The Millennials: Why This Generation Will Challenge the Workplace Like No Other

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We are not ready for our children to go to work.

I don’t mean this in a protective, letting go sense. But rather in a “my-god-what-have-we-done” sense as we hire and manage our children’s generation. Are they, and our workplaces, on a collision course?

Unlike the Boomer flower children, the iPod kids are not about the counterculture. In fact, they are the culture and it is our workplaces that are out of sync with the new 24/7, global, plugged-in, downloading, computer-interfacing rhythms of the digital society.

As I watch my sixteen-year-old do her homework I realize the future is already here. She’s tapping away on her wireless laptop, linking to her assignment from the teacher’s web site. She’s researching on Google, and copying and pasting quotes and stats into Word. Yes, I think approvingly, this is what the wise use of technology should look like. But, of course, there’s more. She’s got six IM chats open. A couple, thankfully, are about the homework and the upcoming dance recital. But the others are about weekend plans, the hot movie, the cute boy. All topped off by a flaming session among the girls. At the same time she’s updating her profile on MySpace, downloading music, burning CDs – and talking on the phone.

“Marisela, are you doing your work?” I ask with that father-knows-best tone. “Yes, Papi, don’t worry.” “But what is the quality of that work,” I continue with furrowed brow. “Papi, don’t worry. It’ll be fine.” And sure enough it is, as that quintessential scorecard, the report card, shows.

I can just see her and her classmates at their first job. They are outside catching some rays. They are on high definition wireless laptops they have slipped out of their purses. They are shaping a client report while planning their service vacation to Costa Rica, doing their holiday shopping, updating their resume on Monster, catching up on the latest outrage on YouTube. And always with ever-present multi-instant communication with co-workers, family, and friends around the world to the beat of background music by their favorite artists.

Sure enough, the judgments about this Generation are flying. “Not serious about hard work.” “Distracted.” “Self-centered.” “Not interested in learning from how things were done in the past.” “Don’t want to pay their dues.” “They spend too much time online.” “They want to be CEO in just five years.” And on....
As a diversity leader, I’ve seen that a telltale sign of inclusion breakdown is when judgments pop up unchallenged and groupthink sets in about the newcomer. When behaviors by others are different from behaviors we believe are right, it elicits one of two reactions about the other: They either are incompetent or a bad person. This is now happening in reaction to the Millennials. As in other forms of diversity, this kind of stance not only is exclusionary, it is not helpful in addressing the real issues. Today, generational diversity is as much an issue as gender and racial diversity.

And resolve this divide we must—not only to nurture inclusive environments that enhance corporate culture and optimize results, but also because the workforce will need to adapt to the Millennials’ way of doing things. Just by nature of who they are, these Millennials will transform the workplace. Already they are transforming the U.S. political landscape: The 25-and-under generation is voting in record numbers and influencing the outcomes in the 2008 presidential elections.1 It’s not just their values and idealism, but also their technological savvy that lets them build a digital grassroots movement advocating for their beliefs. If they end up being a key factor in who wins the general election, their impact will be felt not only in the U.S. but throughout the world, given the many global issues at stake today.

Who Are the Millennials?

Not only is there not exact agreement on what they should be called (Millennials, Generation Y, Gen Y’ers, Nexters, Generation Next, Digital Generation, I-Generation, Net Generation, Netizens, Gaming Generation, Echo Boomers, Boomlets, Baby Busters), there are also discrepancies on how many they are, given different year ranges for categorizing them.

Is it 1978-1995, 1981-1993, or 1980-2000? Depending on the date ranges, the cohort number ranges from 70 to 80 million. Regardless of the exact dates and ages, in the U.S. this is a very large group, as large in numbers as the Boomers, and almost 50% bigger than the Xers.2 Simply said, these are teens and twenty-somethings—the quibbles address how far into the twenties and how low into the teens one goes.

The life events that have shaped this generation include: 9/11, Oklahoma City, Columbine, global warming, AIDS, Katrina, Enron, the Iraq War, globalization, the digital revolution, a wildly fluctuating stock market, the rise of India and China, and an overall decline in the U.S.’ stature. In the workplace, the Millennials are coming of age when layoffs, merit pay, and merit promotions are the norm.

Not only do these headlines of death, destruction, and increased competition make Millennials very present about today and enjoying the moment to the max, they also tend to be socially and environmentally conscious. They are a pragmatic bunch. They know their work arrangements are transactional and that they must be prepared to move on when the deal no longer works for them or their employer. Given the uncertainty both in the workplace and in the world, many Millennials place friends, family, and the community ahead of work.
A Special Relationship with Parents

Many Millennials grew up in dual career households that, while more hectic, tended to be more child-centric, wherein both fathers and mothers were very involved with their kids. In fact, parents remain so involved that there is an unprecedented close relationship between Millennials and their parents: According to research compiled by Tamara Erickson of the Concourse Institute, 90% report being very close to their parents. Compare that to 40% of Boomers who said back in the Seventies that they would be better off without their parents! Millennials see their parents as role models. This translates into them trusting authority (parents 86%, teachers 86%, police 83%). With this closeness many have become equal partners in family decisions, including where to go on vacation or major purchases like the new flat-screen TV, hybrid car, or dog. Working Mother Media’s CEO, Carol Evans, says, “We Boomers rebelled against our parents. And now as parents ourselves we have vowed to not let social change become a barrier between us and our children.”

The children are reciprocating by reaching out to their parents for help with their own major decisions. Parents get very involved in college applications and even in their child’s job seeking processes, earning the moniker of “helicopter parents” for their tendency to hover. Nevertheless, Millennials expect to stay close; and ironically, to the chagrin of many parents, they are open to moving back home after college. Marrying later and being indebted earlier than previous generations makes living at home more appealing to Millennials struggling to pay down both credit card and tuition debt.

Diverse and Global

The Millennials are highly diverse. Among people 18 and under, 33% report being racial or ethnic minorities compared to 10% when their parents were their age. Women are expected to go to college and compete equally with men for any job. Homosexuality for Millennials is not a big deal—teens are more comfortable coming out, and find they are accepted by many of their peers. My daughter, in fact, reassures my boy wariness by telling me about certain guys, “Don’t worry Papi, he’s gay.”

Among my daughter’s teenage peers, global experience is common. Marisela spent six months in Lima, Peru during her high school sophomore year, her friend Rebecca spent a summer with her Argentinean relatives in Buenos Aires. Anna went on a multi-week service trip to Ecuador. Paulina traveled with her grandma to the Czech Republic and in a ceremony carried a Holocaust Torah back to its original synagogue home.

Our kids’ global network extends through their digital network. Text messages fly between a café in Miraflores, Peru and our car on I-80 on the way to visit relatives in Kansas. Webcam chats allow not only for keeping in touch but also for introducing each other’s friends to one another. VOIP web conferencing happens simultaneously, connecting family and friends in Guadalajara, Simi Valley, Miami, Chicago, San Diego, and Lima.
Millennials are emerging as perhaps the first global culture. Globalization supported by technology means a shared experience through world events like the rise of terrorism. Technology such as iTunes and cell phones have also played a role in shaping Millennials’ worldviews and how they think, play, and work.

**How Millennials Are Challenging the Workplace**

Who Millennials are affects what they are looking for in an employer. And they are looking continually. Nearly a third (32%) are looking for new jobs compared to 26% of Xers and 18% of Boomers. In the midst of the Talent War this is worrisome for employers. One managing consulting firm reports that by 2010 half of its workforce will be Millennials. Some 62% of CDW’s workforce currently is under 40. For companies like these, getting it right with Millennials is an economic life and death issue.

The younger generation comes through the door more restless than ever. They want to be valued, put to work, rewarded, and affirmed from the get-go. They will, or are already, challenging the workplace in the following ways:

*They challenge the tenure paradigm.* Experience and knowledge is no longer correlated with age, they argue as they show up iPod’ed, iTuned, cell-phoned, globally traveled, socially networked, and multitasking. For the older generation this is not just about not being up to date with “what kids are up to nowadays” but about the very competencies and technical skills today’s marketplace demands. Who is better equipped?

*They challenge best practices mentality.* Globalization, and the technology that enabled it, have been paradigm-busters that are not yet done in changing the rules of the game. Millennial power rides on the speed in which knowledge doubles. It used to take centuries, now it takes months. The Boomer approach of “let me show you the best practices forged over time” is doomed to obsolescence simply because those practices worked in the past. Millennials operate in a just-in-time mode where a “best practice” lasts as long as the project does.

*They challenge traditional planning.* Millennials live synchronous lives where inputs come from all over at all times and decisions are made accordingly. They coordinate, not plan. Plans are fixed artifacts for a sequential world—in a multitasking, hyperconnected, 24/7 world “plans” don’t hold up. I watch my daughter and friends coordinate where to meet on a Saturday night. For me growing up it was, “Meet you at 7 p.m. in front of the bakery next to the movie theater. I’ll wait for you for 15 minutes. If we don’t meet up then plan B will be….“ For her it’s “See you around 7 p.m. downtown.” And then, at around 7: “I’m downtown, where are you? ” “Walking up the side street with the crazy mannequins.” “Ok, I’ll start walking there, call me when you get to the fountain.” Moments later, “Hey, we just ran into Ricardo before we got to the fountain.” Moments later, “Hey, we just ran into Ricardo before we got to the fountain.” We are now by the ice cream place, meet us there….“ This is how they are going to manage their projects in the workplace. Ready?
They challenge being told what to do. They want to be empowered: Give us a problem to be solved and the right tools, they say, and we will figure it out. Paradoxically, and this may be due to their better relationships with parents, they want to be coached and mentored when needed. They want to be both autonomous and connected at the same time. Command and control management is out. Coaching and collaborative management is in.

They challenge rigidity in time, space, job, and career. Where and when we work should not matter as long as the work gets done, they declare. Connecting, even thousands of miles away, is as easy as connecting face-to-face. In fact, even better because we can all be in more places at once. Who I am, what I do, and the jobs and careers around me need to evolve iteratively and continuously, like software version releases. How will MyJob 1.0 evolve into MyJob 2.0? 5.3? 7.9?

How Corporations Can Prepare and Change

Given these urgent challenges, current corporate philosophies, practices, and policies will not do in attracting, engaging, and retaining this generation. That is why I believe this generation will challenge the workforce like no other. Current people practices were designed during a very different era. So much of what is reality today—and often the only reality the Millennials know—did not exist when today’s people practices were designed. Benefits, performance management systems, and corporate cultures were designed to solve a different set of needs and problems for a very different workforce.

Corporations need to start making some fundamental changes.

CREATE DESIGNER JOBS, CAREERS, BENEFITS

Millennials don’t get “standard.” They have been able to design their travel experiences (extreme mountain biking in the Andes during the day, white tablecloth dinner at night), tennis shoes (color, shapes, favorite saying stamped on the heel), musical set lists (Shakira, Tony Bennett, Snoop Dogg one after the other burned on the CD).

Three trends fuel this: technology, rapid change, diversity. Technology enables a cost effective way to customize products and services. Rapid change makes yesterday’s standard so, well, yesterday. Diversity generates demand for multiple types of solutions, not only from the perspective of race/ethnicity, gender, and nationality, but also in terms of personality, thinking styles, and even hobbies. MySpace, MyYahoo, MyObama are only the beginning. Here comes MyJob, MyCareer, MyBenefits. In this universe time and place are not fixed; they bend, flex, blur into different dimensions that dislocate fixed structures.
Designer Benefits

For example, let’s look at how benefit packages must change. Much as Millennials busted up the paradigm that an artist or producer determines the music set list through a mass-produced CD, I believe they will reject corporations determining their “set list” of benefits. What would be value added for the programmer, financial analyst, or communicator who also happens to be a marathon runner, social services volunteer, or community thespian? The solution should address the needs of a culturally, racially/ethnically diverse generation with a multiplicity of worldviews around money, health, and success that is virtual, autonomous, empowered, and continually digitally connected.⁷

Fixed benefits plans (even with the limited flexibility offered by cafeteria style design) will not be able to withstand these pressures and demands. Corporations will need to give up trying to figure out what is best for their employees with the fixed categories of health, wealth, and paid time off. Corporations would do well to emulate the new iTunes paradigm, which shattered the model of buying fixed set lists and reduced music purchasing to the basic unit of a song.

“Give us a budget and diverse options and we will decide what best enables our multifaceted lives,” Millennials are saying. Think of the possibilities. Instead of a free physical, the twenty-something may opt for credits for solar powering their homes or buying a hybrid car. Others may want to subscribe to short-term paid sabbaticals every six months. Still others may take a $500 credit at a camping retailer to fund their adventure travel, or choose a paid community service day twice a month.

Of course, corporations still have fiduciary responsibility. Companies may still want to require that at least 20% of their employees’ MyBenefits goes to catastrophic health insurance. Or they may employ automatic enrollment in their 401(k) plans, to provide a starting point that employees can choose to continue in or opt out of.

Companies will need to obsess about the interface to enable these options. Content is important, but for Millennials the interface is everything. If it doesn’t sing they will abandon it. The iTunes 99 cent one-song paradigm is brilliant, but it is the clean, attractive, easy-to-use interface that enabled the revolution. As people make more and more complex decisions, Millennials will value smart decision support tools, offered in the spirit of coaching and mentoring. At Hewitt, we are moving in this direction via a benefits delivery interface called People Like Me™, which provides users some decision support about what choices may work best for them by pulling up the stories of people in similar circumstances and backgrounds.
Designer Jobs and Careers

The job is dead! Long live the job! Jobs that look the same day after day, fixed in their definitions of roles and responsibilities, must go. Instead, for Millennials, the job experience must match the fast moving, connected, iterative world they live in. Project-based jobs may better fit their restlessness. This generation will want to choose whom they work with across functions, geographies, and companies. Millennials will be seeking employers that have designed jobs to be broken into pieces or modules that can be easily manipulated into nonstandard work arrangements.

Think about what Leah Campbell, a colleague’s college-age daughter, will be looking for in a job. At Wesleyan University she has made up her own major, “Embodiment Studies.” Check this out: In order to better understand interpersonal and inter-cultural dynamics, in this major she explores, in her words, “how people move through the socio-physical environment, between individuals and among groups, in ways that distinguish, excite, blur, and uphold their conceptions of self-identity.” Her course work includes cultural studies, dance, architecture, psychology, philosophy, and anthropology. Surely she, and many of her peers, will carry this drive for self-expression and meaningful relational thinking into their job expectations.

Companies will need to create a process and interface that announces the available projects individuals can compete for. Of course, job candidates will need to meet criteria for competencies and technical skills, but rather than living in a fixed job description, their competencies will need to be seen as portable from project to project. Clearly some jobs are more conducive to this than others. But be alert to not getting stuck in assumptions about what may or may not work.

These designer jobs should be shaped to offer meaning, as Millennials pursue a portfolio of diverse concerns: career, family, planet. In their commitment to a greener, safer, more progressive world, Millennials want employers that share their philosophy of balancing hard work with having fun and giving back. This is not just about flexibility to take time off and pursue interests outside of work. It’s also about finding ways for the work itself to be more meaningful.

This can come in two different flavors: jobs that are advertised as contributing something tangible for the betterment of the world (medical devices for improving quality of life, green solutions that improve the environment) and jobs where the core skills and competencies can be devoted to improving humanity. Give engineers, for example, a percentage of time during which they can work on pro bono side projects. How to fund this? In one survey, Millennials indicated they are willing to make tradeoffs such as some pay in order to better live their values.
Designer jobs, of course, take us to designer careers for many of the same reasons. Wanting to save the planet, conquer Machu Picchu, or just do something different, will take Millennials on what could seem like circuitous career paths. Corporations will not only have to offer greater flexibility for them to do this, but also not see these pursuits as detours but rather as opportunities for developing leadership skills and job competencies. And, beware: Millennials are not the only people pushing this button. Already a growing number of working mothers and fathers want to off-ramp for a few months or years to raise their children, and then ramp back on without a sense that they are now forever on the corporate slow lane.

Can career maps be embedded with the developmental and experiential value of stepping out into a great new adventure—whether it be parenting, community development, or trekking in the Andes? In the midst of a Talent War, wouldn’t companies want to find ways to nurture their growing alumni network as an already-developed talent pool that it can tap?

CREATE A CULTURE OF CONTINUOUS COACHING, SUPPORT, AND COLLABORATION

Provide Continuous Feedback

Used to instant metrics on the web (YouTube Views, Amazon Rankings, “Who will win the election?” “Should paparazzi stop hounding Britney?”) Millennials expect to know at every moment how they are performing—gimme my score—but without too much analysis. Thumbs up/thumbs down is good enough while they look up briefly from texting on their cell phones. And don’t wait until the yearly review to tell them how they are doing!

When it comes to development, a legacy of constant praise from parents means Millennials expect attention. Mentors and managers who coach, and not give directives, are welcome. Managers who give Millennials the freedom to decide how to do their work, give them ownership of projects or portions of projects, and stay in touch constantly, yet unobtrusively, will motivate and get the best out of their young workers.

This is not an idealistic or cynical crowd. They are, above all, pragmatic. They are task-based rather than process-oriented. Instead of explaining best practices, or spending too much time doing upfront training, from Day One give them the opportunity to make important contributions on the job. Get them started right away, with objectives to achieve and great technological tools to use. In their horizontal, flat world they will find each other, share lines of code, urls, emails, videos, photos, web sites in order to find solutions.

Employers also will do well by giving Millennials markers of achievement—frequently attainable goals and milestones, titles, new responsibilities, and small but frequent promotions. Pay broadbarding structures that have workers slogging through vast expanses of time before a promotion is attained are going to have to go.
Create Ultra-collaborative Environments

In the Millennial social nerve system, all team members are connected to one another through texting, cell phones, email, social networking pages, and mass media. Problem solving is a group effort, particularly since today's technology makes instant collaboration possible. In helping a friend from Peru find colleges to attend in the U.S., my daughter and friend are connected via VOIP and web cam as they surf the web together and send each other links. They are downloading media players, java scripts, and watching campus orientation videos while filling out forms and emailing them to each other—the thousands of miles between them irrelevant.

Ultra collaboration is not just between a few individuals or even many individuals within an organization. It is also with competitors, customers, and academics. It’s even with avatars, virtual entities created by real people but who have their own names and identities.

In “Wikinomics: How Mass Collaboration Changes Everything,” authors Don Tapscott and Anthony Williams show how masses of people are creating TV news stories, sequencing the human genome, remixing their favorite music, designing software, finding a cure for disease, editing school texts, inventing new cosmetics, and writing the global encyclopedia, Wikipedia.10 The blogosphere is teeming with voices bouncing ideas, criticism, and opinions off each other in an ever-present, hyperkinetic fashion that accelerates the development of new ideas, products, and services and which are disseminated globally instantly.

Among its hundreds of stories, “Wikinomics” shares the case study of the Geek Squad, Best Buy’s electronics and computer support service. One of the Geek Squad managers uses multiplayer games such as Battlefield 2 for members to exchange best practices and solve problems. While inside the game, Geek Squad members interspersed fights with quick exchanges about solving clients problems. They played, talked, demo’ed, and networked simultaneously—sometimes with as many as 384 members at a time. This mass collaboration improved on-the-job performance by keeping members connected. In the process, it helped them deliver $280 million to the bottom line.11

At Hewitt, CEO Russ Fradin writes a blog that allows anyone across a nearly 25,000-strong global talent base to reply with affirmations, challenges, and new ideas. This mass collaboration between the CEO and frontline employees leads to changes in policies and programs.

Hierarchy and control are not tenable in the same way as before. All this requires greater transparency and less spin. Things can’t be hidden when thousands are connected and for $25 they can get anyone’s personal records. Ready to allow thousands of employees to write the employee policies, co-create with customers, and define the company’s best practices?
A Final Word

Key to creating collaborative environments is attention to diversity and inclusion by equipping individuals and organizations to navigate differences so that they can collaborate. Building crosscultural competence across all workers is vital. In my crosscultural work I advocate for reciprocal adaptation. The trick for Boomers, and Xers, and Millennials is to stop judging each other and start valuing what each brings to the table. Creating a productive and winning enterprise means moving from “I tolerate your difference,” to “I need your difference—and you need mine. Together let’s solve the world’s problems.”

With every new wave, whether it be in art, business, technology, or politics, there is resistance. Newcomers with new ideas invite skepticism and balking. This time it’s youth who are crashing the party. The Millennials are in the building. RUUP4IT? 12

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Diversity is the mix. Inclusion is making the mix work.™
About the Author
Andrés Tapia is a Senior Diversity Executive, which includes workforce and HR transformation both inside Hewitt and with Hewitt’s clients. As Hewitt Associates’ Chief Diversity Officer/Emerging Workforce Solutions Leader, he is responsible for leading the company in its internal and external diversity vision. He develops diversity strategies hard-wired to the business strategies. He is responsible for embedding diversity implications, concepts, and strategies into Hewitt’s client solutions and services to drive organizational-wide change.

Using his training and experience in journalism, history, political science, and HR, Mr. Tapia has created innovative approaches to the firm’s attraction, retention, and development strategies to foster an inclusive working environment. This includes shifting the diversity paradigm from one based on tolerance and sensitivity to one based on crosscultural competence. Working with current national and global demographic trends, he also focuses on the implications of varying worldviews around health, wealth, and performance by the growing number of diverse groups in the workplace.

Mr. Tapia holds a B.A. in History with an emphasis in journalism and political science from Northwestern University.

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