

Decoding Millennial Lawyers

How to understand and manage this purpose-driven workforce.

BY MARTHA M. NEWMAN

Millennial lawyers are the future of our profession, plain and simple. Definitions vary, but millennials are generally considered to be born between the early 1980s and the mid-1990s, and for the first time, they outnumber baby boomers in the legal workplace, according to a 2019 research study published in *National Review*. By 2025, Deloitte reports, millennials will comprise 75% of the global workforce.

The lawyers who supervise millennials often are mystified by this generation and have little idea how to manage them. Given the growing dominance of millennials, law firms and the companies who hire them can adapt to millennial mores and thrive or stick with tradition and die.

Millennial Stereotypes

Stereotypes persist whether true or not—millennials are demanding, expect instant gratification, are not willing to work as hard, show less deference to their bosses, want frequent accolades, ask prematurely for raises, and act entitled to get what they want sooner than later.

Partners from other generations scratch their heads in disbelief. *Nobody coddled me. I kept my mouth shut and my head down.* Their frustrations with millennials' behavior and their inability to understand younger associates' issues create a rapport gap and generate tension between bosses and their protégés. Often partners do not understand millennial values or how to manage millennial associates effectively.

Millennials' Values

Partnership is still their top career goal, but what matters most to millennials is work that aligns with their values. This way of thinking is called the "millennial shift" in a *New York Times* article titled "Graying Firms Wrestle with Making Room for Young Lawyers." Sixty percent of young adults would give up 15% of their salaries to work in an organization whose values reflect theirs, according to a 2012 study by Rutgers University.

Millennials are purpose-driven. They want to do worthwhile and rewarding work. They want their work to have meaning and impact their clients for the good. They value relationships, collaboration, and open communication. They want transparency about how salary and bonus decisions are made. They value open communication about decision-making, policy matters, and partnership structure that is often secretive.

Work-life balance is a priority for them. It is not all about billable hours. Nearly 9 in 10 want a "career that does some good in the world," according to *Law Practice Today's* article "Unlocking the Talents of the Millennial Lawyer."

Millennials Want Skin in the Game

Millennials value the right to participate in long-term decision-making and to have their opinions heard. If eventually they are going to pony up money for partnership, they want opportunities now to shape the future of the firm and help formulate business strategies that sustain profitability.

Like baby boomers, millennial lawyers prize hard work, but not work that is needlessly hard because of obsolete technology and inefficient processes. Millennials realize they must "pay their dues" but place stock in rewarding innovation and talent as well. The hierarchical partnership track with timetabled promotions feels rigid to them. Allowing millennials to make partner based on merit and client development—instead of years served—appeals to their sense of fairness and motivates them to work hard for faster advancement.

How to Manage Millennials

- Create a strong firm culture that values millennials as people as much as the money they make.
- Be transparent about decision-making that affects them.
- Act like mentors instead of bosses.
- Listen to changes they recommend and respond to their suggestions.
- Give them flexible work schedules and allow them to work remotely

when feasible.

- Offer a balance between their families and professional lives.
- Organize assignments that involve teamwork and mentoring from seasoned partners.
- Modernize technology and innovate to stay competitive.
- Invest in millennials' leadership development and provide opportunities to practice leadership.
- Provide early training in business development and require associates to build their networks.
- Teach them the business of law to prepare them for the future.
- Give frequent, constructive feedback on their performance and clarity about your expectations.
- Be generous in praising their successes.
- Let them know specifically what the criteria are for making partner and keep them apprised of their progress as they strive to reach that goal.

Adapt to Millennials to Survive

Senior partners may want to shape millennials into their own image, but millennials have shattered the old mold. They are not "lifers" as their founding partners often were. In 2016, 4 in 10 lawyers walked out and changed firms, according to an American Bar Association study. That is a frightening statistic when firms spend \$1 billion a year to recruit and train lawyers.

The hard truth is if law firms want to retain talent and compete for clients, their leaders must recognize and respect the values of millennial attorneys and incorporate those values into their organizations and cultures. If firms choose the status quo, they will drive millennials away and into the arms of law firms that understand the necessity of adapting to the world's largest working population. **TBJ**



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