

What Do Millennials Want From Their Work Place?



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This tends to be a hot topic for businesses these days. Businesses, government and non-profits are struggling with how to relate and retain the best talented millennials. I witnessed an exchange while doing some research on millennials in the workplace that piqued my interest on this subject. To provide a context here was the lightbulb.

During a conversational debrief about the perceptions of millennials in the workplace I listened to an exchange between a millennial, who we'll call Samantha, and a person of an older generation, who we'll call George. Samantha, who works at a large corporation, stated that she enjoyed working at her company because of an agreement she made with her manager. Samantha asked her manager if her schedule could be 7am to 3pm instead of the standard 9am to 5pm.

George asked, and I'm paraphrasing here, "What gives you the right to ask for an adjustment to your schedule when you just started working at that company?" George was perturbed with the 'gall' of the millennial to ask for a 'special privilege' so early in her career.

The gulf of understanding between Samantha's desire for more flexible hours and George's affront to Samantha's asking was large. I decided to ask a question of Samantha myself during this exchange. "Samantha, if standard work hours were from 7 to 3 would you have asked to work from 9 to 5?" Samantha's reply was revealing. "Probably. I'm not a morning person. I just wanted the option. Now I realize I actually like getting up in the morning because I have a few hours of quiet at work before everyone shows up." Basically Samantha just wanted an option. George, however, was brought up in a generation that you followed the company line so you don't ask for 'special privileges.'

This exchange of generational cultural divide spurred me on to dig a little deeper into what millennials want, and don't want, in the workplace. I do not portend to have the answer for each millennial because each person, no matter his or her generation, has individual motivations and needs, but I did put together the following findings.

1 Millennials know the corporate womb is a myth but they're not opposed to the womb.

My father worked for a national construction company his entire career. The expectation that he, and others in his generation, had was that the company would provide him with a good salary, pension, stability and health care, and in exchange he would work hard and be loyal for his entire career for that company. This idea of the corporate womb is not what we have today. People are no longer graduating high school and the next day walking into the paper mill and into the middle class.

Millennials do not believe that companies will provide for their well-being as previous generations did.

[Nearly half of millennials feel they may be worse off than their parents.](#) What they lack in financial advancement in the workplace they will fulfill by working at a business that aligns with their values and work-life integration.

- [64% of millennials say it is a priority for them to make the world a better place.](#)
- [72% would like to be their own boss. But if they do have to work for a boss, 79% of them would want that boss to serve more as a coach or mentor.](#)
- [88% prefer a collaborative work-culture rather than a competitive one.](#)
- [74% want flexible work schedules.](#)
- [88% want “work-life integration,” which isn’t the same as work-life balance, since work and life now blend together inextricably.](#)

All the above are more than doable. If you are not part of an organization that is figuring out how to engage millennials, then your company is leaving talent on the table. Don't lose your talented millennials over something as trivial as their preference to work from 7 to 3 instead of 9 to 5. Does it matter what hours they work, as long as they finish their work on time and with quality? If your company bristles at providing options, I recommend you ask yourself why it bristles, rather than blaming the millennials.

Companies would be smart to start listening to what millennials yearn for in a workplace. There are 80 million millennials in our ranks in the United States, and 53.5 million of them are in the workforce. [More than one-in-three American workers today are millennials \(adults ages 18 to 34 in 2015\), and this year they surpassed Generation X to become the largest share of the American workforce, according to new Pew Research Center analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data.](#) The companies that create the

environment millennials desire will be the companies with the deepest talent pool.

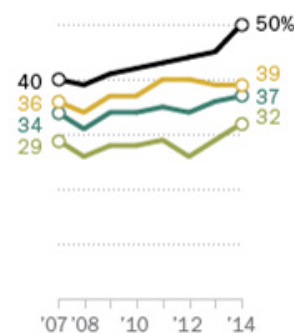
2 Traditional top-down structures do not appeal to millennials.

Among millennials, there is a declining rate of interest in joining political parties or religions, and this is no different than their lack of interest in working in a traditional workplace. Millennials are more individualistic so they do not identify with traditional power structures and institutions. The following graph demonstrates millennials' lack of attachment to political parties and religion compared to previous generations.

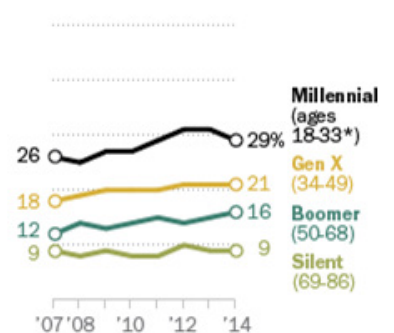
This isn't to say millennials are opposed to working in large corporations; more likely, they just want some flexibility and empowerment. They loathe the monolithic top-down structured approach and thirst for mentorship. Samantha stated that she loved working for her large corporation because it provided benefits, financial security, and was flexible. Don't we all wish to work for that type of company?

Millennials: Unmoored from Institutions

Percent who consider themselves political independents



Percent of adults in each generation who are religiously unaffiliated



* Age ranges are for 2014

Source: Data points represent totals based on all Pew Research surveys of the general public conducted in that calendar year.

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3 **There are certain events that have shaped their world view.**

Millennials have been through a ten-year war, saw a market meltdown, witnessed Twitter take down an Egyptian government, and have taken on copious amounts of student debt. They consume their news and entertainment from Facebook, SnapChat, YouTube, Netflix, Instagram, and probably a dozen more social media sites and apps I've never heard of. Millennials receive tons of information quickly and from everywhere, and not from one of three or four major television network's nightly news shows. [Their cell phones are faster and more powerful than the desktop computer run on Windows 95 that I had in college.](#) Millennials are more interconnected and affected by world events than any previous generation.

Companies should spend more time than they think educating millennials on what the company is doing and why. There is too much information, true and false, on the glorious World Wide Web to help millennials glean the actual goings-on in a company. If a company is not communicating with the workforce constantly about their operation and how and why they are operating, the company could be creating a demotivated workforce or see millennials search for a career elsewhere. Be transparent and you'll gain loyalty. Millennials are used to taking in vast amounts of information from numerous sources. When in doubt communicate.

4 **Millennials' unconscious biases are different than mine and yours.**

Unconscious biases happen when we make assumptions of people and situations quickly to make decisions that we fool ourselves into believing are rational. If you're not sure what I'm talking about, just watch [this brief video from Google.](#)

Millennials are a generation that places less emphasis on what people look like or what group they belong to than what we think. [Young people are more tolerant of races and groups than older](#)

[generations \(47% vs. 19%\), with 45% agreeing with preferential treatment to improve the position of minorities. This may be attributable to the diversity of the generation itself, which recalls that of the silent generation. The shifting population is evidenced with 60% of 18-29 year olds classified as non-Hispanic white, versus 70% for those 30 and older. This reflects a record low of whites, with 19% Hispanic, 14% black, 4% Asian, and 3% of mixed race or other. Additionally, 11% of millennials are born to at least one immigrant parent.](#) This isn't to say they don't have unconscious biases. They do, in fact they probably think we're all Luddites who are too old and need to get out of the way! Their biases are just different. They just see older generations' unconscious biases more clearly than we do because their biases are not the same as ours.

Ensure your leadership team is working on its self-awareness, implementing protocols that minimize unconscious biases in hiring and promotional practices, to create a more inclusionary workplace environment.

"So how do we keep our most talented millennials?"

Millennials are not being obstinate or selfish. They are empowered by previous trailblazing generations to ask for greater freedoms in the workplace because they see that happy workers make a happy workplace. We're not talking about making them CEOs here. We're talking about giving them some choices so they know they are being heard, and therefore are happier and have the desire to become more valuable to the company. This, in turn, helps them be more productive, and thus the company more profitable.

So the answer to the questions is simple: *Ask them what they want and make adjustments.* Isn't that what great leaders and managers should do anyway?