Reaching Millennials
Responding to Generational Diversity in the Workplace

"For Baby Boomer and Gen X supervisors and managers struggling to reach and engage Millennials, EAPs can provide an effective workplace resource to foster an appreciation of generational diversity within the organization. ... EAP-sponsored coaching and leadership mentoring programs can help retain Millennials, again offering EAPs an opportunity to show employers added value."

| By Bernie McCann, PhD, CEAP |

Generations typically share similar values, beliefs, and expectations. They also tend to exhibit similar preferences in areas such as employment and communication, which isn’t surprising given their common experiences using channels such as online, TV, mobile phone, etc. These generational-shaping influences are most obvious as members of this group move into adulthood. Of particular interest to EAPs, HR, and other workplace professionals, is the generation known as Millennials — individuals who were born between 1981 and 1997. This age group has been variously described as optimistic, team-oriented, and high achievers (Broido, 2004; Howe and Strauss, 2003).

Millennials are the largest age group to emerge since the Baby Boomer generation. They comprise just over 23 percent of the total US population, are the most racially and ethnically diverse segment, and contain more individuals from single-parent, blended, or same-sex parent families (Frey, 2014). In 2015, at 53.5 million-strong, this generation (also known as Generation Y) became the largest portion of the US labor force and now makes up one-third of all employees. Additionally, given its disproportionately large share of immigrants, and those transitioning from college to the working world, the Millennial generation’s share of the workforce will continue to grow to 50 percent by 2020.

Millennials are the most educated generation in history. They are skilled in technology, self-confident, able to multi-task, and they have plenty of energy. They are also voracious consumers of information. These individuals typically query and gather data then arrive at their own conclusions — and on their own schedule. They collect all types of health and lifestyle information through a wide range of online and social networks. They prefer to integrate technology with health (via their smartphones or tablets) and are eager to try new technological approaches (apps) to wellness.

Mental Health Issues Common Among Millennials

Data from Transamerica’s Millennial Survey: Young Adults’ Healthcare Reality indicates the most common health conditions among Millennials are depression (21 percent), obesity (18 percent), and anxiety disorders (16 percent) (Transamerica, 2015). According to the American Psychological Association’s annual report Stress in America, Millennials report more stress and less ability to successfully manage it than previous generations, and they also cite their most stressful life pressures as work, money, and job stability.

Close to half (44 percent) of this group report anger or irritability due to stress and overall are more likely to engage in unhealthy behaviors like eating, drinking alcohol, and smoking in an attempt to relieve stress. The report states that 12 percent of Millennials have a diagnosed anxiety disorder, which is almost twice the percentage of Baby Boomers.

A recent BDA Morneau Shepell white paper, The Impact of Anxiety on Different Generations of Employees, discovered that 30 percent of Millennial EAP users have general anxiety at intake, with two-thirds of Millennials interviewed linking their anxiety to declining work performance. They also reported higher levels of associated absenteeism than Generation X and Baby Boomers (Bensinger, Dupont & Associates, 2013a). In a subsequent white paper, The Impact of Depression on Different Generations of Employees, Millennial EAP clients again scored highest in rates of
depression and levels of associated presenteeism than Generation X and Baby Boomers (Bensinger, Dupont & Associates, 2013b).

Considering that serious mental illnesses often manifest in early adulthood and stress is a risk factor for depression and anxiety, it seems prudent to educate Millennials on the signs of psychological distress and encourage them to seek intervention at its onset in order to avoid further complicating mental health issues. One positive demographic data point is that with the advent of the Affordable Care Act, the percentage of Millennials with health insurance has risen from below 70 percent in 2012 to 89 percent in 2015.

**Reaching Millennials is Crucial**

Unfortunately, EAP workforce penetration and utilization has sunk to some of its lowest levels in decades. Various sources have identified rates of between 3 and 5 percent (Dunning, 2014). However, employees in workplaces that extensively promote an EAP and provide worksite activities are more likely to use EAP counseling services than those in organizations that mount less vigorous promotion of EAPs and where no worksite activities are conducted (Azzone, McCann, Merrick et al., 2009). This relatively poor level of communication about available services, combined with concerns over privacy protections and lack of confidentiality, seem to be the two main factors for low EAP usage.

To counter this growing downward trend, EA providers wishing to raise workplace penetration rates must recognize that Millennials are a key population group to reach. However, increasing utilization numbers is simply not possible without addressing the access challenges posed by both Millennials and the emerging population group, Generation Z. The challenges to greater participation in EAPs by these current and emergent generational segments are:

- Easy mobile access; and
- Perceived safeguards of personal information.

This includes both personally identifiable information and sensitive personal information. Without assurances that these type of data will be protected, few Millennials will be willing to participate in EAP interactions.

Both Generation X and Millennial employees (as well as an increasing number of Baby Boomers) reject the idea of a simple phone number as the only point of access to goods or services. Mobile devices running iOS and Android now account for 45 percent of web browsing and are poised to soon become the primary way most people experience the Internet. This means that EAPs without mobile access or a social media presence seriously risk compromising their utilization. As of October 2015, 86 percent of those 18-29 years old have a smartphone, as do 83 percent of those 30-49 years old, and 87 percent of households with annual earnings above $70,000 (Pew Research Center, 2015).

If a generationally savvy EAP offers platforms to engage these younger employees online, they will be more likely to access the EAP and be satisfied with that experience. On the other hand, if an EA provider insists on offering only in-office or telephonic access, these clients may very well decline to use the EAP’s services.
Similarly, if your web-based portal is not smartphone configured, no matter how great your work balance tips are, you will receive fewer clicks. And what about those printed monthly health newsletters or the old paycheck stuffers? Odds are that Millennials will never read them. Contemporary strategies to ensure EAP promotions and information are reaching Generation Facebook (individuals born after 1980) must include increased use of technology – online and social media platforms. Utilizing social media as a communication platform can build relationships and trust with an emerging Millennial EAP client base, particularly if the social media venues are used effectively.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention supports this approach: “Integrating social media into health communications allows communicators to leverage social dynamics and networks to encourage participation, conversation, and community – all of which help spread key messages and influence health decision making. Social media helps reach people when, where, and how they want to receive health messages; it improves the availability of content, and may influence satisfaction and trust in the health messages delivered” (CDC, 2011, p. 1).

**Bridge Generation Gaps to Reach Millennials**

Another approach (or platform in today’s parlance) for EA professionals to reach Millennials, and to provide value-added services to employers, is to offer coaching, training, and educational events, regardless of whether they are on-site or web-based. For Baby Boomers and Gen X supervisors and managers struggling to reach and engage Millennials, EAPs can provide a workplace resource to foster an appreciation of generational diversity within the organization. Today there exists an extensive, yet still emerging, literature regarding how to bridge these generational gaps and how to best blend the various age groups together into productive workforces. For EAPs, offering expert consultation, coaching, and facilitating training presentations to better understand this phenomenon will benefit all four generations currently working together.

As continuous learners, Millennials are likely to value receiving training through their employers in order to acquire new skills and remain competitive in today’s workplace. EAP-sponsored coaching and leadership mentoring programs can help retain Millennials, again offering EAPs an opportunity to show employers added value.

In terms of topics, training and career development offerings for Millennials might include business writing and coaching and mentoring young leaders, especially if they are offered through web platforms. Mentoring works both ways: younger employees can help older workers, not just the other way around. In other words, EAPs may also offer to help Millennials share their technological prowess by coaching other generations in the workplace. This is another service that may be appealing to employers.

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<th>Current Generations in the US Workforce</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Generation</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>The Millennials (or Generation Y)</td>
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<td>Generation X</td>
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<td>The Baby Boomers</td>
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<td>The Silent Generation (or The Traditionalists)</td>
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Summary

The challenges posed in reaching Millennials with EAP services and messages are clearly not insurmountable. Like any other service provider or manufacturer, efforts by EAPs to research and effectively address the unique characteristics of this population will offer a positive return on investment. Since the full numbers of this workforce group will not peak until 2020, there remains ample time to identify and adopt targeted initiatives, which will ensure an expansion of appropriate EAP services for Millennials.

References


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