

MILLENNIALS IN THE WORKPLACE

Finding information to get the job done



Overview

Millennials are now the largest generation in the workforce, and companies need to understand what motivates millennials to truly appreciate the way that they work. One thing is for certain; millennials have grown up very differently than previous generations. Technology is no longer a separate object, but rather, an embedded way of life. This white paper will explore who millennials are, what sets them apart, how they research, where they search for information and why understanding their information-seeking behaviors will help to shape the way your company thinks about the tools that millennials need to find information to get the job done.

HELLO, I AM A MILLENNIAL

Before we understand the information seeking behavior and habits of Millennials, we first need to understand who they are, how their views are shaped and the differences between themselves and the other generations.

The Numbers

Millennials were born between the years 1980 and 2000¹, although some sources argue that those born in the mid-2000s are also part of this generation. Millennials now outnumber the Baby Boomer generation, and will continue to grow, with their full population peak occurring in 2036 at an estimated 81.1 million². Millennials are also the most educated generation of all time³, attaining a higher-rate of both high-school and college educations than previous generations.

Digital Natives

Millennials are the first generation to be heavily influenced by technology. In their lifetime they have been introduced to computers, mobile devices, the Internet, social media, music streaming and so much more. Mark Prensky defines this type of individuals as “digital native[s]” who are “native speakers of the digital language” and who think and processes information differently than previous generations⁴. Not only has technology shifted the way Millennials think, but it has shifted the way they search for and acquire information. You may think that because this is the most educated and technologically savvy generation, their information seeking behavior would be heightened as well. However, the exact opposite may be true, specifically when it comes to research.

Millennials are digital natives who process information differently than previous generations.

Traits of Millennials

So what are the defining traits of this generation and how do they differ from previous generations who now share the work space with Millennials? Millennials embody a number of key traits that impact the way they search for information.

Civic and Globally Minded

Millennials have grown up in an environment where information is abundant and immediate, which has engendered a keen understanding of the world at large. Add to that the fact that Millennials are now the most diverse generation population in America⁵, and as a result, this generation tends to be more civic and globally minded than previous generations.

One-Of-A-Kind

Continuous positive reinforcement and heavy involvement from parents in the formative years and beyond have made Millennials feel as if they are special and one-of-a-kind. Millennials expect instant gratification⁶. As a result, Millennials can be mistaken as entitled.

Work-Life Balance

According to Lee Caraher, “millennials watched and listened to their parents struggle to succeed at work and at home, and most likely make sacrifices to accommodate both roles.” This has influenced millennials’ view of the importance of work-life balance. For some millennials, work-life balance shapes every aspect of their professional life and influences everything from job offers to the execution of their daily work.⁶

Team Oriented / Social

Millennials came of age in a time of continuous social engagement through social media. It’s no surprise then that millennials prefer a team approach and a collaborative environment when it comes to researching and retrieving information.⁵

The Generation Match-Up

Millennials, GenXers and Baby Boomers display different traits that infer the way they search for information. GenXers and Baby Boomers are self-reliant, so it could be assumed they tend to find information on their own. Millennials, on the other hand, are more apt to be collaborative and will tap their social circles and parents for information. Millennials expect instant results and will also adopt technologies that enable them to find information as quickly as possible. It is these fundamental traits of Millennials that has shaped the way they search for information.⁷

MILLENNIALS	GEN XERS	BABY BOOMERS
Optimistic	Self-Reliant	Workaholic
Close Parental Involvement	Adaptable	Idealistic
Work-life Balance	Cynical	Competitive
Civic Minded	Entrepreneurial	Loyal
Team Oriented	Resourceful	Materialistic

COLLEGE YEARS

Millennials are on track to be the most educated generations. A PEW research study found that approximately 27% of Millennial women and 21% of Millennial men between the ages of 18-33 will complete a bachelor degree (compared to 14% and 17% of the Boomer generation during that same age period).³ College is the place that many early career Millennials refer back to for their research “steps”.

Millennials established their information-seeking behavior in college and tend to use the same approach in their professional life.

Who and What They Turn To

Millennials are the “Google Generation”. Their lives have been shaped by search engines and the Internet. In a large-scale survey conducted by Project Information Literacy in 2009, approximately 95% of those surveyed indicated that they turned to sites like Google before turning to scholarly databases or their college library¹⁰. Often, Millennial college students put their social/collaborative trait into action, referring to their professor or instructor, peers or even their parents for recommendations before their college librarian.¹¹ Students need to be taught to access resources other than the sources they grew up with, namely Google and their human sources (i.e., parents, peers, and friends).

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THE CHALLENGE IN THE WORKPLACE

Since Millennials often turned to Google as their first information resource, it can be argued that it's a bad habit resulting from a lack of developed “information competencies.” Although digitally savvy and fast with finding information, the ways in which Millennials search for information and assess information is very limited and is one of the largest hurdles for Millennials in the workplace.

When it comes to researching a work-related project, Millennials adopt the same approach they used in college (Google), assuming this approach will be successful in the workplace. However, this kind of approach is not what their employers expect.

A 2012 survey by Project Information Literacy of recent college graduates indicated that “as they settled into their 40-plus hour-a-week jobs, graduates said they relied on their computer expertise and leveraged information competencies from their college days for solving information problems. Unfortunately, these competencies only went so far. Employers needed them to use a more comprehensive and varied research approach.” In addition, those employers interviewed as part of the survey indicated one important factor in selecting one job candidate over the other was based on the amount of resources they used for research.¹²

Employers want Millennials to use more than Google. They expect all employees to employ a comprehensive and varied research approach.

The table below from this same report indicates that one of the top information competencies for employers is hiring an individual that understands how and what resources need to be accessed for comprehensive research.

Figure 5: Competencies Employers Say they Need — But College Hires Rarely Demonstrate

Optimal Information Competencies for College Hires (according to employers)
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Engaging team members during the research process 2. Retrieving information using a variety of formats 3. Finding patterns and making connections 4. Taking a deep dive into the “information reservoir”

Ordered from most discussed to least discussed competencies; n = 23 interview participants.

Source: Project Information Literacy Research Report: “Learning Curve” | October 16, 2012 | Alison J. Head

Breaking the Habit

The information-seeking habits of Millennial employees has been primarily shaped by search engines, even throughout their college years. Some argue that their cognitive thinking skills have suffered and therefore have a difficult time filtering the correct information from inaccurate information.¹³ Millennials may need an “information mentor” in the workplace to steer them down the right path for effective research. These mentors have knowledge about the most effective resources and tools, and the experience to teach Millennials how to distinguish between vetted information and non-vetted information.

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The Right Resources

Employers need to evolve and meet Millennial expectations. That means purchasing information resources and tools that mimic what Millennials are used to – single-search box, a sophisticated UX experience, and an opportunity for social collaboration. Providing tools

that operate like Google on the front-end, but on the back-end reveal results that are vetted, relevant and cover a broad scope of content, helps Millennial employees with the challenge of determining what information is accurate or inaccurate. Ensuring these tools can evolve or match the varying levels of information seeking competencies with your millennial employees will help to satisfy both the most novice and the most advanced researchers.

The second part to be taken into consideration is promotion and training with these information resources, and utilizing these tools to the best of their ability. As the “information mentors” of your company, it is important to keep in mind that for some of your Millennial employees, you will need to teach them “how to fish” and encourage their efforts when it comes to conducting comprehensive research. The stakes are now higher for these employees, which will lead to their invested interest in using these tools. No longer are the results of their effort a grade or a trophy, but rather a three-fold achievement: contributing to the success of the company, professional growth, and potential monetary gain.

Employers should provide tools that act like a search engine on the front-end, but on the back-end deliver results that are vetted.

Why Premium Content Matters

The biggest challenge for Millennial employees is learning how to conduct research using varied and vetted content, while having the skills to evaluate what information is “good” versus information that is questionable. This is where premium information sources come into play. These kinds of resources provide vetted content in varied formats like journals, magazines, e-books, videos, conference proceedings and more. It takes the guess-work out of providing all researchers with accurate information. Millennial employees will reap the benefits that come with a job well done.

Connect it All Together

Offering the right information resources is the first step to helping your Millennial employees. The second step is to mimic what they have been used to almost their entire lives. Millennials have been raised to turn to a single-search box for all of their answers and expect that when they enter a term into this box they will get complete information.¹⁴ Connecting all of your content and providing an enterprise research platform that “acts” like a search engine will help increase return visits and usage of your paid and internal content. But an enterprise research platform takes it a step further than a search engine, returning the most relevant content results for the user and offering features and functionality to make their research experience more personal.

Training and promotion of these resources is also key to the success of your Millennial employees. Providing ongoing live and recorded training sessions, FAQ sheets or how-to guides and posting these items to a central repository will help Millennial employees to stay educated on these tools and understand their benefits.

Conclusion

Habits are not easy to break. But luckily for your Millennial employees, breaking their information-searching habits is an easy feat. Providing tools that mimic the search engine experience provides an ease of use they may not get with other information tools. Offering a breadth of premium content helps researchers to strike the balance they crave, saving time and creating the right research in their work and also allowing Millennial employees to engage their social / collaborative trait when researching, which is key. Most importantly, providing encouragement as an “information mentor” through training and promotion will help increase usage of these vital tools and guide Millennial employees down the right information path.

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