



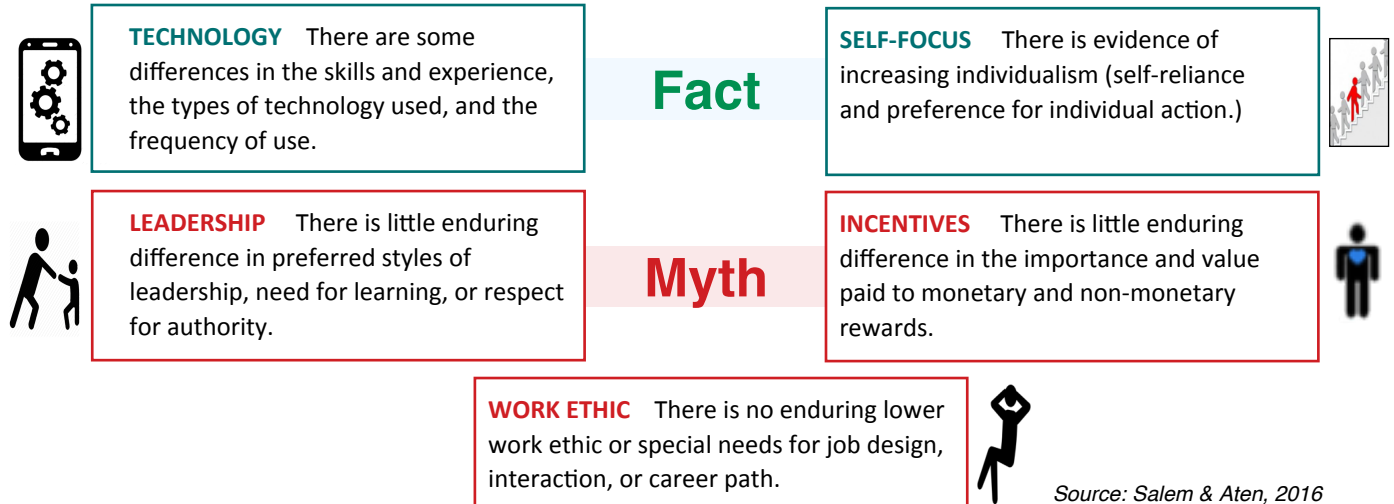
# Perceptions of Millennials in the Military:

## Self, theorized, and leaders' perspectives

### Introduction

Many inside and outside of the U.S. Navy believe that differences between Millennials and younger generations, will require that organizations adapt their practices to attract, motivate, and retain top Millennial (GenY) talent. A review of published research on generational differences (summarized in the figure below) found that although there are some differences between Millennials and other generations (for instance Millennials increasing use of technology and a greater focus on self), there are few differences between the generations' expectations of leadership, incentive preferences, and work ethic.<sup>1</sup>

### A Review of Published Research on Millennials



Source: Salem & Aten, 2016

However, although generational differences are slight and are confounded with cohort, age, and period effects, there is a *perception* of difference. This study investigated self, theorized, and leaders' *perceptions* of Millennials and how *perceived differences* may affect Navy work and life.

<sup>1</sup> See Salem, A. & Aten, K. (2016). Generational differences and the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps



# Perceptions of Millennials in the Military:

## Self, theorized, and leaders' perspectives

### Research Question

This study investigated, “How do Navy Millennials perceive themselves (self perceptions), how do they believe that others perceive them (theorized perceptions), and how do Gen X leaders perceive Millennials (leaders' perceptions)?”

### Findings and Implications

Interviews indicated the following shared theorized and leader perceptions: Navy Millennials are adept at socializing and communicating with technology, are more self-interested than other generations, are stereotyped as lazy, require different leadership styles, and have similar motivations for joining and staying in the Navy. Navy Millennials, however, perceived themselves as exceptions to some of these characterizations. Research and participant responses indicate that global and societal trends are more likely to be enduring influencers of Navy culture than generational differences. Navy talent management policies and practices should focus on these trends, rather than generational differences.

### Method

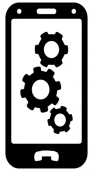
The researchers conducted interviews with nine GenY (Millennial) sailors and nine (GenX) leaders. The interviews centered on five categories of difference identified in the previous literature review (shown above). Researchers analyzed the data using qualitative data analysis software to code group the data and generate word clouds. The analysis resulted in themes related to each initial category, which were compared across the two generational groups. The resulting themes in each of the 5 categories are presented in separate figures on the following pages. The word clouds positioned in the top corner of the page for each category were generated using the software. The size of the text represents the prevalence of the theme. The research approach and methods are further explained in the Appendix: Research Design and Methods.

### Limitations

This was an exploratory study designed to identify and describe *perceptions* of Navy Millennials. The exploratory nature of the study supported the use of interviews and purposeful sampling. This approach, however, results in some limitations. The study relied on a small number of interviews (18) and although participants varied across many demographic characteristics and rank, they were not selected randomly and are not representative of the diversity of Navy personnel. Participants were predominately white, male, educated, and middle class. In addition, Marines are not represented due to Marine Corps study restrictions.

### Future Research

This study suggests that social, technological, and political trends are important influencers of work attitudes and are likely to affect all generations. These trends are evolving and most likely enduring for all age groups. Future research should test and confirm these exploratory findings using random survey data and quantitative analysis techniques to assess perceptions across the identified themes and a broad cross-section of the Navy. If this study's exploratory findings are confirmed, education and policies should focus on larger social, technological, and political trends that affect all ages, rather than on generational differences. Additionally, research should track these trends over time.



# Millennials and Technology

## Shared perception

Navy Millennials are adept at socializing and communicating with technology.



Prevalence of themes

## Findings



### GenY

Eight of 9 Millennials (GenY) interviewed, view **mobile devices** and **social media** as an integral part of life—both personal and work. They see technology as an **outflow of the information Age**, and increasingly rely on social media for both **information retrieval** and **community connection**. They view the use of mobile devices while working as a natural way to communicate and are driven to use the **latest technology**.

*I would say [we are] much better than in previous generations, just being exposed to it more. It's almost a reliance on technology, so we almost forget you know, what life was like without this and have a hard time dealing with situations where there is a lack of technology.*



### GenX

*Facebook or whatever is part of their [Millennials] kind of makeup, their constitution. In the sense that even while they are at work, it's part of their lives.*

Eight of 9 GenX interviewed perceive differences in how Millennials use technology. These differences include the use of **communication tools**, such as **computers**, **mobile phones**, and **social media**, and a tendency to **multi-task** more.

However, GenX participants perceive that Millennials' comfort with technology does not extend to other types of equipment, and they may have **poor mechanical and analog skills**.

## Implications

**Information Advantage** As the world becomes more reliant on information technology and information exchange becomes increasingly instantaneous and effortless, those who have grown up with technology have increasing advantage. Both generations believe that Millennials and the upcoming generation (iGen) have increasing skills, comfort with and demands for information technologies. The Navy will require up to-date systems in order to retain and entice younger adults. More mature Service members should be provided adequate training in new technologies. In addition, Service members skilled in the use of older technologies still in use, should be tasked with mentoring and training those not as experienced with these legacy systems.

*I mean the most obvious is the phone... it's literally all the information you could ever want at your fingertips.*

**Mediated connection** The growth of mobile information technologies changes how people interact and work. More fluent technology users are integrating these technologies into their communications, interactions, and work habits. Those less comfortable with social media and mediated communications are often frustrated with the communication styles and multi-tasking of technology capable youth. The impact of digital media on community, communications, and work structure is far-ranging and the Navy should develop policies that support the positive attributes (such as virtual work teams) and mitigate the risks (such as distraction) that accompany a highly technological work place.

*Oh, I think it's very distracting to have a device...always being connected, always wanting to stay informed of whatever is going on within your circles, or in the news.*



# Millennials' and Self-Focus

## Shared perception

Millennials are entitled, but Navy GenY think: 'I'm different.'



## Findings



### GenY

Seven of 9 Millennials felt that Millennials are stereotyped as entitled and that the stereotype was justified. But, this stereotype was dismissed when Millennials described themselves, and they emphasized their **individual uniqueness**. Participants did note their perception that their age group was more likely to be concerned about **personal goals** (such as travel and education), more likely to voice their **opinions**, and often **critical of their peers**. However, they also noted more communal motivations, such as a preference for **team work, community engagement, and environmentalism**.

*I don't consider myself a millennial because from what I have heard of millennials, nothing describes me. The whole idea of like deserving something without earning it. You know, like you think you should have something just because you were born.*



### GenX

*A generation who thinks that everybody is a winner, everybody should get a trophy, kids shouldn't be spanked anymore. We shouldn't raise our voices at our children anymore. You know? That's the millennial generation and whatever this next generation is even more so.*

Seven of 9 GenX perceived millennials as having both greater individualism and collectivism. Characteristics associated with individualism include having a more positive self-view, and a higher **concern for self**. Common individualism characteristics of Millennials that GenXers noted included being **more vocal, opinionated, and disrespectful**. Common communal characteristics that were noted include **greater civic engagement, concern for others, and environmentalism**.

## Implications

**Consistently young workforce** Research and participant responses suggest that many Millennial stereotypes are mitigated by the aging process and increasing family responsibilities. Because Millennials are marrying and having children later, the responsibilities that often drive concern for others are weaker. Delayed family responsibilities and the youthfulness of Navy personnel means that the Navy can tailor their policies to a consistently youthful workforce rather than to cyclical generational differences.

*It's more at what point you are in your life where the work matters.*

**Increasing openness** The growth of social media and modern parenting have created an environment that allows for self-expression, informal communication, and open transparency. Increasing openness allows for more collaboration and also presents security challenges. Navy personnel policy must balance transparency and security in order to attract and retain active duty personnel.

*When you are participating in social media, you are also thinking about yourself a lot.*

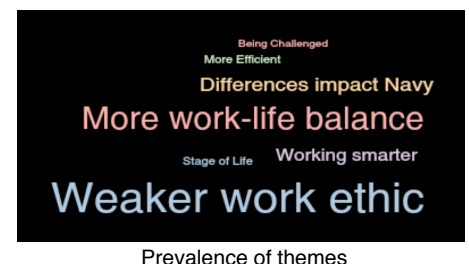
**Concern for others** Although Millennials are concerned with self, they also demonstrate a concern for others. The Navy's promise of adventure and travel along with humanitarian missions are a desirable draw. The Navy can take advantage of its ability to offer opportunities to fulfill individual needs while also making a contribution to community, but they then must follow through on that promise.

*When a ship pulls in overseas, a lot of these young men and women, they are first to go out to the orphanage and pass out soccer balls, or paint buildings or interact with the kids and things like that. Those are some of the things that I think that really speaks to them.*



# Millennials' Work Ethic

Shared perception  
Millennials are stereotyped  
as lazy.



## Findings



### GenY

Six of 9 Millennials felt that there is a strong stereotype that Millennials are lazy. Some said that they observed this weaker work ethic in others, but not themselves. Millennials attributed the differences in work ethic to **family upbringing, changes in the importance of work**, and a sense of **entitlement** brought on by a more privileged life.

Participants saw themselves as different (and not lazy), and expressed a need to be **trusted and challenged**. When not given a challenge, they indicated that they responded with less effort. They want their **opinions on improving efficiency** to be considered and **not dismissed**.

*I don't want to say all millennials are lazy, but I think that they will put their best effort forward to find the easiest way to complete a task. They usually can find a way to complete something as quickly and by expending as little energy as possible.*



### GenX

*When it comes to the younger sailors, they are not as bad as Facebook makes it out to be. They—it's human nature to take the easy way out. Technology makes things so much easier.*

Although 7 of 9 GenXers believed that Millennials had a weaker work ethic, this was seen as a result of several factors in addition to their cohort. These include **personality differences**, a **reliance on technology**, and the impact of modern **child-rearing practices**.

Factors that are seen to mitigate a weak work ethic include maturation factors such as **promotion, aging, marriage, and family**. Some GenXers also suggested that rather than being lazy, Millennials may be **working smarter** and trying to be **more efficient**.

## Implications

**Meaningful Work** Millennials noted that they wanted to understand the purpose and meaning of their work. Many of the GenXers interpreted this questioning in others as resistance, laziness, or whining. Millennials rejected this characterization when talking about themselves explaining that they asked 'why' to identify meaning in their work and that answers to their 'whys' impact their enthusiasm for certain activities and could negatively affect their attitudes towards leadership and the Navy. The Navy can take advantage of the desire for meaning in work by growing their employee engagement activities, encouraging entrepreneurship, and ensuring that leadership understands the potential value of answering 'why.'

*You have got to have a job that they think is acceptable, that they [Millennials] like.*

**Working Smart** The combination of increasingly educated sailors accustomed to accessible technology and the impatience of youth may result in a workforce that expects quick results with minimal effort. Millennial participants noted how they, like their industry counterparts, expected to be consulted about 'how' things could be done, even if the doing was mandatory. They felt (correctly or not) that working together, they could get a job done quickly and efficiently. The Navy can leverage this desire for efficiency and teamwork by encouraging the use of working groups and aligning incentives to reward efficiency (such as with time off).

*Most millennials are—I don't know—they are not lazy, but it's like they just love the idea of like oh yes, one thing we don't have to do. Even if it's not like troublesome for them to do it.*



# Millennial Expectations of Leadership

Shared perception

There are differences in preferred leadership styles.



Prevalence of themes

## Findings



GenY

8 of 9 Millennials felt that there were major differences in what their generation wanted and expected from leadership. GenY wants leaders who can guide and communicate effectively. In their leaders, they want **clear guidance** on **why** something is needed, what is the **desired end state** and the **freedom and autonomy** to do it the way they see fit. They want their leaders to be **fair, trustworthy, supportive, and transparent**. They want to be able to speak their minds and have their **leaders listen and be open** to their ideas and needs. Communicating by **text and social media** is natural for Millennials.

“So, I had about ten sailors closer to my age. That helped, because I was able to communicate with these guys and understand how they liked to be spoken to. I did my best to gain their trust early on, because that's the biggest thing I need in a leader...I need to trust that if I come to you with a problem, you are going to address it, to be open and honest.”



GenX

“Like most people, what they [Millennials] value is as simple as showing their worth. Not through awards, it's just through hearing 'that did not suck, good job.'”

Although many of GenX participants noted Millennials' need for **feedback**, **positive reinforcement**, and **hand-holding**, 4 of 9 also stated that meeting these needs did not require a different way of leading or communicating. GenXers believed that young sailors would either develop a sense of purpose as they matured or were 'lost causes.' GenXers noted some communication issues; increased **informality**, **touchy-feeliness**, **whininess** and almost constant asking 'why.'

GenXers also noted their generations' preference for **face-to-face communication**.

## Implications

### Transparency

Millennials are accustomed to fact-checking and questioning, and perceive that doing so is important to optimize their work. These behaviors may be contrary to traditional military command and control, yet are important to innovation and agility. The Navy should educate leadership on the potential benefits of these behaviors and develop guidance for managing them—employee engagement during times of non-crisis and clear communication of mission purpose and outcomes when command/control is essential.

“So, I think that questioning attitude can possibly change things for the better...in terms of the strategic planning process, I think that's where that type of mentality can be very beneficial.”

### Respect

Millennials, like others, want their leadership to have integrity and to respect subordinates. They want autonomy over the details of implementation and expect their leaders to have high emotional intelligence. To effectively manage youthful sailors, Navy Leadership needs the skills to communicate openly, mentor with emotional intelligence, and manage without micro-managing.

“I understand that he needs to tell me what the end game is, but the way we get there can be discussed.”

### Modern communications

GenXers prefer face-to-face communication, whereas Millennials are deeply engaged in on-line communities. Being disconnected from social media is frustrating and disheartening for the 'connected.' The Navy should integrate social media and work-life and build leadership's knowledge of its use.

“I love the fact that they use the Facebook to instantly broadcast a message...When I need to call a group back to the ship for something, it's type one time, hit send, you have instant notification.”



# Millennial Motivations and Incentives

## Shared perception

There are few perceived differences in what motivates one to stay in the Navy.



Prevalence of themes

## Findings



### GenY

Six of 9 Millennials perceived no differences between generations in motivation to remain in the Navy. Millennials believed generations shared a desire for **adventure**, **education**, **purposeful work**, and being part of a **community**. Millennials also emphasized the importance of **money** and **benefits**, **promotion**, and **skill development** as important retention factors. They valued **positive reinforcement**, and **merit-based advancement** and appreciated **variety and choice** in their work. Millennials also noted that Navy life is very difficult due to moving and being **disconnected** from friends and family. This disconnect is compounded by the **lack of modern communication technology** in the Navy.

*Pretty much what keeps me is traveling, the money, promotion, and the education I am going to get if I am in the Navy...and having [Leaders] show them like a good attitude in the workplace—like motivation*



### GenX

*I had one person who actually likened service in the Navy in the same way that you would have service in a gang. That was built on the three A's of affinity, affection, and affluence.*

Almost all of the GenX participants felt that the generations shared the same motivations and incentives for joining and staying in the Navy. GenX saw Millennials as searching for **purpose** and **community** while also having real life concerns about pressures to earn **money** and **benefits** such as **education**, **retirement** and **time-off**. They believed that a search for new **life experiences** and **adventure** often drove the young to join the Navy. GenXers also felt that the **op-tempo**, **lack of sleep**, and **last minute deployments** made Navy life more stressful.

## Implications

**Community** Millennials compare their careers to civilian work and when comparing money, benefits and work-life balance, civilian careers often won out. Yet, both Millennials and GenXers recognized the unique value of Navy community and purpose. Navy recruitment, promotion, and retention policies should focus on that uniqueness by developing strong community affiliations and creating an ethos of integrity, service, and merit.

*I think sailors really appreciate having other sailors to work with, whether they are 40 years old or 22.*

**Merit** Positive reinforcement in the form of verbal acknowledgments, awards, and merit-based promotions are important, especially to younger Sailors. Because of changes in parenting, we can expect this trend to continue. The Navy, to be a competitive employer, should increase programs valued by young sailors, such as the Sabbatical program, Rating Modernization, PRT changes, and the Meritorious Advancement Program.

*The Meritorious Advancement Program—I love it. I am embracing it. It gives my commanding officer the ability to say you have earned promotion to the next pay grade. That's going to make them successful and make them want to stay.*

**Connection** Millennials, the first 'connected' generation, expect to have near constant contact with their friends, family, and co-workers. Navy life makes this difficult, with long separations and harsh conditions. The Navy should find ways to increase sailors' ability to stay connected electronically with their families and support systems and provide (promised) opportunities for connecting with other cultures while afloat.

*Like I have friends in every COCOM, if I needed actual information I would be like hey, Facebook message them. Like I mean I shouldn't have done that, but to get like real info...*

## Conclusion

The Millennial stereotype is inaccurate and counterproductive



This explorative study of self, theorized and leader perceptions of Millennials suggests that more nuanced factors than generational differences should be considered when assessing workforce trends and related Navy policies and programs. The stereotype of the lazy, self-focused Millennial was resisted by both age groups we studied because it was viewed as an oversimplification and not useful for guiding leadership or policy. Other factors were seen as much more important—societal changes, the economy, and personal differences. As one GenX Leader noted:

***“But, you know, I think how you look at work is just based on individual personalities.”***

Both GenX and GenY participants noted two mitigating factors in the military that may explain participant’ resistance of the stereotype. One mitigating factor is that the military is a unique environment that may supersede slight generational influences. As one young O3 stated:

***“It’s different for me, because I like the idea of a very stable and predictable [life]. I am also from a military family, so my parents both did full careers. So, that’s kind of what I see as like a very appealing thing.”***

Another mitigating factor is that generational differences are confounded with other trends influencing modern life. Participants noted that maturity and the changing societal culture are more important influencers of behavior than the date one was born. As one O6 noted:

***“For the most part, I would say, I mean we are changing the Navy at a much higher pace than we were maybe ten years ago to kind of accommodate different views in terms of the Millennials or the younger people, or just different ways of life.”***

## Implications

The two prominent perceptions about generational stereotypes—that the military is unique and that the stereotypes are oversimplified—drove many participants to focus on factors that they felt *did* affect recruitment, promotion, and retention of service members. These factors (presented on Page 8) include maturation effects, the rise of informationalism, changing geopolitics, changing work places, and the role of culture.

This is good news for the Navy. Instead of chasing the tail of Millennials, and then Generation Z, and then Generation 2050, the Navy can focus its policies on the arc of change. For instance, recognizing the rapid pace of technology change, we can predict and plan for the integration of machines and humans, the use of manipulatable virtual environments, the growth of artificial intelligent agents, the development of extreme networks, the collapse of networks due to cyber attacks, and the appropriate use of ‘big data’. The Navy can then plan for the ‘likely’ by developing future scenarios that are based on researched trends and are evaluated regularly. The result is focused contingency plans that allow the Navy to plan, yet adapt. For instance, in the case of technology, the Navy may move towards specialized skill sets, encourage peer-to-peer communications, offer commercial continuing education options, and/or decentralize and virtualize training.

By understanding the trends that are in play, and making contingency plans for mitigating risks and leveraging opportunities, the Navy can break it’s reactionary cycle of personnel management.

# Moving Forward

Global and societal trends are better predictors of Navy culture and should be analyzed and tracked



"I didn't get a cell phone until high school. My younger brother, got one in middle school. Now it's as early as three and four...it's being connected and just always having like almost unlimited information at your fingertips at all times."

## Maturation effects are in play

With a consistently young, active duty work force, youth is a constant that can be planned for.

**Aging \* Experience**  
**Finances \* Responsibility**

## Information age is evolving

New technologies require new skills and impact work efficiency.

**Computerization \* Mobile Apps**  
**Information seeking \* Less physicality**

"My life is way different than people a few years older than me who have families. Way different."

## Geopolitics drive motivations

Political, economic, and environmental changes impact the desirability of the Navy.

**Economy \* Environment**  
**War**

"If something really happened, if aliens came down from space and started trying to take over, I think it would be just like on that movie where that happened and they all like came together. Now, though, people call people lifers as like a joke."

## Nature of work is changing

The nature of work is changing in industry—an all volunteer force must compete with this.

**Flat organizations \* Shorter hours**  
**Career growth \* Less bureaucracy**

"I saw my subordinates a little bit more as peers than I think other generations have...I think sometimes it sort of blurs the lines of the chain of command."

## Culture impacts behavior

Changing norms impact active duty values, which impact recruiting and retention.

**Child-rearing \* Gender roles \* Liberalism**  
**Education \* Family structures**

"The lack of formality comes from the family environment...their upbringing, their formative years...that family structure perhaps."

# Appendix: Research Design and Methods

## Research Design

This study investigated perceptions of Millennials: “How do Navy Millennials perceive themselves, how do they believe others perceive them, and how do Gen X leaders perceive Millennials?” The study also looked at the impact of these perceptions on Navy work-life, and the potential implications for Navy policy and practice. Because the research sought to investigate perceptions, the researchers collected qualitative data through in-depth, semi-structured interviews. This research was reviewed and approved by the NPS IRB for the protection of human subjects.

## Data Collection

The research team conducted eighteen semi-structured interviews at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, CA. The interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes each. Participants were selected using purposeful sampling and reflect a variety of roles, ages, and communities. Marines were not included in the study because the Marine Corps Survey Office did not initially approve Marine Corps participants. Nine of the interview participants were millennials (born 1980-2000) and 9 were GenXers (born 1960-1980). One participant was dropped because he fell outside of the two targeted age demographics. Demographic information was collected prior to the interview. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Participant information is summarized in Figures 1 through 5.

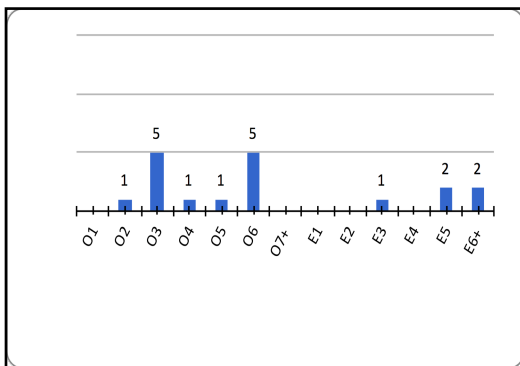


Figure 1: Rank

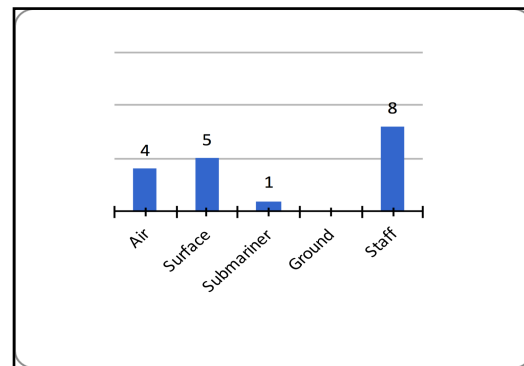


Figure 2: Community

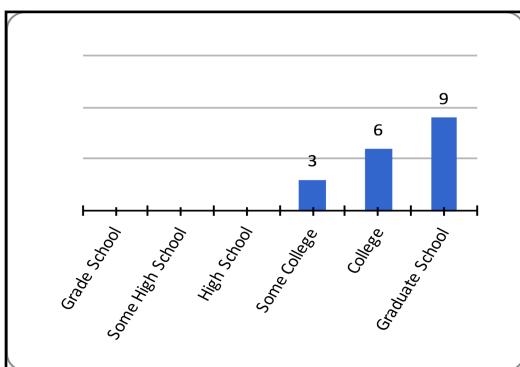


Figure 3: Education

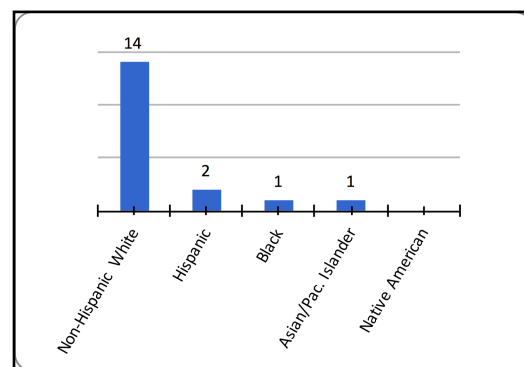


Figure 4: Ethnicity

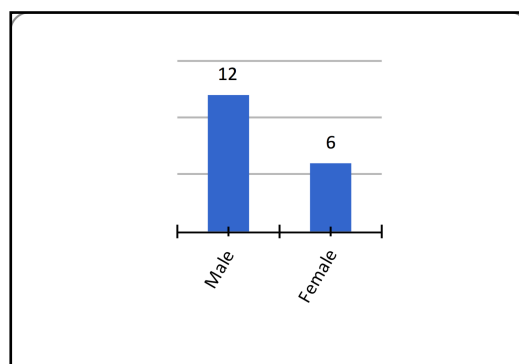


Figure 5: Gender

## Analysis Approach

Researchers analyzed the interview transcripts using thematic analysis with Dedoose qualitative analysis software. Researchers initially read all of the transcripts to become familiar with the data. Researchers began coding with initial broad themes suggested by the previous literature review, selecting text related to perceptions of: technology use, individualism, work attitudes, leadership styles, and commitment to the Navy. The team then continued reading through the transcripts and identified emergent themes, adding descriptive codes through several passes through the data. These codes are shown in Table 1.

After individually coding the interviews, the team then compared the coded segments within and across each group in order to group the codes into thematic categories. The researchers also used the packed code count analysis tool available in the Dedoose software to create visual representations of the data. The Dedoose packed word count tool created visual representations of code applications, whereby more frequently applied codes appear larger assisting in the identification of themes. These clouds are shown in the upper right corner of each topic page of this report. The analysis resulted in the final five themes and numerous sub-themes described in this report and shown below.

|                      |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |                                                                                                                                                                              |                   |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|----------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Technology</b>    | Tech Innovation<br>Tech Social Media Use<br>Tech Knowledge and Use<br>Tech Multi-tasking<br>Tech Information Tools<br>Tech Communication Tools                                                                                                                     |                                                                                                                                                                              | <b>Work Ethic</b> | More Work-Life Balance<br>Weaker Work Ethic<br>Working Smarter<br>Being More Efficient<br>Being Challenged<br>Stage Of Life                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| <b>Self-Interest</b> | <b>Communalism</b><br>Concern for others<br>Civic engagement<br>Work in teams/communal<br>Environmentalism<br><b>Individualism</b><br>Materialistic<br>Critical of Peers<br>Disrespectful<br>Self-concerned<br>Opinionated<br>Positive self view<br>Seek Adventure |                                                                                                                                                                              | <b>Leadership</b> | Communication styles<br>Integrity<br>Mentoring<br>Interpersonal relations<br>Fairness<br>Trust and Respect<br>Transparency<br>Positive Reinforcement<br>Touchy-feely<br>Chain of command<br>Questioning and Negotiating<br>Face-to-face communication<br>Listening and open-mindedness                                                                                               |
| <b>Committment</b>   | <b>Incentives</b><br>Advancement<br>Better life<br>Career support<br>Community<br>Life expeirences<br>Money & benefits<br>Military family<br>Flexibility<br>Rewards<br>Variety                                                                                     | <b>Barriers</b><br>Bureaucracy<br>Hard life<br>FitReps<br>Lack of choice<br>Lack of purpose<br>Tatoo ban<br>Poor leadership<br>Not merit-based<br>Old technology<br>Poor pay | <b>Trends</b>     | <b>Maturation</b><br>Responsibilities<br>Marriage<br><b>Culture</b><br>Parenting, child-rearing, family<br>Environmentalism, Liberalism<br>Gender roles<br><b>Geopolitical</b><br>Economy<br>Education<br>War<br><b>Information Age</b><br>Computerization<br>Information Seeking<br>Less physicality<br><b>Nature of Work</b><br>Flat organizations<br>Fewer hours<br>Career growth |

Table 1: Thematic Analysis