



# Managing millennials' personal use of technology at work

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## KEYWORDS

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Organizational control;  
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Technology use policy

**Abstract** Growing up with the internet and unparalleled access to technology, millennials (individuals born during 1981–1995, also known as Gen Y and Gen Me) extensively use various technologies for non-work-related reasons while at work. Both popular media and scholarly research have portrayed this issue negatively and have supported monitoring and restricting personal use of technology. However, if organizations are to attract and retain millennials—now the largest generation in the U.S. workforce—it is crucial to understand their characteristics and what drives them. Drawing on research on generational differences, organizational control, and cyberloafing, this article explains how unique characteristics of millennials lead them to engage in personal use of technology at work and how organizations might address this issue. Specifically, I contrast two one-sided approaches (deterrence and laissez-faire) that can lead to dysfunctional outcomes when used in excess and recommend more viable solutions. These solutions include establishing a workplace technology use policy based on shared understanding, fostering both relaxation and urgency mentalities, and training both millennials and their managers.

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## 1. Millennials: A different kind of worker

As various technologies permeate every aspect of our lives, a question about the appropriate use of technology at work is an important concern for managers and organizations. One of the most controversial issues is personal use of technology at

work, which is often referred to as *cyberloafing*, a voluntary act of employees using technology for non-work-related purposes during working hours (Lim, 2002). During the work day, employees routinely check social networking sites, read current news articles, engage in online banking and shopping, watch YouTube videos, and book weekend travel. In fact, employees arguably spend about 2 hours per 8 hour work day using technology for personal reasons, at a cost of \$85 billion annually to U.S. corporations due to reduced productivity (Zakrzewski, 2016).

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Who is the mostly likely group to engage in this technology use? Many sources—both popular and academic alike—point to millennial employees. One study found that millennials wasted more than twice as much time as baby boomers (individuals born during 1946–1964) at work (Conner, 2013). Millennials spent about 2 hours on non-work-related technology use while baby boomers did so 41 minutes. In line with this, a study conducted by Ericsson (2013) of nearly 2,000 millennial workers found that the majority of millennials reported they deal with personal matters during office hours; it is almost impossible to leave their personal lives behind, and they constantly check Facebook and exchange messages with friends and family on their devices throughout the day.

Given the pervasiveness of millennials' personal use of technology at work, it is not surprising that employers hesitate to hire members of this generation. For example, managers selected from a representative sample of U.S. industries reported that they prefer to hire senior applicants rather than millennials with the same level of experience (Corgnet, Hernán-González, & Mateo, 2015) because they believe millennials to be less reliable and less diligent. Whether this stigmatization of millennials is based in fact or not, it is undeniable that millennials now comprise the largest segment of the U.S. workforce. If organizations are to attract and retain millennial workers, it is crucial to understand their characteristics and provide a workplace in which they can thrive (Stewart, Oliver, Cravens, & Oishi, 2017).

The purpose of this article is to provide a better understanding of millennial workers and recommend ways for organizations to address their technology usage at work. Drawing on research on generational differences, organizational control, and cyberloafing, this article examines how unique characteristics of millennials lead them to use technology more frequently for personal purposes at work and how organizations might address this issue. After discussing two contrasting approaches that could result in dysfunctional outcomes, I suggest more viable solutions to tap the potential of millennials while curbing their technology misuse.

## 2. Why is it hard for millennials to leave personal lives behind at work?

As the first generation to be born into a wired world, millennials view the appropriate use of technology differently than older generations (Sheaffer, 2009). The internet has nurtured millennials' ability to communicate with others in a uninhibited way

without regard for geographical boundaries (Tappscott, 1998). Millennials spend more time communicating online and building online relationships with friends and strangers than do middle- and late-aged adults (Thayer & Ray, 2006). Texting is their regular mode of communication, and participating in online forums and bulletin boards is part of their daily routine. In addition, millennials have a greater tendency to use technology for entertainment, which includes watching sporting events, listening to music, and playing mobile games (Jones & Fox, 2009). Given their constant use of technology for communication and entertainment, it is not hard to imagine that millennials engage in these activities during a typical work day.

Beyond their close relationship with technology, what else might explain millennials' frequent personal use of technology at work? Without digging deeper, it would be easy merely to demand: "Stop it. You are paid to work, not to play. This is the workplace!" However, millennials' identity is tied to their use of technology (Pew Research Center, 2014). To create a workplace in which millennial workers can thrive, it is crucial to address the issue based on a deeper understanding of their unique characteristics.

Although some research has minimized the importance and potential existence of clear generational differences (Costanza & Finkelstein, 2015), evidence from decades of studies has shown that generational differences do exist, particularly in work values, attitudes, personalities, and career experiences (Lyons & Kuron, 2014).

### 2.1. Work values

Work values are defined as "evaluative standards relating to work or the work environment by which individuals discern what is 'right' or assess the importance of preferences" (Dose, 1997, p. 227). Generational research suggests that young generations believe that work is not central to their lives (Smola & Sutton, 2002; Twenge, Campbell, Hoffman, & Lance, 2010). Instead, millennials place a higher priority on leisure (i.e., they work to live rather than live to work) and work-life balance (Cennamo & Gardner, 2008). As such, they might be more likely to look for jobs with more vacation time and prefer flexible work arrangements such as telecommuting, flextime, and compressed work weeks. In addition, millennials generally hold a weaker work ethic than older generations. They are less likely to agree with the statement "I want to do my best in my job, even if this sometimes means working overtime," and are more likely to say that they would turn down a job because it

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