical to the preservation and existence of the civilian government workforce.

In the analysis discussed in this article, 18 government workers, comprising six each of Generation X, Generation Y, and the Baby Boomers Generation, were surveyed regarding five motivational factors according to importance and level of happiness. The survey was designed to provide insight on the overall average job satisfaction of each respondent (how happy each respondent is with their job compared to the average of all respondents); the overall average job satisfaction of each generation (how happy each generation is with their jobs compared to the average of all generations); normalized average importance for each generation (how each generation values the five motivational factors converted to a single scale); average level of happiness for each generation (how each generation is satisfied with their current jobs based on the five motivational factors); the overall average utility (how all generations combined express value and satisfaction for each of the five motivational factors); and average attribute utility for each generation (how each generation expresses value and satisfaction for each of the five motivational factors). The research questions that this study seeks to answer follow.

Research Questions

Using the previous research on generational life events coupled with work values and attitudes, the following research questions were generated for analysis in this study:

No. 1. Does Generation Y assign different levels of importance to the five motivational factors than Generation X and Baby Boomers?

No. 2. Does Generation Y assign different levels of happiness to the five motivational factors than Generation X and Baby Boomers; and which of these factors is ranked the highest across generations?

No. 3. Does Generation Y's average attribute utility of the five motivational factors differ from Generation X and Baby Boomers?

Method

Participants. Government workers, six in each of the three age groups categorized by Generation Y (born between 1980 and 2000), Generation X (born between 1965 and 1979), and Baby Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964), who work at Naval Sea Systems Command, Virginia Beach Detachment, were selected at random by the detachment security manager. All 18 respondents were given an unsealed envelope that included a cover letter and an identical three-page survey. All participants were asked to voluntarily complete the anonymous survey and return the envelope sealed to ensure confidentiality. Twelve respondents were male (67 percent), and six were female (33 percent).

The mean age of the survey respondents was 36.56 (standard deviation = 11.08). Deeper examination into respondent demographics shows 13 people (72 percent) had completed either a bachelor's or master's degree.

Materials and Procedure. The motivational factor survey was arranged with six demographic questions, one motivational factors' ranking question, and one level of happiness question for a total of eight questions. The demographic set (questions 1–6) consisted of: age, gender, job classification (either management or nonmanagement), occupational category (government-designated categories based on the type of job a person has), highest education completed, and pay plan.

The motivational factors ranking (question 7) presented the five motivational factors and asked the respondent to rank them according to importance. Each factor was given a bounded definition unique to working within a government context. Factor 1 (responsibilities) was defined as the value given to all responsibilities inside the office and while on government travel. Factor 2 (compensation) was defined as the value of the total government compensation package, which includes salary, pension, retirement plan, annual bonuses, cost of living increases, etc. Factor 3 (work environment) was defined as the value given to the job location, people working in the location, and physical work environment. Factor 4 (advancement potential) was defined as the value given to a career path clearly defined for advancement. Factor 5 (free time) was defined

as the value given to the amount of free time away from work. Free time is allocated by the following means: compressed work schedule, accrued sick days, accrued annual days off, and the number of holidays given.

The level of happiness (question 8) consisted of each respondent ranking the level of happiness in their current position using each of the five motivational factors.

Motivational Factor Rankings. Motivational factor rankings were determined by each respondent in their survey. Each respondent was given a maximum of 100 points to distribute among each of the five motivational factors. The more points the participant gave to a particular factor, the more they valued that factor.

Level of Happiness Rankings. Level of happiness rankings were determined by each respondent in their survey. Each respondent was asked to rank the five motivational factors based on their current position. The format chosen was a 10-point Likert scale (1 = being extremely dissatisfied and 10 = being extremely satisfied).

Procedure. The detachment's security manager handed each respondent an open envelope, with a cover letter and an identical survey. Participants were notified in writing that their completion of the survey indicated their consent to participate in this study. Respondents were told if they had any questions regarding the survey to direct them to the security manager. The surveys were not traceable to the survey respondent, and the deadline to finish was 1 week. Once completed, the surveys were to be placed back in the envelope, sealed, and returned to the detachment security manager. The security manager collected all 18 surveys, and they were returned to the primary author.

Results

Analysis focused on respondents' values for importance and level of happiness for each of the five motivational factors. For initial data reduction and ease of calculation, respondents' ages were grouped together by their generation, as defined earlier in this article. The motivational factors (MF) were then normalized as shown in Equation 1 to ensure that each factor could be evaluated on a 100-point scale and compared with one another:

$$\mathrm{MF} = 100\left(\frac{x - OBJ_{\min}}{OBJ_{\max} - \mathrm{OBJ}_{\min}}\right) \quad (1)$$

OBJ_{min} is the minimum respondent value (5), OBJ_{max} is the maximum respondent value (50), and x is the individual respondent's value.

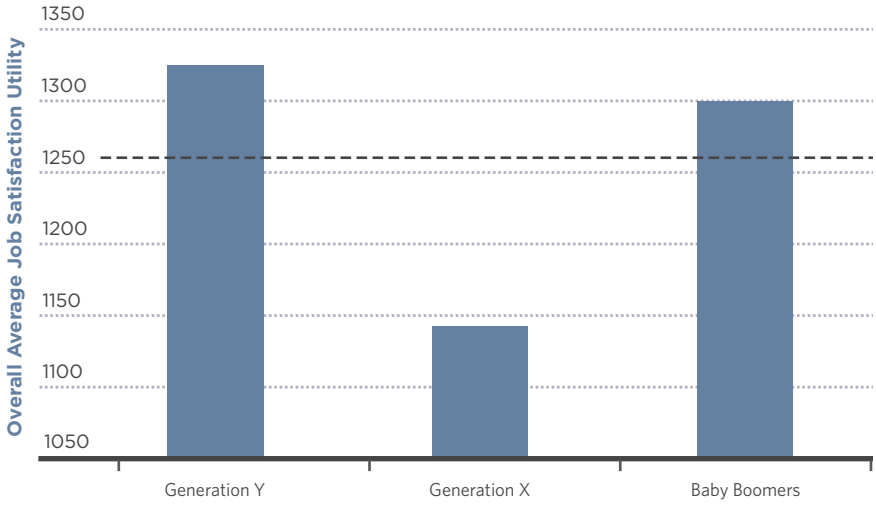
Overall utility, denoted as average job satisfaction (AJS), was then calculated using a traditional weighted sum approach, whereby each MF is multiplied by its relative importance (level of happiness [LOH]), as shown in Equation 2.

$$AJS = \sum_{k=1}^{5} MF_k LOH_k \tag{2}$$

The next step was to analyze each generation separately and average their respective job satisfaction. Figure 1 depicts the overall average job satisfaction utility for each age group. These averages were also used in computing the overall job satisfaction utility for the entire group of respondents (average = 1256.17, denoted by the black dashed line shown in Figure 1). The job satisfaction level was compared to the average job satisfaction utility for the entire group.

The results of Figure 1 show Generation Y and Baby Boomers are well above the average job satisfaction of all respondents. Conversely, it shows Generation X is well below the average job satisfaction of all respondents. Possibly, the Baby Boomers felt more comfortable with being honest and Generation Y shaded their opinions somewhat.

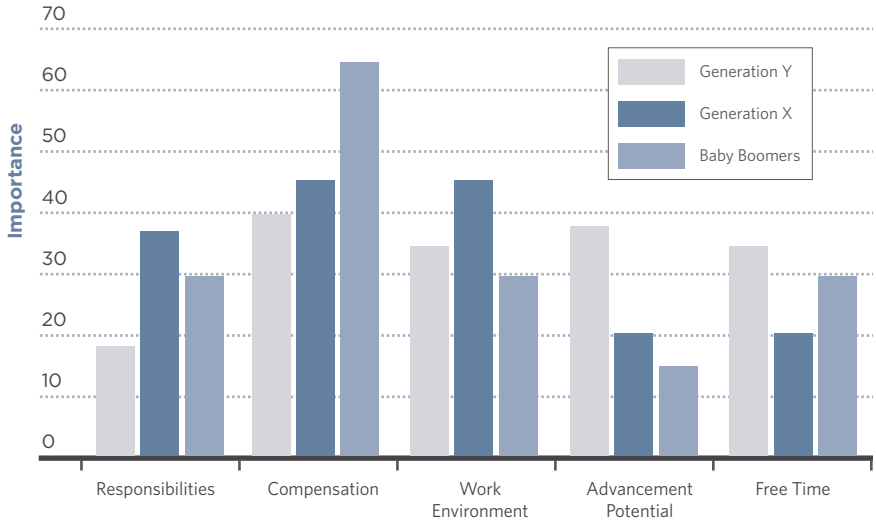
FIGURE 1. OVERALL AVERAGE JOB SATISFACTION UTILITY FOR EACH AGE GROUP



Question No. 1. Does Generation Y assign different levels of importance to the five motivational factors than Generation X and Baby Boomers?

To determine whether Generation Y assigns different levels of importance, the data were analyzed using a two-tailed hypothesis test at a 0.10 significance level. Generation Y results were compared to Generation X, and then Baby Boomers for a total of 10 tests. Of those 10, five were statistically significant and therefore reported. Figure 2 shows the normalized average importance for each generation.

FIGURE 2. NORMALIZED AVERAGE IMPORTANCE FOR EACH GENERATION



Generation Y views responsibilities as much less important than Generation X and Baby Boomers and least important of all the motivational factors. These results are statistically significant.

Generation Y ranked compensation as less important than Generation X and Baby Boomers. This was expected, but only the comparison between Generation Y and Baby Boomers is statistically significant.

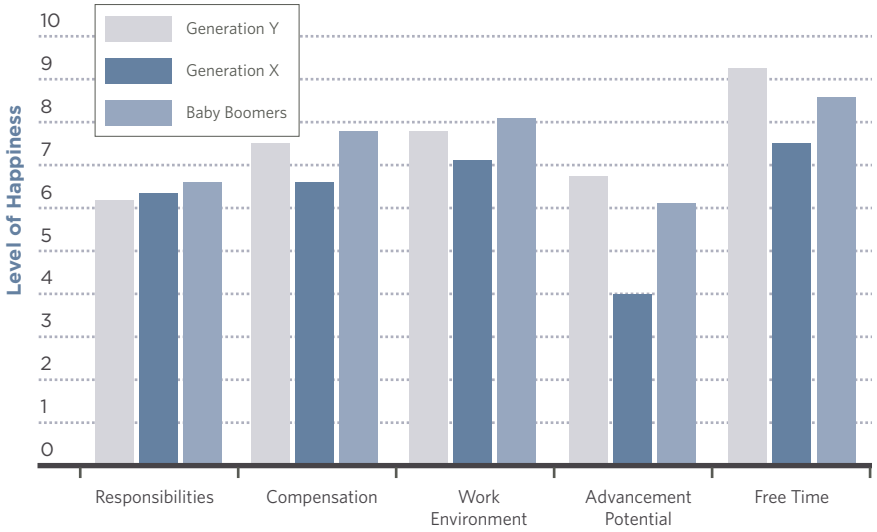
Generation Y ranked advancement potential higher than Generation X and Baby Boomers. Again, the results between Generation Y and Baby Boomers are statistically significant.

Generation Y ranked free time higher than Generation X and Baby Boomers. This time the results between Generation Y and X are statistically significant.

Question No. 2. Does Generation Y assign different levels of happiness to the five motivational factors than Generation X and Baby Boomers, and which of these factors is ranked the highest across generations?

The data were analyzed using a two-tailed hypothesis test at a 0.10 significance level. Generation Y results were compared to Generation X, and then Baby Boomers for a total of 10 tests. Of those 10, two were statistically significant and therefore reported. Figure 3 shows the average level of happiness for each generation.

FIGURE 3. AVERAGE LEVEL OF HAPPINESS FOR EACH GENERATION



Generation Y is satisfied with their current advancement potential in the government more than Generation X and Baby Boomers. However, only the results between Generation Y and X are statistically significant. These results show that Generation Y is very satisfied with their current advancement potential within the Federal Government.

Generation Y is currently satisfied with their current free time more than Generation X and Baby Boomers. Again, the results between Generation Y and X are only statistically significant. These results show that Generation Y is very satisfied with their current free time within the Federal Government.

Results of all three generations' motivational factors were averaged from the average attribute utility for each generation and plotted in Figure 4. Compensation was the highest, with advancement potential being the lowest motivational factor.

FIGURE 4. AVERAGE MOTIVATIONAL FACTORS

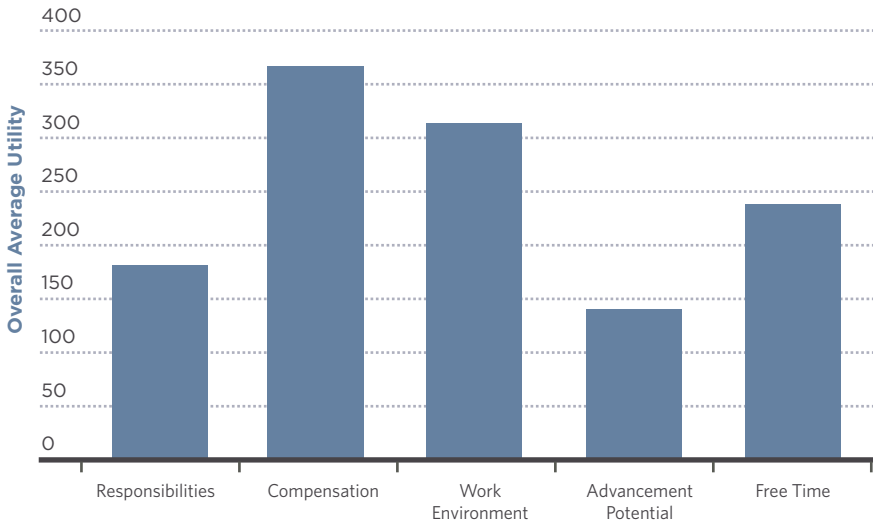
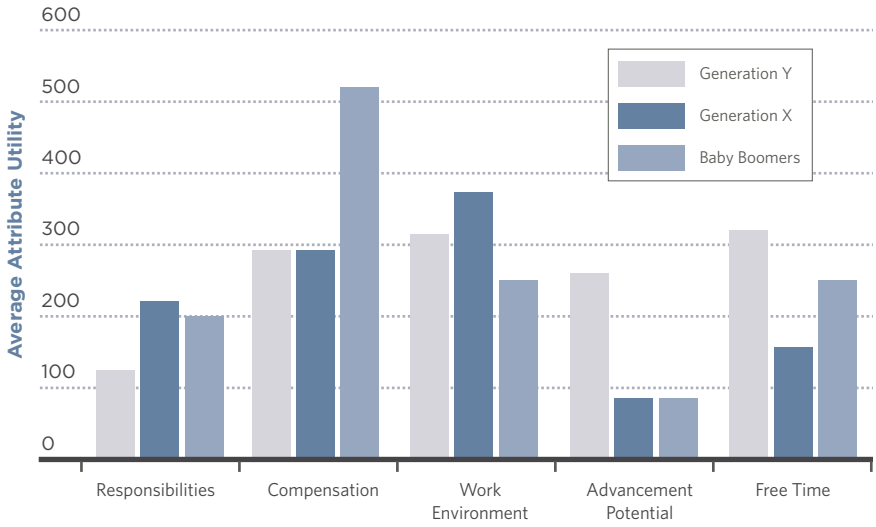


FIGURE 5. AVERAGE ATTRIBUTE UTILITY FOR EACH GENERATION



Question No. 3. Does Generation Y's average attribute utility of the five motivational factors differ from Generation X and Baby Boomers?

The data were analyzed using a two-tailed hypothesis test at a 0.10 significance level. Generation Y results were compared to Generation X, then Baby Boomers for a total of 10 tests. Of those 10, four were statistically significant and therefore only reported.

Figure 5 shows the overall average job satisfaction utility based on each attribute for each generation.

Generation Y's average attribute utility for compensation was less than Baby Boomers, which was statistically significant, but slightly more than Generation X, which was not significant.

Generation Y's average attribute utility for advancement potential was much higher than both Generation X and Baby Boomers. Both results were statistically significant.

Generation Y's average attribute utility for free time was also higher for Generation X and Baby Boomers, although the comparison to Generation X was only statistically significant.

Discussion

This analysis aimed to investigate if Generation Y assigns differing levels of workplace motivation and happiness than Generation X and Baby Boomers in a federal government context. Three research questions were developed based on the literature review: (1) Does Generation Y assign different levels of importance to the five motivational factors than Generation X and Baby Boomers? (2) Does Generation Y assign different levels of happiness to the five motivational factors than Generation X and Baby Boomers? and (3) Does Generation Y's average attribute utility of the five motivational factors differ from Generation X and Baby Boomers?

The results of the first research question would be a tentative yes. Generation Y has a statistically significant difference in four of the five motivational factors pertaining to level of importance. This shows Generation Y does have varying levels of importance for four of the five motivational factors when compared with Generation X and Baby Boomers.

The low values Generation Y attributes to the responsibilities' motivational factor are of intense concern. One possible explanation may be that the government is not providing enough responsibilities to fully engage Generation Y. Another possible explanation may be that Generation Y is not happy with their current responsibilities, and this has impacted their responses to what motivates them.

Generation Y ranks compensation as the highest motivational factor but not by much over the other factors. The importance ranks much less for Baby Boomers, and this response is expected. The reason is the Baby Boomers are nearing retirement age and are trying to reach their maximum earning potential, which dictates the amount they will receive from their pension. Overall, Generation Y places a much higher importance on advancement potential and free time than the other generations.

The answer to Question No. 2 is a cautious yes. Although two of the 10 possible combinations are statistically significant, two (advancement potential and free time) do provide some insight. The two highest importance levels over the other generations, discussed earlier, are advancement potential and free time, which corresponds with the level of happiness calculations. Not only does Generation Y regard advancement potential and free time as very important, but they are content with their levels of both motivational factors.

The results of Question No. 3 are also a tentative yes. Advancement potential and free time are emerging as the most diverse attributes compared to Generation X and Baby Boomers. Based on the literature, Generation Y proactively plans their professional development and expects to achieve it within the federal government. The majority of Generation Y research is done on the work/life balance factor. Research points to this new generation aspiring to attain this balance in their everyday lives. The results presented here promote this same idea.

Conclusions

Questions may be raised about the sample size, concise question set, and significance level used. A much larger sample size and more extensive survey are needed to gain an in-depth understanding of this generation. The authors plan to expand the participant pool in the near future to include a statistically significant number of respondents. The expectation is that the survey and results (although limited due to small sample size) described in this article, coupled with the literature review, will begin to unveil what Generation Y expects from a long and prosperous career in federal civilian service. This can help management in aligning corporate incentives to motivate Generation Y workers, not only by compensation but by the other motivational factors.

The federal government's workforce climate is shifting, and conducting internal studies allows management to be more aware and able to adapt to emerging situations. This study provides the initial basis for conducting more detailed studies specific to the federal government. The government can be in the forefront of understanding and retaining Generation Y by conducting research, validating results based on proven mathematical techniques, and slowly changing the retention landscape with these results. By motivating Generation Y using the outlined factors, governmental managers can tailor retention plans specific to this generation to ensure a sustainable workforce for the future.

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