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Commitment and Employee Development: Comparing Generations X and Y

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COMMITMENT AND EMPLOYEE DEVELOPMENT: COMPARING
GENERATIONS X AND Y

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Psychology

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Science

by

Adam C. Mahoney

August 2015

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The Designated Thesis Committee Approves the Thesis Titled
COMMITMENT AND EMPLOYEE DEVELOPMENT: COMPARING
GENERATIONS X AND Y

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ABSTRACT

This study compared the relationship between organizational commitment (OC) and employee development between Generation X and Generation Y employees. More specifically, this study addressed affective organizational commitment, continuance organizational commitment, and normative organizational commitment. Substantial research has indicated that Generation Y employees are generally less affectively committed to their employers than previous generations. Research has shown that employee professional development increases overall job satisfaction and reduces turnover. It was hypothesized that Generation Y employees would generally show lower levels of each OC component than more senior, Generation X, employees. It was also hypothesized that the difference in OC between Generation X and Y would be neutralized when sufficient professional developmental opportunities were offered. Participants, solicited through several social networking sites, were asked to complete a survey to assess their attitudes toward OC and professional development opportunities. Results partially supported the hypotheses. Generation Y participants had lower continuance commitment than Generation X participants, but no significant differences were found in the other two OC components. Moreover, professional development had a stronger positive relationship with affective and normative commitment for Generation X than Generation Y employees. Thus, Generation X employees who found professional development to be important had greater affective and normative commitment than Generation Y employees. Study limitations and implications for the workplace are discussed.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
LITERATURE REVIEW	5
The Generational Concept	6
Generations in the Workplace.....	10
Organizational Commitment (OC)	20
Employee Development.....	25
METHOD	30
Participants.....	30
Procedure	32
Measures	33
RESULTS	35
DISCUSSION	45
Limitations and Future Research	49
Conclusion	51
APPENDIX A.....	58
APPENDIX B	59

LIST OF TABLES

TABLE 1: Demographic Information of Generation X and Y Participants (in Percentages)	31
TABLE 2: Means, Standard Deviations, Cronbach's Alpha Reliabilities (in bold on diagonals), and Correlations of Main Study Variables	36
TABLE 3: Model Summary for Each Organizational Commitment Component Regressed on Generation, Importance of Formal Development Opportunities, and Their Interaction	40

LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE 1: Interaction between Generation and Professional Development on Affective Commitment	41
FIGURE 2: Interaction between Generation and Professional Development on Normative Commitment	43
FIGURE 3: Interaction between Generation and Professional Development on Continuance Commitment	44

INTRODUCTION

This is the first time in history that four different generations have occupied the workforce at the same time (Lancaster & Stillman, 2012). This unique dynamic has brought generational issues into the limelight because Traditionalist, Baby Boomer, X, and Y generations must learn to coexist, understand the unique differences that set them apart, and resist the temptation to pass judgment on each other. The oldest generational group, known as “Traditionalists,” was born after WWI through the end of WWII, and was followed by the “Baby Boomers,” born between WWII and the start of the Vietnam War. The next generational cohort, “Generation X,” was born from the start of the Vietnam War to 1980. Lastly, “Generation Y,” more commonly referred to as “Millennials,” is the most recent generation and its members were born between 1981 and 2001 (Lieber, 2010). The Baby Boomers, followed by Generation X, are currently the two largest generations and most populous in the workplace, as many of the Traditionalists have retired or are in the process of ending their careers.

Each of these generations has vastly different expectations about what the workplace should offer, how they should behave as employees, how they should be managed, and how they should manage others (Johnson & Johnson, 2010). An example of the ensuing inter-generational conflicts is when more senior workers, such as Baby Boomers, complain that their younger Generation Y co-workers are difficult to interact with, are entitled, and are too service-focused (Deal & Altman, 2010). However, this would not be the first instance where one generation has pointed the finger at another; even Traditionalists once described Baby Boomers in similar ways when they first

entered the workforce (Deal & Altman, 2010). The historic and enduring nature of this conflict underscores the importance of understanding generational dynamics in the workplace.

Many of the senior workers who shaped the modern workplace have reservations about sharing the same space with members of Generation Y. In fact, an estimated 60% of the HR professionals in large companies report inter-generational conflicts between younger and older employees (Eisner, 2005). A poll taken by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM, 2011) shows this conflict remains an issue as a quarter of HR professionals reported “substantial levels of intergenerational conflict” within their teams. According to SHRM’s report, managers indicated concern over their younger coworker’s inappropriate attire and poor work ethic. This latest generation has shown itself to be “utterly challenging and confusing to the global workforce, as well as their supervisors and managers” (Lipkin & Perrymore, 2009, p. 16). More fundamental to this study is how difficult it has been for organizations to “retain Generation Y workers because they have a tendency to change jobs more frequently than their baby boomer or Generation X counterparts” (Ainsworth, 2009, p. 4). This stigma is now associated with Generation Y and has raised questions about how committed they are to their employers.

Organizational commitment (OC) is an important organizational variable to study as research shows it relates to employees’ turnover intentions and other performance variables in the workplace (Irving, Coleman, & Cooper, 1997). OC also relates to employees’ reactions to the demands of global competition and the adoption of technology in the workplace (Meyer & Allen, 1997). However, global competition and

automated technology have both changed the way institutions organize their human capital and have resulted in the loss of domestic jobs, because more work is outsourced for cheaper labor abroad and technology continues to replace tasks once performed by people (Meyer & Allen, 1997). The repercussions of globalization, increases in corporate mergers and acquisitions, and the laying off of workers even during times of profitability have left many disheartened about being too committed to their employers (Mowday, 1999). In essence, these market trends have created a culture where employees resist becoming attached to their employers in order to protect themselves from the harsh reality of modern business (Meyer & Allen, 1997).

The fiscal consequences associated with high turnover, a symptom of a lack of OC, can also be substantial. In fact, SHRM estimated that it costs an average of \$7,123 to hire an employee, which for a business that loses 48 workers annually, for example, would translate into turnover costs exceeding \$340,000 each year (Gross, 2009). In drawing attention to the retention and engagement issues employers are experiencing with Generation Y employees, Lipkin and Perrymore (2009) explain that it can cost three to six times what an employee makes to hire and train someone new for the same job. This statistic underlines the importance of maintaining OC to avoid extraordinary retention costs and also raises the more practical question, what can employers do to hold on to their Generation Y talent?

This study focuses on the attitudes of Generation Y employees toward OC and how these attitudes change when employers offer their employees sufficient development opportunities. The modern economy demands that if a business does not continue to

learn it will inevitably fall behind. Conversely, a business will only learn if the people in charge are learning themselves (Sarvadi, 2005). Recent studies also substantiate this philosophy and demonstrate that development opportunities can reduce the likelihood of employees engaging in neglectful behaviors and help decrease turnover (Pajo, Coetzer, & Guenole, 2010). The positive relationship between development and OC could greatly benefit employers seeking to retain their Generation Y employees.

The primary goals of this study were to determine (1) whether Generation Y employees would demonstrate lower levels of OC when compared to Generation Y employees and (2) if formal development opportunities help to increase OC. Ultimately, this study sought to uncover whether the perception that many senior workers seem to have about their younger colleagues' lack of commitment is grounded in reality.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Perceived organizational support (POS) theory suggests that “in order to meet socio-emotional needs and to assess the organization’s readiness to reward increased efforts, employees form general beliefs concerning how much the organization values their contributions and cares about their well being” (Rhoades, Eisenberger, & Armeli, 2001, p. 42). In other words, employees tend to personify organizations with humanlike characteristics, and actions taken by agents who represent the organization (i.e., management) are seen as those of the organization itself rather than of a single individual. How employees are treated is interpreted as a direct indication of how the organization views them (Rhoades et al., 2001). The social exchange model implies that an individual will look to respond in kind when he or she has been given something of value (Benson, 2006). When viewed through the perspective of the social exchange model, increased POS creates an obligation within employees to reciprocate favorable treatment, which then manifests itself in a greater desire to care for the welfare of the organization and work toward attaining organizational goals (Rhodes et al., 2001).

The present study extends POS and social exchange concepts by focusing on employee professional development as a proxy for POS and OC as a proxy for the desired organizational outcome. Additionally, recognizing changing demographics and experiences, the present study examines generational differences in OC and argues for invariance in the relationship between the generations and OC when professional development is considered. The following literature review provides a historical background on the generational concept with a special focus on the lives and experiences

of Generations X and Y to provide context for how these employees may have different attitudes toward OC. In addition, research on the construct of OC, how it is measured, and its significance for the employee experience are also reviewed. Lastly, this literature review also highlights the impact of employee development opportunities on employee commitment levels and the increasingly important role they play in retaining talent.

The Generational Concept

The first step in better understanding generational issues and conflict is to take a closer look at the very concept of generations itself. Researchers have established date ranges when each generation begins and ends, but these ranges appear to be largely inconsistent when examined across different bodies of research. Thus, these thresholds are only guidelines to assist in identifying to which generational group one might belong. In other words, there is no specific age range or set of dates that unequivocally determines generational affiliation (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002). Nonetheless, several generational definitions are based on significant fluctuations in birthrate (Johnson, 2010). There is also variation in what the term “generation” means. This study defines generation as a group of people born within a defined series of birth years and who share attitudes and values shaped by their socio-cultural environment, as well as pivotal events that occurred during their formative years (Leiter, Jackson, & Shaughnessy, 2009).

It helps to adopt a kind of “ageless thinking” and focus on how each generation experiences a shared, common history (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002). As the events, icons, and conditions experienced in the developmental years have shaped people’s identities, and thus how they interpret the world, each generation forms a culture of its

own (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002). Other factors that influence generational differences are personal, group, and generation signposts, as well as what are described as “life laws” (Johnson, 2010). When one considers these factors, which are all described in greater detail later in this section, it is easy to understand how employees from different generational backgrounds might clash in an increasingly diverse workplace.

Icons. Icons influence the culture of a generation. Icons can include people, places, or anything that serves as a reference point for a group of people (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002). Martin Luther King Jr., the city of Selma in Alabama, and passenger buses are icons of the Selma Bus Boycott and to this day continue to define the turmoil of the Civil Rights Movement for an entire generation of Americans. Other examples of generational icons are the Allied invasion of France during World War II, the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, and the explosion of the Space Shuttle Challenger (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002). It is important to acknowledge the historical significance of these iconic events and the perpetual effects they have on people who experience them.

Conditions. When exploring the composition of a generation, it is also important to consider the political, economic, and social conditions that influenced the environment during the formative years of a cohort (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002). For example, the Cold War influenced the lives of many Baby Boomers and this generation was defined by the looming threat of Communism and the Soviet Union, the constant fear of a nuclear holocaust, and the now classic spy and espionage publications that originated from this time. This very same chapter in American history was little more than a high school

history lesson for the younger Generation Y, born only several years prior to the breakup of the Soviet Union. Generation Y never lived to see a divided Berlin or live in constant fear of a nuclear holocaust as did the Baby Boomers before them. Traditionalists who lived through the Great Depression were deeply affected by the dire economic conditions of the time and many born between 1922 and 1945 feared not being able to put food on the table for their families, which had a lasting effect on their lives and consequently, their perspective on the world (Hoffman, 2008). The Cold War and the Great Depression are largely political and economic in nature, but there were also important social conditions such as significant changes in divorce rates and in the number of single-parent families, which can impact the identity of a generation (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002).

Signposts. Highly individualistic or individual-based experiences are referred to as personal signposts, or life events that profoundly contribute to our identities and have the potential to influence our decisions, reactions, attitudes, and behaviors (Johnson, 2010). These can be positive or negative and can change as people mature. An example is a child returning to an empty home after a day at school because his or her parent(s) are working. This was a common occurrence for many in Generation X who became known as “latchkey kids,” because many of their parents were focused on careers and were often away from home (Johnson, 2010).

Signposts are also seen at the group level and can be especially powerful when compounded in numbers by our associations with other people (Johnson, 2010). For example, African Americans may never experience racism themselves, but the feelings they hold toward race and prejudice will likely be influenced, shaped, and molded by the

experiences of friends and family members who have endured racial prejudice in their lifetime. These feelings and emotions are further intensified when a group signpost is associated with one of a personal nature such as experiencing racism oneself after a friend, family member, or coworker also experiences the same.

Signposts are also generational and are then defined as events or cultural phenomena that are specific to a generation (Johnson, 2010). Generational signposts influence our ideas about organizational commitment, work ethic, and how a job is defined as well done (Johnson, 2010). A signpost for Traditionalist workers who endured the Great Depression is having a tremendous sense of normative commitment toward their employers, as those lucky enough to have a job during this trying time in history felt obliged to remain with their employer (Johnson, 2010). Generational signposts often serve as bonding mechanisms that bring groups of people together through shared experiences. Conversely, they can also create conflict when someone has not experienced an event or signpost in the same way as the majority (Johnson, 2010).

Life laws. The last factor reviewed to understand the fundamentals of generational differences is life laws. Life laws are events that have social, political, or economic influence, but occur before someone is mature enough to remember how things were otherwise (Johnson, 2010). For example, members of Generation X and Y were not alive to experience how schools were before the “*Oliver L. Brown et al. vs. The Board of Education of Topeka (KS) et al.*” 1954 Supreme Court case that ended racial segregation of schools. Traditionalists and Baby Boomers lived through this landmark ruling and remember life before desegregation, but Generation X and Y simply understand

desegregation purely in a theoretical context as a life law and do not remember society being any different. Life laws are important because they help explain how younger generations take for granted the struggles of those prior to them, which can then influence how people across different generations view each other.

Together, icons, conditions, signposts, and life laws mold the attitudes and values that people bring to work everyday and account for the “generation gaps,” which might result in the inter-generational conflict between co-workers that managers and employers seek to resolve (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002). The consequences of these gaps and the conflict that follows might be disgruntled employees and frustrated supervisors, often after a member of one generation uses his or her own lens to pass judgment on the faults of another. This is a phenomenon known as “generational myopia” and it presents as much of a challenge as it is convenient to ignore because many assume that everyone sees the world in the same context (Johnson, 2010). After all, most experience the same critical stages of birth, being educated, finding work, getting married, raising a family, working, retiring, and death. Although everyone experiences many of these stages, no one approaches them in the same way or with the same mindset because of each individual’s unique and generation-specific signposts, icons, and conditions. To help bridge these gaps, we must develop a better understanding of the characteristics of different generations.

Generations in the Workplace

There are currently four generations occupying the modern workplace. This is a historic time, as never before have so many different generations existed in the workplace

at once. There are several reasons for this which include but are not limited to delayed retirement, mid-life career changes, as well as job re-entry (Carver & Candela, 2008).

The challenge this poses is that each generational cohort differs in their expectations of how they should behave, manage their subordinates, and perhaps most importantly, manage themselves (Johnson, 2010). Even though the primary focus of this study is on Generations X and Y, the unique and contemporary nature of this challenge is also why all four of these generations are outlined in this next section.

Traditionalists. The Traditionalists were born between 1922 and 1945 and are roughly between 62 and 85 years old. This group is also labeled the “silent generation” and is credited as being the “brick builders” of corporate culture; this generation remains a substantial demographic in the modern workforce (Lieber, 2010). Many have been or are currently serving as executives in some of the most well-established organizations in the country (Leibow, 2009). As of 2010, there were more than one million workers who are 75 years or older in the United States (Lieber, 2010). As recently as 2009, this generational cohort held three-quarters of the total national wealth (Leibow, 2009). Traditionalists are generally inclined to follow the rules and show great respect for authority as well as a strong sense of patriotism (Leibow, 2009). This is to be expected given that their lives have been shaped by some of the most significant, profound historical events of the 20th century, such as the Great Depression, the Golden Age of Radio, World War II, the Korean War, and the rise of labor unions (Lieber, 2010).

Baby Boomers. The Traditionalists paved the way for the Baby Boomers who were born between 1946 and 1966 (Hoffman, 2008). This generation was raised in a

prosperous postwar economy where the availability of opportunities influenced their characteristically optimistic nature (Leiter, 2010). Baby Boomers are often pegged as rebels forced to conform to societal norms, which contrasts with their parent's tendency to respect authority and follow the rules. Some defining characteristics and values for this generation are a strong need for personal satisfaction, achieving high levels of success, and external recognition of their accomplishments (Leiter, 2009). In terms of historical icons, Baby Boomers lived through the Cuban Missile Crisis, the first moon landing, the JFK assassination, the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights Movement, Woodstock, and the radio replacing television as a communication standard (Lieber, 2010).

Generation X. Generation X followed the Baby Boomers. Generation X was born between 1965 and 1980 (Hoffman, 2008). Members of this generation tend to show little respect for title, rank, or position, but a great deal of respect for accomplishment. They also possess a strong desire to make individual contributions as opposed to work in teams. Also paramount is the need to balance work with their personal lives (Johnson, 2010). However, perhaps most important to this study is that Generation X was the first generation labeled as disloyal to their employers. This was largely due to witnessing their Baby Boomer parents laid off after a lifetime of hard work and dedication during the economic downturn of the 1990s (Johnson). Generation X was the first to grow up watching Sesame Street and playing video games, which later translated into them seeking engaging, fast-paced work. This generation was also greatly influenced by the widespread use of computers, the Space Shuttle Challenger disaster, the downsizing of

corporate America, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the dawn of MTV (Lieber, 2010).

Generation Y. The latest generational cohort is Generation Y, which includes young adults born between 1981 and 2000 (Hoffman, 2008). The term “Generation Y” is one of several names used to describe this cohort; others include Millennials, Nexters, Echo Boomers, the Net Generation, and the Recession Generation, which suggests that the identity of this generation will continue to evolve as more young adults begin to work and continue to define themselves (Lieber, 2010). Generation Y is estimated to be 70 million strong, which represents approximately 20 percent of the U.S. population and makes this the largest generation since the Baby Boomers peaked after World War II (Himmelberg, 2007). It is estimated this generation will make up roughly 75% of the global workforce within the next decade (Hoffman & Lublin, 2014). Millennials are also the most racially and ethnically diverse in U.S. history and when compared to when the previous three generations were in their 20s and early 30s, more Millennials have received a college education yet are single, and do not have children (McLeigh & Boberiene, 2014).

Generational links and conflict. The Echo Boomer nickname for Generation Y refers to how this generation repeated or echoed the rapid increase in birthrates last seen in their Baby Boomer parents immediately following the end of World War II (Johnson, 2010). With a near 50 percent divorce rate, Baby Boomers who had already started a first family where the relationship ended in divorce were working on their second family. Meanwhile, those who had postponed raising children during the 1960s and 1970s to

focus on their careers were reaching their mid-thirties in the 1980s and also began to “settle down” and start families of their own. These trends formed Generation Y and are significant to the genetic makeup of this cohort as many Baby Boomer parents who avoided having children earlier in life to climb the corporate ladder were determined to raise their children better than their parents had raised them and actually possessed the financial resources to do so (Johnson, 2010). Many Baby Boomer parents who already started their first families that ended in divorce also wanted a second chance to rectify mistakes made in their first marriages (Johnson, 2010). This strong and deliberate desire of parents to procreate, also given the availability of contraceptives and abortions, resulted in Generation Y being the “most wanted generation” (Glass, 2007, p. 100).

Many Baby Boomer parents who raised Generation Y children in the 1980s and 1990s dedicated themselves completely to rearing their children and providing everything they never had. The term “latchkey kid” defined the absent and removed parenting styles that many in Generation X experienced during their adolescence but has quickly been replaced with new terms such as “soccer mom,” “stay-at-home dad,” and “helicopter parent,” which describe parents highly involved in the lives of their children (Johnson, 2010). This increased level of involvement was seen in parents taking time off work to shuttle their children around to a host of after school recreational events ranging from soccer practice, band practice, to extra-curricular tutoring. It is also common for parents of Generation Y children to intercede when they perceive that a teacher, coach, or college admission counselor has been unfair toward or hard on their child(ren). This dramatic shift in parenting occurred in less than a decade (Johnson, 2010).

Although the increased parental involvement that is now a quintessential characteristic of Generation Y is generally considered favorable to the more absent parenting style that defined Generation X, it has also sparked concern about the attitudes and behaviors of Millennials as they enter the workplace (Johnson, 2010). Participating in excessive extracurricular activities has also been linked to negative outcomes, such as increased anxiety, particularly performance anxiety (Johnson, 2010). This results from children obsessing over how well they are doing in any given task as well as frustration and anger when their performance does not measure up to their peers. Although parents of Generation Y children encouraged them to participate in as many activities as possible to gain a competitive edge in applying for college, this has also likely contributed to many in this generation requiring continuous, positive feedback from their supervisors to affirm job performance. Having participated in many activities during adolescence could also very well explain why more than half of workers in their 20s prefer working at companies that offer volunteer opportunities (Trunk, 2007).

It is likely that some of the pressures of over-involvement were likely counterbalanced with this unprecedented parental involvement (Johnson, 2010). The parents of Generation Y were the first ones to take responsibility for the happiness of their children and have therefore earned the label of “helicopter parenting,” as they were not only involved, but some suggest excessively involved (Johnson, 2010). For example, some parents complete homework for their busy children or argue with teachers over their children’s low grades on assignments. It has become commonplace for college administrators and HR managers to field phone calls from disgruntled parents calling on

behalf of their young adult children (Glass, 2007). This parenting style has also redefined how young adults approach work and it is common for members of Generation Y to pause on accepting a job offer until they are able to consult with their parents, for example (Johnson, 2010). Moreover, more than half of recent college graduates return to their parents' home after earning their diploma, which helps secure an even stronger platform of parental support until the young adults find the "perfect" job opportunity (Trunk, 2007).

The single most significant factor contributing to the optimism and self-assurance of Generation Y, also related to increased parental involvement, is how Generation Y has been nurtured and pampered with a wide range of activities from volunteering, traveling, and sports games ever since their infancy (Lancaster & Stillman, 2010). This parental safety net protected and gave comfort to Generation Y through major national tragedies, such as the shootings at Columbine High School followed by Virginia Tech and perhaps most notably, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 (Johnson, 2010). It also resulted in Generation Y being both high-performance and high-maintenance as the product of the most child-centric time in history (Armour, 2005). After being brought up by their parents, these young adults expect to be told exactly how they are performing at work, which means that for this generation, receiving regular feedback from supervisors is critical to their sense of job satisfaction (Armour, 2005). In some ways, managers take on the role of parents for millennial employees as they leave home and transition into the workforce (Thompson & Gregory, 2012). Managers can anticipate that their younger

employees will actively seek relationships with them where trust, openness, and honesty are not only valued, but they are expected (Johnson, 2010).

The desire to build strong relationships at work mirrors the sociability of Generation Y as a whole. This generation tends to be highly sociable and interested in the friendships that can develop in the workplace (Johnson, 2010). A survey conducted by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) asked students to rank the most important employment attributes when choosing a new job and found that behind advancement opportunities, job security, and insurance packages, young adults wanted friendly coworkers (Johnson, 2010). This is probably, in part, an outcome of “helicopter parenting,” but also of growing up participating in a host of group activities ranging from team-based sports to going to the mall with a group of friends to even group dating. Another aspect of the high degree of sociability exhibited by Generation Y is that this generation is the first to have fully embraced technology starting from childhood, which has allowed them to use their technological savvy to reach out and establish relationships with others through the exploding social networking phenomenon. A Peanut Lab survey found that 68 percent of Generation Y participants visited a social networking site, such as Friendster, MySpace, or Facebook at least once a day, which amounts to some 48 million people connecting with their friends through computers and smart phones everyday (Johnson, 2010).

Although Millennials have been shown to be sociable and technologically sophisticated, they have also found it difficult to understand the reality that their professional success often hinges upon their ability to successfully interact with older

workers. Workforce demographics are dramatically changing with older workers remaining on the job longer, which means that college graduates often find themselves working side-by-side with Baby Boomers (Armour, 2005). Not only have more senior workers already been shaped by a lifetime that is much different from those led by younger Millennials but they often perceive the degree of confidence exhibited by many younger employees as a lack of respect for them and their experience, which contributes to inter-generational conflict (Armour, 2005). This further emphasizes the reality that intergenerational conflict in the workplace is a real issue and managers will need to strive to understand and connect with Generation Y in order to exploit their full potential.

The increased level of attention that Generation Y children received from their parents throughout their childhood has certainly resulted in this generational cohort being especially aware of their self-worth, which means that they are not shy about changing their employers and are unlikely to respond well to traditional command-and-control management techniques that remain popular in many organizations (Armour, 2005). Walker (2007) cited Peter Sheahan, expert on generational issues as having said, “Generation Y who have been raised to believe that their private agendas drive their public performance will clearly need to be ‘managed’ in a much more sophisticated way than previous generations” and that, “Generation Y has been played up to their entire life, often with money and material things... They know their value, and they know they have options” (p. 148). Another study on workplace generational differences found that younger employees “may seek out work opportunities that supply freedom and autonomy and may be prepared to leave the organization if these needs are not met” (Cennamo &

Gardner, 2008, p. 903). A well-respected executive coach also commented that, “Generation Y employees will not wait around for what they want and will simply leave if they don’t get it” (Buik, 2008, p. 9).

The criticism and condemnation of Millennials and their attitudes toward work has been strong but Generation Y is not the first generation thought to be uncommitted to their employers. According to the Catalyst (2005), Generation X had also been stereotyped as serial job-hoppers who were only in it for themselves and did not desire a long-term relationship with their employers. Wagman and VanZante (2004) further explained, “[Generation] Xers will stick with a company under certain conditions, but their experiences have proved that the old workplace bargain of loyalty in exchange for security is obsolete” (p. 34). Millennial employee’s heightened sense of self-worth, desire to find fulfillment in work, and constant need for a stimulating work environment have created a serious challenge for organizations struggling to hire and maintain these young employees (Armour, 2005). These characteristics appear to have defined many millennial employees and are also why the present study postulates that Generation Y has broadened the gap in attitudes toward commitment even further when compared to the previous Generation X.

It is also important to note that the past few years have been shown to be especially toilsome for younger Millennials who are just now entering the workforce following what is now known as the Great Recession of 2008. This global recession saw unemployment and mortgage default rates soar and bank loans plummet (Debevec, Schewe, Madden, & Diamond, 2013). Many young adults, somewhere between 17 – 23

years old, have found it very difficult to find gainful employment in the post-recovery economy (Debevec et al., 2013). To make matters even worse, wages have been lower for younger employees after the recession than they were before, even for those who earned a four-year college degree, an achievement that has long been a prerequisite for a successful and lucrative career (McLeigh & Boberiene, 2014). The rising cost of higher education has also beleaguered Millennials who have found themselves racked with debt after graduation, which has made it harder to establish themselves and achieve milestones such as buying a home and starting a family. In fact, over 70% of students who earned a bachelor degree in 2014 graduated college with student loan debt averaging over \$30,000 (McLeigh & Boberiene, 2014). It may then make even more sense that Generation Y employees would feel less committed to employers given that the current job market has been anything but receptive to them (Thompson & Gregory, 2012).

Organizational Commitment (OC)

In exploring organizational commitment across the generations, it is necessary to provide background on the construct of OC, the implications it has in the workplace, and how it is measured. The early research on organizational behavior found commitment to be a complex and multifaceted construct (Meyer, Allen, & Smith, 1993) that includes the feelings and behavioral tendencies of workers toward their organization (Jex & Britt, 2008). Meyer et al. (1993) defined OC as a “psychological state that (a) characterizes the employee’s relationship with the organization and (b) has implications for the decision to continue or discontinue membership in the organization” (p. 539). These researchers

eventually identified three unique conceptualizations of OC labeled as affective commitment, continuance commitment, and normative commitment.

Affective commitment (AC) has received the most attention (Wasti, 2008) and refers to a strong emotional attachment to the organization as well as desire to stay with the organization. Normative commitment (NC) is based on a sense of obligation and a feeling that one ought to remain with the organization. Lastly, continuance commitment (CC) describes employees' need to stay with their organization relative to perceived costs associated with leaving and other available opportunities.

This three-component model recognizes that employees can experience varying degrees of each form of OC and that a multitude of elements can account for fluctuating levels of commitment (Meyer et al., 1993). The main predictors of AC are perceived organizational support (POS), procedural justice, or fairness of the processes established for dealing with employee issues, job scope, and autonomy (Britt & Jex, 2008). Research shows that NC likely stems from the individual and cultural experiences an employee has even before they enter the organization (Allen & Meyer, 1990), in addition to how much the organization is thought to invest in their employees and the socialization processes used in on-boarding new employees, which further emphasizes the importance of loyalty (Irving et al., 1997). CC is predicted by a combination of external and internal factors to the employee and organization. These external factors can include the current economic condition and the overall competency level employees believe they possess, which can influence their ability to find another job opportunity elsewhere. Internal factors may include employee seniority, special benefits programs offered by the employer, and

strong relationships with co-workers, all of which could potentially be lost if the employee were to leave the organization (Britt & Jex, 2008).

It is perhaps simplistic to state that OC is negatively related to turnover; committed employees generally desire to remain with their employer (Jex & Britt, 2008). Meyer and Allen (1991) found that employees with higher levels of AC tended to have more positive attitudes toward work. Similarly, Jex and Britt (2008) demonstrated that those with higher levels of AC generally exhibited lower levels of absenteeism. In fact, much of the research on AC has shown that this form of OC has the strongest and most consistent ties to desirable work outcomes, such as employee retention, attendance, performance, and organizational citizenship behavior (Meyer & Allen, 1997). These results have been further supported in a cross-cultural meta-analysis, as AC retained a strong negative relationship with turnover intentions across countries (Wasti, 2008).

The consequences associated with low OC are tangible for employees and organization alike. Workplace surveys have shown that a lack of career development opportunities is one of the leading causes of employee turnover and more specifically, why Generation Y employees leave their employers for other opportunities (Buik, 2008). A real world example comes from the consulting firm, Deloitte, which was baffled at the rate young employees were leaving an otherwise, well-respected company (Trunk, 2007). A consultant named Sam Smith was tasked with investigating this turnover and in his work discovered that “people would rather stay at one company and grow, but they don't think they can do that” (Trunk, 2007, p. 2). Smith further reflected that “two-thirds of the people who left Deloitte left to do something they could have done with us, but we made

it difficult for them to transition” (Trunk, p. 2). This prompted Smith to create a program designed to help young Deloitte employees explore their next career move and what role they could assume at the firm to meet their long-term goals. The initiative saved the company what is estimated as \$150,000 in hiring costs associated with the loss of a single employee. It also spared many existing employees from the pressure of job-hunting as well as from the strain of feeling they had to leave the organization for new career opportunities.

Many of the defining characteristics of Generation Y, such as the aforementioned increase in parental involvement, being raised in a child-centric chapter of history, need to find work that provides a sense of self-fulfillment, and strong desire for change, have undoubtedly influenced this generation’s relationship with their organization. This shift in generational thought and outlook also explains how industry-leading companies, like Deloitte, have changed their retention strategies to meet the unprecedented expectations Generation Y employees have both for their jobs and employers. In explaining this generational phenomenon in the workplace, Lieber (2010) writes, “Generation Y employees are more likely to feel loyalty to their peers than to management or the organization itself and want to ensure equitable treatment of all” (p. 88). Lipkin and Perrymore (2009) explain how lifelong loyalty to an organization was a value created by the Traditionalist who passed it on to Baby Boomers, but has now been rejected by Generation Y. Lipkin and Perrymore further emphasize that this change in attitudes towards commitment has caused major retention and engagement issues and that Generation Y workers are “costing corporations excessive dollars a year because loyalty

is dead” (p. 137). Taman (2014) similarly predicts that “as baby boomers are increasingly retiring and millennial are taking over the workforce, the days where people get a job and stay there for life is a thing of the past” (p. 1).

The impact of this seismic, generational shift has certainly been felt in the workplace and is evident in a recent study performed by Busch, Venkitachalam, and Richards (2008) on generational differences in soft knowledge situations and knowledge management in Australian Information Technology (IT) workers. Their study found that younger employees were generally less committed to their workplace than older Baby Boomer employees. Busch and colleagues explained:

Younger generations appear to be less committed to their workplace, for a variety of reasons such as career advancement, professionally and personally. Younger generations, such as Generation Y, may be less committed to their existing workplace if environmental factors, such as organizational culture, management hierarchy and reward systems to name but a few, are not conducive to their workplace ascendancy. In contrast, we recognize that Boomer employees are more committed to their existing workplace. In this regard, there is an opportunity for Boomer employees to assist their junior colleagues in valuing the importance of longer-term commitment to the existing workplace (p. 56).

A finding from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics supported the same understanding and showed the median employee tenure for workers aged 25 through 35 was just 3.2 years in 2012, which is 1.4 years less than for all employees (Hoffman & Lublin, 2014). These findings suggest a new status quo where any previously held expectation of employee loyalty and long-term commitment to their employers are no longer realistic or considered the norm in the modern workplace.

Employee Development

An increase of corporate mergers and downsizing has caused workers to feel less confident in terms of job security and has also presented a real dilemma for employers who can no longer realistically promise long-term employment (Benson, 2006). In the *Harvard Business Review*, Craig, Kimberly, and Bouchikhi (2002) wrote, “companies have largely abandoned the implicit contract that traditionally promised employment security in exchange for loyalty” (p. 1). This shift in employment security has motivated some organizations to invest in employee development as a means to lower the likelihood of employees feeling the need to seek out other job opportunities and ultimately, remain committed to the organization (Benson, 2006). In fact, U.S. companies in 2008 alone are estimated to have spent over \$134 billion on employee learning and development (Kraimer, Siebert, Wayne, Liden, & Bravo, 2011).

There are many broad definitions of employee development, such as Noe, Wilk, Mullen, and Wanek’s (1997) four-dimension construct, which encompasses employee assignments, on-the-job experiences, formal courses and programs, and professional relationships (Hurtz & Williams, 2009). However, the present study narrows this definition to focus specifically on formal development opportunities, which are defined as any planned, structured, and delimited activities designed with the intent to increase the growth and effectiveness of employees (Pajo et al., 2010). Examples of formal development opportunities include workshops, conferences, in-house training, job rotations, and mentoring programs.

Employee development can increase organizational effectiveness, help employees maintain a competitive advantage over others, and most important to employers, improve overall job performance (Hurtz & Williams, 2009). An international study performed on nurses found that employees were more likely to be satisfied with their job and remained committed to the organization when they believed their employer was dedicated to enhancing their skills and competencies (Lee & Bruvold, 2003). How supportive employees feel their organization is toward their overall growth and well-being also determines the likelihood that they will participate in whatever development opportunities are offered (Kraimer et al., 2011). These cited studies underscore the importance for organizations to support and encourage development in order to bolster job satisfaction among employees and the commitment of their teams. This research also illustrates how even just the perception of organizational support can influence participation in whatever development programs are offered.

Lee and Bruvold (2003) further explained that “employee development is one of the most significant functions of human resource practice. Recent research suggests that ‘high commitment’ human resource practices, such as employee development, affect organizational outcomes by shaping employee behaviors and attributes” (p. 981). In another study, Kuvaas and Dysvik (2009) also explained the importance of development in that “investing in employee development is vital in maintaining and developing the skills, knowledge and abilities of both individual employees and the organization as a whole” (p. 217). These studies help illustrate the importance of development on the

employee and their relationship with their organization, but what about the role of development on employee OC levels and ultimately, turnover intentions?

Benson (2006) summarized the results of her work, which showed that “employees who participate in on-the-job training and gain specific skills are more committed and less likely to intend to leave the firm” (p. 185). Another recent study regarding turnover intentions of public sector IT workers demonstrated that offering training and development opportunities was a significant predictor of turnover intentions (Kim, 2012). Kim (2012) elaborates on the implications of her findings:

Organizational leaders and IT managers need to consider several strategies to show support for their IT employee’s career development goals. For instance, organizations can provide career planning opportunities, training and development experiences to IT employees with managerial goals. Specifically, providing diverse training programs for IT workers to enhance their professional development may make them more likely to stay (p. 270).

Kim’s (2012) study further emphasized the critical role a strong human resource system with a focus on development plays in retaining employees. She also suggested that the positive relationship between employee development and lower turnover rates is salient across different work environments, in both the private and public sectors.

The present study seeks to better understand the attitudes of Generation X and Y employees toward the construct of OC as well as the role employee development plays in that relationship. The research presented suggests a generational phenomenon where younger, millennial employees continuously seek bigger and better opportunities to enrich their lives and advance their careers, irrespective of tenure or relationship with their employer. These young adults have developed a hyper-awareness of their own importance and ability to achieve anything due to the unprecedented level of parental

involvement during their youth. It is then reasonable to believe that these characteristics, which have already typified this generation, have also influenced their attitudes towards OC. It is also why the present study hypothesizes that Generation Y employees are generally less committed to their organizations than Generation X employees.

Though the generational gap in OC is hypothesized to be true, the power and proven effectiveness of employee development should not be underestimated. This is based upon the research highlighted in this review, which suggests that it may be possible for employee development opportunities to have such a positive impact on employee OC levels that it may even be able to compensate for the reduced levels of OC believed to be endemic of the Millennial generation. Therefore, the present study also hypothesizes that reported differences in OC between Generation X and Y participants will be equalized when employees report that sufficient development opportunities are offered.

The concept of OC is broad and complex and the hypotheses below refer to the Meyer and Allen (1997) components of OC, which include affective commitment (AC), normative commitment (NC), and continuance commitment (CC). Each of these is analyzed independently of each other yet also in relation to Generations X and Y employees and their perceptions of formal development opportunities.

Hypothesis 1A: Generation Y participants will report significantly lower levels of affective commitment than Generation X participants.

Hypothesis 1B: When participants report that sufficient formal developmental opportunities are offered, differences in AC between Generations X and Y will disappear.

Hypothesis 2A: Generation Y participants will report significantly lower levels of normative commitment than Generation X participants.

Hypothesis 2B: When participants report that sufficient formal developmental opportunities are offered, differences in NC between Generations X and Y will disappear.

Hypothesis 3A: Generation Y participants will report lower levels of continuance commitment than Generation X participants.

Hypothesis 3B: When participants report that sufficient formal developmental opportunities are offered, differences in CC between Generations X and Y will disappear.

The present study also includes a research question to help better understand the role employee development plays in the relationship between the generations and OC.

Research question: Are differences in OC (AC, NC, and CC) reported between Generation X and Generation Y contingent upon the perceived importance of formal development opportunities?

In other words, is offering employee development opportunities to employees so important that it influences their attitudes towards OC? This question is necessary for the present study to have the potential for practical application in the real world. If a positive relationship between the importance of development opportunities and OC is found to exist, organizations will want to pay close attention and consider ways to reinforce employee development as a means to increase OC.

METHOD

Participants

At the time of the study, the researcher was connected to 870 contacts or “friends” on the popular social network website Facebook. Of these contacts, 723 included a personal email address on their public profile and the majority of data were collected from an initial mass email sent to the 723 Facebook contacts. An overwhelming number of these participants were Millennials, which was not surprising given their personal association with the researcher. A total of 215 survey responses were collected from April 12, 2012 through November 11, 2012. However, only 156 of the 215 responses were included in the subsequent statistical analyses because 19 participants did not report when they were born in the survey and another 40 participants did not properly complete the survey (i.e., too many of their responses were at the extreme ends of the scales, e.g., either all rating 1 or all rating 7). Of the final 156 participants, 100 (64.1 %) indicated they were born between 1981 and 1989 and were thus categorized as Generation Y. There were 56 (35.9 %) participants who indicated they were born between 1965 and 1980 and these individuals were classified as Generation X.

Table 1 presents the demographic information of participants as a function of generations. The demographics of the present study support much of the highlighted contemporary research on Generation Y, which has characterized this generation as the most ethnically diverse and highly educated to date. There were significantly more Generation Y participants who identified as female and belonged to an ethnic minority when compared to Generation X participants.

Table 1

Demographic Information of Generation X and Y Participants (in Percentages)

Demographic	Generation X (<i>n</i> = 56)	Generation Y (<i>n</i> = 100)
Gender Identification		
Male	44.6	38
Female	55.4	62
Race/Ethnicity		
White/Caucasian	85.1	59.6
Black/African American	9.3	8.1
Hispanic/Latino	3.7	11.1
Asian	1.9	13.1
Asian Indian	1.9	3.0
Pacific Islander	1.9	5.1
Marital Status		
Single	33.9	76.0
Married	57.1	20.0
Divorced	8.9	1.0
Highest level of Education		
High School	7.1	9.0
Bachelor's Degree	30.4	51.0
Master's Degree	42.9	35.0
Doctorate (Ph.D.)	19.6	5.0
Current Employment Status		
Full Time	92.9	79.8
Part Time	7.1	17.2
Seasonal	0	3.0
Type of Hours Worked		
Normal business hours	57.1	72.0
"High-tech" hours	35.7	8.0
Shift work	7.1	20.0
Occupation		
Corporate	62.5	55.0
Government	1.8	9.0
Education	16.1	15.0
Non-profit	1.8	5.0
Startup	5.4	3.0
Other	12.5	13.0
Tenure		
0-1 year	19.6	42.4
1-2 years	16.1	27.3
3-5 years	17.9	20.2
5-10 years	28.6	9.1
10 + years	17.9	1.0

Also, more Generation X participants reported having achieved a doctorate as their highest level of education and more Generation Y participants reported having earned a bachelor's degree. As might be expected based on age alone, more Generation X participants reported that they were married, worked a full-time job, and had greater tenure when compared to younger Generation Y participants.

Procedure

The present study is based on data collected over an eight month period in 2012, primarily through a convenience sampling of contacts from the social network website Facebook. A mass email was sent to those 723 who were associated with the researcher on Facebook and had published their personal email address on the social network. This mass email contained an introduction that outlined the study, an invitation to participate, instructions to complete the online survey as well as how to voice questions or concerns. In this same email, participants were asked to take part in the study by clicking on an embedded hyperlink, which opened a web-based survey hosted by the SurveyMonkey service.

The majority of initial responses were from Generation Y participants. In an effort to increase Generation X responses, two San Jose State University professors who advised the researcher on this project forwarded the consent email to contacts within their own LinkedIn professional networks. This provided access to a more diverse population and significantly increased the Generation X response rate. The same survey link was embedded in the consent form so it was not possible to identify exactly how respondents

accessed the survey, either from the initial mass email sent to the Facebook contacts or by a subsequent forwarding of the consent form.

Measures

Organizational commitment. The revised Meyer and Allen's (1997) scales for affective commitment, normative commitment, and continuance commitment were used to measure the three components of OC. The AC and NC scales each contained six items and the CC scale contained seven for a total of 19 items related to OC. All Meyer and Allen (1997) items were rated on a seven-point Likert scale, ranging from "1 = *strongly disagree*" to "7 = *strongly agree*." An example of items designed to measure AC levels is "I would be very happy to spend the rest of my career in this organization." An example of items that are related to the NC component is "Even if it were to my advantage, I do not feel it would be right to leave my organization now." Lastly, an example of one of the items used to measure the CC component is "Too much of my life would be disrupted if I decided I wanted to leave my organization right now."

The initial statistical analyses performed on the data collected from participants were intended to validate the reliability and validity of the three Meyer and Allen (1997) OC components – AC, NC, and CC. Cronbach's alpha reliability analyses yielded coefficients above the desired threshold of .70 for each of the three OC components. More specifically, Cronbach's alphas were .87 for AC, .86 for NC, and .78 for NC. To measure the validity of the three OC components, a principal components factor analysis with varimax rotation was performed. This analysis yielded factor loadings between .62

and .88 for AC, .40 and .86 for NC, and .40 and .82 for CC, supporting the statistical construct validity of the three components.

Employee development. Three items related to employee development opportunities were also included in the survey to gauge how participants felt about the developmental opportunities offered by their current employer as well as their attitudes towards this topic in general. However, only two of the items were analyzed to address the hypotheses. Participants responded to the first question, “Do you feel your employer offers sufficient formal development opportunities?” with a dichotomous, “1 = *yes*” or “2 = *no*.” The second employee development question, “How important is it to you that your employer offers formal development opportunities?” was measured on a seven-point Likert-type scale, which ranged from “1 = *strongly agree*” to “7 = *strongly disagree*.”

Demographic information. The survey also included 11 demographic questions. These questions pertained to participant age, sex, race/ethnicity, marital status, number of dependents, the highest level of education achieved, occupational field, and tenure at their organization.

RESULTS

This section presents the results from a series of inferential statistical tests that analyzed the hypotheses of the present study. These analyses first include an independent samples *t*-test to determine a mean difference in each of the OC components between the two generational groups, Generation X and Generation Y. Second, two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was employed to assess the statistical influence of employee development opportunities on each of the OC components between the two generational groups. Finally, multiple regression analyses were employed to answer the research question, which asks to what extent employee development opportunities influence generational differences in OC. Table 2 includes means, standard deviations, alpha coefficients, and correlations of the main study variables for each generational group.

Affective commitment. Hypothesis 1A stated that Generation Y participants would report lower levels of AC than Generation X participants. An independent samples *t*-test was conducted to determine if there was a difference between the two generations in AC. The results of the analysis showed no significant difference in AC between Generation X ($M = 4.42$, $SD = 1.36$, $n = 56$) and Generation Y ($M = 4.59$, $SD = 1.33$, $n = 100$), $t(154) = -.75$, *ns*. Therefore, Hypothesis 1A is not supported.

Hypothesis 1B proposed that a difference in AC between Generations X and Y would disappear when participants report their employers offered them sufficient formal development opportunities (SFDO). Although no significant differences were found between Generations X and Y on AC, the analysis was still conducted. A 2 (Generation: Generation X vs. Generation Y) $\times$ 2 (SFDO: Yes vs. No) between-subjects ANOVA was

Table 2

Means, Standard Deviations, Cronbach's Alpha Reliabilities (in bold on diagonals), and Correlations of Main Study Variables

Study Variables	Generation X		Generation Y		1	2	3	4	5
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>					
1. AC	4.42	1.36	4.59	1.33	.87 .83	.70**	.16	.38**	.29*
2. NC	3.83	1.47	4.14	1.36	.56**	.88 .85	.13	.37**	.35*
3. CC	4.13	1.03	3.68	1.15	.12	.15	.73 .77	.21	.08
4. SFDO	1.53	.50	1.59	.49	.24*	.27**	.01	-	.31*
5. IFDO	6.06	.73	6.15	.79	-.10	-.05	.12	-.13	-

Note: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.001$ (2-tailed); Cronbach's alpha reliabilities (in bold) and correlations for Generation X are shown above Generation Y; SFDO = Sufficient formal development opportunities; IFDO = Importance of formal development opportunities.

conducted to test this hypothesis. There was no main effect for generation, $F(1, 149) = .179$, *ns* nor was there an interaction between generation and SFDO, $F(1, 149) = .80$, *ns*. However, there was a main effect for sufficient formal development opportunities, $F(1, 149) = 14.54$, $p < .001$ and those who reported sufficient development opportunities ($M = 4.87$, $SD = 1.15$, $n = 87$) had higher levels of AC than those who perceived there were insufficient development opportunities ($M = 4.07$, $SD = 1.45$, $n = 66$). In summary, there was no significant difference between the generations on AC, nor was there any interaction between generations and whether or not sufficient development opportunities were offered. These results do not support hypothesis 1B.

Normative commitment. Hypothesis 2A stated that Generation Y participants would report lower levels of normative commitment than Generation X participants. An independent samples *t*-test was conducted to determine if there was a difference in NC between the two generations. No significant difference was found between Generation X ($M = 3.83, SD = 1.47, n = 56$) and Generation Y ($M = 4.59, SD = 1.33, n = 100$) on NC, $t(154) = -1.31, ns$. Thus, Hypothesis 2A is not supported.

Hypothesis 2B proposed that any differences in NC between Generations X and Y would disappear when participants reported that their employers offered them sufficient development opportunities. Although there were no differences between Generations X and Y, the analysis was still conducted. Another two-way ANOVA was performed using the generations and sufficient development opportunities as independent variables, and NC as a dependent variable. The results of the ANOVA showed no significant generation effect, $F(1, 149) = .943, ns$ or interaction between sufficient development opportunities and generations, $F(1, 149) = .506, ns$. However, there was a main effect for sufficient development opportunities, $F(1, 149) = 15.99, p < .001$. Those who reported that sufficient development opportunities were offered ($M = 4.40, SD = 1.33, n = 87$) showed higher levels of NC than those who did not ($M = 3.52, SD = 1.36, n = 66$). In summary, Hypothesis 2B was also not supported because no significant difference was found between the two generations on NC and no interaction was found between generations and sufficient development opportunities.

Continuance commitment. Hypothesis 3A stated that Generation Y participants would report lower levels of CC than Generation X participants. Another independent

samples *t*-test was run to find if there was a difference between the two generations and this time, the results of the analysis showed a significant difference between Generation X ($M = 4.13$, $SD = 1.03$, $n = 56$) and Generation Y ($M = 3.70$, $SD = 1.15$, $n = 100$) participants on CC, $t(154) = 2.43$, $p < .05$. These results support Hypothesis 3A; Generation Y participants had a significantly lower mean score on CC than did Generation X participants.

Hypothesis 3B posited that differences in CC between Generations X and Y would disappear when participants report that sufficient development opportunities were offered. A two-way ANOVA using generation and sufficient development opportunities as independent variables and CC as a dependent variable was conducted. The results of the analysis showed a significant generational effect, $F(1, 149) = 5.34$, $p = .022$, but no interaction between sufficient development opportunities and generations, $F(1, 149) = .506$, *ns*. Generation X ($M = 4.11$, $SD = 1.03$, $n = 55$) showed higher levels of CC than Generation Y ($M = 3.67$, $SD = 1.16$, $n = 98$). These results also only partially support the hypotheses. Although Generation Y participants displayed lower levels of CC than Generation X participants, employee development did not close the gap in CC between the two generations.

Research question. The present study also asked the following research question: Are differences reported between Generations X and Y in each of the OC components contingent upon the perceived importance of formal development opportunities? This question was asked to gain a better understanding of the role and importance of formal development opportunities in the workplace as well as how it

relates to OC. A linear regression analysis was employed by regressing the AC, NC, and CC components in three different analyses on the Generation X or Y variable, importance of formal development opportunities, and the interaction of the two variables. The model summary in Table 2 presents the results of these regression analyses.

As shown in Table 3 and Figure 1, when the importance of professional development opportunities interacts with generation, there is a clear impact on AC. Generation Y ($M = 4.59$, $SD = 1.33$) workers had a significantly higher mean score on AC than Generation X ($M = 4.42$, $SD = 1.36$), ($\beta = 1.604$, $p < .05$). These results differ from the initial independent samples t -test that compared the two generations on AC, which did not take into account the importance of formal professional development opportunities. Moreover, workers who felt formal professional development opportunities are important (vs. those who did not) have higher mean scores on AC ($M = 6.06$, $SD = .73$), ($\beta = .312$, $p < .05$). In this model there was a significant interaction between generations and the importance of formal development opportunities on AC, ($\beta = -1.619$, $p < .05$). This means that Generation X participants who placed a higher importance on formal development opportunities also generally showed higher levels of AC than Generation Y participants. However, there was no significant difference in AC levels across development opportunities without accounting for generation. As shown in Figure 1, the interaction between sufficient development opportunities and generation adds nearly 4% (R^2) of additional significant variance in AC after accounting for the significant main effects.

Table 3

Model Summary for Each Organizational Commitment Component Regressed on Generation, Importance of Formal Development Opportunities, and Their Interaction

OC Component	Model	β	R	R^2	ΔR^2
AC	1 Generation	.04	.05	.00	.00
	IFDO	.03			
	2 Generation	1.60*	.20	.04	.04
	IFDO	.31*			
	Generation × IFDO	-1.62*			
NC	1 Generation	.07	.12	.01	.01
	IFDO	.09			
	2 Generation	1.71*	.23	.05	.04
	IFDO	.39*			
	Generation × IFDO	-1.70*			
CC	1 Generation	-.19*	.21	.04	.04
	IFDO	.10			
	2 Generation	-.37	.21	.04	.00
	IFDO	.07			
	Generation × IFDO	.19			

Note. * $p < 0.05$ (2-tailed); AC = Affective commitment; NC = Normative commitment; and CC = Continuance commitment; IFDO = Importance of formal development opportunities.

Another regression analysis was employed but with NC as the outcome variable.

All three variables explained significant variance in NC (see Table 3). Generation Y ($M = 4.14$, $SD = 1.36$) had higher mean scores on NC than Generation X ($M = 3.83$, $SD = 1.47$), ($\beta = 1.710$, $p < .05$) and those who felt positively (vs. those who felt negatively)

Figure 1

Interaction between Generation and Professional Development on Affective Commitment

Note. The Low Importance and High Importance labels relate to the survey question “How important is it to you that your employer offers formal development opportunities?” or Importance of Formal Development Opportunities (IFDO). One standard deviation was taken below or above the mean of importance of professional development to test for the moderating role of importance of professional development on the relationship between generation and organizational commitment. AC was measured using a 7-point Likert scale where 1 = “strongly disagree” to 7 = “strongly agree.”

about the importance of formal development opportunities had higher mean scores on NC, ($\beta = .388, p < .05$). This means that Generation X participants who placed a higher importance on development opportunities also generally showed higher levels of NC than did Generation Y participants. However, once again, no significant differences were found between NC and the importance of development opportunities without accounting

for generation. In this model there was a significant interaction between generations and the importance of formal development opportunities on NC, ($\beta = -1.695, p < .05$). The interaction between generation and importance of formal professional development explained an additional 4% (R^2) of the variance in NC. Figure 2 shows that the importance of formal development opportunities helps to explain differences in the two generational groups' NC mean scores.

Lastly, CC was regressed on generation, importance of formal development opportunities, and their interaction as shown in Figure 3. Although the inclusion of the main predictors yielded significant variance ($R^2 = 4.4\%$) in CC, the interaction added no additional variance in the outcome variable. Moreover, the only significant predictor was generation ($\beta = -.188, p < .05$).

Figure 2

Interaction between Generation and Professional Development on Normative Commitment

Note. The Low Importance and High Importance labels relate to the survey question “How important is it to you that your employer offers formal development opportunities?” or Importance of Formal Development Opportunities (IFDO). One standard deviation was taken below or above the mean of importance of professional development to test for the moderating role of importance of professional development on the relationship between generation and organizational commitment. NC was measured using a 7-point Likert scale where 1 = “strongly disagree” to 7 = “strongly agree.”

Figure 3

Interaction between Generation and Professional Development on Continuance Commitment

Note. The Low Importance and High Importance labels relate to the survey question “How important is it to you that your employer offers formal development opportunities?” or Importance of Formal Development Opportunities (IFDO). One standard deviation was taken below or above the mean of importance of professional development to test for the moderating role of importance of professional development on the relationship between generation and organizational commitment. CC was measured using a 7-point Likert scale where 1 = “strongly disagree” to 7 = “strongly agree.”

DISCUSSION

The present study focuses on differences between Generation X and Generation Y employees, not only because Generation Y is the most recent generation to enter the workforce, but also because of the researcher's anecdotal experience of working with these young adults alongside older employees in fast-paced retail environments. In these environments, there is a general sense that Millennials are somehow different and, more specifically, lack a certain level of commitment compared to older generations. As history has demonstrated with the Baby Boomers and Generation X, this is not the first time one generation has turned a critical eye towards the next (Deal & Altman, 2010). Nonetheless, the first-hand experiences of the researcher working side-by-side with Generation X and Y co-workers suggested that attitudes towards commitment had indeed changed with the advent of the Millennials as these employees seemed less dedicated to their employers and more likely to leave when conditions were less than perfect (Lipkin & Perrymore, 2009). It was this perception of a dramatic generational change in attitudes toward commitment as well as the intense focus of the media on Millennials and their issues in the workplace (Spenner, 2014), which inspired the present study.

It was first hypothesized that Generation Y employees would be generally less committed to their organizations than Generation X employees when measured by each of the three OC components (AC, NC, and CC). However, the results of the present study show partial support for these hypotheses. Generation Y employees were not significantly less committed than Generation X employees on either AC or NC, which are the two more desirable forms of OC and have been related to positive outcomes in the

workplace (Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch, & Topolnytsky, 2002). The results of the present study suggest that Generation X and Y employees do not differ, at least not on either of these two forms of OC. One explanation for these findings is that the thoughts and emotions associated with the more positive AC and NC can be experienced at any age and have little to no bearing on an employee's generational demographic. The psychological bond that employees form when they possess a positive emotional (AC) or even obligatory (NC) connections with their organization may be so powerful that it negates differences that would otherwise exist between the two generations. Meyer et al. (2002) found that AC had the strongest relationship with positive outcomes such as attendance, performance, and organizational egalitarianism, whereas researchers Woods, Poole, and Zibarras (2012) discovered that having an emotional attachment to an organization (AC) was negatively related to absenteeism across both younger and older employees alike. However, more research on the AC and NC components, the attitudes they measure and how they relate to the generations is needed to fully investigate and corroborate these assertions.

The only OC component in which Generation Y employees were less committed than Generation X employees was in CC. One could argue that from an employer's perspective, CC is the least desirable form of OC, because CC means that employees remain committed due to a sense of need, either because of a lack of other opportunities or because leaving will result in a loss of benefits (Wasti, 2008). The economic conditions throughout the past several years may have also had a disparate impact on the generations (Debevec et al., 2013). Millennials may not have felt as strong a need to

remain in their organization because it could be easier for them to leave a company after having worked there for three or four years, whereas older Generation X employees, with more tenure, may have felt a greater need to stay due to the perception of it being more difficult to find another opportunity. This dynamic is further compounded when the increased levels of responsibility that often come with age are considered, such as marriage and raising a family. The demographics of the present study support this interpretation because more Generation X participants reported that they were married and had greater tenure at their current job than did younger Millennial participants. These demographic factors may have influenced Generation X employees to be more careful in considering the increased stakes when evaluating career moves and may even explain why it has been said that more senior workers are less likely to hop from one job to the next and have lower turnover levels than their younger counterparts (Bernard, 2012). As a comparison to Millennial employees, research by Trunk (2007) found that Millennials tended to use their parents as a safety net (i.e., moving back home), making it much easier for younger employees to make bold career moves and not feel as though they must stay with their current employer if they do not want to.

The second set of hypotheses was related to formal development opportunities and the present study put forward that differences in the three OC components between the generations would disappear when employees reported that sufficient development opportunities were offered. It was thought that the perceived OC gap would be closed by development opportunities given that Benson (2006) discovered that on-the-job training was positively related to OC and negatively related to turnover intentions. Pajo et al.

(2010) also found that employees were less likely to consider leaving their employer when they participated in more training and development events. The present study supports these hypotheses and previous findings but only for the AC and NC components when development opportunities were considered in Generation X employees. It is also interesting to note that neither the Benson (2006) nor Pajo et al. (2010) studies included Millennial participants.

Lack of support for Hypotheses 1B and 2B may relate to the specific and powerful emotions that AC and NC measure and their apparent relevance to each of the generations. Though the relationship between development opportunities and AC and NC did not differ significantly between the generations, participants who reported that sufficient developmental opportunities were offered, regardless of their generation, also showed higher levels of both AC and NC. This highlights the potential value of employee development as a useful tool that can be leveraged by employers to boost the commitment of their workforce, which does align with and support the Benson (2006) and Pajo et al. (2010) studies. However, employee development opportunities had no significant impact on CC for either generational group. These findings suggest that when employees have higher levels of CC and do not have an emotional attachment to their organization (AC) or even a sense of obligation to remain (NC), they may reach a psychological impasse where development is no longer considered relevant or beneficial to their success. While future studies should empirically address this assertion, it is at least partially supported by Meyer et al. (2002) who found that CC was either unrelated or negatively related to positive workplace outcomes, including organizational citizenship

behavior. Regardless of the causation, this finding is especially relevant for employers, who should leverage employee development to their advantage and foster even higher levels of OC among those employees who are still emotionally and even obligatorily committed. At the same time, organizations should also be mindful that development opportunities may not be as effective in boosting the OC levels of those employees who are staying only because they feel they must.

The present study also included a research question to determine if any differences in the OC components between the generations were dependent on how important it was to participants that their employers offered development opportunities. The findings of the present study as related to this question bear significant implications for the workplace because when accounting for generational differences, employees who reported that they had higher levels of AC and NC also felt as though it was important that their employer offer development opportunities. These findings further underscore the importance of development and offering employees the opportunity to increase their knowledge and skills at work, regardless of their generation. Employers will want to offer employee development programs and initiatives as a means to increase the commitment levels of their employees.

Limitations and Future Research

The present study adds to the growing body of literature on generational issues, particularly as they relate to employees' commitment to their organization. However, there are several limitations that should also be considered in improving a research plan for future study. The first is the uneven sample size between Generation X and Y.

Although both generations are sufficiently represented in the present study, it would have been ideal to gather more data from Generation X participants to improve the ability to detect any differences in attitudes. It proved more difficult than originally expected to solicit participation from Generation X workers, which was likely due to the age of the researcher and reliance on social media outlets to distribute the electronic surveys. This challenge could also be indicative of other generational differences in how these social media platforms are utilized, which could be of interest for future studies.

A second limitation is that the survey responses were collected in 2012 when the economy was emerging from a recession. According to a recent New York Times article, the US economy emerged from the recession in June 2009 and has since been on the rebound, yet an NBC News/Wall Street Journal poll taken in March of 2014 found that 57 percent of American adults still believed the economy was in recession (Barro, 2014). Barro (2014) noted that the economy has improved, but at a very slow pace, which many Americans in the workforce have clearly not felt. These lingering economic woes, even if only a perception rather than factually based on economic data, are powerful and may have significantly impacted the attitudes of participants toward work and remaining committed to their employer (Hoffman & Lublin, 2014). Future studies should examine OC from a more longitudinal perspective to better control for changes in attitudes and conditions, such as a troubled economy.

The present study also provided several opportunities to improve the survey itself and fine-tune the type of data collected from participants. The survey did not collect industry or company information from participants nor was this controlled for in the

results, which would have been an interesting demographic to consider because employee attitudes toward OC may vary between different professional fields and companies. The inclusion of this data point would have also made the results of the present study increasingly compelling to employers by more precisely identifying generational trends within specific industries. Lastly, incorrect response anchors were used for the survey question, “How important is it to you that your employer offers formal development opportunities?” in the present study. This question was assessed on a “*Strongly agree*” to “*Strongly disagree*” Likert-type scale and although it was probably intuitively clear to participants, it should have been measured on a “Very important” to “Not important at all” scale instead to reduce any confusion and further protect the validity of the data collected.

Conclusion

When considered holistically, the results of the present study do not indicate that Generation Y employees are any less committed to their organizations than Generation X employees, despite the hypotheses and supporting literature and research. Keeping the study limitations in mind, the findings suggest that what may be a somewhat commonly held belief that younger employees are not as committed or dedicated to their employers may not necessarily be grounded in truth. The fact that Generation Y was not found to be any less committed than Generation X on two of the three Meyer and Allen (1997) components of OC (AC and NC) also might call into question the validity of the many other generalizations and assertions made about workers or individuals of any generation. Hopefully, more research on this topic will be conducted in the future to build upon both

the strengths and limitations of the present study and draw a greater understanding as to potential factors influencing differences between Generations X and Y in organizational commitment, if any.

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APPENDIX A

SJSU IRB Approval Letter

**SAN JOSÉ STATE
UNIVERSITY**

Division of Academic Affairs

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Graduate Studies & Research
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To: Adam Mahoney

From: Pamela Stacks, Ph.D.
Associate Vice President
Graduate Studies and Research

Date: March 22, 2012

The Human Subjects-Institutional Review Board has registered your study entitled:

“Commitment and Employee Development: A Comparison of Generations X and Y”

This registration, which provides exempt status under Exemption Category 2 of SJSU Policy S08-7, is contingent upon the subjects included in your research project being appropriately protected from risk. This includes the protection of the confidentiality of the subjects' identity when they participate in your research project, and with regard to all data that may be collected from the subjects. The approval includes continued monitoring of your research by the Board to assure that the subjects are being adequately and properly protected from risks. If at any time a subject becomes injured or complains of injury, you must notify Dr. Pamela Stacks, Ph.D. immediately. Injury includes but is not limited to bodily harm, psychological trauma, and release of potentially damaging personal information. This approval for the human subject's portion of your project is in effect for one year, and data collection beyond March 22, 2013 requires an extension request.

Please also be advised that all subjects need to be fully informed and aware that their participation in your research project is voluntary, and that he or she may withdraw from the project at any time. Further, a subject's participation, refusal to participate, or withdrawal will not affect any services that the subject is receiving or will receive at the institution in which the research is being conducted.

If you have any questions, please contact me at (408) 924-2427.

Protocol #:S1202070

cc. Sharon Glazer 0120

The California State University:
Chancellor's Office
Bakersfield, Channel Islands, Chico, Dominguez Hills,
East Bay, Fresno, Fullerton, Humboldt, Long Beach,
Los Angeles, Maritime Academy, Monterey Bay,
Northridge, Pomona, Sacramento, San Bernardino,
San Diego, San Francisco, San José, San Luis Obispo,
San Marcos, Sonoma, Stanislaus

APPENDIX B

SJSU Graduate Research Consent Form

March 5, 2012

Hello,

My name is Adam Mahoney and I am a graduate student at San Jose State University. For my thesis, I am examining generational attitudes toward organizational commitment and employee development. Since we are associated either personally and/or through online social networking, you are believed to be at least 18 years old, and are either currently employed or have been in the past, I am inviting you to participate in this research study by completing an online survey.

The collected data will provide useful information on organizational commitment trends in the workplace. The Survey Monkey questionnaire below will take approximately 30 minutes to complete. Participation is strictly voluntary and you may refuse at any time. You will not receive any compensation and there are no known risks associated.

The completion and the electronic submission of the questionnaire will indicate your willingness to participate in this study. Please keep this information for your records and do not write any information that could identify you on the survey. In order to ensure all information remains confidential, IP address tracking has been disabled.

If you choose to participate and certify that you are at least 18 years of age and are either currently employed or have been in the past, click [here](#) to access the online survey in English. Please answer all questions as honestly as possible.

Lastly, to help collect as many responses as possible, I would like to encourage you to forward this invitation to anyone else you feel might be interested in participating who meets the age and employment requirements mentioned above.

You can direct any complaints about this research to Dr. Sharon Glazer, thesis chairperson at (408) 924-5639 or Dr. Ronald Rogers, Psychology Department Chairperson at (408-924-5600. Questions about a research subjects' rights, or research-related injury may be presented to Pamela Stacks, Ph.D., Associate Vice President, Graduate Studies and Research, at (408) 924-2427.

Thank you for taking the time to assist me in my academic endeavors!

Sincerely,
Adam Mahoney

Graduate Research Survey

You must be at least 18 years old to participate in this survey.

*** 1. I certify that I am at least 18 years old.**

☐ Yes

☐ No

Demographics

Please answer the following demographic questions.

1. When were you born?

☐ 1965 - 1969

☐ 1970 - 1980

☐ 1981 - 1989

☐ 1990 – Present

2. To which gender do you identify?

☐ Male

☐ Female

3. What is your ethnicity?

☐ White/Caucasian

☐ Black/African American

☐ Hispanic/Latino

☐ Asian

☐ Asian Indian

☐ Pacific Islander

☐ Other Race (please specify)

--

4. What is your marital status?

☐ Single

☐ Married

☐ Separated

☐ Divorced

☐ Other (please specify)

--

5. How many dependents live in your household?

☐ 0 (No children)

☐ 1

☐ 2

☐ 3

- ☐4
- ☐5
- ☐6+

6. What is your highest level of completed education?

- ☐High school diploma
- ☐Bachelor's degree
- ☐Master's degree
- ☐Doctorate (Ph.D.)

7. What is your current employment status?

- ☐Full time
- ☐Part time
- ☐Seasonal

8. On average, what kind of hours do you work?

- ☐Normal business hours
- ☐High-tech hours
- ☐Shift work

9. What field best describes your professional occupation?

- ☐Corporate (private sector)
- ☐Government (public sector - Federal, State, or local)
- ☐Education
- ☐Non-profit
- ☐Startup
- ☐Other occupational field (please specify)

--

10. How long have you worked for your current employer?

- ☐0-1 year
- ☐1-2 years
- ☐3-5 years
- ☐5-10 years
- ☐10+ years

Relationship to Workplace

Please rate your feelings on each of the following items.

(Items were rated on the following scale, which was presented after each item).

1. Strongly disagree
2. Disagree
3. Somewhat disagree

- 4. Neutral
- 5. Somewhat agree
- 6. Agree
- 7. Strongly agree

1. I would be very happy to spend the rest of my career in this organization.

2. I really feel as if this organization's problems are my own.

3. I do not feel like "part of the family" at my organization.

4. I do not feel "emotionally attached" to this organization.

5. This organization has a great deal of personal meaning for me.

6. I do not feel a strong sense of belonging to my organization.

1. I do not feel any obligation to remain with my current employer.

2. Even if it were to my advantage, I do not feel it would be right to leave my organization now.

3. I would feel guilty if I left my organization now.

4. This organization deserves my loyalty.

5. I would not leave my organization right now because I have a sense of obligation to the people in it.

6. I owe a great deal to my organization.

1. It would be very hard for me to leave my organization right now, even if I wanted to.

2. Too much of my life would be disrupted if I decided I wanted to leave my organization right now.

3. Right now, staying with my organization is a matter of necessity as much as desire.

4. I believe that I have too few options to consider leaving this organization.

5. One of the few negative consequences of leave this organization would be the scarcity of available alternatives.

6. One of the major reasons I continue to work for this organization is that leaving would require considerable personal sacrifice, another organization may not match the overall benefits I have here.

7. If I had not already put so much of myself into this organization, I might consider working elsewhere.

Please answer the following question(s).

1. How do you feel about Generation Y workers' (born 1981 - present) level of organizational commitment compared to Generation X (born 1965- 1980)?

1. They are more committed
2. They are about the same
3. They are less committed

Please answer the following question(s).

1. Why do you think Generation Y is less committed to their organizations?

--

Workplace Values

Please rate your feelings on each of the following items.

(Items were rated on the following scale, which was presented after each item).

1. Very important
2. Important
3. Somewhat important
4. Somewhat unimportant
5. Unimportant
6. Very unimportant

1. Achievement in work

2. Advancement, changes for promotion

3. Benefits, vacation, sick leave, pension, insurance, etc.

4. Company, to be employed by a company for which you are proud to work

- 5. Contribution to society**
- 6. Convenient hours of work**
- 7. Co-workers, fellow workers who are pleasant and agreeable**
- 8. Esteem, that you are valued as a person**
- 9. Feedback concerning the results of your work Independence in work**
- 10. Independence in work**
- 11. Influence in the organization**
- 12. Influence in work**
- 13. Job interest, to do work which is interesting to you**
- 14. Job security, permanent job**
- 15. Job status**
- 16. Meaningful work**
- 17. Opportunity for personal growth**
- 18. Opportunity to meet people and interact with them**
- 19. Pay, the amount of money you receive**
- 20. Recognition for doing a good job**
- 21. Responsibility**
- 22. Supervisor, a fair and considerate boss**
- 23. Use of ability and knowledge in your work**
- 24. Work conditions, comfortable and clean**

Developmental Opportunities

Please answer each of the following questions.

Formal development opportunities can include workshops, conferences, and other training programs.

1. Do you feel your employer offers sufficient formal development opportunities?

1. Yes
2. No

2. How important is it to you that your employer offers formal development opportunities?

1. Strongly agree
2. Agree
3. Somewhat agree
4. Neutral
5. Somewhat disagree
6. Disagree
7. Strongly disagree

3. When your employer does offer formal development opportunities, you generally take advantage of them.

1. Yes
2. No

Other (please specify)

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Comments

1. If you have any comments, please write them below.

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