

Interviewing and Hiring Millennials

by Jim Kennedy

After I crossed the finish line at the Bay-to-Breakers race in San Francisco last year, I spotted a woman wearing a Google Talent Scout T-shirt and carrying a sign that read “We are looking for brilliant minds” and provided her e-mail address.

She told me that before she’d crossed the finish line, she’d received résumés from over 500 other participants. I’m willing to bet that most of those BlackBerry-toting runners were Millennials.

Who Are They?

Loosely defined, the Millennial generation includes everyone born between 1979 and 2000. There are 75 million of them, and their response to the Google recruiter was typical. Influenced by the Internet, hands-on parenting, and a world in flux, Millennials are multi-taskers, plugged in, self-assured, and constantly angling for new jobs.

In spite or because of this, some experts think that they have the potential to be the next “greatest generation.” (See Verhaagen D., *Parenting the Millennial Generation*, 2005.) Employers aren’t so sure.

Prior to a presentation at the April 2008 NALP Annual Education Conference, I did some research through NALP and augmented it with feedback from my own clients. I learned that 87% of firms have some concern about Millennial attitudes and behavior. Sixty percent were “concerned or very concerned” about these issues.

What is it about Millennials that causes such different responses? And what does that mean for prospective employers? Looking at the general trend of Millennial influences as well as strengths and limitations may help us understand more.

Millennial Influences

By any standard, many Millennials have had a privileged upbringing. Born to parents who alternately push, coddle, and advocate for them, they are pressured to succeed, while at the same time shielded from the challenges of growing up.

Many are protected from competitive pressure so as to sustain a high self-esteem. Their belief is built on praise, and the absence of criticism or judgment, instead of genuine achievements. The recreation department in the Cleveland suburb of Beachwood, Ohio, cancelled this year’s annual Fourth of July all-star youth baseball game for 9- to 12-year-olds because it didn’t want any children to be excluded. The department decided children under age 13 should not play competitive sports.

Such protection may not prepare Millennials to confidently address workplace realities, not to mention a worsening job market and rising debt. At the same time their values now also reject many of the hallmarks of their parents’ lives: divorce, workaholicism, stress-related illness, and a life devoid of fun and meaningful relationships. (See Rebecca Huntley, *The World According to Y*, page 20.)

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Millennial Strengths

Some clear Millennial strengths include the following characteristics.

- **Education.** Tend to be highly educated — undergraduate enrollment has almost doubled since 1970.
- **Technology.** Technological experts who know how to find information quickly, and can presumably multi-task with head-spinning ease.
- **Teamwork.** Live and breathe connectivity, thereby exhibiting strong networking skills and ability to work well in teams.
- **Enthusiasm.** Want challenging and non-boring work where they can affect the outcome of their work, and as a result are responsive to mentoring and personal coaching.
- **Inclusive.** More inclusive, open-minded, and tolerant than previous generations. Sixty percent say they have dated someone of another race. (See “The ‘Millennials’ Come of Age,” Jayson S, *USA Today*, 29 June 2006.)
- **Civic involvement.** More engaged with the world than any generation since the Boomers. This has powerful implications in terms of their interest in pro bono work and their time to perform it.

Millennial Limitations

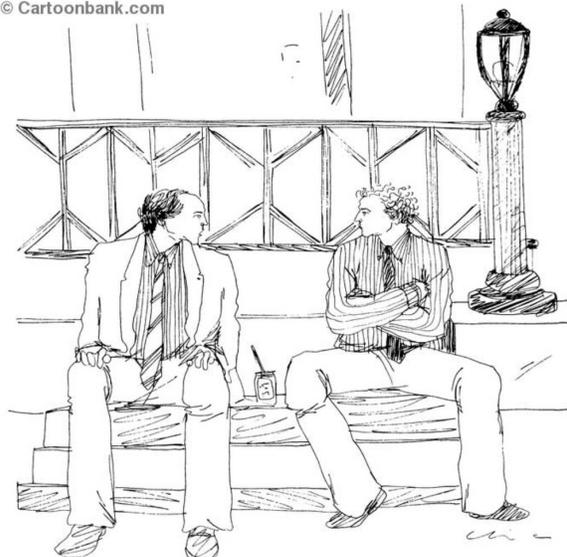
Now for the bad news. Fairly or not, Millennials are often noted for:

- **Over-inflated sense of self.** Doting parents willing to advocate on their behalf and a lifetime of often unearned praise have given many Millennials a false sense of self-esteem — one that doesn’t stand up well to criticism. This can make

Millennials resistant to on-the-job critiques and performance reviews. It can also foster a sense of entitlement, a “What can you do for me?” attitude. One example is the summer associate who expects to be paid for days off because he worked late on other days.

- **4-F work values.** When it comes to committing to a career, some Millennials are 4-F, that is, they have four values that come *before* work: Friends, Fun, Free time, and Family. Work is reduced to something that’s done between weekends. “Millennials will make a commitment to their friends that they wouldn’t dream of making to a job or company.” (See *The World According to Y*, Rebecca Huntley, page 40.)
- **Commitment.** The question for interviewers is, “How do a candidate’s values influence his or her commitment to work and interest in a career? A sign of declining loyalty to a law firm career is the fact that law students are now asking as part of their interview process to see the firm’s “Alumni Roster.” This way they can judge the firm as a place to start on the basis of how good a launching pad it will be to other positions outside the firm that initially hires them.

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“Well, I’m employed by them, but I’m working for me.”

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- **Multi-tasking.** This can be a good thing in small doses. But research shows that multi-tasking impairs performance because it forces the brain to share processing resources. Multi-tasking also adversely affects how we learn, making it harder to retrieve the information in the future. Only very skilled multitaskers can override all distractions (the irrelevant stuff) and process and remember the relevant information effectively. Millennials aren't interested in having knowledge or remembering information (and are not apologetic if they don't). Instead, they value knowing how to *find* information. Perhaps the skill of multi-tasking needs to be explored in the interview, especially for future litigators. After all, how effective is any lawyer who text messages friends while also doing a document review or proofreading a contract?
- **Lack of work experience.** The time-honored summer job has given way to projects intended to impress university admissions committees — such as building dams in Guatemala or learning three languages. All admirable. But if applicants have no real work experience, how can you predict work ethic?
- **Use the Interview Funnel™ Model.** This conversational behavioral interviewing technique focuses on the student's past experiences. It is more effective than probing directly for individual competencies with "Give me an example..." type of questions since memories and thoughts are organized by past experiences, not by competencies. Using the Interview Funnel™ model replaces using the candidate's résumé as a prop to get you through the interview and allows for a more authentic exchange of information. And because this technique is similar to a deposition, it's easy for attorneys to adopt.
- **Be authentic.** Firms need to be more careful about the messages they send. If you say, "This is a great place to work," students assume that means reasonable hours — no nights or weekends. You're better off saying, "We're nice people, we work very hard, and we offer great training and career growth." If hard work and long hours are a reality in your firm, you owe it to students — and to your firm — to let them know what they're getting into before they sign on.

Questions to probe motivation. We've developed dozens of questions to help determine if Millennial applicants have the right motivation and feel committed. Some of these questions are provided below. Have your lawyers try one or two of the following questions in their next interview.

Interview Solutions

Millennials represent a vital new talent pool, but selecting and hiring them won't be easy. Still, I believe that the challenges they represent can be countered with the right interview techniques. I suggest the following.

- **Confirm key competencies.** To identify a candidate's motivation correctly, interviewers need to listen for evidence of ten key competencies in the candidate's answers, all of which tend to be Millennial shortfalls: Problem Solver, Adaptable, Independent, Self-confident, Client-oriented, Continuous Learner, Goal-oriented, Hard working, Initiative, and Self-Motivated. Compare what you learn about the candidate to this list. The lack of too many of these competencies can suggest a risky hire.
- What did you do in school when you got a lower grade than you thought you deserved?
- Where do you see yourself on a continuum in terms of your interest in "the law" or "being a lawyer?"
- What would make you *want* to come to work versus *have* to come to work?
- Describe what would be an ideal work environment for you.
- What do you consider to be reasonable hours?
- If you joined us, what would sustain your motivation and commitment if you found you had to put in really long hours?

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- How will you know in the first three months if you made the right choice?
- What concerns would you have about joining us?
- What do you hope this job is *not*?

The Millennial generation brings great talent to the workplace along with new values about work, commitment, and careers. Law firms need to understand all of this and be especially careful during the selection process. Failure to do this successfully will accelerate long-term problems in associate retention and motivation. Effectively interviewing and hiring talented Millennials is a skill that can be learned.

Jim Kennedy has addressed many NALP conferences on lawyer hiring issues. His firm has trained attorney interviewers for 25 years. He can be reached through his website, www.interviewedge.com