

Work Experience and Polytechnic Students' Expectations of Working Life

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the influence of work experience on polytechnic students' expectations of working life, and the extent to which these expectations resemble known characteristics of Generation Y. The survey involved 147 polytechnic students (62.6% with and 37.4% without work experience). The results showed that their salary expectations were unrealistic. Most of the polytechnic students believed that they would find their first job through job advertisements or personal contacts but those with work experience were more likely to work for someone they knew. Both groups believed that qualification, English proficiency and personality are important in securing their first job but they considered family background to be irrelevant. The students with work experience were more correct in their assessment of the importance of work experience to their would-be employers. The results showed that the polytechnic students exhibited the characteristics of Generation Y, and there are no significant differences between the two groups. They expect their employers to guide them in their new job and to provide affirmative feedback. They also expect to engage in more group work than individual work. However, they have not given much thought to whether they would make sacrifices to meet project deadlines or whether they would be leaders or followers in their new workplace. The findings suggest that Generation X employers may have to accommodate to the expectations of their Generation Y employees, rather than expect them to fit into the old ways of working.

KEYWORDS: *Generation Y, millennials, polytechnic students, work expectations*

Introduction

Generation Y, also referred to as the "millennial generation" is generally understood as people born in or after 1980 (aged 45 or younger in the year 2015). Howe and Strauss [7] define the millennial generation as those born between 1980 and 2002 (which makes them 13-35). There are some variations in the age ranges for Generation X and Y depending on scholars. For example, Thielfoldt and Scheef [24] define the millennial generation as those born between 1977 and 1998 (aged 17-38), Generation X as those born between 1965 and 1976 (aged 39 to 50) and Baby Boomers as those born between 1946 and 1964 (aged 49-51). These ages are calculated for the year 2015. In this paper, Thielfoldt and Scheef's age categorisation of the millennial generation will be used. For consistency, the term "Generation Y" will be used in this paper to refer to the millennial generation.

Because of their different life experiences, Generation Y may have different expectations of working life from Generation X. Some distinctive differences between Generations X and Y are described here to provide background information before expectations of working life is dealt with.

Thielfoldt and Scheef describe Generation X as independent, resilient and adaptable and Generation Y as over-confident of their abilities. They also characterise the Generation X as people who reject rules, and dislike authority and rigidity but the Generation Y rewrite the rules. In terms of personal characteristics, Myers and Sadaghiani [16] describe Generation Y as self-centered, unmotivated, disrespectful, and disloyal but more accepting of diversity and working in groups than previous generations because of an increased amount of group work in school and college.

When the generational cohort differences are carried into the workplace, the older employees who are either Baby Boomers or Generation X would feel uncomfortable with the new and younger Generation Y employees who have values and work habits which are distinctly different from theirs. Since older employees hold upper and middle management positions in the workplace, they may marginalise Generation Y until they conform [16]. Studies have been conducted on various aspects of work situations. For example, Ng, Schweitzer, and Lyons' [17] analysis of survey data from 23,413 millennial undergraduate university students from across Canada showed that they had realistic expectations of