



Conference Paper

Prevalence of Toxic Work Environments and Their Impact on Wellbeing: Preliminary Findings among the Millennial Population

Siti Khadijah Zainal Badri* & Sheryl L.F. Chieng,

Division of Organisational and Applied Psychology, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Nottingham Malaysia Campus

Abstract.

The entering of new cohorts into the workforce like millennials and gen-Z has sparked many discussions on strategies to sustain them at work. Studies have suggested that each generation is bound to unique qualities which distinguish one group from another. Despite the newer generation starting to occupy the workplace that was once dominated by baby boomers, there is still a lack of understanding towards occupational behaviours of other generations like millennials. Besides popular opinions of tech-savvy and emotionally vulnerable generations (especially in comparison to baby boomers), more comprehensive research is needed to understand the pattern and risk factors for their wellbeing concerns. In this paper, we investigate the prevalence of various aspects of toxic behaviour at work towards millennial employee wellbeing from the perspective of work-family conflict, burnout, and mental health. The objective is to address and identify patterns related to the problematic workplace that can affect millennials wellbeing at work. Results were analysed using SPSS software by using descriptive, correlation, and logistic regression methods with samples of 133 millennial workers. Findings suggest that the millennial experience of toxic behaviour at work were linked to the increased commonness of risk of wellbeing problems in terms of mental health and burnout symptoms. This paper highlights the importance of managing toxic behaviours and events for millennial employees at work. The millennial generation often thrives on the emotional aspect of work while showing an increased risk of wellbeing problems such as burnout, when exposed to a problematic environment. This paper therefore suggests the importance of sustaining and promoting a healthy working environment for the millennial generation to flourish.

Keywords: toxic work environment, wellbeing, burnout, mental health, work-family conflict

Corresponding Author: Siti Khadijah Zainal Badri; email: SitiKhadijah.Zainal@ nottingham.edu.my

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1. Introduction

Employees encounter to toxic workplace or organisation has become more prevalent due to unique combination of culture, performance pressure, competitiveness, and unstable economic climate (HRinasia, 2016). The chance of employee to identify workplace that may be harmful to them is very limited especially due to restricted access to organisation record and feedback of former and current employees from the institution. Working in a problematic workplace possesses immense danger to an employee as it can lower their work morale, motivation, and performance (HRinasia, 2017).

Generally, toxic workplace has been interchangeably discussed under several terminologies in current research including workplace bullying (Zapf, 1999; Chan et al., 2019) and work mobbing (Leymann, 1996) to describe existence of negative events or damaging elements within the workplace environment. Regardless, concept of toxic workplace puts more broader focus by not limiting only to harmful behaviour, but also occurrence of indirect counterproductive activity that could be hazardous for employee in the organisation. Elements of toxic workplace may include issues of depraved leadership, pressing work culture and office politics among others (Anjum et al., 2018; Rasool et al., 2021)

Prior studies highlight that likelihood of employee to come across problematic work-place is substantial with one-third (Chan *et al.*, 2019). Working in difficult workplace has linked to many adverse consequences such as declining productivity (Anjum *et al.*, 2018), stress (Wang *et al.*, 2020), burnout and retention problem (Rasool *et al.*, 2021) which are not sustainable for both employees and organisation. Although some discussions are initiated to address problematic workplaces (Chan *et al.*, 2019, Wang *et al.*, 2020), literature on this subject is still consider sparse especially from developing regions (Ullah *et al.*, 2018).

Employee encounter to problematic workplace is vary across culture (Ciby & Raya, 2015) but commonness is seen in developing regions due to several factors such as cultural influence, strong competition and insecure economic environment. Besides, lesser narrative on toxic workplace among Asian countries is driven by this topic often seen as disrespect and insulting for the victim (Rasool *et al.*, 2018). Stronger social norms including high group belongingness and high-power distance are also indirectly contributed to lesser confrontation on characteristics of problematic workplace. This is true for developing country such as Malaysia which has strong cultural foundation towards group behaviour, acceptance (Kwan *et al.*, 2014) and authority submission that often caused a confusion over acceptable work culture or behaviour.



Nevertheless, demands and greater awareness on healthy workplace environment has gained more popularity since the entering of millennials generation into the workplace as they are more susceptible to be affected by wellbeing issue at work (Yap et al., 2022). Despite organisation perceives millennial as a unique and talented cohort, there is also inclination of this cohort to portray more wellbeing problems when working in unhealthy work environment. Notwithstanding, the incident related to toxic or problematic workplace is constantly rising (Rafi et al., 2019) and become more evident in organisational context.

Aside from this, there are also limited investigation increase occurrence of work-family conflict, burnout, and mental health among millennials. Studies have suggested increased concern over mental health among millennials which paves a new direction for organisation to be more responsive towards this issue at work (Greenwood & Anas, 2021; Enos, 2020). Yet, studies that bridge these issues with toxic workplace are rather limited, albeit numerous empirical points on the urgent need to address work-life balance issue, burnout and mental health as a method to retain millennials at work (Yap & Badri, 2020; Petersen, 2019).

Because working in a toxic workplace is detrimental to both employee and business performance (Anjum *et al.*, 2018), and also due to the huge impact it may bring to the long-term success of the employee and organisation (Rasool *et al.*, 2021) especially to millennials, therefore, this paper examines the prevalence of toxic workplace behaviour to the wellbeing conditions of millennials employees at work.

2. Literature review

2.1. Toxic workplace

A toxic workplace refers to the cruel and unpleasant environment or treatment received at work that may jeopardise employee safety and health (Rasool *et al.*, 2020). Working in a toxic work environment can lead to varying problems including reduced support, low engagement, and disturbed wellbeing (Rasool *et al.*, 2021). According to Rasool et al. (2021), there are three of the main components of a toxic workplace which are harassment, bullying and ostracism. Working in a toxic environment is harmful to an employee since it reduces positive work experience which is a detrimental aspect to positive work outcomes and performance (Wang *et al.*, 2020). Prior studies have shown that working in a toxic environment can diminish employees' morale and motivation due to the unconstructive surrounding that increases threat of narcissism, offensive,



aggressive, threat, bullying, harassment, and ostracism. The source of toxicity is also varied where it may originate from their experience of engaging with major stakeholders, colleagues, leaders or even clients.

2.2. Work-family conflict

Referring as inter roles conflict that occurs between work and life (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985), this conflict instigates when there is a mismatch between expectation, behaviour, timing allocation between work and family domains. The conflict can take two forms of work-family conflict and family-work conflict. Work-family conflict is a conflict that occurs when responsibilities from the work domain disturbs the family domain. Another is a family-work conflict which triggers when family domain causes disturbance to the work domain. Literature has suggested that the prevalence of work-family conflict increases due to the pandemic which invites more integration between work and family demands (Powell, 2020; Novitasari *et al.*, 2020).

2.3. Burnout

Burnout is the extent to which an employee has functionality problems due to exhaustion or cynicism related to work (Hakanen *et al.*, 2006). Burnout can happen due to many plausible reasons such as high workload, but it is mainly underlined by a prolonged state of stress and exhaustion (Leiter *et al.*, 2014). According to Hakanen *et al.*, (2006) burnout occurs when an employee is under excessive work demands causing them to feel overwhelmed. It is a form of psychological reaction as a consequence of prolonged exposure to a stressor which leads to chronic emotional and interpersonal deficiency related to work (Maslach *et al.*, 2001).

2.4. Mental health

Mental health is a state of wellbeing that enables individuals to use their abilities in harmony, to cope, recognise, expresses their emotions with the presence of a harmonious connection between body and mind (Galderisi et al., 2015). It concerns the presence of good psychological states with the absence of symptoms that can impair one's access to having a good life. Alike to burnout, a poor mental health state is when individuals are having prolonged difficulty handling different aspects of life



that lead to the development of symptoms such as increased heart rate or palpitation, dysfunctional behaviour, frequent negative emotions among a few others.

2.5. Hypothesis development

The prevalence of toxic workplace to work-family conflict, burnout and mental health problems

Studies have suggested that working in an unconducive and stressful working environment is associated with more negative outcomes (Rasool *et al.*, 2021; Liang, 2020; Demsky *et al.*, 2014). A study by Anjum and Ming (2018), has suggested that working in toxic workplace has a negative relationship with job productivity due to high stress from the surrounding employee must endure. Being in a less constructive work environment or problematic culture induces stresses that can trigger the occurrence of work-family conflict (Mauno *et al.*, 2005). This is because toxic job elements can impair one's equilibrium and coordination between work and life which is a crucial aspect to achieving work-life balance (Moen & Chesley, 2008). Previous studies have indicated that dealing with problematic workplaces can impose an emotional burden on employees which leads to the inability to perform in a family setting (Mauno *et al.*, 2005; Liang, 2020). Due to the negative emotional implications and suffering when dealing with stressful workplace (Liang, 2020), therefore this study argues that dealing with a toxic environment and behaviour increases the prevalence of work-family conflict incidents among millennials workers.

Hypothesis 1: Toxic workplace increases the prevalence of work-family conflict incidents among millennial workers.

It is often reported that being in a demanding workplace can inflict discomfort and emotional exhaustion. Dealing with unpleasant encounters such as bullying and passive avoidance leadership are examples of incidents or conditions which can trigger burnout issues at work (Laschinger et al., 2010; Islam et al., 2021). When an employee is dealing with a toxic environment, it leads to feeling of loss control over work. Unlike tangible resources, losing intangible resources (such as emotional, relationship, cooperation) are much more difficult to compensate as individual assesses their everyday experience from the wide range of emotion which they experience every day. As such, employees encounter different toxic characteristics in the workplace can lead to intensification of negative emotion which further diminishes their positive experience related to work (Okcu & Cetin, 2017) and hence stimulates burnout. Besides, Okcu and Cetin (2017) explained that being a subject of negative experience (whether as a witness or the

victim) can lead to a lack of fulfilment of employee basic needs – emotional and psychological aspect. On basis of these arguments, we further argue that dealing with toxic workplace characteristics increases the prevalence of burnout.

Hypothesis 2: Toxic workplace increases the prevalence of burnout incidents among millennial workers.

Past studies have deliberated that working in a difficult environment can cause ill health (Rasool *et al.*, 2021; Wang *et al.*, 2020). The adverse effects of working within a toxic organisation are severe because it can lead to psychological trauma under extreme experience. According to Okcu and Cetin (2017) witnessing bullying or harassment incidents at work can lead to an employee losing trust in the organisation. Employees encounter with any form of toxic workplace characteristics is severe not only because of the prolonged emotional implication but also the negative perceptions they developed that can hinder positive emotions at work. This is evidence from a study by Kozáková, et al. (2018) which found an association between the victim of mobbing to poor mental health. This is also aligned with several other studies by Khoo (2010), Conway et al. (2021) and Verkuil *et al.*, (2015) among few which discussed the harmful implications of any dimension of toxic characteristics (i.e., mobbing, bullying) to employee mental health. Therefore, our next assumption is as below.

Hypothesis 3: Toxic workplace increases the prevalence of poor mental health problems among millennial workers.

3. Methodology

3.1. Design, measures, and data collection procedure.

This study uses a quantitative approach using the survey to collect data. Data collection was administered using an online survey, Qualtrics platform and took place within pandemic lockdown. A total of 115 responses were collected in which data was analysed using Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) software. All respondents must fulfil the criteria of millennial who are born between years 1982 until 1995 to participate. The toxic workplace was measured using items adapted from Quine's staff questionnaire survey (1999). The items were rated using 'Yes' or 'No' to validate employee encounters to negative incidents at work. Work-family conflict was measured using the 10-items work-family conflict scale by Netemeyer *et al.*, (1995). The scale consisted of two sub-dimensions of work-to-family conflict and work-to-family conflict and was rated with a 6-point Likert scale. Burnout was measured using sub scale



of second version Copenhagen psychosocial questionnaire (COPSQ II) for burnout (Pejtersenm, Kristensen, Borg & Bjorner, 2010). While mental health was measured using 21-items of DASS-21 measuring symptoms of depression, stress and anxiety which were rated using a 5-point Likert scale. This study received ethical approval from Division of Organisational and Applied Psychology (DOAP), University of Nottingham prior to data collection. All participants were briefed on anonymity, withdrawal terms and consent before answering the survey.

3.2. Reliability and validity of the instruments

All scales reliability were checked before hypothesis testing to ensure consistency of the adopted instruments. In brief, NAQ scored .891, DASS-21 with .961, Work-family conflict scored .937 and burnout scored at .937. Multicollinearity within the samples was also observed using Variance Inflation Tolerance (VIF) by regressing all independent items with dependent variables (i.e., work-family conflict, burnout, mental health) this is confirmed as a non-issue as all observed VIF values are below 10. Besides, good convergent validity is assumed based on a high correlation between the two work-family conflict constructs (i.e., work-to-family conflict, family-to-work conflict) which exceeds .700. Also, good discriminant validity is conformed as the correlation between interconstructs not exceeding the .700 threshold.

4. Results

4.1. Demographic of the respondents

Table 1 summarises the demographic profiles of respondents in this study. In brief, the majority of our respondents are female with 63.2 per cent. Almost 40 per cent of our respondents are executive, followed by those with managerial positions with 22.4 per cent and other age categories. For employment status, the majority with 90.4 per cent of the respondents are permanent workers, only 9.6 per cent are contract workers. Lastly, there is a mixed combination of working experience with a majority with 37.6 per cent have 6 to 10 years of working experience and followed by other categories.

Table 2 describes the descriptive statistic and correlation between variables of the study. Items for toxic workplaces were excluded since it was measured using a nominal or 'Yes, No' answer. In terms of mean, we found all the constructs of WFC, FWC, burnout and mental health symptoms are moderate in terms of level. Besides, we found

TABLE 1: Descriptive statistics.

Demographic	Category	f	%	Skewness	Kurtosis
Gender	Male	46	36.8	554	-1.721
	Female	79	63.2		
Company size	Below 50	28	22.4	-1.467	1.124
	251 and above	62	49.6		
	Between 51 and 250	35	28.0		
Position	Non-executive	12	9.6	733	.785
	Executive	49	39.2		
	Manager and above (indi- vidual contributor)	28	22.4		
	Manager and above (with direct reports)	25	20.0		
	Senior management	10	8.0		
	Board of directors	1	.8		
Employment status	Contract	12	9.6	-2.776	5.880
	Permanent	113	90.4		
Working experience	0-2	9	7.2	994	1.579
	3-5	31	24.8		
	6-10	47	37.6		
	11-15	21	16.8		
	16 and above	17	13.6		

that intercorrelation between the constructs of studies ranging from moderate to high correlations.

TABLE 2: Descriptive statistics and correlation between the variables.

	Min- Max	Mean	SD	WFC	FWC	Burnout	MHS
Work-family conflict – WFC	1-6	3.485	1.350	-	.716	.533**	.517**
Family-work conflict - FWC	1-6	2.973	1.258	.716**	-	.339**	.326**
Burnout	1-5	3.072	1.134	.533**	.339	-	.716**
Mental Health symptoms	1-5	2.292	.918	.517**	.326	.716**	-

4.2. Hypotheses testing

Table 3 summarises the result of our hypothesis testing. Logistic regression was performed to test the prevalence of each toxic workplace behaviour to increase the risk of work-family conflict, burnout, mental health symptoms problems among our respondents. The statistical method was utilised due to the use of nominal data (Yes, No) in measuring response for the toxic behaviours. In detail, the result suggests there are



no association between the experience of toxic with millennials increasing prevalence of work-to-family and family-to-work conflict. Four types of behaviour which are 'verbal and non-verbal threats' (B=1.440, p = .001), 'persistent teasing' ((B=3.584, p = .001), 'freezing out or ignoring' (B=1.925, p = .008) and 'removal of areas of responsibility without consultation' (B=1.855, p = .028) are associated to increasing risk of burnout among millennials employees. Meanwhile, all types of toxic workplace behaviour except for five (i.e., refusal of application for leave/training/promotion, physical violence, violence to property, verbal and non-verbal threats, intimidatory use of discipline or competence procedures) are related to one to five times increased risk of mental health problems among the millennial workers.

This paper investigates the prevalence of different types of toxic behaviour towards work-family conflict, burnout and mental health problems among millennial employees at work. In the past, studies of bullying or negative behaviour at work have been heavily skewed to a certain population such as healthcare workers, where the prevalence of bullying or negative work behaviour is higher (ex. Quine, 2001; Ariza-Montes, 2013; Medina-Craven & Ostermeier, 2020). Yet only small attention is given from the millennial workers perspective which potentially accrues greater risk due to this cohort tendency to thrive based on emotional compassion when working (Badri et al., 2021). In line with past empirical, this paper found evidence on the potential increased risk of the millennial employee to accrue burnout (Allen et al., 2015) and mental health symptoms (Verkuil et al., 2015; Conway et al., 2021) when working under problematic circumstances. Conway et al. (2021) mentioned that employee who experiences negative experience such as bullying represents powerful stressor that induces psychological trauma. We affirm this argument based on our findings on the substantial risk of different toxic behaviours to the millennial's employee wellbeing problems associated such as burnout and mental health problems.

A concerning aspect to our finding is how the risk to develop burnout and mental health problem among millennial workers can increase up to five times greater likelihood under the exposure of toxic or bullying behaviour at work. This is particularly disturbing as it signals the vulnerably and huge impact of such incidents on millennials wellbeing trajectory. Particularly, incidents involving undermining millennials' cohort potential or those that can bring down their self-esteem is associated with three to five times increased risks of mental health problems. While this is not entirely surprising, given numerous studies highlighted that the millennial worker population mainly thriving based on emotional and subjective perceptions (Badri et al., 2021; Yap & Badri, 2020), yet it signals potential areas of priority to further tackle the current crisis of millennials



TABLE 3: Prevalence of toxic workplace culture with work-family conflict, burnout and negative mental health symptoms among millennials employees in the logistic regression model.

Types of toxic work culture	W-FC			F-WC			Burnout			MH symptoms		
	Exp (B)	LL, UL	Р	Exp (B)	S.E.	Р	Exp (B)	SE	р	Exp (B)	SE	р
Persistent attempts to belittle and undermine your work.	.651	.308, 1.378	.260	1.601	.843, 3.309	.150	.970	.640,1.560	.970	4.470*	2.273,8.788	.000
Persistent and unjustified criticism and monitoring of your work.	.655	.324,1.326	.240	1.137	.614,2.106	.684	.985	.628,1.547	.949	3.937*	2.056,7.540	.000
Persistent attempts to humiliate you in front of colleagues.	1.051	.494, 2.233	.898	1.183	.613,2.282	.616	.682	.418,1.132	.141	2.824*	1.567,5.091	.001
Intimidatory use of discipline or competence procedures.	1.038	.525,2.050	.915	1.333	.737,2.410	.342	.503	.312,.814	.005	1.590	.954,2.650	.075
Undermining your personal integrity.	.734	.376,1.429	.363	1.107	.617,1.984	.734	1.135	.734,1.755	.568	2.664*	1.531,4.634	.001
Destructive innuendo and sarcasm.	1.005	.503,2.008	.989	1.021	.554,1.879	.948	1.111	.704,1.753	.652	4.300*	2.210,8.365	.000
Verbal and non- verbal threats.	.839	.416,1.690	.622	1.154	.627,2.121	.646	1.440*	.260,1.723	.001	1.456	.871,2.433	.152
Making inappropriate jokes about you.	1.589	.713,3.543	.257	.854	.423,1.725	.660	.586	.341,1.008	.053	1.946*	1.078,3.513	.027
Persistent teasing.	1.452	.533,3.955	.466	.507	.202,1.276	.149	3.584*	1.651,7.783	.001	5.059*	2.333,10.970	.000
Physical violence.	5.008	.072,350.449	.457	.435	.009,22.092	.678	5.737	.121,272.151	.375	8.131	.194,340.810	.272
Violence to property	.261	.017,3.980	.334	.722	.071, 7.294	.782	1.424	.345,5.877	.625	1.494	.348,6.416	.589
Withholding necessary information from you.	.980	.519, 1.851	.951	.785	.445,1.386	.404	.760	.495,1.169	.760	1.771*	1.061,2.947	.028
Freezing out, ignoring, or excluding.	1.638	.813,3.300	.167	.512	.269,.975	.042	1.925*	1.185,3.129	.008	2.151*	1.255, 3.688	.005
Unreasonable refusal of applications for leave, training, or promotion.	.875	.352,.2.175	.775	.687	.302,1.566	.372	1.021	.561,1.859	.946	1.734	.927,3,244	.085



TABLE 3: Prevalence of toxic workplace culture with work-family conflict, burnout and negative mental health symptoms among millennials employees in the logistic regression model.

Types of toxic work culture	W-FC			F-WC			Burnout			MH symptoms		
Undue pressure to produce work	.967	.475,1.970	.927	.981	.529,1.819	.952	1.068	.654,1.743	.793	4.725*	2.261, 9.874	.000
Setting of impossible deadlines.	.843	.435,1.634	.614	1.345	.756,2.391	.313	1.060	.678,1.658	.797	2.985*	1.641,5.428	.000
Shifting of goal posts without telling you.	.590	.307,1.132	.113	1.572	.895,2.763	.116	1.216	.790,1.870	.374	2.272*	1.333,3.876	.003
Constant under- valuing of your efforts.	.661	.325,1.345	.254	1.369	.742, 2.527	.315	.937	.594,1.482	.782	4.009*	2.080,7.728	.000
Persistent attempts to demoralise you	.784	.356,1.728	.547	.861	.427,1.736	.676	1.318	.793, 2.198	.287	2.929*	1.615,5.311	.000
Removal of areas of responsibility without consultation.	.923	.416, 2.047	.844	1.418	.713,2.820	.319	1.855*	1.069, 3.216	.028	1.910*	1.070,3.411	.029

Notes. * is marked for significant result with p lesser than .05.Discussion

generation that is recurrently reported to face greater mental health difficulties (Ferri-Reed, 2013). Besides, it highlights the area of concern and validates other research that emphasised building a positive workplace culture and setting to let millennial workers prosper within the workplace setting (Badri et al., 2021; Chillakuri & Mogili, 2018).

Additionally, this study accrues evidence on the type of behaviour that may lead to an increased occurrence of burnout among millennials. Three behaviours are specifically identified which are associated with compound risk of emotional exhaustion among millennial workers which are verbal/non-verbal threats, persistent teasing, freezing out/ignoring and removal from responsibility without consultation. Millennials as a generation are well known for their enthusiasm and competitive spirit which are embedded strongly since they are young (Raines, 2002). Unlike the former generation, millennials are accustomed to seeing themselves as pressured and high achieving which leads them to occasionally misplace their self-value under lack of recognition (Hershatter & Epstein, 2010). The overwhelming desire to be acknowledged has led millennials to feel under lack of attention and acknowledgements, which explains why some refer to this particular cohort as the 'me' generation (Stein, 2013). As such, this hints at the detrimental aspect of a millennial worker when facing incidents related to the form of rejection, the humiliation of ignoring their attendance that may accumulate risk of emotional exhaustion or burnout incidents at work.



However, this paper suggests there is a lesser threat of toxic or bullying behaviour at work to increase risk of work-family conflict problem. This denotes that albeit the adversity of toxic or bullying behaviour to millennials wellbeing, it does not link or increase the commonness of conflict between work and life events. This finding further assures that imbalance or conflicting work and family demands among millennial employees are likely to underline by deprived workplace structure or lack of coordination between work and family aspects. In place of this finding, we argue that risk from working in a toxic or bullying environment is more perceptible to millennials mental health and burnout problems at work.

5. Implications and Recommendations

Understanding millennials' workers are imperative as this cohort will be anchoring and re-routing the working world in a few years. Knowing what drives and weaken this cohort can help the organisation to plan, revamp and improve the current nuance to better manage millennials in the work setting. Millennials are much more vulnerable when facing issues related to bullying or unpleasant experience or behaviour at work that could be due to their greater reliance on emotion-based experience to flourish both in general and work setting. Organisations, therefore, should pay more attention to develop more healthy work environment and culture for millennials to thrive. A strong focus should also be given to find intervention or resolution for improving work landscape and prevents any form of behaviour or counterproductive culture that can inflict indirect or direct harm to this generation. This is because the psychological trauma employee may develop can grow into expensive long-terms implication for the organisation such as productivity, reduced manpower and increased cost due to potential repercussions such as turnover intention, absenteeism, or ill-health problems.

6. Limitations

One of the limitations of this study is the small sample size with only 133 millennials managed to be recruited although the number is deemed enough for this research. Future research is therefore suggested to replicate this study using a bigger sample or within another population context to improve accuracy and generalisation. Secondly, this study employs only millennial workers as the study population. As such, suggestions and findings from this paper are only limited to the said cohort and could be less accurate to represent the newer generation of Gen-Z or older cohort of Boomers and Gen-X.



7. Conclusion

Managing millennials is important as this cohort will soon transcend to be the biggest population in workforce and leads newer generation. Knowing which behaviours affect their wellbeing at work is crucial for organisation to be strategic in promoting millennials welfare and retain their talent.

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