



## **Millennial Engagement in the Workplace — Adjusting for a New Generation**

**Employment and Labor**



**MILLENNIALS  
PERSONALITY TRAITS**

- Strategic thinkers
- Strong interpersonal skills
- Visionaries
- Passionate
- Enthusiastic
- Decisive







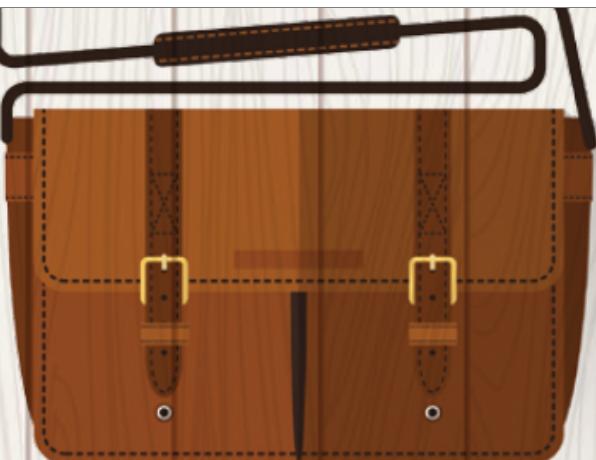
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PASSPORT

FIELD  
NOTES



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## CHEAT SHEET

- **Forget the ambition gap.** Approaches to professional life diverge through the generations, and a desire to find alternative paths should not be mistaken for a lack of ambition.
- **Present varied experiences.** New workers value a diversity of challenges and wish to feel that they are progressing in a company.
- **Provide instant feedback.** Millennials are used to instant responses, and they will appreciate feedback more frequently than on a yearly basis.
- **Don't leave anyone out.** Age bias can be subtle — consider training all employees on multigenerational differences.

Employee engagement and retention are not new concepts for companies. Employers have worked to maximize the potential of their workforces since the beginning of time, and have tried to motivate employees to improve performance and productivity through various types of incentive programs for decades. It's no secret — businesses with highly engaged employees generally have elevated productivity and better financial results. But employee needs and expectations change with the times, and that has never been more apparent than in today's workplace.

Millennials, also known as Generation Y, are now firmly established in the workforce, and their numbers are growing significantly as a proportion of the overall workplace. Companies accustomed to engaging other generations in the workplace are going to have to adjust their practices to attract, engage, and retain millennials. So why should companies pay attention? Millennials are the largest group since the baby boomer generation to enter the workforce. Attracting the top talent among this generation is going to be critical for businesses during the 21st century, especially as the boomers retire or significantly reduce their workloads.

Millennials are men and women born between 1980 and 2000. As a generation, they tend to be highly educated, confident, and technologically savvy. Millennials, however, are different from prior generations and can present challenges for organizations that are not quick to realize they bring with them a new perspective on work and its place in their lives. With that comes a new set of needs and expectations.

Baby boomers often joke about turning to their 12-year-olds when they have an IT problem, but growing up in the digital age truly has a profound effect on how millennials think. As employees, these differences set them apart from those who were hired before. They grew up using social media. They expect instant access to information and immediate responses to their questions. They are used to sharing information and having access on a global level. They are also used to connecting remotely, from anywhere and anytime during the day and night.

With internet access (most often at a very young age), a global world was open to millennials unlike any previous generation. They rightly see themselves as part of the bigger world in a way that many before them seldom did. How does all of this impact the workplace? Deloitte's Fourth Global Survey in 2015 surveyed 7,800 millennials from 29 countries around the globe. That survey shows 73

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percent of millennials believe businesses have a positive impact on wider society. Barry Salzberg, CEO of Deloitte Global, explained, “The message is clear: When looking at their career goals, today’s millennials are just as interested in how a business develops its people and its contribution to society as they are in its products and profits.”

According to the survey, millennials believe that an organization’s treatment of its employees is the most important consideration when deciding if it is a company they want to work for. They are looking for employers that pay as much attention to people and purpose as to products and profit. They then consider the company’s:

- Overall impact on society;
- Financial performance;
- Record for creating innovative products and services; and
- Whether it has a well-defined and meaningful purpose to which it is true, such as employee wellbeing, and employee growth and development.

When evaluating leadership, millennials give little regard to an organization’s scope or scale, its overt charitable activity, or the employment histories of senior executives. They are interested in companies that combine the pursuit of profits with consideration of individuals as employees and members of society. The Deloitte survey indicated that millennials identified the personality traits of those they perceived to be great leaders in business as follows:

- Strategic thinking (39 percent);
- Being inspirational (37 percent);
- Strong interpersonal skills (34 percent);
- Vision (31 percent);
- Passion and enthusiasm (30 percent); and
- Decisiveness (30 percent).

At the bottom of the list were having an autocratic approach (6 percent) and being driven by financial results (10 percent). This new generation of workers does not want to spend a career toiling in “their father’s workplace.”

## **The ambition gap — reality or myth?**

Baby boomers often complain that millennial employees are just not as ambitious as their hard-working parents — the so called “ambition gap.” True or not, they are the future’s business leaders, and for that reason, their needs must be understood. Bentley University’s Center for Women and Business (CWB) surveyed 1,000 college-educated men and women born since 1980 in order to gain a more in-depth picture of the career aspirations of millennials and the values driving those aspirations. Among the number of important conclusions reached by the survey, two findings challenge the idea of the true existence of an ambition gap.

First, millennials have not rejected the idea of a corporate career, but they will seek other options — such as starting their own business — if they cannot find workplaces which align with their personal values. What do they value? Time management, relationships, and job security. They would like career success, but will not tolerate unpleasant workplaces that do not allow them to be their authentic selves and do not support their personal and family values.

Second, “the attitudes and aspirations of men and women are converging.” What does this mean?

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Men are as interested as women are in family and work-life balance. Although the evidence is that women are still not being treated the same, the findings suggest that “the best path to advancing women in business is to view the issue as a generational one and not a gender one.”

In the 21st century, companies will need to take steps to modify policies and procedures within the workplace to engage and retain millennials of both genders. In 2015, millennials have become the largest segment of the workforce according to Pew Research. Considering and implementing changes today will put certain companies at a competitive advantage tomorrow.

## **Show them they are advancing**

Personal and professional goals of millennials challenge them. They want to feel like they are progressing and moving forward in a company. This generation wants to make a difference at work right away. The old “wait until it’s your turn” or “you need to be here 10 years before you can work on that type of project” are nonstarters. Does this mean that companies need to give millennials the corner offices in the first year of employment? No, but there are changes in structure that companies can consider to allow this generation to feel like they are progressing and are an important part of the company.

Because millennials like a challenge, move them around within a company to give them experience or cross-training. Mix teams generationally to allow for the exchange of ideas and mentoring — from both sides. Millennials prefer team-based, collaborative work. Relationships are important to them and they interact with an extensive network of personal and professional connections.

Those companies who develop opportunities for millennials to advance up the career ladder will attract this new generation. To allow for this, companies may need to adjust how this advancement occurs within their internal structures. Adding more levels so there can be steps up in advancement is one way. Adopting a flatter organizational structure is another. Some have described this to be more of a lattice of opportunities rather than a ladder. If employees feel like they are advancing, they are much more likely to be engaged and productive.

## **Manage performance differently**

Reports and studies show that the millennial generation demands more and continuous feedback on their performance. As the largest generation since the baby boomers continues to enter into the workplace, companies are learning that the traditional annual or semiannual reviews are not enough. Millennials want to know about their performance now. Again, they are used to the instant feedback associated with social media, which plays a critical role in their lives. Making adjustments to a company’s evaluation process can enhance employee engagement in the workplace — communicating to them that the company considers them important and wants them to succeed.

For all employees, companies should provide avenues for more frequent and informal performance evaluations. This allows regular feedback to be given to employees on how the company assesses their progress and performance and to define expected performance metrics for employees and the company. In addition, a thorough and well defined job description or a written career path will give the employer and employee clear metrics against which to measure performance and discuss advancement.

In addition to providing avenues for frequent, informal feedback, a structured evaluation process is

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key. An evaluation allows an employer to assess an employee's work performance and to identify an employee's strengths and weaknesses. It not only offers an opportunity for the company to commend good work performance but it allows the company to openly discuss shortcomings where warranted. Further, a structured review process ensures that conversations are being had with all employees and that the topics covered create a more uniform dialogue. Reviews also provide a written record of an employee's progress and problem areas. Through this process, employers have an opportunity to counsel employees on ways to improve performance, to set specific goals toward such improvement, and to motivate employees toward increased or improved performance.

While there is no legal mandate for an organization to conduct employee performance evaluations meeting any particular criteria, employers should implement a system that documents the company's policies and expectations were fair and consistently applied, and that the employee had fair notice of any performance concerns. Honest and accurate reviews are critical. Employers should also document written reprimands in the personnel file, or discussions of poor performance. Please keep in mind, while providing written feedback is helpful to document issues from a legal perspective, it is also very helpful to ensure that the employees understand the company's expectations and where they are falling short. While it can be difficult to hear, listen, and absorb feedback in a live meeting, written feedback allows employees to read and re-read at their leisure, or even to share the written message with someone who can help explain it to them in terms they understand. Ultimately, written feedback can be just as important a development tool as a risk-management protocol.

A performance evaluation should measure the employee in all aspects of the job and should cover a specific time period. Take the opportunity to praise the employee for the areas in which he or she performs well. Positive feedback goes a long way to employee engagement. Also, avoid the "recency effect" — that phenomenon when the manager only provides feedback on a very recent positive or negative interaction.

The evaluation process should include a discussion of the areas in which the employee can improve performance. Use concrete examples of behaviors in need of improvement, and provide suggestions as to how improvement might be accomplished. Invite the employee to discuss the employee's impressions and concerns. Managers who engage in active listening can identify ways to help the employee to improve and may identify obstacles in the workplace that hamper improved employee performance. Never provide negative feedback without constructive suggestions for change, and a roadmap for success.

## **Set goals**

Research on goal setting suggests that people who set specific, achievable goals are more likely to reach those goals than are people who set nonspecific or grandiose goals. Managers should help employees to set very specific goals to foster performance improvement. Millennials like transparency and to know what is expected of them, where they are going, and why they are headed there. As noted above, feedback should be provided periodically, and the employee's progress toward the goal should be reviewed in subsequent performance evaluations and communications.

## **Be flexible**

Companies need to set expectations and deadlines on projects and production. There are orders or jobs to fulfill and client needs to be met. Successfully meeting these demands are what makes a company profitable.

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In order to attract and retain millennials and to remain competitive in the modern work environment, providing flexibility is required. Long gone are the days where employees clock out at 5pm and are “off-duty” when they leave the parking lot. With the benefits of modern society comes the demands of modern society. If your business requires your employees to be flexible in their home lives to accommodate work (checking and responding to email immediately after business hours, etc.), you need to be flexible with work time to accommodate employees’ home lives.

If it is important to be present and work at certain hours, companies need to set those expectations, and explain why they are necessary. When, however, there can be flexibility or a rethinking as to whether something can be done a different way, allowing for this change may improve productivity from employees.

Flexibility also involves being open to new ways of doing things. “This is how we do it” or “we have done this for years” are expressions that may hold a company back from advancing with this generation. Most systems are able to change in at least some way if not completely. Stop and consider what your company can do to allow for more flexibility. Many articles suggest this generation is entrepreneurial so they will have lots of ideas. It will go a long way if companies can harness those ideas. Include younger workers in the discussion of setting expectations for office hours and structure. Let them decide how they want their office or cubicle space configured for maximum efficiency and comfort.

#### Provide employees with development and learning opportunities

Continuous learning and training are important to millennials. Thirty-five percent of millennials reported that they are attracted to employers who offer development programs and training.<sup>1</sup> Millennials favor jobs with a boss who teaches them and helps them progress in their careers. Millennials put greater importance on working with people they can learn from. Making sure your talented millennials have both mentors *and* sponsors who teach them and help advance their careers is a way to instill loyalty while developing a valuable resource for your business. Those employers who engage millennials in learning and training will be more successful at retaining them to stay at the company and to contribute to the company’s success. Like most advice in this article, adopting strong continuous learning and training programs will benefit your entire employee base, especially as technology continues to evolve.

1 "Millennials at Work Reshaping the Workplace" by PwC at 18.

## Transparency

Being transparent in communications regarding expected standards of performance, opportunities for advancement, and what treasures await the successful employee at the end of the rainbow will go a long way to improving work relationships, work performance, and minimizing retention problems. Letting employees know what is expected of them, and providing feedback to them on an ongoing basis, keeps employees motivated. More importantly, letting them know when they can expect to advance and what they can look forward to when they get to the next level will help to keep them engaged in the workplace. However, the millennials’ view of the time/space continuum is not the same as that of the other generations. One millennial, Elizabeth McLeod, in her blog post, “Why Millennials Keep Dumping You: An Open Letter to Management,” had this to say: “I was making more money bartending in college than I am at this entry-level job. You say I’ll get a raise in a year if the company hits a certain number? So what? I need something to care about today. Talk to me about how we make a difference, not your ROI (return on investment) report.”

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Employees want to know their part in making the business successful. They need to feel invested and like they have a stake in the outcome. However, they need to know what the stake is and when they can expect it to be delivered. They won't wait it out in the hopes of unveiling a mystery gift in a year or two.

Don't forget their social conscience and their need for mutual respect.

This generation of employees not only wants to be a force in the workplace; but they have a strong desire to make a significant difference in their communities and the world. They have been raised to believe they can change the world, and they want to do it. They volunteer in larger numbers than their predecessor generation, and will take jobs that allow them to meet these goals, even if they might pay a little less. They also expect to be respected as individuals and as contributors. Focusing on them as people rather than numbers on a balance sheet will go a long way toward building loyalty.

## **Multiple generations in the workplace**

An organization's diverse culture is an asset. Companies that harness the value generational diversity brings to an organization and take steps to provide a workplace free from age discrimination succeed.

While this article focuses on revisiting policies and practices in an effort to engage and retain millennials, companies must be mindful that whatever policies they put in place are consistent across all generations. Federal and state laws protect employees from discrimination based on protected categories such as age. If there is flexibility for one employee, it must be allowed for all. The desire of a millennial for time during the day to attend a child's school play is no different than a Boomer's need to take a few hours off to attend a doctor's visit with an ailing parent. Successful companies understand that having sensitivity and fairness around these issues leads to a more productive workforce and ultimately, profitability.

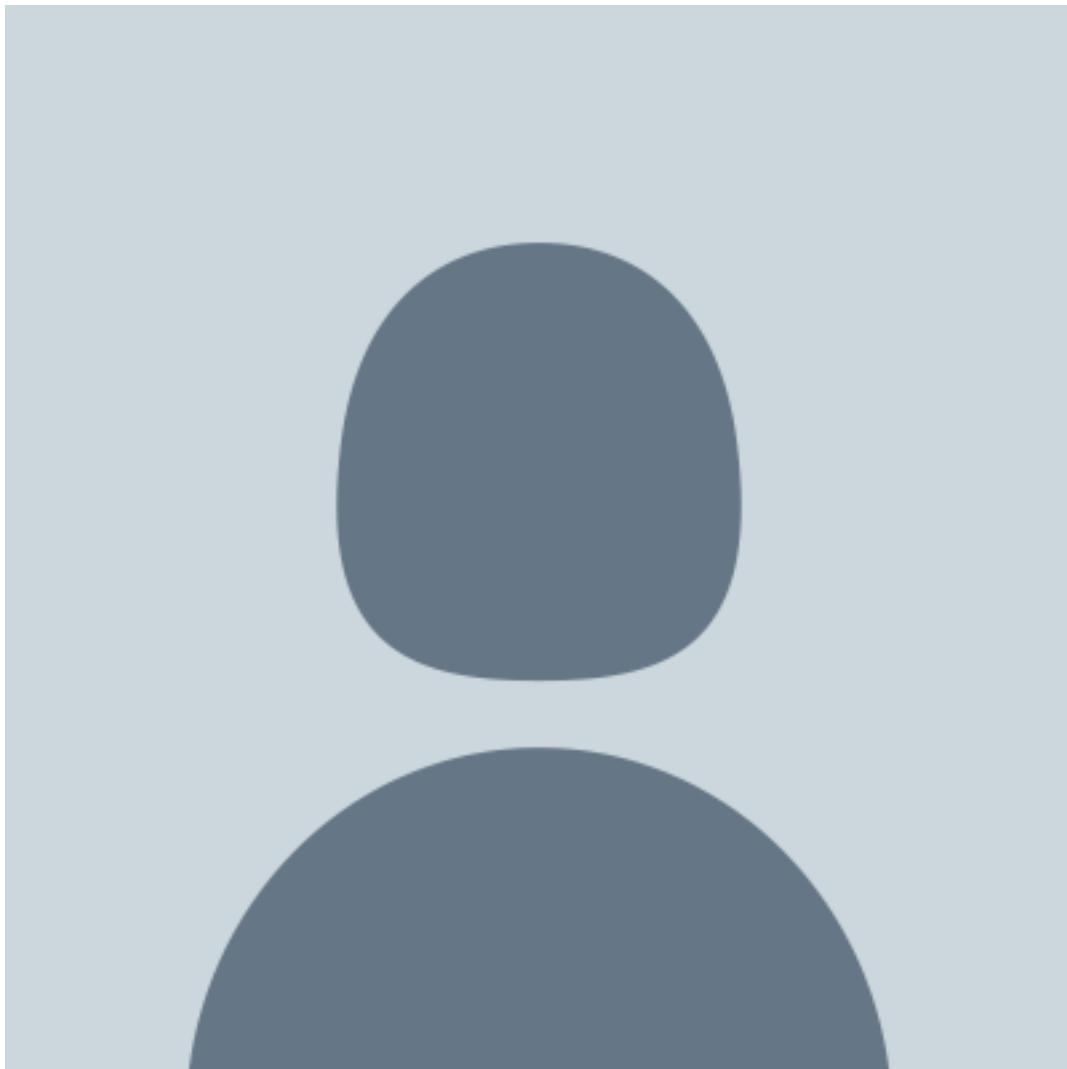
Companies should consider training on multigenerational differences so there is an understanding and acceptance by all. Age bias can often be subtle. Educating workers and managers about their own unconscious biases can lead to a recognition and avoidance of misconduct and foster collaboration. Also consider mentoring and "reverse" mentoring — older and younger workers mentoring each other. Accepting difference is key. Everyone has strengths and experiences that can be passed along to others to enhance the benefit of a mixed-age work force.

Education and training provides understanding and acceptance, a key component to managing employees. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission reported 21,296 complaints of age discrimination filed in 2013. Fifteen years earlier, in 1999, that number was 14,141. Such claims are expected to continue as the US Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that in 2020 there will be 41.4 million workers age 55 and older, or one in four workers in the workforce. Not only is today's labor force older, it is more racially, ethnically, and gender diverse. Companies should implement training and written anti-discrimination policies that include all protected categories under the law — including age — and foster an environment where differences are embraced.

Ultimately, each generation is defined by and brings unique experiences into the workplace. Learning to manage this age diversity will serve to strengthen your business, reduce liability for discrimination, and propel you to business success.

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## Colleen Cone



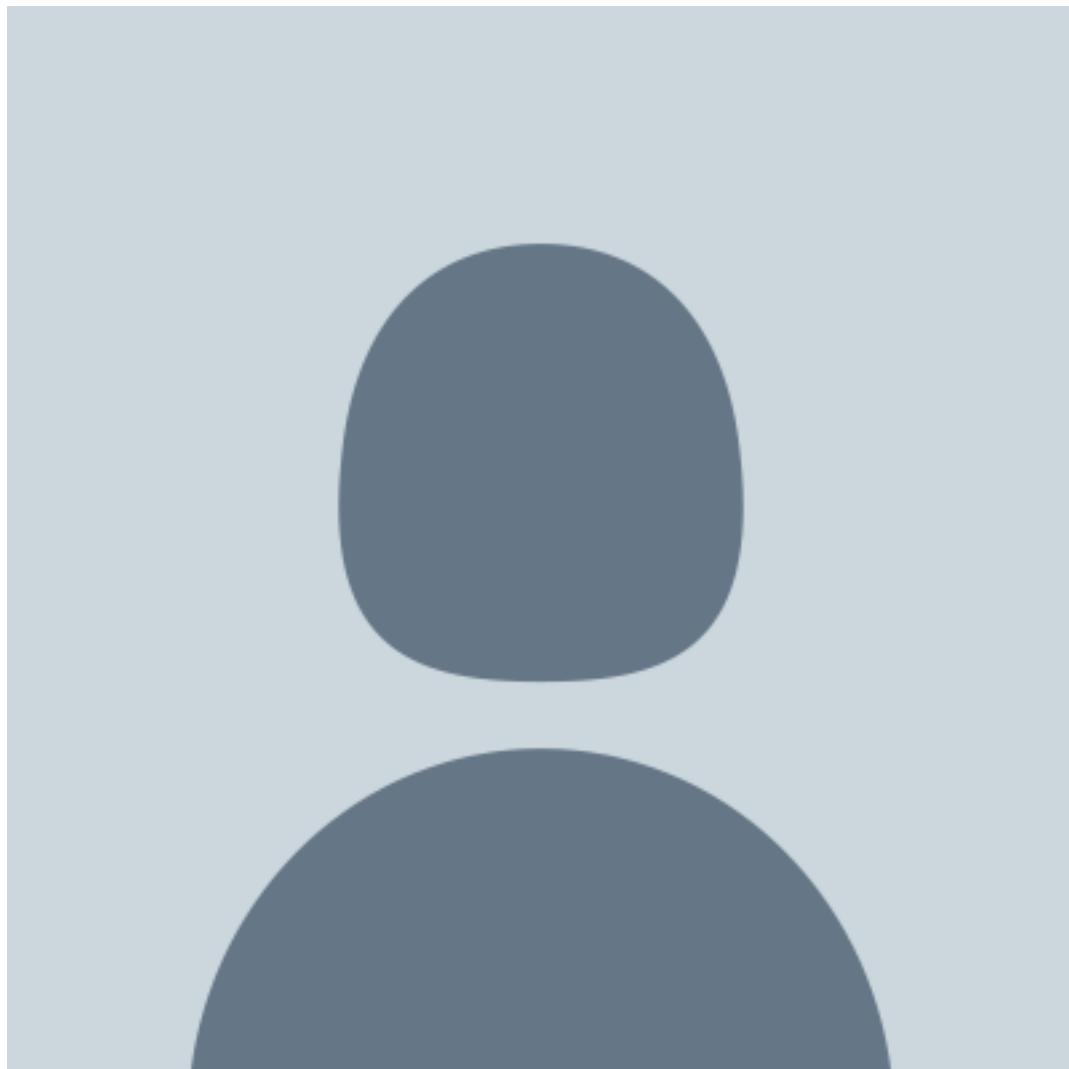
VP, Talent & Culture

Dyn

Dyn is a cloud-based internet performance company headquartered in Manchester, New Hampshire with an award-winning culture based on many principles discussed in this article.

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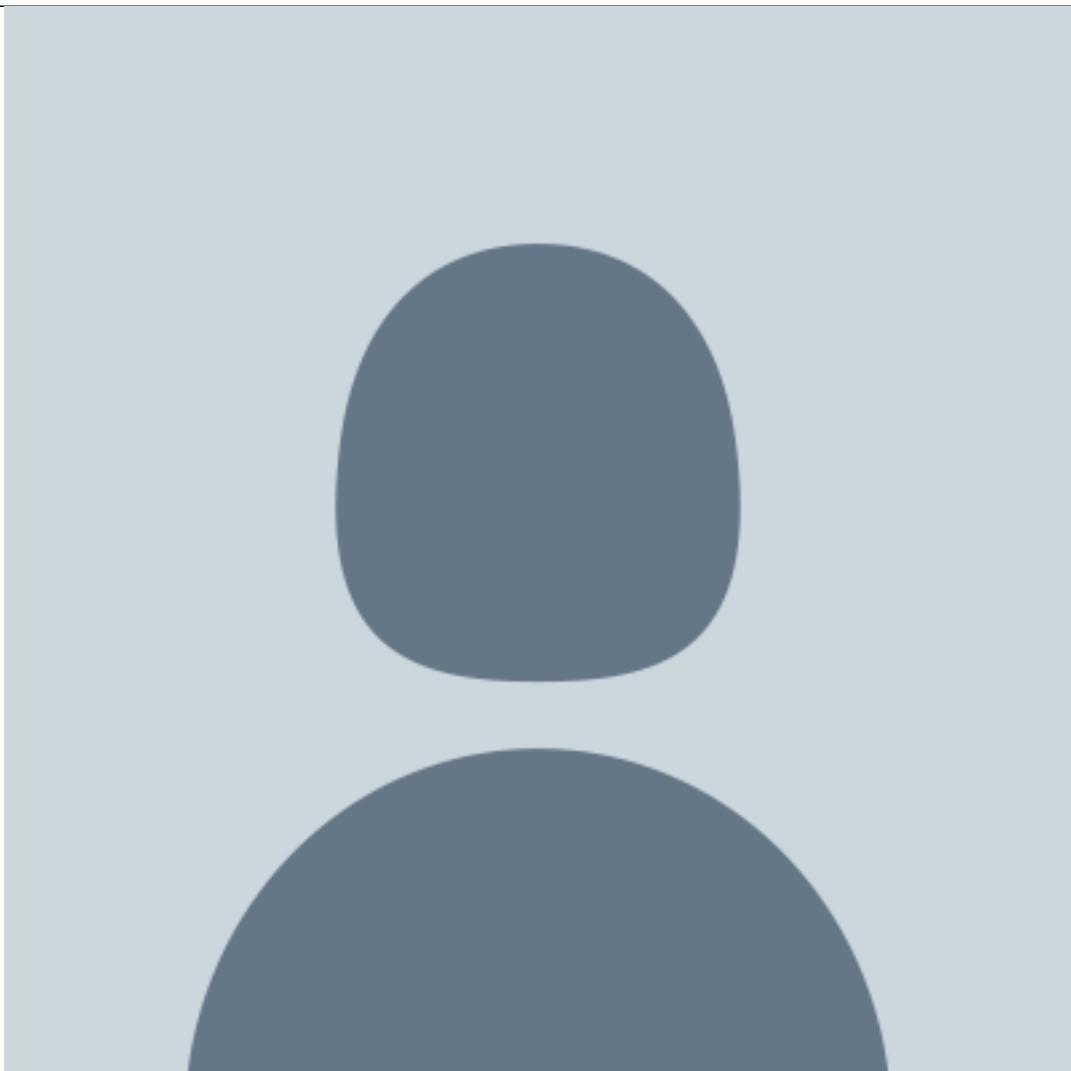


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