

## Into the Looking Glass: Psychological Contracts in Research Administration

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**Abstract:** *In a world of fast moving technology, pressure cooker work climates and stretched resources, productivity, employee engagement, and talent retention are critical to the success of any organization. Research administration offices are no exception. Psychological contract theory provides insightful illumination on reactions to these environments by various generations of employees. Psychological contract is defined as an individual's beliefs regarding mutual employment obligations; written, spoken or purely perceptual. Violations of psychological contracts often elicit emotional reactions and can lead to employee resignations. The purpose of this study was to better understand the role that the psychological contract plays in research administration workplaces and provide helpful information to practitioners. The research identified a number of noteworthy differences between the psychological contract perceptions of the various generations and their workplace preferences. These insights can enable better human capital planning and human resource policy implementation for the future.*

### Introduction

This work examines the effects of psychological contract on various generations working in research administration offices across the country. The psychological contract can be defined as an exchange agreement of promises and contributions between two parties, the employee and employer, and includes an individual's beliefs regarding mutual obligations (Rousseau, 1990, 1995). With understanding psychological contract as the primary objective, this research examines the consequences influenced by psychological contracts in six areas of interest: organizational loyalty, job movement, career commitment, self-reliance, organizational commitment and organizational culture.

The analysis compares reactions and consequences based on generational cohort and specific ideologies. Specifically, this article aims to establish a deeper understanding of the psychological contract by answering the research questions: What effect does a person's generation have on perceptions of organizational obligations (aka Psychological contract), organizational loyalty, job movement, career commitment, Ideology of self reliance, and organizational commitment? What effect do current work environments (organizational culture) have on perception of research administration work by generation? The ultimate goal of this study is to provide helpful information to both scholars and practitioners enabling better human capital planning and human resource policy implementation for the future.

## Background and Objectives

Research administration offices are not isolated from current workforce trends such as employee disengagement and high turnover. As Universities continue to ask for more work out of their already understaffed offices and government audit oversight tightens; healthy office environments and engaged and productive employees are critical. Understanding the preconceived notions and other intrinsic expectations found in your employees' psychological contracts could be the key that unlocks the door to more engaged workers, higher productivity and lower turnover. This study hopes to offer Research Administration supervisors insights that will help understand their employee's psychological contracts, commitment levels and loyalties.

### *Psychological contract.*

To date, this topic has been unexplored in research administration literature. However, literature on psychological contract theory from other fields is more robust. Psychological contract theory extends from early writings of Chester Barnard and his classic book *Functions of the Executive* (1938), highlighting the importance of employer/employee communication in times of change. More recently, Hermida and Luchman (2012) further accentuated the important role of communication in the full understanding of employee's psychological contract perceptions. They found that employees who receive their primary information from peers had a higher risk of psychological contract breach than those who obtained information regularly from supervisors.

Psychological contract theory extends the idea that individual goals create the resistance or acceptance of workplace change and continues to highlight the importance of an individual's beliefs regarding mutual obligations to the organization (Rousseau, 1990, 1995). When psychological contract obligations are perceived as met, high levels of trust and loyalty between employees and employers are created which in turn can lead to better customer satisfaction (Restubog et.al , 2010; Wilkens and Nermerich, 2011) , a point of interest for research administration officers as we move to shift the culture from one of regulation and "bad cop" to one of service to our institutions and faculty members.

Psychological contract theory is believed by many to be closely tied to organizational commitment. McDermott et. al (2013) found organizational commitment varied based on clustering of psychological contract perceptions. A similar study by Tsui et. al (2013) found that job satisfaction's effect on performance was mediated by psychological contract strength. These studies compliment earlier work by Lapalme et al. (2010) which suggests that contract breach by an employer was negatively related to affective commitment of temporary workers, an important point for research administration offices that work with part time or graduate student workers. This study will dive further into organizational commitment variables.

Other psychological contract literature examined the potential link between psychological contract and career/job loyalty. Alcover, et. al (2012) found that employees holding a transitionally oriented psychological contract were significantly more likely to leave the organization than employees with relationally oriented psychological contracts. A study by Restubog et al (2013) found that psychological contract expectations were stronger and violations more severe when the employee-employer relationship was highly transactional and relational. This point is of

particular interest to predominantly undergraduate institutions (PUI) or other small research administration offices where team or familism is more common.

Finally, psychological contract has been found to affect various work environment elements. In 2007, Hicks conducted a study of psychological contract and civil service reform among Florida's state government workers. Her research uncovered correlations between the new work environment and psychological contract complicated by education and income. Ng et. al (2010) found that perceptions of psychological contract breach among employees decreased innovation related behaviors. Chang et. al (2013) had a similar finding where work engagement mediated the negative effect of transactional psychological contracts on innovative behavior.

### *Generational perspective.*

Research indicates that attitudes toward the psychological contract are influenced by employees' experiences (DeMeuse, et. al, 2001); therefore, it can be hypothesized that generation will have an effect as well. Generational cohorts are defined as a group of people sharing similar and stable social and historical life experiences over the course of their lives (Rosow, 1974). Although there are five generations currently in the workforce, this study focuses on the most established three: Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Millennials. Characteristics of each are below although cohort birth dates vary slightly from source to source. Dates in this study are adapted from Meister and Willyerd (2010).

*Baby Boomers.* Research on Boomers (those born from approximately 1946 to 1964) paints a picture of a loyal, hardworking, and secure generation. They compose approximately 26% of the overall US population and just over 30% of the workforce. Boomers, like Matures before them, place high emphasis on warm, friendly workplace relationships (LaRocco et. al, 1980; Yankelovich, 1979).

Boomers are reportedly more concerned with money and willing to spend more of their disposable income on products and entertainment than previous generations (Whitbourne and Willis, 2006). Unlike the generations that sandwich them, Boomers report placing high value on work and generally receive high levels of job satisfaction from it (Rhodes, 1983). Boomers' upbringing was set in a traditional home life where variation was minimized in public and self-esteem and idealism were instilled. Boomers report feeling a sense of drive and dedication in the workplace stemming from their belief in their capabilities to change the world (Cordeniz, 2002). This notion of bucking the status quo credits Boomers with launching change agent societal movements from the war and civil rights protests of the 1960s to the drug culture and rock and roll era of the 1970s and 1980s (Kahlert, 1999).

*Generation X.* Also referred to as Gen X or GenXers, those born between 1965 and 1976 currently comprise only 17% of the US population and approximately 22% of the US workforce. Gen X is a generation of nearly 49 million of the best-educated and most technologically advanced individuals in US history (Reynolds, 2004, US Census, 2009). General values viewed most important by GenXers are a sense of belonging/teamwork, ability to learn new things, autonomy, and entrepreneurship (Hornblower, 1997; Ramo, 1997; Tulgan, 1995; Hornbostel, et. al, 2011). GenXers strive for authority, independence, and a voice in decision-making (Jennings, 2000).

Hornblower (1997) found GenXers to be more competitive, risktaking and success-minded than Boomers. The small size of this generation as compared to those that surround it, accentuates this risk acceptance by limiting competition and fear of failure.

Speaking at the 2004 Annual Convention of the American Banking Association, Greg Churchman, a retention strategist specializing in generational differences among GenXers said, “People tend to leave when they are not challenged and see no prospects for growth. Salary and benefits are important, but are not usually the top priority” (Churchman, 2004, p.12). He outlines four important traits employers should know about their Gen X employees: “Time is more important to them than money, over 70% plan to own their own business”, (Churchman, 2004, p.12).

*Millennials.* At nearly 80 million, Generation Y or the Millennial generation is the second-largest generation cohort behind only the Boomers and already represent 40% of the US workforce and growing. Although disputed slightly, this generation is widely accepted to be born between 1977 and 1997. They are found to have high idealism and relativism and a greater propensity for servant leadership traits. They are also highly individual, valuing their own variation but also more accepting of others variations as well (VanMeter et. al, 2013). In the workplace, Millennials hold expectations of constant communication even with those in authority and flexibility to accommodate their work-life balance (Carless and Wintle, 2007; Smola and Sutton, 2002).

The chart below (adapted from Meister and Willyerd, 2010) outlines some basic influences and traits of the generations discussed above.

*Table 1.* Commonly Associated Generational Influences and Traits

Generation	Major Influences	Broad Traits	Defining Invention
Baby Boomer	Watergate, Women's Rights, Woodstock, JFK assassination	Competitive, Hardworking, Long Hours	Personal Computer
Generation X	MTV, AIDS, Gulf War, 1987 Stock Market Crash, Fall of the Berlin Wall	Eclecticism, Self-Reliant Free Agents, Independence	Mobile Phone
Millennial	Google, Facebook, 9/11 Attacks, Election of Barack Obama	Community Service, Cyber-literacy, Tolerance, Diversity, Confidence	Social Media

With the aforementioned background on psychological contract importance and the overlay of the reality of the multi-generational workplace, this study seeks to provide a deeper understanding of these concepts relevant to employees and managers alike in research administration. We utilized a survey tool to capture perceptions by research administrators regarding the workplace, obligations, job mobility and satisfaction. The details of the study follow.

## Methods

### *Hypotheses*

- H1: Psychological contract obligations will differ by generation.  
 H2: Organizational loyalty will differ by generation.  
 H3: Perceptions of Job Movement will differ by generation.  
 H4: Career commitment will differ by generation.  
 H5: Perceptions on the ideology of self-reliance will differ by generation.  
 H6: Organizational commitment will differ by generation.  
 H7: Work environment perceptions will differ by generation.

### *Sample*

An online survey was created using Survey Monkey which was distributed in two ways. First, flyers with the link and survey description were distributed at two professional research administration conferences, the National Conference of University Research Administrators (NCURA) Region III and the Society of Research Administrators International Western/Southern Meeting. Next, the link and description were posted on social media sites such as colleagues' professional Twitter feeds and Facebook pages as well as sent via the NCURA Collaborate listserv. A total of 265 respondents attempted the survey with 226 finishing to completion and 1 survey by Matures discarded as they fell outside the parameters of this research. This left a total sample of 230 participants. This research was approved by the University of Tampa IRB committee.

*Table 2. Sample Demographics - Generation*

Generation	Percentage
Baby Boomer	36.52%
Generation X	34.78%
Millennial	28.70%

*Table 3. Sample Demographics - Gender*

Gender	Percentage
Female	88.26%
Male	10.00%
No Answer	1.74%

*Table 4. Sample Demographics - Race*

Race	Percentage
African American	3.91%
Asian	2.61%
Caucasian	86.52%
Hispanic	3.91%
Other	1.30%
No Answer	1.74%

*Table 5. Sample Demographics - Income*

Income	Percentage
\$20,000 – \$34,999	2.61%
\$35,000 - \$49,999	13.48%
\$50,000 - \$74,999	40.00%
\$75,000 - \$100,000	22.17%
Over \$100,000	20.00%
No Answer	1.74%

Table 6. Sample Demographics - Education

Education	Percentage
College Graduate	26.09%
Doctorate Degree	8.70%
High School	0.43%
Masters Degree	47.83%
Some college	6.96%
Some graduate school	8.70%
No Answer	1.30%

Table 7. 2006 Study of Research Administration Offices

Responses	N	%
20-29	7	3%
30-39	55	24%
40-49	82	36%
50-59	66	29%
60-69	15	7%
70 and above	1	0%
Total	226	100%

Roberts and House (2006)

from Janssens *et al.* (2003); Robinson *et al.* (1994) as found in Tekleab and Taylor (2003) and one newly created item. The new item was created to offer insight on an alternative to simply staying with one's current job or leaving.

- Transfer opportunities should my current job be eliminated

*Organizational Loyalty.* Organizational loyalty was assessed with 7 items adapted from Janssens *et al.* (2003); and Robinson *et al.* (1994) as found in Tekleab and Taylor (2003).

*Job Movement.* Job movement was assessed using 3 newly created items as there were no existing measures to capture this data.

- One should stay in their job for at least 5-10 years.
- One should not change jobs multiple times in their lifetime
- One should not change employers multiple times in their lifetime

*Career Commitment.* Career commitment was assessed using a measure developed by Blau (1988). The first 6 items were taken from Liden and Green (1980), the remaining two from Downing *et*

As seen in the table 1, the sample holds an inverse representation to the general workforce as the Baby Boomer generation is over represented and the millennial generation is underrepresented. However, this data is complimentary to Roberts and House (2006). As is typical of research administrators the vast majority are female (Table 3), Caucasian (Table 4), annual income above \$50,000 (Table 5), and with at least a masters degree (Table 6) (Roberts & House, 2006; Shambrook & Roberts, 2010). As illustrated in Table 7, the age differentials are similar taking into consideration the 9-year gap, which would increase the number of millennial workers.

### *Variables measured*

The full survey examined seven dimensions as well as demographic information on the respondents. All items were based on the Likert scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 (or 7) = strongly agree. The dimensions relevant to this study are explained below. A copy of the full survey instrument is included as appendix A.

*Psychological Contract.* Psychological contract obligation was assessed with six items adapted

al. (1978) and the final 2 were newly created. The new items were created to provide additional information on respondents emotional attachment to their profession.

- I like this profession too much to give it up.
- I am disappointed that I ever entered my current profession.

*Ideology of Self Reliance.* Ideology of self reliance was assessed using 2 separate, renamed, and newly created items based on theory in McKinley et al.(1998). The newly created items were included to gather knowledge on perceived career control per McKinley et. al. (1998) theory.

- I am in control of my career.
- My career success is dependent on my organization.

*Organizational Commitment.* Three other types of commitment were assessed; affective, continuance, and normative. The affective, continuance and normative commitment factors were assessed using 10 items taken from Meyer et al (1993).

*Organizational Culture.* Respondent's opinions of organizational commitment were assessed using 18 newly created items. The first 8 measures were designed to garner knowledge on workplace volatility and work schedule flexibility. The final 10 measures ask respondents to rate the importance of certain workplace culture aspects and professional development, then asks them to rate their current institutions' policies and support for these elements.

- Whether or not a job has guaranteed tenure is a consideration when selecting employment.
- I believe workplace insecurity is detrimental to recruitment of qualified applicants.
- Job security would make me more motivated to perform my job.
- My organization supports telecommuting opportunities (work from home, flexible hours)
- I am the most productive when I am in control of my work schedule.
- If I could, I would work from home full time.
- My structure of my work schedule makes my personal/family obligations more difficult.
- Work schedule structure is a consideration in job selection.
- Mechanisms to foster creativity/innovation
- Professional development opportunities
- Telecommute/Flexible schedule opportunities
- Mechanisms that promote healthy workplace
- Support for philanthropic

- *In policy and fully supported by supervisors*
- *In policy but not fully supported by supervisors*
- *No official policy but supported by supervisors*
- *No official policy and not supported by supervisors*
  - Mechanisms to foster creativity/innovation
  - Professional development opportunities
  - Telecommute/Flexible schedule opportunities
  - Mechanisms that promote a healthy workplace
  - Support for philanthropic efforts

## **Data Analysis**

The data was analyzed using three specific methods in order to obtain the highest level of understanding. First, an Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) test was run to reveal significant differences between the generational cohorts (as represented by age) as they related to the variables. Next, the ANOVA was confirmed as valid by a Levene's test of homogeneity of variances (Levene, 1960). Finally, regression analysis was done to reveal the direction, strength and predictive value of the generational differences. Each of these methods was performed on individual elements (i.e. questions of the survey) as well as on the composition variables made up of corresponding groupings of questions for a particular topic of interest, as outlined above. In order to make proper comparisons, each data element was scored or reverse scored based on its appropriate comparable direction. The overall regression model and ANOVA as well as the individual elements mentioned below are significant at a minimum of  $<.05$ .

## **Results Part 1**

As mentioned above, the data was analyzed in groupings of related variables as well as by individual questions in order to test the research questions: What effect does a person's generation have on perceptions of organizational obligations (aka psychological contract), organizational loyalty, job movement, career commitment, ideology of self-reliance, and organizational commitment? What effect do current work environments (aka organizational culture) have on perception of research administration work by generation? Of the 7 grouped components examined in this research, three were found to be statistically significant.

*Organizational Loyalty.* The analysis reveals a positive and significant relationship between generation and organizational loyalty where the older the generation, the higher the overall organizational loyalty.



Table 8. Findings

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1 (Constant)	12.792	12.385		1.033	.303
<b>Organizational Culture Measure 14</b>	<b>-1.563</b>	<b>.554</b>	<b>-.227</b>	<b>-2.820</b>	<b>.005</b>
Organizational Culture Measure 15	-1.247	.963	-.093	-1.295	.197
Organizational Culture Measure 16	-2.183	1.373	-.114	-1.589	.114
Organizational Culture Measure 17	<b>3.745</b>	<b>1.644</b>	<b>.166</b>	<b>2.278</b>	<b>.024</b>
Psychological Contract	-.601	1.489	-.032	-.404	.687
<b>Organizational Loyalty</b>	<b>4.527</b>	<b>2.389</b>	<b>.154</b>	<b>1.895</b>	<b>.050</b>
<b>Job Movement</b>	<b>2.405</b>	<b>1.038</b>	<b>.174</b>	<b>2.316</b>	<b>.022</b>
Career Commitment	-.548	.854	-.051	-.641	.522
Ideology of Self Reliance	.698	.985	.053	.709	.479
Organizational Commitment	.624	.846	.053	.738	.462
Gender	-2.476	2.334	-.077	-1.061	.290
Race	2.258	1.411	.113	1.600	.111
Gross Income	1.976	.720	.199	2.745	.007
Education	-.120	.429	-.020	-.279	.780

This result reveals some insight for managers as it relates to each generation. For Baby Boomers, it is not surprising to see high agreement on reliability, policy following, accepting transfers, and staying with the department. These characteristics are in line with the literature and commonly held beliefs about their generation. However, the propensity to develop new skills may surprise many managers who see this generation as one foot out the door toward retirement. Engaging Boomers in opportunities to develop new skills may open up new lines of productivity and increase their engagement in their work.

The results for Gen X and Millennial participants are also in line with commonly held beliefs about their generations. Gen X participants fall in the middle of these findings indicating a mix of support. Typically in mid-career, Gen X would be the most likely to be focused on climbing the organizational ladder. Volunteering for additional tasks, performing reliably and following

policies would be expected as part of this goal. That said, the strong inclination of GenXers to hold entrepreneurial aspirations would likely be in conflict with accepting a transfer or a vision to stay with the department for their entire career. Additionally, the likelihood that they have family obligations, such as care for small children or elderly parents, may inhibit their ability or obligation to work extra hours.

For Millennials, lower organizational loyalty could be a consequence of their newness in the organization, having not fully entrenched in the culture, or could echo popular writings which indicate a fluidity of younger generations' workplace stability (VanMeter et. al, 2013). This would be exceptionally true for statements of career longevity. Additionally, the individualistic side of Millennial participants would place them in sharp contrast to the idea of accepting a transfer unless that transfer was of their own selection and inclination.

*Job Movement.* The analysis reveals a positive and significant relationship between generation and job movement where the older the generation, the higher the overall belief that people should limit job movement. This finding is directly in line with the widely discussed writings on Baby Boomers and the generations that came before where lifetime commitment and full career company loyalty were the norm.

*Organizational Culture.* This area has four distinct groupings. Two of these groupings were statistically significant. The first asks the participants to rate their opinions about leaving their organization. Although similar, this differs from job movement as it speaks to their specific organization and personal propensity to leave rather than the general notion of job movement as a whole.

The analysis reveals a negative and significant relationship between generation and this element of organizational culture where the younger the generation, the higher propensity to leave the organization. This result confirms widely held beliefs that both GenX and Millennials are more mobile in their career path. It has been argued by some that mobility was a necessary coping strategy of the recessionary economy. Regardless of whether or not that belief holds truth, this finding indicates younger generations hold a predisposition to career mobility, not simply as a function of their reality, but also as an ingrained ideology.

The second organizational culture grouping delves into participants' views on factors of organizational culture that contribute to productivity. It was found to be positively significant indicating the older the generation, the more inclined to agree that these elements elevate productivity. This result was highly surprising as it disputes commonly held beliefs that younger generations value alternative organizational culture elements more than older generations. It could be hypothesized that the question phrasing that tied productivity to these elements made the difference as younger generations may desire these aspects of organizational culture but not connect them directly to greater productivity.

## Results Part 2

In this second area of analysis, each of the 56 individual elements that comprise the grouped variables were examined and compared both by a general measure of age and by a generation measure created by grouping ages into their respective generations based on timeframes from the literature. Of these 56, 10 were found to be significant. Although that only amounts to 18% of the total study, this researcher finds these individual elements to be as insightful to research administration practitioners as the broad-based prediction variables above.

First, the element “I agree that my employer is obligated to provide me transfer opportunities should my current job be eliminated” was significant and positive. This element is one variable in the overall picture of previously held psychological contract findings. Where other individual psychological elements were found to be similar among generations, this element was not. This indicates that the Baby Boomer generation is significantly more likely to agree with this statement, followed by Generation X and Millennials who are least likely to agree. This finding is not surprising as it echoes workplace norms that have been eliminated in the current economy. Where this was common practice for long-standing employees, current job and career mobility coupled with economic actualities make this an unlikely reality and one younger generations are likely unfamiliar with to begin with.

Next, under the umbrella of organizational loyalty, the statement “I feel obligated to work extra hours if needed to get the job done” was also significant and positive. This is an indication that the older the generation the more likely to agree to this organizational obligation. This result garners mixed surprise as GenXers, as discussed above, are in a position to value career advancement but may have family obligations that preclude extra hours. It is in line with Millennials’ often-stated conviction to balance work and personal life.

Third, within the grouping of organizational commitment variables, a variable from both affective commitment and normative commitment were found to be statistically significant. First, “this organization has a great deal of personal meaning for me” was found to be positively significant meaning the older the generation the more likely the organization would hold personal meaning. The statement “I would feel guilty if I left my organization now” was significant but negatively correlated indicating the younger the generation is more likely to agree with this statement and less likely to feel guilty about leaving the organization. Both of these echo sentiments shared above related to the organizational commitment grouping.

As mentioned above, a number of questions assessed participants’ opinions about workplace culture. Questions assessed their feelings about their current workplace culture as well as general workplace elements they find important regardless of the presence of those in their current workplace. Three of these elements were found to be statistically significant. First, “work schedule structure is a consideration in job selection,” was negatively significant. This indicates that the younger the generation, the more important work schedule considerations are in job recruitment. This result corresponds with growing workplace trends of flexibility and telecommuting. Although some Baby Boomers are enjoying these new workplace trends, GenX and to a larger degree, Millennials have come to expect these allowances as a common part of prospective job offers.

Second, the statement “mechanisms to foster creativity/innovation” was positively significant. This surprising result indicates that older generations are more likely to value mechanisms specifically aimed at creativity and/or innovation. One possible explanation for this result is the career position/seniority of the Baby Boomer participants. If the participants are managers, they are likely addressing the need for creativity and innovation in their work and the work of their direct reports. Alternatively, this could be a sign of a greater life issue. Due in part to the economic hardships caused by the recession, many Baby Boomers are staying in the workforce longer than previous generations. This longevity may not be coupled with additional promotion opportunities and Boomers may be struggling with boredom and searching for a way to keep their work meaningful and interesting.

Finally, “support for philanthropic efforts” was negatively significant indicating the younger the generations the more important this factor is a part of the work culture. This result directly supports the commonly held belief that Millennials are more community oriented than any generation before them and look for similar values in their workplaces as well as the companies they are consumers of.

In addition to these two levels of analysis, one other finding is worth discussing as a final point of interest. The tables 9 and 10 as well as the comparison bar chart illustrate the importance that research administrators place on various organizational culture elements or alternative workplace “perks” as compared to the realities of these components being offered in their own workplace. We explored 5 areas of relevance to each of the generations: Mechanisms to foster creativity and innovation, Professional development opportunities, telecommute/flexible schedule opportunities, mechanisms that promote a healthy workplace, and support for philanthropic efforts. As demonstrated in Table 9 professional development is skewed in responses to the highest level of importance whereas philanthropic efforts shows the widest dispersal of categories of importance. In contrast there is broader dispersal of opinion as to the degree of support by the institution in which the research administrator works (Table 10).

*Table 9. Research Administrators Reported Perceptions\**

	<b>Creativity &amp; Innovation</b>	<b>Professional Development</b>	<b>Flexible Schedule</b>	<b>Healthy Workplace</b>	<b>Philanthropic Efforts</b>
Very Unimportant	0	0	0.9	0.4	2.2
Somewhat Unimportant	1.7	0.4	5.2	2.2	15.2
Neutral	3.9	1.7	17	5.7	40.3
Somewhat Important	47.8	18.6	39.1	42.4	33.8
Very Important	46.5	79.2	37.8	49.3	8.7

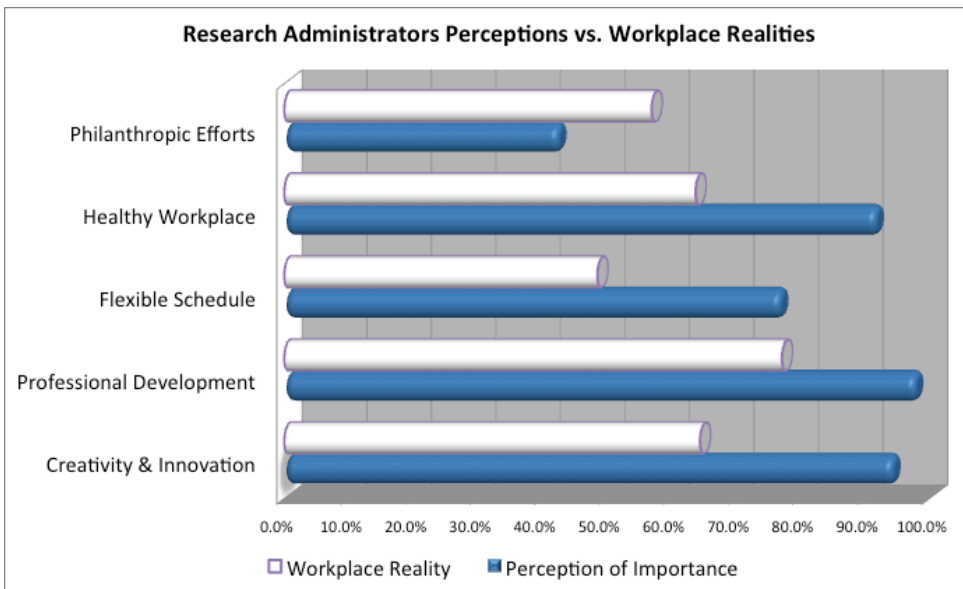
\*Percentages

Table 10. Research Administrators Reported Perceptions\*

	Creativity & Innovation	Professional Development	Flexible Schedule	Healthy Workplace	Philanthropic Efforts
No policy, not supported	19.6	6.5	31.4	13.1	28.9
No policy, supported	48.7	39.2	28.4	27.5	35.1
In policy, not supported	16.1	16.4	20.1	23.1	14.2
In policy, supported	15.7	37.9	20.1	36.2	21.8

\*Percentages

Figure 1. Research Administrators Reported Perceptions vs. Workplace Realities.



What is clear from these findings is that the perceived importance of all but one measure (Philanthropic) far exceeds the reality of support for these measures in the workplace, whether in policy or simply supported by supervisors. For research administration managers looking to maximize engagement and job satisfaction of their employees, each of these elements should be considered in the context of your individual workplaces and discussions around policy changes to better accommodate these requests.

## Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to better understand the role that the psychological contract plays in worker perceptions in today's changing work environment. Specifically this study aims at answering the following research questions: What effect does a person's generation have on perceptions of organizational obligations (aka psychological contract), organizational loyalty, job movement, career commitment, ideology of self-reliance, and organizational commitment? What effect do current work environments (aka organizational culture) have on perception of research administration work by generation? The analysis compared reactions and consequences based on generational cohort and age. Each of the questions was answered and the results were mixed by generation as outlined in following table.

Table 11. Hypothesis Results Summary

Hypothesis	Result
H1: Psychological contract obligations will differ by generation.	Not significant
H2: Organizational loyalty will differ by generation.	Positive and Significant
H3: Perceptions of Job Movement will differ by generation.	Positive and Significant
H4: Career commitment will differ by generation.	Not significant
H5: Perceptions on the ideology of self-reliance will differ by generation.	Not significant
H6: Organizational commitment will differ by generation.	Not significant
H7: Work environment perceptions will differ by generation. (A)	Negative and Significant
H7: Work environment perceptions will differ by generation. (B)	Positive and Significant

Our findings illuminate important and practical lessons for the research administration workplace. For the Baby Boomers, higher levels of organizational loyalty coupled with personal and philosophical ideologies of organizational longevity represent a slowly fading belief system. Organizations can capitalize on these traits, however, by creating policies that properly reward longevity and honor the long-term commitment of these employees. This research points to Boomer's desire to develop new skills and work in environments that foster creativity and innovation. Utilize these lessons as a way to keep Boomers engaged and productive and get the most out of their vast expertise and big picture perspectives. This research also found that Boomers find a great deal of meaning in their organizations. Creating opportunities for Boomers to articulate this meaning may inspire younger generations, particularly Millennials, to find deeper meaning and higher levels of engagement in the organization.

True to their independent nature, GenXers were the most complex of the participants surveyed here. Riding the middle ground on most, but not all, significant elements. For managers of GenX employees, the primary lesson from this research should be to get to know your GenX employees and their individual circumstances and motivators. Are they focused primarily on career promotion or are they pressured by personal obligations? This generation's commitment to the organization is going to be directly tied to these individualized factors. Like Millennials, they are more accepting

of career mobility and change overall, but are more likely to stay in organizations where they see attempts to keep up with workplace trends and accommodate professional growth opportunities.

Finally, the findings in this study largely support the growing body of conventional writings about Millennials. Specifically the lack of organization commitment and the propensity for career mobility are realities that organizations are powerless to counteract. Surprisingly, this research did not find evidence that Millennials believe alternative organizational culture policies increase productivity. However, evidence shows they do hold true to their philanthropic and work/life balance proclivities and challenge their workplaces to honor those values. Organizations that employ Millennials should work to find ways to engage Millennials in meaning-building activities while also making strides to understand the external forces that Millennials draw meaning from. Acknowledgment, authenticity and community building will go a long way with this generation of workers.

As exemplified above, understanding psychological contracts and their related components is invaluable for the success of any organization and that means a direct impact on research administration offices as well. Further complicated by the impact of a multi-generational workplace and the idiosyncrasies of everyday University life, these findings can serve as a roadmap to help research administrators navigate the various expectations and preconceived notions of their staffs and colleagues.

#### *Methodological limitations and future research.*

This work offers many insights but certain limitations should be acknowledged and examined in future research. First, this survey is a one-source method and would be enhanced with the inclusion of a second source such as comparisons between expectations of employees and supervisors.

Next, generation is a contrived measure based on an accepted historical timeframe and use of an age variable. It is possible that life stages, not generation, are causing perceived differences. Hughes & O'Rand (2005) contend that although early life experiences do affect people's perceptions in later years, there is no particular evidence to suggest that these experiences will have the same effect on all who experience them, even at the same life stage, due to variables such as race, gender, or social class.

Finally, a germane future research project would be a deeper examination of psychological contracts through in-depth interviews or focus groups. Each of the aforementioned ideas hold their own merits and limitations; however, each would further a stream of research unable to be captured by this study.

#### *Closing thoughts.*

The greatest danger in times of turbulence is not the turbulence;  
it is to act with yesterday's logic.

- Peter Drucker

Although the theory of generational differences in the workplace was only partially confirmed, the ultimate goal of this study was reached: to provide helpful information to both research administration practitioners about engagement and psychological contract perceptions in the workplace, enabling better human capital planning and human resource policy implementation for the future.

There is no doubt the workplace of today looks very different from that of yesterday, and will be exponentially different from that of tomorrow. For research administrators this means working within the conflicting confines of rapidly changing regulatory environments, high-pressure workloads, and often glacially moving university cultures. The most successful managers will be those who take the time to understand their individual employees' expectations and strive to create appropriate cultural and policy shifts that accommodate them. In the words of Dee Hock, "Organizations, no matter how well designed, are only as good as the people who live and work in them."

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## Appendix A

Please begin with the following background questions.

1. What year were you born?
2. What generation would you say you most identify with?
3. How long have you worked in research administration?
4. How long have you worked in your current position?
5. Have you worked any portion of your professional career in another profession?

*Yes or No*, If yes, how many years?

6. Please select the following statement you feel best describes you.

I view a sense of belonging/teamwork, ability to learn new things, autonomy, and entrepreneurship as most important in the workplace.

I value comfort and stability in the workplace and view myself as economically cautious.

I place high value on work, generally receive high levels of job satisfaction from it and identify myself closely with my occupation.

None of the above

Other

7. The following questions ask your expectations of what your workplace should provide for you. Please state the degree to which you agree or disagree with the following statements.

To what extent do you agree that your employer is OBLIGATED to provide each of the following to you: *Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, Strongly Disagree*

An attractive benefits package

Fair treatment

Job security

Feedback on your performance

Opportunities for career development

Transfer opportunities should my current job be eliminated

The following questions assess your opinions of your workplace obligations. Please state the degree to which you agree or disagree with the following statements.

8. To what extent do you feel obligated to provide each of the following to your employer:

*Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, Strongly Disagree*

Volunteer to do tasks that fall outside my job description

Develop new skills as needed

Perform my job in a reliable manner

Work extra hours if needed to get the job done

Follow policies and procedures

Accept a transfer to a different job or department if necessary

Stay with this department my entire career

9. The following questions assess your opinions of job movement. Please state the degree to which you agree or disagree with the following statements: *Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, Strongly Disagree*

One should stay in their job for at least 5-10 years.

One should not change jobs multiple times in their lifetime.

One should not change employers multiple times in their lifetime.

10. The following questions assess your opinions about your career development. Please state the degree to which you agree or disagree with the following statements: *Strongly Agree, Agree, Somewhat Agree, Neutral, Somewhat Disagree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree*

If I could get another job outside my current profession, that paid the same amount, I would probably take it.

I definitely want a career for myself in the field I am working in now.

If I could do it all over again I would not choose work I my current profession.

If I had all the money I needed without working, I would probably still continue to work in my current profession.

If I had all the money I needed without working, I would probably continue working but not in my current profession.

I like this profession too much to give it up.

I am disappointed that I ever entered my current profession.

I spend a significant amount of time reading journals or books related to my field.

11. The following questions assess your views of your personal competencies. Please state the degree to which you agree or disagree with the following statements: *Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, Strongly Disagree*
- I am in control of my career.
- My career success is dependent on my organization.
12. The following questions will ask your opinions about your organization. Please state the degree to which you agree or disagree with the following statements: *Strongly Agree, Agree, Somewhat Agree, Neutral, Somewhat Disagree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree*
- I do not feel a strong sense of “belonging” to my organization.
- I do not feel like “part of the family” at my organization.
- This organization has a great deal of personal meaning for me.
13. The following questions will ask your opinions about staying with your organization. Please state the degree to which you agree or disagree with the following statements: *Strongly Agree, Agree, Somewhat Agree, Neutral, Somewhat Disagree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree*
- It would be very hard for me to leave my organization right now, even if I wanted to.
- Too much of my life would be disrupted if I decided I wanted to leave my organization now.
- I feel that I have too few options to consider leaving this organization.
14. The following questions will ask for your feelings about leaving your organization. Please state the degree to which you agree or disagree with the following statements: *Strongly Agree, Agree, Somewhat Agree, Neutral, Somewhat Disagree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree*
- I would feel guilty if I left my organization now.
- This organization deserves my loyalty.
- I would not leave my organization right now because I have a sense of obligation to the people in it.
- I owe a great deal to my organization.
15. In recent years, the workforce has become increasingly volatile. Please state the degree you agree or disagree with the following statements: *Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, Strongly Disagree*
- Whether or not a job has guaranteed tenure is a consideration when selecting employment.
- I believe workplace insecurity is detrimental to recruitment of qualified applicants.
- Job security would make me more motivated to perform my job.

16. In recent years, the technology has increased the ability to work outside of the physical office. Please state the degree you agree or disagree with the following statements: *Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, Strongly Disagree*

My organization supports telecommuting opportunities (work from home, flexible hours)

I am the most productive when I am in control of my work schedule.

If I could, I would work from home full time.

My structure of my work schedule makes my personal/family obligations more difficult.

Work schedule structure is a consideration in job selection.

17. The following questions assess your opinions on workplace culture. Please state the degree to which you feel the elements are important to a productive workplace: *Very Important, Somewhat Important, Neutral, Somewhat Unimportant, Very Unimportant*

Mechanisms to foster creativity/innovation

Professional development opportunities

Telecommute/Flexible schedule opportunities

Mechanisms that promote healthy workplace

Support for philanthropic

18. The following questions assess your workplace environment. Please state the degree to which you feel the elements are present in your current workplace.

*In policy and fully supported by supervisors*

*In policy but not fully supported by supervisors*

*No official policy but supported by supervisors*

*No official policy and not supported by supervisors*

Mechanisms to foster creativity/innovation

Professional development opportunities

Telecommute/Flexible schedule opportunities

Mechanisms that promote a healthy workplace

Support for philanthropic efforts

19. What is your gender?

20. What is your race/ethnicity?



21. What is your gross annual income before taxes?

Less than \$20,000

\$20,000 – \$34,999

\$35,000 - \$49,999

\$50,000 - \$74,999

\$75,000 - \$100,000

Over \$100,000

22. What is the highest level of education you have attained?

High School

Some college

College Graduate

Some graduate school

Masters Degree

Doctorate Degree

23. What is your employment category?

Full Time Exempt (Salaried)

Full Time Hourly

Part Time

Other

24. Please complete this sentence. In politics today I would consider myself...

Republican

Democrat

Independent

Other

25. Please complete this sentence. In general I would describe my political views as...

very conservative

conservative

moderate

liberal

very liberal