

LAW WEEK

COLORADO

Millennials and the Practice of Law: A Changing Dynamic

BY MARGOT ALICKS, HEATHER BROXTERMAN AND KYLE MCFARLANE

BAM
family law

Headlines are filled with the impact millennials are having on the status quo. Said to be changing the way of the workplace, we are typically characterized as being less “pushy” than previous generations while holding stronger convictions.

Millennials are now set to define a new generation of business leadership, moving through our thirties and assuming senior positions.

The legal industry — known for its aversion to change and its tendency to cling to tradition (after all, lawyers were among the first to move from Word Perfect to Word!) — is not exempt from this leadership transformation. This should be unsurprising where millennials in the law now outnumber baby boomers and Gen Xers, accounting for 43 percent of attorneys. A recent survey by Cushman & Wakefield found that by 2025, over 50 percent of practicing attorneys in the U.S. will be millennials. Boomers and Xers are retiring, and with them is going the traditional, strictly

hierarchical law firm structure.

Law firm culture has historically been about the big office with spectacular (and intimidating) view, the crushing hours and “face time” required to make partner and seeking symbols that you have “arrived.” Boomer-led firms lived and died by the “billable hour,” imposing exorbitant expectations on junior attorneys to churn revenue.

But the old model is, in many firms, being flipped on its head. Smart, hard-working but forward-thinking millennials are changing firm culture.

So what do millennials look for in a legal workspace? Our wish list includes the following:

Ditch the “hierarchical” structure. “I’m the shareholder, you’re a lowly associate, take orders.” Old school firms live by that mantra. We bristle at it. All team members are equally important to firm success. A hierarchy is for direction and accountability, but it’s not part of the culture.

Partners issue instructions, but that role is no more important than that of associates and paralegals receiving and carrying out those instructions with expertise.

Collegiality, collaboration and inclusiveness. Everyone’s opinion matters. At BAM, we involve everyone in hiring decisions, from paralegals to partners. Associate and partner offices are often the same size, with

the same view. The office is a happy, fun environment for employees and clients. We have regularly scheduled “culture meetings” in a casual, relaxed environment, allowing HR issues to be discussed, complaints to be aired and success stories to be celebrated. Gone is the taboo of “walking into HR,” with the rest of the team watching, worrying and gossiping.

Competence beats tenure. “I have 30 years’ experience” is not a legal argument. Persuasion in court is about talent, knowledge and effort, not “years in.”

That’s one of the reasons that at BAM, all attorneys at any given stage bill at the same rate (e.g., law clerks at \$150; associates at \$215; shareholders at \$295).

Work-life balance. Millennials are comfortable with “remote work.” We use “flex scheduling” instead of rigidly expecting all-day face time from the team. If they need to be home for a cable appointment, we trust them to work from home for that time that day. We don’t have staff “sneaking out” at 5 p.m. because a shareholder is still working. We don’t have anyone leaving a “decoy jacket” on the back of the chair to make it seem they are there late at night.

Diversity and moral consciousness. We actively celebrate diversity on our team. We embrace sustainability. We love

doing well by doing good.

Making a difference. As a natural extension of our moral consciousness, millennials are deeply committed to aligning our work with our values to make a difference. Many millennials are committed to working pro bono and for organizations whose values align with theirs. This is not a political “left/right” issue — millennials on both sides of the aisle want to believe in what they do.

Technology. We grew up with and are comfortable with tech. From marketing to improving operational efficiency in all areas of our law practice, we embrace it. BAM attorneys type faster than long-time typists because we grew up doing it. This means we have no problem adapting as new, innovative technologies are released that allow us to maximize efficiency. We work hard but smart.

It is clear that millennials are reshaping the legal industry, and millennials in firm leadership across the country have already embraced many of these trends and policies. For better or worse, millennials, who are expected to surpass boomers next year as the United States’ largest living adult generation, are changing the legal workplace and indeed the very structure of law firms. •

— Margot Alicks, Heather Broxterman and Kyle McFarlane are co-founders at Broxterman Alicks McFarlane PC, a Denver family law firm.

“Millennials are now set to define a new generation of business leadership, moving through our thirties and assuming senior positions.”