



Millennial Lawyers:

Challenges and Opportunities for Law Firms in Leeds

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This project is designed to explore how different generations within the legal profession negotiate the transformative change the sector is experiencing. In particular, academic and press discussion has drawn attention to how the millennial generation have grown up, studied, interacted with the world and each other and the ways in which these conditions may differ from those experienced by previous generations.



Who are Millennial Lawyers?

Millennials are also known as Generation Y and sometimes the Net Generation. Generally the term is applied to individuals who reached adulthood around the turn of the 21st century. For the purpose of this project we are applying the term to anyone who is 32 or under and is employed as a lawyer, or equivalent, within the legal sector.

Management guides and the trade press suggest that law firms need to overhaul their processes to engage this new generation. While there are real problems with the generational label, it is important to recognise that the labels are applied to young people today in a variety of contexts.

What is said about Millennials?

Millennials are ethnically diverse and are said to be more tolerant of perceived difference than other generations. Other accounts emphasise their engagement with social media, experiences of austerity and quality of life concerns.

Howe and Strauss (2007: 50) have noted that Millennials are viewed in the workplace ‘as pampered, risk averse and dependent.’ The fee regime within higher education, competition for training contracts and growing employment flexibility are also important contexts.

While recognising that the Research Project explicitly recruited on the basis of interest in the generational challenge of ‘Millennials’, one of our most striking findings was that the non-Millennial generation (HR directors and Partners) were much more likely to make use of the term, than the Millennials themselves. Moreover, this was frequently (although not uniformly) done on the basis of negative comments, including inability to

receive feedback, lack of organisational loyalty, being incapable of anything other than instant gratification, and generally less robust in taking criticism. One partner drew on a particular example, which exemplifies common refrains:

“

I had one guy who came in and he was... he did a blog for us, absolutely atrocious, called him in told him to go back and do it again. He said, ‘I’m not doing it again’, you know, and I was sort of sitting there absolutely flabbergasted thinking this is an opportunity for you to learn, etc, how he’d got so far in the process of becoming a solicitor to have that attitude, I was a bit ‘like hang on a second’...

”

[Partner Group, Male]

By way of contrast, there were other, more positive attributes ascribed to the incoming generation of lawyers. This could be a catalyst for wider change.



Although there were differences between the Millennial lawyers and those holding senior roles, there are strong commonalities among the responses of all those participating.

While it was noted that the cultures of the profession may be changing, it is less easy to directly attribute that to the particular generation (i.e. ‘Millennial’) into which more junior lawyers were born.

It is perhaps more helpful to think about the context (education, economy, society and/or the profession) which shapes the environment within which lawyers at all stages are working.

Method and Key Questions:

The project has been designed in partnership with the Leeds Law Society, as part of the Centre for Innovation and Research in Legal Education’s (University of Leeds)¹ commitment to developing partnerships with a wide range of stakeholders in legal education and professional practice. The primary research questions were:

1. <https://essl.leeds.ac.uk/law-research-centre-innovation-research-legal-education>

**Survey of Millennial lawyers who are members of Leeds Law Society
was conducted in Summer 2017:**



- *To what extent do different generations identify and address challenges in contemporary legal practice?*
- *What are the ways in which younger, newly qualified lawyers (aged under 32) conceptualise key professional and work-based issues?*
- *Which professional and work-based challenges (e.g. organisational commitments, career progression and motivation) do Partners / HR managers identify?*
- *To what extent do these views align? And, if not, how do they differ?*

A survey of Millennial lawyers who are members of Leeds Law Society was conducted in Summer 2017. This was followed by four focus groups with key stakeholders: Millennial lawyers at smaller firms or working in-house at the Local Authority ('Millennial Group One'); Millennial lawyers at larger firms ('Millennial Group Two'); Human Resources (HR) personnel; and Partners from a range of Law firms.

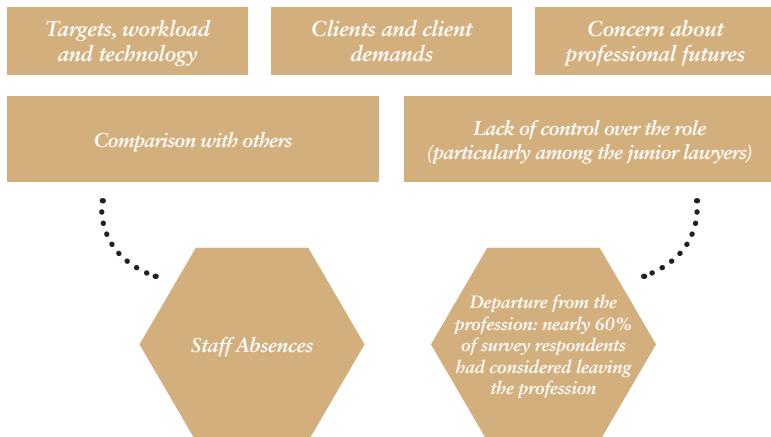
Key findings:

There are strong commonalities among the responses of all surveyed and interviewed.

1 Work-Life Balance

- All recognised that there had been increased interest in the value of work-life balance. Moreover, the increased interest was not solely from younger lawyers.*
- Defining work-life balance varied enormously; it was a subjective assessment, not universal.*
- However, flexible working was seen (by all) as a key way to achieve work-life balance.*
- Identified barriers to this included:*
 - Supervision concerns by firms*
 - Unexpected and unplanned demands on time and the broader pressures of practice*

Sources of Stress & Anxiety in Contemporary Legal Practice³



2. Workplace Cultures

- Workplace culture was identified by the majority of survey respondents as the single best thing about their firm.*
- Focus group respondents were consistent in their understanding of the features of a good workplace.*
- The HR Directors, in particular, emphasised formal policies, while Partners were more likely to stress the importance of 'unspoken cultures.'*
Millennial lawyers expressed a desire for more formalised workplace cultures, including through structured and transparent promotions criteria.
- Valued good practice included support provided to junior lawyers, often from senior lawyers.*

3. Stress, Anxiety and Contemporary Legal Practice

Although the causes of stress and anxiety varied depending on seniority, role and sector, there was a clear acceptance from all participants that stress and anxiety were simply part of the DNA of the profession. There were a number of sources of stress identified, along with particular outcomes of that stress - which can be seen represented in the figure above³.

4. Paralegals: Precarious Employment for Millennials

The belief amongst the Millennial focus groups was that the paralegal role dangles the (however remote) carrot of a training contract. Additional pressures and anxieties are absorbed as a result:

1. Heightened experience of the pressures outlined in Section 3, which are compounded by a low salary and (often) a lack of clarity in terms of career progression.
2. The absence of support from peers – “Hunger Games”.
3. A perception that they receive the least amount of understanding from senior figures.

5. Gendered Disadvantage: Continuing Challenges for Women

The challenges that women face have been highlighted by law firms' gender pay gaps and the under-representation of women at partnership level. Respondents within the survey and the focus groups presented workplace difficulties in gendered terms. Although focus group participants felt that women's experiences had improved, it required little prompting before men and women (at all levels) provided examples of disadvantage, sexist behaviour and outright discrimination experienced by women lawyers.

6. Recommendations

Although some were of the view that legal practice is resistant to change, there is evidence that law firms do adapt. The increased recognition of the importance of diversity and equality issues, leadership skills, mentoring and some firms' moves away from billable hours were seen as positive changes. Furthermore, the extent to which the Millennial lawyers, in particular, reflected upon how the culture of their firms differed demonstrates that 'it doesn't have to be this way' – individual firms can determine their own cultures and, in

doing so, can potentially influence the culture of the industry as a whole. Further areas for firms to proactively address – as part of a cultural shift – include:

- *Demonstrating the Value of Employees: Particular concerns were expressed about:*
 - o salary, particularly at junior levels
 - o clarity about career progression
 - o an opportunity to contribute to firm strategy
- *Enhanced Support in the Workplace: Consider -*
 - o greater clarity about support available
 - o trainee to NQ support
 - o mentoring and soft-skills support
- *Ensuring Greater Clarity of Expectations (from all parties), including with respect to paralegals*
 - o email outside of normal working hours
 - o promotions processes
 - o expectations prior to entry
 - o what work-life balance means in a particular firm
 - o clarity about paralegal role and opportunities
 - o women and the legal profession. the conversation needs to go further than 'it's better than it was'
- *Developing Steps to Recognise and Address Stress and Anxiety*
 - o recognise the value of group activities.
 - o pay close attention to the precarious position of paralegals
 - o culture, support, mental health first aid and training

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The Centre for Innovation and Research in Legal Education was formed in 2017 to support the School of Law in its aim to establish a leading reputation for its commitment to excellence in student education, underpinned by world class scholarship and informed by field-defining research produced by Centre members. Thus, the Centre aims to deliver innovation and world class research and practice in legal and criminal justice education, and the associated areas of professional practice.

The Full Report can be downloaded for free from:

<https://essl.leeds.ac.uk/law-research-centre-innovation-research-legal-education>
and from the website of Leeds Law Society.

We would be delighted to speak to any firm about the issues raised in this Report:

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