

Employment Preference: The case of Generation Y¹

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Introduction

There are anecdotal and research evidences that there are generational differences in values, work attitudes and culture (see for reviews Constanza, Badger, Fraser, Severt, & Gade, 2012; Deal, Altman, & Rogelberg, 2010; Twenge, 2010). Few studies have been conducted on the generational differences in work-related attitudes (Constanza et al., 2012). Although Constanza et al. (2012) found no generational differences in work-related attitudes, there is a strong belief among employers and society that Generation Y is different in many ways.

A generation is defined as a cohort of similarly aged people who experience common historical events (Constanza et al., 2012). Generation Y is a demographic cohort born between 1983 to early 2000s (Twenge, 2010). They are also known as the Millennial generation (Millennials), nGen, GenMe (Twenge, 2010). I will be using the label Generation Y or Gen Y in this paper.

The reasons as to the need to identify characteristics of a generation, its work values and attitudes, and the differences between generations, are to offer appropriate policies and practices in the work place as well as for employers to brand themselves accordingly in order to attract prospective employees.

Employer attractiveness

In a study conducted in Sri Lanka among university undergraduate students, it was found that ‘gaining experience to help career’, ‘future opportunities’, and ‘promotes self-esteem’ were the top three preferred employer attributes (Arachchige & Robertson, 2011). Among MBA students ‘promotes self-esteem’, ‘gaining career experience’, and ‘appreciation from management’ were the top three preferred employer attributes (Arachchige & Robertson, 2013).

Ambler and Barrow (1996, as cited in Berthon, Ewing, & Hah, 2005) had proposed three dimensions to employer attractiveness. They were: psychological benefits, functional benefits and economic benefits. According to Berthon, Ewing, and Hah (2005), there are five dimensions to employer attractiveness. They are: interest, social, economic, development and application values. However Arachchige and Robertson (2011) who used Berthon et al.’s EmpAt scale (employer attractiveness) in Sri Lanka found eight factors: corporate environment, job structure, social commitment, social environment, relationships, personal growth, organisational dynamism and enjoyment.

Cable and Graham (2000) found that “the type of industry in which a firm operates, the opportunities that a firm provides for employee development, and organizational culture affect job seekers' reputation perceptions” (p. 929).

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“Millennials are savvy enough to read organizational culture and they seek out this kind of alignment between an organization’s values and actions. In multiple surveys, a strong majority of them report seeking employment with companies that positively impact society or reflect values that are consistent with their own” (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2008 as cited in Hershatter & Epstein, 2010, p. 221).

In a recent Sri Lankan qualitative study, it was found that prospective employees are “attracted to companies based on their prior experiences with the company” (Weerakotuwa & Adikaram, 2013, p. 1). Further, they found that the images of the companies that exist in the society as well as among their peers, rather than the strategic branding image the companies are attempting to build also had an impact on the prospective employees.

Career expectation

A study of Generation Y in Belgium in two points in time revealed that economic recession had an impact on their career expectations (De Hauw & De Vos, 2010). Specifically, due to economic recession they lowered their expectation regarding work-life balance. However, Gen Y’s expectations regarding job content, training, career development and financial rewards were high even during recession (De Hauw & De Vos, 2010).

Research design

This is a descriptive study. A self-administered questionnaire was developed to measure the various employer preference and demography information. Berthon et al.’s (2005) EmpAt scale consisting of 25 items was used to measure employer attractiveness. Other measures related to ideal employers, work values, and expectations.

The target population were undergraduate students of all Faculties in all state universities of Sri Lanka. Four universities were selected Colombo, Kelaniya, Peradeniya, and Jaffna for the survey. First year students and certain faculties like Medicine and Law were not included. Self-administered questionnaires were distributed to 2851 students and 2155 questionnaires were returned (response rate of 75.55%).

Sample description

The sample consisted of Peradeniya (34%), Colombo (26%), Jaffna (24%), and Kelaniya (16%) undergraduates of which female were 64%. These students were from Management (35.7%), Science (28%), Arts (13%), Agriculture (9.6%), Engineering (7%), and Computer Science (3%) fields. Almost equal numbers were from 2nd (28%), 3rd (35%) and final (35%) year of their study.

Results and Discussion

Relatively more respondents wanted to work in the private sector than public sector (47% vs 41%). Results showed that respondents considered moderately important (mean = 5.97 on a 7-point Likert scale) on average the Employer Attractiveness characteristics such as exciting working environment, supportive colleagues, recognition.

When asked about their expectation in a job, salary/rewards ranked first, followed by job security and responsibilities to match qualification. This finding is similar to a study of job hopping among Gen Y in Sri Lanka which found that the main reasons for remaining or leaving a job were pay and career path (Dharmawansa &Thennakoon, 2014).

In terms of ideal employer, MAS, Unilever, John Keells, Central Bank, Commercial Bank, Brandix got the top preference in this study. This findings is similar to the finding of Taylor Nelson Sofres which found Unilever was the most preferred employer of choice followed by John Keells, Brandix , MAS and Virtusa (as cited in Weerakotuwa & Adikaram, 2013).

Majority wanted to obtain Accountancy related qualification in addition to their degree. Most of them also wanted to continue their studies with some even up to PhD.

Conclusions

This large survey among Gen Y shows that preference for government employment still persists in quite a percentage. The blue chip and other top companies are organisations which are preferred employers by these respondents. They also like to further study in other fields to complement their current knowledge. They also viewed various employer characteristics are important which the Sri Lankan organisations should consider when branding themselves.

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