

Generational Differences in Workplace Expectations: A Comparison of Production and Professional Workers

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Abstract Much of the extant literature regarding generational cohort differences has been conducted on college-educated participants, a potential bias noted by previous researchers. The present study therefore examines generational cohort differences in workplace expectations between professional (i.e., “white-collar,” largely college educated) and production (i.e., “blue-collar,” largely non-college educated) workers. Using online survey data from 2,799 union workers employed by the same organization, we compared expectations when first hired as well as current workplace expectations between professional and production workers from three different generational cohorts (i.e., Gen Y, Gen X, and Baby Boomer). We found evidence for generational differences that confirms some of the common characterizations of Gen Y workers; however, this characterization was principally found within our professional subgroup of Gen Y employees. Further, the data suggest that other factors (e.g., workplace experiences, maturation effects) may shape current workplace expectations more than do generational differences. These results suggest that concern over generational differences may be limited to certain workplace expectations and to specific subgroups of employees.

Keywords Generational differences · White and blue-collar workers · Workplace expectations

Much has been written about “Gen Y,” also referred to as “the Millennial Generation,” and the degree to which this cohort—born between approximately 1982 and 2000—differs from their elders in terms of workplace expectations, attitudes, and organizational outcomes (Deal et al. 2010; Twenge 2010; Twenge and Campbell 2008).

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Generational cohorts share, and are presumably shaped by, important historical, cultural, and social events and movements during similar and critical developmental periods (Joshi et al. 2010). These common experiences shape beliefs and values which then characterize a given group born between particular years. The popular press and more practitioner-oriented publications often characterize Gen Y as believing that they are special; they have been sheltered by their parents and schools; they are confident and optimistic about the future; they are team-oriented, conventional, rule bound, feel pressured to succeed, and are more heavily focused on achievement than previous generations (Emeagwali 2011). They have also been described as being less loyal, more difficult to retain, more desirous of meaningful work, more “entitled,” more casual, and less “work-centric” (O’Brien 2013; Thompson and Gregory 2012; Wesner and Miller 2008).

By contrast, Gen X workers (born between 1965 and 1981) are said to possess a fairly cynical and skeptical attitude toward their employers. Because they grew up during a time of rapid technological change and the erosion of job security, they have been said to value commitment to their own careers more than loyalty to the organization, as compared to previous generations. They are described as being willing to challenge authority and to desire autonomous and independent work. Likewise, Baby Boomer employees (born between 1946 and 1964) have their own distinct characterization: they have been described as possessing a strong work ethic and to place work above personal life. They value achievement and success as well challenge, personal improvement, innovation, and creativity in their work. They also prefer collaborative work more than Gen X employees as well as favor a more formalized work culture than Gen Y or Gen X employees (Cennamo and Gardner 2008; Dries et al. 2008; Lester et al. 2012).

The empirical literature, however, does not paint as clear a picture of generational differences, and, for the purposes of this paper, the characterization of Gen Y workers (Hershatter and Epstein 2010; Kowske et al. 2010). One possible reason for this discrepancy concerns the heavy sampling among college students, and, relatedly, a failure to include various occupational groups of Gen Y workers (Deal, et al. 2010; DeHaww and DeVos 2010), which may have introduced an unintended bias toward professional employees. Second, a reliance on comparing mean group differences between generational cohorts may have failed to reveal other types of important generational differences. Although important, mean difference analyses ignore potential differences in patterns of intercorrelations between variables for different generational cohorts. The present study, therefore, aims to address these two problems by examining mean group differences on workplace expectations by generational cohort, comparing two different occupational groups with very dissimilar educational levels—one comprised of production workers (i.e., “blue-collar” workers) with 8.7 % of the sample holding a college degree, one comprised of professional workers (i.e., “white-collar” workers) with 77.3 % of the sample holding a college degree—employed by the same company. We also explore the correlations between these expectations and other workplace variables, separately, for each generational cohort and occupational group. Given the paucity of empirical work related to professional/educational generational

differences, we did not specify directional hypotheses a priori but instead centered our work on the following research questions:

1. Which types of workplace expectations show generational cohort differences, both in terms of mean group differences as well as correlational differences?
2. Do we find the same generational cohort differences for workplace expectations when first hired in both professional and production workers, or does occupational group interact with generational cohort in determining initial expectations?
3. Relative to workplace experiences that may differentially impact occupational group, does generational cohort become less important in setting or shaping workplace expectations after a period of employment?

Workplace Expectations and Gen Y

Expectations, we argue, are the beliefs one holds regarding what he or she thinks the company will provide in terms of areas such as pay, benefits, career development, training, and job security. Although related to constructs such as motivational drivers (Wong et al. 2008), values (Cennamo and Gardner 2008), desires (Ng et al. 2010), or what they “absolutely, positively must have from work” (Rawlins et al. 2008), expectations differ to the extent that they focus more on what the individual thinks is probable or likely rather than what the individual prefers or wants. These areas where workers have expectations (e.g., health benefits) are salient components of the psychological contract, and many authors have speculated that these have shifted in recent decades, both in response to long-term changes in the economy over the past three decades (Rubin 2012) as well as to the recent recession that began in 2008 (DeHauw and DeVos 2010). The psychological contract refers to the expectations an individual has regarding what an employer will provide in exchange for what the worker will contribute to the organization (Rousseau 1989) and has long been recognized as an important element in shaping job-related attitudes and behaviors. Interestingly, many of the forces that have undermined the old contract have resulted in workplaces that, arguably, offer less to the employee. Rubin (2012) points out that in this new economy, workers are “hyper-exploitable” because positions can be readily outsourced; safeguards that protect employees from long work days have eroded; health and retirement benefits have declined; technology, although offering more flexibility in work, also keeps employees “tethered” to their jobs. In short, at a time when organizations may offer less to workers than they did previously, the popular press stresses that this new generation of workers may be expecting more from employers than generations before (DeHauw and DeVos 2010). The intersection of these seemingly opposing forces provides some rationale for this study’s focus.

The empirical literature regarding generational differences on expectations has also tended to describe this newest generation of employee as having higher, rather than lower, expectations in most areas investigated. As noted, however, these findings are largely drawn from college samples. Hershatter and Epstein (2010), for example, in their college student sample, found that participants expected a great deal of support from any future employer, including job security, a good work environment, sufficient

but not excessive challenge, and good communication with one's supervisor/mentor. Similarly, Myers and Sadaghiani (2010) noted that Gen Y workers expected close relationships and frequent feedback from supervisors as well as open communication in areas that have historically been reserved for upper management; they also expected to be promoted more quickly, to earn high pay, and to receive frequent rewards. By contrast, Real et al. (2010), in one of the few studies that focused exclusively on skilled trade workers (who were not necessarily college graduates), failed to find large generational differences on questions that asked about the importance of having a job with qualities such as high status, opportunities for advancement, or chances to make friends.

Workplace Expectations and College Student Sampling

It is important to consider how and why a college student sample may paint a nonrepresentative picture with respect to this area of generational difference and workplace expectations. Clearly, the expectations one holds before, or just at, the point of hire are shaped by a multitude of factors—broad beliefs about organizations in the context of the larger and current economic environment, the specific company's reputation, as well as educational, familial, and individual formative experiences (Real et al. 2010). Despite the fact that higher educational status may no longer provide the same degree of assurance for employability as it did historically (Rubin 2012), those with a college degree have almost certainly been told, and likely believe, that they bring more to the employment setting because of their college degree. Thus, using a norm of reciprocity, one would predict that these employees might expect more from the company in terms of rewards and support. Moreover, Hershatter and Epstein (2010) and others (Gallicano et al. 2012; Thompson and Gregory 2012; Wesner and Miller 2008) describing the stiff competition Gen Y faces for college admission, point to the pressures college-bound students have to earn high grades and AP credit, win varsity letters and debate trophies, and hold leadership positions. Argue these authors, the parents of these students, who have often invested a great deal in private school tuition, have likewise played a strong and supportive role in their students' lives in order to ensure success that is commensurate with the steep investment they have made. It is these developmental experiences which, in turn, have resulted in Gen Y's emphasis on achievement (which later translate to high workplace expectations for promotions, pay, and recognition) and expectation for support (which later translate to high workplace expectations for mentoring, clear feedback, and training). In short, although the authors assert this pressure extends to "all economic strata"—and presumably then, all who have been part of Gen Y—the flavor of the description of this competitive pool is that of a college bound subset.

By contrast Real et al. (2010) also argue that skilled-trade workers are socialized by their families and work communities, though the nature of this socialization differs from that of their college-bound counterparts. Speaking of their sample of workers in the construction industry, they assert that, "many of these younger workers may have been socialized into these occupational communities in their home, neighborhood, and social class while in their formative years, thus learning the values, norms, and practices associated with the construction crafts" (p. 311). Thus, these authors downplay the

effects of more widely shared generational cohort impacts in shaping workplace expectations, focusing instead on what they believe to be more powerful proximal experiences. Limited empirical evidence for the importance of subgroup differences within generational cohort was also found by Ng et al. (2010) who reported a number of significant mean group differences within those who were college educated between gender, minority status, and work experience on what they desired from a job. Thus, even though these differences do not permit us to hypothesize the direction of the difference between college-educated/noncollege-educated or professional/production workers, the various socializing elements in play warrant an examination of these differences and how they shape workplace expectations.

Once hired, socialization into the organization continues to play a role in the development and revision of workplace expectations. As noted by Myers and Sadaghiani (2010), “newcomers also engage in evaluations, assessing not merely job-related tasks and responsibilities, but also the organization and whether they will like working with coworkers and supervisors” (p. 227). To what extent this socialization differs between occupational groups or is more influential in reshaping expectations than, say, those influences that are related to generational cohort, has not been addressed in previous investigations.

In summary, the popular press and extant empirical literature paint an inconsistent picture of Gen Y’s workplace expectations, and, further, provide a basis for investigating whether such expectations differ between occupational groups that differ in their educational levels. Guided by the three research questions, we compared workplace expectations in several areas (e.g., pay expectations when first hired, current pension expectations) between professional and production workers from Gen Y, Gen X, and Baby Boomer generational cohorts. We also examined the relationship between these expectations and a number of work-related attitudes and intentions.

Method

Company Description

Respondents work for a large manufacturing company on the west coast of the United States. As in many other large American companies, the workforce has experienced substantial organizational change and restructuring in the last decade but still maintains a reputation for providing relatively good pay and benefits to its workforce that include comprehensive health benefits, defined pension benefits, and generous educational and training opportunities. This compensation package is, in part, due to the existence of two unions that represent, separately, production and professional employees. The powerful union local representing the production workers has struck the company several times to win pay and benefit increases and to try to protect workers’ job security. More recently, its focus has been on defending health and pension benefit provisions in the contract as well as protecting the principle of layoffs according to seniority. The union representing professional workers is less prone to strike and has accepted the principle of performance-based pay raises and layoff rules. In its most recent contract negotiation, this union grudgingly accepted that new hires would no

longer be part of a defined benefits retirement plan but would be moved to a defined contribution plan.

Participants and Procedure

All employees who had provided email addresses to the professional (approximate $N=8,000$) and to the production ($N=20,881$) workers unions were sent an email from their respective unions containing a short description of research focus, an invitation to participate in an anonymous on-line survey that would take approximately 15 min to complete, and a link to this survey that could be accessed directly from the email. Approximately 1 week later, a reminder email was sent to all union members that reiterated this information, and participants were given 3 weeks to complete the survey following the reminder email. Because the unions had promised workers that they would not share email addresses, we did not have direct control over this email list, nor was the union representing the professional workers able to provide us with a precise count of their members who received the email; however, the survey link was constructed such that only one completed response was accepted from a given IP address. Following the guidance of union officials, we did not offer an incentive for participation, but did emphasize the importance and utility of the research as a means for motivating employees to complete the survey. Respondents were guaranteed anonymity, assured that this research project was independent from both the company and union, and provided researcher contact information.

We obtained surveys from 3,665 employees (approximately 12.7 % response rate) with 2,284 participants (11 % response rate) belonging to the union representing production workers and 1,129 (approximate 14 % response rate) belonging to union representing the professional employees (252 did not answer this question). This response rate met our expectations as it is close to the rates obtained by others with survey characteristics similar to ours (Constant Contact 2013; Rao and Pennington 2013). Mean age (50.3 years for production, 48.6 years for professional) and percent women (14.4 % for production, 17.2 % professional) was not markedly different between union groups, nor from their respective union demographic data. As expected, educational level was substantially different between the two subgroups: for the union representing production employees, 8.7 % had earned a college degree or higher, whereas for the union representing professional employees, 77.3 % possessed at least a college degree.

Consistent with other researchers (Lester et al. 2012; Twenge et al. 2012) we created generational cohort groups by dividing respondents into the following categories: Gen Y (born between 1982 and 2000), Gen X (born between 1965 and 1981), and Baby Boomer (born between 1946 and 1964). Excluding respondents born earlier than 1946 as well as those for whom such demographic data were not completed, this resulted in a final sample size of 2,799 (professional Gen Y, $n=145$; production Gen Y, $n=168$; professional Gen X, $n=208$; production Gen X, $n=536$; professional Baby Boomer, $n=483$; production Baby Boomer, $n=1,259$).

Materials

The on-line survey contained a series of demographic questions and items related to the topics of workplace attitudes, experiences, and intentions. The majority of the questions

were close-ended, quantitative items drawn from the literature and validated in other studies. In order to increase response rate, we sought to shorten the survey as much as possible; thus, in the case of two measures (i.e., expectations of the company, perceived organizational support) we eliminated one item from each scale. Based on previously collected data, we dropped those items which did not affect the overall reliability of the measure. The questions we analyzed in this paper included the following items.

Expectations of the company. Drawn from the work of Greenberg et al. (2010), participants were asked, “*When first hired, did you expect [name of company] to provide you with....*” followed by a list of seven items: (a) career development?, (b) quality, affordable health benefits?, (c) high pay?, (d) a good pension?, (e) rapid advancement?, (f) long-term job security?, and (g) job training? For each item respondents indicated their expectation on a scale anchored from 1 “*definitely no*” to 7 “*definitely yes*.” Later in the survey, participants were asked, “*Consider your thoughts now. Do you expect [name of company] to provide you with...*” and a list of the same seven items and same response scale followed. Items were summed to create an expectations when first hired total score ($\alpha=0.82$; range 7–49) and a current expectations total score ($\alpha=0.88$; range 7–49). We analyzed first hired and current expectations responses at both the item and scale levels.

Intent to quit. To measure the likelihood that one planned to leave the company in the future, we used Cammann et al. (1983) three item measure of intent to quit (e.g., “*I often think about quitting my job.*” $\alpha=0.80$, range 3–15). Participants indicated their response on a 5-point scale, and items were summed so that higher scores reflected greater intent to quit.

Organizational commitment. Three items from Lincoln and Kalleberg (1990) were used to measure commitment to the company (e.g., “*I feel very little loyalty to [name of company].*” $\alpha=0.66$, range 3–15). Using a 5-point response scale anchored from “*strongly disagree*” to “*strongly agree*,” participants rated each statement and items were summed so that higher scores reflected higher levels of commitment.

Perceived organizational support. We used three items from Eisenberger et al. (1986) to measure the degree to which workers feel as though the company notices and cares about them (e.g., “*[Name of company] appreciates extra effort from me.*” $\alpha=0.88$, range 3–15). Identical to the previous measure, participants indicated their response on a 5-point scale and the items were summed so that higher scores indicated greater levels of perceived organizational support.

General job satisfaction. To assess overall satisfaction with one’s job, we asked respondents to complete a three-item measure (e.g., “*In general, I like working here.*”) using a sliding bar response format that ranged from (10) “*strongly disagree*” to (50) “*strongly agree*” (Cammann et al. 1983). Items were converted from this scale to a 5-point scale and summed so that higher scores indicate greater levels of satisfaction ($\alpha=0.82$; range 3–15).

Job involvement. Lodahl and Dejnér’s (1965) eight-item scale of job involvement measured the degree to which participants feel they are engaged with their work and work is central to their life (e.g., “*The most important things that happen to me involve my work.*” $\alpha=0.70$, range 8–40). Participants rated each statement using the same 5-point scale anchored from “*strongly disagree*” to “*strongly*

agree” and items were summed so that higher scores reflected higher levels of involvement.

Results

Expectations when First Hired

To compare expectations when first hired by occupational and generational cohort groups, we conducted a 2 (production, professional) * 3 (Gen Y, Gen X, Baby Boomer) MANOVA using the seven item-level responses to the first hired expectation questions as the dependent variables. Gender was entered as a covariate (Cennamo and Gardner 2008) in all analyses, and to address the issue of unequal cell sizes in our subgroups, we used Type I rather than Type III sums of squares in the computations. We also report Pillai’s Trace statistic as it is more conservative than other options; however, in all cases, all test statistics resulted in similar findings. The overall tests for generational cohort (Pillai’s Trace=0.098, $F=18.26$, $p<0.001$), occupational group (Pillai’s Trace=0.035, $F=12.93$, $p<0.001$), and the interaction of generational cohort * occupational grouping (Pillai’s Trace=0.035; $F=6.36$, $p<0.001$) were significant; we then examined the F-values for the main and interaction effects of individual items. Table 1 presents the marginal means for generational cohort and for occupational group as well as the cell means (i.e., generational cohort by occupational group) for each of the seven items. Table 1 also includes the significance tests for the main and interaction effects as well as a description of the item level post-hoc analyses, corrected with a Bonferroni confidence interval adjustment.

Turning first to the comparison of occupational groups, examination of Table 1 reveals that professional workers had higher expectations than production workers when first hired, but only in the areas of career development and job security. The trend was reversed for the area of good pension. Second, the post-hoc analyses for generational cohort differences reflected that Gen Y employees had higher expectations than did Baby Boomer workers in the areas of career development, high pay, and job training. Gen Y workers also had higher expectations for rapid advancement than did Gen X and Baby Boomer employees. They had, however, significantly lower expectations than Gen X and Baby Boomer workers in the area of pension. The post-hoc tests also reveal a number of significant differences between Gen X and Baby Boomers: Gen X participants reported higher levels in the area of career development, health benefits, and job training as compared to Baby Boomer workers.

Examination of the cell means for items with significant interactions point to several interesting differences between professional and production workers in different generations. For the area of pension expectations when first hired, among the professional workers we found that expectations were lowest for Gen Y and increased for the older cohorts. For production workers, however, Gen X workers had slightly higher expectations than did Gen Y or Baby Boomer employees. With respect to the item rapid advancement, we found that professional Gen Y and Gen X workers were higher than Baby Boomers, but for production workers, Gen Y workers were higher than their Gen X and Baby Boomer counterparts.

Table 1 MANOVA F-values and estimated means by occupational group (Occp) and generational cohort (Gen): expectations when first hired items

Item	Gen Y (1) Mean (SE)	Gen X (2) Mean (SE)	BB (3) Mean (SE)	Occp. Mean (SE)	F-value	Direction of sig mean diffs
Career Dev.	Professional	5.93 (0.14)	5.73 (0.11)	5.28 (0.07)	Occup: 21.26***	Professional > Production
	Production	5.55 (0.13)	5.33 (0.08)	4.92 (0.05)	Gen: 27.87***	1, 2 > 3
	Gen Mean	5.74 (0.10)	5.53 (0.07)	5.10 (0.04)	Int: (ns)	
Health benefits	Professional	6.07 (0.10)	6.30 (0.08)	6.15 (0.05)	Occup: (ns)	
	Production	6.23 (0.09)	6.24 (0.05)	6.12 (0.03)	Gen: 3.20*	2 > 3
	Gen Mean	6.15 (0.07)	6.27 (0.05)	6.13 (0.03)	Int: (ns)	
High pay	Professional	4.95 (0.13)	4.70 (0.11)	4.51 (0.07)	Occup: (ns)	
	Production	4.71 (0.13)	4.53 (0.07)	4.55 (0.05)	Gen: 4.53**	1 > 3
	Gen Mean	4.83 (0.09)	4.61 (0.07)	4.52 (0.04)	Int: (ns)	
Good pension	Professional	4.66 (0.13)	5.56 (0.10)	5.97 (0.07)	Occup: 26.76***	Production > Professional
	Production	5.59 (0.12)	5.99 (0.07)	5.80 (0.04)	Gen: 31.06***	1 < 2, 3
	Gen Mean	5.13 (0.09)	5.78 (0.06)	5.88 (0.04)	Int: 20.37***	
Rapid Adv	Professional	4.43 (0.14)	4.33 (0.11)	4.06 (0.08)	Occup: (ns)	
	Production	4.55 (0.14)	3.88 (0.08)	3.98 (0.05)	Gen: 9.49***	1 > 2, 3
	Gen Mean	4.49 (0.10)	4.11 (0.07)	4.02 (0.05)	Int: 3.62*	
Job security	Professional	5.41 (0.16)	5.34 (0.13)	5.28 (0.09)	Occup: 16.70***	Professional > Production
	Production	5.07 (0.15)	4.97 (0.09)	4.82 (0.05)	Gen: (ns)	
	Gen Mean	5.24 (0.11)	5.16 (0.08)	5.05 (0.05)	Int: (ns)	
Job training	Professional	5.87 (0.12)	5.71 (0.10)	5.29 (0.07)	Occup: (ns)	
	Production	5.98 (0.12)	5.71 (0.07)	5.40 (0.04)	Gen: 25.94***	1, 2 > 3
	Gen Mean	5.93 (0.09)	5.71 (0.06)	5.35 (0.04)	Int: (ns)	

*** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$

Current Expectations

Next, we conducted a 2 (occupational group) * 3 (generational cohort) MANOVA using the seven current expectations items as the dependent variables, again controlling for gender and using a Type I sums of squares in the analyses. As with first hired expectations, the overall multivariate test for generational cohort (Pillai's Trace=0.101, $F=17.31$, $p<0.001$), occupational group (Pillai's Trace=0.050, $F=17.03$, $p<0.001$), and their interaction (Pillai's Trace=0.028, $F=4.62$, $p<0.001$) were significant. Table 2 presents the marginal and cell means as well as the results of the follow-up univariate and Bonferroni-adjusted post-hoc tests.

We found a different pattern with respect to main effects for occupational group vis-à-vis current expectations: here, production workers had higher expectations than professional workers in the areas of health benefits, high pay, and, as before, good pension. With respect to generational cohort, the directions of group differences were similar to those obtained for the first hired expectations: Gen Y workers had significantly higher expectations than did Baby Boomers in the areas of career development, health benefits, rapid advancement, and job training. Gen Y workers also had significantly lower expectations than did Baby Boomers in the area of good pension. We also saw that Gen X workers had significantly higher expectations than did Baby Boomers in career development, high pay, rapid advancement, and job training.

The interaction effects, however, again illustrate a number of significant differences in how occupational groups varied as a function of generational cohort. Among the professional workers for the items related to high pay and rapid advancement, we found that the Gen Y workers had the highest expectations, and these were similar to those held by Gen X professional workers: the drop of expectations was found when moving to the professional Baby Boomer employees. By contrast, the Gen X production workers reported the highest expectations in these two areas with Gen Y workers reporting similar levels as the other generational groups. Turning to the pension item, among professional workers, we found that Gen Y employees had the lowest expectations, rising with Gen X and Baby Boomers; by contrast, Gen Y production workers reported levels that were similar to the other production worker cohorts.

Correlations Between Expectations and Other Work Measures

To see if the relationship between expectations and other workplace measures differed as a function of generational cohort and occupational group, we correlated total expectations scores with these measures, separately for each of the six groups. The total score for expectations when first hired (not shown) revealed very little relationship to any of the other work variables for any of the groups.

The correlations between the current expectations total score and work variables, however, presented a slightly different pattern (see Table 3). First, we found that the negative correlations between expectations and intent to quit were strongest for Gen Y employees, significantly more so as compared to both Gen X ($p<0.05$) and Baby Boomer ($p<0.001$) workers. The relationships between current expectations to organizational commitment, perceived organizational support, and general job satisfaction also showed moderate and significant correlations for each of the six groups; however, the magnitude of these correlations was not significantly different between groups. The

Table 2 MANOVA F-values and estimated means by occupational group (Occp) and generational cohort (Gen): current expectations items

Item	Gen Y (1) Mean (SE)	Gen X (2) Mean (SE)	BB (3) Mean (SE)	Occp. Mean (SE)	F-value	Direction of sig mean diffs
Career Dev.	Professional	4.69 (0.17)	4.21 (0.14)	3.53 (0.10)	4.14 (0.08)	Occp: (ns)
	Production	4.29 (0.17)	4.24 (0.10)	3.64 (0.06)	4.06 (0.07)	Gen: 35.34***
	Gen Mean	4.49 (0.12)	4.23 (0.09)	3.59 (0.06)		Int: (ns)
Health benefits	Professional	5.12 (0.17)	4.78 (0.14)	4.59 (0.09)	4.83 (0.08)	Occp: 9.80**
	Production	5.39 (0.16)	5.15 (0.09)	4.90 (0.06)	5.15 (0.07)	Gen: 8.73***
	Gen Mean	5.25 (0.12)	4.97 (0.08)	4.74 (0.06)		Int: (ns)
High pay	Professional	4.51 (0.15)	4.41 (0.13)	4.02 (0.09)	4.31 (0.07)	Occp: 7.66**
	Production	4.54 (0.15)	4.62 (0.09)	4.56 (0.05)	4.57 (0.06)	Gen: 4.24**
	Gen Mean	4.52 (0.11)	4.52 (0.08)	4.29 (0.05)		Int: 3.35*
Good pension	Professional	3.65 (0.17)	4.11 (0.14)	4.45 (0.10)	4.07 (0.08)	Occp: 71.21***
	Production	4.88 (0.17)	5.08 (0.10)	4.92 (0.06)	4.96 (0.07)	Gen: 4.85**
	Gen Mean	4.27 (0.12)	4.59 (0.09)	4.68 (0.06)		Int: 5.74**
Rapid Adv	Professional	3.48 (0.15)	3.38 (0.12)	2.66 (0.08)	3.17 (0.07)	Occp: (ns)
	Production	3.06 (0.15)	3.12 (0.08)	2.83 (0.05)	3.00 (0.06)	Gen: 21.43***
	Gen Mean	3.27 (0.10)	3.24 (0.07)	2.75 (0.05)		Int: 5.03**
Job security	Professional	3.89 (0.19)	3.72 (0.15)	3.51 (0.10)	3.71 (0.09)	Occp: (ns)
	Production	3.61 (0.18)	3.93 (0.10)	3.85 (0.07)	3.80 (0.07)	Gen: (ns)
	Gen Mean	3.75 (0.13)	3.83 (0.09)	3.68 (0.06)		Int: (ns)
Job training	Professional	4.77 (0.17)	4.47 (0.14)	3.95 (0.09)	4.40 (0.08)	Occp: (ns)
	Production	4.79 (0.16)	4.70 (0.09)	4.27 (0.06)	4.59 (0.07)	Gen: 20.69***
	Gen Mean	4.78 (0.12)	4.59 (0.08)	4.11 (0.05)		Int: (ns)

*** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$

Table 3 Correlations between current expectations and workplace variables: by generational cohort and occupational group

	Generation Y		Generation X		Baby Boomer	
	Prof ^a (<i>n</i> =109)	Prod (<i>n</i> =111)	Prof (<i>n</i> =165)	Prod (<i>n</i> =359)	Prof (<i>n</i> =363)	Prod (<i>n</i> =917)
Intent to quit	-0.44**	-0.52**	-0.32**	-0.33**	-0.29**	-0.24**
Organizational commitment	0.49**	0.52**	0.37**	0.45**	0.42**	0.45**
Perceived organizational support	0.54**	0.43**	0.39**	0.42**	0.46**	0.42**
General job satisfaction	0.40**	0.56**	0.36**	0.38**	0.38**	0.40**
Job involvement	0.16	0.10	0.17	0.14*	0.15	0.19**

^a Prof = Professional worker, Prod = Production worker

** $p < 0.001$; * $p < 0.01$

correlations between current expectations and job involvement were roughly equal in magnitude across groups and differed in significance level as a function of the varying subgroup sample sizes.

Discussion

Consideration of different types of work-related expectations, how they change, and the associations they have with other workplace variables reveals a complex picture, but one from which we conclude the following. First, as related to Research Question 1, some of the data point to generational cohort differences, but this is not an impact that cuts uniformly across all areas where workers have expectations. Next (Research Question 2), the cohort differences we found between Gen Y, Gen X, and Baby Boomer generations that were most consistently aligned with descriptions in the popular press and extant literature were more common among professional rather than production workers. Finally (Research Question 3), and as noted by a number of authors (DeHauw and DeVos 2010; Real et al. 2010; Smola and Sutton 2002; Wong et al. 2008), these results suggest that a number of factors shape expectations including generational cohort experiences before employment, maturation changes that affect workers at given developmental periods, and workplace experiences and/or period effects that may be especially targeted toward, or experienced by, certain generational groups. Moreover, there is some evidence that once employment begins, occupational differences and workplace experiences play a greater role than generational cohort experiences in shaping expectations. Below, we discuss each of these conclusions in greater detail.

Generational Cohort Effects for Specific Workplace Expectations

To expand on the first point, we do find some evidence of generational group differences that are consistent with a “pure” generational cohort interpretation and that are in accordance with some of the descriptions of Gen Y workers noted in previous

studies. As described previously, Gen Y has been characterized as expecting assistance from their employers so that they can advance and develop in their work (Deal et al. 2010; DeHauw and DeVos 2010; O'Brien 2013). Consistent with those reports, we see in Table 1 that expectations of support for career development and job training when first hired were significantly greater for Gen Y respondents as compared to Baby Boomers; Gen Y also had higher expectations for rapid advancement than the other two generational cohorts. Although there may be error in recall (discussed below), we can cautiously rule out maturation as an explanation for group differences given that we asked about expectations when *first hired*.

Compared to Baby Boomer respondents, we also find that Gen Y respondents expected significantly higher pay when first hired; however, they also expected significantly lower pension than Gen X and Baby Boomer participants. Although a higher pay expectation is consistent with the overarching stereotype of Gen Y employees expecting more from their organizations, lower pension expectations would seem to stand in direct contrast. It could be, however, that this is, in fact reflective of an important generational cohort difference, one where a norm of immediate reciprocity plays a more central role in the psychological contract of younger workers. During Gen Y employees' formative years, they may have witnessed well-publicized examples of companies where pensions have eroded or been lost (Block 2009), and they may have come to view defined pension benefits as less possible in today's economy. Furthermore, the time factor of immediate (pay) versus future (pension) distinguishes these two financial forms of recognition. While younger workers have an expectation that they should be compensated in the present for work just performed, they may not believe that this obligates the company in any way for future compensation. The correlational findings also lend some credence to this interpretation as we found significantly stronger associations for Gen Y relative to Gen X or Baby Boomers between current expectations and intent to quit. Assuming that high current expectations are reflective of *met* expectations (which the positive correlations imply), these data suggest that a norm of reciprocity may operate more strongly for Gen Y versus Gen X or Baby Boomer workers: higher expectations that are fulfilled by the company are, in turn, met with higher and more positive employee intentions to remain. This is not to say that Gen X or Baby Boomers do not have a similar orientation, but rather that this connection may be greater for Gen Y employees.

Generational Differences that Vary by Occupation

It is, however, the interaction of generational cohort and occupational grouping on expectations that is of particular interest in the present research as it suggests that within cohorts, important and systematic developmental and workplace experiences may differentially impact worker expectations. In short, the findings suggest that Gen Y production workers are more similar to Gen X and Baby Boomer production coworkers: it is among the professional employees that Gen Y workers differ from their Gen X and Baby Boomer coworkers in ways that more closely match some of the descriptions in the literature and popular press.

For example, in Tables 1 and 2, inspection of the cell means for the pension variable shows that a generational effect is observed most strongly among the professional

employees with younger workers having the lowest expectations relative to their professional Gen X and Baby Boomer colleagues. Production workers' values, by contrast, are more stable. In a similar manner, current high pay expectations (Table 2) show more stability among production workers: it is among the professional workers that we see more cohort variability with Gen Y reporting higher values than either Gen X or Baby Boomer workers. Interestingly, expectations for rapid advancement when first hired (Table 1) among professional workers is highest among Gen Y followed by Gen X and then Baby Boomers. Among production workers, however, the values are not stable but rather highest among Gen Y workers as well. Comparison between production worker cohorts suggests that this may be a more recent or abrupt change for this youngest cohort.

The interpretation of the interaction effects found in Table 2 especially, however, must consider the potential impact of workplace events, rather than the result of varied, preemployment development experiences that are more common among professional workers, as being the reason for such group differences. For example, current pension expectations are lowest among the Gen Y professional workers, and yet this was likely influenced by the recent contract negotiation that resulted in a change from company guaranteed benefits to a defined contributions plan for newly hired workers. Taken together, these findings illustrate important occupational by generational differences, both pre- and post-employment.

Multiple Factors Shape Expectations

Our last conclusion—the importance of multiple factors in shaping expectations—is illustrated, first, by a number of significant generational group differences that lend themselves to an aging/maturation explanation either better than, or in addition to, a simple generational cohort interpretation. For example, we find that with respect to current expectations (Table 2) Gen Y and Gen X participants report significantly greater expectations of support by the company in the areas of career development, rapid advancement, and job training as compared to Baby Boomer respondents. Although this could, again, be interpreted as supporting a generational cohort explanation (i.e., Gen Y still has higher expectations), it is also possible that this generational group difference reflects that when approaching the end of their careers, all workers simply expect less support in their career development, including less ongoing or job training.

Somewhat apart from aging effects, although intertwined with them given the cross-sectional nature of our research, we found some evidence that Baby Boomers' experiences with the company may have affected their expectations. With respect to the health benefits variable, Table 2 shows that Baby Boomers have significantly lower current expectations than Gen Y workers. Again, such a finding could be interpreted as supporting a generational cohort explanation (i.e., Gen Y employees expect more in terms of health benefits which, we note, is an immediate benefit). It is, however, also possible that this finding is more directly linked to particular company experiences for those with longer tenure in the company—the Baby Boomers—who have seen health benefits erode during their time with the company. In addition, we find evidence that occupational status explains several differences in expectations. For example, in Table 2, we find that expectations for health benefits, high pay, and good pension are greater for production than for professional workers, perhaps illustrative of the fact that

the union representing production workers had recently experienced more positive contract negotiations than the union representing professional workers.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Collectively, these findings suggest a stronger generational cohort interpretation for the professional group, a result that supports the assertion that study of workplace generational cohort differences may, in fact, not be generalizable when examined with predominately college-educated participants (Deal et al. 2010; DeHauw and DeVos 2010; Real et al. 2010). Moreover, interpretation of these results tentatively suggests that, over time, occupation-specific experiences may override generational differences. Although we regard these results as conceptually and practically useful to researchers and practitioners, we also note that they should be interpreted within the larger context of other findings. First, comparison of initial expectations (Table 1) and current expectations (Table 2) shows that expectations for all groups generally decreased after employment began. Second, we failed to find significant associations between initial expectations and workplace variables. Although we are cautious in interpreting null findings, these results suggest that concerns over Gen Y's initial expectations, and organization's efforts to satisfy the alleged demands of younger workers, may be overstated at least insofar as these initial expectations relate to future levels of important workplace attitudes and self-reported measures of intention or effort.

Study of generational differences using cross sectional data, as recognized by other researchers (Kowske et al. 2010; Twenge 2010; Wong et al. 2008), is complex given that several different interpretations are possible when mean group differences are found by generational cohort: (a) actual generational differences based on differential formative experiences as a function of birth year; (b) age/maturation differences that are stage-of-life dependent; and/or (c) workplace experiences that have impacted or been targeted differentially at the generations. Indeed, it is possible that Baby Boomer and/or Gen X participants might have shown results similar to Gen Y had we measured them years ago when they were the at the age or stage of life as our current Gen Y respondents. Longitudinal panel designs provide the best methodology for addressing such confounds, but have obvious challenges, particularly when conducted within a single organization where attrition and limited new hiring come into play. Our survey questions about "first hired" expectations, however, may have provided a small way to address this problem, as these items intended to capture workers' expectations at a common developmental period, presumably before workplace experiences had exerted any type of impact. Another possible way to address this problem would be to statistically control for age and/or time worked at the organization; however, in the current study, these variables were strongly associated with generational cohort ($r=0.91$ for age, $r=0.57$ for years worked at company). Indeed, the participant's age was used to assign the respondent to a generational cohort. Thus, to control for age or years worked would have removed most of the systematic variance that was, in fact, the focus of the study: subsequent analyses (not shown) that controlled for either of these variables rendered most of the group differences nonsignificant. Although detection of the amount of *unique* variation in generational cohort—that is using time worked as a control—does have value, it underestimates the degree to which variation in generational cohort, which overlaps with time worked, also contributes. We also note that our effect sizes for mean group differences were small

(between 1 and 5 %), although some have argued that even small effects can translate into meaningful differences in applied settings (Twenge 2010).

We also acknowledge that recall of one's initial expectations may be prone to error, shaped by one's current expectations and the years that have passed since first hired—which differs greatly between Gen Y, Gen X, and Baby Boomer employees. The mean correlation between first hired and current expectation items, however, was only 0.29 and not markedly different by generational cohort (0.295, 0.291, and 0.294 for Gen Y, Gen X, and Baby Boomer, respectively). Thus, the impact of current expectations on recollections of initial expectations appears to have been small and, to the extent that generational cohort correlates with the number of years employed by company, not related to the amount of time elapsed between the two sets of expectations.

Adding to the call for longitudinal data already made by other researchers, we encourage continued examination of occupational differences outside of this particular company as our findings attest to their value to researchers and practitioners alike. The company studied here, a rather traditional, classically structured organization, may have attracted workers who were especially interested in a more traditional form of the psychological contract, both at the time these employees were first hired and at the time that we conducted our survey. Further study of how potential employees develop initial expectations and subsequently change these expectations over time would also be useful for companies insofar as these changes in expectations are associated with important workplace attitudes and intentions.

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