

Making an Impact: Reverse Mentoring with Millennial and Gen Z Interns and Young Professionals

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Abstract

Millennial and Gen Z interns and young professionals have been the recipients of negative work stereotypes over the past several years. These misunderstood generational cohorts are loyal to supervisors that care and teach them the skills and meaning behind their work. They want to give back and make an impact early within their careers. Reverse mentoring programs are the answer to bridging a cross generational divide. Reverse mentoring fosters a learning environment that is an innovative way to encourage knowledge sharing while emphasizing leadership development for Millennials and Gen Z interns and new professionals. The implementation of reverse mentoring programs creates a traditional mentoring role reversal scenario. In reverse mentoring, a younger, new professional acts as the mentor to share expertise, new insights and trends with the senior leader in the organization, acting as the mentee. Reverse mentoring is a cross generational learning tool for organizations to develop future leaders and give established organizational leadership perspective on understanding trends, technology, and recruiting and retaining early career employees.

As a university internship coordinator for over 15 years, I have heard from many internship site supervisors about their thoughts and experiences related to supervising the generation cohort known as Millennials (students born between 1980-1994) and most recently Gen Z (students born between 1995-2012). Millennials are currently the largest generation in the United States labor force. Baby Boomer and Gen X managers complain about poor work habits, perceived sense of entitlement, lack of loyalty, and other issues related to negative work stereotypes for

Millennials. Another generation group that is piggy-backing off of the Millennials is Gen Z, who are often referred to as “Millennials on Steroids.” This is the group that are the ‘new interns,’ those that are being hired for upcoming summer internships.

Internship supervisors and summer seasonal employers need to look beyond the stereotypical labels and ideas that both generational cohorts are experiencing. Supervisors must find a way to work with their interns that fall into

the Millennial and Gen Z generation categories. These groups want to learn and grow more than anything else and in a 2016 Gallup survey, 89 percent said they respect and are loyal to supervisors that care and teach them skills and the meaning behind their work. Internships are excellent opportunities for Millennials and Gen Z to make a difference, give back and thrive in a work environment that is important to them. This article will provide information on engaging Millennial and Gen Z interns in the workplace through reverse mentoring programs.

Currently, there are five identified generations that are working side by side in the private, non-profit and public sectors. The generational titles and birth years often vary but most are familiar with the following categories of Traditionalists, Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials and Gen Z. All of the generations contribute in unique and different ways, but two generations continue to get the short end of the stick: Millennials and Gen Z. The media sheds light on older generations painting a picture of doom and gloom as the Millennials and Gen Z join the workforce as interns and new professionals. The reported negative characteristics of Millennials and Gen Z are often characterized as a group that is narcissistic, unfocused, lazy, entitled, self-interested and tough to manage. While the Baby Boomers were likely to toss out similar complaints about Generation X in the 90s, the Millennials, and most recently, Gen Z have been saddled with more 'generational stereotypes' than any other group.

Traditional media sources along with newer social media outlets allow us to share opinions and ideas at lightning speed and just like gossip, word travels fast. Is there truth in the negative portrayals? Is it the media perpetuating

the stereotypes? First, it is important to understand and recognize what events, technologies and parenting strategies shaped the Millennial and Gen Z generations. The Millennials are the first generation to grow up with the advanced technology that we use daily. This group, along with Gen Z, grew up with Facebook, Instagram, snapchat and more. The technology has allowed them to filter their lives and present themselves at their best, without the daily frustrations, setbacks, and uncertainty. This use of technology raises serious questions: is face-to-face, two-way communication and even the ability to talk on the phone becoming a lost art? Are Millennials and Gen Z ready to experience honest critique, criticism, and face-to-face confrontation? These students are used to providing and receiving instant feedback on their performance and personas linked to social media and other forms of technology. How do we help these generations understand that building confidence and a professional skill set and developing strong and lasting personal relationships takes time? Millennials and Gen Z want to achieve job satisfaction and fulfillment in the workplace. However, these are very slow processes that take time, patience and most importantly guidance. The realization that many life journeys are arduous and failure will happen before achieving great success is necessary. These are difficult ideas to understand based on parenting strategies that focused on protecting and shielding this generation from defeat, disappointment, loss and other essential character and 'grit' developing life experiences.

As with all generations, it is important to recognize perspectives and work characteristics. As Millennials and Gen Z continue to graduate from college and advance within the workplace,

employers can coach and mentor in the areas of helping these unique generations build confidence, patience, social and communication skills, while finding a balance between life and technology. More than any other generational cohort, the Millennials and Gen Z want to understand the ‘why’ within their work, while finding purpose and also making an impact. They want a coach, not a boss, and desire regular feedback and the opportunity to grow within their jobs while giving back to their organizations (Trunk, 2007). Providing unique mentorship programs that not only have the seasoned employee mentor the new professional, but further the program by creating a reverse mentorship situation creating a cross generational learning experience is recommended (Murphy, 2012).

Reverse mentoring gives the traditional mentor new insight into old work challenges while the Millennial or Gen Z intern has the ability to contribute to the organization on topics related to technology, social media, and current trends (Greengard, 2002). This idea of “mentoring up” gives new talent a voice and allows them to engage while finding value and purpose within the organization (Zielinski, 2000). When comparing reverse mentoring with traditional mentorship, the key difference is the role reversal with the mentee, rather than the mentor in the senior position within the organization. The benefits of reverse mentoring are plentiful for both parties involved.

The benefits to the senior leader:

- Share back new ideas with other leaders in the organization
- Receive feedback and guidance on leadership skills

- Understand what it is like to be a new hire or intern in the organization
- Gain insight on how organizational policies and culture are being perceived
- Learn from the experience and knowledge base that the younger mentor brings to the relationship on technology and social trends

The benefits to the young professional/intern:

- Ability to have an early impact within the organization
- Develop leadership
- Gain relevant and important networking opportunities and contacts
- Learn about additional areas and departments within the organization
- Access to long range plans, visions and strategic thinking of senior leaders
- Opportunity to share new knowledge and ideas with the organization
- Strengthen interpersonal relationship and communication skills

Organizations that have piloted reverse mentoring programs have identified best practices or lessons learned from launching these initiatives (Murphy, 2012). Creating programs that clearly communicate defined expectations is recommended before implementing reverse mentoring. It is necessary to gain committed individuals and establish a regular meeting schedule. Forty-five minute to an hour-long meetings are recommended, and finally the mentor should summarize the meeting with a progress tracking system that is defined for both parties. The reverse mentoring relationship is one that will evolve over time. Documentation of what is working and what needs to be adjusted for future meetings or reverse mentoring pairs is paramount to the program’s success.

Finally, reverse mentoring programs serve as a useful tool for retention and recruitment of Millennials and Gen Z. Reverse mentoring is a personalized opportunity to give back and make a difference in the workplace. The most common contribution that early career interns and employees find is that their new ideas, pulse on emerging trends, and instant connection to technology makes them a valuable resource in the workplace (Murphy, 2012). Millennial and Gen Z mentors are also in a unique position in that they tend to have new perspectives on programs, services and processes used within organizations. Reverse mentoring is a new approach for cross generational understanding while developing new talent (Cohen, 2003). The establishment of reverse mentoring programs at the internship level can be one of the most beneficial outcomes of an internship program. Companies can tap into the experience, unique perspectives and insight of Millennial and Gen Z interns while providing these new professionals with real work experience and a relationship that will strengthen their growing network of industry professionals.

References

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