GEEKS, GEEZERS, AND GOOGLIZATION

By Dr. Ira S. Wolfe

How to Manage the Unprecedented Convergence
of the Wired, the Tired, and Technology
in the Workplace

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Make Way for Generation Y

Born between 1980 and 2000

Gen Ys are very entrepreneurial. Most worked at legitimate jobs before they left high school. Gen Ys are technology-savvy. They've never known a world without mobile devices and 24/7 connectivity. They see themselves as citizens of the world and feel very connected through the Internet. Gen Ys fly to Europe to visit friends and family as easily as Veterans and Boomers crossed state lines. Family vacations take place on cruise ships instead of cabins by the lake. They have better relationships with their parents than many Gen Xs and Boomers, and have a strong interest in teamwork (although they define "team" differently than Boomers and Xers). And despite an ongoing debate about the human ability to multi-task, they seem to be creating a new frontier for juggling multiple activities simultaneously.

Gen Y values: Making a difference in the world and respecting diversity.

The youngest workers, members of Generation Y, are on the scene and demanding respect. You've heard the stereotypes about this generation. They text constantly. They dress inappropriately. They're overly confident. They are Generation Y.

Described as being "high maintenance," (some might say, "spoiled") they're quite vocal and willing to share their opinions about everything. And they expect management to care. And to respond: Quickly, please.

They have been also called the Millennials, Generation Y (and WHY), iGeneration, Net Generation, the Children of the Rising Dow, and most recently Trophy Kids.

Trophy Kids

On March 2, 1962, Wilt Chamberlain set the NBA single-game scoring record by scoring 100 points. This achievement has been proclaimed as one of the greatest achievements in sports history. Events like Chamberlain's scoring record along with landing a man on the moon shaped and influenced an entire generation to believe that you could achieve anything if you set your mind to it.

But 47 years later, a Texas high school girls basketball team, after winning the game by a score of 100-0, received nothing but backlash and criticism for running up the score. In a case of remorse, officials from the school responded by seeking a forfeit and apologizing for the margin of victory.

Chamberlain was cheered. The girls were jeered.

What changed?

For the record, Millennials were born between 1980 – 2000. They grew up during the greatest period of wealth creation in modern history. They have also witnessed irrational exuberance ending in the dot-com crash, terrorism, war, climate change, and the worst recession since the Great Depression. They have been coddled by their parents and nurtured with a strong sense of entitlement. Now entering the workforce, this generation's attitude towards life creates a stark contrast to the make-do-with-what-you-have attitude of the WWII generation and the winner-take-all attitude of the Baby Boomers. The workplace has become an interesting psychodrama featuring the workplace attitudes of the Millennials and employers' efforts to manage these uber-connected and collaborative rookies.

As evidenced by the jeers and not cheers to running up a 100-0 score, winning isn't everything anymore. That's not to say Millennials don't have ambition. In fact, their ambitions may even be far larger than any previous generation – they just don't see the path of achievement littered with bodies that they need to step over on the way to their personal goals. For previous generations who grew up and worked in a world when there was only one winner and all others were losers, this "trophy kid" generation is a tough pill to swallow.

How did these kids get this way? For many Millennials, few "accomplishments" didn't rate some type of acknowledgement. In games, it was common for everyone to receive a trophy — win or lose – thus the name "trophy kids." Stick ball transformed into T-ball. The embarrassment of getting selected last (or not at all) by your friends shifted to not being allowed to strike out! The lesson shifted from "second place is the first place for losers" to "everyone who plays is a winner."

This generational tension is a bit ironic. While many managers and most of the media targets the kids, the blame might fall squarely on the very people doing the loudest complaining - doting parents, teachers and coaches. After all, the grumbling Baby Boomer managers are the same indulgent parents who raised the millennial generation after starting families late in life or vowing not to make the same mistake twice with children from second and third marriages.

And it's not just Boomers who are the hovering adults. Generation X latch-key kids, now raising their own families, have ditched the key and are showing up at every school event, soccer game and even parent-teacher conference. Moms go to work and Dads stay home to see their kids off to school and meet them at day's end. No more are kids expected to fend for themselves while both parents plug away at work. And if it's not Mom or Dad doing the doting, it's Grandma or Grandpa. No child left behind for many Millennials means no child should ever participate in any event without his or her own raving fans.

At school, teachers accentuate the positive. Kids no longer fear the bad report card – teachers do. This generation was treated so delicately that many schoolteachers stopped grading papers and tests in harsh-looking red ink to avoid bruising the child's precious self-esteem. Managers in turn must now tread lightly when making even the most benign critique.

Millennials also grew up with "Baby on Board" signs and a culture that lovingly catered to their needs. They arrived at college and work expecting the same. Their parents have been called "helicopter parents" and "snowplow parents" for hovering over every move their child made and trying to pave the way to a better future. Managers

and more experienced workers are now expected to be mentors and coaches, not teachers and drill sergeants.

Authorities on the digital revolution, these youngsters have grown up online, bathed in bits and bytes. As a result, they are characterized as being tech-savvy, multi-cultural and collaborative. Unlike their parents who grew up *watching* 24 hours of television per week, Millennials grew up *interacting* with their media. These "crackberry" kids literally let their fingers do the talking. They send more text messages everyday than there are people on the planet. They grew up tethered to multiple electronic devices while juggling text messages, surfing the Net and listening to iPods – all while doing their homework. They effortlessly mix learning, communicating and playing.

By age 21 years of age, it is estimated that the average Millennial child will have:

- Spent 10,000 hours playing video games

- Sent 200,000 emails and text messages

- Spent 20,000 hours watching TV

- Spent 10,000 hours on their cell phone

- Spent under 5,000 hours reading

Young people are gathering en masse online to collaborate. Millennials, unlike their Gen X predecessors who incessantly played one-dimensional games, create the games they play – virtually and interactively with people they've never met. Hanging out with friends down the street has been replaced by online gaming and social networking. It's like they closed the bedroom door, but instead of one best friend inside they now invite thousands of friends in. Lacking in many Veteran social circles – school, work and family – these online networks provide virtual instant feedback and affection.

Worldwide this generation is huge, nearly 2 billion strong. In the U.S., the Millennials outnumber the Baby Boomers, previously the largest generation. When combined with the Gen Xs, they already make up the majority of the workforce. The Boomers made and moved markets. The Millennials will be the doing the same thing but more quickly and dramatically. Millennials will rewrite the rules for communities, education, meetings, workplaces, and marketplaces.

A controversial study released in 2008 found today's college students are more narcissistic and self-centered than any preceding generation. A ferocious response erupted on blogs condemning the study: "our youngest generation isn't more narcissistic," the offended said. "We are just more misunderstood," reads one blog.

Fittingly for a win-win generation, both conclusions might be correct. In a 2007 Center for Applied Research study of the Millennial Generation, two responses dominated:

- The Millennials are spoiled rotten brats whose parents have given them everything.
- The Millennials are extremely talented and will bring the most advanced technology and teamwork skills to the workforce.

Which response is correct? What if both responses are correct? What if the Millennials are spoiled, narcissistic brats who possess the talent and skills businesses need?

While that scenario may cause your heart to skip a beat, make your skin crawl and send chills up and down your spine, GET OVER IT! Millennials are the future. Yes, their attitudes and values are different - not good or bad, just different.

Whether you agree with them or not, Millennials will be knocking on your doors for jobs for years to come. Blame it on the Boomers who lowered our birthrate to historic lows. Blame it on society who raised a generation of latch-key kids then expected them to play ball with the rest of the kids. Blame it on the helicopter parents who won't let go of their kids long after they reach adulthood. Blame it on a restrictive immigration policy. Blame it on whomever and whatever you want. But let it be known that when managed effectively, Millennials will emerge as some of the brightest, most generous, and collaborative employees you've ever employed.

These Gen Y "geeks", unlike the Veterans who matured in an "Era of Limits," grew up in the "Era of Options" (1991-2000). Seminal influences included MTV, AIDS, terrorism, globalization, the end of the Cold War, weapons of mass destruction, high public distrust of government, and influential special interest groups.

The "company man" disappeared during this era as competitive speed and innovation led to flatter, more nimble organizational structures. Dot-com companies came out of nowhere, driven by the powerful tool that promised to eliminate political, economic, and societal boundaries once and for all: the Internet.

As a result, Gen Y geeks often

- Are committed to making a life, not just a living.

- View team-building, engagement, and partnerships as essential to leadership.

- Recognize that with diversity come new perspectives, ideas, and insights.

- Desire and believe that they can better the world.

- Are experimental and entrepreneurial, less loyal to employers.

- Learn through both Veteran and experiential means.

- Are more secure with insecurity and change.

- Have multiple careers, thanks in part to longer life expectancy.

Why shouldn't they expect more balance in their lives, greater satisfaction in their careers, better relationships with more people?

Millennials are used to the instant gratification of the technological resources that have always been at their disposal. While answering machines changed communication habits for the Veterans, beepers, voice mail and fax machines revolutionized the modes of staying in touch for Boomers. Then came the mobile "bag" phone in the 80s and cell phone in the 90s. Today we have a generation that has grown up with "instant" messaging, staying in constant contact with others anywhere in the world through mobile phones and smartphones—virtual entertainment centers that combine communication, music, and video in the palm of your hand. They are accustomed to sharing their opinions, favorite music and live video with the world and making their voices heard instantly, about even the most mundane topics. Through self-created

blogs, websites, Facebook, and Twitter accounts, they are connected to the entire world, anytime. The world is literally at their fingertips.

They can easily gain instant access to people and information around the world, providing them with a sense of empowerment, and speed that may overwhelm less tech-savvy older generations. They really are the "net" generation, with a global outlook, although the events of September 11, 2001, certainly left an indelible imprint on their collective psyches.

Gen Y, like older generations, experienced the sort of close parenting that eluded Generation X. Thanks to more family-friendly workplace policies, and a natural reaction against unsupervised children, Generation Y enjoyed closer parental involvement, bordering on the over-indulgent, resulting in the "helicopter" and "snowplow" parenting I mentioned earlier. Reports abound of parents going with their children on job interviews, serving as agents to negotiate compensation packages, and constantly texting their kids in class. The combination of technological access with parental backing has created a phenomenal sense of empowerment.

As these youngsters finish school and go looking for work, job recruiters are noticing they are bringing a sense of entitlement with them. They are, after all, what they've been told all their lives – the most talented, tech-savvy generation ever. These younger workers demand to be treated like colleagues, not subordinates and expect access to all levels of management, even the CEO, to share their brilliant ideas –not tomorrow, not next week but today, right now. This is the generation that gets and reports news instantaneously by texting and "tweeting." Patience is not seen as a virtue.

This "Digital Generation" is ready to learn anywhere, anytime, and is even more comfortable with technology than Generation X. While the Gen X grew up in a world with ATMs and personal computers, Gen Ys have always had the Internet. Influenced by education-minded Boomer parents, Gen Yers believe that education is the key to their success, and they're poised to be lifelong learners. Generation Y is *even more* entrepreneurial and techno-savvy than Gen X.

A distinctive characteristic of Generation Y is that they demand immediate feedback, and they expect to gain a sense of accomplishment hourly. They thrive on challenging work and creative expression. They're more than willing to tell management how to improve their workplace policies and procedures, which can rub experienced, older employees the wrong way. Savvy managers need to provide them with appropriate outlets to share their insights because they also possess the ability to be great team players. They love challenging work and creative expression and they, too, value freedom and flexibility.

What this all means is that Generation Y is used to getting attention, and they are demanding it in the workplace. They want to have a close, highly-responsive relationship with their superiors, like they had with their parents, and a personal relationship with their boss is very important to them. They don't respond well to the Veteran command and control management style. Martin and Tulgan point out, "They consistently tell us they have difficulty with older managers who condescendingly correct them or even yell and scream."

They want managers to spend time getting to know them and their capabilities, and to develop a personal mentoring relationship with them. In keeping with the

atomization of the Internet, they want their jobs to be even more personalized, and even more customized than the Gen Xs that preceded them.

These Millennials see the older generation as resisting change and being stuck in procedures. They are always seeking shortcuts and striving to get more done faster. They may seem to older employees to be stuck on "fast forward". (So some things never really change from one generation to the next!)

Managers are advised to consistently provide constructive feedback to this cohort—the more immediate, the better. Gen Y expects to stay in constant contact with others, including management. Executive secretaries and middle management must now function as portals of access, not gatekeepers. This may mean adaptation for older managers accustomed to being "out of touch" after hours or on weekends and preserving their time for board room meetings and golf outings. Today's VIP list must include the up-and-coming workforce.

As is always the case with new employees or younger generations, the older generation may find themselves having to explain the rationale behind certain policies or being challenged to justify every procedure and explain why things are the way they are. It will be most productive if managers see this as an opportunity to question the status quo and a chance to consider innovation, rather than as an impertinent imposition.

Millennials not only value but demand opportunities for ongoing training and development. Like Generation X, these Millennials see "job security" as meaning constantly updating their skills to remain marketable. They are always looking for better opportunities, elsewhere. Finally, whereas older employees understandably want

rewards to be tied to seniority, younger employees want to be rewarded for their performance and results.

Dr. Jon Warner and Anne Sandberg propose that members of Generation Y are in the "spring" of their careers, and, as such, are filled with enthusiasm and interested in discovery and exploration. The authors recommend using what they call a highly interactive "building" managerial style, in which communication is clear and focused, as well as energetic and engaging. Additionally there should be a lot of give and take in communicating.

Cam Marston, a multigenerational communications and marketing consultant, points out that many younger workers have had an extended adolescence—as much as a decade longer than their predecessors. They marry later and stay in school longer, and as a result, feel less pressure to select a career in their twenties. Whereas earlier generations were told to "get a job" and become "self-sufficient," today's young workers are being encouraged to find a job that makes them happy or that offers "self-fulfillment." Marston's interesting view is that Boomers sought self-sufficiency first, and hoped to stumble upon self-fulfillment, while the Millennial's view is reversed: seek self-fulfillment first, and hope to become self-sufficient eventually. To complicate matters, more and more Millennial employees are finding self-fulfillment outside of work – like family, friends, and community.

Some other interesting differences include perspectives on time. Boomers were apt to define a hard worker by counting the number of hours devoted to work. A 60-hour work week meant you were on track for a highly valued promotion. Gen Ys measure work ethic by whether they complete required jobs on time, and they are likely to

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perceive office gatherings as interfering with their personal time, rather than as a reward.

Promotions mean little to Gen Ys. Boomers define themselves by their work and work to pay the bills. Gen Xs also work to pay the bills, but they assume the job they have will not last forever. Thus, they work to learn new skills that will help them obtain their next job. They are loyal to people, not jobs.

Generation Y is not working to pay the bills, but to afford a lifestyle. Work to them is a means to an end, not an end in itself. With all this in mind, organizations will need to possess adaptable and flexible leaders to be able to motivate and manage such disparate workers.