

The Conversation Your Millennial Colleagues Want to Have With You

We, three millennials, facilitated a session at ICMA's 2021 Annual Conference on how millennials are changing local government, expecting maybe 20 or so people to show if we got lucky. It was standing room only.

The local government professionals in the room were painfully aware of the great "silver tsunami" hitting the profession. As older generations of employees [retire at high rates](#), local governments are not adequately prepared to fill the gap in essential knowledge and experience they are leaving behind. To help fill the gap, we are increasingly having to turn to the millennial generation to fill vacant management roles, but there remains a need to increase focus and bolster efforts to prepare them for success.

Participants at the session spanned multiple generations and spent the hour commiserating on common issues and collecting new ideas to help foster and develop talent in their organization. Here are some of the topics discussed and examples of how some of our colleagues are creating solutions to this generational transition.

Getting Them in the Door: Recruiting Millennial Talent

A common theme of the conversation was the struggle to attract younger generations into the profession. Especially for smaller organizations, issues reaching these potential applicants seemed universal. Millennials have access to millions of job listings online affording them the ability to shop around for opportunities that fit their values and career goals. Several participants shared insight on what strategies they've seen or used to successfully attract millennial interest in their organization:

Lead recruitment with value propositions. Much like generations that have come before, what draws millennials to public service is their desire to make a positive impact on their community. A [Deloitte survey](#) found that in the past two years, 44 percent of



responding millennials made choices over the type of work they are prepared to do or organizations they would work for based on personal ethics. Southlake, Texas, heavily emphasizes the organization's values in recruitment materials and promotion and includes quotes from current employees on what sets the city apart from other employers. Consider leading recruitment with storytelling that highlights how their decisions as a local government professional today will have impacts on the community for years to come.

Promote diversity in your workforce. Local governments have long struggled with their workforce accurately reflecting the communities they serve. A recent [Glassdoor survey](#) revealed that 76 percent of employees and job seekers reported a diverse workforce as an important factor when evaluating companies and job offers. Tacoma, Washington, openly advertises its efforts to promote diversity among their workforce in their *Handbook for Recruitment and Hiring*, website, and job listings. They are using this generational transition to focus on increasing the diversity of their workforce. Be as transparent as possible with what actions your organization is taking to promote diversity and equity in the workplace and reiterate these actions throughout hiring materials and interview processes.

Invest in apprenticeship or fellowship opportunities. Understanding the role many industries and passions can play in local government is key to attracting and retaining a young workforce. Many students and young professionals need help finding the relationship between their interests and local government, and apprenticeships or fellowships can create that connection. Hillsboro, Oregon, starts early by holding an annual “youth invasion” event where over 300 high school students rotate through city departments like public works, IT, and risk management to inspire new career options. They continue to foster youth involvement by offering apprenticeship and internship



opportunities for high school through graduate students.

Offer flexibility and other “fringe” benefits. Millennials are prioritizing work-life balance and permanent full-time or hybrid telework positions and “fringe” benefits, such as paid volunteer time, paternal leave, and pet insurance, have cropped up as interesting incentives to draw young employees in. These approaches have grown more commonplace in local government since February 2020, heightening the availability of these options as top considerations for millennials when looking for new work. Covington, Georgia, utilizes four-day, ten-hour work weeks for its electric operations where a few crews work either Monday-Thursday or Tuesday-Friday. Continuing practices that initially began during the pandemic, office staff have the opportunity to work from home on certain days or hours.

Keeping Them in Their Seat: Retaining Star Talent

For the millennial generation, many are considered to be in the early to mid-career stage, either getting established in a new career or feeling relatively stable and seeking additional responsibility. At this stage, professional development is of the highest priority to retaining your best talent and several ideas were shared on how to approach it in your organization:

Offer new opportunities to learn and grow. One of the most important things younger generations are looking for in an employer is opportunities for them to develop their skills and grow. While investing in training or membership in professional associations is great, these offerings can often be limited by budget. Cross training or [staff sharing](#) has been an effective way to provide “vertical” growth for an employee while also bolstering organizational capacity. The [Management Talent Exchange Program \(MTEP\)](#) of Santa Clara and San Mateo County, California, allows participating jurisdictions to exchange



employees for three months to help build capacity and develop employees at a low cost.
⁵ These programs can be implemented internally by creating an exchange program between departments.

While younger participants in the roundtable asked for these new opportunities, they cautioned against pigeonholing younger staff as the “token millennial.” This is when the one younger person in the room is seen as the only one who can connect with the younger residents, troubleshoot with technology, or tweet.

Create a roadmap. Saint George, Utah, creates a roadmap for younger employees as another tool for retention. By looking at the future needs of the organization and pairing them with the professional goals of millennial staff, they create a vision of a long and rewarding future within the organization. As a manager you can start with having a conversation, either as part of the regular performance review process or in coordination with succession planning. Millennials want to know that when they put in the work and do the job well there will be a place for their advancement within the organization.

Treat mentorship as a critical need. Call it imposter syndrome or a generic lack of confidence, mentorship is often needed to encourage the younger generation to stick with local government or move on to the next step. Whether it is a formally structured program or something that happens organically, mentorship is critical for retaining talent. Several of the session’s participants were ICMA [local government management fellows \(LGMF\)](#), recent MPA or MPP graduates being fostered and developed by cities across the United States to become the profession’s next leaders.

As a requirement to host, LGMF’s are paired with a mentor whom they meet with on a regular basis. One LGMF at the session was recently hired full-time in their organization and said, “If it were not for the advice provided by the multiple mentors I had within the



city, I would not have felt the same level of confidence to apply for my most recent promotion." One manager mentioned using a group mentorship approach where he meets with five employees at a time to help minimize the strain on his schedule and provide opportunities for them to co-mentor with each other.

Conclusion

While it can seem daunting to add one more issue to the laundry list of tasks undoubtedly already on your desk, taking some time this next week or month to review your organization's approach to recruiting and retaining millennials is essential to the long-term health of your organization. Now more than ever, we must be willing to adapt our working environments, benefits, and management styles to attract quality talent in our organizations. Some of the strategies shared here have proven successful. Two of the authors of this article were attracted to their current organization through the ICMA Local Government Management Fellowship and they both accepted permanent positions to stay on with their host community immediately following their fellowship.

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