



Millennials at the Thinkery in Austin, Texas, tinker with Turtle Robots in the museum's *Innovators' Workshop*. Photo by Jo Lammert

Millennials: Are Science Centers and Museums Attracting and Retaining Them?

By Adrienne Barnett

Shift happens. Generationally speaking, it's happening in the U.S. workforce right now. According to a recent analysis, Millennials (born 1980–2000) have overtaken Generation Xers (born 1965–79) as the largest portion of the U.S. workforce (Fry, 2015). This was not the case in 2011, when I completed my museum studies master's degree thesis, *Catch Them if You Can: Building Career Pathways for Millennials in Science Centers/Museums* (astc.org/about/pdf/ABarnett.pdf). My research sought to determine best practices and policies for attracting, engaging, and retaining talented Millennials in the science center and museum field and to identify obstacles to the career advancement of young museum professionals (YMPs) of the Millennial generation in U.S. natural history museums and science centers.



Wayne Lessly, an exhibit technician at Science Museum Oklahoma (SMO), Oklahoma City, works on a model train for the *Tiny Tracks* exhibition. Lessly, a Millennial, has worked at SMO since 2016. Photo courtesy Science Museum Oklahoma

In April 2017, I resurveyed to see if and how the perspectives and experiences of YMPs and their managers have changed. One of the things strongly desired by YMPs in 2011 was more professional development—mentoring, specifically. So my 2017 research also examined whether mentoring is still in demand and whether YMPs have meaningful mentorship opportunities. Is the field shifting its practices to align with the changing workforce?

My 2011 research included a literature review, interviews, and two online surveys (one for directors and one for YMPs), which garnered responses from 92 directors from 65 institutions and 121 Millennials from at least 40 institutions. (Providing the institution name was optional in the YMP survey.) In 2017, I posted the same two surveys on eight ASTC Communities of Practice (CoPs) and emailed the surveys to directors at 404 U.S. science centers, natural history museums, and children's museums (the last group was new for 2017). I received responses from 65 directors from 47 institutions and 208 Millennials from at least 57 institutions.

The results were intriguing. As in 2011, responses came from a wide geographic range of centers with varying budgets and staff sizes. In 2017, 87% of directors responding to the survey self-identified as white and 13% as people of color (down slightly

(-1.5%) from 2011), while 79% of Millennial respondents self-identified as white and 21% as people of color (an 8% increase). In addition, the data showed a shift in the ages of directors corresponding with the workforce in general: fewer Traditionalists (born before 1945) and Baby Boomers (born 1945-64) and an increase in Generation Xers (+7%) and Millennials (+5%). There was also an 11% increase in the proportion of YMPs holding advanced degrees (master's and doctorate).

ATTRACTING, ENGAGING, AND RETAINING MILLENNIALS

The good news is that science centers and museums continue to attract Millennials by offering what they feel are “enjoyable work environments” and appealing “job descriptions.” YMPs also cited the “prestige of the organization” and the “ability to be creative” as appealing factors in choosing the field. When looking at the benefits desired by Millennials, one change stood out. While “comprehensive benefits packages (healthcare, dental, vision, etc.)” and “paid time off/paid vacation” still topped their list, there was a significant increase (+22%) in the percentage of Millennials desiring paid maternity/paternity leave (2011: 47%, 2017: 69%). Childcare/elder-care support, however, remained at the bottom of the list. As a parent myself paying hefty childcare expenses,

I assume this may indicate that many Millennials are thinking about, but not yet having, kids.

Regarding keeping Millennials engaged and enjoying their work, the top three factors cited were “the ability to be creative and use my skills in my position” (2011: 34%, 2017: 38%); “work that is worthwhile to society” (2011: 28%, 2017: 28%); and “enjoyable work environment” (2017: 22%, 2011: 35%).

To gain an understanding of how Millennials would like to be treated by management, and whether they feel their preferences are being met, I asked respondents about their workplace desires and experiences. Each question series was asked two ways: What do Millennials want? And do Millennials/directors believe that management is providing it?

Millennials consistently gave higher rankings to their desire for certain practices than their institutions’ success at meeting their needs in areas such as “management is receptive to exploring ideas and innovations presented by YMPs,” “managers work to include me in the decision-making process,” and “YMPs feel recognized and rewarded for their accomplishments at work.”

When asked the same series of questions, directors revealed an understanding of Millennials’ workplace preferences. However, a greater proportion of directors felt science museums are delivering these experiences and empowering YMPs in the workplace, revealing a disconnect between Millennials and management. (See Figure 1.)

FIGURE 1: WORKPLACE PREFERENCES OF MILLENNIALS IN 2017

Please indicate how strongly you agree with the statements below pertaining to your institution:
(1 = LEAST agree and 5 = MOST agree)

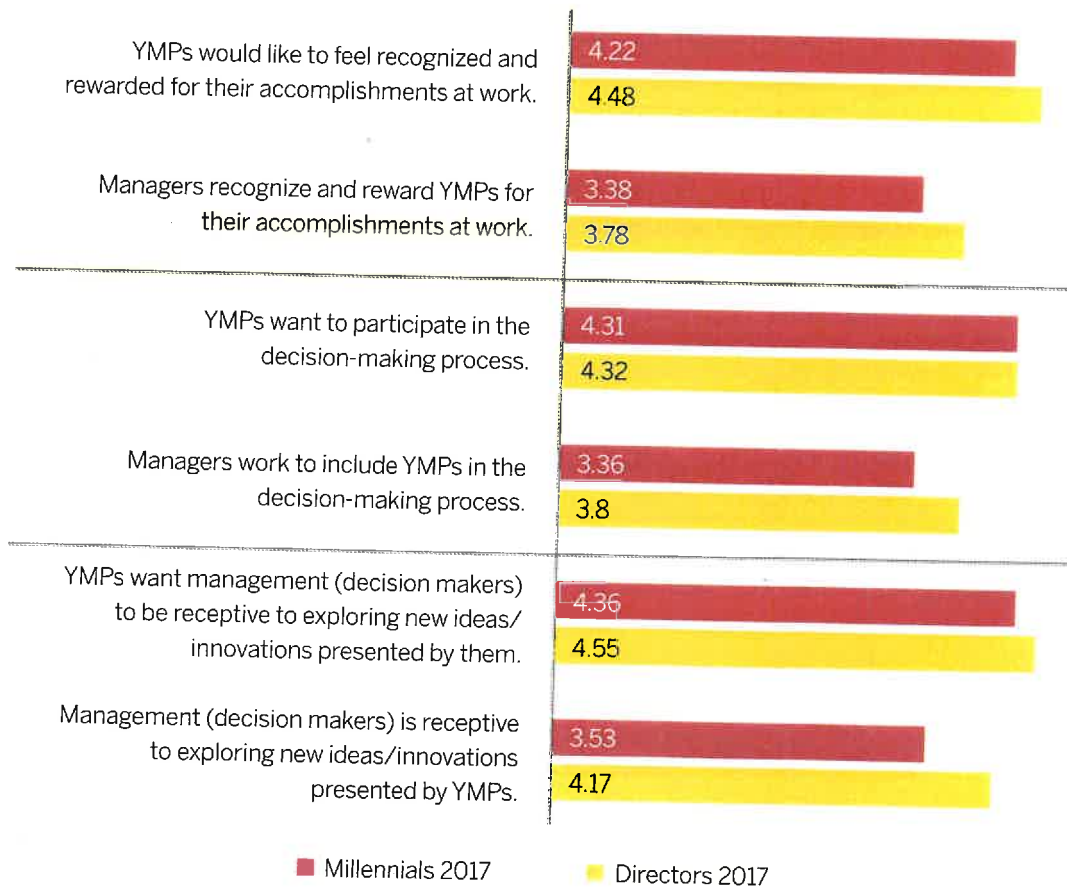
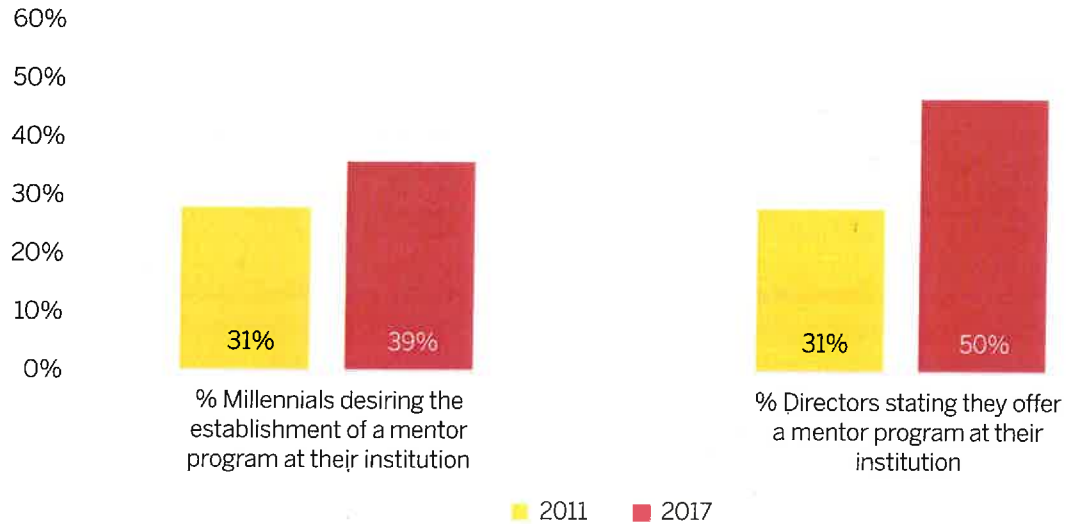


FIGURE 2: MENTORING DESIRES AND PROGRAMS OFFERED



Both surveys identified Millennials' desires for more professional development than is offered to them, with "having (a) mentor(s)" and "professional training programs" taking the top two spots in both years, though "having (a) mentor(s)" ranked first in 2011 and second in 2017. Although 19% more directors in 2017 indicated that they currently offer mentoring at their institution than in 2011, Millennials' desire for mentor programs to be established has grown from 31% in 2011 to 39% in 2017. (See Figure 2.)

OBSTACLES TO CAREER ADVANCEMENT AND OUTLOOK

When asked, "Do you feel there are inherent obstacles to YMPs' career advancement in the science museum profession at your institution?" most Millennials (74%) and directors (65%) responded yes, though the proportion of Millennials responding yes had increased by 6% since 2011 while directors' yes responses had decreased by 8%. (See Figure 3.) According to both groups, the main obstacles remain unchanged: "inadequate/limited open positions" and "a lack of clear advancement paths." When asked if they feel YMPs will need to take positions outside their current organizations in order to advance, once again, respondents overwhelmingly agreed, with 81% of Millennials and 87% of directors responding yes.

When asked, "If you are considering seeking employment outside the science museum field, which statements best describe why?" only 15% selected "not applicable—I'm not interested in leaving the science museum field," the same as in 2011. This indicates that 85% of Millennials surveyed are considering seeking employment outside the science museum field. Once again, when asked the top reasons for considering seeking employment outside the science museum field, respondents answered "financial concerns—low salaries or wages, lack of raises" (2011: 55%, 2017: 59%); "lack of opportunities to advance" (2011: 40%, 2017: 45%); and "insufficient professional growth/development opportunities" (2011: 20%, 2017: 24%). We haven't moved the needle on this one.

The surveys concluded with open-ended questions. The first question, "How would you define career advancement?" produced equivalent results in 2011 and 2017. Both Millennials and directors replied with phrases that included "increased compensation," "more responsibility," and "mastery or increased use of skills."

The second open-ended question, "What do you feel are the most important contributions of Millennials to science museums?" elicited responses like "innovation, new ideas, fresh perspectives"; "a

comfort with knowledge of new technologies and social media”; and “awareness about social issues.” This brings me back to the mentoring desired by YMPs. While Millennials want opportunities to learn from older, more experienced colleagues, they also enjoy reverse mentor programs, where they have the chance to share technology, social media, or other skills with older colleagues (Eisner, 2005).

WHAT DO THESE DATA SAY ABOUT THE FIELD?

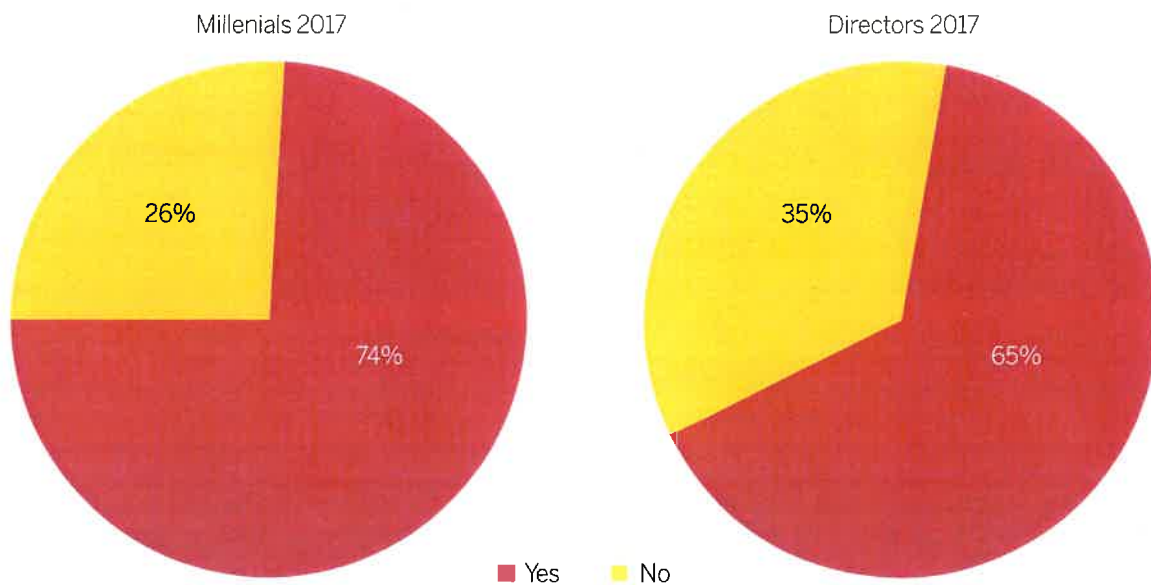
As in 2011, my research reveals that our field is at risk of losing talented YMPs to other sectors due to financial concerns, lack of advancement opportunities, and a desire for more professional development. The 2017 data provide some good news: more Millennials are working in science centers and museums, they are more racially and ethnically diverse than those who manage them, and they value advanced degrees. Yet Millennials crave career advancement and competitive compensation in a field that has yet to establish clear pathways for achieving these.

If Millennials, as well as directors, feel that Millennials must leave their current organizations to advance their careers, what does this mean for the science museum field? One possibility is that science museums may benefit from the “swap” of talented staff eager to stay in the field, who, in order to advance, accept opportunities with increased responsibilities and pay at other science museums. However, when asked in 2011, “Was your previous job at a science museum?” 50% said no, and this response went up to 58% in 2017. The swap may not be happening at a significant scale.

Will science museums lose their most talented emerging staff to other sectors? The surveys showed that in 2011, 56% of YMP respondents were at the traditional age for career transition (27-37 years old), while in 2017, the proportion increased to 75%. Ironically, just when their experience and knowledge potentially become the most useful to their organizations, many YMPs reach a stage in their lives when financial concerns, such as owning a home and starting a family, become increasingly important. Understandably, this is also when Millennials desire

FIGURE 3: OBSTACLES TO CAREER ADVANCEMENT

Do you feel there are inherent obstacles to your/YMP’s career advancement in the science museum profession at your institution?





Sciencenter greeters in Ithaca, New York, participate in a weekend interactive program for guests. Photo courtesy of the Sciencenter

promotions that include increased responsibilities and pay. Without these options, many will inevitably leave their organizations.

One 2017 Millennial described career advancement as “the ability to continue to learn in my current position, prove myself as an asset to the organization, and have the confidence to take my skills with me when I move on to another place.” The field has an opportunity to transform the perception and viability of science center and museum careers. By addressing low compensation and lack of career pathways and structures, and by providing meaningful professional development including mentoring opportunities, science centers and museums can cultivate and retain top talent in the coming decade. I hope that as Millennials build their skills, they

find themselves not navigating through an obstacle course of advancement, but smoothly progressing along personally fulfilling and financially viable careers—and staying in the field! ■

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FOR FURTHER READING

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Adrienne Barnett (abarnett@thinkeryaustin.org) is associate director of programs at the Thinkery in Austin, Texas.