Tap the unique strengths of the millennial generation

By Patricia D. Chambers, BHScN, RN, DC

HOW MANY NOVICE NURSES are retained is directly related to the quality of the workplace. Healthy work environments enhance staff retention, boost an organization’s finances, and lead to excellence in nursing practice. Best-practice literature confirms that healthcare workplace culture impacts both the quality of services that healthcare professionals provide and their level of workplace engagement. A new generation is now entering nursing: the millennial generation. These 18- to 27-year-olds have shown a high level of interest in nursing, as indicated by a significant increase in applications to nursing programs. Unfortunately, after graduation, many of these novice nurses quickly decide that nursing isn’t for them. Data on attrition of the members of the millennial generation show that novices leave or change jobs quickly: Their turnover rate is 30% in the first year of practice, climbing to 57% by the second year.

This article explores how colleague relationships and the principle of “it” influence millennial generational nursing retention. It also offers many practical approaches and simple suggestions any nurse or unit can embrace to produce a quality workplace. First, let’s consider an overview of millennial generation cohort group preferences.

Looking at a generation
Generational profiles examine groups of people who share a collective personality as a result of living in a similar historical, political, and social time. Although it’s important...
not to stereotype individual nurses, recognizing generational differences can improve nursing work environments and nurse retention.

The millennial generation, sometimes referred to as generation Y, is the second largest generational cohort in the general population today. Born between 1981 and 2000, young people in this cohort were typically raised by parents who nurtured them and structured their lives. Members of this generation, raised with almost endless choices, were encouraged to express their opinions. Subsequently, they learned to view themselves as equal partners with their parents and teachers. Members of this technologically savvy generation have no memory of a world before the high-speed Internet.

They’ve also been taught to question each situation to find meaning in every task. A common complaint from seasoned nurses is, “These new nurses question every aspect of their assignment and patients’ care plans instead of just doing their work.” Seasoned nurses must remember that millennial generation nurses grew up with this questioning attitude.

Members of the millennial generation also exhibit a high degree of altruism. This interest in giving back to society accounts for a remarkable level of volunteerism.

In short, the millennial generation is tech savvy; optimistic, friendly, and cooperative. They’re team players who gravitate to group activities and have a need for frequent and immediate feedback.

Generational profiles such as this illustrate how collective life experiences define and shape values and attitudes. When seasoned nurses and employers recognize generational preferences and tap into them, retention will improve.

Welcome to the real world
Experienced nurses are all too familiar with the phrase, “nurses eat their young.” Sadly, in many nursing facilities this statement continues to ring true. In fact, a quick Internet search reveals the poignant voices of young nurses blogging about how to weather and survive their initial difficult months as nurses.

In clinical rotations, nursing students become accustomed to managing two patients. Imagine how overwhelmed they feel on their first job, when they’re expected to care for four times as many patients, multitask, and triage priorities successfully. Maybe you remember going through this transition yourself. Many of these skills aren’t taught in school and need to be learned immediately by novices.

What’s the “it” principle?
The principle of “it” can be used to reach millennial generation nurses to improve their workplace experiences and enhance retention. “It”—an attitude or perspective that’s both simple and profound—isn’t easily defined. No blueprint, nursing principle, or procedure can be followed to find “it,” which isn’t a system or a model. “It,” a key ingredient to building high-quality workplaces, is a power that can be harnessed and used to maximize the talents of all nurses. If a workplace has it, staff are engaged and satisfied with workplace quality.

On the other hand, just one person’s negative attitude can easily kill the positive energy in a workplace. Mounting evidence shows toxic work environments contribute to conflict and stress among nurses and are unsafe and demoralizing places to work.

Fortunately, if nurses aren’t as satisfied as they could be, “it” can be cultivated. Every nurse has the power to build this factor at work.

Here are some simple steps you can take to apply the “it” principle to the characteristics of the millennial generation and improve workplace relationships.

First step: Unleash the power of mentors
Generational profiling identifies millennial generation members as seeking a consistent, supportive work environment for learning while they transition from novice to self-sufficient nurse. Literature shows millennial nurses expect more coaching and mentoring than any other generation. Health organizations can provide extensive orientations, internships, and formalized preceptorships. Seasoned nurses can bring a positive attitude and perspective to work each day, modeling professional behaviors while they help millennial generation nurses develop clinical skills.

The simple but profound act of being available to novices makes a huge difference. Availability begins with the conscious decision to care about novices in the workplace. You have the power to ignite the spark of caring in those around you. Explain the why behind your actions while providing emotional support to novice nurses.
Mentors are trusted guides who combine career and social relationships to promote the capabilities of others.\(^7\) Nurses in the millennial generation thrive in structured, secure, nurturing environments. They enjoy teamwork and appreciate frequent feedback.\(^3\) At its best, mentoring is a tool that can make millennial generation novices feel both cared for and capable.

**Second step: The fun begins**

The literature suggests the social climate of a workplace can be a predictor of nurses’ intent to stay or leave because social climate helps determine whether work is frustrating or exciting.\(^1,8\) Obviously, job frustration is a strong predictor of a nurse’s intent to leave a job.

Based on the generational profile, we know that millennial generation members need to feel connected, enjoy teamwork, and have a strong social conscience.\(^3\) Nursing units become unstable when key staff members leave because departures cause coworkers to reevaluate their own options.\(^6\) But nursing units that operate well as a team, encourage friendships, socialize together, and serve together are more likely to retain their staff.

We all need to form supportive relationships at work; in fact, social interaction is a requirement for job interaction. Fun, play, and recognition at work must become a culture, not a program. All nurses, seasoned or novice, are responsible for sharing sincere, meaningful activities with coworkers whether these are formal, informal, timely, or spontaneous.\(^1\)

Theme days (such as Hawaiian day), casual Fridays, unit-sponsored potlucks, or chili cook-offs are examples of easily initiated unit events that increase fun and encourage friendship. Heartfelt messages of gratitude and appreciation among staff members could be encouraged through thank-you note packages. An artfully wrapped package (that’s never opened) with a note of thanks can be passed around a nursing unit. When the current owner of the package notices another nurse doing something great, he or she can recognize that effort by “passing the package.”

Social interaction outside of work that encourages nurses to share their passions with others also promotes the “it” factor. Urban hikes, movie nights, golf tournaments, book clubs, or cooking classes are all events that foster camaraderie and promote coworker relations.

Finally, social climate initiatives should involve developing a collective social conscience and service to others. Service possibilities, which are endless, all build into the “it” factor. Nursing units should tap into their millennial generation nurses’ altruistic spirit and encourage them to take a leadership role in these programs, which could involve collecting goods or raising funds for charitable organizations. In this way, novice nurses are the ones building the “it” factor in the unit.

**Gifts of the millennial generation**

Millennial generation nurses themselves have much to offer. They are the first generation of nurses educated with research-based, best-practice methods and outcome data. Millennial generation nurses are looking to be seen as equal partners and to have a voice in nursing process. Who better to share and institute best-practice policies than those who just learned about them?

Millennial generation nurses should also be valued for their understanding of technology. They can be instrumental in helping organizations implement workplace technology initiatives, and they can be technology mentors to more seasoned nurses.\(^3,7\)

Seasoned nurses bring the priceless gift of experience to the workplace; novices bring the gifts of enthusiasm and cutting-edge learning. Introduce the simple strategies discussed here to your unit and watch millennial generation morale grow and retention rates increase.\(^1\)

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**REFERENCES**


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