The premise of the article by Krishnaraj and Pesch (1) is that understanding generational differences in the radiology workforce can influence individual satisfaction and the overall performance of an organization. The authors provide an excellent foundation for understanding three of the four generations that currently comprise the workforce and discuss their impact on culture, recruitment, and training.

Baby boomers include most of the current radiology leaders and are idealistic and competitive, with an incredible work ethic and a commitment to institutions, processes, and hierarchy. They may delay retirement and be less likely to relinquish leadership positions. Generation Xers, influenced by factors such as high divorce rates and women entering the workforce, strive for meaningful work balanced with family life. With the emerging trend of dual-income households, men increasingly prioritize child rearing, and both sexes seek flexibility in work hours. This generation of digital immigrants uses technology to improve efficiency.

Millennials comprise most current trainees. They seek feedback and are hierarchy averse, technologically savvy, and astute in assessing choices. They place a higher priority on performing meaningful work rather than earning prestige or working for particular institutions. They are more likely than those of other generations to leave jobs that do not align with their values.

Generalizations based on any one factor inherently lead to oversimplifications. Are baby boomers really workaholics, unable to relinquish their hard-fought leadership positions? Do millennials really change jobs every 3 years? Is it wrong to want to leave work at 5 PM? Is it inappropriate to wear headphones at work, or is this question about perceived etiquette and institutional norms? We informally asked a number of people regarding the use of headphones and garnered such a variety of opinions that we think it is potentially deserving of its own article. Reactions ranged from a millennial saying it is “unprofessional and makes the person seem disengaged” to a baby boomer saying, “I can think of 100 things more unprofessional than listening to music.” These responses show why a transparent dialogue about simple behaviors and established institutional norms can reduce misinterpretation between and within generations.

A goal of any organization is to achieve high performance. The authors suggest that understanding generational stereotypes can empower organizations to use the strengths of each cohort and respond to their unique requirements (1). While this is an excellent starting point, we believe that the next steps include shattering these stereotypes to understand the complexity of individuals and establish an institutional culture of psychologic safety that transcends age and background. Results from Google’s Project Aristotle, an initiative to build the perfect team, showed groups that shared the following three foundational principles had the highest levels of productivity and satisfaction: (a) providing everyone the equal opportunity to speak, (b) endorsing sensitivity to differences, and (c) establishing group norms based on institutional values (2).
The best approach is to assume that all people, irrespective of generation, are more complex than any one stereotype and to provide a psychologically safe environment for ideas to be shared and debated. Effective leaders with high levels of emotional intelligence and a commitment to transparent communication are key to creating a culture of safety and bridging potential miscommunications within an intergenerational workforce.

With respect to the recruitment and retention of talent, some of the solutions raised in this article, such as flexible work hours and work environments, are not just a response to millennial demands but are intricately related to market forces and important technological advances to optimize the work environment. Two-income households are now the norm, and individuals and institutions are no longer restricted in space or time regarding how quality work can be accomplished. Many private groups and academic institutions have geographically separated imaging centers that reroute studies to subspecialists who can work in an environment suitable for their personal and professional needs. Thus, the perception of Generation Xers’ desire for work-life balance as “disengagement owing to an unwillingness to work an extra weekend of call or serve on overnight shifts” may not be a generational issue but a larger institutional failure to optimize schedules and workflow (1). “Working smarter, not harder” is not just a millennial concept but a modern one, applicable to every generation and industry. An employee’s peak performance occurs at 55 working hours per week, with diminishing returns after this point (3). Flexibility in work hours and environment will allow institutions to rise above geographic limitations, age, and sex to recruit and retain the best talent.

A similar paradigm shift has occurred in education and training. Data-driven research has increased our understanding of how we learn. For example, active recall (ie, testing), interleaving, and contextualization of information using a multimodality approach have proven to be more effective than more traditional models of didactic-based passive classroom instruction (4). In addition, teaching how to acquire knowledge rather than focusing on individual facts may be a more effective approach given that new knowledge is produced daily. The baby boomer tradition of group-based meetings will continue for all generations, but how these meetings are hosted is changing to online formats (eg, webinars), which are scalable and provide more flexibility and efficiency than in-person meetings.

The authors report that annual reviews and quarterly meetings are satisfactory for baby boomers, whereas immediate feedback is demanded by millennials (1). This trend is not a product of a video-game culture but is rooted in research that shows that continuous timely feedback is much more effective for improvement (5). The rate of individual improvement is a function of if and how quickly individuals get feedback—the faster a person receives feedback, the faster gaps in knowledge can be closed (6). For example, the most effective breast radiologists are not those with the highest volume of studies read, but those who receive feedback from pathologists (7). The authors also discuss the critical role mentorship plays for Generation Xers, as they are either early-career radiologists or those entering their mid-career. However, we know that mentorship and coaching are critical for success at all levels for continuous performance optimization.

Finally, we would like to address the critique of millennials’ entitlement. While they are frequently criticized for googling rather than reading and are perceived as lazy in comparison with their supervisors, millennials face tremendous challenges and opportunities; their behavior may be more reflective of economic forces than of character flaws. All radiologists are reading an unprecedented volume of complex studies, leading to an epidemic of burnout that may affect younger generations disproportionately, as they are the largest proportion of the workforce and are expected to read images from all modalities, in contrast to baby boomers who may read images from only selected modalities. Additionally, the rise of a new economic model based on a do-it-yourself culture and learning through experience over assembly-line work has been the impetus for millennials to be more creative and value independence, which are advantageous qualities to have in current competitive global markets (8,9).

In a technology-driven specialty such as radiology, large “safe” companies such as General Electric are losing significant market value, and smaller companies are quickly rising in value (10). New technologies (eg, those driven by artificial intelligence) will continue to force radiologists to adapt. Millennials are likely to adapt not because they are digital natives but because their resourcefulness and independent thinking bring new perspectives and insights. Recognizing these talents rather than perceiving millennials as entitled will be instrumental for adapting and evolving institutions and practices.

When simple and some complex tasks can be performed by computers, a new definition of value built on quality, innovation, and creativity will drive the market. Understanding economic drivers, harnessing the collective intelligence of all generations, providing a culture of safety, and
adopter an effective workflow will be key factors for individual and group success. Using these principles, leaders in institutions can develop innovative solutions, recruit and retain the best talent, and empower radiologists with training tools to succeed and find meaning in daily work—that is, if those in radiology leadership are open minded enough to listen and facile enough to adapt.

References