

Research update: Generation Y's expectations for ethics at work in New Zealand

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I have recently completed my Masters Thesis in Human Resource Management and Industrial Relations at Victoria University of Wellington. My thesis explores young Generation Y's expectations to ethics at work in New Zealand.

Business ethics is receiving greater attention in organisations all around the world, including New Zealand, and a values based ethical culture seems key to the success of an ethical organisation (Jacobs, 2016). However, today's workplace may have up to four generations working together, and with each generation having their own set of norms and values. Literature focuses on intergenerational conflicts in the workplace and sees generations as an aspect of diversity that is often difficult to balance to human resource management (Pritchard & Whiting, 2014). The generation that have just entered the workforce, the so-called Generation Y (born 1992-1999) or millennials, is more than once described as lazy, self-absorbed and entitled by other generations (Adecco, 2016).

This research aimed to let Generation Y speak for themselves to avoid such stereotypes, with a focus on the underlying values that drives ethics at work. It is important for organisations to understand Gen Y's expectations of work if they wish to attract and retain young talent, as well as for minimising intergenerational conflicts. Awareness and understanding of the new workforce's values makes it easier to gain an increased person-organisation fit to drive productivity and commitment (Winter & Jackson, 2016), whilst a 'values misfit' is considered a push-factor for employees leaving the organisation (Van der Wal, 2017).

For this research 19 young people with a variety of backgrounds were interviewed with use of Q-methodology. This method required participants to organise a set of statements, related to the research topic, from those they consider to be most important to the least important (Wolf, 2014). The data gathered was then statistically analysed and interpreted.

The results revealed three distinctive sets of values or typologies in relation to ethics at work. In Table 1 the three typologies, described as The Achiever, The Ethical Employee and The Public Conservationist, representing the views of individuals from Generation Y are depicted.



Table 1: The three typologies developed from the Q-sort.

People associated with the first set of values - The Achiever - want to be the best at what they do and expect a good work-life balance to enable them to do the best work they can for the organisation. Though they are hard workers and wish to add value to the organisation, they do not put much focus on ethics at work.

The second group - The Ethical Employee - values a strong ethical culture where managers are expected to set the tone in the workplace and they expect to be in an organisation where they feel comfortable and employee behaviour is regulated.

For the third group - The Public Conservationist - the focus is on preserving the environment and giving back to society. This group sees work as a holistic part of their lives and therefore they want work to be in line with their intrinsic motivations and passions.

In addition, some consensus values across all typologies and participants could be discerned. They agree that money is not the reason to work, but rather, they wish to have a say when it comes to innovative ideas and all find it important that employees should be treated decently at work.

Additionally reasons and theoretical explanations for the change in values across the current generation and these ethical expectations of the new workforce were discussed in the research with help of socialisation theory (Arnet, 2014; Prot et al., 2014), scarcity theory (Inglehart, 1990) and ecological modernisation theory (Buttel, 2000). These theories show

that the increased attention to ethical and environmental issues has developed in the period in which generation Y was socialized and that it therefore has a strong influence on the expectations that this generation has of work and of employers.

With New Zealand experiencing an employee shortage and organisations struggling to fill positions (Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment, 2017) organisations must make themselves attractive to the younger generations that are entering the workforce, and develop an organisational culture with values of potential and current employees aligned with the organisation. Human resource management is a key player in embedding organisational values and developing an organisational culture in order to retain employees, so it is crucial for HR practitioners to understand the complexity of the workforce values and expectations. After all, it is costly to continuously hire, train and lose employees. Integrating ethics in the business and HR strategy will increase the reputation of the organisation and create competitive advantage (McMurrian & Matulich, 2016). My Thesis helps to understand the young generation Y's expectations for ethics at work; a dimension of the organisational culture that is of increased importance in and for today's workforce.

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