



ACCOMMODATING A NEW GENERATION OF WORKERS

“... Even with all the progress that’s been made over the years, what has been a gradual **evolution** in diversity is about to become a **revolution**. It’s been brewing for several years now in our colleges, high schools, and trade schools as the seventy-six-million-member Millennial generation prepares to make its definition known to the workplace.”¹

¹ *When Generations Collide*: Lynne C. Lancaster and David Stillman

Referring to the U.S. in the above quote, the Millennials’ generation (those born in the Eighties/early Nineties and also known as the Net Generation or Generation Y) is the biggest in American history. For example, more than 81 million people in the U.S. were born from 1977 to 1997. They now make up 27 percent of the population. By comparison, the Baby Boomers, born 1946 to 1964, were 77 million strong and now make up 23 percent of the population.

In 2005, Statistics Canada noted that by 2004 the labour market for young Canadians aged 15 to 24 had rebounded sharply from a 21-year low in 1997. Employment among these young people was growing at a fast pace, even faster than among adult workers. Between 1997 and 2004, job creation among youth rose over 21 percent, the equivalent of 428,000 new jobs. This compared with a growth rate of just 15.8 percent among adults aged 25 and over. Among young adults aged 20 to 24, employment had risen 18 percent, the equivalent of 236,000 jobs. Moreover, the Millennials had arrived in large numbers.

Don Tapscott, in his book entitled “*Grown Up Digital: How the Net Generation Is Changing Your World*” (McGraw-Hill), identifies eight norms of many Millennials: they prize freedom; they want to customize things; they enjoy collaboration; they scrutinize everything; they insist on integrity in institutions and corporations; they want to have fun even at school or work; they believe that speed in technology and all else is normal; and they regard constant innovation as a fact of life. The arrival of the Millennials to the workforce means organizations have little choice but to adapt to these highly communal, highly wired young workers. Sponsored by corporate social network provider SelectMinds, a 2006 survey of Millennials found that nearly half rated the availability of support/networking programs for employees with common interests as an important factor in their decision to join and/or remain with an employer, compared with 36 percent of their peers.²

Also of note, a 2007 report by the U.S. National Endowment for the Arts concluded that American employers ranked reading and writing as the top deficiency in new hires. The report outlined a glaring deficiency in reading and writing among new entrants in the American workforce. It indicated that even among recent fourth-year graduates, new hires were unable to write effective business communication, read analytically or solve problems. The situation was described as “... troubling employers who are being forced to invest in additional training — or simply look for skilled workers offshore — for one of

² “*Social Revolution: A Wired Workforce Community*”, Ed Frauenheim, Workforce Management On-Line, October 22, 2007, p. 1, 28-37

the most fundamental job skills in the 21st Century economy”.³ In the same regard, similar “functional literacy” issues have been shown by past business surveys to exist in Canada.

What do the Millennials bring to organizations?

Over the next decade, the Millennials will be making up a larger portion of knowledge workers. With their arrival, they bring with them a very different set of skills, attitudes and even values in some cases, including:

- A willingness to forgo better remuneration in the immediate future in exchange for relevant experience opportunities, mentoring and training; notably conditions which would quickly result in more immediate recognition and would positively benefit their general career development.
- A strong desire to have working conditions and adequate compensation in order to facilitate greater work-life balance and their lifestyles.
- An understanding that the traditional employment arrangements and job security with one life-long employer are no longer available in today’s reality. As well, anticipation that a career most likely will involve several employers in varying contractual arrangements, part- or full-time and short- or long-term.
- Exceptional computer and creative skills in terms of using the latest high-tech tools, while often lacking in certain basic reading and writing skills resulting partly because of an increased dependence on such high-tech tools.
- As the first global generation ever, greater tolerance of diversity than their predecessors, strong views about justice and the problems faced by their society, and a willingness to become engaged in some kind of civic activity at school, at work or in their communities.
- A belief that constant innovation and greater mobility is a fact of life to which they must quickly adapt. Studies have generally shown that workers between the ages of 18 and 24 are demanding, impatient and tend to have a high opinion of their own abilities.
- A greater cynicism about big business, government and the law. Deference to authority figures has significantly dropped. Rather than automatically accepting the authority of society's collective rules, the Millennials are more likely to adopt the view that if an individual objects to a law, a policy or a rule, it is his or her prerogative to try to get around it.

How will organizations have to adapt?

First, organizations will have to recognize that significant differences exist between the generations represented in their workforce — be they Boomers, Generation X or the Millennials. In particular, managers, supervisors and recruiters are going to have to adjust their approaches to recruiting and retaining the Millennials. In some instances, depending on the organization’s personnel and needs, training or orientation sessions may be helpful in ensuring such recognition of diversity is applied within the workplace and in related social settings. Organizations will have to recognize and accommodate the following attributes of the Millennials in terms of values, attitudes and skill sets:

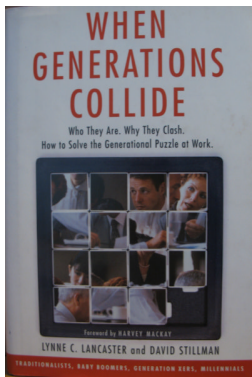
- Organizations need to come up with solutions like flexible benefits packages and alternative working arrangements that are mixed and matched according to the individual employee.

³ “New Workers Sorely Lacking Reading, Writing Skills, Report Finds”, Jeremy Smerd, Workforce Week Management, December 23, 2007 - January 5, 2008. Vol. 8 Issue 51

“Healthier organizations mean more productive employees.”

- Organizational success over the next decade will depend on how they deal with workloads, reward and recognition, performance management, recruiting and retaining talent and developing supportive managers.
- When private and public sector organizations were enjoying an excess of skilled labour, they didn't have to worry about many routine human resource issues surrounding recruitment and retention. Unfortunately, most organizations have been and continue to be reactive, not proactive. For example, work-life balance issues can no longer be seen as soft and fluffy.
- Whatever the sector, many Millennials will consider an organization's standing with respect to corporate social responsibility (CSR) as it applies to such areas as environmental protection, occupational health and safety, public safety, business ethics, community support activities, etc.
- In today's highly competitive labour market, compensation for work continues to be very important and needs to be sufficient in order to attract highly skilled entrants.
- While at work, organizations will have to delineate clear policies regarding the use of social networking technologies such as blogging, MySpace, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, etc. In order to promote work-life balance, there should be some reasonable flexibility allowed for the personal use during work time of computers, Blackberries, etc. Just as the telephone and fax were important tools of previous generations, new technologies/telecommunications are just as valued by this Net Generation. Social networking technologies promise not only to score points with the Millennials, but they can also help firms to recruit and develop employees and increase their productivity.

Recommended Reading:



“When Generations Collide”

(Who They Are. Why They Clash. How to Solve the Generational Puzzle at Work.)

by Lynne C. Lancaster and David Stillman
(HarperCollins Publishers, New York, NY, 2002)

- ◆ *Kids These Days... Twentysomethings Are Changing the Workplace*: Erin Pooley, Canadian Business, June 6-19, 2005: <http://healthyorganizations.net/Documents/Kids%20these%20days%20-%20Generation%20Y.pdf>
- ◆ *How to Retain and Develop Graduates*: John Pope, *HR Zone*, 13-Nov-2007: <http://healthyorganizations.net/Documents/How%20to%20retain%20and%20develop%20graduates%20-%20HR%20Zone.pdf>

Recommended Web Sites:

- ◆ Footwork Consulting Inc., David K. Foot, Author of *Boom, Bust & Echo*, 1996: <http://www.footwork.com/book.asp>
- ◆ Generation WHY?, Eric Chester: <http://www.generationwhy.com/>
- ◆ BridgeWorks, Lynne C. Lancaster and David Stillman: <http://www.generations.com/>

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