

Will millennials redefine success and change the way Americans work?

Robert Christian | Aug. 30, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

Editor's note: Michael Sean Winters is on vacation this week. Filling in for him is Robert Christian, editor of [Millennial](#) [1], a journal featuring the writing of millennial Catholics. He is a doctoral candidate in politics at The Catholic University of America and a graduate fellow at the Institute for Policy Research and Catholic Studies. Winters will be back next week.

Anne-Marie Slaughter launched a national discussion last year with her article "[Why Women Still Can't Have It All](#) [2]," which highlighted the barriers women face in successfully climbing to the heights of their professional fields while also trying to maintain a rich personal and family life. As the director of policy planning at the State Department, Slaughter came to feel she could not be both the worker and mother she wanted to be.

In the article, Slaughter questions the ethical framework that praises leaders for coming up short in their personal lives: for sacrificing their family life for professional success. She challenges those who glorify hours spent in the office above all else. The crux of her argument is that a more balanced life would be better for everyone, and we should make changes that reflect that reality.

If there is a new wave of feminism that is more focused on human flourishing than power or wealth, on having a joyful, balanced life rather than climbing the corporate ladder, millennials will almost certainly play a critical role. If the workplace is to be structured differently, millennials will be leading the charge.

Millennials are the "me, me, me" generation, the spoiled, entitled brats who want everything handed to them rather than earning it the old-fashioned way -- by pulling themselves up by their own bootstraps. That's the story, anyway: the silly, ridiculous narrative often put forward by members of a generation that put everything (even wars) on a credit card, that has allowed economic inequality to explode, that inherited an economy that allowed them to get quality jobs right out of college or even high school to provide for their families, and that in reality achieved nothing alone, since no person is an island.

Are there millennials who refuse to grow up? Of course, and helicopter parenting is no myth. But living at home after piling up tens of thousands of dollars in debt to cover college tuition is not sophomoric, but sensible. Placing one's autonomy above all else might make sense to baby boomers and gen-Xers, but millennials have witnessed the personal and moral bankruptcy that mentality can bring.

Millennials are challenging the status quo of the workplace. We want to find work that is fulfilling. We often prefer working as part of a team rather than as a grunt in a rigid hierarchical structure. We frequently see a Monday-through-Friday, 9-to-5 schedule as neither attractive nor logical. Millennials want time for our personal lives. We often work harder and more efficiently in a positive environment rather than one driven by intimidation. Many who sit behind a computer all day would rather wear shorts or jeans than a suit. We are baffled by older generations' refusal to utilize new technology to make work more efficient and productive. Finally, many of us seem to question whether the pursuit of wealth is really the key to achieving success.

If millennials have their way, what will this mean for the workplace and how we define success?

The church has long called for work that is fulfilling. This type of work allows each person to use their unique gifts to make a contribution to the common good. It is far more human than the depersonalizing form of work that views people as cogs in a machine. This does not mean millennials are entitled to land their "dream job" right away; instead, it means that a career doesn't need to begin with hazing and incessant tedium.

As noted, millennials often see the value in working as a team. The [Google model](#) [3] is showing the type of success that can be achieved by utilizing a group or team dynamic rather than relying on the traditional hierarchical structure. It can foster a workplace environment that is more likely to reward real accomplishments rather than the mere appearance of hard work. Mutual obligations can create greater incentives than trying to avoid getting yelled at by one's boss.

What about Mark Zuckerberg's hoodies at the office? Anyone who has had to wear a suit in the middle of summer in Washington, D.C., can confirm how senseless such a custom is. Business attire is supposed to show one's seriousness, but for many millennials, it seems ridiculous and antiquated. If one is trying to sell products to a client in person or make a pitch like a modern-day Don Draper, it may make sense. But if one is just working alongside coworkers at the office, one's seriousness might be better measured by substance rather than style, in which case comfort might be valued more than customs.

Millennials want flexibility in their jobs. Some want to be able to take a long lunch and work late. Others want to be able to work long hours earlier in the week and take off early on Friday. Millennials want to be able to work from home, at times at least, in jobs where that is feasible. Since many reject the model of only working hard and efficiently when a boss is looking over their shoulder, they do not value physical presence in the office as much as older workers. The mentality is that with laptops and smartphones, work can be done efficiently and effectively when it needs to get done rather than just in a 9 a.m.-5 p.m. window.

This desire for flexibility relates to personal time. For younger millennials, they may seek flexibility so they have time to meet with friends or attend weekly activities. Many define their identity more broadly than by their job title. The biggest change is coming now with millennial parents. Many grew up the way Slaughter described, with a parent often absent from their life for work. Many millennials do not wish to make the same choices. We want to be there at important moments in our kids' lives. And this is true not just of women in the workplace, but millennial men as well.

Millennials are already demanding real change in the American workplace. Not all the changes are necessarily positive; the blending of personal and professional time through more flexibility may end up being an invasion of the private life, giving people less time completely away from their jobs. Millennials may underestimate the importance of face-to-face communication and interaction. A variety of other problems could emerge if my generation has their way at the workplace.

But these negatives appear to be outweighed by some of the positives. Millennials' experience of marriage may become much closer to a real partnership. Men are starting to fulfill more of their familial and personal

responsibilities as certain social stigmas over traditional gender roles lose steam. Changes in the workplace could allow both men and women to achieve greater work/life balance and realize their full potential as persons. Economic challenges will still put pressure on families, but changes to the workplace have a tremendous potential to strengthen family life.

There is something toxic in the way our society has traditionally defined success. Slaughter points to the way it blocks the pursuit of happiness. Millennials are already searching for new ways to define success and get their priorities straight. Engaging in work that makes a real difference in the lives of others, being present and supportive as a parent, focusing on substance over style, and developing a real partnership with one's spouse are all pretty good barometers for success. Millennials offer the real possibility that personal values will challenge the dominant values of bourgeois culture. We might not be able to have it all, but it would make an incredible difference if we simply recognized that we are spiritual, emotional, intellectual and physical persons with dignity and worth who are capable of strengthening our communities, being loving members of a family, and making a contribution to the common good, playing our role in the breaking in of the Kingdom of God.

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[1] <http://millennialjournal.com/>

[2] <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2012/07/why-women-still-cant-have-it-all/309020/>

[3] <http://www.google.com/about/company/facts/culture/>