



# Workplace engagement of South African Millennials: A non-issue?



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Although theories on generational issues abound, this research sought to explore whether Millennial employees and employees from Generation X responded differently to the South African work environment. The aim of the study was to assess whether South African Millennials experience their work environment different to Generation X employees, focusing specifically on engagement and identifying the differential activation of engagement across these generations. Data from 1913 Millennials and 1027 Generation X employees, from an existing database representative of employees across the broad spectrum of South African organisations, were analysed. Data on the age of employees and responses to the employee engagement questionnaire (UWES-9) were available across all cases. The reliability of the instrument was tested first, followed by measurement invariance testing across generations. This was followed by mean differences testing between the generations on the total scores, as well as subscale scores and items. The results reveal that the UWES-9 was reliable and measurement invariant across generations. It further revealed that no mean differences exist between Generation X and Y (Millennials), as far as total engagement scores are concerned. This result is significant as it reveals that South African Millennials respond similarly to the generation preceding them to workplace engagement initiatives. The findings also indicate that Millennials respond well to interventions that help them build confidence and juggle multiple responsibilities.

**Keywords:** Millennials; employee engagement; UWES-9; Generation X; South Africa.

## Introduction

The current workplace is unique in that it must accommodate the needs and expectations of four generations of employees. Although there is some fluidity in the cut-off dates for the various generations, for the purposes of this study the following dates were used: Baby Boomers 1945–1964, Generation X 1965–1979, Generation Y (Millennials) 1980–1996, Generation Z from 1997.

Several researchers warn that the needs and expectations underlying the different generations will inevitably lead to an intergenerational struggle.<sup>1,2,3,4,5</sup> It is argued that these underlying differences in the workplace are incompatible and impact negatively on employee engagement in general, but particularly the engagement of Millennials. Some argue that the present work environment does not accommodate Millennials sufficiently to create circumstances, which ensure that Millennials engage at work.<sup>4,6,7,8</sup> A focus on Millennials is important, as they constitute more than one-third of South African citizens<sup>9</sup> and is a generation that has an increased prominence in the workplace.

The concept of engagement is important in the work environment and is regarded as a chronic rather than a transient state<sup>10</sup> that is related to professional efficacy. A lack of engagement manifests in low morale and even deviant behaviour,<sup>6</sup> whilst engagement is accredited as an antecedent to many positive organisational outcomes, including the sought-after innovative work behaviour.<sup>8,11,12,13,14</sup>

Most perceptions about Millennials and how different they are is based on stereotypes. Empirical data offer limited solutions for managers who have to make decisions in their interaction with different age groups and manage the perceived generational struggle. To contribute a possible solution, this research aims to present data contrasting Millennials and Generation X as the two largest age groups presently in the workplace, verify the stereotypes and offer management solutions. Access to the results of this study will enable managers to take informed decisions, rather than relying on broad generalisations and stereotypes. As the data were collected in

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South Africa, the results are applicable to local conditions, which may be different from what is reported in mainstream Western literature.

## Literature review

Millennials in South Africa are sometimes referred to as 'Afrilenials'<sup>15</sup> and account for more than a third of the country's population.<sup>9</sup> South Africa provides a unique case study for the study of inter-generational relations in the workplace as its political transition from apartheid to a new inclusive democracy coincides with the Millennial Generation (Generation Y) epoch. The characteristics of generations can differ between developed and developing countries<sup>16</sup> and combined with a significant political change it adds a unique dimension to the study of generational dynamics in the workplace, more specifically employee engagement.

### The characteristics of Millennials

Millennials are generally characterised as entitled, narcissistic, self-interested, unfocused, shallow and lazy.<sup>1,4,5,7,13,14</sup> It is furthermore indicated that they thrive on authenticity, individuality and unique experiences.<sup>15,17</sup> Millennials' loyalty is self-directed,<sup>16</sup> as a result they are more loyal to their own career than to any specific organisation.

Despite this self-centeredness, Millennials have been found to have lower self-esteem than any other generation and lack the coping mechanisms to deal with stress.<sup>4</sup> Deloitte<sup>18</sup> reports that Millennials acknowledge that they lack confidence and interpersonal skills. This could be attributed to the fact that they have not had to build and sustain relationships in the 'real world' as they live in the artificial world of Facebook and Instagram, which is disadvantaging them in the workplace<sup>1</sup>. Therefore, it may be suggested that the appropriate workplace interventions should help Millennials build confidence, develop their teamwork, cooperation and soft skills, and build patience, perseverance and trust.<sup>19</sup>

Having grown up in a world of instant gratification, Millennials demand a workplace where they have a meaningful work that allows for quick career progression and promotion, pays well and gives opportunities for training, development and mentorship.<sup>5,13,15</sup> Although Millennials demand constant feedback, they are good at handling multiple responsibilities and are less willing to sacrifice personal time for their career.<sup>3,5</sup> Their infatuation with technology may, however, threaten the work-life balance that is so important to them.<sup>19</sup>

In the United States, Millennials spend less than 3 years in a job before moving on<sup>2</sup> and in South Africa this is 'not more than 2 years'.<sup>7</sup> A total of 73% of Millennials who plan to stay with their employer for more than 5 years do so because of the education (training) opportunities such employer offers (Deloitte<sup>18</sup>). Millennials report that their formal education contributes only 23% to the skills, knowledge and experience they use in their job.<sup>18</sup>

As Millennials are impatient with talk without action<sup>13</sup> and focus on delivering on the value drivers of the organisation, it is not surprising that the commodification of employment, evident from the so-called 'gig economy' where employees have short stints at a number of employers either simultaneously or consecutively, is very attractive to Millennials at all levels of the organisation.<sup>18</sup> By pursuing the gig economy as a means to, or because of the need for a higher income, Millennials may be their own worst enemy<sup>20</sup> as the achievement of short-term goals do not necessarily result in long-term career gains. Instant gratification does not necessarily equate to the job satisfaction, deep fulfilment or career advancement they so keenly want.

### Employee engagement

Definitions of employee engagement abound, including 'the emotional commitment the employee has to the organisation and its goals',<sup>12</sup> 'the extent to which people are personally involved in the success of a business'<sup>21</sup> and 'a positive, fulfilling work-related state of mind that is characterised by vigour, dedication and absorption'.<sup>9</sup> Vigour manifests in high levels of energy and investment in the work environment. Dedication manifests in involvement in the work leading to feelings such as enthusiasm and pride, whilst absorption leads to full concentration and attachment to the work. These three concepts underlying employee engagement, that is, vigour, dedication and absorption form the basis of this study.

Employee engagement has been studied from a variety of angles. South African researchers<sup>22</sup> found that a positive work-life balance impacted positively on employee engagement. They concluded that work-life balance and employees' engagement impact positively on the bottom line. This link between work-life balance and employee engagement as a determinant of business success is confirmed by local researchers.<sup>6</sup>

Vanover and Ludolf identify four key requirements for employee engagement, namely the ability to work remotely, having a meaningful job, receiving timely and consistent feedback and appropriate reward systems.<sup>8,14</sup> Bothma supports the notion of technology as an enabler to ensure an engaged workforce and improved productivity.<sup>12</sup> Schaufeli, a leader in the conceptualisation of engagement and his collaborators<sup>9</sup> found that engaged workers feel more successful and productive in their jobs. These authors also found in their study that work engagement is related to perceptions of professional success and that work engagement increases with age.

Employee engagement has also been investigated from a leadership perspective. The Harvard Business Review<sup>23</sup> reports that executive and senior management have a far more optimistic perception of employee engagement than staff at other levels. This publication further indicates that high engagement results in less absenteeism, lower staff turnover and less safety issues, as well as more customer

satisfaction, productivity and profitability. In fact, 71% of their respondents identified engagement as very important to achieving overall organisational goals. Employee engagement is argued to be a result of engaged leadership where 'leaders ... lead in ways that engage employees'.<sup>24</sup>

This leadership style creates the climate for positive engagement, but if leaders put profit before people, micromanage and ignore staff feedback they would be on the right path to 'killing' employee engagement.<sup>21</sup>

Leaders caution that the traditional HR approach of valuing tenure over impact will have a negative impact on employee engagement in what the author calls the 'new world of work'.<sup>20</sup> Millennials are realistic about this world of work and generally expect Industry 4.0 to have a dramatic, but generally positive, impact in the workplace by augmenting their job and allowing them to move away from the mundane aspects thereof.<sup>18</sup>

### Millennials and employee engagement

Given that Millennials will form 50% of the global workforce by 2020,<sup>8</sup> it is critical to business success to ensure that they engage in the workplace. Ludolf urges employers to work with the strengths of Millennials rather than emphasising their weaknesses as their impact on the world of work – and business – will continue to grow.<sup>14</sup>

As a perfect match rarely exist between an incumbent and his or her job description,<sup>25</sup> adaptability is required both of the organisation and the individual, which may be a challenge to Millennials. Given South Africa's history of an unequal, and in some instances dysfunctional, education system a 'more flexible' approach to hiring and retention of Millennials in this country is supported.<sup>16</sup> However, Baron-Williamson cautions that employers should not, in their eagerness to hire skilled Millennials, neglect key HR processes such as background screening.<sup>11</sup> Given the rise in CV fraud generally and specifically in an environment such as South Africa where unemployment is at an all-time high, stringent HR processes is the only way to mitigate the risk of appointing candidates that are not appropriate – which will have a negative impact on employee engagement in general. Recruiters should ensure that the Millennials they consider have 'curious minds' and are flexible so that they fit both the specific role and the company.<sup>25</sup>

Millennials are characterised by low self-esteem<sup>4</sup> and a limited ability to accept constructive criticism.<sup>1</sup> This manifests in a higher suicide, accidental death because of drug overdose and depression rates amongst Millennials. However, this may also be as a result of their unrealistic career expectations, which underscores the necessity of relevant engagement programmes for this generation.<sup>4</sup> Particularly in the 'ultra-marathon length' career they face<sup>26</sup> working into their seventies, they need to acquire an understanding that unlike the instant gratification they have become used to, competence and excellence take

time – more for some and less for others. Employee engagement programmes for Millennials will have to focus on teaching them the skills to continuously reinvent themselves through continuous learning without becoming Jack of all trades but master of none. There is much to be said in this regard for the so-called 'lattice career path'<sup>27</sup> that features both vertical and horizontal career moves for developing a diverse but well-rounded millennial workforce, but it requires career adaptability skills.

Given the fact that Millennials are increasingly the leaders who implement and execute change<sup>26</sup> and are facing the 'ultramarathon length career' mentioned earlier, these changing demands on engagement initiatives are relevant to consider for organisations that want to allow Millennials sufficient opportunity to grow, learn and develop.

Are the best practice findings regarding the determinants of business success and employee engagement different for different generations? Some contend that although Millennials want to feel connected and committed to their role, they see it by and large as a stepping stone and growth opportunity.<sup>20</sup> This means that Millennials' employee engagement initiatives need to be fast-tracked to ensure a meaningful contribution and impact in the shortest period of time, whilst retaining a focus on personal development. South African researchers<sup>19</sup> identified a significant positive relationship between dimensions of career adaptability and employee engagement, which may indicate that Millennials may be engaged even though they seem to job hop.

From the aforementioned, it is clear that the impact of Millennials on the South African and international work environment will only increase and that engagement initiatives will have to keep track of their changed demands in the work environment.

## Methodology

### Design

A cross-sectional survey design was used. A cross-sectional design is well suited to describe a population and compare groups within that population. Surveys allow for the relative quick and economical collection of data from large samples. The design suited the research well in both respects.

### Population and sampling

The target population was all employees in all sectors. However, because of practical constraints, data was collected from a convenient sample of South African organisations. Access to organisations, which employed more than 60 employees (this was the only exclusion category), was gained via students enrolled for their Master's in Business Leadership at a South African business school. Within each organisation, random samples of employees were drawn until a limit of 60 respondents per organisation was reached and completed the questionnaire. This permitted proportional coverage of all the generations.

## Ethical considerations

The original data collected in accordance with the prescribed guidelines of the Graduate School of Business Leadership. The use of that data, as secondary data, was approved by the Research Permission Sub-Committee (RPSC) of the Senate Research, Innovation, Postgraduate Degrees and Commercialisation Committee (SRIPCC) of the University of South Africa (UNISA). (Ethical clearance number: 2018\_PRC\_REW\_012.

## Measurement

The Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES-9) consisting of nine items was used to measure employee engagement. The Utrecht Work Engagement Scale-9 comprises three dimensions, namely vigour, dedication and absorption.<sup>10</sup> Three items measure each dimension, as set out in Table 1.

Respondents were required to indicate the occurrence of each event on a seven-point scale, ranging from 0 (never), 1 (a few times a year or less), 2 (once a month or less), 3 (a few times a month), 4 (once a week), 5 (a few times a week) to 6 (every day). A high score on any of the items, or dimensions, or the total score would be indicative that the respondent experiences the particular aspect more often than those with lower scores.

With regard to reliability, Schaufeli and Bakker<sup>28</sup> reported that the Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of all nine items varies from 0.85 to 0.94 (median = 0.91) across the nine national samples. The  $\alpha$ -value for the total database is 0.90.

In a South African sample<sup>29</sup> a Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of 0.780, 0.890 and 0.780 for vigour, dedication and absorption, respectively, was reported. In two other South African samples<sup>30</sup> Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of .908 and .911 was reported.

Schaufeli and Bakker<sup>28</sup> also reported that the suggested three-factor structure of engagement is confirmed (cross-samples from different countries) and that the construct is related to other constructs in an expected manner. Within the South African context, a three-factor model of work engagement was confirmed,<sup>29</sup> whilst another study<sup>31</sup> could not replicate the three-factor structure and reported the presence of a very strong general factor and, in comparison, two weak group factors. However, in a meta-analysis the validity of employee engagement in the workplace was broadly confirmed.<sup>32</sup> Despite the aforementioned, measurement invariance was reported across gender<sup>30</sup> and across race in South African samples.<sup>29</sup>

**TABLE 1:** The items of the three dimensions of Utrecht Work Engagement Scale-9 that measure employee engagement.

Items measuring vigour	Items measuring dedication	Items measuring absorption
1. At my work, I feel bursting with energy.	4. My job inspires me.	7. I am proud of the work that I do.
2. At my job, I feel strong and vigorous.	5. When I get up in the morning, I feel like going to work.	8. I am immersed in my work.
3. I am enthusiastic about my job.	6. I feel happy when I am working intensely.	9. I get carried away when I am working.

Source: Adapted from Schaufeli WB, Bakker AB. 2003. Utrecht work engagement scale: Preliminary manual. Utrecht: Occupational Health Psychology Unit, Utrecht University.

Age was self-reported and generational differences were based on the following numbers: Baby Boomers – born between 1945 and 1964; Generation X – born between 1965 and 1979; Generation Y (Millennials) – born between 1980 and 1996; and lastly Generation Z – born after 1996. This study focused on the difference between the two largest groups in the sample, namely Generation X and Generation Y (Millennials).

## Statistical analyses

Firstly, demographic statistics were calculated mostly to describe the sample and to verify the validity of the sample, comparing sample statistics with the statistics reported on the workforce composition of South Africa.

Secondly, the reliability coefficient for the UWES-9 across the different generations was calculated. An acceptable cut-off score for acceptable reliability is 0.70<sup>33,34</sup> and this was applied in the study.

Exploratory factor analyses were performed to gain insights into measurement invariance across the generations, and as such, the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin and the Bartlett's test of sphericity was conducted to sanction the suitability of the data for factor analysis. The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin measure of sampling adequacy is acceptable when above the minimum criterion of 0.5 is met, with the Bartlett's test of sphericity showing statistical significance ( $p < 0.05$ ).<sup>35</sup> These guidelines were also used in this study.

It is acknowledged that the traditional three-factor solution is not always replicated in South Africa,<sup>31</sup> but it has been found to be valid across several cultures.<sup>10</sup>

With regard to measurement invariance,<sup>36,37</sup> signs of invariance were firstly analysed comparing the factor structure of a one factor solution, for Generation X and Millennials, using the Tucker's phi-test. These calculated scores were interpreted similarly to what local researchers<sup>38</sup> did, interpreting Tucker's phi-values greater than 0.90 as essential agreement and values above 0.95 as pointing to very high agreement. With regard to the theoretically sound three-factor solution, inspection of the exploratory factor analyses factor loadings was used as indicator of measurement invariance, focusing on the same items loading on the same factors and similarity with regard to the highest loadings per solution.

Next correlations between the independent variable (age) and the dependent variable (engagement) were calculated. These correlations were deemed statistically significant when the significance was smaller than or equal to 0.01, particularly as the sample size was relatively large. The practical significance was interpreted as the amount of variance explained, by interpreting the coefficient of determination as the percentage of variance explained in the dependent variable. The coefficient of determination was calculated by squaring R and multiplying it by 100.<sup>33,39</sup> To gain insight into

the relative importance of age, the correlation between tenure, management position, post level and engagement was also calculated.

Remaining with the theme of the relative importance of independent variables, age, tenure, management position, as well as post level were regressed to predict engagement. Apart from aspiring for an appropriate model fit (statistically significant F-value), the interpretation of significant betas was important. Significance ( $p < 0.05$ ) was used to identify those variables, which uniquely and significantly predict engagement. If the beta was not statistically significant, it was interpreted that the variable does not contribute to the declared variance in the dependent variable.

Lastly, to explore whether the mean scores on engagement differed for Generation X and Millennials, *t*-tests were performed, focusing on the differences in the total engagement score, scores on the subscales, as well as mean differences at an item level. *T*-values with a *p*-value less than 0.05 was considered as an indication of a statistically significant difference between groups<sup>40</sup> and a Cohen's *d*-value larger than 0.2 as evidence that the differences were of practical significance.<sup>41</sup>

Cohen's *d* was calculated using the following formula: Cohen's  $d = (\text{Mean } Y - \text{Mean } X) / ((\text{s.d. } X + \text{s.d. } Y) / 2)$ . The Cohen's-*d* value presents the difference between mean values in terms of standard deviation units.

## Results

In Table 2 descriptive statistics of the sample is reported. As there were some missing data, only valid percentages are reported, resulting in percentages not always adding up to

**TABLE 2:** Demographic particulars of the total sample ( $N = 3124$ ).

Variable	Generation				Total
	Z	Millennials	X	Baby boomers	
<i>N</i>	51	1913	1027	133	3124
<b>Age†</b>					
Mean	22.41	32.33	45.89	59.87	37.80
Standard deviation	0.753	4.140	4.729	3.095	9.094
<b>Tenure</b>					
Mean	1.78	5.52	12.92	19.26	8.48
Standard deviation	1.28	3.83	8.20	12.76	7.453
<b>Gender</b>					
Male	35.3	53.7	61.5	66.2	54.2
Female	64.7	46.3	38.5	33.8	45.8
<b>Race</b>					
Asian people	15.7	8.9	7.4	5.3	9.32
Black people	58.8	64.5	49.6	36.4	52.3
Coloured people	2.00	8.2	9.6	5.3	6.27
White people	23.5	18.3	33.5	53.0	32.07
<b>Management</b>	<b>5.9</b>	<b>29.7</b>	<b>50.2</b>	<b>46.2</b>	<b>33.0</b>
Post level A‡	7.8	3.1	.5	2.3	2.3
Post level B	39.2	22.2	14.9	15.0	19.8
Post level C	49.0	46.0	37.8	42.1	43.2
Post level D	3.9	23.6	38.0	31.6	28.4
Post level E/F	0	3.1	8.1	8.3	4.9

†, Age and tenure is reported as mean and standard deviation, in brackets; ‡, Post level are on the Patterson A scale, with A the lowest level and F the highest.

100. However, invalid data never amounted to more than 1.5% of the available data.

Data from 1913 Millennials and 1027 Generation X employees from an existing database representative of employees across a broad spectrum of South African organisations and a cross-section of races and genders, were analysed.

The reliability statistics on the UWES-9 is reported in Table 3. Reliability coefficients higher than 0.70 was deemed as acceptable.<sup>33,34</sup>

From Table 3 we can observe that for all groups the threshold of 0.70 was reached. The UWES-9 thus seems to be reliable in the tested sample with an alpha of 0.900. Age was an important variable in the study. In line with the utterances of Jacobsen and Jensen<sup>42</sup> regarding gender, reporting on age should be reliable as it should generally be easy for respondents to answer and few people should lie about their age.

The focus next shifted to the factorial validity of the UWES-9 across both generations of interest, requiring exploratory factor analyses. Before this could proceed, some qualifying statistics were calculated, the results of which are presented in Table 4.

Both the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin measure of adequacy and the Bartlett's test of sphericity were above the cut-off levels set for the study (Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin measure of adequacy  $> 0.50$ ; Bartlett's test of sphericity  $< 0.05$ ). Given these outcomes, factor analyses were performed.

Presented in Table 5 is the factorial structure of UWES-9, for both Generation X and Millennials and for a one and three factor outcome.

Tuckers phi, tapping from the single factor structure of the total group and how the subgroups differ from that, is a congruence coefficient used to assess the similarity of factors. The value is very close to 1, larger than 0.999, suggesting a high similarity between the subgroup factors and the factors of the total group, as evident from the single factor item loadings in Table 5. This suggests measurement invariance.

**TABLE 3:** UWES-9 reliability statistics.

Variable	Generation Z	Millennials	Generation X	Baby boomers	Total
<i>N</i>	51	1913	1027	133	3124
Cronbach's alpha	0.891	0.901	0.869	0.919	0.900

**TABLE 4:** General statistics relevant to the factorial structure of Utrecht Work Engagement Scale-9 for both Generation X and Y.

Variable	Generation		Total
	Millennials	X	
Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin measure of adequacy	0.921	0.905	0.918
Bartlett's test of sphericity ( <i>p</i> -value)	0.001	0.001	0.001
Variance explained by 1 factor	56.738	55.916	56.632
Variance explained by 3 factors	74.169	75.866	74.731

Note: Three factors explained significantly more variance than the single factor. The three-factor solution thus seems to be the better fitting model.

**TABLE 5:** Factorial structure of Utrecht Work Engagement Scale-9 for both Generation X and Millennials: item loadings.

Item	Millennials			Generation X				
	Single factor	Three factors		Single factor	Three factors			
		Factor 1	Factor 2		Factor 3	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
1	0.705	-	0.866†	-	0.699	-	0.874†	-
2	0.788	-	0.774	-	0.795	-	0.758	-
3	0.823†	0.586	0.577	-	0.846†	0.704	0.513	-
4	0.831†	0.701	-	-	0.827†	0.733	-	-
5	0.815†	0.699	-	-	0.825†	0.657	0.542	-
6	0.708	0.678	-	-	0.746	0.713	-	-
7	0.777	0.804†	-	-	0.750	0.804†	-	-
8	0.733	0.617	-	0.543	0.672	-	-	0.716
9	0.559	-	-	0.918†	0.510	-	-	0.890†

†, High loadings (> 0.8) are presented in bold and loadings lower than 0.50 were suppressed to ease the interpretation of the results.

Inspection of the factorial structure on the three-factor solution also reveals a great deal of similarity between Generation X and Millennials in South Africa in the way they respond to the items of the UWES-9. Evidence of configural invariance (where the groups have similar factor loading patterns) and weak invariance (where the absolute values of factor loadings are similar) was observed. Configural and metric measurement invariance<sup>37</sup> was thus achieved, indicating that engagement is measured similarly for both generations. It was thus assumed that sufficient data on measurement invariance were collected to continue with higher level analyses.

Differences on engagement across the generations were tested for in two ways. The first was to assess whether age predicted engagement, using correlation and regression analyses. In Table 6, the correlation between age and engagement is reported. This statistic is central to the research, and the last column (Total) should be interpreted in this case.

Table 6 indicates that age correlates significantly with engagement ( $r = 0.045$ ;  $p = 0.012$ ). Thus, the higher the age of the individual, the higher is his or her level of engagement. This significance should be seen against the background of a large sample ( $N > 3000$ ). The coefficient of determination is the correlation squared times 100, which equates to 0.203, indicating 0.2% of the variance in engagement is explained by age. This is an infinitesimal number and suggests no practical significance.

Also, observable from Table 6 is that management position is an important predictor of engagement ( $r = 0.154$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $R^2 \times 100 = 2.370$ ), accounting for almost 2.4% of the variance in engagement. This could be as a result of management bias.<sup>23</sup>

Regression analyses were performed next to determine whether age is a unique and significant predictor of engagement, given the other demographical data collected. The results of these analyses are presented in Table 7, where the focus should again be on the last (i.e. Total) column.

**TABLE 6:** Correlation analysis: The relationship between age, tenure, management position, post level and employee engagement.

Variable	Generation				Total
	Z	Millennials	X	Baby boomers	
<b>Age</b>					
<i>r</i>	0.105	0.009	0.062*	-0.063	0.045*
<i>p</i>	0.464	0.686	0.048	0.473	0.012
<i>N</i>	51	1913	1027	133	3124
<b>Tenure</b>					
<i>r</i>	-0.082	-0.056*	0.020	0.176*	0.023
<i>p</i>	0.567	0.015	0.526	0.043	0.208
<i>N</i>	51	1913	1027	133	3124
<b>Management, or not</b>					
<i>r</i>	0.192	0.127***	0.166***	0.313***	0.154***
<i>p</i>	0.176	< 0.001	< 0.001	< 0.001	< 0.001
<i>N</i>	51	1907	1022	132	3112
<b>Post level</b>					
<i>r</i>	0.064	0.021	0.078*	0.242**	0.049**
<i>p</i>	0.658	0.369	0.013	0.005	0.006
<i>N</i>	51	1908	1024	133	3116

\*,  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*,  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*,  $p < 0.001$ .

**TABLE 7:** Regressions analyses: age, tenure, management position and post level as predictors of engagement.

Variable	Generation				Total
	Z	Millennials	X	Baby boomers	
<b>Model: Summary</b>					
<i>R</i>	0.225	0.151	0.178	0.355	0.156
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.050	0.023	0.032	0.126	0.024
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup> adjusted	-0.032	0.021	0.028	0.098	0.023
<b>Model fit</b>					
<i>df</i>	446	41 899	41 016	4127	43 103
<i>F</i>	0.611	11.145	8.352	4.576	19.316
<i>p</i>	0.656	< 0.001	< 0.001	0.002	< 0.001
<b>Model: Age</b>					
Standard Beta	0.095	0.011	0.067	-0.18	0.024
<i>t</i>	0.640	0.427	20.06	-0.219	1.073
<i>p</i>	0.525	0.670	0.039	0.827	0.283
<b>Tenure</b>					
Standard Beta	-0.034	-0.085	-0.026	0.124	-0.028
<i>t</i>	-0.225	-3.356	-0.798	1.463	-1.227
<i>p</i>	0.823	0.001	0.425	0.146	0.220
<b>Management, or not</b>					
Standard Beta	-0.176	-0.145	-0.172	-0.243	-0.159
<i>t</i>	-1.214	-5.872	-4.893	-2.596	-8.071
<i>p</i>	0.231	< 0.001	< 0.001	0.001	< 0.001
<b>Post level</b>					
Standard Beta	0.060	-0.023	-0.006	0.113	-0.014
<i>t</i>	0.396	-0.934	-0.167	1.203	-0.744
<i>p</i>	0.694	0.351	0.867	0.231	0.457

The last column (Total) in Table 7 reveals that the model fit for the whole group, was acceptable ( $F[4, 3103] = 19.316$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), declaring 2.30% of the variance in engagement. Only the item 'management or not' contributed uniquely and significantly to the explanation of engagement. This was not the case for age or any of the other demographic variables.

Table 8 presents mean scores (with standard deviations provided in brackets), mean differences, *t*-statistics (and the significance of the statistic presented below that in brackets),

**TABLE 8:** Mean scores, mean differences, significance of difference ( $N_y = 1913$ ;  $N_x = 1.027$ ).

Variable	Millennials		Generation X		Mean difference	<i>t</i> -statistic	<i>p</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.				
Engagement (Total)	37.781	-10.264	38.454	-9.997	-0.673	-1.711	0.087	-0.066
Vigour (Subtotal)	12.175	-3.782	12.314	-3.804	-0.138	-0.947	0.344	-0.036
Dedication (Subtotal)	12.662	-4.033	12.947	-4.017	-0.285	-1.830	0.067	-0.070
Absorption (Subtotal)	12.943	-3.735	13.193	-3.58	-0.249	-1.750	0.080	-0.068
Item 1	3.805	-1.498	3.814	-1.544	-0.009	-0.162	0.872	-0.005
Item 2	4.007	-1.437	4.049	-1.428	-0.042	-0.761	0.447	-0.029
Item 3	4.37	-1.453	4.466	-1.404	-0.095	-1.725	0.085	-0.067
Item 4	4.194	-1.64	4.228	-1.598	-0.033	-0.538	0.590	-0.021
Item 5	4.049	-1.687	4.178	-1.652	-0.129	-1.993*	0.046	-0.077
Item 6	4.42	-1.407	4.544	-1.408	-0.124	-2.283*	0.023	-0.088
Item 7	4.793	-1.429	4.885	-1.359	-0.092	-1.695	0.090	-0.065
Item 8	4.259	-1.478	4.344	-1.438	-0.084	-1.489	0.137	-0.058
Item 9	3.904	-1.664	3.971	-1.641	-0.067	-1.059	0.290	-0.040

S.D., standard deviation.

\*,  $p < 0.05$ .

as well as the practical significance of the difference (presented as Cohen's *d* values).

The Levene's test for equality of variances was never significant, thus revealed that the variance were homogeneous across the two groups.<sup>1</sup> The degrees of freedom was 2, 938 across all comparisons.

The results reveal that no mean differences exist between Generation X and Millennials, as far as total engagement scores are concerned. No difference was found at a subscale level either. With two items (Item 5 and 6), related to dedication, Millennials scored lower than Generation X. At the item level, the differences were statistically significant ( $p < 0.05$ ), however, practical significance was negligible, far below the 0.200 Cohen's *d*-value, which will indicate practical significance.<sup>41</sup>

## Discussion

The sample was relatively large ( $N = 3124$ ), with Millennials making up 61.23% of the sample. The descriptive statistics on the sample, presented in Table 1, affirm the validity of the sample. For instance, more Generation X respondents report to be in management positions than Baby Boomers or Millennials, and the tenure of Baby Boomer and Generation X respondents was higher than that of Millennials.

Considering the reliability of the measurement instrument, the results reveal that the UWES-9 was reliable with an alpha of 0.900. Measurement invariance across the two generations of interest was tested in this study by means of exploratory factor analyses. The Tuckers phi statistic revealed that the factual structure for Generation X and Millennials were very similar. The same was found when inspecting the three-factor solution (See Table 5), where the items loaded almost on identical factors, and where the dominant items were identical across the factors.

Differences on engagement across the generations were tested for in two ways, namely age and tenure, management

and post level. The correlation between age and engagement was statistically significant –  $r = 0.045$ ,  $p = 0.012$  – (last column in Table 6), but at a practical level insignificant, declaring only 0.2% of the variance. When adding tenure, management and post level to age, age was not a significant predictor of engagement as indicated in the last column of Table 7.

Correlation and regression analyses thus did not show a relationship between age and engagement.

This finding contradicts a previous finding<sup>10</sup> that work engagement increases with age – a finding that may be indicative of the uniqueness of the South African work environment.

The result indicating that no mean differences exist between Generation X and Millennials as far as total engagement scores are concerned is significant as it reveals that South African Millennials respond similarly to the generation preceding them to the workplace with regard to engagement. This finding challenges the perception, as reported by other authors<sup>14,5,7,13,14</sup> that Millennials are more self-interested, entitled and unfocused than Generation X. It seems that the impatience of Millennials with talk without action is more to the detriment of employers that are unable to structure their employee engagement initiatives to support the hunger of Millennials to make a difference and move up the ladder than to the detriment of Millennials themselves as they seem not to have any problem to spend less than 3 years in a job before moving on.<sup>2</sup> As with employees of other generations employers can retain Millennials by optimising educational (training) opportunities.<sup>18</sup>

Considering previous research regarding Millennials and engagement, the findings support the contentions of earlier researchers<sup>4,19</sup> that Millennials respond well to interventions that help them build confidence and juggle multiple responsibilities. As Millennials will form 50% of the global workforce by 2020,<sup>8</sup> accounting for more than a third of the South African population<sup>9</sup> and increasingly fill management positions (see Table 7), together with the sought-after

innovative work behaviour of Millennials,<sup>8,11,12,13,14</sup> this finding is critical for business owners wishing to ensure the future success of their organisations.

Although Millennials are generally criticised for their self-directed loyalty,<sup>16</sup> this study seems to support the contention that other generations in the workplace have also benefited from the way in which Millennials have redefined workspaces<sup>13</sup> through their insistence on work-life balance, their reluctance to sacrifice personal time for their career,<sup>3,5</sup> a company culture that values personal growth and development<sup>2</sup> and reliable and seamless Wi-Fi and technology.<sup>8,43</sup>

The finding that only one demographic variable, namely 'management or not', contributed uniquely and significantly to the explanation of engagement, that is, that management position is an important predictor of engagement seems to confirm the Harvard Business Review<sup>23</sup> finding that executive and senior management have a far more optimistic perception of employee engagement than staff at other levels.

Ultimately the success of organisations depends on the ability of the different generations to work together. The earlier finding that Millennials focus on short-term goals should point to the necessity for engagement interventions that will assist Millennials to string together these short-term goals so that they contribute to the achievement of their long-term goals.<sup>20</sup>

## Conclusion

As the study found a great deal of similarity between Generation X and Millennials in the way they respond to the items determining engagement, contact between Millennials and Generation Xers should be encouraged in the workplace. This finding indicates that the contention<sup>8,14</sup> that the key requirements for employee engagement, that is, the ability to work remotely, having a meaningful job, receiving timely and consistent feedback and appropriate reward systems, will be applicable to both Generation Xers and Millennials. Ultimately the success of organisations depends on the ability of the different generations to work together.

Deloitte<sup>44</sup> found that the majority of Millennials do not expect to be happier than their parents and also fear that they will not succeed in an Industry 4.0 environment. It can be argued that Generation Xers hold the key to whether Millennials will succeed and fulfil their potential. The good workplace practices Millennials demand, such as personal development plans and coaching and mentoring, provide older generations with the opportunity to shape these future leaders by developing their strengths. Hopefully Millennial managers will be the 'engaged leaders'<sup>24</sup> required for the new world of work. Barrick<sup>1</sup> points out that Generation Xers were originally made out to be just as 'bad' as Millennials are now made out to be and they need to accept that Millennials work differently than they do and mentor and coach them to ensure that their strengths are enhanced and their weaknesses mitigated.

With Millennials' *penchant* for change, experimentation and innovation, Generation Xers can learn from them in the same way that Baby Boomers learnt from Generation Xers to embrace technology.

This study indicates that the intergenerational struggle in a multi-generation workplace<sup>1,2,3,4,5</sup> is not insurmountable in South Africa. It can be overcome through appropriate workplace engagement initiatives, given the finding that Millennial and Generation X employees experience and engage very similarly in the South African work environment.

Future research may be undertaken to compare the findings of this study regarding South African Millennials with African Millennials or Millennials internationally. Research with a focus on different economic sectors and how generational matters manifest in a specific sector may also be interesting and useful. The primary limitations of this study are single source bias and the use of convenience sampling.

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### Data availability

The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article.

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