Millennials' "Get a 'Real Job'" Exploring Generational Shifts in the Colloquialism's Characteristics and Meanings

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Abstract

This study provides a replication of Clair's 1996 research on the colloquialism "real job."

Colloquial meanings are influenced by generational and socio-cultural changes; thus, a

replication exposes how Millennials who are coming of age during the Great Recession

understand the phrase. Analysis of data from 139 currently matriculated Millennials suggests that

a real job provides a salary that is utilitarian rather than lucrative, offers medical and retirement

benefits, and is fulfilling. Our analysis revealed four themes that are presented under the broad

categories of acceptance (right of passage; mark of distinction) and rejection (meaningless

concept; relativism) of the colloquialism. Overall, participants were divided about the utility of

the term and nearly half of the students rejected that a real job exists. The implications of these

findings are discussed.

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By 2020, Millennials will comprise 46 percent of the U.S. workforce (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013b). Considerable research has been conducted on Millennials' expectations for work and how they are distinct from previous generations (see Meister & Willyerd, 2010; Twenge, 2010 for comprehensive summaries). However, research on the meanings Millennials assign to everyday talk about work is limited even though communication influences both the type of work that is (un)desirable and employment expectations (Cheney, Lair, Ritz, & Kendall, 2010; Cheney, Zorn, Planalp, & Lair, 2008; Zorn & Townsley, 2008). In particular, colloquial expressions represent taken for granted assumptions that are not readily problematized due to their frequency of use (Cheney et al., 2010; Clair, 1996). Colloquialisms condense our understandings about work into a single phrase that communicates what can and should be expected of work. Foundational to organizational communication scholars' research on the meaning of work is Clair's (1996) study on the colloquialism "real job." Clair's (1996) work highlighted the value of understanding the role of colloquialisms in socialization and provided an understanding of how members of a particular generational cohort – Generation X – understood the real job colloquialism and the "work-choice process" (p. 251).

This study offers a replication of Clair's (1996) research on the colloquialism, real job. Because colloquialisms are both enduring and adaptable, we contend a replication is necessary to understand how the meaning may have shifted due to generational and socio-cultural changes, even though the phrase remains the same (Deal, 2007; Wray-Lake, Syvertsen, Briddell, Osgood, & Flanagan, 2011). Changes in meaning of the real job colloquialism would represent a potential generational conflict about how work is understood and ordered by members of the Gen X and

Millennial generations. By following identical procedures with a different population, this study

is an empirical generalization (Tsang & Kwan, 1999) of Clair's (1996) work. As such, we rely

on the same theoretical and methodological frameworks as the original study. (A full theoretical

account is beyond the scope of a research note; interested readers are encouraged to revisit

Clair's [1996] work.) By replicating Clair's (1996) study, we can gain insight into whether/how

generational and contextual differences affect the meanings and characteristics Millennials' and

Gen Xers' associate with the colloquialism. Such differences are of particular importance

because Gen Xers have advanced to fill the majority of middle management roles in

organizations and are managing Millennials (Erickson, 2010).

In 2014, Gen Xers (born between 1965-1980) represented 27% of the adult population

(Pew Research Center, 2014) and have been described as slackers, disinterested and disloyal to

their employers, independent, and primarily motivated by money in the workplace (O'Bannon,

2001). In her study of late Gen Xers ($N = 34$), Clair found that the majority of her participants

accepted the dominant discourse of what constitutes a real job. Specifically, money ($n = 18$);

utilizing education or potential ($n = 8$); enjoyable ($n = 8$); standard 40 hour work week, 8 hour

day ($n = 7$); and advancement ($n = 5$) were top characteristics of a real job. The focus on money

was central to the meaning Gen X attached to the real job colloquialism. For Gen Xers, helping

others ($n = 1$) and making a difference ($n = 1$) were not strongly identified with the

colloquialism.

Millennials (born after 1980; Pew Research Center, 2014) are a generation in which

every kid has been told, "You can be anything you want. You're special" (Twenge, 2006, p. 25).

Characterized as "optimistic, rule-following achievers" (Peck, 2010), Millennials have been

labeled "trophy kids" (Alsop, 2008, p. 33). Lair and Wieland's (2012) research on the socializing

function of colloquialisms around the meaning of work investigated Millennials' experiences with the phrase "what are you going to do with that major?" Comparable to Clair's (1996) findings, "high-pay, high status work" (Lair & Wieland, 2012, p. 443) characterized the preferred responses. In addition, Millennials reported favoring work that allows them to make a difference and is fulfilling (Meister & Willyerd, 2010; Twenge, 2010).

Differences between Gen Xers' and Millennials' work values have been empirically demonstrated as well. Compared to Gen Xers, Millennials have reported lower work centrality (Deal, Altman, & Rogelberg, 2010; Twenge, 2010), work ethic (Twenge, 2010), and extrinsic work values (e.g., status, respect, salary). In addition, Millennials have reported higher job satisfaction (Deal et al., 2010; Kowske, Rasch, & Wiley, 2010), job security (Kowske et al., 2010; Twenge, 2010), and desire for work life balance (Twenge, 2010) than Gen Xers. One potential explanation for these differences is the influence of socio-cultural events such as the Great Recession.

The Great Recession has been especially hard on Millennials. Millennials have higher levels of debt, poverty, and unemployment than Gen Xers (Pew Research Center, 2014). In 2011, the unemployment rate for young college graduates was 9.4% and *under*employment reached 19.1% (Shierholz, Sabadish, & Wething, 2012). In contrast, late Gen Xers (such as those sampled for Clair's original study) entered the workforce during the boom economy of the late 1990s. At that time, the unemployment rate was below five percent and the price of inflation was actually declining (Katz, Krueger, Burtless, & Dickens, 1999). The late 1990s and the mid 2000s respectively represent historic highs and lows of unemployment in many parts of the country (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013a).

As Gen X and Millennials begin to comprise the majority of the workplace (Meister & Willyerd, 2010), awareness of differences in colloquial meanings can help illuminate shifts in socialized expectations around the nature of work. To better understand these differences, we ask:

RQ1: What are the characteristics of a real job according to currently matriculated Millennials?

RQ2: What meanings do currently matriculated Millennials assign to the real job colloquialism?

Method

Participants

To answer the research questions of this study, we utilized a purposive sample of students (juniors and seniors) enrolled in three upper division communication courses at a mid-sized Midwestern university. College students' understandings of the real job colloquialism are removed from a specific organizational context (Kramer & Miller, 1999) and role-specific contexts (Kramer, 2010; Lair & Wieland, 2012). Further, because of their impending transition between pre- and post-college employment, the term has high salience for the participants (Clair, 1996).

Students were given the opportunity to participate in the study and received five extra credit points for participation. Following IRB protocol, students who declined participation were provided with an alternative assignment. In total 147 students volunteered to participate in the study. Because this study sought to understand the perspectives of late Millennials, responses from six participants over the age of 30 were not included in the analysis. In addition, two participants were eliminated because their essays included discussion of the real job

colloquialism from another college course. The effective sample was reduced to 139, including

30 males (22%), 98 females (70%), and 11 who declined to identify their sex (8%). The average

age of participants was 23.1, ranging from 19 to 27 with the modal age being 21. The age range

falls within the defined Millennial birthdates.

Data Collection

Data were collected during the first two weeks of class in the Fall 2010, Spring 2011, and

Spring 2012 semesters. The course instructors introduced the project through an in-class

announcement explaining the researchers' interest in how people learn about work and, more

specifically, about students' experiences with the term real job. Because work was topical to the

classes in which data were collected, participants were unlikely to see this research as too

invasive or onerous. At the time of data collection, content on critical approaches to organizing,

which might have affected responses, had not yet been covered in class. Interested students

received the following specific instructions adapted from Clair (1996):

> To begin, please recall a recent or meaningful time when you have encountered the
>
> phrase "real job." This may be a time when you told someone else to get a "real job,"you
>
> were told by someone to get a "real job," or any other set of circumstances when you
>
> have heard the phrase "real job" used. Then, write or type a one-page essay describing
>
> your experience and what the phrase "real job" means.

Following the methodology used by Clair (1996), interested students were asked to handwrite or

type a one-page response and submit it within a week. A notable difference in the data collection

between this study and Clair's (1996) is the sample size ($N = 139$ compared to $N = 34$).

Data Analysis

Prior to data analysis, the two authors independently read the essays twice to increase familiarity with the data. Then, the data were analyzed in two phases. To answer RQ1, the authors independently read each essay line by line and manually coded for characteristics used to describe a real job (e.g., full time, use my degree, enjoyable). In this phase, a codebook was created with characteristic definitions and examples to minimize definitional drift. When a characteristic was identified, it was entered into the codebook regardless of the number of times mentioned. Coding was inclusive of multiple characteristics within a single essay. After individually coding the characteristics, the researchers engaged in intensive discussion to resolve discrepancies (Gibbs, 2007; Saldaña, 2013). In total, 23 characteristics were identified (see Table 1).

To answer RQ2, the researchers conducted a thematic analysis in two cycles in order to develop a more nuanced understanding of the meanings associated with the colloquialism. In the first cycle, the authors analyzed the full set of data line by line to develop an initial coding scheme. During the first cycle, the researchers used descriptive coding and allowed for simultaneous coding (Saldaña, 2013). Once the descriptive codes were identified, the researchers engaged in focused coding for a second cycle (Saldaña, 2013). Focused coding is a method that "categorizes coded data based on thematic or conceptual similarity" (Saldaña, 2013, p. 151). During this cycle, the essays were placed into three broad categories: the essay was generally supportive of the term, the essay broadly rejected the use of the term, or the essay contained statements that supported *and* rejected the term. Because the essays were coded line by line, multiple themes could be present in a single essay. Differences in coding were resolved through discussion between the authors.

Results

Characteristics of a Real Job

The first research question sought to identify the characteristics of a real job. Twenty-three characteristics of a real job (Table 1) were identified. For brevity, we highlight the five most common characteristics: financial autonomy; college education; career; enjoy/passion/fulfillment; and benefits. The results indicated that financial autonomy ($N = 87$) was the dominant characteristic of a real job. Most students described financial autonomy as the ability to support themselves and "pay all my bills." Only two essays defined a real job as one where you "make lots of money." A college education was the second most commonly described characteristic ($N = 61$) of a real job. For some participants a real job required a degree ($n = 34$). For example, "I consider a real job to be something you need an education to achieve," Female, 22). Other participants ($n = 27$) defined a real job as limited to employment within your area of study or degree specialty. The third most commonly mentioned characteristic of a real job was that it is a career ($N = 48$). Careers were defined as "long-term and prestigious" and "requiring a commitment." Fourth, students characterized a real job as something they would enjoy and have passion for doing ($N = 44$). The fifth most common descriptor was that a real job would provide benefits including health care, paid vacation, sick days, and 401K plans ($N = 39$).

The Meanings of a Real Job

The second research question posed in this study sought to understand the meanings Millennials assign to the real job colloquialism. All participants indicated familiarity with the colloquialism. Our analysis revealed four themes that are presented under the broad categories of acceptance (right of passage; mark of distinction) and rejection (meaningless concept; relativism) of the colloquialism.

A slight majority (*n* = 79) of essays were generally supportive of the colloquialism's use and its validity. Of these essays, all mentioned the role of a college education in securing a real job. A subset (*n* = 50) described a real job as a type of superior employment. These essays acknowledged that the real job colloquialism defines a particular type of work that is desirable and distinct from other forms of employment.

Right of passage. Seventy-nine essays characterized a real job as the inevitable outcome of a college education and the passage into adulthood. Students indicated that a real job is a right granted when they earn a college diploma. Interestingly, 12 of these essays connected the phrase "real world" to real job. For example, "Ultimately, I associate real job with real world which begins after college" (Male, 23). The essays described getting a real job as something that "you've been waiting for all your life" signifying "adulthood and growing up" (Female, 21). Some essays (*n* = 35) expressed concern about not finding a real job after college. One student wrote, "As for expectations, if I do not receive what I believe to be a real job upon or near graduation I would consider it a failure" (Male, 21). Other essays referenced the economy as fueling their fears, "I think in our current economic standing the words real job are terrifying" (Female, 22). Even amid concerns, the essays expressed strong belief that their education would provide opportunities to secure a real job.

Mark of distinction. Fifty essays explained that the colloquialism distinguished between different types of jobs. A small subset (*n* = 8) described the colloquialism as distinguishing between workers. To begin, real jobs were described as more desirable and different than "starter jobs" or "just jobs" because they offered the workers more opportunity and responsibility. A 22-year-old female stated, "I am pretty sure I have never had a 'real job' I just label the jobs I have had as 'jobs to get me by.'" One student offered this summary, "A real job

comes with real responsibility, real deadlines, real rewards" (Male, 20). Beyond the job itself, the term real job created meaning about the employee. For example, "Our friends with real jobs are more mature, family oriented, and driven" (Male, 22). Another essay stated "When I use the term (as horrible as it sounds) its [*sic*] to make people feel bad about their job" (Female, 21). Similarly, "One day I thought this (job) was not really who I am, my real job is not titled as cashier" (Female, 21). In contrast to the essays that identified how the colloquialism provides meaning to certain types of employment and employees, 66 essays did not support using the colloquialism as a way to order occupations. Essays in these themes suggested that work has an inherent value and challenged the arbitrary nature of assigning value to particular types of work.

Relativism. Fifty-one of the essays said the meaning of a real job is subjective and should be defined by the worker. These essays indicated that an individual's goals, desires, and time of life may influence personal interpretations of what constitutes a real job. For example,

> Some people consider working at a restaurant a real job because they do take pride in it and they have worked hard to get in and keep the position that they hold, which is great. To some people a janitor is a real job and to others a doctor is a real job, but it is in the perception of the person that holds it. (Female, 22)

One essay stated succinctly "A real job is whatever job you choose to do; it is whatever job you love."

A meaningless concept. Twenty-six essays fully rejected the real job colloquialism as "insulting" and "arbitrary." The essays in this theme described the colloquialism as having no relevance for how they evaluated work and were characterized by their use of capitalization, underlining, and exclamation marks. For example, "The term real job is <u>so subjective</u> that the word itself has no real meaning" (Female, 23), and "I'm tired of the term it's so overrated!!"

(Female, 24). The essays described how the term was used by others (e.g., parents, siblings, friends) to delegitimize their current job. For example, "What gives [my mom] the right to say I don't already have a real job?!?"

Finally, a small number of essays (*n* = 6) combined the right of passage and the relativism themes. The essays accepted the colloquialism and expressed that it influenced the type of work they desired. However, the essays then explained that they were not willing to impose their beliefs on other people. As evidence, "This is just my personal opinion of a real job because I have high standards for what I want my life to turn out like. Some people's perception of a real job could be where they are right now and that's just great if that is what they want for themselves" (Female, 21). Interestingly, three of the essays identified stay-at-home moms as an example of a job that fit this description.

Discussion

We embarked on this replication to learn how Millennials assign meaning to the real job colloquialism and compare our findings to Clair's (1996) foundational study. The meanings assigned to a socializing colloquialism articulate unspoken assumptions and expectations about work. Though the real job colloquialism continues to be used, the results of this study suggest that this colloquialism is a contested term both within our sample and when compared to Clair's (1996) results. In particular, our findings highlight three ways that the colloquialism's characteristics and meaning have shifted between generations. First, our sample described different salary and benefit expectations than Gen Xers. Second, these Millennials were more likely to define a real job in negative terms than Clair's (1996) Gen X participants. Third, these Millennials embraced a more relativist view of what a real job means than their Gen X counterparts.

To begin, the current study identified money as the top characteristic of a real job, a finding similar to previous research (Clair, 1996; Lair & Wieland, 2012). However, students in this study did not expect a real job to provide a "six figure salary," as was reported in Clair's (1996, p. 257) findings. In contrast, the essays in this study connected wages to existing financial obligations that constrained their independence. Rather than a status symbol (Clair, 1996; Lair & Wieland, 2012), the essays described salaries in a more utilitarian manner. The connection between salary and debt responsibility could be associated with Millennials' high levels of student loan debt. In 2010-11, roughly 57% of students from public four-year colleges graduated with debt and had borrowed an average of $23,800 (College Board, 2012).

Expanding upon wages, considerably more essays in this study mentioned receiving benefits, inclusive of retirement funding (e.g., 401ks), as a characteristic of a real job. This characterization exposes the shifting landscape in U.S. employment inclusive of changes in how retirement is funded (e.g., 401k versus pensions) and healthcare. The essays indicated a willingness to forgo lucrative salaries to receive benefit packages. When considered in light of the ongoing socio-cultural conversation regarding the Affordable Care Act, students who have part-time, no-benefits employment are likely acutely aware of the need for health insurance. We suggest that the national conversation and workplace policies regarding both healthcare and retirement have changed considerably from the late 1990s to now with effects on understandings of the real job colloquialism. As evidence, fewer than half of the small businesses (i.e., those with fewer than 99 employees) that employ around 50% of the population (U.S. Small Business Administration, n.d.) offer medical, retirement, and life insurance benefits and only 60% offer forms of paid leave (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012). Moreover, employees are

contributing more of their wages to retirement and healthcare due to organizational reductions in contributions (Peck, 2010).

Taken together, the implications of these findings offer insight into potential sources of conflict in the workplace. Millennials' perceptions of a real job are connected to an expansive set of benefits. Yet, these types of benefits (e.g., health care, training, retirement) can be very costly to companies. The challenge for organizations is to shift resources from salaries to more expansive benefit packages without compromising long-term fiscal health. Our findings suggest that salary alone might not motivate Millennial employees; Millennials may be seeking jobs that provide security and fulfillment distinct from a lucrative salary. For Gen X managers this finding opens up alternatives to enhance job attractiveness and avoid long term salary commitments that may not be sustainable for the organization.

Next, in stark contrast to Clair's findings, nearly half of the essays in this study rejected the real job colloquialism. Similarly, the essays defined a real job in more negative terms than the Gen Xers in Clair's (1996) study. Participants in this study associated the terms boring, scary, stressful, and life sucking with the colloquialism. This finding was somewhat surprising because Millennials have been described as optimistic rule followers and contrasted with Gen Xers as jaded slackers (Alsop, 2008; Peck, 2010). We suggest that this finding may signal how the Great Recession has altered the real job colloquialism's meaning. Millennials might be choosing to reject the notion of a real job due to shrinking employment opportunities. The unemployment rate for young college graduates remains high (9.4% in 2011) and *under*employment is even higher (19.1% in 2011; Shierholz et al., 2012). Millennials who define a real job similarly to Clair's (1996) Gen Xers are likely to be disappointed with their employment options, particularly if the colloquialism provides distinction to the worker as well as the job.

The above findings suggest that Millennials may be less likely to accept traditional organizational hierarchies and linear paths to advancement. In addition, Gen X managers' understandings of a real job might lead to conflicting expectations when working with their Millennial employees. Others have suggested how such differences highlight the need for new approaches to engaging employees, including expanded views of collaboration and personalized recruiting (see Meister & Willyerd, 2010 for details). In short, a real job as defined by a Gen X manager (i.e., a high paying, full-time, enjoyable position with regularly scheduled hours) might be rejected by a Millennial applicant or employee thereby creating divergent understandings about the meaning and value associated with particular forms of work.

Finally, our findings highlight an inherent tension between the relatively elite educational status of our participants and a willingness to consider a wide range of work as real. While a slight majority of the essays were consistent with the findings of Clair (1996), the remaining essays were passionate about their disdain for the colloquialism and its use to marginalize particular types of work. The considerable number of essays that rejected the colloquialism's validity may signal a larger socio-cultural shift in attitudes toward labor. Because Millennials have been told they can "be anything they want to be" (Twenge, 2010), Millennials in this sample might consider a wider range of work to be defined as a real job, particularly if the job is fulfilling and offers a salary that pays the bills. A caveat is in order, however. Despite definitional flexibility, the essays emphasized a college education as central to a real job, a finding consistent with Clair (1996) and Lair and Wieland (2012). This finding hints at how work is understood along class lines; even the essays that embraced a more inclusive understanding of the colloquialism may still fall into well-defined class distinctions. Given that approximately 30% of all U.S. workers have a college diploma (United States Census Bureau,

2013), this finding raises several questions about how educational credentials are intertwined with employment status and work.

The contradictions in the findings may create socialization challenges and opportunities for organizations as they seek to assimilate Millennials into existing organizational cultures. Specifically, Millennials may challenge how resources are distributed in relation to organizational position and be unwilling to accept the extreme pay differentials that exist currently between senior management and lower-level employees. The more inclusive and equitable conceptualization favored by Millennials may provide organizations with new ideas for organizing. When coupled with Millennials' preference for advancement opportunities, Millennials may strive to empower and advance workers in a wide range of organizational positions.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Admittedly, this study has limitations intrinsic to its sample population that suggest directions for future research. To begin, our sample is comprised of college students whose understandings of a real job were likely heavily influenced by their educational experiences and position. As such, the centrality of college to their understanding of a real job might be overly strong and would not appear as frequently in a more heterogeneous sample. In addition, the sample is skewed female. Determining the role gender may have in meanings of a real job is not possible given our procedures. Next, the sample was limited to students enrolled in upper division communication courses. Students in different majors (e.g., business) may provide different responses. Future research that is inclusive of a broader sample base with even gender distribution may yield an expanded understanding of the colloquialism. We are particularly interested in longitudinal research that is inclusive of a large, heterogeneous sample that would

allow for analysis along class, race, ethnicity, and educational lines. Such research would lend even greater insight into the different meanings associated with the colloquialism and how particular types of work are given preference and marginalized over time.

Conclusion

This study investigated Millennials perceptions of the real job colloquialism. Our findings suggest that Millennials' expectations have been tempered by the Great Recession; this sample rejected the colloquialism at a level unseen in previous research. Millennials favored a more inclusive iteration of the colloquialism and were less likely to embrace the same conceptualizations of a real job as Gen Xers (Clair, 1996). The essays in this study identified salary as utilitarian as opposed to a status symbol; highlighted the importance of benefits and fulfillment; identified a college education as integral to obtaining a real job yet were split on whether they would be able to get a job in their field of study; and were supportive of an individual's right to determine the meaning of the colloquialism rather than having it imposed upon them. In sum, the essays in this study highlight the contested nature of the colloquialism and expose how Millennials are divided about the ability of the term to preference or marginalize individual work choices.

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Table 1

Summary of Characteristics of a real job (RQ1)

Characteristic	Frequency	Percent
Financial Autonomy	$N = 87$	63%
Ability to pay bills, support self	$n = 48$	
Salary	$n = 23$	
Earn more than minimum wage	$n = 14$	
Make lots of money	$n = 2$	
College Education	$N = 61$	44%
Degree required	$n = 34$	
Use degree	$n = 27$	
Career	$N = 48$	35%
Enjoy/Passion/Fulfillment	$N = 44$	32%
Benefits	$N = 39$	28%
Full Time	$N = 25$	18%
Regular Schedule	$N = 23$	17%
Advancement	$N = 21$	15%
Responsibility	$N = 19$	14%
Professionalism	$N = 17$	12%
Unique Skill Set	$N = 15$	11%
Job Security	$N = 10$	7%
Challenging	$N = 9$	6%
Contribute to Society	$N = 6$	4%
Flexible	$N = 3$	2%
Boring	$N = 2$	1%
Scary	$N = 2$	1%
Stressful	$N = 2$	1%
Life Sucking	$N = 1$	<1%