Understanding
Millennials & Technology

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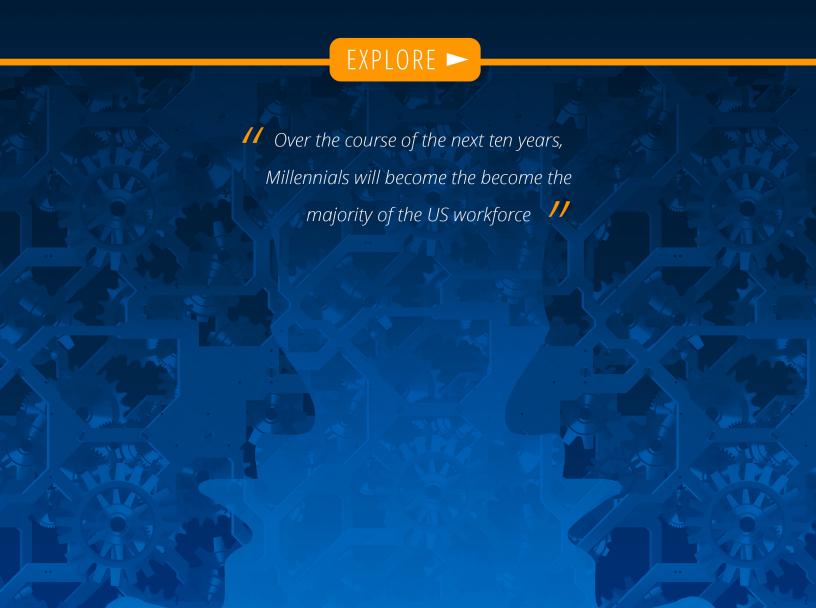
The Millennial generation (defined broadly as those born between 1980 and 2000) is the largest cohort in US history, even larger than the Baby Boomers. This means that over the course of the next ten years, Millennials will become the majority of the US workforce.

Every time a new generation enters the workforce, it brings challenges for management, and Millennials are no different. In order to keep them engaged, associations will need to provide Millennials with technology for working efficiently and effectively.

WHO ARE THE MILLENNIALS?

- There are **roughly 86 million Millennials** in the US currently, and there could be as many as 88.5 million by 2020, due to immigration
- **Only 5% of Millennial adults do not own a mobile phone** and even fewer do not own a computer
- **Millennials are technology natives** (i.e., they were born into technology), while all other generations are technology immigrants
- **Around 2025, Millennials will become the majority of the workforce**, and the majority of them will be in their 20s

This white paper will review how Millennials' relationship with technology is dramatically different than any previous generation of US workers, and what that means for associations and those who provide technology to associations. Managers who understand how Millennials relate to technology will have a tremendous advantage in recruiting and retaining Millennial employees.

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UNDERSTANDING MILLENNIALS AND TECHNOLOGY

Millennials communicate differently

When I write that Millennials communicate differently, I mean that they use their technology in a different manner than previous generations. Consider this account from one of my clients:

I was working with a small association that represented the fashion industry. There were about 15 staff at this association. As it happened, of the 15 staff, all but four were under the age of 30, thus a majority of Millennials. And not surprisingly, all of the Millennials used instant messenger (IM) to communicate, not only with their friends, but with colleagues, members, and customers.

The executive director was in her early 60s, a classic Baby Boomer. As she walked through the office, what she saw was a lot of staff "chatting" on IM. What she perceived was staff socializing rather than working. So she had her IT staff person turn off all instant messenger programs within the office. As a result, staff moved immediately to their phones and text to communicate with friends (see more in the section on "mobile"). Turning off IM didn't stop them.

If you stop and think about this for just a moment, turning off IM for Millennials is the equivalent of turning off phones for everyone else. IM and text is how Millennials communicate. It's what they grew up on and it's a natural extension of how they interact with others.

Those of us that are not Millennials (or Generation Z) need to understand that because a technology is different does not make it wrong. Unlike all earlier generations, Millennials communicate via social platforms as much or more than face-to-face or phone. And regardless of the technology flavor of the week (remember MySpace?), managers need to understand what technologies Millennials are using to communicate and look at ways to integrate that technology into day-to-day

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business practices. Shutting the technology off or ignoring it completely will only cause Millennials to work around those barriers.

YOU CAN'T STOP IT, SO YOU MIGHT AS WELL EMBRACE IT.

Millennials have different expectations of technology

As noted above, Millennials are technology natives, as opposed to the rest of us, who are immigrants. As a result, Millennials have much different (and perhaps much greater) expectations of technology. Here are some examples of how that manifests itself in Millennials' expectations of how they work, where they work, and what tools they will have access to.

1. Millennials grew up on the web

The majority of Millennials cannot remember a time when the Internet did not exist (remember when we called it the "World Wide Web"?).

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Thus they are very comfortable with how the web works, and what that means in terms of user interface and user experience. As a result, Millennials often find traditional software interfaces (the old client/server interface) confusing, non-intuitive, and "old."

This point was driven home to me recently when working with a client on selection of a new association management system (AMS). We had narrowed the choices for a new AMS down to two systems. One was based on a more traditional client/server format, while the other was a fully web-based system. Both products provided the vast majority of functionality that the client required, at a very similar price. On paper, the two choices were almost identical.

Following the completion of the two demos, I took a straw poll of the attendees (the client had eight staff attending the demos). The poll was six for the web-based product, two for the more traditional software.

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One of the attendees said to me: "Did you notice how the vote split?" I had not, so I asked him what he observed. He replied: "All the staff under 35 voted for the web-based product. The two votes for the other product were from staff over 50."

And he was right. The two systems were virtually identical, except for the interface. And understandably, the Millennials voted for the one with the interface that they were most comfortable with.

This has serious implications for what software you select for your staff to use, because user adoption is directly affected by how the person perceives the software.

2. Millennials know that "Google is the answer"
Although Google itself didn't come into existence until the 1998, the idea that we can "google" the web for any answer we need is foundational for Millennials. And as a result, when there is an issue of any sort, Millennials will head to the web for answers.

So what does this mean when it comes to technology? It means that your staff (and Millennials in particular) will expect to be able to find answers to their questions online. For example, for many associations, the most important piece of software in use is their AMS. When staff has questions about how they use the software, they are naturally going to go to the web to see if they can find an answer.

Thus the AMS provider must provide online information and there must be a broad base of users that are also sharing their learning online. For example, because Salesforce.com is used by tens of thousands of people and companies, Salesforce users can go online and find thousands of "how-to" videos and documents to help them use the product.

While it may be unfair to expect small companies to match what Salesforce does, that doesn't lessen the likelihood that staff will go to the web seeking answers.

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Associations need to keep this in mind as they select hardware, software, and services that staff will use.

3. Millennials want to tailor their experience

When my younger son was about 12 years old, he frequently played an online game called Minecraft. Minecraft is sort of like Legos online, where users can build entire civilizations with all kinds of functioning scenes, structures, and characters. There is also an entire ecosystem of gamers who build add-ons to Minecraft that users can download, often for free. These add-ons (some called "skins," others called "mods") allow the user to completely customize his or her experience of the game.

Likewise, when any of us purchase a smartphone, one of the first things we do is download "apps" that add new functionality to the phone.

Millennials have grown up in an environment that allows them to completely tailor their experience when it comes to technology. As a result, when they are in the office, their expectation is that they can tailor their work technology as well.

For associations this means providing staff with technology (both hardware and software) that allows them to customize their experience. For example, many (but not all) AMS packages now allow the user (or at least the organization) to modify screens within the software to better reflect their needs. This type of tailoring is not just a nicety anymore; it's a necessity.

4. For Millennials, technology has always been portable

The rapid advance and adoption of portable technology is no more apparent than the growth of mobile phones from simple wireless telephones to complete hand-held computing systems.

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I recall a moment in the early 21st century of being stuck in traffic on my way to see a client in downtown Washington, DC. At the time I owned a Sidekick mobile phone which allowed me to not only use the phone as a phone but also as an email tool. So I pulled out my Sidekick (stopped dead in traffic) and emailed my client that I would be late.

Upon my arrival, my client greeted me and gave me a sly smile. "You weren't really stuck in traffic, right?"

"Of course I was," I responded, "Did you not get my email?"

He replied: "Yes, but that's how I knew you weren't in traffic. How could you have sent me an email from your car?!?"

HOW FAR WE'VE COME

For Millennials, technology has always been portable. From laptops, to smart phones and tablets, and ubiquitous wifi connectivity, Millennials expect their technology to be easily accessible from anywhere. The result is that employers must provide technology that allows for portability. Is your software accessible from anywhere? Does your hardware allow your staff to work from anywhere? Do you provide internet access outside the office? Millennials will expect all of this.

Conclusion

Every new generation that enters the workforce brings new challenges for management. But the Millennial generation brings a unique set of expectations because they've been "marinating" in technology nearly since birth. As technology natives, their expectations from technology, from what they use to how they use it, is far different from any preceding generation. Association managers need to understand these expectations and be prepared to address them as Millennials become the majority of the workforce over the next ten years.

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