

Managing Millennials: Project Management for an Evolving Workforce

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Abstract

Managing today's workforce requires a paradigm shift in order to attract, retain, and develop a workforce that is increasingly comprised of Millennials. At 35% of the workforce, Millennials are tech-savvy multi-taskers who value flexibility, connectivity, and the ability to make a direct impact. They seek rapid career advancement, personal and professional growth, and recognition for contributions. Literature on Millennials considers this generation to be "entitled," "privileged," and "disloyal." While there may be some truth to these allegations, many companies are recognizing the value that this generation offers the modern workforce and are adapting their approaches in order to attract, retain, and grow this valuable piece of the workforce. This article will provide several scenarios and strategies for project managers to better manage today's workforce and establish a more productive, Millennial work environment.

Paradigm Shift for an Evolving Workforce

By 2020 Millennials are projected to make up over 35% of the global workforce¹, translation: no matter your profession you will need to learn how to manage, work for, and work with Millennials. In the United States, this generation already is the largest contributor to the workforce. Millennials are considered to be the most educated generation to date, and are characterized by their desire for growth and learning, digital and personal connectivity, and rapid professional advancement². Their desire to be heard, make an immediate impact, and grow personally and professionally are shifting the paradigms and cultures of industries, organizations, and teams. Customizing your approach to managing Millennials can pay huge dividends by attracting this growing population of potential employees, retaining quality personnel, and increasing engagement and productivity.

As one's workforce evolves, a shrewd project manager must consider inter-generational differences on projects and balance a number of approaches and considerations to maximize productivity.

Below is a quick summary of the generations that comprise almost the entirety of the U.S. workforce:

¹ <http://www.manpowergroup.com/millennials>

² <http://www.latimes.com/business/la-fi-career-coach-boomers-millennials-20161124-story.html>

	“Baby Boomers”	“Generation X”	“Millennials”
Birth Years ³	1946 - 1964	1965 - 1984	1982 - 2004
Percentage of U.S. Workforce ⁴	29%	34%	35%
Common Traits ⁵	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Goal-oriented • Hard-working • Highly competitive • Independent • Non-comformists 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tech-savvy • Independent • Individualistic • Flexible 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tech-savvy • Self-expressive • Prone to switch jobs • Multi-taskers • Connected

Awareness of these inter-generational differences and the common traits of each generation can help project managers build and more effectively manage their teams.

Millennials in the Workforce: Who Are They?

The labor ecosystem is changing. You may have noticed the young man furiously clicking on their keyboard while seamlessly multi-tasking across three computer screens, or perhaps the young woman who seems undaunted by speaking truth to power and side-stepping the hierarchy to advance an innovative idea, or the employee who is constantly pushing for more responsibility. Millennials, also known as Generation Y, are defined as those who are born between the early 1980s and early 2000s⁶. This generation has also been called the “Peter Pan” and “Boomerang Generation” for their propensity for delaying many common adult rites of passage such as launching their careers, buying a home, getting married, and starting a family⁷. This is due in part to more Millennials moving to cities and experiencing high-priced rents, crippling student loans, or simply desiring the mobility of not setting permanent roots. A recent Time Magazine article on Millennials begins with “you might think that they are entitled, lazy, and over-confident. You’d be right – but you’d also be wrong.⁸” Whether perception or reality, companies and project managers must adapt their methods and techniques to adjust to the reality that Millennials now make up the largest percentage of the workforce and will continue to move up the corporate ladder (slower than they may actually like).

Millennials may be one of the most misunderstood generations to date. There are 5 common associations of Millennials that cross-cut a range of literature on working with Millennials⁹:

1. **“Entitled:”** Millennials are ambitious, impatient, and are seeking to climb the corporate ladder quickly. Many view this generation as “unwilling to pay their dues”, while

³ <https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2014/03/here-is-when-each-generation-begins-and-ends-according-to-facts/359589/>

⁴ <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/05/11/millennials-surpass-gen-xers-as-the-largest-generation-in-u-s-labor-force/>

⁵ <https://globalnews.ca/news/3587440/generation-traits-millennials-baby-boomer-generation-x/>

⁶ <https://www.livescience.com/38061-millennials-generation-y.html>

⁷ <https://www.livescience.com/38061-millennials-generation-y.html>

⁸ <http://time.com/247/millennials-the-me-me-me-generation/>

⁹ <https://www.monster.com/career-advice/article/how-millennials-can-debunk-stereotypes-at-work>

Millennials believe that their advancement should be based on their production, talent, and potential rather than their tenure.

2. **“Easily Sidetracked:”** Millennials nature is to multi-task. As digital natives, technology has been part of their lives since birth. While some may view this characterization as attention deficiency, many Millennials feel that their use of technology have helped them think more creatively, compartmentalize, and complete tasks more effectively.
3. **“Seeking Recognition:”** Growing up in the age of helicopter parents has created this association of Millennials with “participation trophies” and constantly seeking recognition for their efforts. Millennials crave recognition and feedback and want their contributions to be shared and valued.
4. **“Disloyal:”** A 2016 Gallup Poll found that 21% of Millennials changed jobs in the past year. Part of this comes from Millennial’s mobility through delayed adulthood milestones and part of it is a realization that with other opportunities come an opportunity for career advancement, promotions, and financial benefits. Millennials have a wealth of information at their fingertips and are highly connected, which affords them the opportunity to compare career paths and evaluate their options.
5. **“Privileged:”** Flexibility is important to Millennials and many companies are evolving the regular 9-5 schedule to recognize this. Millennials are willing and able to deliver results efficiently and effectively and seek the schedule that enables them to be their most productive selves.

Each of these stereotypes comes with rays of truth that necessitate a deeper, less superficial view. As the workforce adapts and evolves, industries, companies, and project managers need to more deliberately consider their personnel, working styles, and methods in order to optimize performance.

Managing Millennials: Approaches to Optimize Performance

Full disclosure: I am part of “the most threatening and exciting generation since the baby boomers brought about social revolution¹⁰.” As a Millennial who manages a team of mostly Millennials, I live, experience, and witness many of the strengths, challenges, and opportunities of working with Millennials. I’ve been both stigmatized by these stereotypes and felt myself stigmatizing other Millennials who at first glance have made outlandish requests. When evaluating any request, it is important to assume positive intent, showcase empathy, and get to the heart of the matter. Moreover, these requests can best be evaluated once you have established a relationship, built trust, and gained a better understanding of your employees’ tendencies, capabilities, and intent.

¹⁰ <http://time.com/247/millennials-the-me-me-me-generation/>

1. Optimizing “Entitlement”

The Scenario: A high-performing member of my project team had just been promoted and already had their eye on the next promotion. Their expectation was that within one year they could be positioned for promotion and certainly within two years they should be promoted.

Deconstructing the Stereotype: It’s quick to fall into the “entitlement”, “wait your turn,” and “ladder-climber” trap. Don’t confuse “entitlement” with ambition. Recognize that you have a talented employee who wants to show their worth and be rewarded for the value they provide. Be aware that your employee also has more information than any previous generation and may have found articles, Glassdoor reviews, or had peer conversations that they believe justifies their request for promotion.

The Strategy: First and foremost, recognize their high-performance and praise their desire for growth. Share what the expectations are at the next level. Guide them in developing a plan to develop competencies, meet expectations, and exceed benchmarks. Can you provide them with additional responsibilities that enable them to learn and grow? Are there opportunities for on-the-job (OJT) training, conferences, or other professional training that can help them build needed skills? Have them own this plan, customize it with your guidance, and track their progress. This provides your team member with the flexibility to manage their careers, prioritize efforts, and incorporate regular feedback. Additionally, it directly speaks to your employees’ desire for empowerment, recognition, and growth. By providing them with the expectations for success and tools to take on greater responsibility and build knowledge and skills, you are strengthening the project team and linking the Millennial to the company.

2. Optimizing “Easily Sidetracked”

The Scenario: You watch in awe as their fingers blur across the keyboard, their eyes dart across the multiple screens at their desk, and they pause momentarily to respond to a text on their phone. Their stamina is impressive, as they are able to maintain this cadence throughout most of the day. However, you have noted in their performance review that they have missed deadlines, do not always prioritize their time, and need to focus on the immediate task at hand.

Deconstructing the Stereotype: While many Millennials wear “multi-tasking” as a badge of honor, others view it as a dirty word. Time, mind-space, and energy are wasted as one transitions between assignments. Millennials may recognize this, but also may crave the stimulation and pressure to complete a task before moving onto the next one. Many Millennials may judge themselves by the number of small wins stacked up throughout the day and enjoy shifting gears as they transition between tasks.

The Strategy: Digital natives crave flexibility, stimulation, and rapid gratification. Provide them with the tools to prioritize and track their wins. Tracking tools will help Millennials visualize how they are bucketing their time. Set micro-targets for deliverables (i.e. “see if you can complete this piece by the end of the day”) so that they can focus their energy on one task while also having the flexibility to manage that block of time. Work with them to compartmentalize by having them set blocks of time for reviewing email or responding to texts during the day rather

than checking frequently throughout the day. Highlight the benefits of “uni-tasking” where focus is devoted to one project over a short period of time. Provide them with feedback and recognize when projects are completed ahead of deadlines and put them in charge of tracking the number of micro-projects that meet quality specifications while completed within the deadline. This can be a tough balance as you want to provide them with ownership of their schedule and tracking their progress without coming off as “micro-managing.” Providing your employees with this feedback will appeal to their desire for flexibility, recognition of their impact, and need to visualize their contributions. Ultimately, this will also enable you to better empower your team to meet quality and time requirements.

3. Optimizing “Seeking Recognition”

The Scenario: Their energy and enthusiasm is infectious. They are constantly stopping by to inform you of progress, a positive meeting, or the next steps that they are taking. They ask if they can help with anything. After several months on the project, you begin to notice that their enthusiasm is waning and they do not come by as much.

Deconstructing the Stereotype: Do not automatically assume that their appetite for recognition has been satiated. In fact, that appetite might be feeding off of frustration or a sense that their contributions are not valued. While it’s easy to write their initial behavior off as “attention-seeking”, “wanting their participation trophy”, or “looking for validation for just doing their job,” remind yourself that this teammate is trying to do more than just gain praise and that this trait is not just isolated to Millennials alone. 85% of United States workers like to have their work recognized and 52% believe that their work should be recognized more¹¹. Companies that spend >1% of their budget on recognition, see upticks in retention, engagement, and even financial returns¹². Recognition is good for everyone and there are appropriate ways to do this for Millennials that do not break the budget or take away from your work.

The Strategy: Recognition is a best practice for any generation and seems to be particularly effective for Millennials. In order to prevent too frequent updates, schedule weekly “pulse checks” with each member of your team where you can have unstructured time to build a relationship, share positive outcomes and receive praise, and problem-solve together. In team meetings, open each meeting with “shout-outs” where teammates are recognized for a specific contribution. Moreover, share positive feedback from a client or member of the team in emails to someone higher-up in the company and copy the individual receiving the feedback so that they know it is being shared. Additionally, when a milestone is met or a piece of the project is delivered on-time and in line with scope and quality expectations, or an innovative approach is developed, make sure to recognize that teammate for their efforts immediately. While these approaches may seem small, they make a tremendous difference in morale, build a culture of recognition, and validate the efforts of each team member.

¹¹ <http://blog.socialcast.com/e2sday-the-power-of-recognition-in-the-enterprise/>

¹² <http://www.globoforce.com/resources/research-reports/shrmgloboforce-fall-2012-report-the-business-impact-of-employee-recognition/>

4. Optimizing “Disloyalty”

The Scenario: They compare your company and work environment to others, sometimes to the detriment of the team and morale. Several members of the team have left for the “greener pastures” that other companies may offer – higher salary, more interesting projects, a distinct culture, etc.

Deconstructing the Stereotype: Millennials recognize that information is power and come from a culture where sharing information is part of your currency. Your employee may not be deliberately causing rifts or internal strife and may intend to provide a service to the team and share ideas for enhancing the overall effectiveness of the team and company.

The Strategy: Be direct in acknowledging the value that benchmarking against competitors can bring. However, also raise the importance of ensuring benchmarks and comparisons are valid and take into account the full spectrum of information. Tap into this employee’s skill, desire to provide a service, and informational capital by empowering them. Give them the responsibility of benchmarking across a number of factors, competitors, and companies and connect them with HR or another member of the team who may be able to guide their efforts. Have them highlight the valuable distinctions that your company and team provide as well as identify prospective gaps. Collaborate with them to craft a narrative and design solutions. This approach emphasizes transparency, builds on the desire for information, and empowers the team member to work with you to capture best practices that could make your team more effective, increase morale, and strengthen retention.

5. Optimizing “Privileged”

The Scenario: They are undaunted by speaking up in meetings to share their unvarnished ideas, opinions, and feedback. One of these ideas is to allow more flexible work schedules through telework and remote arrangements.

Deconstructing the Stereotype: Technology and the evolving workforce offer more opportunities for flexibility without constraining the organization. Your employee’s request may be grounded in the best of intentions and may contribute to a more productive work environment. Imagine if your hour roundtrip commute could be devoted to work. Imagine if time putting on professional clothing and your morning work preparation activities could be spent on actually delivering the work. Your employee may be tapping into an alternative that could lead to enhancement in time, production, and morale.

The Strategy: Show appreciation for these ideas and coach the employee through how to build an effective business case. Empower them to satiate their desire for information by benchmarking telework against other companies. Have them build a strategy for how this effort could be implemented and what the benefits and potential drawbacks are to implementing this approach. Should you adopt this approach, begin by piloting it. Perhaps have the employee telework a day a week and see if you can compare their productivity to days when they are in the traditional office environment. Be transparent about telework expectations and adapt the plan as needed. Doing so may ultimately foster a more productive environment and empower your team

to continue to offer creative solutions, share innovative ideas, and appreciate the flexible work environment.

Adapting for Today's Workforce

As the world's workforce evolves, project managers need to consider how to modify the traditional employee ecosystem to attract, retain, and develop talented personnel. While the traditional 9-5 may still work for many, a growing percentage of the workforce values flexibility, opportunities for growth, and desires to make an impact. This workforce is increasingly using technology to alter the employment landscape and aid them in delivering results faster and better.

In addition to time, scope, quality, and cost constraints, today's project manager must also consider constraints and opportunities for managing a modern workforce seeking flexibility, growth, impact, and recognition. Flexible schedules, remote work, training and professional development, communications and connection, and the use of technology are all strategies that can be employed to more effectively manage Millennials. Leveraging these tools appropriately can not only retain and grow a talented foundation of employees, but also can mold tomorrow's leaders, foster a more productive team, and adapt employment practices to meet today's needs in attracting, retaining, and developing today's employees.

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Evan Piekara currently works in management consulting as a Senior Manager for BDO Public Sector. Evan supported the launch of BDO's Public Sector Management Consulting practice helping government and nonprofit organizations develop strategic plans, performance metrics, and manage change efforts. In this capacity, Evan has collaborated with a range of executive leaders and managed diverse teams to deliver results to complex challenges often under tight timelines. Evan currently holds over 8 professional certifications including Project Management Professional (PMP), Change Management Specialist (CMS), Certified Conflict Manager (CCM), Six Sigma Lean Professional (SSLP), Total Quality Management Professional (TQMP), and a Strategic Organizational Leadership Certification (SOLC).

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