

INNOVATION

Millennials in the Workplace: Disruptive Tech, Open Innovation, and Investment Strategy

by Adelia Gregory



Millennials are growing up and entering the workforce. Their impatience, ambition, and desire for immediate results might lead others to think of them as entitled. But there are lessons to be learned on both sides of the generational divide.

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Who are these notorious beings known as “millennials?” Google would have you know that they’re people who “reached young adulthood around the year 2000,” but in reality, the term seems to apply to all young adults of the current generation. Millennials are a common subject of interest and debate: is this group of consumers and workers entitled? Why are nearly 80% of them avoiding the stock market? And how serious is their tech-

obsession? But these details aren't sufficient in explaining an entire demographic, and amount to little more than generalizing. Thus, a more pressing question seems to arise: what impact are millennials making in the workplace? Are they simply the beneficiaries of a decade of radically disruptive and lucrative technological innovation, or are they, too, the catalysts of recent trends in open innovation?

According to UC Berkeley Haas School of Business professor Henry Chesbrough, open innovation is the “use of purposive inflows and outflows of knowledge to accelerate internal innovation, and expand the markets for external use of innovation.” Quite simply, Chesbrough depicts open innovation as open, participatory, and decentralized – a beneficial consequence of the Internet's democratization of knowledge. This democratization changed the entire political and strategic landscape of technology, to the extent that few companies today choose to innovate solely on their own. As Princeton reminds us, a disruptive innovation is one that “disrupts an existing market,” and as such, improves products, lowers prices, or designs new types of consumers. These are the types of innovations that have profoundly disrupted the world we live in and created a new fleet of consumers—namely millennials. It's almost mind-blowing to imagine that an entire generation of people was raised with technology that was as life-altering as it was fleeting: personally, I remember telling my dad in 2002 that VCRs were about to be phased out; he was incredulous with disbelief. By the time I was 10 years old in 2005, VCRs had become an extinct species. It's evident that millennials have been shaped as much by the rapid extinction of outdated technologies as by the technologies themselves. With an increasing succession of tech bombarding us on a daily basis, most millennials don't even blink. We've embraced ambiguity and impermanence as a central feature of our working lives, since most employers value flexibility over employee security. Thus, millennials may seem entitled, because many have sought to fill the void typically occupied by security and tradition with something that is meaningful and unique to our generation: innovative and rapidly evolving technology.

At the risk of diverging, I think it's crucial to understand how this differs from the baby-boomer generation. Why do such misunderstandings and miscommunications erupt between the two? Baby boomers view themselves as optimistic workers with good organizational memories, who are both highly committed and willing to work long hours. Baby boomers are thus a stable, reliable, working demographic, but are occasionally

perceived as inflexible by younger generations. Moreover, many baby boomers came of working age within large organizations and corporate hierarchies—where ascent was a systemized process, often following the Weberian model of bureaucracy:

1. **Fixed jurisdiction:** these organizations had definitive purposes and goals. Being disruptive in any way wasn't encouraged. I'm looking at you, tech.
2. **Hierarchy of office:** orders issue from above to those below; there's no ambiguity regarding who's boss and who's not. There was a predefined path to everything: promotion, demotion, firing, hiring.
3. **Organized through written documents:** the 80s were the heyday for this! Some remember a time when everything had to be written down and recorded in files and folders, stored in file rooms with dozens, if not hundreds more of these files.
4. **Experts in their field:** people who worked for these organizations were selected on the basis of qualifications; These officials were typically specialized to the point they didn't focus on anything else. Unfortunately, this often resulted in numerous people bringing someone the same memo. (See Office Space's "Did You Get the Memo?" scene)
5. **Separation of home and work:** these organizations demanded a person's full working capacity! Focus on work at work and on life elsewhere.
6. **Rules:** lots of them. They form the basis of the organization's decisions and actions — stable, exhaustive, and learnable. That's where all those file folders came in handy.

As one can see, bureaucracies form an organized and systematic way to approach things, but were often rigid and opposed to new ideas... a time before open innovation could markedly revolutionize the way firms conducted business. The stability of these organizations provided even those without a college degree a chance to climb the ladder. Millennials, on the other hand, are the highest educated generational cohort yet—they tend to be skilled with tech, very self-confident, capable of extensive multitasking, and are generally energetic; they're team-players and enjoy challenges. However, their high expectations tend to translate into needing "immediate results in their work," and a

“desire for speedy advancement.” Older colleagues may view these behaviors as entitled and reflective of short attention-spans. And this is where most of the debate comes from: baby boomers attempting to learn how to understand, market to, and hire these wily millennials.

Many millennials came to working age when giants like Google, Apple, and Facebook were just forming, bringing flat management hierarchies and fluid, team-based roles into mainstream prominence. And as the tech industry grew, offering alternatives to traditional bureaucracies, more and more millennials joined in or went on to start companies themselves. Whereas the ideal worker used to be a loyal, hardworking official rewarded for his seniority, the new ideal is one of the up-and-coming entrepreneur: college-educated, racially-diversified, and technologically-innovative. The kind of person capable of convincing investors to put millions of dollars into a fledgling company – hoping for the next \$1 billion + “unicorn.”

Thus, disruptive technology has shaped the way millennials work: fostering impatience, ambition, and a desire for immediately quantifiable results. But millennials have much to learn, particularly in regard to finance. Perhaps they could be taught a thing or two about how to build their savings and invest those disruptive bucks.



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