Understanding, Working With & Retaining
YOUNG PROFESSIONALS
By Wyatt Bradbury

Millennial and Generation Z employees combined (the young group of emerging professionals) made up 40% of the total labor force in 2016. Millennials constitute 35% of the labor force and are the single largest generation employed (Fry, 2018).

Wyatt Bradbury

Wyatt Bradbury, ASP, is a commercial account manager for Grainger. He is pursuing a Master's of Engineering with a concentration in Advanced Safety Engineering and Management from University of Alabama at Birmingham, as well as a B.S. from Columbia Southern University. Bradbury serves as President of ASSP's National Capital Chapter and serves on the planning committee for the Mid-Atlantic Construction Safety Conference. He is a member of the Society's Emerging Professionals in OSH Common Interest Group.

Pew Research Center (2019) defines Millennials as those born between 1980 and 1996, coming of age prior to 2018 and the first generation to do so in the new millennium. Generation Z is the group of young professionals who follow. Besides the obvious fact that faces are getting younger, it has become clear that the U.S. workplace is drastically changing as a result.

To many, young professionals (both generations combined) are a confusing group of folks. Labels, stereotypes and generalizations were all in place when I started my first professional safety job. Since my first day, I have worked to debunk the stereotypes placed on me and demonstrate that I am a valuable asset to the profession. In some ways, the disruption and confusion about younger professionals is more prevalent in safety than in other industries. However, pointing fingers at or discrediting professionals solely because of their generation does little to advance the safety profession or develop a lasting legacy that each generation can be proud to have contributed to.

The concept of passing the torch from one generation of OSH professionals to the next cannot be imagined as a relay race in which we run a designated portion, hand off the baton, and let the next person run with the legacy and glory of all hanging in the balance. Our profession is a marathon in which the destination, in many ways, is the journey. Mentoring is similar to training for a marathon except that it goes both ways, as the generations encourage each other to overcome their deficiencies and successfully complete the marathon together.

Each professional, no matter the generation, has a unique set of experiences, failures and successes that have shaped them into who they are. The Millennial and Z generations, like every other, are a product of the societal system. Not every aspect discussed here applies to each individual, but all can be seen somewhere in our workforce and in our profession. Following are four areas that safety professionals can consider to help them understand, work with and mentor young professionals in the workplace. Those who have gone before these younger generations can teach the soft skills they would not otherwise learn without the guiding hands of mentorship.

1) Navigating Opportunities

Millennials and Generation Z are the only two generations working in the safety industry that were born after OSHA was established. Organizations such as ASSP can connect these generations to training, educational development and, most importantly, other professionals. Career paths allow entry in the profession as coordinators, analysts and technicians and advancement into titles such as vice president, senior consultant and director. Young professionals are met with resources, opportunities and advice about how to navigate them all. Each day affords a chance to expand views beyond the books and learn something new. Instead of blazing trails and building bridges for the first time, young professionals are able to wander, question and develop. Instead of knocking hard against the same doors for small wins, they must prioritize which door to knock on first.

In many ways, young professionals may not know what direction to go in their safety career until they start walking. This contrasts with the number of earlier professionals who first became established in their company or industry, then switched into a safety-focused role as an opportunity arose. A plethora of internships are available help, but there are many more young professionals who know they love safety but are not sure how, where or in what context they want to apply it daily. To guide them, they need veteran professionals to candidly talk about their career paths and experiences. It is important to have open conversations about what it means to change roles within a company or between companies. Without the valuable insight gained from learning from those who blazed the trails, decisions about professional development and career paths will all be based on conjecture. Additionally, declining to support opportunities for growth, development and networking in our young professionals may exacerbate some of the negative stereotypes that exist.

Instead, help young professionals understand how to take advantage of the most relevant opportunities and what is required for additional doors to open, or explain why they might never open.

2) Education

Instead of choosing safety as a career, then seeking education, safety professionals have the opportunity to choose safety through education. All levels of safety degree programs are available and seeing increased enrollment. For many safety positions, an associate's, bachelor's or master's degree is expected. BCSP certification is also one of the first professional goals that safety professionals work to achieve. Young professionals read journals and use any number of resources to find answers to questions. They often have a great deal of knowledge that is miles wide but only inches deep. When it is time to put all that knowledge into practice, they may falter, through no fault of the educational system. At other

times, education becomes a barrier dividing the haves and have nots.

It is important for young professionals to know that the education that many of them went into debt for is still valuable, but be given the time and space to learn and fail when practicing their craft. They must learn from the mistakes of others but still experience some of the hard knocks. Some young professionals also need to learn the soft skills of leadership, patience, empathy and active listening.

In the book *The Go-Giver* (Burg & Mann, 2015), the protagonist, Joe, is an ambitious individual who is working hard to achieve success for himself and record profits for his company. His approach and persona remind me of young professionals I know. Through the course of the book, Joe comes to realize that simply achieving success in and of itself is an inadequate goal that seems to take more from the world than it gives no matter how noble the spin of achieving success. Through a focus on serving others, increasing the value he brings, placing the needs and interests of others first and being an authentic individual, Joe succeeds at a level he never could have dreamed, all because he put others before himself.

The system through which I was educated rewarded achievement, performance and victory, not service, gratitude, authenticity or humility. It is not that I am incapable of the latter, but that I need help understanding what those concepts mean and how they apply in our increasingly dynamic and diverse working environments.

The education system as a whole necessitates a focus inward on our knowledge, achievements, awards and skills. It prioritizes individual achievement and success. Young professionals get jobs based on the degrees, internships, leadership positions and awards won. They need other generations to help them learn to focus on outward success, in some cases, for the first time. This does not mean young professionals are selfish and entitled individuals. On the contrary, it means that the goal instilled in them has been to work hard and achieve demonstrable success for employers, teams and themselves. Now, instead of achievement, they must learn to focus on serving others and ensuring the success of others, much like Joe experienced in *The Go-Giver*.

If the young professionals in your workplace do not take an approach or possess a skill you need from them, use their strong ability to grow and learn to develop and achieve that skill. In the way that I entered the workforce lacking soft skills, I know my ability to self-reflect, respond to direct coaching and learn from mistakes is unmatched because the education system has programmed me to overcome weakness and fault in the pursuit of achievement. Do not simply write off young professionals because they do not have a skill on their first day. Chances are, like many other issues we find in our profession, it is a systemic failure, not an individual failure, that simply replacing an operator will not solve. However, taking the time to decipher and align goals as well as determine the skills that might be weak or lacking within a company's young professionals provides both parties a road map for reprogramming goals and objectives.

3) Technology & Automation

Let's face it, the lives of young professionals have been one evolution of technology. Every time I visit home I see a picture of myself at age one banging on the keyboard of my dad's first computer. This computer arrived near the midpoint of my father's life. Can metrics be tracked effectively using basic Excel functions? Absolutely. Does PowerPoint still effectively provide a visual during trainings? Probably more than any other application. Has all of this technology changed the way we communicate? Without a doubt. Progression of technology is a reality that young professionals have learned to embrace.

Sometimes a phone call should precede an e-mail to certain individuals. Some folks might need an in-person visit to follow up and ensure that their questions and concerns are addressed. Maybe that safety management system or app that we think everyone should use requires insight from other stakeholders. While it might seem that younger generations rely on technology, it is because their lives have evolved with it to date. Help the younger professionals on your teams understand how to communicate effectively through multiple methods and use different styles to their advantage. Help them understand the greater impact that technology has on the company as a whole.

My first full-time safety job was in construction. This role was the first time I had interacted with older-generation and blue-collar employees in a professional setting. I failed miserably at first. As a product of the digital age, I started communication with e-mail, only following up on the phone or in person if I really needed to. That is what I had been trained to do. I thought picking up the phone was a time-consuming exercise that gave me far more information than I actually needed.

I pushed hard for electronic safety management. Why shouldn't we automate our system so that less time is spent administrating and more time can be spent advocating? What I came to realize, however, is that a phone call helped me to be perceived as a person, not a position, and that people are far more likely to go the extra mile for other people than for a title or authority. Although safety management systems are efficient, people can be easily removed from the equation, desensitizing the system. Not all companies are able to absorb that.

Starting out in the business world is often the first time that most of our communication takes place with people outside of our own generation. It has been a struggle for me personally (as I am sure my employers to date would attest) to grasp some of these unfamiliar, albeit tried and true, techniques. I was missing a guiding hand as I navigated for the first time these approaches to interactions with established generations in business. If a relationship needs to be built in person or over the phone, expressly communicate that to the young professional who may have always depended on e-mail. If certain people should be approached with

Taking the time to decipher and align goals as well as determine the skills that might be weak or lacking within a company's young professionals provides both parties a road map for reprogramming goals and objectives.

a level of deference, help the young professionals understand what that looks like. Most of my professional communication issues have not been with my message or even my tone, but with the means that I am using to communicate it. For a technology-dependent generation, young professionals may need help understanding when to stop typing and start talking, and how much of the same goes for the systems we are trying to build.

4) Thinking, Communicating, Acting

For many young professionals, each doctor's visit growing up was an opportunity to practice speaking our minds to address needs and concerns with an authority figure. It was a chance to tell that professional with a respected title that we had a concern or issue. In return, we received the person's undivided attention, compassion, reassurance and advice.

I can remember my sixth-grade teacher, Mrs. Bristow, requiring us to use the GATE depth and complexity icons to look for patterns, unanswered questions, big ideas, trends, details and ethics in nearly every assignment (Hanson-Smith, 2016). These symbols were prompts for our writing assignments that challenged us to expand our views, and provide context and reason to our arguments. The icons helped the class develop the habit of thinking critically and challenging the world around us. From early elementary grades on, our teachers told us to ask challenging questions, think critically and do what it takes to find the truth. For some, challenging the system has been an expectation and trait that was sought after and cultivated. Innovation has been desired and celebrated, as has diversity in perspective, approach and thought.

When young professionals show up to the professional environment and begin asking questions or trying to change things, help them understand why things are the way they are. Instead of responding, "that is how we have always done it" or "we discussed this last year and a decision was made," provide the background and history that only experience can give. I could offer many examples of supervisors in various contexts stifling ideas and not providing a worker with opportunities to learn, grow or understand why an idea is not of interest or how to better present it for the next time. Remember, the education system trains students to engage with authority and to never simply accept "no" without rationale. The transition to the professional world will undoubtedly take adjustment; supervisors clearly explaining how expectations are different and providing even a limited amount of context could be a satisfactory middle ground.

If a professional presents an idea, give him/her an opportunity to develop a business case. Help that individual interact with other stakeholders to widen his/her understanding of the effects the change might have. Let the person practice giving a presentation to the C-suite even if in mock form. Let creative young professionals present seemingly off-the-wall ideas at a safety committee meeting so that feedback and diverse perspectives can be shared (Rodriguez, 2018). If an idea is off the wall, explain why it is. If the idea has already been tried, let the person review the full context as to why it was not implemented.

> By supporting the development of an idea, regardless of whether it is eventually implemented, many necessary business skills are strengthened along the way.

Rodriguez (2018) speaks of developing an innovation team within companies led by the youngest of professionals whose mission is to generate off-the-wall ideas. Through these teams, the seasoned members of the company help provide context, perspective and experience to the ideas shaping innovation in its most pure form. By also reducing the impediments to responsible action and allowing critically thinking stakeholders from all groups to have a seat at the table, ideas go through a primitive management of change process that allows for practicability and efficiency to be naturally assessed. Now, not only are ideas welcomed, but also young professionals are helping to build efficiency of process as they are mentored by and learn from some of the best minds in the company.

Young professionals have been trained to share ideas. Let them know that these ideas matter. By supporting the development of an idea, regardless of whether it is eventually implemented, many necessary business skills are strengthened along the way. Stifling the creative potential of professionals will have lasting effects on their energy and enthusiasm, similar to what a lack of frontline employee engagement in the safety process does to safety system implementation in the field.

Conclusion

Engaging young professionals in the workforce can be a challenge for both the employer and employee. However, the concepts discussed in this article should provide insight into some elements of the relationship. I hope that these ideas foster conversations that would otherwise not have occurred and provide perspective, clarity and depth that is desperately needed by the next wave of safety professionals. If nothing else, I hope some communication results to help build relationships across the generations, allowing us all as professionals to begin looking at issues from the diverse perspectives that abound in the OSH profession.

As we begin to pass the torch of leadership from one generation to another, remember that we are not simply passing the baton and walking off the track. We are training for and running a marathon in which younger and older generations have a goal of challenging each other to complete a race they can be proud of, and leaving nothing on the course except the example of intergenerational cooperation and communication for others to follow. **PSJ**

References

Burg, B. & Mann, J.D. (2015). *The go-giver.* New York, NY: Random-House.

Fry, R. (2018, April 11). Millennials are the largest generation in the U.S. labor force. Retrieved from www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/04/11/millennials-largest-generation-us-labor-force

Hanson-Smith, K. (2016, June 20) Introduction to the iconic prompts for depth and complexity. Retrieved from www.scusd.edu/sites/main/files/file-attachments/icons_for_dandc.pdf

Pew Research Center. (2019, Jan. 17). Millennials. Retrieved from www.pewresearch.org/topics/millennials

Rodriguez, J.A. Jr. (2018, Nov.). Building a world-class safety culture through the power of innovation. Presented at EHS Today Safety Leadership Conference in Louisville, KY.