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What Millennials Want from Their Nonprofit Workplaces

https://doi.org/10.1515/npf-2023-0009
Received February 1, 2023; accepted November 3, 2024

Abstract: This research article focuses on how nonprofits can recruit and retain Millennials, the generation born between 1981 and 1996, by examining what they want in a nonprofit workplace. Millennials are the largest generation in the American workforce, so their workplace needs are critical for employers to understand. As this paper will explore, Millennials are advocating for the types of changes that benefit all workers, regardless of generation, such as living wages, comprehensive and affordable health coverage, schedule or location flexibility, and better management practices.

Keywords: nonprofits; millennials; organizational culture; nonprofit workplaces; recruitment and retention

1 Introduction

For all the good they do in the world, nonprofits have developed a reputation for being less than stellar workplaces. In addition to the difficulty of tackling some of society's toughest problems, they can be plagued by poor management, low pay, lack of resources, and overwork. Poor workplaces exist in all sectors, but the nonprofit sector is uniquely tied to an ethos that the mission is more important than anything else, which can lead to uniquely toxic or dysfunctional workplaces (Jaffe 2021; Timm 2016). Devotion to the mission can cause workers to put up with bad treatment (Bunderson and Thompson 2009) and is often cited as the reason they accept lower pay (Sowa and Word 2017). However, there is a growing body of evidence that mission attachment is not always enough to override dissatisfaction with pay or advancement opportunities (Brown and Yoshioka 2003; Kim and Lee 2007; McGinnis Johnson, Piatak, and Ng 2017). Exacerbating the issue is that funders often push back on increased spending on administrative expenses or "overhead" ("The Scope and Impact of Nonprofit Workplace Shortages" 2021). What is often considered "overhead" are

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budget items like salaries and benefits or organizational investments that would improve staff's quality of life or make their work easier (Jaffe 2021). This push to keep administrative costs as low as possible has fueled a phenomenon known as the nonprofit starvation cycle, where an overall lack of investment hinders organizational efficacy (Gregory and Howard 2009). While the conversation amongst nonprofit leaders is changing, with a growing chorus advocating for eliminating this focus on overhead, it is still a common practice amongst funders (Le 2019; "The Scope and Impact of Nonprofit Workplace Shortages" 2021). These forces have made employee recruitment and retention challenging in the nonprofit sector. Nonprofit leaders have reported in surveys for years that they are highly concerned about their ability to recruit and retain staff and that they are struggling to fill open positions ("2021 Nonprofit Talent Retention Practices Survey" 2021; "The Scope and Impact of Nonprofit Workplace Shortages" 2021; "State of the Nonprofit Sector Survey 2018" 2018). The National Council of Nonprofits deemed this shortage of nonprofit employees "a workforce crisis" because while recruitment and retention challenges are not unique to nonprofits, a nonprofit having to reduce services because of staff shortages has outsized impacts on the community it serves ("Nonprofit Workforce Shortages: A Crisis That Effects Everyone" 2022).

This article focuses on how nonprofits can recruit and retain Millennials, the generation born between 1981 and 1996, by examining what they want in a nonprofit workplace (Dimock 2019). I focused on Millennials for a few reasons. First, Millennials are the largest generation in the American workforce, so understanding what motivates their job decisions is particularly crucial for employers to understand (Fry 2018). Second, Millennials are no longer entry-level employees or interns. The majority of millennials are in their thirties and are the current generation of middle management (Dimock 2019). Third, Millennials approach work differently than older generations. They value extrinsic rewards like pay more than Baby Boomers and value leisure time more than either Gen X or Baby Boomers (Twenge et al. 2010). They also have lower work centrality, meaning a belief that work is the primary source of life satisfaction, than earlier generations (McGinnis Johnson, Piatak, and Ng 2017). Millennials change jobs more frequently than earlier generations and are more comfortable making lateral career moves (AbouAssi, McGinnis Johnson, and Holt 2021; McGinnis Johnson, Piatak, and Ng 2017).

Contextually, it's important to remember that Millennials entered a workforce permanently changed by 2008's Great Recession. This has had long-lasting impacts on their career trajectories and earning potential, setting a course for Millennials to be the first generation since the Great Depression to be less well off than their parents (Petersen 2020). As COVID-19 shut down the economy in 2020, Millennials had less money saved or invested, were less likely to own a home, were paid less, and were less likely to have benefits than older generations (Lowrey 2020). Millennials have

decided they are fed up with the status quo of work. Journalist Anne Helen Petersen's viral article about Millennials struggling with work-related burnout was turned into a bestselling book that deemed Millennials "the burnout generation" (Petersen 2020). Millennial social media influencers have amassed large followings on Instagram and TikTok, preaching the importance of boundaries between work and life. For example, creator @loewhaley has more than 2.7 million followers watching her videos about advocating for boundaries at work. In one video skit, she shows herself explaining to a comically pushy colleague who wants her to work on vacation that "just because you don't respect your personal time doesn't mean I won't respect mine" (@loewhaley 2022). This conversation was further fueled by the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent Great Resignation, where millions of people, particularly Millennials, quit their jobs seemingly en masse (Hsu 2021). A national survey established these workers were largely quitting in search of higher pay, more opportunities for advancement, more respect, and better work-life balance (Parker and Menasce Horowitz 2022). Nonprofits are not immune to these forces, but the aforementioned nonprofit starvation cycle and the belief that mission comes before all else can make changing nonprofit workplaces uniquely difficult.

As this article will explore, Millennials are advocating for the types of changes that benefit *all* workers, regardless of generation, such as living wages, comprehensive and affordable health coverage, schedule or location flexibility, and better management practices. Improving workplaces in these ways could increase retention, which decreases costs associated with turnover and assists with recruitment by making the organization a more attractive workplace. These improvements could also increase employee satisfaction and engagement, which may increase employee and organizational performance (Akingbola 2017; Akingbola and van den Berg 2019).

2 How Did We Get Here?

Work has fundamentally changed in recent decades, a phenomenon that is not restricted to any one sector. There are several mismatches occurring between employers and employees that cause negative outcomes for both. These mismatches are related to qualifications, geography, amount of work, pay, and work-life balance (Kalleberg 2008). Being over or under-qualified for a job can reduce job satisfaction and engagement (Kalleberg 2008). Where individuals want or can afford to live may not match where their desired jobs are, resulting in other mismatches, such as being underemployed (Kalleberg 2008). Working either more or less than one would like to or not making enough money to meet your needs can reduce job satisfaction and increase stress (Kalleberg 2008). Conflict between work and family obligations also causes stress (Kalleberg 2008). These mismatches are interrelated, and for any

individual, solving one may cause another (Kalleberg 2008). Kalleberg contends that because these mismatches are so widespread, they are a social issue rather than an individual one (2008).

Changes in how private companies operate have also shifted the culture of work in all sectors. Over the course of the 1980s and 1990s, companies were pressured by consultants and investors to prioritize short-term gains over long-term stability (Petersen 2020). Consultants encouraged companies to cut costs on anything that was not a "core competency," resulting in layoffs, outsourcing, and contracting out (Petersen 2020). This shift contributed to a growing precarious class of workers. Made up of freelancers, contractors, temps, and gig workers, this "precariat" is typically not well paid (even for skilled work) and lacks the protections and benefits of being an employee (Jaffe 2021; Petersen 2020). Dependence on contractors is widespread, from the federal government to tech companies. An estimated 40–50 % of tech workers are contractors, and in some cases (such as Google), the contractors outnumber employees (Petersen 2020). Additionally, because technology has made it possible to work anywhere at any time, some workplaces expect their employees to be accessible and responsive at all times (Petersen 2020). This type of overwork has been idealized as an external signal that an employee is motivated and working hard (Petersen 2020). Beyond that, the ideal was to *love* your work and pursue it regardless of personal cost (Jaffe 2021). These practices and norms have impacted the nonprofit sector as well, changing those workplace cultures.

Some challenges, however, are unique to the nonprofit sector. First is the nonprofit starvation cycle. The cycle begins with unrealistic expectations from funders of what nonprofits need to spend on administrative costs; then, nonprofits are pressured to conform to this expectation by cutting administrative spending, which just fuels the unrealistic expectations, causing even more cost-cutting (Gregory and Howard 2009). The pressure to keep administrative costs low and a normative expectation that salaries should also be low contribute to nonprofits generally paying less than equivalent roles in other sectors (Baluch and Ridder 2021; Gazley 2017). Organizations across the sector report struggling with raising enough money to cover administrative needs, paying competitive salaries, and hiring enough staff ("State of the Nonprofit Sector Survey 2018" 2018). As a result, nonprofits struggle with investing in internal HR processes, internal talent development, or other infrastructure that would improve the experience of employees (Carpenter 2017; Sowa and Word 2017). Some nonprofits were able to use Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) loans during the COVID-19 pandemic to fill some of these gaps and invest in staff (Ceka and Warner 2023; Williams 2020). However, the overall norms in the sector have not changed. While PPP loans were crucial in the short term for many of the organizations that received them, it is not clear if the benefit continued past the immediate crisis (Ceka and Warner 2023).

The second challenge is the professionalization of the sector. Sometimes referred to as marketization or managerialism, as nonprofit workplaces adopt the management practices and performance metrics of the private sector, what it means for nonprofit work to be meaningful changes (Baluch and Ridder 2021; Hwang and Powell 2009; Sandberg and Robichau 2022). Workers can struggle to balance the expectations of managerialism with their mission attachment (Hwang and Powell 2009). The nonprofit workforce also increasingly sees themselves as professionals with sector-specific skills that should be compensated and valued accordingly (Walk, Stewart, and Kuenzi 2020). It also can require workers to have a unique mix of skills (Akingbola, Rogers, and Intindola 2023). Relatedly, the nonprofit sector is more educated than the workforce as a whole (McGinnis Johnson, Piatak, and Ng 2017). However, levels of education do not always line up with the jobs workers get in the sector, leading to perceived over qualification. This is an issue because workers who perceive themselves as overqualified have lower job satisfaction, lower engagement, and higher turnover intent (Harari, Manapragada, and Viswesvaran 2017).

A mission-driven workforce also behaves and is motivated differently. Many workers in the nonprofit sector are mission-driven, though that is not a motivation that is exclusive to the sector. This motivation means that work engagement may be different in these workplaces than in others (Kim et al. 2013). It is more complicated than the traditional view of intrinsic motivation over extrinsic, instead being a combination of the two (Walk, Stewart, and Kuenzi 2020). Nonprofit workers are "following a calling, but also want to be compensated adequately for their work" (Walk, Stewart, and Kuenzi 2020, 20). Connection to an organization's mission and values can positively impact worker behavior (Akingbola and van den Berg 2019). There is some evidence that nonprofit workers are more satisfied with their work than peers in other sectors, but they may also be more stressed than their private sector peers (Borzaga and Tortia 2006; Hamann and Foster 2014). However, being overly dependent on this intrinsic motivation is a risk for nonprofits because it can be hard to sustain (Gazley 2017; Sowa and Word 2017). Empirical research has demonstrated that mission attachment does not override dissatisfaction with pay or career advancement and that workers expect more than just the psychic income of feeling like they are helping others or making a difference (Brown and Yoshioka 2003; Kim and Lee 2007; Robichau, Sandberg, and Russo 2024).

This type of passionate motivation can make work, even tedious or menial work, deeply meaningful, but it also sets workers up for burnout and possible exploitation (Bailey et al. 2019; Bunderson and Thompson 2009). This occurs because mission-driven workers can see the mission as more important than anything else, including their personal lives or health (Bunderson and Thompson 2009; Dempsey and Sanders 2010; Timm 2016). Memoirs of social entrepreneurs lionize this self-sacrifice as noble and necessary (Dempsey and Sanders 2010). Workers internalize it to their own

detriment (Bunderson and Thompson 2009; Freudenberger 1974). Individuals who see their work as meaningful can set themselves up for the kind of overwork that leads to burnout. In one study, respondents who did not see their work as deeply meaningful were more likely to maintain work-life boundaries (Oelberger 2019). The conflict between meaningful work and the rest of one's life can cause a high level of emotional distress (Oelberger 2019). A sense of meaning can cause boundary inhibition, which helps explain why employees who feel their work is deeply meaningful accept things like overwork, even at a cost to their personal relationships (Oelberger 2019). This type of overwork was, until recently, considered something to aspire to and the sign of a dedicated, hardworking, nonprofit employee (Dempsey and Sanders 2010; Jaffe 2021; Petersen 2020). Even as the broader cultural conversation has shifted, practices have not. One study of a charity trying to implement better work-life balance practices found that the needs and realities of the work conflicted with the policies and messaging (Riforgiate and Kramer 2021). The needs of those the organization served, as well as what leaders did in practice (such as emailing outside work hours), mattered more than any policy or work-life balance message (Riforgiate and Kramer 2021).

From the earliest studies of burnout, this characteristic of mission-driven workers has been pinpointed as putting them at particular risk (Freudenberger 1974). Burnout "is a prolonged response to chronic emotional and interpersonal stressors on the job and is defined by the three dimensions of exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy" (Maslach, Schaufeli, and Leiter 2001, 397). While often discussed at an individual level, the strongest predictors of burnout are organizational and situational, so it is important to examine individuals in their organizational context to truly understand the causes of burnout (Maslach, Schaufeli, and Leiter 2001; Moss 2021; Petersen 2020). Maslach, Schaufeli, and Leiter identified six areas of mismatch between employees and organizations that lead to burnout: workload, control, reward, community, fairness, and values (2001). These mismatches can become particularly acute in nonprofit workplaces because of the nonprofit starvation cycle and the nature of mission-motivated workers. Nonprofits often develop cultures that encourage overwork and underpayment, leading to mismatches in workload and reward (Jaffe 2021; Maslach and Leiter 2005; Timm 2016). Idealism can also push workers to overexert themselves, leading to exhaustion (Freudenberger 1974; Maslach and Leiter 2005). Nonprofit workers tend to have higher workloads than those working in the private sector and work longer hours than those in the public sector (Hamann and Foster 2014). Even in organizations where leaders try to encourage balance, the needs and realities of the work conflict with policies and messaging about the importance of work-life balance (Riforgiate and Kramer 2021). One of the first papers to outline the concept of burnout describes how mission-driven workers end up in this position that is as relevant today as it was when it was written in 1974:

> But it is precisely because we are dedicated that we walk into a burnout trap. We work too much, too long, and too intensely. We feel a pressure from within to work and help and we feel a pressure from the outside to give. (Freudenberger 1974, 161)

Mission-driven workers may also hold their employers to a higher standard of behavior (Bunderson and Thompson 2009). Workers want both the values of an organization and how those values are put into action to reflect their personal values (Sandberg and Robichau 2022). This can result in a values mismatch, where workers become cynical because management is not behaving in line with organizational values (Maslach and Leiter 2005). However, cultural dynamics within nonprofits can also make speaking up about toxic or otherwise damaging behavior difficult because organizations value seeing themselves as "good," and leadership wants to protect that perception (Vijfeijken 2019).

Why should researchers or nonprofit leaders care about the current state of nonprofit work? First, because of the negative impact it has on their employees. Second, the impact on individuals ends up negatively impacting entire organizations. On an individual level, nonprofit workers are struggling with burnout, lower physical and mental well-being, lower work engagement, and lower job satisfaction. These all contribute to reduced productivity, lower performance, and higher turnover (Griffeth, Hom, and Gaertner 2000; Maslach, Schaufeli, and Leiter 2001; Moynihan and Pandey 2007; Rubenstein et al. 2018). The impacts of stress and burnout on individual well-being are not to be discounted. Employees who become cynical as a result of their burnout may struggle with the loss of the idealism that motivated them, negatively impacting their mental well-being (Freudenberger 1974). Burned-out employees can also have physical symptoms such as fatigue, frequent headaches, insomnia, and colds they can't seem to get over (Freudenberger 1974; Moss 2021).

On an organizational level, low well-being, engagement, and job satisfaction negatively impact organizational performance (Abzug 2017; Akingbola 2017). Turnover is expensive due to the costs of recruitment and training and can also negatively impact organizational performance (Selden and Sowa 2015). As a workplace becomes more stressful, job performance decreases (Jex, Sliter, and Britton 2014). There is also some evidence that burnout can be "contagious" and spread amongst a team (Maslach, Schaufeli, and Leiter 2001). Burned-out employees have lower organizational commitment, which contributes to reduced job performance and higher turnover (Griffeth, Hom, and Gaertner 2000; Maslach, Schaufeli, and Leiter 2001). Overwork may also negatively impact productivity. Empirical research suggests that after working more than 55 h a week, "productivity drops so significantly that there is no value in putting in any more hours" (Moss 2021, 123). There is also concern that the culture of nonprofits is reducing sector commitment and damaging the pipeline of leadership talent (Carpenter 2017; Walk, Stewart, and Kuenzi 2020). Middle

managers can be a particular flight risk because their skills are highly transferable and can earn them higher salaries in other sectors (Vincent and Marmo 2018). As a result, many have considered leaving the sector (Vincent and Marmo 2018). There is also some evidence that unstable or uncertain economic times can push nonprofit employees to sector switch to the private sector (Piatak 2017). However, dramatic events can cause individuals to reevaluate their career goals, which can cause or increase nonprofit sector commitment (Kuenzi, Stewart, and Walk 2021). It also seems that COVID-19 has shifted priorities, with nonprofit workers desiring more work-life balance (Kuenzi, Stewart, and Walk 2023).

3 Work and Millennials

Some of the changes to workplaces can also be attributed to generational change. As Millennials (born between 1981 and 1996) become the largest generational cohort in the workforce, they are trying to shift the culture of work (Fry 2020). Millennials overall value intrinsic rewards less than Gen X (born between 1965 and 1980) or Baby Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964) and value extrinsic rewards more than Baby Boomers (Twenge et al. 2010). Millennials have lower work centrality, meaning a belief that work is the primary source of life satisfaction, and value leisure time more than Gen X or Baby Boomers (McGinnis Johnson, Piatak, and Ng 2017; Twenge et al. 2010). What is particularly compelling about the data used by Twenge et al. to make these assertions is that it is longitudinal survey data collected about each generation when they were the same age, showing clear empirical evidence of how Millennials differ from earlier generations in a way that cannot be solely attributed to being younger or their place in the workplace hierarchy.

Millennials also expect quick promotions, raises, and opportunities for advancement and change jobs with greater frequency than earlier generations (AbouAssi, McGinnis Johnson, and Holt 2021; Ng, Schweitzer, and Lyons 2010). However, they switch jobs more than they switch sectors (AbouAssi, McGinnis Johnson, and Holt 2021). Those switches are not solely to get promoted; Millennials are more comfortable with lateral career moves than earlier generations (McGinnis Johnson, Piatak, and Ng 2017). Additionally, Millennials may experience burnout at higher rates than other generations (Moss 2021; Petersen 2020). Millennials may also be driving the recent growth in unionization efforts in an attempt to secure fair wages, better working conditions, and more job security (Jaffe 2021; Schaffer 2022). As noted in one profile of unions at liberal think tanks, a generation "attuned to structural inequality is not going to see the old model of post-collegiate, pay-your-dues penury as charming" (Schaffer 2022). In 2021, there was concern that the uncertainty and shock of COVID-19 could lead to sector exit, particularly by

Millennials whose long-term career trajectories could be impacted (Kuenzi, Stewart, and Walk 2021). The subsequent "Great Resignation," where employees left their jobs in historic numbers for better jobs, suggests there was some merit to that concern (Parker and Menasce Horowitz 2022).

Researchers have generally focused on extrinsic rewards, particularly compensation when trying to understand Millennial behavior in the nonprofit workforce, but the evidence that compensation is the main factor in decision-making is mixed (AbouAssi, McGinnis Johnson, and Holt 2021; McGinnis Johnson and Ng 2016). AbouAssi, McGinnis Johnson, and Holt found that low pay led to Millennials leaving jobs in the nonprofit sector but not necessarily leaving the sector entirely (2021). Similarly, McGinnis Johnson and Ng found no evidence that pay correlated to millennial sector switching intentions (2016). However, higher-paid millennial nonprofit managers are less likely to express an interest in switching sectors (McGinnis Johnson and Ng 2016). Financial considerations may play a role in initial sector choice among Millennials. Among college students with high public service motivation scores, student debt can lead to students pursuing higher-paying private sector jobs (Ng and McGinnis Johnson 2020). If compensation does not predict job or sector change among Millennials, then what does? Opportunities to build skills or be promoted seem to be bigger factors in job changes than compensation (McGinnis Johnson, Piatak, and Ng 2017). It is possible that early career job dissatisfaction could drive Millennials into different sectors rather than just switching jobs within the nonprofit sector (AbouAssi, McGinnis Johnson, and Holt 2021). This study aims to expand on the earlier work done by McGinnis Johnson, Ng, AbouAssi, and others on Millennials in the nonprofit workforce by asking a broader set of questions focused on more than just compensation as well as by examining Millennials as they have advanced in their careers by using more recent data. It also explicitly answers the call from Kuenzi, Stewart, and Walk in their 2021 paper about the impacts of the pandemic on the nonprofit workforce to explicitly examine what is happening with the Millennial generation.

4 Methodology

Data were collected via an online survey of Millennials with nonprofit work experience in the fall of 2021. The survey was distributed via email listservs[1] and posts on Facebook and LinkedIn with a focus on listservs and pages that would potentially

1 Invitations to participate in the survey were sent as part of monthly newsletters by the Washington D.C. and Chicago chapters of the Young Nonprofit Professionals Network and by ReproJobs (a widely read newsletter amongst employees at reproductive health providers and advocacy organizations).

have large populations of Millennials with nonprofit work experience. To ensure all respondents were members of the population of interest, the survey began with two screening questions. The first asked about their year of birth (to establish they were a Millennial), and the second asked if they had ever held a paid position at a nonprofit. I used Pew Research Center's generational cutoffs, so respondents born between 1981 and 1996 are Millennials (Dimock 2019). If a respondent either was not a Millennial or had never worked at a nonprofit in a paid position, the survey automatically ended. In total, 203 people clicked through to the survey and consented to participate. Of those, 19 respondents were eliminated from the sample because they did not meet one or both parts of the inclusion criteria. This left a total of 184 respondents. A demographic breakdown of the sample is provided in Table 1. The majority of the sample (59.8 %) had worked for 3 or more nonprofits. Respondents were from all over the country, with 51 metropolitan areas represented. While the survey was not explicitly limited to those working in the United States, all but one respondent was U.S.-based. The most represented metropolitan areas were Washington, D.C. (15.2 %), Chicago (13.6 %), and New York City (12 %). A wide range of types of nonprofits were represented, including universities, human service organizations, arts and culture institutions, and advocacy groups, as illustrated in Table 2.

This demographic breakdown matches with what we know of the demographics of the nonprofit sector workforce as a whole, that it is predominately white, predominately female, and more educated than the overall workforce (Abzug 2017; Weisinger 2017).

To minimize confusion, the survey had two versions, one for those currently working in the nonprofit field and one for those who had left the sector.[2] This allowed some questions that were specific to each group. For example, respondents who had left the sector were asked why they decided to take a job outside the nonprofit sector. It also enabled the questions for the group who had left the sector to be worded in such a way that it was clear they should be answering based on their last nonprofit job, not their current job. By including both groups, this allows comparisons between people who stayed and people who left in an attempt to avoid survivorship bias by only surveying individuals who still work in the nonprofit sector. The intent was to see if workplace issues were driving people to leave not only their jobs but the sector as a whole. The survey was pretested by a small group of Millennials with nonprofit work experience in the spring of 2021. As a result of an Apple privacy update that went into effect right as this survey was deployed, data on how many recipients opened an email newsletter are no longer accurate because the tracking pixels used to collect that data no longer work (Apple 2021). Additionally, while LinkedIn

2 In cases where the respondent was not currently employed, they answered the survey based on the sector they had most recently worked in.

Table 1: Demographics of sample.

Gender	***n***	**Percent**
Woman	138	75 %
Man	11	6 %
Non-binary	10	5.4 %
Unspecified	25	13.6 %
Race and ethnicity		
Asian	11	6 %
Black	7	3.8 %
Hispanic or Latino	4	2.2 %
Middle Eastern	3	1.6 %
Multiracial	10	5.4 %
White	124	67.4 %
Unspecified	25	13.6 %
Age		
35–40	47	25.5 %
30–34	71	38.6 %
25–29	66	35.8 %
Highest degree		
High school	0	0 %
Bachelor's degree	58	31.5 %
Master's degree	89	48.4 %
Professional degree	5	2.7 %
Doctorate	5	2.7 %
Unspecified	27	14.7 %
Current sector		
Nonprofit	140	76.1 %
Private	24	13.0 %
Public	15	8.2 %
Self-employment	2	1.1 %
Not nonprofit, unspecified	3	1.6 %
Number of nonprofits worked for		
1	29	16 %
2	34	18 %
3	57	31 %
4 or more	53	29 %
Unspecified	11	6 %

Table 2: Types of nonprofits respondents worked for.

Type	*n*	Percentage
Social and political rights	12	7 %
Healthcare	55	30 %
Human and social services	23	13 %
Education	23	13 %
Visual and performing arts	11	6 %
International relief and development	7	4 %
Other	39	21 %
Unclear or unspecified	14	8 %

provides some data on views of personal posts, Facebook does not. As a result, it is not possible to calculate an accurate response rate.

The focus of this article is the data that were collected via open-ended questions in the survey about desired changes and the benefits that respondents most valued. The first cycle of coding was done using descriptive coding to determine common topics and themes (Saldaña 2021). These categories were based on themes that organically came up in the open-ended responses rather than using predetermined codes. Those codes were then mapped into the broader change categories of changes to benefits or compensation and organizational changes, as illustrated in Figure 1 (changes to benefits or compensation) and Figure 2 (organizational changes). These categories were determined based on what would be required by organizations to make the change with changes to benefits and salary focused on concrete additions to adjustments to salaries and benefits and organizational change focusing on structural, cultural, or programmatic change. Table 3 (benefit and compensation changes) and Table 4 (organizational changes) provide examples of each sub-code.

Because this study was done without a comparison group, it is possible that the concerns expressed by Millennial nonprofit employees are shared by other generational cohorts. However, existing research on generational approaches to work

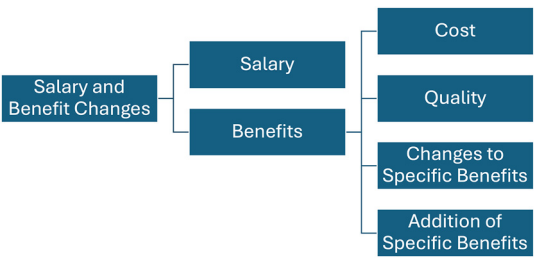

Figure 1: Changes to benefits or compensation coding tree.

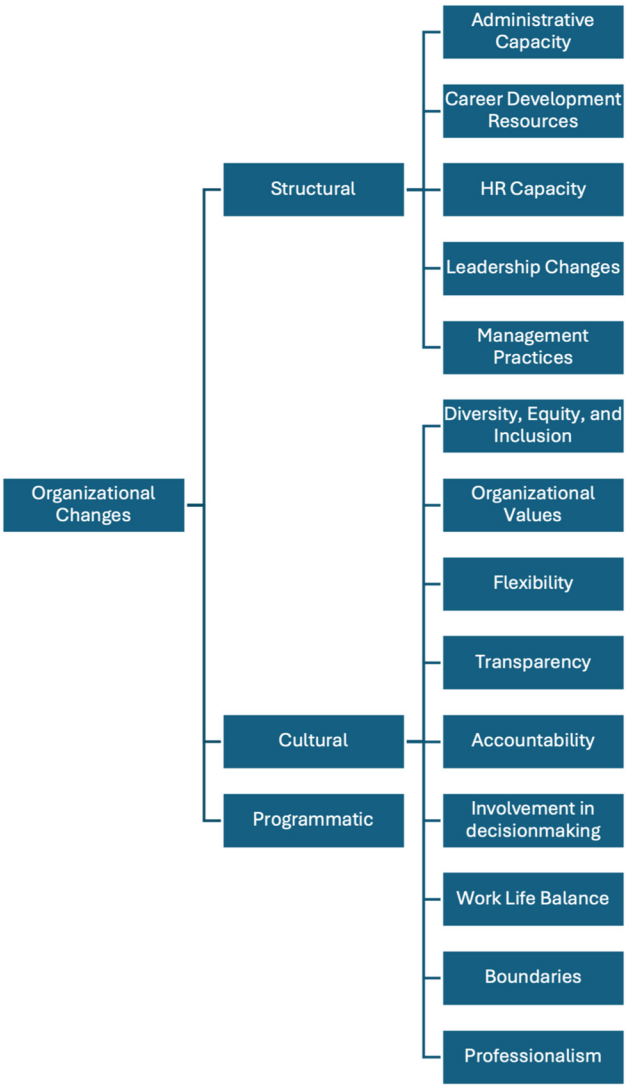

Figure 2: Organizational changes coding tree.

indicates that there are distinct differences in how Millennials approach work compared to older generations in the workforce as a whole. The existing research also does not indicate that the areas in which Millennials differ from other generations overlap with the areas where we know nonprofit employees differ from their peers in other sectors. It is also worth noting that this survey did not ask about the

Table 3: Salary and benefits changes sub-code examples.

Code	Example
Salary	"Pay closer to similar roles at other institutions"
Benefits (cost)	"Having affordable and comprehensive vision and dental insurance is very important to me, in addition to a fair salary. Both are offered at my job, but are so expensive and cover so little that I had to opt out. Especially since they pay us so little, they may as well have not offered them."
Benefits (quality)	"Access to mental health services. We are a mental health agency providing no-cost essential services across the city, but our employee healthcare is through insurance that is notoriously terrible for mental health."
Benefits (changes to Specific benefits)	"Increase parental leave (currently 1 week)"
Benefits (addition of Specific benefits)	"Free parking. I pay $71 per month to park and while the university offers public transportation incentives, our city is not public transportation friendly."

Table 4: Organizational changes sub-code examples.

Code	Example
Structural (administrative capacity)	"More investment in infrastructure for employees (administration, HR, recruitment, employee engagement, etc.)"
Structural (career development resources)	"Clearer and more standardized growth pathways and professional development opportunities"
Structural (HR capacity)	"My employer needs to hire more people and pay direct service staff more. We are incredibly understaffed, which has lead to burnout and turnover."
Structural (leadership changes)	"The board is very dysfunctional and are either micromanaging or extremely disengaged"
Structural (management practices)	"Leaders being present with teams, taking the time to understand what is required to complete a project, and planning accordingly"
Cultural (DEI)	"Engaging in anti-racism work and anti-oppression work in general."
Cultural (organizational values)	"Increased focus on social justice"
Cultural (flexibility)	"WFH flexibility, flex time so that employees don't work more than 40 h work weeks"
Cultural (transparency)	"More transparency about department and organizational decision making"
Cultural (accountability)	"Management had way too much power with little accountability structure in place which infiltrated into every aspect of the work"
Cultural (involvement in decision-making)	"For employees to have decision-making power with the organization's strategy"
Cultural (work-life balance)	"Better work life balance (modeling from top down)"
Cultural (boundaries)	"Respecting boundaries on our time, not weaponizing the mission to make us work more"
Cultural (professionalism)	"Be more formal and professional"
Programmatic	"Creating opportunities for parents to learn alongside their student(s)"

Table 5: Desired changes by survey respondents.

	Organizational changes		Salary or benefit changes	
	n	Percent	*n*	Percent
Currently work for a nonprofit	85	60.71 %	68	48.57 %
No longer work for a nonprofit	36	81.82 %	33	75.00 %
Full sample	121	65.76 %	101	54.89 %

Paycheck Protection Program loans that some nonprofits received and that helped preserve a large number of nonprofit jobs during the pandemic in the period just before this survey was done (Ceka and Warner 2023; Williams 2020). What is clear, however, is that whatever investments were made by the organizations these respondents worked for using PPP funds were not enough to deal with concerns about being underpaid or underlying organizational culture issues.

5 Findings

Millennials have a range of ideas for how their nonprofit workplaces could be improved. The main theme that emerges is that respondents want the kinds of changes that make working in nonprofits viable for the long term. Millennials are seeking alignment between staff treatment and an organization's mission and values. While mission matters to them, they seem less likely to buy into the idea that the mission is more important than absolutely anything else, reflecting a shift that has been observed in recent work on nonprofit employee motivation (Kuenzi, Stewart, and Walk 2021; Walk, Stewart, and Kuenzi 2020). As one respondent noted when explaining their decision to leave the nonprofit sector, "I wanted to escape the idea that nonprofit work was passion work and that I should accept lower wages because of this." Desired changes fit into two categories: changes to compensation and benefits and organizational changes, as indicated in Table 5.[3]

Turning first to changes to compensation and benefits, it is unsurprising that pay emerges as a persistent theme, with 40.5 % of respondents mentioning it. However, requests for higher pay are typically tied to other concerns. Some respondents sought pay that was on par with similar organizations or provided a living wage. As one respondent wrote, "When negotiating my current salary my (now) boss told me that

3 41.30 % of respondents indicated changes in both categories and 20.65 % did not indicate changes in either category either by saying they did not want any changes (4 respondents) or by not answering the question (34 respondents).

since I work on a school-year basis, I can always get a summer job. I DON'T WANT TO HAVE TO HAVE A SECOND JOB IN ORDER TO AFFORD TO WORK AT MY FIRST JOB." Other respondents noted the ways that staff worrying about their own financial stability could harm the organization's work. As one wrote, "frontline staff who work directly with clients providing the services that our organization exists to offer are not paid a living wage. We all struggle with our bills and it makes doing our jobs difficult." Other respondents sought regular cost of living increases, the opportunity to receive performance-based raises, or ensuring a raise when someone was promoted. It is also important to note that concerns about pay were almost never the only concern respondents had, even amongst those who had cited pay as a reason they left the nonprofit sector.

In addition to pay, insurance coverage and paid time off (PTO) came up frequently. Health insurance was mentioned by 50.5 % of respondents, and PTO was mentioned by 56.5 %. The quality and affordability of health insurance mattered significantly. Several respondents noted they wanted to make more money in order to afford their employer-offered insurance. As one respondent noted about a prior nonprofit workplace, the offered insurance "was actually pretty good, but I couldn't take full advantage of it because I didn't make enough for copays." Another respondent, who had employer-provided insurance at a prior workplace, "avoided doctors and dentists like the plague because it cost so much." A desire for more PTO was often tied to organizational culture or workload concerns. One respondent summarized a concern that was repeated by many respondents when they noted PTO was the most important benefit to them, but that PTO "needs to be real. I don't want to be expected to 'work' or 'be available' during my time off." Respondents also noted wanting alignment between an organization's mission and provided benefits. One respondent, who works for a nonprofit that provides no-cost mental health services, noted that their "employee healthcare is through insurance that is notoriously terrible for mental health." Another wrote, "one of our main issues is reproductive rights, so I think it's hypocritical if we do not offer substantial parental leave for both parents, including in cases of adoption and abortion support."

While salary and benefit changes came up frequently (being mentioned by 54.9 % of respondents), organizational changes came up with more frequency and urgency, being mentioned by 65.8 % of respondents. This was also the category of changes most pressing to respondents currently working in the nonprofit sector. While 48.6 % of that group mentioned salary or benefit changes, 60.7 % mentioned organizational changes. The first category of desired organizational changes was changes to staff workload, either by changing expectations or hiring more staff. As one respondent wrote about a prior job, "the organization was constantly short-staffed. Leadership constantly pushed for programs and events that we did not have the human capacity or financial resources to do properly, so had to add additional

responsibilities to everyone's already overfill [sic] plate. We needed to scale down offerings or scale up staff." Similarly, a number of respondents sought investment in the areas normally seen as "overhead." As one respondent wrote, they wanted "more investment in infrastructure for employees (administration, HR, recruitment, employee engagement, etc.). I think this is an area most nonprofits fund last and have the most difficulty finding funds for." Many respondents also expressed a desire for their organizations to invest in professional development and provide opportunities for career growth.

Respondents also sought support for the sometimes emotionally difficult work they did and the burnout they and their colleagues were struggling with. Several respondents noted that they felt like they were on their own, and they wanted more resources from their organizations to support their mental health and prevent or manage burnout. As one respondent put it, "despite our efforts – and I do think leadership is trying – all of the pressure remains on the individual to mitigate burnout. If you're burnt out it's because you're not doing 'self care' well enough and need to take a somatics course – not because the organization itself needs to transform." As another respondent noted, when explaining why they planned to look for their next job outside the nonprofit sector, "nonprofit work is also mentally and emotionally exhausting in a way that I think might be different than working in the private sector."

Finally, respondents often noted elements of organizational climate and culture they wanted to change. Many respondents talked about this in the context of PTO and work life balance. Many respondents indicated they did not feel they could fully take advantage of the offered PTO, either because they felt they couldn't actually use it or because they were expected to be available or working when they did. As one respondent wrote, "I don't feel like I can take the time off work because of the sheer volume of work, meetings, etc. I have to do." Another wrote they wanted management to respect employees' boundaries on their time rather than "weaponizing the mission to make us work more." I consider this an element of climate and culture because these respondents suggest that use of their PTO is not tied to how many days they are afforded or even explicit prohibitions on time off but by cultural expectations within the organization. As one respondent noted, they wanted their organization to "stop glamorizing over working." This lack of boundaries between work and life that contributed to pressures to work on vacation or not take PTO at all often started with the behavior of senior leadership. Similarly, many respondents expressed a desire for flexibility, either via remote or hybrid work environments, schedule flexibility, or both.

There were also respondents who indicated negative aspects of their organization's overall culture. Multiple respondents described their organization's environments as toxic. This often came out of a lack of accountability for bad behavior,

discrimination, or both. As one respondent noted about a prior workplace, "it was an extremely toxic and abusive environment, and that largely stemmed from some senior staff who were never held accountable." Another respondent described their prior workplace as having "an environment of mistrust and pain" and "a culture of harassment." Respondents in organizations like this craved accountability for bad behavior. It is also worth noting how broader cultural forces, such as the idea that the mission is more important than anything else and underinvesting in organizational infrastructure like HR, lead to these types of cultures.

However, even for organizations not on that extreme end, there was noticeable room for improvement. One respondent highlighted a culture that was attempting to be positive where "staff are expected to just keep excelling, working, grinding, performing and delivering" despite the organization's difficult political context and that "there is an intense pressure to perform vulnerability, authenticity, and 'showing up as your full self' while somehow remaining upbeat and 'fierce.'" Another noted that her organization "is engaging in DEI-related work and frequently solicits feedback from employees (particularly people of color) but I have not noticed any substantive changes to the organization after almost two years of work." Another described her organization as "very siloed and stuck in the past on how things work. It's very challenging to get new work off the ground in areas that aren't directly related to the mission (i.e. things in marketing or IT)."

There are real risks to nonprofits if they do not seriously examine these issues. Millennials will move organizations and sectors to find what they are looking for. Of respondents currently working for nonprofits, half are already looking for a new job or would stay at their current organization for less than a year if the choice were up to them. Of the respondents who have left the sector, their concerns echoed the concerns of those currently in the sector. One respondent, who now works in government, wrote, "I couldn't support a family at the nonprofit. It was a good job but not a viable career path." Another noted, "I pivoted into tech and now make triple the salary with far better benefits and flexibility." Several noted they had left the sector or were planning to leave in search of more professional development. Some respondents had soured on the sector entirely because of negative experiences. As one respondent wrote, "I was severely burnt out when I decided to leave my job, and recognized that very few organizations within the nonprofit sector were actually treating employees fairly in regards to expectations, work loads, benefits, and pay. I was doing the work of three senior level people at my last job, and getting paid for only one of those roles!" Another, despite being happy with their current organization, noted that they hoped to leave the sector once their student loans were forgiven because they would "rather get paid more and know I'm dealing with problematic environments than ones that pretend they are social justice oriented." Several respondents indicated that burnout was part of why they had left their jobs

or the sector. The answers of respondents who had left or are planning to leave the sector also provide some support for the idea that Millennials are less willing to sacrifice themselves for the mission, even if it is a mission they deeply believe in. As one respondent wrote, they wanted "to unwind my identity and sense of self from my job … I want to quit my job to find a role where at least for a little while I can just show up, turn some widgets, and go home without having to spend so much of myself."

6 Limitations

More research is needed to validate the findings from this small sample, in particular, to further examine the question of whether Millennials are less willing to sacrifice their personal well-being for the mission than prior generations of nonprofit workers. Future research could compare Millennials to Generation Z to see if they have similar beliefs and investigate distinctions between managers and non-managers. A similar study that sampled multiple generations could also test which desires are generationally specific and which are present in the nonprofit workforce more broadly. A larger study could also investigate intra-sector differences by examining if things like mission, job function, or organizational size impact workplace expectations.

7 Conclusions

These findings contribute to our growing understanding of the complexities of the nonprofit workforce. As many other studies have begun to find, nonprofit workers have motivations and needs that go well beyond the traditional donative labor hypothesis (see Dempsey and Sanders, 2010; Kuenzi, Stewart, and Walk 2021; Robichau, Sandberg, and Russo 2024 among others). It also builds on our understanding of generational change in the nonprofit workforce and how Millennials are driving sector-wide changes.

These findings also offer some clear takeaways for nonprofit leaders considering how to recruit and retain Millennial talent. First, make sure all employees make a living wage that covers the cost of their benefits. Second, make sure everyone has adequate PTO where they can actually disconnect from work. Make sure leaders are modeling that behavior. Third, ask your employees what else they need. Deliver it when you can and be transparent in instances where you cannot. Fourth, make sure how you treat employees aligns with your values as an organization. Some of the harshest words from survey respondents were aimed at managers and organizations

that they felt were hypocritical or who didn't back up their words with concrete action.

Managers can go further if they want to expand their impact beyond their own organizations. They can advocate with funders – both private and government – to change policies that hinder their ability to invest in staff. For example, they can lobby against restrictions in government grants and contracts that don't allow them to keep up with prevailing wages in their region. They can also advocate for public policy changes that will enable workplaces to address areas where policy has failed workers of all ages. Government-paid family and medical leave on the federal or state level helps provide a much-needed benefit for nonprofits that otherwise cannot compete with the leaves offered by their private sector competitors. Government-funded childcare subsidies help offset the rising cost of childcare, which is a growing concern among Millennial parents trying to balance their careers with their family lives. Leaders could also advocate for federal national service programs to help promote opportunities for skill-building and increase the nonprofit workforce (Sagawa 2020).

It is important to note that while Millennials were the focus of this study, the changes respondents are advocating for benefit *everyone* and will make nonprofits more attractive long-term career prospects for all potential employees regardless of age. Overall, Millennials seem to be fed up with the status quo of nonprofit work and are more vocal and action-oriented in changing it.

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