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The Millennial Wave

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Associations must use purpose, culture to keep young talent



June 11, 2018
By [Lori Sharn](#)

Associations would seem to have a leg up when it comes to attracting millennial employees. This generation, according to research, wants to be inspired by meaningful work, and associations are mission-driven organizations.

But the reality is often different. Many CEOs find themselves challenged by recruiting, managing and retaining millennial staff.

"You can't twirl your arms without coming across a news story about millennials in the workplace," said Paul Bellantone, CEO of Promotional Products Association International. "It came to a point where we needed to not just acknowledge it, but respond to it in meaningful ways."

Today, PPAI has more younger staffers than ever, Bellantone says, with about one-fourth of the association's employees belonging to this cohort, sometimes called Generation Y.

Millennials surpassed all other generations to become the largest segment of the workforce in 2016, according to Pew Research Center, which defines millennials as those born between 1981 and 1996. As boomers (born 1946-64) increasingly exit the workforce, and as less numerous Gen Xers (born 1965-80)

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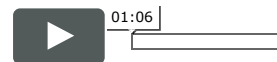
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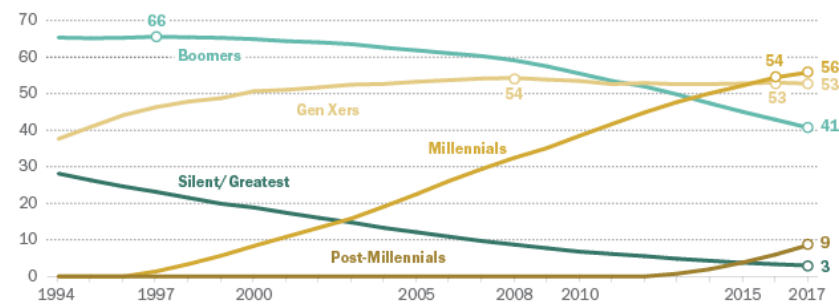


start nearing retirement age, the tide will turn even more.

"This is a curve you want to stay ahead of," said Jamie Notter, workplace culture consultant and co-author of the book "When Millennials Take Over."

Millennials became the largest generation in the labor force in 2016

U.S. labor force, in millions



Note: Labor force includes those ages 16 and older who are working or looking for work. Annual averages shown.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of monthly 1994-2017 Current Population Survey (IPUMS).

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Though there are many myths about millennials (see link above to related content), it is also true that this generation behaves very differently in many ways, Notter said.

"Look about what shaped them as a generation, and then you'll understand their behavior," he said. One huge factor, of course, is the internet. Millennials grew up with unparalleled access to information and to instant connections. They expect to show up at work and get things accomplished, even when it means shaking up the way things have always been done, Notter said. They are driven by innovation, ideas and collaboration, because they have experienced so much change.

"I think we bring a different way to think about things," said PPAI membership engagement specialist Alicia Haswell, 35. "We like to acquire information and put our spin on the outcome. ... We always try to figure out a better way."

Association cultures, however, tend to be rooted in tradition and hierarchy, said Sarah Sladek, a generational consultant and CEO of XYZ University. Millennials are inspired by work that makes a difference, she said, and by the ability to wear multiple hats and learn a variety of skills.

"The number-one reason they will leave a job is they feel their skills aren't being utilized or respected, or they're not being challenged," Sladek said. "The physical environment is secondary."

Clarity of purpose

Bellantone said the promotional products industry has long been concerned about attracting younger professionals. But PPAI realized it needed to look at its internal staff as well, and whether that was reflecting the general population and what the association would need in the future. Key was tapping into a shared sense of purpose.

"What we found was we needed to draw a straighter line—and a very clear line—between what the association stood for in its mission and what these newer employees were doing on day one," Bellantone said. "We didn't have that luxury that maybe we had with other generations, that someone wasn't getting itchy until two or three years into the job. From day one we talked to our younger employees about why their job matters to the organization, and how they're making a difference, and talking about cross collaborations with other departments—that their pathway doesn't need to be just up; it could be over."

Bellantone said a millennial staffer came to him in 2015 with a "very well-thought-out plan" for a new position at the association. PPAI adopted much of the proposal and named the plan's creator, Seth Barnett, as diversity development and engagement manager. PPAI created tools and resources—including information about millennials as both employees and customers—for members and for the industry's regional associations. (Barnett recently left PPAI for a private-sector job.)

The American Osteopathic Association needs to keep up with its constituents, who are much younger than in the past. About 60 percent of osteopathic physicians are under age 45, primarily the result of growth in the number of osteopathic medical schools, said CEO Adrienne White-Faines.

“The question for me is are we bringing in the talent that is needed to meet the needs of a profession that is actually geared toward younger generations?” White-Faines said. Often, that talent is found in millennial staffers.

To meet these needs, the association looked at its own culture, she said, with a bend toward innovation and respect for the past, and a focus on excellence. AOA stresses that staffers can help change and shape health care even if they are not physicians themselves, White-Faines said. This needs to be tied to job descriptions and interviews as well.

“Everyone has to be talking the same language, and (potential hires) have to see it and feel it when they come in,” White-Faines said.

Freedom to thrive

Nicole Harris, CEO of the National Glass Association, said her nine-person publications team is predominantly millennial and predominantly works remotely. Harris said she chose to “follow the talent” wherever they wanted to go or move, and gives them more autonomy in how they choose to work. The team adopted the messaging app Slack and has been trying out Trello, an online collaboration tool.

“They also seem to have flattened the traditional magazine hierarchy even though they respect authority,” Harris said in an email to CEO Update. “And I admire (envy) how they prefer to balance their work and personal lives. In small ways I even try to emulate them. For instance, I no longer email any staff over the weekends or late at night, just to set an example.”

Bellantone said he asked some of his younger staffers what is good about working at PPAI, and they talked about the value of volunteering. The association has a number of workplace committees, such as community service, safety, wellness, recognitions and social activities.

A younger staffer on the social committee proposed scrapping one large outing for all employees—such as a baseball game or scavenger hunt—in favor of five or six different activities on the same day. As a result, Bellantone said, more employees participated in the smaller activities than had been attending the all-staff outing.

Openings for volunteers on the committees are posted, and each committee has a budget.

“And they get to apply it the way they think best,” Bellantone said. “They do a good job with it. It’s grassroots, rather than top down.”

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