



Supplemental RESEARCH BRIEF
2009 NATIONAL BUSINESS ETHICS SURVEY®

*Millennials, Gen X and Baby Boomers:
Who's Working at Your Company and What Do They Think About Ethics?*



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Founded in 1922, the Ethics Resource Center (ERC) is America's oldest nonprofit organization devoted to the advancement of high ethical standards and practices in public and private institutions. For 88 years, ERC has been a resource for public and private institutions committed to a strong ethical culture. ERC's expertise also informs the public dialogue on ethics and ethical behavior. ERC researchers analyze current and emerging issues and produce new ideas and benchmarks that matter — for the public trust.

For information about the National Business Ethics Survey, see page 16.

Millennials, Gen X and Baby Boomers: *Who's Working at Your Company and What Do They Think About Ethics?*

As the Baby Boomer generation nears retirement age, business is already confronting the transition to younger workers who, generational theorists argue¹, have their own values and assumptions about workplace behavior. At the same time, numerous news stories and even a handful of research reports argue that younger workers don't hold the same set of professional and ethical standards as their predecessors, that values and appropriate professional behaviors are no longer "givens."² Many business leaders are wondering how to ensure that the generational divide doesn't cause miscommunication, hinder performance, and—worst of all—put their company at risk.

The first step to addressing the challenge of generational differences in the workplace is to have a better understanding of the three primary³ generations in the workforce: Millennials, Generation X, and Baby Boomers. Each generation has been shaped by watershed moments in its formative years, demographic trends, and cultural phenomena. And each generation comes to work with a characteristic set of skills and challenges that impact employing companies and have the potential to help or hinder relationships with managers and coworkers. The table below offers a portrait of each generation, including its attributes and beliefs about work.

See Endnotes

Three Primary Generations in the US Workforce: 2009⁴

	Baby Boomers	Generation X	Millennials
Other names for generation	Boomers “Me” Generation	Baby Busters Slacker Generation X-ers	Generation Y Echo Boomers Generation Next
Birth years of this generation ⁵	1946 through 1964	1965 through 1980	1981+
Age groups in 2009 NBES study ⁶	45-63	30-44	18-29
Significant world events and cultural trends shaping their worldview	Born after end of World War II Raised in era of economic prosperity Assassinations of RFK, JFK, and MLK, Jr. Civil Rights Movement Vietnam War Sexual Revolution	Baby Bust Two-earner households with latchkey kids Rise in divorce rates Widespread use of personal computers Raised in era of economic uncertainty (recession, layoffs, etc.) <i>Challenger</i> disaster	Grew up with email, Internet, cell phones, and immediate access to information Violence and terrorism in US: Oklahoma City bombing, Columbine High School, Sept. 11 Globalization Most scheduled childhoods in US history
Positive traits ascribed to this generation	Hard-working Idealistic Committed to harmony	Entrepreneurial Flexible and creative Comfortable with technology	Tech-savvy Attuned to and appreciative of diversity Skilled multitaskers
Negative traits ascribed to this generation	Sense of entitlement Workaholics Self-centered	Skeptical and cynical Lazy, slackers Question authority figures	Lacking basic literacy fundamentals Very short attention spans—distracted and distractible Not loyal to employing organization
Workplace attributes	Belief that hard work=long hours Long-term commitment to employing organization	Desire for work-life balance, demand for flexible work schedules Less hierarchical, prefer more flexible structures Expect to have multiple employers, perhaps even multiple careers	Excellent at integrating technology into workplace Demand immediate feedback and recognition Expect to have many employers, multiple careers

While numerous researchers espouse these classifications and they seem to be consistent with most people's experience in the workplace, there is also a growing skepticism about the real impact of generational differences in the workplace, a sense that employees of all ages are more alike than different. Recently, research⁷ has demonstrated that the generations share a common desire for strong, effective leaders and an innate belief in the importance of respect and fairness in the workplace. One can't help but wonder: How different are the generations, really? Is all of the talk about generational diversity just hype? Do generational trends really trump tenure and experience or are the challenges of managing Millennials really just the challenges of managing young workers with little professional and life experience under their belts? If generational differences do exist, what does that mean for us as managers?

Six times since 1994, the Ethics Resource Center has carried out a nationally representative poll of employees at all levels that explores beliefs and experiences related to ethics and compliance at work: the National Business Ethics Survey (NBES). It provides data by age and is the most exacting longitudinal research effort examining business ethics from the employee⁸ perspective and serves as a rigorous measurement of trends in workplace ethics and compliance, a snapshot of current behaviors and thinking, and a guide in identifying ethics risk and measures of program effectiveness.

In order to assist business leaders grappling with questions about generational diversity and its impact, ERC mined NBES data to answer key questions:

- Are one's perceptions of ethics in the workplace a matter of one's generation or one's state in life? Do the youngest members of today's workforce differ considerably from their predecessors?
- Do rates of observed misconduct vary based on employee age groups? How do Millennial employees compare to their predecessors in Gen X and the Baby Boomers?
- Do the commonly held beliefs about Millennial employees pan out when it comes to their perceptions of workplace ethics?
- In terms of workplace ethics, are there any specific age groups that are particularly vulnerable?

Because of the longitudinal nature of the NBES study we were able to uncover: trends in workplace ethics and compliance that transcend generational differences; purported "differences" between Baby Boomers, X-ers, and Millennials that are, in actuality, more likely a result of differences in work experience and tenure; and perceptions, attitudes, and challenges that do seem to be unique to Millennials, the most recent entrants into America's workforce.

Maybe We're Not Really That Different: Age-Independent Trends in Workplace Ethics and Compliance

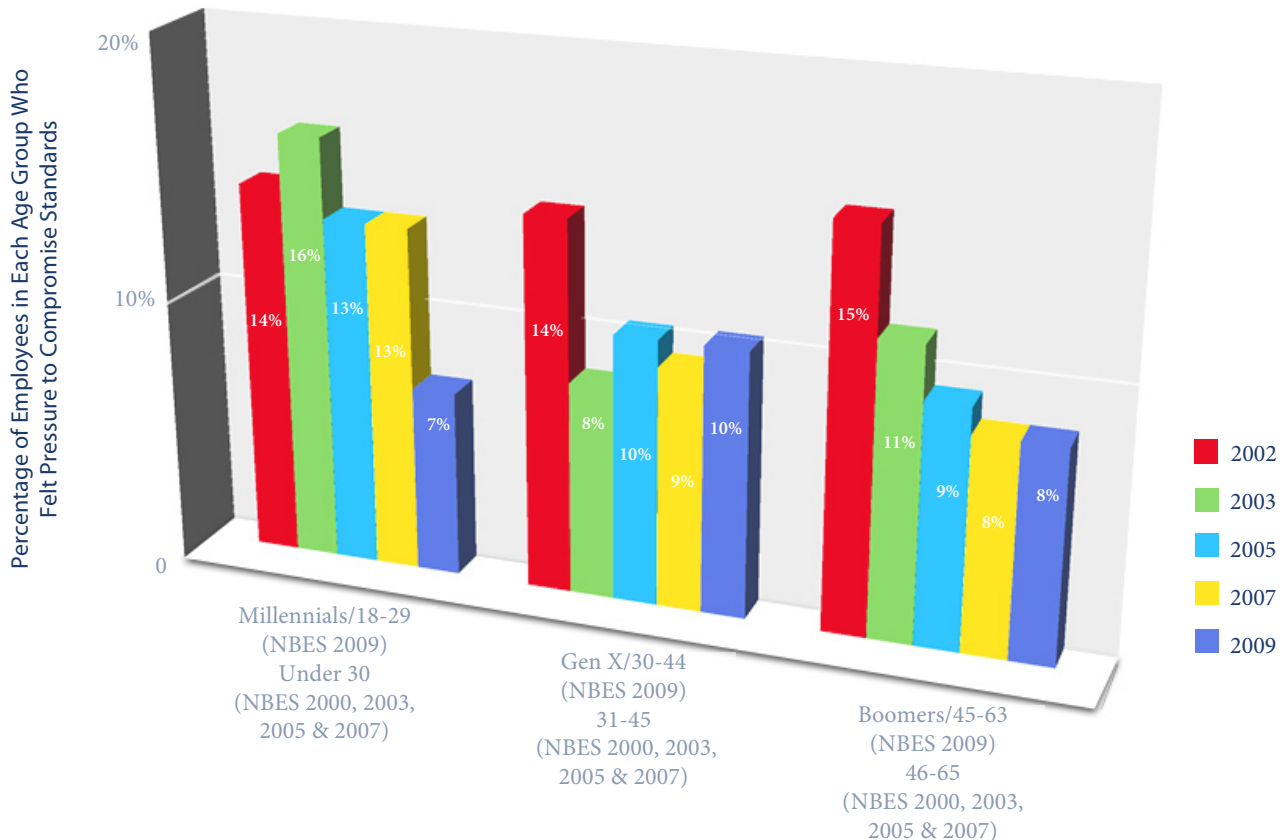
Throughout the history of NBES research, we have consistently found that employees who have felt pressure to commit misconduct are far more likely to actually observe misconduct than those who do not.⁹ As the saying goes, where there's smoke, there's fire; basically, when employees feel pressure to compromise the company's standards of ethical conduct, they are almost always actually observing wrongdoing as well. As a result, pressure to commit misconduct is a clear warning sign of ethical issues in a company.

NBES data from 2000-2009 reveal that:

- Pressure does not consistently trend based on one's level of professional experience, i.e., younger workers are not consistently more likely to feel pressure than older workers or vice versa;
- There tends to be little variance among rates of pressure when comparing age cohorts;
- In 2009, the rate of pressure among workers of all ages was at or near historic lows.

Taken together, these points suggest that *pressure is an age-independent trend—one that is experienced similarly by all workers.*

In 2009, Among All Age Groups, Pressure at or Near Historic Lows



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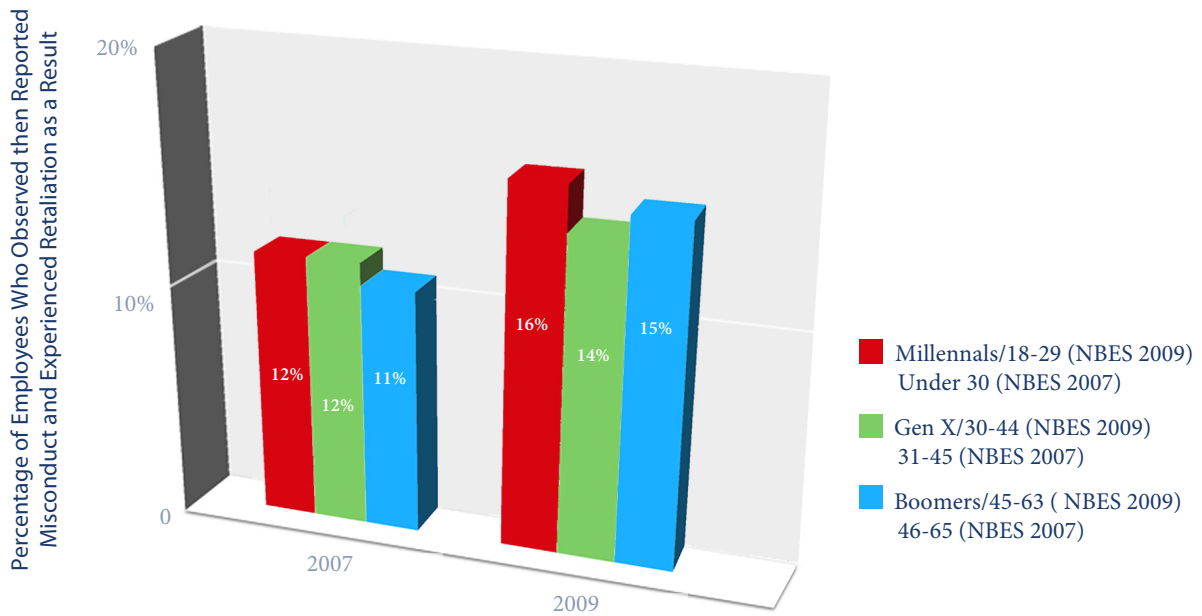
Another key indicator of the ethical health of a company is whether employees who report misconduct experience retaliation as a result. In 2007, research¹⁰ conducted by the Corporate Executive Board identified fear of retaliation as the primary leading indicator of misconduct. Also, structural equation modeling based on the 2007 NBES dataset revealed that increases or decreases in retaliation cause corresponding increases or decreases in rates of reporting. Retaliation is not only the key indicator of whether misconduct is occurring, it also drives reporting,

thereby determining whether it remains an area of vulnerability.

The Ethics Resource Center has retaliation data from its 2007 and 2009 surveys. As with pressure, *retaliation also appears to be an age-independent trend*. In both 2007 and 2009, there is no appreciable difference between the rates of retaliation experienced by the three age cohorts. Unfortunately, in 2009, rates of retaliation rose for all age groups

All Age Groups Experience Retaliation at Similar Rates

In 2009, Retaliation More Common in All Age Groups



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The More Things Change, the More They Stay the Same? Work Experience Trends vs. Generational Differences

Because of the longitudinal nature of the NBES dataset, we were able to explore whether perceived differences between Millennials, X-ers, and Boomers were the result of generational diversity or merely manifestations of trends related to work experience and tenure. Basically, we were able to answer the question: “Is it really an issue of Millennials/X-ers/Boomers or just how things are with younger/mid-career/older workers?”

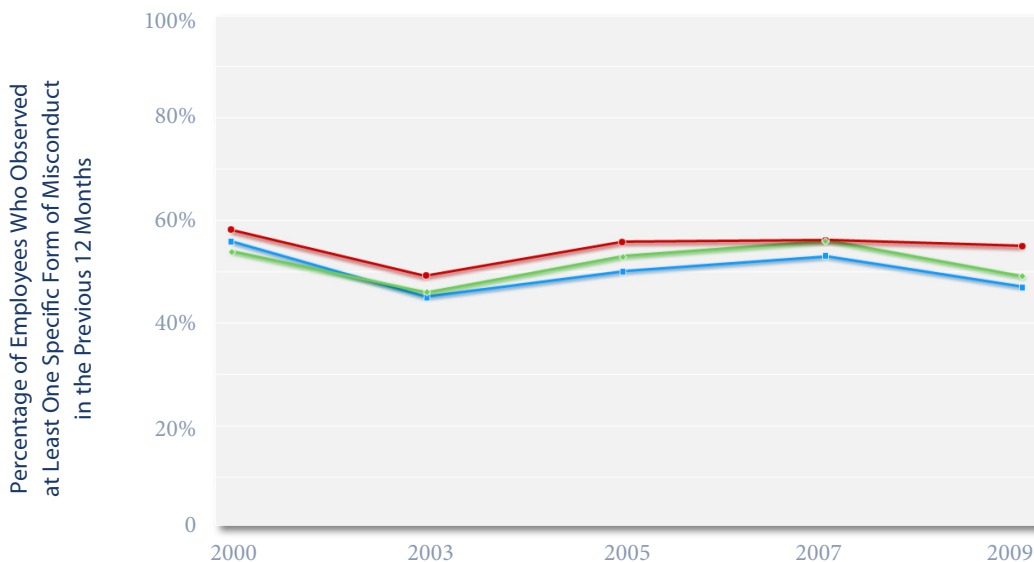
A primary goal of any ethics and compliance pro-

gram is to reduce rates of misconduct. Accordingly, much of ERC’s research is focused on when and why misconduct happens and what companies can do to curtail it. Misconduct was a key research topic for this report because, by determining if rates of observed misconduct vary among the age groups, we can learn whether certain groups are more vulnerable and require special attention, even intervention.

NBES data reveal that, both today and in the past, younger employees are the most likely to observe misconduct.¹¹ In ERC surveys in 2003, 2005, and 2007 as well as in 2009, rates of observed misconduct decreased as employee age increased; simply put, younger workers are more likely to observe misconduct than older employees.

Younger Employees More Likely to Observe Misconduct

Difference Between Millennials and Older Coworkers



- Millennials/18-29 (NBES 2009)
Under 30 (NBES 2000, 2003, 2005 & 2007)
- ◆ Gen X/30-44 (NBES 2009)
31-45 (NBES 2000, 2003, 2005 & 2007)
- Boomers/45-63 (NBES 2009)
46-65 (NBES 2000, 2003, 2005 & 2007)

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The data show that younger workers are consistently a “trouble spot” when it comes to misconduct. But the difference in 2009 is more pronounced than in previous surveys, suggesting that both a work experience trend and a generational difference are at play.

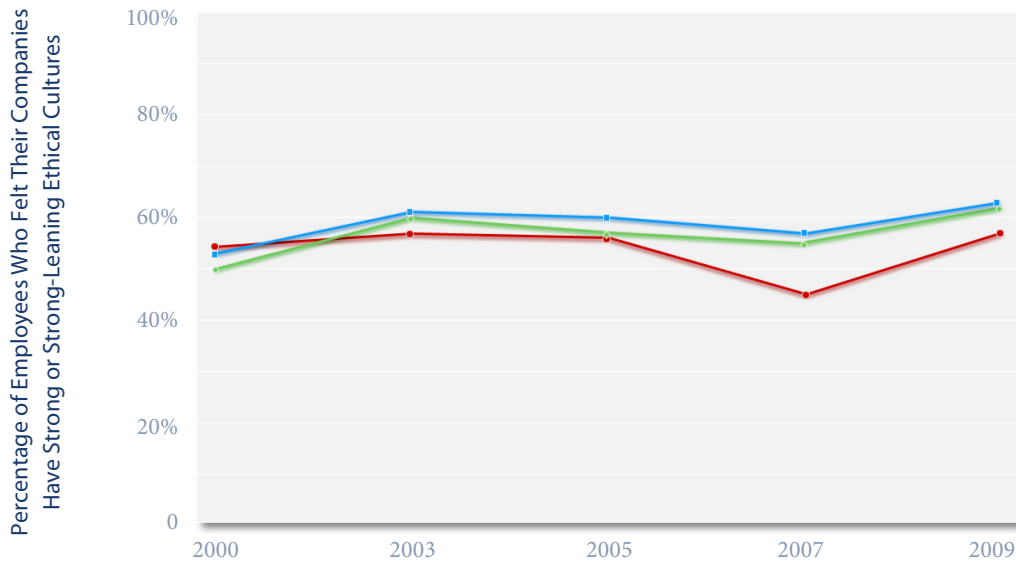
This finding reveals that *all younger workers—but Millennials especially—are a significant area of vulnerability in terms of observed misconduct.*

In addition to investigating the desired results of an ethics and compliance program, ERC conducts research into the factors that shape a company’s environment in terms of ethics and that drive employee perceptions of ethics in the workplace. Ethical culture is the extent to which an organization’s ethical standards are given priority and promoted by its management, employees, policies, processes, and decision-making. The more employees see others being held accountable for ethical actions and acting

with integrity, the stronger the ethical culture of the organization will be. In order to assess the strength of an organization’s ethical culture, ERC has developed indices to measure the perceptions employees have about their peers, direct supervisors, and senior leadership. Past ERC research, including the 2007 National Business Ethics Survey, has shown that stronger scores on these indices lead to reductions in pressure to commit misconduct, fewer observations of misconduct, increased reporting of observations, and decreased retaliation against whistleblowers.

Not surprisingly, perceptions of ethical culture trend closely with rates of observed misconduct. Younger employees are generally less likely to have a positive impression of their company’s ethical culture than their older colleagues in the workplace. This finding reinforces the fact that younger employees have less-positive experiences when it comes to ethics in the workplace.

Younger Employees Generally Hold Less Positive View of Company's Ethical Culture

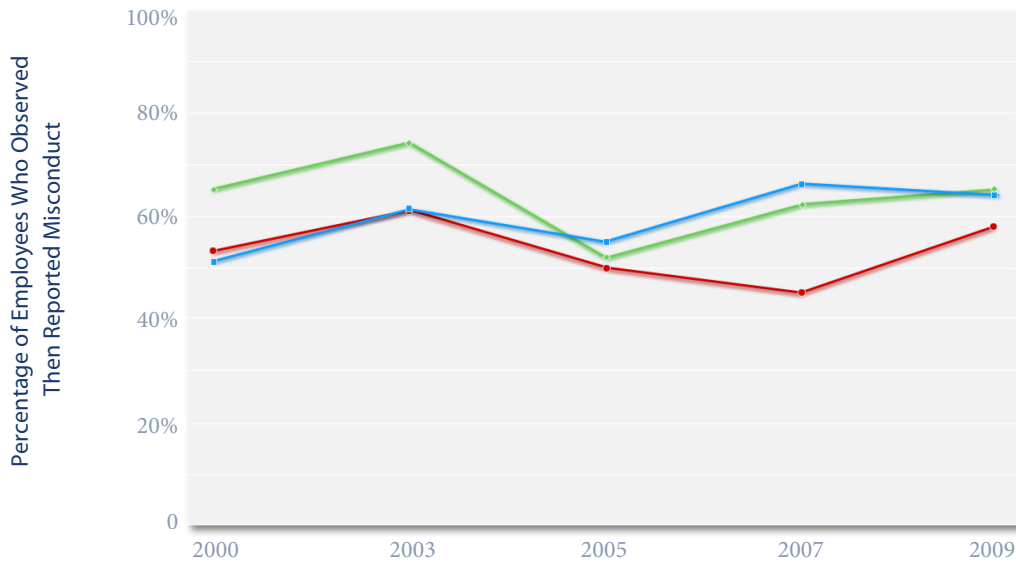


- Millennials/18-29 (NBES 2009)
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When we examine rates of reporting, we see the trend continue; again, the findings are generally less positive among younger workers.

Generally Youngest Employee Less Likely to Report



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In almost every case, reporting rates were lower for younger workers than for their older colleagues. This finding is particularly troubling when combined with what we already know about misconduct. *Younger workers are more likely to observe misconduct, less likely to report it, and have fewer resources to draw from, given that they have the least life and work experience.*

What's the Matter with Kids Today? Ups & Downs of Millennial Workers

Analysis of NBES data reveals that, in terms of their attitudes about ethical issues and perceptions of ethics in the workplace, Millennials closely resemble the picture that has been painted of them in past research:¹²

- They are very tech-savvy and seamlessly integrate Web 2.0 features (e.g., blogging) into their daily lives.
- Because they grew up in the Internet age, they value confidentiality and privacy less than other age groups. In their thinking, information flow is virtually instantaneous and knowledge is meant to be shared rather than owned.
- Like their Gen X peers in the workforce, they believe that doing a good job is about the work you do—not how many hours you put in.
- They connect easily with a greater diversity of races, religions, and sexual orientations. Millennials believe that diversity is cause for celebration and sharing, not a source of tension and apprehension.

The findings of ERC’s research coincide with much of the profile of Millennials. For example, Millennial employees are less likely to observe employee privacy breaches than their elder coworkers, but more likely to observe discrimination. While it is certainly

possible that the differences in observation are the result of differences in incidence, it is likely that sensitivity also is a factor. Millennial employees are keenly attuned to discriminatory behavior, but are less likely to take note of breaches of privacy.

Misconduct	Millennials	Gen X	Baby Boomers
Observed Sexual Harassment	8%	7%	7%
Observed Abusive Behavior	21%	22%	24%
Observed Accepting Gifts/Kickbacks	4%	4%	3%
Observed Making Improper Payments/Bribes	2%	1%	1%
Observed Discrimination	18%	12%	14%
Observed Health/Safety Violations	14%	10%	10%
Observed Conflict of Interest	17%	17%	15%
Observed Goods/Services Fail to Meet Specifications	11%	10%	7%
Observed Inappropriate Alteration of Documents	7%	7%	5%
Observed Improper Use of Competitors Inside Information	2%	2%	3%
Observed Misuse of Company's Confidential Information	6%	7%	5%
Observed Improper Hiring Practices	12%	9%	9%
Observed Lying to Customers, Vendors or the Public	13%	12%	11%
Observed Lying to Employees	21%	20%	18%
Observed Stealing or Theft	12%	10%	7%
Observed Internet Abuse	16%	20%	17%
Observed Environmental Violations	4%	4%	4%
Observed Misreporting Financial Records	6%	4%	4%
Observed Falsifying Time/Expense Sheets	13%	11%	9%
Observed Employee Benefits Violations	15%	11%	9%
Observed Engaging in Anti-Competitive Practices	2%	2%	2%
Observed Customer Privacy Breach	6%	7%	5%
Observed Employee Privacy Breach	8%	12%	11%
Observed Insider Trading	1%	1%	1%
Observed Making Improper Political Contributions	1%	1%	1%
Observed Company Resource Abuse	26%	23%	22%
Observed Substance Abuse	9%	7%	6%

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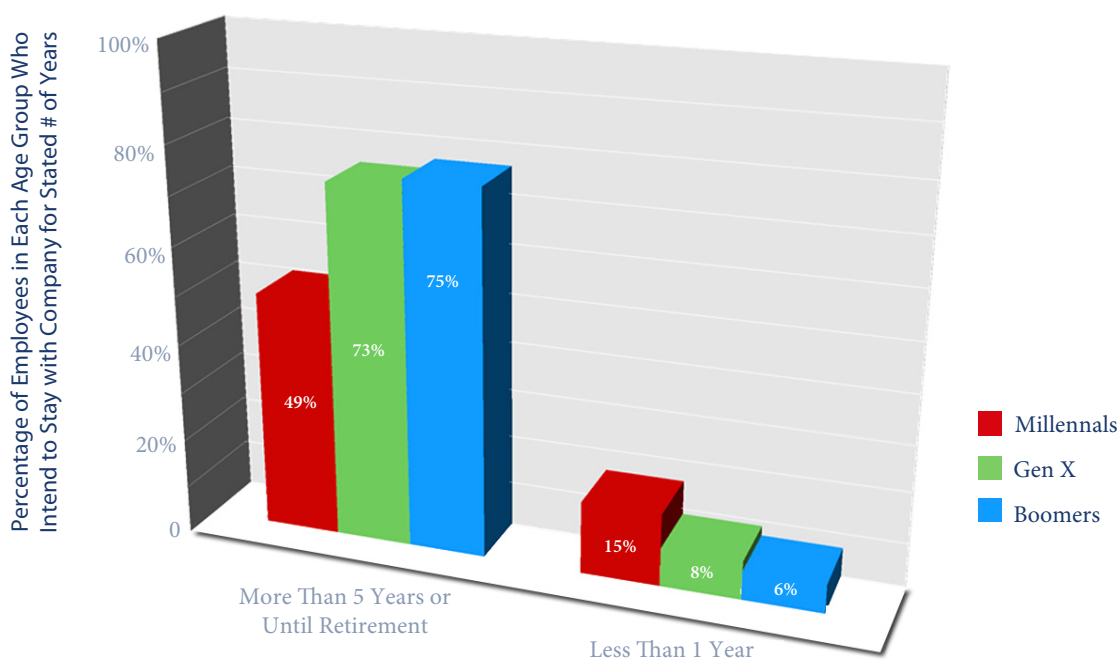
Investigation of employees' sense of appropriate workplace conduct also supports the Millennial profile:

- Millennial employees are more likely to find it acceptable to blog or tweet negatively about their company.
- They are more likely to find it acceptable to keep copies of confidential documents.
- Along with X-ers (who also believe that hard work is about work product rather than hours worked), Millennials are more likely than Boomers to find it acceptable to call in sick when they are not.
- Millennial workers are the least likely to find it acceptable to give a cold shoulder to someone for reporting an edgy joke.

Behavior	Millennials	Gen X	Baby Boomers
Acceptable to Date Boss	14%	17%	16%
Acceptable to Date Coworker	47%	52%	47%
Acceptable to Blog/Tweet Negatively about Company	12%	8%	5%
Acceptable to Buy Personal Items with Company Credit Card	8%	9%	11%
Acceptable to Keep Copies of Confidential Docs	19%	16%	15%
Acceptable to Call in Sick When Not	18%	19%	13%
Acceptable to Claim Someone Else's Idea as Your Own	1%	1%	1%
Acceptable to Accept Tickets Given by Client, Customer or Vendor	43%	47%	45%
Acceptable to Give Coworker Cold Shoulder for Reporting Joke	8%	11%	11%

Far Fewer Millennials Intend to Stay with Company

Millennials Twice as Likely to Want to Leave Within 1 Year



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Also consistent with commonly-held impressions of them, *Millennial workers are less likely to be engaged and to see their long-term future as being tied to their current employer.* Seventy-eight percent of Millennials would recommend their company to family or friends, compared to 82 percent of X-ers and Boomers. And fewer Millennials (73 percent) than X-ers (75 percent) or Boomers (77 percent) believe their company motivates them to contribute more than is required. Finally, Millennials are twice as likely to want to leave the company within the year and far less likely to plan on staying for five or more years.

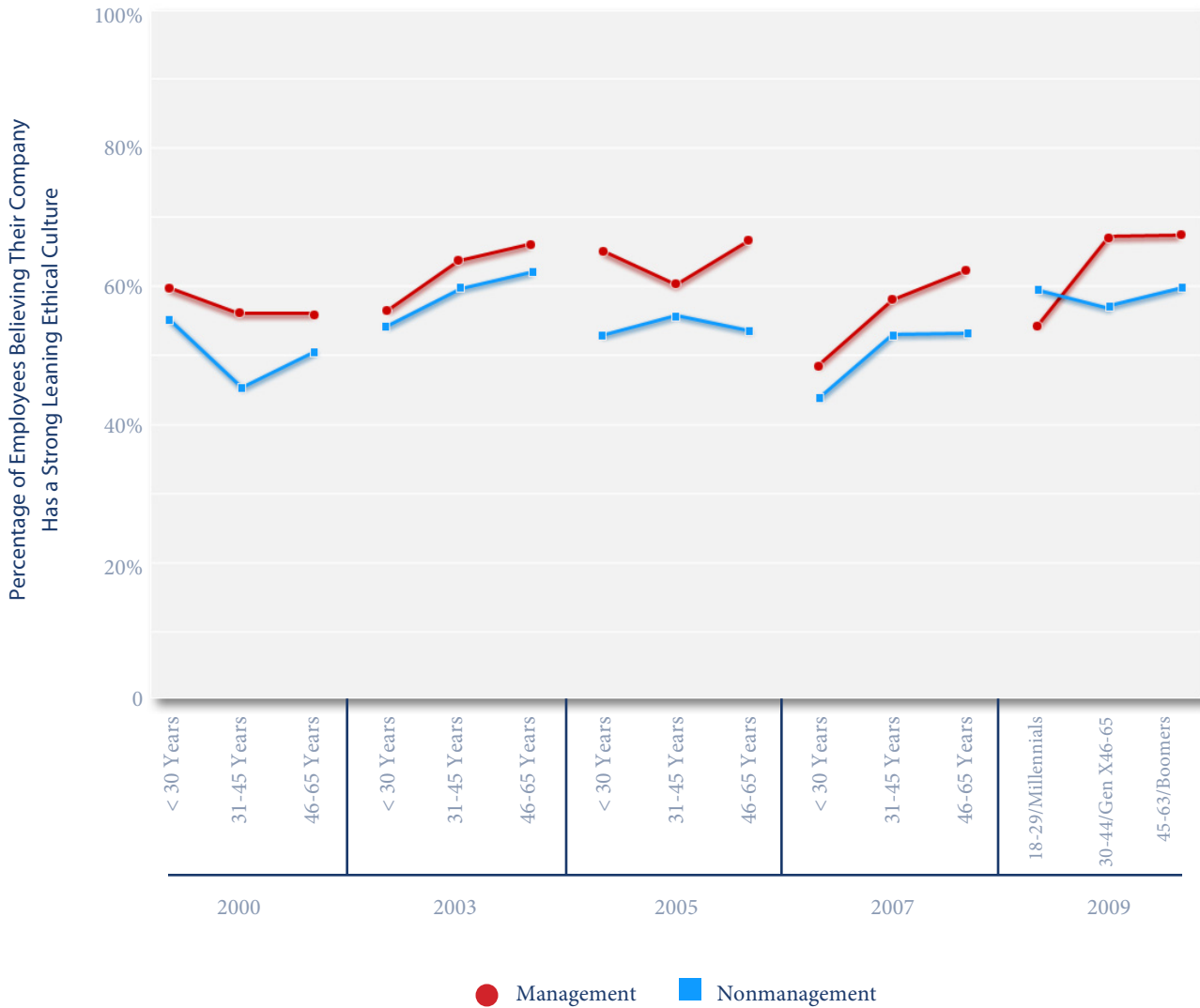
Younger workers—especially Millennials—seem to face particular challenges in the workplace and, as a result, merit particular attention from leaders and supervisors, but one group stands out as a major area of vulnerability: managers who are Millennials. Unlike managers in other age groups and contrary to historical trends,

Millennial supervisors have more negative impressions of and experiences with their company's ethics than nonmanagement workers in their age cohort.

There is a consistent trend running through all of ERC's past NBES studies: managers have a rosier view of their companies' ethical culture than those in nonmanagement positions, i.e., managers are significantly more likely than nonmanagers to characterize their company's ethical culture as being strong or strong-leaning. Among Millennial employees, however, this is not the case: only 54 percent of Millennial managers deemed their companies' ethical culture to be strong or strong-leaning compared to 59 percent of nonmanagers who held such positive impressions. Millennial managers also have less positive impressions of their companies' top management and coworker cultures than workers in their cohort who are not managers.

Only Millennial Managers Hold Less Positive View of Company's Ethical Culture Than Nonmanagement Peers

In All Other Survey Years and in Other Age Groups, Managers Hold Rosier View Than Nonmanagers



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Not only do Millennial managers have less favorable impressions of their companies' ethical cultures than almost any other employee group¹³, they also observe more misconduct than their non-management

peers, and are more likely than older managers and non-management members of their cohort to experience retaliation.

Implications of the Findings

When it comes to ethics in the workplace, some things transcend age and generational differences, such as an innate desire for fairness and an eagerness to work for leaders who are trustworthy and capable. In other ways, though, age and generations do play a role. When it comes to ethics and ethical conduct in the workplace, some groups are more vulnerable: workers who are young, Millennials, and especially Millennial managers. Prudent business leaders should take steps to assist these employees with the special challenges they face. There are ways to ease the burden on younger workers, while protecting the company and growing its nascent pool of talent:

- Develop targeted training programs for younger workers to enable them to identify and appropriately address ethics issues that are common in their field and position.
- Supervisors¹⁴ of younger workers should pay particular attention to this group, help shape their developing professional ethics standards and consistently provide support and guidance.
- Establish mentoring programs that pair young talent with older, accomplished employees who can share their experience and help nurture the younger workforce.
- Help develop Millennials' appreciation for the value of confidentiality by clearly articulating, explaining, and routinely reinforcing policies and guidelines related to Internet use, information-sharing, and intellectual property.
- Determine your level of flexibility in terms of work schedules, then communicate expectations accordingly.
- To help Millennials' managers weather the challenges of their roles, put in place programs and initiatives that connect them with management peers from other generations and encourage direct supervisors to serve as mentors and supports.

Endnotes

1. E.g.: Notter, J. (Fall 2007). Moving beyond the hype about generational diversity. *Journal of Association Leadership*. Retrieved from <http://www.asaecenter.org/PublicationsResources/JALArticleDetail.cfm?ItemNumber=30439>.
Research and Training Center, University of Minnesota. (2008). *Generational differences in the workplace*. Minnesota: Anick Tolbize. Staff writer. (2007, April 18). Dueling age groups in today's workforce: From Baby Boomers to Generations X and Y. *Knowledge at Wharton*. Retrieved from <http://www.wharton.universia.net/index.cfm?fa=viewfeature&id=1330&language=english>.
2. E.g.: The Conference Board, Partnership for 21st Century Skills, Corporate Voices for Working Families & Society for Human Resource Management. (2006). *Are they really ready to work? Employers' perspectives on the basic knowledge and applied skills of new entrants to the 21st century U.S. workforce*.
Corporate Voices for Working Families. (2008). *Tomorrow's workforce: ready or not it's a choice the business community must make now*.
3. Although there are still some members of the Silent/Greatest Generation in the workforce, they are a small percentage of the working population as a whole. According to the Boston College Center for Work & Family, in 2008, only 10 percent of all workers were aged 63 or older. See <http://www.bc.edu/centers/cwf/research/publications/meta-elements/pdf/EBS%20Multi-Gen%20Presentation%20final.ppt> for additional information on this subject.
4. Information in this table has been drawn from several sources:
Hammill, G. (Winter/Spring 2005). Mixing and managing four generations of employees. *FDU Magazine Online*. Retrieved from <http://www.fdu.edu/newspubs/magazine/05ws/generations.htm>.
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5. Birth years for and duration of each generation vary significantly in the literature. While typical of many research reports, these figures are cited in:
Human Capital Institute. (2008). *Decoding generational differences: Getting back to work*. Washington, DC: Carolyn Sprague.
6. The 2009 NBES asked about each respondent's age, not his or her birth year. As a result, participants have been categorized into generations based on their age when the data was collected, i.e., July-August 2009.
7. Deal, J.J. *Generational difference in the workplace: Fact or fiction?* [PDF document]. Retrieved from Group of Eight Human Resources & Industrial Relations Conference Web site: <http://www.go8hrconference.monash.edu.au/docs/generational-differences.ppt>
8. Participants in the 2009 NBES were 18 years of age or older; currently employed at least 20 hours per week for their primary employer; and working for a company that employs at least two people. They were randomly selected to attain a representative national distribution. All interviews were conducted via telephone, and participants were assured that their individual responses to all survey questions would be confidential.
9. For example, in 2009, 88 percent of those who felt pressure to compromise standards also observed misconduct, but only 12 percent of those who did not feel pressure witnessed wrongdoing.
10. Griffen, M., & Davis, T. (2007). *Sourcing competitive advantage from organizational integrity: The hidden cost of misconduct*. Retrieved from https://www.celc.executiveboard.com/public/CELC_ResearchAlert.html
11. Between 2007 and 2009, respondents were asked about 15 specific behaviors, common to those two surveys. "Yes" respondents stated that they observed at least one of the behaviors in the previous 12 months.
12. E.g., Tyler, K. (January 2008). Generation gaps: Millennials may be out of touch with workplace behavior. *HR Magazine*. Johnson, J. & Lopes, J. (Spring 2008). The intergenerational workforce, revisited. *Organization Development Journal*.
13. Only Gen X non-managers have more negative perceptions of overall ethical culture than Gen Y managers.
14. Past research conducted by ERC has demonstrated the significant role that supervisors play in employees' work experience and commitment to ethics. Furthermore, research conducted as part of this study reveals that, compared to their perceptions of top management and of coworkers, perceptions of supervisors among younger workers are particularly positive, making them natural role models and sources of support. See Ethics Resource Center. (2008). *Reducing pressure to behave unethically: The role of leaders and coworkers*. Arlington, VA.

ABOUT NBES

The 2009 National Business Ethics Survey (NBES) is the sixth in a series of reports that began in 1994. NBES has grown into a mainstay of research on ethics in the American workplace.

NBES is the most exacting longitudinal research effort examining organizational ethics from the employee perspective. The long-term nature of the study is important because it provides context for national trends. NBES is the only longitudinal study that tracks the views of employees at all levels within organizations to reveal real-life views of what is happening within organizations and the ethics risks they face.

Download the initial 2009 NBES report at www.ethics.org/nbes.



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