

BURSTY WORK AND MILLENNIALS: A PERFECT MATCH

Millennials' ease with technology and multitasking work style is just what the contact center needs.

By Mariann McDonagh, inContact

Millennials, the generation born between 1979 and 1994, often get a bad rap. The workforce doesn't quite understand them yet, and as a result they have been called unmotivated, self-centered, disloyal, and a number of other unfavorable adjectives. Perhaps these negative opinions are a bit biased. We should look closer at the millennials' characteristics, as well as their more positive qualities. This generation is at ease with communication technologies, works well in team environments, communicates often with supervisors and desires to make a positive difference for the company where they work.

The observation here is that they are, along with their work style, simply misunderstood. This generation of workers will likely never identify with the same ideals that those before them operated on, or end up working the same job for 35 years before retiring. In 2014, 36% of the workforce will be comprised of millennials, according to a recent study by UNC's Kenan-Flagler Business School and the YEC. And that number will only continue to grow. It's time that others in the workforce stop trying to change what they don't understand about millennials. It's time that we embrace those differences, accept them, and start figuring out what those differences can do to improve the way we've done business for all these years.

What Is "Bursty Work"?

"Bursty Work" refers to the fast-paced, multitasking nature of many of today's jobs, including those in a contact center. Simply put, it is working in short bursts on one simple task, and then switching instantaneously to another task that

takes priority, only to switch again when the next request becomes more important.

As in any line of work, certain tasks are more time-sensitive than others. We may have plans to attend an internal meeting, but an urgent email comes through and the meeting is postponed.

What makes the contact center unique is that agents are expected to react according to information they receive in their individual queues with efficiency and accuracy. Contact center technology can help them determine what is important or urgent.

The idea of working in this manner may seem frustrating and inefficient to many of today's employees, especially those in the baby boomer and older groups, who grew up when technology was much simpler. But for today's workforce, it is second nature. Think about the alerts and activity a cell phone generates each hour, and the ease with which teens and 20-somethings today are able to manage that constant flow of incoming messages. It's not hard to imagine a millennial picking up a phone call in the middle of typing a text message, switching to navigate directions to the nearest coffee shop, and checking in on a social platform before posting a photo of their favorite drink—all in a matter of seconds.


Why Millennials Are Burst Workers

The bursty work method is essentially multitasking with technology, so why are these new employees such a good match for it? For starters, this group of individuals grew up with technology. Unlike the workforce generation before them, millennials began using technology early at home and in school from the beginning—many even

received their own cell phones as a child. These tools are ingrained in everyday life and have been for years. Adopting a new tool isn't an overwhelming burden, but an exciting addition to their tech lineup. They are used to turning their brains on and off to tasks, and adjusting focus quickly to address a variety of needs at once; for example, answering an instant message chat from a friend while watching TV and typing an email.

This generation is constantly looking for new opportunities and thrives on frequent change and activity. According to a study from the Journal of Business and Psychology titled, "Millennials in the Workplace: A Communication Perspective on Millennials' Organizational Relationships and Performance," millennials desire frequent communication with superiors and stimulation in the workplace through a variety of responsibilities. These workers tend to become bored working on one item at a time, and as such, one common tip provided by HR managers for attracting and maintaining millennials is to allow them the opportunity to multitask and take care of multiple responsibilities at work. This bursty work model lends itself to these desires, making a perfect match between the contact center and the millennial work style.

How This Helps the Contact Center—and Your Customer

The cross-channel communication happening in the contact center today means information is coming in to your agents from every direction. In order to keep up with customer demands and best address the issues at hand, these communications are often prioritized. This means that agents are required to respond quickly, 

shifting seamlessly between items in the queue.

Consider this scenario: An agent is answering an email correspondence with a customer when he receives a phone call that ranks higher in priority. He moves to the phone call, leaving the email partially completed. Once the call is resolved, he is able to return to the email until a chat pops up with a more urgent request. He may continue working in this manner all day, switching frequently between tasks and between channels.


For many non-millennial workers, this style of bursty work may seem frustrating, but for this young generation of the workforce, it works right into their daily routine. According to a study by *Time* conducted in April 2012, digital natives switch their attention between media platforms (tablets, TV, magazines, smartphones, or channels within platforms) an average of 27 times each hour—that's almost once every two minutes. For these tech enthusiasts, the variety of tasks and channels provides engagement, and multitasking is not only embraced but preferred. The new-age model of contact center prioritization and task assignment is particularly suited for millennials, and as such could provide big efficiency benefits for the business.

There is another audience of millennials to

consider in the equation, as well. As this generation grows up, it's not just your agents who are millennials—so are your customers! They are becoming loyal consumers and their habits and preferences will guide the way we do business (see "Serving the Millennial Generation," pg. 24). Like your young agents, these millennial consumers also prefer to communicate through a variety of channels, at a rapid pace, and they will expect that your customer service system and personnel will be able to respond. Offering someone in customer service behind the screen, or on the phone, who understands the way your customers interact with media and with the companies they do business with, can only help you make more meaningful and lasting connections.

Finally, millennials have been found to work well in teams and collaborative environments, according to the UNC study previously referenced, which means that, generally speaking, this group of workers isn't afraid to give input or to receive it. That spells continuous improvement for your contact center. A recent MTV "No Collar Workers" survey suggests that millennials desire almost constant feedback on their progress. With this level of desire to understand their performance, the business is provided a major opportunity to

improve the individual success of each agent, as well as overall team efficiency, and ultimately, the experience of the customer.

Imagine that one of your tech-savvy agents identifies a potential way to improve communication. This generation isn't afraid to speak up. And that's a good thing because your millennial customers certainly won't be shy to speak out about their experience with your brand—whether it's positive or negative feedback. Media consumption and behaviors change rapidly, and millennials may be our ticket to keep up with the pace. We can learn an important lesson from these workers about how to communicate: quickly, often and honestly. 



Mariann McDonagh is Chief Marketing Officer for inContact, where she is responsible for brand strategy, demand generation and channel marketing and development. She is a frequent contributor to the

inContact blog and leading contact center industry publications.

✉ mariann.mcdonagh@incontact.com

🌐 www.incontact.com