

WHAT TO DO ABOUT MILLENNIALS

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Juan Pablo Cappello, the founder of the Private Advising Group law firm in Miami, attempts to answer the question playing on the minds of managing partners in Latin America: how to motivate young lawyers who are not driven by the prospect of turning into them.

Over the past 15 years I have spent the better part of most weeks travelling throughout Latin America having “un café”, “un cafecito”, a “cafezinho”, “un mate”, “una lagrima”, “un café con piernas” or – my favourite – “un café café” with local lawyers. Regardless of the country, regardless of the size or relative prestige of the Latin lawyer’s law firm, the conversation inevitably leads to the same topics – and surprisingly those topics don’t involve fútbol.

The lawyers I meet with realise that the business of law has changed radically for the Latin lawyer in the past five years. Changes brought about by technology have altered both the economics of the practice of law and the “why and how” of the practice of law. Senior lawyers in Latin America are struggling to understand these changes. I hope to shed some light on these changes (or at least provide my opinion). Regardless of whether you agree with me or not, I encourage lawyers in Latin America to reimagine their law firms and question both why and how they practice law.

So to address the first concern on every managing partner’s mind in Latin America: “What is going on with young lawyers today? Why do our young associates seem more focused on planning their next vacation than planning their future with our firm?”

While it is fashionable among my generation to criticise the work habits and commitment of today’s young lawyers, we must accept these young lawyers are wired differently and motivated differently than the generations of lawyers that preceded them. (Some of my greyer, older lawyer friends even admit to envying this young generation’s “joie de vivre” and ability to live without being bound by concerns about the future.)

Young lawyers today are part of the “millennial” generation. These attorneys came of age at the turn of the millennium. They have never really lived without the instant gratification of the internet. The internet, the rapid pace of technological change and constant connectivity have all conspired to wire this young generation differently than the rest of us.

One myth my generation holds onto is that millennials are lazy and unwilling to work hard. That simply isn’t true. Thanks to energy drinks, binge watching television series, and constantly checking their social networks, millennials know no bounds between work and play. Millennials literally live to work, live to play and live to socialise all at once – like their iPads, millennials have many “tabs” open all the time.

My generation of lawyers grew up learning to “compartmentalise”; we lived by the mantra “Work hard, then play hard.” Older lawyers believe that work and play are two different things, done at different times. Working hard allows you to be able to play hard later. (We only have one “tab” open at a time.) Millennials do not compartmentalise. They expect to play hard, work hard and live fulfilled at the same time, all the time.

So a few practical suggestions on how to deal with our young attorneys:

Accept that holding out the promise of “making partner” in exchange for years of sacrifice isn’t a trade the millennial attorney is willing to make.

Rather than offer a payout at the end of a long, long road, we have to offer the millennial attorney the opportunity to be part of an interesting and positive “community” (our law firm) where they work and play. Show them trust (increasing with positive results) by not expecting them to spend all their time in the office and allow them to

demonstrate that they will work hard and keep your clients happy – the winners will be self-motivated and validate that trust.

You have to figure out a way to show your millennial attorneys that being part of your firm is pretty cool (even if it involves sacrifice) and by sticking around they will be an integral party of a “community” worth being part of.

Accept that the millennial will not accept a boss. For a millennial, a “boss” is someone a millennial gets to fire – usually by posting “WaL” on a social network. (Translation: “what a loser; fired”)

Millennials are looking for a mentor or a coach. No one is in charge of the internet. A millennial does not see why someone should be in charge of him or her.

Millennials are looking for mentors who are “trending”. Just like in a social network, millennials like to follow the leader. To attract and retain millennials to you and your firm, you must make the millennial feel that you are leading through example – not that you are must be followed because you are “boss”.

Leading by example translates to showing a millennial that you are “having an awesome life”. A millennial wants you to literally communicate: “I work hard, I play hard, I have lots of interests outside of work I am pursuing. By being an attorney I have the freedom to live this awesome, fulfilling, interesting life.” hile you would never be so crass as to say it, you want young attorneys to think, “I wish I could have my managing partner’s life”.

The moment the managing partner of your firm says to a millennial on a Monday morning: “Why weren’t you checking your work e-mails this past weekend? I was here all weekend working and had to cancel all of my weekend plans. You should have been at the firm with me this past weekend,” the following will occur:

First, that millennial doesn’t want to be that senior lawyer. Second, and more concerning, that millennial is going back to his or her computer to look for a new job. The thought of being older, working all weekend and being grumpy on a Monday morning may be enough to cause that millennial to take a sabbatical from the practice of law (probably to study dolphins on Isla de Pascua).

Being considerate, within reason, will help retain your associates. They are not willing to spend all their time chained to a desk regardless of the financial reward, and definitely not to “make partner” and live what they perceive to be a depressing life. Fear may cause the work to churn out a bit faster, but will result in you having to train a new millennial far too often.

Accept that millennials are much less concerned about money than you and I. You will simply not motivate a millennial with more money. But you can motivate a millennial with the offer of a cooler life, which requires more money.

No need to be naive: millennials care about money, they just aren’t motivated by it. Rather than holding out the promise of more money, offer a millennial an off-site to Machu Picchu or a one-month internship to a law firm in Miami during the Ultra Music festival to motivate them. Saying “Next year’s bonus might be 10 per cent bigger if you work really, really hard” just doesn’t motivate a millennial.

We can misspend a lot of energy debating if this new generation has our “same work ethic” or “our commitment and loyalty”, but frankly it doesn’t matter if they do or they don’t. The reality is that 100 per cent of a law firm’s assets (its attorneys) walk out of the door every night – we need to understand what brings them back in the morning.

Step into the mind and motivations of today’s young lawyer and you will have a much more productive relationship with your young attorneys. Even if you don’t quite understand why they are how they are.