



Anxiety and work:

The impact of anxiety on different generations of employees

INTRODUCTION

Workforces are presently facing the inevitable reality of having 5 generations at work for the first time in history (Meister & Willyerd, 2010). Discussions of multigenerational issues in the workplace often quickly take the shape of Traditionalists, Boomers, Gen-X, Millennials and Gen Zs extolling the virtues of their cohort. Over the past few years, there has been a wealth of material published describing best practices for engaging each generation in the workforce, from communication preferences to leadership tips and tactics. What has not been fully explored is whether there are generational differences in how the workforce experiences personal problems.

This is the first in a 4-part series of white papers examining generational differences in the impact of anxiety, depression and risky alcohol use on work performance. This paper will explore the relationship between anxiety and declines in work performance through a multigenerational lens. Part two will explore depression by generation, the third paper will address risky alcohol use, and the final paper will address a comparison of all problems by generation.

Nobody talks about anxiety

The symptoms of anxiety are often overlooked because they tend to occur within the mind of the anxious individual. People with anxiety experience constant, chronic, and unsubstantiated worry, often about health, family, money, or work (Spitzer, Kroenke, Williams & Lowe, 2006). This type of worry can occur over the course of hours and even days. Some of the symptoms include:

- Feeling nervous, anxious or on edge
- Uncontrollable worry
- Worrying about many things
- Trouble relaxing
- Restlessness, inability to sit still
- Easily annoyed or irritable
- Fearful that something awful might happen

While anxiety disorders are the most common mental illness in America, affecting more than 40 million adults across the country (Kessler et al., 2009), the impact of anxiety in the workplace is often overlooked. More visible and perhaps sensational problems like violence in the workplace, substance use disorders and suicidal behaviors appropriately receive the attention of human resource professionals, managers and organizational leaders. A look at the economic impact of anxiety on healthcare costs and productivity reveal that anxiety is a formidable foe for workplaces in the United States:

72% of people with daily anxiety report it interferes with their lives (ADAA, 2006)

- Only 9% of people with anxiety receive formal diagnosis and treatment

Anxiety contributes to more than \$42 billion in health care costs annually (Greenburg et al., 1999)

- People with anxiety are 3-5 times more likely to use health care services

METHODOLOGY

When employees seek EAP services they first speak with one of Morneau Shepell's masters degreeed clinicians who conduct a telephone-based assessment to provide support and help determine the most appropriate level of service. Over the course of the EAP relationship, Morneau Shepell's clinicians collect a variety of data sets that are then analyzed and shared with Morneau Shepell's client customers in the form of anonymous quarterly and annual utilization reports. The data for this paper was taken from a cumulative report of employees seeking EAP services over an 18-month period from January 2013 - June 2014.

In order to measure the impact of anxiety on the workforce, Morneau Shepell investigated the relationship between reported anxiety and declines in work performance by generation. Employees accessing Morneau Shepell EAP were screened for anxiety using the PHQ4 (Kroenke, Spitzer, Williams & Lowe, 2009). Employees that returned a positive screen for anxiety were then further assessed using the GAD7 (Spitzer, Kroenke, Williams & Lowe, 2006). Their responses were then scored and analyzed.

Those employees that were rated positively for anxiety were also asked questions about the impact that their anxiety had on work performance. Their responses were then categorized into the following domains:

- **Absenteeism** - Missed days from work due to anxiety
- **Presenteeism** - Presented to work physically but did not function at his or her full capacity due to anxiety
- **Work relationships** - Experienced tension or conflict with coworkers as a result of anxiety
- **Disciplinary action** - Received either verbal or written disciplinary action as a result of anxiety

Participants were categorized into the following generational categories:

Generation	Birth year range
Baby Boomers (Boomers)	1946 - 1964
Generation X (Gen X)	1965 - 1977
Millennials (Gen Y)	1978 - 1999

*Traditionalists (1927 - 1945) and Generation Z (>1999) were omitted from this study due to small sample sizes.

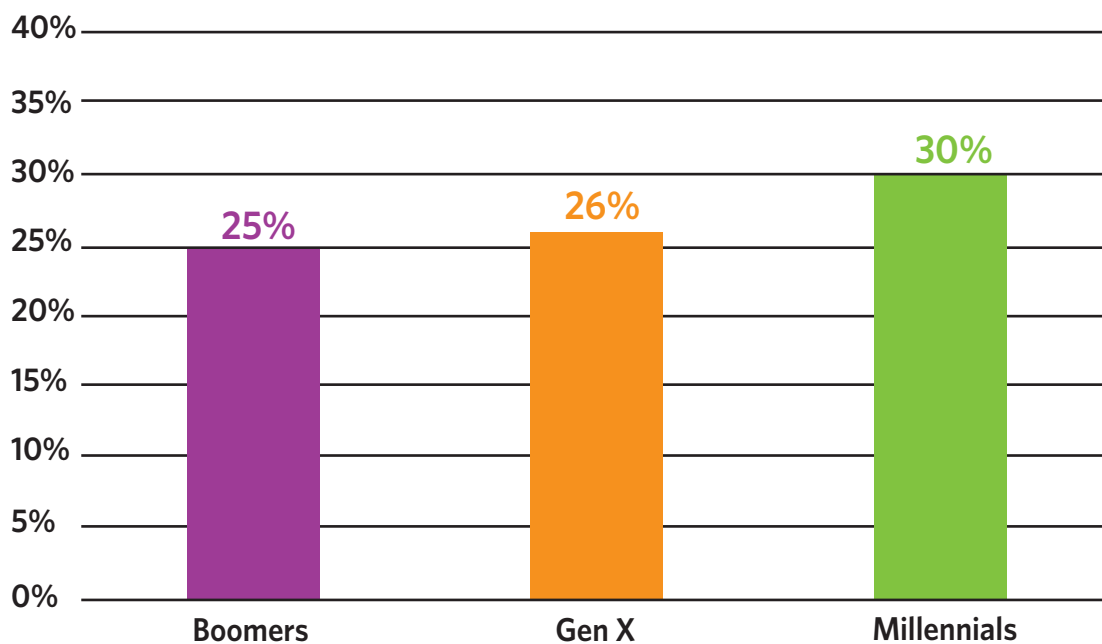
Results and discussion

Who has the most anxiety?

Millennials reported the highest levels of anxiety at intake. Approximately 30% of Millennials using Morneau Shepell's EAP reported experiencing anxiety. Anxiety appears to decline slightly with age as Gen X and Boomers were less likely to report anxiety. Overall, anxiety accounted for 27% of EAP users during this period of time.

Figure 1

Rates of anxiety by generation



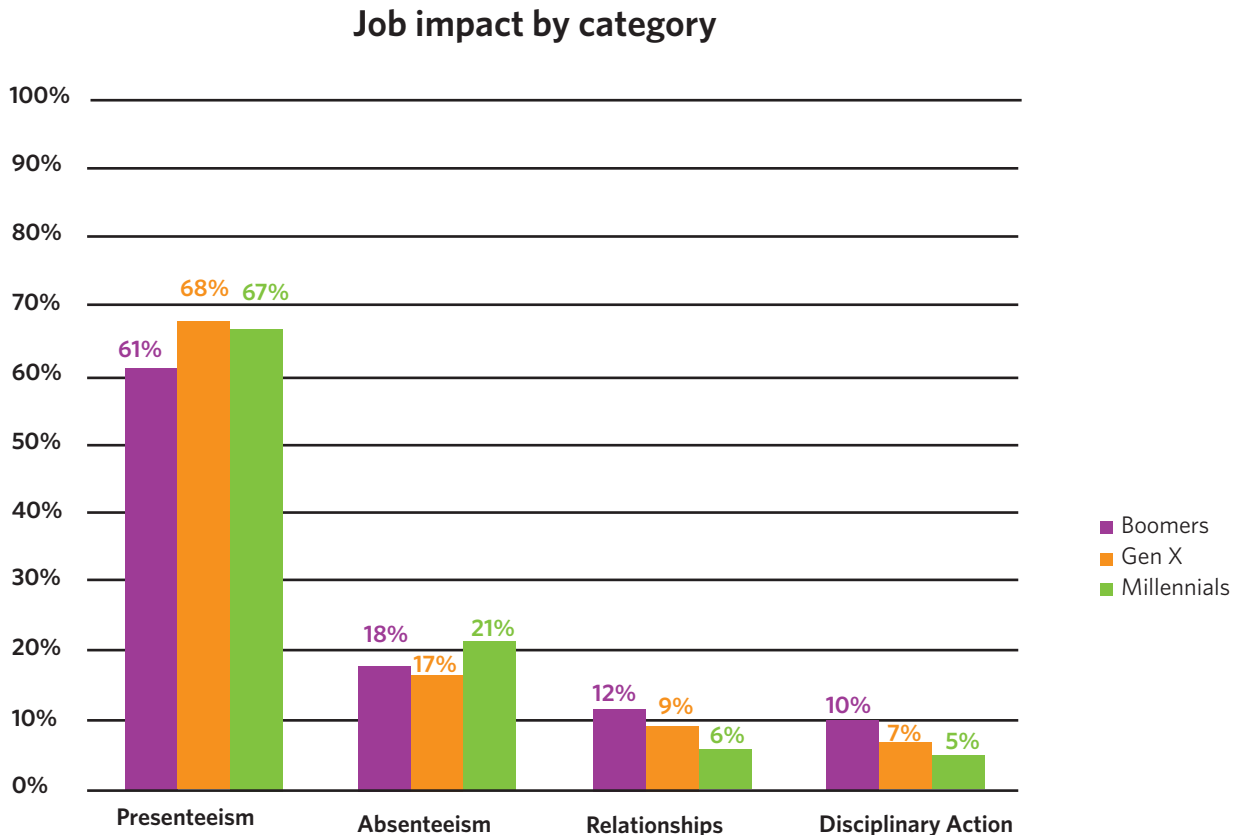
"I am anxious and not sleeping well. My relationship with my supervisor is not good and I have work related stress. I feel like my supervisor can be intimidating sometimes. I keep doubting myself about my work."

- Millennial female

How can anxiety cause declines in work performance?

Figure 2 demonstrates the extent to which anxiety contributes to declines in work performance. Presenteeism is the most common decline in work performance experienced across each generation, followed by absenteeism, relationship issues and disciplinary action.

Figure 2



Presenteeism: #1 reported anxiety-related decline in work performance

Presenteeism was the highest reported job impact with over 60% of all participants with anxiety reporting it as a concern. The differences between generations in presenteeism are slight, however the authors find the similarities in rates of reported presenteeism to be noteworthy.



"I am maxed out with my job. I am trying to balance my family of 4 kids. My job is consuming all my energy and I can't shut it off. My family is affected. I am constantly working but I am not accomplishing very much. I don't know how to shut my mind off and not think of work."

- Generation X female

Absenteeism: Millennials miss more work

Though each generation reported a relationship between absenteeism and anxiety, the degree of impact varied. Generation Y reported the highest levels of absenteeism with Boomers reporting the least amount of absenteeism. Note that absenteeism appears to decrease in a linear fashion with age. Generational differences in attitudes toward work may help explain these differences. Boomers tend to value visibility at work, perhaps with a greater intensity, than their generational counterparts. This data does not suggest Gen Y experiences the effects of anxiety more intensely than other generations, but that members of Gen Y may be more inclined to call in sick or take a day off when feeling anxious.



“I am having some relationship issues that make me anxious. My girlfriend and I are in a blended family situation. We both have children and I have used all my PTO time since it is just easier not to go to work. My boss is not happy with me.”

- Millennial male

Workplace relationships: Conflict gets worse with age

The generational differences in declining workplace relationships are noteworthy. In contrast to the previous categories, Boomers were the most likely to report conflict in their relationships at work. Compared to Gen Y, Boomers were twice as likely to have declines in workplace relationships due to anxiety. Unlike the absenteeism data, declines in workplace relationships appear to increase as the workforce ages.



“I had the same supervisor for 8 years. It has been a rough year with my supervisor who is creating stress for me. I didn’t have a review for 2 years, then had a horrible review this year. I do not trust my supervisor and I am waking up in middle of night thinking about it.”

- Baby Boomer male

Disciplinary action: Boomers get busted

Similar to declines in relationships at work, Boomers were most likely to report incidents of disciplinary action due to anxiety.



"I got caught smoking while on job (on premises) and I am currently suspended with pay. I want to quit."

- Baby Boomer female

More than just worry

Anxiety is a legitimate workplace concern that leads to predictable declines in work performance. Though the symptoms of anxiety are shared, the data suggests that the expression of anxiety on work performance appears to differ across generations.

Generation	Highest risk
Baby Boomers	Relationships and disciplinary action
Generation X	Presenteeism
Millennials	Absenteeism

Based on our findings, Morneau Shepell recommends that workforces pursue additional training and informational campaigns around detecting the hidden signs and symptoms of anxiety, as well as multigenerational strategies for dealing with employees that experience anxiety at work. Employee Assistance Programs are equipped to help workplaces deal with anxious employees in a cost effective manner. Additional multigenerational strategies will be included in the fourth and final paper in this series.



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