

# the millennial mindset

why today's young  
workforce thinks differently

Cara Silletto, MBA  
Crescendo Strategies

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4th Edition

ISBN 978-0-9975676-0-1

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Published by Crescendo Strategies.

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Interior layout - MiniBük, [MiniBuk.com](http://MiniBuk.com)  
Printed in the USA by MiniBük

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# What's Happening

Most professionals know generational issues exist in their offices, but all too often they can't pinpoint exactly how those differences are affecting the business or what to do to fix them. Is the "us vs. them" mentality just a headache, or is it actually impacting performance and profitability?

The increasing tension is likely due to an intense power transfer happening between today's top leaders who are mostly baby boomers (born 1946–1964) over to generation X (genX) and the growing millennial generation (born 1981–2000, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics).

Everyone knows the baby boomer cohort was huge, at 80 million strong, but many don't realize genX (born 1965–1979) workforce was about half their size at only 45 million. So when genX entered the work world, they were taught the "boomer way" of doing business and were expected to follow the boomer definition of "professionalism." In order to advance

their careers, most genXers decided to play the game and adapt their personal styles to meet the expectations of their boomer managers. They didn't have the manpower to go toe-to-toe against their bosses to change things.

**Here's today's game changer: the millennial generation is 80 million strong, and we're already larger than the remaining boomers in the workforce. We haven't had a young professional cohort with this much power in nearly 40 years, and many boomers don't recall how much they changed the workplace when they decided not to follow in the footsteps of their fathers, who often stayed at the same company their entire careers. (Young boomers were labeled "job hoppers" by their predecessors too. It's all relative!)**

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, by 2020, millennials will be the new majority — with estimates that by 2030, we'll dominate the workforce at a whopping 75% majority. The cultural transformation will be quick, but, as you already know, not painless.

While many generational issues have already been discussed in books written on this

subject, this book will go beyond the “helicopter parenting” and “trophy kid” stereotypes frequently cited. I promise to show you an insider’s professional *and* millennial perspective on the top factors causing frustration in the workplace.

From all the research and work we’ve done to address generational differences within organizations from various industries, we’ve identified five primary points of contention. So let’s get the issues on the **TABLE** and talk about them now — **T**echnology, **A**uthority, **B**alance, **L**oyalty and **E**ntitlement. In this guide, you’ll read an example of each issue and learn helpful strategies for how to handle these inevitable situations.

In each example, you’ll see how the real source of conflict isn’t that one side is doing it right and the other is doing it wrong. Rather, conflict commonly arises when you have two team members on opposite ends of any widening spectrum. When people can’t see where their coworkers, managers or employees are coming from, tensions rise and productivity falls.



Learning why these gaps exist and how to spot them will equip you to serve as a mediator when your company experiences culture clashes, miscommunication or missed expectations.

# Issues on the TABLE: **Technology**

## **Musical Advancements**

Let's take a step back in time. How did you listen to music as a child? If you are a baby boomer, you probably started with the radio and albums. You played your favorite records through grade school, high school, and even into adulthood. (And some of you still have your Beatles records, don't you?)

Now think about the millennial experience. By the time I was born in 1981, cassettes had taken over, so many of us started with these. But before I was ten years old, I had to trade in my Sony Walkman for a Discman and transition to CDs. And for my 21st birthday, what was on my wish list? An MP3 player, of course.

While boomers had one primary music technology they knew and loved, millennials never had the opportunity to get too attached to any one mode, since new technologies were released much more frequently than for previous generations.

## Affinity for Change

What does this mean in the office? **Our relationships with technology as children often equate to our comfort level with change as adults.**

On one hand, you have many in the older generations with a battle cry of, “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it!” They lament that as soon as they find a technology they understand, it’s suddenly replaced with a newer, supposedly “improved” system — one they have to learn all over again. It can feel like an endlessly frustrating cycle that leaves many not wanting to try new things and some getting increasingly bitter with each round of changes.

On the other side you have the millennials. Our mantra is: “Out with the old - in with the new.” Or in our preferred vernacular, “There’s an app for that now!” And contrary to some beliefs, we don’t drive change for change’s sake. We simply realize the shelf-life on technology is getting shorter every day, so many of us feel we must keep up or we’ll get left behind. If there’s a better, faster, cheaper way, we will likely try it.

## Things to Consider

If you're working with young people who are trying to drive change more quickly than you are comfortable with, think back to your lifelong relationship with the albums we never had. While you embraced one long-term option, we were forced to constantly adapt to upgraded versions and entirely new platforms as boom boxes shrank. While boomers get comfortable with one product at a time, millennials seek constant progress.

And we are not trying to drive you crazy. Our need for progress can be put to good use by focusing our efforts on things that need improvement. Find an inefficient process or outdated program that could use enhancement and hand it off as a special project. A fresh pair of eyes is invaluable.

It's critical to remember that longevity is relative. Avoid saying things like, "we just got new software five years ago." That's ancient in millennials' minds and in most of today's rapidly changing business environments.

**Are you holding on to the way it's always been done because that works for you? Or are you honestly open to the change demanded by today's fast-paced, competitive business climate?**

# Authority

## Trust & Respect

While most boomers were told to “respect their elders,” many millennial children were encouraged to “question authority.” Even for those who didn’t explicitly hear that message we saw the need to do just that when figures of authority or seniority, one after another, were exposed by the media for behaving inappropriately. And as the media continue to showcase those with titles, tenure, and uniforms walking away in handcuffs or fired for misconduct, millennials have become much stingier about handing over respect.

And wouldn’t you? Social trust has disintegrated among the general public over the past decades. And this is the *only* world millennials know.

## Experience vs. Innovation

Who were your role models? Odds are the people who influenced your personal and pro-

essional development shaped the path you envisioned as “success” years before you got there. They were probably from previous generations. Now ask a millennial the same question and you’ll get quite a different answer. We often look to our peers to define “success.” Picture Mark Zuckerberg.

Zuckerberg founded Facebook at 19, and by 23, he was a billionaire still wearing a hoodie. He didn’t learn the industry from seasoned veterans. He had a great idea that applied to a new technology, and he ran with it.

So for the millions of millennials who watched Zuckerberg, and others, catapult to success, one lesson has subconsciously taken hold: innovation trumps experience. Zuckerberg proved that experience isn’t a requirement for career advancement and that spending time “paying our dues” may actually be holding some young professionals back from our true potential.

## **Things to Consider**

Millennials are the most egalitarian generation ever with a belief that everyone is equal,

primarily because our parents gave us a voice at a very young age. My mother was told as a child, “you don’t have an opinion unless I give it to you, young lady!” No wonder she swung that parenting pendulum the other direction to make sure I felt my voice counted at home.

In fact, things were so equal at my house, I got to make the decision of where my family went on vacation when I was ten. Where did we go? Boston. Why? My sister and I wanted to see where the New Kids on the Block lived! Did your parents ever let you pick the family vacation spot?

We were asked our opinions regularly, so you can imagine why millennials believe *everyone* brings value to an organization in his/her own way from day one. We don’t value traditional ranks and a chain of command as others have in the past.

So what does that mean for millennials’ managers? Respect may not come immediately, and it certainly won’t be based on authority, seniority or a title. I may speak up in a way that some view as disrespectful or “overstepping my bounds,” but from my perspective, you



chose *me* out of all the candidates who applied. Don't you want to hear my opinion? Don't you want me to help the company in any way I can (even if it goes outside my job description)?

**If you're serious about retaining millennials, are you demanding respect based on your position and tenure, or are you gaining it via influence, expertise and mentorship?**

# Balance

## Work/Life Integration

Another complaint about millennials is that we are constantly distracted at work. Walk by one of our cubicles throughout the day and you're guaranteed to find us checking in on social media, texting or taking personal phone calls on occasion. The natural assumption is, "They have no work ethic."

For a generation that values 9-to-5 productivity at the office, these habits are understandably irritating. But what do those same millennial employees do outside the 9-to-5 window? Are they checking work emails early in the morning or late at night? If they are, why does it matter that they're on social media at 10 a.m. or taking a call from their mom at 2 p.m.?

While previous generations requested greater work/life balance when they joined the workforce and grew their families, millennials are now demanding work/life *integration*. Everyone has smartphones, so there's no longer

a separation between our personal and professional lives. My phone never leaves my side, and this is my go-to resource for personal *and* work email, my calendar, text messages, social media, games and more. It's my life. And it's 24/7.

## **Day vs. Evening Look**

And not only is our work/life productivity 24/7, our attire is too. Remember those old commercials for women that promoted the ability to quickly go from day to evening wear with a quick change of shoes, a darker eye shadow, more diamonds, and the removal of the blazer? Those days are over.

Millennial women (and men) want to look fantastic every day, all day and do not see a need to separate their wardrobe.

Unlike previous generations who left their personal life at the door, millennials value authenticity and being “who we are” all the time, whether at work or play. We feel more constrained by a strict dress code than other employees because we feel you are restricting our identity and self-expression at the office.

## Things to Consider

Today's demand for work/life integration calls for a new management method. With 24/7 availability, it's harder to quantify employee productivity by hours logged, so other measurable milestones are now needed. Are they getting their jobs done? Are they obtaining the desired results for their roles? And are they still accessible even when they're not visible in the office? Visibility does not equal productivity!

Is it possible to squash the long-time belief that punctuality equals respect, when we all have smartphones and can continue working on other things when someone is late to a one-on-one meeting? By 7 a.m., I've already checked my emails from bed and responded to client requests while brushing my teeth, so is it really imperative that I be at my desk before 8:01 a.m.?

By allowing employees to thrive in their 24/7 world, mixing in an appropriate dose of personal time throughout the day, employers can gain hours of availability from staff that they've never had before. The trade-off is often in the company's favor, so it may be time to re-

view your stance and policies on punctuality, depending on your industry, of course.

# Loyalty

## The Meaning of Loyalty

Another complaint often heard about millennials is our lack of commitment. But here's the harsh reality:

**We don't know what loyalty looks like.**

**We've never seen it.**

Divorce peaked in the 1980s. My parents got split when I was in middle school, and my mom was laid off three times before I hit college. She's always received stellar performance reviews, but that doesn't save you when your entire department is outsourced or consolidated with an acquired company's resources.

I was a *child* consoling a single parent who had come home crying, yet again. What perspective do you think I should have today regarding company loyalty?

Why should I believe any company has my best interest at heart, over that of the bottom line? I understand difficult decisions have to be made as business competition becomes

fiercer and costs must be cut. Just don't expect long-term loyalty when I know you can let me go with no cause on my part, and little or no notice.

## **Our Response: YOLO**

Let's be honest here. I work for you because it's currently mutually beneficial. And when that's no longer the case, I'm gone – whether it's your decision or mine.

While our parents played the “I need to stick it out” card for fear of being labeled disloyal or ungrateful for the opportunities given to them, we learned from their experiences that loyalty isn't worth as much today. Why should we be committed when pensions have disappeared? And our parents instilled a new philosophy in us; take care of yourself. My mother told me to never depend on a spouse or a company for my livelihood. She said I needed to set myself up for success, even if I had to create it on my own.

Seeing our parents get the raw end of the loyalty deal is why millennials have embraced a new mantra: YOLO — You Only Live Once! They taught us, after learning the hard way, that life

is short, so we shouldn't stay unhappy for long.

## Things to Consider

This new stance is a huge issue for employers today. It means if millennials don't like their managers, we're gone. If we don't like our schedules, we're gone. If we get bored with our roles, we're gone.

Millennial loyalty isn't automatic and most new hires feel very little obligation to their employer, so don't expect it. If you want us to stay, gain our loyalty by simply treating us like internal customers. Continue winning us over like you do for external customers, and show genuine appreciation for our commitment over time, as you would a returning customer.

**Remember, there are ample opportunities for your employees to go elsewhere and we choose to continue working for you. Don't take anyone for granted, or else prepare yourself for more two-week notices!**



# Issues on the TABLE: Entitlement

## Growing Up “Millennial”

I’m not out to play the blame game, but there is a case to be made that millennials’ parents inadvertently enabled our heightened sense of entitlement. While I must admit that most millennials feel they deserve more than they have earned at their young age, I’d like to shed some light on why we gained this unrealistic perspective.

In general, millennials were rarely told “no” growing up. We think we can have everything we want, because that’s what our parents gave us, for the most part. And of course they were always there to bail us out if we got ourselves into trouble too. Did you call your parents for cash when your car broke down in college? I did!

## The Credit Card Phenomenon

Do me a favor. Stop reading for a moment and visualize your holidays *before* the 1980s?

What do you see? (STOP HERE...SERIOUSLY!)

Family, food, and fellowship, right?

Now think about the holidays *since* the 1980s. Who do you think were the beneficiaries of the explosive commercialization of the holidays? The millennials!

In the 1980s, personal credit card use became the norm for middle-class American families. Until then, most parents could only afford a few gifts for each child. But by the time I was five, in an effort to “keep up with the Joneses,” our competitive boomer parents were charging holiday gifts and bought nearly everything their children wanted. So when I asked for a bike, a Super Nintendo, and Guess jeans, Mom and Dad couldn’t resist buying all of that, and more. Plus, they remembered their own, leaner childhood holidays and wanted to do *better* for their families. Our parents had great intentions, but this had a huge impact and created the millennials’ heightened sense of entitlement.

**So are millennials the culprit, or are we merely a product of the way we were raised?**

## Student Debt

And after getting nearly everything we asked for as children, my millennial friends and I grew up and went off to college. At that point, we started putting some credit cards and loans in our own names.

Today's typical college student has more debt coming out of school than most parents would ever dream a financial institution would lend a 20 year old. The *average* student debt from a four-year, public school degree is nearly \$30,000. In fact, some millennials are taking jobs that have an annual salary that's *less* than their student debt amount.

## Things to Consider

There's no question that millennials have a higher sense of self-worth today than any young professionals who came before them. And we probably do expect too much on day one with little experience. But something to keep in mind when we ask for more money than you'd expect in an interview is that we already have huge bills waiting in our mailboxes, which previous generations did not have hang-

ing over their heads.

We were told we must go to college to get a “good job,” so most did. And we expect that “good job” to pay for the education bills we incurred during our journey to get there.

So how do you compensate for unrealistic expectations and weed out the truly entitled? Communicate clearly defined expectations from the start. During hiring and onboarding, spell out the position’s perks and milestones for advancement. We are not going to get everything we want on day one, but you can show us an attainable plan for building our skills and gaining valuable relationships that will get us closer to where we want to be.

And it’s critical to broaden your definition of “advancement.” Most young professionals want to advance their careers quicker than promotions become available, and you can retain us longer by abolishing the “career ladder.” Instead, think about offering special projects, more education, mentoring or community involvement to keep us interested another six months, and another six months after that.

# Successful Strategies

## It's Time to Turn the TABLEs

As older and younger generations learn to understand and respect one another's unique perspectives, more substantial conversations can occur where both parties find mutually-agreed-upon solutions. Now that you understand the issues on the TABLE, *you* are the perfect catalyst for this movement.

**And remember, the changing workforce isn't all about millennials. Everyone wants a voice, recognition, flexibility, transparency and a great coach leading the team, not a boss. The difference is that millennials have a much lower tolerance for accepting any less, so these expectations often become demands.**

Companies who are now successful at bridging their widening generational gaps are putting intentional effort and resources toward the following areas of their businesses in order

to improve retention rates and eliminate unnecessary turnover costs:

## **Successful Organizational Strategies**

- Train managers to be more effective
- Validate hunches with data via surveys
- Strengthen employer brands
- Revamp the on-boarding experience
- Improve corporate communication channels, frequency and content
- Schedule shifts creatively
- Offer new advancement opportunities
- Modernize hardware and software
- Treat employees as internal customers and continue winning them over

## **Successful Management Strategies**

- Say “What if we could...” instead of “We can’t, because...”
- Reevaluate traditional definitions such as professionalism and work ethic
- Clearly communicate their expectations
- Maintain open dialogue with teams
- Coach others to be more effective
- Recognize a job well done, *even* if it is the

employee's job

- Treat employees as unique individuals

**Anytime you think to yourself, “they should know better,” or “that’s just common sense,” be aware that you are judging those people and forcing your unwritten expectations on them. Be kind, like my early mentors, and share the “inside scoop” of your unwritten playbook (a.k.a. company culture). They’ll thank you for it down the road!**

## About the Author



Workforce thought leader Cara Silletto, MBA, is a national speaker, author and consultant. She is the President & Chief Retention Officer of Crescendo Strategies, a firm working with clients across the country to reduce unnecessary employee turnover by bridging generational gaps and making managers more effective.

As an early millennial herself, born in 1981, Cara currently sits in a unique sweet spot for bridging the generational divide, with more than a decade of experience spent figuring out the unwritten expectations of her managers. She understands firsthand why 70% of young professionals are fearlessly leaving their jobs in less than two years. And with each lost employee costing companies between \$5,000 (unskilled) and \$250,000 (highly specialized) to replace, Cara's Master's in Business Administration (MBA) allows her to quantify real turnover costs for clients. She provides the strategic



perspective needed to increase retention of the critical talent her clients can't afford to lose.

**Workforce Magazine in Chicago named Cara a “Game Changer” for her innovative work addressing generational issues from the millennial perspective, and Recruiter.com included her in their 2016 “Top 10 Company Culture Experts to Watch” list. Cara is also the author of the 2018 book, *Staying Power: Why Your Employees Leave & How to Keep Them Longer*.**

If your organization can no longer afford increasing turnover, widening generational gaps, or ineffective managers driving away talent, contact Cara to determine if what Crescendo Strategies does for other companies could work for your organization. Visit [crescendostrategies.com](http://crescendostrategies.com) to learn more or contact Cara directly at 812.207.0739 or [cara@crescendostrategies.com](mailto:cara@crescendostrategies.com).

# Is the generational gap in your office widening every day? Let me guess...

- Managers see new hires as lazy and entitled.
- New hires don't think they need to pay their dues.
- Rising stars leave after just 18 months.



Sound familiar? It's no secret millennials (workers under 37) have a different definition of professionalism. Do you understand why? Great managers do!

Millennial Cara Silletto, MBA, is a national speaker and consultant focused on reducing unnecessary employee turnover.

*We were blown away! Cara had us curious from the start, and won us over with insights about ourselves. More than a presentation; she delivered a thought-provoking call to action.*

— Captain Bethany Miller, UPS

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ISBN 978-0-9975676-0-1



9 780997 567601

\$5.00 US

50500



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