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# **The implications of perceived workplace inclusion for attracting and retaining millennial professionals with diverse backgrounds**

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## **Abstract**

Millennial survey data published by consultancy firms suggest a dominant role of workplace diversity and inclusion in influencing Generation Y's perception of and commitment to employers. Despite the introduction of diversity policies and relevant management practices, organisations across different sectors in the UK reported difficulties in attracting and recruiting millennials from minority ethnic backgrounds. This raises the questions about the extent to which the existing organisational practices have an impact on employees' actual perception and experience of workplace inclusion. It also indicates a need to understand what workplace inclusion means to millennials, especially those from historically excluded identity groups. This developmental paper explores the subject through reviewing relevant evidence and outlines the design of an empirical study. It aims to shift the popular focus on surface diversity to inclusion and contribute to the discussions about how organisations can adapt their strategies to attract and retain the increasingly diverse future workforce.

## **Keywords**

Workplace inclusion, future workforce, diversity management, human resource

## **Introduction**

The projection of generation Y, which is also known as millennials, occupying one third of the global workforce by 2020 (Manpower, 2016) has stimulated discussions about the potential challenges for organisations to attract and retain younger employees with highly diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds (Catalyst, 2018). The employment rate of those aged between 25 and 34 reached 82 per cent in the UK, which is higher than previous generational cohorts at the same age (UK Parliament, 2017). Government figures also showed that 17% of millennials in the UK are from non-white backgrounds, with 26% born abroad and 13% born in an EU country (Brown et al., 2017). However, attracting and recruiting young professionals from Black, Asian, and minority ethnic groups (BAME) are found difficult across sectors (i.e. Churchill, 2019; Mohdin, 2019; McGregor-Smith, 2017). The growing concerns with the potential challenges for managing future workforce prompted the consultancy press to promote a millennial archetype that is associated with distinctive work values and attitudes, such as prioritising diversity and inclusion (KPMG Global, 2018; Deloitte, 2018). Despite that this archetype has been critiqued for its conceptual and methodological pitfalls (Parry and Urwin, 2017; Williams, 2019), examining what workplace inclusion means to BAME millennials and how they experience inclusion will contribute some insights into the recruitment difficulties and how employers could adapt the existing inclusion practices to attract and retain a diverse Generation Y workforce. To obtain these insights, this research will conduct a structured review of the existing evidence and semi-structured interviews with BAME millennial professionals in the UK. This developmental paper presents the rationale behind the research and its methodology. The research interviews will be carried out prior to the British Academy of Management Conference in September 2019 in which the preliminary research findings will be presented.

### **Perceived workplace inclusion**

The impact of workplace inclusion on organisational attraction and commitment is evident (Ferdman, 2014). However, the extent to which the existing policies and practices have an impact on shaping positive employee perception and experience of workplace inclusion remains unclear due to a lack of empirical work (Shore, Cleveland and Sanchez, 2018). This presents two key implications for both HR scholars and practitioners. First, the meanings of inclusion should be defined with an explicit approach to translating policies into actual workplace practices. Prior scholarship showed that employees' inclusion experience is often directly influenced by interactions with peers in work groups (Ferdman et al., 2010; Glomb and Liao, 2003; Shore et al., 2011) and line managers (Brimhall et al., 2017; Ehrhart et al., 2016). This influence implies the importance to develop a shared understanding of inclusion across different management levels and functions.

Second, organisations need to develop and adapt their inclusion initiatives, policies, and practices with an evidence-based approach by drawing on research as well as employee experience. Evidence showed that ethnic and cultural values influence the conception and expectation of workplace inclusion. For instance, a recent study revealed that Chinese employees and managers defined inclusion with an emphasis on tolerance and harmony (Tang et al., 2015). Meanwhile, a case study in Belgium conceptualised inclusion as same treatments among employees while showing respect to different ethnic values (Janssens and Zanoni, 2008). These findings highlight the importance for organisations to evaluate the effectiveness of their existing inclusion practices in fulfilling the expectations of employees from diverse sociocultural roots.

To address these research gaps, this project will explore how BAME millennials perceive and experience inclusion in the workplace. Shore et al. (2011) proposed that inclusion consists of two key elements, including belongingness and uniqueness. These elements are reflected in millennial survey data that suggested an importance for younger employees to feel that their opinions are valued as well as to that diversity is recognised and respected in the workplace (Deloitte, 2018). Moving beyond belongingness and uniqueness, Shore, Cleveland and Sanchez (2018) developed a conceptual model that interprets workplace inclusion as the extent to which individuals, especially those who identified themselves with marginalised social groups, perceive psychological and physical safety, work group involvement, respect and appreciation, decision-making influence, management authenticity, and recognition of diversity. This research will deploy these conceptual lenses of workplace inclusion and refine the key constructs through developing a taxonomy of inclusion experience based on interviews with BAME millennial professionals.

### **Generational Y**

Popular media frequently portrays Generation Y as a cohort with distinctive work attitudes, behaviours, and expectations with a tendency to quit and seek for new employment opportunities. Management consultancies also echo those arguments with a great deal of attention paid to identifying the potential differences between millennials and other generational cohorts (Merriman, 2016). Prior scholarship on generational differences primarily departs from the cohort perspective (Gilleard, 2004), which considers millennials as a homogenous group with a set of shared work values, attitudes, behaviours, preferences, and expectations regardless of age, racial, socioeconomic differences.

On the contrary, Mannheim's (1952, 2012) social forces perspective places an emphasis on the gradual and dynamic progression from one generation to another without an absolute chasm

between the two. This perspective has been echoed by scholars who questioned the validity of the cut-off points adopted by the mainstream generation literature (Urwin, Buscha and Parry, 2014; Parry and Urwin, 2011, 2009, 2017). Drawing on Mannheim's (1952) theory of that collective memories of a generation are cultivated through shared earlier life experience of special social and historical events, some scholars called for contextualisation in future generation research with a focus on how different societies might shape the values of individuals in the same generation (Lyons and Kuron, 2014; Kuron et al., 2015).

Studies of Generation Y have been mainly conducted in specific locations such as the US and Canada (Krahn and Galambos, 2014), while little is known about whether and how sociocultural roots might form individual values, attitudes, and behaviours despite of being categorised as the same generation. In response to the call for critical academic treatments of the millennial archetype that was found to be reinforced by management practices (Williams, 2019), this project will include as many non-white ethnic groups as possible in the research interviews and probe into diverse perceptions of inclusion among millennials rather than assuming that millennials share a consensus on the meanings and the importance of workplace inclusion.

### **Research method**

This study adopts a structured and critical approach to reviewing the evidence on workplace inclusion and Generation Y studies. Both academic and non-academic sources are included in the review as a result of that the workplace inclusion literature is still in its infancy (Shore, Cleveland and Sanchez, 2018) while consultancy and governmental publications also provide some preliminary insights into the potential challenges to attract, recruit, and retain the millennial workforce in the UK.

The second stage of this study involves structured interviews with individual graduates who were born after 1982 (Howe and Strauss, 2000) and identified themselves with one or more minority ethnic groups. These participants also need to have at least two years of full-time work experience in the UK. The participants will be asked to fill in a questionnaire that include information about education, ethnic, and employment history. The sample will include women and men in equal numbers to minimise gender bias. It will also include as many non-white ethnic groups as possible given the focus on forming a fundamental understanding of how employees across BAME groups experience workplace inclusion. The interviews will adopt the critical incident technique (Butterfield, 2005; Chell, 2004; Flanagan, 1954), asking individuals to recall and reflect on at least two specific events, including one that illustrates felt inclusion in the workplace and another that shows experience of being excluded. The '*context-rich*' nature of critical incident technique (Chell, 2004 p. 47) will allow the interviewer to obtain focused, in-depth accounts of specific examples of employee inclusion experience that remained understudied.

Research participants will be asked to identify critical incidents as illustration of feeling included and excluded in the workplace, including the following key questions.

- 1) What does workplace inclusion mean to you?
- 2) Could you share an example of when you felt included in the workplace?
- 3) Could you share an example of when you felt excluded in the workplace?
- 4) Does your cultural and ethnic background influence your expectation of workplace inclusion?
- 5) Do any other cultural values have an impact on your expectation of workplace inclusion?

- 6) Do you think your colleagues share the same perception of workplace inclusion?
- 7) Do you think your manager share the same perception of workplace inclusion?
- 8) Are your expectations of workplace inclusion fulfilled?
- 9) How does your perception and knowledge of how inclusive an organisation influence your decision to work for or quit?
- 10) Do you believe that there are generational differences in the perception of workplace inclusion?

This project will conduct 40 interviews or until the interview data reaches theoretical saturation. The interviews will be anonymised and recorded with permissions from the participants. The data will be professionally transcribed. The researcher will adopt an inductive approach to data analysis with an objective to identify patterns and themes related to belongingness and uniqueness in the workplace. Grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) will provide an appropriate framework for extracting critical information based on research participants' interpretation in a systemic manner.

Mainstream studies of Generation Y have been challenged for the limitations resulted from overlooking how the attitudes, values, and behaviours of a cohort within a specific age range might change with aging (Parry and Urwin, 2017). While acknowledging this methodological concern, this project does not intend to generalise from the research findings to suggest that Generation Y's perception and experience of workplace inclusion is different from other age cohorts. On the contrary, this research will take a critical approach to the subject and focus on how Generation Y of diverse ethnic backgrounds perceive and experience inclusion. Furthermore, this research will form a conceptual and empirical foundation for a future research project at a larger scale, exploring how values embedded in different ethnicities and cultures affect the workplace inclusion experience of the younger workforce.

### **Contributions**

This research project seeks to contribute to the understanding of actual workplace inclusion experience that remains understudied (Shore, Cleveland and Sanchez, 2018) through exploring how workplace inclusion is perceived and experienced by millennial professionals who associate themselves with one or more than one minority ethnic groups. The review of extant evidence and the empirical research findings will also identify key factors related to the inclusion construct of uniqueness and belongingness, providing crucial implications for organisations in developing and adapting their diversity and inclusion practices to the future workforce.

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