

# Managing Millennials

By Claire Raines, 2002

<http://www.generationsatwork.com/articles/millennials.htm#Who%20They%20Are>

I get questions every month from businesspeople looking for something about the newest generation of workers. They'd like an updated version of *Twentysomething* or *Beyond Generation X*, books I wrote in 1991 and 1996. Along with Bruce Tulgan's *Managing Generation X*, they're the classics on managing and motivating young employees. The thing is, the young employees we were talking about in those three books are well established in the workplace today, and the next generation is showing up with a whole new perspective, a different set of values, a distinctive work ethic. They're as different from Generation X as they can be. By and large, it's the Gen-Xers who are managing them, and who are looking for help in understanding just what the Millennials are all about. Thus this article. I think you'll find a fairly comprehensive treatment of Millennial employees.

## Who They Are

They're the hottest commodity on the job market since Rosie the Riveter. They're sociable, optimistic, talented, well-educated, collaborative, open-minded, influential, and achievement-oriented. They've always felt sought after, needed, indispensable. They are arriving in the workplace with higher expectations than any generation before them—and they're so well connected that, if an employer doesn't match those expectations, they can tell thousands of their cohorts with one click of the mouse. They're the Millennial Generation. Born between 1980 and 2000, they're a generation nearly as large as the Baby Boom, and they're charged with potential. They're variously called the Internet Generation, Echo Boomers, the Boomlet, Nexters, Generation Y, the Nintendo Generation, the Digital Generation, and, in Canada, the Sunshine Generation. But several thousand of them sent suggestions about what they want to be called to Peter Jennings at abcnews.com, and "Millennials" was the clear winner.

In this uncertain economy and highly competitive business environment, companies across North America recognize that the differentiator is their people. Those organizations that emerge as winners in the battle for talent will have their fingers on the pulse of this newest generation. They'll design specific techniques for recruiting, managing, motivating, and retaining them.

The Millennials are just entering the workforce, and, as they do, employers are scrambling to find out everything they can about them. Are they Gen-Xers on steroids? Or are they a new breed entirely? How do they choose a career? And why? How will they change the workplace as we know it today? What are they looking for when they post their resumes on monster.com? What is their work ethic? What is unique about them? How do the best and brightest managers communicate with and motivate them?

While we'll continue to see older colleagues—Xers, Boomers, and Veterans—supervising the newest recruits, other scenarios will become commonplace: experienced Boomers reporting to a fresh-faced Millennial...members of all four generations working side-by-side on teams...a Millennial calling on a powerful Gen-X client. Just as the Xers and Boomers finalize their own negotiations for an uncertain workplace peace, optimistic Millennials find themselves at the mercy of Xer skepticism. Gen-Xers complain the Millennials are another indulged generation like the Boomers—that they're self-absorbed and Pollyanna-ish. Millennials charge that Gen-Xers are cynical and aloof—that they throw a wet blanket on fresh ideas and idealism.

As the most recent generation to enter the fray, the Millennials are likely to ask their older colleagues to chill out, get a life, and walk a mile in a younger generation's shoes.

### Shaped by Their Times

Born from 1980 through 2000, the most influential years for this generation as a whole are the 90s and the 00s. They're the first generation to grow up surrounded by digital media. "They're the 'Babies on Board' of the early Reagan years, the 'Have You Hugged Your Child Today' sixth graders of the early Clinton years, and the teens of Columbine," say Neil Howe and William Strauss in *Millennials Rising* (Vintage Books, 2000).

Just as all generations are programmed from the moment of birth, the Millennials began a series of programming experiences when they were infants. These experiences created the filters through which they see the world—especially the world of work. Eight key trends of the 90s and 00s have had a profound effect on their generational personality.

- **Focus on children and family.** In the decades right before and after the turn of the Millennium, Americans moved the spotlight back onto kids and their families. That spotlight has swung like a pendulum over the last sixty years. During the post-WWII era, children were all the rage. It was a popular time to be having kids and to be a kid. Then, when the Gen-Xers were growing up, the spotlight had shifted. Latchkey kids, children of divorce, and kids with two working parents found themselves growing up on their own, in the shadow of the Baby Boom. One Gen-Xer told me, "The Boomers took so much and left us so dry." The early 90s saw the spotlight swinging back. Las Vegas and Club Med *went family*. Parents and grandparents took the kids along on trips across the country and to destinations all over the globe. Eating out—once an *adult thing*—became a family matter. Ninety percent of fathers attended the birth of their children. The Federal Forum on Family Statistics reported that national attention to children was at an all-time high (The earlier peak was in the 1960s when the Boomers were kids.). Older parents—the average age for moms was now 27—brought more maturity to their roles as caregivers, teachers, and coaches.
- **Scheduled, structured lives.** The Millennials were the busiest generation of children we've ever seen in the U.S, growing up facing time pressures traditionally reserved for adults. Parents and teachers micromanaged their schedules, planning things out for them, leaving very little unstructured free time. They were signed up for soccer camp, karate club, and ballet lessons—and their parents were called into service, shuttling them from one activity to the next. Some started carrying *Daytimers* when they were in elementary school.
- **Multiculturalism.** Kids grew up in the 90s and 00s with more daily interaction with other ethnicities and cultures than ever before. The most recent data from UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute shows that interracial interaction among college freshmen has reached a record high.
- **Terrorism.** During their most formative years, Millennials witnessed the bombing and devastation of the Murrah federal building in Oklahoma City. They watched in horror as two Columbine High School students killed and wounded their classmates, and as school shootings became a three-year trend. And their catalyzing generational event—the one that binds them as a generation, the catastrophic moment they all witnessed during their first, most formative years—is, of course, the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001.
- **Heroism.** Emerging out of those acts of violence, Millennials watched the re-emergence of the American hero. Policemen, firemen, firefighters, and mayors were pictured on the front page of the newspaper, featured on TV specials, and portrayed in art and memorabilia. In the 10 months following 9/11, the word *hero* was heard more than it had been in the entire 10 years before.
- **Patriotism.** During the post-Vietnam and Watergate era, patriotism was at an all-time low. Displaying the American flag, always and forever the right thing to do for members of the WWII Generation, had become less and less common—particularly among

disillusioned Boomers and skeptical Xers. September 11 changed all that. Stores that carried flags sold out within 24 hours, ordered more and sold out again. Every other home and car seemed to fly the old red-white-and-blue. Businesspeople sported the stars and stripes on their lapels, and kids wore T-shirts with flags on the front, on the back, and on the shoulder. It seemed that national pride had been tested, and the overwhelming verdict was that patriotism was alive and well. The UCLA freshmen survey reported signs of renewed political interest. The percentage of students who reported discussing politics represented the “largest one-year increase since the 1992 presidential election year.”

- **Parent advocacy.** The Millennials were raised, by and large, by active, involved parents who often interceded on their behalf. Protective Boomer and Xer parents tried to ensure their children would grow up safely and be treated well. Parents challenged poor grades, negotiated with the soccer coach, visited college campuses with their charges, and even went along to Army recruiting centers. Then, too, Millennials actually *like* their parents. In the Generation 2001 survey, conducted by Lou Harris on behalf of Northwest Mutual Life Insurance, Mom and Dad were most often named when young people were asked whom they admired.
- **Globalism.** With penpals in Singapore and Senegal, Millennials grew up seeing things as global, connected, and open for business 24/7.

## Compelling Messages

Growing up, Millennials were bombarded with a unique set of consistent and compelling messages—many of them so imbedded in the culture that adults, let alone children, were barely even aware of them. The school system reinforced a distinct set of values. Parenting patterns unique to the era molded a new generational perspective. The era had its own mood that pervaded the developing perspective of youth. These messages had a profound effect on the generation as a whole:

- **Be smart—you are special.** They’ve been catered to since they were tiny. Think Nickelodeon, Baby Gap, and *Sports Illustrated for Kids*.
- **Leave no one behind.** They were taught to be inclusive and tolerant of other races, religions, and sexual orientations.
- **Connect 24/7.** They learned to be interdependent—on family, friends, and teachers. More Millennials say they can live without the television than the computer. Many prefer chatting on line to talking on the phone.
- **Achieve now!** Some parents hired private agents to line up the right college; others got started choosing the right pre-school while the child was still in the womb.
- **Serve your community.** Fifty percent of high school students reported volunteering in their communities, many of their high schools requiring community service hours for graduation. On one Roper Survey, when Millennials were asked for the major cause of problems in the U.S., they answered *selfishness*.

## Millennial Characteristics

All of this translates into a generation of employees with a different work ethic than any other, certainly different from their Gen X colleagues. Here are the main components of their work ethic:

- **Confident.** Raised by parents believing in the importance of self-esteem, they characteristically consider themselves ready to overcome challenges and leap tall buildings. Managers who believe in “paying your dues” and coworkers who don’t think opinions are worth listening to unless they come from someone with a prerequisite number of years on the resume find this can-do attitude unsettling.
- **Hopeful.** They’re described as optimistic yet practical. They believe in the future and their role in it. They’ve read about businesses with basketball courts, stockrooms stocked with

- beer for employers, and companies that pay your way through school. They expect a workplace that is challenging, collaborative, creative, fun, and financially rewarding.
- **Goal- and achievement-oriented.** Just a day after she won a totally unexpected Olympic gold medal, skater Sara Hughes was talking about her next goal—scoring a perfect 1600 on her SATs. Many Millennials arrive at their first day of work with personal goals on paper.
  - **Civic-minded.** They were taught to think in terms of the greater good. They have a high rate of volunteerism. They expect companies to contribute to their communities—and to operate in ways that create a sustainable environment.
  - **Inclusive.** Millennials are used to being organized in teams—and to making certain no one is left behind. They expect to earn a living in a workplace that is fair to all, where diversity is the norm—and they'll use their collective power if they feel someone is treated unfairly.

## The Digital Divide

Federal reports show that Millennials are healthier and more economically secure than any earlier generation. They are personally conservative about issues like drinking and driving. Reading scores have improved. The rate of high school graduates who go on to receive a college degree is at an all-time high. There's lots of good news about this newest generation of employees.

There's also one distinct area of great concern. It's called the digital divide. Never has the gap between the have's and the have-not's been so great. There is a whole group of Millennials coming of age separate from the experience we've discussed so far in this chapter.

Sixteen percent grew up—or are currently growing up—in poverty. Although every generation has members who grew up poor, never have the differences been so dramatic. The schism is about technology. While demographers debate just how influential digital technology has been on the Millennial personality, no one doubts its profound impact. It is certainly the great unifier of Millennials from places as diverse as Geneva, Japan, and Jersey. More than any other factor, it has united the generation, even globally.

Yet there's a group of young people who grew up—and are growing up—without access to a computer—at home, at school, or in the community. As responsible businesspeople, we need to reach out to those who grew up or are growing up beyond the divide. Companies like Microsoft who have donated literally millions of dollars to community programs that make computers available to low-income children are leading the way. Internships, mentoring, and training programs make a big difference. In the true spirit of diversity, forward-thinking companies will reach out to young new employees who've grown up without the benefit of the best our society has to offer—but who want to create challenging, satisfying, meaningful work lives for themselves.

## 6 Principles of Millennial Management

So how do you translate what you've read so far into your day-to-day life on the job? What do today's young employees want? If we're designing recruiting programs and management systems based on their values and needs, how do we proceed? What kind of work environments attract, retain, and motivate Millennial coworkers?

Here are their six most frequent requests:

1. **You be the leader.** This generation has grown up with structure and supervision, with parents who were role models. The "You be the parent" TV commercials are right on. Millennials are looking for leaders with honesty and integrity. It's not that they don't want to be leaders themselves, they'd just like some great role models first.

2. **Challenge me.** Millennials want learning opportunities. They want to be assigned to projects they can learn from. A recent Randstad employee survey found that “trying new things” was the most popular item. They’re looking for growth, development, a career path.
3. **Let me work with friends.** Millennials say they want to work with people they *click* with. They like being friends with coworkers. Employers who provide for the social aspects of work will find those efforts well rewarded by this newest cohort. Some companies are even interviewing and hiring groups of friends.
4. **Let’s have fun.** A little humor, a bit of silliness, even a little irreverence will make your work environment more attractive.
5. **Respect me.** “Treat our ideas respectfully,” they ask, “even though we haven’t been around a long time.”
6. **Be flexible.** The busiest generation ever isn’t going to give up its activities just because of jobs. A rigid schedule is a sure-fire way to lose your Millennial employees.

### The Workplace of Tomorrow

For years, we’ve given lip service to *internal customer service*. It means treating employees the way we do customers. But, as far as I can tell, in most companies the idea really hasn’t been put into practice. The Millennial workforce will cause us to make internal customer service a way of doing business.

“Well, maybe,” you’re saying. “But what if the economy takes a nose dive—or another nose dive? Then these young people won’t be able to be quite so demanding, will they? It’ll be a seller’s market. We won’t have to bend over backwards to cater to them.”

I’m afraid bending over backwards is just what we’re going to have to do, although I think it will be a lot more fun and rewarding than it might seem. You see, we’re going to need Millennial workers **desperately** over the next decade—even if the economy doesn’t take wings. It’s those dang Baby Boomers who are causing the problems. The average age for a nurse is 47. That means she—or he—will be moving on before long. Half of all certified school teachers plan to retire within five years. Sixty percent of all Federal workers are Baby Boomers who say they’re on the edge of retirement. There’s no getting around it. We’re going to need those Millennials.

So back to the *internal customer service* idea. It’s time to think of our businesses like we would a small retail venture. Just as we would consider customers, we need to consider employees. We need to ask ourselves:

- Where do our employees tend to come from and where can we get more like them?
- How can we attract them?
- What kind of experience and environment are they looking for?
- Once we’ve got them here, how can we keep them coming back?
- What kind of perks can we offer that will have them stick with us?
- How can we reward the most loyal of them?

### Getting Ready for the Millennials

Be Prepared For...

- high expectations
- possible involvement of parents

Don’t...

- expect them to pay their dues
- throw a wet blanket on their enthusiasm

Do...

- encourage them
- mentor them
- learn from them

### The Handbasket Theory

*"Kids. I don't know what's wrong with these kids today."  
--from Bye Bye Birdie*

As I write this, the majority of Millennials are still kids. And, despite the facts, they're getting a bad rap. You're familiar with the handbasket theory. It's as old as time. It says, "Kids just ain't no good these days." It says, "Today's kids are going to hell in a handbasket."

Ask around. You'll see what I mean. Some people will tell you that today's kids are rude. That they're not learning anything in school. That they have no respect. Frankly, I think those statements say more about the people saying them than they do about kids today. Sure, there are some bad ones, but close examination shows they're a pretty good lot.

Let's take four of the most common myths about Millennials and look at the reality:

Myth	Reality
1. Today's kids are violent.	In the last two decades, the volume of serious teen violent crime declined dramatically.
2. Teen pregnancy is up.	Teen pregnancy is falling at the fastest rate ever recorded.
3. Kids' use of drugs is up.	According to Mike Males, author of <i>Framing Youth</i> (Common Courage Press, 1999), "every reliable measure shows that compared to adults, modern adolescents use milder drugs. Teens take drugs in lower quantities. Teens use drugs less frequently. Teens use drugs in less risky settings. Teens are less likely to mix drugs with each other and with alcohol. Teens are particularly unlikely to drive after using alcohol or drugs."
4. They're like X squared.	This doesn't say much for Gen-Xers, who, in fact, have made tremendous contributions to the success of organizations in all industries in the last two decades. But Millennials as a generation have more in common with Baby Boomers and members of the

WWII Generation than they do with  
Generation Xers.

*"In the real world, young people behave better than any generation in decades."  
--Mike Males, "Ignore Fear Mongers; the Kids are Okay,"  
San Jose Mercury News, April 29, 2002*

### 3 Cool Ideas for Managing Millennials

1. Design office space so that Millennials are set up physically to share ideas.
2. Consider assigning projects to groups of employees who are evaluated as a group for reaching a goal.
3. Set up a reverse mentoring program. Companies from Procter and Gamble to Siemens have set up tutoring for middle-aged executives. Young newcomers help the executives navigate the Net. Jack Welch of General Electric fame says that "e-business knowledge is usually inversely proportional to age and rank." GE matched 1,000 managers and 1,000 young employees. Even though the younger cohort had just joined the firm, they tended to understand new technologies better than GE's finest.

### Millennials at Work

#### Liabilities

distaste for menial work  
lack of skills for dealing with  
difficult people  
impatience  
lack of experience  
confidence

#### Assets

multitasking  
goal orientation  
positive attitude  
technical savvy  
collaboration

### Millennials: What They Want From a Job

- to work with positive people
- to be challenged
- to be treated respectfully
- to learn new knowledge and skills
- to work in friendly environments
- to have flexible schedules
- to be paid well

## Where Employers Go Wrong with Millennials:

- not meeting their high expectations
- discounting their ideas for lack of experience
- allowing negativity
- feeling threatened by their technical knowhow

***“A 60-something graduate recently reflected: ‘We wanted what they want. We just felt we couldn’t ask.’ Herein lies the truth: what young workers want isn’t so different from what everyone else wants. However, young workers are asking for it.”***

*--Karen Cates and Kimia Rahimi, “Mastering People Management,”  
Financial Times, November 19, 2001*

## Millennial Learning Preferences

- teamwork
- technology
- structure
- entertainment & excitement
- experiential activities

## Millennial Communication Preferences

- positive
- respectful
- respectable
- motivational
- electronic
- goal-focused

## Q&A

### **Dear Claire,**

I always have to tell my teenage and twentysomething employees to do a task – they don’t take the initiative to get the work done. They just don’t seem to have the work ethic that my older workers do. What’s the secret to motivating them?

Eric

### **Dear Eric,**

This is a challenge that lots of managers and supervisors face. The work ethic of older generations was different. Typically, the oldest generation was intrinsically motivated—they worked for work’s sake, and considered it an honor just to have a job. Baby Boomers characteristically have worked hard because their self-image was based on their careers. Teenagers and twentysomething employees often have a different work ethic. Most are in the *no fear* category—not motivated by threats of punishment or firing.

The key is to get to know each as an individual: find out what is important to him or her, why

they're working, what they want to get out of their jobs. Get them to teach you how to motivate them. Then ask them to do the task and sell them on the benefit to them of doing that task. It may also help to set goals with each of them for the next 60 days or so, with a reward at the end, so that when you assign tasks, they can see where accomplishing that task will take them.

I know it sounds complicated, but it's all based on getting to know each person as an individual, something I'll bet you're already good at.

For information on speeches and workshops about managing Millennials, call 303-322-0474 or email [ClaireRaines@aol.com](mailto:ClaireRaines@aol.com).