Leverage the Strengths of Millennials: Finding Common Ground and Hidden Opportunities

by Avery Blank and Scott Westfahl

A baby boomer and a millennial offer specific steps for moving from a misunderstanding of millennials to leveraging the incredible talents of the next generation of legal leaders.

Introduction

To give hope, energy, and ideas to legal talent leaders, lawyers, and law firms, we offer new perspectives to counter the persistently over-hyped narrative that millennials have landed from Mars and are unlike any previous generation in human history. Writing together as a baby boomer/millennial team, we instead find common ground and opportunities. We also push back against the army of consultants and experts whose stark portrayal of intergenerational differences often does more harm than good. We have all attended presentations on generational differences that are highly entertaining but in the end leave us discouraged and daunted rather than energized and hopeful. It is time for a new, constructive thread in this dialogue.

It is frustrating when others are quick to judge you, even before they meet you. How would you feel if you were labeled "entitled" or "lazy" when you have worked tirelessly to get to where you are today? Perpetuating and feeding off generalizations is dangerous because it can close people off to the opportunity to understand others and, in turn, find common ground or appreciate differences. Stereotypes about millennials are counterproductive to professional relationships, organizational culture, and business. Law firms have the opportunity to embrace millennial differences and leverage diversity to help their organizations.

Here is our roadmap to pivot from misunderstanding to opportunity. The baby boomer here (Scott) will challenge stereotypes about millennials to help older people see that millennials aren't actually from Mars. He will offer a language and framework where common ground can be found. As a millennial, Avery will build upon this common ground and offer insights about how we can build intergenerational bridges. Together, we will suggest specific steps for leveraging the incredible talents of the next generation of legal leaders.

The Baby Boomer's Perspective (Scott)

When "experts" proclaim that millennials are like nothing the world has ever seen, they tap into powerful psychological forces. In particular, older generations are seeking validation that their way of working and viewing the world remains valid. By portraying millennials as deeply misguided, older generations develop an excuse to disengage (believing that "these kids today are lazy, disloyal, and needy, so I don't care what they say or want"). Within law firms, we hear partners call young associates "kids" as they dismiss associates' views about how firms should adapt to face the critical societal and technological changes that millennials recognize more clearly than law firm partners do.

Let's tone down the rhetoric and find common ground.

First, an analogy. Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) assessments help teams by providing a non-judgmental language and framework to discuss team members' differences in communication and working styles. Studies show that team success is highly correlated with creating "psychological safety" and allowing team members to contribute equally and fully. Teams help create psychological safety by using MBTI concepts to reflect without judgment and resolve issues arising out of individual team members' different communication and working styles.

We need a similar language and framework to describe what is happening across generations in the workplace. Charts that simplistically lay out what each generation "wants" or expects at work often create more resentment than understanding. Conversations devolve into whether a generation's preferences are justified, fair, and/or "right." By contrast, because the MBTI framework asserts that type "preferences" (e.g., introversion vs. extraversion) are naturally distributed across the human population, type preferences and related differences are not viewed as right or wrong. They just "are." People accept them and then work to resolve differences.

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Foundationally, a non-judgmental way to speak about generational preferences can begin within a deeper understanding of the psychology of motivation. Consider this: When we see a play by Shakespeare, we realize that even though centuries have passed, "after changes upon changes we are more or less the same" (quoting Paul Simon for our baby boomer audience). All that Shakespeare understood about what motivates people remains true today. In Daniel Pink's book *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*, the three powerful intrinsic motivational factors identified — mastery, meaning, and purpose — apply across generations and have huge implications for everyone in the workplace.

Since that is true, let's begin a new dialogue about generational preferences with this first insight rooted in common ground:

> *What motivates each generation is more or less constant. We all want to do meaningful work, have ownership and be included in important decisions about it, and develop our talents so that we are maximizing our strengths.*

Let's account for generational preferences in a different, less judgmental way.

If motivational factors are constant, what explains differences in workplace generational preferences? We offer this second insight:

> *While motivational factors are constant, what does vary over time is the social — and increasingly technological — context in which people are able to act upon their motivations to optimize them.*

Let's illustrate this through a debunking of a few key myths about millennials:

> ***Myth one****: Millennials are "needy" and want to be coddled/encouraged with positive feedback in a way that prior generations have not been.*

Let's face it, we ALL crave feedback, particularly when it is positive. We pick on millennials because they are simply more vocal about their needs. Why are they more vocal? The answer lies in the social and technological environment in which millennials experience feedback and act upon their motivational need for it. In other words, we aren't experiencing a shift in the basic human need for feedback, reassurance, or understanding. Rather, millennials and the social media tools they are developing are leading us all in a significant shift towards a more transparent and feedback-driven world. Millennials aren't more needy than past generations; they are simply more empowered to ask for what they want.

When I was a young lawyer, I never received useful feedback. All I received was the generic, annual conversation about my salary and maintaining or increasing my hours. I was frustrated. I wanted to know what I could do to improve as a legal professional and where I stood on the path toward partnership. I wanted to be able to make career decisions and daily choices around my work that would align with my long-term interests. But with no feedback, it was nearly impossible to get it right. My needs were not different from the needs we see expressed today by millennials.

What is different? Millennials have grown up in the most feedback-intensive environment in world history. From their teachers and parents, they have been receiving quick corrections, information, and communication. Their environment has shaped their expectations. It is encouraging to see that millennials have moved us closer to a world where people with a growth mindset can request and receive feedback and realize more of their human potential. With feedback, they have been able to make choices about where to spend their time, based upon a clearer understanding of their natural talents.

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Naysayers suggest millennials are unable to accept negative criticism and accept failure because they all received trophies just for participating. Thus, millennials aren't "tough" and have false assumptions about their own value, skills, and abilities. This simplistic view ignores how self-aware people are about their own worth, even when being awarded a trophy, and, more importantly, how peer-based feedback works in the digital age. Whether or not parents, schools, or athletic teams award trophies, millennials know the score and keep score publicly in their online lives in ways that are much more Darwinian and "tough" than anything prior generations had to experience. You have to be a tough young person to survive any kind of failure in the world of Snapchat and Facebook. Trophies are put on shelves and in closets — but being tagged or not tagged, friended or unfriended, liked or not liked when you post or express yourself all happens very publicly and is daunting. Millennials can handle tough feedback. To survive your teen years, you need to develop such a thick skin that you might become insensitive to feedback and more risk averse than you should be because failures are more public now than ever before.[1]

> ***Myth two**: Millennials are too inexperienced to know that their opinions are not yet very valuable and their push to rate and review everything is arrogant and unhelpful.*

Older generations often resent millennials' continuing push to be heard and to rate and review everything, as they believe millennials have a lot less to offer than they actually do. But bad ideas come from lots of places, and it is false that age always correlates to wisdom. Further, provided that diverse teams get along and can work well together, it has been definitively proven by University of Michigan Professor Scott Page and others that diverse teams solve complex problems more effectively than homogenous teams. Millennials are correct that the best teams will include and listen to their input and perspectives, and they are continually engineering new ways to ensure their voices are heard in the marketplace even when traditionally they have been ignored. In our specific recommendations for firms, we address how this is a terrific opportunity for firms.

> ***Myth three**: Millennials are less loyal to organizations than previous generations.*

[1] One millennial interviewed in a CNN special report last year noted that she has a three-page, single-spaced list of rules for "selfies" and will not post a new selfie without ensuring that it complies with all of those rules. Anderson Cooper seemed stunned by this information, but fellow millennials on the panel confirmed that even if you are the most popular person in school, the day after you post what your classmates think is a poor selfie, you fall immediately to the bottom of the school social order and are ridiculed. Again — you need a tough skin and a cautious outlook to survive in the digital age!

Changing the World Through Raising Their Voices

by Scott Westfahl

Recently, while teaching in our Harvard Law School (HLS) Executive Education "Leadership in Law Firms" program, I polled a group of 45 law firm leaders from around the world. They all agreed that they would never try a new restaurant without first reading online reviews. Then I asked how many of them had ever written an online review. Only two had. "So who's writing the reviews?" I asked. Blank stares. "The millennials you've been complaining about," I explained. "And why do they write reviews?" More blank stares. "Because in the digital age, they realize that their ability to give direct, timely, open feedback motivates change. Their voices are heard, and the restaurant improves service, or food, or parking or it goes out of business." Indeed, the food revolution we are experiencing in U.S. cities is substantially attributable to market transparency through social media feedback and information sharing that is driven by millennials. My final point to the law firm leaders? That since they are in a service business, they are incredibly fortunate to be bringing in a generation of new lawyers who strongly believe in optimizing client service through feedback and analysis, and who will minimize the risk of disruption by constantly adapting to changing business conditions and client feedback!

Gaining the Competitive Advantage

by Avery Blank

When I was acting as an Expert Advisor for the Bloomberg Law and Stanford Law-sponsored Women in Law Hackathon, we were developing our presentation to pitch to the panel of judges. Most of the partners on the team assumed we would use PowerPoint. But the other advisor on our team and I knew of Prezi, a modern presentation software that helps you better tell a fluid story than traditional slides. Our team put together a presentation that was eye-catching, engaging, and different from the other eight teams. Having knowledge of modern products gave us a competitive advantage. Clients want to hire firms that are aware of modern trends and will utilize the best technology to win their case. Millennials can offer insight on the latest developments that can keep a business at the forefront of its industry.

Millennials are frequently criticized for being less "loyal" to organizations and employers. Such judgmental language is both incorrect and destructive, as older supervisors can use this stereotype as an excuse not to invest in or mentor younger people. Again, millennials are looking for meaning, mastery, and autonomy in their work, not dissimilar to previous generations. One colleague who was given access to years of data from the *American Lawyer* magazine's annual mid-level associate survey found that the three most highly correlated factors in whether associates were happy were (1) interesting work (meaning), (2) partner behavior (mentoring, coaching, developing mastery), and (3) flexibility (autonomy).

Since those factors hold steady across generations, what accounts for this perception of disloyalty? The answer again lies in the social context in which millennials are able to act upon their motivational needs. Today, there is incredible labor market transparency through which millennials can quickly compare their current job positions to alternatives, and apply online in an instant.

By contrast, when I was practicing law in Washington, DC, in the early- to mid-1990s, it was incredibly difficult for associates to learn about alternative jobs other than by fielding calls from headhunters who were paid large commissions to try to place us in similar positions at a different law firm. For years, the only place we could spot in-house or government legal jobs was through the "Help Wanted" ads printed weekly in the back pages of the *Legal Times* newspaper (which we would sneak into the law firm library to review once the partners had gone home for the night). Later, an entrepreneur in Washington started to publish a monthly mimeographed newsletter that aggregated alternative legal jobs. We paid him $30 per month for a subscription to his *Attorney Jobs* newsletter. My point? We weren't more loyal to our firms — we simply had far less information to compare opportunities and find new ones than millennials now enjoy. The great news? That means that law firms and other organizations are under increasing pressure to provide better working environments for their associates and employees. The accelerating pace of law firm investment in professional development for associates arises directly out of the increasing transparency in the market for top talent. All of this has been driven by millennials who are leveraging available technology to the great benefit of us all.

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Myth four*: Millennials have a very short attention span and are constantly distracted, unlike older generations.*

This myth is harder to debunk because there is at least some element of truth to the idea that millennials are heavily device-dependent. But again, we need to look at motivational factors and realize that this gap is not as large as some would like to claim. We all become addicted to the immediate gratification that comes from checking email, receiving texts, and feeling like we are the center of the universe. We find meaning when people are reaching out to us or "liking" what we post. We demonstrate and express our personalities and strengths through social media, and have autonomy over what we choose to share and how. Millennials are simply more masterful at the available techniques to do so, and thus arguably more addicted. But let's be very careful about casting the first stone. We are ALL frustrated and bemoan the lack of attention we see in meetings when people of all ages are checking devices constantly (or, in my case, in the classroom when students or executive education participants of all ages cannot help but check their email constantly). I have seen older law firm leaders check their email and take phone calls during *their own* presentations to associates — sending the wrong message about what behavior is allowed in their firms. On this charge, it is up to all of us to do better — and perhaps for millennials to develop technological solutions to forcing devices out of meetings in order to sharpen attention and focus!

The Millennial's Perspective (Avery)

Millennial professionals want to make an impact at our respective organizations. We are driven by our desire to find meaning and purpose and master our craft. True, many millennials want to make an *immediate* impact and thus quickly find meaning, purpose, and mastery. The quick pace of society and technology in which we have grown up has us wired to want to be effective members of our organization without delay. Here are a few things millennial professionals need to help them achieve their goal of being effective and impactful team members in the quickest way possible:

To bring our whole selves to work

Unlike older generations, millennials do not see a stark contrast between their professional and personal lives. We do not believe we have to sacrifice one for the other. Millennials believe their professional and personal selves can coexist. We do not want to check our personal lives at the door when we walk into work.

Deloitte research reveals that many professionals are not their authentic selves at work because pressure to conform still exists at many organizations. This concept is called "covering" and involves downplaying aspects of yourself (that may relate to gender, race, age, sexual orientation, disability, socio-economic background, political affiliation, or citizenship) or your natural tendencies to fit into what you perceive as the corporate culture.

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No one, including millennials who place particular importance on diversity and inclusion, wants to "cover." An associate who voted for Donald Trump does not want to censor his words in political conversations out of fear his coworkers will judge him. An African-American woman wants to feel like she can wear her hair naturally and not have people say it is untamed or unprofessional looking. A young man doesn't want to constantly be making excuses for denying an invitation to lunch with his colleagues because he cannot afford to eat at the expensive restaurants they patronize. Millennials do not want to spend time and energy being someone they are not. We want to be authentic without being judged.

When millennials can be their whole selves, they can be more productive and successful. We are not using energy to suppress what we might not want others to know about us. In being more productive, we can better find meaning, inspiration, and satisfaction in our work. It is when we find these things that millennials add tremendous value to their organization. For millennials to feel comfortable being their whole selves at work, we need law firm leaders to model the behavior — to not be afraid to bridge their professional and personal lives and be authentic and vulnerable.

A flexible workplace

Millennials grew up with technology enabling them to do almost anything anywhere at any time. Technology allows us to work in a way that works with both our professional and personal lives.

Millennials want work-life integration. We want to be able to leave the office to take our sick child to the pediatrician or work from home while the plumber is fixing a water leak. Millennials do not want to hide what they are doing. We want to be able to tell our manager what we are doing without fear of consequences, or we want a manager who empowers associates to have control over when, where, and how we work. Millennials want to be honest without the repercussions.

To be clear, millennial professionals want flexibility, not less work. For better or worse, technology has made all of our lives easier in some ways and harder in others. While technology allows for flexibility, it also allows us to do more in less time. Millennial professionals are not lazy. We are empowered with the tools to add great value, but only if we can work with an organization that values flexibility and makes us feel comfortable exercising the option.

Have our voices heard and contribute

Today, there are many platforms that allow millennials to voice their perspective and ideas. We enjoy sharing, interacting, and engaging. We want to contribute in all facets of our lives. This is particularly true for professionals. We invested time and money to learn and get to where we are now. We have been taking in information for years. Now we, not unlike other generations, are chomping at the bit to give back, contribute, add value, and make an impact.

> *We want to speak up, not to hear our own voices but so that you can benefit from our ideas. In that sense, we want to be seen as thought partners, not workhorses.*

We want to speak up, not to hear our own voices but so that you can benefit from our ideas. In that sense, we want to be seen as thought partners, not workhorses. We want to work with you, not for you.

We want to feel comfortable speaking and sharing our thoughts and innovative ideas with managers, partners, and members of firm leadership. Many of us want to participate in client meetings, contribute to firm strategy, and be members of firm committees. Our knowledge and expertise in modern trends, new products, and social media can help the firm make smart decisions that aid in its continuity and ability to thrive as a business. We want the opportunity to write for the firm blog or publish a journal article. We would like to be asked to speak at conferences and association meetings. We want to represent our organization and be part of developing the firm's thought leadership and business. When we have these opportunities to contribute meaningfully, it helps us to find purpose in our work.

Learn how to practically apply information

Millennials know how to acquire information. We grew up with Google as our best friend. But Google can only get us so far. Obtaining the information is only half the battle. To be valuable members of the firm, we need and want to learn how to properly apply the information.

To do this, we need to feel comfortable asking you questions and for you to be willing to answer them. We would love for you to say "pull up a chair" and then talk us through how information is used and put into action. Help us understand the steps to start developing our book of business and position ourselves to be on the partnership track.

One of the biggest takeaways I have learned as a Contributor with *Forbes* is that my readers want practical, actionable steps that will help them to advance in their careers. For example, people are intrigued to learn why it is important for millennials to be on boards, but a lot more people are interested in the steps for getting on a board before the age of 30. They want to know the *how* and spend less time on the *why*.

Similarly, at Harvard Law School all first-year students must take a cutting-edge Problem Solving Workshop during their January term. Students work in teams to simulate what actual lawyers would do in the middle of a legal case as it is happening. After the purely doctrinal, highly Socratic fall semester of their first year, the students are excited to receive advice, coaching, and feedback on real-world, practical ways that lawyers solve problems.

We want to feel competent and confident. This is particularly true for women, say Katty Kay and Claire Shipman, authors of "The Confidence Code: The Science and Art of Self-Assurance — What Women Should Know" (*The Atlantic*, May 2014). Research reveals women are generally less self-assured than men and that for women to feel confident they first need to feel competent. The book recounts an instance where a male senior partner at a law firm noticed that a young female associate "was excellent in every respect, except that she didn't speak up in client meetings." Recognizing that confidence is "an important aspect of doing business," the partner believed "confidence should be a formal part of the performance-review process." This, however, is not enough. Partners need to help associates develop the confidence, and this means arming us with the tools we can use to practically apply information. Firms undermine their ability to recruit, retain, and advance their associates — particularly female associates — and ultimately do business if they do not play an active role in helping their associates become competent and confident lawyers.

The more open you are to helping us, the more we will know and the more quickly we will know how to use the information. The sooner we feel we have mastered our job, the sooner we can add more value and provide more opportunities to help the firm.

So What Can Law Firms Do?

We recommend that law firms consider piloting a number of initiatives to improve intergenerational working relations and also to leverage more fully the great opportunities presented by the arrival of millennials as the majority of their workforce. Here are some specific ideas:

1. **Reduce the noise and drop the judgment**. Through leadership training for partners and professional development/career-related discussions with associates, law firms first need to create a common language and framework through which to discuss intergenerational differences and to reframe them as opportunities. Emphasize the common ground we have presented: that

what motivates human beings doesn't change over time. Point out and discourage specific, judgmental stereotypes and blaming so that partners aren't calling associates "coddled" or "kids" and associates aren't assuming that partners don't care about them simply because they don't always know how to communicate effectively. Be open and flexible to different, modern, and innovative ways of working and doing things.

2. **Empower your millennials**. As law firms have grown larger, an unfortunate result has been more hierarchy and even less autonomy for associates. Firms assume associates aren't ready to contribute meaningfully to client or firm discussions and strategy, and shut them out even more than used to be the case when leverage ratios were smaller. Firms should pilot initiatives that empower millennial associates, such as:

   - Giving them greater responsibility for hiring, pro bono, or charitable activities — including real leadership roles like leadership of the office committee on new associate hiring, for example;
   - Developing team and firm-wide engagement surveys and tools to give associates a regular, constructive way of suggesting how to improve internal firm processes or client service;
   - Asking associates to develop new associate training, lateral integration programs, metrics by which success should be measured, and regular reports by associates to management on associate preparedness and perceived gaps; and
   - Providing associates with opportunities to write (e.g., for the firm blog or an article for a journal) and speak (e.g., at conferences and association meetings) and represent the firm through channels and activities that can lend themselves to business development.

3. **Leverage the power of teams**. Unlike consulting, engineering, and even military teams, lawyer teams rarely employ even basic team tools that can substantially improve both client service and associate engagement. For example, HLS Executive Education is about to work with a major law firm to pilot a "toolkit" of simple team tools for formal team launches, mid-point check-ins, quick weekly surveys, and post-project debriefs. Teams using these tools will create for all team members more:

   - Meaning — through explicit sharing of client and team goals and celebration of goal achievement;
   - Mastery — through better coaching, mentoring, and alignment of assignments with team members' strengths; and
   - Autonomy — through better project planning, less work duplication, and better delegation.

Seeing partners and associates as teammates and providing the opportunity to share information will help associates develop the competence and confidence to be valuable, effective team players.

4. **Encourage people to bring their whole selves to work**. We know that law is a relationship-driven business, and we encourage lawyers to focus on building authentic, personal relationships with clients. But rarely outside of summer associate recruiting dinners do law firms explicitly promote the development of authentic, holistic relationships among their own lawyers. Some ideas:

   - Start a "re-recruit your own people" initiative. Firms spend so much time and effort on summer associates but so rarely invest later in "re-recruiting" well-performing associates. Partners don't talk to mid- and senior-level associates about why it's great to be a partner and what their lives are like outside of work. Partners aren't seeking ways to connect associates to opportunities and networks that could enrich their lives and tap into their broader strengths and interests. Loyalty can be significantly cemented when hierarchical barriers are lowered through such efforts.
   - Rethink the intranet and how lawyers' profiles are written and presented. Most lawyer internal biographies are written by or for the marketing department and are dry and external-facing. By contrast, professional firms like

Deloitte have created internal profiles of employees that present a more holistic view of the professional, to include even voluntary personal information that can shed light on professional qualities.[2]

Conclusion

People are incredibly adaptive because change happens all around us all the time. We are genetically designed to seek patterns and apply frameworks, lenses, and filters to make sense of change and quickly process the enormous amount of data coming at us each day. Unfortunately, our need to make sense of the world leads us to take shortcuts, develop stereotypes, and leave our implicit biases unquestioned. Worse, we sometimes leap to easy, convenient explanations for nuanced challenges and ideas. We want to believe in simple explanations and, admittedly, we sometimes enjoy placing blame on others and judging them to be the problem, not us. That is what we see happening all too often in discussions about intergenerational differences, particularly with respect to millennials. We hope that our thoughts and ideas here give people an alternative, more thoughtful way of considering and resolving such differences. It is time for a new way of thinking, based upon common ground, and aimed at leveraging the strengths that each generation offers in service of others.

About the Authors

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[2] Similarly, why couldn't a law firm's internal biographies include both professional and personal information, all searchable? In addition to the usual office/contact info/practice area/education/secretary information, a partner's biography could show the five clients he/she has worked with most over the past year; the three associates who have billed the most time with him/her and who can be contacted if the partner isn't available; the partner's own explanation of things to keep in mind when working with me or things that you should never do when working with me; information about the partner's outside interests, boards, charities, pro bono work, family, etc. Associate bios could include similar professional and personal information, as well as associates' statements as to what kind of work or other involvement they might be seeking. Buy-in might be easier than one might think. For example, years ago, a partner pulled me aside to suggest a similar system. He was upset that he would be meeting with a third-year associate the next day with whom he had worked on a deal nine months earlier. He didn't remember the name of the associate's wife and son and wanted somehow to be able to look that up because he cared but hadn't written them down earlier.