



Win Big by Unleashing Millennials' Connective Intelligence

*This article is by Saj-Nicole Joni, chief executive of [Cambridge International Group](#) and an advisor to executives worldwide. *The Right Fight*, by Saj-Nicole Joni and Damon Beyer (HarperCollins, 2010), is available in book, e-book and audio formats.*



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A few weeks ago, Ron Wallace's pumpkin won the Super Bowl of Pumpkins weigh-off. It weighed in at slightly more than 2,000 pounds. In so doing, it broke a world record many thought could never happen. Ron Wallace had grown a single pumpkin that weighed over a ton. I was reminded of Sir Roger Bannister's 1954 breaking of the four-minute mile. He ran it while many were still arguing that the feat wasn't physically possible.

But what is most astonishing is how fast the winning pumpkin's size has grown. It took from the beginning of time to the year 2000 to grow a pumpkin that weighed slightly over 1,000 pounds. And then in a mere 12 years people doubled that, breaking a barrier thought to be impossible.

How did it happen? Ron says it relied on the power of connection fueled by the Internet. Since 2000, pumpkin competitors have been sharing information on what works and what doesn't. No one person has had all the knowledge, but Ron's ability to piece together collaboratively shared bits and pieces fueled his triumph.

That story says a lot about what happens when we unleash what I call connective intelligence, or CxQ. Connective intelligence is your ability to make breakthroughs by connecting ideas, people, information, and resources. You use CxQ whenever you sift through multiple sources of information to put pieces of a puzzling problem together in new ways. It's in your ability to build and realize value from networks of relationships, in your ability to convene communities, to marshal a various of resources to focus on a result, and to make diversity and differences productive. History is full of high CxQ people, including Bill Clinton, Ben Franklin, and Leonardo da Vinci. And just as with IQ and EQ (emotional intelligence), some people naturally have more CxQ than others.

Why do I care about Ron's pumpkin? Because what he displayed is the awesome power of connective intelligence that millennials can unleash in the workforce. In my conversations with chief executives and their top teams, I find that most are keenly aware of the need to bring this next generation into this workforce, and they know that the workforce dynamic is changing. The race is on to attract and retain the best and brightest of them. But how do you integrate current practices to allow millennials, inherently gifted with CxQ, into the workplace? This is the millennial challenge.

About a year ago, I met one of world's most exemplary millennials, Erica Dhawan, a researcher at Harvard who is globally recognized expert on unlocking the power of the multi-generational workforce. Realizing that it would take a cross-generational dialog to cut through all the noise and get to the essence of the millennial challenge, Erica and I have joined forces in a spirited debate and substantive research effort.

Our research so far has shown that most well-meaning older people look at millennials in the wrong way. Senior managers talk about engaging and retaining this workforce by providing pay, perks, and play opportunities in a company. Thinking that way is a gigantic mistake. Millennials have much more to contribute to what matters and what wins, to innovation, productivity, strategy, results, and sustainability. But who in upper management is taking them seriously?

Yes, everyone likes pay, perks, and play. But millennials are not fooled. They want more than a fun environment, free food, cool workouts, and tickets to events. Like every generation of young people, they are full of idealism and inspiration. They are not constrained by set beliefs about what is possible; they aren't yet worried about mortgages and families to provide for. They see the world they are inheriting facing urgent challenges and risks related to climate change, income disparity, health issues, and more. They want to make a difference, right their world, and create a vibrant future for themselves, for the rest of us, and for the planet.

And here is a stunning fact: This generation is uniquely equipped to lead to breakthrough innovation in a way that has never before been possible, because it is the first to have grown up in a world of ubiquitous connection. For millennials, engagement with all social media is not only about entertainment or news. It is embedded in daily life. Digital connection is the air they breathe. They do everything in it, from deeply sharing their lives with friends and family (who may live in different cities or countries), to shopping and paying bills, communicating at work, meeting people after work, finding places to get a decent burrito, competing at sports and games, accessing health care, learning new things, or taking care of children and aging parents, ad infinitum.

The missing link is this: In our new world of an embedded digital infrastructure that connects all of our lives, the power of connective intelligence holds exponential, and previously untapped, potential for breakthroughs in ways we can barely begin to imagine. Think about that 2,000-pound pumpkin. Think Wikipedia. Think crowd-sourcing. This is what millennials bring to the table, and it is fundamentally different, powerful, radical, and greatly needed.

To their credit, millennials are stubbornly unwilling to park their connected way of being and creating at the door when they come to work. They need and want to apply this unique and important capacity to help their companies and communities innovate. And though they are still junior in the pecking order, they need to be listened to and empowered to lead in this way, now.

It's up to the current generation of CEOs to make room for people with high CxQ. CEOs need to be committed curators who foster such people's work. Top managers need to enable the millennials to fully develop and use their ubiquitous, digitally connected CxQ in everything they do. And in turn, millennials need to teach us all how to develop our own digitally enabled CxQ in service of solving society's most pressing challenges.

This will require profound change. It means rethinking job definitions, work processes, and power and role structures and redrawing boundaries. Erica and I are already working with global companies in shifting from pay, perks, and play millennial programs to programs that embody this unleashing of CxQ. We'll be writing about these results in subsequent articles, and in our forthcoming book.

Empowering millennials in this way is worth it. It's what they want, it is what they deserve, and it's what we all need. So get ready to move over. Because it's up to us to make room for them to do this, now. emotional connection when leaders step up to the hard choices of this responsibility. A lot of people can do a lot of things, but owning the essence of why we matter—that is first and foremost is what it takes to lead.

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