



MANAGING MILLENNIALS

BY LEXI MATTHEWS

It's official: In 2015, Millennials surpassed Generation X to become the largest cohort within the American workforce according to a recent analysis of US Census Bureau data by the Pew Research Center. Millennials, the cohort defined as adults ranging in age from 18-34, currently has over 53.5 million members in the US workforce. Just how fast is the Millennial population growing? By the year 2030, the same study predicts that millennials will occupy 75% of the workforce.

For a few of you, these statistics are probably terrifying. You might even be thinking, how will we survive if the majority of the workforce is occupied by a group that is often described as lazy, narcissistic, entitled, and disloyal? Yikes - I'd be scared too.

So, the question becomes: are we, as an entire generation on the cusp of taking over the workforce, really that horrible? Or are we just different?

Regardless of your answer to that question, I see two options moving forward. We can continue to put blinders on and experience tension in the workplace by rolling our eyes and complaining about each other's work habits, or, we can leverage the generation gap and capitalize on the unique skill set that each generation brings to the team.

I choose option two. With the exponential and continuous growth of millennials, it is imperative we embrace the generation gap and work together to create a cohesive and thriving environment.

Anyway you slice it: Millennials are here to stay.

According to the Pew Research Study, millennials as a group, can be described as being "unattached to organized politics and religion, linked by social media, burdened by debt, distrustful of people, and optimistic about the future."

So, how does this group fit into the workplace?

Try googling "millennials in the workplace". Within seconds, there are over 500,000 different results on this topic, each with a different take on the subject. Half of the results are positive and optimistic with an emphasis on creating future success, while the other half appears to be emotional, condescending and cynical regarding our future. One thing is clear, opinions

are strong and filled with emotions.

Take for instance, The TIME Magazine cover from May 2013 pictures a young woman laying on her stomach and taking a selfie with bold letters that read "The ME ME ME Generation. Millennials are lazy, entitled narcissists who still live with their parents." I would be willing to bet that cover alone swayed many opinions and further widened the generational gap.

In reality, it's important to recognize every generation has had something to say about the younger generations entering the workforce. The Silent Generation called the Gen X'ers slackers. The Gen X'ers called the Baby Boomers rebels and dreamers. Boomers call us self-absorbed losers that live off our parents. Millennials think boomers are out of touch and idealistic. See my point?

We're in a unique position within the Festival and Events Industry: we have an incredible opportunity to combine the expertise and real-world experience that Boomers and Generation X'ers have with the unique skill sets, advanced education, and technological know-how that millennials have. Why not capitalize on this?

Millennials are different than any other group before them, but that doesn't mean we're going to wreak havoc on the workforce. Let's look at 5 of the biggest myths about millennials in the workplace.

MYTH #1: Millennials are Entitled and Spoiled

Each generation functions differently and sees the world through different eyes than the one before it. As millennials, we've grown up with devastating and monumental events such as 9/11 and the 2008 recession, the largest economic disaster since the great depression.

Each situation has undoubtedly had an impact on how we view and interact with the world. Millennials currently value experiences over material items, according to an Eventbrite study, because as a millennial, we've seen how fast things can change and how quickly those items can disappear. What doesn't disappear? Experiences and memories. One of the biggest fears of a millennial? FOMO (Fear Of Missing Out).

Millennials are also the first in the modern era to have higher levels of student loan debt, poverty and unemployment, and lower levels of wealth and personal income than their two immediate predecessor generations (Gen Xers and Boomers) had at the same stage of their life cycles.

We've watched as our parent's generation experienced unprecedented economic turmoil and uncertainty after the late 2000s. Fast forward to today - the class of 2016 has become the most indebted graduating class ever.

The total education debt - including federal and private loans - has now reached over \$68 billion dollars, nearly a ten-fold increase since 1994. What does this mean for millennials? 71% of bachelor degree recipients will graduate with an average student loan debt of \$29,000 - more than twice the amount borrowers had to pay back just two decades earlier.

Many millennials will now be saddled with tens of thousands of dollars of student debt for degrees that we were once told would guarantee them a great job right out of college. I know, that sounded very millennial-ish, but we were brought up with an unrealistic and maybe semi-entitled sense of future job security. The messages were always the same: "you can be whatever you want to be when you grow up," and "stay in school, go to college, earn your degree, and you'll get any job you want." To no fault of their own, our parents, teachers, and role models couldn't predict the economic turmoil and technological advances that would flip our country upside down.

Despite this growing debt, the number of millennials graduating with degrees and unique skill sets continues to climb and we're all competing to get a seat at the table.

It shouldn't come as a surprise that in 2014, for the first time in more than 130 years, adults ages 18 to 34 were slightly more likely to be living in their parents' home than they were to be living with a spouse or partner in their own household. Many unfairly condemn these post-grads and label them as failures or aimless moochers. In reality, most are staying at home to save money or pay off loans.

We're often criticized for having helicopter parents who believed that everyone on the team should get a blue-ribbon. I was definitely not one of those children – in fact, as a competitive gymnast for over 15 years, we were constantly reminded each day by our coaches that “second place is the first loser.”

**MYTH #2:
Millennials are Know-It-Alls
Who Question Everything**

I'll admit, I can see how my own enthusiasm and curiosity could come across as annoying. I also think millennial expectations about what a boss-employee relationship should look like are often skewed and idealized in our minds. Not every job is going to actually be like a witty workplace sitcom – i.e. Parks and Rec or The Office (how awesome would it be to work with Leslie Knope or Michael Scott?).

Fair warning – what I'm about to share is going to sound extremely millennial: From the get-go, I expected my boss to not only to be my mentor but to want to mentor me as well. That's not necessarily a fair set of expectations to place onto a manager, especially without knowing the type of relationship or chemistry that will develop.

Fast forward three years later and I realize how lucky I am to have someone who is willing to share his wealth of knowledge and teach me the ins and outs of the industry that he's learned over the past 30 years. He doesn't have to answer my endless stream of questions and he certainly doesn't owe it to me to come up with an explanation every time I ask, “why” or “how come we're doing it like this?” – in fact, as my boss, he could just say “because I said so.” But that probably wouldn't keep me around very long.

**MYTH #3:
Millennials are Lazy**

We don't like to be bored. It's as simple as that. Having anyone, let alone a millennial, sit alone in an office all day answering phones when that was not part of the job description is a sure-fire way to lose them.

This point needs extra clarification to avoid coming across entitled: in no way are millennials above these tasks and we understand the importance of being a team player. This is especially true for those of us working in non-profit organizations or smaller companies where we've all agreed to perform “other duties as assigned” - a

standard line included somewhere within most job descriptions. We just don't want to be taken advantage of or mislead. Simple enough, right?

Not unlike our Boomer and Gen X counterparts, millennials value a healthy work-life balance. Flexible work hours? PLUS. Opportunity to work remotely a few times a month? HUGE PLUS. Though this option is not traditional and is still a relatively new concept for most companies, research has shown that this type of flexibility actually boosts both productivity and morale. Win-win scenario.

**MYTH #4:
Millennials are Disloyal**

This is the topic that leaves hiring managers perplexed, frustrated, and a little scared to hire us. Millennial loyalty might be the biggest misconception about our generation. In fact, a recent global-study of millennials in the workplace, published by IBM, shows we are no more likely to leave a job than our Baby Boomer co-workers.

Millennials are a passionate group who need to find meaning in the things they do in all aspects of their life - including work. We value learning and opportunities for professional development – i.e. IFEA and the CFEE certification program. Not only do opportunities like this sharpen our skill set and increase our network of industry professionals, but it also shows us that you value our contributions and are willing to invest in us in the long-term. In return, we'll do the same for you.

**MYTH #5:
Millennials Need Extra
Coddling, Hand-Holding and a
Stream of Constant Praise**

We're often criticized for having helicopter parents who believed that everyone on the team should get a blue-ribbon. I was definitely not one of those children – in fact, as a competitive gymnast for over 15 years, we were constantly reminded each day by our coaches that “second place is the first loser.” Looking back, it probably wasn't the best message to drill into a group

of eight-year-olds, but it definitely got the point across and it's been engrained in my brain ever since. Even to this day, I attribute my competitive edge and desire to succeed to the daily rigor and discipline that was instilled in me from a young age as a gymnast.

To be honest, I believe the generalization that millennials carry similar expectations for the workforce as they did for a youth soccer team they were on when they were five, is a little silly. If you do encounter a millennial with those expectations, they better at least come prepared with some orange slices and a box of Capri Suns for the whole office to enjoy.

One thing I will say with confidence is that millennials LOVE feedback. We want to know when we're doing a good job but even more important, we want to know when we could be doing something better.

So Where Do We Go From Here?

The reality is: millennials are here to stay. Figuring out how we can all effectively work together is crucial, especially for the Festival & Events industry. Why is it so important for our industry? Millennials are the ones spending, sharing, and promoting our events. Millennials highly value the experiences we all offer such as festivals, concerts, etc. With an estimated \$1.3 trillion in annual consumer spending, we have a huge opportunity to capitalize on the millennial patron.

It isn't easy to change workplace culture or the way people think, and it's probably not going to happen overnight. We have to gain a better understanding of how each generation functions and then tap into those specific strengths and acknowledge the weaknesses of each generation as well. The result? A more cohesive, efficient, and unstoppable team.

1. Pew Research Center Study – “Millennials Surpass Gen Xers as the largest generation in U.S. Labor Force”
2. Eventbrite Study – “Millennials: Fueling the Experience Economy”
3. IBM Study - “Myths, exaggerations and the uncomfortable truths: The real story behind Millennials in the workplace”

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