

Millennial Communication Professionals In the Workplace

Millennial communication professionals and their managers hold sharply different perceptions about millennials' workplace factors, values and attributes

Juan Meng, Ph.D., University of Georgia
Bruce K. Berger, Ph.D., University of Alabama

Millennials now represent the largest generation in the work force (35%), and they will be leaders in organizations and in the public relations profession for several decades. Often defined by their acute relationships with technology and high expectations for employment institutions, millennials have often been criticized for the different values, qualities and attitudes they bring to the workplace. Thus, attracting, managing, and developing the next generation of millennials, and public relations leaders, has emerged as a key challenge.

A new study by The Plank Center for Leadership in Public Relations and the Institute for Public Relations of millennial communication professionals (MCPs) confirms their generational differences but concludes some differences (e.g., millennials' native digital skills, passion for leadership, and strong values for diversity, transparency and social responsibility) will help advance and enrich the profession.

Though every generation is different, organizations always seek to hire and retain top talent in each generation. This research report first highlights some of the striking generational differences between MCPs and their managers, and then reveals a rich, 5-phase talent management ecosystem to attract, engage, develop, retain and gain from top MCPs. The key is to contextualize and personalize steps taken in each phase of the ecosystem.

The Survey

An online survey of 420 MCPs and 420 professionals who manage them (MGRs) examined workplace values and attributes, engagement with the job and the organization, leadership capabilities and development opportunities, and recruiting and retention drivers. MCPs shared self-perceptions about these issues, while MGRs evaluated the MCPs who worked for them regarding these same issues.

The surveys included 71 questions for which respondents shared their perceptions on a Likert-type, 7-point scale where "1" meant "not all," to 7, which meant "to a very great extent." The survey was pretested, and questions selected had been validated in previous studies. In addition, participants responded to one open-ended question: *What one thing could your organization do, or stop doing, to increase your commitment to it?*

The Participants

Two appropriate panels of U.S. participants were purchased from Qualtrics. The panel of MCPs included 420 full-time communication professionals between the ages of 21-36. Nearly two-thirds (63.1%) of the MCPs were female, 35.0% were male, and 1.9% were transgender.

Three quarters of participants (75.2%) were Caucasian, 11.0% were African-American, 5.7% were Asian or Asian-American, 4.0% were Hispanic/Latino, and 4.1% were other.

The panel of MGRs included 420 full-time communication professionals, ages 37 and older, who managed or supervised the work of at least one MCP. Half of the MGRs were female (50.0%), 48.8% were male, and 1.2% were other. The vast majority (85.0%) was Caucasian, 6.2% were African-American, 2.1% were Asian or Asian-American, 4.3% were Hispanic/Latino, and 2.3% were other.

The 840 total participants came from diverse organizations and industries in the U.S. The majority (MCPs=57.2% and MGRs=58.1%) worked for public or private corporations, followed by nonprofits (MCPs=17.4% and MGRs=19.5%), and communication agencies (MCPs=20.5% and MGRs=12.1%).

Big Differences in Perceptions

The differences between MCPs and MGRs were significant for more than 80% of the survey questions regarding workplace values and attributes, leadership capabilities and readiness, engagement with the job and the organization, leadership development opportunities, and recruitment and retention drivers. Some key differences include:

Workplace values and attributes. More than 80% of MCPs said they're ambitious and passionate about work, but only half of their managers agreed. MCPs rated themselves significantly higher than MGRs did in work centrality, rewards and recognition, risk-taking and work-life-social values. The only exceptions were technical savvy and technical innovation. The biggest differences were in work centrality—ambition, passion for work and professionalism—and work-life-social values like diversity and social responsibility, as MCPs consistently rated themselves much higher than their managers did.

Workplace values and attributes

	MCPs	MGRs
Ambitious about making progress and gaining new opportunities	83.3%	51.7%
Passionate about work	82.7%	47.6%
Willing to take risks at work	50.1%	41.6%
Value diversity of people at work	73.9%	62.9%
Supportive of social causes and socially responsible companies	63.9%	58.3%

Leadership capabilities. Almost three quarters (70.9%) of MCPs said they want to lead and are ready to do so. They rated their capabilities much higher than did MGRs for their communication knowledge, vision, team leadership skills, ethical orientation, strategic decision-making and relationship-building skills and readiness to lead. Fewer than half of the MGRs agreed, citing deficiencies in all areas, especially ethical orientation (47.6%) and readiness to lead (49.0%).

Leadership Capabilities

	MCPs	MGRs
Demonstrate a strong ethical orientation and professional values	76.9%	47.6%
Ready to be an excellent leader in communication	70.9%	49.0%

Leadership development opportunities. MGRs believe their organizations are doing a better job of developing MCPs than do the millennials regarding mentoring, internal and external training, and support for university education. MCPs rated their organization’s support for development quite low. They noted the areas for greatest improvement are providing more mentoring, supporting their involvement in community service projects, and making greater use of professional association development opportunities. Both groups agreed the most consistent development focus was on building essential job-related skills.

Engagement in job and organization. MGRs rated their own engagement in the job (83.1%) and the organization (74.4%) significantly higher than MCPs rated their work (72.8%) and organizational (59.3%) engagement. *Engaged* employees give greater discretionary effort, work with passion and feel strongly connected with their organization. *Not engaged* employees do the minimum, just enough to get by. They show up, go through the motions, but bring no energy or passion to the workplace. *Actively disengaged* employees can harm or weaken the organization. They act out their unhappiness or resentment on the job and may adversely influence others.

Engagement

	Disengaged		Not engaged		Engaged	
	MCPs	MGRs	MCPs	MGRs	MCPs	MGRs
Engaged in my job	2.4%	1.0%	24.8%	16.0%	72.8%	83.1%
Engaged in my organization	4.3%	1.0%	36.4%	24.3%	59.3%	74.4%

However, MCPs with less than one year on the job were as highly engaged as MGRS; the level dropped sharply for those with 1-3 years of experience before rising gradually to year-one levels after the seventh year. Juan Meng, Ph.D., University of Georgia and co-investigator of the study, said “MCPs come to the job with excitement and enthusiasm, but these qualities slide after the first year, and MCPs may seek employment elsewhere due to poor cultural fit, discrepancies between the job description and actual work, issues with supervisors or simply better financial and development opportunities elsewhere.”



Recruitment and retention drivers. Two-thirds of MCPs said job decisions were driven most by reputation (68.1%), culture (67.2%), and location (67.4%), among nine drivers. MGRs imagined that pay and benefits, travel opportunities, and knowing others in the hiring organization were stronger drivers for MCPs. More than 60% of MCPs said key retention drivers were culture (63.8%), work-life-social approach (62.4%), and development opportunities (61.6%), among 14 factors. MGRs’ perceptions of recruitment and retention drivers for MCPs were significantly lower for most factors, though gaps weren’t as pronounced as in other areas.

Recruitment

<i>I was attracted to the organization because it...</i>	MCPs	MGRs
Had a fine reputation	68.1%	57.1%

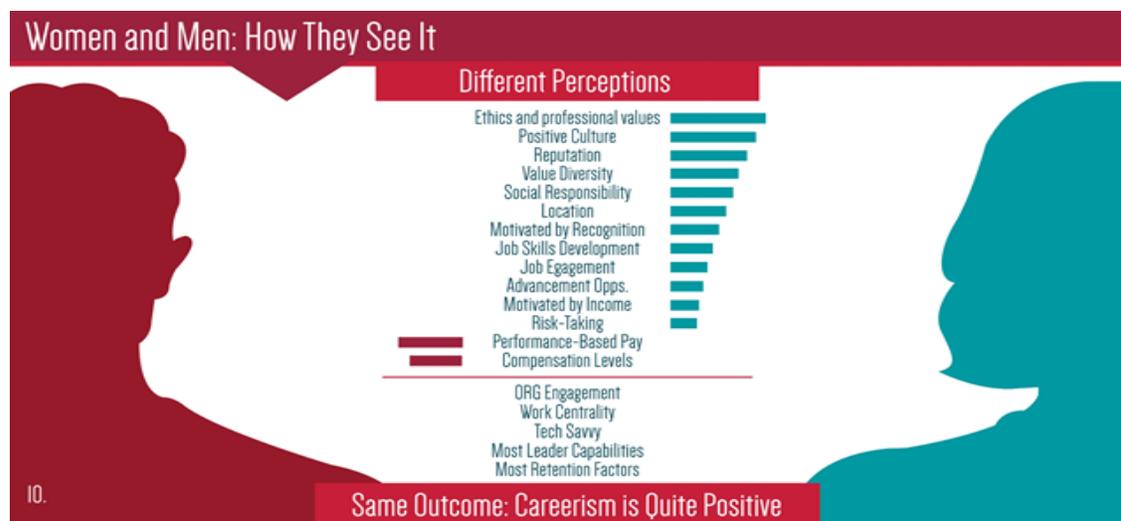
Is a very socially-responsible organization	57.9%	50.9%
Offered opportunities for growth and development	62.4%	55.2%
Has a very open and positive culture	67.1%	60.9%
Is a great location (geographically)	67.4%	58.3%

Retention

<i>To retain employees, my organization...</i>	MCPs	MGRs
Supports a work-life-social approach	62.4%	55.7%
Has a very open and positive culture	63.8%	61.2%
Engages in socially-responsible programs	55.2%	53.8%
Provides growth and development opportunities	61.6%	62.1%

MCPs said meaningful career planning, more mentoring, equal pay for men and women and performance-based pay and compensation would increase retention rates.

Gender differences. Women rated their ethical orientation and the importance of culture, reputation, diversity and social responsibility much higher than did men. They also said they were greater risk-takers and more engaged with their jobs. Men rated only two areas significantly higher than women—performance-based pay and benefits. This may be more evidence of the gender pay and opportunity gap? The profession is increasingly female (70%), but men make more money and the greatest number of executive positions. Overall, both women and men are positive about their careers, believe their organizations value their contributions, and anticipate bright futures.

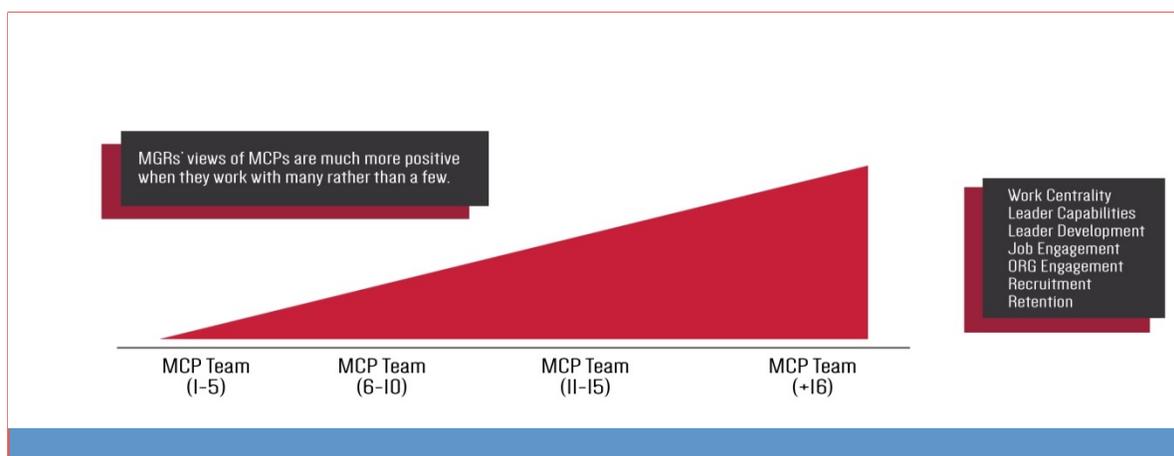


The power of culture. One area of agreement for men and women, and MCPs and MGRs, is the crucial importance of organizational culture. MCPs said an organization's culture is a primary reason for joining and remaining with an organization, and MGRs recognized this.

At the same time, MCPs and MGRs mentioned the need for cultural improvements in their organizations when responding to the open-ended question: *What one thing could my organization do or stop doing, to increase MCPs' commitments to our organization?* About

one-third of respondents in both groups highlighted needs for improved internal communications, better and more frequent managerial communications, more recognition for contributions, more training and development, greater shared power and diversity, and more mentoring.

The more millennials, the merrier. Managers of large teams of MCPs (16 or more) rate them significantly higher and more positively than do supervisors of smaller teams of MCPs. This is especially true for work centrality, leadership capabilities and development, and recruitment and retention drivers. Job and organizational engagement also were significantly higher in larger teams of MCPs.



Larger teams may create a more supportive unit culture due to stronger shared values, a greater sense of accomplishment, or simply working with others like themselves. One way to maximize their collective values and contributions is to provide them with an environment—a talent ecosystem—designed to even more fully attract, engage, develop, retain and gain from them.

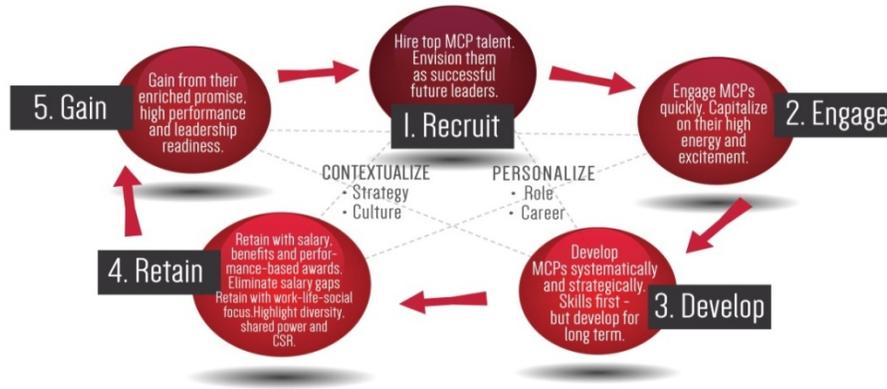
A Talent Management Ecosystem for MCPs

Bruce Berger, Ph.D., co-investigator for the study and research director for the Plank Center, said the generational differences in the study are real, but so are some bright hopes and qualities within them. “MCPs see the world differently—from context to connectivity to crisis—but they are digital natives with great passion for leadership and strong values for transparency, social responsibility, diversity and community—all touchstones for our profession today. We can draw from these skills and values to enhance practice and build a brighter future,” Berger said.

Data modeling of the results revealed one way to do so—through creation of a talent management ecosystem to help organizations 1) recruit, 2) engage, 3) develop, 4) retain and 5) gain from MCPs. In the study, these five processes strongly interacted with, and influenced each other. In an ecosystem, everything touches everything else—things are interconnected—and evolving steps in one process affect other processes.

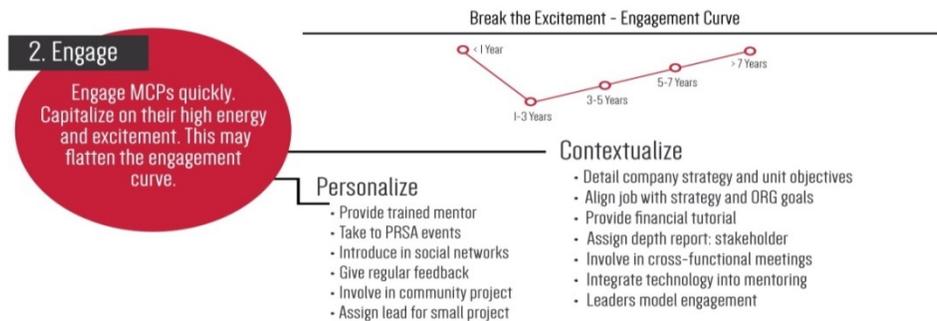
To enrich the ecosystem for organizations and individuals, steps in each process must be contextualized and personalized. *Contextualize* refers to how things fit in or are embedded in company strategy and culture, helping organizations meet their goals. *Personalize* refers to how

steps tie into an MCP’s personal role and career, which helps satisfy individual aims. Organizations often lean heavily on context, but the combination of the two is far more powerful, and dozens of steps or actions can be taken to contextualize and personalize each process.



Process #1 highlights how organizations envision MCPs and their strong values and directly appeal to them in recruiting and hiring. For example, to **personalize** this process, organizations should provide honest job descriptions, include one of their young rock stars in the interviews, candidly discuss diversity and transparency initiatives, and host a small social (even virtual) event for the MCP. To **contextualize** the search process and interviews, organizations should position themselves clearly in the community, demonstrate technologies, describe CSR activities, and share “invisible” culture—values, vision, decision-making processes—to bring the organization to life beyond the job description.

Process #2 involves engaging MCPs as quickly as possible to capitalize on the excitement and energy they bring to their new job. Specific actions to take in this regard are indicated in the figure below. To **personalize** engagement, employers should provide a trained mentor, deliver regular feedback, assign leadership for a small project, and involve millennials in a community activity or organization. To **contextualize** engagement, organizations can align the job with company goals and strategy, provide a financial tutorial, and require leaders at all levels to model engagement.



Process #3 is systematic and strategic development. Organizations often focus on enriching basic job skills first, but they shouldn't stop there; instead, think long-term, continuous effort, and customize for each MCP. **Personalize** with continued mentoring and frequent performance conversations, enrich their interpersonal skills (e.g., listening and conflict management), involve them in recruiting new talent, and provide some **autonomy time** to pursue a personal but organization-related project. **Contextualize** by pairing MCPs with organizational veterans to lead projects, involving them in industry events, and including them in strategic-thinking and planning initiatives and financial analysis.

Process #4 deals with retaining top talent, which involves two interrelated areas for MCPs: traditional salary, benefits and performance-based awards, and a focus on work-life-culture issues. These highlight the importance of flexible work times, open culture, diversity, and social responsibility. To **personalize** this process, organizations could share power and decision-making, provide career counselling, recognize achievements more often, provide flexible work schedules, and support community and professional engagement. To **contextualize** the process, employers could increase budget responsibilities, insist on equal pay, engage in CSR activities and diversity recruitment, and provide top-level development programs with behavioral and critical-thinking dimensions.

Process #5 is gaining the benefits of the ecosystem in the enriched capabilities and values the system has helped cultivate—MCPs' high performance and leadership readiness. These outcomes feed back into an evolving ecosystem that helps organizations adapt to changing generations, dynamic marketplace realities, and social values and preferences. **Personalized** gains for MCPs include strengthened interpersonal skills, a clear understanding of strategy and culture, richer and more diverse leadership credentials, and a track record of making a difference in the community and profession. **Contextualized** gains for organizations include a more caring, inclusive and mentoring culture to attract generation Z top talent; recognition for equal pay, diversity and CSR programs and results; and a growing pipeline of leadership-ready talent.

Conclusion

This study confirmed great differences between MCPs and their managers regarding workplace factors, values and attributes; job and organizational engagement; and support for leadership development. At the same time, MCPs' native digital skills, passion for leadership and strong values for diversity, transparency, social responsibility and community represent touchstones for the profession in the future.

“Millennials will be leaders in our field for the next 3-4 decades,” said Tina McCorkindale, Ph.D., President and CEO of IPR. “Our study shows that a contextualized and personalized talent management system enriches development of this generation's skills and values, benefitting individuals, organizations and the profession.”

About The Plank Center for Leadership in Public Relations

The University of Alabama Board of Trustees established The Plank Center in 2005. Named for public relations leader and UA alumna, the late Betsy Plank, the Center develops and recognizes outstanding

diverse public relations leaders, role models and mentors to advance ethical public relations in an evolving, global society through a variety of initiatives (<http://plankcenter.ua.edu/>).

About the Institute for Public Relations

The Institute for Public Relations is an independent foundation dedicated to the science beneath the art of public relations™ and focused on research that is immediately applicable in communications practice. Its research is available free at www.instituteforpr.org and provides the basis for the organization's professional conferences and events.