

Engaging the 21st century multi-generational workforce: Findings from the Age & Generations study

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Chestnut Hill, Mass.: Sloan Center on Aging & Work at Boston College, 2009

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THE SLOAN CENTER ON

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AT BOSTON COLLEGE

ENGAGING THE 21ST CENTURY MULTI-GENERATIONAL WORKFORCE

*Findings from the Age & Generations Study**

Marcie Pitt-Catsouphes and Christina Matz-Costa

This analysis and report was commissioned by the MetLife Mature Market Institute.

* The Age & Generations Study was funded by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation.

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The authors would like to express sincere appreciation to the MetLife Mature Market Institute (MMI) for commissioning and contributing to this report on engagement. The patient and collaborative approach of the Mature Market Institute contributed immensely to the success of this project.

The Sloan Center on Aging & Work at Boston College is grateful for the generous support of the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation for the Age & Generations Study as well as other Center activities. We also want to express our appreciation for the patient support of the 12 worksites that collaborated with us to make this study a success. The research team for the Age & Generations Study included (in alphabetical order): Elyssa Besen, Javier Boyas, Jackie James, Kathy Lynch, Christina Matz-Costa, Marcie Pitt-Catsouphes (Co-Principal Investigator), Michael Smyer (Co-Principal Investigator), Jennifer Swanberg, and Monique Valcour.

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I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Employers interested in enhancing the engagement of today's multi-generational workforce will want to know:

- What is employee engagement and why is it important?
- How can employers recognize employee engagement?
- How does age affect employee engagement?
- What are drivers of engagement for employees in different generational groups?
- What can employers do to maximize employee engagement?

In this study, we address these important questions and focus on selected findings from the Age & Generations Study. The Age & Generations Study was a research project conducted by the Sloan Center on Aging & Work at Boston College in 2007-2008. Approximately 2,200 employees across the country participated in this study. (For details about this study, see, "At a Glance: The Age & Generations Study" on page 25.)

Insights from this study will be of use to managers and supervisors who are interested in enhancing the engagement of their employees of all ages and generations.

Research Highlights:

Major findings from this study include:

- Older workers are more likely to have higher levels of engagement than younger workers.
- Employees reporting better physical and mental health are more likely to have higher levels of engagement than those with poorer physical and mental health.
- Employees who are satisfied with the training and development opportunities available to them are more likely to have higher levels of engagement than those who are not satisfied.
- Employees working in teams that have a culture supportive of workplace flexibility are more likely to have higher levels of engagement.
- The investment that employers make in their benefits programs also contributes to the level of the engagement of their workforce, specifically, employers who offer health insurance for the family members of full-time employees, life insurance, and employer-contributions to the employees' defined contribution plans are more likely to have higher levels of engagement.
- "One size does not fit all" when it comes to the steps that employers could take with regard to employee engagement. Employers might want to focus on specific drivers of engagement for some employees in particular age/generational groups and other drivers for some of those in other groups.
- Access to the flexibility needed to fulfill work and family responsibilities is one factor that is associated with higher levels of engagement among Gen Y employees (those born after 1980).
- Satisfaction with training and development is one factor that is associated with higher levels of engagement among Younger Gen X'ers (those born between 1972 and 1980).

- Being a supervisor is one factor that is associated with higher levels of engagement among Older Gen X'ers (those born between 1965 and 1971).
- Good physical health is one factor that is associated with higher levels of engagement among Younger Boomers (those born between 1955 and 1964).
- Supervisor support is one factor that is associated with higher levels of engagement among Older Boomers/Traditionalists (those born before 1955).

II. BACKGROUND

If you could compare a snapshot of today's workforce with one taken as recently as 20 years ago, you would probably come to the conclusion that the 21st century workforce is different than that of the 20th century. And you would be right.

One difference is that the labor force is aging.

An indicator of this change is the fact that the median age of the labor force is rising.¹ In 1992, the median age of the U.S. labor force was 36.6 years. Labor force economists project that by 2012, the median age will jump to 41.4 years. (See Figure 1.)

In part, the aging of the workforce reflects the labor force participation patterns of the Baby Boomers, those who were born between 1946 and 1964 and who comprise the largest generational cohort in U.S. history. Furthermore, the Boomers are beginning to express new ideas about late career work and the postponement of retirement. Labor market economists project that the labor force participation rates of younger adults will remain about the same (or even decline a bit); however, these rates are expected to increase among older adults.

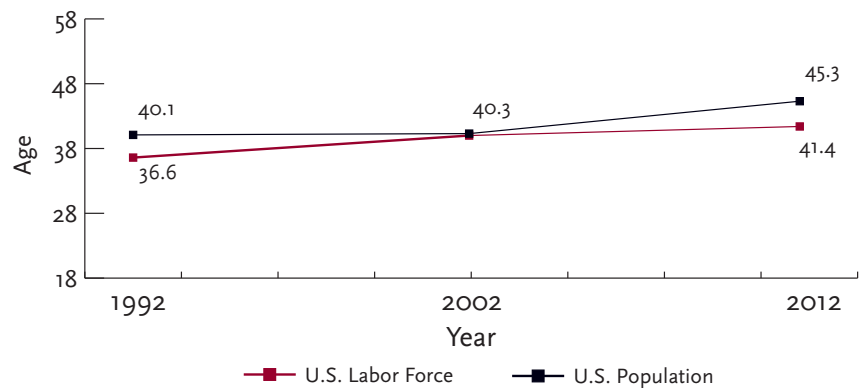
Figure 2 presents changes in the labor force participation rates by age group over a 30 year period (projected to 2016), noting that older adults will experience the most significant increases in labor force participation rates.

Today, employers and employees face both opportunities and challenges associated with the contemporary multi-generational workforce that are very different from those of previous generations. Workplaces are just starting to come to grips with the realization that age can matter.

Age Matters: It's Important for Employers. There are a number of reasons why shifts in the age demographics of the workforce can be a compelling business issue. For example:

- *Brain Drain:* Headlines of newspapers around the country have warned business leaders that the retirement of the Baby Boomers could result in the biggest brain drain in U.S. history.⁴ If these experienced workers leave the workplace en masse, the loss of business knowledge – for example, knowledge about the needs of key customers or knowledge about effective problem solving practices – that would ensue could be devastating to organizations.⁵
- *Responding to the Marketplace:* The aging of the workforce, of course, reflects the aging of the population – a population of consumers and customers. Some organizations have re-thought their market strategies so that they can better target Baby Boomers. It has been estimated that Baby Boomers are

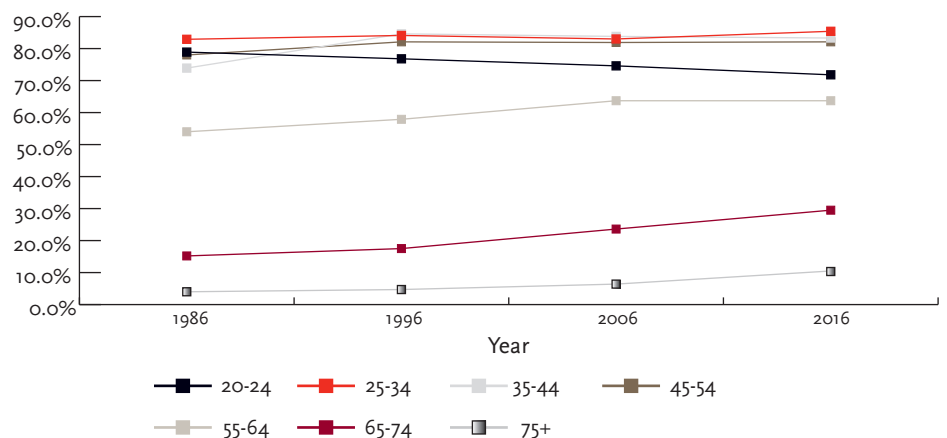
Figure 1. Median Age of U.S. Population and Labor Force: 1992, 2002, and projected 2012



Source: Toossi, 2004²

Figure 2. Labor Force Participation Rates of Workers by Age Group, 1986-2016 (projected)

Figure 2 presents changes in the labor force participation rates by age group over a 30 year period (projected to 2016), noting that older adults will experience the most significant increases in labor force participation rates.



Source: Toossi, 2007³

responsible for \$3.8 trillion in annual spending and by the year 2015 it is projected that this number will increase to \$4.6 trillion.⁶ Organizations will want to be sure that they understand the experiences and perspectives of this age demographic.

- From Surplus to Potential Shortages:** Employers in some industry sectors — particularly those who employ high percentages of older workers in critical occupational groups — have begun to consider the potential impact of the loss of talent as the Baby Boomers march toward the normative retirement age of 62-65 years. Their concerns are exacerbated by the fact that the number of potential workers in the next generations is smaller than in the Baby Boomer generation. In some regions of the country, this will mean that the labor surplus we have enjoyed for the past several decades could soon come to an end.⁷ Some are predicting that without significant increases in productivity, there will not be enough people to fill job vacancies.⁷

Age Matters: It's Important for Employees. Across age and generations, employees seek employment situations where they are respected and valued and where they have opportunities to contribute their talents, competencies and experience at the workplace.

Which employees are considered to be "ideal workers"?

Documentation of performance appraisals and promotion criteria suggests that employers define the ideal worker as an employee who is aggressive, independent, single-mindedly devoted to the organization or their career, non-emotional, and rational.⁸

One challenge associated with notions such as the ideal worker is that they can perpetuate harmful stereotypes in the workplace that emerge when employees do not fit the expected pattern. Older workers who want to extend their labor force participation beyond the traditional retirement age of 65 years or those who want to re-career and begin to work in a different occupation are likely to "surprise" employers because these new behaviors represent a break from the typical patterns of the 20th century "ideal worker".

Managers who assume that their employees will all want to climb the corporate ladder by steadily increasing the scope of their responsibilities, prestige, and pay might be stumped by older workers who do not want to retire but who are no longer interested in the scramble to the top. They might label such a worker as disinterested or disengaged...which, may in fact be the furthest thing from the truth.

Employers who want to remain employers of choice for *all* employees, regardless of age or career-stage, will work to expand their notions of ideal workers and then will want to identify steps they can take so that their young employees, employees at midlife, and older employees will want to work for that organization, will remain highly engaged in work, and have a desire to stay with that employer. These employers will want to gain an understanding about what motivates workers of different ages to work with passion so that the organizations can adopt policies and programs that enhance employee engagement, taking age into consideration.

III. EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

What is engagement?

Employee engagement is a hot topic among employers right now.

Recent headlines exclaim:

"The Pitiful State of Employee Engagement"⁹

"Gen Y: Disengaged — Except in India"¹⁰

"Engaged Employees Equal Increased Earnings"¹¹

Although there is a lot of buzz about engagement, there is a bit of confusion over what it is, exactly. Some of the words used to define employee engagement include: "commitment," "participation," "involvement," "motivation," "morale," "job-fit," or "discretionary effort." Although some people use these words as if they are synonyms of engagement, these different terms do not really mean the same thing.

For this report, we use the term “employee engagement” to mean:

A positive, enthusiastic, and affective connection with work that motivates an employee to invest in getting the job done, not just “well” but “with excellence” because the work energizes the person.

Although employees can be engaged in specific work tasks, specific roles or sets of responsibilities, their work or their jobs overall, their work groups, or the overall organization, this report focuses on engagement in employees’ work (that is, their jobs overall).

Employee Engagement at GlaxoSmithKline (GSK)

At GlaxoSmithKline (GSK), a research-based Pharmaceutical Company, employee engagement is the glue that links attraction and retention. Their employees’ creativity, innovation and “going the extra mile to make products and processes more efficient and effective” is critical to retaining a competitive edge.

Their work with team resilience surfaced a gap in engagement. They realized that many members of their key talent pool, while highly engaged, were not taking good care of their health and did not have alignment between their personal and professional lives. Workload was perceived as being a major impediment to full engagement.

Three years ago, GSK began an initiative to create a culture shift from one of “time” to one of “energy,” energy management, and power engagement. GSK offers a two and a half day workshop that supports a deep dive into the principles of physical energy (movement and nutrition), mental energy (focus on what’s important), emotional energy (positive attitude and emotional intelligence) and spiritual energy (passion). The company has targeted leaders who not only can serve as role models, but also create an environment where all employees have permission to strategically align their energy to be successful at home and at work. Periodic workshops are offered to the alumni of these courses to help them build and sustain their energy. All have access to a full array of wellbeing programming and a supportive work environment to help them maintain their energy and resilience. Preliminary data indicate that the initiative yields higher engagement, and data are now being gathered to measure the longer-term impact of this approach on deepening employees’ engagement.

Lots of Buzz

In December 2008, we checked to see “who’s talking” about employee engagement.

A Google search for the phrase “employee engagement” returned approximately 604,000 results, as compared to other popular management topics like “workplace flexibility,” which returned approximately one-quarter of the results (94,000).

A search for this phrase in Business Source Complete, a database that includes management articles, returned 702 results, 381 of which were from the years 2007/2008 alone, compared to 190 in 2005/2006 and 101 in 2003/2004.

It is more or less intuitive that job satisfaction and organizational commitment would be correlated with employee engagement, but is engagement different from these other orientations toward work? Let’s do a comparison.

Job satisfaction refers to an overall assessment that an employee makes about the job. As Erickson (2005) has described, “(e)ngagement is above and beyond simple satisfaction with the employment arrangement or basic loyalty to the employer—characteristics that most companies have measured for many years. Engagement, in contrast, is about passion and commitment—the willingness to invest oneself and expend one’s discretionary effort to help the employer succeed.”¹²

There is ample evidence that low job satisfaction is related to a range of undesirable work behaviors, and, high job satisfaction might result in the positive orientations that characterize high engagement, but they are not exactly the same. Macey & Schneider (2008) note that “(a)lthough there may be room for satisfaction within the engagement construct, engagement connotes activation, whereas satisfaction connotes satiation.”¹³ While job satisfaction may assess the conditions that provide for engagement, it does not directly tap the concept of engagement itself.

Organizational commitment is employees’ sense of allegiance to and pride in the organization, overall. As described by Hallberg & Schaufeli (2006), organizational commitment is “the emotional attachment that employees form with their organization, based on shared values and interests.”¹⁴ It is important to make a distinction between engagement in one’s work and commitment to the organization. Although organizational commitment is an important facet of engagement; it is only one of a number of states that comprise the full concept of engagement.¹³

We believe it is important for employers to understand these differences so that they can take effective steps to “set the stage” for increased levels of engagement – steps that could be different than those taken if the goal is to augment job satisfaction, for example. If engagement is confused with other types of employee attitudes, it is possible that employers will not leverage opportunities to augment engagement in an efficient and effective manner.

Why is it important to think about employee engagement?

Given the current economic challenges, employers are likely to put a premium on having fully engaged employees. Engaged workers are those who are willing to “go above and beyond” to get the work done and get it done well. In contrast, workers who are dis-engaged represent lost productivity and innovation.

Promoting employee engagement is one indicator of the effectiveness of employer approaches to talent management. Why? One reason is that enhanced employee engagement benefits employees and employers, alike.

Table 1. Benefits of Engagement for Employers and Employees Cited in Research¹⁵

Benefits of Engagement for Employees Include:	Benefits of Engagement for Employers Include:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Engaged employees report lower stress. ■ Engaged employees have higher job satisfaction. ■ Engaged employees indicate they are more satisfaction with personal lives, overall. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Engaged employees use less health care. ■ Engaged employees take fewer sick days. ■ Engaged employees are more productive. ■ Engaged employees have longer tenure. ■ Engaged employees create stronger customer relationships.

An Employee’s Perspective

During a recent focus group conducted by the Sloan Center on Aging & Work, one participant commented,

“I never feel like in my whole life I worked just for money. Sometimes when I worked just for money, I didn’t stay a long time because work for me is like an extension of myself, and it has to have meaning and purpose.”

Contrary to Woody Allen's adage that "Eighty percent of life is showing up," most employees don't want a job where they are only asked to "show up." In fact, a majority of employees say they want work that is challenging, satisfying, and where there are opportunities for learning and development.¹⁶ Perhaps this should not be surprising since workers typically spend more than a third of their waking hours each week doing work. This represents a considerable investment of time, energy, and mental and physical effort, so it is logical that people would want work to be meaningful to them and also valued by their employers.

Most people want to be engaged in their work because accomplishments at work are extensions of our "selves." Being engaged in quality work contributes to a sense of meaning in our lives.¹⁷ Put directly, good jobs can enhance employees' well-being.

Why, then, isn't everyone highly engaged?

In some situations, there is a mismatch between what people want, need, and expect from their jobs and what their jobs are providing them.¹⁸ Of course, a number of factors affect the extent of fit or mismatch. Trends associated with the aging of the workforce make it important to consider whether employees' ages, their tenure with the company, their life-stage, and career-stage is related in any way to engagement. We recognize that worker's skills, abilities, and motivations change and evolve over the course of their lives. The type of job that might have been a good match at one point in life might later become a mismatch; conversely, what was perceived as a mismatch at one stage might seem very desirable at other stages in life.¹⁸

There may be short-term as well as long-term engagement consequences of job mismatch. When expectations are not fulfilled, employees may dis-engage from work, and may begin to show evidence of working for a paycheck rather than working with passion. Eventually, the employees may look elsewhere for an employment situations that will meet their needs.

If employers offer quality employment experiences to their employees, will all employees remain engaged?

There is some evidence that the drivers of engagement may be different from those that affect employees' decisions about working for a specific employer and those that affect employees' decisions to remain with their current employer. That is, some components of a good job may result in prospective employees taking a job whereas others might affect engagement or retention.

A recent study conducted by Towers Perrin found that while factors such as competitive pay might affect the decisions that employees make about working for a particular company, factors such as opportunities for learning and development are related to employees' expressing a willingness to "go the extra mile" at work.¹⁹

Table 2. Factors that Attract, Engage, and Retain Employees

Attracting the Right People	Securing Discretionary Effort	Keeping the Right People
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Competitive base pay ■ Work-life balance ■ Challenging work ■ Career advancement opportunities ■ Salary increases linked to individual performance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Opportunities to learn and develop new skills ■ Opportunities to improve skills and capabilities ■ Reputation of the organization as a good employer ■ Input into decision making in one's department ■ Organization focuses on customer satisfaction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Organization retains people with needed skills ■ Satisfaction with people decisions ■ Manager understands what motivates employees ■ Ability to balance work-life ■ Reputation of organization as a good employer

Source: Towers Perrin, 2005¹⁹

Employee Engagement at Central Baptist Hospital

Data continue to support the fact that the quality and caliber of the manager is a key component to employee retention, engagement, and performance. Central Baptist Hospital in Lexington, Kentucky has utilized an employee empowerment model to increase employee engagement since 1994. Employees from all aspects of the organization participate in a shared leadership model coined at the hospital as “Shared Governance”. Employees work with department leaders, senior leaders and peers across the organization to have a voice in their work environment. As part of the Shared Governance model, employees take an active role in the selection of the department leaders or managers. A multi-level interview process includes a team of representative staff members from the selected department who solicit topics and questions from their peers and then incorporate these into the leader interview process. Experience has shown that team members appreciate the opportunity to participate, are committed to the process, and are respectful of the thoroughness and screening involved in identifying the final level of candidates.

Employee engagement is measured in several ways including the involvement of the employee committee, thoughtful deliberations regarding candidate recommendations, and improved scores on the bi-annual employee engagement survey, conducted on an organizational wide basis.

The Shared Governance model has been used effectively to increase employee engagement even through difficult times. During 2006, the employees of one key department reported concerns regarding their Department Director. Scores from the department staff were high in areas like support for the organization and their peers but the lowest in the hospital in support for their Director. Staff reported they felt open to communicate to senior leaders but did not feel the same openness to their Department Director. An interim survey of the staff was conducted validating this data and presented to the Department Director who chose to resign. In follow-up employee engagement surveys conducted in 2008, support for department leadership in this department is now among the highest in the hospital. Staff members are being re-organized on committees and teams to provide input into issues such as scheduling guidelines, process improvements and educational needs. Currently vacancy rates in the department are 2.28% and patient and physician satisfaction are high.

Is it important to think about engagement and age?

Some dated ideas and stereotypes of older workers would have us believe that engagement is a condition of youthful energy. Indeed, aging has long been viewed as a period of adjustment (and readjustment) made in response to the limitations experienced by adults as they transition into their elder years.²⁰ For much of the 20th century, many people who studied aging accepted the proposition that gradual disengagement from work and community life was expected as people became older – whether or not they experienced physical limitations that made continued involvement in the social and work world difficult. Until the Baby Boomers started to think about new paradigms for late career work (and alternatives to abrupt and complete retirement), the disengagement perspective has shaped how we think about older workers' withdrawal from the labor force.²¹

But new ways of thinking about the multi-generational workforce have encouraged us to consider alternatives to disengagement and to think about the potentials associated with employees who are engaged across the different stages of adulthood. Some have recently begun to discuss the “third age” of adulthood, described as the stage which follows the transition from midlife and proceeds to the more dependent elder years.²² The third age philosophy posits that many people in their 60s and 70s are active, competent, and eager to assume the responsibilities of both paid and unpaid work.

With this as a backdrop, a compelling case can be made for using the idea of engagement as a way to unleash the talent of today's multi-generational workforce.

IV. DRIVERS OF ENGAGEMENT: THE AGE & GENERATIONS STUDY

Is age a driver of employee engagement? What other factors are important?

The Sloan Center on Aging & Work at Boston College explored these questions using data from the 2008 Age & Generations Study.

Measuring employee engagement?

The Age & Generations Study used the nine-item Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES-9, ©Schaufeli & Bakker, 2003) to assess engagement.²³ The UWES-9 reflects the idea that engagement is a persistent and pervasive state of feeling and thinking rather than an intermittent orientation. This measure defines engagement as “a positive, fulfilling work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption.”²⁴

“**Vigor** is characterized by high levels of energy and mental resilience while working. It is the willingness to invest effort in one's work, and persistence even in the face of difficulties.”²⁴

“**Dedication** refers to being strongly involved in one's work and experiencing a sense of significance, enthusiasm, inspiration, pride, and challenge.”²⁴

“**Absorption** is characterized by being fully concentrated and happily engrossed in one's work, whereby time passes quickly and one has difficulties with detaching oneself from work.”²⁴

The Utrecht Work Engagement Scale

©Schaufeli & Bakker, 2003²³ (reprinted with authors' permission)

Have you had these feelings about your work? How often?

	Never	Almost never (a few times a year or less)	Rarely (once a month or less)	Some- times (a few times a month)	Often (once a week)	Very often (a few times a week)	Always (every day)
At my work, I feel bursting with energy (Vigor).	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I find the work that I do full of meaning and purpose (Dedication). ²⁵	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Time flies when I'm working (Absorption). ²⁶	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
When I get up in the morning, I feel like going to work (Vigor).	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I am enthusiastic about my job (Dedication).	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I am immersed in my work (Absorption).	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I persevere, even when things do not go well (Vigor). ²⁷	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I am proud of the work that I do (Dedication).	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I feel happy when I am working intensely (Absorption).	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

What affects variation in engagement?

Employers are interested in the factors that affect employee engagement, in part because they want to identify steps they might be able to take to support higher levels of engagement.

What might these factors be?

As suggested by the information contained in Table 3 below, employee engagement could depend on a range of workplace factors that exist “at work,” as well as characteristics that employees “bring” to work.

Table 3. Examples of Factors that Might Affect Employee Engagement

Characteristics Employees Bring to Work	Workplace Characteristics
Age	Tenure at Job
Gender	Supervisory Status
Marital Status	Number of Work Hours
Parental Status	Full-time/Part-time Status
Elder Care Status	Hourly/Salaried Status
Race/Ethnicity	Satisfaction with Training and Development
Household Income	Access to Flexibility Needed
Education	Culture of Flexibility
Physical Health	Whether Access to Benefits Affects One's Decision to Stay with Their Employer
Mental Health	Satisfaction with Benefits
Core Self-Evaluation (self perception)	Supervisor Support
	Inclusion/Exclusion
	Work Overload
	Work-Family Culture
	Job Security

Our first step was to explore some fundamental characteristics of the employees, themselves. The Age & Generations Study gathered information about the characteristics listed in Table 3 above: gender, marital status, parental status, race/ethnicity, household income, education, physical health, mental health and self-perception (labeled core self evaluation).²⁸ Because the Sloan Center on Aging & Work is interested in examining how age affects people’s employment experiences, we also considered employees’ age and their tenure with their current employers.

We found that the following factors related to employees’ characteristics explain higher levels of employee engagement: gender (being female), household income (having lower household income, however this effect was found to be very weak²⁹), elder care status (having no elder care responsibilities), physical health (being in better physical health), mental health (being in better mental health), core self evaluation (having a more positive sense of self), and age (being older).³⁰

Contrary to myths about older employees disengaging as they age, older employees report higher levels of engagement even when many other factors (such as physical health) are taken into consideration.

- *Suggestion for Employers:* Employers may want to pay careful attention to this first set of factors (i.e. employee characteristics).

First, these factors can help employers to identify options for different approaches to enhancing employee engagement. For example, employers might want to get ideas from employees with children about supports that the organization might provide that would simultaneously support positive work-family outcomes and also enhance engagement.

Secondly, employers might be able to take steps to affect some of these characteristics which, in turn, could affect employee engagement. For instance, effective wellness initiatives and programs designed to promote the successful management of chronic diseases might improve employees' health which could then affect levels of engagement for some employees.

Of course, when employees are at the workplace, these individual characteristics interact with their experiences at work. Therefore, we also considered whether a number of different factors related to job/employment structure; access to resources; and workplace culture *might* affect employee engagement (See right-hand column of Table 3).

1. *The Structure of the Job/Employment Situation:* The way that a person's job and employment situation are structured refers to factors such as the number of hours the person works, whether the person is employed full-time, the person's status as a salaried or hourly employee, and whether the person has supervisory responsibilities. Asking questions about work overload (for example whether employees feel they have the time necessary to complete the tasks assigned to them) is one way to assess how employees assess characteristics of their jobs,³¹ and measuring employees' perceptions of job security provides one way to understand how jobs are structured.³²
2. *Access to Resources:* We asked employees about their access to the formal and informal resources they need or want. For example, employees reported their satisfaction with training and development,³³ their access to the flexible work options they felt they needed to manage their work and family responsibilities, whether the benefits offered by their employers affect their decision to remain with their current employer, their satisfaction with benefits, and the extent of support they receive from their supervisors.³⁴
3. *Workplace Culture:* Employees' work experiences can also be affected by workplace culture, such as the culture of flexibility³⁵ (whether employees feel that there is deep support for the use of existing flexible work options), perceptions of inclusion,³⁶ and perceptions of work-family culture.³⁷

As we expected, many of the workplace factors listed above are positively related to levels of employee engagement. These include the number of work hours (with working more hours being related to higher engagement), satisfaction with opportunities for training and development, the culture of flexibility, supervisor support, perceptions of inclusion, and perceptions of job security.³⁸

It is important to give careful consideration to the relationship between work hours and levels of engagement. Although higher work hours predict higher engagement, it is not clear “which causes what.” For example, it is possible that people who are engaged are so passionate about their work that they work long hours. Alternatively, there might be a situation (such as being considered for a promotion) that would simultaneously cause both higher levels of engagement as well as longer work hours. And, there is substantial evidence that “too many work hours” as well as “too few work hours” can be detrimental to employees.³⁹

- *Suggestion for Employers:* Although employee engagement is often considered to be an individual experience, it might be interesting to consider how other people at the workplace can affect the levels of engagement of individual employees. For example, perceptions of supervisor support and inclusion are both positively related to the levels of engagement. Some employers might want to promote employee engagement by increasing resources that are available to supervisors or by acknowledging the importance of team inclusion.

The findings of the Age & Generations Study, which are summarized in Figure 3, provide employers with insight into factors that can drive levels of employee engagement.

figure 3. Overall Drivers of Engagement³⁸



What does this mean for employers?

Employers can identify options to enhance the drivers which could, in turn, increase the levels of employee engagement. For instance, given the importance of the culture of flexibility to levels of employee engagement, supervisors and managers might want to think of ways that they could strengthen the culture of flexibility at their workplaces so that employees feel that they can use flexible work options without worrying that people will think that they are not dedicated workers.

Do age & generations matter to levels of employee engagement?

The aging of the workforce has spurred interest in the experiences of today's multi-generational workforce. The Age & Generations Study explored whether employees' age and generational group are related to their engagement experiences.

We used employees' birth year to designate generations:

- Gen Y/Millennials: born after 1980
- Younger Gen X'ers: born between 1972 and 1980
- Older Gen X'ers: born between 1965 and 1971
- Younger Boomers: born between 1955 and 1964
- Older Boomers/Traditionalists: born before 1955.

Differences Within and Between Age/Generational Groups

It can be difficult to have conversations about the similarities and differences between groups of people. Within the diversity community, there has been a long-standing debate about the advantages and disadvantages that result from focusing on “differences.”

Indeed, research often suggests that there are more important differences within any particular group of people, such as among women and among men, than there are differences between those groups.⁴⁰

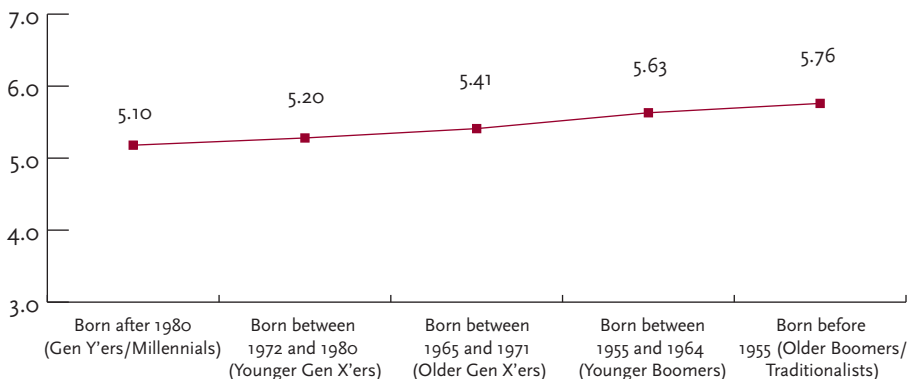
In an effort to draw attention to the diversity that typically occurs within groups, we have separated the Gen X'ers and the Baby Boomers into “younger” and “older” members of those two groups.

In this study, we use age and age-related factors to compare and contrast the responses of different groups of employees who participated in the Age & Generations Study. Our analyses found that there are a number of similarities in their employment experiences, suggesting that many aspects of their work experiences might be “age-neutral.” However, our data also suggest that age-related factors may be related to other specific aspects of their experiences at the workplace.

While we feel it is important to pay attention to these differences, readers should understand that these differences should not over-shadow the commonalities.

As noted in Figure 4, levels of engagement increase with age/generational cohorts.

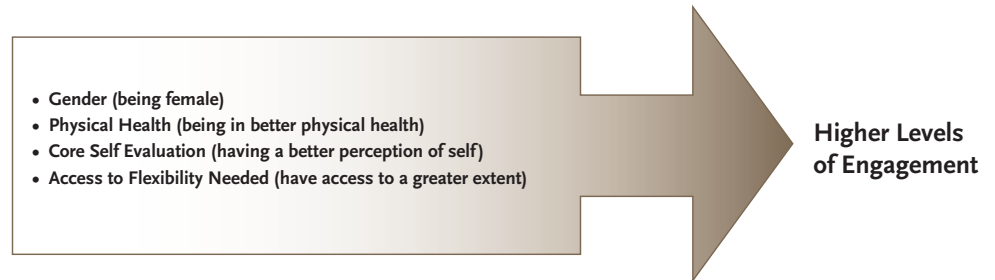
Figure 4. Average Engagement Score by Generation⁴¹



We used the lens of generations to consider whether different factors are related to employees' levels of engagement.

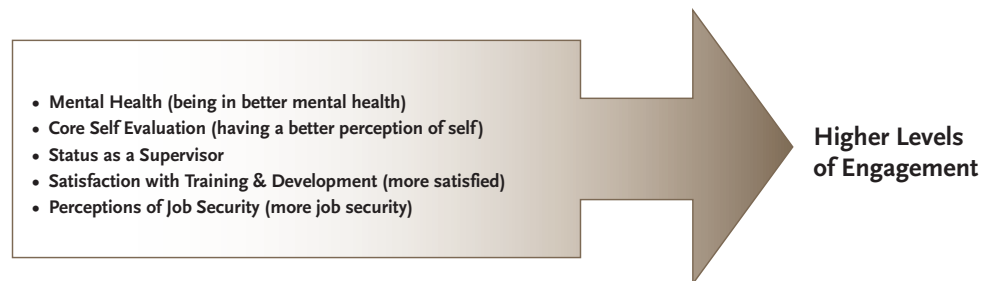
As indicated in Figure 5, gender (being female), physical health, core self-evaluation, and access to the flexibility needed are each related to the levels of engagement among the Gen Y/Millennial employees (those born after 1980)⁴² who participated in this study.

Figure 5. Drivers of Engagement Among Gen Y'ers/Millennials⁴²



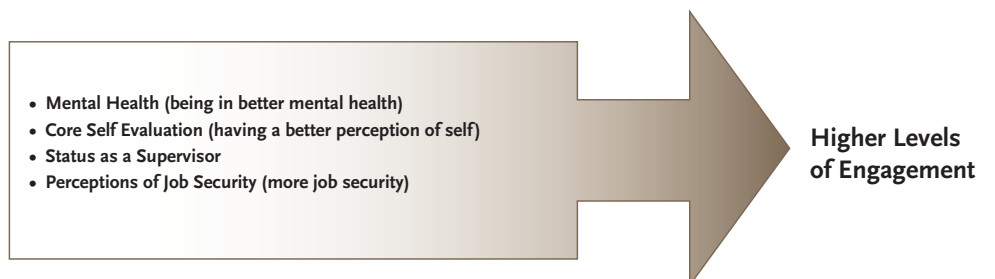
Different factors emerged as those affecting the levels of engagement of the Younger Gen X'ers: mental health, core self evaluation, status as a supervisor, satisfaction with training and development, and perception of job security (See Figure 6).

Figure 6. Drivers of Engagement Among Younger Gen X'ers⁴³



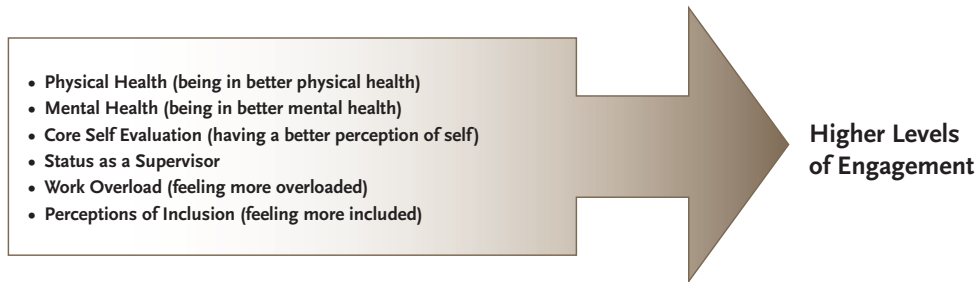
We found that similar factors were related to the levels of engagement of Older Gen X'ers compared with Younger Gen X'ers, with one exception: satisfaction with training and development was not a factor that reached a level of statistical significance for this group (See Figure 7).

Figure 7. Drivers of Engagement Among Older Gen X'ers⁴⁴



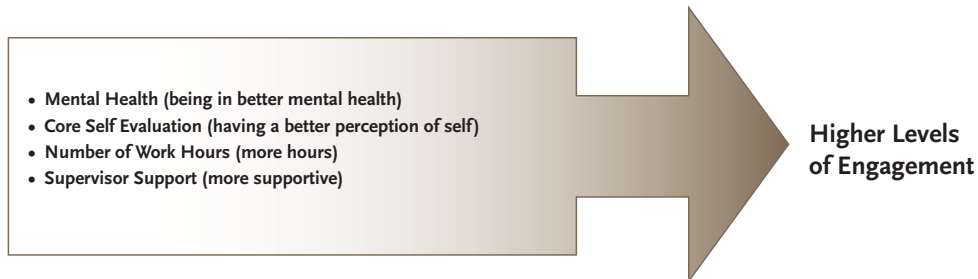
As noted in Figure 8, six factors predicted levels of engagement among Younger Boomers: physical health, mental health, core self-evaluation, status as a supervisor, work overload (higher levels), and perceptions of inclusion.

Figure 8. Drivers of Engagement Among Younger Boomers⁴⁵



The factors related to the levels of engagement among Older Boomers include: mental health, core self evaluation, number of work hours, and supervisor support (See Figure 9).

Figure 9. Drivers of Engagement Among Older Boomers and Traditionalists⁴⁶



As summarized in Table 4 below, some factors, such as gender, number of work hours, satisfaction with training and development, work overload, and perceptions of inclusion predicted the levels of engagement within one age/generational group but not the others. However, other factors, such as mental health, core self evaluation, and status as a supervisor, help to explain variation in the levels of engagement of employees in several of the age/generational groups.

It is important to note that our findings do *not* mean that the findings in the “empty” boxes are *not* important to employees in other age/generational groups; rather, that our study did not find that these factors help us to understand variations in the levels of engagement within these groups.

Table 4. Summary of Factors Related to the Levels of Engagement by Age/Generational Group

	Gen Y'ers/ Millennials (Born after 1980)	Younger Gen X'ers (Born 1972- 80)	Older Gen X'ers (Born 1965- 71)	Younger Boomers (Born 1955- 64)	Older Boom- ers/Tradition- alists (Born before 1955)
Gender (female)					
Physical Health					
Mental Health					
Core Self Evaluation					
Status as Supervisor					
Number of Work Hours					
Satisfaction with Training and Development					
Access to Flexibility Needed					
Supervisor Support					
Work Overload					
Inclusion					
Job Security					

These analyses indicate that “one size does not fit all” when it comes to the steps that employers could take with regard employee engagement. The findings also suggest that employers might want to focus on specific drivers of engagement for some employees in particular age/generational groups and other drivers for some of those in other groups. For example, having access to the flexibility that employees need to fulfill work and family responsibilities was one of the factors related to higher levels of employee engagement among the Gen Yer’s in our study. In contrast, one of the factors that helped to explain variation in the engagement levels of Younger Boomers was their perception of inclusion.

Investing In Benefits Helps With Employee Engagement

The investment that employers make in their benefits programs can also contribute to the level of engagement of their workforce (compared to the overall engagement at other workplaces).

All of the organization that participated in the Age & Generations Study offered the following benefits to most or all of their employees: health insurance for employees; paid sick days; unpaid sick Days; short-term disability; dental insurance; paid vacations; flexible spending accounts; employee assistance programs; and defined contribution retirement plan 401(k) or 403(b).

We found that organizations who offer the following benefits had slightly higher engagement scores on the whole than the organizations in our study that did not offer these benefits:

- Health insurance for the family members of full-time employees
- Life insurance
- Employer-contributions to the employees' defined contribution plans

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

Enhancing employee engagement requires that employers make a long term commitment. The quick-fix approach is rarely sufficient or sustainable.

We hope the following steps will help you get started at your workplace. Of course, organizations might decide to change the order (or skip some of the steps entirely).

1. *Define what engagement means at your company.*

As noted in this study, employer engagement can mean different things to different people. Here are some thoughts to keep in mind.

Employers will first want to distinguish factors that can affect levels of engagement from measures of engagement, itself. For example, since mental health is one factor that explains some of the variation in the levels of engagement, you would not want to include measures of mental health as part of your engagement measure (although you might include an item about a sense of fulfillment that people get from work).

Then, you will want to make a distinction between engagement and the consequences of engagement. For instance, if you want to examine the relationship between engagement and individual performance, you would not want to include an item about performance in your measure of engagement.

Employers may want to consider whether they should develop their own measures or use a measure of employee engagement that has been used by other workplaces or in previous studies. There can be advantages with each approach. Developing a customized measure will fit your needs, but it is important to be sure that it is a good, reliable measure which really does capture levels of engagement (rather than inadvertently measuring something else). On the other hand, using an existing instrument often makes it possible to compare the results from your organization with levels of engagement of other organizations.⁴⁷ The challenge is to be sure that you feel the measure meets the criteria above; that is, it does not conflate engagement with either factors that *affect* engagement or *outcomes* associated with engagement.

2. *Conduct an organizational audit.*

An organizational audit focused on engagement will provide your organization with an overview of the current situation.

An audit might include assessments of:

- strategic linkages between employee engagement and key business priorities
- commitment to employee engagement at different levels of the organization
- prevailing attitudes at the workplace related to employee engagement
- current practices that reward or discourage employee engagement

The box insert below provides some questions that can guide an organizational audit.

Quick Check

Strategic Linkages with Key Business Priorities

To what extent do managers link employee engagement to business priorities, such as:

- Innovation
- Customer Service
- Overall Quality of Products or Services
- Organizational Reputation

Does this vary department to department?

Do managers gather the type of data that could help them document these strategic linkages?

Commitment to Employee Engagement at Different Levels of the Organization

Do top managers at the organization recognize departments or work teams that demonstrate high levels of employee engagement?

Do supervisors acknowledge employees who “go above and beyond”?

Attitudes at the Workplace Related to Employee Engagement

How common do you think the following attitudes are at your organization? Do these attitudes function as facilitators or barriers to the full engagement of your younger workers, your workers at midlife, and your older workers?

Extent to which attitude seems to be present:

Not at all To a limited extent To a moderate extent To a great extent

Our organization encourages managers to “tap into” the passion and enthusiasm that employees bring to their work.

Employees in our organization describe their work as being energizing.

People in our organization often talk to each other about those aspects of their work which give them a sense of accomplishment and meaning.

Practices and Procedures

Does your organization have practices, such as annual reviews, that periodically assess the levels of employee engagement?

Are supervisors accountable for steps they take to support the levels of engagement of team members?

Does your organization periodically assess the levels of engagement of the workforce, overall?

3. *Gather data.*

Employers interested in increasing employee engagement will want to gather data to establish the current levels which can then be compared to levels in the future.

One approach is to include a measure of engagement in the organization’s employee survey. This enables employers to examine the relationship between factors such as employee engagement and other items on the survey, such as intent to leave.

It can be helpful to organize the findings by departments or other work units (as long as there are sufficient numbers of employees so that the confidentiality of their responses is respected). The results can help employers identify areas of the organization where there are high levels of engagement. These success stories may provide ideas for replicating engaged work teams.

4. *Force Field Analysis*

Employers may want to think about the factors listed in Figure 3 above as being factors that can either facilitate or inhibit employee engagement. The process of Force Field Analysis has proven to be useful as a technique to assess the need for and to implement change in an organization. The example below can serve as a starting point for understanding how the process can be initiated.

Managers and supervisors could work with their teams to construct a worksheet similar to the table depicted in Table 5. Using the worksheet, ideas about factors that either support or inhibit employee engagement can be entered into columns 2 and 4. Then, workplace leaders can begin to discuss steps they might take to enhance those factors that facilitate employee engagement and steps they might take to reduce factors that inhibit employee engagement (listing these in columns 1 and 5).

Table 5: Sample Force Field Analyses

Column 1	Column 2	Column 3	Column 4	Column 5
Steps to Augment Facilitators	Factors that Support Engagement	Goal: Enhanced Employee Engagement	Factors that Inhibit Engagement	Steps to Reduce Inhibitors
Step 1: Step 2: Step 3: For example: What could your supervisors do to enhance the culture of flexibility?	[List factors here.] For example: Culture of Flexibility		[List factors here.] For example: Perception of Low Supervisor Support	Step 1: Step 2: Step 3: For example: What could managers do to help supervisors provide tangible and intangible supports to employees?

5. *Identify action steps*

There are a number of action steps that employers might want to take. Some organizations will decide to focus on a single driver of engagement, such as supervisor support or perceptions of inclusion. Others will want to adopt a more comprehensive approach, addressing several factors at one time.

Many employers will be relieved to find out that it is probably not necessary to develop an engagement initiative, per se. Rather, it is likely that existing programs and supports could be adjusted so that they support increased employee engagement.

6. *Set objectives and develop metrics for individuals and for organizations.*

Once employers have a sense about their current level of engagement and their hopes for future levels, they can set their metrics, implement steps for improvement and then gather data to determine the success of their efforts.

VI. CONCLUSION

Whether we are in a period of economic growth or economic downturn, employee engagement is a win-win for employers and for their employees. Previous research has shown that higher levels of engagement are associated with several positive business outcomes and when employees derive a sense of meaning and fulfillment from their work, they tend to experience positive personal outcomes as well (see Table 1 for some examples). Organizations that want to tap into employees' reservoir of energy and passion will pay attention to employee engagement.

As discussed in this study among other factors, age is an important driver of employee engagement. Therefore, managers and supervisors may want to adopt a customized approach to employee engagement, recognizing that different opportunities and resources might affect the engagement of employees of different ages.

THE AGE & GENERATIONS STUDY AT A GLANCE

The Age & Generations Study was conducted by the Sloan Center on Aging & Work at Boston College in 2007 and 2008. The Center collaborated with nine U.S. workplaces (12 worksites) on this study.

We gathered three types of data: information about the individual organizations as a whole (from a key respondent— typically someone from HR), information about a selected department(s) in each organization (from a key respondent— typically the department manager), and information about employees within each department (from the employees themselves).

Data was collected using surveys, most of which were completed online, though some employees used written questionnaires.

The information discussed in this publication focuses on the employee survey only. The employee survey asked a series of questions about the following topics: employees' perceptions of their work, organization/department as a whole, work group, supervisor/team leader, work style, and outlook on life.

In total, 2,210 employees from 12 departments participated in this study.⁴⁸ Although the data we have collected are very rich and allow us to examine a range of experiences at the workplace, readers should keep in mind that the findings may not be representative of all employees, departments, or organizations in the U.S., nor are the respondent employees from each organization necessarily representative of the overall organizations where they work. Therefore, in the section below, characteristics of the organizations who participated in the study are described, followed by characteristics of the employees who completed the survey. Readers should keep these characteristics in mind as they read this report and know that specific findings might not apply to other groups of employees.

Due to the nested nature of the data (employees nested within organizations), hierarchical linear models (sometimes called a mixed model or a multilevel model) have been used for analysis of the relationship between employee/work characteristics and engagement.

Organizational Characteristics:

- The participating organizations are affiliated with a range of industry sectors: 2 of the organizations are in the educational services industry; 2 are in health care and social assistance; 1 is in retail trade; 2 are in finance and insurance; 1 is in professional, scientific and technical services; and 1 is in the pharmaceutical industry.
- Five of the participating organizations have a worksite located outside of the U.S. and 4 do not.
- All of the organizations in our sample were considered large businesses, each having over 1,000 employees: 4 of the organizations had between 1,000 and 10,000 employees, 4 had between 10,000 and 50,000 employees, and 1 had over 50,000 employees.
- While 4 of the participating organizations were for-profit, 5 were non-profit.

Employee Characteristics: ⁴¹

- 62% were women and 38% were men
- 89% were full-time employees and 11% were part-time
- 47% were paid as hourly employees and 52% as salaried employees
- Median earnings reported were: \$71,000/year for salaried employees and \$20/hour for hourly employees
- The average age of the employees was 42
- The Generational breakdown was as follows:
 - Gen Y'ers/Millennials (born after 1980): 12%
 - Younger Gen X'ers (born between 1972 and 1980): 23%
 - Older Gen X'ers (born between 1965 and 1971): 16%
 - Younger Boomers (born between 1955 and 1964): 26%
 - Older Boomers and Traditionalists (born before 1955): 23%.
- 35% had supervisory responsibilities
- 85% were White, 6% Black, 2% Hispanic, 3% Asian, 4% other
- 1% had less than a high school education, 10% had a high school degree or GED, 10% had some college, 12% had a 2 year degree, 30% had a bachelor's degree, 5% had some graduate school, 33% had a graduate degree
- 25% were never married, 64% were married, and 11% were separated, widowed, or divorced
- 57% had no children under 18, 35% had 1 or 2 children, and 8% had 3 or more children
- 7% reported that they have an additional job with a second employer
- Only a minority (5%) indicated that they were temporary employees. A slightly higher percentage were consultants (7%)
- A small percentage (4%) reported that they are "working in retirement"; that is, they had officially retired from a previous job

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- 41 The descriptive statistics reported here are findings from a dataset in which responses are weighted so that each organization in the sample is equally represented in the dataset.
- 42 These characteristics were found to be statistically significant predictors of employee engagement in a multi-level regression model containing all of the predictors listed in Table 3 (except for age). This model was restricted to include only Gen Y'ers/Millennials.
- 43 These characteristics were found to be statistically significant predictors of employee engagement in a multi-level regression model containing all of the predictors listed in Table 3 (except for age). This model was restricted to include only Younger Gen X'ers.

- 44 These characteristics were found to be statistically significant predictors of employee engagement in a multi-level regression model containing all of the predictors listed in Table 3 (except for age). This model was restricted to include only Older Gen X'ers.
- 45 These characteristics were found to be statistically significant predictors of employee engagement in a multi-level regression model containing all of the predictors listed in Table 3 (except for age). This model was restricted to include only Younger Baby Boomers.
- 46 These characteristics were found to be statistically significant predictors of employee engagement in a multi-level regression model containing all of the predictors listed in Table 3 (except for age). This model was restricted to include only Older Baby Boomers/Traditionalists.
- 47 See, for example, Harter, J. K., Schmidt, F. L., & Keyes, C. L. M. (2003). Well-being in the workplace and its relationship to business outcomes: A review of the Gallup studies. In C. L. M. Keyes, & J. Haidt (Eds.), *Flourishing: Positive psychology and the life well-lived* (pp. 205-224). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- 48 Although 2,210 employees responded to the survey, not all respondents filled out every part of the survey. The results were based on the total number of people who responded to an item or a series of items used in an analysis.

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The Sloan Center on Aging & Work at Boston College

The Sloan Center on Aging & Work at Boston College was founded in 2005. Working in partnership with workplace decision-makers, the Center promotes the quality of employment for the 21st century multi-generational workforce. The Center strives to put evidence into practice to improve employment experiences for both employers and employees. We place a particular emphasis on workplace flexibility that supports 21st century ways of getting work done and enhances employees' work experiences. Our multi-tiered strategy includes combining employer engaged research and academic rigor with innovative communications. We engage multi-disciplinary teams of researchers from around the world to forward three research streams – the US National Initiatives, the State Initiatives, and the Global Initiatives.

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The Center on Aging & Work is grateful for the continued support of the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation.

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