Managing Multiple Generations in the Workplace

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With Millennials being the most the savvy, but the least team players, Gen Xers trying to work smarter yet skeptical about authority figures and Boomers being the most loyal, but lacking the ability to adapt well, it is a wonder we get anything accomplished in today's workplace. Each generation has its own ideas of what it means to be successful, work/life balance, and work style. Knowing and understanding the different generational workers leads to a more effective workplace.

Baby Boomer Perspective:

**Strengths:** hardworking, team player, mentor

**Weaknesses:** lacking in adaptability and collaboration

**Benefits/Focus:** health care and retirement

I was admitted to practice in 1972. Having been born in 1947 and having practiced law for over 44 years, I would be considered a baby boomer and, of course, a senior lawyer. My perspective is from about the most senior lawyer you could find.

I began my practice in 1972, working for a lawyer who had a general practice with a litigation slant. We litigated for another firm. We were also the city attorneys for Circle Pines, Minnesota. I was admitted to practice on October 20, 1972 and on October 21, 1972, I was send out to represent Circle Pines in misdemeanor prosecutions. I was Circle Pines city attorney for criminal matters. I was given no training, although I had clerked for this attorney for two years.

I had to learn with no apprenticeship and/or training, but rather, on the fly. I welcomed the challenge of being independent and litigating almost immediately after receiving my license.

Before, I could be admitted to federal court, I was given a matter which required a Motion in federal district court. I called my brother-in-law, who was an Assistant U.S. Attorney, who arranged with the Judge to allow me to argue the Motion before I was formally admitted to the federal bar. At Special Term, with a room full of attorneys, the Judge started the proceedings by saying:” Where is the new attorney? Please come forward!” He proceeded to lecture me in front of a courtroom full of attorneys on what I should be doing before bringing a Motion and how I should approach Motion practice. Needless to say, I was quite embarrassed but at least the other

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attorneys were supportive since the judge was Miles Lord, who regularly picked on attorneys and was quite a maverick on the Bench.

Within two years, I argued my first case in the Minnesota Supreme Court, which I won and was given the opportunity a few years later to argue my first case in the 8th Circuit. One of the Judges on the panel was William Webster, who became the FBI Director. He asked me to cite the facts and holding of a case I cited in a long string citation. I admitted that I had not read the case. This was after he told me before I started the argument that he was inclined to decide against my client. Obviously, I learned some important lessons.

Also in the seventies, I litigated my first class action where I was constantly outmaneuvered by a senior litigator who went on to serve on the Supreme Court.

The point is, I learned by doing without a lot of supervision and guidance. I worked long hours for not a lot of money and endured a lot of severe learning events.

I started doing labor work in 1973, when AFSCME’s then attorney was elected to the State Legislature and had a conflict of interest with respect to state employees. Since we were law school classmates and our firm did his firm’s litigation, I got the client. Fortunately, the Public Employment Labor Relations Act was only passed in 1971, with significant amendments two years later. I got in on the ground floor before anyone knew much about public sector labor law. I was cheap at $35.00 an hour, willing to learn and willing to put a lot of time into learning labor law which was taught at my law school. Most of my cases were therefore cases of first impression and I made a lot of the law in this area in Minnesota since AFSCME was the predominant public sector union.

In one of my early cases, I brought a Writ of Quo Warranto to force the Supreme Court to take original jurisdiction of a case and sat in a conference room with the Justices, explaining to them that they were a constitutional court which could take original jurisdiction of a matter and actually hold a trial. They accepted the writ and remanded to a panel of retired District Court Judges who made findings for the Court.

How does my history affect my attitude towards millennials?

Millennial attorneys have large student debt and want to make money immediately. They have financial pressures, I did not experience. I had a tuition and books scholarship but tuition was really cheap back then. Millennials do like regimentation-annual reviews, forced rankings outdated competencies, partner tracks, minimum billables, forced apprenticeships, etc. They want to be challenged immediately and achieve immediate gratification in their work. They don’t want to spend five years in the law library or carry the briefcases for the senior partners. They demand workplace flexibility in terms of work schedules, time off, flexible hours and workloads, etc. As my former millennial associate told me: time is more important than money. Lawyers today share child rearing responsibilities, have other outside interests and don’t want to spend all their waking hours working. They do not want to, like me, continue taking phone calls, responding to e mails drafting responses and having conference calls while I am on vacation.

Millennials want their jobs to be meaningful and see clearly how their work contributes to the firm’s success. They do not want to wait for us to catch up to them. They are much more willing
to leave for greener pastures and have little regard for loyalty or a long term commitment to a
firm. They move around and seek new challenges and opportunities.

We need to recognize and validate the differences in their approach to work. We need to develop
new models of law firm organization. We need to develop new ways to deliver legal services
which are cognizant of the new ways of stimulating creativity and productivity. We need to
encourage millennials to find meaning in their work and satisfaction in their jobs. We must find
ways to accommodate their priorities regarding family life and other outside activities. Work is
not the end all of their lives. Work needs to have purpose and provide for growth. It must be
challenging and creativity must be encouraged. The way we did things is not the way of the
future.

When I started practicing, I did not take any time off. I was working before I took the bar exam
and immediately afterwards. I never took anytime off after law school. I was litigating right after
I was admitted to practice. My parent instilled in me a strong work ethic. I expected to work hard
and long. I welcomed more and more responsibility and wanted to do everything right away,
which is why I picked a sole practitioner to work for. I was impatient to do everything the senior
lawyers were doing and quickly. I welcomed added responsibility and treasured my
independence. I wanted to learn on my own and never questioned the direction I was going. I
was, after all, a typical baby boomer. I wanted to make money to support my family and
measured my worth by how hard I worked. I never questioned my path or priorities.

The lesson in all this is that baby boomers reflect the era that produced them. That does not mean
we were or are right. Millennials have much to teach us and we err if we do not learn from them.
In many respects, I think they will be better lawyers and people because of their differing
attitudes and outlook. We can take the best of both our generations and make things better.
Respect for each other and an open mind are key to our understanding of each other. Together
we can make it a better world for those of us who are dedicated to the law.

**Generation X Perspective:**

**Strengths:** Most effective managers, revenue generators, adaptable, their work speaks for itself

**Weaknesses:** Not cost effective, lacking in display of executive presence, generation under the
most financial stress

**Benefits/Focus:** Interested in workplace flexibility

As a Generation X employee, I fit the mold: I was born in 1969, grew up as a latch key kid
because both of my parents worked and, while I am focused on my career, I strive daily to have
some work life balance.

My parents both grew up on farms in South Carolina and were the first to go to college in their
respective families. I grew up assuming college was the next step after high school. After I
finished my undergraduate degree, I began teaching high school English. While I enjoyed the
job, I barely made enough money to support myself so I decided to further my education. This
shocked my parents as neither had ever expected any post graduate work and certainly did not
plan to finance this endeavor. Hence my $60k in student loan debt.
After graduating from law school, I did a judicial clerkship and then began my employment at a large law firm where I remain 17 years later. I usually arrive at work around 8:30 and work until 6:30 (unless I have a basketball, soccer or football game to attend) billing between 1600-1800 hours per year. I earned a spot as an equity shareholder in my 8th year of practice. Each year since, I have strived to credential myself in the practice of Labor and Employment law by writing, speaking and doing good work for my clients in a never-ending effort to make more shares. No one really pushes me to do this, it is self-imposed. There is no limit on my aspirations at this firm where I anticipate being until I retire. While I have interviewed for a few in house positions and spoken to another firm or two, I have never really considered leaving the firm where I started as I was brought up to not be a job hopper. My father worked in his same job, with the same company for his entire career. It is a badge of honor for me and, to be honest, I am resistant to change so I stick with what is comfortable and reliable. I meet my billable hour requirements and do as many non billable activities as I can within the firm to help maintain it as one of the Best Places to Work for both myself and others.

As a truly single mother (my childrens' father is deceased), I have somewhat of a forced work life balance. I work a lot. However, I strive to never miss a soccer, basketball or football game for either of my two active teenage boys. This has become harder as they get older and more involved. They are on competitive travel teams for soccer and basketball so, in addition to their local, school teams, we travel throughout the United States to compete in the Fall and Spring of each year. I look at being a present mom as my first priority and job. I am blessed to be able to do this by working some 10-12 hour days in advance of having to travel for their sports and having a laptop and phone allow me to work from anywhere at any time. I am often emailing early before 7:00 am and am working after the mad dash for dinner, showers, homework, laundry and bed all of which begin after 8:30 pm at my house most week nights. Since they only have one parent, I feel it is important to be present for their activities. That said, you will be hard pressed to find a client who is unable to reach me at any time for any reason. I have had many a conference call on the sidelines of the football field or in my car in the parking lot of the basketball stadium. In fact, you would be surprised at the amount of work I get done in my car. Technology has absolutely made my schedule easier. I can get on my laptop anywhere and access documents and emails as if I was in the office.

As for vacation, following in my parents footsteps, we take a trip to the same beach on July 4 each year. We have had this tradition for my kids entire life. We usually try to go skiing or to visit friends on Spring Break - activities that have now been sidelined for college tours. Other than this and travel for sports, you will find me in the office on a regular basis. No overseas travel for me.

I have had some challenges in the workplace, specifically with men - baby boomers - who used to not get the working mom schedule when I had a mandatory pick up time at 6 pm and was often running out of the office parking lot at 5:55. I had to bite my tongue to not say that of course they did not understand my life as all they had to so was work - they had a wife to pick up their kids, get them to practice, do grocery shopping, cook their dinner, do bath time and homework, do their laundry and pick up their dry cleaning. All they had to worry about was work. I actually had one baby boomer tell me, "Well, this was the life you chose." In fact, I did not choose to bring two children into the world knowing that I would be solely financially and emotionally responsible for them, but life happens. However, I am blessed to have made the
right decisions earlier in life, going back to law school, moving closer to my parents, and working at a well-established firm that enable me to do it. I am actually quite content with my work life and my home life.

**Millennial Perspective:**

**Strengths:** Tech-savvy, open to and encourage change, enthusiastic about their jobs, largest generation in the workplace

**Weaknesses:** Not team players; not hardworking

**Benefits/Focus:** Timing of promotions and bonuses

I was born in 1985 at the beginning of a technological revolution. Technology has always been a significant part of my life, but subconsciously so. My generation grew up with technology as part of our existence, which means few Millennials actually identify as being technologically literate. Instead, Millennials are more consciously bound by other shared values, such as diversity and education, which play a far greater role in the way that we view our world. In addition, our generation graduated into a difficult economy, which has left many Millennials with feelings of distrust toward employers. This has been compounded by the fact that many Millennials graduated with large amounts of student debt and no positions available to pay down that debt. These experiences have shaped many Millennials’ view of the world, including my own.

I grew up in a majority White Christian community in Wisconsin, but my family was mixed-race and, as a result, diversity issues for me have always been omnipresent. My childhood and adult friends have always been of different ethnicities, races, sexual orientations, genders, and religions. Most Millennials have a consciousness of diversity that differs greatly from prior generations in that it is viewed as an essential component of a highly functioning workplace or environment, as opposed to a luxury. I personally place significant value on this, as it is one of, if not the most, important factors in my desire to join an organization or company.

In addition, like many Millennials, I am highly educated, but this is means much more than just having a degree. Millennials have been raised in an intense and highly competitive academic environment. In my personal experience, academic competition has been a significant part of my life from elementary school through law school. Test scores dictated how our generation progressed through school, including the courses we took, the institutions we attended, and the jobs we eventually obtained. Further, our generation developed in an educational environment that demanded specialization at a young age. In my experience, this is particularly true of the legal profession, as it is simply not enough to express interest in a field as a young attorney; you must demonstrate through coursework and internships an interest in a specific field.

Like many Millennials, I graduated into a difficult economy, which also shapes my worldview. Following my graduation from law school in 2010, I experienced this in far from unique ways. The legal economy was particularly hard hit. Many of my classmates and others in my generation, including me, went through periods of underemployment or unemployment before obtaining the positions we sought after. This experience has “hardened” many Millennials by
creating a level of distrust between employees and employers that, in part, inspires significant turnover.

This background is important to understanding and appreciating the Millennial perspective with respect to our values and our interests. In the workplace, our generation values work life balance and meaningful work. With those values come increased turnover and a desire to advance within the workplace at a faster rate.

Our focus on work life balance is rooted in our experience with technology and diversity. Technology allows us the opportunity to work from anywhere in the world, which means that many Millennials not only are open, but demand a flexible work arrangement, irrespective of family obligations. Work life balance is also undoubtedly rooted in changing views of gender-norms. Many Millennials view the role of caregiver as a gender-neutral role, particularly with respect to the role that men increasingly play in childhood development. This view is further informed by changing family dynamics, with a significant increase in same-sex couples raising children. Regardless of why Millennials seek this balance, it is clear that a work environment that encourages working remotely is an essential component to a successful Millennial workplace.

Further, many Millennials, including myself, have a different view of the balance between high earning potential and time. In my experience, time is more valuable to many Millennials and, as a result, many Millennials are open to taking less in pay in exchange for more manageable and predictable hours. In personal experience, my focus has been on my “per hour” wage, as opposed to aggregate compensation. This view is not unique, as many Millennials feel the same.

Millennials also have a strong interest in doing meaningful, high level work that usually avoids the drudgery of our jobs. For me, this interest is rooted in my educational background and ability to leverage technology. As a result of our increased demands on specialization, many Millennial attorneys have specialized from day one. This has resulted in many Millennials feeling a sense of ownership over their disciplines, which I often think appears to others to be “entitlement” as opposed to “ownership.” Further, it seems as if, as a generation, we are more likely to voice our concerns about promotion and advancement to more interesting and meaningful work than prior generations. In addition, technology also allows us the opportunity to work smarter and faster. By relying on technology to do much of the drudgery of our jobs, we are able to generate more work product and on a more efficient basis than without technology.

Lastly, many Millennials have less loyalty to their current employers than prior generations, in part because of the economy in which graduated, but also because of the increased demands on our generation with student debt. By graduating into a hostile economy, Millennials did not enjoy a two-way street with job loyalty following their graduation and when we began our first jobs. As a result, many Millennials are constantly prepared for worst and have an eye towards protecting themselves and their careers by any means necessary, including by changing jobs. Further, because of the increased financial demands on Millennials by way of student debt, Millennials are encouraged to find other positions to maximize earning potential. This problem has been exacerbated by the fact that many Millennials have undergone significant periods of underemployment or unemployment, which means that many Millennials are already behind on potential earning capacity.
Nevertheless, while Millennials certainly stand out as a generation that is challenging the workplace as prior generations know it, the fundamental aspects of what Millennials want seem to be not all that different from these prior generations. What seems different, however, is that Millennials are more likely to voice their opinions about these topics and, at times, demand that their employers change with them. That confidence to express our views and demand certain terms and conditions of our employment has its roots in our experiences, which undoubtedly differ greatly from prior generations.