

Managing Challenges and Opportunities Presented by Millennials

As baby boomers march toward retirement and generation X pushes into middle age, "millennials" are emerging in the workforce. Born after 1980, the millennials or generation "Y", like every other generation before them, present their own unique set of challenges and opportunities.

Millennials are likely among your workforce now and will be a growing presence for at least the next couple of decades. Praised for their grasp of technology, web 2.0 applications, optimism, and ability to collaborate, millennials are also thought to exhibit less than ideal professionalism, work ethic, independent decision-making ability, and critical thinking skills. To some, millennials are "special, sheltered, confident, team-oriented, conventional, pressured, and achieving" (see *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation*, Howe and Strauss, 2000). To others they have been taught by "helicopter parents" and an "everybody wins a trophy" mentality "to put their own needs first and to focus on feeling good about themselves" (see *Generation Me: Why Today's Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled--and More Miserable Than Ever Before*, Twenge, 2006). What can we know for sure about this age group and what effect will they have on your organization?

One thing we know for sure about millennials is that they are, like baby boomers, a large age group. Generation X, the generation between baby boomers and millennials, is 45 million strong while millennials approach 75 million. This means that when positions need to be filled because baby boomers are retiring, millennials will rise in the organization more quickly than their generation X predecessors—providing leadership opportunities at a relatively young age.

Another thing we know for sure is that millennials have grown up with technology, particularly communication technology and the Internet, like no other generation. This means greater familiarity and skill with technology and perhaps, the dark side of this familiarity: less developed formal writing skills, less independence, and less skill at face-to-face interpersonal interaction.

In my work with business executives, I have heard several consistent comments: millennials write business letters that include abbreviations from the world of texting and chatting (for example, URW for "you're welcome"), millennials spend too much time on social networking applications (Facebook, Twitter, etc.) and emailing friends while working, and millennials have a harder than expected time accepting anything less than positive feedback. Admittedly, these are anecdotal observations but they have been offered by a variety of people working in a variety of organizations.

What to do? As the title states, millennials present management challenges and opportunities. The challenges are setting limits on the non-work related use of social

communication technology, developing formal writing skills, nurturing independence and decision-making, developing face-to-face interpersonal skill, and finding a way to deliver constructive criticism. Some of these challenges can be met with performance reviews (setting limits, formal writing skills, for example) while the others may require training managers to coach millennial subordinates on independence, decision-making, interpersonal skills, and how to take constructive criticism. Notably, these challenges are best met through manager coaching, particularly if there is a positive relationship between the manager and the subordinate—the type of relationship rarely achieved with a trainer.

The opportunities are in tapping into millennials' technological sophistication, their interest in collaboration, and their interest in achieving. Some organizations use reverse mentoring to have millennials help senior executives learn social networking and other communication technology. This mentoring can also carry over into helping the executives understand how social networking and the related technology is impacting market research and the marketplace itself. In addition, any organization that does not tap its own millennial workforce to understand their behavior as consumers is missing a huge opportunity to understand potential customers better. Finally, other organizations have facilitated a team approach to tasks to take advantage of millennials' interest in collaborating and achieving. Nothing like friendly teamwork and competition to increase productivity.

It's hard to say at this point whether the challenges posed by millennials outweigh the opportunities they present. There is little doubt, however, that organizations that embrace the challenges will be in a better position to benefit from the opportunities.

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