Stereotype or reality? A genuine review of millennials' career perspectives

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to review existing research on the career attitudes, values and behaviors of the Millennial generation (born approximately between 1981 and 1996) to differentiate how research evidence confirms or contradicts the stereotypes of Millennials based on their coverage in the popular press.

Design/methodology/approach – The authors conducted an integrative literature review comprising 102 studies published between 2004 and 2025 that were published in peer-reviewed journals of sufficiently high quality.

Findings – The authors present out findings based on five main themes: career success; career development, patterns and progressions; work-life interface; career-relevant individual differences; and contextual influences on Millennials' careers, including the global financial crisis of 2008 and the Covid-19 pandemic. What is found largely questions the stereotype of Millennials as being lazy, self-interested job-hoppers. Instead, the authors find that they are committed to work but with a strong sense of work-life balance.

Practical implications – Millennials represent three-quarters of the global workforce in 2025 and are increasingly in leadership positions. Understanding their careers helps others working with them as employees and/or managers. Generational stereotypes have staying power and can contribute to intergenerational conflict; having a perspective based on research evidence provides a more nuanced perspective.

Originality/value – To the best of the authors' knowledge, this is the first literature review of research on Millennials that specifically focuses on understanding their careers attitudes, values and behaviors. This study complements existing reviews on Millennials at work.

Keywords Generational differences, Millennials, Careers, Pandemic, Covid-19

Paper type Literature review

A staggering amount of attention has been paid to the Millennial generation in both the academic and popular press (Deloitte, 2025; Deal, Altman, & Rogelberg, 2010; Twenge, 2014). A recent Google search for "Millennials" returned 225 million results, and "Millennials careers" yielded 31 million. No longer organizational newcomers, Millennials are currently estimated to represent 75% of the global workforce (TeamStage, 2024) and occupy positions at numerous levels within organizations, including top leadership. Perhaps because of their ubiquity as the first generation of social media natives, Millennials have received a lot of attention from the popular press, mostly negative, portraying them as lazy, entitled, narcissistic job-hoppers (Chicago Tribue, 2021; Stein, 2013; Twenge, 2014).

Generational cohorts are groups of individuals who by virtue of their point of entry into a life stage are thought to have a shared experience that differentiates them from others who entered that stage at a different time, earlier or later (Joshi, Dencker, & Franz, 2011). Generational differences matter in the workplace, affecting outcomes as central and varied as conflict, socialization and organizational change (Joshi et al., 2011; Rudolph & Zacher, 2017; Smola & Sutton, 2002; Urick, Hollensbe, Masterson, & Lyons, 2017). Empirical findings on generational differences can be elusive in part because of confounds with other related constructs like age and historical period (Lyons & Kuron, 2014); however, even given this methodological ambiguity, people in today's work organizations believe these differences exist, which helps perpetuate intergenerational stereotypes and conflicts (Van Rossem, 2019). Scholars have devoted ample attention and effort trying to understand whether Millennials truly differ from other generations in terms of their attitudes, values and behaviors (Ravid, Costanza, & Robero, 2025). Much of this research looks at differences between Millennials and the other generations currently in the workforce (Table 1).

Understanding Millennials is critically important at the current moment. Ranging in age from roughly their early 20 s to early 40 s, Millennials constitute approximately half of the working population for managerial and professional occupations, according to the U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2020). Yet, while there have been several recent literature reviews of generational differences at work (Deal et al., 2010; Joshi et al., 2011; Lyons & Kuron, 2014; Ng & Parry, 2016; Rudolph, Rauvola, & Zacher, 2018; Twenge, 2010), none has directly examined the attitudes, values and behaviors of Millennials' careers. This omission creates a gap in our understanding as to whether the claims people

Table 1. Generational cohorts in the workplace

Cohort	Year born
Traditionals	1928–1945
Baby Boomers	1946–1964
Generation X	1965–1980
Millennials / Generation Y	1981–1996
Generation Z	1997–2012

Source(s): Ravid et al. (2025)

believe to be true about Millennials that are touted in the popular press – e.g. that they are lazy and self-focused rather than organization-focused – are actually supported by academic research on this topic.

Defined as "the individually perceived sequence of attitudes and behaviors associated with work-related experiences and activities over the span of the person's life" (Hall, 2002, p. 12), careers are distinct from other organizational constructs because they are longitudinal, and multi-level, bridging between individuals and institutions such as organizations, occupations, industries and non-work domains (Barley, 1989). Older Millennials embarked upon their careers during the global financial crisis of 2008 and ensuing recession (Twenge, 2014; Ng, Lyons, & Schweitzer, 2018) and further experienced the brunt of the pandemic in their formative career stage (Akkermans, Richardson, & Kraimer, 2020; Varshney, 2023). This is also a generation versed in technology and social media (Ismail, Rahim, Lee, & Tharir, 2016; Van Rossem, 2019), which can support career development and set it apart from previous generations.

In this paper, we seek to advance theory on careers in today's workplace by offering the first integrative literature review (Cho, 2022) of the research on Millennials' careers to see what thematic categories emerge. Our aim in doing this review is to assess to what extent scholarly research on Millennials supports their stereotypes in the popular press. Given recent interest in how the pandemic has shaped the workplace in general and people's careers in particular (Akkermans et al., 2020), we also address how it may have changed Millennials' career preferences.

Our conceptual review advances the study of careers in several ways. First, given the prevalence and staying power of generational stereotypes (e.g. Chicago Tribue, 2021; Van Rossem, 2019; Twenge, 2014), it is important to understand the state of research about Millennials' career-relevant values, attitudes and behaviors. Much of what we uncover may question the conventional narrative about Millennials as entitled, selfish job-hoppers (Stein, 2013; Chicago Tribue, 2021). This may be especially true post-pandemic (e.g. Varshney, 2023). Second, having a better sense of what Millennials value in their own careers has implications for their leadership in organizations. Third, more practically, uncovering what we know about Millennials' careers helps set an agenda to guide future research and practice in the post-pandemic world.

Methodological approach

We followed the existing recommendations for conducting an integrative literature review (e.g. Torraco, 2005). To locate relevant articles for our initial consideration, we searched five electronic databases – ABI-Inform, PsycINFO, ProQuest, EBSCOHost and Emerald Insight – using Boolean combinations of the keywords "Millennial" or "Generation Y" and "career" for peer-reviewed articles, published between 2004 and 2025. We also cross-referenced articles in previous reviews of generational differences on workplace issues (e.g. Joshi et al., 2011; Lyons & Kuron, 2014). Next, we reviewed each article to determine whether it met our inclusion criteria, based on the quality of the research methods (e.g. was based on an adequate sample size) and the relevance of the conclusions. Finally, we assessed the content of each article based on its key findings or conclusions and aggregated these findings into thematic categories. We then integrated these results into new understandings about each category, which were validated by at least two authors. Our final sample included 102 papers (noted with an asterisk in the references); a full list of papers as well as more details about our methodology and process is available from the authors.

Understanding millennials' careers: beyond the stereotypes

The topics covered by current research on Millennials' careers can be grouped into five main thematic categories:

(1) career success;

(2) career development, patterns and progressions;

(3) work-life interface;

(4) career-relevant individual differences; and

(5) the universality of Millennials' careers across cultural contexts.

For each category, common stereotypes exist and are reinforced in the popular press. These stereotypes are so pervasive that even Millennials believe they apply to themselves (Van Rossem, 2019). For each category, we review not only what the research says, but how it reinforces or deviates from these stereotypes and assumptions. A summary of our findings is found in Table 2.

1) Career success

Career success is defined as the accumulated positive outcomes of working over time (e.g. Seibert & Kramer, 2001). There are two main types of career success: *objective*, marked by extrinsic factors like salary, number of promotions and position, and *subjective*, intrinsic judgments people make about their own success, including factors like career and job satisfaction (Seibert & Kramer, 2001). The stereotype often attributed to Millennials is that they prioritize subjective career success over objective success.

Objective career success. Although younger Millennials are still in the early phases of their careers – resulting in limited available evidence on their objective career success – some research has begun to explore Millennials' advancement within corporate hierarchies, including promotions and compensation growth. For instance, a salient point of difference between Millennials and their older-generation bosses in an Australian public service firm was that bosses would not promote their Millennial subordinates as quickly as the subordinates expected (Winter & Jackson, 2016). In part, bosses viewed this as Millennial entitlement, though this claim was not empirically supported, and is likely an illustration of the prevalent cultural narrative about Millennials rather than an empirical difference (e.g. Twenge, 2014; Stein, 2013; Chicago Tribue, 2021). Twenge, Campbell, & Gentile (2012) found that in their early career, Millennials placed more value on making money and gaining status compared to Boomers and less compared to Gen Xers, suggesting the possibility of differences in the way Millennials experience success. Other research found that all generations value competitive pay (Roongrerngsuke & Liefooghe, 2013; Takase, Oba, & Yamashita, 2009) suggesting no difference between the generations. Another study found that both Millennials and Gen Xers prioritized good wages as their number-one job reward, but for Millennials, interesting work was number-two, versus job security for Gen X (Tosti-Kharas & Lamm, 2023).

Subjective career success. In terms of subjective career success, Australian Millennial public service employees defined long-term success as making a difference in the world and helping others, and reported feeling frustrated by not feeling their daily work made a substantive difference (Winter & Jackson, 2016). Research from the USA is mixed in this regard. Consistent with the Australian data, Bubany & Hansen (2011) conducted a cross-temporal meta-analysis, a robust method that allows the separation of age and cohort, of college students from 1976 to 2004 using the Strong-Campbell interest inventory and found an increase in ratings for social careers over time. However, in the cross-cultural comparison

Table 2. Summary of conceptual review of research on millennials' careers

Review category	Popular stereotype	State of the research
Career success	Millennials define success in terms of "saving the world," rather than making money	• Millennials across cultures defined success primarily as achievement • Results were mixed on both millennials' desire to make a positive difference in the world as well as their overall job and career satisfaction
Career development, patterns and progressions	Millennials are "job hoppers" who embrace a boundaryless career mindset	• Millennials' job mobility and organizational commitment is similar to generation X and more than baby boomers • Upward career paths remain the norm, both across and within organizations
Work-Life interface	Millennials are lazy, value leisure and place a stronger priority on work-life balance than previous generations	• Value placed on leisure and desire for work-life balance has been increasing over generations, from traditionals to millennials • However, millennials were willing to work hard for this balance. There are times when work might take precedence over leisure and family time
Career-Relevant individual differences	Millennials are entitled and narcissistic, but also more altruistic than previous generations	• Millennials' work values (e.g. altruism) are more similar to than different from other generations' values • Recent evidence suggests that millennials are not more narcissistic or entitled than other generations were at the same age
Contextual influences on millennials' careers	Millennials have been affected by the great recession and the pandemic	• Some major world events (e.g. the great recession, advent of technology) affect millennials even across cultures • However, there is very limited research on millennials in the workplace post-pandemic • What we do know suggests that they now place a higher value on financial security and job stability

Source(s): By authors

reported earlier, making a difference and helping others were less important to success than making money for U.S. Millennials, and were on par with being satisfied and learning (Parry, Unite, Chudzikowski, Briscoe, & Shen, 2012). Thus, it may be that Millennials wish to do good and help others, but still objectively prioritize making money. This view may be in line with how *others* in the workplace view Millennials, as in a US-based study that found that older generations thought Millennials were primarily concerned with money and not prosocial activities like helping others (Weeks & Schaffert, 2019). In sum, counter to stereotypes of Millennials being more interested in doing good than making money, our research finds the opposite to be true, even across cultures.

2) Career development, patterns and progressions
Much of the conceptual writing about career patterns tends to imply that younger generations embrace a boundaryless career mindset and will not commit to a single employer for the long-term (Van Rossem, 2019). This may be in part because of the economic instability Millennials grew up with, whereas traditional careers are associated with older generations, in particular Baby Boomers, for whom job stability and organizational security were the norm (Hall, 2002; Arthur & Rousseau, 1996).

Boundaryless career patterns. A common stereotype about Millennials is their lack of organizational commitment and frequent career moves. In support of increasing boundarylessness, a study of Malaysian workers across industries found that, compared to their Generation X counterparts, Millennials were more likely to desire non-traditional careers outside organizations (Ismail et al., 2016). This same paper also found that Millennials valued making frequent job changes, not being tied to any one organization and desiring more freelance and contract work. A study of Canadian university students on the job market found that more than half did not want to find an organization in which they could stay long-term (Ng, Schweitzer, & Lyons, 2010) and a meta-analysis (Costanza, Badger, Fraser, Severt, & Gade, 2012) showed a decline in affective, normative, and organizational commitment over successive generations alongside increased intentions to quit. Cross-sectional studies also reported lower commitment among Millennials (e.g. Brunetto, Farr-Wharton, & Shacklock, 2012; Solnet, Kralj, & Kandampully, 2012).

We interpret the practical significance of these studies with caution. A study in The Netherlands claimed significantly increasing turnover intentions and decreasing continuance commitment across generations, though we note that the response means were at the midpoint, interpreted as essentially neutral, rather than indicating strong intention to leave (Lub, Bijvank, Bal, Blomme, & Schalk, 2012). This same study showed that both Generation X and Millennials valued intra-organizational mobility more than Baby Boomers, which questions the assumption that seeking new opportunities necessarily means leaving the company.

Further, based on time-lag data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the Pew Research Center found that Millennials were just as likely to stay with their employers as Gen Xers were at the same age (Fry, 2017) and that college-educated Millennials actually stayed *longer* than Gen Xers at the same age (Fry, 2017). Thus, the stereotype that Millennials are less committed to their employers was not substantiated.

Adding to this picture, Lyons, Schweitzer, & Ng (2015) concluded that younger generations were simply making more career moves in all directions than previous generations, but the upward career path remained the norm. This results in Millennials having almost twice as many job and organizational moves per year as Gen Xers, almost three times as many as the Boomers, and 4.5 times as many as the Traditionals. Perhaps as a function of their relatively early career stage and time in the labor market, Millennials

reported fewer overall significant career events compared to their older counterparts (Ng et al., 2018).

Employability. If it's true that Millennials desire mobility, will they be able to move successfully? Part of the answer depends on their beliefs about employability, and part depends on being able to actually move jobs. Australian Millennials viewed their current and future employability as very high, even in a sluggish economy (Winter & Jackson, 2016). A sample of Millennial hospitality workers in Australia reported higher turnover intention and job switching behavior than Gen X and Boomer coworkers (Solnet et al., 2012). This group also reported less job security, but higher employability. The authors tested for intra-Millennial differences and found that the youngest Millennials, who had been in the organization a maximum of five years, were the most likely to desire to switch jobs compared to their older Millennial counterparts.

Beyond age, context is likely more important than has been noted in the extant literature. In a matched sample of university students graduating in 2006 and 2009 in Belgium (De Hauw & De Vos, 2010), the authors disentangled generational influences from contextual influences, specifically the global recession of 2008. Support was found for the generational hypothesis that Millennials had high expectations of their employers regarding job content, career development and financial rewards. They also found support for contextual influences; the 2009 cohort of Millennials graduating after the recession had lower expectations of social atmosphere (good relationships among colleagues), work-life balance and job security than did the 2006 cohort.

Any conclusion about whether Millennials are indeed "job hoppers" must be based on studies that account for age and/or career stage as well as context, and our review yielded no studies matching these criteria. Research has found that job satisfaction increases as people age (e.g. Dobrow *et al.*, 2018), while voluntary turnover decreases (Ng & Feldman, 2009). Therefore, research must rule out the conclusion that job hopping can be attributed to being young in general, rather than specifically to being a young Millennial. Similarly, those in more advanced career stages in terms of longer organizational and positional tenure report higher continuance commitment (Allen & Meyer, 1993) and lower turnover intentions (Ornstein & Isabella, 1990). Consequently, studies that overlook career stage risk mischaracterizing Millennials as job hoppers, when their moves may be a rational response to roles that – due to limited tenure or early career placement – offer less responsibility, power or status than those held by more experienced colleagues. Taken together, the research on the impact of Millennials' boundaryless careers is mixed and suggests a number of potentially confounding factors, including age, career stage and/or context.

3) Work-life interface

The question of what role Millennials want work to play in their lives is central to understanding their career decisions and aspirations, as well as their commitment to work. One of the most pervasive stereotypes about Millennials is the higher value they place on work/life balance (Van Rossem, 2019). They have been characterized in the press as valuing work-life balance higher than any other job reward, including upward mobility and a sense of meaningfulness at work (Jenkins, 2018) and a recent non-academic report showed them to have higher levels of burnout than other cohorts, attributed to the competing demands of work and family (Braun, 2025). In fact, Millennials are often portrayed in the popular press as overly demanding and entitled to perks, such as remote work and flexible hours, that enable this work-life balance (Stein, 2013).

Consistently, one study found that Millennials placed less importance on work than family compared to their Baby Boomer counterparts, and about the same importance as

Generation X (Gallup, 2016). Smola & Sutton (2002) noted a trend over previous generations (from Boomers to Gen X) toward desiring a balance between work and personal goals. A time-lag study demonstrated that Millennial students in the USA placed greater value on leisure and less value on work centrality than did Baby Boomers at the same age (Twenge, Campbell, Hoffman, & Lance, 2010). Consistent with these findings, studies of Canadian university students (Ng & Gossett, 2013) and working employees (Kuron, Lyons, Schweitzer, & Ng, 2015) found that balancing personal life and career was by far the top career goal for Millennials. Similarly, in a cross-organizational study of South African employees, Millennials rated work-life balance the most important job reward, even over career advancement (Pregnolato, Bussin, & Schlechter, 2017). A survey of 1,100 Millennial employees across five large companies revealed that work-life balance ranked fourth in importance behind job satisfaction, salary and development of new skills, with 81% of women and 69% of men rating it as very or extremely important (Harrington, Van Deusen, Fraone, & Morelock, 2015). Finally, in a study comparing generations across five countries, Cogin (2012) found a consistent pattern of increasing value placed on leisure from Traditionals to Millennials, and decreasing value placed on hard work. Thus, the research presents a clear trend of Millennials valuing work-life balance, especially compared to previous generations.

Yet, despite this trend, much research finds that Millennials' desire for work-life balance does not mean that they are unwilling to work hard or be flexible in finding that balance. For example, during the financial crisis, Millennials lowered their expectations of work-life balance (De Hauw & De Vos, 2010). In an Australian study, Millennials felt that work-life balance would not always be attainable, noting that occasional work during the evenings and weekends was to be expected and tolerated (Winter & Jackson, 2016). In fact, Millennials reported being willing to take pay cuts, give up promotions or change geographic locations to maintain work-life balance (Ernst & Young, 2015). In sum, although Millennials place a high value on work-life balance, the stereotype that they feel entitled to, or demanding of it, is not supported.

4) Career-relevant individual differences

Much has been asserted colloquially about what Millennials value in life and the job characteristics they find desirable. For example, the alleged credo of the Millennial generation at work is, "Let's make the world a better place," suggesting an endorsement of altruistic values (Dries, Pepermans, & De Kerpel, 2008). A more negative allegation is that Millennials value hard work less and leisure time more, essentially that they are lazy (Stein, 2013; Chicago Tribue, 2021). We examine the extent to which research backs claims that Millennials have different career-relevant values than other generations.

The best support for answering whether Millennials' career values differ from other generations comes from a small number of time-lag studies that address the age confound. Twenge et al. (2010) found that Millennials placed greater value on leisure and less value on work centrality, social (e.g. making friends) and intrinsic (e.g. an interesting job, opportunities for learning) values than did Gen X and Boomers. However, Millennials also reported placing greater value on external values (e.g. pay and promotions) than Boomers. Millennials did not value altruism (e.g. helping others) more highly than previous generations. A longitudinal study comparing two panels of high school seniors (ages 18–25), one of Millennials and one of Gen Xers, found that Millennials placed greater value on extrinsic rewards and experienced stronger job entitlement than did Gen Xers (Krahn & Galambos, 2014). While job entitlement declined in both cohorts as they aged, it did so at a slower rate for Millennials. Despite these findings, research also shows that values may

change during the transition between high school and early career, suggesting that longer-term longitudinal studies are needed (Jin & Rounds, 2012). In addition, several cross-sectional studies suggest that Millennials value learning (Roongrerngsuke & Liefooghe, 2013), advancement (Leschinsky & Michael, 2004; Wong, Gardiner, Lang, & Coulon, 2008), fun (e.g. Lester, Standifer, Schultz, & Windsor, 2012; Lamm & Meeks, 2009) and mentorship (Gursoy, Maier, & Chi, 2008) more than older generations.

In terms of Millennials' altruism, although cross-sectional research suggests Millennials value doing good for others (e.g. Deloitte, 2025; Kuron et al., 2015), the preponderance of evidence suggests that while Millennials value altruism, it is not a distinguishing generational characteristic as they do not-values it more than other generations (Cennamo & Gardner, 2008; Chen & Choi, 2008; Hansen & Leuty, 2011; Twenge et al., 2010). Some studies even suggest Millennials place a lesser value on altruism (Leveson & Joiner, 2014) and serving others at work (Weeks & Schaffert, 2019). Millennials reported performing fewer organizational citizenship behaviors (OCBs) compared to older generations; however, those with a service-based career anchor performed similar numbers of OCBs as their older co-workers (Gong, Greenwood, Hoyte, Ramkissoon, & He, 2018). In terms of Millennials' work ethic, the evidence of increased value on leisure (Twenge et al., 2010) and decreased value on hard work (Cogin, 2012) are counterbalanced by other research suggesting greater willingness to work overtime and self-reports of higher work martyrdom, relative to Boomers and Gen Xers, on items such as "I want to show complete dedication to my company and job" (Becton, Walker, & Jones-Farmer, 2014).

Of all the claims made about Millennials, perhaps none has received more media attention than the claim that Millennials are entitled, self-focused narcissists (Stein, 2013). Indeed, studies, some using time-lag designs, have found greater narcissism in Millennials compared to previous generations (e.g. Stewart & Bernhardt, 2010; Twenge & Campbell, 2008; Twenge, Konrath, Foster, Campbell, & Bushman, 2008). Yet, these findings have not been without criticism, on methodological grounds, that they are not robust proof that Millennials are more narcissistic than previous generations were at the same age, or that every generation in its youth may in fact be a "Generation Me" (Roberts, Edmonds, & Grijalva, 2010; also see Trzesniewski, Donnellan, & Robins, 2008). The results are similarly mixed. More narcissistic Millennials had greater expectations of finding a job after college, being promoted more quickly, and earning a higher salary, even controlling for GPA (Westerman, Bergman, Bergman, & Daly, 2012). Also, in line with the stereotype, Millennials express higher levels of equity sensitivity, a proxy for entitlement, than either Boomers or Gen Xers (Allen, Allen, Karl, & White, 2015). Yet, by contrast, Millennials report more respect for their leaders, more acknowledgment that their workload was reasonable, and that they had sufficient work-related resources, compared to both Gen Xers and Boomers (Cucina, Byle, Martin, Peyton, & Gast, 2018). Thus, our review highlights mixed and inconclusive results about whether Millennials really are more narcissistic or entitled than previous generations.

5) Contextual influences on millennials' careers

Given the spread of technology and globalization, certain major world events affect Millennials across locations and cultural contexts (Edmunds & Turner, 2005). One of the major worldwide events seen as affecting Millennials' careers was the financial crisis of 2008–2009 and resulting recession (Twenge, 2014). The sluggish economy meant early Millennials, who were in their twenties, began their careers in a period of higher unemployment and mass layoffs, fewer job prospects and higher student loans (Pew Research Center, 2011). Accordingly, Millennials' initial job expectations and experiences

included downward mobility, underemployment and living with their parents (Fry, 2016; Arnett & Schwab, 2012).

Another important influence during many Millennials' formative career stage was the proliferation of technology, particularly the Internet and social media (Hershatter & Epstein, 2010; Twenge, 2014). Evidence suggests that these influences are not overly specific to the US or Western world (Teng & Tay, 2012). Advances in technology may affect Millennials' careers in varied ways, including job search, remote work and AI-assisted recruiting, but these have not been well-studied. Specifically in the USA, other events commonly cited as affecting Millennials in their formative years are: the terrorist attacks of 9 / 11, wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Columbine school shootings and increased immigration (Twenge, 2010; also see Murphy, 2012, for a comparison across generations), to which we add the Black Lives Matter movement and, most significantly, the pandemic. Indeed, it is difficult to fathom a greater influence on Millennials' careers than the pandemic. Scholars have aptly categorized the pandemic as a career shock, given its global impact and profound transformation of how, when, where, and even which work gets accomplished (Akkermans et al., 2020).

Accordingly, we explored how the pandemic affected Millennials' career values, preferences and behaviors but found limited studies to date relating to the pandemic and Millennials in the workplace. Most generational research published after the pandemic contained data collected prior to the pandemic or focused on Generation Z, the youngest generation in the workplace at that point, rather than Millennials. One exception was a study about Millennials' views of changes to their workplace psychological health during the pandemic (Varshney, 2023), which found that, contrary to the stereotype that Millennials are job hoppers who seek novelty and expect the workplace to accommodate their preferences, post-pandemic many Millennials recognized the need to be grateful for the jobs that were available and greatly valued stability. Another study corroborated the finding that, post-pandemic, Millennials' top concerns were around stability, financial security and the well-being of others, the same concerns reported by Generation Z (Azimi, Andonova, & Schewe, 2022). Overall, our review provides suggestive evidence that Millennials evolved away from original stereotypes of novelty-seeking job hoppers toward valuing financial security and job stability.

Discussion

Our integrative literature review of the past 21 years of research on Millennials' careers yielded several insights, particularly highlighting the extent to which research findings may match widely-held stereotypes popularized in the media. Even when our review's findings were largely consistent with these common assumptions about Millennials, such as their desire to achieve work-life balance, contradictory evidence from academic literature also exists. Thus, we suggest that overreliance on stereotypes to judge Millennials at work is misguided.

Key findings emerged in our review of each of the five key topic categories. First, one of the most robust findings was that Millennials value objective indicators like achievement and financial rewards more than subjective indicators like career satisfaction or making a difference. This stands in contrast to the broader narrative of Millennials as primarily interested in intrinsic rewards and reinforces the importance of studying both types of career success (Parry et al., 2012). Second, in the topic area of career development, patterns and progression, our review showed that, counter to stereotypes, Millennials' careers were not more boundaryless or involving more frequent job changes than previous generations. Indeed, upward mobility remained the norm. In our third topic area, work-life interface, we

found that Millennials clearly desire work-life balance, though rather than feeling entitled to it, per the stereotype, they are willing to work hard to achieve it. They also acknowledge that opportunities to balance work and leisure are constrained by economic and organizational realities. Our fourth topic area, career-relevant individual differences, showed inconclusive results that Millennials are more narcissistic and entitled than previous generations were at the same age. Further, contrary to popular opinion, we found no evidence that Millennials are more altruistic than other generations. Finally, our fifth topic area, our examination of contextual influences on Millennials' careers, provided suggestive evidence that the pandemic did influence Millennials' career aspirations increasing their desire for financial stability and job security.

Practical implications

Our review of Millennials' careers suggests several important practical implications. We found that, counter to stereotype, Millennials are committed to work; they are not lazy, entitled, or narcissistic. Further, they have robust values around work-life balance. With the caveat that Millennials may change as they age and enter new career stages, these insights provide a starting point for further exploration. Importantly, we encourage managers to guard against their own stereotypes and biases regarding Millennials, as most of the assertions in the popular press were not supported in our review.

As Millennials' desire for work-life balance was so clearly supported in our review, organizations seeking to attract and retain Millennials should consider this factor. Millennials across 30 countries rewarded organizations that offered a high degree of flexibility with higher levels of loyalty (Deloitte, 2025). Highlighting work-life balance in recruitment materials would help attract Millennials as well (Broadbridge, Maxwell, & Ogden, 2007). Given that, post-pandemic, Millennials seem to value job security and stability above all else, we encourage organizations to consider these factors. Further, the future of remote work for Millennials, as the largest cohort in the current workforce, has been forever changed by the flexibility warranted by the pandemic, where the vast majority of employees reported wanting to work at least a few days at home even when it is safe to return to the office (Miller, 2020). Whether the pandemic fueled Millennials' desire for greater work-life balance, or simply facilitated it, we expect this to be particularly relevant to the late Millennial sub-cohort.

Recommendations for future research

Our review revealed that several central and significant career topics (e.g. Akkermans & Kubasch, 2017) were either underexplored or absent in extant research on Millennials' careers. We found almost no research on career competencies (e.g. social capital), physical health (e.g. burnout, workaholism, stress), identity or a consideration of social categories like race and ethnicity. A particularly glaring gap is the lack of research on how the pandemic affected Millennials' careers. Given their prominence in organizations, Millennials may have decision-making authority about return to office mandates or expectations for flexible work schedules – or at a minimum, as 75% of the current global workforce, they are the largest group of people on the receiving end of such dictates. We hope that future research will consider how Millennials responded to the pandemic, both as a unified or splintered cohort and believe we have provided some theoretically valuable ideas about considering early versus late members of the cohort (e.g. Debevec, Schewe, Madden, & Diamond, 2013).

Research suggests the potential for more variation within generations than between them (e.g. Cucina et al., 2018). Drawing on findings from consumer preference research, which suggest that Millennials splintered based on whether they were early or late cohort members

(Debevec et al., 2013), we suggest applying a similar lens to career preferences, especially in response to the pandemic. The pandemic occurred when early Millennials were in a more advanced career stage and potentially serving in leadership positions. We expect their career preferences, values and behaviors were likely relatively established, and not subject to change in response to the pandemic compared to the later Millennials. The early Millennials were also at a career stage where they might have the financial security to enable discretionary changes such as career pauses or acquiring portable skills to transfer to new jobs, industries or self-employment.

By contrast, the pandemic arrived when late Millennials were at a more formative career stage. The career values and preferences of this younger sub-cohort were not as firmly set and therefore were more subject to potentially significant change than was the older sub-cohort. These ideas are consistent with media reports that younger Millennials are at the forefront of promoting ideas like "quiet quitting," "lazy girl jobs" and other more extreme changes like resigning from work, changing careers, desiring four-day workweeks, and not wanting to return to an in-person work experience (e.g. Burton, 2025; Harter, 2022; Higham, 2024; Perna, 2023). We would like to call for additional research to continue to examine how the pandemic affected Millennials' careers.

In summary, our findings suggest that sometimes academic research can uncover the inaccuracies of our public perceptions, as was the case for Millennials. Whether this is due to academics spending more time around their younger students (who might have been Millennials at the time the research was conducted), or more rigorous methods, we encourage future research to unpack what is taken for granted as truth in the media. Research examining variance within Millennials should use advanced methodological and statistical approaches, such as time-lag repeated measure analyses, which enable the comparison of effects based on generational cohort, organizational cohort, life/career stage and age (e.g. Joshi et al., 2011). We also call for research that adopts a multi-level perspective that not only considers the impact for Millennials but also for their managers, team members and organizations.

Acknowledgements

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Further reading

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