

U.S. millennials post ‘abysmal’ scores in tech skills test, lag behind foreign peers

By [Todd C. Frankel](#) March 2 at 10:21 AM
WashingtonPost.com blog

There was this test. And it was daunting. It was like the SAT or ACT -- which many American millennials are no doubt familiar with, as they are on track to be the best educated generation in history -- except this test was not about getting into college. This exam, given in 23 countries, assessed the thinking abilities and workplace skills of adults. It focused on literacy, math and technological problem-solving. The goal was to figure out how prepared people are to work in a complex, modern society.

And U.S. millennials performed horribly.

That might even be an understatement, given the extent of the American shortcomings. No matter how you sliced the data – by class, by race, by education – young Americans were laggards compared to their international peers. In every subject, U.S. millennials ranked at the bottom or very close to it, according to a new study by testing company ETS.

“We were taken aback,” said ETS researcher Anita Sands. “We tend to think millennials are really savvy in this area. But that’s not what we are seeing.”

The test is called [the PIAAC test](#). It was developed by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, better known as the OECD. The test was meant to assess adult skill levels. It was administered worldwide to people ages 16 to 65. The results came out two years ago and barely caused a ripple. But recently ETS went back and delved into the data to look at how millennials did as a group. After all, they're the future – and, in America, they're poised to claim the title of largest generation from the baby boomers.

U.S. millennials, defined as people 16 to 34 years old, were supposed to be different. They're digital natives. They get it. High achievement is part of their makeup. But [the ETS study](#) found signs of trouble, with its authors warning that the nation was at a crossroads: “We can decide to accept the current levels of mediocrity and inequality or we can decide to address the skills challenge head on.”

The challenge is that, in literacy, U.S. millennials scored higher than only three countries.

In math, Americans ranked last.

In technical problem-solving, they were second from the bottom.

“Abysmal,” noted ETS researcher Madeline Goodman. “There was just no place where we performed well.”

But surely America's brightest were on top?

Nope. U.S. millennials with master's degrees and doctorates did better than their peers in only three countries, Ireland, Poland and Spain. Those in Finland, Sweden and Japan seemed to be on a different planet.

Top-scoring U.S. millennials – the 90th percentile on the PIAAC test – were at the bottom internationally, ranking higher only than their peers in Spain. The bottom percentile (10th percentile) also lagged behind their peers. And the gap between America’s best and worst was greater than the gap in 14 other countries. This, the study authors said, signaled America’s high degree of inequality.

The study called into question America’s educational credentialing system. While few American test-takers lacked a high school degree, the United States didn’t perform any better than countries with relatively high rates of failing to finish high school. And our college graduates didn’t perform well, either.

ETS researchers tried looking for signs of promise – especially in math skills, which they considered a good sign of labor market success. They singled out native-born Americans. Nope. They tried native-born Americans with at least one college graduate parent – a big group when compared to other countries. That didn’t work. They looked at race – white and Asian Americans did better, but still fell behind similar top performers in other countries and below the OECD average.

The ETS study noted that a decade ago the skill level of American adults was judged mediocre. “Now it is below even that.” So Millennials are falling even further behind.

“It doesn’t seem like it’s going to get better if we stay on the road we’re on,” Goodman said.

Want to try your hand with sample PIAAC test questions?

[Literacy No. 1](#) [Literacy No. 2](#) [Literacy No. 3](#)

[Math No. 1](#) [Math No. 2](#) [Math No. 3](#) [Math No. 4](#)

[Tech Problem-Solving questions](#)