

Market Trends

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How Education Companies Can Manage and Motivate Millennial Workers

They Crave Workplace Flexibility, Opportunities for Professional Growth, and Fun in the Office

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Flexible work arrangements, gamified staff meetings, unlimited vacation time, lots of free food, foosball, and dogs in the office.

companies—like employers in other industries—are thinking harder about how to design workplaces that appeal to this generation of employees.

Ranging in age from about 22 to 37, millennials are often described as not only ambitious and tech-savvy, but also nomadic, averse to constructive criticism, and lacking in soft skills, like face-to-face conversation.

In order to manage and motivate millennials, education companies need to take a nuanced view and figure out what approach works best.

Education companies—and ed-tech companies in particular—may be uniquely positioned to attract and retain talented millennials over employers in other sectors of the economy. When it comes to a career, millennials want their work to have impact, be meaningful, and contribute to the good of the world. The ed-tech sector checks a lot of those boxes, said Adam Smiley Poswolsky, 35, a millennial workplace expert and author of *The Quarter-Life Breakthrough*.

“The majority of millennials would take a pay cut to find work that matches their values,” he said. “The ed-tech space has an advantage because it’s easy for people to understand why it

Who Are Millennials and What Do They Want?

Millennials were born **between 1983 and 1994**. According to the [2018 Deloitte Millennial Survey](#), which questioned 10,000 millennials across 36 countries about their perceptions of business and what was valuable to them in the workplace, millennials want diversity and flexibility in the workplace, and more stimulating work environments. According to the survey:

57 percent said a positive workplace culture was very important

51 percent said financial rewards were very important to them

44 percent said flexibility and opportunities for continuous learning were very important

contributing to.”

leave their current employer within two years

Largest Generation in the Workforce

36 percent said interpersonal skills were essential in the workplace

Millennials are officially the largest generation in the workforce today, replacing the Baby Boomers, who are retiring in droves. By 2025, millennials will make up an estimated 75 percent of the workforce.

“This is a massive changeover,” said Lindsey Pollak, 44, author of *The Remix: How to Lead and Succeed in the Multigenerational Workforce*, and an expert on millennials. “This is a change in the dominant workforce and is a really big deal.”

Because being purpose-driven in their work plays a key role for millennials considering careers, it can be an excellent hook for companies trying to lure top talent. Two-thirds of [Khan Academy](#)’s 200 employees are millennials, and the nonprofit organization’s mission to bring free, high-quality education to students is a big selling point, said Mini Khroad, the organization’s chief people officer.

“We are surrounded on every side by high-tech companies and anyone who works at Khan Academy could work in high tech and make a lot more money,” Khroad said. The organization is based in Mountain View, Calif., in the heart of Silicon Valley. “We attract a lot of people who have a passion around education and it makes it easy for us to recruit.”

But just being an ed-tech company with a focus on improving education for students isn’t going to give millennials a feeling of purpose, Pollak said. That message has to be front and center in an education business, both for the

employees writing code in an office.

Education companies need to “talk about the positive end goals of the work [they’re] doing all the time,” she said. “Make sure all employees see the end results.”



The majority of millennials would take a pay cut to find work that matches their values. The ed-tech space has an advantage because it’s easy for people to understand why it matters and what their work is contributing to.

Adam Smiley Poswolsky
Millennial workplace expert

Some companies are trying to make sure their office environments, along with their missions, reflect millennials’ needs. At the Montreal-based educational games company [Classcraft](#), the founders have taken its mission of “transforming the school experience through play” a step farther.

On the first floor of their offices outside Montreal, there’s a foosball table and video game consoles. The office is paperless (three-quarters of millennials say they would [take a pay cut to work at an environmentally-friendly company](#)). Annual holiday events have featured ice fishing and curling. They offer a flexible work schedule.

Feedback

Classcraft has also transformed its work environment to reflect its K-12 product. It has taken its own learning platform and adapted it to the workplace for its 45 employees, most of whom are millennials, said CEO and co-founder Shawn Young.

Every employee has a game character and earns points for different interactions. Staff meetings are gamified, and just like in the K-12 version of Classcraft, there is often a fun “random event” to kick off meetings as an icebreaker. The random event might call for a team to create a funny walk, for example, or talk like pirates.

In addition, the entire company’s onboarding process is gamified as a quest and the new hire is the adventurer. Veteran employees can earn points by answering questions about—and getting to know—new hires.

“There’s ultimately a strategic benefit to have our employees using our own product and experiencing it,” said Young, who is 35. “They’ll develop better ideas and adapt it for better practices in the classroom.”

Young recognizes that millennials seek constant feedback and social recognition—an offshoot, some experts say, of having been raised in a social media generation, where people collect Instagram likes and have lengthy Snapchat streaks.

So the in-house version of Classcraft features an electronic “kudos box” where people submit messages of appreciation that are read to the whole staff and later displayed on a wall. There are about 500 notes there now.

“Millennials care about top-down recognition from their boss like everyone else,



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but they care even more about peer recognition,” Young said. “It’s really powerful when we read those out loud to everyone.”

Jeff Weber, 52, the executive vice president of people and places at ed-tech software company [Instructure](#), which has about 1,300 employees, 800 of them millennials, said his company wants to provide more input and interaction between employees and managers, partly in recognition of millennials’ needs and that of all employees. But he is also convinced that in most workplaces, it doesn’t happen organically on its own.

Instructure created its own software to promote more feedback and support internally. Now digital tools help managers and employees track and facilitate informal conversations, even suggesting language to help those discussions take place. The company built on that with additional software to facilitate mentoring and skills advancement opportunities, and has recently begun to sell these platforms to its corporate clients.

Millennials “want to learn and develop and grow,” Weber said. The company, he said, has found that some employees would rather have more training opportunities than cash bonuses.

“They want to feel they are expanding their reach and moving along the path [toward] what they want to accomplish,” he said.

PD Is the Recipe for Retention

sets, those who study them say. Professional development motivates them and keeps them engaged, benefiting the companies they work for, said Julia Rivard Dexter, 42, the co-founder of education startup [Squiggle Park](#). The company has 15 employees, all millennials.

To that end, Squiggle Park—which aims to boost students’ reading skills through digital games—holds a four-day biannual company retreat. The first two days are spent improving employees’ individual skills, using a business coach to help them understand what drives and motivates them. “If they’re not the best individual they can be, then as a company, we’re not the best we can be,” Dexter said.



The thought of working at the same company forever is laughable to them.

Lindsey Pollak
Millennial expert, author

Khan Academy sets aside \$2,000 per employee per year to allow them to choose their own professional development. And online adaptive math curriculum provider [Dreambox Learning](#) is rolling out individualized growth plans for every employee over this year, in addition to having a director of training and development who creates professional development. Thirty percent of Dreambox’s 210 employees are millennials.

But Chelsea Giusti, the director of the people team at Dreambox Learning, said sometimes millennials struggle to understand how to progress in their careers or get to the next phase or role. After leaving college—where a path is often laid out for them—the workforce isn’t always designed around their wants and needs, she said.

path—where they want to go and how to get there.”

Millennials won't hesitate to leave a job where they don't feel they're growing. But while this age group does change jobs at a fairly high rate, it's no higher than other generations when they were in their 20s at the start of their careers, said Pollak, which somewhat debunks the myth that millennials are constantly jumping from one job to the next.

But the idea of being “loyal” to a particular company for a long period of time is not part of their DNA the way it might have been for previous generations, Pollak said. “The thought of working at the same company forever is laughable to them,” she said.

Room for Improvement on ‘Soft Skills’

Millennials bring a lot to the table—an ease and facility with technology, leadership skills, the ability to collaborate. But there are some hallmarks of the generation that may mean employers have to take new or different approaches. Employers say millennials’ “soft skills”—such as face-to-face conversation and talking on the telephone—can be lacking.

At STEAM education startup [Piper](#), interim CEO Dave Lundgren, 59, brings in lunch for his 15 employees—nearly all millennials—daily so they can eat together and connect. Lundgren is a veteran of big Fortune 500 companies like Hewlett Packard and Broadcom, but said he takes a different management approach than the organizations he used to work for. Lundgren doesn't have an office, and sits at a desk just like everyone else. He makes sure to be accessible. And he doesn't toss out orders for his staff from “the boss”—millennials don't respond well to that.

“You never want to dictate to them,” he said. “If you ask questions and jointly converge on the answers, then the point of action is completely embraced.”



Some companies have found that millennials would rather have more training opportunities than cash bonuses.

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Lundgren does notice that millennials are sometimes averse to certain forms of communication. He tries to get them accustomed to face-to-face or voice phone communication, which millennials often shy away from, he said.

“Millennials tend to use voice communication less,” he said. He shows them that “talking, intonation, and rhythm bring a lot more nuance to communication than texting.”

Because millennials feel their work is purpose-driven and they are passionate, they can come off as entitled, or wanting to play key roles quickly, avoiding the tradition of “paying their dues” that older generations may have followed and respected. But Kyle Steele, 41, program director of [Rally](#), a social enterprise startup accelerator, said employers need to harness the passion, while providing constructive criticism that millennials will hear.

“The way you help them get there is for them to feel like you truly care about them,” he said. “The way that happens is by spending time listening to them and developing an understanding and rapport.”

Dogs in the Office, Spa Passes

Part of developing that understanding is to acknowledge what millennials want in the workplace. Surveys of millennials say they value diversity and are more likely to stay longer in jobs at diverse companies.

For Dreambox, that’s been a selling point. The company’s CEO Jessie Woolley-Wilson is African-American and that attracts millennials who are specifically

diversity and inclusion and a lot of people interview at Dreambox because of that,” she said. “It’s a great recruiting tool for us.”

But Dreambox also tries to appeal to millennials in other ways. The company allows dogs in the office and sets aside three days annually for employees to work at a charity of their choice. There are quarterly, week-long hackathons to let employees collaborate on creative projects of their choice. And like nearly all of the companies in this story, there are flexible work options such as allowing employees to work from home, or individualized hours.

But Young, of Classcraft, said that even with those flexible environments and remote work arrangements, millennials value the social networks and communities they build in the workplace, and they want to have fun. Classcraft has worked hard to create that environment through shared activities—remote workers were flown in for the curling and ice fishing—and the company has a social committee with an \$800 monthly budget for staff-led rapport-building activities.

The company takes special care to make remote workers feel connected too, with a Slack channel hashtag #remotepoplearerealpeople and by including them in what’s going on in the home office. For example, for remote workers who couldn’t attend a Valentine’s Day lunch, the company shipped them chocolates.

There are other areas companies will likely need to beef up as millennials fill out employee ranks.

Rates of mental health issues are significantly higher for millennials, many of whom feel less of a stigma about accessing supports than previous generations, Pollak said. “If you are managing millennials, you’re likely to face more discussions about mental health,” she said.

There are standing desks, bike racks, and showers for those who want to exercise during work hours. The company brings in healthy food options, created a lunch-time kick-boxing program, and purchased two passes for a nearby Swedish spa, so that employees can go and even take a friend or a spouse.

While all of that contributes to a better work-life balance and an emphasis on easing stress, it also makes for a lively work environment, Young said.

“We wanted to create the type of company that I would want to work for,” Young said. “We created a workplace where it’s cool to have fun.”

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