

## MILLENNIALS IN THE WORKPLACE: MYSTERY OR MAGIC?

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*Jeanne Charles Wood\**

Unlike no time in the past have we heard so much buzz about a generation than what we have experienced with those who came of age after the new millennium--commonly known as millennials. Concerning the workplace, the buzz centers around cross-generational interaction between baby boomers and the millennial worker. The contrast between these two generations has created a plethora of material for bloggers, writers, speakers, psychologists, training companies and other specialists in connection with workplace matters. In recognition of this dynamic, I had the pleasure of participating on a panel entitled, "Opportunities and Challenges Arising from the Millennial Workforce" at the 2018 AAA Labor Conference.

The panel was composed of labor and employment professionals, both millennial and non-millennial, who provided a perspective about their day-to-day experiences and knowledge of the millennial worker. I (baby boomer), along with co-panelists Eddie Clopton, Esq. (Gen-Xer), then-Assistant General Counsel with Exelon; Professor Mark D. Gough (millennial), of Pennsylvania State University's School of Labor and Employment Relations; and Sarah Saez, M.A. (millennial), a union representative with the United Food and Commercial Workers Local 135, presented information to heighten the awareness of the impact millennials are having on the workplace including the traditional labor/management relationship. This article will seek to continue the discussion by conducting a deeper examination of the mindset and work values of a millennial worker. Additionally, some suggested methods for sustaining balance and resolving conflict will be presented.

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## I. THE MILLENNIAL PROFILE

While there are no absolutes when it comes to describing a group of people, the information that follows is based on recent data and opinion expressed in the litany of information on the millennial topic. Certainly, many of the characteristics described can be attached to those from other generations depending on their personal experiences, culture and family dynamic. Millennials are generally described as someone born between 1984 and 1996. Baby boomers were born between 1946 and 1964. Sandwiched between these two generations is Generation X whose members possess some of the traits of both generations and, therefore, have not created the shift that has occurred with the millennial worker.

Millennials were raised by baby boomers whose parenting style (which differs quite a bit from their workplace style) gave children a voice. Millennial children were consulted for meal choices, often turning the preparer into a short order cook in order to satisfy the household. They were consulted regarding the family vacations, attire, hairstyles and a variety of other decisions. The school systems, by extension, adopted similar philosophies. This choice and voice nurtured a generation of what some say are self-centered individuals who think first about their microcosm of existence instead of how their actions might relate to those around them. While being quick to point out that they are not to blame, some experts on the topic go as far as describing millennials as “entitled,” “narcissistic,” or “lazy.”<sup>1</sup> According to the National Institutes of Health data as published in a *Time Magazine* article entitled, “Millennials: The Me, Me, Me Generation,” “the incidence of narcissistic personality disorder is nearly three times as high for people in their 20s as for the generation that’s now 65 or older.”<sup>2</sup> Such data confirms the notion that managing millennials creates a challenge for those in the baby boomer generation.

Imposing corrective action on a millennial may be difficult. While exceptions exist, millennials often challenge authority instead of deferring to it. For example, due to the litigious nature of baby boomers, school systems are loath to monitor or try to correct poor behavior for

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<sup>1</sup> Gosse, David (2017, January), Transcript of Simon Sinek Millennials in the Workplace Interview, Retrieved May 13, 2019, from <https://ochen.com/transcript-of-simon-sineks-millennials-in-the-workplace-interview>.

<sup>2</sup> Stein, Joel (2013), “Millennials: The Me Me Me Generation,” *Time Magazine*, Retrieved May 13, 2019, from <http://time.com/247/millennials-the-me-me-me-generation/>.

fear of being charged with a harassment or other civil rights lawsuit. No longer is the high regard for authority a common staple in the education system with students literally yelling at teachers; calling their parents to launch an all-out attack on the teacher; or, once in college, complaining to the dean because a professor demanded excellence.

A colleague who teaches Composition at an institution of higher learning told me about a student who filed a complaint with the dean because she would not accept the student's *handwritten* assignment where the instructions specifically required a *typed* submission. The real kicker is that the dean entertained the complaint... (sigh). On more than one occasion, I have heard stories of students yelling at professors in class or addressing them in ways such as, "What's up dude?" (and this was to a female professor)... (sigh). It is these scenarios that reflect the erosion of traditional behavioral boundaries and protocols that find their way squarely into the middle of the employer-employee relationship. In managing this relationship, many are scratching their heads (or perhaps pulling out their hair) in an effort to understand what must seem completely mysterious and even mystical to those finding themselves in supervisory or even co-worker situations with a millennial. To navigate this journey, it is helpful to understand how millennials view the world.

The general rule is that people work a job or pursue a career for economic gain or sustenance for life. Millennials view money differently. In general, millennials are marrying and buying real estate later than their baby boomer counterparts. Millennials are more likely to have a dog than a child. They don't enjoy the economic security their parents experienced. While they have more education, they also have more debt. Under the weight of this debt, millennials are not able to secure mortgages and often rely on support from parents either through living with them or receiving a financial supplement. Additionally, the cost of living has increased significantly since their parents came of age.

When I purchased my first home in 1988, only two years out of college, it cost me \$50,000 for a starter home in suburban Chicago. By contrast, depending on the locale, my adult daughter who graduated college in 2013 (yes, I'm a millennial parent) will need to spend 4-5 times the amount I spent for a starter home while her entry-level salary in 2013 was not much more than mine was in 1986 when I entered the workforce. It is no wonder that millennials are stuck in a virtual purgatory between childhood and true adult independence. Because of

this reality, money and, thus wages, do not have the same meaning that it had for prior generations that used money to elevate their standard of living or readily moved into independence. It's just not the same playing field for millennials. Hence, millennials seek employment that makes them happy rather than to simply to earn a paycheck.

By the same token, because of their supplemented existence, they tend to enjoy a relatively comfortable lifestyle. Many are unwilling to forego the comforts to which they became accustomed to under their parents' roof for the sake of independence. They may literally stay financially adjoined to their parents through use of the parent's cable tv, cell phone, share ride and health care accounts. The proverbial weaning off process that once occurred shortly after high school, is now taking place well after the college years and can be met with resistance. I recall a friend (this really is a friend's story, not mine) who told me that her daughter, upon graduating with her bachelor's degree and challenged with now paying her own way, told her mom (my friend), "Thirty is the new eighteen," referring to the age when children become responsible for themselves. I think this statement sums up the mindset of many recent entrants to the workplace. Mysteriously to us baby boomers, they don't see a problem with it. Therein lies the challenge with acclimating the millennial worker. The challenge becomes how best to integrate an individual who might not see himself or herself ready for all the responsibility of adulthood, into a workplace that expects them to be high functioning adults capable of managing the demands and expectations of the workplace.

## **II. THE MINDSET OF A MILLENNIAL WORKER**

Employers should understand that millennials do not have a deep sense of loyalty to any job. In my view, the reason for this is two-fold. One, rare is the workplace that rewards employees for longevity with promises of a pension until death and all types of other fringe benefits during life. The millennial worker may have a parent who experienced a layoff, reduction-in-force or downsizing that was all too common in the 1990s and the first decade of the new millennium. They may have seen the parent suffer through the shock and deep disappointment that comes after such an experience. The message to a millennial (or others for that matter)... don't commit so deeply to any one employer because you could end up broken. Another reason that millennials do not have a deep sense of loyalty to any particular job or employer, as discussed in more detail below, is that a millennial worker will not stay in an

employment situation where they feel uncomfortable. Thus, understanding the mindset of a millennial worker means understanding some of their common traits that may manifest in the workplace.

Millennials are confrontation averse. A millennial would prefer to email or text you a complaint or concern than to drop by your desk and discuss it. When forced to initiate a perceived confrontation with a millennial employee, it may not end well. A relative who is a manager in the banking industry explained her utter amazement when she critiqued the attire of a young worker by letting her know that it was inappropriate. The young lady began to cry. We discussed how that was such a no-no in the 1980s when we entered the professional workforce. Similarly, in a 2012 *Tribune* article by Rex Huppke, he describes a focus group where millennials were asked various questions. One millennial told the focus group leader that his boss had yelled at him. The millennial explained that the boss had not raised his voice or used profanity, but he was “really firm and he disagreed with me.”<sup>3</sup> If I could use an emoji here, it would be the one with the really big round eyes.

Next, convenience is required. Think about it. Millennials have come of age during a time where everything is literally at their fingertips. They can “swipe right” for a date. They do not need to carry books or paper. It’s all in the cloud. During their developmental years, they did not have to physically go to a library to conduct research or even wait for stores to open. By virtue of the internet, there is perpetual access to everything. Thus, landing in a workplace that is rigid and inflexible will quickly become a source of conflict which could lead to unhappiness for both the employer and the employee and end with a severing of the relationship.

On the other hand, millennials have had a magical impact on the world. Millennials are extremely innovative. They think differently than their progenitors, which has produced tremendous benefits for society. While many say social media is a blessing and a curse, when used appropriately, baby boomers would likely agree that it has made the world smaller by allowing friends and family members to stay connected. Grandparents can watch special events in which their grandchildren participate either by still shot or video. Siblings, classmates, co-workers and other groups stay in touch and feel that

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<sup>3</sup> Ask Rex Huppke: I Just Work Here (2012, November), “Millennials struggle with confrontation at work,” Retrieved May 6, 2019, from <https://www.chicagotribune.com/business/ct-xpm-2012-11-19-ct-biz-1119-work-advice-huppke-20121119-story.html>.

they remain a part of each other's lives through interfacing with a device. Businesses, organizations and governmental entities all benefit from the window opened by social media. The millennial innovation has also led to the use of the "app" allowing us to pay bills, buy concert tickets, order flowers, schedule appointments and now, along with a long list of other things, even buy a car through an app.

Millennials care more about the environment than past generations. They are more accepting (not just tolerant) of cultural and lifestyle differences. With their tremendous sense of social justice, they are readily becoming more politically active. Just take note of the students who survived the Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High School shooting. They became a part of the political process in order to effectuate change. Millennials are also seeking and winning political office in significant numbers, signifying that they want to be part of the solution to our social ills. It is also likely that this same sense of social justice has led to the recent increase in law school enrollment. As reported by Above the Law, a website that provides news and insights on developments in the legal community, after reaching a 40-year low in 2017, law school enrollment is starting to creep back up with first-year law student enrollment having increased by 2.9% since 2017.<sup>4</sup> Assuming that the motivation for pursuing law as a profession aligns with the traditional calling of seeking to do good, these statistics support the idea that millennials are mobilizing to make a difference in the world around them.

### III. MILLENNIAL VALUES IN THE WORKPLACE

Our value systems are the driving force behind our motivations. Motivation becomes the driving force behind our behavior. Understanding the values of our workplace partners is critical to managing a cohesive working relationship. In keeping with this process, it is important to understand what work means to the millennial.

First, millennials work to live, not live to work. While discussing this topic with a digital media professional who is a millennial, I was told "Work should not feel like jail!" Perhaps this explains the reason why Digital Nomadism is on a sharp incline. Digital Nomads *choose* to be "location-independent," embracing a technology-enabled lifestyle that allows them to travel domestically or internationally

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<sup>4</sup> Zaretsky, Staci (2018, December), "Law School Enrollment Is Up for The First Time In Nearly A Decade," Retrieved May 10, 2019, from <https://abovethelaw.com/2018/12/law-school-enrollment-is-up-for-the-first-time-in-nearly-a-decade/>.

while continuing to be employed. MBO Partners, a company that provides resources to help promote the effectiveness of the independent contractor relationship reported in 2018 that 4.8 million independent workers describe themselves as digital nomads. The reporting suggests that while baby boomers enjoy this option, millennials “will also continue to flock to this lifestyle, inspired by the opportunity to pursue their travel interests while working.”<sup>5</sup> Career opportunities that allow this workstyle foster the work and quality-of-life balance valued by millennials.

For those millennials who work in a traditional setting, many see the workplace as an extension of home life. The environment should be comfortable with access to snacks, entertainment and flexibility. Attire is relaxed to the point that there is no longer such thing as “work” attire and “play” attire. They are one in the same. Of course, this can be quite challenging in more conservative industries like law, finance and banking. Even work relationships are much more relaxed. Gone are the days when titles were used, or even certain boundaries of familiarity protected. The line between personal and professional relationships begins to blur with more informal modes of communication like texting making the line of inappropriate conduct easier to cross.

The millennial worker desires purpose-driven employment. If you speak to millennials about the career path they desire, you might be met with uncertainty. While a millennial might not be able to specifically identify what they want to do for the rest of their lives, what they do know is that it must have purpose. I’m not sure where this deep-seated motivation comes from, but it may be attached to the highly me-focused trait which is commonly associated with millennials. Perhaps it is because their baby boomer parents explained the “why” so often that purpose and reason are concepts embedded in their mental DNA. Whatever the explanation, employers would do well to avoid potential clashpoints by feeding this desire rather than suppressing it. Clashpoints are “an area where the generations are likely to collide, but each has a valid point of view.”<sup>6</sup> Cultivating the need for purpose could lead to all around employment satisfaction.

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<sup>5</sup> MBO Partners (2018), “A State of Independence In America Research Brief, Digital Nomadism: A Rising Trend,” Retrieved May 13, 2019 from <https://www.mbopartners.com/state-of-independence/research-trends-digital-nomads/>.

<sup>6</sup> Crosby, Jackie (2016, July), “Debra Arbit of BridgeWorks on helping companies resolve clashes among generations,” *StarTribune*. Retrieved May 11, 2019, from

KPMG is one company that has embraced this reality by launching a firm-wide Higher Purpose initiative which, as the company explains, is “a comprehensive effort to strengthen our people’s pride, engagement, and emotional connection to the firm by encouraging them to recognize and celebrate the meaning and positive impact of the work they do.”<sup>7</sup> Keeping the workplace values of the millennial at the forefront of employee relations is a necessary component to advancing harmony in the workplace. It is this concept that supervisors, human resource, labor relations and dispute resolution professionals need to understand in order to effectively manage the unavoidable province of conflict in the workplace.

#### IV. SUSTAINING BALANCE AND SOLUTIONS FOR MINIMIZING CONFLICT

Having explored both the *mystery* and *magic* of the millennial worker, it is only fitting to identify solutions for sustaining a balanced and healthy existence in a multi-generational working environment. First, I think it is important to learn from the lessons associated with, what some refer to as, failed parenting strategies. We must recognize that as much as we want our children to have great self-esteem and be confident in their truth, we must also own the fact that children will not always be children. *Time Magazine* explains the phenomenon this way: “The problem is that when people try to boost self-esteem, they accidentally boost narcissism instead. ‘Just tell your kids you love them. It’s a better message,’ says Jean Twenge, a psychology professor at San Diego State University, who wrote *Generation Me and The Narcissism Epidemic*. ‘When they’re little it seems cute to tell them they’re special or a princess or a rock star or whatever their T-shirt says. When they’re 14 it’s no longer cute.’ All that self-esteem leads them to be disappointed when the world refuses to affirm how great they know they are.”<sup>8</sup> Hence, the high rate of job dissatisfaction reported among millennials.

The goal is to raise confident and balanced adults who will contribute to society in a productive way demonstrating their individual gifts and

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<http://www.startribune.com/a-conversation-with-debra-arbit-of-bridgeworks-helping-companies-resolve-clashes-among-generations/387870212/>.

<sup>7</sup> KPMG Purpose, (n.d.), Retrieved May 11, 2019, from <https://advisory.kpmg.us/services/hr-people-change-services.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Stein, Joel (2013), “Millennials: The Me Me Me Generation,” *Time Magazine*.



talents. We must recognize that children are the future entry-level employees; frontline employees; supervisors; consultants; captains of industry and leaders. They need to be cognizant of their value but also the value of those that can impart wisdom. That means that while thinking outside of the box is great, respect for certain institutions must remain. These institutions include the rule of law, respect for those in authority, respect for one another, honor and tradition. These principals are critical to maintaining order among a society of diverse and unique individuals who are required to collaborate in order to accomplish any task or advance society as a whole.

Second, perhaps we need to reset our standards and measurements. In other words, go back to basics. Preparing our future adults does not start when they enter the workforce. It starts in early childhood. When I was in elementary school, good character was just as important as academic achievement. There was an entire list of conduct traits on the report card. For example, “follows instructions,” “plays well with others,” “pays attention,” and so on. A deficiency in any of these areas required just as much accountability as getting a poor grade in Math. It may be worthwhile for the business and education communities to come together to help steer the process of developing youth for their future careers. Instilling the values we want to see demonstrated in future workers must be cultivated early and comprehensively by all stakeholders.

Next, to manage the current multi-generational challenges, employers should develop a toolbox of techniques that can be implemented depending on the work cultural and climate. In the 1980s, Total Quality Management (TQM) was a method for cultivating a workplace where all employees become vested in resolving conflicts that arise with the long-term goal of maximizing productivity and profitability for the company. Six Sigma is a similar concept. I worked in such an environment prior to becoming a lawyer and believe that this workstyle, in large part, shaped my desire to practice as a dispute resolution professional after practicing law. Whether it is one of these tools or another, the key is to adopt a workplace philosophy that nurtures mutual investment in the worker and the company.

Another approach to sustaining balance is identifying and talking about clashpoints head on. Millennials and baby boomers should agree that instead of living in their respective extremes, each group can move their ideologies closer to the midpoint by recognizing that there is value in both points of view. In other words, all workers can

learn from each other without forcing a particular idea or philosophy. Employers could create “buddy” relationships with cross-generational workers. Relationships promote cohesive existence and can be used to help each group coach the other on its views and perspective, with the goal of achieving more understanding and less conflict.

As referenced earlier in this article, the panel on “Opportunities and Challenges Arising from the Millennial Workforce” at the 2018 AAA Labor Conference had the audience participate in a values and influence assessment exercise. The exercise resulted in bringing an awareness of their work values to the participants. This, hopefully, provided some insight on how to interact with others who might have different workstyles. In other words, to know yourself is the first step to successful interaction. A values assessment can help employers understand indicators such as motivation, leadership style, communication style and expectations. Early identification of these indicators can be the basis for developing a working relationship that promotes job satisfaction and performance.

Finally, training is always paramount to placing individuals on notice about what is expected and how to go about meeting desired behavior. Ultimately, multi-generational workers must embrace the value each can contribute. Doing so should bring deeper understanding and perhaps remove the mystery and highlight the magic of the millennial in the workplace. To the baby boomers I say, one thing’s for sure... things will never be the same.