Millennials at work are a topic of great discussion, from HR conferences to watercoolers. These new workers, it is said, expect extra feedback on the job, immediate promotion, and flexibility in the extreme. Older workers say, “Don’t they know they have to pay their dues, like the rest of us?” In their Atlantic article, “The New Generation Gap,” Neil Howe and William Strauss write, “The new generation gap ... is different. It features a smoldering mutual disdain between Americans now reaching midlife and those born just after them.” They made this statement in 1992, about Gen X and the Baby Boomers.

Not So Different
The Incentive Research Foundation (IRF) recently released the results of an extensive literature review on the subject, “Generations in the Workforce & Marketplace: Preferences in Rewards, Recognition & Incentives.”

Researcher Allan Schweyer found that over at least the last 100 years, every generation has entered the workforce and immediately exasperated older colleagues with their change-the-world sense of entitlement. This was true of the Lost Generation of the 20s, the Counterculture of the 60s, and Gen X Slackers of the 90s.

The needs and demands of the new arrivals are out of step with the other generations in the workplace and create a good deal of friction. Millennials are the latest – and because of the sheer size of their cohort, perhaps the noisiest – of countless new generations to grate on the nerves of their older coworkers.

What’s more, we are often told that Millennials are different because they are “digital natives” and live life via their iPhones. This is misleading, however, when you consider the Gen Xers who had a MacPlus in college and spent the 90s at an internet startup. A look at the passengers on any commuter train will tell you that it’s not just the Millennials who are absorbed in their devices. They are not defined by this; we all are. It's just a fact of modern life.

Prime Motivators in Common
The three main generations in the workforce – Millennials, Gen X, and Baby Boomers – actually want very similar things from their working lives. All generations are motivated by recognition, career opportunities, flexibility to suit complicated lives, and fair compensation and benefits.

Priorities shift with different life stages. As Millennials gain experience, as well as kids and a mortgage, their priorities and behaviors shift to become increasingly like those of their Gen X and Boomer colleagues. As Schweyer put it on a recent IRF webcast, a 25-year old with two children and a mortgage has more in common with a 40-year old with the same responsibilities than they do with a 25-year old who lives at home. As we get older, we gain experience, we add responsibilities, and our needs change. We might need help with elder care or financial planning instead.

Jennifer Deal of the Center for Creative Leadership co-presented the IRF findings. She suggested that in thinking about what is really different about a generation, we can ask ourselves: Will this be as true of them when they are 65 as it is when they are 25? If it is not, the difference can be attributed to life stage.
Managing the Conflict
So, if we are not really that different, why all the animosity about Millennials in the workplace? The answer is surprisingly simple: We have no patience for stages we’ve already been through.

Researchers Rachel Ruttan, Mary-Hunter McDonnell, and Loran Nordgren considered this issue for their Harvard Business Review article, “It’s Harder to Empathize with People if You’ve Been in Their Shoes.” They write, “In a series of recent experiments, we found that people who endured challenges in the past... were less likely to show compassion for someone facing the same struggle, compared with people with no experience in that particular situation.”

Simply put, we were all new to the workplace at one time or another. We all had hopes and expectations. And we have all been disabused of our illusions about workplace perfection. We just don’t have the patience for reliving that experience with the next batch of newcomers. We expect them to get over it.

Make It Easier for Everyone
When it comes to the impact of generations on employee engagement programs, Schweyer writes, “Organizations might conclude that generational differences don’t matter but differences in stage of life or lifestyle do. If so, the actions they might take are much the same. Indeed, commercially at least, providers of products and services ranging from cars to financial planning have long catered to customers at various stages in their lives—minivans for young families and retirement plans for aging workers, for example.” It is important that organizations consider the varied needs of the diverse workforce to understand what will motivate and retain the best people.

Gen X and Baby Boomers must be responsible for transferring knowledge, so that the Millennials (and before long Generation Z) can get up to speed and provide the kind of support and contribution needed to keep the business on track. Evolving a culture that promotes training and development will help. Why not include recognition for senior employees who do great work sharing knowledge and skills with teammates new to the workforce?

Organizations can provide the motivational tools and give frequent feedback to younger workers, as well as flexibility to those with aging parents or children. Employee engagement platforms are not just a good place for a Social Stream, to connect with workers in an informal way, but also provide the framework and guidance for reinforcing the right behaviors across the organization. Benefits and HR policies may need to shift to reflect the changing demographic and technology. And tax laws may need to evolve to allow for milestone rewards for younger workers in the early years of their employment.

It is important to let these employees know that there is a place for them, and we hope they stay. Thinking strategically about the Millennial’s transition to knowledgeable and skilled workers will allow an organization to grow and deepen talent, as well as to engage and retain employees.