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EXPERT ADVICE

# Remodeling Corporate Culture for the Digital Era



The desire for constant connection among the Millennial workforce is exactly the characteristic most valuable for businesses that operate globally. Having a workforce that delights in instantaneous communication, that is always on and always reaching out to new social contacts, can furnish a tremendous competitive advantage to businesses today.

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By John Tobin  
Jun 16, 2012 5:00 AM PT

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While the Millennial generation hoards the headlines that declare the latest trends in technology and their applications to the workplace, it's worth remembering that it was the Baby Boomers who put the "e" in email, e-learning and e-commerce. The foundations of the Digital Era that forever changed the way we work, shop, learn and play were built by innovators born from the mid-1940s through the 1950s.

The past half century has been a period of building great businesses founded on technology- driven processes that run by the clock and the calendar. In the new millennium, however, technology has been redefined -- as has the employee. It's no coincidence that employees entering the workforce today wear no wristwatch and carry no calendar in their wallet.

As the great entrepreneurs of the Boomer generation flock to retirement resorts, the great innovators of Gen Y move into their positions, a joyously different breed of human being in a corporate landscape where Millennials seem strange to management and managers seem hopelessly antiquated to their new employees.

Many organizations traditionally have tracked progress and success in terms of hours billed, rates charged, quantities delivered or facilities expanded. Millennials, on the other hand, can't grasp the concept of a "clock watcher." For the most part, they do not distinguish between work hours and personal hours -- it's all one life for Millennials.

## **Always On**

That's because they carry the digital devices they use at home into their work. Their preference is to work whenever and wherever they are most productive, and technology has allowed them to succeed in that pursuit, with handheld devices that place an office full of capabilities in their pocket. The BYOD (Bring Your Own Device) phenomenon is creating security headaches for IT staff, but it's helping 21st century companies experience their own boom.

Millennials shun museum pieces like land lines, conference room calendars, time sheets and "The 6:00 News." Rather, they thrive on instant messaging, Skype and Kinect, social networks and texts. More than any previous generation, they are totally comfortable with talking to strangers and colleagues half a world away -- they probably already are friends on Facebook or followers on Twitter.

Social networks, furthermore, provide a communications path for a generation who could care less about privacy issues and readily declare and share every aspect of their lives, from breakfast to business proposals.

"Communicating" is not a function or activity for Millennials -- it's an environment. It's just always present, always available, and always necessary. These workers may never have heard a dial tone. They grew up with a mobile phone on their belt and at their ear.

These are the students who drove English teachers nuts with insertions like "IMHO" and "LOL" throughout their compositions. They are the first generation in a century not to plead with parents to take them to the Department of Motor Vehicles on their 16th birthday -- and to buy them a car, as well. These young adults live the majority of their lives in the virtual world, and they don't need to drive to stores, to movie theaters or even to schools. It's all "e-ailable" to them on that device in their pocket.

The desire for constant connection among the Millennial workforce, however, is exactly


the characteristic most valuable for businesses that operate globally. Having a workforce that delights in instantaneous communication, that is always on and always reaching out to new social contacts, can furnish a tremendous competitive advantage to businesses today. Smart businesses, therefore, are placing a priority on ways to attract these upcoming, technology-driven workers, as well as ways to modify the corporate culture to help ensure that they stay.

## **Different Motivations, Different Rewards**

Overriding these efforts of business managers should be three considerations that may require dramatically new ways of defining work ethic and work processes:

1. Finding ways for employees to engage with the company will become paramount. Research studies reveal that when employees are engaged, businesses experience better customer service, more product innovation and improved productivity. When businesses measure engagement and determine how best to improve that measure, managers are better able to ensure that every worker understands and is focused on his or her value to the overriding goals of the company. Engagement helps drive employees toward corporate objectives because they become a challenge to be met with technology.
2. Managers and supervisors need to accept that the activities and rewards that motivate Millennials are different from the motivations of past generations. Above all, Millennials need effective communication methods and a corporate culture that values them for their expertise, rather than for compliance with traditional processes. Employers should encourage Millennials to bring their own devices to work -- and then collaborate with the IT department to accommodate them. Employees could be rewarded for posting to Facebook and Twitter and using those networks for collaboration among offices and globally. The corporate culture may need to be flipped to reward risk-taking instead of safety. Many offices in progressive companies today look more like a coffeehouse or a campus union than a cube farm; Gen Y employees prefer to work wherever they want in a manner that is both casual and collaborative.
3. Accountability still matters, but the way we measure it needs to change. Handing out certificates for perfect on-time attendance needs to yield to rewarding perfect online projects. Productivity may need to be measured by the output of digital endeavors instead of the hours recorded on a timesheet.

Organizations can find help in reshaping their corporate culture and work processes from consulting firms that have studied operational efficiency in workplaces with generational differences. These firms have created programs to make the transition easier and more effective. Most important for the manager, however, is the need simply to realize that the world has changed. It's time to auction the bulletin boards

and notepads on eBay and prepare our businesses for a digital workforce and a different way of managing our business. 

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**John Tobin** is national general manager for [Slalom Consulting](#) and speaks with customers every day about their organization's efficiency and effectiveness in relation to business and technology solutions. He was named one of 2011's top 25 consultants by *Consulting Magazine*.

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