How preferences for types of appreciation differ across employee age groups

Paul White and Gene George

Abstract

Purpose – *Organizational leaders and human resource professionals affirm that to have (and keep) an effective workforce, understanding one's employees is critical. Thus, understanding the differences between employees of different age groups is important. Simultaneously, studies have demonstrated the significant positive impact appreciation has on the functioning of organizations. When team members feel truly valued, numerous positive benefits result, including lower staff turnover, less absenteeism, higher customer ratings and greater profitability.*

Design/methodology/approach – *Because individuals prefer to be shown appreciation in different ways and prior research has shown some age differences, this study examined how appreciation preferences differ across seven employee age groups. Over 190,000 individuals completed an online assessment based on the five languages of appreciation, which identifies employees' preferred ways of receiving appreciation. The respondents were separated into seven age groups, from 19 years old and younger to 70 years old and above.*

Findings – *The results of an analysis of variance found that there were significant differences across groups. Although the patterns of preferences were largely the same across many groups, post hoc analyses found both the youngest and oldest age groups differed from employees in their 30s with regards to their desire for quality time. Additionally, older employees were extremely low in their desire for tangible gifts.*

Originality/value – *As the proportion of employees shifts from older to younger groups of employees, these results raise important implications for organizations' approaches regarding how appreciation and other motivators should be adjusted for different groups of employees.*

Keywords Human resource management, Culture, Employee engagement, Leadership, Human capital, Rewards

Paper type Research paper

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O rganizational leaders and human resource (HR) professionals affirm that to have (and keep) an effective workforce, knowing and understanding your employees is critical. Age often is considered an important proxy for social experiences, attitudes or beliefs that cannot easily be measured directly. Thus, understanding the differences between employees of different age groups is important.

Similarities and differences of a variety of characteristics across age groups have been a frequently examined area in recent years. Comparisons of work ethic (Zabel *et al.*, 2017), work-related values (Parry and Urwin, 2011), motivations (Heyns and Kerr, 2018) and views of meaningful work (Weeks and Schaffert, 2019) are some of the areas that have been explored.

Specifically, understanding and adjusting to the characteristics of younger employees has been the source of much research. The Gallup group found that the majority of millennials (55%) are less engaged at work than all other generations and that earning more money is not the primary driving force for them (Wagner and Harter, 2006). Additionally, 88% of millennials report they desire a collaborative work culture (in contrast to a competitive one),

and 74% want flexible work schedules (Van den Bergh and De Wulf, 2017). Millennials also highly value feedback and acknowledgment, to the extent that they would like feedback every week or immediately, when possible (Asghar, 2014).

Appreciation in the workplace

Through a series of studies and interviews with one million employees across the world, the Gallup organization found the process of communicating appreciation to employees to be one of the core elements related to increasing employee engagement (Buckingham and Coffman, 1999). In a global study of over 200,000 employees, the *most important factor* related to employees enjoying their job was that they felt appreciated (Strack *et al.*, 2014).

Simultaneously, studies have demonstrated the significant positive impact employees feeling appreciated has on the functioning of organizations (Friedman, 2021). When team members feel truly valued, the level of employee engagement within a workplace has been shown to be highly predictive of numerous positive benefits, including lower staff turnover (Glassdoor, 2013), less absenteeism, reduced internal theft by employees, fewer on-the-job accidents, higher customer ratings and greater profitability (Wagner and Harter, 2006).

Unfortunately, however, expressing appreciation is not commonplace. A study by the John Templeton Foundation found that 60% of employees say they either "never" express gratitude at work or do so perhaps once a year (Kaplan, 2012). A total of 65% of North Americans have reported they have not received *any* recognition for work well done in the past 12 months (Rath and Clifton, 2004). And while 51% of managers believe they do an adequate job of showing recognition for work well done, only 17% of the employees who work for them agree (SHRM/Globoforce, 2012).

Employees differ in how they want to be shown appreciation

Not everyone likes to be shown appreciation in the same ways, as demonstrated by Chapman and White in *The 5 Languages of Appreciation in the Workplace* (Chapman and White, 2019), which is based on the work done by Chapman (2009) and his book, *The 5 Love Languages*. When appreciation is not communicated in the ways desired by the recipient, not only are time and effort wasted, but frustration can result as well.

Generational shift

As organizational leaders and HR professionals are aware, a major transition has been occurring in the ages of employees during the past decade, with older employees ("Baby Boomers") leaving due to retirement and large numbers of younger employees ("Gen Z" and "Millennials") entering the workforce. For example, in 2016, the number of millennials in the workforce surpassed both the number of Baby Boomers and Gen X'ers working (Fry, 2018).

In a prior smaller study (White, 2018), we compared the appreciation preferences of millennials with older employees. The overall patterns of desired appreciation languages were similar (words of affirmation preferred the most, followed by quality time and acts of service, with tangible gifts being the least preferred.) A slight trend was noticed that the preferences of younger employees shifted slightly from words of affirmation to quality time.

Given ongoing questions raised by in-the-field users of the *Motivating by Appreciation* (*MBA*) *Inventory* about expected and observed different preferences across age groups, a deeper (looking at seven distinct age groups) and broader (more participants) investigation of the issue was deemed to be important. The purpose of this investigation is to explore this issue *more deeply* by comparing seven different age groups of employees and, *more broadly*, by using a larger sample (190,000+ versus 65,000).

Methodology

The *MBA Inventory* was administered to 190,642 individuals. This online self-report assessment was developed to identify the preferred ways individuals desire to be shown appreciation in the workplace and is based on the five languages of appreciation (Chapman and White, 2019). Comprising 30 paired statements in a forced-choice format, the *MBA Inventory* identifies the respondents' primary language, secondary language and least valued language of appreciation. The development, reliability and validity of the inventory have been reported elsewhere (White, 2016). Currently available in eight languages, the *MBA Inventory* has been taken by over 295,000 employees worldwide.

Although the assessment is based on the five languages of appreciation, only four of the appreciation languages are assessed by the inventory. This is due to the low frequency of appropriate physical touch as a primary language ($<1\%$ of the general population) and the potential for high negative reactions by respondents who are uncomfortable with any physical touch in the workplace or if they have had negative related experiences in the workplace (Chapman and White, 2019).

For each respondent, their answers to the inventory items assisted in identifying their primary language of appreciation, from four options: words of affirmation, quality time, acts of service, tangible gifts. (Table 1 for descriptions of each appreciation language.)

The age range for each group and the number of employees in each group are reported in Table 2. The respondents included 128,284 females (67%) and 62,359 males (33%).

The frequencies (by percentage) of each age group's primary language of appreciation are reported in Table 3.

An analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to examine whether employees in seven age groups differed in how they preferred to be shown appreciation. The data were then further analyzed through post hoc statistical procedures to examine the results from the ANOVA more closely.

Table 1	Descriptions of languages of appreciation
Language	*Description*
Words of affirmation	Praise communicated orally or in writing
Quality time	Focused attention with your supervisor, "hanging out" with coworkers, working together on a project
Acts of service	Helping coworkers complete a time-sensitive project or assisting them in solving a problem
Tangible gifts	Giving a small gift reflecting colleagues' food preferences, hobbies or interests

Table 2	Age group distribution		
Group	*Age range (in years)*	*Number of employees*	*% of total* N
1	<19	2,219	1.1
2	20–29	44,561	21.9
3	30–39	60,744	29.9
4	40–49	47,700	23.5
5	50–59	33,612	16.6
6	60–69	11,165	5.5
7	70+	834	0.4
Total		200,839	100.0

Table 3 Primary language distributed across age by percentage of total group							
	Age in years (%)						
Appreciation language	<20	21–29	30–39	40–49	50–59	60–69	70+
Tangible gifts	5.8	7.3	7.2	6.2	4.4	3.3	2.3
Acts of service	17.1	16.6	20.7	22.8	23.9	23.5	22.3
Quality time	37.5	30.8	26.3	25.2	25.2	24.1	25.2
Words of affirmation	39.6	45.3	45.8	45.8	46.5	49.1	50.2

Results

The results from the ANOVA found that there were significant differences among the seven age groups examined in how they prefer to be shown appreciation (F = 4.066; $p < 0.01$).

The ANOVA test does not indicate between which age groups differences may be statistically significant. To examine this issue, we conducted a Tukey–Kramer post hoc test. To confirm our findings, we also ran the Tukey honest significant difference test.

Both analyses found statistical differences. Two pairings of groups were found to be significantly different. Group 1 (employees 19 years old and younger) and Group 3 (employees in the 30–39 age range) had significantly different preferences (Q = 4.915; p = 0.03; α = 0.05). And Group 3 (30–39 years old) and Group 7 (employees 70 years old and older) also differed in how they desire to be shown appreciation (Q = 5.034; p = 0.03; α = 0.05).

Some additional general trends can also be observed from the data. Although words of affirmation was consistently the most frequently chosen preferred appreciation language across all age groups, the percentage for each age group declined as employees were younger – from 50.2% of the oldest employees to 39.6% of those under 20 years of age. Second, the younger the employee, the percentage of employees who chose quality time as their preferred appreciation language grew (from 25% to 37%). Conversely, tangible gifts as one's primary language of appreciation declined as employees were older – from 7.3% of employees in their 20s to only 2.3% of employees 70 years old or older.

Discussion

In the case of preferences for forms of appreciation in the workplace, this study suggests that to a limited degree, age can be used to identify the likelihood an employee would have a specific preference, allowing an employer to anticipate and plan for practices that could have a potentially significant effect on employee morale and productivity. Especially given the age-diverse workforce of today's economy, employers can benefit from understanding how workers from different age groups compare in their preferences.

An important implication for organizational leaders and HR professionals is to understand the shift in how employees desire to be shown appreciation and to reflect these changes in organizational priorities and procedures. Older employees value appreciation primarily through words of appreciation and, second, quality time. But they clearly place a low priority on receiving tangible gifts as a means of meaningful appreciation. Leaders should strongly consider rethinking the decades-old practice of giving plaques, certificates and small gifts as tokens of appreciation, especially to their older employees.

Conversely, younger employees (Gen Z's and Gen X'ers) value quality time as an expression of appreciation more than their older colleagues. A critical factor to remember, however, is that younger employees prefer time with their peers more than time with their supervisor or manager (White, 2018). Practically, this means organizations should organize activities that facilitate peer interaction (especially for younger employees) as part of their plan to create a positive, supportive workplace culture.

Although some moderate differences between age groups were found in how employees prefer to be shown appreciation at work, the themes were not earth-shaking. Rather than continuing to investigate appreciation preferences based on age, it appears other factors may yield more practically relevant findings. Type of industry, level of job responsibility (front-line employee, supervisor, manager), location (urban, suburban, rural) and personality types (introverted, extroverted) are potential areas for exploration.

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author [PW]. The data are not publicly available due to privacy restrictions required by the institutions for whom the respondent's work.

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