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Generations and the Future of Work: case study exploration of Business Stakeholder perspectives on Zillennials in the Northern Irish workplace

Generations
and the Future
of Work

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Abstract

Purpose – This research aims to better understand the Zillennial Generation within the workplace, specifically using the perspectives of Business Stakeholders within the context of Northern Ireland. Understanding the perceptions of Zillennials in the workplace is important due to their growing numbers and subsequent impact on the future of work.

Design/Methodology/Approach – A case study approach is used to gain a deeper understanding of stakeholder opinions and experiences of Zillennials. The authors draw on extant research and use semi-structured interviews to explore the experiences and views of stakeholders within three case firms employing Zillennials.

Findings – The study concludes that discrepancies can be seen between Zillennial performance and behaviour, compared with Business Stakeholder workplace expectations. Findings suggest that according to Business Stakeholders observations, Zillennials display some, but not all, attributes of Generation Z and Millennials. Business Stakeholders observations also reveal that Zillennials demonstrate some, but not all, entrepreneurial behaviours and competencies.

Originality/Value – While many studies focus on both Generation Z and Millennials, research focused on unique cusp generations is limited. No research has been conducted that investigates the perception of Zillennials within the context of Northern Ireland.

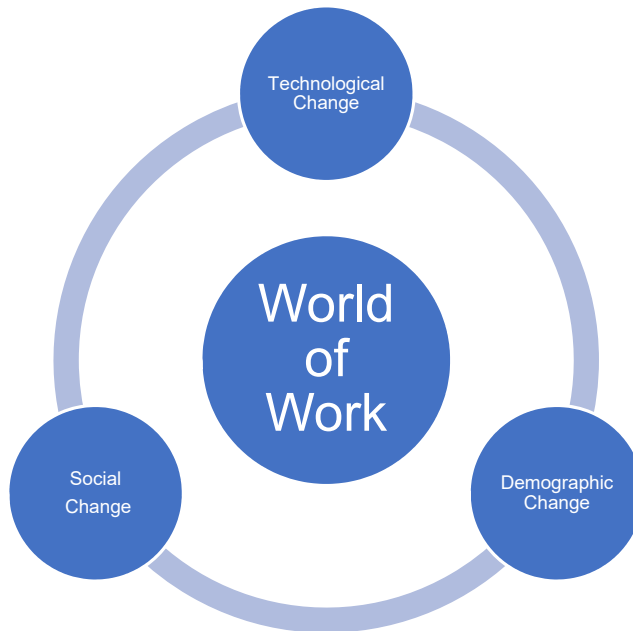
Keywords Zillennials, Generation Z, Millennials, Entrepreneurial Potential, Business Perspectives, Future of Work, Case Study

Paper type Case study

Introduction

Throughout history where we work, when we work and the types of roles that we work in have changed. The labour market is constantly evolving as a result of demographic, social and technological changes (Allen, 2015; Hawksworth *et al.*, 2015; McGowan, 2020; Parry, 2017; Ransome, 2019). It is these changes that have created the multifaceted employment landscape evident today (Figure 1).





Source(s): Author's own work

Figure 1.
The Changing World
of Work

Technological and Social Change

Traditional types of employment such as full-time, part-time, fixed-term or casual workers still exist, but less traditional types have developed such as freelancer, contractor and gig worker (OECD, 2019). Many factors contributed to the creation of these new modes of working, primarily improved flexibility for both employer and employee (Hyman and Summers, 2004) along with a drive for collaboration and entrepreneurial efforts (Aroles *et al.*, 2019, p. 285). Technological advances have enabled development of new digital business models (Kraus *et al.*, 2019), and remote working from anywhere in the world (Mehandru, 2019). It is common for workers to have more than one job or a “side hustle”, with 33% of the United States (US) workforce in the gig economy, while independent contractors are the fastest growing employment style in the European Union (EU) (Westfall, 2019). It has been said that these changes that have occurred in the workplace alongside flexible modes of working are contributing changes in “individuals” perceptions of paid careers’ (Vrontis *et al.*, 2022, p. 2).

Demographic Change

Demographic changes that have occurred over time, have challenged employers, managers and business owners with a workplace consisting of an extremely diverse group of workers whose work attitudes, practices and expectations vary widely (Kupperschmidt, 2000; Higginbottom, 2016; Kostanek and Khoreva, 2018). These diverse groups are often referred to as “generations”. This generational diversity can impact upon organisation productivity, job satisfaction, operational performance and strategic success (Lancaster and Stillman, 2009; Macky *et al.*, 2008; McCrindle, 2018; Rood, 2011; Scholz and Rennig, 2019). Business Stakeholders such as managers, employers and business owners, must navigate these changes to cultivate business success. This study will focus on demographic change shaping the business landscape.

Motivations and Research Gap

There are currently five commonly known generations in the workforce today; consisting of Traditionalists, Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials, and Generation Z (Wiedmer, 2015). There is however, no consensus on specific generational date ranges (Berkup, 2014; Zemke *et al.*, 2000). Taylor (2018) explains that “exact years distinguishing generations were unclear because generations fade into one another without a distinct starting and stopping point. This overlap creates a cusp generation” (p. 136). Zillennials, for example, are the oldest members of Generation Z and the youngest Millennials (Figure 2). This research will use chronological date ranges for generations, as outlined in Figure 2, similar to Berkup (2014).

While Northern Ireland (NI) is in close proximity to both mainland United Kingdom (UK) and EU nations such as the Republic of Ireland (RoI) it has a unique business landscape, as well as a unique cultural and socio-historical environment creating distinctive generational cohorts. Therefore, it cannot be assumed that generation analysis conducted in the UK is directly applicable to the countries within. With little research on generations in the NI context, as well as wider research indicating potential generational tensions and differing practices, attitudes and values in the workplace, the need to better understand younger generations and their impact on the local business landscape is evident.

Further to the complexities of geography, it becomes harder to understand Generation Z when studied as a whole. The oldest members of Generation Z do not feel they can identify with Generation Z fully, with many stating they also feel an affinity to Millennials (Warna, 2019). These individuals can be defined as a Cusp Generation (Figure 2). As detailed in this paper, limited research focuses on distinct generational cohorts and few have investigated stakeholder perceptions of Cusp Generations such as Zillennials. It is crucial to understand this new Cusp Generation because, when each generation enters the world of work, they have a significant impact, as their unique characteristics become more apparent.

Research Objectives and Research Questions

This research investigates Business Stakeholder perceptions of Zillennials to provide a better understanding of Zillennials and potential implications for the future of work. Specifically, this paper seeks to explore how the world of work perceive Zillennials and the tensions between the world of work and Zillennials using Business Stakeholder perspectives.

Literature Review

Zillennial’s grew up in a distinct cultural environment, in the mid-2000s with dial-up Internet and did not have a mobile phone until their late teens; growing up in the transition to the digital age (Table 1). Cusp generations are a unique cohort, that are said to act as a “generational bridge” (Smit, 2017) as they relate to both parent generations. Meaning Zillennials could potentially display traits of both Millennials and Generation Z. Although the extent to which they display traits of both Millennials and Generation Z is currently unknown.



Key:

- Generation
- Cusp Generation/Bridge Generation

Source(s): Author’s own work, Adapted from Berkup (2014)

Figure 2.
Chronological
Generation
Classification

	Millennial	Generation Z
Birth Year	1980–1994	1995–2005
Defining Life Events	9/11 and the Iraq War (Dimock, 2019)	Global Warming, Covid-19 (Jankowski, 2020)
Defining Pop Culture	Spice Girls (McCrindle, 2018)	One Direction (McCrindle, 2018)
Communication Methods	SMS, Instant Messaging (Dukut, 2018)	Emojis, Social Media Platforms (Dukut, 2018)
Defining Technologies	Mobile Phones with text capability, CV and DVD, Dial-up Internet, Laptop (Dukut, 2018)	Smart Phones, Music/Media streaming services (Dimock, 2019), iPad, Virtual Reality (VR)
Digital Aptitude	Digital Pioneers (Grodzki <i>et al.</i> , 2018)	Digital Natives (Grodzki <i>et al.</i> , 2018)
Source(s): Author's own work		

Table 1.
Millennial and
Generation Z –
Defining Attributes

Socio-historical factors in the creation of Generations

Exposure to the same socio-historical environmental factors are said to contribute to the development of generations as they develop in their formative years (Mannheim, 1952; Strauss and Howe, 1991). The socio-historical environments of each country within the UK are unique and therefore create distinct generational cohorts. In regard to NI specifically, as part of the UK but also on the Island of Ireland, NI has a unique cultural environment and history. In accordance with the works of (Mannheim, 1952) and (Strauss and Howe, 1991) these are contributing factors in the development of generations. This unique environment creates a unique generation with its own preferences and attitudes. As generations enter the business landscape it is inevitable that they will have an impact on the organisations in which they work.

Generations and the Workplace

Generational and age focused research places emphasis on differences between generations, their needs and desires, as separate cohorts and their influences on one another within the landscape of work (Mihalcea *et al.*, 2012; Berkup, 2014; Kenny and Rossiter, 2018; Zhang and Acs, 2018). Considerable differences are emerging in relation to working expectations, attitudes and personal values of each generation (Crumpacker and Crumpacker, 2007; Dries *et al.*, 2008). It is these differences in the multi-generational workforce that create tension between workers (Macky *et al.*, 2008; Sullivan *et al.*, 2009), thus creating a challenging working environment for Business Stakeholders to manage.

Generation Z consists of those born since 1995, the oldest being 28 years old, they are now beginning to enter the workforce (Berkup, 2014). They are the first generation to grow up surrounded by technology (Premack, 2018; Singh and Dangmei, 2016; Wiedmer, 2015), giving rise to nicknames such as “Children of the internet” and “Digital Natives” (Berkup, 2014; Singh and Dangmei, 2016). Generation Z would also be expected to be comfortable with remote working, but a recent US study finds one-third of this group found remote working during Covid-19 difficult, explaining it affected work-life balance (Gurchiek, 2020). Research indicates they are an anxious cohort (Bencsik *et al.*, 2016; Kronos Incorporated, 2019). This anxiety can be seen in the workplace when separated from their phones, with fear of missing out causing stress, impacting their ability to complete workplace tasks (Kick *et al.*, 2015).

Entrepreneurial Potential

Generation Z are frequently cited as having a “strong entrepreneurial spirit” (Gibbons, 2018), although the extent to which they are entrepreneurial remains underexplored. Research suggests

they display a greater degree of entrepreneurial intention than previous generations (Johnson, 2015). It is even suggested that they are the most entrepreneurial generation so far (Lufkin, 2018; Schawbel, 2014). A recent study states that 54% of Generation Z want to start their own business (Schroeder, 2020). However, contradictory evidence suggests they are more risk averse (Weller, 2017), which is inconsistent with how the entrepreneurial individual is understood in terms of behavioural traits and competencies (Bandura, 1977; Knight, 1921; McClelland, 1961; Palich and Bagby, 1995; Timmons, 1978). Although extant research has provided some indication of traits and competencies that Generation Z may display, as outlined in Table 2, it would seem that “most of the traits that will define this generation have yet to emerge” (Wiedmer, 2015, p. 55).

Research focusing on Generation Z in the UK is limited with most research focusing on the US and mainland Europe (Bresman and Rao, 2017a; Deloitte, 2019; Kronos Incorporated, 2019; Scholz and Rennig, 2019). Caution is urged as Generation Z’s traits and preferences can vary between countries (Bresman and Rao, 2017a; Scholz and Rennig, 2019). These variations mean that Business Stakeholders are unable to predict how this new generation will impact, or be impacted by, local business landscapes. Regional differences exist, therefore it is difficult to gain and utilise any understanding of this group on a larger scale and therefore a regional perspective is required to provide an accurate representation of generational cohorts. No research has been conducted that investigates the perception of Generation Z in NI.

Business Stakeholder Perspectives on Generation Z and Millennials

Extant research has focused on differences between generations (Haynes, 2011; Gursoy *et al.*, 2008), as well as workplace conflicts and tensions between generations (DiRomualdo, 2006; Ratan, 1993). Williams (2019) indicates that Millennials in the workforce are challenging due to “recruitment, retention and training” (p. 384) potentially creating a mismatch with business expectations. Indeed, Hurrell *et al.* (2017) suggest the tensions and lack of trust between employers and Millennials with disapproval from employers regarding social media use in, and outside, the workplace. Furthermore, Carver and Candela (2008) suggest Millennials are intolerant of “co-workers and managers who refuse to master and effectively use cutting edge technology” (p. 989), with members of Generation Z remarking that Baby Boomers don’t understand technology and don’t like change (Lorenz, 2019). Stankiewicz-Mróz (2020) concludes that further considerable differences can be seen between employer perceptions and Generation Z expectations of work. Bresman and Rao (2017b) have also highlighted that there is a “gap in expectations between Gen X managers and Gen Z employees” (p. 29).

	Generation Z	Sources
Traits	Not cyber safe	Beckingham (2019)
	Entrepreneurial	Gibbons (2018), Johnson (2015)
	Risk averse	Weller (2017)
	Anxious, particularly stressed by social media and the news	Bencsik <i>et al.</i> (2016), Kronos Incorporated (2019), Portell (2019)
	Make self-care and healthier lifestyle choices priority, exercising regularly, practicing mindfulness	Iqbal (2018), Walker (2017)
	Concern themselves with a variety of social, political issues and environmental issues	Premack (2018)
	Want meaningful work for a cause close to their hearts	Nagumo (2019)
Competencies	Tech savvy	Nintex (2019), Shatto and Erwin (2016)
	Take in information fast	Williams (2015)

Source(s): Author’s own work

Table 2.
Generation Z – Traits
and Competencies

Key trends have emerged from extant research with respect to attitudes towards Generation Z. For example, ACAS (2016) concludes there are concerns about Generation Z entering the workforce because they are perceived as needing instant gratification, resist authority, lack strong communication skills and expect quick promotion. Furthermore, previous generations, including employers, express similar concerns with suggestions that Generation Z are lazy, narcissistic, unaware and selfish (Higginbottom, 2016; Micoleta, 2012; Whyte-Smith *et al.*, 2017).

Taylor's (2018) research focusing on Xennials, generational cusp between Generation X and Millennials (Figure 2) suggests that cusp generations are under researched, specifically in relation to their place in the workforce. Zillennials are the oldest members of Generation Z and the youngest Millennials, born between 1993 and 1997. Scholz and Rennig (2019) state that there is a "lack of research in relation to the characteristics of the younger generation in the UK" context (p. 104). Therefore, there is an important need for the exploration of perceptions and observations of younger generations, as outlined in this paper.

Research Approach

The aim of this research is to provide Business Stakeholder perspectives, experiences and opinions of Zillennials within the workplace, specifically within the context of the NI business community, therefore a qualitative methodology was deemed most appropriate. Quantitative approaches "quantify and analyse variables" (Apuke, 2017, p. 40), and are considered unsuitable as they would provide more breadth instead of critical depth. Qualitative methods are most suited to gain a deeper understanding of the complexities of Zillennials (Creswell *et al.*, 2003). Specifically, the approach allows learning from the Business Stakeholder's lived experiences and their direct observations of Zillennials (Neubauer *et al.*, 2019).

A case study approach has been adopted. Case studies provide an opportunity and allow researchers to gain "deeper and richer insights into emergent phenomena" (Vidgen *et al.*, 2017, p. 631). After initial communication, a back and forth dialogue evolved via email, with researchers using a demographic questionnaire. Following this, the researchers used semi-structured interviews to assist with data collection for the case studies. They provide the ability to delve deeply into the topic while also providing a degree of flexibility that enables the researchers to explore emerging areas of interest as they arrive or change questioning order accordingly (Dearnley, 2005; Kallio *et al.*, 2016). Semi-structured interviews are commonly used in case study research as this enables "the researcher to attain rich, personalized information" (Hancock and Algozzine, 2017, p. 46). Semi-structured interviews have also been used in generational studies, for example, Lamasan and Oducado (2019) and Pantaleo and Dzidic (2021). Informed by the literature and recent world events, five topic areas were used to guide the semi-structured questioning (Table 3). The iterative nature of the process enabled researchers to reflect on the data, before going back to respondents, when required, to probe further during interviews (Bowden and Galindo-Gonzalez, 2015).

Research was conducted during the 2020 Covid-19 lockdown, meaning face-to-face contact was not possible. Online communication enables researchers to access participants who would otherwise be hard to reach (King, O'Rourke and DeLongis, 2014; Lijadi and van Schalkwyk, 2015) and is a suitable replacement for face-to-face interviews (Deakin and Wakefield, 2013). Therefore, data collection was conducted online via Zoom.

Participants were selected using convenience sampling (Jager *et al.*, 2017). Covid-19 caused business disruption and a change in business priorities. Utilising colleagues who had built professional relationships with Business Stakeholders provided quicker access, providing a quick route to communication and additional credibility, as opposed to contacting them cold. This study includes three semi-structured interviews, one for each of the Business Stakeholder case companies (Table 4). This number of participants was deemed appropriate due to the exploratory nature of the study, where depth, not breadth, was the critical factor. Previous research studies

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Topic	Topic Reasoning
Characteristics/First Impressions	Descriptions, characteristics and first impressions of Zillennials, have these changed over time
Aspirations/Control	Focuses on their workplace attitude, their role and what they look for in employment
Workplace Interaction/Behaviour	Focuses on interaction with others, their behaviours and any challenges the business stakeholders face with this group
Entrepreneurial Potential/Intention	Explores areas of entrepreneurial traits and characterises such as risk-taking propensity, impact on the workplace and Zillennial responses to workplace situations
Covid-19/Pandemic	Discussing the effect of the pandemic, home working or work pattern changes on Zillennials in their workplace

Source(s): Author's own work

Table 3.
Interview Topic Areas

	P1	P2	P3
Gender	Male	Male	Female
Generation	Generation X	Baby Boomer	Generation X
Job Title	CEO/Founder	Director/Founder	Senior Director (HR)
Education Level	GCSE	BTECH, HNC, HND or Technical Qualification	Master's Degree
Industry	Manufacturing	Digital Marketing	IT
Time in Company	7+ Years	7+ Years	7+ Years
Number of Employees	10–49	10–49	250+
Employment Type(s) Offered	Part-time, Full-time	Full-time	Part-time, Full-time
	Contractor/Sub-Contractor	Intern/Placement	Contractor/ Sub-Contractor

Source(s): Author's own work

Table 4.
Business Stakeholder Profiles

exploring three case studies or less have been adopted for similar business focused research (Vidgen *et al.*, 2017; Ngai *et al.*, 2018). Business Stakeholders were selected based on specific inclusion criteria namely NI based, employed Zillennials and were “expert witnesses” with direct experience of Zillennials. No further participants were required as stability of opinion emerged.

The semi-structured interviews were recorded and then analysed using Thematic Content Analysis (Alhojailan, 2012). Thematic Analysis has been conducted using the six phase process by Braun and Clarke (2020) (Table 5). While this research applies the Braun and Clarke (2020) method of thematic analysis, it is also inductive in nature and develops theory from the data so can also be considered in part inspired by the works of Gioia *et al.* (2013).

Phase	Action
Phase 1	Data familiarisation and writing familiarisation notes
Phase 2	Systematic data coding
Phase 3	Generating initial themes from coded and collated data
Phase 4	Developing and reviewing themes
Phase 5	Refining, defining, and naming themes
Phase 6	Writing the report

Source(s): Braun and Clarke (2020)

Table 5.
Six Phase Process

Interview data was coded using NVivo software (Phase 2), Phase 3 involved the generation of initial themes from the coded data, an example of generating the initial theme “peer-to-peer learning” can be found in Table 6. In phase 4 themes are developed and reviewed, similar themes can be combined (Table 7). Themes can then be refined, defined and named in Phase 5 (Table 5). Six themes have been conceptualised from the data analysed (Figure 3). After Phase 5 was complete, common and uncommon participant ideas were identified.

Research Findings

Business Stakeholder Interviews

Each Business Stakeholder provided demographic details as outlined in Table 4. Two fall within the age range of Generation X and one within the Baby Boomer Generation (Table 4). It is their direct contact with Zillennials in their businesses that qualifies them as “expert witnesses” and therefore are qualified to provide details of their experiences, opinions and observation of Zillennials.

There are six themes; Learning, Expectations, Adaptation, Technology, Balance and Fresh Thinking. Although separate themes, they are interconnected (Figure 3). These six themes also connect the three research areas of focus in this paper; Workplace, Generations and Entrepreneurship.

Learning

The topic of learning was considered important by all Business Stakeholders, particularly in respect to peer-to-peer learning from employee to employee within the company. Essentially tapping into the current expertise within a business and learning new skills from colleagues (Palmer and Blake, 2018). It is recognised that Zillennials learn from older Generations within the workplace and vice versa. P2 highlighted the “*need to recognise that, a multi-generational workplace is no bad thing as everybody learns from each other*”. Similarly, P1 noted there “*is a lot of peer-to-peer learning*” within the organisation from employees of different generations. While P3 did not specify specific age ranges, noting that employees who join the company are “*allocated a buddy and the quality of the buddy tends to impact the quality of the employee*” as they “*partner really closely and they’ll come to get to grips with the company culture*”. Furthermore, when asked to describe Zillennials in three words, P1 and P2 highlighted learning as key to this group with “*passion for learning*” and “*wanting to learn*” provided as key descriptors.

This theme of learning continued as Business Stakeholders stressed training and development as key workplace drivers for Zillennials. P3 stated that “*what they want is, lots of training, lots of personal development, lots of opportunities for them to grow and actually grow that career*”, similarly P2 mentioned that “*they mean business, they want to learn and they want to move on quickly*”. While P1 also noted “*wanting to learn*” as a key descriptor for this group, it was also stated that that this need for learning was a “*challenge*” for the business as they “*don’t have a set training pattern that we would put a new employee through. It’s basically this is what’s expected, and we’ll learn as we go along . . . and I think one of the challenges for us is that making sure that the people pick that up and basically come along the speed we need them to*”.

Expectations

The idea that Zillennials have a strong need for achievement was a common theme. Vroom (1964) defines motivation such as this as an individual making choices based on how successfully they perceive the results of their actions will match with their desired outcome. According to McClelland’s (1961, 2005) Achievement Motivation Theory, it is the need for achievement coupled with desire for power – an issue uncovered in this study. The Zillennial

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Initial theme: Peer-to-peer learning Code	Sample Quotes
Knowledge Base vs Skills Peer-to-Peer learning Learning From Each Other	<p>So, ya know . . . knowledge base tends to be from an older generation down but actual skills and understanding of new and innovation stuff tends to be the other way around</p> <p>Everyone pretty much gets on and integrates pretty well and they learn off each other . . . ya know . . . there is a lot of peer to peer learning that goes on with regards to “if you don’t know what you’re doing or you don’t understand come and sit beside me and we’ll go through it” and learn that way</p> <p>It’s a bit of both to be honest with ya . . . it really is a bit of both. Ya know because people of my generation . . . ya know a lot of the new stuff that’s happening with artificial intelligence and IoT and innovation and stuff . . . it’s not really in our wheel-house. Em, whereas twenty-three to twenty-seven year olds have grown up with that and they’ve come through school and come through university with that, so there is a lot of both ways. There is things that I say I think we should be doing on social media or our website or our Internet and they can turn round and say “well actually I don’t think that’s a good idea at all . . . here’s why and here’s what I think we should be doin”</p> <p>Em . . . I think probably the learning on the job, we don’t have em a set training pattern that we would put a new employee through. It’s basically this is what’s expected and we’ll learn as we go along. Em . . . and I think one of the challenges for us is that making sure that the people pick that up and basically come along the speed we need them to do that at . . . I think they fit extremely well to what we are trying to do . . . you know a lot of the stuff we bring out as a company now fits their agenda and fits what looks good within that generation</p> <p>Anybody that joins the organisation is allocated a buddy and em and the quality of the buddy tends to impact the quality of the employee [<i>small laugh</i>] . . . ya know they’ll partner really closely and they’ll come to get to grips with the company culture pretty quickly</p> <p>You know we need to be thinking about you know how we change our management style, to adapt to those people but for good managers that just comes naturally. But they keep us if you like eh they keep us sharp I suppose. Rather than us sort of asking, they are asking us . . . can we do this can we do that? We need to recognise that ah, you know a multi-generational workplace is no bad thing as everybody learns from each other</p> <p>They are pretty much ready to muck in . . . ya know because the way we break the business down everyone has got specific role that they carry out but those roles also impact other people’s roles as well em so you know . . . so they have to do what it is they do well, but then they also need to integrate that with other people too . . . so you know we’ve got . . . our company’s got people employed from the age of eighteen up to fifty and within that everyone pretty much gets on</p> <p>So, generally speaking we . . . we have very few issues you know between staff, and you know they all get on great. Sometimes you know there’s . . . you know I . . . they don’t call me [Participant Surname], the do call me [Participants First Name]. There would be a little bit of deference there, but you know everybody from the MD of the business down, they get on with as if they were an ordinary colleague. If I was to try to articulate that a bit better, em, I don’t think they see rank, eh as something to be . . . or management as something to be wary of or they just see managers as other people</p>
Working well with others of different generations	

Source(s): Author’s own work

Table 6.
Phase 3 - Generation of Initial Themes

Theme: Learning Initial Themes	Codes
Peer-to-peer learning	Knowledge Base vs Skills Peer-to-Peer learning Learning From Each Other Working well with others of variety of ages
Desire Training and Development	Training, personal development and opportunities drives them so they can fast track their career Training is more in-depth for this group Training and development is important to them so 'we' need to adapt to managing them Training and Development and work environment is important to them Personal Development important to them Passion for learning and they also want a nice work environment Professional development and personal growth is important to this group Work Environment must have learning and career development Work environment, career progression and learning and development are important They strive to learn They like and enjoy communication about their work as the want to progress Training and development is very important to them
Learning through experiences and from others is important	Experiences are important to their development and business acumen and understanding what work is about Learning on the job-challenging for employer as they have to come up to speed Learning from Parents or Family Business Zillennials who have business experiences from parents have better understanding of business that others
Lack real world experience	Lack of real work experience or workplace preparedness They come out of university with limited employability Head knowledge but no common sense Many have lack of business acumen or how world works The Zillennials with limited exposure to real work (only part-time jobs) have limited business awareness and don't know how the world works Smart but no common sense They are smart academically but have no common sense or worldly knowledge Zillennials don't know how world works They need to know how world works They have an unrealistic view of the world
Managing and Coaching Zillennials	Managing their expectations vs reality so they have realistic expectations of working life Feedback is not always taken well Need to be clear on expectations when managing Orgs need to adapt to manage them proactively. They already are doing this somewhat Org thinks they are proactive in their management of this group Org assesses them to ensure personality fit Orgs role is to reset expectations-coach and feedback Trying to educate them on understanding what life is about-business acumen She sees the role of the org to reset this group's expectations using coaching and feedback Role of org is to coach and give feedback but some Zillennials will leave as their expectations won't change Not a lot of training needed for Zillennials just systems, health and safety, etc The company has set procedures and set goals. They just go more in-depth with Zillennial training Encouraging them to speak up Managed using formal and informal checking regularly

Table 7.
Phase 4 - Developing and Reviewing Themes

Source(s): Author's own work



Source(s): Author's own work

Figure 3.
Business Stakeholder
Perspectives Themes

desire to learn and develop themselves was coupled at times with their want to earn more money and move to senior positions swiftly, as highlighted by all participants. Unanimously participants indicated that Zillennials are interested in moving up the corporate ladder, expecting to attain leadership or senior positions fast; P1 noted that *“the journey to seniority is not understood”* by these Zillennials. Whilst P3 and P2 also show similar opinions, indicating that Zillennials will stay a couple of years to get experience and then move onto another company. All participants disapproved of the Zillennial's unrealistic expectations and desire to move their career at speed. Indicating that Zillennial's *“don't want to serve their time”* (P3), *“they have more of an opinion of their abilities than maybe is reality”* (P2), with one participant stressing that Zillennials have not *“grasped the overall concept maybe of how business works ... of how maybe the world works”* (P1).

Zillennials have shown a high degree of self-efficacy which maybe isn't nearly as commensurate with their actual ability, as unanimously agreed by all participants. Bandura (2010, 1977) explains self-efficacy as the belief that individuals have the power to affect the events that have an influence on their lives. In the Business Stakeholder's opinion, Zillennials have a technical skillset which they bring to the organisation. However, many lack business awareness and management skills that are vital, not only to the Business Stakeholder's companies, but also for Zillennials themselves to fulfil personal desires of successful career progression. This theme of Zillennial expectations then extended to what they expect from roles and the workplace itself - *“it's about status, it's about career and it's about the money and the benefits package”* (P3).

P2 and P3 highlighted their company's benefits package as being particularly important to Zillennials, while P1 agrees to some extent, it is suggested that money plays more of a role for Zillennials as a driving factor. P2 noted a desire amongst their Zillennial employees for a flexible and relaxed environment; a workplace that mimics their social sphere. P3 believed that they have unrealistic expectations with regards to additional company benefits, requesting, for example; "a beer fridge" while in the office and for their "Spotify" and "Netflix" accounts to be paid during home working. P3 expressed shock and frustration; believing that these expectations are unrealistic and declaring a necessity for Zillennials to become more realistic "otherwise they're gonna go through their working life feeling disappointed and feeling that organisations have under delivered".

Adaptation

The themes of Adaptation and Expectations are intrinsically linked. While the Business Stakeholders noted that they are aware Zillennials have specific ideals with regards to work and the workplace, the degree to which they are willing to flex to meet Zillennial expectations and subsequent requests varies. The idea of adapting diverges on who needs to adapt - Zillennials or employer. Some Business Stakeholders believe that companies need to adapt to how Zillennials are managed. P2, for example, states that companies in general "need to adapt in relation to how we manage them more proactively . . . we need to be thinking about, you know how we change our management style, to adapt to those people". They note that their company has already "changed the work environment to facilitate more collaborate working and breakout areas", while describing how Zillennials in their organisation prefer a more relaxed flexible environment. Similarly, describing an employee appraisal P1 indicates that they adopt a give and take approach to Zillennials, where communication plays a key role in establishing what each party wants. P1 stated "we will try and cater a job to suit someone's aspirations". However, these perspectives differ from those of P3 who stated that Zillennials "may need to change, adapt . . . fit in to the company culture and not expect the company to change to meet them". This Business Stakeholder appears to believe that the role of the company is to coach them to help reset their unrealistic expectations.

Technology

Existing, albeit, limited understanding suggests both Generation Z and Millennials display a proficiency with technology. It is therefore unsurprising that all Business Stakeholders unanimously agreed that technology was an area that Zillennials excel in. These technical skills are considered beneficial for the companies. Business Stakeholders highlighted technological proficiency as a key Zillennial strength where their innovative skills and knowledge of technologies, which other members of staff may potentially not possess, are valuable. Business Stakeholders believe that this knowledge is partly due to schooling and partly the quantity and availability of technology this group were exposed to growing up. It has been suggested that they are able to understand technology to a greater degree compared to older generations, as with generations before where technology is "just not natural to them [older generations]" (P2) and "not really in our [older generations] wheel-house" (P1). What emerges from this research is that Zillennial's deep-rooted technical skills are of benefit to these companies, as limited training on the use of technology and the awareness of emerging technologies is required, filling in knowledge gaps that other generations may not possess, while challenging established thinking within the organisation. A typical comment from P1 was "I say I think we should be doing on social media or our website or our Internet and they can turn round and say "well actually I don't think that's a good idea at all . . . here's why and here's what I think we should be doing . . ." Knowledge base tends to be from an older generation down but actual skills and understanding of new and innovation stuff tends to be the other way around".

It was also noted, however, by two of the three Business Stakeholders that Zillennial comfort with technology can also have negative consequences within the workplace. Frequent use of personal devices has been said to create distractions as the use of phone or mobile devices can inhibit their ability to focus on training sessions or daily tasks. For example, P3 states that they have been contacted by *“training partners saying, “ok we’ve got a problem here, this person is constantly on instant messenger” or whatever it might be”*.

Balance

Through this research, the Zillennial desire for status, money, and learning has been identified. Their wish to focus on, and their ability to implement, a work-life balance has also been emphasised by all Business Stakeholders. It has been mentioned in a mostly positive light, as P2 states that Zillennials have a *“much better balance in them, as work life balance”*. Likewise, P3 indicates that they *“don’t think that they are particularly interested in working long hours . . . they are focused in terms of trying to find the right balance for work and home”*. P1 has also alluded to the Zillennial desire for work-life balance, although does not see this in such a positive way as the other Business Stakeholders. P1 views Zillennials as living for the moment and not understanding that if you work hard this will enable you to also live well. The theme of Balance can be linked to the theme of Expectations, as the Business Stakeholders quite clearly describe that Zillennials are focused on, and expect, a balanced work-life. This balance is something that Zillennials inherently expect. This is demonstrated by the Business Stakeholders as P2 states that Zillennials have a *“much better balance in them, as work life balance. Whereas my generation was very focused on clocking the hours”*. Similarly, P3 indicates that *“I don’t think that they are particularly interested in working long hours and being online at ten o’clock at night . . . they are focused in terms of trying to find the right balance for work and home”*.

Fresh thinking

When discussing Zillennial strengths all Business Stakeholders used the term *“fresh”* or *“freshness”*. Fresh thinking was highlighted as Zillennials are said to provide a *“new thinking”* within the company. Two of the three Business Stakeholders compared this freshness with older generations within the company. P1 stated that Zillennials believe *“there’s no limitations to where we could go, there’s no limitations to what we can do. That if you look to someone in their fifties you wouldn’t see”*. While, P2 highlighted that it is this freshness that *“keeps us challenged”*. The theme of Fresh Thinking fits with the Technology theme, as it has been said that it is *“new thinking, it’s a freshness . . . there’s a familiarity with a technology”* (P3).

This concept of freshness or fresh thinking could be considered a new way of thinking, the development of new visions, concepts or innovative ideas which is reminiscent of “entrepreneurial attributes”. This is an interesting concept as parent generations, Generation Z and Millennials, are seen as having a high degree of entrepreneurial potential. Business Stakeholders within this study unanimously conclude that Zillennial employees display this “freshness”, raising a further question as to whether Zillennials are entrepreneurial. The key issue is to what degree do they display entrepreneurial traits and competencies and what impact will this have on the future of work?

Discussion and contribution to knowledge

Limited research has provided understanding of both Generation Z and Millennials, specifically how they are perceived and their subsequent impact on the world of work. However, there is extremely limited research conducted on generational cusps with few studies focusing on the cusp known as Zillennials. Existing knowledge does not draw

conclusions on how Zillennials are perceived by key stakeholders, specifically Business Stakeholders, who will be hiring, working with and managing these individuals. This research seeks to address this knowledge gap specifically in the context of NI, with unique characteristics, while also comparable to other UK regions in terms of opportunities and challenges. This research seeks to enhance understanding specifically regarding the workplace, generations and entrepreneurial knowledge.

Workplace

Building upon existing knowledge on generational expectations within the workplace, this research concludes that Business Stakeholder expectations differ from those of Zillennials, so much so that Business Stakeholders suggest that Zillennial career expectations need to be managed. Business Stakeholders expressed how this cohort provide technological skills that the company needs, a fresh thinking that was perceived as important and a passion for learning. On the other hand, disapproval has been shown in relation to Zillennial employee's expectations which are considered to be too high and therefore unrealistic including the desire for status, money and benefits coupled with flexible working and work-life balance, contributing to generational workplace literature. Participating Business Stakeholders viewed Zillennials as wanting the best of both worlds, something that the Business Stakeholders believe may not be attainable at the speed at which the Zillennials expect. This idea of the Zillennial's desire for work life balance is a unanimous conclusion considered to present both positive and negative implications.

This research has provided new understanding of Zillennials with clearer perceptions regarding this cohort, allowing the identification of possible areas of tension that could arise between Business Stakeholders and Zillennials within the workplace. The Business Stakeholder views on Zillennial attitudes towards company benefits, work-life balance and need for achievement at speed are misaligned with Zillennial expectations of work. Misalignment of expectations could cause tensions and resentment in the workplace if left unresolved. Although the ideas of balance and flexibility have been previously discussed with regard to both Generation Z and Millennials ([Ozkan and Solmaz, 2015](#); [Bencsik et al., 2016](#)), this is the first time an understanding of these ideas have been provided in a Zillennial context. There are differing Business Stakeholder opinions on how to meet the challenges they perceive Zillennials bring. While P1 and P2 took the approach that the business should adapt management styles and work environments to cater for this cohort, P3 was of the view that unrealistic expectations should be reset by the company and not catered for, similar to work by [Bresman and Rao \(2017b\)](#) which indicates that Generation Z have high expectation of work, such as; work must be meaningful, providing opportunities for learning and offer a substantial salary with flexibility. Although all three Business Stakeholders indicated that they believe Zillennials have unrealistically high expectations only one of the three (P3) stated that the company should not have to adapt. Interestingly, P3 works in a large business in a HR capacity, while P1 and P2 are founders of small businesses ([Table 4](#)).

This research provides insights that suggests a clear divergence in Business Stakeholder experiences, expectations and opinions of Zillennials. The study highlights perceived high expectations that Zillennials have regarding work and their career ambitions; all Business Stakeholders concluded a Zillennial desire to move up the ranks fast and earn more money quickly. This is coupled with the Business Stakeholder's opinion that Zillennials have a higher belief in their ability to undertake a leadership or management position than maybe is reality. Conclusions were drawn that Zillennials have a sense of entitlement and do not want to put the time in to gain the knowledge that first-hand experience brings. This study provides a deeper understanding of the perception of Zillennials, which allows comparisons of this unique cohort with their parent generations and how they themselves are perceived.

New Zillennial insights provided by this research, add to and draw some parallels with studies focused on Millennials and Generation Z, for example, [Bresman and Rao \(2017b\)](#), [ACAS \(2016\)](#) and [Stankiewicz-Mróz \(2020\)](#) previously highlighted a gap in expectations of work between managers and employees with Generation Z. This idea of Zillennial entitlement, concluded by this study, also has similarities to opinions other generations have of Millennials ([Credo et al., 2016](#); [Waljee et al., 2020](#)).

Generations

This research provides new insights on Zillennial generational traits and competencies. New conclusions include a better understanding this group, providing insights into their desire for learning and swift career advancement. Further conclusions are presented of business challenges faced with regard to technology distractions. Their desire for, and success at, attaining work-life balance is also acknowledged. It is clear tensions exist between generations, this research suggests that Zillennials learn from older Generations within the workplace and vice versa. Their keen ability to learn and share knowledge adds to existing notions that Zillennials could potentially act as a generational bridge between the generations before and after them, namely Generation Z and Millennials.

This study contributes towards understanding generational traits and competencies. Some of the sentiments in this study in relation to Zillennials are similar to previous studies of Generation Z and Millennials, although this research concludes that not all of the parent generation attributes are associated with Zillennials. For example, previous literature suggests that parent generation, Generation Z, are selfish, lazy and narcissistic ([Micoleta, 2012](#); [Whyte-Smith et al., 2017](#); [Higginbottom, 2016](#)). In this study, these are infrequently cited, with only one participant actually using the word “*Selfish*”, while others described Zillennials as “*Energetic*” and “*Dependable*” - directly contradicting previous conclusions such as lazy, which is associated with their parent generation, Generation Z. It is also noted by two of the three Business Stakeholders that Zillennials do not stay long in a company and tend to move on fast, only staying a couple of years in general. Prior research focused on Generation Z has also indicated that employers face the issue of Generation Z not staying in a company for very long ([Stankiewicz-Mróz, 2020](#)).

This study concludes that Zillennials are perceived by Business Stakeholders as having a high degree of proficiency with technology and are sought after for this ability, as previously acknowledged about Generation Z ([Shatto and Erwin, 2016](#)). Business Stakeholders stated that Zillennial employee’s technical knowledge is beneficial to their companies, as it is not an innate skill found in older generations. It is concluded however that being tech savvy can distract from work; a notion previously proposed by [McCrinkle \(2018\)](#).

Previous studies suggest that industry executives anticipate that Generation Z will be less collaborative than Millennials ([Alsop, 2015](#)), while [Carver and Candela \(2008\)](#) and [Lorenz \(2019\)](#) indicate that Millennials and Generation Z are intolerant of other generations abilities with technology. Conversely, this research indicates positive attitudes towards Zillennials in this regard with no issues between co-workers. Their ability to work well with co-workers is actually emphasised by respondents, detailing that employees, old and young alike, learn from each other. Through this research, insights have provided perspectives on the Zillennial ability for collaboration and ability to work with co-workers. The positive conclusions drawn in this study are in direct contrast with previous literature which suggest that both Generation Z and Millennials often do not work successfully with co-workers. This study develops this perspective further, concluding that this collaborative nature could be where Zillennials play their part in being that “generational bridge”. Therefore, assisting in the smooth workplace transition and integration between generations before and after them. Breaking new ground into generational research, this study has provided new insights into

the perceptions of Zillennials as well as providing indications of where this cusp generation may or may not align with their parent generations.

Entrepreneurship

Behavioural traits such as higher levels of self-belief (Bandura, 1977), need for achievement (McClelland, 1961), lower fear of failure and a greater capacity for calculated risk (Knight, 1921) are some traits displayed by entrepreneurs. These, coupled with competencies such as management know-how, leadership skills, opportunity focus, communication skills and a flexible nature (Rampton, 2014), can be used to identify entrepreneurial people. Extant research suggests that Generation Z and Millennials show varying degrees of entrepreneurial potential, while the degree to which their cusp generation, Zillennials, are entrepreneurial has been underexplored. Contributing to literature on entrepreneurial studies, throughout this research Business Stakeholder observations reveal that Zillennials seem to demonstrate some, but not all, of the behaviours and competencies of entrepreneurial people.

This research indicates that Zillennials have a freshness of ideas which is highly regarded by Business Stakeholders. It is this generation of new ideas and concepts that could be seen as this cohort having a key entrepreneurial attribute (Olson, 1985). It appears the Business Stakeholders believe Zillennials have a high need for achievement and, to some degree, higher than that of previous generations, a trait commonly displayed by entrepreneurial people (McClelland, 1961). All participants concluded that Zillennials want to move up the ranks fast and “don’t want to serve their time” the way previous generations had to. This need for achievement is coupled with a greater degree of self-belief. While a higher degree of self-belief is said to be displayed by entrepreneurial people (Bandura, 1977). This study suggests however that Zillennial self-belief doesn’t equate with the realities of their competencies. They need to learn about “how business works”. Competencies of management and communication are lacking and therefore they do not have the experience required to attain the roles at the speed they desire. Business Stakeholders indicated that Zillennials display a high degree of flexibility regarding work-life balance, but little was mentioned with respect to flexibility in work challenges. They are not afraid to ask for what they want and if unhappy in a role will demand roles and benefits commensurate with what they deem appropriate and show no fear of leaving the company. Zillennials display a degree flexibility and are not afraid of taking calculated risks, both can be considered entrepreneurial traits (Knight, 1921; Rampton, 2014; Timmons, 1978). Interestingly, Business Stakeholders note these areas as key concerns as Zillennials seem to be unaware of their ineptitude in these areas, potentially due to their high degree of self-belief.

Implications for Policy and Practice

This research provides an understanding of Zillennials which may impact working practices when managing Zillennials. For example, employers may adapt their business practices to suit Zillennial preferences and their preferred way of working as suggested. It also informs employers on how to motivate and attract Zillennials using key drivers such as their desire for balance, learning and need for achievement in the workplace. Using motivational factors aligned to this cohort, enables companies to better understand Zillennials, enabling the practices and policies to improve attraction and retention of Zillennial talent.

This research may also assist businesses as they endeavour to transition Zillennials into the company’s culture. Providing an insight into potential Zillennial expectations, and the potential tensions and barriers to transition in a company if the company, for example, has conflicting values (business stance on social issues), practices (business policy on flexible working models) or advancement opportunities (timeframe before managerial role is appropriate in the eyes of the business) for example can facilitate integration into the business and highlight adaptations required.

This study suggests how to use Zillennials' technology, fresh thinking and possible entrepreneurial skills potential to support business needs. This research concludes Zillennial's successful ability to work with colleagues collaboratively which is contradictory to parent generations. Zillennials could therefore act as a generational "bridge" assisting in bringing together both Generation Z and Millennials in the workplace to facilitate a positive working environment. This is a key takeaway from a managerial perspective, enabling the facilitation of succession planning in the workplace. Using Zillennials as a bridge generation, coupled with their collaborative nature and desire for training to assist Millennial managers connecting to and working effectively with, Generation Z could potentially reduce workplace tensions and barriers.

This study provides insights for academic institutions involved in the development of Zillennials for the future of work, their employability and skills development. Zillennial expectations need to be managed. This knowledge could assist University Employability Departments in developing student programmes which could provide students with a clearer perspective on workplace expectations, practices and norms. Conversely, it may benefit businesses awareness of the changing expectations of the future workforce, supporting businesses to adapt their thinking, policies and procedures accordingly.

Research Limitations

Limitations to this research are acknowledged. The approach taken involved three Business Stakeholder case studies which suited the need for depth, as opposed to breadth, of understanding. These provided meaningful insights and a deeper understanding of complex issues regarding Zillennials, along with consensus of opinion emerging. As the aim of this study was to provide an insight into the Business Stakeholders' perceptions of Zillennials, a small sample was deemed appropriate and stability of opinion was achieved. This research also provides insights of how perceptions of Zillennials may or may not coincide with how parent generations are perceived. It is important to note that the traits and competencies displayed are not binary and therefore it would be reasonable to suggest that further investigation into the degree to which Zillennials display these traits and competencies would be appropriate to draw definitive conclusions.

Further Research Opportunities

Future studies might consider a focus on the perception of Zillennials within different industries or regions of the UK including comparable regions such as Scotland or Republic of Ireland. Studies such as this would enable comparison to the NI perceptions on Zillennials. As this research focuses on private sector business, a further area of investigation might be in the public sector.

This study also raises questions as to what degree are Business Stakeholder perceptions of Zillennials actually displayed by Zillennials? Another study may explore the Zillennial propensity for idea generation and how Zillennials display this trait. Will Zillennials endeavour to start their own business or work entrepreneurially within an organisation. Studies using samples of Zillennials would provide additional insights and aid further discussion.

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