

Responding to Generational Diversity in the Workplace: Reaching Millennials

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[Originally published in the *Journal of Employee Assistance*, Vol. 47, No. 1, Pgs.:16-19, 1st Qtr 2017.]

Generations typically share similar values, beliefs and expectations and exhibit analogous characteristics, for example in communication and employment preferences, given their common experiences during life stages and through similar channels (e.g., online, TV, mobile, etc.). These generational-shaping influences are most obvious as group members move into adulthood. Of particular interest to EAPs, HR and other workplace professionals is the generation known as the Millennials- those individuals who were born between 1981 and 1997. This age group has been variously described as optimistic, team oriented and high-achieving rule-followers (Broido, 2004; Howe and Strauss, 2003).

Current Generations in the US Workforce				
Generation	Born between	Age span	Number (in millions)	Percent of Workforce
The Millennials (or Generation Y)	1981-1997	19-35	53.5	34%
Generation X	1965-1980	36-51	52.7	32%
The Baby Boomers	1946-1964	52-70	44.6	29%
The Silent Generation (or The Traditionalists)	1928-1945	71-88	3.7	>5%
Source: Pew Research Center analysis of US Census Bureau, 2015 Current Population Survey data				

The Millennials are the largest age group to emerge since the baby boom generation. They comprise just over 23 percent of the total US population, are the most racially and ethnically diverse segment and contain more individuals from single parent, blended or same-sex parent families (Frey, 2014). In 2015, at 53.5 million-strong, this generation (also known as Generation Y) became the largest portion of the US labor force and now makes up a third of those employed. Additionally, the Millennial generation's share of the workforce will continue to grow to 50 percent by 2020, given its disproportionately large share of immigrants, and those transitioning from college to the working world.

Millennials are the most educated generation in history, skilled in technology, very self-confident, able to multi-task, and have plenty of energy. And they are voracious information consumers--these individuals typically query and gather data, then arrive at their own conclusions--and on their own schedule. They collect all types of health and lifestyle information through a wide range of online and social networks. They prefer to integrate technology with health (via their smartphones or iPads) and are eager to try new technological approaches (apps) to wellness.

Millennials and Mental Health: Less stigma but more willing to access?

Data from Transamerica's *Millennial Survey: Young Adults' Healthcare Reality* indicates the most common health conditions among Millennials are depression (21 percent), overweight (18 percent), and anxiety disorders (16 percent (Transamerica, 2015). According to the American Psychological Association's annual report *Stress in America*, Millennials report more stress and less ability to successfully manage it than previous generations and cite their most stressful life pressures as work, money and job stability. Close to half (44 percent) of this group report anger or irritability due to stress, and overall are more likely to engage in unhealthy behaviors like eating, drinking alcohol and smoking in an attempt to relieve stress.

The report states that 12 percent of Millennials have a diagnosed anxiety disorder—almost twice the percentage of Baby Boomers. A recent BDA Morneau Shepell white paper, *The Impact of Anxiety on Different Generations of Employees* discovered that 30 percent of Millennial EAP users have general anxiety at intake, with two-thirds of Millennials interviewed linked their anxiety to declining work performance, and reporting higher levels of associated absenteeism than Generation X and Baby Boomers (Bensinger, Dupont & Associates, 2013a). In a subsequent white paper, *The Impact of Depression on Different Generations of Employees*, Millennial EAP clients again scored highest in rates of depression and reported higher levels of associated presenteeism than Generation X and Baby Boomers (Bensinger, Dupont & Associates, 2013b).

Considering that serious mental illnesses often manifest in early adulthood, and stress is a risk factor for depression and anxiety, it seems prudent to educate Millennials to recognize the signs of psychological distress and encourage seek intervention at their onset, to avoid further complicating mental health issues with pressures of work-related stress. One positive demographic data point is that with the advent of the Affordable Care Act, the percentage of Millennials with health insurance has risen from below 70 percent in 2012 to 89 percent in 2015.

Reaching Millennials

Unfortunately, EAP workforce penetration and utilization has sunk to some of its lowest levels in decades. Various sources have identified rates of between 3-5 percent (Dunning, 2014). However, employees in workplaces that extensively promote an EAP product and provide worksite activities are more likely to use EAP counseling services than those in organizations that mount less vigorous promotion of EAPs and where no worksite activities are conducted (Azzone, McCann, Merrick et al., 2009). This relatively poor level of communication about services available when combined with concerns over privacy protections and lack of confidentiality seems to be the two main factors for low EAP usage. To counter this growing downward trend, EA providers wishing to raise workplace penetration rates must recognize that Millennials are a key population group to reach. Growing utilization numbers is simply not possible without addressing the access challenges posed by Millennials, and the next group Generation Z. The two challenges to greater participation by these emergent generational segments are: 1) easy mobile access and, 2) perceived safeguards of personal information--both personally identifiable information and sensitive personal information. Without assurances that these categories of data will be protected, few Millennials will be willing to participate in EAP interactions.

Both Generation X and Millennial employees (as well as an increasing number of Baby Boomers) reject the idea of a simple phone number as the only point of access to goods or services. Mobile devices running iOS and Android now account for 45 percent of web browsing and are poised to soon become the primary way most people experience the internet. So EAPs without mobile access or a social media presence seriously risk compromising their utilization. As of October 2015, 86 percent of those 18-29 years old have a smartphone, as do 83 percent of those 30-49 years old and 87 percent of households with annual earnings above \$70,000 (Pew Research Center, 2015).

If a generationally-savvy EAP offers platforms to engage these younger employees online, they will be more likely to access the EAP and to be satisfied with that experience. On the other hand, if an EA provider insists on offering only in-office, or telephonic access, these clients may very well decline to use the EAP's services. Similarly, if your web-based portal is not smartphone configured, no matter how great your work balance tips are, you will receive fewer clicks. And about those printed monthly health newsletters or the old paycheck stuffers -- odds are Millennials will never read it. Contemporary strategies to ensure EAP promotions and information are reaching Generation Facebook (individuals born after 1980) must include increased use of technology – online and social media platforms.

Utilizing social media as a communication platform can build relationships and trust with an emerging Millennial EAP client base, if the social media venues are used effectively. Information from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention supports this approach: “Integrating social media into health communications allows communicators to leverage social dynamics and networks to encourage participation, conversation and community – all of which help spread key messages and influence health decision making. Social media helps reach people when, where and how they want to receive health messages; it improves the availability of content and may influence satisfaction and trust in the health messages delivered” (CDC, 2011, p. 1).

Organizational Development and Generational Diversity Opportunities

Another approach (or platform in today’s parlance) for EA professionals for both Millennials and to provide value-added services to employers are coaching, training and educational events, either on-site or web-based. For Baby Boomer and Gen Y supervisors and managers struggling to reach and engage Millennials, EAPs can provide a workplace resource to foster an appreciation of generational diversity within the organization. Today there exists an extensive, yet still emerging literature regarding how to bridge these generational gaps, and how to best blend the various age groups together into productive workforces. For EAPs, offering expert consultation, coaching, and facilitating training presentations to better understand this phenomenon will benefit all four generations currently working together.

As continuous learners, Millennials are likely to value receiving training through their employers in order to acquire new skills and remain competitive. EAP-sponsored coaching and leadership mentoring programs can help retain Millennials, again offering EAPs an opportunity to show employers added value. Typically, training and career development offerings for Millennials might include business writing, coaching and mentoring young leaders, and particularly if offered through web platforms. Offering to help organize Millennials within a workgroup to coach their tech savvy with other generations in the workplace may also be appealing to employers.

The challenges posed in reaching Millennials with EAP services and messages are clearly not insurmountable. Like any other service provider or manufacturer, efforts by EAPs to research and effectively address the unique characteristics of this inchoate population will offer a positive return on investment. Given that the full numbers of this segment will not peak within the workforce until 2020, there is ample time to identify and adopt targeted initiatives which succeed in ensuring a continuity and expansion of appropriate services for Millennials.

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