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# Millennials: What Other Generations Say About You

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**A FEW YEARS AGO**, I began to research and write a book about the Millennial generation in the workplace. My interest in the topic is long-standing. First, my husband and I raised two Millennials. Second, through a variety of involvements, I have had numerous opportunities over the years for extended and in-depth exposure to what I consider to be a remarkable generation. And, third, I became intrigued with the number of times, during speaking engagements or panel discussions, that the topic of these newest entrants to the multigenerational workforce would come up—and almost always in negative terms.

The complaints have a similar theme and do not match what I have observed with my own eyes. Critics say: “Millennials are too entitled.” “They are unable to solve problems.” “They want to make a lot of money without working hard for it.” “They want constant feedback.” These are just some of the concerns that other generations express about their younger colleagues.

## MILLENNIALS AND MANAGERS

The unstated message in this litany is that senior leaders feel it requires a lot of extra work to manage Millennials, and they have little time to commit to the effort. For leaders in law firms, the issue is challenging because the role of supervising others is not built into the reward structure of most firms. Lawyers are generally placed in leadership roles

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to recognize their talents on behalf of their clients, and they are judged far more by their billable hours and skills in generating business than by the time they spend managing others. This means that spending time to manage a generation considered to require a lot of time to manage isn't viewed favorably.

So where does this leave the newest entrants to the workplace? Law school graduates are entering law firms and law departments with high hopes and expectations that they will succeed—just as they have succeeded in their significant efforts to get into and through law school, and to pass the bar exam. They did not undertake years of hard work to find themselves suddenly labeled as uncommitted and too complicated to manage.

The problem is exacerbated by Millennials not being told about these concerns directly. Instead, the issues are discussed out of earshot—and more as a lament than a challenge to be solved. This is the worst of all worlds for members of a generation used to succeeding, and who now find themselves thwarted by the very qualities that made them so successful in the past.

## **WORKING AROUND MISCONCEPTIONS**

So what should Millennials do as they excitedly enter the legal profession and reach the milestone they have worked so hard to achieve? This generation will be required to navigate a workplace structure that isn't inherently logical, without the support systems that likely played a key role in their prior achievements. To succeed, Millennials will need to understand how others view them, oftentimes wrongly, and develop strategies for addressing these misperceptions. The list below should help them navigate that journey.

### **1. Dispelling the entitlement myth.**

Entitled is the word used most frequently to describe Millennials, and it is used so pervasively that I have devoted an entire chapter to it in my upcoming book. The word completely misses the actual characteristics others are seeing. As a generation, Millennials demonstrate self-confidence and self-respect. And why shouldn't they, since their parents, teachers and coaches spent years helping them feel that way?

This is the one place where simply understanding how others see them can make a difference. Self-confidence, especially among newer employees, can be wrongly perceived as unjustified. Millennials can combat this misperception by trying to ensure their self-confidence is not misread as arrogance or an expectation of privilege. Tone and style matter, and confidence and self-respect can be expressed in a way that does not appear to others as entitlement.

### **2. Demonstrating problem-solving skills.**

Lawyers are not known for offering detailed explanations when they give out assignments. Even worse, they are not necessarily receptive to answering the

myriad questions that would help fill in the gaps. This is difficult for Millennials, who have always been encouraged to ask questions and who may have relied on a supportive network to help solve problems in the past.

To move beyond this stereotype, it is necessary to put all assignments in the context of the big picture. Millennials need to think not only about the specific assignment given but about the larger context. What is the client trying to achieve? How does the assignment fit within that goal? The worrisome part is if the young lawyer does not have the information needed to answer these questions; it is difficult to demonstrate problem-solving skills in a vacuum. This requires Millennials to learn an additional skill: piecing together information about the client and the matter, developing a framework for responding and then following up with prepared questions that need to be asked, but in a context that demonstrates having carefully thought about the issues. Learning to interact with people stretched too thin is a skill that can last a lifetime.

### **3. Why it's not all about the money.**

Recently, a Millennial overheard one of my generational conversations with a company executive who complained his younger workers only seemed interested in making more money. Afterward, she told me that she was able to find a terrific job in her field after graduate school but the student debt she owes as a percentage of her income was crushing. She stated that all her friends were in the same situation, which made them particularly sensitive to opportunities for increasing their income.

A young lawyer once told me his large firm saw young lawyers strictly as billable-hour units, which caused him and his colleagues to respond by focusing on how much the firm paid them, because little else seemed to matter at his workplace.

The challenge for Millennials is to devise strategies for appropriately addressing compensation needs. It is reasonable to share information about debt burdens from school loans. It is harder to discuss compensation when it is the only source of satisfaction from one's job. When that happens, masking job dissatisfaction is difficult, and it may be time to develop a longer-term strategy for improving one's situation at work or finding alternate opportunities.

### **4. The importance of feedback.**

Millennials have received feedback about most of their activities throughout their lives. It is reasonable, therefore, to expect that feedback would be an ongoing feature of a work environment where learning from each assignment is an important element of job growth. The problem is that the pressures of the legal profession leave little time for ongoing feedback. The most frequent concern I hear from young lawyers is their frustration, not simply with the lack of feedback after assignments but also with an annual performance review process that can take less than 10 minutes and offers little in the way of specific direction about past work or future development.

Millennials can engage in two simultaneous courses of action to address this significant omission. First, strategically seek feedback at opportune times from those who may be receptive to providing teaching moments. Demonstrate that the assignment has been reviewed and—if lucky enough to have been provided a copy—redlined comments have been studied. Prepare questions that will help improve the work product for the next assignment. Second, cultivate allies who can help to develop a group approach to appropriate people in the firm about the importance of a detailed evaluation process that provides useful feedback about past assignments and helpful recommendations for what needs to be done to advance in the future. There is an enormous amount of information available that demonstrates the link between a strong performance appraisal process and the long-term effectiveness of a workplace.

## **CLOSING THOUGHTS**

None of these challenges can be solved by Millennials alone. Strong intergenerational relationships require that all involved deepen their understanding of each other's motivations, backgrounds and perspectives. These tips may have been written for Millennials, but smart senior leaders will read between the lines and understand that there is a great deal they can do to ensure an economically vibrant law firm or legal department where everyone is engaged in the mission of the clients and the long-term health of the organization.

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