

A changing world of work. What can we learn from the service sector about employing Millennials (and Gen Z)?

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Introduction

Thinking about today's luxury service industry encounter, I am reminded of the comedy take-off of a 1970s advertisement by a European car manufacturer – “designed by computer, built by robots, driven by xxxxxxx (insert nationality)” Instead, we have something along the lines of “the affluent elderly, served by millennial youth and managed by the despairing middle-aged”. Is this mix a recipe for disaster or the making of a perfect service mix? How do you, as a (in your eyes) relatively successful manager in a service or other business context, meet the service demands of an aging customer base while, at the same time satisfying the work and life demands of your millennial (and, increasingly more likely) Gen Z workforce? In this discussion we will reflect on the latter of these two challenges and consider what both practical and academic thinking has to offer by way of solutions. We will note that there are no simple answers to the challenges that this scenario presents but that understanding the individual needs of both your young customers and your young workers may prove the best way forward. Above all, we will advocate the importance of listening to and understanding young people (from whatever generation) in your team as way to get the best out of them and to offer a positive and rewarding working experience.

In this paper, we consider the experience of what we might call the millennial or Gen Z ‘frontline’, the sectors of the economy that absorbs by far the largest number of young people as the location of their first job experience. We consider what lessons the experience

of frontline service work (FLSW) can give other sectors who employ millennials and their successors into the workplace, Gen Z and propose ways forward based on these lessons.

Frontline service work and generational theory

Frontline services such as retail, hospitality, travel, food service, personal services in the home and health and social care are frequently depicted as industries of youth, depending heavily on a young workforce to meet their skills requirements but also building their brand and market image in terms of the attributes which a young workforce deliver. Youth workers generally encapsulate the aesthetics and the cultural values that are associated with employee branding in many frontline service operations, as they are expected to identify with the products and services they are tasked to deliver. While the youth image of frontline service work (FLSW) is by no means a new phenomenon, the growth in services employment at the relative expense of opportunity in primary and secondary industrial sectors, has created new jobs which have been taken disproportionately by young workers. In a contemporary context, these young workers belong to the millennial and Z generations, millennials being those who are loosely and variously defined as people born in the decades of the 1980s and 1990s and Gen Z as those born between the mid 1990s and early 2000s. It is worth reflecting that, in the US alone, Gen Z comprise some 61 million potential workers and consumers. We are told that they are more likely to be cautious in the job decision-making than millennials because they face greater financial insecurity but, in other respects, have many similar characteristics. For simplicity, we will band these two groups together as 'new entrant youth' as recognition that generational labelling is a constantly moving feast. Between these two groups, new entrant youth now make up close to a majority of the workforce in many developed economies. Millennials,

indeed, are fast tracking to the doors of the executive team in many companies, bringing a younger workforce into regular contact with managers at all levels.

A significant body of work in both the professional and academic literature addresses the attributes of new entrant youth as both consumers and workers and points to clear parallels between the two of them. As consumers, they make their choices and complete purchases by means of a far wider range of methods than previous generations, including retail, leisure and other lifestyle purchases. They do this by combining online, face-to-face and virtual shopping in a seamless way. They are borderless in their choices, interrogating information about products and services online and then move seamlessly between criteria that highlight luxury, value, convenience, brand and a host of other considerations. They are true consumer butterflies and the same is true in terms of attitudes to employment. Some research studies focus on work attribute characteristics that value a supportive environment, with clear structures and unambiguous reward and progression indicators to millennials. They value and expect balance between work and life, are technology-savvy, are happier than previous generations and look for strong personal relationships at work. This focus on hedonistic outcomes can be interpreted as suggesting a weaker work ethic to that of previous generations. The research base for such generalised assertions, however, is questionable and it would be a mistake to attribute such characteristics to all young people indiscriminately.

Generational theory, upon which any discussion of millennials and/ or Gen Z as distinct groups builds, especially in a workplace context, is also highly contested. Interpretation of the significance of generational factors at work are subject to considerable debate, with basically two schools of thought. The dominant and populist view is that generations share common characteristics based on shared experiences and that these

define the assumptions and values that they (baby boomers, Gen Y, millennials, Gen Z) bring into the workplace. Advocates of the potency of generational theory argue its significance in the context of the workplace, arguing that generational differences do make a difference and may impact on the success or otherwise of the business. This, in turn, has led to a wide range of publications in books and business magazines, giving advice on how we, as older managers, should 'handle' our new entrant youth workforce. Generational theory, in a sense, puts us as managers in a passive position, needing to respond to the demands of our workforce and having to shape work patterns, practices and culture accordingly.

By contrast, there is an interesting view that it is organisational values and culture that shape how groups of employees behave and interact with work and these emerge irrespective of the age or generation to which employees belong. This perspective places the organisation in a somewhat stronger position and suggests that all workers, including new entrant youth, can be 'sold' the virtues of an organisational culture, in turn influencing attitudes and behaviour. However, good people management dictates that all managers and their organisations should seek to understand and work alongside the aspirations and expectations that all employees collectively and individually bring into the workplace. This means both actively creating the desired working environment for all generations of workers and, in doing so, listen fully to what your workforce want.

Youth entering the workforce

Notwithstanding these limitations, the high level of youth participation in FLSW provides a learning platform for the wider economy in terms of gaining a better understanding of millennials or whatever label we wish to use for younger workers. There is a general assumption that each generation must adapt to established workplace norms in

order to become useful members of the workforce. This assumes that each generation is absorbed into the workforce, leading to some changes but ultimately conforming more than changing. This passivity does not go unchallenged and there is considerable debate about the dangers of assuming generic generational characteristics for all young people within a given age bracket. The basis of the employer-employee relationship for new workers is that the former sets the agenda which is explained at the time of recruitment and selection – job expectations, working conditions and hours, remuneration, standards of behaviour, dress code etc. - and a condition that underpins a job offer is acceptance of these rules and the broader culture within which they are located. While established workers may have a voice in shaping some of these conditions, through collective or other forms of negotiation, new entrant employees have little or no input into this agenda and employers rarely seek their voice.

So how could such consultation at point of recruitment work? Rather than set the conditions as a 'take it or leave it' proposition at time of job offer, employers can and probably should engage in conversations with prospective employees about what they want from work, how the job on offer can be accommodated within their wider lifestyles and the demands that those entering the company have and what changes may be required, from both parties, to make the relationship work – a bit like the process through which most couples go at time of marriage or long-term partnering. In FLSW, there are probably some compromises that employers cannot make because of the nature of customer demand (weekend service, for example) but there will be many others where accommodation can be achieved to the benefit of the new employee, the employer and, maybe, established workers as well.

The recruitment of new entrant youth into FLSW also presumes that such processes of integration achieve substantial levels of conformity from new workers through processes of induction, training and acculturation and that this is, on the whole, a desirable and necessary outcome. Service companies such as the InterContinental Hotels Group (IHG) invest significantly in employee Onboarding, an induction process for all new staff (most of whom will be young) that encompasses cultural values and practical information. Onboarding is a high octane, high energy process over three days during which new entrants encounter the values and culture of Inter-Continental Hotels but are also equipped, in a practical way, with the tools they require to start in their new jobs. It is a very clear statement from the company that 'we are delighted you are here and we want to make your stay with us as much fun and as productive as possible'.

Such programmes, at their best, should be the basis for discussion of and advocacy for more effective support for youth transition from education to work, designed to create young workers who 'fit in'. As managers, we need to understand the major steps that are involved in moving from education to work, even in countries where some form of part-time work is normal for young people from the age of 15 upwards. We need to reflect on the argument that 'transition' is inadequate as a concept in helping us to understand the nature of the engagement of young people today with work and learning. Rather, youth engage with a growth process of identity development that enables them to make an active investment in experiences which shape their future careers and in particular their values regarding the place of work alongside other facets of their lives which, collectively, frame their identity. This presents challenges to businesses who have not always found ways to accommodate youth aspirations of this nature and, as a consequence, may experience high levels of disaffection with work, propensity to leave and underperformance from their

young or millennial employees. Engaging with this process of helping millennials move from the relative freedoms of school and college to the discipline of work is not exclusive to FLSW, it is a challenge for all workplaces but the nature of service work is that we throw new employees in situations of unsupervised frontline responsibility very early on in their working lives.

This discussion explores the argument that, in front-line services and, arguably, other organisations as well, there is also substantial learning which needs to be undertaken by businesses. Employers are hugely dependent on the youth talent pool for a majority of their newly sourced workers and rather than seek to force old models of behavioural and cultural conformity on their workforce, they will benefit greatly from attempting to gain greater understanding of what it is that new entrant youth want from their working lives. As a result, successful businesses in services and other sectors are those that create workplace values, norms and practices that both celebrate what is core to the organisation while also reflecting the reality of what it is that will attract and retain young people. We will address this contention and draw wider lessons from FLSW that can have value to public and private sector organisations across the economy.

The changing nature of frontline service work

On the face of it, the frontline service work environment has many attractive features for new entrant youth and others seeking employment. It is a sector with few thresholds to cross for access, either in the sense of technical skills requirements or professional accreditation. In most countries, jobs are readily available and many of them require little or no formal qualifications or experience to enter. There are opportunities for transfer across frontline service sectors, from hospitality to care and retail to tourism, for

example. There are also fluid and accessible promotion opportunities within organisations. Service work is geographically ubiquitous, found in every country and community and, largely, sharing common work demands and skills parameters. This ubiquity includes attractive locations for lifestyle choice, close to leisure, cultural and educational opportunities. It offers flexible opportunities in terms of when and for how long work is offered and delivered, allowing employees to build other commitments around work demands. Many service businesses, especially in hospitality and tourism, naturally 'breathe' in response to seasonal demand in a way that matches the cycle of availability of young people in education – a workforce is available during school/ college vacations which coincide with peak business demand but working opportunities do not extend beyond these seasonal boundaries. These attractive attributes come at a cost. FLSW is frequently physically demanding, routinized and without challenge, delivered at anti-social times, poorly paid, insecure, offering limited opportunity for growth, based on authoritarian, top-down models of management and leadership and ghettoising of women, minorities and youth in the least attractive positions, leaving those employed in such work powerless to enact their own agency because of their status within the organisation. Of course, FLSW includes employment in a wide range of organisational settings, from small, family businesses to multinational organisations, third sector NGOs and under the auspices of national and local government and the nature of actual jobs varies accordingly. So generalisation about such work requires very careful qualification.

It is arguable that the nature of frontline service delivery and the consequences that this has for work are changing in ways that map well against the descriptors applied to millennials, particularly in relation to the use of technology and the speed of transaction. FLSW is moving away from exclusively physical delivery to include various forms of

technological intermediation via telephone, online, chat facilities via social media, robotic and automated responses. Youth passion for technology as consumers, such as through the use of automated supermarket checkouts and online retailing, may also represent their Achilles heel within the job market as many customer-facing frontline jobs fall victim to technology substitution. Some writers have referred to millennials as born to technology or 'digital natives' for whom there is a seamless integration of work and non-work technology, representing the crossover in use between work and life without recognition of any distinction. By contrast, there can be an over-emphasis on technology in the service workplace in that future skills will continue to place strong emphasis on soft skills such as teamwork, creativity, adaptability, and social and cultural awareness which are just as important as skills that apply emerging technologies. New entrant youth, it would seem, aspire to but may not always exhibit these soft skills which, while at the heart of FLSW, may also be a vulnerability in that, in the future, they may provide the differentiator that protects against technology substitution, the takeover by robotisation.

Precarious work

FLSW is frequently customer-facing, precarious, low paid, and is widely perceived to require limited or no prior training. However, such work is also physically stressful and emotionally demanding. Challengingly, service work of this nature is low status and the workforce includes an over-representation of youth, women, ethnic minorities and other disadvantaged groups. Yet the glaring paradox is that these same employees play a crucial role in delivering service experiences to consumers and are at the heart of the customer experience, especially within the branded service experience economy. Indeed, it is important to look at what motivates young people, specifically millennials, to adopt such

brand-supporting behaviour in service-related work, within which what each individual's values are key. They highlight that millennials are influenced in employment by their early memories of work and the workplace and this shapes their subsequent workplace relationships.

Precariousness and the challenging nature of contemporary service work is also reflected in the reshaping of working relations and work contracts, which challenge the basis of a stable and long-term association between employer and worker. This is particularly evident in the case of new business models, in what is styled the gig, sharing or digital labour market economy – in the US, it is estimated that over 16.5 million people are working in “contingent” or “alternative” work arrangements. Of these, nearly 6 million people, 3.8% of all workers, hold contingent jobs in the US. Another 10.6 million were working as independent contractors, on-call workers, temporary-help agency workers and for contract firms. Many of these workers are younger employees who appreciate the freedom that such work brings but also recognise the constraints. The gig economy model brings together digital requests (orders), labour intensive service companies and service providers or deliverers (the workers) who are primarily young and, possibly, do not give priority to the ‘traditional’ workplace benefits of employment longevity and job security. Such role changes in service work need to be seen in the wider context of what can be referred to as the changing role for employees in service from that of direct delivery to one of brand enhancement or value creator on behalf of the brand or organisation. This change can be seen as representing an overall decline in the status of the service worker but it is a role which does appear to chime with the attributes associated with millennial workers.

There is some evidence that employers within today's rapidly changing work environment are starting to back-off from some of the more one-sided relationships that represent the gig or shared economy at its most precarious. In the US, there are employment agencies in areas such as nursing that offer full time employment for people who wish to work on temporary assignments, giving flexible workers the architecture of job security (important for interaction with the external world) while still permitting flexible response to employer demand in the labour market. Similarly, social and political pressure has led to significant changes in the working conditions of notionally 'self-employed' Uber drivers in New York and delivery drivers in the UK. Many of these workers fall into the category of millennials of Gen Zers.

Notwithstanding the recalibration of much service work through substitution by and intermediation through technology, many areas of the frontline service continue to grow, notably hospitality and tourism, personal services in the home and health and social care. By contrast, conventional, shop-based retail is witnessing a steep decline in scale in many countries. Some of these areas may see a decline in the employment opportunities they offer but others are, currently, of limited substitutability, for example care work relating to the elderly and disabled.

Millennials and Gen Z at work

As has already been noted, millennials and Gen Z as generational cohorts have been attributed with a wide range of workplace and working life characteristics. Typically, commentators highlight their traits as including high self-esteem, self-centeredness, propensity to multitask and team orientation. Youth entrants into the workforce look for good and open communication between co-workers and managers, a respectful and

professional work environment, a good support and feedback system for guidance and good management. There are optimistic takes on the positive contributions that millennials can make in the workplace, focusing on their positivity, energy, belief in collective action and trust in authority. Analysis suggests that many new entrant youth workers have developed a “work to live” philosophy and that they will only commit to work in-so-far as it fits in with their wider schemata of life. However, there is also a need to highlight challenges in accommodating their psychological entitlement in the form of a sense of importance and the need for constant recognition. Maybe the answer is to recognise new youth entrant attributes as a virtue in employment. The British Army, for example, has recently launched a recruitment drive which highlights supposed millennial attributes as characteristics that have a place in the culture of the military organisation (Fig 1).

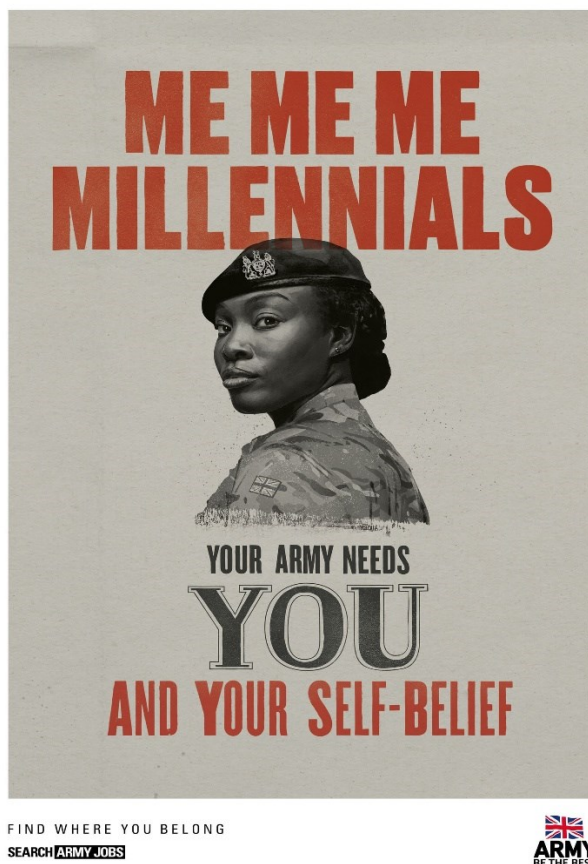


Figure 1: British Army recruitment poster, January 2019

The challenge of being a (well educated) young worker

The challenge for many new entrant youths and their employers is that the young workers are also confronted by challenging realities in the workforce and society in general. They do face obstacles to prosperity that their parents didn't face especially if they work in precarious, short-contract jobs or in the gig economy where their status is deemed to be self-employed. Accessing home and other loans can be problematic for them in such conditions. They are also educated to a higher level than previous generations but that, in itself, does not guarantee success. They will need to develop new skills at a number of points within their working lives in order to stay abreast of the demands of the workplace. Similarly, it is also worth noting the paradox of high youth unemployment in many developed countries and labour shortages within key frontline services sectors such as care. There is also evidence that millennials have benefited from levels of education inaccessible to previous generations. As a consequence, they bring expectations of what graduate work entails, 'graduateness', into employment which FLSW cannot necessarily satisfy. In some areas of service work, these expectations are reinforced by bespoke tertiary education programmes in areas such as Hospitality, Hotel and Retail Management. For many graduates, the reality of first job experiences does not match expectations and, in fact, leads to high levels of early career attrition.

As a manager, how do you manage a conversation along the following lines?

Manager: How is spreadsheet analysis work I asked you to do coming along?

Young worker: Nearly done, I had a few more interesting tasks to do for Sally (a colleague) first

Manager: Right – you do appreciate that I need this data by Thursday?

Young worker: Yeah but it is not very interesting or challenging and, anyway, Sally’s work fits in much better with that I studied at college. Couldn’t one of the school interns do the boring spreadsheet stuff – they are more suited to it?

Manager (sigh)

The challenge here is to decide whether to let this go, insist that the work be done on the basis of your managerial authority or to call on the young worker’s better nature at a time of pressure (job needs to be done by Thursday)? With a typical millennial or Gen Z, maybe the third option has the best chance of success.

Youth underemployment, alongside youth unemployment, remains a major social and economic blight in many countries. Given the major expansion of tertiary education opportunities in most developed countries, the extent of underemployment among graduates is a challenge that has been largely avoided in policy assessments of both educational provision and labour market demand. Evidence from the post-financial crisis decade from 2008 repeatedly points to graduate underemployment and the extent to which these millennials are resorting to FLSW as their only employment. Importantly there is evidence to demonstrate that underemployment is significantly gendered and women, who dominate numerically in FLSW, are much more likely to remain in underemployed positions over an extended period of time. Interestingly, some studies suggest that some underemployment is not universally perceived in negative terms by graduates, a finding that is linked to social class and low family expectations relating to employment outcomes from university education. Whether there is a generational dimension to this is unclear but research provides no direct indication. In a service sector context, debate about

underemployment of graduates pre-dates the emergence of the millennial generation in the workforce.

On the face of things, then, the growing demand for service workers in frontline roles or positions of progressing responsibility should be a perfect match with millennials and Gen Z emerging from higher levels of education than previous generations and seeking employment opportunities that meet their needs for flexibility, variety, mobility and growth. However, the question that is to the forefront when proposing this argument is whether service employment can really meet the expectations of the 50%+ of these young people in many developed countries who graduate with tertiary education qualifications? We now explore models of service work which can meet these new entrant youth expectations by creating a workplace paradigm that takes their aspirations as a starting point in formulating work and employment.

Service work - learning from millennials and Gen Z

The argument that underpins this discussion accepts that expectations of work and employment today are significantly different from those which pertained in the past. It is moot whether these expectations are specifically millennial or Gen Z as many of the attributes associated with these groups in the workplace, including those relating to technology, are found within a much broader age span in the workforce today. What is clear is that some of the workforce attributes we have identified as 'millennial' earlier in this paper do not sit comfortably with the fairly authoritarian and top-down management culture which characterises many traditional service organisations.

The author's experience over a timeframe of some 35 years is that service employers have consistently sought to challenge new and 'unorthodox' workforce attributes in order

to achieve conformity to a rigid and employer-benefiting model of what work in sectors such as hospitality and retail should be like. Non-conformity is seen as a 'problem' to be addressed through disciplinary action and the search for more conforming employees. Thus employee turnover, consistently high in the frontline service sectors of many countries, is seen as a problem, a flaw in the DNA of predominantly young workers which indicates their lack of loyalty, commitment and career focus and, explaining why investment in training and development would be futile in the case of such people. Similarly, in industries where stochastic demand in the form of seasonality, is commonplace, employment policies for seasonal workers typically are dominated by short-termism, a lack of willingness to invest in staff because such training would be wasted when staff leave at the end of the season.

Our understanding of new entry youth and their expectations of life and work provides opportunity for service employers to recalibrate their world of work in ways that are mutually beneficial to their workforce and to the business. At one level, this means applying the principles of sustainable human resource management. Operationalised, it is possible to identify the key components of sustainable HRM practice as attracting and retaining talent and being recognised as an 'employer of choice'; maintaining employee health and safety; investing into the skills of the workforce on a long-term basis by developing critical competencies and lifelong learning; supporting employees' work-life balance and work-family balance; managing aging workforces; creating employee trust, employee trustworthiness and sustained employment relationships; exhibiting and fostering (corporate) social responsibility towards employees and their communities ; and maintaining a high quality of life for employees and communities. Most of these attributes of sustainable human resource management sit comfortably alongside how young people perceive the world of work as part of their wider lives. Interpretation of what they mean at

the level of the business is likely to make that operation much more youth friendly as good practice people management principles for the contemporary era.

So at a broad level of principle, the adoption of sustainable human resource practices provides a framework which is likely to appeal to youth and engage and challenge them in the work that a service business has to offer. However, there is a need to interpret these principles in terms of the very real operational challenges that FLSW faces in interfacing with the expectations of these generations. How, for example, can we address the 'problem' of high labour turnover in many service businesses? The answer might lie, as a starting point, in moving away from seeing turnover as a problem and accepting short-term working relationships between an organisation and an employee as an opportunity for both to benefit from the period during which they do work together. This can mean up-skilling the workers to undertake tasks at the highest level and giving them project or operational responsibility where appropriate. By framing a time-bound relationship in terms of the opportunity for both to learn and benefit from the interaction and to plan accordingly, both parties can benefit. This principle applies to, for example, student and seasonal workers where the time limits are known in advance but can be extended to all new employees who may choose to leave at any point in the future.

Similarly, there is opportunity to recognise the talent and desire to learn which well-educated young people bring to the workplace and to provide them with the opportunity to understand the whole business in which they are involved. Helping all employees to understand the full context of the business and, specifically, the work they are undertaking plays directly to youth expectations and is likely to encourage loyalty and retention. This is particularly the case with graduates and, potentially, provides a route map to take them beyond their current state of underemployment. This can be further operationalised

through adopting meaningful empowerment in a way that gives a sense of meaning and responsibility to millennial employees. An open, inclusive and transparent approach to managing the business has the added benefit of helping to prepare those seeking access to leadership roles in the company for such roles and ensuring that they are ready to contribute once they do cross that threshold.

A final example will suffice in this discussion. The millennial and Gen Z focus on life beyond work combined with a blurring of the boundaries between the two provides opportunity to engage with employees 'in the round', to support and encourage them to meet their goals both inside and outside of the workplace. Enabling them to meet the lifestyle objectives which brought them to the ski or surfing resort in the first place alongside their responsibilities in employment will enable them to flourish in both. Supporting the need to meet family and similar obligations outside of the workplace will have a similar effect with mutual benefit. The notion of mutuality is important in engaging with the sense of fairness that most millennials and Gen Z display. Workplace flexibility is frequently framed in terms of employee flexibility in order to support organisational needs. It is important to reflect on the idea of mutual flexibility, by employer and employee, as the key to meeting the aspirations of both.

The lesson from these examples, then, is for organisations to address workplace and job design through the spectacles of those who work there, primarily the millennial generation upon who they depend. Involve and listen to those most directly affected, the young employees. Delivering the key principles of sustainable human resource management by reference to this millennial and Gen Z gaze, thereby learning about effective work practices in a contemporary context, can provide a partial answer to one of the big

challenges in service sector employment, how to both meet the aspirations of these workers and enable them to flourish within the realities of the frontline service workplace.

Conclusions

Frontline service work presents a myriad of challenges against a wide range of criteria. Addressing them has, over the years, proved to be singularly ineffective with few remedies that offer more than partial or temporary relief. Our understanding of the millennial and Gen Z generations and what they aspire to from their working lives presents an 'old wine in new bottles' challenge in that each previous generation has confronted its own set of dilemmas in this area of work but the nuances of each require response. It is arguable that service work is changing more rapidly than in the past and, certainly, the growth in demand for frontline service workers in retail, hospitality, travel, food service, personal services in the home and health and social care puts added urgency into this discussion.

In this discussion, we have raised as many additional questions as we have sought to answer. We have explored some of the challenges and paradoxes which confront contemporary service work and the opportunities that effective engagement with the millennial generation provide. Applying sustainable human resource management principles in a way that is nuanced and tailored through the eyes of millennials and Gen Z is not a panacea but can provide a way forward that, heretofore, has been seriously lacking. At the end of the day, the answer to questions about how to manage millennials lies with the employees themselves – talk to your workers, engage with what they want and seek to accommodate these wants wherever possible, even if this means reframing the basis of

work in your organisation. After all, our currently youthful workforce will soon become the majority in the workplace – until superseded by new, as yet unlabelled generations!!

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