

Millennials, Social Media & The Gig Economy

The Death of Unions or the New Face of Organized Labor?

Millennials view work very differently from past generations – including the one managing them.

The Great Recession of 2007, slow growth in the job market and low wages have presented very different career opportunities for them than for their parents. The left-leaning Center for American Progress (CAP) reports 30-year-olds are making less today than the same age group 10 years ago despite being more educated and working in a more productive economy.

They also make up a smaller share of labor union membership than ever before. Less than 6 percent of 30-year-olds were union members in 2014 compared to 17 percent of Baby Boomers when they were 30 in 1984. But that's changing. More than three-quarters of the growth in union membership in 2017 came from people younger than 35, according to the Economic Policy Institute.

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In true millennial fashion, they've turned to social media to discuss their experience and, in some cases, form their own, informal unions. And in true union fashion, traditional organizers are meeting them there.

All of these changes represent an opportunity for employers to maintain, or regain, their direct relationships with a new generation of workers. Let's explore how.

I. WAGE GAP WOES

Millennials, by any measure, have not seen the growth in wages that generations before them benefited from, according to the Center for American Progress. The group's [March 2016 report](#) highlighted the impact of the wage gap in detail.

- 30-year-olds today make about the same as 30-year-olds in 1984
- More than 38 percent of 30-year-olds today have college degrees compared to 25 percent of Baby Boomers when they were 30
- Millennials are competing for work instead of employers competing for them

Meanwhile, conservative Heritage Foundation reports Millennials aren't [investing for retirement](#), either. It found in 2015 that only 7 percent of households headed by those younger than 35 own stock – a record low.

The wage outlook for Millennials in 2017 is not much better. While the economy is improving, it will take years of extreme growth in wages to make up for the decade or more of stagnation and low pay. **CAP says joining unions would help.**

“Millennials have spent almost their entire working lives in a labor market that is loose – with too many job seekers and too few jobs – and where private-sector labor unions are almost entirely absent. Certainly, monetary policy that promotes employment while making it easier for workers to form unions would help Millennials make up lost ground.”

OPPORTUNITY: Rather than thinking of these employees as annoying or high maintenance, take this opportunity to help build relationships and keep this important group from looking for outside help:

- Set aside pre-conceived notions and stereotypes about this new and emerging workforce. They're reasonable and credible people who simply look at the world from a very different perspective
- Seek first to understand, not be understood
- Stop trying to change them to conform to your idea of what a “good employee” looks like and let them help you redefine the notion

Employers must develop and use true leadership skills instead of relying on the old notion of simply being the boss.

The “Gig” Generation

- + Some companies are facing a new breed of “informal” unions among workers who aren't technically allowed to organize.
- + The gig economy, a broad description of digital contract and freelance workers who developed a market since the Great Recession, is ripe for this kind of organizing.
- + Instacart, the online shopping service that relies on contract workers, faced a “no delivery day” organized on a private Facebook group, [according to an article](#) in Fast Company.
- + Uber and Lyft have faced lawsuits over classifying their drivers as contractors and faced pressure from unions as well as informal “strikes” over wages.
- + Contractors are looking for many of the same things as full-time employees including better hours and pay, and advancement opportunities. Technology has just allowed them to organize in new and sometimes even more effective ways.

II. IF YOU DON'T BUILD STRONG RELATIONSHIPS WITH MILLENNIALS, UNIONS WILL

Just 5.9 percent of today's private sector workers were union members at age 30 compared to 17 percent of Baby Boomers when they were 30 in 1986, according to Center for American Progress.

Unions are taking notice and looking for new sectors, full of young people, who might be looking for protection due to uncertainty in rapidly shifting industries.

Millennials being targeted on two levels: Those who are part of the new "gig" economy who might be looking for camaraderie or some sense of community as well as collective bargaining rights on their own terms, and those who are part of the "old" economy, which is being significantly affected by the gig economy, and are looking for some job security and leverage.

- Unions are [getting into the schools](#) to engage with Millennials, thanks to a ruling from the National Labor Relations board that allows them to organize grad students and adjunct professors.
- Recently, journalists at the *Los Angeles Times* voted to join a union despite opposition from the newspaper's management. The election is the first in the newspaper's 136-year history, and seems to be [part of a growing trend](#) among other – primarily digital – media companies.
- UPROXX [reports a push](#) by producer [Sonny Digital](#) encouraging freelance hip-hop producers to unionize in an effort to make more money, or even get paid at all, for their contributions to hit songs.

Reaching Millennials

- + Listen more than talk
- + Coach more than direct
- + Match your message to their style

Managing Millennials

1. Develop and strengthen true leadership skills and discard old-fashioned and ineffective notions about "being the boss"
2. Help employees be loyal to their careers, not the company
3. Look for the "middle way" when problem solving
4. Design policies and procedures that recognize and respect differences
DO make a difference
5. Instead of directing traffic, learn how to remove barriers to traffic flow

III. IF MILLENNIALS ARE A GROWING TARGET, THEN SOCIAL MEDIA IS THE CRITICAL BATTLEGROUND

Unions are increasingly using social media platforms and other online tools to make contact and organize employees without employers even realizing organizing is going on.

Millennial members of the Service Employees International Union – United Healthcare Workers-West took note of the importance of engaging young workers after realizing that most leaders on the union's Executive Board were older than 35.

The younger workers moved to change that with a conference for members born after 1979. From that, they created a caucus called the Young Workers UHW (YWUHW), which has started hosting social media training for its members:

"We've set out to prove there are ways in which we can communicate and organize online. Each member is asked to recruit a new young worker to attend. We will be putting these new skills to use when we join millions of other activists at the Women's March nationwide. YWUHW is also developing a weekly internet show to be shared on social media so that young workers can hear about issues important to them, and hear a new voice from their union. The show will be produced entirely by young workers and young union staff members. Later this year, we plan to host another young worker's conference, which we aim to include young workers from other locals to participate in. Our goal is to be the entry point for young people in social activism and making sure we're continuing to fight for rights so many before us won."

This new method of organizing means employers need to pay attention to what's happening online, as well as onsite. Just because you don't see organizers in your parking lots or walking the halls, doesn't mean they're not talking to your people.

Watch out for these trends:

- Recently established closed or private Facebook groups created for categories of employees
- Employees "liking" union social media accounts and updates or indicating they're "interested" in union-organized Facebook events
- Social media ads sponsored by the union targeting employees in their newsfeeds
- New websites, Twitter handles and hashtags that might resonate with employees
- Uptick in texting between staff
- [Electronic card signing](#) efforts online

Union's struggle to recruit Millennials

Millennials make up the smallest percentage of union membership in the workforce despite low wages and less opportunity for advancement when compared to prior generations.

Age	Union membership percentage
16-24	4.4
25-34	9.2
35-44	12
45-54	13.3
55-64	13.3
65+	9.6

Source: U.S. Department of Labor 2016 data