

Motivating the Millennials

By Bob Nelson, Ph.D.

Overview

The Millennials, the youngest generation of workers born roughly between 1980 and 2000, are entering the workforce in droves. An estimated 44 million are already working and 46 million more are to become a part of the workforce in the upcoming years ahead. This generation will come to dominate the workforce in both number and attitude and in the process reshape the work experience that all employees will come to have.

This massive workforce change presents challenges for every organization: The pending exodus of the Baby Boomers as 70 million retire over the next 10 years, the fact that 76% of Millennials currently working in your organization report they plan to leave as the economy improves, the fact that the cost of replacing professional employees is estimated today to be 1.5 times their salary (so says research from the national Society for Human Resource Management) – not even taking into account the opportunity cost of lost corporate knowledge of products and services, client relationships, process and procedures.

The conclusion is that your organization – and each of your managers -- needs to be skilled at attracting and motivating this younger new talent and even more skilled at holding on to that talent. What is important to this generation and how can employers best tap into the potential they have to offer at work? It's worth your investment of time and energy to see how best you can attract, motivate and retain Millennials in your organization today.

Profile of the Millennials. Known by a variety of names (Gen Y, the Nintendo

Generation, the Microwave Generation, Generation Next, the Net Generation, Generation Why, the Echo Boomers, and the Trophy Generation), this generation is well educated, has high aspirations for themselves and their careers, and a lofty sense that who they are and what they do matters. They love all things high-tech, have and expect instant connections, and are highly optimistic and socially responsible. The Millennials bring some tremendous skills and attributes to the workplace, which can at times be offset by perceived negatives of their generation:

Upsides. Millennials are techno wizards, not only at complete ease with today's technology, but avid users more so than any generation to come before them. They are quick learners and very resourceful—quick to look for answers from whomever and wherever those can be found. They are optimistic, hardworking and high-achieving, systematically setting and then achieving goals in rapid sequence.

While these characteristics can be found in high-achievers of any age or in any generation, they are common elements found in the majority of Millennials, not just a select few, and, better yet, these attributes all happen to be ideal characteristics most every employer needs from its employees in order to be competitive today.

Downsides. The challenges of working with Millennials are they tend to have an inflated opinion of themselves and are over confident, especially given their limited work experience. They expect to have meaning and purpose in their jobs from the very first day of work and look to be challenged – some might say entertained -- on a constant basis.

They want to earn more sooner and have both job status and respect, even before either has been earned. They need and demand instant feedback and praise on an ongoing, daily basis.

Other generations tend to react negatively to these attributes, feeling that Millennials are a generation of spoiled youth that need to wake up to the realities of work in which everything does not revolve around them. They need to “pay their dues” and earn the respect of their colleagues and management before they are trusted with greater responsibility. The authors feel, however, that if managers can look past the limitations and shortcomings of this generation they will have an easier time of tapping into the vast potential this generation has to offer.

Reframing Expectations. It should be expected that this generation feels very entitled and expects more from their employer. Again, this is a generation that has been raised to believe they are very special; a generation that has been told they can achieve anything. They have big dreams and plans and are in a hurry to achieve those. These are positive attributes, but they need to be channeled – and that’s the job of their managers (like it or not!). We’re not talking about abdicating your role as a manager. Or letting them do whatever they want – we’re talking about connecting their values and skill set to the work that you need them to do.

Everybody wants everyone else to be just like them: to value what they value, to act like they act and to conform to their norms. Just as easy to accept is the notion that we can allow people to be who they are, i.e., different from one another, but still keep a clear focus on the performance that is needed to get the work done. As is the case for the perceived differences in this generation’s work ethic, if you give a younger employee a reason to get excited, they will and do show an extraordinary work ethic and passion to get the work done—plus have fun in the process.

Keep the focus on the work and not on those things that may not matter anyway, e.g., dress, informality, working hours, communication preferences, etc.

In Bob’s research, the most motivating aspects to employees in general – and especially for this generation – are things that don’t cost much, if any money. Taking time to get to know them, asking their opinion, involving them in decisions (especially those that affect them and their work), creating socializing opportunities at work, focusing on learning and development opportunities—these are the motivational opportunities that any manager can deploy.

Motivating the Millennials

The keys to motivating this generation can be found in harnessing these aspects of the work relationship: Work Direction, Personal Development, Social Interaction, Feedback and Praise and Meaningful Rewards.

Work Direction. Millennials want and expect to be constantly excited about how they are spending their time at work. They are consummate multi-taskers, very capable of managing a multitude of activities at once. Easily bored, they want and need to be challenged, which is a blessing for managers who want to take advantage of their energy, skills and resourcefulness.

Provide clear work expectations, but allow Millennials to bring their own imprint to their jobs. Show them the “big picture” as to how their jobs relate to the mission, strategic objectives and core values of the organization. Ask for and use their ideas as much as possible or encourage them to pursue their own ideas when those have merit. This generation is very socially conscious, so linking them as directly as possible to the mission of your non-profit organization would be highly impactful, likewise for volunteering. For example, if the organization was Meals for Wheels, let the Millennial go on home visits to see directly

who the organization is helping and hear their appreciation or task them with helping to increase the organization's online presence to expand the reach of the organization's mission.

Personal Development. Millennials are committed to constant learning and personal development and growth and their manager can easily serve as a coach and mentor to meet them at that expectation. Talk in terms of "development opportunities" and in long-term time frames that exceed any given task or assignment. If you shape the context for your relationship with a Millennial as extending years into the future in how you will help them grow and gain experience they will be more likely not to look to change jobs at the first sign of frustration or disappointment.

A Millennial's manager needs to take the time to help coach Millennial employees and in the process show them how they can make a positive, meaningful impact at work. Redefine the timeframe for this generation's focus and show them how the things they are doing now can lead to things they want to be doing later. Talk with them about their interests and ways they can apply their skills; talk about career paths and needs of the organization; discuss opportunities that they can pursue, and help them get prepared to meet future opportunities.

Social Interaction. Millennials are very social and perhaps more peer-group oriented than previous generations. Most of their upbringing and educational experiences were in groups as was the bulk of their social experience, be it playing video games, group sports, or connecting on Facebook with their friends.

Use these generational preferences to your advantage by allowing them to work together on projects and assignments and set up frequent non-work social situations such as team-building activities and celebrations. If they tend to work best with others and the

way they get into a project is to talk it through with co-workers – great, let them do that. Make it clear what you need the end result to be, but let them bring the imprint of who they are to the task so they can be excited about the work and even have fun getting it done. You may not need to have your job be fun to get it done, but don't fault them if that's their preference.

Feedback & Praise. One of the most defining characteristics of this generation is their significant need for constant praise at work. This can be frustrating for other generations to understand, e.g., "I just told him last week that he was doing a good job, do I really have to tell him again?" and easy to dismiss as being a symptom of a generation whose parents spoiled them, showering them with constant praise and protecting them from any of the harsh realities of life. Instead, consider this perspective:

The Millennials have learned in times of change one needs a constant source of feedback (think "video game") to be on the mark and adjust their performance accordingly. Since job requirements and expectations are constantly in flux, yesterday's feedback may no longer be relevant today. Constant feedback, thus, is not to pump up a frail ego as much as to assure the employee is on track to continue to do good work day after day for their employer. Feedback and praise serve as reinforcement as well as a corrective mechanism for this generation.

By this we don't mean "micromanaging," a negative term that is almost always associated with an ongoing stream of negative feedback and corrections that a manager makes in working with his/her employees. No one feels micromanaged when his/her boss tells them in explicit detail what he/she most liked about a great job the employee did. As such, we'd recommend making it a high priority to provide greater and more frequent praise and recognition in a

greater variety of forms. Equally important, but far less often (quarterly?) would be having “developmental discussions” in which you can focus on ways the employee can improve. When you build on a strong foundation of ongoing positive feedback, employees are more likely to trust that you are on their side and thus be willing to accept constructive criticism from you when it is offered.

Provide frequent feedback based on the performance of Millennials, which might be a new perspective for many of them that grew up getting trophies even when their team lost or all “A’s” as a result of rampant grade inflation in schools. Provide a context for how their contributions relate to team and organizational goals, the organization’s customers and even to society. This systematic framing of feedback and praise takes it from being unearned hype to a practical information stream that can help shape desired behaviors and results you need from them. Finally, be authentic, providing direct and honest feedback and evaluations that can best help the Millennial to excel, trusting you, his or her manager all the more in the process.

Meaningful Rewards. Millennials want rewards that are meaningful and exciting to them when they have done good work or an outstanding job. This includes financial incentives, and, of course, EVERYONE wants to make more money, not just the Millennials. The Millennials, however, may have the least realistic expectations as to what is needed to earn more money (especially if their role model is P. Diddy, Lindsay Lohan or A-Rod) and that’s where you can help them out. Show them the skills they need to learn and the contribution they need to make in order to make more money, and show them the path as to how they can get there working for you in your organization.

This translates into discussions in which a manager needs to state things like: “I can’t

just pay you more because you want to make more. I can pay you more when you have increased your level of contribution to the organization that warrants earning more. Let’s talk specifically about what that would look like.” Then you can channel the person’s energy into things he or she can directly impact, such as implementing a cost-savings idea, or delighting an important customer, or helping to streamline a process or helping to bring in a new account and so on. Of course, there will probably be limits as to what they could ever be paid working for your organization, in which case you can focus on skills you are helping them develop that they can use over their entire career or to one day run their own business.

When this generation is acknowledged for doing good work, they have expectations that the reward experience be fun and exciting, not the same old boring thing the company has done for years. They increasingly expect rewards that are Creative, Varied and Personalized. Creative in that the rewards are fun and unique – not the same certificate, plaque or trophy that has been passed out to employees for years in the organization. Varied in that the employee has a choice and a say in what they can get when they are rewarded for doing a good job. The days of one size fitting all are long gone with it comes to employee motivation today. What thrills and delights one employee may be boring and insulting to another. Avoid this problem by allowing employees to choose what best motivates them – be it the latest electronic merchandise, an experience or a charity donation – when they have the opportunity to be thanked for having done a great job. Personalized in that the reward needs to be tailored to their unique interests, which can be a hobby, travel or a life experience.

Online Recognition & Rewards Can Work Best. In line with the times, the motivations of the Millennials can best be met with the use of an online rewards and

recognition program that provides a central online platform or portal for managing and motivating today's employee. Although it can easily be used for all employees, we find that such an online solution to be ideally suited for the Millennial generation of workers. It provides a high-tech solution that appeals to this generation of workers; frequent praise they desire in the form of online praisings from peers or managers around organizational objectives, core values, etc.; a social aspect of public posting of praises and the ability to pass praise they receive on to their social network via LinkedIn or Facebook; and maximum choice on the part of each employee as to how they will be rewarded with points they have earned.

The age in which "one size fits all" when it comes to motivation is long gone. In times past it was traditional for all employees to get the same thing at different milestones (e.g., years or service, employee of the month, retirement parties, etc.). Now the trend is to allow employees to choose those things that most motivate them when they're being rewarded for doing a good job. There are different ways to do this and, for example, you can have a variety of different programs/activities that can be used with employees (from on-the-spot awards to celebrations to education sabbaticals, etc). For example, at Walt Disney World in Orlando, Florida, they have well over 200 different employee recognition programs, tools and activities for driving desired behaviors and results.

You can achieve this same result, however, by leveraging some of the latest technology that is now available from the incentive industry. For example, you can have a dedicated website in your organization that can serve as a portal for all things having to do with recognition and rewards in your organization: strategic objectives, organizational mission, and core values you want to promote; public recognition, points

allocation, and individual rewards redemption; and ongoing communication, tracking and feedback reports, which can be used to enhance and improve the ongoing recognition initiative.

In addition, this solution allows you to diminish the costs of administration and personnel to your organization's recognition and reward programs, often replacing those incentive programs that have lost their significance over time. This solution allows ease in tracking and reporting of motivators in a way that helps to build a momentum of success in the organization that truly leads to the creation of a culture of recognition as part of being an employer of choice.

Summary

Chinese philosopher Lao-Tzu once said, "A journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step." This could be a conversation, an article, a conference call, a book, a presentation... perhaps even a mandate. You first need to raise the awareness of an existing or impending problem to get managers to consider taking action about it. And that problem needs to have an associated level of pain to warrant appropriate action. The greater the pain, the greater the pressure to take action sooner. Depending upon the management team you have, understanding and motivating the Millennials may take a series of steps for them to see the significance of the issue from a positive perspective for both themselves as managers and for the organization.

There are many reasons to be frustrated by the newest generation in the workforce, but a greater number of reasons to be excited about what they have to offer any employer that is willing to meet them at their expectations in the workplace. In many ways, what this generation wants is what *all* employees want. Perhaps now is the time to consider making your work environment more meaningful and exciting for Millennials and every other employee as well.

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