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The Myth of the Millennial

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THE MYTH OF THE MILLENNIAL

By Tanner Hafen and Matthew Fudge

Millennials get a bad rap, whether it's in the press, the workplace, or everyday conversation. The widespread view of millennials, as articulated by business author Simon Sinek, is that they "are tough to manage... entitled, and narcissistic, self-interested, unfocused, lazy."¹ This perception has significant consequences on the ways millennials and other generations get along, not only because it can affect the way older generations view millennials, but also because millennials are becoming increasingly fed up with it.

Just Google search
"Buzzfeed Millennials"
to get an idea of how
millennials are feeling.

In the workplace, these perceptions and millennials' responses to them can lead to misunderstandings and negatively impact the way all employees interact and perform which doesn't help anyone.

So, what should be done about it? Should companies and workers get used to this generational gridlock? The answer is a definite, "No!" However, the solution will depend on companies and individuals—including millennials—taking strides to successfully understand and integrate millennials into the workplace. Everyone involved should try to better understand each other and let that understanding influence the way all people treat each other for the better.

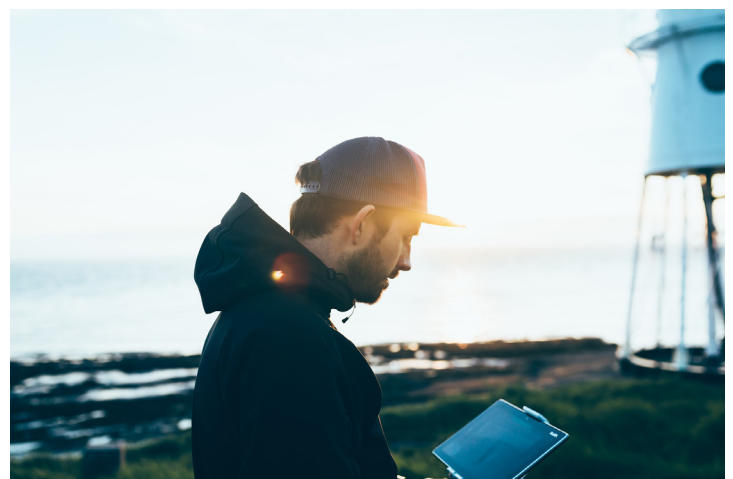
What We Know and What We Don't

The world millennials have grown up in is a very different one than the world of their parents and grandparents. The emergence of the Internet

and new forms of mass communication, the War on Terror, global warming, a worldwide economic recession, the emergence of social media, as well as popular, "new" parenting styles and educational methods have significantly impacted the way millennials see the world and live their lives. Because of these influences, millennials are bound to be different in some ways from previous generations, as Generation Xers were bound to be different from Baby Boomers.

However, many of the negative perceptions about millennials are likely just that, perceptions. According to Jeff Bednar, Assistant Professor of Organizational Leadership and Strategy at the Marriott School, "...the reality is, there is still debate about whether generational differences are even real and meaningful, and whether differences that do exist are simply manifestations of life stage or age effects."² Though our environment does have a significant effect on us, older coworkers may have acted a lot like millennials (more than they'd care to admit) when they were the same age.

To support his point, Professor Bednar cited a study done by IBM that found that Baby Boomers and Generation Xers were more likely to be concerned with work/life balance than millennials, and that Baby Boomers were the most concerned of the three generations in the workforce with solving social and environmental challenges.³ These issues are the same issues millennials are often accused of being overly concerned with in the workplace. Interestingly, these results suggest that many



measures seen as catering to millennials benefit everyone.

What Businesses Can Do

Whether the workplace was ready for them or not, millennials are now the largest generation in the workforce.⁴ Though this change has presented challenges, businesses have made strides in addressing the perceived attitudes and desires of their millennial employees. Many of these considerations go a long way in making the workplace a more positive place for everyone.

A significant part of businesses efforts to better integrate millennials is in an increased emphasis on Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and Psychologically Healthy Workplaces (PHW). CSR is the idea that companies should address social issues through philanthropic donations, volunteering, and environmental responsibility.⁵

A Psychologically Healthy Workplace is what it sounds like – a workplace that emphasizes work-life balance, employee development, health and safety, and employee recognition.⁶ (To learn more about efforts to create a PHW, read this issue's article, "The Perks of Being a Young Professional" by Elisabeth Andersen.) CSR and PHW can have many beneficial effects on businesses and their employees. For example, CSR and PHW efforts, especially when combined, create companies that are more attractive places for all employees,⁷ increasing employee satisfaction at work.⁸

Other efforts businesses have undertaken to increase millennial job satisfaction is to address

millennial employees' apparent desire for frequent feedback and a sense of purpose. Shad Morris, Associate Professor of Organizational Leadership and Strategy at the Marriott School, suggests that managers can provide these provisions in regular, short interactions according to (what he calls) a "RAP framework." Simply put, this entails recognizing (R) the employee for their contributions and progress, aligning (A) their goals with the goals of the organization, and providing purpose (P) by discussing with the employee the impact their efforts are having on the world, this company, their family, etc.⁹ This framework (or something similar) can provide needed guidance, correction, and encouragement to any employee.

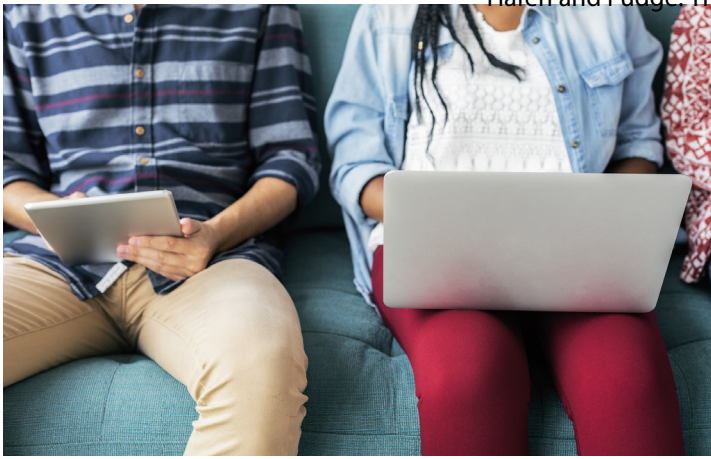
R Recognizing Contributions
A Aligning Goals
P Providing Purpose

What Millennials Can Do

Like any relationship, the one between employee and employer involves some give and take; millennials, not only businesses and management, have an important role in their successful integration into the workforce. Millennials can do their best to counter some of the negative perceptions about them by showing how their unique upbringing can be an asset to businesses.

Millennials can change plenty of negative perceptions. An especially prevalent one is that millennials are "needy." Part of the reason for this specific perception is that managers frequently complain about how often millennial employees seek guidance and clarification. Though businesses can address this perceived desire for constant feedback—as already discussed—millennials can do their part to adapt to management styles that are less feedback driven. They can do this by responding to their manager's efforts to help them gain independence with





attempts to encourage millennials to take appropriate risks and to become more comfortable with ambiguous instructions.

Though the negative perceptions for millennials still need to be overcome, millennials can highlight the distinct advantages they have at work because of their upbringing thus, changing) negative perceptions. A prime example of this is the positive impact on millennials of growing up with new forms of technology. This exposure to technology helps millennials achieve higher tech literacy than other generations.

But, that's not all. Gary Small, a neuroscientist at UCLA has mapped differences in the brain's neural pathways between generations, and found that those who are more comfortable with technology are more proficient in areas like multitasking, responding to visual stimulation, and filtering information.¹⁰ In a business world that is increasingly fast-paced and data-driven, millennials can use these skills to show their value and set themselves apart in more positive ways.

In Conclusion

The suggestions are just a beginning of what can be done by businesses and millennials to better integrate millennial employees into the workplace. These efforts will go a long way in making the workplace a more inviting place for the newest generation of workers. What's more, millennials' perceived differences and desires will benefit all employees, regardless of their generation.

In the words of Professor Bednar, "having greater purpose in our work could probably benefit all of us! And wouldn't greater work/life balance do us all a little good?"¹¹

In summary, all can try to be more understanding to their ever-changing group of coworkers, and all should embrace the positive changes this understanding will bring.

Notes

¹ Simon Sinek - *Millennials in the Workplace*. Anonymous. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ldh8E6LCLhM>.

² Hafen, Tanner and Jeff Bednar. 2017. *Correspondence with Jeff Bednar*

³ Baird, Carolyn. "Myths, Exaggerations and Uncomfortable Truths.", last modified -12-20, accessed Mar 13, 2017, https://www-01.ibm.com/common/ssi/cgi-bin/ssialias?subtype=XB&infotype=PM&appname=GBSE_GB_TI_USEN&htmlfid=GBE03637USEN&attachment=GBE03637USEN.PDF.

⁴ *Millennials Surpass Gen Xers as the Largest Generation in U.S. Labor Force* 2015. Pew Research Center. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/05/11/millennials-surpass-gen-xers-as-the-largest-generation-in-u-s-labor-force/>

⁵ Post, Jennifer, "What is Corporate Social Responsibility?" *Business News Daily.*, accessed Jun 8, 2017, <http://www.businessnewsdaily.com/4679-corporate-social-responsibility.html>.

⁶ "APA Center for Organizational Excellence: Creating a Psychologically Healthy Workplace." APA Center for Organizational Excellence., accessed Jun 8, 2017, <https://www.apaexcellence.org/resources/creatingahealthyworkplace/>.

⁷ Catano, Victor M., and Heather Morrow Hines. 2016. "The influence of corporate social responsibility, psychologically healthy workplaces, and individual values in attracting millennial job applicants." *Canadian Journal Of Behavioural Science / Revue Canadienne Des Sciences Du Comportement* 48, no. 2: 142-154. *PsycINFO, EBSCOhost* (accessed March 9, 2017).

⁸ Simone R. Barakat, Giuliana Isabella, João Maurício Gama Boaventura, José Afonso Mazzon, (2016) "The influence of corporate social responsibility on employee satisfaction", *Management Decision*, Vol. 54 Issue: 9, pp.2325-2339, <https://doi.org/10.1108/MD-05-2016-0308>.

⁹ Hafen, Tanner. 2017. *Interview with Shad Morris*.

¹⁰ Hershatter, Andrea and Molly Epstein. 2010. "Millennials and the World of Work: An Organization and Management Perspective." *Journal of Business and Psychology*; New York 25 (2): 212. doi://dx.doi.org.erl.lib.byu.edu/10.1007/s10869-010-9160-y. <http://search.proquest.com.erl.lib.byu.edu/docview/196907420/abstract/69DE40807B6C4F09PQ/1>.

¹¹ Hafen, Tanner and Jeff Bednar. 2017. *Correspondence with Jeff Bednar*.