



# Millennials at Work

## How to manage the 'next great generation'

by: Paul Schwartz, Copier Careers

**“S**tand back all bosses!” CBS correspondent Morley Safer advised in a recent “60 Minutes” segment. “A new breed of American worker is about to attack everything you hold sacred!”

Safer was referring to the “Millennials,” the generation of Americans born between 1982 and 1995. Millennials have just begun to enter the workforce, but already their approach to work and to life has unnerved corporate America — so much so, says Safer, that companies across the nation are shelling out millions to teach their managers “how to deal with this generation that only takes ‘yes’ for an answer.”

The “60 Minutes” report prompted a backlash among young viewers, who condemned it in blogs and on Internet message boards. “What a myopic, unfair representation of the work ethic of my generation,” wrote one viewer.

“Isn’t this the same story you ran when the 60s generation started working?” asked another.

Still, there were plenty of (mostly older) viewers who praised Safer for articulating their objections to young workers. “I say fire all of them,” wrote Jim Backlan of Frederick, Md. “When they get hungry enough they will do what the rest of us did: work hard to put bread on the table.”

Undoubtedly, many employers in the copier/MFP industry share Backlan’s viewpoint, and for good reason. Most of the people who now manage or own independent copier/MFP dealerships started out as entry-level sales reps or technicians; they owe their success to years of hard work and dedication. Ours is not an industry associated with easy money or effortless promotion and yet — if Safer is to be believed — those things are exactly what young employees are after. And if they cannot get them from us, we are told, they will get them from someone else.

It would be convenient if we could tell the entire generation to take its demands — for higher wages, better incentives, more flexible schedules, faster advancement — and shove them. But the laws of supply and demand are in their favor and few business owners can afford to ignore the first generation of Americans to grow up using personal computers. Now that networks and software are the new nuts and bolts of our business, we need young technophiles more than ever to help us sell and service our merchandise.

Companies like Google (which consistently ranks among



America’s top employers) use perks like massages, exercise classes, game rooms, free food and naptimes to attract young employees. Needless to say, we will not see many copier/MFP dealerships installing air hockey tables, hanging hammocks or hiring yoga instructors any time soon. Still, to stay competitive they will need to make a few less-frivolous adjustments.

### “If It Weren’t For You Meddling Kids”

“When you’re finished changing,” wrote Benjamin Franklin, “you’re finished.” Though Franklin and the rest of his “Awakening” generation (born 1701-1723) are long gone, his observation remains as relevant as ever. For the Boomers and Gen-Xers who comprise today’s managerial class, the only protection against redundancy is adaptation. To manage Millennials effectively, you will have to identify fissures in your management technique and change your style accordingly.

How do you know what to change? Try examining your complaints about young workers:

■ **Millennials Require Too Much “Hand-Holding.”** This complaint, common across all industries, is shared by many employers in the copier/MFP business. Employers say that Millennials simply want too much from their managers: too much attention, too much instruction and too much feedback. “You have to give them more direction than other workers,” says one dealer.

"You need to be with them all the time and make sure they're doing their jobs."

**Source of the Problem:** Baby Boomer and Gen-X employees have always favored autonomy in the workplace; they like to do their jobs with as little interference from management as possible. As the Boomers and then the Gen-Xers aged and moved into supervisory roles, they brought with them a hands-off approach that rewarded "self-starters" and eschewed "micromanagement." Although this hands-off style has reigned in the American workplace for decades, it does not always bring out the best in today's young workers. Millennials — many of them raised by an extended family of anxious parents, teachers, counselors and coaches — seek guidance and leadership. Millennials are no less confident or intelligent than anyone else, but they want to be assured that they are doing their jobs correctly. This need for validation is seen by many employers as dependence, incompetence or indecisiveness.

**Tips for Managers:** The best thing managers can do is overcome their distaste for micromanagement — or, as writer Bruce Tulgan calls it, "undermanagement."

"Managers who think they don't have time to manage spend their time managing anyway," he says. "But it's all crisis management that could be avoided if they were hands-on managers every day."

Your duty as a manager is to improve the bottom line by helping your employees succeed. If that means spending more time with young workers, so be it. You are delusional if you expect your employees to adapt to you. Instead, be flexible and manage each employee as an individual with unique strengths, weaknesses and needs.

■ **Millennials Do Not Know How to Work.** Mary Crane, a consultant interviewed for the "60 Minutes" report, exaggeratedly noted that Millennials "have climbed Mount Everest. They've been ... to Machu Picchu. But they've never punched a time clock. They have no idea what it's like to actually be in an office at nine o'clock with people handing them work."

"I don't think these kids have had it as tough as we did," says an employer in the copier/MFP industry. "A lot of them are coming from dual-income families. They didn't have to earn money in their youth and they take it for granted that they're always going to have enough. The work ethic isn't there."

**Source of the Problem:** Although there are myriad exceptions, it is true that some Millennials — particularly those who have graduated from a four-year college — do not have a long work history. There's a reason for this. As Neil Howe and

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William Strauss write in their book "Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation": "Many Millennial teens feel that the payoff on the skills and credentials they could acquire by studying, training or interning are worth a lot more" than the wages they would earn from a part-time job. By the time they enter the workforce, Millennials have worked hard — at school, at sports, at art, at music, at volunteering

and at internships. But Crane is right: some of them have not punched a time clock or felt the sting of poverty or unemployment. Consequently, the term "company time" does not have the power over them that it does over older workers.

**Tips for Managers:** Steven Shepard, a Vermont-based consultant, writes that "nothing will turn off a Millennial faster than work that has no perceived value." They have little stomach for boredom and are determined to find stimulating, worthwhile work. So if you want to keep your Millennials from surfing the Internet, loitering at the snack machine and giving you less than their best effort, you need to keep them challenged and motivated. Help them understand how their efforts contribute to the company's health and take the time to define goals, assess progress and establish criteria for success.

■ **Millennials Are Unprofessional.** From their dress to their vocabulary to their general demeanor, Millennials are often accused of being unprofessional. Steve Say, president of AZ Tech, Tempe, Ariz., says that Millennials do not have the people skills that older workers do. His technician-training curriculum combats this deficiency with lessons on customer service and business etiquette.

Loren Davis, owner of Davis Business Machines, Helene, Mont., believes that standards of dress have degenerated over the past several years and fears that common sense is in retreat. Millennials "are quick to understand technology," he says. "But don't ask them to write a business letter. They can't do it."

**Source of the Problem:** There are surely many complex socio-cultural explanations for why Millennials are the way they are, but suffice it to say that every generation of oldsters thinks the youngsters look funny, talk funny and act funny. And yet, somehow, the world keeps spinning.

**Tips for Managers:** Flip-flops and t-shirts may be okay for the Google crowd, but they are not going to fly in a copier/MFP dealership. Weed out slobos by qualifying job candidates carefully. Would the young person across the desk from you make a good impression on your customers or does

his (or her) behavior or dress leave something to be desired? No matter how young or inexperienced a person is, if he cannot impress you in a job interview there is no way he will impress anyone else once he is on the job. So qualify, qualify, qualify, and before you extend a job offer, make sure to explain your expectations regarding appearance and conduct. If a candidate cannot live with your rules, then he is not the right candidate.

■ **Millennials Want Too Much, Too Fast.** Historically, copier/MFP dealerships and other businesses have hired young, inexperienced people so that they can train them properly and groom them for long-term employment. The problem is that Millennials “want it all” — a killer salary, ample vacation time, flexible hours — without first putting in the requisite hard work. “I believe they think of themselves like merchandise on eBay,” said Marian Salzman, an ad executive interviewed by “60 Minutes.” If Millennials cannot get what they want from their current employer, said Salzman, they will find a new job.

**Source of the Problem:** Millennials insist on getting the best possible compensation because they have to. Tuition costs have skyrocketed over the past decade, real wages have fallen for years and most entry-level salaries barely cover the cost of living. “If you consider that the typical Millennial is expected to pay off thousands of dollars in student loans, fund his own retirement and pay into Social Security without expecting to receive a single dollar in benefits, maybe this generation won’t seem so spoiled,” wrote one “60 Minutes” viewer.

Indeed, many managers do see Millennials as spoiled, greedy, disloyal and unwilling to pay their dues. More often than not, young workers are merely trying to make ends meet. They literally cannot afford to be loyal for the sake of loyalty alone.

**Tips for Managers:** Margins are tight, profits continue to

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dwindle and many copier/MFP dealers are unable to pay their employees as well as they would like to. Even for Millennials, however, money is not everything. Remember that Millennials also place immense value on doing meaningful work and maintaining a healthy work/life balance. A couple of extra vacation days, a more flexible schedule or even a few words of praise may help you improve

your retention rate.

### The Kids Are All Right

In a column for *Business Week*, Liz Ryan writes: “As managers, our job is to hire the people who will make our companies hum. Anyone and everyone who gets hired — and remember that we did, in fact, hire these folks — is likely to cause some disruption. Lumping employees into generational heaps and then labeling them by their generational faults is a crutch for poor managers.”

Ryan is right. Admittedly, it is easier to complain about Millennials as a group than it is to relate to them as individuals, just as it is easier to impugn your subordinates than it is to manage them. Luckily, you are old! You know that a little hard work will not hurt you. So buck up! Quit complaining, learn to reject stereotypes and make every effort to work with — rather than against — the talented young people on your payroll. Even if it has been years since you touched your toes, you can still teach those kids a thing or two about flexibility. ■

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