

Millennials in the Workplace: Does This Sound Like You?

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If there is one thing Millennials and their bosses can agree upon, it's this: They're special. "That's what everybody has told them all their lives," notes [Barbara Keats](#), a management professor at the W. P. Carey School of Business.

Millennials were born between 1977 and 1994. Today, there are some 70 million in this 17 to 34 age group, roughly 20% of the U.S. population. Not all in that age group, however, are classic "Millennials," according to [Dale Kalika](#), a professorial colleague of Keats in the management department. Keats and Kalika are conducting a research project focused on Millennials. When referencing the youths who are making some managers pull out their thinning hair, she says, "We're really talking about the middle and upper classes. It doesn't cut across all social and economic levels."

The parents of boss-taxing Millennials spent their days "giving their children lots of praise, telling them they couldn't do wrong, giving them second chances ..."

"And third chances, and fourth," adds Keats.

The result, the professors say, are students who take criticism and less-than-A grades very personally, but not very well. Also, "They consider their parents to be friends," Keats explains. "So, they tend to see professors and employers as peers, and they act that way."

Trophies for all

The professors also advise bosses to be mindful of the Millennials' need for praise. Remember, this peer group grew up in an age when every kid on the team was a star, regardless of how many strikes against them.

The result, the professors say, is that these young people crave approval and respond best to what Kalika calls "persuasive means. Be a facilitator, a mentor, not just an authority."

Along with careful criticism, Millennials need structure. “These are the kids who, every day after school, had ballet lessons, art classes or T-ball,” Keats notes. Even leisure was structured into the newly coined “playdate.”

In addition, she maintains that Millennials “have little tolerance for ambiguity. They want lots of feedback. And bosses will have to gradually bring them about” when it comes to dealing with the “uncertainty of outcomes” or the often “imperfect direction” one may encounter on the job.

Ethics are another thing to watch. Millennials don’t necessarily think cheating is wrong, Keats says. With a Teflon-coated view of personal character, they don’t believe doing something unethical — like cheating — makes them bad people, she explains. “They seem to think that cheating is an OK way to achieve things ... because they’re busy.”

Getting work from your new workers

Lest this scare you off, there are positives about this generational contingent, as well as ways to make them care.

For one thing, they’re an extremely eager, achievement-oriented group. [Michael Goul](#), a professor of Information Systems at the W. P. Carey School of Business, admits he sees self-importance in this group, “but not an arrogance. They say ‘Give me a challenge.’ They’re willing and open to learning, and they want someone to lead them along.”

He also points out that Millennials are a generation weaned on computers, so “they’re very accustomed to the tool sets and the way information technology presents information.”

And, the Millennials are an altruistic bunch, which may be why the professors have found it’s effective to focus on work — and school assignments — that is meaningful.

[Julie Smith David](#), another information systems professor at the W. P. Carey School, believes there’s power in Millennial communication conventions. As an example, she points to the software called Twitter, a free social networking and micro-blogging service. The premise behind Twitter is that users are supposed to keep in touch by answering one simple question: What are you doing? “I’m driving to work. I’m eating a banana.”

David can see businesses making use of such technology. “Suppose you’re a large distributor. You could send a message — ‘Big snowstorm at regional distribution center. Things are going to be late.’ And then everyone is up-to-date.” Of course, she jokes, no Millennial would write such a long message. It might be something more like, “Big snow — we’re screwed.”

David sees “a lot of power in these social networks and interactions, and Millennials are quite good at them.” How could that be of value? “The Millennials,” David says, “are better at collaborating and, potentially, they’re better at collaborating remotely.”

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