

# How Central is Work to Young Adults?



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### **White paper prepared for MonsterTRAK May, 2007**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Today's young adults are different. More than previous generations, they are looking for more than a steady job and good career. They value a high quality of life that views work as one role in a variety of roles that contribute to a good life. Attitudes and values about work can shape how young adults choose careers and commit to specific jobs. Work centrality is an important concept because it describes how involved people are with their work. People who view work as central to their lives are generally more motivated toward high performance and are more satisfied with their work. However, little is known about the work centrality of young adults who will soon begin their careers. This white paper describes survey results from over 10,000 young adults between the ages of 18 and 28. The study was conducted by a joint research project between MonsterTRAK and the Michigan State University Collegiate Employment Research Institute. The purpose of the survey was to profile young adults on their attitudes toward work and general life.

This white paper focuses on how central work is to these young adults.

What you will learn from the study includes:

1. Work centrality is lower in current young adults than in the previous generation.
2. Young women are slightly lower in their ratings of work centrality than young men.
3. Young adults who rated work as a high life interest were compared with young adults whose work centrality was medium or below average. From these comparisons, young adults with high work centrality:
  - a. were less likely to job surf and more likely to have a career/life vision.
  - b. were more likely to postpone marriage.
  - c. were more likely to rate themselves as being superior to others.
  - d. were more trusting in business, government, and religious leaders.
  - e. were less interested in a job that emphasized low stress and more interested in a job that emphasized success factors such as a high income, a prestigious company, and promotion opportunities.
4. Young adults who rated work as relatively low to their central life interests were more likely to be interested in jobs that were not stressful. In rating the importance of different job characteristics to a job search, these young adults rated low stress factors (ex. working regular hours) about equally important with job success factors (ex. high income).

## WORK CENTRALITY

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Work typically plays a central role in the lives of adults. For many, an occupation or profession helps define a person by giving him or her a sense of identity, meaning, and accomplishment. However, many changes in general society and organizations in particular, have served as catalysts to new values and perspectives on work. At the societal level, a shift from an economy based on production to an economy based on consumption has resulted in a rise of values associated with comfort, convenience, and covetousness of material goods (Currie, 2004). At the organizational level, technological innovations, organizational restructurings and outsourcing no longer guarantee work for a good employee. Lessons learned from these changes can prompt young adults to hold work values that differ from older, more established workers.

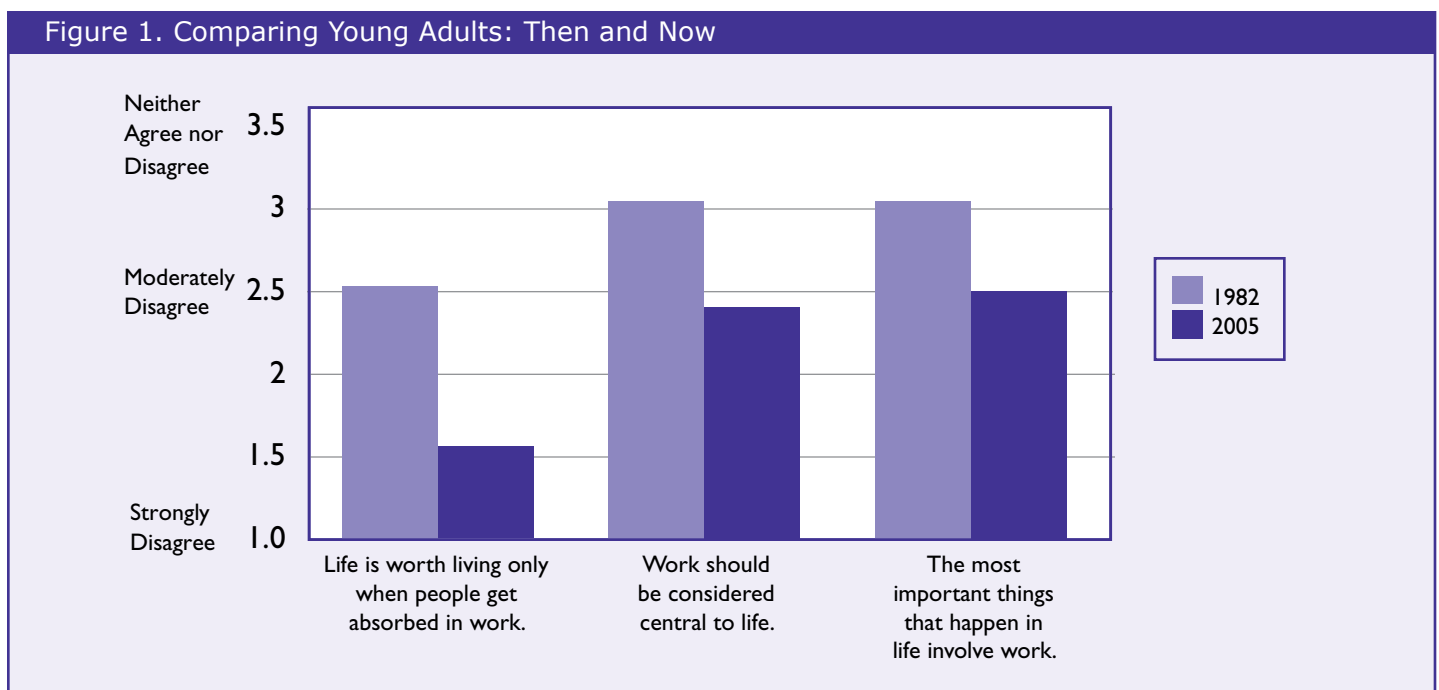
What makes this generation of young adults different from previous ones? Economic, cultural, medical, and historical trends have enabled today's young adults to put off financial and familial responsibilities. Unlike previous generations, most of today's emerging adults are likely to have parents who can still afford to support them well after high school and college graduations. Cultural attitudes are more tolerant of premarital sex and medical advances in birth control and fertility have made it possible for more young adults to postpone marriage and children. Finally, recent scandals in government, business, and religion have eroded young adults' trust in traditional institutions and leaders from these establishments. Inappropriate and unlawful behaviors from government leaders, corporate implosions in financial scandals, and large-scale lawsuits convicting religious leaders of sexual misconduct have helped produce a generation of emerging adults who are less likely to trust basic institutions of our society. Correspondingly, they are less likely to follow advice from their elders and more likely to take their time to make life-changing decisions.

Descriptions of emerging adults reveal positive and negative pictures. On the positive side, delaying marriage until the late 20's may help reduce teenage pregnancies and early divorces. Delaying career choices may also give young adults more time to carefully consider alternatives and develop a realistic preview of a chosen career. On the negative side, many young adults choose to live with their parents and drift in a series of low paying, disconnected jobs, saving their money to buy luxury items. They have a sense of entitlement to special attention, extra favors, and rewards; but don't feel obligated to put in the work that might merit these considerations.

From these trends, the current generation of young adults is qualitatively different from previous generations. Many names have been used to describe people between the ages of 18-28 who have not assumed full adult roles; including: emerging adults, twixters (people between adolescence and adulthood), Generation X, 13th Generation, and the Millennial generation (See Arnett, 2004; Grossman, 2005; Howe and Strauss, 1991, 2000). Most of the current research is comprised of qualitative studies, or interviews, conducted on relatively small numbers of people. In late 2005, MonsterTRAK launched an electronic survey and collected data from over 10,000 young adults between the ages of 18 and 28. The purpose of the survey was to develop a profile of this generation of young adults. Results from the survey are described in a series of white papers for MonsterTRAK.com. This report focuses on work centrality and examines three issues: (1) How does the current generation of young adults compare with young adults from a previous generation? (2) Are there any gender differences in how young men and women view work centrality? and (3) What characteristics distinguish young adults who are high, medium, or low on work centrality?

## WORK CENTRALITY OF YOUNG ADULTS: THEN AND NOW

Work centrality was measured by a six-item scale developed by Rabindra Kanungo and published in 1982. His scale, the Work Involvement Questionnaire, was developed on a sample of 703 undergraduate and graduate-level students. The six items were: (1) The most important things that happen in life involve work, (2) Work is something people should get involved in most of the time, (3) Work should be only a small part of one's life, (4) Work should be considered central to life, (5) In my view, an individual's personal life goals should be work-oriented, and (6) Life is worth living only when people get absorbed in work. Students were asked to rate each statement in terms of how strongly they agreed or disagreed with it. Of Kanungo's 703 students, 64.6% were under the age of 30; thus the majority of these students were young adults. Average ratings for the six items were compared between Kanungo's 1982 sample, and the Monster sample's data collected in late 2005. Results for three items with the largest differences between the 1982 and 2005 samples are shown in Figure 1.



In all three cases, the average rating for the 2005 group was lower than the average rating for the 1982 group, indicating lower work centrality for the current generation of young adults. The largest group difference was found for the most extremely worded item: *Life is worth living only when people get absorbed in work*. For that item, young adults in 1982 mildly disagreed with it; but young adults in 2005 more strongly disagreed. Furthermore, young adults in 1982 were more neutral to the other two items in Figure 1; whereas the 2005 young adults expressed clear disagreement. For the remaining three items, differences between the 1982 and 2005 samples were less pronounced, however the combined difference for the overall scale was significant indicating work was viewed as less central to today's young adults. In subsequent interviews with young adults, we asked them how they thought they differed from previous generations. One student simply said, "Work is not the #1 priority, we want more of a personal life".

## WORK CENTRALITY OF YOUNG MEN AND WOMEN

The Monster survey collected data from 3,112 young men and 7,114 young women. A statistical comparison of the mean responses for men and women across the work centrality items showed significant differences for all six items; however both groups responded in generally similar ways. Two items are displayed in Figures 2 and 3 for illustrative purposes. Figure 2 shows both men and women strongly disagreed that life is worth living only when people get absorbed in work. Figure 2 also shows that more women disagreed with this statement; whereas more men agreed with it. This trend was evident across all six work centrality items. Figure 3 shows a more typical distribution of responses to a work centrality item. Although it is still obvious that most young people disagreed with the statement that work should be considered central to life, the level of disagreement was less pronounced and about 1 in 6 young adults agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. Like the other items, men were more likely to agree with work centrality items, than women.

Figure 2. Gender differences to question: "Life is worth living only when people get absorbed in work."

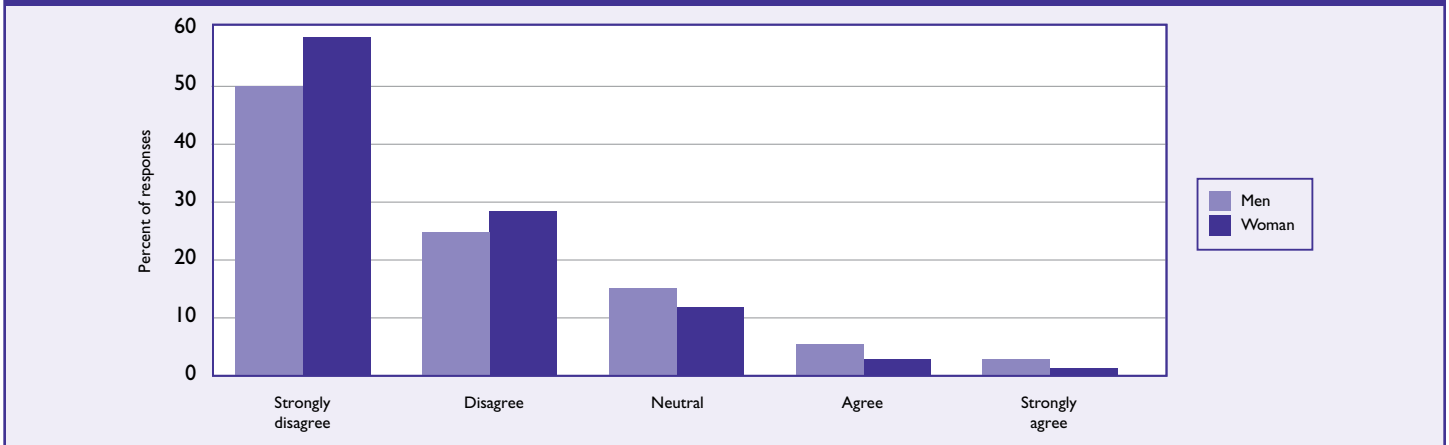
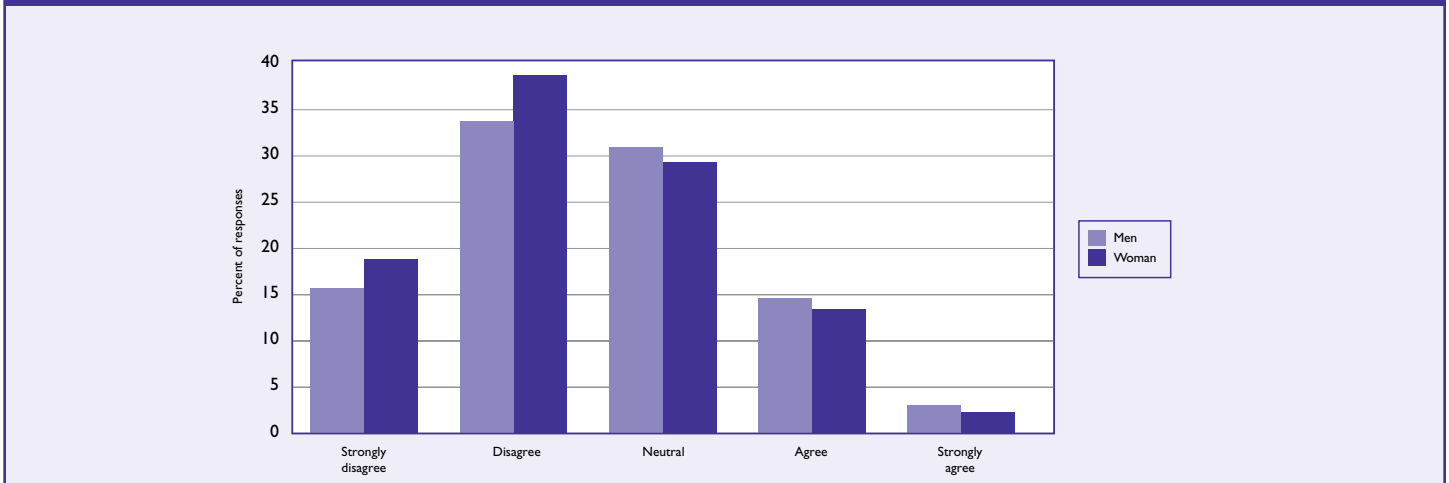


Figure 3. Gender differences to question: "Work should be considered central to life"



The results from the survey are consistent with previous research examining work centrality ratings of men and women. Snir and Harpaz (2006) found men worked significantly more hours per week than women. A variety of reasons are offered for this difference. In general, women are more interested in relationships, are more responsible for family and household duties, and are more likely to face discrimination in the workplace. These reasons may act as barriers to women perceiving work as central to their lives as compared with their male counterparts.

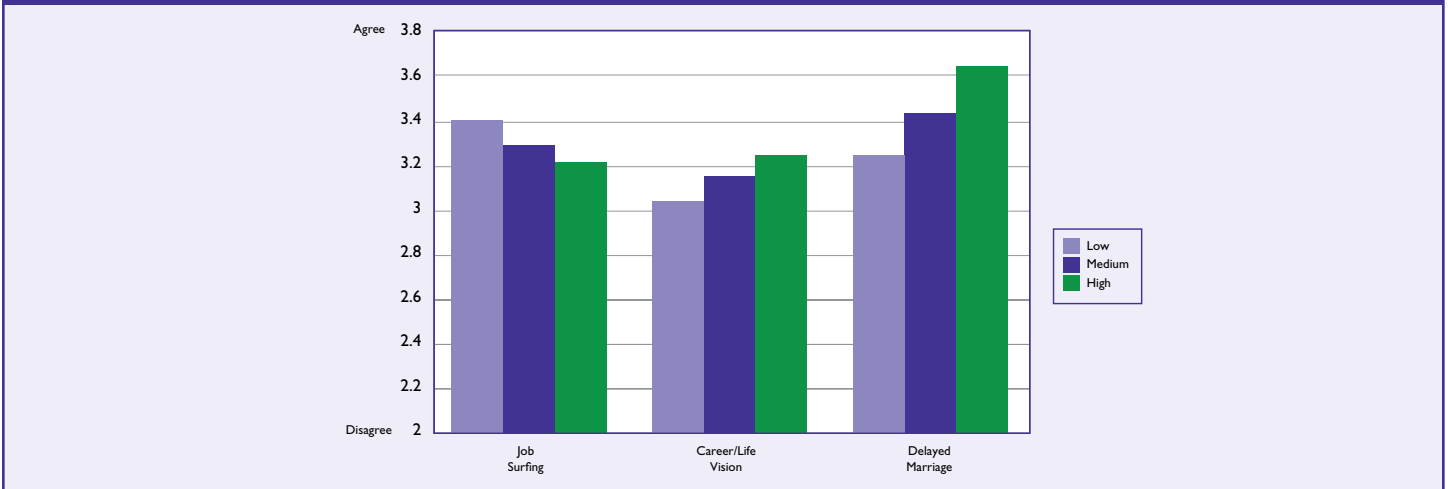
## CHARACTERISTICS OF YOUNG ADULTS WITH HIGH, MEDIUM, OR LOW WORK CENTRALITY

Ratings across all six work centrality items were averaged to compute a scale score in order to compare young adults who were high, medium, or low on work centrality. These groups were based on the scale mean and standard deviation, with high and low groups defined by scores that were one standard deviation above the mean (high) or one standard deviation below the mean (low). A standard deviation is a statistic that describes the dispersion or variance of scores around the scale mean or average. Thus, the High Work Centrality group consisted of 1,541 young adults who scored one standard deviation above the mean, making them the top 15% of the survey respondents. Similarly, the Medium Work Centrality group consisted of 6,997 young adults representing the middle 68% of survey respondents and the Low Work Centrality group was made up of 1,712 young adults who scored one standard deviation below the mean (the bottom 16%).

Twelve survey scales were used to compare young adults who were high, medium, or low on work centrality. Three scales were developed to validate early profiles of this generation that were based on interviews and relatively small samples of young adults. Previous research has described this generation as lacking clear visions for their careers and general lives. Although they often express ambitious goals, they can be directionless in how to achieve those goals (Schneider & Stevenson, 1999). Thus, they are more likely to try out different jobs or “job surf” in order to find the right career. Here, the term “job surfing” is analogous to surfing on the internet, a common activity of young adults who visit many internet sites, looking for something that interests them. The Job Surfing factor was measured by items such as: “I would rather try out different work experiences than settle down into one job” and “I would be willing to endure frequent job changes in order to find a job that fits my interests and abilities.” The Career/Life Vision factor was measured by items such as: “I do not have a well-defined career plan” and “I can’t imagine what my life will be like 10 years from now.” Finally, as mentioned previously, medical advances in birth control and greater acceptance of premarital sex, have made it possible for more women to postpone childbirth until they are in their 30’s or even 40’s. In 1970, the median age of marriage in the U.S. was 20 for women and 22 for men; and children were born shortly thereafter. In 2000, the median age of marriage was 25 for women and 27 for men; and parenthood was delayed until the late 20’s. Thus, the third factor tapped Delayed Marriage and was measured by two items: “Marriage is not a high priority for me at this point” and “I believe I still have a few years to be single before I settle down and get married.” For all factors, respondents rated the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with each statement on a five-point rating scale, with higher numbers indicating stronger agreement.

Results for these three factors are shown in Figure 4. Consistent with results from previous studies, young adults who are highly involved with work are less likely to surf for different jobs, and more likely to develop a career/life vision and to delay marriage. However, for many young adults, responses to statements indicating that they have a well-defined career plan or that they have specific goals for the year are most likely to be neutral. These neutral responses may indicate an accurate situation of little planning and vision for the future. On the other hand, neutral responses are often a sign of reluctance to admit that there are no plans or future goals. It may be more desirable to give a vague neutral rating rather than a wholehearted endorsement to a statement such as “I can’t imagine what my life will be like 10 years from now”. Further examination of these young adults will consider two personality traits and the importance of specific job characteristics to a young adult’s job search. Results from this profile can help families, schools, and organizations better guide young adults as they transition from school to work.

Figure 4. Profile of young adults who are high, medium or low on work centrality

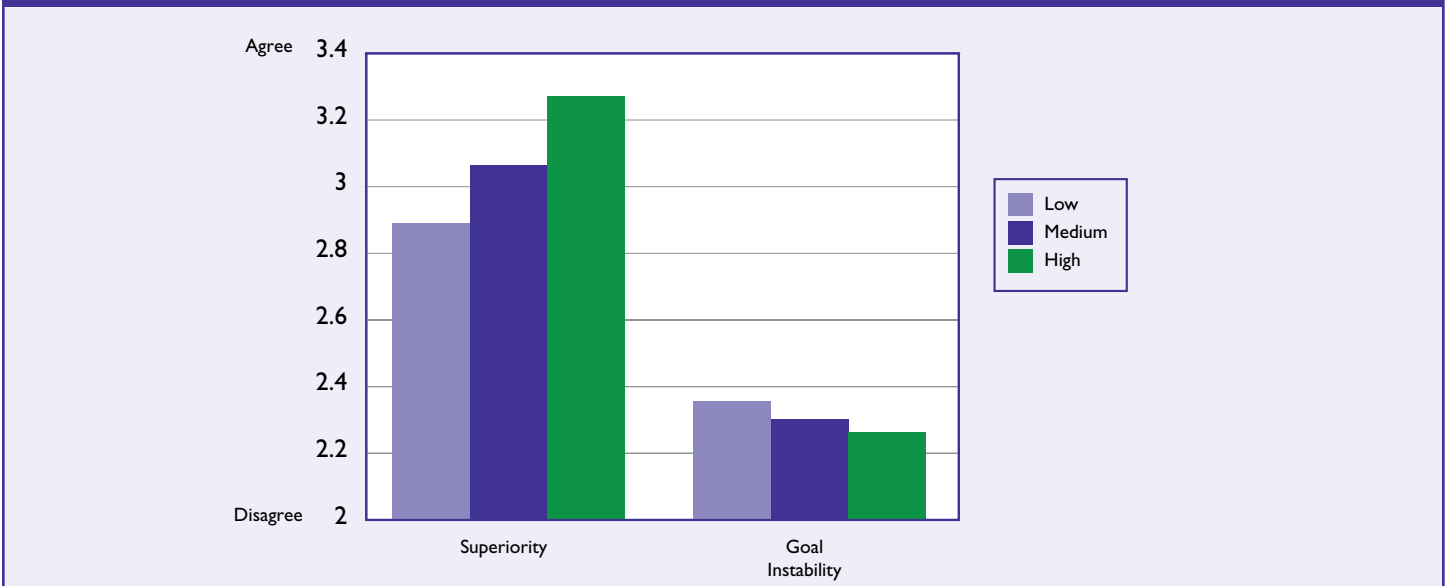


Two scales tapped personality dimensions related to beliefs that one is superior to others (named the Superior factor) and to beliefs that one is not sure about oneself or doubts he/she can follow-through on goals/work (named the Goal Instability factor). The Superior factor was measured by items such as: "I deserve favors from others" and "I know that I have more natural talents than most", whereas the Goal Instability factor was measured by items such as: "I wonder where my life is headed" and "I don't seem to get going on anything important" (Robbins & Patton, 1985). Both factors were theorized to describe younger adults more than older adults.

Figure 5 shows how high, medium, and low work centrality groups compared on these personality dimensions. Higher scores indicate greater perceptions of superiority or more goal instability. There were no significant differences for the Goal Instability scale. However, there were significant differences for the Superiority scale with high work centrality related to higher perceptions of superiority. Thus, young adults who believed work was central to their lives also believed they were better than most others.

This personality trait may be linked to high aspirations with work. People who believe they are better than others often believe they are entitled to more in life. For most people, getting more in life usually means working for it. Thus, high work centrality can help support an individual's need to excel over others and to obtain rewards and recognition given to successful people.

Figure 5. Personality differences in young adults who are high, medium or low on Work Centrality

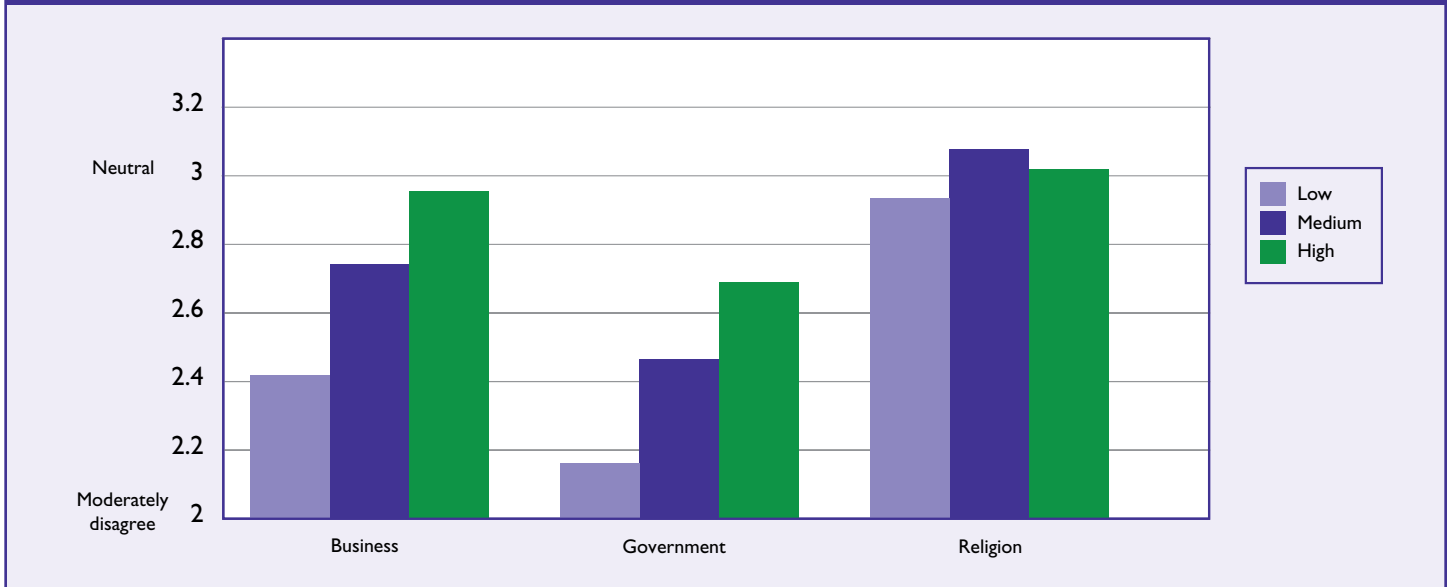




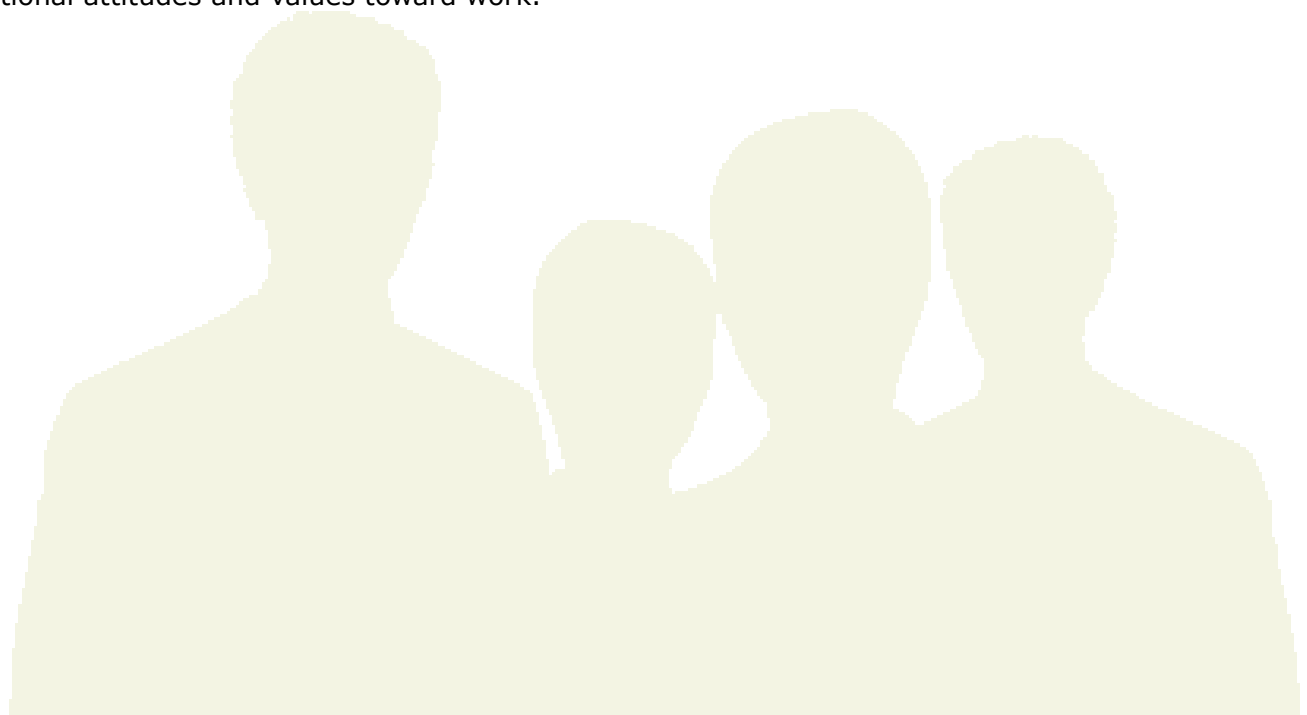
# How Central is Work to Young Adults?

Three scales were used to measure attitudes toward business, government, and religious leaders. Each scale contained similar items such as: "Most public officials can be trusted to do what is right without our having to constantly check on them." "You can generally trust religious leaders to do what is right." and "Corporations usually try to keep the promises they have made during the course of business." Results for the three work centrality groups are shown in Figure 6.

Figure 6. Trust differences in young adults who are high, medium or low on work centrality

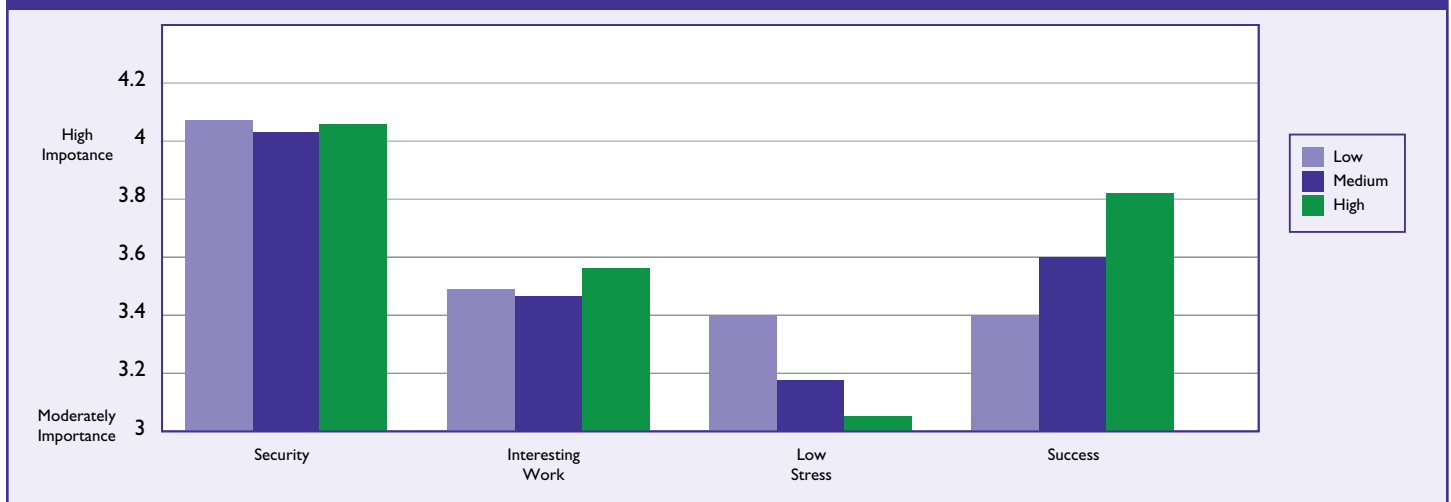


Overall means from all three groups showed young adults trusted religious leaders most, followed by business leaders and government leaders. There were no differences across work centrality groups on their trust in religious leaders. However, significant differences were found in business and government institutions. The high work centrality group tended to place greater trust in business and government than did the other two groups. This result suggests that young adults with high work centrality are able to find role models or trusted resources that can help them develop positive work roles. Conversely, the least trusting group was also the group with the lowest work centrality. Perhaps those young adults who hold low opinions on current leaders are less likely to be influenced by them and thus less likely to hold conventional attitudes and values toward work.



Finally, four scales were created to tap important job characteristics. Results from these scales were compared across the three work centrality groups and are shown in Figure 7. The Security scale grouped job characteristics that were related to a person's job security. These characteristics included geographical location, good benefits, the opportunity to learn new skills, and job security. Results comparing the three work centrality groups on this Security scale showed no significant differences. Young adults rated this set of job characteristics as highly important to a job search – higher than any other job characteristics set. A second factor was labeled Interesting Work and included job characteristics related to flexibility in work hours, being able to work independently, travel opportunities, and interesting work. Again, no differences were found among the three work centrality groups, with all groups valuing interesting work. Thus, regardless of how central work is to a young adult, most view job characteristics related to security and interesting work in similar ways.

Figure 7. Job characteristic preferences in young adults who are high, medium or low on work centrality



In contrast, the Low Stress scale tapped job characteristics that were associated with predictable, low stress work. These included limited overtime, regular hours (no nights/week-ends), annual vacations of a week or more, and limited job stress. This set of job characteristics was not rated as important as others, but there were significant differences across the work centrality groups.

For young adults with high work centrality, job characteristics reflecting low stress were not as important to them as other factors. In addition, this group rated low stress factors significantly less important than the other work centrality groups, particularly the low work centrality group. Interestingly, young adults with low work centrality rated low stress factors about as important as success measures such as salary and promotion opportunities.

Finally, a fourth factor described job characteristics associated with success. The Success factor examined how important high income, a prestigious company, and chances for promotion were to a young adult's job search. Results across the three work centrality groups showed significant differences. Success characteristics were most important to the high work centrality group and least important to the low work centrality group. These results are consistent with the general research on work centrality. People who value work above other life roles are more attuned to indicators of career success.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

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Several books have been written that describe today's young adults. They range from optimistic predictions that this generation will be the next greatest generation (Howe, Strauss, & Matson, 2000) to dour predictions of a narcissistic generation that believes it is entitled to fame and fortune without having to work for it (Schneider & Stevenson, 1999; Twenge, 2006). Few of these books have systematically examined large numbers of young adults. The results in this report suggest that the current generation of young adults is drifting away from conventional values of work as a central life interest. They are looking for more balance between work and non-work ("non-work" includes all roles/activities outside a person's job – e.g., family, recreation, religion, civic activities, etc.).

Organizations that hire these young adults may benefit from a better understanding of this new generation of workers. Recruitment practices, orientation programs, and socialization practices should be designed to better integrate young adults into the workforce. Young adults are looking for the best fit between what they want (but may not be able to define) and what an employer provides. Recruitment practices would benefit from clearly branding a company's values and environment; for example, using blogs where recently hired employees can talk with potential new hires about the company. Orientation programs need to focus on more than the formal procedures and processes within the company. Time needs to be earmarked for activities that allow new hires to mix with a variety of co-workers and to develop and express their personal and professional values. Socialization programs can also help young adults make the transition into the work world. Proper role models, mentors, and career development professionals can help young adults see what their career options are and how they can maximize their ability to plan and pursue these options (Csikszentmihalyi & Schneider, 2000).

Future research on these young adults should be conducted to better predict who is likely (and who is not likely) to value work as a central life role and how this role can be developed. This project is a step in this direction. Results from this research will not only help organizations recruit and retain young talent, but also help young adults find successful and satisfying careers.



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## SUMMARY

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### **Results from the survey revealed the following key points:**

- Compared to a previous generation, current young adults are less involved with work. This may be due to general decreases in job security and/or greater perceived needs to balance work and non-work roles.
- Young women rate their work centrality slightly lower than young men. This difference may be attributed to gender differences in family/household roles, gender discrimination at work and/or preferences for social roles.
- Young adults with high work centrality are less likely to surf for different jobs. In addition they are more likely to have a career/life vision for themselves and are willing to delay marriage. This profile is a positive one for employers who need new employees who know what they want and are involved in their work. However, another group of young adults with low work centrality may be problematic to employers. This group is more likely to surf for different jobs and is not committed to any particular work life. Employers are challenged to socialize these people to embrace work roles through recruitment, training, and development efforts.
- Young adults with high work centrality can be characterized as believing themselves to be superior to others. These people value public expressions of success that a high income, prestigious company, or chances for promotion can bring. Such indicators of success can justify perceptions that these young adults are better than others and thus, entitled to better things in life.
- Young adults with high work centrality can also be characterized as having more trust in leaders of religious, business, and government institutions. Greater acceptance of these leaders may result in greater agreement with conventional values that work should be a central life interest. These people are less interested in a job that emphasizes low stress and more interested in a job that emphasizes prestige and advancement.
- Young adults with low work centrality are less likely to perceive themselves as superior to others and more likely to value job characteristics that minimize stress. Furthermore, they are least trusting of business, government, and religious leaders. Perhaps these young adults lack role models or trusted people who can help them identify appropriate work roles they can take pride in.

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Additional information about the young adults in this research is reported in earlier white papers:

- Chao, Georgia and Philip Gardner (2006). *Important characteristics of early career jobs: What do young adults want?* White paper prepared for Monster TRAK.com.
- Chao, Georgia and Philip Gardner (2006). *Today's young adults: Surfing for the right job*. White paper prepared for Monster TRAK.com.

## RESEARCH PARTNERSHIP

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### **About MonsterTRAK**

Founded in 1987 as JobTRAK and acquired by Monster®, the leading online global careers and recruitment resource, in 2000, MonsterTRAK is a leading college recruitment solution that successfully connects employers with college students, recent graduates and career centers. MonsterTRAK provides a wide range of entry-level, part-time and internship job listings, along with resources that enable students to develop and execute their own career management strategies. Recognized for the last five years by Student Monitor for offering world-class customer service, MonsterTRAK maintains superior relationships with more than 3,100 college and university career centers, MBA programs and alumni associations nationwide. For more information, please visit [www.monstertrak.com](http://www.monstertrak.com) or call 1-888-562-8725.

### **About Monster**

Monster is the leading global online career and recruitment resource. A division of Monster Worldwide, Monster works for everyone by connecting quality job seekers at all levels with leading employers across all industries. Founded in 1994 and headquartered in Maynard, Massachusetts, Monster has 34 local language and content sites in 32 countries worldwide. More information is available at [www.monster.com](http://www.monster.com) or by calling 1-800-MONSTER.

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Monster Intelligence provides groundbreaking information and custom market analysis to help Monster customers make informed decisions about today's most pressing human capital issues. By analyzing and collecting data from over 3.3 million unique job searches performed on Monster each day, Monster Intelligence provides insight to help HR professionals improve recruiting success, leverage best practices, accelerate worker performance, and retain top talent. For more information, visit <http://intelligence.monster.com> or call 1-800-MONSTER extension 6513.

## **About Collegiate Employment Research Institute (CERI) at Michigan State University**

CERI, established in 1985, is nationally recognized for its research on the transition from college to work; employment readiness of college graduates; and the transition experience through college (“the sophomore year”). The Institute is also involved in the assessment of learning in the workplace; assessment practices for University accountability (outcome assessment); and evaluation of integrated learning opportunities. CERI annually publishes Recruiting Trends that provides an analysis of the college labor market. For information on the Institute visit <http://ceri.msu.edu>, or call us at 517-355-2211.

## **About Dr. Georgia Chao**

Georgia T. Chao is Associate Professor of Management at the Eli Broad College of Business at Michigan State University. Prior to joining the MSU management faculty, she was Section Head of the Department of Management at the General Motors Institute. Her primary research interests lie in the areas of career development, organizational socialization, and cultural issues in organizational behavior. Dr. Chao has published a number of articles in these areas and has conducted training and applied research at General Motors, Ford, AT&T, Singer, and other organizations. She received the Academy of Management award for the Outstanding Publication in Organizational Behavior in 1995 with Dr. Gardner. In 2000, she was named a Fellow of the American Psychological Association and the Society of Industrial and Organizational Psychology. Dr. Chao currently serves on four editorial boards.

## **About Dr. Phil Gardner**

Phil Gardner is the Director of the Collegiate Employment Research Institute at Michigan State University. Prior to joining MSU, he was on the faculty at the University of California, Riverside. His primary research interests cover the transition from college to work, early career dynamics of young adults, impact of co-curricular activities on career aspirations and achievement, and college labor markets. Dr. Gardner has published his work in a variety of publications and speaks frequently on college campuses and before employer associations. He received the Academy of Management award for Outstanding Publication in Organizational Behavior (with Dr. Chao) in 1995. Dr. Gardner currently serves as senior editor of the Journal of Cooperative Education and Internships.





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