



Social Media, Debt, and Exclamation Points: Millennials in the Legal Profession

January, 2019

The legal profession, like society at large, is evolving with the addition of younger millennial attorneys in the next great generational shift. In 2015, the United States Census Bureau reported millennials (i.e. those born between 1982 and 2000) now number 83.1 million and represent more than 25 percent of the nation's population. The millennial population exceeds even that of the 75.4 million baby boomer generation born between 1946 and 1964. As a result, millennials now make up a sizeable portion of the legal industry, making their presence known by raising new issues and bringing innovational and unconventional ideas to the legal workplace.

These changes have generated a number of stereotypes about newer lawyers and professionals in general, both positive and negative. Doubtless, millennials and more experienced, older attorneys each offer valuable perspectives to the profession. Elizabeth Lampson, a shareholder at Davis Rothwell Earle & Xochihua, says younger attorneys bring energy and enthusiasm to the workplace. In her view, millennials help older lawyers answer the question, "How do we stay relevant and keep younger people interested?"

One example of staying relevant concerns millennials' comfort with social media and technology. "I recall working on a case with an older shareholder who was impressed by my 'youthful' ideas. I had drafted document requests for the plaintiff's Facebook account in hopes of finding posts that marked the location of where the plaintiff was making posts during a certain timeframe. The shareholder never would have thought of it on his own," says Jackie Mitchson, an associate at Bullivant Houser Bailey.

Familiarity with technology also has its downsides, however. Lampson acknowledges the advantages of her millennial colleagues' comfort with technology, such as the ability to work remotely, but emphasizes the need to be visible. "It's great we have the ability and opportunity to work remotely because it allows us to work anywhere, but the best way for a younger associate to shine is to be available and be seen around the office," says Lampson. One piece of advice she offers to millennials who have grown accustomed to communicating primarily through text messages and email is to advocate for meeting with clients and colleagues in person or speaking on the phone. "Make a point of having a few solid phone conversations a day. You will get so much more information with actual human connections," says Lampson.

One of the more stigmatic stereotypes among millennials is that they have a tendency to act "entitled" or unwilling to "put in the work." Kelsey Benedick, a millennial associate at Lane Powell PC, believes the stereotype is misplaced. "I think our generation focuses more on work-life balance than generations past, and, as a result, we are often perceived as lazy or less hard working or too big for our britches. I think our commitment to balance will make us great leaders in the future, and I'm really hopeful that our generation will improve diversity and inclusion in the workplace," says Benedick.

Lampson recognizes the widespread belief that millennials do not want to work as many hours and, in response, says sometimes attorneys just have to put in the work. "Be committed to putting in the time. That doesn't mean be a doormat and take on too many projects you won't be able to finish, but it is important to provide a good work product, and sometimes that takes more time," says Lampson.

Acknowledging the reality that cultural and societal norms have changed in recent decades also



helps to explain generational differences. A recent Experian report found in the past 10 years, the average outstanding student loan balance increased by 62 percent. "We come out of school with a mortgage-size student loan debt that previous generations didn't face. Housing costs are also much higher than they used to be," says Mitchson, recognizing the unique challenges millennial parents face compared to her older counterparts. "When millennials come across as flaky or uncommitted, it may just be that there are multiple top priorities pulling them in different directions at the same time. Folks from previous generations who have a spouse at home or who works part time don't always recognize how much they lean on their spouse and the extent to which their spouse's career sacrifices helped to elevate their own career."

Benedick also believes it is misleading to characterize millennials' attitudes as entitled. In her view, millennials are less willing to accept "That's how it's always been done" as a valid explanation for issues they have with the legal profession in general or with an individual practice or partner. "Just because something has always been done a certain way does not mean it should be done that way. Like our commitment to work-life balance, I think our pushback against that mentality causes some more experienced attorneys to view us as entitled when really we just want to improve the workplace," says Benedick.

Although the differences between millennials and the partners and supervisors they work for are numerous, it is essential for each to listen and learn from the other. "Listening to the next generation is key. They bring in fresh ideas and a well-rounded perspective," says Lampson, which is something her firm greatly values. To be sure, certain aspects of the legal industry never change, but some do, and being aware of how and why things have changed is vital for creating a more productive and cohesive workplace. As always, however, broad generalizations about a particular group of people are not always the most accurate. "Contrary to what you hear in the popular media, we aren't all the same – we are all special snowflakes. In all seriousness, we're all individuals, with unique experiences and you can't really figure out how to relate to us on a one-size-fits-all basis," says Mitchson.

In the years ahead, the transfer of power to the millennial generation will be a source of both adversity and great innovation, but as with every generational shift, respect and cooperation will be the foundation of a better professional environment for all.

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