
From Ricky And Lucy To Beavis And Butthead: Understanding The New Generations

by ROBERT W. WENDOVER

How does a “fifty-something” manage a “twenty-something?” For that matter, how does a “thirty-something” manage a “sixty-something?” And what on earth do we do with those kids in green hair and body piercings?

Manufacturers’ representatives across the United States are coming face-to-face with the challenges of hiring and managing those in younger generations. These young people don’t seem to think right, do they? They don’t seem to act right. And they certainly don’t have the right work ethic. Right? Well, it’s not that simple.

Every new generation of workers is a product of the influences they absorbed as they came of age. These influences include the im-

Every new generation of workers is a product of the influences they absorbed as they came of age.

pacts of technology, diversity, and the amount of adversity they experienced as children. The age group in their mid-twenties through late thirties are commonly known as Generation X. This is a population that came of age in the midst of social chaos, layoffs, divorce, recession, gas lines, the Watergate scandal, and the advent of latch-key kids. Due to these experiences, they are skeptical of institutions, suspicious of marketing, wary of their parents’ teachings, and remarkably resourceful. When they come into your workplace, their priorities are far different than those workers in their 50s and 60s who remember the era of paying dues, saving for a rainy day and keeping your nose to the grindstone. These young people focus on balance of life. They view a job as a means to an end rather than the



end in itself. They view employment as a contract, meaning loyalty has little relevance. It also means that if the employer “breaches” the contract by demanding too much overtime, promising work that doesn’t materialize or failing to follow through on training or some other commitment, they are not afraid to leave for another job. The days of staying with the same employer year after year are lost on them.

Expressive Behavior

Experience has taught Xers that if you don’t ask, you don’t get. Therefore, they’re not afraid to express their opinions, make suggestions and speak up for what

they want. While this behavior may be interpreted as demanding, assertiveness has gotten them what they want in the past. Finally, they focus on the outcome rather than the task. This means if they can find a more efficient way of getting something done, they're not afraid to try it, even if it means bending or breaking the rules.

The leading edge of Generation X has just reached 40 years of age. They now have 20 years of work experience under their belts. But as they move into senior management positions or ownership, they will change the way industry conducts business.

The cohort following the Xers has become known as Generation Y, Generation Why, the Nexters, the Net-Geners and other labels. The Center for Generational Studies has adopted the term "Millennials." This is an age group whose first members were born in 1981. They have been entering the marketplace for the past five years and possess work values considerably different from those of Generation X.

The Millennials have grown up in a world of technology, prosperity and convenience. With the proliferation of computers, they have become a menu-driven culture that wants to point and click to every answer. They are entering your shop having grown up in the midst of cell phones, Palm Pilots, personal-entertainment systems and big screen plasma TVs. The natural impatience that all of this has created makes them restless employees, especially in an environment where many of the tasks are repetitive. ("You want me to spend the entire day calling people? Borrrring!")

Working to Spend

Where previous generations have been taught to save, this generation has been taught to spend. Studies indicate that the average teenager spent \$103 per week in 2003. This means that Millennials are working for a different reason than older generations did in their youth. Many of them come to work for you in their early 20s, for instance, already burdened with a host of monthly payments for credit cards, rent, cable TV, an auto loan and a cell phone. In other words, they earn to spend. Giving them cash bonuses only helps to pay off the monthly bills they have already. It provides little incentive.

They base their decisions on convenience rather than on hard work. This generation has been inundated with messages about how to do things quickly and easily. The overarching message in the media is, "Don't do it yourself. Hire someone else." With this kind of wiring, it's easy to understand why the term "hard work" seems like a dirty word. The problem of course is that they don't have the financial resources. So they feel stuck in a "wage slave" job.

With the emphasis on technology and computers, fewer and fewer of these young people are entering the trades. They see images every day of the 25-year-old who has made it big designing

Experience has taught Xers that if you don't ask, you don't get.

some computer gadget. And he didn't even get his hands dirty. They dream about striking it rich while working in your \$8/hour job. They arrive with expectations and experiences different from that of previous age groups. They tend to see a job as a job rather than as a possible career.

At the same time, there is ample evidence that this generation's basic skills are sadly lacking. Employers complain constantly about workers who are unable to add, subtract, multiply and divide. The employees' response to this is, "Hey, the computer will figure it out anyway."

How will all of this have an impact on your agency over the next few years? Only time will tell. This is not to say that you can't succeed in working with these younger generations. It will, however, require a change in the way you conduct business. Here are some brief suggestions:

- **Recruit and Hire Better** — Make recruiting and selecting good people a top priority. The reality in today's job market is that you get what you pay for. Hiring a fast-food fry cook may be cheaper in the short run, but will

The Millennials have grown up in a world of technology, prosperity and convenience.

Make recruiting and selecting good people a top priority. The reality in today's job market is that you get what you pay for.

cost you a fortune in employee turnover, mistakes and poor customer relations. Successful business owners will tell you that paying a better wage attracts better applicants and builds loyalty. If you're replacing five people a year at a cost of \$5,000 apiece (believe me, it costs that much), then you're wasting \$25,000 a year of hard-earned income. If you have a five percent profit margin, you have to gross 20 times that amount in additional revenue to replace the lost profit. That's a half a million dollars! Take the time to recruit, hire and pay for good people. It'll ease your heartburn.

- **Focus on Retention** — As I explained, employee turnover costs most small businesses a fortune. But measure retention in weeks not years. If you can keep the average employee an extra 12 weeks, you will have reduced

turnover by 25 percent. That will add thousands to your bottom line. Remember the adage that says, "People go to work for companies, but leave managers." It all comes down to how people are treated on the job.

- **Train! Train! Train!** — Let's be honest, the average small-business owner is a lousy trainer. Proper coaching and instruction are the most important keys to day-to-day operations. The better you train your people, the more pride they will take in their work. Besides, if there is one thing that will keep Generation X on the job, it's the opportunity for development. They thrive in positions where there's always something to learn.

- **Teach Them the Business** — If you want to get people invested in their job, teach them why they're doing it. Show them where the money goes on a

\$10,000 contract, for instance. Help them to understand the dollar cost of making mistakes. Lay out a spreadsheet of monthly operations. After a while, some will begin to make suggestions for improving operations and saving money. When they do, you'll know they're invested in the business. No, by the way, they will not leave to start their own competing firm. The vast majority don't have the courage to take the risk, and the rest like working for someone else.

- **Lighten Up** — Remember that both of these generations have grown up in a world of media and entertainment. They look for fun in everything they do. That said, consider your supervisory style and work environment. Is it okay for employees to enjoy themselves while working? What can you do to find a better balance while still maintaining the quality and quantity of work? Focus on the outcome rather than the task.

- **Prepare for the Future** — Look forward five or 10 years. A good portion of the Baby Boom will be reaching retirement. Consider who you have in place now who can be developed into a key contributor. How can you identify these people and help them see the long-term vision? In short, this is succession planning. While that may sound like a complicated process, it is simply taking the initiative to mentor people for the future. After all, you don't want to go to your grave running the business. Do you?

Generational diversity in the workplace will continue to play a critical role in the management of your business. The key to your long-term success is taking action now to hire, develop and keep young talent.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Robert W. Wendover is the director of The Center for Generational Studies, which conducts research, produces seminars and publishes resources on how the generations relate to one another in American society. For more information visit www.gentrends.com. He may be contacted at (800) 227-5510.



Copyright © 2005, Manufacturers' Agents National Association

One Spectrum Pointe, Suite 150, Lake Forest, CA 92630-2283 • Phone: (949) 859-4040 • Toll-free: (877) 626-2776 • Fax: (949) 855-2973
E-mail: MANA@MANAonline.org • Web site: www.MANAonline.org • All rights reserved. Reproduction without permission is strictly prohibited.