

Tapping into the Next Generation: Pitfalls & Best Practices for Engaging Millennials

Harness the talents of the biggest-ever generation with these strategies.

By Matt McCrosson & Liz Gousse

Move over, baby boomers. Millennials are officially the largest generation in U.S. history. There were 92 million Americans born between 1980 and 2000, according to census data. In a class so large, it's difficult to make broad generalities about work ethic and perspectives. But given that millennials will make up 75% of the workforce by 2025, there's little debate that organizations that can harness this generation's skills and talents will be better positioned for success.

The nonprofit sector is in fact uniquely suited to hire and retain top talent among millennials. In a recent survey, six in 10 millennials said an employer's "sense of purpose" played a role in why they chose their current position. And they place a high value on the impact they can have in their careers – 84% said "knowing I am helping to make a positive difference in the world is more important to me than professional recognition," according to research from Bentley University. Nonprofits have these aspirations baked into their business. That's an advantage.

But while millennials may place impact over recognition, they still have high expectations when it comes to their work environment. Only 30% of the respondents surveyed by Bentley were willing to work in an unpleasant environment to achieve career success. They want the employer to have a sense of purpose, but they expect a nice place to work, too.

The key for nonprofits is to communicate their mission while fostering an environment that matches what millennials want on the job. We've seen it work at nonprofit organizations of all sizes in many different fields. Here are five things nonprofit leaders should keep in mind to bring millennials on board.

1. Culture Counts

Nonprofits that best connect their organization's outward mission with their internal culture will be the most effective at wooing millennials – and motivating them to do their best work. That starts with keeping employees updated on the impact your organization is making in the world, just as you do with your donors. Make sure these communications are honest and candid. Employees, especially millennials, will dismiss reports that seem forced or phony.

“ Millennials have high expectations of their work environment.”

Arrange the work space to accommodate a millennial mindset. Younger workers see traditional cubicles as stuffy and isolating. That doesn't necessarily mean they expect bean bag chairs and ping pong tables, but there can be a balance. Create a more open layout with unassigned seating. Areas primed for collaboration will foster the teamwork and creative working sessions employees crave.

When it comes to updating operations, consider this: The majority of millennials grew up playing video games and want gamification in everything from workplace training to physical fitness. They see competition as a frequent part of collaboration and look for the built-in rules and structure that gamification offers. You can't turn your whole office into a game, but a "Best Idea Competition" with bragging rights for "Genius of the Week" may spark a better brainstorm than a traditional whiteboard session.

2. Flexibility & Accountability Aren't Mutually Exclusive

As millennials occupy more of the workforce, part of the culture shift is the waning dominance of the 9-5 workday. Millennials expect to be able to take time off when they need it (even if it's just a personal day). But they don't mind answering an e-mail or two on that day off or later in the evening. If a big project means everyone works late, millennials may be less likely to complain.

Nonprofits must embrace this more flexible approach without sacrificing accountability. Millennials may expect a little more leeway in how they complete an assignment, and they may do better work because of that freedom to follow a creative idea or rethink an approach. But that flexibility shouldn't extend to missed deadlines or shoddy work. It's up to an organization's leaders to make sure a looser structure doesn't impact accountability or results.

“Traditional cubicles are seen as stuffy and isolating.”

3. Create Clear Goals & Roles

One way to set an expectation of accountability is to establish clear goals and roles for employees as soon as they join your organization. Again, nonprofits have a unique opportunity to tie workplace expectations to the greater mission and impact of people's work. The stereotype that millennials are constantly job hopping is a myth, Pew found. Millennials are eager to grow their careers at a single organization, and they appreciate – and need – mentors to help them navigate that path.

A big part of creating that culture of flexibility and accountability is empowering younger workers to take ownership of their work and the effect it has on the outside world. That starts with a clear understanding of what role they will play and what your organization expects from them.

4. Be Generous with Benefits

Nonprofits often struggle to compete with the corporate world when it comes to salary – that's not a new challenge exclusive to millennial workers. Nonprofit organizations often try to fill this gap by offering plentiful benefits. The most revolutionary examples include unlimited vacation and mental health days. These perks can be effective, provided organizations have successfully built a culture of accountability.

But the approach doesn't have to be so extreme – millennials still appreciate traditional benefits like generous health care coverage and retirement savings matches. These perks, combined with the meaningful work and a path for career growth, are often enough to lure top millennial talent away from the corporate world.

Nonprofits should also consider incentives that don't only benefit the employee. Many organizations allow employees to take time off for volunteer work. Some nonprofits sponsor organization-wide volunteer days to make an impact locally. These kinds of “days on” are more common in the for-profit world but present a unique opportunity for nonprofits to draw one more connection between the work employees are doing and the greater good.

5. Cool Tech Is Enticing

There's no doubt that millennials are wowed by cool technology. They've grown up assuming that near-constant updates to technology will make their lives easier. To them, the workplace is no exception.

You need to be thoughtful when it comes to technology upgrades – budget limitations demand that. But finding ways to embrace new technology, without sacrificing security or privacy, can show your organization is ready to adapt to new opportunities – and may also improve productivity.

Bring in New Funds

Understanding what motivates millennials won't just give you a leg up inside the workplace; it will also give you a fundraising advantage. Studies show that about half of millennials donate to a cause on a monthly basis, based on their own criteria and expectations. As millennials dominate the workforce, they're quickly becoming affluent members of society and leading decision makers.

Nonprofit organizations that can successfully onboard millennial employees and help them transition to leadership roles will be better suited to attract this growing donor class. That starts with creating a workplace and culture that resonates with millennials. Focusing on impact, flexibility, gamification, and cutting-edge tech are all crucial elements in reaching younger generations and incorporating them into the organization. 

Matt McCrosson (mmccrosson@pkfod.com) is a partner with PKF O'Connor Davies (pkfod.com), an accounting and advisory firm. Liz Gousse (egousse@pkfod.com) is a consulting services senior manager with PKF O'Connor Davies.



Matching Your Methods to Millennials

To dive deeper into millennial engagement, see these articles at NonprofitWorld.org:

Want to Hire Top Talent? Create an Irresistible Culture (Vol. 33, No. 4)

Are You Offering the Right Perks? (Vol. 35, No. 1)

Manage for Today, Mentor for Tomorrow (Vol. 23, No. 5)

Here Come the Millennials – and their Money (Vol. 34, No. 3)

A Path to Stronger Programs, Greater Engagement, and Less Burnout? (Vol. 36, No. 1)

“Cool” Is the New Recruiting Tool (Vol. 29, No. 3)

Let's Take the Mystery Out of Training Millennials (Vol. 36, No. 1)