

Make way for the Millennials

Generation Y, also known as the Millennials, is leaving college to join the workforce – but is the chemical industry ready?



Andy Brice London

Millennials are typically defined as the generation born between the early 1980s and the late 1990s. They are characterized as dynamic, open-minded and tech-savvy and have very specific expectations of both their future careers and employers.

While some of these attributes may be atypical to the chemical sector, companies that act quickly to adopt a new approach to recruiting may find it pays dividends.

A white paper written by three recent graduates of NACD's Emerging Leaders program looked at the emergence of this generation and the pool of young talent now at the industry's disposal. It found that although a new mindset was necessary, there were overwhelming business benefits for making changes to attract these young workers.

"The Millennials are going to have a lot of choices available to them and if our industry doesn't do things differently and change the way we're hiring people, we're really going to miss out on that talent," says Melody Moore, co-author of report

and director of regulatory compliance at LeSaint Logistics, LLC.

The most pressing reason to target this key demographic is the imminent retirement of the post-war Baby Boomers – only recently surpassed by the Millennials as the largest living generation, she adds.

Consultancy Deloitte notes that 23% of those currently working in the chemical industry are due to retire within the next decade, taking with them a wealth of expertise and knowledge. This impending deficit of labor highlights just how important it is to focus on replacing them with fresh talent.

"The generation known as the 'Traditionals' [born from 1930-1945] has now pretty much left the workplace and the Baby Boomers are about to exit completely too," says Moore. "The next group born in the 1960s and 1970s, Generation X, just isn't big enough to replace the number of people leaving and that's why this is such a big issue. The Millennials are going to have to pick up the slack."

Deloitte's research shows that this demographic is attracted to large-scale, well estab-

lished global businesses and finds them twice as appealing as smaller organizations. However, the chemical sector is deemed one of the least desirable industries among this age group.

While this in itself makes it difficult for chemical companies to tap into this valuable tool of talent, Millennials also have an altogether different mindset and expectations – and these values will need to be accommodated moving forward too.

The challenge facing the sector is therefore twofold: companies need to help change the perception about the industry to attract these young people, and they must also show more flexibility to meet Millennials' ambitions.

Efforts are clearly being raised to remove the negative stigma attached to an industry that touches every part of our everyday lives, and companies are indeed focusing more on public outreach to dispel the myths surrounding chemicals and science.

MISAPPREHENSION OF THE INDUSTRY

"The perception of our industry is not even close to reality," notes Michael Ford, account executive at Americhem Sales Corporation. "We're phenomenal stewards of the environment and the managing of the chemicals but it's basically not widely understood and some people still see us as the bad guys."

"NACD and its membership were instrumental in helping to put laws and regulations regarding public and employee safety along with the environment as top priority. This also helped to weed out the companies that did not adhere to existing environmental and safety regulations.

"We've already seen a paradigm shift in other areas like the software industry, for example. At times, people often spoke of individuals in the computer science industry in derogatory terms, but then it became very desirable to become a part of this robust and lucrative profession. It's really important to change these attitudes for the chemical industry too."

Deloitte says an overwhelming majority of graduates with qualifications in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) are not making use of all of their skills and are actually working in completely unrelated fields. Only 26% are working in STEM occupations.

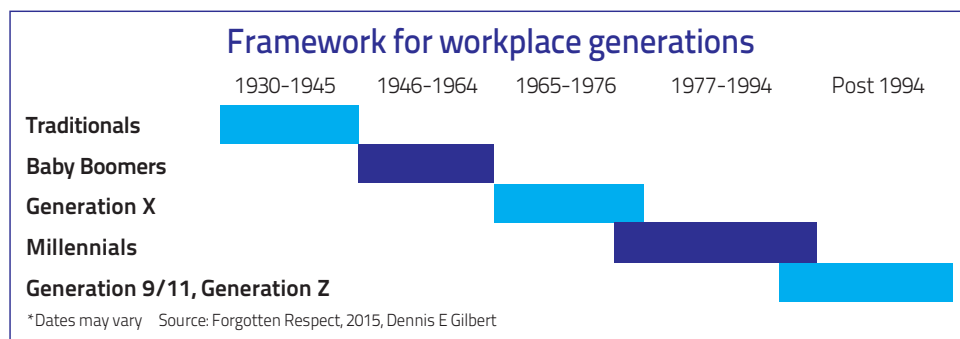
Initiatives such as



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Director, regulatory compliance, LeSaint Logistics



the Chemical Educational Foundation's *You Be the Chemist®* program are, however, making headway and encouraging students to consider a career in chemistry.

Apprenticeships also offer an effective way of attracting and retaining young talent, with trainees often staying on to fill positions within the participating companies. This helps to avoid the sudden learning curve that new employees face when they start working, effectively providing a six-month advantage over hiring new or inexperienced staff.

In June 2017, the Trump administration signed an executive order to increase the number of US apprenticeships beyond the current 500,000, by doubling the amount the government spends on these programs.

According to research by Accenture Strategy, formal training is a priority for Millennials – some 84% of those questioned expect professional education when starting a new assignment. They acknowledge their degrees provide the academic foundation to succeed but they also desire practical on-the-job training. They want a clear career development plan, which is something potential employers should be ready to discuss even during the interview process.

FLEXIBILITY REQUIRED

Although financial remuneration also drives Millennials' decision making when it comes to job hunting, an attractive work/life balance is another important factor. For that reason, companies should be willing to offer some degree of flexible working to their new recruits.

While this may be difficult to accommodate in the chemical sector given the need for high performance and productivity levels, forward-thinking businesses need to adapt. They could, for example, offer an alternative to the traditional Monday to Friday working week – maybe staggering days off, allowing different start and end days, or letting employees set their own schedules – provided they perform well and achieve their targets, says Moore.

"Millennials need freedom and want to have more of a relaxed, flexible working environment; they want their work hours to fit within their schedule. It's a whole new way of thinking and our

industry has to react quickly," she notes.

"I've seen many changes over the last few years but companies are going to have to get even more aggressive. The chemical sector may have some problems with this but it's about having a different attitude and a new approach to these rigid working practices," she adds.

Ford agrees. "I believe the chemical industry is ready for change. There are very professional organizations and I think management is starting to understand this. Flexibility with work schedules could create some challenges but these can be worked out.

"Of course, there will have to be adaptations on both sides. Millennials are smart individuals and when they come into the businesses and see how they're actually run, they'll realize that some things are possible and some are not. But they will also bring with them some great new ideas and ways of working, so I think there will be a lot of good synergies."

Studies have shown that these young professionals also favor the so-called "Google" working en-



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vironment with its more laid-back business setting. While this might not be the conventional approach for most distributors, the introduction of coffee bars, open kitchens, meditation areas, or even gaming areas with pool tables, ping pong, and retro arcade machines certainly appeals.

Once you have the talent engaged, it tends to stay engaged long-term – if not with a single company, then at least within the industry, notes Moore. "Millennials are likely to job hop, it's in their

nature – but making these changes and doing everything you can to offer them a more flexible and relaxed working environment might entice them to stay," she says.

Modern employers need to ensure they are properly aligned with their human resources teams and include them in both the hiring and post-hiring process. A strong onboarding program is essential to Millennials and continuous interaction is vital for higher retention rates.

This means strong training programs, as well as a buddy system and checklists. Millennials expect more frequent appraisals and interaction, perhaps at 30, 60 and 90-day intervals rather than just the typical 90-day and annual review.

"They want to be measured, to have metrics that allow them to either succeed or fail. They need to feel empowered," she adds. "What was very clear from our research was that they want there to be set goals. They want to have training and a career path; they don't just want to work for a company – they want the company to give something back."

UPDATE TRAINING MATERIALS

Companies also need to ensure they update their antiquated training platforms and that they embrace the digital era, using the technology that Millennials frequently use.

Social media, for example, is now essential when hiring and employers will have more success if they migrate to talent acquisition technology for their hiring platform. According to recruitment specialist Glassdoor, 86% of working people who are in their first decade of employment will use social media to look for jobs and research employers. However, companies can no longer simply use old favorites like Facebook and Twitter, says Ford.

"Social media is very important as long as you use the relevant social media platform of the time," he notes. "Many young people do not use Facebook anymore, so if you tried to recruit them through that you wouldn't have much success. If you used Snapchat or Instagram, however, then you'd have their attention."

The industry is full of job vacancies – from chemists and tank truck drivers to sales representatives and accountants – and there is a real danger that they will remain unfilled if something is not done quickly. This research shows chemical companies are starting to understand the need for change but they must embrace it – and quickly – or they risk being left behind. ■

The white paper, "Recruiting and Retaining Talent – Millennials in the Chemical Industry", was written by Melody Moore, LeSaint Logistics, LLC; Michael Ford, Americhem Sales Corporation; and Kyle Lee, A.G. Layne, Inc. – all graduates of NACD's Emerging Leaders program.