



Overcoming Generational Differences

A Millennial's Guide to Succeeding in a Multigenerational Law Practice

By Sarah Beth Jones and Darryl A. Wilson

Just as the practice of law is ever-changing, so are the individuals entering the profession. Today's law firms have attorneys representing each generational group: traditionalists (1900–1945); baby boomers (1946–1964); Gen Xers (1965–1980); and millennials (1981–2000). The preferred communication method, work schedule, expectations, and ideas about success vary among these groups. For millennials, the most common generational issues encountered involve communication, work–life balance, and retention.

Communication: The vast majority of issues that surface in the workplace result from conflicting communication styles. Millennials yearn for constant feedback and approval through different means of communication. However, other generational groups may not place the same value on the forms and frequency of feedback. If this feedback does not occur as expected, it is often based on lack of understanding. Millennial associates are often unaware of how little time supervising partners have to offer feedback. And partners are most likely unaware that those millennial associates expect instant feedback after each task or project that they complete. Millennials must appreciate that the other generations likely did not receive instantaneous feedback when they were starting out practicing law, while the other generations must recognize that this type of feedback is highly valued by millennials. Herein lies a true conflict in many law firms that goes unattended because no steps are taken to acknowledge and understand the different communication expectations among generations. To break the communication barriers, law firms must be willing to have the crucial conversation about the different generational groups and their expectations.

Work–Life Balance: It's no secret that millennials like the idea of arriving to work at 8:00 a.m. (or a little after), enjoying an hour lunch away from the office (a mental break from the work day does everyone good, after all),

and walking out the front door at approximately 5:00 p.m. (not a second later) to get on with the rest of our lives outside of work. In contrast, our baby boomer counterparts believe in arriving at 7:30 a.m., eating lunch at their desks, and not exiting the building until the task at hand is completed, regardless of the hour. After all, baby boomers are credited as the inventors of the 50-hour work week.

Millennials should understand that this 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. mentality is likely to be perceived as less than satisfactory by the standards of the other generational groups. Other generational groups knew that you should beat your boss to work in the morning and never leave before your boss at the end of the day, and no one had to tell them this. This mentality is in stark contrast to that of the millennials, and other generations are often puzzled that millennials don't appear to share this view. Indeed, there will be times that millennials will have to adapt to other generations' expectations to get the task done, even if it means staying until 10:00 p.m. on a Friday night when the weekend is calling. As attorneys, we should all prioritize work–life balance and take advantage of days when we can leave at 5:00 p.m. and relish the time available for other things.

Retention: What exactly is the driving force for millennials to stay put in one place? Is it the high salary to pay off the mountain of student loan debt? How about the firm's occasional happy hours? Maybe it's even the high rise building that gives you the amazing views of the city? While each of these may play a role in keeping the millennial lawyer on the job, it's actually a combination of these elements, coupled with a well-thought-out succession plan that will keep the millennial lawyer happy. Additionally, implementing a strong diversity and inclusion committee into the firm's succession plan will allow associates an opportunity to feel a part of the continuation of the firm's progress.

Millennials are becoming the driving force of most industries. Accordingly, the preceding generations will soon begin to step down from leadership roles. Millennials will begin to take their place, but nonetheless, the business will still go on. Firms must realize that the millennial business owner will want someone who shares his or her values and who is in touch with the latest advances in technology to ensure that the firm that the



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business owner chooses will be able to keep up. Here is where your millennial associates give you an edge.

Millennials like to be involved on all fronts. We need to feel that we are contributing to a goal that we respect. Millennials want to be passionate about our work and want to do a good job (hence the need for constant feedback). Millennials need to understand why we are doing what we are doing. We want to feel integral to the cause and the team. It is important for other generations to acknowledge these characteristics of millennials, so that they can understand our motivations and expectations, which will improve their ability to work with millennials.

At the same time, millennials should not walk into a law firm job on day one and expect to be talking to and meeting with clients in a few weeks, or even months. As the other generations did, we millennials also must prove ourselves. Respect and trust must be earned. Millennials should report to work, do our jobs, and watch and learn from our mentors and senior attorneys. As millennials, we place a high value on being heard, but we also need to remember that it is important to listen. We may be surprised just how much we can learn when we actively listen and observe the more experienced attorneys in our practice groups and firms.

The Solution: Issues surrounding communication, imbalanced work-life schedules, and low-retention rates in the workforce for millennials are constantly arising, but what steps are being taken to address those issues? Sometimes, as millennials, we have to take the steps to improve our own workplaces. We should suggest conversations to address the different expectations of the members of our practice groups, spanning as they do across the four generational groups. However, there are some unique situations that don't allow millennials to be as forthcoming with advice as others. In those situations, millennials should seek a trusted colleague to challenge firm management to take the necessary steps to break generational barriers. The truth is that a multigenerational firm or practice group should not be considered negative or stressful. A team consisting of multiple generations with diverse backgrounds and experiences only makes

for a stronger, smarter, well-rounded team if you can simply learn to communicate and work through any issues and be open to the perspectives and values of others. **FD**