

The Center for Sales Strategy

4 Hot Topics About Managing Millennials

Talent in the Younger Crowd by Beth Sunshine



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As a Talent Analyst for the Center for Sales Strategy, my job is to put people under a microscope and analyze the qualities that make each one of them unique. People are like snowflakes and no two are alike; I am passionate about finding what makes each one special. Helping our clients understand what makes each person they interview tick – that’s my thing. I coach them to put the right people in the right jobs based on their unique set of strengths, and I work fanatically to guide people to use their talents to become great at what they do.

So, you can imagine how hard it is for me to lump people together into one big group and talk about them as a whole. It goes against everything I believe in!

Yet, more and more often, when talking with sales managers, I find myself discussing both talent and fit in the context of the generation to which the seller belongs. Everyone wants to talk about Gen Y and Z these days, the "Millennial Generations".

Understanding this generation:

Things you need to know:

1. They are focused on Productivity – not clocking hours at their desks
2. They need immediate feedback and want to hear what they are doing right – often
3. They want their managers in the trenches with them
4. They need constant reminders of why they should stay in their jobs

Coaching this generation:

Things you need to do:

1. Get to know their personal interests and goals
2. Give them immediate and detailed feedback on their performance
3. Teach them how to do something by demonstrating and doing it with them, side-by-side
4. Create a collaborative environment with peer mentors, group brainstorming, and team celebrations

I don't think the fascination with this younger generation is going to change anytime soon. The U.S. Census Bureau data suggests that by the year 2020, millennials (those born after 1980) will make up about half of the working-age population in this country. So, the old adage, "if you can't beat 'em, join 'em" seems to be a pretty smart suggestion here, which is what brings me to writing this paper today.

As a sales manager, you need to understand how to hire these younger sellers and how to retain them – or the guys across the street will. So, I am going to briefly tackle just a few of the most common questions I hear from clients and also share some of the broad conclusions that we at the Center for Sales Strategy have drawn about this often-misunderstood group of workers that are going to fill our cubicles and drive our revenue. But, in the end, you must remember we are talking about people... individuals... who need to be managed individually.

OLD ENOUGH TO DRIVE: Are they stuck in park?

Hands-down, the question I hear most often from our clients related to this younger generation sounds something like this, *“Are you sure that this same talent interview will still apply to my younger sales candidate? Or do I need to lower my standards for talent because this younger generation... they just don’t have the work ethic or the drive that sellers used to have?”*

Any question related to the efficacy of the interview is a good question – and one that we ask ourselves every year. Our Kaizen data collection process allows us to look back annually and make sure that the interview is still measuring the right talents and that we are still recommending the right people. Through this in-depth research, we get into the nitty-gritty of the interview and ensure that each individual question in the interview is still effective. I am pleased to report that the interview is as solid as ever – even with these younger folks in the mix.

But they DO behave a bit differently, don’t they? Here’s why: Work hours aren’t as important to millennials as they were to previous generations at the same point in their careers. Today’s younger worker is not lazier, but she values her leisure time and describes work as less central to her life. She is exceedingly focused on getting her work done and sets the bar high for herself, but she may not feel she needs to do that from 9:00 to 5:00. Her personal life may happen during work hours, but her work life may happen during personal hours since she considers her time more fluid.

As a sales manager, you need to respect this because you are not going to change it. Get to know what is important to these employees outside of the workplace and appreciate their personal goals. Include friends, spouses, and yes – even parents, in after-hours work events and celebrations because community is important to them. Also, make sure these employees are able to access the information they need from home because they want to work when they want to work, regardless of what the clock says. As Bloomberg Businessweek pointed out, you need to “accept the inevitable. By the time this generation is fully in the workforce, the standard work week will likely be replaced by a new set of rules based on productivity, not hours at their desk.”

GOOD NEWS: The secret weapon to managing millennials.

Another topic that comes up with frequency is the fact that millennials (sometimes called “trophy kids”) have higher self-esteem and a serious addiction to positive reinforcement. They need immediate feedback and always want to hear what they are doing right, not usually dealing well with criticism.

My response? True.

You know the drill: you sign up for the team, you play the game, you do your best, and everyone gets a medal. These guys want their medals – but they do not need the shiny kinds that hang from ribbons around their necks. They hunger for praise and the specific rewards that are meaningful to them, which mean that you need to really know them in order to reward them the right way. In a recent “unscientific” survey we did with a group of millennials, we asked about the rewards they would find most meaningful. The most common responses include “incentives, trips, call-ins, days off, flex hours, recognition, cell phones, laptops, gym memberships, expense accounts for more social interaction, team get-togethers, and good coffee.” Although these rewards were listed most often, as expected, we heard a wide array of answers.

Specific and positive feedback in a variety of forms is key when managing people. Regardless of our age, studies show that the average person needs FIVE pieces of positive feedback before they are open to one piece of corrective coaching. These guys may need even more than five, but in the end, they are really no different than coaching anyone else. Let me ask you this, did your mom ever tell you that the world doesn’t revolve around you? I thought so. Sometimes we all feel that it does.

Provide these younger sellers with immediate and detailed feedback on their performance and do that often. It will be natural for you to show them ways that they can do things better or differently. As I always remind sales managers, “you need to catch them doing it right!” At the same time, make sure you schedule time to periodically ask them the questions from the Individualized Management Questionnaire (IMQ), have their strengths and hot buttons top of mind, and manage them in the way that is right for them. Oh, and get them a single-shot, extra-hot, light foam latte from time to time, would ya?

MILLENNIALS: Let’s give them a hand!

Another hot topic during talent feedback calls is the millennial’s need for a lot of hand-holding and clear direction. Do not misread this powerful yearning for guidance as a lack of ability or drive. This is a generation that proudly admits they have been highly programmed, micro-managed by parents and teachers and, although they may be independent, they have grown to crave the input of others. Even the hardest-working of the bunch wants to work with a manager who teaches him a new skill by doing the task with him, side-by-side. This millennial seller also wants his manager to provide him with specific expectations, clear direction, and full disclosure of all of the information upfront. Generational studies show that this cohort typically hates the vague, undefined, and ambiguous. They move fast and don’t want to waste time back-tracking, so they want to know precisely what’s expected of them and how they should go about accomplishing their goals from the start.

So, what does that mean in managing them? It means you need to position yourself as a partner in their learning and success. Schedule in-field days and weekly Individual Focus Meetings with them and stick to

your schedule. Prepare to discuss a new project or technique with them in micro-detail well in advance of the required performance. Don't be afraid to challenge them, but provide rigid structure by breaking down their goals into a series of milestone steps and check-in with them regularly to make sure they are on the right track.

Manage their expectations regarding their own career growth in the same way by helping them to lay out a specific road map for success. Talk in detail about what they need to do to grow their career, how they need to do it, and how long it usually takes. Regularly revisit this road map and discuss their progress. Related to compensation, recognize that as a whole, they will likely prefer a salary or a guarantee that is clearly defined and feels secure. Essentially, we need to strike that perfect balance between micro-managing them and giving them so much space that they feel like we don't care, and we need to give them very specific feedback on how they are doing – often.

FORGET THE ROSE-COLORED GLASSES: This generation wants green!

This brings us to our final Millennial Hot Topic: their bad rap for job-hopping. Would you believe studies show that these younger workers are actually more satisfied with their jobs and more desirous of job security than older workers? It's true. But, like the generations before them, millennials will, of course, leave a job when they believe they have found a better opportunity; the difference is the lure that takes them away. Rather than leaving a job for title or salary, these folks will often leave because of a vague sense that they should try something else. They are often quick to wonder how green the grass is on the other side of the fence and they are willing to go check it out.

This younger worker is not as confined by regional boundaries and often feels connected to people and places that they have only experienced on the internet. They are not as reticent with change which leads them to always be on the lookout for the next great opportunity. This general sense of optimism is often fun to manage because they are more open to coaching and direction. However, this may cause them to be perceived by their veteran peers as less invested in their work, interfering with team cohesion. Finally, this group is also more likely than any other generation to feel a general need to make the world a better place and is often attracted to jobs they find earth-friendly. Raised to "go green," they often align themselves with companies and organizations that they feel share those same values and will sometimes leave for opportunities that feel more socially responsible.

Clearly, you need to make sure the grass is always the greenest on your side of that fence so they don't go hopping over. Communicate with them often and know how they are feeling about their careers. Match these sellers up with peer mentors who will partner with and guide them while providing them with roots to keep them planted. Consider offering more vacation days or flexible work schedules (a millennial "hot button") and a specific plan for work coverage in their absence. Provide many opportunities for collabo-

ration, group work, and team goals. Offer variety in training and allow them to spend time “cross training” in other departments to understand the business from the inside out.

Create an environment that feels “fun” and “friendly” (both are big buzz-words for this generation) and celebrate successes as a team. Build an environment of transparency, void of all secrets, and share information with them often. Ask them often about their level of happiness and fulfillment and share your feelings with them. Give them the opportunity to connect to the community through their jobs and feel like they are making a positive difference. Remember that these younger workers created social networking. Find a way to leverage that need to connect with others, participate in group-think sessions, and share information often.

WHEW!

Well, I did it. I traded in the microscope for a telescope and for a brief while forced myself to focus on this generation as a constellation rather than a vast collection of unique and individual pieces of matter. It was fun while it lasted, but the indisputable truth is that while understanding the commonalities among the members of a large group is interesting, and it provides sales managers with one more tool to connect to the people they are dedicated to coach, we must be careful not to take this too far. We can't allow broad generalizations to get in the way of understanding each individual in the group.

At the Center for Sales Strategy, we have established our “reason for being” which is “Turning Talent into Performance” and we know that can only be done once you figure out how an individual is wired, recognize what talents they bring to the role, work with them to build upon their unique strengths, and help them to work around areas of weakness. Just like their more experienced counterparts, this generation needs us to understand them as a group but coach them as individuals.

Now What?

Want to better understand the unique strengths and behaviors of an individual you are coaching? Contact the Center for Sales Strategy Talent Department at interview@csscenter.com and schedule time with a Talent Analyst to dive deep into that seller's Talent Profile. Together, you can build a strong Individualized Management Plan for those that you manage. The clear road map that provides both direction and milestones is not just for them, you know. We can use one of those too.

Wish you had a way to receive timely reminders by email or text message for some of the coaching strategies that you are thinking about right now? We can help you with that too! Log on at www.coachingreminders.com and schedule a few important reminders that will prompt you at just the

right time and help you to keep the millennials you are managing engaged. This is a free service that we offer, so feel free to set up coaching reminders for your veteran sellers as well.

Feel like reading more about the “Millennial Generation?” Check these out:

1. <https://www.inc.com/peter-economy/9-powerful-tips-for-communicating-better-with-millennials.html>
9 Tips for Communicating Better with Millennials
Inc.com
2. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/shamahyder/2014/03/04/here-is-what-you-need-to-know-about-millennials/#2ded23b1311d>
What you need to know about Millennials
Forbes
3. <http://beta.latimes.com/business/la-fi-career-coach-boomers-millennials-20161124-story.html>
A Baby Boomers guide to managing Millennials at work
LA Times
4. <https://www.nbcnews.com/better/careers/7-ways-millennials-are-changing-workplace-better-n761021>
7 ways Millennials are changing the workplace for the better
NBC News

The Center for Sales Strategy consults business-to-business sales organizations to attract, retain and develop the highest performing sales people. We help our clients develop a strategic approach to sales, and provide them with tactical tools essential for new business development. We work most effectively with companies that demonstrate consistent values, hands-on management, and a belief in developing the talent of their people.