Managing Millennial Talent in Diverse Organizations in Corporate India

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Research Article

ABSTRACT

Talent management strategies are dependent on the constitution of an organisation's workforce and as such are usually evolutionary in nature, to address contemporary issues. With businesses world over having recognised the economic and talent imperative of a diverse workforce, these management strategies must be tailored to engage, retain and develop employees - men and women, belonging to different generations, culturally and linguistically diverse. Though gender diversity in corporate India has been an area of focus for many high growth organisations, generational diversity or diversity in the ages of workers is under-explored in the Indian context. The need for smart strategising becomes the need of the hour when one generation of all accounts for the majority of workers - the MILLENNIALS. This paper is based on a nation-wide study of millennials (born in or after the year 1985) cutting across gender and geographical boundaries. Basis the career aspirations, expectations and drivers of Indian millennials that could also give rise to intergenerational workplace conflict recommendations on strategies for managing this cohort are made.

INTRODUCTION

Millennials - the most influential generation of our times as also the most populous in the Indian workplace are changing the corporate landscape as never before. Born in or after 1985, they are over 700 million in number and account for 40% of the Indian workforce. The liberisation, privatization, globalization wave and the tech revolution characterized their formative years. Research suggests that in another 5 years-time, by 2020, they would constitute more than half of the entire working population in India.

Much has also changed the way work gets done across the globe. Work ethos has changed, workforce has become as diverse as it has ever been, and subsequently workplace dynamics today is multilayered. Thought leaders who helm high growth organizations in India are faced with a critical challenge - of managing a generationally diverse workforce and catering to their distinct career aspirations. And the most dominant of all generations at work today are millennials. In this research piece, specific emphasis will be placed on strategies for managing talent from this generation most effectively, averting conflicts of interests with their co-workers from other generations while ensuring the entire workforce is at its productive best.

Before examining the generational diversity of the Indian workforce it is important to understand the underlying reason for the same - continually expanding global businesses that require workers with varied, multidisciplinary skills that can add value to their operations a consequence of which is the average bandwidth of employee ages being stretched far and wide. In a 2014 study conducted by the authors [1], the Indian workforce was found to be comprised of five distinct generational cohorts identified, namely:

Free-Gens (Born between 1945 and 1960)

Gen X (Born between 1961 and 1970)

E-Gen (Born between 1971 and 1980)

Gen Y (Born between 1981 and 1990)

Gen Z (Born after 1990).

Conforming to this definition, millennials are constituted by one half of Gen Y and Gen Z in entirety. This paper is based on a pan-Indian study on about 1731 Indian millennials - men and women, cutting across the urban-rural divide. And these were some of the questions for which answers were sought - What do Indian millennials aspire for? What are their career expectations? What about their working styles and work values? How can organizational leaders in India steer clear of intergenerational conflicts that might arise as millennials slowly take over the corporate reigns? In the sections below, the study contour - from study methodology to response analyses is presented in great detail.

ABOUT MILLENNIALS IN INDIA

MILLENNIALS are the most influential generation of our times as also the most populous in the Indian workplace. With the oldest millennial having over 8 years of industry experience and the youngest being freshmen straight out of college, their intra-generational diversity spans a wide spectrum. And if we are to go by numbers, they are 700 million and counting and account for about 40% of the Indian workforce. Studies suggest that in another 5 years, more than half of India Inc. would be millennials, in short they are to rule the workplace. As against the popular misconception that millennials are a pampered, entitled, even narcissist lot, this is what the 2015 Deloitte study [2] on Indian millennials revealed:

80% of them aspire to lead or reach a management position within their organization

70% will deliberately seek employers whose corporate responsibility behavior reflects their own

76% of WOMEN said they expected to rise to the most senior levels within their organisations, as compared to a global average of 49%.

83% believe international experience is necessary to further their careers, compared to a global average of 66%

89% believe their company has a strong sense of purpose, which 86% can relate to.

Businesses should focus on people and purpose, not just products and profits in the 21st century according to millennials.

And these are the qualities that leaders need to have to appeal to millennials and inspire them, according to the same study - *be a good speaker and a strategic thinker, be inspirational and support innovation, be passionate and enthusiastic, be a visionary and have strong business ethics, inter-personal skills and advanced technical skills and last but not the least, be well networked*. So this is what millennials want from their leaders. Effective leadership also requires leaders to be in the know of what people they lead aspire for and what their value systems are – to inspire, innovate and co-create.

STUDY AT A GLANCE

This study was conducted amongst 1731 Indian millennials over a two month window - from 1st August 2015 to 1st September 2015. The study was administered through an online survey that captured basic demographic profiles, career expectations and work approaches of millennials. This was the intra generational diversity of the sample - in terms of gender, geography and age (**Figure 1**):
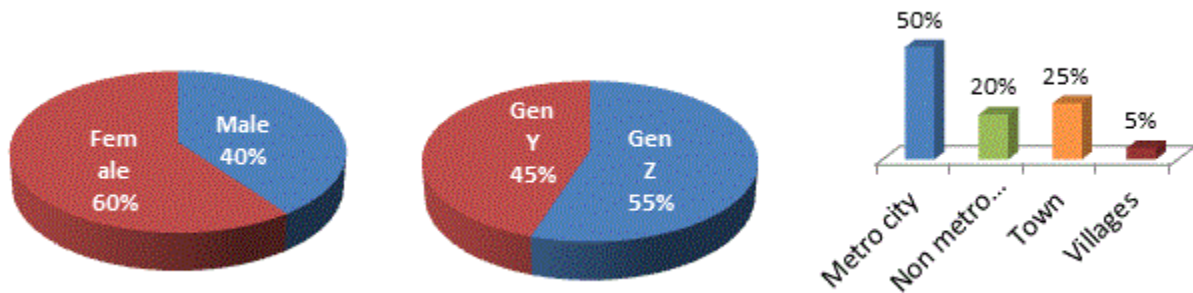
Figure 1. Millennial profile diversity.

CAREER EXPECTATIONS OF MILLENNIALS: WHAT DO THEY WANT?

To attract millennials and retain them, to develop and nurture their competencies and aptitude, it is important to first understand what the expectations of millennials are with regard to their careers. Is there something other than a monetary imperative that drives them to work? Do they want to be recognized and appreciated? How intent are they on learning and adapting to technology? Does constructive feedback get the better out of them? Take a look at **Figure 2** to understand the relative importance that millennials attach to each of these to carefully arrive at their career expectation model. The percentage distributions shown against a given 'expectation' are the percentage of millennials who said this was critically important to them.
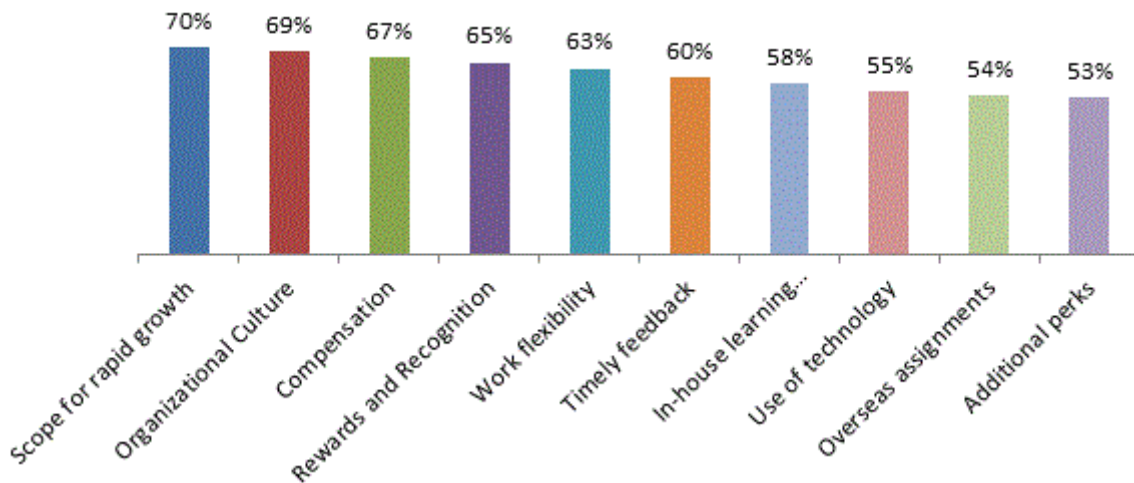

Figure 2. Percentage distributions of milennials against a given expectation.

It is interesting to note that millennials are most attracted by the scope for rapid growth, followed by organizational culture and in position three comes the career expectation of competitive compensation. Leaders need to take a cue from this, actually two - one that majority of millennials expect their employers to provide them with scope for rapid growth - they want to become leaders and the metamorphosis from a corporate newbie to a leader should happen quickly and meaningfully, two that organizational culture is paramount to them, that they want to work for organizations whose mission, vision and purpose is in sync with their larger goals for life. One may also observe that of all the ten career expectations identified and surveyed, all of them are critically important to at least 50% of the millennials. This signifies that millennials more often than not will value the complete package on offer, incentives in isolation will not have a great influence on them and will not help retaining them for the long haul.

POINTS OF INTERGENERATIONAL CONFLICT

The research also brought to light significant pointers with regard to the areas of intergenerational conflict. The conflicting zones were identified in terms of a 360 degree holistic view of today's work architecture parametrically identified through work value, working style, demonstration of respect, orientation towards D&I, ability to network and comfort with technology.

Work value: Work value is the set of ethics and values a generation brings to work and continue adhering to. It refers to an unwritten code of conduct people belonging to a generation follow while at work. Millennials were observed to have

more liberal and non-traditional work values - though generally rule compliant, missing a tax deadline by a couple of days did not bother them as much as the non-millennials.

Working style: Working style refers to the preferred style of working commonly used by a generation. This is inclusive of the timings they prefer to work, their approach towards work flexibility and their preference in terms of the physical workspace they want to work at. There's evidence that the differences that distinguish people in terms of attitudes, abilities, work styles, and personal preferences are as likely to come from differences in their length of experience and career stage as to their being members of a particular generation [3]. Te results showed that millennials have a more casual working style when compared to non- millennials. And what is more interesting - almost an equal percentage of millennial men (54%) aspired for work flexibility whilst amongst the older generations the need was more pronounced amongst women. This indicates that life outside of work is important to millennials - they want a career integrated with their lives.

Demonstration of respect: This refers to the extent of respect a representative typical of a generation, demonstrates in all forms of business communication. It is also inclusive of his/her expectation of respect at the workplace. A 2008 study pointed out that the older generations at work show greater respect for authority [4]. To draw from the results of this study, millennials are once again more casual – they are more tolerant to sarcasm at work or a noisy workplace, do not take offence whilst the older generations expect respect.

D&I orientation: With people of different genders, races, religious beliefs and nativities co-working for a common cause within an organisation, this aspect refers to the attitude of a generation with respect to this diverse co-existence. In an interesting revelation by a global study, it was found that the older generations have been able to mould "diversity" to fit their sensibilities as many of them have been the primary proponents and practitioners in the field. They have a greater appreciation for "integration" rather than "inclusion", opined the study [5]. This study found that the seniors at the workplace are more welcoming of diversity than millennials. They are more inclusive in their beliefs which can benefit the organization as the seniors have a greater influence in shaping the organizational culture.

Networking capabilities: This refers to the ability of different generations to network, connect and socialise for both professional and personal pursuits. Previous researches showed that Generation Y is some of the most social of any generational cohort; but they communicate and socialize much differently from the rest [6]. Results revealed that the millennials are more outgoing in their ability to network amongst colleagues.

Technology comfort: Workplaces and work gadgets are no longer what they were ten or 20 years ago. The modes of communication, the delivery speed, the devices used have all evolved for the better. In such a context, technology comfort refers to the extent of reception each generation has to technological advances. One of the most frequently reported characteristics of millennials is their comfort with technology [7]. This study also corroborated this theory – that the millennial generation who are alternately referred to as digital natives are more tech-savvy and depend on technology to a greater extent than the older generations.

MANAGING MILLENNIALS: WHAT INDUSTRY EXPERTS HAVE TO SAY?

In a recent discussion conducted by the authors to release the results of this study to industry stalwarts, a few additional observations were made by industry experts who were familiar with the millennial territory. To categorically list these observations:

On Attracting Millennials

With a millennial majority workforce, it is important that organisational leaders focus on having inclusive policies to cover this extremely diverse cohort. Millennials are aspirational and demanding - they want it all - from Rewards and Recognition to a liberal work culture.

Whiling hiring millennials with diverse socio-economic-educational profiles, strategies to attract them must be customised to meet their expectations.

Organisations need to be progressive about the way they hire. Leveraging technology - such as using smart phone apps for hiring, appeal a lot to millennials.

On Engaging Millennials

Organisations need to help keep millennials maintain their energy levels to combat monotonous working patterns.

Employers shouldn't be judging the millennial generation by the typical stereotypes. Their pulse need to be felt.

Every generation is a product of its times. To add, their behavioural patterns with regard to various facets of day-to day life - working, shopping, banking or entertaining have evolved (and are evolving) with the advent of technology. This should also be kept in mind while engaging with millennials.

On Developing Millennials

Millennials do create a healthy turbulence at the workplace. But that helps an organisation stay progressive. They also need a clear picture of their projected career growth.

Millennials have a strong aspiration for fast-track career growth. This is something millennial managers need to pay attention to.

Organisation practices and policies need to be CONTEMPORARY. This is important to engage not only millennials but also the seniors at the workplace.

INCLUSIVE LEADERSHIP TO MANAGE MILLENNIALS: IS IT THE SILVER BULLET?

The study results and the ensuing discussion revealed three critical aspirations of millennials:

Career wise they want to grow and grow fast. This has two important implications: a) They are intent on proving their merit to find their way up the ladder b) They will be at their best in an inspired environment

Their autonomy is paramount to them. This would actually mean that millennials want to be empowered, to be made responsible, and to be left to prove their mettle.

Organisational culture is critical when they make their choice of job. Millennials want to work with organisations where there is no conflict of interest, the vision and goals are in sync with theirs!

A careful look at these three critical observations tell us that Indian millennials want to be inspired, empowered and want to work for organizations with a common, shared vision. These are exactly the key attributes that define an inclusive leader [8] - of being able to inspire, empower and co-create shared visions. And there is reason why millennials are seeking inclusive leaders - because there has been a transformation in the definition of "inclusion" by millennials as per a 2015 Delloite study of millennials [9], "When it comes to defining inclusion, millennials focus primarily and extensively on teaming, valuing a culture of connectivity and using collaborative tools to drive business impact. Prior generations instead defined inclusion in terms of equity, fairness and the integration, acceptance and tolerance of gender, racial and ethnic diversity within the organisation". Another 2013 research on millennials also reported that they prefer an inclusive leadership style - "Millennials grew up in glass houses. They are comfortable with transparency. They believe leadership should be the same". Global studies that examined millennial mindsets [2] have also shown that the most important consideration millennials have to label an organisation as a "leader"is its treatment of its employees. This is followed by the business's Overall impact on society, its financial performance, Record for creating innovative products or services; and whether it has a well-defined and meaningful purpose to which it is true. A 2014 study by Catalyst also found that the more included millennials felt, the more innovative they reported being in their jobs [10].

A leader in "principle" should inspire, influence and help people associate with a "dream" [11]. Adapting that to diverse organizations with a millennial majority, the leader has the additional responsibility of co-creating a shared dream, one that is dreamt by millennials and the rest. Also does he or she have to spearhead the creation of an organizational culture that fosters diversity and encourages creativity? This would entail creation of a value-based environment wherein the organization's mission resonates deeply with individual and collective psyche. There are studies that point out that leadership is a relational property rather than an attribute or ability of an individual [12]. For reaping the benefits of diversity, leaders must demonstrate through their actions, belief in and commitment to diversity, create opportunities for dialogue about differences, and when required even alter rules for acceptable behaviors [13]. Considering the volatility of today's business environments leadership is more about enabling and empowering your employees to face the unknown, make decisions and take risks at the face of uncertainty; predictability is long a thing of the past. A 2014 global study by Catalyst found that empowerment was the behavior that most reflected altruistic leadership. Personal humility, courage, and accountability closely followed empowerment as key indicators of altruistic leadership [10]. The study also brought to forth the Indian model of leadership - Altruistic leadership that predicted inclusion, which in turn had a direct positive effect on employee innovation and engagement.

More research on the inclusive leader that he/she is a "synergist that sparks the team to head in the direction that it needs to go in" Bruce Stewart (Office of Personnel Management, USA) [14]. And synergy is what could help actualize the aspirations of millennials. It follows that millennials are at their best with inclusive leaders - they are most innovative and creative, happy and productively engaged, focused and energized in an environment of inclusion, one in which they are convinced that not only will their organisation value their opinions but also will it synergize its resources for a greater social impact.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This social research on the most dynamic generation in existence helped bring to light the preferences and expectations of millennials with regard to their careers. Discerning organisations intent on acquiring the smartest in this talent pool, need to tailor their strategies to fit this cohort. Here are a few major leads that emerged from the study:

Create an organisational structure that allows quick progression: Millennials prefer a fast-paced challenging career trajectory, as evident from the study. Scope for lateral and linear growth will attract them and keep them bound to their organisations. It will benefit the organisations to create such structures where millenials with the right talent and merit have ample scope for advancement.

Switch on the social media spotlight: As the generational pulse reveals, being social media friendly would accentuate an organisation's visibility amongst millennials and keep their energies live. To engage most constructively with millennial talent, it is recommended that organisations ensure that their social media page actively reflects their corporate values.

Cut across the digital divide: It is true that the urban-rural divide is slowly disappearing especially amongst the millennials thanks to the great unifier of their times - digital technology. However to stay true to the spirit of diversity and inclusion, forward-thinking companies should also focus on attracting promising millennial talent across the digital divide - those who've grown up without the benefit of the best the times had to offer, but who are intent on creating challenging, meaningful work lives for themselves. Internships, mentoring, and training programs that can ease their journeys to the corporate world, could be initiated.

Provide opportunities for learning: Opportunities for continual learning to hone their skills basis industry requirements, appeal greatly to millennials. Partly fuelled by peer-pressure and partly by ambition, avenues for skill-nourishment are something they are keen on while at a job. To satiate the millennial aspiration for being skill proficient, organisations should ensure that their in house training initiatives are best in class and industry relevant.

Devise contemporary organisational policies: Every generation is a product of its times and millennials are no different. Their career expectations are as specific as can be. To attract and retain the best of this generation, it is suggested that an organisation ensures that its policies, procedures and practices are in tune with the times.

Involve millennial employees while strategizing: It is important to involve the millennial employees on an organisation's roll while devising strategies specific to this generation. While this will not only help identify with this extremely connected cohort better, it will help make them feel more valued and important.

Become gender bilingual: Millennial Indian women no longer believe in the notorious glass ceiling. Stereotypes and gender roles do not hold them back. However they prefer to work with organisations that are essentially gender bilingual and have women friendly policies. To benefit from having a gender diverse workforce, it is suggested that organisations establish themselves as an employer of choice for women.

Respect their need for autonomy: Millennials prefer to work for organisations where their creative contributions are acknowledged. To keep the millennials at their productive and creative best, organisations can consider giving them the requisite flexibility in terms of working style and be sensitive to their want for autonomy.

CONCLUSIONS

Corporate landscape has always been under evolutionary influences of the times and with millennials becoming the majority in the workforce a definite paradigm shift has happened with regard to the average Indian employee's approach towards work - what they aspire for, what drives them to a career, how they prefer to work and what alienates them at work. This nation-wide study of Indian professionals presented several insights on the same. To conclusively comment, scope for rapid growth is the primary career aspiration of millennials. They are less conservative about work values and are most effective in autonomous, flexible settings. Millennial Indian women as much as men aspire for career achievement and both genders do not believe in stereotypes or gender roles. For discerning organisations to leverage the in-house millennial talent for their best interests, leaders who lead millennials need to be inclusive - be flexible and adaptable, encourage collaborative working and be open and authentic. And rest assured that the future of organisations is secure with a generation that is perhaps the most collaborative and social of all.

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