

Companies must address the communications preferences of millennials, new research finds

The day will soon be here when a job offer may hinge on a Tweet. As senior executive baby boomers look to retirement, companies must fill the pipeline with millennials, entry-level employees 28 and younger. And people in that generation communicate electronically and through social networking. Forward-thinking organizations consider Facebook, MySpace, You-Tube and Twitter as recruiting tools.

[Ben Rosen](#), the Robert March and Mildred Borden Hanes Professor of organizational behavior at UNC Kenan-Flagler, analyzed results of a recent survey on what prospective employees expect from an employer and how they go about learning what a company values. The results may surprise some companies reluctant to change.

"If you have a generation that has cut their teeth on technology, and you don't leverage that technology to reach out to them and get your organizational image message across, you might be losing your competitive advantage," Rosen said.

Rosen's online survey sent in spring 2009 to a random sample of 2,800 UNC Kenan-Flagler alumni from selected graduating classes between 1980 and 2009 followed a much more extensive study Rosen conducted in 2008 about generational differences in the workforce. That research into work styles, attitudes and priorities of the three generations uncovered areas of friction among baby boomers, Gen X and millennials (also known as Gen Y) who must work together. For instance, millennials thought their bosses (routinely from the baby boomer category) were too consumed with work and would skew millennials' work-life balance. Gen X thought millennials had too much of a sense of entitlement and resented picking up the slack for millennials who set strong boundaries on work to preserve a work-life balance. Baby boomers thought millennials hid behind text messages and instant messaging to avoid difficult discussions face to face. The differing attitudes and priorities among the generations caused tension among workers and sometimes presented obstacles to smooth organizational functioning.

The follow-up survey to alumni explored what the three generations value in an employer and how they go about finding that information. Mounting evidence suggests that millennials will not stay in a job if their expectations aren't met. Rosen's findings may help companies recruit and retain top young talent.

"When our economy was expanding, so many organizations just could not hire enough junior people or hold onto them long enough," Rosen said. "Many companies were really scrambling to fill their entry-level positions with those who had the right skill sets. As we come out of the recessionary period, organizations will need to staff up again."

When baby boomers began their careers, the "psychological contract" between employer and employee was that the company would bring new hires in at entry-level positions, train them, rotate them through jobs, promote them up the ladder and provide job security. The company was loyal to the individual, and, in turn, the individual was loyal to the company and made a career there.

Now, with a changing economy, downsizing, uncertainty in organizations, mergers and buyouts, organizations are no longer in a position to offer job security. Employees, facing the realities of today's workplace, don't feel bound to stay with an organization if something more to their liking comes along. In this "free agent" job market, companies have to work harder to attract and keep good people.

“Companies might wish for greater stability, commitment and loyalty from their employees,” Rosen said, “but companies are coming to grips with the fact that what they wish for isn’t going to happen.”

Companies especially want to attract millennials and women of all ages suited for managerial positions. The number of women in the workplace has gone through peaks and valleys over the years. Initially, managerial positions weren’t open to women. After the glass ceiling cracked, women got disillusioned with positions that didn’t allow them to balance work and family responsibilities. Women concluded they’d be better off working for themselves. As some companies begin demonstrating greater social responsibility, women are being drawn back into corporations.

Surprisingly, Rosen’s survey revealed that when asked “What do you want from a job?” all three generations listed the same five or six priorities, including interesting and challenging work, competitive salary and opportunities for advancement. Millennials rated the importance of a good social environment and opportunities to travel and work outside the U.S. higher than the other two generations. Gen X placed greater emphasis on interesting and challenging work and opportunities for advancement. Baby boomers wanted health and other benefits.

Understanding how millennials gather and digest information may be key to attracting them. Organizations that continue to communicate with potential job applicants through traditional printed materials and formal interviews may not be getting through to Gen X and millennials.

Rosen found that millennials, in particular, sought information on company Web sites, blogs and social networking sites when assessing opportunities for advancement and the likelihood of doing interesting and challenging work. Similarly, millennials were more likely to rely on information in blogs and social networking sites to learn about an organization’s social environment and fun co-workers. Millennials were the most skeptical of information from formal interviews, leery that they were being fed the “party line” on sensitive issues of ethics, social responsibility and diversity. All three generations greatly valued information from exchanging e-mail with current employees about the nature of the work.

In light of his findings, Rosen suggests that recruiters might highlight travel opportunities and a fun social environment through videos of current employee testimonials. These also could be posted on the company’s Web site. During formal interviews, prospective employees could be given e-mail addresses of current employees willing to talk personally about positive experiences of international job assignments and sociable co-workers. Organizations eager to get their message out to millennials may need to expand their recruiting strategies to increase their electronic presence, Rosen said, and make the most of Facebook, MySpace, YouTube and Twitter.

“Though millennials might make up 20 percent of the workforce today, in five years they might be 50 percent of the workforce,” Rosen said. “Organizations willing to use the most effective outreach media should be well-positioned to win the war for talent in the years ahead.”