Millennial Learning Myths and Misconceptions: Prescriptions for a Modern Learning Strategy

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

With millennials now the largest generation in the workforce, many organizations have become consumed with trying to cater to this group's learning preferences. But are members of Generation Y really that different from other generations? Increasingly, research reveals that millennial values vary less from those of other generations than the media has led us to believe. So rather than focusing L&D efforts solely on millennials, we propose that organizations adapt to meet the needs of a broader, more diverse group: the modern learner.
FOR THE FIRST TIME: A WORKFORCE COMPRISED OF FIVE GENERATIONS

Today’s multi-generational environment brings an interesting set of dynamics for human resources. According to the book The 2020 Workplace, by Jeanne Meister and Karie Willyerd, the demographic composition of the working population has been changing quite significantly. People are living and working longer than ever before, which means that most companies’ teams now consist of five generations. In the past, the typical generational span for an organization might encompass three or four generations but today, most companies are supporting employees from the Traditionalist generation through Generation Z. The five generations are:1

- Traditionalists - Born before 1946
- Baby Boomers - Born between 1946 and 1964
- Generation X - Born between 1965-1976
- Generation Y - Born between 1977-1995
- Generation Z - Born after 1995

As time passes, the proportion of each generation in the workplace is evolving. As Figure 1 illustrates, Generation Y will comprise half the global employee population by 2020, possessing the most significant representation of any generation in the workforce.

Authors William Straus and Neil Howe are often credited with naming Generation Y the “millennial generation.” They coined the term in the late 1980s, when referring to the generation that would graduate high school in 2000, at the dawn of the second millennium.

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There is no shortage of coverage and conjecture about the millennial generation. The attention paid toward this generation is unprecedented. At the time of writing this paper, over 34 million Google search results are returned with the term “millennial.”

Within the field of enterprise learning and development, almost every trade magazine, conference or blog provides guidance about specialized design approaches and engagement tactics to gain acceptance of millennials. In many ways, a hyper-fixation on millennials has grown within the human capital field, affecting just about every facet of talent management: recruiting, engagement, development, diversity, performance appraisals and succession planning.

**MILLENNIAL PORTRAYALS**

Numerous facts about millennials have emerged over the past several years; many of these have been emphasized and repeated to the point where they have become part of our collective understanding. Millennials are commonly characterized with fundamentally different behaviors than previous generations. Countless articles and numerous books have been written about their needs, preferences and desires. Some widely accepted generalities include:

- Millennials value collaboration
- Millennials desire meaningful work
- Millennials seek life-work balance and flexibility
- Millennials have a thirst for building their capabilities
- Millennials prefer frequent feedback about their performance
- Millennials aspire to grow in their career

When considering these descriptions about millennials, take pause. *What generation doesn't want these things for their professional experience?*
**SURPRISING SIMILARITIES AND SUSPECT SUPPOSITIONS**

Demographic themes are often intended to help in understanding broad trends, not specific situations. Being born at a certain time does not predestine a person’s disposition, yet popular culture has led us to believe it is acceptable to assume this is the case with millennials.

Surprisingly, new insights have emerged to show that millennial portrayals are not unique to Generation Y. Harvard Business Review reports few depictions that differentiate millennial interests and behaviors are grounded in empirical research. Attributes we have come to affiliate with millennials are actually values shared among other working generations.

Jessica Kriegel’s book *Unfairly Labeled: How Your Workplace Can Benefit from Ditching Generational Stereotypes* provides an in-depth examination of the information used to justify generational differences. She uncovered shocking contradictions. The book also highlighted that most of our generalized understanding of millennials is based on anecdotes and assumptions that are neither accurate, nor useful.

Kriegel is not alone. Researchers at George Washington University and the Department of Defense carefully combed through numerous generationally-focused studies and concluded that meaningful differences among generations probably do not exist in the workplace. Their meta-analysis revealed no significant differences across the generations in job satisfaction, organizational commitment or intent to turnover. The small differences that do appear are likely attributable to factors such as stage of life. Their findings go on to advise that interventions designed to address generational differences may not be effective.

A recent study by CNBC shines the spotlight on the similarities too. Looking at the importance of six traits in a potential employer — ethics, environmental practices, work-life balance, profitability, diversity and reputation for hiring the best and brightest — millennial preferences in each of the six traits are essentially equivalent to the overall population.

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5 “Millennials not so different when it comes to work: Survey.” Steve Liesman, CNMC, November 3, 2015.
Bottom line: employees, regardless of age bracket, want similar things from their employment experience.

The IBM Institute for Business Value’s multigenerational research encompassed hundreds of employees, multiple countries and various industry verticals. Their findings pointed to the fact that employment desires among millennials, Gen Xers and Baby Boomers are incredibly similar. Figure 2 depicts only nominal differences among the three generations.6

Research also indicates that millennials change jobs for the same reasons as other generations—for more money and a more innovative work environment. They look for versatility and flexibility in the workplace, strive for a strong work–life balance in their jobs7 and have similar career aspirations to other generations, valuing financial security and a diverse workplace just as much as their older colleagues.8

While L&D teams have been led to believe that millennials prefer microlearning videos, Skillsoft’s 2016 research found that multiple generations view digital books as a vitally important learning mode. In fact, millennials rated digital books slightly more important than Gen X and Baby Boomers. Many millennials shared that the ability to read enables them to progress their learning at a faster pace than video. Millennials also indicated a strong need for job aids, handouts and written materials for reinforcement.

Skillsoft’s findings align with Kriegel’s research regarding generational biases toward learning modalities. Despite the prevalent L&D belief in generational-specific learning preferences, Kriegel’s research found no such variation across the generations.

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However, it is actually the ubiquity of technology, the accelerated pace of work and our consumer experiences that are driving new work practices, not millennials per se.

WHY THE MILLENNIAL HYPE? HOW THINGS WENT AWRY AND THE HARM IT CAN DO

Millennials are the first true “digital natives.” Most members of Gen Y from developed countries have grown up with computers, internet access and devices within the home that exposed them to technology at an early age. Because of this familiarity with technology, millennials have been credited with driving new work practices and expectations. However, it is actually the ubiquity of technology, the accelerated pace of work and our consumer experiences that are driving new work practices, not millennials per se.

Despite that fact, marketers and consulting firms have made inordinate amounts of revenue from distinguishing the millennials from other generations. Hundreds of firms and purported millennial experts are competing for space in the market catering to those who believe millennials are different and are anxious to cater to those differences lest they lose business. Highlighting differences in groups and promising insights is currently a lucrative value proposition.

Soon, conventional wisdom will prevail and the hype about millennial differences will fade—not only because the descriptions are incorrect, but because they also cause damage. According to Kreigel’s findings, many millennials are frustrated with the stereotypes because they are being denied positions and well-earned promotions due to misnomers about their work ethic.10

Perpetuating millennial myths is not only factually inaccurate, it is a form of age discrimination. Why, when it is obvious that we should not refer to seniors or members of a particular race or gender with the types of characterizations often applied to millennials, has it become acceptable to do so to 80 million people from Generation Y?

The sentiment also extends to the way we design learning experiences. Learning experiences don’t have a linear correlation to a given generation. Instead, L&D should focus on creating a learning experience that addresses the “modern learner.”

MODERN LEARNING HELPS ALL GENERATIONS

In 2014, Bersin by Deloitte published an infographic titled “Meet the Modern Learner.” Members of the learning field virally circulated this piece because it succinctly conveys how overwhelmed, distracted, impatient, collaborative, untethered and empowered today’s modern workers are. Time pressures, work habits and pervasive technology are driving more digital learning. Today’s learners are also ready to assume more accountability for their own development. The landscape is quite different from the past, when L&D design focused primarily on event-centric formal learning experiences typically separated from the work itself.

THE SIX ELEMENTS OF THE MODERN LEARNING FORMULA

Just as collective generations have evolved, so must the formula for modern learning. Progressive L&D teams are embracing learning’s informal and “always-on” nature by creating an ecosystem that offers diverse learning modalities that appeal to the modern learner. Modern learning has a formula with six important and inter-related elements:

THE FORMULA FOR MODERN LEARNING

| LEARNER-CENTRIC | • Just in-time, just-for-me options  
|                 | • Personalized learning experiences |
| MICRO/MODULAR   | • Short 2-5 min bursts of learning and reference  
|                 | • Combine into larger programs |
| VARIED TREATMENTS | • Purposeful application of video treatments 
|                 | • Experts, scenarios, animation, “how-to” |
| RETENTION-DRIVEN | • Reinforce, practice, assess  
|                 | • Ensure application of learning |
| EMBEDDED        | • Accessible within learning systems, company portals |
|                 | • Push content recommendations to learners |
| MOBILE          | • Anytime access via tablet and smartphone  
|                 | • Read, Listen, and watch preference and choice |

1. **Modern learning must be learner-centric.** Learning experiences must attract the modern learner by providing “just-in-time, just-for-me” options. They must allow for relevant opportunities to gain new skills or take on new challenges. And they must be personalized to enable learners to choose what, how and when they want to learn, ultimately resulting in individualized learning experiences.

2. **Modern learning must be micro-sized and modular.** Given learners’ current access to vast amounts of information, knowing where to find an answer is often just as important as having that knowledge. Since uninterrupted time is limited, providing short bursts of information that can stand alone or combine into broader programs is key.

3. **Modern learning must incorporate varied treatments and formats.** The use of video in learning is on the rise—but not all video is created equal. Modern learning should purposefully apply the right video treatments for the right purpose, using animation, interactive scenarios or facilitated discussions for different ends. Additionally, modern workers still learn in multiple ways, so combining formats leads to increased engagement and more effective learning.

4. **Modern learning must drive retention.** Although a key ingredient to modern learning is having access to information, the need to learn new skills or change behaviors hasn’t gone away. And it’s still not easy—in fact, it’s hard. Changing behavior requires more than a short burst of knowledge via a video. It requires continuous application of formal and informal learning by reading, watching, experiencing and interacting. This ongoing practice and application helps learners recall new knowledge and use that knowledge to change how they work.

5. **Modern learning must be embedded in and connected to learners’ work.** Advancements in technologies allow for new methods to not just embed content where and when it’s needed, but to connect learners to content just right for them. Gone are the days of browsing through a static LMS catalog. Instead, modern learning must leverage data about the learner to push and recommend the right resources at the right time.

6. **Modern learning must be built for mobile access.** In a world where more than half the population has smartphones, learning must go with the learner. A formula for modern learning considers the most appropriate mode for access on the go. Traditional eLearning courses may have a place, but videos, e-books, and audio books that can be consumed while walking, running, biking or commuting are compelling options for engaging the modern learner.
INDUSTRY THOUGHT-LEADER INSIGHT:

LEARNING IN THE DIGITAL AGE

At Capgemini University, we recognize that the digital age is all about speed and agility. Everything is accelerating. Our approach to learning must also adapt to the Digital Age.

We believe that access to the latest information and best practice has become paramount for any professional to be able to do their job effectively. Sustainable competitive advantage is increasingly about employees efficiently finding the right information, just-in-time, to learn and perform.

We also believe that employees must be digitally fluent in order to continually adapt their skills. The digital era essentially requires a lifelong commitment from learners in order to stay relevant and valuable in the marketplace.

Finally, for our business to meet the market demands, it is critical that our learning teams align with specific business priorities and integrate modern and learner-centric ways-of-working. Doing so provides the business with superior agility and with the right skills. It also ensures that digital age learning gradually becomes part of the “natural workflow” of an organization.

Capgemini University’s approach to learning in today’s Digital Age includes six characteristics which bring their own unique benefits:

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<th>CHARACTERISTIC</th>
<th>BENEFIT</th>
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<td>Engaging through an exceptional and relevant learning experience</td>
<td>Learner-centric design working hand in hand with business aligned objectives results in higher employee engagement</td>
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<tr>
<td>Empowering, personalized and self-directed</td>
<td>The learner drives his or her own development, with assets that fit individualized needs (one size fits one). The learner is empowered and more engaged throughout the learning process</td>
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Capgemini has earned numerous learning industry awards for their innovative learning programs, including the 2016 Skillsoft Industry Innovation Award for “Empowering Continuous Talent Development.” The program, “Embark,” equips leaders with competencies required to lead a team successfully, which in turn adds value to the Capgemini business. Embark is a blended virtual learning journey that leverages a powerful mix of Capgemini’s proprietary content and subject matter experts, Skillsoft eLearning resources and the SumTotal platform.

### CHARACTERISTIC | BENEFIT
---|---
Ubiquitous, just-in-time, on-demand and in context | Learning supports performance on the job, specific activities and problems through small learning resources accessible anytime and from anywhere
A balanced blend of experiential, social, informal and formal approaches | The right format for the right purpose makes learning more effective
Hyper-connected with analytics everywhere | Connected and targeted learning drives increased effectiveness which can be measured
Continuous, based on inquiry, exploring and doing | Learning promotes inquiry and curiosity, nurturing an organization’s learning culture and supporting lifelong learning

Implementing Digital Age learning requires a significant transformation in the way L&D teams design, build and deliver learning. This is the exciting challenge we are tackling head on today.

**Access the full Capgemini Point of View: Learning in the Digital Age.**

**HOW SKILLOFT ADDRESSES THE NEEDS OF THE MODERN LEARNER**

As the market leader in eLearning, Skillsoft understands the needs of the modern learner and continues to innovate with new content, new technologies and new experiences.

Skillsoft video-based content uniquely leverages multiple styles designed to present the learning objectives and engage the users in the very best way. For example, we may use an interactive scenario to teach tactics for working with difficult people or animation to describe concepts around information security.
Short 3-5 minute video segments are a given, but our newest course style is paced even more quickly and efficiently, allowing for more learning in less time while relying on the same sound instructional design that you’ve always counted on from Skillsoft.

Knowing that the modern learner wants more than just videos, Skillsoft courses, digital books, audio books, practice tools, and exam preps provide a variety in modality that currently goes unmatched. And many resources are curated into playlists allowing learners to easily access what they want when they need it, whether they are looking for a burst of learning in a moment of need or a more complete learning path aimed at developing a new skill.

Understanding that a modern learning experience is the intersection of engaging content and beautiful technology, Skillsoft is introducing Percipio.

Percipio is a content delivery experience like no other; designed to change the perception of learning within the organization so that learning isn’t something that your workforce has to do, but something that they want to do.

Central to Percipio is the concept of Channels. Channels are an easy and personalized way to pinpoint the courses, books, videos and other resources available about a topic in a pre-curated package.

Progress and impact is important to learners, managers and executives alike. With Percipio, all progress is tied back to goals, making it easy to demonstrate the value Skillsoft eLearning provides.
SKILLSOFT CUSTOMERS SHARE BEST PRACTICES FOR ADDRESSING THE NEEDS OF THE MODERN LEARNER

- Curate a blend of short, trusted content by key topics and functions.
- Be vigilant about delivering an elegant end-user experience.
- Communicate what's-in-it-for-me (WIIFM) in short form (think 140 characters) and do so constantly.
- Exploit social learning to connect employees and exchange knowledge.
- Make learning continuous and enable learners to easily chart their progress.
- Ensure managers encourage learning and provide prompt feedback when new skills are applied.

TAKE ACTION

Change is happening throughout organizations. Business models, strategies and the face of the modern worker have never been the same. The stakes are as high as ever and L&D has a unique opportunity to impact each organization's success. But supporting business performance will take new approaches, innovative ideas and agility. As learning leaders face this challenge, they are encouraged to do the following:

1. Embrace the challenge of creating solutions for five generations of learners as an opportunity for new ideas and approaches. Be open to new perspectives.

2. Don't assume modern learning preferences apply just to the younger generations. All generations want meaningful work, opportunity for learning new skills and career growth.

3. Think of learning as an ecosystem that brings formal, informal and social collaboration together into a continuous learning environment.
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kieran King began her career in the talent field more than 20 years ago. In 1999, Kieran joined CBT Systems (which was acquired by Skillsoft in 2002) and participated in the evolution of the learning industry by consulting with organizations across a wide variety of sectors and geographies. She has consulted with companies to design enterprise learning programs, implement learning and talent platforms, lead strategy engagements, and advise on measuring learning’s impact on business outcomes. Kieran has authored several methodologies and white papers, she blogs regularly and she’s been featured in magazines such as *Chief Learning Officer, Elearning!, Talent Management* and *Forbes*. Kieran was also a featured on Sirius Radio’s *In the Workplace* hosted by Wharton Business School. Today, Kieran studies the composition of successful learning and talent partnerships throughout the world.

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ABOUT THE INDUSTRY THOUGHT LEADER

Dr. Regis Chasse is member of the Capgemini University executive committee, and Director of Curriculum for Capgemini Group. In 2015, Capgemini global curriculum reached over 165,000 employees across 40 countries, either virtually, regionally or centrally. The global curriculum that he oversees builds the strategic capabilities necessary for Capgemini Group to achieve its objectives and ambitions in the near and long term.

Dr. Regis Chasse began his career as a software engineer and project manager, while graduating from the Ecole Privee des Sciences Informatiques (E.P.S.I.) in Paris, France, with a Master in Computer Science (french-eq.). He then moved to the United States in 1993 and completed a Master in Business Administration with the University of Nebraska. He joined Capgemini Group in 1998. Dr. Chasse also holds both a Master of Education and a Doctorate of Education from the University of Pennsylvania.

Dr. Chasse is a seasoned conference speaker and author on the topics of continuous learning, learning innovation, Digital Age learning, learning effectiveness evaluation and the value of professional certifications for corporations. Dr. Chasse is a member of the Employer Subject Matter Expert Team (ESMET) advising the U.S. Department of Education on the “Jobs for the Future” initiative.
ABOUT SKILLSOFT

Skillsoft is the global leader in corporate learning, delivering beautiful technology and engaging content that drives business impact for modern enterprises. Skillsoft comprises three award-winning solutions that support learning, performance and success: Skillsoft learning content, the Percipio intelligent learning platform and the SumTotal suite for Human Capital Management.

Skillsoft provides the most comprehensive selection of cloud-based corporate learning content, including courses, videos, books and other resources on Business and Management Skills, Leadership Development, Digital Transformation, IT Skills and Certification Training, Productivity and Collaboration Tools and Compliance. Percipio's intuitive design engages modern learners and its consumer-led experience accelerates learning. The SumTotal suite features four key components built on a unified platform: Learning Management, Talent Management, Talent Acquisition and Workforce Management.

Skillsoft is trusted by thousands of the world's leading organizations, including 65 percent of the Fortune 500. Learn more at www.skillsoft.com