

Millennials, Gen X and Baby Boomers: Who's Working at Your Company and What Do They Think About Ethics?

Ethics Resource Center (ERC)

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Objective:

The objective of this brief is to determine, using 2009 NBES data, what, if any, differences exist between the three primary generations of workers (Millennials, Generation X, and Baby Boomers) in terms of their views towards ethics. The brief also attempts to determine whether there are any specific age groups that are particularly vulnerable to ethics problems.

Methods:

The NBES is conducted biennially via telephone questionnaire. In 2009, the survey had 3010 respondents, of which 158 were removed due to being government employees, since the survey was attempting to survey only employees of for-profit businesses, for a revised total of 2852 respondents. Calls were made to randomly sampled residential households within the contiguous 48 states.

To be eligible for participation in the 2009 survey, respondents had to be:

- Eighteen years of age or older;
- Currently employed;
- Working for a company that employs at least two people; and
- Working at least 20 hours per week for their primary employer.

Results of the survey were weighted based on gender and age, according to statistics obtained from the 2000 U.S. Census data. Only 12% of all non-demographic questions had a difference of two or more percentage points between un-weighted and weighted results.

Key Findings:

- Pressure to commit ethical misconduct is experienced at similar levels across all generational groups surveyed
- Retaliation rates also appear to be an age-independent trend
- Younger workers are more likely to observe misconduct than older employees, and possibly as a result hold a less positive view of the company's overall ethical culture
- Younger workers are also less likely to report misconduct when it is observed
- Millennial workers are much less likely to intend to stay with their current company long-term, and are twice as likely as other generations to want to leave within one year
- Millennials who are managers are the only group who are less likely to view the company ethical culture as positive than non-management employees in their age group

Conclusion:

These findings clearly indicate that younger workers (and in particular, Millennial managers) are an especially vulnerable group when it comes to observing and reporting misconduct, overall views of the ethical culture, and feelings of loyalty to the company. The brief goes on to recommend developing training programs with these issues in mind designed specifically for younger workers, and encourages pairing younger workers with older mentors to help develop stronger responses to ethical issues.

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