

# The Beat (Up) Generation

They're narcissistic. Impatient. And just try to get them to work nine to five. Trouble is, the conventional view of Millennials just may be all wrong. They're charging into a world the rest of us are resisting.

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## STEVEN CLARKE IS 25 YEARS OLD

and ready to rule the world of real estate. Just ask him. He freely admits that he expects to be making millions of dollars within the next year. He is so sure of this, in fact, that he informed everyone in his office—the majority of whom range in age from 40 to 60—of his plans. ● They were not impressed. ● “You could definitely tell they thought, ‘Who is this person and why does he think he can do something that took me years to do?’” Clarke, of Charleston, South Carolina, recalls with a laugh. ● Exasperating though it may be, Clarke’s hubris is not unique, at least not for someone in his age group. A so-called Millennial, or member of Generation Y, one of the 76 million people born roughly between 1982 and 2004, Clarke perfectly exemplifies the characteristics of so many of his peers,

especially in the workplace. Their attitudes often collide head-on with those of the Baby Boomers, the 79 million individuals born between 1946 and 1964, who adhere to long-established rules of behavior and have radically different ways of conducting business. They also irritate the 51 million Gen-Xers, born between 1965 and 1979, who resent being overshadowed by the newcomers.

“For the first time ever, we see all these generations working together at the same time,” says Tony Deblauwe, the founder of HR4Change, a human resources consulting service in Silicon Valley. “There’s more of an opportunity to kind of crash into one another’s ideologies and opinions. It creates a lot of confusion.”

It’s not just confusion; Millennials are, arguably, the most reviled generation in recent history, and armies of consultants are hustling to decipher them. Called the “Trophy Generation,” notorious for receiving prizes simply for showing up, they are thought to be entitled, narcissistic, self-promotional, coddled, opinionated, whiny, and needy, especially at work (when they’re not complaining about unemployment, that is). They seek constant feedback and immediate gratification. They multitask and can’t focus. They’re sensitive to criticism and unable to work alone. They refuse to pay their dues.

Don’t even mention their (limited) verbal and writing skills.

“There are a lot of people who are really angry at them,” says psychologist Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, a research professor at Clark University and author of *When Will My Grown-Up Kid Grow Up?*

Newspaper and magazine articles only feed the fire, regularly chronicling Millennial incompetence. For example, wide publicity attended a study reported in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* that analyzed 9 million high school seniors and college freshmen and found that Millennials are more materialistic, more politically disengaged, and less concerned about helping the world at large than both Generation X and Boomers were at the same ages.

“People talk about how selfless Millennials are, how much good they want to do, but there’s zero evidence that they’re any more altruistic than previous generations,” says study co-author Jean Twenge, professor of psychology at San Diego State University and author of *Generation Me: Why Today’s Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled—and More Miserable Than Ever Before*. Twenge has famously found that Millennials tend to

be especially self-absorbed. Her cross-generational data analysis of college students shows that recent cohorts are especially narcissistic, believing they are above average and deploying more “I’s” and “me’s” in their writing.

Millennials’ work ethic also leaves something to be desired, the stereotype goes. In a 2006 study of executives and human resource managers at more than 400 companies, most said that today’s college graduates had only “adequate” professionalism, innovation, creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills. HR managers, in turn, are left scratching their heads, trying to figure out how to handle this demographic. As Dallas psychologist Sherry Buffington, co-author of *Exiting Oz: How the New American Workforce Is Changing the Face of Business Forever and What Companies Must Do to Thrive*, put it: “Most managers have absolutely no clue how to manage this generation.”

Jeff Avallon, the vice president of business development at IdeaPaint, a workplace technology firm in Boston, is not among them. He points out that each generation has a common set of human needs—for community and communication, in particu-

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lar—that are uniquely shaped by their life experiences but are foreign to anyone outside that age group. “Millennials are no more spoiled or cantankerous than any other generation, they’re just solving their basic needs for community and communication differently from anyone before them,” says Avallon, 29.

He contends that Millennials’ behavior is totally functional for the world they inherited. They don’t respond to traditional hierarchical organization? Sorry, there’s no longer enough time for that. The economy demands constant innovation, and the ruling-by-iron-fist model is not nimble enough for reacting quickly. Millennials are simply trying to do better.

“A Millennial circumventing traditional hierarchy is likely searching for the quickest route to a solution rather than orchestrating a grand-scale mutiny,” says Avallon. “Efficiency is at the heart of the perception gap about Millennials.” In a world drowning in information, their M.O. is to cut out the extraneous.



## WHAT GIVES?

WHILE HR MANAGERS are trying to understand what makes Millennials tick, some social scientists are trying to determine why Millennials inspire such ire. True, younger generations have long befuddled older folks—the Beats, the Vietnam-era flower children, the “slacker” Gen X-ers. Still, Millennials inspire their own brand of vitriol—and an entire industry is dedicated to helping human resources interpret them.

“I’m really surprised at the vehemence I come up against all the time,” says Arnett. “It seems out of proportion.”

A large part of the antipathy stems from the fact that Millennials and Boomers have drastically opposing perspectives

on work and life. Unlike Boomers, who toil during the day and leave it behind when they go home, Millennials blur the lines between work and life. Every day is Casual Friday. They can’t comprehend why they must go to the office at all. According to a 2013 study by Spherion, a recruiting and staffing firm headquartered in Fort Lauderdale, it’s “time and flexibility”—not financial compensation or benefits—that help keep Millennials loyal to their employer.

“None of my friends get why they need to show up in an office when you can do everything remotely,” says Clarke. “I have my own struggle with that. Lots of Boomers equate working hard with time

and physical work: You show up in your office and sit at your desk and get your work done, as opposed to Millennials who can sit in Starbucks and work on a laptop.”

Nor do Millennials respond to traditional workplace hierarchies, which can be frustrating to long-established institutions. In the ideal Millennial office environment, everyone would work collaboratively, with less emphasis on old-school rules. Google is the exemplar of the utopian Millennial landscape, with its policy of allowing employees one day a week to work on personal projects.

“They say that they get more innovation out of that free time than any other time,” says Buffington, who calls

it “structured freedom.”

Millennials thrive on it.

Boomers don't get it.

But if anything, Millennials' behaviors, values, and attitudes are a response to rapidly shifting societal and generational forces, such as the technological and economic implications of the Internet.

“They have a different value set—on global interconnectedness, the Internet, cell phones, instantly knowing what's going on in the world,” says Buffington. “They're smart, talented, socially connected globally, quick thinking, technically savvy. We need that in the world and business environment we've created. You can't legislate thought and innovation.”

Older folks ridicule the Millennial

gain control by being accountable.”

Millennials also have a different take on the concept of respect. They want to be praised—often—and they long to be taken seriously, but they're not so quick to return the compliment. To them respect is something earned, and not a given. Their lack of regard enrages Boomers, who are used to showing and commanding it.

“Millennials have self-confidence and assuredness, and these characteristics can be off-putting to people in older generations who feel that because of their age and experience young people should be more deferential toward them,” says Julie Coates, an adult-learning specialist in River Falls, Wisconsin, and the co-author of *Nine Shift: Work, Life and Education in*

RESPECT HAS A DIFFERENT FEEL ACROSS GENERATIONS. MILLENNIALS BELIEVE RESPECT SHOULD BE EARNED. OLDER GENERATIONS ARE FRUSTRATED BY THEIR LACK OF CIVILITY.

obsession with smartphones, but they are overlooking what the technology represents: an efficient means to maintain community and communication. “Young people have been raised with technology answering their every beck and call, so this type of efficiency is sought after in the real world as well,” Avallon says. And thanks to social media, they're used to instant results and never-ending attention.

In a survey conducted by IdeaPaint of 600 employed Millennials, 49 percent believe that poor management is dragging their company down; 45 percent attribute that to the lack or misuse of technology solutions. “Many of the concepts that make Millennials happy *are* a better way of working,” Avallon argues.

And then there's self-promotion, a byproduct of technology. But how else can you stand out from the competition? “That's happening with everyone anyway,” says Millennial consultant Dan Schawbel, the author of *Promote Yourself: The New Rules for Career Success*. “Because of social networks, everyone has to think, ‘What's my reputation?’ If people want to stand out when recruiters look online, they have to build an online presence and a personal brand or someone else will. They have to

*the 21st Century*. “But this is not a deferential generation.”

Christine Porath, an associate professor of management at Georgetown's McDonough School of Business, puts it this way: “Certainly, Millennials are appreciated for their use of technology and skills around that, for their ability to multitask and their teamwork skills. But I hear complaints about their desire and demand for respect—that they have a need for respect but an inability to give it. Respect has a different feel across generations.” Older generations are frustrated by the perceived lack of civility.

Boomers and Millennials also have different takes on the notion of career. The Boomers and their forebears expected to stay in one job from college graduation until they received their retirement watch. Millennials, on the other hand, have no company loyalty. But they'd like to.

If a position doesn't meet their expectations, why stick around? The 2013 Spherion survey found that 54 percent of Millennials think that periodic job changes increase their career potential, versus 38 percent of Boomers.

Buffington believes such an outlook comes from Millennials' mindset around

winning and losing—much of which was shaped by technology. Boomers, for example, learned about winning from sports and war. But the younger generation learned from gaming, “where you re-set,” she says. “That's exactly what they're doing in the workplace: ‘This isn't working for me; it's a re-set. Goodbye.’”

Perhaps more than any other group, Millennials have been urged to follow their bliss. “They have been taught to expect fireworks from day one if they choose according to their passion,” says Cal Newport, author of *So Good They Can't Ignore You*. “They're stymied when facing the much less glamorous reality of the entry level.”

Because Millennials expect immediate glory, they're willing to cut their losses much more quickly than Boomers when they don't get it. That willingness actually boosts their position of power (a classic negotiation tenet is that the person most willing to leave the table has the upper hand), yet another unappealing trait to Boomers. “Millennials know that,” says Buffington. “They're the most willing to walk because they have no problem with working 15 or 18 jobs in their lifetime. That puts them at an advantage.”

Technology is another enormous—and obvious—source of generational conflict. Millennials were weaned on computers, cell phones, and the Internet, expecting instant responses in real time. Thanks to social media, they're used to getting immediate results.

They're also used to Being Noticed, putting their personal stamp on everything from their cars to their cell phones. But they have also been working collaboratively since elementary school. Being left alone is their idea of hell, which explains why they need a constant stream of feedback. (One survey found that 80 percent of Millennials said they wanted regular feedback from their managers, and 75 percent longed for mentors.) Semi-annual reviews frustrate this group; they want to know how they're doing now, not six months from now. Who knows where they'll be in six months?

Generation X, by contrast, longs to work independently. Pioneers in juggling work and family, their work orientation is to build a big portfolio of skills. The feedback they want? Promotions.

## IT'S NOT THEIR FAULT

WHILE CULTURAL FACTORS and technological advances have certainly shaped much of Millennial behavior, there's also another contributor: the brain.

In decades past, children were considered mature by the time they reached their teens. But today, young people prolong adolescence well into their 20s, which has created a demographic Arnett calls "emerging adults." In part the economic environment has changed—unemployment has forced Millennials to live with their parents well past their expiration date. And, too, their brains are still developing. The prefrontal cortex, home to judgment, impulse control, and decision-making, doesn't mature until the mid-20s. That's one of the reasons that Millennials tend to rely on one another for decision-making; they need validation from their social networks before doing anything.

The developing brain also affects the way Millennials digest information.

Take training. When learning, says Coates, Boomers are happy to watch a PowerPoint presentation with a broad overview. Millennials, on the other hand, are interested only in the information needed to complete the task at hand. "Millennials say, 'When I need it, I will learn it,'" says Coates. "If the relevance isn't observable, their attention won't be there. The task of Millennials in learning is to understand how to eliminate unnecessary information; in previous generations finding the right information was the challenge."

Another element delaying development is their upbringing by hovering, "helicopter" parents, who infantilized them. One recent study found that 52 percent of people ages 18 to 25 phone, email, or text their parents daily. Their parents return the gestures.

The same helicopter parents—the ones who handed out prizes and awards even when their child finished in fifteenth place—often accompany their

offspring into the workforce, applying to jobs, attending interviews, even negotiating salaries for their offspring. A 2012 survey of more than 500 college graduates by Adecco, a human resources organization, noted that 8 percent of them had a parent accompany them to a job interview—and 3 percent had the parent sit in on it. (Some companies have embraced parental involvement. In May, Google held its second annual Take Your Parents to Work Day; more than 2,000 parents attended. In November,

LinkedIn hosted a similar event.)

The extended parental connection is unnatural, says Schwabel, and impedes their ability to function in the real world. "Millennials view their parents, instead of their management, as mentors and that can make it harder for them to grow in their respective companies," he says.

Deblauwe recalls a young recruit he interviewed for a finance position. After meeting the prospect in the waiting room, another woman extended her hand—her mother. "I started walking with the candidate and the mom followed," Deblauwe says. "She said, 'I want to make sure my daughter tells you all these things; she's nervous, but she's a hard worker. I was shocked. How could she not know that this was inappropriate?'"

The daughter didn't get the job.



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## GEN WHY?

AT THE END of the day, most experts chalk up Boomers' anger with Millennials to good old-fashioned envy. Boomers resent their younger colleagues for their confidence, their talents, their opportunities—their youth. An estimated 10,000 young people turn 21 every day in the U.S., and by 2025 three out of every four workers worldwide will be Millennials. It makes older workers feel obsolete. Yet the economy is forcing Boomers to stay in the game, competing for jobs with people 30 years younger whose tech skills are far greater. "There's fear, jealousy, and lack of understanding, which is based in large part on a lack of skill," says Roy Cohen, an executive coach in New York and author of

*The Wall Street Professional's Survival Guide.*

Arnett agrees. What's more, he says, the common perceptions are invalid. In 2012, he conducted a nationwide poll of over a thousand young adults between 18 and 29. Eighty-seven percent of Millennials said it was important to have a career that better the world around them. Seventy-nine percent said it was more important to enjoy their job than to make big money.

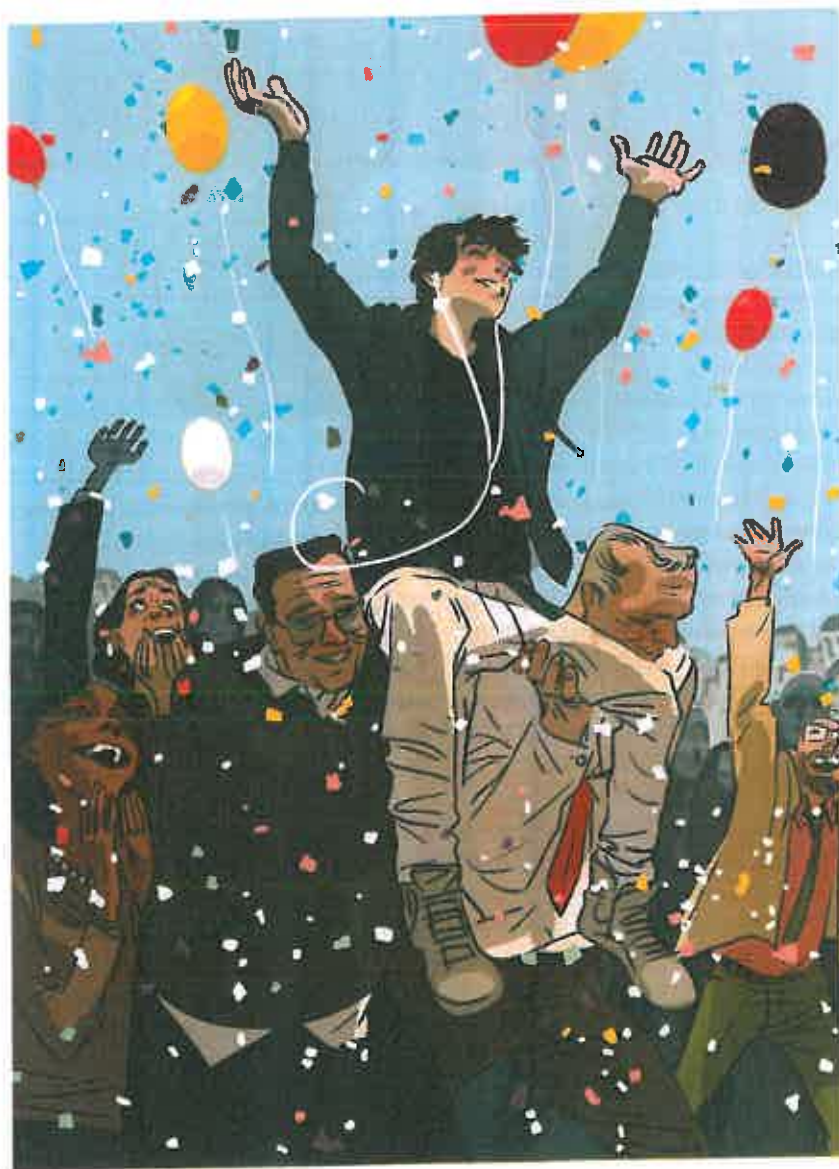
"They're accused of being selfish and narcissistic. It's so unfair," he says. "The

fact is, they volunteer in greater proportions than their Baby Boomer parents. To me, they're an extraordinary generation that we should be celebrating, not dumping on. I think it's great that they're pushing back in the workplace and not just letting themselves get exploited."

Even the most ardent critics grudgingly acknowledge the positives within the group, especially regarding gender equality and gay and lesbian rights.

"They're so much more open to

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change because they've constantly been in it," says Gail Romero, CEO of Collective Changes, a women's global mentoring program based in Seattle. "They are willing to have a balanced life. We've been telling women that for decades—and then we have this new generation saying 'I'm having a balanced life,' and we don't like it? We don't get to have it both ways."

It's worth noting, however, that even young people feel pressure to keep up with the rapid shifts in technology. And even they worry that they're aging out.

Which brings us back to Steven Clarke, the Millennial Realtor. Not only does he work for a major national real estate company where he is one of the youngest employees, he also runs his own property management firm—where he is the oldest.

He feels frustrated by his 23-year-old assistant and 21-year-old intern's technological prowess and workplace expectations. After his intern had worked for him for a few weeks, Clarke's assistant told him that the intern was getting bored. "I was like, 'What do you mean he's getting bored?'" he recalls. "She said, 'He expected it to be quicker.' I was like—it's been two weeks! I saw myself. It was an out-of-body experience. I sounded like one of those 55-year-olds who had a negative reaction to me." **P**

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