

## Work experience and polytechnic students' expectations of working life

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### ABSTRACT

This study examined the influence of work experience on polytechnic students' expectations of working life, and the extent to which these expectations resemble known characteristics of Generation Y. The survey involved 147 polytechnic students (62.6% with and 37.4% without work experience). The results showed that their salary expectations were unrealistic. Most of the polytechnic students believed that they would find their first job through job advertisements or personal contacts but those with work experience were more likely to work for someone they knew. Both groups believed that qualification, English proficiency and personality are important in securing their first job but they considered family background to be irrelevant. The students with work experience were more correct in their assessment of the importance of work experience to their would-be employers. The results showed that the polytechnic students exhibited the characteristics of Generation Y, and there are no significant differences between the two groups. They expect their employers to guide them in their new job and to provide affirmative feedback. They also expect to engage in more group work than individual work. However, they have not given much thought to whether they would make sacrifices to meet project deadlines or whether they would be leaders or followers in their new workplace. The findings suggest that Generation X employers may have to accommodate to the expectations of their Generation Y employees, rather than expect them to fit into the old ways of working.

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## Introduction

Generation Y, also referred to as the “millennial generation” is generally understood as people born in or after 1980 (aged 45 or younger in the year 2015). Howe and Strauss (2000) define the millennial generation as those born between 1980 and 2002 (which makes them 13-35). There are some variations in the age ranges for Generation X and Y depending on scholars. For example, Thielfoldt and Scheef (2004) define the millennial generation as those born between 1977 and 1998 (aged 17-38), Generation X as those born between 1965 and 1976 (aged 39 to 50) and Baby Boomers as those born between 1946 and 1964 (aged 49-51). These ages are calculated for the year 2015. In this paper, Thielfoldt and Scheef’s age categorisation of the millennial generation will be used. For consistency, the term “Generation Y” will be used in this paper to refer to the millennial generation.

Because of their different life experiences, Generation Y may have different expectations of working life from Generation X. Some distinctive differences between Generations X and Y are described here to provide background information before expectations of working life is dealt with. Thielfoldt and Scheef describe Generation X as independent, resilient and adaptable and Generation Y as over-confident of their abilities. They also characterise the Generation X as people who reject rules, and dislike authority and rigidity but the Generation Y rewrite the rules. In terms of personal characteristics, Myers and Sadaghiani (2010) describe Generation Y as self-centered, unmotivated, disrespectful, and disloyal but more accepting of diversity and working in groups than previous generations because of an increased amount of group work in school and college.

When the generational cohort differences are carried into the workplace, the older employees who are either Baby Boomers or Generation X would feel uncomfortable with the new and younger Generation Y employees who have values and work habits which are distinctly different from theirs. Since older employees hold upper and middle management positions in the workplace, they may marginalise Generation Y until they conform (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010). Studies have been conducted on various aspects of work situations. For example, Ng, Schweitzer, and Lyons’ (2010) analysis of survey data from 23,413 millennial undergraduate university students from across Canada showed that they had realistic expectations of their first job and salary. However, different from the generation before them, the Generation Y expected rapid career advancement, opportunities to develop new skills and valued individualistic aspects of a job. They seek to have satisfaction in life outside of the workplace, which makes them very different from Generation X whose meaning in life often hinges on job satisfaction. Ng et al. (2010) also found some variation by gender, minority status and academic achievement but these explained a small proportion of the variance for career expectations and priorities. Besides this, Hershatter and Epstein (2010) also described technology as a “sixth sense” of Generation Y who interact with the world through technology. Hershatter and Epstein also described Generation Y as employees who expect their employers to accommodate to their needs because they have experienced malleability of institutions [including educational institutions and parents] have given in to their demands.

The different work practices, attitudes and expectations of Generation Y compared to those of the employers and older employees would give rise to problems of Generation Y employees leaving their jobs (Ng et al., 2010). Laird, Harvey, & Lancaster (2015) found that contrary to assumptions, Generation Y does not dislike job performance evaluation and it can be strategically used to bring about job satisfaction. From their review of existing literature on Generation Y and the workplace, Lyons and Kuron (2014) concluded that although there have been studies on personality, work values, attitudes, career expectations and experiences, teamwork, and leadership of Generation Y, the empirical evidence has been inconsistent and there is great variation in methodologies (see also Deal, Altman & Rogelberg, 2010). In addition, researchers are only beginning to study Generation Y's work life in the Malaysian setting. These research findings would be useful for employers as different expectations of Generation Y have an impact on the workplace. As Twenge and Campbell (2012) put it “[a]t a minimum, today's businesses need to at least understand the young generation – what challenges them what inspires them what motivates them – to engage successfully with the millennials” to reduce turnover (p. 11).

### **Purpose of study**

This study examined the influence of work experience on polytechnic students' expectations of working life, and the extent to which these expectations resemble known characteristics of Generation Y.

### **Method of study**

The participants of the study were 147 polytechnic students in the northern states in Malaysia: 87 (59.2%) female and 60 (40.8%) male students. Their English proficiency was average to low based on the SPM English scores with most of the students scoring A2 to C6 (4 with A1, 22 with A2, 27 with C3, 29 with C4, 22 with C5, 23 with C6, 9 with P7, 7 with P8 and 4 failed English).

The polytechnic students' expectations of working life were examined using 12 pairs of items. The items were formulated with reference to literature on the characteristics of the Generation Y (Appendix). For example, items 11 and 22 formed a pair. Item 11 (“I expect my employer to guide me to do my new job”); referred to characteristics of Generation Y whereas Item 22 (“I expect to use most of what I have learnt at polytechnic to do my new job”) referred to characteristics of Generation Y. In the analysis of means, the results for the pairs of items will be compared, that is, items 12 and 21, items 13 and 20 and so on. A 5-point Likert scale was used (1 – strongly disagree; 2 – disagree; 3 – have not thought about it; 4 – agree; 5 – strongly agree).

The questionnaire also elicited the students' background information: gender, race, parents' occupations, SPM English results, work experience (if any), expected salary, expected first job as well as the means by which they would use to secure their first job and which quality would earn them their job (qualification, English proficiency, work experience, personality, and family background). These results are presented as frequency and percentages.

### **Results and Discussion**

Out of 147 polytechnic students, 55 (37.4%) were without any work experience and 92 (62.6%) had worked before. For those who had worked before, the duration ranged from 1 to 8 years but a majority of them had worked for several months only.

***Expected salary for first job***

The first job the polytechnic students expected to get upon graduating with a diploma from the polytechnic included programmer, teacher, software developer and government jobs but some reported that they would open their own business. In the questionnaire, they were asked to give their expected salary for their first job after graduating with a polytechnic diploma. The results showed that polytechnic students with work experience had higher expectations (RM3140) than those without work experience (RM2578).

Their salary expectations were too high when compared to the results of a November 2011 survey conducted by top online recruitment firm, Jobstreet.com. The survey was conducted on 1,830 fresh graduates, of which 63% were from Klang Valley and 58% were from outside Klang Valley. The Jobstreet.com survey showed that the bachelor degree holders expected a salary level between RM1,800 and RM2,600 (73%) but only 54% received a salary within this range and another 35% received a salary below RM1,800. Diploma holders expected a salary level between RM1,200 and RM1,800 (67%), and 37% of them earned less than RM1,200. Based on the Jobstreet.com survey, the salary expectations of the polytechnic students, with or without work experience, were unrealistic.

***Means of getting their first job***

Work experience influenced some views on means of getting their first job. Table 1 shows that both groups of polytechnic students believed that they would secure their first job by responding to job advertisements – 74.5% of those without work experience and 68.5% of those with work experience reported the high likelihood of this happening.

Table 1. Percentages showing views of polytechnic students with and without work experience on means to secure their first job

How will you get the job?	No work experience (n=55)			With work experience (n=92)		
	Not likely	Not sure	Very likely	Not likely	Not sure	Very likely
By looking for job advertisements and sending a job application letter and CV.	1.8	23.6	74.5	8.7	23.9	68.5
By working for someone I know	7.3	52.7	40.0	6.5	38.0	55.4
By getting someone to introduce me to a company	7.3	30.9	61.8	6.5	34.8	58.7

\*Total may not add up to 100% because of rounding off

More of the polytechnic students with work experience believed that they would work for someone they knew (55.4% very likely) than those without work experience (40.0% very likely). While a majority of the students were not keen to work for family and friends (people they know), they did not mind getting someone to introduce them to the company.

The two groups of polytechnic students have similar views on the usefulness of personal contacts to secure their first job. The percentages of students who felt that they were “very likely” and “likely” to use this means of getting their first job were similar for both groups of students (about 60% and 33% respectively).

Considering the unemployment rate among graduates and diploma holders, the polytechnic students’ intention of using all means available to search for their first job is reasonable. Based on available statistics for the year 2012 released by the Higher Education Ministry, 24% of 184,581 graduates from universities, university colleges and polytechnics nationwide were unemployed (EduSpiral, 2013). Arts and Social Sciences graduates topped the list of unemployment, constituting 44.5 per cent of unemployed graduates, and the second were graduates from technical fields (27.7%). Science graduates came in third (16.49%). The Higher Education Ministry statistics showed that the unemployment rate was higher among the bachelor degree holders (12.2%) than diploma holders (3%) (EduSpiral, 2013).

***Expectations of qualities employers are looking for***

The polytechnic students were asked to indicate which of the five characteristics (qualification, English proficiency, work experience, personality, and family background) were important in helping them to get their first job. The results showed that polytechnic students with and without work experience were similar in some expectations of qualities employers are looking for.

Table 2. Frequency and percentages showing expectations of polytechnic students with and without work experience on qualities employers are looking for

Characteristics that will help them to get the first job	No work experience (n=55)		With work experience (n=92)		Total (n=147)	
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%
Qualification	55	100	92	100	147	100
Personality	50	90.91	86	93.48	136	92.52
English proficiency	50	90.91	84	91.30	134	91.16
Work experience	40	72.73	90	97.83	130	88.44
Family background	18	32.73	15	15.79	33	22.45

Table 2 shows that both groups of polytechnic students (with and without work experience) believed that their qualification was their most important asset to get their first job, followed by their personality and English proficiency. Both groups believed that family

background is not relevant but the percentage is slightly higher for those without work experience (32.73%) than those with work experience (22.45%). The marked difference is in their views on the importance of work experience. Almost all (97.83%) of the polytechnic students with work experience rated their work experience as important but only 72.73% of those without work experience did so.

Studies have shown that work experience is important to employers. Ooi and Ting's (2014) analysis of 105 job advertisements from newspapers and online sources showed that 60% mentioned work experience. Another study by Omar, Manaf, Mohd, Kassim, and Aziz (2012) also yielded similar results. Omar et al. (2012) analysed 300 job advertisements posted in Jobstreet.com in January to March 2011 and found that employers preferred to employ degree graduates with work experience. A majority of the advertisements were for graduates with at least a first degree and only 23.3% were for diploma holders and 6% were for certificate holders. Out of the 300 advertisements analysed, 40% required work experience, 26% stated that work experience was an advantage, 22% did not mention work experience and 12% did not state any conditions. They also found that work experience are more important for the construction industry, finance and engineering – and these are the industries that the polytechnic diploma graduates in this study will seek employment in.

### *Expectations of working life*

The results of the 2-tailed independent t-tests showed that polytechnic students with and without work experience are not significant different in their expectations of working life ( $p > .05$ ) (see Table 3).

Table 3. Means showing expectations of polytechnic students with and without work experience on working life

Items	Expectations of working life	Overall (n=147)	No work experience (n=55)	With work experience (n=92)
11	I expect my employer to guide me to do my new job.	4.15	4.20	4.12
22	I expect to use most of what I have learnt at polytechnic to do my new job.	4.16	4.14	4.16
15	I expect my employer to give me feedback on my work in progress.	4.20	4.18	4.22
18	I expect to finish my work before showing it to my employer for feedback.	4.05	4.00	4.08
16	I expect my employer to give positive comments on my work.	3.99	3.94	4.01
17	I expect to be scolded sometimes for bad work in my new job	3.52	3.61	3.46
14	I expect to work in groups in my new job.	3.90	3.87	3.92
19	I expect to do jobs on my own in my new job	3.50	3.71	3.38
12	I expect my employer to give me more time if I	3.74	3.76	3.73

	cannot finish a project on time.			
21	I expect to work at night and weekends to finish off projects to meet the deadline.	3.26	3.24	3.27
13	I expect to lead my colleagues in my work.	3.54	3.58	3.52
20	I expect to follow instructions of my colleague to do my work.	3.67	3.65	3.68

(1 – strongly disagree; 2 – disagree; 3 – have not thought about it; 4 – agree; 5 – strongly agree). Bolded means show that the means for the polytechnic students with work experience are higher

Three pairs of items have group means which are close to or above 4. The results show the polytechnic students have three characteristics which resemble Generation Y characteristics described in the literature:

1. They expect employers to guide them in their job although they will use knowledge and skills learnt from their diploma (Items 11 and 22);
2. They are more likely to expect constant feedback on work in progress rather than a summative feedback upon completion of the work (Items 15 and 18); and
3. They expect positive affirmation but have not given thought to whether they will get reprimanded on their work performance (Items 16 and 17).

The polytechnic students expected to use most of what they had learnt at polytechnic to do their new job but they depend their employer for constant guidance to carry out their job responsibilities. In this respect, the polytechnic students exhibited the characteristics of Generation Y. Generation Y expect their supervisors to give frequent feedback on their work performance to help them stay on track (Society for Human Resource Management, 2009). The guidance needed to be given in an affirmative manner rather than in the form of reprimand. These characteristics resemble what is known of the Generation Y who grew up with “helicopter parents” (Litzenberg, 2010, p. 409) hovering over them and monitoring their every move to make sure that they do things correctly. The parents reward them with praise and incentives when they perform well and encourage them when they do not. To Wilson and Gerber (2008), the Generation Y’s expectation for frequent feedback can be likened to how ATM receipts provide immediate feedback on account balance.

This is a stark contrast to Generation X who expect to perform a given task without referring to their supervisor. They use their available knowledge and skills to perform the task, and they may consult their peers to get advice, but they would not let their supervisor know that they face difficulties in carrying out the task because it reflects badly on them. Now the internet offers a place where a host of information can be obtained, and this allows Generation X to be more independent in carrying out their responsibilities. The Generation X who has grown up as "latchkey" kids are independent, resilient and adaptable (Thielfoldt & Scheef, 2004). Generation X expects an evaluation of how well they have carried out the task upon its completion, much like how a mark or grade is given upon completion of a coursework assignment or examination. They also expect more reprimands than affirmation because Generation X were brought up by parents who were critical of them. Because of these differences between Generations X and Y, the new Generation Y employees’ expectations of constant and positive guidance may not be met as their supervisors and employers expect them to figure out how to do the job, as they

themselves did. As a result of the different approaches to work, productivity may be compromised.

Next Table 3 shows another three pairs of items with means between 3 (have not thought about it) and 4 (agree). The analysis revealed the following characteristics about the Generation Y polytechnic students participating in the study:

1. They expect more group work than individual work in their new job (Items 14 and 19);
2. They do not know whether they would make sacrifices to meet deadlines but they expect leeway and project deadline extensions (Items 12 and 21); and
3. They have not given much thought to whether they would be mainly leaders or team members in the new workplace but are inclined to think they would lead (Items 13 and 20).

The present education system, whether in Malaysia or in other countries, tends towards group work as a move towards student-centred teaching rather than individual work which is associated with teacher-centred teaching. Having grown up working on group projects, the Generation Y is used working in teams and sharing the responsibility of work completion. Generation Y likes teamwork because it is fun and they can avoid taking responsibility for risk and mistakes (Alsop, Nicholson, & Miller, 2009; Gursoy, Maier, & Chi, 2008). Thielfoldt and Scheef (2004) recommends mentoring of the Generation Y in groups because they work well in team situations; situations which allow them “to act as each other's resources or peer mentors”.

Similarly, through the education system the Generation Y has been socialised into thinking that they would be leaders and team members. In the emphasis on leadership as an important soft skill, university students are trained to have the following skills:

- Knowledge of basic leadership theories
- Ability to lead projects
- Ability to understand and take the roles of both the team leader and team member
- Ability to supervise team members

The teamwork skills emphasised in the modules for soft-skill development are:

- Ability to build good relationships, interact and work effectively with others to achieve the same objective
- Ability to understand and take the roles of both the team leader and team member
- Ability to know and respect the attitudes, behaviours and beliefs of others
- Ability to contribute to planning and streamlining of group outcomes
- Responsibility for group decisions

These descriptions are given by the Department of Higher Education, Malaysia (*Modul Pembangunan Kemahiran Insaniah untuk IPT Malaysia* [Human Development Skills Module for Malaysian Institutions of Higher Learning], n.d.). For the teamwork to produce desired outcomes, members need to be able to work independently to do their part because not all work

can be performed as a group. In Ooi and Ting's (2015) study of 105 job advertisements in newspapers and jobstreet.com, they found that teamwork skill is the second most frequently mentioned soft skill in job advertisements. To the job advertisers, both ability to work independently and as a group are important. Ooi and Ting reasoned that if certain group members do not do their part, the other team members have to cover for the non-performing members and this would compromise group outcomes.

The last characteristic of polytechnic students from the Generation Y that is described here is the extent of their commitment to meet project deadlines (Items 12 and 21). Generation X employers and supervisors expect their colleagues to make sacrifices to make project deadlines but Generation Y may not share their view of job commitment. To Generation Y, a balance between work life and personal life is important (Carless & Wintle, 2007; Smola & Sutton 2002). They do not give up personal time easily to finish work. They also expect more flexible working conditions and hours (Society for Human Resource Management, 2009). The polytechnic students in this study expressed tendencies towards this although a proportion of them have not given much thought to the sacrifices they would make for the sake of company targets.

To sum up, the polytechnic students in this study exhibited characteristics known of Generation Y in Western settings, particularly in their expectations for frequent and positive feedback and guidance, and preference for group work over individual work, but they generally have not given much thought to how much extra time outside of office hours they would put in complete work to meet deadlines. They expect to both lead and be team members in group projects. These are characteristics of Generation Y employees that Generation X employers have to be prepared for to make the best of the work situation for good productivity.

## **Conclusion**

The study on Generation Y's expectations of working life showed that their expectations resembled characteristics of Generation Y described by researchers elsewhere (e.g. Gursoy et al., 2008; Hershatter, & Epstein, 2010; Myers & Sadaghiani 2010; Thielfoldt & Scheef, 2004), showing that the polytechnic students in their early twenties are not that different from those elsewhere in their work approach. They expect their employers to guide them in their new job and to provide affirmative feedback on their work in progress. They also expect to engage in more group work than individual work. However, they have not given much thought to whether they would make sacrifices to meet project deadlines or whether they would be leading or participating as followers in their new workplace. Despite differences in setting, it seems that the polytechnic students were showing the characteristics of their generational cohort, probably due to influences of the social media and mass media as well as parenting styles and educational practices which had changed since the time of Generation X. In addition, this study also showed that work experience had made the polytechnic students more aware of the realities of work situations, including sacrificing personal time to complete work tasks to meet company targets and deadlines.

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## Appendix

### Polytechnic Graduates and Working Life

#### A. Background

1. Gender: [ ] Female [ ] Male
2. Race \_\_\_\_\_
3. SPM English results: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
4. Father's job: \_\_\_\_\_
5. Mother's job: \_\_\_\_\_

#### B. The first job after graduation

6. Have you worked before?  
[ ] No  
[ ] Yes. What was your job? \_\_\_\_\_  
How long did you work? \_\_\_\_\_ year \_\_\_\_\_ months
7. What will you work as after graduation? \_\_\_\_\_
8. How much do you expect to earn? RM \_\_\_\_\_
9. How will you get the job? Please circle your responses.
  - a. By looking for job advertisements and sending a job application letter and CV.  
1                      2                      3  
*Not likely*        *Not sure*        *Very likely*
  - b. By working for someone I know.  
1                      2                      3  
*Not likely*        *Not sure*        *Very likely*
  - c. By getting someone to introduce me to a company.  
1                      2                      3  
*Not likely*        *Not sure*        *Very likely*
10. Which of the following will help you to get the job? Please tick.
  - a. Qualification [ ] Yes [ ] No
  - b. English proficiency [ ] Yes [ ] No
  - c. Work experience [ ] Yes [ ] No
  - d. My personality [ ] Yes [ ] No
  - e. My family background [ ] Yes [ ] No

### C. Working life

Please circle your responses.

11. I expect my employer to guide me to do my new job.

1                      2                      3                      4                      5  
*Strongly disagree    Disagree    Have not thought about it    Agree    Strongly agree*

12. I expect my employer to give me more time if I cannot finish a project on time.

1                      2                      3                      4                      5  
*Strongly disagree    Disagree    Have not thought about it    Agree    Strongly agree*

13. I expect to lead my colleagues in my work.

1                      2                      3                      4                      5  
*Strongly disagree    Disagree    Have not thought about it    Agree    Strongly agree*

14. I expect to work in groups in my new job.

1                      2                      3                      4                      5  
*Strongly disagree    Disagree    Have not thought about it    Agree    Strongly agree*

15. I expect my employer to give me feedback on my work in progress.

1                      2                      3                      4                      5  
*Strongly disagree    Disagree    Have not thought about it    Agree    Strongly agree*

16. I expect my employer to give positive comments on my work.

1                      2                      3                      4                      5  
*Strongly disagree    Disagree    Have not thought about it    Agree    Strongly agree*

17. I expect to be scolded sometimes for bad work in my new job.

1                      2                      3                      4                      5  
*Strongly disagree    Disagree    Have not thought about it    Agree    Strongly agree*

18. I expect to finish my work before showing it to my employer for feedback.

1                      2                      3                      4                      5  
*Strongly disagree    Disagree    Have not thought about it    Agree    Strongly agree*

19. I expect to do jobs on my own in my new job.

1                      2                      3                      4                      5  
*Strongly disagree    Disagree    Have not thought about it    Agree    Strongly agree*

20. I expect to follow instructions of my colleague to do my work.

1                      2                      3                      4                      5  
*Strongly disagree    Disagree    Have not thought about it    Agree    Strongly agree*

21. I expect to work at night and weekends to finish off projects to meet the deadline.

1                      2                      3                      4                      5  
*Strongly disagree    Disagree    Have not thought about it    Agree    Strongly agree*

22. I expect to use most of what I have learnt at polytechnic to do my new job.

1                      2                      3                      4                      5  
*Strongly disagree    Disagree    Have not thought about it    Agree    Strongly agree*