



A Study of the Effects of Cooperative Education on Generation Y's Workplace Expectations

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Abstract

This study investigates the impact of cooperative education on Generation Y's expectations regarding pay, promotion, and flexibility in the workplace. Understanding workplace expectations will provide employers the necessary knowledge to attract and retain employees. This research specifically targets commerce coop students who have completed work terms as well as students belonging to non-coop commerce programs in order to assess whether or not cooperative education influences expectations concerning the aforementioned measures. Researchers expanded upon previous studies completed in regards to pay and promotion expectations; past investigations have not compared the expectations of flexibility of coop and non-coop students. Undergraduate commerce students at the University of Guelph were requested to participate in this study through social networking sites, using "man on the street" methods, and word of mouth. Students who chose to participate completed an online survey. Findings suggest that participation in a cooperative education program does not have a significant impact on the expectations of undergraduate commerce students. Expectations may be formed through various experiences that do not pertain to coop placements. This investigation provides several opportunities for future research regarding the workplace expectations of Generation Y individuals, as well as what aspects of work they value the most.

Introduction

Many young adults face great difficulties in entering the workplace after graduating from university. Members of Generation Y often hold high expectations, resulting in much disappointment regarding their first job following graduation (Kawana-Brown, 2007). They are generally looking for different characteristics in their desired jobs contrasted to what employers might in fact be offering (Barron, Maxwell, Broadbridge & Ogden, 2007). Therefore, with Generation Y increasing their presence in the workforce, it is crucial to understand their needs and desires in order to create a solid, hardworking, and satisfied workforce.

In an attempt to understand this new generation, studies have examined their work expectations, motivators, and attitudes. Members of Generation Y are often seen as impatient (Gardner, 2006). However, this stereotype might be emergent from various positive characteristics, which when used properly can be very beneficial to employers. Generation Y is independent, seeks challenge and values work-life balance; characteristics not often offered in most starting positions for university graduates (Barron, Maxwell, Broadbridge & Ogden, 2007). Evidently, this is why young employees might come across as less driven and hard-working than elder workers who are better matched for their job characteristics. Furthermore, this also explains why retention rates of young employees could be low for many organizations, as Generation Y workers are unable to find jobs for which they are well suited.

Research by Solnet, Kralj, and Kandampully (2012) found that employers must redesign incentives to attract and retain Generation Y employees. It has also been found that increased employee turnover may result if Generation Y does not have a work environment conducive to goal attainment and career development (Westerman & Yamamura, 2007). The research available has implicated that managers need to make alterations to assist Generation Y as they find their place in new work environments and provide realistic job previews to new hires

(Davis, 2010). Westerman and Yamamura (2007) suggest that further research on work environment preferences for newer generations will provide firms with pertinent information to help improve workplace productivity as they transition to a new generation of workers.

In order to increase the efficiency of Generation Y employees, it is not only necessary to look at how the workplace can be improved to satisfy their expectations but also how these expectations are established in the first place. That is why it is important to take education into account and its effects on students. Creating more realistic expectations for graduates will result in a smoother transition from school to work, avoiding disappointment and maximizing their success in their first jobs post graduation. Research studies indicate that cooperative education can assist students by providing them with hands-on opportunities to practice skills they have acquired through schooling and by exposing them to real work settings (Garavan & Murphy, 2001). The quality of the coop experience, however, will directly impact its ability to have an effect on students and augment their expectations (Lubbers, Loughlin & Zweig, 2004). Understanding the common characteristics of new employees, such as those shared by all members of Generation Y, can help improve coop experiences of students so that they can truly benefit from the program and make their expectations of their first job following graduation more realistic.

This research serves as an exploratory study to examine whether the workplace expectations of Generation Y on pay, promotion, and flexibility differ for undergraduate commerce students who have completed cooperative education terms relative to the expectations of students enrolled in a regular degree program. It is expected that an enhanced understanding of how cooperative education impacts students' work expectations will assist managers in their ability to attract and retain younger employees.

Literature Review

Generation Y Preferences

Individuals defined as members of Generation Y include those born between 1980 and 1995, which generally refers to the children of the Baby Boomers (Ng, Schweitzer & Lyons, 2010). Research states that members of Generation Y are confident, passionate, self-reliant, independent, and team players (Barron, Maxwell, Broadbridge & Ogden, 2007). These individuals prefer working environments that enable them the opportunity to grow through decision-making, autonomy, and challenging projects (Westerman & Yamamura, 2007). It is not unexpected that Generation Y workers seek jobs with mixed rewards that will inspire and motivate them given that they are goal-oriented and desire flexibility in a job (Solnet, Kralj & Kandampully, 2012 and Crocker & Meier, 2010). The features that Generation Y view as most important in selecting employment are work-life balance, salary, and having the opportunity for advancement within the organization (Demagalhaes, Wilde & Fitzgerald, 2011). Additional research around work-life balance found that Generation Y workers prefer having flexible hours and schedules that provide them with the opportunity to work remotely (Solnet, Kralj & Kandampully, 2012). Research regarding the preferences of this generation provides us with valuable information in a time of transitioning between generations at work. It is essential for organizations to understand what adjustments need to be made to accommodate the changing work preferences of Generation Y in order to remain competitive relative to other workplaces (Westerman & Yamamura, 2007).

Generation Y Work Expectations

According to Martin (2005), Generation Y has widespread expectations that future careers will provide them with flexibility, great responsibility, and tasks that need resolving instantly. Generation Y also expects to have challenging work, changing work environments, and promotion opportunities (Treuren, 2010). There are conflicting results as to the salary expectations of this generation, with research by Treuren (2010) stating that they believe they will receive high salaries and research by Ng, Schweitzer, and Lyons (2010) showing that they expect more realistic salaries. Further research needs to be conducted to provide support for the salary expectations of this generation.

Cooperative Education

Cooperative education programs are designed by universities and colleges to enhance learning through practical experience in a workplace. The program ties the experience to learning objectives, which allows students to gain a deeper understanding of their academic program (Cagle & Kilbourne, 2000). Cooperative education programs are an increasingly popular element of higher education for business students and provide many potential benefits. Having the opportunity to work in their field of study assists students in taking theories studied in the classroom and applying them to relevant situations in a business environment (Herger, 2009). Graduates from coop programs often attribute much of their success in gaining promotions and having the confidence to take on greater responsibility to their coop experiences (Lester & Costley, 2010). Cooperative education has been found to provide students with more realistic expectations about their future careers and better knowledge of industries, companies, and career options than students not in coop programs (Ng & Burke, 2006). Coop students also have a greater ability to identify what they want out of a career and place a higher degree of importance on completing challenging work, working with good people, and reporting to good people (Ng &

Burke, 2006). Despite the fact that coop students believe their experience will increase their initial salaries, Cagle & Kilbourne (2000) found no significant difference between initial salaries of coop students and non-coop students. The conflicting evidence between the studies by Ng & Burke and Cagle & Kilbourne indicates that further research is required to provide evidence on how coop changes the expectations of students, and whether the quality of the experience has an impact.

Theoretical Model and Hypotheses

This study examines whether the experience of cooperative education work terms alters the annual salary expectations of undergraduate commerce students for their first job upon graduation. It hypothesizes that work experience through coop will provide students with realistic expectations as to an average salary for new, educated employees with relatively little professional work experience.

HI: Work experience through cooperative education will be negatively associated with salary expectations.

Ng, Schweitzer, and Lyons (2010) indicated that Generation Y employees desire to be promoted rapidly which signifies high expectations for job accomplishments. It is likely that the expectations of Generation Y are not realized upon entry into the workforce, which could result in high levels of dissatisfaction and lower motivation. We will study how cooperative education work experiences can alter these expectations. Assuming that participation in a coop work term results in more realistic expectations, it is believed that those students who have completed a

work term will expect to work in their first position post-graduation for a longer period of time before their first promotion, as compared to those who have not experienced that job preview.

H2: Work experience obtained through cooperative education will reduce expectations regarding promotion.

We extend previous research by examining the value that students place on flexibility in the workplace. Past research has not compared the expectations of flexibility of coop and non-coop students. This research is valuable to employers who are providing future employees with realistic job previews and could be valuable to universities that want to instil realistic expectations in their students. Flexibility is a broad category and for the purposes of this study has been narrowed to include: the timing of shifts, compressed workweeks, vacation time, working on projects of interest, working from home, and break time. We anticipate differences between coop students and students who have not participated in coop on their expectations of flexibility in jobs upon graduation, but available research has not yet indicated the direction of the correlation.

Participation in coop has been found to provide students with the opportunity to apply theories learnt in the classroom (Herger, 2009) and to form more realistic workplace expectations (Ng & Burke, 2006). For this reason, it is believed that the quality of each coop placement will have an impact on a student's expectations. The more opportunities they are given to engage in the workplace and to experience a realistic work environment, the more their expectations will be influenced.

H3: Those coop students who have experienced a higher quality coop placement will have lower expectations for pay and promotion than those who have had a low quality experience.

Methodology

Participants

Participants consisted of commerce students enrolled in cooperative education programs who had completed various amounts of coop terms, as well as commerce students who were not enrolled in coop programs. Complete responses were obtained from 86 undergraduate commerce students attending the University of Guelph, of which 23 were enrolled in coop. The age of respondents ranged from 18 to 30 and every year of study but first year was represented in the sample. The gender of respondents was skewed, perhaps due to the composition of the population. Complete responses were received from 25 men, 58 women and two unspecified.

Procedure

The data for this study was collected using an online survey method, which was designed by fourth year students in the Human Resources Management program at the University of Guelph. The survey asked questions pertaining to Generation Y's expectations regarding pay, promotion, and flexibility. Various methods were utilized to recruit participants. These included communicating with students via email, social media outlets and the Man on the Street method. Each method used included a recruitment notice that informed students of the purpose, intent, anonymity, and informed consent of the study. Participants were asked to complete the survey

with an added incentive of entering a draw to win one of 10 \$5 dollar Tim Horton's gift cards. Participation in the study was voluntary and the participants were informed that their responses to the survey would be anonymous and confidential. Furthermore, upon completion of the survey participants were presented with the option of submitting their email addresses to be entered in the Tim Horton's draw, thereby upholding anonymity. The estimated combined number of surveys distributed through every method of recruitment is 550. With 112 total responses received, the response rate is estimated at 20.36%.

Measures

Pay Expectations: To assess the expectations of pay, both coop and non-coop students were asked to indicate the level of annual salary they expect to receive at their first job upon graduation. Options ranged from "less than \$25,000" to "\$105,000 or higher". Students selected the option that best fit their expectations within a \$10,000 range.

Promotion Expectations were measured based on how long an individual perceived it would take them to receive their first promotion. Respondents were asked to indicate their answer by selecting a time frame from 0-10 years and 0-12 months.

Flexibility Expectations and Work Values: Students' work values were measured using the Lyons Work Values Survey 32-Item Format (Lyons, 2004). Both coop and non-coop students were required to answer these questions. Items were rated on a five-point scale which ranged from "Not at all important" to "Absolutely essential" in regards to whether or not students believed they were a top priority in their decision to continue or accept a job. A sample item is "Having the AUTHORITY to organize and direct the work of others".

In order to assess the value that respondents assigned to flexibility, six items were added to the Lyons Work Values Survey. The categories of flexibility were created by conducting qualitative research, using a convenience sample. Researchers asked 25 members of Generation Y to list the most important aspects of flexibility that they would seek in a job. The top six responses were used to create the items listed in the Appendix. The structure of each item created was modeled after the structure of the items in the Lyons Work Values Survey.

Coop Experience: Participants who were enrolled in cooperative education programs responded to questionnaire items regarding their individual coop experiences based on an evaluation measure developed by Sturre, Keele, Treuer, Moss, McLeod, & MacFarlane (2012). This measure, as it is still in the early stages of development, does not include a rating scale. In order to employ this measure, students were asked to respond to statements using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). This scale reflects whether or not a coop student believes that their work placement experiences enhanced skills and various expectations pertinent to their future careers. From the experience measure, 15 applicable items were included in our survey. A sample item is "the placement unit provided me with the opportunity to apply industry or work relevant skills."

Analytic Procedure

The data collected was analyzed by comparing independent, dependent and control variables through correlations and p-values, as well as by comparing means and standard deviations to find differences among the various categories of respondents.

Results

None of the hypotheses were supported in the data collected. Table 1 presents the means, standard deviation and number of valid responses for the main variables of our study.

Salary

The average salary expectation rating for coop students was 3.91, which was slightly higher than that of non-coop students (3.40). However, the correlation between salary and the decision to enrol in coop was not significant at the .01 or .05 level ($p=.197$). Both averages are in the \$35,000-\$44,999 category.

Promotion

There were no significant differences observed in relation to promotion and participation in coop.

Flexibility

There were no significant differences found among the various elements of flexibility between those who are enrolled in coop and those who are not. However, it is interesting to note the highest- and lowest-rated categories based on averages for each group. Answers were selected on a 5-point scale. For coop students these categories were: working on projects of interest (3.7) and having the option of a compressed workweek (2.35). The highest and lowest for non-coop students were: vacation time (3.80) and working on projects of interest (2.92). Projects of Interest was the only category of flexibility which showed a significant correlation to any of our other dependent variables. There was correlation of .229 ($p=.045$) to salary expectations.

Quality of experience

The overall quality of a student's coop placement experience was not correlated with any of our dependent variables. The only significant discovery in this category was that the overall quality of the person's coop experience was positively correlated with Instrumental work values ($r=.464$, $p=.04$).

Table 1 Comparison of means and standard deviations for coop and non-coop students.

Variable	Coop student			Non-Coop Student		
	Mean	Standard Deviation	Valid N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Valid N
Salary	3.91a	1.47	23	3.40a	1.67	67
Promotion	22.04a	8.65	23	21.49a	12.56	69
Flexibility	3.00a	.89	20	3.28a	.89	60
Coop Quality	4.16 ²	.89	21	--	--	--
Instrumental WV	4.03a	.47	20	3.95a	.56	61
Cognitive WV	4.08a	.48	20	3.78a	.64	61
Prestige WV	3.71a	.75	20	3.22b	.76	61
Social WV	3.81a	.72	20	3.67a	.76	61

Additional findings

Although our original research question did not yield significant findings, the data analysis uncovered some interesting observations relating to our control variables. The most significant observations related to a student's work values. The strongest impact was the positive correlation of work values to the overall score for flexibility expectations. Every category of work values showed a strong to moderate positive correlation with flexibility, significant at the .01 level. Correlations and p-values for Flexibility are listed in Table 2. Salary was positively

correlated with Cognitive WV($r=.356$, $p=.001$) and Prestige WV ($r=.385$, $p=.000$). The final dependent variable, Promotion, was negatively correlated with Instrumental WV($r=-.220$, $p=.048$), Cognitive WV($r=-.221$, $p=.048$), and Prestige WV($r=-.231$, $p=.038$).

Table 2 Correlations of Work Values to Flexibility Expectations

Work Values	Pearson Correlation (r)	Sig. (p)
Instrumental WV	0.606	.000
Cognitive WV	0.402	.000
Prestige WV	0.364	.001
Social WV	0.477	.000

The work values of coop and non-coop students did not vary greatly. However, a significant correlation was found between the decision to enrol in coop and prestige work values ($r=-.274$, $p=.013$). The average rating of the importance of prestige characteristics of a job was higher for coop students than for non-coop students, as outlined in Table 1. For coop students, the mean rating was 3.71/5 with a standard deviation of .75. For non-coop students, the mean was 3.22/5 with a standard deviation of .76.

As shown in Table 3, in relation to gender, male respondents rated flexibility ($r=.233$, $p=.042$) and prestige ($r=.243$, $p=.032$) as more important job characteristics than did female respondents.

Table 3 Comparison of means and standard deviations for Women and Men

Variable	Women			Men		
	Mean	Standard Deviation	Valid N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Valid N
Salary	3.36a	1.46	59	3.96a	1.95	27
Promotion	21.26a	12.46	61	22.56a	10.63	27
Flexibility	3.08a	.83	53	3.53b	.97	24

Coop Quality	4.35a	.54	12	3.90a	1.20	9
Instrumental WV	3.96a	.52	53	3.95a	.59	25
Cognitive WV	3.86a	.64	53	3.86a	.60	25
Prestige WV	3.22a	.74	53	3.63b	.83	25
Social WV	3.76a	.70	53	3.61a	.85	25

Discussion

As Generation Y enters the workforce, it is important to understand their expectations and how they are formed. The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of cooperative education on expectations in order to examine an area with a conflicting body of knowledge. The results of this study indicate that participation in a cooperative education program does not have a great impact on the expectations of undergraduate commerce students. However, every category of expectations assessed in the study showed a significant correlation to at least two categories of work values.

It makes sense that work values and expectations would be related. For example, the positive correlation between prestige and salary could be due to the nature of the anticipated career. This finding suggests that those factors that influence work values will have a greater impact on a student's expectations than would their participation in a coop program.

Limitations/Directions for Future Research

This study was constrained by numerous limitations, which greatly impacted the results. One of the main issues was that the study was conducted in a very short time frame, which made it difficult to recruit a large sample size. Thus, the generalizability of the findings is limited by the small response rate and the sample being comprised of only commerce students at the University of Guelph. Unfortunately, that population is small and the number of coop commerce students is drastically lower. Furthermore, very few students who have completed coop work terms remain at the school, which left us with a small group of students to examine. We did not take this into account during the design of our study and the result was a negative impact upon our ability to generalize the findings. Due to the sample size, this study may not be representative of all Generation Y students. Future research should examine a more substantial sample of students from institutions across Canada and the world.

In addition, the recruitment methods used hindered our ability to quickly and efficiently recruit the evenly distributed sample of coop and non-coop students we desired. By approaching all commerce students, the probability of obtaining large numbers of coop students was reduced and we had a much higher proportion of non-coop respondents. Distinct recruitment procedures should have been designed to separately target each group of students in order to obtain balanced responses. Considering these factors in future research would result in higher response rates, which would improve the comparison of coop and non-coop students and help to uncover trends that we were unable to find.

Finally, there were additional factors that were not considered in this study, such as how personal characteristics of the students, and Generation Y in general, would affect their expectations and experiences. Certain attributes of individuals may have impacted their expectations regardless of whether they participated in coop or not. Therefore, the effects of coop

might remain hidden by overpowering factors that control students' expectations and perceptions.

The impact of work values on expectations over other variables measured indicates that future research should consider a person's job prospects and personal preferences when studying expectations. For example, an explanation to the lack of statistically significant differences in the results when comparing coop students to non-coop students could be that university business students generally have part-time or summer jobs of the same type, whether in coop or not. As a result, students' expectations of their future jobs are based on similar experiences in the workplace and are thus equally realistic, excluding other factors that might influence expectations. Therefore, this research study could be conducted differently, by comparing the expectations of students who are or who have been employed during school versus students who have never worked. Conducting it in this manner would isolate the effects of employment on students' expectations for their future job. This study would have different independent variables, as it would be researching whether part-time employment during school helps with the transition from school to work. In this case, the moderating variable could be the similarity between the student's job and their field of study.

Another finding from this study that could prompt further research was the higher expectations of coop students on pay and promotion. These expectations could have resulted from perceptions of greater experience relative to students not enrolled in coop programs and should be investigated in more detail. Also, the study found that men value workplace flexibility more than women, which contradicts instincts that women would require flexibility to attend to traditional childcare duties. Future research could seek to confirm these findings with larger sample sizes and diverse populations.

Conclusions

Contemporary literature pertaining to Generation Y's workplace expectations indicates that Generation Y expects challenging work, changing work environments, and promotion opportunities (Treuren, 2010). In addition to Generation Y's individual preferences of working environments (that enable opportunity for growth through decision-making, autonomy, and challenging projects), coop could also serve as a source of competitive advantage that might help Generation Y meet their career expectations.

With the goal of creating a link between these two ideas, this study aimed to help answer the question of whether the experience of cooperative education work terms could alter the annual salary, promotion, and flexibility expectations of undergraduate commerce students for their first job upon graduation. Although the results of the study indicated a lack of statistical significance between Generation Y's expectations of pay, promotion, and flexibility in their first job post university in relation to coop students, other interesting findings were reported. Work values were positively correlated to the overall score for flexibility expectations and gender differences were found in overall expectations of flexibility.

In order to add statistical significance to this study, it was recommended to increase sample size, diversify the study, and also rectify the validity of the study by looking at other important factors, such as non-coop work experience.

This study was successful in terms of answering the questions it aimed to ask. Throughout the research process, other unexpected findings were collected, which may help to

pave the road to new ideas and research in the field of workplace values and expectations.

Ultimately, this study can be used as a tool to further existing knowledge on workplace values and expectations, which will aid employers in understanding the expectations of their future employees.

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Appendix

Flexibility Measures added to the Lyons Work Value Survey 32-Item Format:

- Having the ability to choose the TIMING OF YOUR SHIFTS.
- Having the ability to choose a COMPRESSED WORKWEEK by extending daily work hours.
- Having the freedom to choose when to take your VACATION TIME.
- Having the opportunity to work on PROJECTS OF INTEREST.
- Having the option to occasionally WORK FROM HOME.
- Having the freedom to choose your BREAK TIME.