

SHOULD WE UNDO THE FLAT ORGANIZATION: ACCOMMODATING NEEDY MILLENNIAL GENERATION WORKERS

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Abstract

The late 1980s and the 1990s brought major flattening to corporations to facilitate higher per employee profitability and to bring about a new modern and more effective organization structure. However the entry of the largest generation of managerial workers (generation Y) solicits a rethinking of the flat organization. Entry of the Millennial Generation into the corporate world has created problems. In response to these problems firms are seeking to redesign how managers manage, encourage, critique, appraise and motivate the new worker to reduce employee job dissatisfaction, absenteeism and turnover. We propose that not only do interpersonal managerial techniques need to change but organizational structure could be redesigned to help increase employee morale, loyalty and help reduce employee turnover. We conducted a study on millennial students to understand their expectations for promotions and how they view promotions as a satisfier. Findings indicate that a flat organizational structure may not facilitate the needs of the millennial worker. Millennials want promotions and project they would leave flat organizations where they do not receive promotions.

Keywords: Flat organization, millennial worker, workplace promotions

Introduction

The Millennial Generation (Generation Y, Gen Y, M Generation, Echo Generation, Echo Boomers, The Internet Generation, or Nexters), at least 76 million strong (Walker, T, 2007), are job hoppers (Eisner, 2005; Green, 2008). Hutton (2003) reports upwards of one half of all Millennial workers leave UK firms within two years and Thesiss (2007) finds 46% of

US workers leaving their jobs. Given the high firm cost of handling turnover (Simmons & Hinkin 2001), it is important to reduce the high turnover of the generation entering the job market. We submit that one factor driving the high turnover rate of Millennials is the flattening of corporations which has led to few promotional steps for new hires. Eisner's (2005) work calls for firms to change their internal management strategies to adjust to the millennial employee. Changing the work environment is important because, an employee's perception of their work place impacts their performance (Ripley, Hudson, Turner and Osman-Gani, 2006). If an employee perceives that promotional rewards are not obtainable, this employee will tend to leave the organization. Eisner (2005) notes, that Millennials want immediate rewards and acknowledgement for their work. The flat organization tends to make unavailable the amount of promotions as are available in a more hierarchical organization. We submit that organization redesign towards a system at the lower organizational levels with more promotional steps sets forth as a reward system for Millennials that accommodates the character traits of the Millennial.

This paper sets forth how the needs and motivates of Millennials call for promotions as a reward and acknowledgement of success and how a promotional hierarchy provides motivation for Millennials to remain at their current firm. This paper portends that the entry of the largest generation of managerial workers (Generation Y) solicits a rethinking of the flat organization. Entry of the Millennial Generation into the corporate world has created problems. In response to these problems firms are seeking to redesign how managers manage, encourage, critique, appraise and motivate the new worker to reduce employee turnover. We propose that not only do managerial techniques need to change but organizational structure could be redesigned to help increase employee morale, loyalty and help reduce employee turnover.

Others have examined related issues to this paper. Cable & Judge (1994) studied new job entrants and salary expectations. They examined dispositional characteristics in job seekers related to pay and benefits. Judge & Bretz (1992) and Turban & Keon, (1993) found job entrants seek to match their dispositions with the organizational culture of the selected firm. Behling (1998) reviewed employee selection from the firm perspective, looking at criteria for selecting employees including intelligence conscientiousness and job skills. Assertions of self-selection based on disposition fill all of these works and review different aspects of selection criteria and presumed job/organizational/employee fit. These studies have however not reviewed the impact of organization structure in the equation of self-selection, organizational culture or employee dispositions. Nor did they

examine the intersection of dispositions and generational cohort. This paper seeks to fill that hole in the literature.

Millennial Graduates

While teaching millennial students we found, as many others, that the current generation was different than our generation. Thinking back to our days in industry and in the classroom and reading of the problems the current generation was having acclimating to corporate life we began to wonder if the flattening of the organization which occurred in the late 80s and 90s (continuing on today) was partly responsible for the extreme job hopping of millennial graduates. So we undertook to review the character traits associated to Generation Now and study the impacts of a thin corporate ladder upon this group of job-hopping graduates. If organizational structure contributes to Millennial Generation turnover than some of the “flattening of the organization” needs to be reversed. Westerman, & Yamamura (2007) assert that employee retention may be impacted by firms understanding and addressing generational differences. Likewise, they propose that if corporations do not adjust to the Millennial Generation they will continue to have high turnover. We suggest changing the flat organization to accommodate this generation is an appropriate technique to foster firm profits through lower turnover.

Key characteristics of the newest generation of workers

Much study has been done on the millennial generation but translating the understanding of the generation into managerial techniques has been difficult. As a result job hopping is high among Generation Y (Trunk, 2007; Tulgan, 2004; Twenge, & Campbell, 2008; Fields, Wilder, Bunch, Newbold, 2007) and corporate expense related to employee acquisition is on an upward spiral. Techniques aimed at managing Generation Y has to date neglected the impact of organizational structure upon Generation Y motivation, satisfaction and retention.

Descriptions of the Millennial Generations remain consistent from study to study. We believe these studies have found a number of character traits of the Millennial Generation which support the thesis that this generation could be helped by a system of promotional rewards. Howe and Strauss (2000) introduced the first general research on the Millennials finding seven core traits of the millennial generation: Special, Sheltered, Confident, Team-Oriented, Conventional, Pressured, Achieving. Research following has confirmed these general traits and found more detail within these core traits.

We offer a select composite of findings from several studies that found characteristics of the Millennial Generation that we believe support the need for changes in organizational structure to aid firms in better fitting

internal structure with the needs of the Millennial employee. We categorize these findings in four areas: need for praise, expectation for rewards, desire to succeed, and require instant feedback. This categorization was based on the similar areas focused found in the works of the authors found in the table. Fundamentally, each study finds praise, drive, expectations for rewards and instant reward systems vital to Generation Y's set of mental expectations and satisfaction system. Thus, we classified the findings of the authors in this manner within the table.

Composite Study Analysis

	<i>Need for Praise</i>	<i>Expectation for Rewards</i>	<i>Desire to succeed</i>	<i>Require Instant Rewards</i>
Eisner (2004)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Grew up being told they are special and should receive immediate achievement - Require high maintenance - Want a feeling of belonging - Value respect and want to earn it 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Have been told they can do anything -Measure personal success -Want to meet personal goals -Have high expectations of personal success -Have respect for accomplishment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Need to succeed -Seek those who can further professional development -Have respect for accomplishment -Work best when their abilities are identified and challenged -Work best when pushed by challenging work - Have results driven personalities - Work best when pushed by challenging work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Look for instant gratification - Demand immediate rewards - Want a valuable payoff for good work - Have low confidence in long term payoffs and expect shorter term rewards - Seek immediate payoffs vs long term job security - Open to leaving for something that looks better - Are open to leaving for something that looks better - Find current managers lacking in ability to provide incentives to achieve
Francis-Smith (2004)				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Call for immediate feedback regarding performance
Sweeney (2006)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Want to feel special and successful - Prone to doubt and worry 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Prefer merit system 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Impatient, require constant feedback and want to know how they are progressing - No tolerance for delay
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Have been catered to and feel special 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Create mental images of places that are sacred to them 		
Haserot (2005)				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Desire to achieve now - Want instant gratification for any work effort they

				provide - Want instant promotions
Beard, Schwieger, & Surendran (2007)		- Millennials expect customization		
Lyons, Duxbury, & Higgins (2005)	- Desire prestige	- Higher expectations to succeed than does Generation X	- Desire status - Define success in materialistic ways	- Believe change is good and staying the same is bad
Stafford & Griffis (2008)	- Believe their lives are important	- Confident	- Pressured to achieve	

In sum, the character traits of the Millennial Generation do not call for a person to graduate college and then wait seven to eight years until they are promoted. Indeed the desire for praise and recognition, the desire for instant rewards, the desire to achieve, and the requirement to have instant rewards push against the flat organizational structure where promotions are rare and workers are skilled: having multiple lateral jobs. Eisner (2004) expects Gen Y to become more and more "assertive" with employers about getting short-term rewards. Our personal observation from working at several major companies, prior to academic life, is that people want to be promoted and feel frustrated if they cannot be promoted. Now that the Millennial Generation has entered the workforce the findings of Crampton and Hodge (2007) are worrisome: after 10 years of study little is known about how to change things to make a real difference. We assert one way is structural changes inside the organization.

The Flat Organization

During the period 1945-1988 firms focused on hierarchical structure in order to effectively manage large corporations (Hammer and Champy, 2001). However, the advent of information technology and systems which made managing information more efficient allowed control without such hierarchies. The ability to manipulate data and the advent of organizations which had "knowledge workers" who needed little oversight, helped lead to major downsizings of middle management and delayering of management during the late 1980s and 1990s. This delayered organizational structure (the flat organization) continues to flatten and is a given in today's environment (Rajen & Wulf, 2006; Guadalupe & Wolf, 2007). Drucker (1988) pushed the concept of the flat organization denoting that "information-based" organizations will enable businesses to work without the overhead organizational structure. Drucker's message only quickened the pace of

flattening. Organizations had for several years, by this time, noted the lessened need for middle management and had been delayering for years. Flattening the organization was actually studied as early as 1969 when Carzo and Yanouzas (1969) found flat organizations were better at processing decisions but took more time to handle conflict and coordinate the work of groups within the company.

There is evidence that the implementation of the flat organization has helped corporations. Firms, when they flatten, tend to reduce the number of positions (lowering employee expense and shortening the communication path from CEO to lowest level workers). Tsui, Pearse, Porter and Tripoli (1997) denote a number of studies which found positive impacts include: heightened employee performance on core tasks and more corporate loyalty. In 2003, Ellis denotes that perceptions have changed such that the general worker believes that flattening is justified and that the amount of layers between CEO and first-level managers has decreased twenty-five percent. Further, she found evidence that lower level workers take more responsibility, feel empowered, and that higher level managers take more responsibility for results. Hannan, Rankin, and Towry (2006) found that flattened organizations lead to managers who reject more projects where there is excessive slack yielding more profit per subordinate for accepted projects. They hold that this results in a more effective budgeting process. Guadalupe & Wolf (2007) found flattening increases with increased international competition.

Of course there are problems with flattening the organization. Normally, such flattening is abrupt and disruptive. Such disruption causes morale issues as well as harming efficiency while the organization recovers from the disruption and fully develops processes to maximize the lack of layers (Brousseau, et al., 1996; Evans, Gunz & Jallard, 1977; Nutt & Backoff, 1977; Ebadan & Winstanley, 1997). Beyond this, problems found by researchers include: the quickness with which one's career dead-ends (Applebaum & Santiago, 1997), increased outsourcing of work to replace the lost middle management jobs (Seppala, 2003), a lack of training and lowered employee morale may derail the benefits of delayering (Grimshaw, Beynon, Rubery and Ward, 2006), and employee polarization into specific expert groups vs nonexpert employees. Delayering forces organizations to be more diligent and invest more resources in developing the leadership capacity among the remaining managers or teamwork effectiveness is reduced (Klagge, 1997).

Hierarchies are generally looked at as organizational means to either distribute or process information or authority (Guadalupe & Wolf, 2007). However, limiting the view of structure to these facilitating functions limits the possibilities of what structure can provide. Indeed Guadalupe & Wolf

(2007) also note that research demonstrates that changing organizational structure impacts firm performance in a broad array of consequences. In this regard, we believe that structure impacts employee motivation, loyalty, optimism, and focal belief in future potential. Likewise, Nelson (1997) asserts that reengineering and rethinking organizations must consider the employee, using what we know of psychology to fit the organization with the employee.

We agree that many mature knowledge workers do not need the layers of organization and that added red tape from hierarchies slows down immediate action on key issues. But, to assume that a college graduate with little expertise and no experience can operate without supervision is a faulty concept. Likewise, the characteristics of this generation calls for a system of rewards in the form of promotions that encourage individuals and as a result encourages and employees longevity with a firm.

In light of the entrance of the new generation, we wish to challenge the notion that flattening is the panacea for business. Indeed it may cause business major problems in terms of higher employee turnover, and higher costs of business. We believe that unique study needs to be done on new managerial entrants and especially with regard to the Millennial Generation. Some work has been done tangentially to this proposed focus. Grimshaw, et al. (2006) find that the flattened workplace means that there is a large gap in the organizational ladder. This gaps has made it a challenge for an employee to know what it takes to get promoted. It means that fewer employees get promotions and thus creates a “winner take all” attitude. They also find that this situation makes it hard to create employee loyalty, increases employee training costs, and may harm “on-the job” training, since such is seen not to aid in one’s chances for promotion.

The Millennial Employee in a Flat Environment

Westerman, and Yamamura (2007) propose that if firms do not modify themselves to account for the differences associated with the Millennial Generation they will experience high turnover. We believe this proposition true in relationship to the flat structure of the organization. The number of levels within organizations has declined significantly since the late 1980s. This flattened structure causes three general problems for the Generation Y worker as they enter the first few years of working life. They stagnate quickly and do not perceive desired recognition for their work results. They do not sense a potential reward for staying with their current firm. They do not develop loyalty to the firm since they do not believe they will attain the status they desire.

The flat organization ignores several important factors that are consistent in millennial workers. Generation Y wants: praise, instant

gratification, and promotions which recognize task accomplishment and provide a sense of attainment. We submit that the lack of these wants being met are: poor employee morale, job instability, turnover and resultant firm inefficiency and ineffectiveness. Providing the Generation Y worker promotional steps, which advance their career, would facilitate their needs for praise, gratification, more immediate payoff, prestige, and most of the attributes listed in the above description of the generation. A review of the needs described by the Millennial Generation descriptions above seem to have some direct beneficial fulfillment that can come with the promotional step ladders which were eliminated during the rush to flatten the organization.

Promotions provide for the Millennial Generation worker improvement in morale because they are proud of themselves, have a feeling of accomplishment and satisfaction with the firm who has recognized their attainments and has given them positive feedback. Promotions also promote more responsible behavior, in that, as one moves up they have a greater sense of self-respect and seek further promotions (De Souza, 2002). Thus, having a corporate ladder can reduce turnover. Eisner (2005) found that the Millennial worker believes management is ineffective in providing incentives that motivate and that they want to work at a company where they feel appreciated. Perhaps the lack of promotions as an incentive contributes to this Generation Y viewpoint.

Several researchers have found the relationship between promotions and turnover. Munasingh (2006) notes that expectations for promotion are strongly deterrent for turnover, and that workers who believe promotions are obtainable will stay. Lyness & Judiesch (2001) found promoted managers were less likely to leave their company if the promotion had occurred within the past 11 months. The Mercer Human Resource Center found commitment to a firm and work motivation are both impacted more from promotional opportunities than base pay (Accounting Office management & Administration Report, 2003). Smola and Sutton (2002) found that employees will have no greater commitment to the company than they believe the company has toward them. Eisner and Harvey (2009) report studies noting that 50% of Generation Y workers expect to be promoted within 2 years and that most Gen Y men would leave their job for greater advancement opportunity. Christen, Iyer, and Soberman (2006) Found direct relationships between worker satisfaction and promotional opportunities.

Methodology/Results

As an initial test of our hypothesis we surveyed the millennial students at one of our colleges. We sent an email to 1287 students and received 213 responses for a 16.55% response rate. An offer of a \$25 Visa

card to one of the participants drove responses. Questions were oriented on the expectations of the generation toward their future careers and how they would respond in situations given different possible future organizations. Respondents were queried as to their preferred work environment. Our hypothesis was that students when projecting their possible future organizational environments would prefer to work in hierarchical organizations which would facilitate promotional stepping stones. We also hypothesized that students would project themselves in the future to believe that they were more successful if they had promotions.

Two possible work environments were described:

In a hierarchical organization the company has established a large number of management levels, perhaps 28 levels. A new manager who is a very good worker can expect a promotion to a higher level every 6 to 12 months. The higher the person goes in the company the longer it takes to be promoted to the next level. But in the early days, promotions came at a quicker rate. Salary increases each promotion level from 3% to 8%.

In a flat organization there may only be 4 levels of management and getting a promotion would only happen once every 6 to 10 years. In this type of organization you would receive the same pay raises in the same time frame as a hierarchical organization, and you would have different jobs with increasing responsibility while working but with no "promotions". Everyone works as a team and at the same organizational level.

Respondents were then asked. "If you made the same amount of money working for either of the companies, which one would you rather work for: hierarchical organization or flat organization?" 59% of all students desired the hierarchical organization with 64% of the business students favoring the hierarchical organization. When asked how they would like working in a hierarchical organization (rating 1-10) 68% of all students and 75% of business students rated approval at 6 or better (5 or better 96% of business students). When asked if they would like working in a flat organization respondent scores (business and total population) dropped to 50% (6 or better). These results demonstrated strong significance. A significantly higher number of respondents ($n = 170$) preferred the hierarchical organization over the flat organization ($n = 117$), $\chi^2 (1, N = 287) = 9.79, p = .002$. There was no difference between males and females regarding the preference for a flat or hierarchical organization, $\chi^2 (1, N = 287) = 1.13, p = .288$. Similarly, after eliminating majors with fewer than 10 respondents, there was no association between one's major and the preference for a flat or hierarchical organization, $\chi^2 (7, N = 234) = 7.24, p = .404$.

We felt a more telling appraisal of their projection of liking one organizational verses another was to discover if they viewed promotions as a measure of personal success. On a scale of 1-10 students reported that they would see promotions as a sign of personal success (6 or better – 82% total population and 89% business students) (5 or better – 89% total population and 98% business students).

To ascertain if promotions might help the millennial graduate reduce their job hopping tendencies, we asked students to project their likelihood to stay at an organization where they were promoted. Students reported they would be more likely to stay at an organization where they were promoted (6 or better – 84% total population and 89% business students) (5 or better – 93% total population and 100% business students). To focus this in the opposite direction we asked if students would be likely to leave an organization which had not promoted them within 3 years (6 or better – 35% total population and 57% business students) (5 or better – 65% total population and 75% business students). These questions demonstrated that the lack of promotions would increase both their readiness to leave and an intent to leave (although intent is weaker than readiness). Thus, lack of promotions open a person to opportunities that become available and increase the focal attention to find another job (although focal attention has a weaker intensity than openness).

Respondents preferring the hierarchical organization had significantly more positive attitudes toward promotion, $F(1, 285) = 28.23, p < .001, \eta^2 = .09$. Moreover, respondents who preferred the hierarchical organization reported that they expected more frequent promotions, $F(1, 283) = 5.25, p = .023, \eta^2 = .02$. There were generally no gender differences in attitudes toward promotion. Males, however, did expect more frequent promotions than did females, $F(1, 283) = 11.04, p < .001, \eta^2 = .04$. Different majors expected promotions at different rates, $F(7, 224) = 2.76, p = .009, \eta^2 = .08$. Business majors expected the most frequent promotions. Post hoc analyses using the Fisher LSD criterion indicated that business majors expected significantly faster promotions than did education and psychology majors ($p < .05$). 71% of the total population (80% when education and Christian ministries majors are redacted) and 92% of business students expect to be promoted within 2 years. We find this response telling beyond the others. Even when students put themselves in flat organizations as their preference, they still expect to be promoted within 2 years.

We were surprised at the weak response to our projecting question asking if the respondent would feel bad about their personal success if their friends were in hierarchical organization and had experience promotions, while they were in a flat organization. The question provided that the respondent had salary increases equal to their friends but without

promotions. Only 23% of the total population and 37% business students rated 6 or better that they would feel bad about themselves. However the numbers jumped to 56% total population and 71% business students on a 5 or better scale. We had expected higher numbers here but we still find significant alarm to businesses if millennial employees devalue themselves when they compare themselves to peers in other organizations. Because the survey items were intercorrelated, the items associated with promotion (the importance of promotion, the motivating value of promotions, how likely the respondent was to leave if not promoted, and how good or bad a respondent would feel if he or she were in a flat organization and his or her friends were promoted) were combined into a single scale called "Attitude toward Promotion." This 4-item scale had acceptable internal consistency, $\alpha = .69$.

Due to the low frequencies in some majors, these were combined into the following categories: business, communication, education, psychology, art, interior design, kinesiology, biology, and other. The students with other majors were removed from the analysis, and a one-way ANOVA indicated that there was a significant effect of college major on one's attitude toward promotion, $F(7, 226) = 2.23, p = .033, \eta^2 = .07$. Business and interior design majors had the most positive attitudes toward promotion, and education majors the least positive attitudes toward promotion. A Tukey HSD post hoc comparison showed that the business majors' attitudes toward promotion were significantly higher than those of education students.

There was a significant association between one's choice of a flat or hierarchical organization and one's intention to design such an organization if starting his or her own business, $\chi^2(1, N = 286) = 124.93, p < .001$.

Discussion

The implications of this research should drive corporations to rethink the flat organization at the entry level. New managerial entrants need to develop firm loyalty and need progressively enhanced positions within the company. This kind of a structure would serve the Generation Y employee by understanding their penchants and characteristics and would be molding the organization to enable better acclimation into the corporation.

We are not suggesting that firms completely reverse course and reinstate all the layers of management that existed prior to 1988. Rather, we are suggesting that developing a new structure geared toward Generation Y can support firm goals. This ladder could be devised in such a way as to divide the first management layer into a series of stepping stones toward movement to a higher corporate level

This structure would provide the Now Generation worker with appropriate feedback, encouragement, and prospects for career growth. This type structure could better fulfill this generation's desire for feedback,

acknowledgement of attainment and symbols of success. It would support them in meeting personal goals, having a payoff for work, and a multitude of the other character needs of this generation.

This structure would also help businesses minimize the job-hopping nature of the Millennial Generation worker. The firm would thus have less expense recruiting replacement workers, less reduced performance as attention is spent by current workers seeking a new place of employment, and the cost of undone work while seeking to fill open positions. It could also impact morale and thus work effort, absenteeism, and performance.

Limitations

This survey was conducted during the recession of 2009. This could have reduced the results in intention to leave as students contemplate the difficulty of obtaining and retaining jobs in the current economic environment. This would have impacted the results by lessening the expectations for promotions. Thus, the survey, if done prior to the recession, could have had a greater demonstrated need for corporate hierarchy for the millennial worker.

Future Research

This survey could be conducted at other colleges to validate the projected feeling of millennial students. Future studies could survey millennial graduates who are in both flat and hierarchical orgs for differences in satisfaction, turnover, etc. These studies could ascertain how graduates of college react to the work structure and environments they found themselves in and their feelings with regard to their work structure environments.

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