

Millennials need to get real about work world

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First in a two-part series

Millennials. Can't live with 'em. Can't live without 'em.

That's what many employers tell me about the youngest generation in the workplace.

Advertising executive Owen Hannay, for one, has placed a moratorium on hiring people fresh out of college unless they've done a work-related internship or have an advanced degree.

That's quite a shift for the 45-year-old principal of Slingshot LLC, whose Dallas agency is known for its leading-edge marketing.

It's not that millennials lack the creative genius or technological know-how that he's looking for. Far from it, he says. It's more that they lack the real-world grounding it takes to deal with responsibility, accountability and setbacks.

"They wipe out on life as often as they wipe out on work itself," says Mr. Hannay, who let go more than a dozen millennials from his 130-person staff over the course of 2006.

That's when he stopped hiring them. "They get an apartment and a kitty, and they can't cope. Work becomes an ancillary casualty. They're good kids with talent who want to succeed. That's what makes me nuts."

He turned to Dallasite Cathie Looney, a nationally known speaker and generational expert, to help him understand this age group, the oldest of whom are 27 and just entering the workforce.

He's still not hiring them, but she's teaching him and his largely Gen X and late boomer staff how to work better with the younger folks.

"The biggest thing she does is help us understand where these kids are coming from," Mr. Hannay says. "Their orientation is so different from Gen Xers, who were the latchkey kids and are self-starters. These kids are fabulous at building teams, but they're challenged by responsibility and accountability."

All true, says Ms. Looney, a certified reality therapist and retired director of children and family ministry at St. Michael and All Angels Episcopal Church. And many employers are backing away from hiring them because they're so high maintenance.

"They've been overparented, overindulged and overprotected," she says. "They haven't experienced that much failure, frustration, pain. We were so obsessed with protecting and promoting their self-esteem that they crumble like cookies when they discover the world doesn't revolve around them. They get into the real world and they're shocked.

"You have to be very careful in how you talk to them because they take everything as criticism."

Go, go, go

They are also imminently teachable, Ms. Looney contends, and well worth the effort.

"I love this generation. They're high achievers. They're confident. These kids are go, go, go," she says.

With a growing skilled labor shortage, employers can't just kiss off this group.

"If you want to get the best out of the millennials, you have to invest in them. You have to give them a mentor to teach them how to navigate the adult world," Ms. Looney says. "You have to tell them in black and white what your expectations are for them and what the consequences will be if they don't meet those expectations."

Ms. Looney holds degrees in elementary and secondary education from the University of Mississippi and a master's degree in counseling from the University of Arkansas. Her certification comes from the William Glasser Institute of Reality in California.

Ms. Looney sees the humor in both her name and her certification. "I chose reality therapy because I'm from Mississippi, and there is no reality in Mississippi. So I thought I might find out a little bit about it."

But she's serious about her mission and her message. "Reality therapy is about taking responsibility for your own actions. You can't change other generations. They are what they are. All you have control of is how you deal with them."

She tells employers like Mr. Hannay to start by looking at how this generation was parented.

Women who put careers on the backburner to have children brought a strong work ethic and intensity into parenting, Ms. Looney says.

"We think that our child's success in school is emblematic of our success as a parent. A Harvard decal on the back of your Hummer is a stellar performance review," she says.

But parents of millennials also turned into agents who worried about building self-esteem. Unfortunately, such coddling can lead to workplace meltdowns, Ms. Looney says. "Healthy, resilient people learn life skills from failure and frustration.

"These are kids who have a bunch of participation awards. They think they should be rewarded for showing up at work. You have to say, 'No, no darlin'. You're paid to show up. But you have to do a good job to get a raise.' "

Employers need to play to this group's significant strengths. Millennials are highly educated, well-traveled, goal-oriented, technologically superior and great team players.

"They're connected 24/7. They know people all over the world. Their pen pal is in Singapore, and by pen pal I mean Facebook. And they're willing to share their networks. If they see an injustice done in the workplace, they band to fight that injustice."

Hovering parents

She says you can tell a lot about the generations by their homes: "Gen Xers wanted to reclaim the inner city. Millennials say, 'I don't mind living with my parents.' "

"These kids are fabulous, but they need to cut the umbilical cord," she says. "Parents are showing up at their kids' work. They call about their kids' reviews or whether they're going to get a raise."

To fend off such parental intervention, Ms. Looney suggests employers write thank-you notes to offending parents: "Thanks for this great kid. We're really enjoying him or her. Aren't you glad your work's now over?" "

Coming Sunday: Garrett Creek Ranch is trying to help employers bridge the generational communications gap.

AGE AND ATTITUDES

"To understand the millennials, you have to understand all of the generations and how they fit together," says Cathie Looney, who, at 57, is a baby boomer in age but not in spirit.

Here's her take on her generation and the next two.

Baby boomers (1946 to 1964)

"The world revolved around us as children. We're the spoiled brats. We had a decadelong temper tantrum beginning in the mid '60s. In the '80s, it was acquire, acquire, acquire. In the 1990s, many of us who'd postponed parenting for careers had children. We're the 'I, I, I, me, me, me' generation. We want to think of ourselves as altruistic, but we always make sure that we take a picture of ourselves standing in front of the house that we helped rebuild."

Gen Xers (1965 to 1980)

"These are the latchkey kids who had to bring themselves up as mothers went off to break the glass ceiling. Over half of this generation come from divorced families and over half from two working parents. They're self-reliant but don't trust others as much. They're great entrepreneurs. You can give them a project, and they'll get it done. But they don't like working in teams. They are more of an angry generation. They see themselves as wedged between entitled boomers and millennials."

Millennials (1981 to present)

"They've been told they were special since the day they were born. Their idea of one-on-one is text-messaging, but they love groups and are great team players. They don't wear watches. They find the time on their cellphones. They never had their own alarm clock. Mama got them up. Nickelodeon, *Sports Illustrated for Kids*, Pottery Barn for Kids, Gap Kids. For goodness' sake, Las Vegas even went family.

"Parents – both boomers and Gen Xers – thought they could give their kids self-esteem, forgetting that each one of us earns our own self-esteem."