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The 'Trophy Kids' Go to Work

With Wall Street in turmoil and a financial system in crisis mode, companies are facing another major challenge: figuring out how to manage a new crop of young people in the work force -- the millennial generation. Born between 1980 and 2001, the millennials were coddled by their parents and nurtured with a strong sense of entitlement. In this adaptation from "The Trophy Kids Grow Up: How the Millennial Generation Is Shaking Up the Workplace," Ron Alsup, a contributor to The Wall Street Journal, describes the workplace attitudes of the millennials and employers' efforts to manage these demanding rookies.

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When Gretchen Neels, a Boston-based consultant, was coaching a group of college students for job interviews, she asked them how they believe employers view them. She gave them a clue, telling them that the word she was looking for begins with the letter "e." One young man shouted out, "excellent." Other students chimed in with "enthusiastic" and "energetic." Not even close. The correct answer, she said, is "entitled." "Huh?" the students responded, surprised and even hurt to think that managers are offended by their highfalutin opinions of themselves.

If there is one overriding perception of the millennial generation, it's that these young people have great -- and sometimes outlandish -- expectations. Employers realize the millennials are their future work force, but they are concerned about this generation's desire to shape their jobs to fit their lives rather than adapt their lives to the workplace.

Although members of other generations were considered somewhat spoiled in their youth, millennials feel an unusually strong sense of entitlement. Older adults criticize the high-maintenance rookies for demanding too much too soon. "They want to be CEO tomorrow," is a common refrain from corporate recruiters.

More than 85% of hiring managers and human-resource executives said they feel that millennials have a stronger sense of entitlement than older workers, according to a survey by CareerBuilder.com. The generation's greatest expectations: higher pay (74% of respondents); flexible work schedules (61%); a promotion within a year (56%); and more vacation or personal time (50%).

"They really do seem to want everything, and I can't decide if it's an inability or an unwillingness to make trade-offs," says Derrick Bolton, assistant dean and M.B.A. admissions director at Stanford University's Graduate School of Business. "They want to be CEO, for example, but they say they don't want to give up time with their families."

Millennials, of course, will have to temper their expectations as they seek employment during this deep economic slump. But their sense of entitlement is an ingrained trait that will likely resurface in a stronger job market. Some research studies indicate that the millennial generation's great expectations stem from feelings of superiority. Michigan State University's Collegiate Employment Research Institute and

MonsterTrak, an online careers site, conducted a research study of 18- to 28-year-olds and found that nearly half had moderate to high superiority beliefs about themselves. The superiority factor was measured by responses to such statements as "I deserve favors from others" and "I know that I have more natural talents than most."

For their part, millennials believe they can afford to be picky, with talent shortages looming as baby boomers retire. "They are finding that they have to adjust work around our lives instead of us adjusting our lives around work," a teenage blogger named Olivia writes on the Web site Xanga.com. "What other option do they have? We are hard working and utilize tools to get the job done. But we don't want to work more than 40 hours a week, and we want to wear clothes that are comfortable. We want to be able to spice up the dull workday by listening to our iPods. If corporate America doesn't like that, too bad."

Where do such feelings come from? Blame it on doting parents, teachers and coaches. Millennials are truly "trophy kids," the pride and joy of their parents. The millennials were lavishly praised and often received trophies when they excelled, and sometimes when they didn't, to avoid damaging their self-esteem. They and their parents have placed a high premium on success, filling résumés with not only academic accolades but also sports and other extracurricular activities.

Now what happens when these trophy kids arrive in the workplace with greater expectations than any generation before them? "Their attitude is always 'What are you going to give me,' " says Natalie Griffith, manager of human-resource programs at Eaton Corp. "It's not necessarily arrogance; it's simply their mindset."

Millennials want loads of attention and guidance from employers. An annual or even semiannual evaluation isn't enough. They want to know how they're doing weekly, even daily. "The millennials were raised with so much affirmation and positive reinforcement that they come into the workplace needy for more," says Subha Barry, managing director and head of global diversity and inclusion at Merrill Lynch & Co.

But managers must tread lightly when making a critique. This generation was treated so delicately that many schoolteachers stopped grading papers and tests in harsh-looking red ink. Some managers have seen millennials break down in tears after a negative performance review and even quit their jobs. "They like the constant positive reinforcement, but don't always take suggestions for improvement well," says Steve Canale, recruiting manager at General Electric Co. In performance evaluations, "it's still important to give the good, the bad and the ugly, but with a more positive emphasis."

Millennials also want things spelled out clearly. Many flounder without precise guidelines but thrive in structured situations that provide clearly defined rules and the order that they crave. Managers will need to give step-by-step directions for handling everything from projects to voice-mail messages to client meetings. It may seem obvious that employees should show up on time, limit lunchtime to an hour and turn off cellphones during meetings. But those basics aren't necessarily apparent to many millennials.

Gail McDaniel, a corporate consultant and career coach for college students, spoke to managers at a health-care company who were frustrated by some of their millennial employees. It seems that one young man missed an important deadline, and when his manager asked him to explain, he said, "Oh, you forgot to remind me." Parents and teachers aren't doing millennials any favors by constantly adapting to their needs, Ms. McDaniel says. "Going into the workplace, they have an expectation that companies will adapt for them, too."

Millennials also expect a flexible work routine that allows them time for their family and personal interests. "For this generation, work is not a place you go; work is a thing you do," says Kaye Foster-

Cheek, vice president for human resources at Johnson & Johnson.

Although millennials have high expectations about what their employers should provide them, companies shouldn't expect much loyalty in return. If a job doesn't prove fulfilling, millennials will forsake it in a flash. Indeed, many employers say it's retention that worries them most.

In the Michigan State/MonsterTrak study, about two-thirds of the millennials said they would likely "surf" from one job to the next. In addition, about 44% showed their lack of loyalty by stating that they would renege on a job-acceptance commitment if a better offer came along.

These workplace nomads don't see any stigma in listing three jobs in a single year on their resumes. They are quite confident about landing yet another job, even if it will take longer in this dismal economy. In the meantime, they needn't worry about their next paycheck because they have their parents to cushion them. They're comfortable in the knowledge that they can move back home while they seek another job. The weak job market may make millennials think twice about moving on, but once jobs are more plentiful, they will likely resume their job-hopping ways.

Justin Pfister, the founder of Open Yard, an online retailer of sports equipment, believes he and his fellow millennials will resist having their expectations deflated. If employers fail to provide the opportunities and rewards millennials seek, he says, they're likely to drop out of the corporate world as he did and become entrepreneurs. "We get stifled when we're offered single-dimensional jobs," he says. "We are multi-dimensional people living and working in a multi-dimensional world."

These outspoken young people tend to be highly opinionated and fearlessly challenge recruiters and bosses. Status and hierarchy don't impress them much. They want to be treated like colleagues rather than subordinates and expect ready access to senior executives, even the CEO, to share their brilliant ideas. Recruiters at such companies as investment-banking firm Goldman Sachs Group Inc. and Amazon.com describe "student stalkers" who brashly fire off emails to everyone from the CEO on down, trying to get an inside track to a job.

Companies have a vested interest in trying to slow the millennial mobility rate. They not only will need millennials to fill positions left vacant by retiring baby boomers but also will benefit from this generation's best and brightest, who possess significant strengths in teamwork, technology skills, social networking and multitasking. Millennials were bred for achievement, and most will work hard if the task is engaging and promises a tangible payoff.

Clearly, companies that want to compete for top talent must bend a bit and adapt to the millennial generation. Employers need to show new hires how their work makes a difference and why it's of value to the company. Smart managers will listen to their young employees' opinions, and give them some say in decisions. Employers also can detail the career opportunities available to millennials if they'll just stick around awhile. Indeed, it's the wealth of opportunities that will prove to be the most effective retention tool.

In the final analysis, the generational tension is a bit ironic. After all, the grumbling baby-boomer managers are the same indulgent parents who produced the millennial generation. Ms. Barry of Merrill Lynch sees the irony. She is teaching her teenage daughter to value her own opinions and to challenge things. Now she sees many of those challenging millennials at her company and wonders how she and other managers can expect the kids they raised to suddenly behave differently at work. "It doesn't mean we can be as indulgent as managers as we are as parents," she says. "But as parents of young people just like them, we can treat them with respect."

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