

Getting the Next Generation to Work for You

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by Jordana Willner

Your entry-level job applicants resemble the teenyboppers on MTV. Your youngest employees look like your children. The media's hype about an apathetic, short-attention-spanned new generation causes you to doubt the abilities of your "twenty-something" workers.

Welcome to the new generation gap.

The next generation—the enigmatic, flannel-wearing, denim-ripping, MTV-watching products of the Watergate era—have grown up and are hitting the job market, eager to fill entry-level positions in the American work force. And you, their managers, are baffled.

Just who are these young workers? Is the new crop of recent college graduates as lazy and hopeless as years of hype have suggested? Will they really be the first generation to fall short of their parents' accomplishments? How should you lead a precocious generation that grew up hard and fast in a rapidly changing world?

Not knowing what or who to expect, you may fear that your young applicants are ignorant, unskilled, and disinterested. This notion couldn't be further from the truth.

Despite all the negative publicity, a modern, unique generation has emerged in the '90s. Born into a riotous, post-Watergate, post-Vietnam, post-1960s US to baby boomer parents, today's recent college graduates grew up quickly to the beat of cable television, music videos, personal computers, rampant divorce rates, and the gluttonous 1980s. But while rumors of laziness and apathy persist, surveys find this group ambitious, energized, and poised for success.

With bachelor's degrees in hand, these new workers are scratching at the corporate gate, eager for that first job—their runway to professional greatness. Unfortunately, they carry a negative image and a unique perspective that is neither understood nor acknowledged by the leaders who buy into the stereotypes. As a result, where ambitious entry-level workers hope to find professional challenges, inspiring mentors, and hard work, they are instead facing low expectations, boring jobs, and a disappointing lack of leadership. Productivity and morale are low among entry-level workers, and unless something changes, you risk underutilizing—and losing—your best young talent.

There are some good young, raw materials out there. By recognizing the skills and nurturing the ambitions of this unique young group, you can lead your youngest employees to optimal productivity. Debunking the following 10 common concerns about the next generation entering the work force will help you productively put these eager young graduates to work.

Misconception #1: The next generation is lazy

The media and entertainment industries have foretold a lazy generation. But in reality, young adults are dedicated to individual pursuits of special interests, lofty goals, burning ambitions, and behind-the-scenes projects that fuel actions and fill time. In an age of abundance and success, recent college graduates believe deeply in their abilities to succeed.

Above all else, they fear boredom. The video game-playing, channel-clicking, Walkman-listening generation is unaccustomed to down time, and in professional situations where they are underutilized they fall prey to that very condition.

Don't make the mistake of assuming members of the next generation are lazy. Instead, try putting their remarkable energy to work for you.

- Keep them busy. Extract as much work as possible
- Recognize the signs when they are not challenged and provide more work

- Anticipate when they may finish their assignments and be prepared with more work to give them
- Teach them to generate and supply their own work so they do not always depend on you
- Demonstrate a busy, productive work model

Misconception #2: The next generation doesn't care about anything

Young adults of the '90s have not taken to the streets with political protests, sit-ins, and campus upheaval, thus the common perception that they are apathetic. However, being practical and self-involved, they care about what affects their own interests. Inspire their motivation and personal investment by helping them feel like members of the company and by associating its success with their own:

- Demonstrate the connection between their work and the company's success
- Keep them informed of company news
- Encourage their participation in meetings and events
- Ask what they think—show that the company values their opinions and insights
- Link their outside interests and special skills to their work
- Share compliments—let them feel proud of their accomplishments
- Let others outside your team or department know where they have contributed

Misconception #3: The next generation is disloyal and unreliable. They won't stay in a job

In these fast-paced times of economic success, work force turnover, mergers, downsizing, and subcontracting, employee loyalty is rare and unpredictable—among employees of any age. Young workers are equally unpredictable. The fact that they grew up in a time of change and increasing disloyalty means you face a greater challenge in creating an appealing, challenging work environment. However, the challenge isn't impossible.

- Keep in touch with your young employees. Know them and recognize the signs when they are involved, bored, or detached
- Create a strong enough relationship that they are likely to tell you, in advance, when they plan to leave or seek other work
- Challenge them, so their accomplishments bring them pride and personal investment
- Create a comfortable environment where they are content
- Provide feedback so they become aware of their value, strengths, and areas that need improvement
- Help them understand how their work can ultimately lead to advancement, a salary increase, or a lucrative career
- Make sure they understand their value to you and the organization

Misconception #4: The next generation has few skills and adds little value

So you see no reason to hire image-ridden, overgrown latchkey kids? Think entry level: Dirty jobs that must be done. Low-level, high-volume tasks that require a steady organized hand, a motivated appetite for tedium, a responsible busyworker—in other words, a recent college grad hungry for a career. Filing, answering phones, entering data, exchanging correspondence, researching, editing, word processing, documenting, handling customer service, and performing analysis are just some of the important tasks you need completed by a cheap, reliable worker.

Eager young professionals provide the skills, energy, and willingness to perform these basic, essential duties. And down the road, in the middle and upper echelons of your organization, you will need reliable, competent workers who know your business and have shown loyalty. Where better to look than to your entry-level staff who, thanks to your careful recruitment and grooming, are high-functioning, time-tested members of your team?

Misconception #5: The good ones are hard to find

Matching the right individual with the right job can be a long shot at any age. The complexity increases when trying to connect recent college graduates ignorant of job-hunting techniques with companies that don't know how to find or attract them.

- Cast a wide recruiting net. Advertise in newspapers and trade journals, on popular Internet career sites such as the AHIMA Online Job Bank, at campus career centers, job fairs, or by word of mouth through your own professional

network

- Advertise for a reasonable length of time. Give them time to find and respond to your ads
- Challenge applicants to write knockout cover letters or to describe how their skills fit in with your job description
- Write attractive ads that focus on the positive experiences a young worker can expect with your company
- Stress the future opportunities available with the specific skills and experience gained at your company
- Tempt them. Money speaks volumes
- Move quickly through the interviewing and hiring process or risk losing them to other job offers
- Read resumes for evidence of initiative, skills, individuality, ambition, and activities—not for a long job history

Misconception #6: Recent college graduates take too long to train

Young employees are hungry for knowledge and anxious to prove themselves. Fast, efficient training is vital to get them working, fend off boredom, and begin providing the productivity you need.

- Teach them the job and help them feel comfortable without constant supervision
- Outline their responsibilities, requirements, quotas, resources, processes, and equipment
- Train them quickly, before they lose interest or get discouraged
- Don't control the flow of work too tightly. They may feel detached and untrusted if you dole tasks and information sparingly
- Think long term! Yes, training takes time, but the payoff is a productive, knowledgeable employee
- If you can't train them, get someone else to do it. Delegate, but stay involved
- Introduce them into the team and show them how to adapt to your department's work routine
- Define success and the criteria for financial and organizational advancement
- Teach the rules and standards of the office—don't assume they know etiquette, dress code, hours, or other workplace particulars

Misconception #7: New workers don't understand the business

True, but they can learn.

Never assume a young worker connects specific tasks with the business of the organization. In an age of mergers and acquisitions, emerging technologies, and outside contracting, work is not always a clear-cut exchange of effort for output. But if you teach them about the organization, its business, and the job, your young worker can stay focused and informed—thus enhancing their contribution.

- Teach the big picture—both organization- and industrywide
- Answer the questions:
 - What does your organization do?
 - Who are your clients?
 - How do you make money?
 - What stages are involved in your work?
 - Who else makes your work possible?
- Connect their job to the greater scope of the organization
- Explain what other people do and how their work helps the organization
- Teach the business so they act as knowledgeable public ambassadors
- Inform them of organization news and developments

Misconception #8: Young workers require too much attention

Actually, ambitious young workers are very hesitant to appear needy, burdensome, annoying, or, worst of all, young. So as long as you equip them with the knowledge, resources, and reasonable workload they need to perform well, they are likely to respect your limits. When working with them, remember to:

- Recognize the importance of consistent, familiar daily interaction

- Don't disappear. Establish a rapport whereby you are accessible and they are accountable. This leads to the smooth job performance of all parties
- Set aside specific time on a regular basis during which you can check in with each other and directly address any questions they have
- Schedule reliable, consistent periodic staff meetings where you can review status and issues in a structured manner
- If you are a telecommuter or absentee leader, use all available methods (i.e., e-mail, voice mail) to foster good communication
- Establish your boundaries

Misconception #9: The next generation is unpresentable and unprofessional

For a generation that grew up under the influence of popular trends ranging from punk rock to grunge, professional behavior can represent something of a mystery. Possessing skills and potential, but no professional image, young workers learn by example.

- Show a strong model of professional behavior
- Explain and demonstrate what words and subject matter are appropriate
- Show what clothing communicates a mature professional image
- Define the mannerisms, actions, and habits that distinguish professional behavior
- Teach them about professional practices like time management, project organization, and teamwork. Let them know the value of having a personal planning book
- Be better than you want your workers to be
- Explain when they fall short of these guidelines and expectations
- Address any deviation they make from the job that you feel is out of line
- Avoid mentioning topics you don't want to discuss (e.g., how last weekend's date went)
- Show the limits of appropriate behavior (e.g., arriving on time to meetings, answering the phone in a professional manner)

Misconception #10: Entry-level workers are young enough to be my children

So? They are also young enough to be your niece or nephew, your cousin, neighbor, or friend. Your young employees may remind you of your child, but you hired them because you thought they could do this job. Youth does not indicate lack of qualification.

- Remember that they are not your children and don't want to be treated as though they were
- Treat them with the professional respect you would give any subordinate coworker
- Show how their work makes them valued workers, not rewarded children
- Be sensitive to age references. If you make age an issue, you remind them that you perceive them as young—less than a real employee—which could dampen their enthusiasm

The next generation of recent college graduates hitting the job market is primed and ready to grow under your leadership. Recognize that you and your new workers need each other—and remember that your best chance for success is to understand their ambition, fast pace, and desire to learn and contribute. So disregard the rumors and hype, stand back, and let your entry-level employees prove themselves—by getting to work.

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