



## Professionalism on Point

# Leading the future workplace

**T**he legal profession is undergoing unprecedented change. Law school enrollment is down. Law school debt is up. Clients are looking for quicker, faster, cheaper work. And start-ups are exploiting inefficiencies in the legal market. The profession is changing more quickly than we can even imagine. For you reading this, however, the question to ask isn't, "What just happened?" but rather, "How will you lead it?"

See, the work isn't the only thing that's changing. The workplace is changing, too. If you are a leader in our Future Workplace, you may need to ask yourself some difficult questions to learn how to get the best performance out of your workforce.

How is the workplace changing? Let's start with demographics. We now have four generations in the workplace, each with different traditions and different approaches to work. And of those four generations, millennials represent approximately 50 percent of the workforce. By 2030, that figure will increase to 75 percent. Those statistics should be of crucial importance to you as a workplace leader — not just because of the different generations, but also because of demographic shifts.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, by 2060, our national population will be 417 million — around 100 million more than it is currently. Much of that growth is driven by minorities and immigrants. By 2044, more than half of all Americans will belong to a minority group. By 2060, nearly 20 percent of our population will be foreign-born. That's your future diverse workforce.

Now this diverse workforce is entering a completely transformed organizational workplace, a workplace moving from hierarchal to flat. A hierarchal organization is precisely how many large law firms are organized today: managing partner at the top; equity partners in

the middle; income partners below; junior attorneys segregated by year and status; and then staff divided by department.

But there's a change coming, and it's called flat organizations, which — in a direct repudiation of top-down organizations — eliminate job titles, hierarchies and corner offices.

Here's an easy comparison: Apple is a strongly hierarchal organization; Google is a mostly flat one. Your job as leader is to determine what approach best raises your team's performance and best serves your clients.

And that flatter, millennial-overrun, diverse workplace, it's going to be open all the time. Today's workplace isn't the ideal 9-to-5 model of our past. Rather, it's a 24/7 workplace where we are on call, all day long. We can access our work anytime and anywhere in the world.

But what happens to a workplace that never really closes? Instead of waiting at work at 5 p.m. for that client to e-mail you back, you now sit at home at 10 p.m., get that e-mail from the client and interrupt your personal time for work time. Which is better? Which will lead to a healthier workforce? You, Future Workplace Leader, will need to figure this out.

Now, since you're working late, you get Dolly to pick up that dining room table on Craigslist. You order dinner using Postmates and your daughter's ballet shoes on Amazon Prime. Finally, you head to work in your UberPool.

You are a high-frequency user of our new gig economy. Forget about flat structures. Maybe that's what the 24/7 workplace will look like: A gig workforce where your employees may have 20 different jobs that have nothing to do with what you're paying them to do.

Put that all together: millennial workers, diverse population, flatter organizations, 24/7 workplaces, gig workforce — that's our Future Workplace. The challenge for you is to figure out how to lead that workplace.

**Four generations:** You will need to listen to and include all the different perspectives that each generation brings to the workplace. How will you lead younger and younger people who may have less long-term loyalty to your organization and who may have a perspective on professionalism vastly different from yours?

**Diverse workforce:** You will need to adapt to the permanently changed demographics of the future workforce. How will you fully integrate that diversity into your organization?

**Flatter organization:** You will have a team seeking less formal hierarchy and more open collaboration. How will you ensure that doesn't result in a lack of leadership and vision?

**24/7 workplace:** Your workforce may work everywhere and your workplace may never close. How will you include workers who work at all hours, from home, or the beach, or the ski slope, or Starbucks?

**Gig economy:** You will lead people who may have multiple bosses and multiple jobs. How will you create an inclusive atmosphere where they can all thrive?

The Future Workplace is full of difficult questions, all of which you need to answer. We are a profession that has survived and flourished over millennia. It is up to you, Future Workplace leader, to ensure your legal organization successfully navigates these changing times. The great Dr. Emmett Brown, fictional hero to millennials and Marty McFlys, put it best, "Your future is whatever you make it. So make it a good one." ■

[michelle.silverthorn@2civility.org](mailto:michelle.silverthorn@2civility.org)

*Michelle Silverthorn is the diversity and education director at the Illinois Supreme Court Commission on Professionalism. She leads the professionalism education goals of the commission and works with law schools, students and other legal groups to develop interactive education workshops.*