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Route to:

Managing Millennials

MORE AND MORE ARE ARRIVING AT YOUR WORKPLACE

A YOUNG WOMAN THIS PAST SUMMER wore a swimsuit to the beach with the decorative legend, printed in various scripts, “It’s all about me.”

One hopes she wore it with some degree of ironic sensibility – but maybe not. After all, this is the age of MySpace and YouTube – two self-focused websites extraordinarily popular among the young.

Born since 1980, the so-called Millennial generation (also referred to as Generation Y, Nexters and Echo Boomers) has just begun to join three earlier generations in the workplace – Generation X (*ca.* 1958-1980), Baby Boomers (*ca.* 1946-1958) and a few not-yet-retired Traditionalists (born before the end of World War II).

Products of the Reagan era or later, they have little if any memory of the Soviet Union and the Cold War. For most or all of their lives, they have been “connected” by computer and wireless phone, have lived in an age of instant reality (with satellites providing real-time coverage of world events) and have been coddled by hovering “helicopter parents” anxious to provide them with every possible competitive edge in today’s flat world. During their formative years, signs on their parents’ cars warned “Baby on Board,” while bumper stickers asked less considerate parents, “Have You Hugged Your Children Today?” Their moms and dads even went with them to college orientation week, helping them select the right courses and sometimes demanding to interview their teachers.

Wisconsin’s Beloit College for some years has published its famous “Mindset List” – which

attempts to help its faculty understand the “event horizons” of incoming freshmen, *i.e.*, what they have always known to be true. For instance:

- This year’s entering class grew up getting lost in “big boxes.”
- They have never heard anyone “ring it up” on a cash register or sound like a “broken record.”
- A coffee has always taken longer to make than a milkshake.
- “Google” has always been a verb.
- Disney theme parks have always been in Asia and Europe.

The entire list of 75 unique frames of reference can be found at www.beloit.edu/~pubaff/mindset/index.html.

As the college observes, the list is neither critical of anyone nor all-inclusive; for example, there is likely to be a Beloit student who owns an “antique” typewriter or eight-track tape player. Equally true, not all Millennials are fortunate (or unfortunate) enough to have had helicopter parents always at their side – or money to spend on the latest iPod model and hottest Razr phone. And countries today that place PCs on every student’s desk are educating a far different generation from those in countries with few or no computers for their schools – creating a chasm known as the “Digital Divide.”

New challenges, opportunities

INTEGRATING MILLENNIALS into the workplace provides managers with a fresh set of challenges, but also with an equally important set of opportunities. For example, having led

highly scheduled and structured lives, Millennials may expect to be told not only *what* to do, but *when* to do it. On the other hand, having been taught inclusiveness from an early age, they are more tolerant of other races, nationalities and gender preferences than may be true of older workers. Similarly, having spent hours and hours alone in front of their computers and game machines, they are extraordinarily techno-savvy and are exceptional problem-solvers – but may have no clue as to how to work in teams.

Those who have taught or hired Millennials praise them for their intellectual curiosity and genuine desire to make the world a better place. They have a strong work ethic and, if properly integrated into a workplace that may strike some of them as alien, can become important contributors to the enterprise's success. Over the next ten to twenty years, they may well steer the enterprise in new directions that generate fresh sources of profit while helping to preserve the earth's dwindling resources.

Also, early indications are that they may be somewhat less restless than their older cousins from Generation X, who until the last recession were changing jobs every three or four years, in search of new challenges and fatter compensation packages. However, thanks to the Information Age, Millennials are extremely well-connected (in the electronic meaning of the phrase) and know of dozens if not hundreds of other employers anxious to utilize their skills. The employer who fails to challenge the new employee and provide day-to-day mentoring and encouragement may find the Millennial among the dear departed.

How to hire the new Millennial

This is going to be difficult. Hiring a freshly minted Millennial, who performs amazing digital feats on micro-equipment we barely recognize, isn't going to be like hiring the money-hungry Generation X-er who fell for the Porsche in the parking lot every time.

Hiring managers are going to have to work very hard to convince Millennials that the organization will provide challenging assignments, surround them with fellow Millennials, offer helpful and constant feedback, treat them with the utmost respect, give them the flexibility to be with their families on important occasions and nurture them

in an environment filled with increasingly diversified opportunities designed to help them succeed not fail. All of which is no small task.

Most workplaces, quite frankly, are not designed to integrate the needs and preconceptions of successive generations of employees, each of which acts quite differently from its predecessors. The more wedded the workplace is to traditional organization models (with their rigid vertical hierarchies) and training programs (with their school solutions to every problem), the tougher the task will be.

Among the newest generation, superficial issues such as tattoos and overly suggestive attire are the most easily handled – provided some rationale is offered as to why some forms of dress may be inappropriate in the presence of customers or clients. The bigger challenge is how to harness the skills, energy, attitudes and enthusiasm of entry-level Millennials for the good of the organization as well as the world.

One suggestion, offered by a number of training-and-development experts, is the use of “reverse mentoring” in which the young coach the old in the finer points of computer technology, viral marketing, cutting-edge design, eco-sensitivity and the like. That approach not only takes advantage of Millennials' unique skills, but also helps them become a contributor from Day One. Reverse mentoring, in fact, can help turn “you-nique” into unique.

In the first quarter of the 21st century, there are conflicting demographic trends in the United States and other developed nations. On the one hand, the ratio of those over 65 years old to those of working age continues to increase. On the other hand, the number of births continues to exceed the number of deaths; that, combined with increasing immigration, caused the U.S. population to exceed 300 million on October 17, 2006. By about 2025, those old enough to work may equal the number of available jobs. In the meantime, Millennials will be in the driver's seat as they reach management age.

– George Snider

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