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MANAGING MILLENNIALS IN THE WORKFORCE

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A MULTI-GENERATIONAL GUIDE

Millennials are a fascinating subject of study in their own right. Put them alongside other generations and an unbelievably complicated set of dynamics erupt — some fantastic, others frustrating. Nowhere is this more evident than in multi-generational workforces. While today's leaders regularly discuss the challenge of managing millennials[1] in the workforce, few consider how each generation differs in the way they approach the challenge. But they should, because they do.

This article reviews the defining characteristics of baby boomers[2], Gen X[3], and millennials, then leverages those qualities to understand the generation-specific challenges that come with managing millennials in the workforce. By considering how generational identities interact, we support mutual understanding, which can inspire informed solutions to managing millennials in the workforce.

Why Managing Millennials in the Workforce Matters

Our discussion of managing millennials in the workforce will be more meaningful if we first speak to its significance. The fact that you've chosen to read this article is a good indication that you want to understand how millennials work[4]. But the real question is: why should businesses care?

Perhaps the most staggering reason is the fact that millennials now make up the largest segment of today's working population. At 73 million strong[5], more positions are filled by millennials than any other generation.

Being the first digitally native generation, they're also the first to show the effects of growing up in a world with technology at every turn. Typical millennial traits such as a need for frequent feedback[6] and extreme impatience with inefficiency[7] are adaptive responses to a newly digital world.

Technology is (presumably) a permanent fixture in the modern world, which means that while millennials might be the first generation to exhibit these kinds of attributes, they probably won't be the last. To support long-term success, businesses need to be sensitive and responsive to these generational adaptations — and the sooner they are, the better.

In short, it's important to talk about managing millennials in the workforce because millennials are no longer the future. They've arrived, they're not going anywhere, and ready or not they're making a lasting mark on the workplace.

Who's Who?

No organization is officially in charge of determining when one generation ends and the next begins. Rather, generations are named and categorized according to popular consensus[8]. That said, for the purpose of this article, we'll use Pew Research's widely accepted generational cutoffs[9] to segment these groups.

Of course, no generation is truly uniform, but sweeping themes characterize each. These shared characteristics are large-scale responses to the cultural circumstances each generation lived through. As mentioned above, many tell-tale millennial quirks are direct reactions to a tech-saturated[10] world. Gen X was shaped by their own set of circumstances and baby boomers, theirs.

Our investigation of generation-specific approaches to managing millennials in the workforce begins with a review of the key workplace-relevant characteristics exhibited by baby boomers, Gen X, and (of course) millennials themselves.

After all, it's important to understand what each generation is like on its own before we start talking about how they interact.

What Makes a Baby Boomer a Baby Boomer

Born in a period of post-war prosperity (1946-1964), baby boomers grew up with a strong desire to pursue (and capacity to deliver) impressive professional feats. They are work-centric[11] and famous for marathon workweeks that sometimes push the 80-hour mark. Having grown up in a period when lifetime positions[12] at a single organization were the norm, the typical baby boomer is loyal to their employer by default.

In their youth, baby boomers were pioneers of social progress[13], living through the end of the civil rights movement, second-wave feminism, and the Vietnam War. Although by today's standards their views skew conservative, baby boomers have a desire to drive progress that's not so unlike millennials' (this shared attitude can sometimes be leveraged as an advantage for baby boomers managing millennials in the workforce).

Baby boomers grew up without today's modern technology, but they've adapted to it with relative ease, mainly using it as a tool to support productivity[14]. Having met modern technology so relatively late in life (the oldest baby boomers were nearly forty when the first mobile phone[15] was introduced) it makes sense that they have a unique, albeit comparably more removed, relationship with it.

Keep these qualities in mind through our subsequent discussion of millennials, and think carefully about how the generations compare. This will help you understand the roots of the dynamic that arises when baby boomers take on managing millennials in the workforce.

What Makes Gen X Gen X

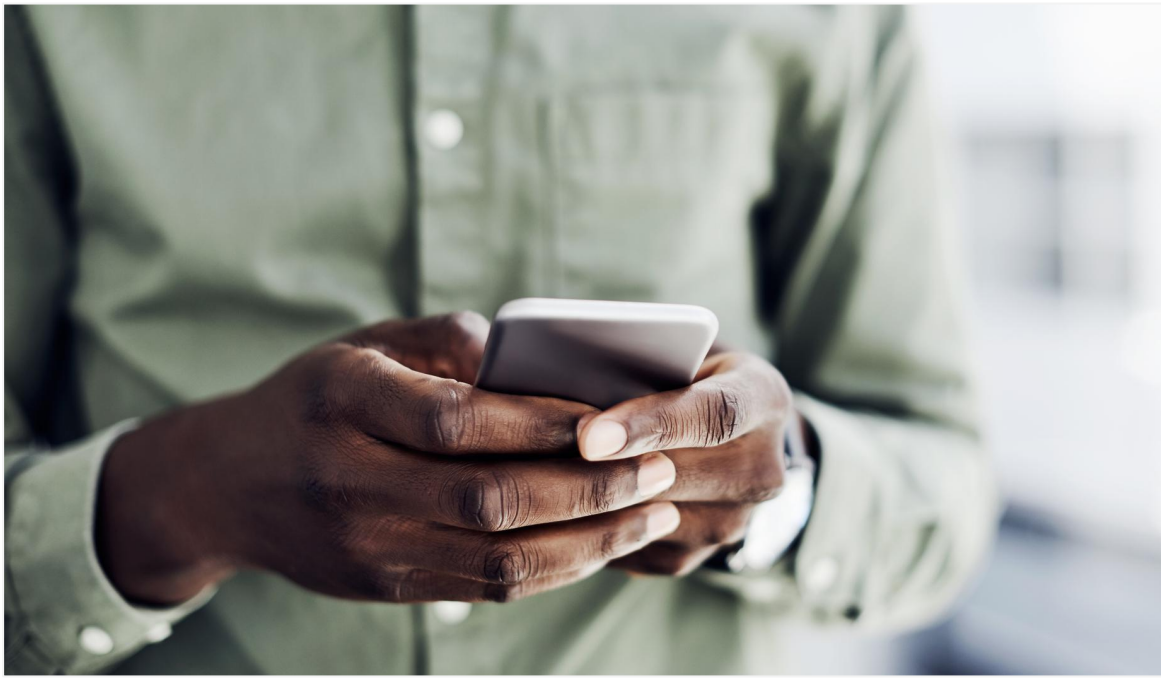
Sometimes described as the "forgotten middle child[16]," Gen X (born 1965-1980) is actually anything but unremarkable. Compared to the 73 million millennials and 72 million living baby boomers, the 65 million members of Gen X belong to the smallest generation alive today (this is perhaps why they're sometimes paid comparatively little attention)[17].

They're characterized as less ambitious[18] than baby boomers or millennials, but 70% of organizations[19] believe that members of Gen X make the best workers overall. The group as a whole is independent and self-motivated[20], which some experts trace back to the many nights they were left to their own devices while baby boomer parents worked late. At the same time, being the children of workaholic parents led Gen X to advocate for the value of healthy work-life balance[21].

Culturally, Gen X is a generation defined by change. They've lived through many formative moments[22] including the stock market crash of 1987, multiple recessions, and the dot.com bubble burst. Understandably, these circumstances shaped the characteristic Gen X belief that if there's anything reliable about the world, it's instability. Psychology Today[23] describes their worldview as centered around "the need to combat corruption," characterizing them as, "a generation in search of human dignity and individual freedom."

Although introduced to technology later in life, today Gen X is as well-versed in it as any millennial — although significantly less reliant[24]. This shared technological fluency can be an important common ground for Gen X leaders managing millennials in the workforce.

As our discussion continues it will become apparent that many of these classic Gen-X attributes are shouting distance from those that define millennials. Often, this makes managing millennials in the workforce a fairly intuitive task for Gen X — or at least, more intuitive than it is for baby boomers.



What Makes a Millennial a Millennial

At last, we arrive at the generation in question: millennials. Born between 1981 and 1996, millennials are at the center of an unbelievable amount of discussion, and for good reason: they're markedly different from the generations that preceded them.

Their differences have inspired some highly unflattering portrayals of the millennial employee. At their worst, millennials are painted as entitled, lazy, attention-seeking brats. Early research seemed to support these appalling claims[25], but a decade or so under the metaphorical microscope has revealed that such characterizations are extreme negative slants on the generation's true nature.

Millennials are hungry for personal and professional development[26] and will quickly disengage in settings where the need isn't satiated (this is perhaps the trait that leads some to call them narcissists). They want frank, frequent feedback[27] on performance. Leaders managing millennials in the workforce should keep in mind that annual reviews are not well-suited to millennials' needs and should consider weekly one-on-ones[28] as an alternative. Millennials notoriously look for new positions every two years[29] on average, and even more frequently when the aforementioned needs are not met.

For a millennial, the world moves fast and they rely on technology to keep pace. From real-time recognition and on-demand learning to instant communication, millennials are constantly plugged in. They leverage technology as a resource to make work more efficient and as a creative tool to support workplace flexibility. Remote work options[30] are increasingly feasible in a digitally connected world and accordingly, millennials expect their employers to offer them.

Finally, successfully managing millennials in the workforce requires empathizing with their desire for a sense of purpose at work. For them, it's a professional priority[31] situated even above pay. Organizations that offer the opportunity to contribute to the world at large are both more attractive and more engaging to the millennial employee.

When managing millennials in the workforce, keeping these things in mind will help leaders more effectively support their success and establish mutual understanding that safeguards all parties from becoming jaded towards one another.

Similarities and Differences across Generations

When Gen-X and baby boomers take on the task of managing millennials in the workforce, their differences amplify. This is where things get interesting. There's much to say about each generation in isolation, and exponentially more about the ways they interact.

Rather than examining how each of these generations takes on managing millennials in the workforce, we'll organize the remainder of this discussion around common themes that exercise a major influence on working relationships. Beginning with the ways the generations differ from one another most, we'll address three important intergenerational themes and work up to understanding the ways Baby Boomers, Gen X, and millennials (sometimes) see eye-to-eye.

Workplace Expectations

The most significant way that millennials differ from Gen X and Baby Boomers is in the expectations they have about work.

While baby boomers proudly recall[32] the unbelievably long hours they worked in the early days of their careers, even the most junior millennials are notorious for packing up and heading out promptly at 5:00[33]. Older generations are prone to interpret this as laziness[34] or downright disrespect, but it's really just a consequence of drastically different expectations.

While millennials might argue for quality over quantity, their predecessors often see long hours as a direct indicator of work ethic[35]. Millennials embrace the work-hard-play-hard[36] mentality more than any generation before them, including Gen X, who pioneered the very idea of work-life balance.

Length of work day is not the only misaligned expectation millennials bring to work. When it comes to turnover, millennials typically stay at a job for less than two years[37], where Gen X stays at least 20% longer than that[38], and baby boomers may stay for multiple decades. In this case too, it's not that one generation is right and the others wrong. They're just different.

If you're a non-millennial managing millennials in the workforce and find yourself repeatedly frustrated with discrepant workplace expectations, it's time to sit down for an open and honest conversation with your millennial employees. When these implicit expectations go unexamined, they contribute to tense workplace dynamics. Luckily, when brought to light, these intergenerational differences are often easily resolved.

Technological Fluency

When it comes to technology, the biggest rift[39] lies between baby boomers and the other two generations. Whereas Gen X and millennials were both introduced to technology early enough that it's become second nature to them, baby boomers — for better or for worse — don't share that same relationship.

Baby boomers managing millennials in the workforce must be open to millennials' suggestions. Gen X would also do well to take this attitude, but they typically need less of a reminder. Bear in mind that, although they may be your juniors in other respects, millennials usually have a more advanced, nuanced understanding of technology than previous generations do.

In light of that, take millennials' suggestions seriously and keep in mind that efficiency — not to be mistaken with laziness — is one of their top priorities. Not only can technology make your business more effective, it's also a key tool[40] for keeping millennials engaged. The benefits of working with — not against — millennials when it comes to technology are impactful and far-reaching.

Sense of Purpose

Baby boomers, Gen X, and millennials were all significantly influenced by their respective experiences with social and political turmoil, and all feel compelled to drive progress[41] at a high level as a result. While their opinions don't always converge on issue-by-issue specifics, baby boomers, Gen X, and millennials all share the general sentiment that they want to contribute to something important. Luckily, at work, there's a shared purpose built in: company purpose.

The practice of tying job function back to some larger company purpose already comes highly recommended as an approach to managing millennials in the workforce, but its positive impact extends to smoothing over generational rifts, too.

Implementing some kind of system — such as a core-values based employee recognition program[42]— to remind managers and employees of every generation that they're all working towards the same larger goal, is a unifying way to make your team truly feel like a team. A shared purpose can also overshadow more trivial differences, giving coworkers a meaningful incentive to collaborate, compromise, and put their differences aside in the interest of developing something greater than themselves.

Final Thoughts

If there's one rule to know when dealing with a multi-generational workforce, it's that communication is key. Many of the differences leaders cite as so problematic when managing millennials in the workforce can be solved fairly easily if they are addressed outright.

Case and point: baby boomers, Gen X, and millennials are far from aligned on their implicit workplace expectations. Honest discussions about what employees consider a healthy work life balance, the factors that might lead to looking for another job, and the path to a promotion all work proactively against built up frustration stemming from misaligned expectations.

In a similar vein, making space for open discussions about the value new technological solutions might offer your team, as well as regular, intentional conversations around shared purpose will not only prevent the frustration that arises from cross-generational misunderstanding, but are powerful steps towards strengthening your team overall.

At the end of the day, generational differences can be your biggest strength, or your worst nightmare — it's up to you and your team to decide how you'll face them.

About Fond

Fond is a global SaaS platform that seamlessly consolidates employee rewards and recognition processes into one easy-to-use solution. With Fond, employees and managers can recognize each other, redeem rewards, access exclusive corporate discounts, and measure success so HR departments spend less time managing programs and more time driving results.

Fond is based in San Francisco, California.

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