

The Challenge of Reaching Across Generations

There is a great deal of discussion around whether or not naming certain generations is valid or not. If you want to academic models, there is plenty of literature supporting both points of view. For my part, I think that the names bestowed on the various generations capture some essence of the generation that the rest of us intuitively agree upon such as the Silent Generation, the Greatest Generation, Baby Boomers, GenX, Millennials, and are therefore useful.

The names spring from the characteristics associated with that group of people as they “come of age” or reach the place of adulthood in our society and culture, grouped together according to the years when they were born. The Millennials, also referred to as GenY, Echoboomers, GenNext and even the Google Generation, were born between 1982–2000, and now number roughly 76 million. These twenty-somethings are literally the “next up” to enter our work force and graduate schools.

Authors William Strauss and Neil Howe who wrote *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation* (2000) have probably been the most influential in defining the term because they say members of the generation themselves coined the term *millennials*. As a group, “millennials are more numerous, more affluent, better educated, and more ethnically diverse (p.4)” than previous generations. Below I summarize some of the admittedly generalized characteristics for this generation that will impact how they enter the workforce and higher education:

1. Millennials want to make a difference in the world, for work to have “meaning.” 9 out of 10 interviewed for the book, *The M-Factor* (2010) by Lynne Lancaster and David Stillman said this was “*the most important factor*” for their work lives.
2. Twenty-somethings want a stimulating work environment where they can express their passions, and 51% according to the Kelly Global Workforce Index are prepared to take a lower salary to have this.
3. They want to use their tech savvy to communicate via Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, and any other social media you can think of, and they discuss their work! This demand for interactivity can be a boon to employers seeking to publicize themselves, and can also be used to recruit and retain employees as new workers conduct job searches through the web.
4. Millennials “want to be heard” and will create innovative solutions if allowed. They are excellent collaborators, and not so happy with working alone. They want praise for the “job well done” and a sincere “thank you” goes a very long way to building their loyalty. Some employers, such as C.H. Robinson Worldwide, a global third party logistics (3PL) provider, lets employees determine their own job titles, such as “Logistics Specialist” as a form of innovation.

The down side: Some researchers see too much emphasis on the individual who needs to be validated and feel good because they were overprotected as children. Jean M Twenge titled her book *Generation Me: Why today's young Americans are more confident*,

assertive, entitled -- and more miserable than ever (2006) and coined the term “GenMe” to describe them. Jane Healy and Neil Postman in separate books have argued that despite the technological connectivity and community the generation seems to crave, the connections are superficial and do not lend themselves to critical thinking and reflective, thoughtful learning. It is also not at all clear at this stage how the Millennials will “compete”: will they be interested in building and staying in an organization they see as making a difference, or will they be about “gaming” the system to their own advantage? For employers, teaching the “why” of what is being done may be one of the most important lessons to be learned in reaching this generation.

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