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Learning From the Millennials

Comment from an unemployed 25-year-old: “I have a job interview, and I’ll see if it’s a good fit for my interests and personality.”

“Really?” I think, “Don’t you just need a job?” Millennials, born about 1982-2000, seem to have a different perspective about life and work than their employers. Increasingly, ophthalmic technicians and office staff are millennials, and the ophthalmologists working with them may be baffled by their attitudes. Worse, we can be judgmental without understanding the underlying dynamics. Now, even the ophthalmologists entering the workforce are considered millennials.

When ophthalmologists question the work ethic of millennials, I’m reminded that many of today’s successful baby boomers were once anti-authoritarian hippies. While I remember that era with nostalgia and good humor, our parents weren’t so amused. Some of today’s attitudes can be attributed to youth, but the perspective is truly different. And perhaps the millennials have something to teach us.

The millennials are challenging traditional notions of work. Fueled by the technological revolution of mobile communication, our young people imagine work differently and feel productive while on a laptop, tablet, or phone, even in a hammock or a Starbucks. My younger colleagues are always available—late at night or on vacation—to answer questions about a patient or provide subspecialty advice. They aren’t annoyed by the interruption; rather, interspersing work with the rest of life is the new norm.

We’re told that millennials want a more balanced life than the work-obsessed baby boomers. Maybe they are wise. I took 3 weeks off work after having twins—it never occurred to me to take more time. Now, my colleagues typically request 3 months of maternity leave. A male cornea specialist unapologetically requested parental leave when his daughter was born. It’s about time.

One of our top business challenges is training and retaining competent staff. Many of us have experienced higher turnover rates lately, and it seems that the younger workers have little job loyalty. PricewaterhouseCoopers reports that in 2008, over 75% of millennials surveyed expect to have 2 to 5 employers over their career; in 2016, over 25% expect to have more than 6 employers.¹ Our technicians will leave for

a job with better hours or slightly better pay. Furthermore, millennials value flexibility in work hours. So, how can ophthalmology groups adapt and retain good workers?

Research on millennials reveals that they want their work to make a difference, especially locally.² What an opportunity for ophthalmology! We can create work cultures that emphasize an ophthalmologist-led team approach to health care and engage all of our staff in creating the model. Beyond that, we can emphasize that our shared work has intrinsic value and that we make a difference in the lives of our patients.

The desire for flexibility in work hours also presents an opportunity. Why not open at 7 a.m. to accommodate working families and stay open into the evening? Then, we’ll have flexibility when scheduling employee (and MD) work hours, some with early shifts, some with late hours.

As work values are evolving, salary isn’t the sole motivator. Let’s think more creatively about the rewards that motivate our young employees. They often want more training and the chance to grow with the practice. We can ask what they value and help them meet their personal goals.

By 2020, millennials will make up 50% of the global workforce. In order to grow and thrive, we need the creativity and skills of our youngest employees—especially because they have intrinsic comfort with the kind of technology and communication modalities that are revolutionizing health care. After all, the millennials will inherit our health care system. Let’s guide them. And let’s learn from them, as well.



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1 www.pwc.com/gx/en/managing-tomorrows-people/future-of-work/assets/reshaping-the-workplace.pdf.

2 <http://survey.telefonica.com/globalreports/>.