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# Learning From Millennials in the Legal Workspace



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Whether you are a baby boomer (someone born in the years from 1946 to 1964), a member of Generation X (someone born in the years from 1965-1982), or a lawyer who is older or younger, you have or will have experience working with members of the millennial generation. The millennial generation is about to be the largest living generation of adults. They will be leading our profession, setting professional norms, and influencing the practice of law for decades to come. Sometimes maligned for being lazy and/or unreliable, so-called millennials bring a new perspective and new skills to a legal workspace. These new cultural norms can sometimes cause friction but may also be opportunities for growth for lawyers of any age.



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## Who Are the Millennials?

To understand millennials, we must start by identifying some general characteristics with an understanding that these are generalizations and there are vast differences between individuals. Millennials (someone born in the years from 1982-1996) were raised in a child-centric culture, which for many of them means they are confident, optimistic, and inquisitive.<sup>1</sup> They celebrate diversity, cannot live without technology, and respect authority without being in awe of it.<sup>2</sup> They also believe in work/life balance and expect flexibility, both in where they work and how they work. Millennials assume they will change jobs several times during their careers both for economic reasons and to stay engaged in their work. They have an entrepreneurial spirit.<sup>3</sup>

## What This Means for Your Workplace

Bringing in a new generation of workers can mean different things for different law firms. Despite the differences in organization size, culture, management, and mission, one thing is the same: all legal workplaces “need to master the art of multigenerational issues for internal success and external (client) understanding.”<sup>4</sup> For larger law firms like Nixon Peabody LLP, learning to “speak millennial” has been going on for a few years with for-

mal trainings and strategic approaches to hiring and retaining young talent, according to partner Armando Batastini. “We value diversity of all types, and recognize that a diversity of ideas and backgrounds creates a better business. With this fundamental in mind, we have consciously sought to understand and integrate millennials as an important part of our present and future.” But if you are a solo practitioner, part of a small law firm, or work in a governmental institution, you can also benefit from understanding and appreciating millennials. You may learn something from millennials that might make you happier and more successful. Millennials are a driving force behind workplace change. Here are three ways in which you might have something to learn from the millennial approach.<sup>5</sup>

## 1. You May Have Been Wrong About Work/Life Balance

Historically, many lawyers have struggled with achieving a work/life balance. One article explains, “The problem is that law school embeds a ‘no boundaries’ mindset about the practice of law...Associates in large firms know that mentality continues into practice...In most larger firms, associates are still working in a kind of extended boot camp, where it’s ‘let’s see who can survive the pressure.’ But for many, the alternative – starting their own firm – can be a nastier edition of the same game. Struggling to make a living. Then seeing the work expand to take over their lives – without an escape clause. They just have to keep working harder as the firm grows, because ‘I’m making good money, my name is on the door and I have some prestige. I can’t give that up!’”<sup>6</sup> Some lawyers work through their vacation or have a hard time taking time off. In one study of 11,671 associates from large law firms, about 40 percent of the associates had unlimited vacation days. Of the firms included in the study that had official policies, the norm was a generous 20 vacation days per year. However, the survey found only about a third of associates used all their vacation days.<sup>7</sup> Despite the demands of clients, networking, professional development, and technology, there is a path forward to greater work/life balance and millennials are leading the way. “Survey after

**Allowing millennials to offer trainings on legal technology or join/start/lead a technology committee in the office can be one way to allow millennial lawyers to feel like they have ownership of their work, meet others in the firm that they might not know, and become more engaged in the firm itself.**

survey...show that what millennials most want is flexibility in where, when and how they work.”<sup>8</sup>

One survey explains this further by stating, “millennials strive for work/life balance...they want time for themselves and space for their own self-expression. Overall, the dominant definition was “enough leisure time for my private life” (57%), followed by “flexible work hours” (45%) and “recognition and respect for employees” (45%).”<sup>9</sup> The legal profession, with high rates of anxiety and substance abuse, should embrace the ethos of flexibility which is being ushered in by millennial workers. Sometimes “how we have always done it here” needs a revamp. The increasing number of millennials in the workplace may be the catalyst for much-needed change in the concept of work/life balance in our profession.

## 2. Technology Is Good


Understanding, managing, and harnessing technology are vital skills for the modern law office. Forbes Contributor and CEO of Legal Mosaic Mark A. Cohen states, “Technology is transforming every segment of the legal ecosystem including its: (1) workforce; (2) division of labor; (3) economics (4) structure; (5) providers; (6); skillsets; (7) career trajectories; (8) education and training; (9) customer expectations; and (10) culture.”<sup>10</sup> Knowledge of technological innovation and demonstration of technological competence is not just a good business practice but it is an ethical requirement in most states.<sup>11</sup> Could your firm use a technology audit? The good news for your legal practice is that many millennials possess comfort with technology.<sup>12</sup> While comfort with technology is not necessarily the same as com-

petence in law practice management software or cybersecurity protocols, it may be a good place to start. Not all young people have well-developed technology skills, but they may have a level of comfort with a variety of technologies which can benefit the entire law firm or office. Millennials also do not generally have the same attitudes and barriers to the adoption of technology that older generations can have.<sup>13</sup> Allowing millennials to offer trainings on legal technology or join/start/lead a technology committee in the office can be one way to allow millennial lawyers to feel like they have ownership of their work, meet others in the firm that they might not know, and become more engaged in the firm itself.

## 3. Law Is a Business. But Mission Matters!

Millennials want meaningful work. We all do, right? The difference is that this generation is not afraid to question authority about the purpose of assignments.<sup>14</sup> Roger Williams University School of Law Dean and Professor of Law Michael J. Yelnosky characterizes this mission-mindedness as to be expected, “I think the millennials are a product of their environment. They are faced with an uncertain economy characterized by employers who are not loyal to their employees. It seems only natural that they might respond by looking for both balance and meaning in their work.”


Millennials are not just looking for meaning, in some cases they are demanding it and are not afraid to leave a workplace that does not fit their needs. “The typical worker will have 12 different employers in his or her lifetime, and... younger workers are statistically twice as likely to leave their jobs in search of




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better offers.”<sup>15</sup> One way to retain millennial workers is to engage your employees and keep the mission of your law firm in mind. According to John Feldmann, as cited in a Forbes Human Resources Council post stated, “Millennials don’t just want a job; they want to know their work is making a difference. How do their performance goals relate to the goals of the organization? How will the organization’s goals impact society? Employers who are able to demonstrate to millennial employees the economic and social relevance of their work will experience far more engagement and far less turnover than those who can’t.”<sup>16</sup> Even though law is your business, law can also be your mission. As Thomas C. Grella states in *Lessons in Leadership: Essential Skills for Lawyers*, “Part of a good strategic planning process for any law firm must include determining the values that the organization recognizes as important to its success... without shared values some members of the firm could easily see their positions as just jobs. They may not be invested in the firm’s future or may feel that they are mindlessly following orders.”<sup>17</sup> If your firm doesn’t have a mission statement or a strategic plan, perhaps it is time to start the process of writing these foundational documents.<sup>18</sup> If you do have a mission statement or strategic planning document, you may still be able to benefit from increased focus on the mission by actively discussing the firm’s shared values at meetings. Author Grella suggests you “allow time for others to offer input and suggestions, ask questions, and voice concerns about how the firm can live up to its values and still achieve its mission.”<sup>19</sup> According to statistics from the Rhode Island Bar Association from May 2018, there are 1083 Bar Association members born between 1982 and 2004

of a total of 6743 members. Attracting, engaging, and retaining millennial lawyers is important for your practice and the future of your practice. Allow this generation’s mission-minded focus to benefit your firm.

### Conclusion

We have presented three ways in which millennial-thinking can be positive and could be embraced by your legal workplace. While not every suggestion may be applicable to you and your law firm, the most important takeaway from this list is that it is a springboard for starting a critical conversation in your office about multigenerational thinking and flexible inclusivity. While oft maligned, millennials can bring a new perspective and new skills that can make your firm more relevant, more culturally aware, and more profitable.

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### ENDNOTES

- 1 Ursula Furi-Perry, *The Millennial Lawyer*, 22-23 (2012).
- 2 *Id.*
- 3 *Id.* at 31.
- 4 Michah Buchdahl, *Law Firm Management Struggles with Multi-Generational Issues*, *L. Prac. Today* (Mar. 13, 2013), <http://www.lawpracticetoday.org/article/law-firm-management-multigenerational/>.
- 5 Briana Steinhilber, *7 Ways Millennials Are Changing Workplaces for the Better*, *NBC NEWS: A BETTER WAY* (May 18, 2017), <https://www.nbcnews.com/better/business/7-ways-millennials-are-changing-workplace-better-ncna761021>.
- 6 Dustin Cole, *Why Lawyers Really Struggle for Work-Life Balance*, *ATTORNEY AT WORK* (Feb. 28, 2018), <https://www.attorneyatwork.com/successful-firm-why-lawyers-struggle-for-work-life-balance/>.
- 7 Gayle Cinquegrani, *Lawyers Need Vacations. Case Closed*, *BLOOMBERG LAW: BIG LAW BUSINESS* (May 25, 2018) <https://biglawbusiness.com/lawyers->

## Invitation to Exhibit

### Rhode Island Bar Association Annual Meeting June 13 & 14, 2019

Where can you get a two-day exhibitor space at an event attended by over 1,500 attorneys and judges for only **\$900**? At the **Rhode Island Bar Association Annual Meeting** on Thursday and Friday, **June 13 and 14, 2019** at the Rhode Island Convention Center in Providence, that's where. And, since requests have traditionally exceeded the supply of available exhibit spaces, immediate applications are encouraged.

Exhibitor space is available in the comfortable and high-visibility location immediately in front of, and surrounding, the entrances to all Annual Meeting seminar rooms. Serving as the site for all meeting food and beverage breaks, these are excellent locations for attracting attendee attention. Each space costs \$900. This fee includes a draped six-foot table, two chairs and two tickets for all meals, including: Thursday Luncheon Buffet; Thursday Awards Reception; and Friday Annual Meeting Luncheon.

Exhibit space is limited, and previous exhibitors receive location preference, but there are still some spaces available. Please note that sending in an application does not guarantee a space, as exhibit spaces are assigned based on availability and product and service mix. **Completed Exhibit Space Application Contracts are due no later than March 22, 2019.** Exhibit space assignment and confirmation occurs by April 5, 2019. Exhibit payment is due on or before confirmation.

**To receive 2019 Annual Meeting Exhibitor Application Forms, please contact the Bar's Director of Communications Kathleen Bridge by telephone: 401-421-5740 or email: [kbridge@ribar.com](mailto:kbridge@ribar.com).**