



Time for Law Firms to Learn from Millennials

Differences between generations are an age-old problem, and certainly one that law firms have struggled with for decades. Today it is the millennial generation (generally those between 20 and 35 years old) that is confounding senior lawyers. While some firms are slowly adapting, if reluctantly, others are digging in their heels and resisting change.

While law firms tend to be senior heavy, the proportion of millennial employees will continue to grow (some estimates put millennials at half the workforce by 2020), so it may be time to take a fresh look at the value that millennials can bring to the firm. The differences between baby boomers (the youngest of whom are now in their 50's) and millennials in some areas are stark but ultimately firms can benefit from adapting to some of the traits of millennials. While not all millennials will necessarily exhibit the full range of millennial traits, there is a risk that if law firms aren't able to attract and retain the best talent from the current generation it will create talent gaps in the future.

Based on our work with firms we see opportunities in five key areas: increased collaboration and enhanced social networks, taking advantage of a flat organization, enhanced feedback and mentoring, increased productivity through agile working, and commitment to service.

Collaboration and Networks

Law firms today are intensely focused on collaboration. They are adapting compensation systems, developing new metrics, and talking about it at every opportunity. The good news is that millennials prefer working in teams and want to collaborate. The key for firms is to capitalize on this energy and adapt internal working norms to take advantage of the natural work styles of millennials. It is important to recognize that the meaning of team today may not fit the traditional law firm definition. Giving an associate a discrete assignment which they then work on independently is not really teamwork, even if they are technically a member of a larger working group. Millennials want to be active members of teams, do meaningful work and understand how their work contributes to the overall goals for the effort. Client team, practice group and initiative leaders will need to adapt the way that they lead and structure teams to create more integrated groups with enhanced communication across the team.

Millennials' high degree of connectedness and networks present a major opportunity for law firms. This generation is far more networked than previous generations and they tend to gather massive information and contacts due to their access to and use of supporting technologies. Leveraging their networks and connectedness could allow millennials to be far more effective in generating work and solving client problems, particularly if firms can harness these skills/assets through their own supporting technologies. These tools can also be used to support and enhance internal collaboration efforts.

Flat Organization

Related to the preference for working in teams, millennials are more likely to prefer a flat organization. While law firms are theoretically relatively flat, the reality is that there is often an internal hierarchy based in part on title but more often on book of business. Perhaps as a result of the more informal relationships that millennials have had with educators, coaches and other adults throughout their schooling years, they are less likely to be influenced by this hierarchy and more likely to see themselves as equals. The positives are that they are more willing to be active participants, to speak up and to take initiative. Unfortunately, senior lawyers often perceive this mentality as one of entitlement, and thus, a firm's ability to leverage the positive aspects of millennials' high levels of engagement will require a shift in mindset. Senior lawyers will need to be open to listening to and considering the contributions of the younger lawyers. Firms will need to move away from the traditional law firm hierarchy and adapt their view of their relationships and communications with junior lawyers.

Feedback and Mentoring

Millennials want frequent feedback, although cynics might argue that what they really mean is that they want frequent **positive** feedback. Setting that aside, frequent informal feedback can be far more effective than formal annual review

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processes. Frequent feedback can be more specific because it is typically about a specific matter or task. And more effective because changes can be made more quickly if required and the feedback is not tied directly to promotion or compensation. This will require a willingness and discipline on the part of the supervising lawyers to provide constructive feedback, both positive and negative in a timely and balanced manner. Not only will firms need to train partners and senior lawyers in effective feedback and communication styles, they will also have to define expectations around the timeliness of feedback and prioritize it relative to billable commitments which often take priority.

Beyond feedback, millennials are also eager to seek out mentoring relationships and guidance from other lawyers. While senior lawyers often subscribe to the sink or swim method of career development, millennials want more guidance. Just as they might prefer positive feedback, they also don't want to make mistakes and therefore look to senior lawyers for the playbook. Much like the informal feedback, there is a real opportunity for firms to provide frequent, informal training and career guidance for younger lawyers. This creates a unique opportunity for firms to align junior lawyer contributions with the firm's longer term strategy and goals at an earlier stage in their careers, which is likely to increase their future success and ability to matriculate to partner.

Agile Working

While Gen Xers were the first to push the idea of work-life balance, which firms often interpreted, correctly, to mean 'less work', millennials tend to look at work-life balance in a different way. They often prefer flexibility both in timing and location of work. They are willing to work hard but on their own terms. Working at home periodically, or working different hours, may be appealing to them. Outside the law firm world companies are providing employees extra time during the work day for activities like fitness and community service, along with periodic or regular remote working opportunities. More and more law firms are looking at agile or flexible work environments, which ultimately may improve morale and productivity.

Service and Social Consciousness

Finally, one area where law firms and millennials are naturally aligned is in social consciousness and service. Many millennials seek service opportunities and look for meaning in their work. Law firms have long committed to pro bono and other service and community activities. Millennials can bring renewed vigor to firms' pro bono commitments, which in turn provides them with some of the experience and responsibility that they are looking for.

While retaining millennials, who are often eager to change jobs frequently, may be an ongoing challenge for firms, there are certainly traits of the millennial generation that firms can learn from and capitalize on. It is sometimes hard to embrace change, particularly when the old model worked well for so many of us. But instead of trying to make millennials look just like us, perhaps we need to think about how to take advantage of the traits that are uniquely theirs.

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