

Article

Clips, Texts and Tweets: Training Today's Millennials



By Robert W. Wendover

I spoke with a fifty-something manager recently and he asked me if I thought that video clips might be a better way to connect with his emerging workforce. My first thought was, “Well, Duh!” But then I got thinking about my 56-year-old self. So much has changed about training delivery in the past five years that it makes my head spin. As someone who began his career with overhead projectors and flip charts, there are days when I feel like I’m playing a constant game of catch-up. This article will address a few global questions. The next two will give you some practical ideas that I, and others, are using in the field. Finally, I’ve provided some thoughts on training individual Millennials.

First, digital technology is just a tool. In spite of what Apple, Google, Microsoft and the others will tell you, software is not, in any of its incarnations, a solution. The big focus these days is faster, better, cheaper. While it’s easy to define faster and cheaper, better is a different story. Software takes much of the thinking out of learning. For perfunctory tasks, that’s great. But for the development of problem solving and troubleshooting skills, it’s a nonstarter.

Talk to teachers and trainers and they’ll tell you about the menu-dependent souls in their classes who appear intimidated when asked to reason thru a challenge outside of the computer environment. The real solution? Develop case studies and situations they’ll face on the job and then ask them, perhaps force them, to find solutions. It might be tough at first, but with trial, error, and repetition come mastery. No one has ever grown without discomfort and no one is going to do so in the future.

Second, it’s all about the messaging. As some have heard me say from the platform, Millennials are the most diverse, wired, impatient, demanding, fun-loving workers in US history. This means that everyone is competing for their attention 24/7/365. Yes, the average person under thirty seems to be able to do five things at the same time. But that doesn’t mean that they’re doing them well. This generation has come of age immersed in non-stop hyperbole, with shocking and outrageous video clips, photos and lyrics thrown in periodically just to interrupt the mindset. This doesn’t mean we have to have naked people running thru the classroom, training room, shop or laboratory to capture their attention. But it does mean, we all have to put a lot more effort into the

stories, illustrations, titles, and exercises we use when competing for a share of mind. Whether it's one-on-one, in a classroom, in the field, or over the Web, successful instructors spend a lot more time these days on training delivery than they do on training content.

Third, get chunky. Millennials just don't have the temperament to sit thru a 45-minute presentation or even a video without having something else to do with their thumbs. I could digress into why this is so, but that's not the point of this exercise. Review the information you presently provide during training. How much of it is presented by a "talking head?" Why not take that information and break it down into three- to five-minute chunks and upload it to a page on your website. Then send employees a link to the page. Older individuals might watch it on a laptop or desktop, Millennials will probably watch it on their mobile device. Everyone will find it more engaging, trust me. Everyone will also be able to watch it as many times as necessary to master the content. After all, very few of us understand most content the first time.

Fourth, training is not about providing information. It's about getting people to think. When working with college faculty, I always tell them that the most powerful question they can ask a student is "What does it mean?" The same is true in a training environment. You ask the question and then wait for the answer. There may be an awkward pause. Maybe even a long one. But don't save their butts or let them off the hook. That awkwardness you're observing is learning taking place. Do this enough and two things will happen: 1) They will hone their reasoning skills; 2) They will grow in their confidence to work independently.

Fifth, training effectiveness all comes down to selecting the right learners. Some of you know that the first book I wrote was entitled, **Smart Hiring**. Over the past twenty five years, I have become more and more convinced that taking time to hire the best people is the solution to so many other woes. Is it tough finding good people these days, especially in areas like the sciences and skilled trades? Yes. But simply hiring any degreed or certificated person because you're short-handed and only two people applied is not a solution. Sure, you may hire the person, but make sure you know where their true deficits are on the way in the door. I have met more than my fair share of young college graduates who don't possess the common sense of a hardworking high-school dropout.

Over the next three posts, a dozen practical strategies for training the Millennial learner.

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