

What Is a Millennial?

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The generation of workers born roughly between 1977 and 1995, known as millennials or Generation Y, represents the biggest shift in the U.S. workforce since the baby boomers came of age. Eighty-million strong, they will soon account for the majority of American workers, especially as boomers start to retire.

But it's not just their vast numbers that make millennials important to the labor market. Workplace experts say they're unlike previous generations, and that's forcing a cultural shift on companies and managers. According to Stan Smith, a national director for human resources at accounting giant Deloitte, millennials are team-oriented, eager to tackle huge challenges, and quite particular about their leaders. "They won't do something just because you say, 'I'm the manager,'" Smith says. "On the other hand, they'll work hard for someone who truly mentors them."

Key Stats

- **Buzzword popularized:** 2000
- **Also known as:** Gen Y, Generation Why, Adulthooders, Echo Boomers, Generation Next, Gen I (Generation Internet), Generation Tech
- **Population stats (based on figures from the U.S. Census Bureau):**
 - Baby boomers: 73 million
 - Generation X: 49 million
 - Millennials: 80 million

Why Millennials Matter Now

Look closely at the population figures in the box above. There are more millennials than baby boomers, and there are more than *50 percent* more millennials than Generation Xers. If that makes you wonder where all these kids are going to find jobs, think again. We're on the brink of a pronounced talent shortage as the baby boom generation nears retirement. (According to the [Conference Board](#), 64 million skilled workers will be eligible to hang up their gloves by the end of this decade.) In the coming years, both Gen Xers and millennials will be called upon to help fill the big shoes left by exiting boomers.

The effects of this imminent brain drain already are apparent across the labor spectrum. California police departments now host boot camps for 12-year-olds in the hopes of grooming future officers, while Deloitte is publishing books and launching interactive websites in attempts to woo high-school-age millennials. Despite the current recession, college recruiters and HR staffs talk

about the “seller’s market” that companies face. Until recently, many millennials collected multiple job offers before making decisions, and experts see the trend returning when the economy perks up. One Manhattan-based national consulting firm has even sworn off “exploding” job offers, those that squeeze applicants with tight deadlines to either accept or decline a position.

Why Millennials Matter to You

Sure, you’re going to need millennials simply to put butts in seats. But these workers are also change agents who may force you to rethink and improve your methods of recruiting, training, and management — the lifeblood elements of your company. They’re accustomed to working away from their desks, using everything from library computers to smartphones and laptops. They got intense and individualized mentoring from teachers and coaches, and they were never told that their elders should intimidate them. “The world is a flat hierarchy to these kids,” says Peter Johnson, director of admissions at the University of California at Berkeley’s Haas School of Business. “Whether you think it’s a good or bad thing doesn’t really matter. It’s a market condition.”

Many companies have realized they need to change with the times: UPS has begun to abandon its training manuals for hands-on learning in staged neighborhoods; Deloitte empowers its middle managers to offer flexible scheduling to their team members, and Google bypasses corporate hierarchy by making its brightest new millennials managers and granting them direct access to the company’s co-founders, Larry Page and Sergey Brin.

Millennials’ Strong Points

According to Lynne Lancaster, a consultant on generational issues in the workplace, millennials were the first generation to grow up with soccer moms, doting dads, and trophies for participation. All that adult attention gave them confidence and a knack for following directions. In addition, says Lancaster, many millennials’ lives have been heavily scheduled since childhood, so they understand achievement and heavy workloads. And growing up with PCs has contributed to their comfort with technology and social networking. “There definitely are the speed processors among them,” says David Morrison, who runs Twentysomething, a consulting and marketing firm focusing on young adults. “They’re quick learners and quick to put together information. In that way, they’re an incredible asset to any team.”

Millennials are nicknamed Generation Why for a reason. Experts say they’re like living, breathing search engines, asking question after question. This gives company mentors a huge opportunity to shape millennials’ workplace beliefs and attitudes. These days, mentoring programs can be found everywhere from Fortune 500 firms to the basic-training barracks of the U.S. Army.

Millennials also are motivated by work they find meaningful. For some, that means the chance to give back through a company-sponsored charity. For others, it’s finding value in the daily work you give them. “Philanthropy doesn’t resonate with me,” says 24-year-old Dan Siroker, an associate product manager at Google. “What motivates me is working on products that I think help people’s lives.”

Millennials' Weak Spots

Perhaps you've heard tales of their unreasonable demands ("I'm not working overtime!") and disarming gumption ("Can I have a word with the CEO?"). The cliches do contain grains of truth. As children who grew up hearing about the entrepreneurial heroics of Bill Gates and Jeff Bezos, millennials may be quick to leave your company for what they think is a better opportunity — it doesn't even matter that these are belt-tightening times. "In the last few years, I've definitely noticed a surge of young entrepreneurs — we've lost a couple of great employees," says Zaw Thet, CEO of 4Info, a Silicon Valley-based text messaging company that does work for MTV and NBC. "It might sound surprising, but retaining people has become harder."

Here's another surprise: While millennials are talented text messengers — they tap out up to eight times more monthly mobile-phone messages than baby boomers — they're not all technology wizards. "We're advising companies to perform technological assessments as part of their new-employee orientation," Lancaster says. "Young new hires might be phenomenal on a cell phone but not as great on a computer."

How to Talk About Millennials

Terms associated with millennials:

Helicopter Parent: Parents who hover over their millennial offspring. Acting on the notion that they know best and can help their children make decisions, Helicopter Parents hope to prevent their kids from making missteps.

Black Hawk: A Helicopter Parent who goes to unethical lengths to help his/her child. A dad who helps write his kid's college application essay is a Black Hawk.

Trophy Children: Children driven to succeed in part to please their parents' need for elevated status and bragging rights.

Boomeranging: The act of children moving back into their parents' homes after graduating from college. Parents often welcome their millennial children back into the house. The children are sorely missed and get the opportunity to squirrel away money for a down payment on a house or to start a business.

Additional Resources

Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation by Bill Strauss and Neil Howe. Published in 2000, this was the first broad profile of the generation.

When Generations Collide by Lynne Lancaster and David Stillman. Solutions to workplace clashes based on generational differences.

Managing the Generation Mix by Bruce Tulgan. A step-by-step guide to adjusting your communication and management styles for a wide span of generations.

PBS's "**Generation Next**" webpage. Informed by the network's documentaries on Millennials, the site offers a compilation of audio and video clips, as well as profiles and news stories.

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