Editor's Note:

As editor of the *College & Undergraduate Libraries* column "On My Mind," I wanted to introduce myself and let you, the reader, know a little bit about what I intend this column to be. Primarily, I want it to be a venue for you to write about anything that has been bugging you or that you think needs to be said. This is an opinion column so please share your opinion. Maybe you want to talk about what you wished you had learned in library school. Or, perhaps you have a bone to pick with people who rely too much on using statistics in their weeding of books from the library's shelves. Whether the majority of librarians hold your opinion or not, I will try to give you a venue to express your thoughts. Also, this column is intended to be informal so feel free to use the first person. That does not mean that you cannot or should not back up statements you make with research. Please do. It does mean that personal anecdotes and stories are encouraged and make for a more interesting read. Finally, inquiries into writing for this column should be directed to me via email at jenninge@uwec.edu. I will try to get back to you in a timely manner.

On My Mind

Mind the Generation Gap: Millennials & Boomers in the Library Workplace

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Introduction

The Millennial Generation, also known as Generation Y, the Net Generation, and Echo Boomers and defined as those born between 1981 and 2000, is entering the library workforce in greater numbers every year. In recent years, business literature has started to focus on the impact that the Millennial Generation is having on the workplace. However, this literature often describes generational characteristics and differences between generations with sweeping brushes. In this article, two colleagues look at some of these broad generalizations, how they have or have not played out in the library, and provide reactions to them from the perspective of a Baby Boomer (Jill, MA Interim Head of Reference and Instruction, McIntyre Library) and a Millennial (Eric).

There has been a lot said and written about the Millennial Generation wanting a work-life balance. What are your thoughts on this topic? Is this a true generalization of the Millennials or do you think that it is something that a majority of workers want?

Jill: Millennials seem to be eschewing the workaholic lifestyle of their Boomer parents, who

– perhaps driven by a desire to distinguish themselves from the masses of their abundant

generation – sacrificed much of their personal lives to achieve financial reward and professional

recognition. I think Boomers and Gen Xers eventually recognized the cost of professional

ambition and deserve credit for adding work-life balance to our lexicon and raising it as an issue.

I would like to think that librarianship is becoming a more family-friendly profession, as I did not

find it to be particularly so when my children were little. I spent many of my child-rearing years

working part-time, as it was the only way to have the flexibility needed as a primary caregiver.

Even if more flexibility had been an option for a full-time librarian, I doubt that I would have

taken advantage of it for fear of being considered a slacker. That was the culture. Now that I

am in an administrative and tenured position, I try to recognize and promote the idea that

family does and should come first, and that it is a good thing for people to have a full life outside

of work. I am pretty sure this has always been the case, but the climate is changing so that we

can admit it now.

Eric: Speaking only for myself as a Millennial, I definitely want a work-life balance. It seems

like that is something that most all workers would want and would expect. I think what the

question is really getting down to is what role your job plays in your life. If it is one in which

your life and who you are is dependent upon your job, then by my definition, you do not have a

work-life balance. If your job is only a part of how you define yourself as a person and it does

not influence everything you do outside of work, then your job does not rule you and you

probably have work-life balance. In my opinion there is nothing inherently wrong in wanting (or

not) a work-life balance as I define it above. What all sides should recognize and appreciate is

that what may be good for one person may not be wanted by another person.

Millennials are also called the Net Generation, which implies their technological know-how or prowess. What role does or has technology played in your job as a librarian? How might this be different for your librarian colleagues of another generation?

Eric: When I was in elementary school, we used the card catalog to find books in the library.

Even though it was the late 1980s and early 1990s, I grew up in a small town in Iowa and the

OPAC (Online Public Access Catalog) had not made its way there. When I got to middle school in

the mid-1990s, I finally saw my first OPAC. It was not until three or four years ago that the

public library in my hometown allowed users to search the OPAC from their homes and not have

to come into or call the library to use it. I grew up with technology constantly changing in the

library. This has had a major impact on my perception of what a library is and can do with this

resource.

One reasonable criticism of my generation, however, is that we can be too enthusiastic

about the benefits of technology. For example, I am a big advocate of using Wikipedia. I know

that there are many out there who do not like this new technological tool and would be averse

to using it at the reference desk. The difference between my older colleagues and me is that I

never had to learn the print reference resources in detail because I had a large body of

knowledge available online through databases and online reference resources. As a result, we

can be too enthusiastic about the use of technology – we grew up with it and did not have to

learn the old way of doing things (e.g., print reference resources) in library school because the

technology (e.g., Wikipedia) was readily available.

Jill: Boomers in the profession have witnessed and participated in the computer technology

revolution in libraries essentially from its beginning to the point we are at today. I recall the

now quaint-seeming leap from a keyboard to a mouse and the enormous challenge it posed just

in terms of physical coordination. In considering the distance Boomers have traversed

technologically, it is mind boggling and quite impressive. Millennials, who were born

maneuvering a mouse, are often lauded for their adeptness and comfort with technology. As a

group they readily embrace the latest technology and can sometimes exhibit frustration with –

and occasionally even arrogance toward – their older colleagues who may not adopt the latest

technology as readily or with the same level of enthusiasm. While it is likely that the Millennial

Generation will change the profession exponentially through technology, we should not forget

that our seasoned library veterans were – and continue to be – the technology pioneers who

learned, adapted, and developed technological innovations that transformed the profession.

Millennials are often characterized as an entitled generation, unwilling to "pay their dues." i.e., they have unreasonable expectations of success in the workplace. Do you find this to be true? Why or why not?

Jill: As the third child born to my family in three years, at the tail end of Baby Boom

Generation, I am accustomed to taking what is left and waiting my turn – for the bathroom, for

desired classes in college, or for the opportunity to advance professionally when more senior

librarians retire. Millennials are not. They are used to being rewarded for their effort, and are

more likely to move around in pursuit of those rewards than to stay and wait for them. Delaying

marriage and family has made Millennials more mobile than preceding generations as they build

their careers. Unless working at a large university with an expansive library system, moving up

in academic libraries often means moving out, and with fewer strings attached, Millennials can

do that. Many Millennials enjoy the safety net of parents on whom they can rely for support

longer than previous generations were able to, which enables them to experiment with a

variety of professional opportunities and leave those that do not meet their expectations. The

economic challenges of the past year, however, may have a profound effect on those

expectations, and I suspect that if job opportunities continue to diminish we will see this

generation – out of necessity – alter its expectations, exhibit more patience and become more

content with "paying their dues."

Eric: I think much like other things, there is always a grain of truth to generalizations like this

one. I am not sure what others are expecting out of their jobs, but I am certainly not expecting

to be the head of a department or the head of a library any time soon. That being said, I do

think that my opinion is just as valid on some (but not all) things as that of someone who has

twenty more years of experience. If that is unreasonable, then call me guilty.

I would like to give another personal story. At my first job, one of my colleagues told me

that she felt like my grandmother. When I left, I was told by a different colleague that she felt

like a mother bird watching her baby hatch from its egg and fly away. Neither comment was

something I wanted to hear. I wanted to be treated as a colleague and not as a baby bird or

grandchild. While Millennials may be overeager to put themselves in situations beyond that for

which their experience has prepared them, there are also situations in which Millennials, solely

because of their age, are not treated as colleagues.

Heavy parental involvement in a Millennial's work life is being seen in the business world. Some think this is a good thing while others think it is not. Do you see evidence of this in the library profession? How do you feel about it?

Eric: I think that there is something to be said about that. I know that I consulted with my parents when I was looking for jobs, but I was not married so I did not have someone like a spouse to bounce things off of. My parents were not doing the job searching, writing the cover letters or the resumes – I was. I consulted my parents, as well as friends from school, siblings, and colleagues at work, because I valued their opinions. It is completely reasonable to consult or talk with someone who has been through many of the same experiences that you are going through and if that happens to be your parents, great. These people (parents or not) can share with you their knowledge and help you understand what it means to be a professional or how to deal with certain personality types at work. One thing that I think could be studied further is how much of a role the presence of a significant other plays in a Millennial's reliance on parents as sounding boards. I know that the average age for marriage is up into the mid- to late twenties whereas twenty to thirty years ago it was in the low twenties. I conjecture that delaying marriage may influence the role that parents play in Millennials' work lives.

Jill: As both a parent and a colleague of Millennials, I find this generalization to hold true, to varying degrees. I have not witnessed extreme examples, such as parents showing up for job interviews or negotiating contracts for their children. On the other hand, I have seen parents very involved in helping their Millennial children balance their lives. In some cases, they have relocated to follow their children, assisted with childcare, or aided in home purchasing and maintenance. As Boomers, we are paradoxically *those* parents and at the same time critical of those helicopter parents. I admire the natural inclination of Millennial students and colleagues to communicate with and rely on their parents for friendship, advice, and support. The intimate and open relationships that Millennials have with their parents may contribute to their relative

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comfort and confidence in professional relationships with older colleagues. When I began in the profession some twenty years ago, I was less outspoken than new librarians are today. I was advised – and it was my inclination – to observe and learn for the first year before questioning how things were done. As Boomers, we have encouraged our kids to ask questions, to interact with adults more as peers and less as authority figures, and to expect to be not only seen but heard. Some cite concerns over Millennials' ability to problem-solve due to an overreliance on parents, and that may be true in some situations. But, Millennials are also not hesitant to identify problems, and that is the first step toward solving them.

It has been said that Millennials have a fear of failure; they have always received praise for simply participating in activities in life, and are unprepared to deal with criticism as they have largely been shielded from it. Describe your thoughts on the idea that there is a fear of failure and how it plays out in the workplace.

Jill: My children are equally amused and shocked by the teacher comments on my husband's childhood report cards. "This boy has a lame sense of humor." "He will never understand math." As Boomers we compensated (overcompensated?) for the painful moments of our childhood by ensuring that our own children would be ensconced in the protective armor of high self-esteem. I have a closet full of certificates of participation garnered by my children over the years for everything they did (whether they did it well or not), and it is quite likely that the parents of my younger colleagues have similar collections. Admittedly, our good intentions may have resulted in a generation that is unprepared to deal with failure, because whenever it was in our power to do so, we kept them from experiencing it. Compounding the issue, I would suggest, is that our profession attracts high achievers, and high achievers have never been comfortable with failure. The downside is that now we have higher maintenance colleagues who may require a gentler touch, but the upside is that we have many high achieving colleagues who strive to do well to earn that praise to which they are accustomed.

Eric: I do not think anyone likes to be criticized. My father always used to say that it is fine to criticize, but make the criticism constructive. That is, make it useful to the person being criticized so that they can take something or learn from it. If it is not constructive, criticism does seem much like a personal attack. In order to tie this into the fear of failure, I would say that I definitely see myself at times trying to build consensus among colleagues so that I do not fail or get criticized. I will ask before I do when it comes to simple things that I am sure I should probably just do and not involve others. Working on things in groups or with a team is something that has been stressed since grade school for Millennials. It should come as no surprise that it is one of the defining characteristics of my generation. Unfortunately, it can be used as a crutch or coping mechanism for those who have a fear of failure.

Millennials need constant feedback and recognition. Do you believe this statement to be true or false? Why?

Eric: I am apt to agree with the idea that constant feedback is needed more than recognition. I think that the need for feedback is really tied into the idea that Millennials might have a fear of failure; getting feedback constantly is a way to reduce the chances of failing. It also ties in to the generalization I have seen tossed around that Millennials need very structured directions on how to do things. I do not want to make it sound like Millennials are completely without critical thinking abilities or able to complete tasks without strict directions; it may just take Millennials time to learn how to do that without asking for constant feedback. Or, we need to be told that failure is OK and expected.

To be completely honest, the reason I do not think recognition is necessary as much as feedback is that if I do something well I know that I did it well. That sounds arrogant, I know, but I do not mean it to be. Sure, it is nice to get recognition if you did something well, but if managers feel it necessary to give recognition because of something a Millennial did only because he or she is a Millennial, then it really detracts from the weight of that recognition.

What I am saying is that recognition should only be given to a coworker if is deserved – regardless of age.

Jill: I do think it is true, but is it a bad thing? This need for feedback and recognition is born of a desire to do the right thing and to do it well, and this generation's desire to succeed is surely preferable to complacency or indifference. Working with Millennials is moving our organization toward a place where we are a little more cognizant of and intentional in telling people when they do a good job. I see that as a good thing, not only for Millennials. Everyone, regardless of age or experience, can use a pat on the back from time to time.

Conclusion

As so often happens when we set out to explore our differences, we discover how we are the same. We may be at different places, navigating through life and career with vastly different sets of circumstances and expectations, but many of our core values—as humans and as librarians—converge. If we approach it as our professional obligation to get to know our colleagues, especially those we would be the least likely to encounter if our work lives did not bring us together, we will build a foundation upon which we can understand, appreciate, and discover the unique abilities of our colleagues. We will recognize where one generation's weakness is another's strength and how they are interconnected and even complementary. A Boomer may view a young colleague as impertinent until she considers that hers is the generation that set out to instill this very confidence in its children. A Millennial may be frustrated by a lack of direction or feedback from a Boomer boss until he realizes that this may be a generational difference in communication style rather than a personal flaw. We encourage you to do what we have done here: sit down together, respond to these generalizations, and share your stories. In so doing we learn to take less offense where none is intended, respect and even find humor in our differences, and celebrate the library made better by virtue of our diversity.

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