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The Young and the Restless: How to Engage Federal Millennial Workers



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Ah, millennials. Those smartphone-obsessed, hyper-social, approval-craving, thrill-seeking do-gooders, moving from job to job almost as soon as the latest craft beer or prestige TV series arrives to capture their fancy.

Employers have struggled with the idiosyncrasies of this generation, testing all manner of recruitment and retention strategies: mobile offices and flexible work schedules; continuous training and roadmaps for rapid advancement; and even cold-press coffee bars by the conference room.

Vying for the loyalty of millennials is especially critical for the federal government. Federal agencies need millennials, who constitute an entire generation and are being counted on to replace the government's rapidly aging workforce. However, recent pauses in hiring activities acutely affected millennials interested in government service. All agencies should regularly revisit engagement efforts, especially those agencies facing reductions in force or future hiring freezes. Traditional messages meant to recruit and retain employees—public service and exceptional job security—are not resonating with younger employees.

For one, millennials (people born after 1980) are underrepresented in federal jobs: They constitute just 16% of the federal government's workforce, compared with 34% of the total U.S. workforce. For another, they're leaving federal jobs after an average tenure of 3.8 years, compared with an average tenure of 8.8 years for all federal employees.

In response, agency leaders acknowledge that "We have to change. We have to remain competitive, not only to retain quality folks but also to be viable," according to one large-agency executive. "Our government culture relies on a 'proven success' model that can be great but doesn't exactly keep you on the cutting edge. And for the younger workforce, old-fashioned just doesn't work."

In this paper, we'll look at what's behind the millennials' quick departures from federal government jobs and identify ways that managers can stem the tide.



Part One: Diagnosis

Millennials arrive at their government jobs full of enthusiasm—stunningly so. Government employees under age 25 blow away every other age cohort in job satisfaction. The 2016 Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS) separates respondents into six age groups, and the youngest set was by far the most satisfied. The 25-and-under group was the most positive among all age groups in response to the majority (83%) of the survey's questions.

But then, something happens. The group of employees age 26-29 are still positive, but less so than their younger peers. And then, when these workers turn 30, their experience in federal service quickly sours. Employees in their 30s (a group that crosses the generational line between millennials and Gen Xers) registered below-average satisfaction on two-thirds of the FEVS survey questions, marking the group as the most pessimistic of all ages.

What happens to end the honeymoon?

There are clues in the uglier parts of the survey. The questions that elicited the lowest overall satisfaction align with top millennial concerns,

including the desire for merit-based advancement, for freedom to innovate, and for more interaction and responsiveness from leadership. The responses to these questions accentuate the pattern from the greater survey: Cheerful young workers give the highest marks, followed by a sharp decline in positivity among workers in their late 20s, followed by another decline among 30-something employees—with the latter group often giving the most negative responses.

And remember that the disaffected millennials who were surveyed aren't the ones who have left their government posts; these responses are from the workers who have stayed. It stands to reason that the dissatisfaction they express is even greater among their already departed peers. (This sort of mid-career satisfaction dip isn't exclusive to government workers, but the specific causes and contours identified in the survey suggest a particular disconnect between federal employers and millennials.)

With that in mind, let's examine some of the soft spots illuminated by the 2016 FEVS survey.



FACT

Young federal workers give the highest engagement marks, followed by a sharp decline among workers in their late 20s, followed by another decline among 30-somethings.



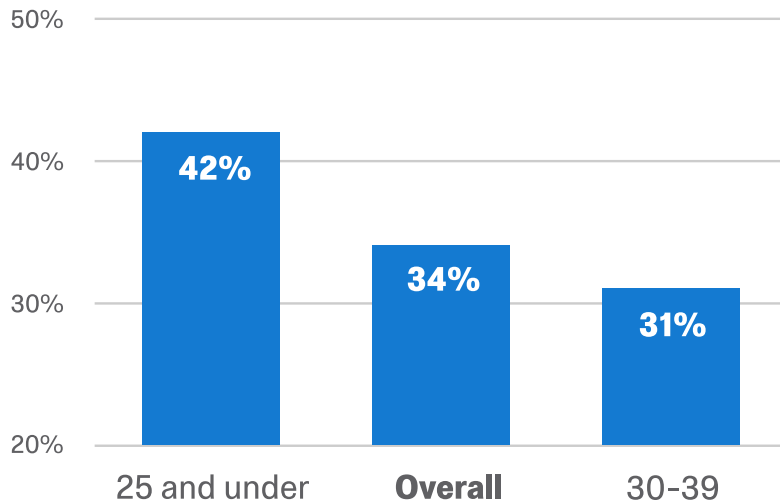


MERITOCRACY

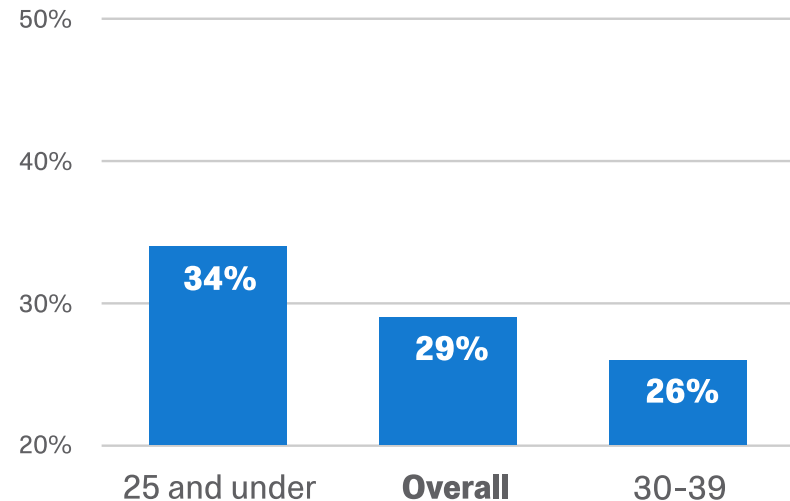
Millennials grew up believing that their hard work would be recognized and rewarded. They are less cynical than Gen Xers, and their “trust in institutions assumes and relies upon an equitable system, one that assures that industriousness and accomplishment will be rewarded with acknowledgment, encouragement, and access,” according to Emory University scholars Andrea Hershatter and Molly Epstein.

Yet it seems that after working for the federal government, that trust begins to break down. On the FEVS survey, the following four questions elicited the survey’s most pessimistic answers overall, with each marked by a sharp decline as younger federal employees move from their 20s into their 30s.

In my work unit, differences in performance are recognized in a meaningful way



In my work unit, steps are taken to deal with a poor performer who cannot or will not improve

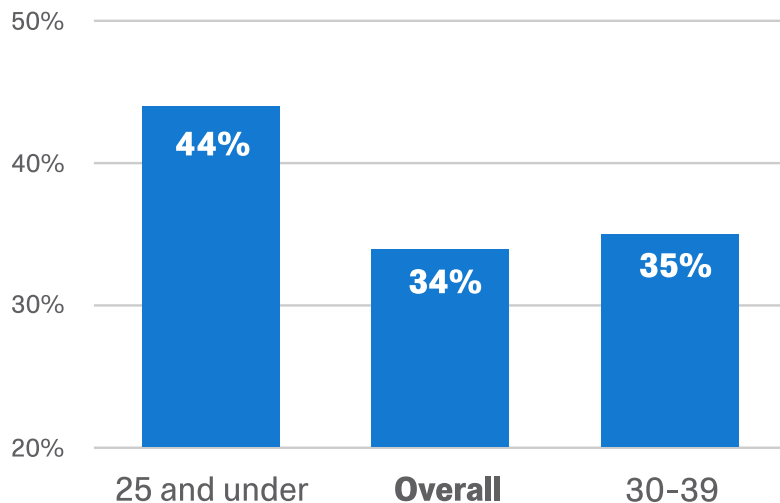




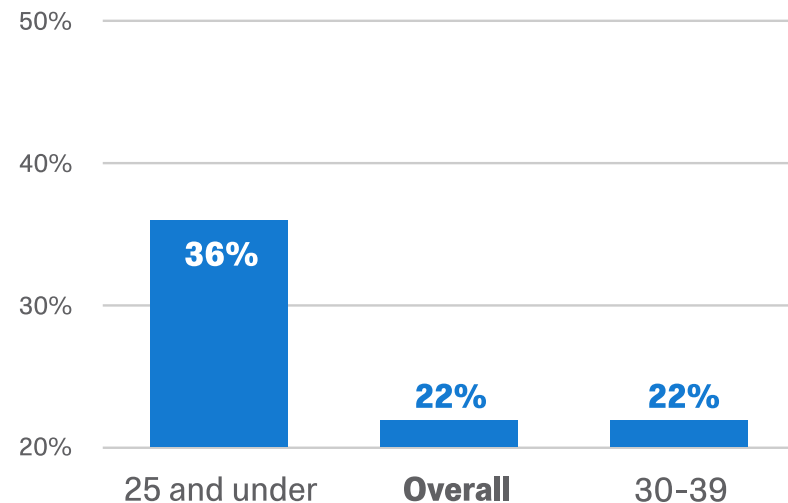
Because opportunities for promotion are limited in federal service, many managers feel challenged to offer millennials the advancement opportunities they crave. Their challenge, then, is to find alternative means of cultivating job satisfaction. "It's going to take a while to hit those higher

[job-grade levels]," says one agency leader. "You have to make that deeper connection so they're heavily invested in what they're doing, and give them that sense of family."

Promotions in my work unit are based on merit



Pay raises depend on how well employees perform their jobs



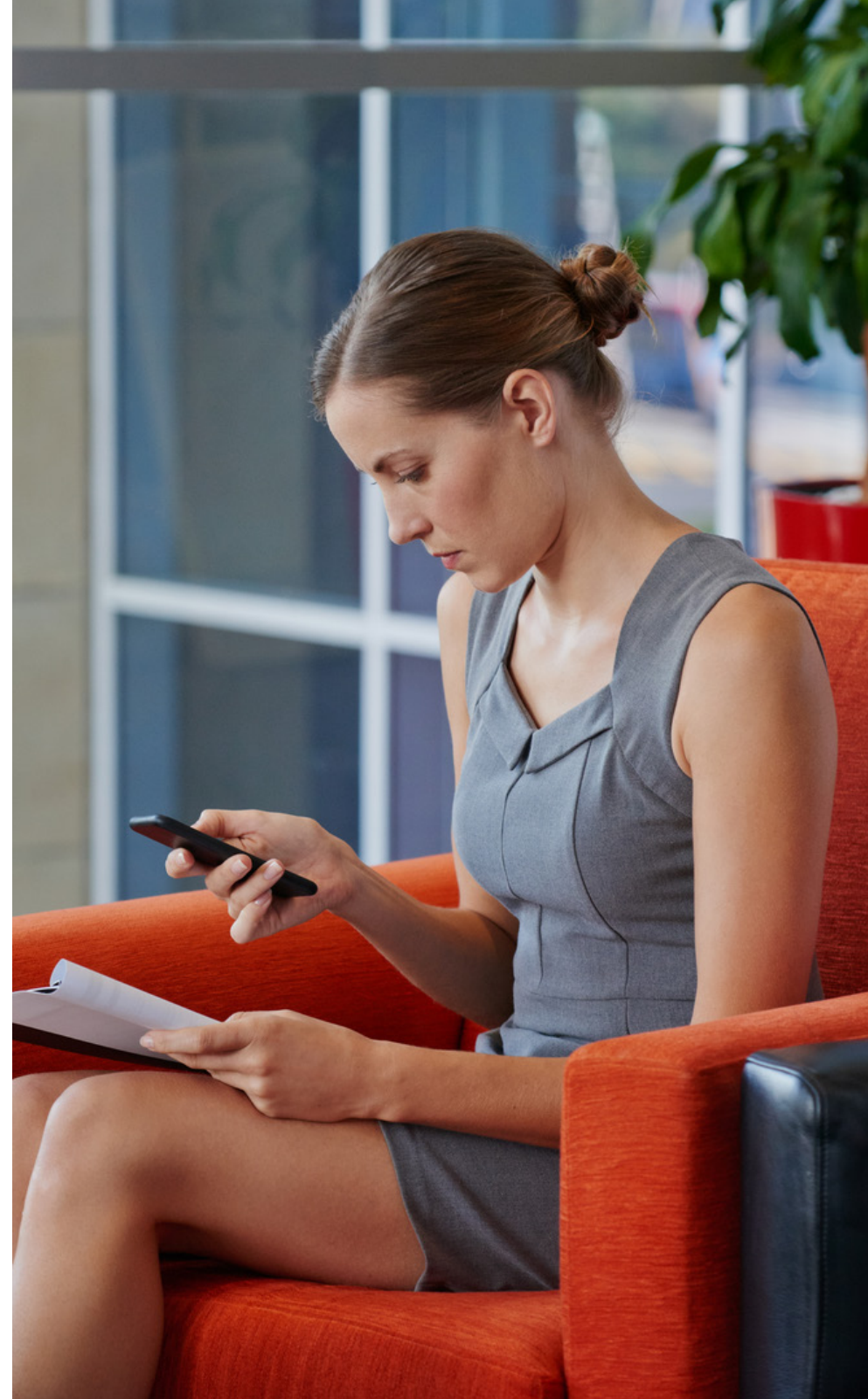


INNOVATION AND CREATIVITY

Millennials have come of age during an era of profound technological disruption and innovation, which influences their workplace expectations in two ways, according to a PwC survey: First, they expect to use the same gadgets and services at the office as in their personal lives; and second, they expect the freedom to experiment and create on the job.

Similarly, millennials report greater job satisfaction in workplaces that encourage ideas among all employees and foster a creative working culture, according to a 2016 Deloitte report.

Yet the federal workplace seems to be falling short. The FEVS survey prompt, "Creativity and innovation are rewarded," showed only 38% of all employees agreed, and 30-somethings again brought up the rear with only 36% in agreement.





TEAM LEADERSHIP AND INTERACTION

Millennials want a close and ongoing relationship with supervisors—one that better resembles a coach/player dynamic than the traditional boss/employee structure. A 2016 Gallup study indicates that when this relationship delivers the goods, it dramatically increases engagement.

The FEVS results bear this out. The 11-question section titled, “My Supervisor” is the only portion of the test where 30-somethings joined their younger peers in providing responses that were uniformly more positive than those of older government workers. Supervisors seem to be connecting with their millennial employees, but this finding also highlights the exceptional importance that millennials place on this relationship, and thus its influence on employee satisfaction and retention.

Millennials’ hunger for feedback and interaction is nearly insatiable. They are fans of training, mentorship, and even accountability, and they want on-demand access to feedback. That means that managers of millennials may have to adjust their own work styles or make other accommodations in order to provide their millennial employees with the desired level of interaction.

Millennials “want to check in with their supervisors daily or even twice a day, but in the federal government right now they’re getting a weekly sit-down and an annual performance review. It’s not even remotely close to what they want,” says Trevor DeLew, Head of Federal at Qualtrics.

Employees of the largest federal agencies showed the least engagement, while engagement grew progressively stronger as the size of the agency size decreased.



A MOVING TARGET

In some ways it's unsurprising that the federal government struggles to produce work environments that conform to the millennial ideal. In previous generations, young workers craved the security and stability that a government job could provide. Although that's still important to government workers, overall there's been a shift in preference for smaller organizations that are more nimble. Only one in seven recent college graduates wants to work for a large company, according to a 2016 Accenture report.

Smaller organizations seem to be more successful at capturing their employees' attention—a trend that is visible even within the federal government. Employees of the largest federal agencies showed the least engagement on the 2016 FEVS survey, while engagement grew progressively stronger as the size of the agency size decreased.

To some extent this shift toward smaller organizations may be driven by generational traits, but it also owes to factors such as the high profile of

technology startups. The greatest success stories in American business during the lifetimes of millennials belong to companies like Google, Facebook, and Tesla—organizations that began with small teams and quickly generated breakthrough products. These Silicon Valley companies have created a career ideal that doesn't align well with large bureaucratic organizations.

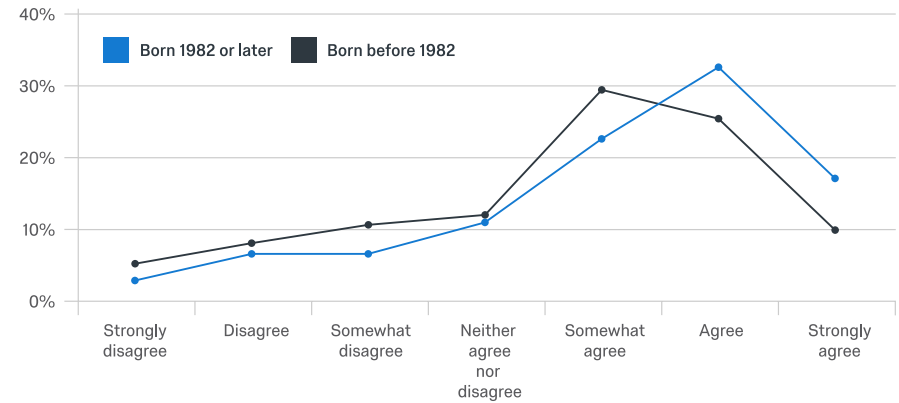
Indeed, some of the workplace trends ascribed to millennial preference may be less a function of a unique generational mindset than of changing cultural goals and values whose impact extends across generations.

We found that attitudes toward “millennial issues” were similar among millennials and older government workers alike. Both, for example, have unfavorable views about communication from agency leaders and report a gradual erosion in their sense of mission. The Qualtrics survey also shows that millennials report being more satisfied, more eager to go to work, and more likely to recommend their workplace than their older peers.

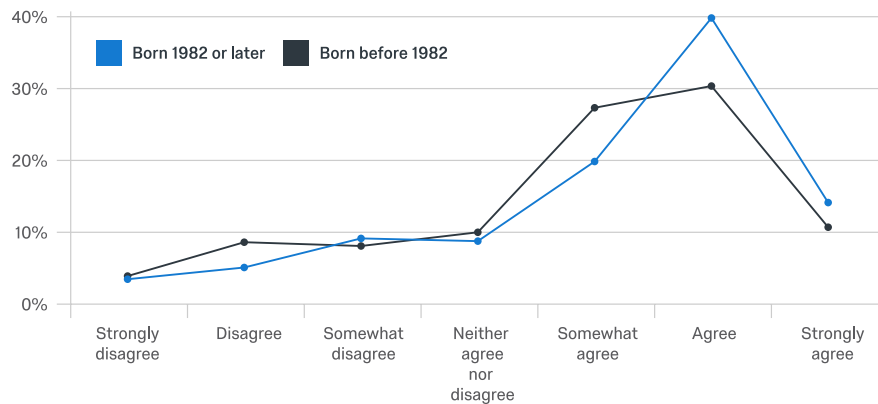


Qualtrics studied engagement patterns among 300 federal employees, comparing millennials and older employees.

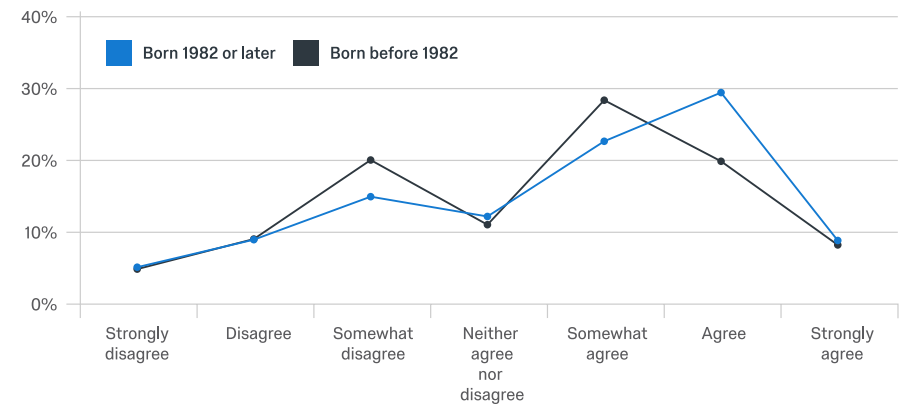
I would recommend my agency to friends or family as a great place to work



Overall I am satisfied with my job at my agency



Generally speaking, when I get up in the morning I look forward to going to work





The academic research into generational differences is limited, and much of what's been published is skeptical of claims that millennials are wired differently than everybody else, according to George Washington University professor David P. Costanza. Younger employees may just represent the earliest adopters of a shift in workplace preferences that will ultimately appeal across generations.

Employers, then, should expect some "millennial" trends to continue and affect older workers as well. That's a worrisome notion if it means that increasing turnover is a fact of modern life.

As mentioned earlier, millennials are leaving their government jobs after only 3.8 years. While agencies and supervisors can take steps to maximize their long-term appeal to workers, the fact is that the federal government is currently outperforming the marketplace at large in terms of millennial retention. Millennials across all industries nationwide have an average job tenure of only 2.8 years, according to government data. Nor are they planning to put down roots: 44% of millennials say they plan to leave their current jobs within two years, according to a Deloitte survey.



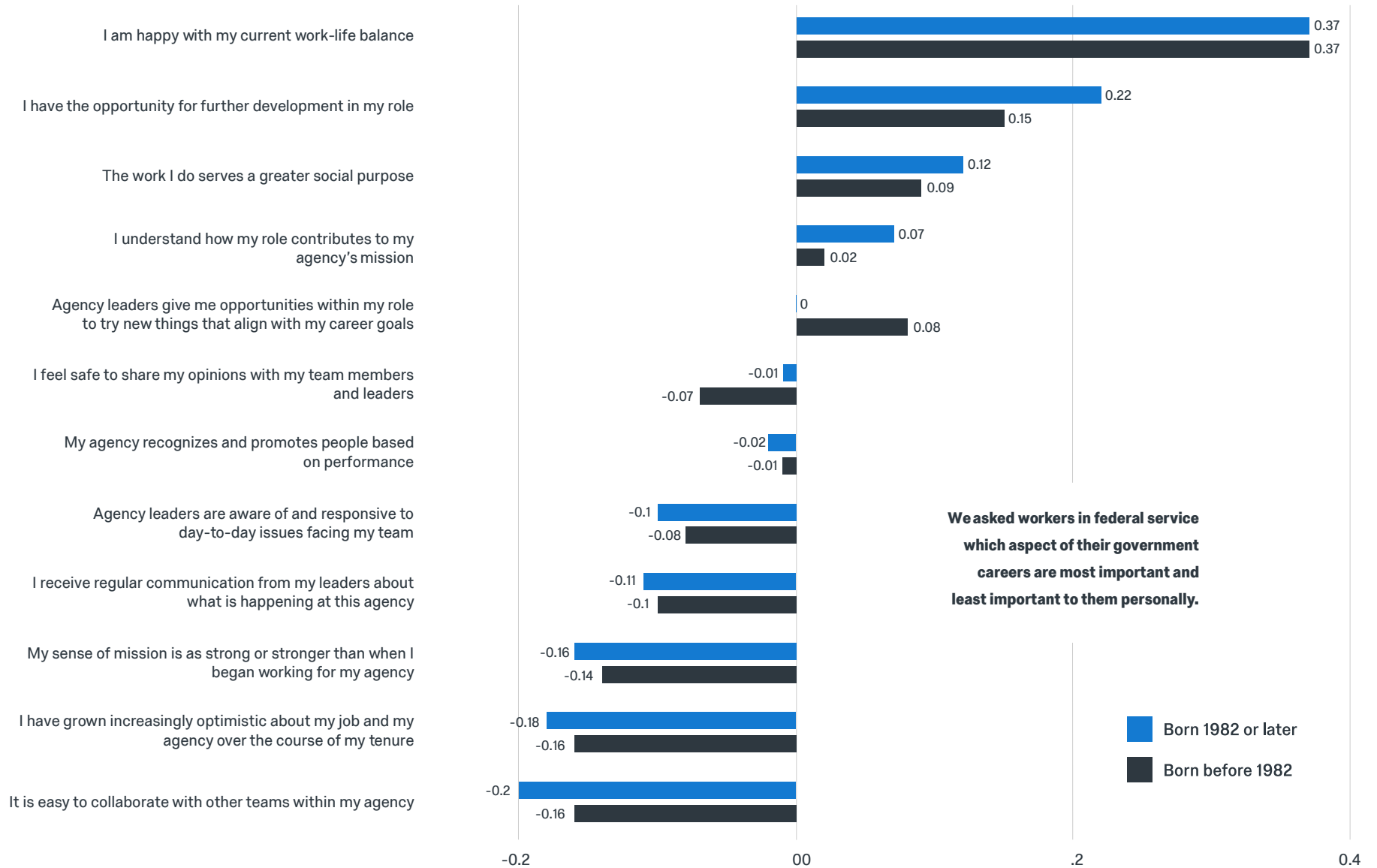
QUOTE

"The assumption in government is that you're in it for the long haul, but that's not consistent with expectations in the private sector and it's just not realistic."

BEN GRANGER, PH.D.



MOST AND LEAST IMPORTANT ENGAGEMENT FACTORS



*MaxDiff analysis allows respondents to identify most- and least- desired attributes, generating a robust ranking among different attributes



Part Two: Prescription

Organizations in every sector are struggling to crack the millennial-retention code, and the federal government seems in many ways singularly ill-equipped to succeed. Managers within federal agencies can't wave a wand and cut through layers of policy and bureaucracy. For some agencies, basic incentives like "bring your own device to work" are just as pie-in-the-sky as "bring your dog to work."

Yet there are tactics at the disposal of every federal manager that can improve the millennial experience in your office. And smart, incremental changes geared to millennials may improve engagement and performance across your department. Here are a few strategies to consider.

CULTIVATE (AND STRETCH) A STRONG FIRST IMPRESSION

Instill a strong sense of possibilities and expectations right away by augmenting and emphasizing the onboarding process. It should convey clearly your agency's mission and social purpose (a millennial priority and a strong suit of government work) as well as the opportunities

and challenges that lay ahead. Use this critical introductory window to maximize enthusiasm while also preparing new employees for some of the difficulties they will encounter.

"If you can instill that sense of mission and how everyone fits into the grand scheme, it helps to bridge the gap," as employees go on to encounter job frustrations, says one executive from a large federal agency.

TRACK NEW EMPLOYEES' EXPERIENCE—CLOSELY

It's clear from the FEVS data that some air seeps out of millennials' balloons during their first few years. But it's far less clear exactly when and why that disillusionment sets in. You need more granularity, with insights into which engagement initiatives are successful. The solution: Ask your millennials how they're doing immediately after onboarding, and then often enough to identify specific issues that cause dissatisfaction. That sort of detail enables managers to intervene meaningfully, keeping small problems from becoming big ones.



STAT

Four in ten millennials prefer electronic interactions to in-person ones.

FOCUS ON CAREER DEVELOPMENT

On-the-job training, mentorship, and a plan for career advancement are cornerstones among millennial job expectations. Qualtrics research shows that the opportunity for further development is one of the biggest drivers of engagement and where millennials clearly diverge from their older peers. And a 2016 Deloitte survey also found a strong correlation between the workers who share those sentiments and those who are planning to change jobs soon. It's possible for supervisors to address these concerns informally, and without overtaxing management resources. For example, you could establish an internal job-enrichment program focused on skill-building or cross-training, using peer employees as mentors.

Qualtrics' survey of millennial engagement drivers indicates that millennials seek and appreciate the development opportunities in federal service. It's very possible that they disengage as those opportunities wane.

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ENCOURAGE A JOB CHANGE ... WITHIN GOVERNMENT

Another option is an inter-agency transfer or some other, more formal opportunity for cross-training. Workers of all ages in the Qualtrics research identified federal service's work/life balance as their most important consideration. Research also shows that millennials are likely to change jobs a few times regardless of their satisfaction levels, so after a few years on the job it may make sense to help them broaden their experience within the federal government rather than outside it. This might be a painful move for a manager to make—in the short run it benefits the employee and the government at large, but costs the agency and department. In the long run, however, your department is likely to benefit in the eyes of its millennial employees, thanks to a new avenue for career advancement and the concern for career development that it demonstrates.

FIND THE TIME FOR INTERACTION AND FEEDBACK

Managers and directors may already feel overworked, but there's no getting around the fact that millennials crave and expect frequent and direct feedback, especially from their superiors. Satisfying that desire is a struggle for many organizations, but the good news for busy supervisors is that the communication mechanism doesn't have to be a sit-down in the boss's office. In fact, many millennials neither expect nor prefer that. Four in ten prefer electronic interactions to in-person ones, according to a PwC report. This creates an opportunity to replace meetings with text messages, emails, surveys, and internal network posts. Keep in mind, though, that the contact needs to be personal and frequent. Bonus points if you provide meaningful performance feedback and direction with an eye toward refining your employees' existing skills, or cultivating new ones.



30-somethings
strongly disagree:
“I believe the results of
this survey will be used
to make my agency a
better place to work.”

GET CREATIVE ABOUT RECOGNITION

Millennials crave recognition, and the FEVS data make clear that they're dissatisfied with their federal work experience in this regard. When they work hard, they expect to be rewarded, but they feel that their agencies don't promote or acknowledge them according to the merits of their performance.

This dynamic can be stressful for federal supervisors who are constrained by an advancement system that is largely seniority-based. But managers who get hung up on that ignore a key truth about millennials: The recognition they seek doesn't necessarily involve a promotion or a raise.

“If you publicly recognize them for doing a great job with a social media post they can share, that could be better than a raise,” says Qualtrics' Trevor DeLew. “Millennials might think, ‘I'm doing all this great work and nobody notices.’ And it's pretty easy to make a blog post. Managers just have to learn what those drivers are.”

FACILITATE A CONVERSATION

Effective group communication is just as critical as maintaining one-on-one contact. Through whole-team communication, managers are able to provide high-level updates, relate current projects to the departments' broader mission, and prompt dialog between team members.

That last point shouldn't be overlooked. Millennials crave feedback and interaction, and it doesn't all have to come from managers. By facilitating a means for peer-to-peer feedback, collaboration, and discussion, managers can foster engagement across the team.



SURVEY SAYS

The FEVS survey is useful, but it is filled with generalist questions, conducted only once per year, and results are released months after responses are complete. By surveying your own team more frequently and specifically, you'll gain a much better sense of how the day-to-day life of your agency or department is affecting the work experience, as well as how to improve it. And your employees will feel valued and included because they'll know that their opinions matter.

An important caveat: You have to act on the survey results. If you solicit opinions and don't respond, workers soon learn that their opinions really don't matter after all. That brings to mind a 2016 FEVS question that elicited some of the most pessimistic responses overall, especially from 30-somethings. "I believe the results of this survey will be used to make my agency a better place to work."

As organizations of all stripes work to craft a formula that will induce millennials to stick around, the challenge is especially critical for federal agencies. An aging workforce, combined with an institutional culture built on low turnover, necessitates finding a way to increase the government's appeal to millennials. The good news is that it's possible, and, contrary to popular stereotypes, doesn't even require a foosball table or a latte machine.

In fact, the management tactics that appeal most to millennials aren't generational gimmicks, but thoughtful responses to changing times that are likely to resonate with employees of all ages, and thus improve the overall health of your agency.

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