Information Leadership Challenge Paper: 1/2010

Author  Martin Rich and David Chan,  
City University London  

Title  Responding to the Millennial Generation  

The Information Leadership Challenge Papers are a series of succinct topical essays, reviews and ‘think pieces’ published by the City University London’s Centre for Information Leadership.  

The Centre for Information Leadership is an interdisciplinary centre that brings together expertise from all Schools of the University in order to focus on important areas for research, training, knowledge transfer and policy making for the Information Leadership community.  

We welcome responses, or indeed counter-challenges, to the contents of these papers. Please send comments to: david.chan.1@city.ac.uk
Introduction
The Millennial Generation, those born after 1985, would appear to be qualitatively different from previous generations in the attitudes and behaviours. In the US, this generation has been put under the spotlight and has been the subject of much research. The Pew study has identified distinct characteristics of this generation and has attracted much news and media comment.

Martin Rich has been teaching the first cohorts of millennials as a lecturer at the Cass Business School and his initial studies would confirm that the millennial generation is qualitatively different. Whilst the depth of research into the UK millennials has not been as comprehensive as that of the US, indications from Martin’s initial studies and other UK commentators would suggest that there may be similarities with the US.

The qualitative differences between millennials and previous generations pose significant challenges to employers as a greater number of this generation transfer from education into the workforce. As the millennials become a greater proportion of adult society, their demands will impact on public policy and the delivery of public services. This poses significant challenges to the public sector and policy makers.

This challenge paper sets out some of these challenges and drawing upon a conceptual model from Martin Rich, sets out some of the main issues for employers, educators and policy makers.

For ease of reference this paper is structured under the following main headings:-
- Background and definitions
- Challenges
- The Rich Model
- Implications

Background and Definitions
The millennials as defined by Stauss and Howe (1997) are the first generation that has grown up with the ready availability of computer and computing technology. Basically, this means the generation that was born after 1983. For them the world-wide web has been part of their social ecology and the ubiquitous presence of mobile phones and text messaging has been a fabric of their social lives.

The millennials have been the subject of much intense research in the US. The Pew Millenial Study (2010) in the US found that millennials were comfortable with using technology and found novel ways of using technology not envisaged originally by the designers. They also found that:-

- 83% slept with their mobile phones nearby as opposed to 50% of the baby-boomers;
- They were more ethnically diverse;
- 75% were regular users of social networking sites;
- 38% were unemployed as opposed 19% of the American population yet were overwhelming positive that they would find good employment
- Most were liberal and tolerant in outlook and supported the Obama campaign.

McGuire et al (2007:594) observed that Millennials ‘are regarded as fundamentally different from any other group of young people in the last fifty years’. In his preliminary studies of students at a British business school, Rich (2009) found that the millennials were qualitatively different from the previous generations in the following ways.

- Individuality:
  - Preference for individualised technologies
  - Continuous partial attention
- Identity
  - Liking self-selected teams
  - Receptive to user-generated content, be it Web 2.0 or in action learning sets
- Information
  - Comfortable with handling large volumes of information
  - Need support in going beyond Google
Stern (2008) reports on the characteristics of the millennial generation, based on a survey, and on the fears that affect employers as this generation increasingly enters the workplace. Again there is an emphasis on members of this generation being more entrepreneurial, less likely to remain in a single traditional job for any length of time, than their older colleagues, and a sense among employers at least, that intergenerational differences are becoming increasingly marked. But there is also a strong sense that employers remain uncertain about what to expect from members of the millennial generation as more of them enter employment, echoed by the work of McGuire et al (2007) on fostering intergenerational communication. An implication of this is that employers can learn from universities about how best to exploit the strengths associated with the millennial generation.

Because individuality is important to the millennial generation, employers may need to adapt their approaches to graduate recruitment: one way to represent this is that graduate jobs will need to be marketed less as commodities, and more as products which can be tailored to a particular customer. The lines between employment, leisure, and what could be termed ‘individual enterprise’ may become blurred; for instance a not uncommon choice for a recent business graduate would be to work informally for a small entrepreneurial business while looking for a more permanent and secure job, and to continue to contribute to the small business even once in permanent employment.

Webber and Johnston’s (2006: 47) analysis of the information literate university invokes the idea of the learning organisation, defined in their paper as one where employees can identify, needs, opportunities, and information sources for learning. They place considerable emphasis on the information literate university’s rôle within society as a whole, and the ability to support students into employment is an integral part of this.

However, it remains open to question how effectively these skills can be transferred into the workplace. Lambe (2007) makes a strong case for the significance of the taxonomies surrounding the knowledge within a business; in the set of competences measured above there is a parallel between understanding these taxonomies and ‘structural understanding’ (one of the supplementary competences) of web resources. Another of the supplementary competences is ‘positive engagement’. For participation in web 2.0 resources which invite contributions from users, but which are also available for anybody to browse, this can reasonably be regarded as an optional competence. Employers are more likely to demand positive involvement in information resources within a business, so there is a case for classifying this as a core competence within a business.

Challenges

Whilst the recession has minimised the impact of the millennials in employment due cut-backs in early entrant recruitment, as we move out of recession, employers and policy makers need to address some significant challenges as the millennials become a greater proportion of the workforce. Their expectations and their priorities will shape not only markets but also interactions between the state and the public at large. Further, as the UK moves further into a knowledge-based and high-skill economy, enterprises will need to acknowledge the preferences of the highly educated and highly skilled millennials who will be the future talent on which most organisations will depend.

The following details some of these challenges.

First entry recruitment

Handy (1994) has written about the demise of the traditional career, the modern cursus honorum, and the rise of the portfolio manager. Apart from a few recognised careers such as medicine, the Law, the Civil Service etc., few organisations can offer employment for life to any new entrant. Millennials preference for individuality and their own entrepreneurial inclinations necessitates changes in how graduate positions should be marketed.

How many enterprises still market their graduate jobs entry as commodities? Should graduate careers be marketed as “customizable”?

Induction and socialisation

The changing nature of the workplace (Dale and Burrell, 2007) means that employees in the future are increasingly unlikely to spend all their time in one office, and will be increasingly reliant on new technology to communicate with colleagues. The issue of cognitive authority is relevant here: how do employees judge the nuances of communication with colleagues who they only deal with through email? Similarly there is an
increasing tendency for employees to work as part of a large virtual team, with members spread around different parts of the world. This is an issue where graduates find employment with multinational companies. An extension of this is the professionalisation of the open source movement, where employees of an organisation can be paid to participate in an open source community. An example from the higher education sector arises where staff from the Open University contribute to developments around the Moodle open-source learning system (Sclater, 2008).

**How many enterprises have thought through the implications of the blurring between the workspace and the personal space? Have you policies covering contributions to other, possibly open-source, organisations? Have contracts of employment been reviewed to enable this or does all Intellectual Property generated by employees still belong to the enterprise?**

**Staff Retention and Talent Development**

The emphasis on individuality, and on building up a portfolio of different activities, is likely to have an effect in the future of employees' expectations in terms of work-life balance. Forbidding access to social networking sites behind fire-walls and insisting on one-size fits all use of technologies will drive the millennials to use other options. Millennials have a preference to use networks and apply collective intelligence in problem solving.

_Do your access policies and systems work against the millennials' inclinations to be self-starters? Do your talent programmes identify and recognise the softer skills of harnessing collective-intelligence? Do you allow or even encourage your staff to develop their insights in a variety of spaces that may be outside your organisation's control?_

**Playing to their strengths**

Millennials have a liking for self-selected teams and are comfortable with using user-generated content. They are also comfortable with handling large volumes of information. However, they need support in going beyond the initial Google enquiry and weighing evidence from authoritative sources. They prefer to deal with folksonomies and tend to rely on cognitive authority.

_Do your enterprise allow self-selected and self-organised teams? Do you have authoritative content available through the intranet and have you defined the criteria for judging authority? Who are the reliable information sources within your enterprise and how are they made known? Do you encourage your staff to use a variety of information sources both internal and external to the organisation?_

**The Rich Model**

This is a conceptual model (see appendix) that provides a road-map for understanding the qualitative differences between millennials and previous generations. It also poses an agenda for further research and actions.

It is based on the preliminary studies of undergraduate and postgraduate students being taught at the City University London.

On the left hand site, the characteristics of millennial students are summarised. This leads to topics for further study that will impact on the new competencies required to be effective.

The quotes are from students that participated in Rich’s preliminary study and have been included to provide a ‘flavour’ of the attitudes of the millennials.

Although the model was constructed to highlight changes required in HE teaching methods and further research, the model is useful in that it summarises the main characteristics of the millennials and also focuses on the skills and competencies needed to work as knowledge based roles. The “New competences in information literacy” summarises the new skills that are likely to be in demand based upon the millennials key characteristics and the possibilities available from Web 2.0 information sources.
Call to Action
The Millennials have grown up with the Internet and are in some senses Digital Natives and are well placed to understand the changes in customer behaviour in the Digital space. As more and more business and social interactions take place in the Digital space, the ability of enterprises to exploit these opportunities will depend critically on their understanding of the behaviour and mind-set of the Digital natives. Many senior decision-makers just do not ‘get’ this.

This paper highlights the behavioural and mind-set difference between the Millennial generation and previous generations of employees. As the Millennials become more significant proportion of the workforce over time, the challenge for all enterprises is how they can be effectively integrated into the workforce and how the organization can maximize the contributions of this generation. So, what is your organization doing to meet the challenges outlined in this paper?

References

Handy, C (1994). The Empty Raincoat, Hutchinson Business


Millennial students:
- Individuality:
  - Preference for individualised technologies
  - Continuous partial attention
- Identity
  - Liking self-selected teams
  - Receptive to user-generated content, be it Web 2.0 or in action learning sets
- Information
  - Comfortable with handling large volumes of information
  - Need support in going beyond Google

Approaches to learning:
- Learning styles and strategies (Grasha, Honey/Mumford)
- Constructivist and student-centred learning

Dimensions for further study:
- Individuality
- Instantaneity
- Anxious-independent
- Web resources

New competences in information literacy:
- Necessary
  - Accurate searching
  - Judging authoritativeness
- Supplementary
  - Use of variety of channels
  - Structural understanding
  - Positive engagement

Web 2.0 concepts:
- User-generated
- Mashups
- Folksonomies

New pedagogic approaches

Appendix: The Rich Model

‘It’s still important to have lectures which offer something which isn’t in the written or web material. The good lectures are more like a conversation between the lecturer and the students and they just fly by: I don’t find myself tempted to check whether somebody’s been texting me in those lectures’

‘I joined LinkedIn [a networking site for people in business] and made a bunch of contacts by giving constructive answers to somebody who had posted a question about using Windows Vista’

‘People don’t always want to talk about their ideas for coursework in the discussion areas for fear that other people might copy them, but that actually works two ways and if you put up ideas, others might add to them and we’d come up with a better idea collectively’

‘My desktop is completely personalised: news feeds, Google toolbar, and so on, so I can see exactly what I want to as soon as I log in. It’s frustrating that the VLE (virtual learning environment) doesn’t offer RSS feeds so that I can easily keep track of changes’

‘You need to recognise that students have a finite attention span – this is partly the reason for continuous partial attention – and also they are going to take an exam for this so will have some anxiety about its content’

‘You need to recognise that students have a finite attention span – this is partly the reason for continuous partial attention – and also they are going to take an exam for this so will have some anxiety about its content’

‘You need to recognise that students have a finite attention span – this is partly the reason for continuous partial attention – and also they are going to take an exam for this so will have some anxiety about its content’