Millennials and Technology in Today’s Workplace

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Today’s multi-generational workplace poses many interesting communication and technology challenges. For senior generations, key among these challenges is the way Millennials use technology. What Baby Boomers and Gen Xers generally do not see, however, is the set of unique challenges Millennials encounter as they bring their exceptional technology skills into the workplace.

Millennials have been exposed to technology of various sorts since birth and have grown up within the digital world, adapting constantly to change. They do not view advances in technology as something they would choose not to learn, as their more senior colleagues sometimes do.

No prior generation has had to face the odd assortment of communication and technology transitions that Millennials confront daily. At home, social networking and text messages are their preferred forms of communication. At work, however, they are expected to communicate via email, telephone, and face-to-face interactions. This means that Millennials continually adapt to the communication styles of those with whom they work, even though they communicate more efficiently and effectively on a personal level. This is not an adjustment that prior generations had to make as their communication options at home and work were the same.

As a result of this significant variance, Millennials demonstrate a quiet sophistication and ability to adapt that often goes unnoticed. In assessing the technology capabilities of their
colleagues, they determine whether they must adapt to a less efficient style of communicating, whether they will be expected to assume the role of teacher, or whether they will face co-workers whose unwillingness to learn to use technology or maximize its efficiency impedes workplace effectiveness.

As technology has guided how Millennials communicate with one another, it has also shaped their social norms. The internet provides a forum for lives to be lived publicly and for every experience to be recorded and distributed widely. Privacy boundaries, compared to those of previous generations, have crumbled. Prior generations chronicled their lives but shared the tangible aspects of those experiences selectively within a close geographical circle of friends and family.

Today’s opportunities for the public display of every aspect of one’s life may profoundly affect how Millennials view privacy considerations. Privacy and confidentiality issues that Boomers and Gen Xers take for granted seem very different to people whose daily life experiences are shared on-line. Moreover, Millennials’ comfort with sharing information about themselves and each other has profound implications for how they will manage privacy in the workplace.

A 2013 study of Millennials’ use of technology in the workplace found that:

The majority of Millennials say they carry out personal tasks during work hours. Though keen to perform well at work, it is virtually impossible for them to leave their personal lives behind, as they typically check Facebook, conduct IM chats and send and receive text messages on their devices throughout the day. This is seen as a right rather than a benefit.¹

While some might read this statement as fueling the “entitlement” reputation, it also reflects an expectation of their ability to communicate with friends the way they have for much of their lives.

Of particular significance to employers, the study identified how vast the divide can be with respect to the effort to maintain workplace norms and policies in a vastly changing technology climate. A stunning 66% of Millennials reported that they do not abide by IT policies generally, and “45% of employed Millennials globally use social networking sites at work, whether prohibited or not.” Nearly 30% said they do not even know if their company has a corporate IT policy.²

Millennials’ comfort with and recognition of the speed and ease of technology was evident in the survey of Millennials I conducted while researching my new book, You Raised Us—Now Work With Us: Millennials, Career Success, and Building Strong Workplace Teams,³ which separates the myths from reality about the newest generation in the workplace. Survey respondents generally

³ Forthcoming from the American Bar Association. apps.americanbar.org/abastore/index.cfm?pid=1620615&section=main&fmt=Product.AddToCart
indicated that they have an expectation that they can interact freely with others during the day, including communicating with friends via text and social media. The question we haven’t yet answered, however, is whether these interactions hinder their ability to do the job or serve as only momentary distractions.

Responses to my survey also demonstrated the differences between how Millennials communicate personally and how they communicate professionally. Respondents communicated with their friends most frequently via text (more than 86%) and social networks (more than 75%). In the workplace, however, respondents were more likely to face restrictions on their use of text messaging and social networks.

Respondents expressed frustration with having limitations imposed on their ability to use technology to its optimum benefits. They described having to adapt to the inefficient expectations of others, even where the failure to take advantage of simple technologies resulted in a lower quality work product. Some respondents were similarly puzzled by missed opportunities to use technology to make tasks easier. They recognized that it is harder for older generations to learn technology, but they resented the missed opportunities for greater efficiency and were frustrated when their suggestions for improving efficiencies were ignored.

At the same time, the expectation that Millennials will serve as unpaid tech support can have negative effects for both the Millennials and their senior colleagues. Respondents repeatedly described being diverted from assigned legal tasks to troubleshoot their own technology problems or to help others solve theirs. Many reported feeling like they had two jobs: the one for which they were hired and that of unpaid technology teacher.

When Millennials spend their time assisting more senior colleagues on tech issues, their own job responsibilities suffer and their colleagues can continue to ignore even the easiest paths to self-sufficiency. Millennials noted a particular inequity in the reluctance of older generations to learn a new technology that could significantly improve workplace functions, knowing that they themselves lack the luxury of ever refusing to do a task they find difficult or unnecessary.

Thinking Differently About Millennials and Technology

Senior generations in the workplace need to think differently about how younger workers are trained on issues of technology, privacy, and confidentiality. The data demonstrating that IT restrictions in the workplace are widely ignored pose daunting challenges for employers. At the same time, it is important to pay greater attention to the dynamics that occur around technology issues.

The following are tips that should help individuals responsible for professional development and other senior leaders as they seek to meet these challenges.

1. **Expertise can come in all age groups; consider establishing procedures to encourage employees to share ideas and suggestions.** Workplaces that ignore ideas offered by younger employees about ways to use technology to take advantage of marketing trends or to improve workplace efficiencies do so at their peril. Millennials have a tremendous vantage point, and their observations and suggestions can provide an important perspective often missed by senior workers less facile with social media’s role in marketing and branding or with ways technology can benefit clients more efficiently. Such steps can include the development of a forum to discuss the pros and cons of ideas presented, the appointment of a task force to further investigate suggested technological improvements, or other programs that demonstrate attention to and an interest in new ideas. These interactive discussions offer an additional opportunity for more experienced workers to provide
communication advice to their younger colleagues.

By being proactive, you are sending an important signal that new ways of solving problems are always welcome. People who offer suggestions are invested in the organization. Accordingly, all ideas should be encouraged. Having been encouraged to speak up throughout their lives, Millennials expect their ideas to be taken seriously when they speak up at work. This does not mean that every recommendation warrants implementation. It does, however, warrant a response. Failure to do so can result in lost opportunities to implement improvements and can harm morale.

2. **Understand the challenges in your own workplace.** To begin the process of traversing the technology divide, employers should assess the capacities of both senior and junior professionals and identify areas where the divide is impeding efficiency. It is important to understand and bridge these differences to avoid unnecessary inefficiencies and the impacts of conflicting messages.

For Millennials, often impatient with the pace of change at their workplace, it is important that the assessment be transparent and provides information explaining any constraints on progress. For example, does the workplace have limited financial resources, impacting the purchase of newer technology and training programs? Are fellow workers uncomfortable with or resistant to learning new technologies? If the latter is the case, are there opportunities for entering Millennials to make useful suggestions and assist with a more constructive role in implementing change?

3. **Bridge the technology divide in ways that provide an opportunity for Millennials to shine and for senior workers to learn and grow.** Millennials may be uniquely situated to translate technological complexities and to help demonstrate how pushing past discomfort can result in greater ease and efficiency. Reverse mentoring programs are a growing trend in the corporate sector and offer great opportunities in professional services as well. Such programs can be implemented and structured to help Millennials develop stronger relationships with the more senior colleagues they mentor. An effective reverse mentoring program will also recognize Millennials for their specific contributions and help them benefit from the efficiencies they can create.

4. **Monitor and reward roles that should be recognized.** When workplaces do not monitor the extra time spent by Millennials in providing additional tech support responsibilities, the result can be unfinished assignments and increased attrition. The older generations’ discomfort with technology; overreliance on the technical support of younger workers; and, in some cases, outright refusal to incorporate available efficiencies into workplace interactions can drive Millennials to distraction (literally). Effective strategies can facilitate stronger intergenerational communications and more effective use of technology. Workplaces should consider implementing ways to provide Millennials with some form of internal credit for their role as technology teacher. The assumption that younger workers will be available throughout the day to teach their less proficient colleagues imposes an unfair burden and impedes workplace productivity. If technology tutoring is more than an incidental part of a young professional’s day, greater structure needs to be created around the role.

5. **Do not make assumptions that privacy and confidentiality mean the same thing to a Millennial as to other generations.** Recently, an in-house lawyer told me about seeing a younger colleague happily recounting on Facebook the company’s excellent result in a recent negotiation. The senior lawyer was horrified. To the younger lawyer, it was the logical extension of what one always does with good news—share it with friends. Boomers and Gen Xers need to be more explicit than seems inherently logical to them in developing and communicating the
boundaries around what can and cannot be shared. And, even if the answer is a blanket prohibition, that needs to be clarified—and not in a way that calls into question the judgment of a younger colleague. All generations in the workplace are traversing new ground when it comes to communicating on-line. Overbroad rules are at greater risk of being ignored than are well-crafted policies that everyone can understand as essential to their effective job performance and responsibilities.

Both Millennials and senior generations have a role to play in addressing the challenges posed when technology allows for continuing intrusions in the workplace. The opportunities for distraction will only increase. Determining where and how to erect boundaries are questions for all generations. Moreover, finding those opportunities to help Millennials channel their significant technological expertise in a way that improves workplace effectiveness can result in improved relationships and added value. Meeting each of these challenges and opportunities openly and creatively is in everyone’s best interest.


Portions of this article are excerpted from her book You Raised Us – Now Work With Us.

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