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## Social media powers young lobbyists

But despite digital age, face time still most important connection By Deanna Fox Updated 10:09 am, Wednesday, January 13, 2016
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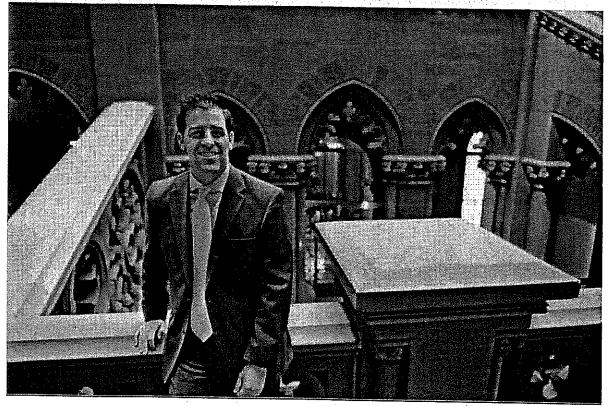


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Matt O'Connor, a lobbyist with Hinman Straub, poses for a photo at the Capitol on Wednesday, Jan. 6, 2016, in Albany, N.Y. (Paul Buckowski / Times Union)

The world is being taken over by millennials — and that includes the corridors of power in New York's political influence industry.

As baby boomers phase out of the workforce, an emerging class of 35-and-younger professionals is dictating the new rules of the lobbying industry.

How they come into and approach lobbying, however, won't be the same as the prior

generation.

Time spent "on the inside," usually as a legislative aide, was once the key to unlocking the crucial relationships needed by an aspiring lobbyist. But increasingly, Albany's young turks are finding ways to eschew that step through education and other career paths. A growing number of younger lobbyists are heading into the field direct from law school instead of time spent on the public payroll.

"Having a legal degree sharpens advocacy skills," said 31-year-old Jonathan S. McCardle, an attorney and registered lobbyist with Featherstonhaugh Wiley & Clyne in Albany.

He pointed to the mandatory two-year lobbying ban — the "cooling-off" period that's imposed on legislative staffers after they leave public service for the private sector — as one impediment that might prompt aspiring young lobbyists to take another route into the business.

"It's harder for a non-lawyer to go from the inside to lobbying," said Matthew O'Connor, a 33-year-old registered lobbyist and government analyst for Hinman Straub in Albany. Instead of law school, he opted for a master's degree in public administration.

O'Connor and McCardle are also part of the social media generation that uses the power of technology to make friends — at least in the professional sense — and influence politics.

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"I think lobbying is changing. I think there is less relying on who has been around the longest and who knows the most people," said **Emily Whalen**, a 34-year-old attorney and registered lobbyist for **Wilson Elser Moskowitz Edelman** and Dicker in Albany. Whalen, who started her career in New York politics working as a state Senate staffer, said that regardless of having ready-made contacts from her time on the inside, the ubiquity of social media gives her a leg up on establishing connections.

"I think LinkedIn has helped," she said. "I'll get a request from someone (and) I don't

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recognize their name, but then I'll see that they're chief of staff to an assemblyperson, or work for one of the campaign committees. I'll always accept, because then when I meet that person in real life you have this instant connection. It does

help to have a conversation with someone that you've met — even in a virtual way."

Social media has become such an intrinsic tool of lobbying that the state **Joint Commission on Public Ethics** has begun examining regulating its use, and clarifying the line where, for example, a retweet becomes an act of advocacy.

As it has done in virtually every sector, the Web in general has hastened the pace of lobbying. "We've been forced to adapt," said O'Connor.

Everything moves more quickly, he said, and the days of months-late budgets and working through the night are the relics of the old guard, thanks in large part to the ability to quickly send and retrieve information.

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"Technology has enabled multitasking.

Now you can be on a train and follow a hearing," O'Connor said. Gone are the days of hours spent in the legislative library, or laboring over a fax machine or copier.

That rapid pace of the internet extends to client relations, as well.

"Clients expect you to be even more dedicated to their issues," said McCardle. Immediate responses and staying abreast of an issue — and the news surrounding it, regardless of how voluminous social media, blog, and news site postings are — is a prerequisite of lobbying in the digital age.

Faster is not always better, of course.

"We'll get an email that will say, 'I just read a story online that says the governor is about to sign this bill or likes this type of legislation, and so we want to change our tactic completely.' And it's like, 'Did you read the article completely, or did you just read this one line?'" said Whalen, who points to a lack of news literacy on the Web and the tendency to jump to conclusions from reading a Facebook headline versus analyzing an article in its

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entirety.

"Even though things move quickly, as a lobbyist you can tell when things are a threat or a boon," she said.

"You always have to be prepared and make sure the facts are straight. For example, I can quickly pull up similar legislation in another state to form a point of reference," said O'Connor.

While an older generation of lobbyists had to rely on letter-writing campaigns and palm cards to influence decisionmakers, "social media allows you to amplify a message and repeat that message with ease," O'Connor said. It harkens to the adage at "all politics is local" when a lobbyist can easily speak to a politician's district via Twitter or Facebook.

Disruptive technology aside, the new generation of lobbyists in Albany have something else in common: All of them arrived in the craft during a period of unprecedented federal corruption investigations, and tightened ethical guidelines.

"Lobbying is much more documented," said McCardle. "You're expected to sign in and register at meetings for full disclosure. Each year the rules and regulations for lobbyists are further defined, leading to more transparency. There is a map of who you see and what you are lobbying for."

The issues that will define the lobbying careers of Whalen, McCardle and O'Connor mimic the sentiments of their generational peers — especially in the role and performance of government.

"Government isn't as nimble as tech companies," O'Connor said. "As technology changes, government has to catch up and figure out a way to deal with the paradigm shift."

Regardless of which side of the issues they find themselves on, "there is no replacement for face-to-face interaction with people," said McCardle.

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