

How to blend millennials with gen-Xers and boomers at work

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Emily Smillie is one busy millennial.

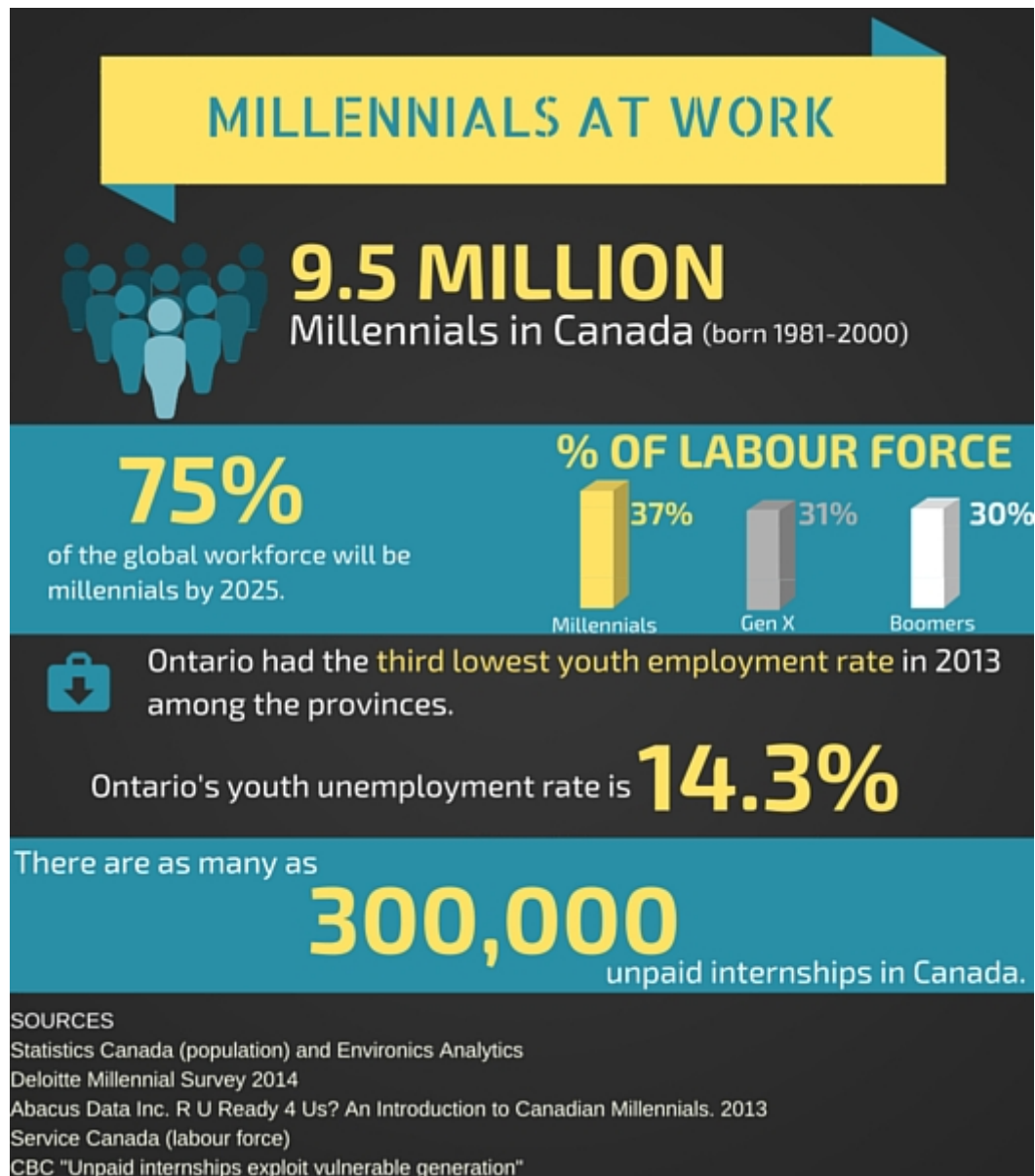
She's working full-time in Toronto on a one-year contract as a talent and traffic manager at an advertising agency, and travelling home to Goderich every weekend to spend time with her ill mother. This Saturday she made her documentary debut in My Millennial Life, in which she details her job-hunt, including unpaid internships, intermittent promo work (such as handing out commuter newspapers at Toronto's Union Station) and her frustration at having a post-graduate education and yet still being underemployed.

"At this point, I just think it's me," she says in the documentary. "There's something wrong with me." Twenty-four at the time, Smillie laments having to depend on her parents to make ends meet, and even to help her buy Christmas gifts. "My parents are throwing money to my cause. I feel bad about it."

There's no shortage of data available on the 9.5 million millennials in Canada, 37 per cent of whom are now working alongside baby boomers and gen-Xers: they're overeducated, underemployed, in debt, many of them live at home, extending adolescence and delaying adult milestones such as marriage, children, cars and real estate.

They're coddled, entitled, distracted and barely looking up from their smartphones and tablets. They don't answer emails, preferring texting, Snapchatting or Instagramming.

In *What Millennials Want from Work*, Jennifer J. Deal and Alex Levenson write that millennials look for meaning and work-life balance more than salary and fancy titles and prefer consensus building and



collaboration over management hierarchies.

But for every one generalization — no matter the behaviour patterns or attitudes the data reveals — is an individual who doesn't fit.

Are they outliers? Or is it just impossible to describe a swath of the population — one of the most diverse in terms of race and socio-economic status — without doing them at least a little disservice?

(View the [text alternative for the Millennials at Work infographic.](#))

In less than a decade, millennials will eclipse the older generations in the workplace but for now it's the multigenerational aspect of offices that's causing some friction. Technology has a lot to do with it.

Michelle Dagnino, a labour lawyer and consultant on youth and millennials, says that two points of conflict in today's multigenerational workplace are communications and decision-making styles. "If an older worker is expecting an answer to an email and doesn't

get it and it keeps happening this will lead to an overarching narrative that millennials don't know how to communicate.”

She says millennials tend to be more collaborative since they're used to being consulted on everything from what's for dinner to where they want to go for family vacation, and they can Google anything they need to know so don't feel they need to ask for direction. Dagnino says they re-cast hierarchies as flat. They want opportunities to lead but care more about contributing in a way they find meaningful.

This may cause them to overstep. Emily Smillie is no stranger to doing so. She's the kind of person who says what's on her mind. In a telephone interview she retells something that happened near the beginning of her time with the advertising agency while shadowing her boss presenting an ad to a client, she weighed in on what the client thought may have been a lighting issue. Smillie thought it was a bad makeup job causing the problem and voiced that it could maybe be corrected in post-production, not knowing they were way past that point in the process. “I didn't know my ass from my elbow in advertising then,” she says. Her boss let her know she was out of line. “It's the Internet,” she says. “I'm so used to talking directly to anyone on Twitter, I can say whatever I want, when I want.”

Lauren Morocco, a publicist at Harper Collins in Toronto, says her communication style has changed only because technology has advanced. The 30-year-old was born early enough into the cohort to remember a time before texting and social media. When she began doing PR the phone was her tool; now it's exclusively email. Growing up in Niagara Region, she knew she'd have to move to Toronto to acquire her dream job. Her parents couldn't afford to support her through unpaid internships so after studying sales and marketing in college, she found a fulltime marketing job and volunteered on everything from film festivals and special events to writing arts reviews, to beef up her resume. “I got hands-on training while I was already making money.”

In *My Millennial Life*, James Slifierz explains his choice to leave the University of Waterloo three years into a business degree to manage his own startup: “My parents said ‘Oh so are you going to get a job?’ and I said ‘You guys were expecting me to be in school. I'm still getting an education; I'm just getting it somewhere else.’”

Since millennials put more of a premium on balancing work with personal life, they sometimes get tagged as lazy or coddled. In fact, they are often working more than the usual 40 hours per week because they have to juggle multiple jobs to make a living wage. “This generation is about managing different economic opportunities,” says Slifierz at a Q & A after the film's debut screening in Toronto. “And whoever can do that will be successful.”

So what may be perceived as a lack of loyalty at work is just another circumstance these young people deal with in a post-economic downturn reality.

If millennials are disrupting

MILLENNIALS

What Canadians 31+ think of them

75 % say millennials are tech-savvy.

Here's how some other attributes rank:



* 1,005 Canadians 31+ were surveyed.

Source: Abacus Data Inc. R U Ready 4 Us? An Introduction to Canadian Millennials. 2012

tvo Never stop learning

communications styles and hierarchies, and striving for more work-life balance, what can companies do to accommodate the onslaught of this generation?

“I think one of the greatest challenges is recognizing what differences are actually generational and what are the actual shifts in the way the workforce has changed over time,” says Lisa Taylor, president of Toronto-based consulting firm Challenge Factory and an expert on changing workplace demographics.

She sees the age blend as an opportunity. “I think the idea that age either gives you an ability or limits your ability to be contributing will start to disappear as we see millennials take on incredibly significant roles.”

The coveted balance millennials crave is something that all generations are seeking. “It’s just that the millennial generation is the first to be working in an environment where that is actively possible and part of the landscape,” Taylor says.

For now, as they build their careers and “manage their opportunities” they’re squeezing in personal time when they can – even if that means they’re always checking their phones.

(View the [text alternative for what Canadians 31+ think of millennials infographic.](#))

While Smillie was at university, her mother lost their home to foreclosure. “It was devastating,” she says. “But I learned first-hand that I need to support myself. I think it’s doable.” Smillie says she’s struggling to have a life outside work. “I’m tired. I have emotional exhaustion. I work all week then work all weekend to help my mother. But I need to spend as much time with her while she’s still here.”