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Comparison of Attitudes between Generation X and Baby Boomer Veterinary Faculty and Residents

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Abstract

Understanding the characteristics and preferences of the different generations in the veterinary workforce is important if we are to help optimize current and future veterinary schools and teaching hospitals. The purpose of this study was to compare the attitudes of different generations of veterinary faculty and those of faculty and house officers. A survey administered to faculty and house officers asked respondents to identify their level of agreement with a series of statements addressing work and lifestyle issues and feedback preferences. In addition, the survey included an open-ended question on non-monetary rewards for hard work. Thirty-eight of 48 faculty members (79%) and 45 of 54 house officers (83%) completed the survey. Among faculty, there were no significant differences between the Generation X and Baby Boomer subgroups or between genders. More faculty than house officers responded that delayed gratification is acceptable ($p = 0.03$) and that it is difficult to balance home and work life ($p < 0.001$). Compared to faculty, house officers preferred more frequent ($p = 0.03$) and critical ($p = 0.02$) feedback. The most common responses to the question on effective non-monetary rewards for hard work, from both faculty and house officers, were recognition and time off. No attitudinal differences were detected between generations within the faculty group, but a number of significant differences emerged between faculty and house officers. Increased awareness of the importance of balance and rewards for hard work, as well as modification of feedback styles, may be beneficial in teaching and mentoring current and future generations.

Keywords

professional development; resident education

NOTES

a WebSurveyor, Vovici Co., Dulles, VA <<http://www.vovici.com>>

b SPSS 14.0, SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL <<http://www.spss.com>>.

INTRODUCTION

Attracting and retaining specialists in academia is an important issue in the medical, dental, veterinary, and other health professions. In veterinary medicine, the majority of new diplomates now pursue non-academic career pathways. This creates a challenge for veterinary teaching hospitals, which need sufficient faculty to provide advanced patient care, student teaching, specialty and graduate training, and research. A recent assessment of workforce needs for clinical specialists identifies a current and projected future deficit in the number of specialists needed for schools and colleges.¹

While many issues may play a role in this trend, such as the income gap between private practice and academia and levels of student debt, other factors may attract potential faculty to or “repel” them from academic careers. A study conducted at Harvard University in 2001 found that the five factors of greatest importance to recent doctoral graduates planning academic careers were institutional support for research, time for family or personal obligations, quality of the department, teaching load, and a flexible work schedule.² While some of these factors may be related to the changing demographic landscape of academia, where there are now more women and members of ethnic minorities than ever before, the preferences of different generations in today’s workplace may also play an important role in issues of teaching style, work environment, mentoring, and career choice.

There are several generations in the workplace today: the Silent Generation or traditionalists (born before 1946), Baby Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964), Generation X (born between 1965 and 1981), and the Millennials (born after 1981).³ Most current veterinary faculty are Baby Boomers or belong to Generation X. The vast majority of current interns and residents belong to Generation X, but Millennials make up much of the current veterinary student population. Therefore, understanding the characteristics of these different generations is important if we are to optimize current and future veterinary schools and teaching hospitals. Numerous books and papers have been written about the characteristics of these different generations (for an excellent review, readers are directed to the book *When Generations Collide*³). A brief summary of key characteristics is presented in Table 1. It is important to be aware that while these characteristics are generalizations, subject to individual variations, they are a useful way to compare the attitudes and preferences of individuals born in the different generations. It is apparent that, because of these different generational characteristics, gaps can easily arise in expectations or preferences for mentoring, evaluation, and career choices. Distinctions between these generations may have profound implications for how we educate veterinary students and house officers, as well as for how we attract and retain specialists in academia.

Several researchers have studied generational differences in populations of medical, dental, pharmacy, and nursing students.^{2,4–8} Borges et al. found significant differences between Generation X and Millennial medical students: Millennial students scored higher on measures of warmth, reasoning, emotional stability, rule consciousness, perfectionism, and openness to change, while Generation X students scored higher on self-reliance.⁵ In contrast, a study of physicians in internal medicine (both faculty and residents) showed few differences in work hours or in attitudes towards patient care and work–life balance.⁶ To our knowledge, similar studies have not been published that address generational differences within the veterinary profession. We hypothesized that differences in attitudes do exist between Generation X and Baby Boomer faculty and house officers and that these could be important issues for attracting and retaining specialists in academic careers. The purpose of the study reported here was to compare attitudes toward work and lifestyle issues between different generations of veterinary faculty, and between faculty and house officers.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Tufts Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine comprises three different departments: Clinical Sciences, Biomedical Sciences, and Environmental and Population Health. Most clinical faculty and house officers are employed in the Department of Clinical Sciences (48 faculty, 10 interns, and 44 residents); therefore, only members of this department were included in the study.

A survey was developed by the authors to address attitudes that are considered characteristic of different generations.³ For each survey item, respondents were asked to identify their level of agreement with the statement (strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, strongly disagree). In addition, the survey asked for preferences on feedback style and included an open-ended question on what—other than money—respondents would consider an effective reward for hard work. Finally, faculty respondents were asked whether they plan to stay in academia until retirement. The Office of Institutional Research and Evaluation (OIR&E) at Tufts University developed the survey using commercial survey software.^a The survey was approved by the Tufts University Institutional Review Board. It was administered online via an embedded link in e-mails sent to all faculty and house officers. After the initial distribution, two reminders were sent electronically to encourage response. In addition to the online version, OIR&E created a paper version that could be distributed to people who preferred to hand-write their responses (only one of the 38 faculty responses was submitted on paper; none of the house officers chose to fill out the paper version of the survey). As an incentive for completing the survey, participants were entered into a random prize drawing. All responses remained anonymous.

The goal of the survey was to investigate differences among the generations currently working in veterinary medicine, so responses were first categorized according to respondents' birth year. Of the four possible generations mentioned above, only two were represented among faculty respondents: the Baby Boom and Generation X. Responding house officers belonged solely to Generation X.

The first set of analyses addressed generational differences among faculty members. For the level of agreement or disagreement with statements, independent *t*-tests were used to compare the means of Baby Boomers' responses with those of Generation X faculty. The second set of analyses addressed differences between house officers and faculty for the same set of survey items. Independent *t*-tests were conducted to compare the means of the two groups on their level of agreement with each statement. Feedback preferences were expressed in percentages and compared by chi-square analysis.

The third set of analyses was intended to be a comparison between Generation X and the Baby Boomers, regardless of position. But because all responding house officers belonged to Generation X, we were not able to make this comparison. Generational differences would have been confounded with differences of "position" (i.e., house officer vs. faculty). Regression analyses supported this finding: generation was not significant, but position was, in explaining survey responses. Therefore, an alternative third analysis was conducted, comparing both Generation X house officers and faculty.

Commercial statistical software^b was used for all analyses; statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$.

RESULTS

Thirty-eight of 48 faculty (79%) and 45 of 54 house officers (83%) completed the survey. The proportions of male and female respondents were not significantly different between the faculty

(23 female, 15 male) and house-officer groups (27 female, 18 male; $p > 0.05$). Within the faculty group, both the Baby Boomer ($n = 22$, 58%) and Generation X ($n = 16$, 42%) were represented, while all house officers belonged to Generation X.

Among faculty, there were no significant differences in responses either between the Generation X and Baby Boomer subgroups or between genders. In general, faculty believed that house officers have different values concerning work life and home life (58% strongly agreed or agreed) but disagreed that house officers are less interested in putting in the long hours required to succeed in academia or less willing to do so (61% disagreed or strongly disagreed; see Table 2). All faculty respondents (100%) strongly agreed or agreed that balancing home/family life and work is important, and most (82%) strongly agreed or agreed that it is difficult. Most faculty indicated that it is appropriate to defer to the opinions of those more experienced (69% strongly agreed or agreed) and 79% strongly agreed or agreed that “delayed gratification” is acceptable (i.e., “When I am working on a project, I do not mind if I do not get the desired result immediately, as long as the project is successful eventually”). Fewer faculty than house officers responded that it is important for people to “pay their dues” (47%). Most faculty (84%) strongly agreed or agreed that people who work hard should be rewarded. The most common responses to the open-ended question about effective non-monetary rewards for hard work were in the categories “recognition from peers and superiors,” “increased support (e.g., materials, staff, and support),” and “more time off” (see Table 3).

Most faculty respondents (51%) expressed a preference for annual performance feedback, as compared to receiving feedback immediately (11%), frequently (27%), or “only when necessary” (11%). Nearly all (97%) preferred to hear “both the good and the bad,” rather than critical feedback (0%) or only the positive (3%). Most (81%) also preferred specific, rather than general (19%), feedback. There were no significant differences between Baby Boomers and Generation X faculty in terms of feedback preferences. Most faculty (74%) indicated that they probably or definitely plan to stay in academia until they retire.

A number of significant differences emerged when all faculty were compared to house officers (see Table 2). Significantly more faculty than house officers agreed that house officers have different values concerning work and home life ($p = 0.04$) and that house officers are less interested in putting in the long hours required to succeed in academia or less willing to do so ($p < 0.001$). More faculty also agreed that delayed gratification is acceptable ($p = 0.03$) and that it is difficult to balance home and work life ($p < 0.001$; see Figure 1).

House officers and faculty expressed significantly different preferences for feedback. House officers preferred more frequent feedback ($p = 0.03$; see Figure 2) and more critical feedback ($p = 0.02$; see Figure 3) than did faculty. Both faculty and house officers indicated that they prefer specific rather than general feedback ($p > 0.05$; see Figure 4). The most common responses from house officers to the open-ended question about non-monetary rewards for hard work were in the categories “recognition” and “more time off” (see Table 3).

Generation X faculty ($n = 16$) were compared to house officers ($n = 45$) to determine the relative effects of position (faculty vs. house officer) within the same generation. For all responses, position appeared to exert a stronger effect than did generation. Results were similar to those found for most comparisons of all faculty to all house officers. However, Generation X faculty agreed more with the importance of “paying dues” for advancement than house officers did ($p = 0.04$), whereas the response to this statement was not different when all faculty were included (this was because Generation X faculty agreed more strongly with the statement than did Baby Boomer faculty).

DISCUSSION

Contrary to our hypothesis, our analyses detected no attitudinal differences between generations among veterinary faculty. It was not possible to compare generational differences within the group of house officers, since all respondents in this group belonged to Generation X. These results differ from those of studies comparing students of different generations^{4–8} and from the characteristics generally attributed to the Generation X and Baby Boomer generations.^{3,9} However, our findings are comparable to those of another study that evaluated similar questions among faculty and residents in internal medicine, which found no differences between Baby Boomers and Generation Xers. The results of the present study suggest that generational differences in attitudes may play a more important role in certain professions or at certain stages of professional life.

While no differences between generations were detected, significant differences were identified between faculty and house officers. For both faculty and house officers, there was strong agreement with the importance of balancing home and work life. However, more faculty than house officers expressed agreement that this is difficult. It is not clear whether this is because house officers are less aware of the challenges of academic life, because faculty are frustrated at being unable to achieve that balance, or because the two populations have different expectations. While members of Generation X often are seen as having different values with respect to home and work life and as being less willing to put in long hours, the majority of both faculty and house officers disagreed with these ideas (although house officers disagreed significantly more). In keeping with another generalization about Baby Boomers and Generation X, faculty were significantly more likely than house officers to accept the idea of delayed gratification.

While both faculty and house officers indicated that they prefer specific feedback, the preference of house officers was for more frequent, critical feedback. This result is also consistent with perceived characteristics of Generation X. This discrepancy may present a challenge for Baby Boomer faculty, who do not require frequent or critical feedback, when they mentor younger house officers.

The open-ended question about non-monetary rewards for hard work produced interesting results that may be useful for mentors and administrators. For faculty, the most effective rewards fall into the categories of recognition (from peers and superiors), increased support (e.g., materials, staff, and support), and more time off. Effective rewards for house officers also include recognition and time off; however, 20% of the house officers indicated that a better balance between work and personal life would be an effective reward (compared to none of the faculty). While faculty and house officers did not differ in their response to the statement regarding the importance of work–life balance, house officers appear to place more value on a balanced life. At the same time, house officers seem less aware of the challenges of achieving that balance. Addressing this issue is important for administrators and mentors, both in terms of program design and in terms of providing house officers with the skills they need to better achieve this balance.

Most faculty indicated that they plan to stay in academia, suggesting that their job satisfaction is relatively high. However, this attitude may not be adequately demonstrated to house officers. It is important for faculty not only to like their jobs but also to express that satisfaction to house officers and to articulate why an academic career is so appealing to them. Faculty, mentors, and administrators must also be aware of the importance of balance and of rewards for hard work. In addition to money, other rewards may also be very effective and valuable. Finally, it is important to address our own biases as educators and to reassess our teaching and mentoring methods to ensure that they meet the needs of current and future generations.

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Figure 1.
Responses to the statement, "I believe that it is difficult to balance home/family life and work" ($p < 0.001$)

Figure 2.
Responses to the survey item on preferred frequency of feedback ($p = 0.03$)

Figure 3.

Responses to the survey item on preferred nature of feedback ($p = 0.02$)

Figure 4.
Responses to the survey item on preferred type of feedback ($p > 0.05$)

Table 1

Key characteristics of the different generations in today's workplace*

	Traditionalists (pre-1946)	Baby Boomers (1946–1964)	Generation X (1965–1981)	Millennials (Post-1981)
Generational “personality”	Loyal	Optimistic; competitive	Skeptical	Realistic
Management style	Chain of command	Change of command	Self-command	Collaboration
Career goals	Build a legacy	Build a stellar career	Build a portable career	Build parallel careers
Rewards	Satisfaction of a job well done	Money, title, recognition, the corner office	Freedom	Work that has meaning
Balance	Support me in shifting the balance.	Help me balance everyone else and find meaning myself.	Give me balance now, not when I'm 65.	Work isn't everything; I need flexibility so I can balance all my activities.
Job changing	Job changing carries a stigma.	Job changing puts you behind.	Job changing is necessary.	Job changing is part of my daily routine.
Training	I learned it the hard way; you can, too.	Train' em too much and they'll leave.	The more they learn, the more they stay.	Continuous learning is a way of life.
Feedback	No news is good news	Feedback once a year, with lots of documentation	Sorry to interrupt, but how am I doing?	Feedback whenever I want it, at the push of a button

* Data source: Lancaster and Stillman (2002)³

Table 2
Responses from faculty ($n = 38$) and house officers ($n = 45$) to survey items

	Strongly Agree %		Agree %		Neither Agree nor Disagree %		Disagree %		Strongly Disagree %	
	Faculty	House Officers	Faculty	House Officers	Faculty	House Officers	Faculty	House Officers	Faculty	House Officers
I believe that interns/residents have different values than faculty members concerning work life and home life.*	18.4	6.7	39.5	26.7	18.4	35.6	21.1	22.2	2.6	8.9
I believe that interns/residents are less interested/willing than faculty members to put in the long hours it takes to succeed in* academia.	2.6	0.0	15.8	6.7	21.1	15.6	55.3	28.9	5.3	48.9
I believe it is important to balance time spent between home/family life and work.	68.4	73.9	31.6	23.9	0.0	2.2	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
I believe that it is difficult to balance home/family life and work.*	34.2	4.3	47.4	28.3	13.2	28.3	5.3	26.1	0.0	13.0
I believe that it is appropriate to defer to the opinions of people who are more	13.2	13.0	55.3	52.2	21.1	26.1	10.5	4.3	0.0	4.3

	Strongly Agree %		Agree %		Neither Agree nor Disagree %		Disagree %		Strongly Disagree %	
	Faculty	House Officers	Faculty	House Officers	Faculty	House Officers	Faculty	House Officers	Faculty	House Officers
experienced than I am.	2.6	4.4	44.7	31.1	36.8	28.9	15.8	28.9	0.0	6.7
I believe that it is important that people "pay their dues," in order to advance in their career.										
When I am working on a project, I do not mind if I do not get the desired result immediately, as long as the project is successful eventually. *	21.1	4.3	57.9	65.2	18.4	19.6	2.6	8.7	0.0	2.2
People who work especially hard (e.g., who put in long hours and are productive) should be rewarded for it.	31.6	33.3	52.6	53.3	15.8	11.1	0.0	2.2	0.0	0.0

* $p < 0.05$ for faculty vs. house officers.

Table 3

Faculty and house officers' coded responses to the open-ended question, "Other than money, what would you consider to be effective rewards for hard work?"*

Category	Faculty (<i>n</i> = 38)		House Officers (<i>n</i> = 45) %
	Generation X %	Baby Boomer %	
Recognition from peers	40.0	31.8	22.2
Recognition from superiors	20.0	31.8	6.7
Materials, staff, and support at work	20.0	27.3	4.4
More time off	33.3	13.6	20.0
Public recognition and acknowledgment	20.0	18.2	35.6
Professional advancement	20.0	13.6	13.3
Academic freedom	13.3	18.2	2.2
Ability to implement changes	13.3	18.2	6.6
Job satisfaction	6.7	18.2	8.9
Continuing-education opportunities	13.3		
Job stability	6.7	4.5	2.2
Improving animal health	6.7	4.5	2.2
Research/teaching awards	6.7	4.5	
Teaching and inspiring students		9.1	2.2
Useful results	6.7		4.4
Social events		4.5	
Flexible schedules		4.5	
Advancing program		4.5	
Intellectual stimulation		4.5	
Better balance of work and personal life			20.0
Successful grants and publications			6.7
Improved relationship with colleagues			2.2
Positive work environment			2.2
Opportunity to present data at conferences			2.2

* Because responses could be coded in multiple categories, percentages may not add to 100%.