Millennial Communication 101

Adapting to the Mindset of a Rapidly Growing Generation in the Workforce

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Introduction

Much as their baby boomer parents and grandparents did before them, millennials will soon be dominating the workforce and already are a key employee demographic for employers. Millennials possess a different set of learning and communication preferences than previous generations. This can make it challenging for organizations to develop operational and regulatory training that will engage this fast-growing demographic group.

Traditional strategies for educating staff … are failing to engage millennials – and disengaged workers are a liability for employers.

While it is easy to assume that millennials will eventually learn to adapt to corporate practices, the reality is that traditional corporate strategies are failing:

- 91 percent of millennials expect to stay in a job for less than three years.[1]

- 79 percent would consider leaving their jobs to work for themselves.[2]

The need to understand and work with the millennial mindset should be a top priority for all employers.

Consider that more than half of millennials admit that they are likely to evade restrictive workplace controls on their digital activity[3] Then imagine the potential repercussions to the business from a digital misstep that leads to a compliance violation – or a major data breach. Traditional strategies for educating staff about health and safety, loss prevention, data security and privacy, and other critical topics are failing to engage millennials – and disengaged workers are a liability for employers.

When the corporate message is understood, the engagement level of the employee is enhanced. And there is certainly opportunity for employers to improve their corporate communication and training approach so that millennial workers can better contribute to the success of the organization. To connect with these workers more effectively, organizations first need to understand who millennials are and what forces have influenced the way they learn and communicate.

1   Jeanne Meister, "Job Hopping Is the 'New Normal' for Millennials: Three Ways to Prevent a Human Resource Nightmare," *Forbes*, August 14, 2012: www.forbes.com/sites/jeannemeister/2012/08/14/job-hopping-is-the-new-normal-for-millennials-three-ways-to-prevent-a-human-resource-nightmare/#52e5f3095508.

2   "The 2015 Millennial Majority Workforce: Study Results," study commissioned by Elance-oDesk and Millennial Branding, October 2014: www.slideshare.net/oDesk/2015-millennial-majority-workforce.

3   Daniel Humphries, "Are Millennials the Latest Security Threat?" Software Advice, May 11, 2015: www.softwareadvice.com/security/industryview/millennial-threat-report-2015/.

Who Are Millennials?

Millennials, also referred to as Generation Y, are a larger living generation than baby boomers.[4] While the defining birth years vary by source, millennials are generally classified as those who were born between 1980 and 2000. Notably, millennials are no longer the youngest employees in the workforce; in fact, many Generation Y professionals are now in management roles. Younger members of the millennial demographic are often classified as Generation Z and are just beginning to enter the workforce.[5]

Millennials' affinity for digital communication is often why the media refers to them as "digital natives" or the "Facebook generation." They have grown up with social media, laptops and smartphones, and have witnessed many other changes in communications. For this reason, millennials expect instant access to information. Wider and faster access to information presents new security challenges for employers managing the use of devices and apps at work. Many employers have responded to these demands by introducing bring your own device (BYOD) programs, as well as policies for accessing social networking sites while on the job and using company-owned equipment.

Even though their social tendencies have earned millennials another title – the "Me Me Me Generation"[6] – millennial professionals are not as self-absorbed as some employers may think. This generation grew up amid global uncertainty and endured the recession. Such life events have actually heightened their concern for safety and corporate social responsibility. In fact, when asked to identify their top three goals in selecting a job, 65 percent of millennials chose making a difference in society, their city or country.[7]

By understanding the roots of the millennial mindset, employers can better communicate with this rapidly growing demographic group in the workplace to increase their engagement, alignment with operational best practices and contributions to the company.

[4] Richard Fry, "Millennials Overtake Baby Boomers as America's Largest Generation," Pew Research Center *Fact Tank*, April 25, 2016: www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/04/25/millennials-overtake-baby-boomers/.

[5] Individuals born from the mid- to late 1990s onward are often segmented into their own cohort, known as Generation Z. Members of Generation Z have defining characteristics that set them apart from their millennial/Gen Y predecessors. Already born in the age of technology, Generation Z has a higher affinity for visual communication, reliance on multimedia and entrepreneurial drive. Despite differences between millennials and Generation Z, they share the same workplace learning needs.

[6] Joel Stein, "Millennials: The Me Me Me Generation," *Time*, May 20, 2013: http://time.com/247/millennials-the-me-me-me-generation/.

[7] Gregg Zoroya, "Survey: Millennials Around the World Worry Most About Economic Inequality," *USA Today*, October 25, 2015: www.usatoday.com/story/money/2015/10/25/survey-millennials-around-world-worry-most-economic-inequality/74583976/.

Communication: Grabbing Millennials' Attention

Communicating with millennial employees, who have an attention span as short as eight seconds and an inclination to multitask across three to five screens, continues to be a struggle for many employers.[8] How can employer communications compete with the influx of platforms? How can organizations overcome stimulus overload and retain the millennial employees' attention?

For a start, organizations should consider applying these strategies when creating operational and regulatory training messages for the millennial demographic:

· Emphasize visuals.

· Keep messages concise.

· Use infographics for content-heavy messages.

The posters in Examples 1 and 2 help to illustrate a "what not to do" vs. a "what to do" approach to developing communication that will engage millennials. Traditional employer communications, like Example 1, tend to focus on content that is company-centric and often favor substance over aesthetics. By contrast, Example 2 is more millennial-friendly; it takes a more succinct, visual approach. A high-level comparison of the two can be found in Table 1.

Example 1: Traditional Employer Communication

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[8] Microsoft Canada, "Attention Spans," Consumer Insights, Spring 2015: https://advertising.microsoft.com/en/WWDocs/User/display/cl/researchreport/31966/en/microsoft-attention-spans-research-report.pdf.

Example 2: Millennial-Friendly Communication

SINK OR SWIM

PHISHING DEFINED   When scammers use electronic messaging to fool you into giving up your private information.

EVERY DAY...

156M   Phishing emails are sent
8M   Phishing emails are opened
800K   Phishing links are clicked
80K   People fall for the scam

DON'T BE A PHISHING VICTIM...BE A CYBER STAR!

THE MOBILE THREAT

Mobile users are **3x** more likely to fall for a phishing scam than desktop users.

THE SOCIAL STEAL

Fraudsters use social sites because:
★ 50% of people will accept a "friend" request from a stranger.

5 million Facebook users have been victims of phishing attacks.

THE WORKPLACE BREACH

3 out of **4** companies experienced a phishing attack in the last year.

56% of Millennials said they would probably avoid restrictive workplace security controls.

THE CONSEQUENCES

RUINED REPUTATION   LOST IDENTITY $ LOST MONEY   LOST TIME

CUT THE RISK

★ DON'T BE SO QUICK TO CLICK.
★ THINK BEFORE SHARING **SENSITIVE INFO.**
★ STORE PINS AND PASSWORDS **IN YOUR HEAD** NOT ON YOUR MOBILE DEVICE.

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Millennials often skim information, as they read high volumes of new content on their social feeds each day. For a generation accustomed to reading news in 140-character bites, brevity and simplicity are keys to retaining their attention. The challenge for employers is that not all company communications can be conveyed in just 140 characters. Visuals can help.

If the rise of highly visual social platforms like Instagram indicates anything, it is that visual communication is a preferred form of content for millennials. In September 2015, Instagram reached over 400 million active users.[9] Seventy-three percent of those users are between 15 and 35 years old.[10] As a generation known for communicating through memes, GIFs and emoticons, millennials express themselves through imagery and respond best to strategies that incorporate the same mode of communication.[11] The meme featured in Example 3, for instance, features imagery representative of millennials' expressiveness.

Of course, images alone cannot convey corporate regulations and policies as comprehensively as an employer may require. The millennial-friendly poster shown in Example 2 provides employers with a compromise solution: an infographic.

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[9] "Celebrating a Community of 400 Million," *Instagram Blog*, September 22, 2015: http://blog.instagram.com/post/129662501137/150922-400million.

[10] Anthony Clasen, "Why Instagram Is So Important to Millennials," *Iconosquare Blog*, April 22, 2015: http://blog.iconosquare.com/instagram-important-millennials.

[11] Memes and GIFs are humorous, visual modes of communication used on social media platforms and blogs. Memes are typically familiar images taken from pop culture that express an idea, behavior or style with a simple statement. GIFs are mini-animated images that capture a pop culture moment.

Table 1: Comparison of traditional vs. millennial-friendly communication

Element	Example 1 (Traditional)	Example 2 (Millennial-Friendly)
Information	• Text-heavy • Sentences and paragraphs	• Bite-size chunks • Statistics • Contemporary references (e.g., Facebook)
Language	• Directive language (e.g., do this, don't do that) • Professional, corporate-speak	• Punchy headline • Conversational • Use of contractions
Focus	• Work-centric • Compliance	• Blends personal, social and work-life experiences • Relevant consequences (e.g., damaged personal brand)
Layout	• Text grouped around a single graphic	• Infographic design with multiple icons • More visual
Graphics	• Stock photography • Middle-age corporate male wearing suit and tie	• Colorful illustrations • Multiracial figures, with both genders represented • Casual clothing
Typography	• Single font style, single font size	• Stylized numbers and letters, varied font sizes
Size	• Standard paper or poster size	• Distinctive sizing

Example 3: "Another virus? Ugh. I fail at cyberhygiene."

Infographics, as the name implies, allow for hybrid communication of information in both words and graphics. This form of communication enables millennials to comprehend a message at a glance or by a quick skim. It takes less than one-tenth of a second for people to get a sense of a visual scene, falling well within the average eight-second attention span of millennial employees.[12]

Visual learners make up over 65 percent of the population, and 80 percent of what people remember is what they see, compared with the 20 percent who remember what they read.[13] As such, infographics are a strong communication tool for any type of employee.

Millennial Communication 101: Tips for Success

Colorful visuals that convey messages with short and succinct content are likely to resonate with millennials. Play up the use of icons, illustrations and creative imagery to emphasize key points and desired learning outcomes. More visually appealing messaging can help to improve retention of information for all employees, not just millennials.

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[12] "Thirteen Reasons Why Your Brain Craves Infographics," NeoMam Studios, February 28, 2016: http://neomam.com/interactive/13reasons/.

[13] Ian Lloyd, "Why Every SEO Strategy Needs Infographics," WMG, February 12, 2014: www.webmarketinggroup.co.uk/blog/why-every-seo-strategy-needs-infographics.

Training: Millennials' Learning Preferences

The millennial mindset requires employers to re-evaluate their approaches to communication and education. But raising employee awareness of workplace procedures and policies is not enough. Corporate training for this demographic group needs to follow a multistep approach, with several points of communication to convert awareness into actionable learning.

This includes using:

- Visual communication that is relatable

- Short, easy-to-digest training modules

- A personalized approach that blends work-life experiences

Posters and other communication materials can help to raise awareness, but the retention and application of information require a more tailored training approach. In fact, the "forgetting curve" shows that if employers do not reinforce learning, 79 percent of important workplace information can be forgotten in the first month (see Graph 1).[14]

Typical forms of workplace training often take a lecture approach, with annual 15-minute module-style videos and a follow-up quiz. These videos typically use an impersonal voiceover and contain standardized stock image slides to explain concepts. Millennials are likely to lose interest within the first few minutes of traditional videos with monotone voiceovers and outdated visuals.

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[14] Garry Platt, "The Forgetting Curve and Its Implications for Training Delivery," *TrainingZone*, August 15, 2011: www.trainingzone.co.uk/develop/cpd/the-forgetting-curve-and-its-implications-for-training-delivery.

Graph 1: Ebbinghaus' Forgetting Curve

Elapsed Time Since Learning
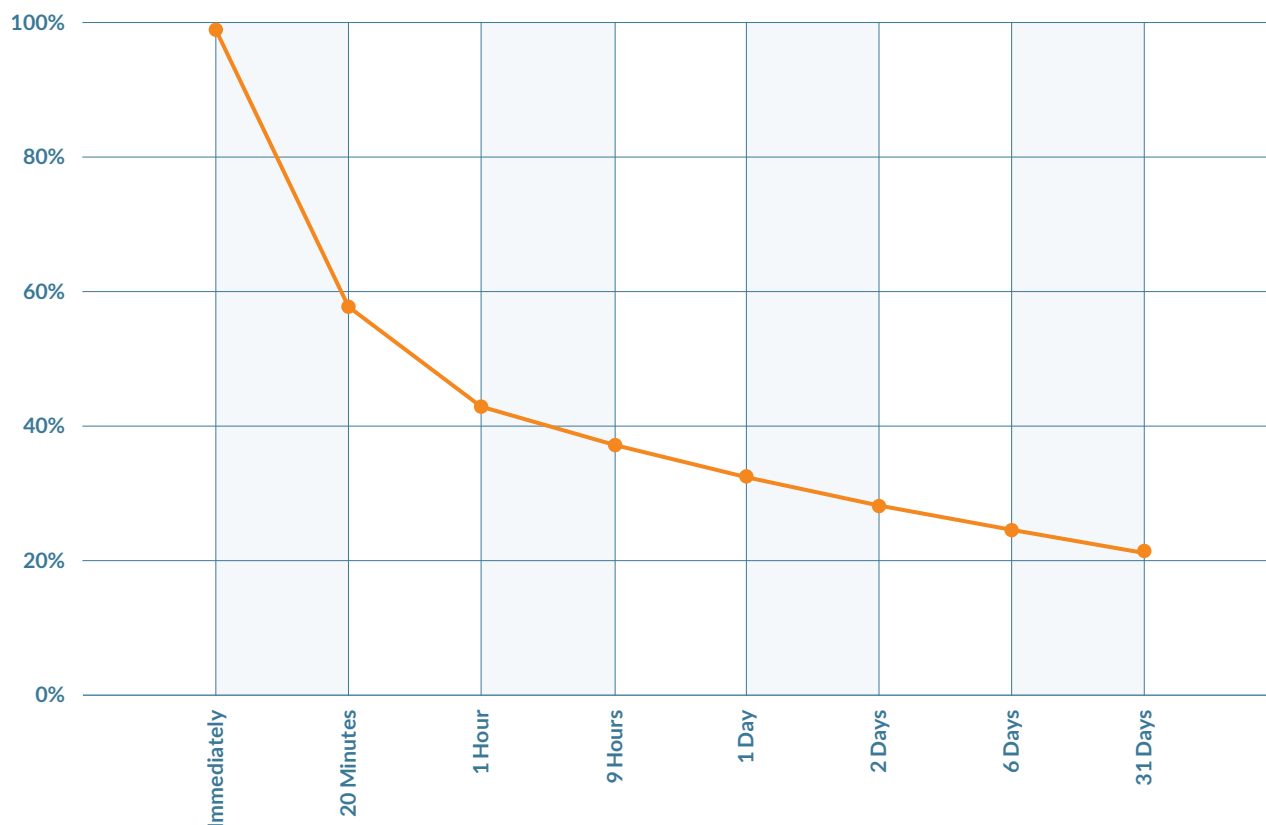
The millennial–friendly training video responds to this need for personalization in several ways. First, the voiceover should be an energetic persona who communicates with employees as a peer would. Because 98 percent of millennials are more likely to relate to a peer's voiceover than that of a brand,[15] the objective corporate persona typically used in a traditional corporate training video provides an unnecessary communication gap. Graphical elements are equally as important. Animated objects and characters – particularly youthful ones that are physically reflective of millennials – can enliven the material for Generation Y and create a greater visual memory than static illustrations or photos will (see Examples 4 and 5).

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[15] "Marketing to Millennials: A Social Approach for a Social-Savvy Generation," SocialChorus, July 26, 2013: www.slideshare.net/SocialChorusU/millennial-webinar-s-cslides-1?ref.

How to Connect with Millennials – Three New Stats Shed Light

To strengthen the effectiveness of the video, learning outcomes should connect with work or personal life scenarios that millennials can relate to. While multimedia capabilities can be limited by budget and compliance needs, employers can still be creative about incorporating relevancy within training content. For instance, if employers are limited to slides, they can use general stock visuals with peer personas or fun graphics that speak to relevant life experiences.

Example 4: Video With Animated Characters

Example 5: Video With Animated Objects

Appealing to Millennials' Sense of Personal Brand

As a social generation, millennials prioritize their personal image. To help these employees understand the concept and dangers of phishing, for example, a video could show how negligence in maintaining a conscious mindset and behavior about data security can result in negatively affecting a millennial's relationships and personal brand. By taking a "Don't put your brand or those of our clients at risk" approach, the video would help employees link the emotions they would feel about having their personal information exposed to the importance of protecting the information of their clients.

Making this correlation with real-life scenarios improves the likelihood that millennial employees will engage with a company's training modules.

The Power of Microlearning

Because training videos contain vital information related to an employee's safety and well-being or desired operational and regulatory-compliant behavior, employers need to carefully consider how to deliver such learning content. Microlearning strategies are one approach that can help millennials learn and retain information during training.

Microlearning breaks the training material up into several two- to three-minute monthly videos, an approach that can drastically improve employee retention. As quick, visual communicators, millennials prefer to receive instruction delivered in short, digestible pieces rather than one long annual training video. Interestingly, the microlearning strategy doesn't only benefit millennials. According to the Rapid Learning Institute, 94 percent of learning and development professionals acknowledge that their learners prefer bite-size online learning modules.[16]

Technology provides the interactivity and the personalized approach millennials desire. Though video content and interactive quizzes align with the multimedia preferences of millennials, these media alone will not secure their attention. Millennials seek individualized, interactive approaches to learning that allow them to work with concepts, both independently and with others.

Research has long acknowledged a correlation between personal experience and memory retention. In a study shared by the Training Industry, this relationship was proven to be even more applicable to young learners. Results showed that 90 percent of students forgot what they learned from a typical schoolbook within three days.[17] This study reveals that typical lecture-style learning methods that lack interactive components fail to resonate with millennials. They respond best to learning that connects with the bigger picture and relates with their own experiences and personal life.

Millennials prefer to receive instruction delivered in short, digestible pieces.

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[16] Michael Boyette, "RLI Survey: Bite-Size Learning Is Hot at ASTD Conference, but Execution Is Lagging Back on the Home Front," Rapid Learning Institute, May 12, 2014: http://rapidlearninginstitute.com/uncategorized/rli-survey-bite-size-learning-hot-astd-conference-execution-lagging-back-home-front.

[17] "Forgetting Curve," Training Industry: www.trainingindustry.com/wiki/entries/forgetting-curve.aspx.

Conclusion

Contrary to the self-absorbed, uninterested reputation the millennial generation has earned, warranted or not, employees in this demographic can be receptive to operational training on topics such as health and safety, data security, loss prevention, and regulatory compliance. The American Psychological Association reports that millennials rank personal safety higher than any other generation as a stress factor in the workplace.[18] And according to Pew Research, 71 percent of millennials take active steps to protect their information online and adjust their privacy settings.[19]

The key to engaging this demographic effectively is taking a more personalized approach. Employers cannot wait for employees to adapt their learning and communication preferences. The traditional corporate communication approach just isn't effective.

While undertaking such shifts may seem like an imposition, this rapidly growing generation cannot be ignored for much longer. Millennials are reaching middle management and will soon have a hand in shaping the direction of operations within their companies. Companies need to ensure that as these workers assume leadership roles, they are fully prepared with

the knowledge they need to guide the organization. Additionally, the newest employees – Generation Z – will benefit from improved communication and training as they start their careers and corporate contributions.

The key to engaging this demographic effectively is taking a more personalized approach.

Streamlining corporate communications to meet millennial needs should be seen as an opportunity, rather than a burden, as remodeling communication and training strategies can have an overall positive workplace impact. For instance, infographics will improve the rate of comprehension of essential processes and procedures for every employee, and understanding the big-picture correlations of learning is a longstanding demand for all types of learners.

New communication and training strategies inspired by the need to meet the learning preferences of the millennial generation are enabling employers to revitalize their workplace culture and create stronger employee relations in the long term.

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[18] Hannah Ubl, "Millennials Rank Personal Safety as Top Workplace Issue," UL, November 5, 2013: www.ulehssustainability.com/blog/training/millennials-rank-personal-safety-as-top-workplace-issue/.

[19] Lee Rainie, "Privacy in the Digital Age," Pew Research Center, June 3, 2015: www.pewinternet.org/2015/06/03/privacy-in-the-digital-age.

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Kelly Lovell partnered with Protiviti to produce this white paper. Lovell is an acclaimed youth mobilizer and consultant, sought out for her expertise in engaging millennials and Generation Z. She is a 14-time award-winning thought leader, a two-time TEDx speaker and the CEO of Lovell Corporation. As one of Canada's premier youth consultancy firms, Lovell Corporation helps *Fortune* Global 500® companies build effective youth marketing and millennial employee retention strategies. Featured by *Forbes*, *The Globe and Mail*, FOX News, and *Entrepreneur* magazine, Lovell's work continues to receive public recognition for bridging the gap between youth, business and community.

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