

A Force for Change: Millennials



29 March, 2018 by Craig Morgan, Head of Marketing, goBalto

Much has been written about the generational group, millennials, and their impact on the workplace, leadership style and corporate culture. And justifiably so, as millennials by 2025 will make up the majority of the workforce¹. With this in mind, companies are clamoring to understand how to recruit, motivate and retain these workers. Millennials have an affinity for technology and for challenging the status quo, but what is the current and expected impact of this demographic on clinical research? And equally as important, what should sponsors and Contract Research Organizations (CROs) be doing about it?

The cultural nuances and motivational drivers that make this demographic unique are the very elements that can make or break a clinical research study. Despite being cognizant not to fall into the trap of overgeneralizing millennials²,

it is critical to look at these differences and how they may impact stakeholders in the clinical research value chain, from sponsors/CROs and investigative sites to patients as their impact on society increases. Millennials represent increasing numbers within the patient pool and increasingly are becoming key players in trial planning, administration and investigation of studies.

Purpose-driven Generation

Millennials are often characterized as the “purpose-driven” generation^{3,4}. They often seek purpose in what they do, often questioning business purpose and execution. Millennials often have an interest in challenging the status quo of systems or even regulations they consider to be unnecessary or burdensome. A recent study explores the changing expectations of millennial clinicians and how they prefer a collaborative approach to nearly all aspects of their practice, with a hyper focus on patient centricity⁵. For clinical trials, this means millennial investigators are likely to be even more focused on what matters to patients, not just what is important to the sponsor organization. With patient-centricity at the forefront, the inherent complexity of clinical trials and the highly-regulated operating environment may be at odds with these expectations. Millennial clinicians can be expected to push for change in these rigid processes and systems that do not put the patient first.

More importantly perhaps, the purpose-driven approach of this generation may offer important clues for how to recruit and retain study subjects in the future. Rather than just appealing to the individual benefits of participating in a study, sponsors may also benefit from appealing to the larger societal benefit. A global LinkedIn survey of over 26,000 millennials found that employees who feel like their work creates positive impact are more likely to be fulfilled and stay on the job longer⁶. This notion may have an application for increasing study engagement. It may be as simple as finding ways to give study participants a forum to engage more closely with the study or other patients. By offering more information to the patient about the larger study results, sponsors can help them more fully grasp the impact of their participation. With that, data transparency may move from being a nice-to-have to a critical element in a successful retention strategy.

Less Individualism, More Focus on the Team

Ambitious and team-oriented, millennials prefer a tight-knit, cross-functional working approach that values social interaction⁷. Having grown up in an environment that promotes teamwork, most millennials like working in groups and prefer a sense of unity over division and collaboration over competition.

“We should expect this generation to tear down walls between sponsors, vendors and sites involved in clinical programs. Clinical research of the future will see research sites and investigators brought in before protocols are developed to create a highly collaborative team environment,” said Matthew Howes, CenterWatch⁸.

More interdependent organizational models are emerging as millennial clinicians prefer working in research teams, hospitals and with other cohorts. Open to change and multitasking, they thrive in a dynamic, fast-paced environment. If harnessed effectively, this has the potential to improve the quality of protocols and streamline study execution by facilitating communication between sponsors and research staff.



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Technology: Moving Beyond Enabling

Millennials are often skeptical of legacy entrenched systems that are inefficient, cumbersome and lacking transparent communication mechanisms. This has important implications for both research teams as well as patients. It's no secret that patient recruitment is one of the biggest challenges for clinical research, particularly as patient populations become more targeted, with nearly a third of the time dedicated to clinical trials being spent on patient recruitment and enrollment⁹. Other research cites 37 percent of trials failing to meet their enrollment targets, with more than 10 percent never enrolling a single patient¹⁰.

Social media platforms can help locate these hard to find target populations. Online patient communities such as PatientsLikeMe¹¹ as well as patient advocacy groups offer hubs that sponsors are increasingly utilizing for patient recruitment purposes¹². Other platforms, such as RateClinicalTrials.co.uk and Yelp, also post reviews of facilities that conduct clinical trials, allowing participants to be more informed about what to expect. As patients move to sharing information online with one another; however, new challenges in patient confidentiality and monitoring are coming into play¹³.

For clinical study teams, using technology to enable real-time collaboration across sites, sponsors and CROs will only increase in importance as the millennial workforce grows. No longer willing to muddle through business processes with outdated platforms that rely on email communications and Excel, we can expect these workers to drive the industry further towards cloud-based technologies that promote real-time data access and collaborative workflows.

Change Is Constant: Embracing the Future

"There is nothing permanent except change," said Heraclitus, an ancient Greek philosopher. Attracting and retaining millennial talent¹⁴, the change agents in clinical research, is going to be vital to achieving the goal of reducing timelines, transparency, communication and process optimization in clinical trials. Beyond patient engagement, sites, sponsors and CROs will increasingly find that embracing technologies that promote cross-organizational collaboration in real time is no longer optional but expected and necessary. Millennials will lead the vanguard of change by pushing study teams to find faster and more transparent ways of working with patients. Ultimately, being a mouse click or finger swipe away from investigators, study staff and patients will become the norm.

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About the Author

Craig Morgan is a technology and life sciences management professional with more than 15 years' experience in the application of informatics and bioinformatics to drug discovery. He currently heads up the marketing and brand development functions at goBalto, working with sponsors, CROs and sites to reduce cycle times and improve collaboration and oversight in clinical trials. Craig can be contacted at cmorgan@gobalto.com.

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