Lauren Stiller Rikleen heard plenty of millennial bashing during her years as a partner at a Boston-area law firm—but she never bought it. “The stereotypes don’t match up with my experience as a lawyer and as a mother of two millennials,” she says. “I’ve never understood the constant negative refrain.”

Rikleen was so baffled by the disconnect, in fact, that she launched a second career geared toward helping different generations effectively work together. In her book *You Raised Us, Now Work with Us*, Rikleen (a member of the *ABA Journal* Board of Editors) investigates and unravels common myths about 20- and 30-somethings and offers practical advice on how to bridge generation gaps. The reality, she found—and one that’s backed up by countless examples of young lawyers who are tackling a variety of problems in the profession—is that millennials are neither entitled nor lazy.

As younger attorneys flood the workforce and begin replacing the retiring baby boomer ranks, even the most conservative law firms are realizing the need to reshape corporate culture and embrace millennials’ tech-savvy, self-confident and flexible point of view. Older lawyers are realizing that younger attorneys won’t accept the rigid hierarchies and old-fashioned processes that defined their own careers. At the same time, millennials also won’t receive the same mind-boggling hourly rates that clients formerly paid without batting an eye.

With all these changes, experts say firms may need to invest time and resources in helping a multigenerational workforce interact effectively. As Rikleen dug into her research, she began to understand that work-life balance matters previously had been considered “women’s issues” and were now being redefined as generational concerns. “Young lawyers—men and women alike—are thinking of work-life integration and how to live a whole life,” she says. That’s a good thing—but a host of miscommunication and mislabeling have created intergenerational tension. Worse yet, these misunderstandings threaten to calcify into fixed beliefs that can prevent a younger generation from developing to its full potential. Bridging the generational divide, then, is critical to creating a functional work environment, and separating generational myths from reality is the first step.
MYTH NO. 1: THEY HAVE A SENSE OF ENTITLEMENT

The biggest myth, Rikleen says, is the idea that millennials feel entitled. “What we’re seeing is the manifestation of a generation that was raised with an enormous degree of self-confidence,” she says. “My parents did not have the resources that we did as parents of millennials. We were constantly told how important it was to raise emotionally secure, healthy children.” This child-centric upbringing combined with youthful enthusiasm results in a confident, achievement-oriented attitude common among new workers. The downside? Older people who were not raised in the same way can find that confidence jarring. “Millennials have a comfort with speaking up that other generations mislabel as entitlement,” Rikleen says. Rather than rolling their eyes at so-called entitled behavior, employers should welcome the self-esteem they see in their young employees. Take, for example, the three women who founded the Knight, Morris & Reddick Law Group in Chicago. While doing contract work for a firm in 2012, Yondi Morris-Andrews was horrified when she heard a partner flippantly refer to his associates as “slaves.” “I knew I couldn’t work in a culture like that,” she remembers. Rather than keep her head down and swallow her indignation, Morris-Andrews went home, tweeted that she needed to start her own firm—and was quickly retweeted by her friend Keli Knight. Soon after, she met with Knight and Jessica Reddick at a Starbucks. Though Reddick and Knight didn’t know each other, “it immediately felt natural, like we’d been planning this for a really long time,” Morris-Andrews says. The three young lawyers talked for more than an hour, about everything from flip comments that were insulting to real concerns that being part of their generational cohort might be a barrier to career growth and success.

Knight had her own reasons for getting involved. After taking over a role from an older male attorney—and being told she was doing a better job—Knight learned she was making substantially less than he had. She left that firm and joined a small real estate law firm, where she was on the partner track. As the recession hit, however, the firm’s fortunes changed: “It made me realize that I had to venture out on my own,” she says. Today, the three represent clients who include NBA star Derrick Rose. They also run a boutique legal staffing agency and have expanded to Los Angeles. Many of their clients are fellow millennials and entrepreneurs who respond well to the firm’s active Instagram presence that provides glimpses into their interests outside the office. “We’re very serious about being true to ourselves and being different from a typical firm,” says Morris-Andrews.

Indeed, millennials seem to have abandoned the old pursuit of work-life balance in favor of work-life integration. In today’s always-on, technology-saturated work environment, juggling boundaries has given way to posting Instagram pics of leisure pursuits alongside tweeting about interesting legal wins.

MYTH NO. 2: THEY’RE SLACKERS

Knight’s eagerness to strike out on her own is hardly an anomaly for this generation. Perhaps more than any other trait, a willingness to leap into entrepreneurship separates 20- and 30-something lawyers from their Gen-X and
file paperwork to increase your likelihood of patent success. The training he received as a corporate lawyer, he says, was critical to Alt Legal’s growth. “My experience at Kirkland was amazing,” he says. “In addition to learning how to be a lawyer, I gained an understanding of the concerns lawyers face when they’re evaluating technology and adapting to it. That’s been invaluable.”

There are countless other examples of millennial-helmed legal startups trying to fix the industry’s pain points. “Millennials have more entrepreneurial opportunities than any other generation, combined with a sense of confidence that makes the challenge more inviting and a greater comfort with risk that comes with being young,” Rikleen says.

Millennials’ boldness about striking out might also stem from their exposure to the criticism and frank feedback that comes with living on social media, notes Avery Blank, a Yardley, Pennsylvania-based generational strategist and consultant who has a JD. “We have that thicker skin because social media really gives you the opportunity to feel the real-world effects of how people react to us and what we’re thinking,” in this regard, millennials are hardly the fragile snowflakes of longtime portrayals. “We’ve toughened up, and I think that’s allowed us to be a little more willing to take risks.”

Ryan Alshak of San Francisco is an example of millennials’ ability to identify opportunities and pivot. The graduate of the University of Southern California School of Law is attempting to solve the long-standing bane of lawyers’ existence: time entry. It earned him a position as a 2017 ABA Journal Legal Rebel.

Alshak’s timekeeping software, Ping, not only automates the entry process but also aims to record data so that lawyers can better understand how they spend their time and create more accurate budgets. Alshak didn’t always intend to become an entrepreneur. In fact, he was dead set on being the general counsel for the Los Angeles Clippers—so much so that he joined Manatt, Phelps & Phillips, the LA firm that counted the NBA team as a client. But all those dreams went up in smoke shortly after Alshak began working, when recordings of racist statements made by Clippers owner Donald Sterling were publicized in 2014. His firm boomer counterparts.

A first-generation immigrant, Nehal Madhani graduated from the University of Pennsylvania Law School and landed a job working in Kirkland & Ellis’ bankruptcy practice. But four years in, he left that safe, rarefied world to launch his own company. It wasn’t easy. Madhani’s first startup, a marketplace that connected companies with legal help, sputtered out after a few months. “Small businesses have a high failure rate and are stingy on the legal fees—so not the best customers,” he says.

Undaunted, Madhani decided to start over, drawing on a kernel of insight gained from his own experience as an entrepreneur. He had handled his own intellectual property filings for the first business and quickly became frustrated by the laborious process. So Madhani decided to automate IP deadlines by connecting to databases that would automatically download the latest filings and by creating algorithms to review data and identify deadlines. Today, his company, Alt Legal, has hundreds of customers, ranging from small firms to Am Law 100 members, and manages hundreds of thousands of filings. It’s clearly filling a huge need. “One of our clients has 20,000 IP filings,” Madhani points out. “You just cannot track that manually.”

Alt Legal is looking to expand internationally and wants to start analyzing its IP data to offer customers insights about, for example, who might be infringing on their IP or how to

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“LAW FIRMS NOW UNDERSTAND THAT THEY HAVE TO MOVE TOWARD DATA-DRIVEN DECISIONS TO SURVIVE IN THIS NEW ECONOMY. THAT’S CHANGED EVEN IN THE PAST YEAR.” —Ryan Alshak

Photographer by Earnie Grafton

Photography by Sandy Graff
Silicon Valley legal tech accelerator one of the first participants in a new spring, the company was named to build Ping full time. This past ing a lot of time on the table.” Alshak enter his hours. “I knew I was leav-ably wait until the end of the week to remember how he would inevita-
America,” Alshak says, laughing, “I was the worst timekeeper in three years as a corporate litigator. I didn’t want to wait that long. I wanted to create something similar, but I didn’t want client,” he says. “I knew I could build on my partner’s case, my partner’s this feeling that I was just working fantastic time, but I couldn’t shake and Switzerland, “I was having a spending 18 months working on cases that took him to Israel, London and Switzerland, “I was having a life plan was thrown for a loop. After dropped the Clippers, and Alshak’s time in BigLaw was critical in help-
His idea for a startup was born to use machine learning to determine that they have to move toward data-driven decisions to survive in this new economy,” he says. “That’s changed even in the past year.”

MYTH NO. 3: THEY ARE DISLOYAL AND JOB HUNTERS

Beyond solving long-standing problems through technology, millennials are also deeply com-
mitted to finding work that aligns with their values. Rikleen points to a 2012 study conducted at Rutgers University in which nearly 60 per-
cent of young adults said they’d give up 15 percent of their salary to work for an organization whose values they share. Across the country, many young lawyers are rearranging their careers to accommodate more pro bono work. This millennial tendency to pursue work that aligns with their values dovetails with another persistent

myth, Blank says: That millen-

nials are less loyal than other generations. “The reality is that we’re not—it’s conditional loyalty. There’s certain things we’re looking for, and one of those things is purpose. If we don’t see a company that really aligns with our values, we’re not going to stick around.”

Michelle Stilwell and Victoria Slatton

they were less than two years out of school, she and Stilwell decided to launch their own Washington, D.C., firm, helping nonprofits tackle legal issues related to the immigration ban. Trump’s election and immigration policies were wake-up calls, Stilwell says. And though they’ve confronted plenty of skepticism about how two 20-something lawyers can handle such thorny, politically charged cases, the pair say their passion—combined with social media savvy—has made up for inexperience.

“We care so much, and we’re totally dedicated to figuring out how to help out clients,” Stilwell says. Jessie Kornberg felt a similar call to action. After graduating from the UCLA School of Law, the San Francisco Bay Area native worked at Bird Marella, a Los Angeles boutique litigation firm. In 2014, she was appointed the first female CEO of Bet Tzedek, a 60-employee nonprofit that has provided free legal service to people in Los Angeles for more than four decades. Under Kornberg’s leadership, the agency has created the county’s first trans-

gender medical-legal partnership, a small-business startup clinic and a program to respond to growing concerns around the deportation of undocumented immigrants.

Although she studied ballet seriously as a child and worked for a New York City nonprofit that provided after-school pro-

gramming following graduation from Columbia University, Kornberg has known she wanted to be an attorney since fifth grade, when she learned that Thomas Jefferson was a lawyer. At Bet Tzedek, Kornberg oversees $15 million worth of annual legal services to low-income, disabled and elderly people in an increas-

ingly challenging environment.

While she acknowledges rising anxiety about new threats and deportation surges that affect
her clients, "I'm constantly inspired by the energy with which my staff is responding to it," she says. "We're on track to serve four times as many people this year as last, and that is a direct result of the terror being created in our immigrant community. It is both maddening and motivating." Kornberg gives credit to mentors who helped her immensely in her early days as Bet Tzedek's youngest chief. "There's no way to talk about my career without focusing on key relationships," she says. "People like to complain that millennials don't stick around in one spot long enough. I'm trying to reshape that idea, because I think it's amazing that we hop around like fleas. It means that so many different entities can be connected through colleagues."

MYTH NO. 4: THEY'RE TOO DIFFERENT FROM PREVIOUS GENERATIONS
Nicole Abboud also owes her career to the relationships she forged early in her law practice. After graduating from Southwestern Law School, she tried her hand at several different kinds of law, from family to intellectual property. But after planning to be a lawyer her entire life, "when I started practicing, I realized I didn't love it," she remembers. In an effort to define her future and break out from the disillusionment and isolation that came with professional dissatisfaction, Abboud began asking other young lawyers about their own stories. She eventually created the Gen Why Lawyer podcast, which focuses on millennial attorneys who either redefined their law career in a way that increased their satisfaction or left law altogether.

"THE WHOLE POINT OF MY PODCAST WAS TO MAKE IT INSPIRATIONAL AND SHOW LAWYERS THAT YOU DON'T HAVE TO FEEL STUCK. I FEEL LUCKY EVERY DAY TO REACH PEOPLE." – Nicole Abboud

"I had no experience whatsoever—I looked up free YouTube videos about what podcasting equipment to buy and how to record and upload to iTunes," says Abboud of Culver City, California. Her initiative paid off, and Gen Why's success led her to leave her law job to launch a video and podcasting business, Abboud Media, to help lawyers develop their personal brands.

"To be honest, I struggled a lot with an identity crisis when I left the law," Abboud says. "The fact that I'm so vocal about my journey gives other people permission to speak up too. The whole point of my podcast was to make it inspirational and show lawyers that you don't have to feel stuck. I feel lucky every day to reach people." Many of these young attorneys are also redefining how and when they work.

"We take meetings all over the city, we meet at each other's houses, and we meet over brunch," says Morris-Andrews of Chicago. "We're not chained to the office"—even though they have an impressive one in the Willis (formerly Sears) Tower, and they work around the clock.

Rikleen believes this flexibility is a positive that leads to more sustained and focused work, not less. Older lawyers, she says, need to come around to the new way of working.

"I hear a lot of grumbling from my contemporaries. The quote would be: 'Oh, the younger generation won't put in the hours that we put in,' they want to go away on the weekends,' " she says. "I don't think that's true. Yes, there is a desire to lead a whole life, but that doesn't translate into a lack of commitment. It's just in a technologically driven world, millennials understand there are a lot of ways they can accomplish what needs to be done."

In the end, millennials' confidence, tech savvy and willingness to establish new work patterns will play an important role in establishing the future of law. As boomers retire in large numbers, there won't be enough Generation Xers to take their place. As a result, Rikleen says, millennials' increasing role offers an "unprecedented chance to reconsider how and where we work." This is crucial as millennial strengths are increasingly becoming client preferences, Blank says. "So it behooves an organization—a law firm—to think about what millennials do, what drives them and what their preferences are. Because the reality is that that's what more and more of their clients want."

Kate Rockwood is a freelance writer living in Chicago. She was born at the tail end of the Gen X generation.