

# millennials



## ► Registering On the Millennial Radar Lessons From the Cisco Sales Associate Program



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There is a growing need, within the utilities industry, to attract young, talented engineers against a competitive private market. One of the most powerful tools a utility has is a rich supply of knowledge and experience. To be successful, however, utilities are going to have to gather resources and get creative.

In order to better understand exactly how to attract a new generation of engineers, it is important to become familiar with the generation as a whole. Millennial is a term applied to individuals born between 1982-2004. They are the children of a rapidly evolving technology age and are vital to the workforce in that most statistics predict 86 million millennials will be in the workplace by 2020 - representing a full 40% of the total working population.<sup>1</sup> It is no surprise, therefore, that a lot of research has been done on what this demographic seeks when it comes to career choice. In sifting through the mass of data, some very clear trends emerge. Millennials look for a shift in the traditional work environment. They hail

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from a generation that has become used to online activities versus on-site ones. Everything from renting movies to banking has become a virtual interaction instead of a face to face event.<sup>2</sup> And as such, they want a work environment that is less "office and hours of operation" centric and more focused on measure of output. Admittedly, this might not be a top draw that utilities are able to easily provide, but it is only one facet of the traditional that Millennials tend to shy away from. It seems that corporate structures and information silos are unattractive to the up-and-comer and here is where utilities can make a true difference. Mentorship is among the top factors Millennials find important when making their first career choice, taking precedence, in many cases, over financial reward. Millennials want to learn. They are

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eager to get feedback and move up the ranks while doing important work. According to a PwC survey conducted in 2011, Millennials found the opportunity to work with strong coaches and mentors of utmost value.<sup>3</sup> Here utilities have a rare opportunity to reach out, close the generational gap and bring young talent to their table. But how? Utilities can learn from the examples of the private sector, which has long been preparing for the future workforce. One outstanding example is Cisco's Sales Talent Programs.

Cisco Senior Director, Sales Talent Programs, Maureen Williams outlined the Cisco Sales Programs and how they successfully attract Millennial talent. The first leg of the journey for young people seeking to work with Cisco is the internship program. From there, a handful of students are chosen to come back after graduation and continue on in the Cisco Sales Associate Program (CSAP). The internship, offered to college seniors, begins a nine-week experience that, for some, turns into a three-year career track and, potentially, a lifelong professional relationship with Cisco. Operated from five worldwide hubs, for nine weeks the interns share the same living space and do account research all summer, working with local systems and sales engineers to understand what

being an engineer at Cisco really feels like. This takes the student out of the vacuum of a classroom, or cubicle, and shows them practical implementation of their knowledge. An integral part of this program is the mentorship aspect. The interns are given carefully chosen mentors far enough along in their field to have the experience to guide, but also generationally close to the interns in age. An atmosphere of learning, respect and communication allows interns to see what their careers can look like after graduation. And so, in a nine-week period, the internship has accomplished three major goals for millennials seeking to enter the workforce: a non-traditional environment, an investment in learning and a feeling of accomplishment by being part of a solution. Once the internship ends, Cisco will offer some participants the next most important factor for Millennials, a career track. The program assesses the interns and will offer top candidates positions, sending them back to school with an offer. Those who accept the offer will graduate and enter the CSAP.

Implemented in 2000, CSAP has put three thousand associates in career paths at Cisco, and two-thirds of them are still with the company. CSAP has a two-year trajectory. The first four months are Systems,

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Applications and Products (SAP) training. Then the associates shadow other engineers and sales teams, gradually building experience and confidence in applying what they have learned. The second year has the participants working on solutions, but not yet face to face with the customer alone. Again, mentoring plays a large role in this phase. Field engineers and field sales people provide constant feedback and guidance, creating a safe place where associates can work without fear of mistakes having irreparable repercussions. Mentorship, at every turn, is tailored to the experience. It is important to keep the mentee's perspective in mind. For the difficult first months of an internship, the mentor is an employee that has recently and successfully navigated the trials of the nine-week program and gone on successfully to the next career track. However, moving along the two-year journey, the mentor changes in experience, knowledge and seniority, again, to better guide and teach according to the need. By the third year, Associates are promoted to System Engineer 1. The impressive aspect to this program is not only the high rate of hires, but the even higher rate of retention. With 2/3 of the employees still at the company for a span of over a decade, it is clear that Cisco has hit their mark. But what can utilities do, without the potential resources required to implement such

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an intricate and far reaching program?

Ms. Williams had some innovative and attainable suggestions for utilities seeking to draw the attention of the Millennial workforce:

- Create a structured career path. Let the new engineer or recent graduate know that there is a willing investment on both parts, and, as long as the performance is up to par, a solid future laid in place.
- Communicate a willingness to facilitate a strong future by proactively mentoring the employee, ensuring support and guidance. As Ms. Williams stated, "Make the investment in them and they will stay with you."
- Have a clear mentorship structure that assigns every new engineer a mentor early in their career as well as one that is seasoned and more experienced. This will



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bridge the gap between generations, giving Millennials the familiarity they seek, while still imparting the knowledge they find invaluable.

- Think outside convention by trying things like panel discussions, at events, run by the new engineers, with topics that include how to draw more Millennials to the work force. *Listen to what they have to say.*
- Sponsor lunches, or charity events, aimed at new employees in your company or those looking to enter the utility workforce. Giving back to their communities is very important to Millennials. By showing Millennials that utilities possess a deep sense of community service as a core value, the utility sphere can speak to the younger generation entering the workforce in a powerful and relevant way.
- Promoting bonds between the young people working for your company will go a long way in keeping them as employees and inspiring their best work. In that vein, social media becomes a great tool to create

communities. Connection with others their age is important to Millennials and utilities can help coordinate this communication.

- Finally, implement a reverse mentorship system, where executives spend an hour or so on the phone with the Millennial population to be mentored by the Millennial with the goal of a better understanding of what it is like to be a Millennial, and what they perceive and seek in their work environment.

A simple Google search will yield a mountain of results for what Millennials want, but a consistent theme throughout those results is that Millennials want guidance, an investment in their future career track and a setting that allows them to feel purposefully part of a solution. Given the future utility landscape and the solid source of vast knowledge in the existing workforce, utilities are in a firm position to secure new engineering talent, and thereby the future of the industry. It just requires a re-strategizing of methods, perhaps putting mentorship front and center. ■

<sup>1</sup><https://www.forbes.com/sites/robashghar/2014/01/13/what-millennials-want-in-the-workplace-and-why-you-should-start-giving-it-to-them/#6ad0a7694c40>

<sup>2</sup><http://fortune.com/2015/03/26/3-things-millennials-want-in-a-career-hint-its-not-more-money/>

<sup>3</sup><http://www.pwc.com/gx/en/managing-tomorrows-people/future-of-work/assets/reshaping-the-workplace.pdf>

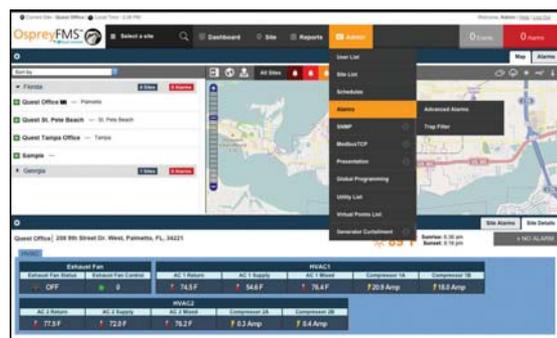
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