

# MIND THE GAP

## United States



EMPLOYEE PERSPECTIVES

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## INTRODUCTION

In this paper, we examine the preferences and perceptions of young adult employees, employees at midlife, and older employees in the U.S. about the quality of their employment experiences. Other papers in this series summarize similar analyses of data from countries around the world.

Organizations that want to remain employers-of-choice must periodically assess how shifts in the business environment might affect the effectiveness of their talent management strategies, policies and programs. Globalization and changes in the age composition of the workforce - two important 21st century trends that have affected today's businesses - make it important for managers to consider:

- How does age affect employees' preferences for an idealized job and their assessments of their employment experiences?
- Do employees' perceptions of their employment experiences vary from country to country?

### *What does "mind the gap" mean?*

Train stations across England play recorded messages to remind passengers that they should "Mind the gap." These words of caution urge train travelers to pay attention to the space between the door of the train car and the platform in the station.

We use the phrase, "Mind the Gap" to remind employers to pay attention to any gaps that might exist between the access that employees of different age groups have to quality employment.

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The Sloan Center on Aging & Work in Boston, in collaboration with the Middlesex University Business School in London, created the Mind the Gap series to provide employers with basic employment-related information country-by-country. There are two types of papers in the Mind the Gap series.

**Employee Series:** This series examines the perspectives that adults of different ages have about employment and the assessments that they make about their employment experiences. These papers focus on one central question:

- Does age affect employees' preferences for an idealized job and their assessments of their employment experiences?

**Employer Series:** This series examines the prevalence of human resource policies and programs at workplaces in a selected country. Because most talent management strategies and programs are age-neutral, we compare the availability of selected human resource policies in practices in the targeted country with the availability of similar policies and practices in a small number of countries with approximate economic circumstances. These papers focus on one core question:

- How does the availability of human resource policies and programs in the targeted country compare with other countries?

Although papers in both series focus on a single country, when the information contained in two or more papers are considered in tandem, it is possible to consider whether employees' perceptions of their employment experiences vary from country to country.



## Quality of Employment: Dimensions of a “Good Job” and a “Good Place to Work”

Most people would agree that “good jobs” are a “good thing.” High quality jobs offer benefits to employees and to the organizations where they work.

- ➔ **Benefits for Employees:** The quality of employment<sup>1</sup> affects the health and well-being of employees. Research confirms that poor quality jobs (such as jobs requiring extreme work hours, jobs that are very demanding – particularly those where employees do not have access to the resources they need to meet those demands) are associated with negative outcomes, including high stress levels and physiological reactions such as cardio-vascular problems.<sup>2-9</sup>
- ➔ **Benefits for Employers:** Employers often connect the quality of employment they offer to employees to their employer-of-choice strategies. There is some evidence that the adoption of policies and practices that promote the quality of employment available to employees is related to positive outcomes for organizations, such as customer satisfaction and organizational performance. Employer-of-choice strategies can result in enhanced employee engagement which, in turn, can be linked to organizational outcomes, including financial measures. For example, higher employee engagement can reduce costs such as those associated with unwanted turnover. One study found that 59% of highly engaged employees report that they intend to stay with their employers in comparison to the 24% of disengaged employees who “intend to stay.”<sup>10</sup> A number of studies have linked employee job satisfaction with positive performance indicators. Fortune reports positive relationships between being recognized as a “great place to work” and stock indices.<sup>11,12</sup>

The Global Institute focuses on eight important dimensions of the quality of employment:

- Fair, Attractive and Competitive Compensation & Benefits
- Opportunities for Development, Learning & Advancement
- Wellness, Health & Safety Protections
- Opportunities for Meaningful Work
- Provisions for Employment Security & Predictabilities
- Workplace Flexibility
- Culture of Respect, Inclusion & Equity
- Promotion of Constructive Relationships at the Workplace

The following sections of this paper use the quality of employment framework to discuss the availability of workplace-based policies and programs in the United States

## Indicators of Fair, Attractive and Competitive Compensation & Benefits in the U.S.

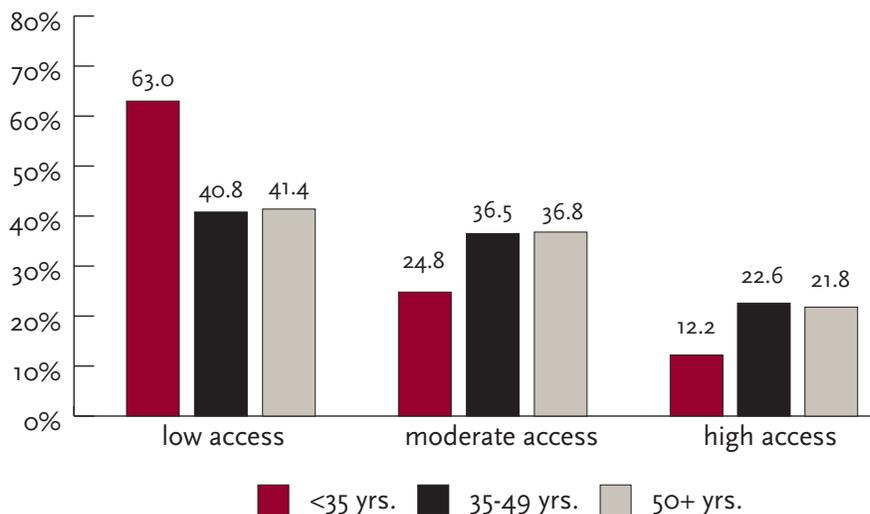
- ▶ *Compensation and benefits are distributed in a fair and equitable manner, meeting most of employees' basic economic needs.*

- A clear majority (88.7%) of adults in the United States report that having a job which offers good pay is an important job characteristic; however, older adults (80.8%) are somewhat less likely to report that having good pay is important than younger adults (93.1%) or adults at midlife (91.6%).<sup>13</sup>
- Older employees (12.0%) are less likely to indicate that – if they decided to leave their current jobs – poor pay or benefits would be the most likely reason (26.9% of younger workers and 23.6% of workers at midlife).<sup>14</sup>
- Younger employees (69.4%) are less likely to report that they have access to personal health insurance (a critical issue in the United States) in comparison to employees at midlife (85.4%) or older employees (84.7%).<sup>14</sup>
- Older employees (71.2%) are more likely to report that they have money for savings after they have paid their expenses/bills than younger employees (65.5%) or employees at midlife (63.5%).<sup>14</sup>

- ➡ As indicated by the information in Figure 1 below, younger employees are the least likely to have access to core benefits: personal health insurance, family health insurance, pension, retirement plan, paid vacation days, paid holidays, & paid sick days.<sup>14</sup>



Figure 1: Access to Benefits Packages by Age Groups\*.



\* The measure, access to benefits packages, is based on data from the 2002 National Study of the Changing Workforce. One point was assigned for each of seven job benefits: availability of personal health insurance, availability of family health insurance, pension plan with guaranteed benefits and no respondent contributions, retirement plan with variable benefits to which the respondent contributes pre-tax, paid vacation days, paid holidays, and paid time off for illness. The majority of respondents had at least some of these benefits, so “low access” is considered an employment situation where the employee reports access to five or fewer benefits, while “high access” is considered a job offering all of these benefits.

Source: McNamara, 2008 from the 2002 National Study of the Changing Workforce.

## Indicators of Opportunities for Development, Learning & Advancement

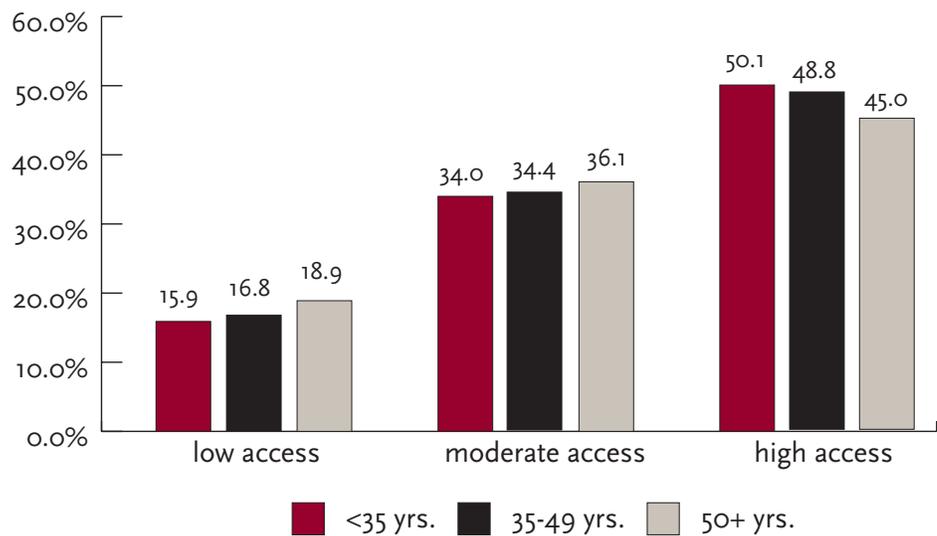


\* The measure, the importance of opportunities for achievement and responsibility, is based on data from the 1999-2000 World Values Survey (including approximately 1,200 respondents from the United States). This variable is the sum of whether people reported that it was important to have “a job where you can achieve something” and “a responsible job.” A score of 0 (neither mentioned) was considered low, while a score of 2 (both mentioned) was considered high.

- ▶ *Opportunities for the development of expanded skills and responsibilities are available.*

- Approximately half of all U.S. adults (47.7%) indicate that it is important for them to have a job where they can achieve something and a job with responsibility. As noted in Figure 2 below, there are some slight differences among the age groups with younger adults and adults at midlife indicating that having opportunities for advancement and responsibility are important job characteristics.<sup>13</sup>

Figure 2: Importance of Opportunities for Achievement and Responsibility by Age Group\*



Source: McNamara, 2008 from the 1999-2000 World Values Survey.

- Older employees (1.2%) are less likely than younger employees (4.0%) or employees at midlife (3.6%) to indicate that the most likely reason for leaving their current job is poor opportunity for advancement.<sup>14</sup>
  - Less than 1% of U.S. employees report that—if they were to leave their current jobs—the most likely reason would be lack of learning opportunities (with the differences among age groups not being statistically significant).<sup>14</sup>
- ➡ Across all age groups, approximately two-thirds (63.4%) of U.S. employees indicate that they have access to training or education programs through their workplace, but younger employees (55.5%) are less likely to report having this access than employees at midlife (65.4%) or older employees (66.5%).<sup>14</sup>

## Indicators of Wellness, Health & Safety Protections

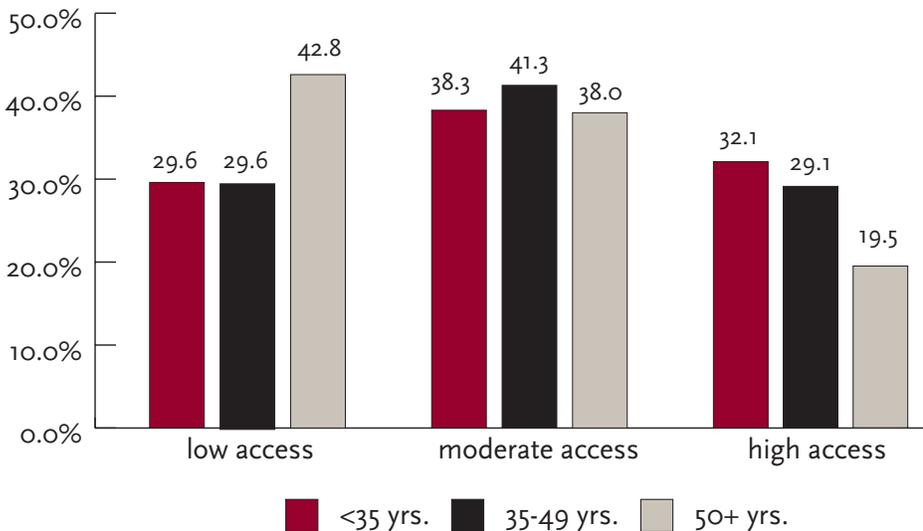
- ▶ Well-being is promoted through workplace policies, and social protections are offered in case of illness.

- 38.2% of all workers in the United States report that it is important to have a job without too much pressure (the differences among age groups are not statistically significant).<sup>13</sup>
- Younger employees (27.3%) in the United States are less likely to report that they have access to a wellness program than older employees (40.1% employees at midlife and 42.2% of older employees).<sup>14</sup>



- ➡ As indicated by the information presented in Figure 3 below, older employees are less likely to report the following situations: they have to work fast, they have a high chance of injury on the job, and the work is physically demanding and tiring.<sup>14</sup>

Figure 3: Job Demands by Age Group\*



\* The measure, job demands, is based on data from the 2002 National Study of the Changing Workforce. A scale was constructed from the sum of two items: “my job requires that I work very fast” (ranging from 1 for strongly agree to 4 for strongly disagree) and “my job is physically demanding/tiring” (ranging from 1 for strongly agree to 4 for strongly disagree). Respondents scoring between 6 and 8 points were rated “low” on job demands, while those scoring 2 or 3 were rated “high” on job demands.

Source: McNamara, 2008 from the 2002 National Study of the Changing Workforce.

## Indicators of Opportunities for Meaningful Work

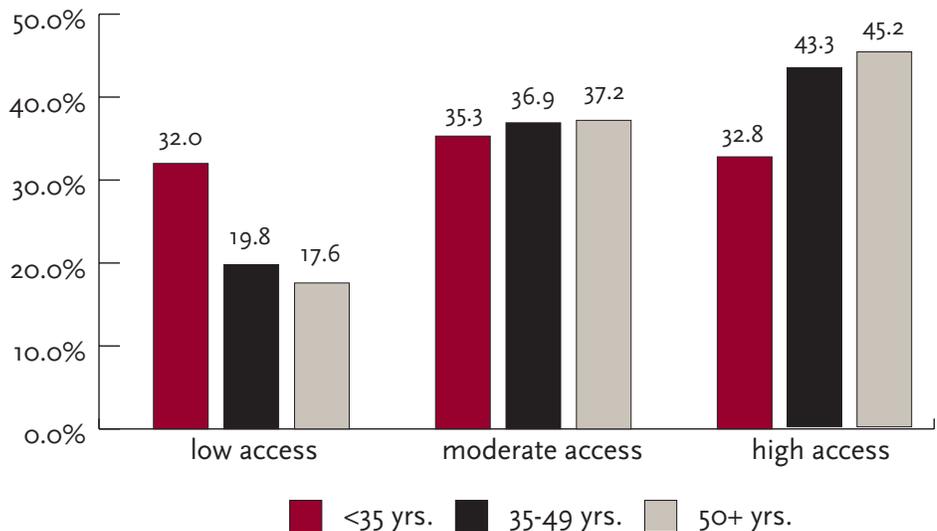


► *Opportunities for meaningful and fulfilling work are available.*

- Across all age groups, approximately one-third (36.4%) of U.S. adults indicate it is important for them to have a job that is interesting, enables the employee to use initiative, and meets one’s abilities.<sup>13</sup>
- As indicated by the information in Figure 4 below, younger employees (32.8%) are less likely than employees at midlife (43.3%) or older employees (45.2%) to have high scores with regard to indicators of the meaningfulness of their jobs.<sup>14</sup>

\* The measure, access to a job with meaning, is based on data from the 2002 National Study of the Changing Workforce. The scale is the sum of five, four-point scales, where 0 indicates low agreement/meaningful work and 3 indicates high agreement/meaningful work (recoded): “Work I do is meaningful to me,” “On job I have to do things that go against conscience” (reversed), “Job lets me use my skills and abilities,” “My job requires I do the same thing over and over” (reversed), and “Has opportunities to develop own special abilities.”

Figure 4 : Access to a Job with Meaning by Age Group \*



Source: McNamara, 2008 from the 2002 National Study of the Changing Workforce.

## Indicators of Provisions for Employment Security & Predictabilities

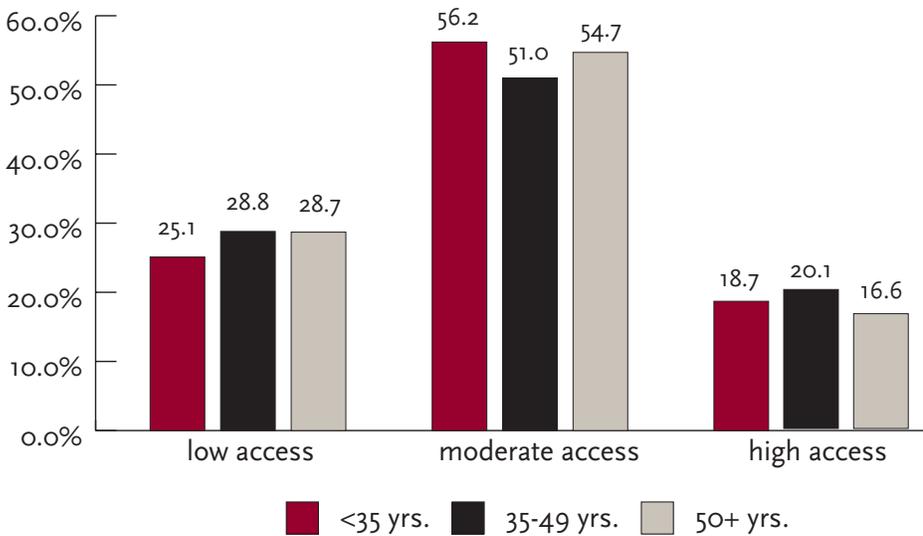
- ▶ *Terms of employment are communicated clearly, with an emphasis on smooth transitions through jobs and careers.*

- A majority (71.8%) of U.S. adults of all ages report that it is important to have a job with good job security (the differences among age groups are not statistically significant).<sup>14</sup>
- Older employees (33.6%) are less likely to report that they have to work with little or no advanced notice once a month or more (with 43.5% of younger employees and 46.8% of employees at midlife).<sup>14</sup>

- ➡ Across all age group, approximately one-fifth of U.S. employees report high employment insecurity (with the differences not statistically significant) (See Figure 5).<sup>14</sup>



Figure 5 : Extent of Job Insecurities by Age Group\*



\* This measure, job insecurity, is based on the 2002 National Study of the Changing Workforce. A scale was constructed from the sum of two items: “Experienced downsizing in past year where currently work” (1 point for Yes) and “Likelihood of losing job and looking for new job in next 2 years” (3 points for very likely, 2 points for somewhat likely, 1 point for not too likely, 0 points for not at all likely). A low score was defined as 0 points, a medium score was 1 or 2 points, and a high score was 3 or 4 points.

Source: McNamara, 2008 from the 2002 National Study of the Changing Workforce.

## Indicators of Workplace Flexibility

► *Options, choice, and control over work conditions and hours are available.*

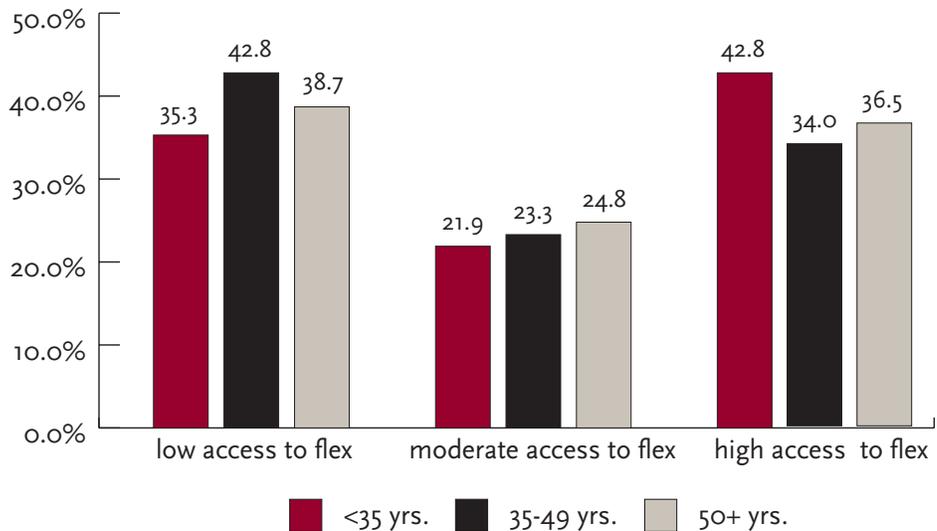


- Older adults (60.5%) in the U.S. are less likely to indicate that having good hours are an important characteristic of a good job that young adults (71.9%) or adults at midlife (68.7%).<sup>13</sup>
- Older adults (30.0%) are less likely to indicate that it is important to have a job with generous holidays than younger adults (42.5%) or adults at midlife (38.4%).<sup>13</sup>
- Younger employees (29.6%) are the more likely than employees at midlife (12.7%) or older employees (8.0%) to want to work at least 5 or more hours per week than they currently do, and employees at midlife (60.5%) are more likely than younger employees (42.4%) or older employees (58.3%) to indicate that they would prefer to work at least 5 hours per week fewer than they currently do.<sup>14</sup>

➤ As indicated by Figure 6 below, younger employees (42.8%) are more likely than employees at midlife (34.0%) or older employees (36.5%) to report that they have access to more flexibility at work: hard to take time off; ability to choose start & quit time; ability to choose start & quit time on a daily basis; ability to work part-time; ability to work part-year; ability to work compressed work week.<sup>14</sup>

\* This item, access to flexible work options, is based on data from the 2002 National Study of the Changing Workforce. A scale was constructed from the sum of the following six items: "Difficulty taking time during day for personal/family matters" (coded 0 for very hard to 3 for not at all hard), "Can choose own starting/quitting times" (coded 1 for yes), "Can change start/quit time daily" (coded 1 for yes), "Could arrange full time or part time in current position if wanted" (coded 1 for yes), "Could arrange to work part year" (coded 1 for yes), and "Allowed to work a compressed work week some of the time" (coded 1 for yes). The resulting scale ranged from 1 to 8, and was categorized as 1 through 4 (low score), 5 (medium score), and 6 through 8) high score.

Figure 6 : Access to Flexible Work Options\*



Source: McNamara, 2008 from the 2002 National Study of the Changing Workforce.

## Indicators of Culture of Respect, Inclusion & Equity

- ▶ *Diversity, inclusion, and employee personal growth are valued.*

- Across all age groups, a significant percentage of U.S. adults (45.6%) report that it is important to have a job that is respected.<sup>13</sup>
- 43.6% of all age groups indicate that they have experienced discrimination due to race, gender or age in their current jobs (with the differences between age groups not being statistically significant).<sup>14</sup>



## Indicators of Promotion of Constructive Relationships at Work

- ▶ *Interactions with supervisors and coworkers are professional and respectful.*

- 5.1% of employees in the U.S. reported in 2003 that the most likely reason they would leave their jobs would be problems with their immediate supervisor/manager (The differences among age groups are not statistically significant).<sup>14</sup>
- ➔ Across all age groups, 47.4% of U.S. employees report that they receive “high” support\* from their co-workers (with the differences between age group not being statistically significant).<sup>14</sup>



\* This item is based on the 2002 National Study of the Changing Workforce. A scale was constructed from the sum of “I have the coworker support I need to do a good job,” “I have the coworker support I need to manage work/family life,” “I feel part of the group of people I work with.” All items were coded 1 “Strongly agree” through 4 “Strongly disagree,” and the sum of these six items was reversed so that the final score ranged from 1 (low support) to 10 (high support). A low score was defined as 1 through 5, and a high score was defined as 6-10.

## ABOUT THE INSTITUTE

Established in 2007 by the Center on Aging & Work, the Global Perspectives Institute is an international collaboration of scholars and employers committed to the expansion of the quality of employment available to the 21st century multi-generational workforce in countries around the world.

The Global Perspectives Institute focuses on innovative and promising practices that might be adopted by employers and policy-makers.

The Institute's research, publications, and international forums contribute to:

- ▶ a deeper understanding of the employment experiences and career aspirations of employees of different ages who work in countries around the world;
- ▶ informed decision making by employers who want to be employers-of-choice in different countries; and
- ▶ innovative thinking about private-public partnerships that promote sustainable, quality employment.

Apart from the Mind the Gap series, the Global Perspectives Institute publishes a Statistical Profile Series highlighting workforce demographic trends in different countries as well as a Global Policy Series focusing on selected workforce policy in certain country contexts.

For more information on our publications, please visit us online at:  
[www.bc.edu/agingandwork](http://www.bc.edu/agingandwork)

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The Sloan Center on Aging & Work at Boston College was founded in 2005 with a grant from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation. The Center partners with workplace decision-makers on responses to the increasingly global multi-generational workforce. These collaborations focus on quality of employment with the aim to inform employers with research data to attract, engage and retain high quality industry talent. As of 2008, the Center has three research streams – the US National Initiatives, the State Initiatives and the Global Initiatives. Research teams in these three areas gather information and collaborate with leaders in the public, non-profit and business sectors to leverage today's diverse multi-generational workforce as competitive advantages in the 21st century economy.

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- 11 From: Great Place to Work Institute. (2008). What makes a great place to work: Financial results. <http://www.greatplacetowork.com/great/graphs.php?page=1>.
- 12 Unfortunately, most of the research linking employer-of-choice strategies with business outcomes tends to focus on correlational relationships. Such studies do not definitively establish that being a "best place to work" causes positive organizational performance; indeed, it might also be true that high profits and strong financial growth cause higher employee engagement and foster perceptions that a particular workplace is an employer-of-choice.
- 13 McNamara, 2008 from the 1999-2000 World Values Survey. The World Values Survey was conducted in the U.S. in 1999-2000 and gathered information from 1,200 respondents in the U.S.
- 14 McNamara, 2008 from the 2002 National Study of the Changing Workforce. The National Study of the Changing Workforce was conducted by the Families and Work Institute in 2003.