

8-21-2019

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Recommended Citation

Dahl, Dick, "Law School News: Millennial Law 08-21-2019" (2019). *Life of the Law School (1993-)*. 684.
https://docs.rwu.edu/law_archives_life/684

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August 21, 2019

Law School News

Millennial Law

Millennials are poised to surpass Baby Boomers as the U.S.'s largest living adult generation this year. They also comprise, by far, the majority of RWU Law's alumni base. What makes these lawyers different? And how are they changing the law?



August 21, 2019

Dick Dahl

We've all heard the labels that have been foisted upon the so-called Millennial generation.

- *"They're self-centered."*
- *"They're lazy."*
- *"They need hand-holding."*

There's just one problem with such generalizations, however: they're all inaccurate, according to those in a position to know.

"Millennials are very creative; they don't always necessarily do things in a traditional way," says Katie Ahern '07, director of the Business Start-up Clinic at RWU Law.

“They’re very mission driven,” adds Veronica Paricio, RWU Law’s assistant dean for career development. “They want work that’s meaningful and they’re not afraid to say what they’re feeling.”

It’s worth getting a firm understanding of what drives the Millennial generation, because it is steadily increasing its reach and power. And its impact on the law profession promises to be significant – and positive.

“They’re going to be great for the legal industry,” Ahern predicts.

According to the Pew Research Center, Millennials — those born between 1981 and 1996 (i.e., currently between the ages of 23 and 38) — are poised to surpass Baby Boomers as the largest living adult generation this year. This unique population also comprises, by far, the majority of Roger Williams Law’s alumni base.

“We have very good studies that indicate how this generation is different from previous generations,” notes Elisabeth Kelan, Ph.D., author of *Rising Stars: Developing Millennial Women as Leaders*. “On one hand, yes, there’s always the idea that this generation is very self-entitled; they want everything immediately, and so on. But on the other hand, that self-confidence can be really positive in [many] situations. It depends on the environment.”

Deep Patel, author of *A Paperboy's Fable: The 11 Principles of Success*, fleshes in several more Millennial characteristics:

- **Values-Driven.** Millennials need income as much as anyone, but not at any cost. Meaning matters; fairness, justice and societal impact matter. “Millennials care about a variety of social causes, including those related to climate change and social equality,” Patel notes.
- **Technological.** Millennials are a digital generation. “They were born when the internet, personal computers and cellphones went mainstream,” Patel explains. “As a result, Millennials are obsessed with technology.”
- **Collaborative.** Millennials “thrive on feedback,” transparency and opportunities to “collaborate with peers within and across teams,” says Patel.

Their idea of a career’s proper place in their lives also diverges from that of previous generations.

“The biggest change I’ve seen is that students come to law school now saying, ‘I know I don’t want to work 100 hours a week; I want a job that’s going to give me flexibility and autonomy, and will let me pick my own hours,’” says Paricio. “Their interests aren’t to be at a firm for 40 years and then retire as a partner. That’s not what they’re coming to law school to do. They come into their first job knowing it’s not going to be their last job.”

Paricio arrived at RWU Law in 2007, just before the Great Recession began to unfold, causing law firms to drastically retrench – and prompting young potential law-school students to look elsewhere for stable careers. Those developments had a pronounced impact on law-school

enrollments, according to Paricio. They've also meant that the mostly Millennial student bodies of today are significantly different from those of 2007.

"These students *really, really* want to come to law school," she says. "They see all that negative press and say, 'I still want to go.'"

And collectively, the Millennial generation has begun to change society — and to change the legal profession as well.

"A Little More Niche"

Third-year RWU Law student Sebastien Voigt, who has a job lined up this year as a public defender in New Jersey, is one of those who came to law school with a specific goal in mind. A 28-year-old Brooklyn native, Voigt worked for a couple of start-ups in New York after receiving his undergraduate degree in 2013 from Brooklyn College. He became interested in law from interacting with lawyers in those companies. They told him that if he wanted to have a legal career, nothing is as initially important as getting into court.

"I knew that I wanted to litigate, because it was a skill set that I believed I had and that I could polish," he says. "But it was also because litigators have more flexibility in the job market, as opposed to transactional attorneys or attorneys who do not know how to appear in court." As a law student, he realized that he is most interested in criminal defense work and has become an active member of the school's Criminal Defense Clinic. He's already mapped out a general career plan: five years as a public defender – then segue to something else.

Another 3L, Rachel Feiden, came to RWU Law precisely with the goal of doing transactional law, and she's stuck to that plan. "I do think people are coming to law school today with a narrower path," says Feiden, a native of upstate New York with a 2016 undergraduate degree from Iona College. "With the tighter job market, you need to think a little more niche and then try to become as experienced as you possibly can" in your field of choice. While working in RWU Law's Corporate Counsel Clinic last year, Feiden landed an externship with the Boston Red Sox, fell in love with Boston, and hopes to land a job in a firm there that handles transactional law.

Patrick Burns, a 3L and articles editor on the *Roger Williams University Law Review*, came to law school envisioning a practice in real estate or wills and trusts. A native of Barrington, R.I., and graduate of Fordham University, he landed a part-time job with DeSisto Law Offices in Providence, a firm providing defense work for municipalities. He will be joining them full-time after completing law school.

"I think that younger attorneys, at least through law school, are more focused, given what the employment climate is," Burns says. "My goal, even before I decided to go to law school, was: how can I get good, sustainable employment? I think that's something that younger people have to be more intentional about and plan for more now than folks in other eras maybe had to."

Wearing Many Hats

While many Millennial students are focused from the start on one particular area of law, others pursue law degrees to serve as tools to assist in the achievement of more entrepreneurial career goals.

A good example is Christopher Carreiro '15, a Swansea, Mass., native and town selectman who wears many hats. After receiving his J.D., Carreiro passed the bar in both Rhode Island and Massachusetts and launched his own practice, focusing on bankruptcy, probate and estate work, and real estate. That practice, however, is just part of a broader work mix that includes a real estate brokerage; an online business selling equipment and merchandise to police, fire, and EMS customers; and teaching as an adjunct professor at Bristol Community College. He also has his own weekly radio program, "The Third Degree at 3 with Chris Carreiro," on WSAR-AM radio in Somerset, Mass.

"I never wanted to work for anyone else," he says. "If you work for a law firm, where you have a requirement of so many billable hours and other requirements, it becomes extremely stressful and there's no real disconnect between your personal life and your work life."

Dan Reilly '15, a classmate of Carreiro, expresses a similar sentiment. He remembers the reaction he got in 2012 when he told friends and colleagues of his decision to go to law school. Hailing from a family of lawyers, Reilly was completing his senior year at Providence College at the time, while also serving as the youngest member of the Rhode Island General Assembly.

"When I told people I got accepted and was going, there was not a single lawyer I knew who said, 'Great decision, congratulations, it's going to go well,'" he recalls.

But Reilly forged forward, and today he too maintains more than one livelihood. After law school he worked in a Providence law firm for six months, handling mostly trust and estates work. In the course of this work, he began to notice that many clients moving from the Northeast to the Southeast needed help from lawyers in other states to draft documents and make court appearances for them. Spotting an opportunity to launch his own venture, Reilly would Google suitable lawyers in the locations where the clients were moving, then email or call them to gauge interest and perhaps reach an agreement. He and the lawyers would email the needed documents back and forth and, at the end, he'd mail the lawyer a paper check. After a time, however, the process just seemed too inefficient.

Reilly's solution? A lawyer-matching service called Legably, which he launched last year. "It's a marketplace to connect lawyers with other lawyers for short-term projects," Reilly explains. "You can hire them, manage their work, and pay them, all through one platform, and the platform makes money by handling the transactions from the lawyers posting the work via a small service charge."

"I don't want to call it the work of the future, because people will always have careers," Reilly notes. "But people are increasingly looking for flexible freelance income and the ability to toggle on and off an income stream – and to do so in as flexible a manner as possible."

Reilly has since left the law firm, is working full-time as an associate at Acertitude, a Providence executive-search firm, in a non-legal capacity, though he says his legal experience has proven to be helpful in negotiating compensation plans and employment agreements. In addition, Reilly maintains his own law practice, which focuses on providing legal services to medical professionals.

At 34, Greg Rosenfeld '11 has been successful in fulfilling his pre-law-school goal of becoming a criminal defense lawyer. He now has his own firm in West Palm Beach, Fla. He keeps tabs on other Millennials who have become lawyers and does believe the legal profession is changing as a result.

“It’s a decisive time in our country right now,” he says. “You have a lot of young attorneys out there who have gotten into law for all the right reasons and are out there trying to fix problems. I would also say the legal field is developing and moving in the right direction – going from a good-old-boys club to one where women are stepping into positions of power and that’s fantastic for the legal field.”

Lawyer Stories

While not a Millennial himself, Ben Gold '06 has had ample opportunity to study lawyers in that category. After receiving his J.D., Gold worked in the legal departments of two city housing authorities -- in New Haven and then Danbury, Conn., and is now assistant executive director of North Central Massachusetts Housing Authorities in Leominster, Mass. Talking with some lawyer friends in 2017, he was struck by the realization that all attorneys have stories to tell about why they decided to go to law school, and that it might be interesting to develop a platform for lawyers and law students to share those stories.

The result was Lawyer Stories, an Instagram page (now on Facebook as well) which had, by the beginning of 2019, grown to include 500 such stories. Lawyers and law students submit their stories and a photo or two, Gold edits them if necessary, and generally posts one per day. The Instagram site has more than 15,000 followers; Facebook has topped 1,000; and the result of all this growth, Gold says, is a broad-based community of lawyers—the majority of whom are Millennials. “It’s actually developed into a community,” says Gold, who recently launched a closed Facebook group called Lawyer Stories Alumni Network. “I know that people have connected with each other off of it.”

So what do these young lawyers seem to have in common?

“I think a lot of them like to build their own brand, be their own person,” he says. “They like to use social media as a tool and sort of weave it within their work.”

Also, he says, Millennials seem to value work flexibility — the ability to not be tied to set working hours. “I think they want to work when they feel most motivated and at the peak of their best working hours, rather than having a rigid, eight-to-six schedule. They also want the flexibility to work outside the office.”

Feedback and Chit-Chat

One common – yet demonstrably unfair – rap against Millennials is that they are overly “needy” people and in constant need of affirmation. Paricio explains that this is a generational misinterpretation of what, in fact, reflects a greater desire to be purposeful. “Whenever I talk to attorneys and they talk about Millennials,” she says, “I try to debunk that myth. I don’t think it’s fair to discredit people who are actually very motivated, and who are generally looking for feedback, not necessarily praise.”

Ahern, the Business Start-up Clinic director, adds that this desire for feedback is more broadly based.

“From my own observations working with students and up-and-coming lawyers from this generation, I would say they’re very good at self-reflection and self-development – more so across the board than I’ve observed with other generations of lawyers. It’s ingrained in them; they’re constantly assessing themselves and seeking feedback and trying to get better.”

Another critique involves Millennials’ perceived overdependence on technology. While Millennial lawyers tend to enjoy electronic networking, the argument goes, some are unwisely neglecting the more traditional ways in which lawyers connect with one another. This is partially reflected in declining membership in professional legal organizations.

While the number of lawyers in the U.S. is at an all-time high, bar associations everywhere are losing members, and there’s a belief that the growing presence of Millennials in the profession is one of the reasons.

In a May 2018 census, the American Bar Association reported that there are 1,338,678 licensed, active attorneys in the U.S. – a 0.2 percent increase since 2017, and a 15.2-percent rise over the past decade. Yet the ABA itself is losing members—between 2017 and 2018 its membership dropped by fully 4 percent — and the organization reported early last year that state and local bar associations are losing ground as well. A survey by the ABA’s Division for Bar Services revealed that nearly 60 percent of voluntary state bar organizations, for example, reported membership declines of between 1 and 10 percent.

Millennials’ tendency to network electronically, as opposed to face-to-face, is a characteristic of the generation and something that Paricio addresses when she talks to law students.

“The underbelly of technology and social media and things like that is that you might not get to know as many attorneys in person,” she says. “So we spend a lot of time working with students, getting them comfortable with the fact that lawyers are social beings and if lawyers don’t work on developing traditional communication skills in addition to the electronic ones – for example, hanging out at the courthouse and just chit-chatting with other lawyers – they might have a harder time getting referrals.”

Yet, on balance, Ahern is confident that the unique traits of the Millennial generation bode well for the legal industry.

“They’re always looking for a better way to get things done. They’re creative at solving problems,” she says. “So I think that, as people are looking at alternative ways to practice law, this generation will be big contributors.”