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The Truth About Gen Y

Elisabeth Pain
United Kingdom
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Arrogant. Individualistic. Unable to commit. Short attention span. These are some of the labels assigned by employers and pundits to the generation just joining the workforce. Dubbed "Generation Y" or "millennials" in English-speaking countries, these tech-savvy folks, most of whom never knew a world without the Internet, were born between about 1980 and 2000.

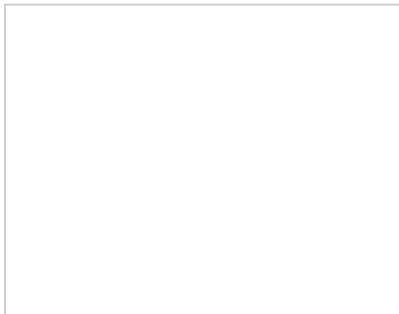
Just as with previous generations--Boomers, Gen X, and so on--the clichés assigned to the latest generation inevitably overreach. "People can make a lot of assumptions, and there is a danger about stereotyping," says Paul Redmond, head of the careers and employability service at the [University of Liverpool](#) in the United Kingdom. Such labels can lead to prejudice and be hard to overcome.

Those who traffic in such media clichés may be surprised to hear what some experts are saying. "We expect that they

will do great things," Redmond says. "They have values and ... they are terrific at working with computers; they are brilliant at multitasking and very good at working in teams." Redmond isn't alone in his enthusiastic assessment.

WHAT GEN Y HAS TO OFFER

According to Reena Nadler, program director of [LifeCourse Associates](#), a marketing and human resources consultancy in Great Falls, Virginia, founded by generational experts Neil Howe and William Strauss, the millennial generation is turning the clichés on their heads. "Student achievement is rising," says Nadler, a millennial herself. Today's youth dedicate more hours to their studies and extracurricular activities than previous generations did.



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"We have the best qualified generation since history," says Patricia Vendramin, a sociologist at the [Work & Technology Research Centre](#) of the Fondation Travail-Université in Namur, Belgium. Millennials get work experience early, they're flexible, they're willing to relocate, and they're open-minded, she adds. Also, "they are very skilled at using technology" and they're true team players, Redmond says.

Many millennials are upbeat, confident, and believe in helping others and serving the community, Nadler adds. "This generation has grown up feeling that the world has big problems, but we can all come together and fix them," Nadler says.



Paul Redmond

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WHAT GEN Y WANTS FROM WORK



Reena Nadler

When Vendramin and her colleagues looked at how different generations in Belgium, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, and Portugal relate to work--her study was part of the European Social Patterns of Relations to Work ([SPReW](#)) project--they found that everyone is different. Yet, as they also concluded, trends *do* exist. Although millennials expect good material benefits, above all they expect self-fulfillment and rewarding relationships, says Vendramin, who coordinated the SPReW study.

That description fits the observations of experts in other developed Western countries. Compared with previous generations, "they are driven and motivated by different things. It's not money and material things like a car," agrees Avril Henry, a human resources management consultant in Rozelle, Australia. Rather,

"the sense of doing something worthwhile, [or] a noble cause, motivates them," Redmond says. Consequently, "employers realize that if they want to tap into the talent, they have to tap into corporate social responsibilities promoting their values."

A frequent complaint of Gen-Y employers is that they expect too much too soon and are immune to imposed authority. "They want to work in an organization where they are valued as employees and also valued as people," Henry says. "If they don't feel a sense of belonging and mutual respect between them and their manager, they will not stay."

More than any earlier generation, millennials have had nurturing parents, and they expect that nurturing, and the personal growth that results, to continue. They seek what Redmond calls "the three C's": change, challenge, and choice. They want to be closely mentored and to be given opportunities to gain new skills. Many watched their parents remain loyal to a company only to be made redundant in the 1990s recession, Henry says. It's a mistake they don't intend to repeat. "Gen Y are driven by making themselves employable and multiskilled," she adds.

Millennials also expect their work and personal lives to work together. "The young generation have ... a more polycentric conception of ... existence," Vendramin says. "Work is still extremely important in their life, but other things [are] too." Perhaps due to the influence of technology, they perceive work and life as seamlessly entwined. They want to stay in touch with friends and family from work, work from home, and have flexible hours.



Patricia Vendramin

Not all the research supports the prevailing stereotypes. Some individuals, Vendramin found, value stability over stimulation. "Many millennials are thinking in the long term. We don't want [just] any job and then move on to the next one," Nadler agrees. Yet, "the younger generation is more open to mobility," Vendramin says. Periodic precariousness "is acceptable because it allows [them] to look for a better place."

WHAT'S ANNOYING TO EMPLOYERS



Avril Henry

As people from Gen Y have entered the job market, cultural clashes with employers have come into focus. Of particular concern to companies is a perceived difficulty in keeping their young recruits interested in their work. "Employers are saying to me, 'We have a real problem with Gen-Y recruits,'" Redmond says. It's "not only hard to recruit them but to keep them. As soon as they get bored, they leave."

Many millennials grew up feeling sheltered, at the center of both their parents' and their country's attentions. "One of the things employers see [as] the most annoying is that we expect constant praise," Nadler says. Millennials also don't buy into the idea that putting in a lot of hours is a sign of dedication. "Millennials don't want to be sitting around the office not doing much or doing it slowly so as to appear as

servicing [their] time," Nadler says. Adds Henry: "One of the mottoes of Gen Y is, 'We want to work smarter, not harder.' They use technology to improve the way of working."

Millennials' outspokenness and their tendency to communicate electronically, paired with a certain obliviousness to office etiquette, is perceived by older superiors as disrespect. "Older generations feel that millennials are wanting to break the rules," Nadler says. In fact, she suggests, they're doing their best. "Employers are reporting that young employees want to know exactly what's expected of them, what they should wear, who they should go to," Nadler adds.

Perhaps the most bizarre aspects of this generation, say, to observers, is the continued involvement of their parents. Parents have been spotted at career fairs and job interviews; a few have even phoned employers to negotiate their child's starting salary, Redmond says. Employers look for independence, so "if your parent comes to interview, it can look really bad."

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Will the members of Gen Y get what they're seeking? Will employers prove willing to litter the hallway with roses? Possibly. Henry believes that today's youth will reap "the benefit of about 15 years of unprecedented economic growth and prosperity." Today, "employers are competing for Gen-Y graduates. When they come out of university with a science degree or business degree, they have multiple options to choose from."

Vendramin doesn't agree that the latest generation has it that easy. Employers are not as willing to train people on the job as they once were, so today's graduates may have to work through a precarious period gaining experience before they find professional stability. Although millennials are often perceived as lacking dedication, in fact "the labor market ... keeps [its] distance with them," Vendramin says.

Redmond, too, sees the professional future of Generation Y as far from assured. The balance of power between employers and employees could tilt in either direction. "The economy is really shaking at the moment; many of the graduate recruits are going to be hit by this," Redmond says. It will be interesting to see "whether the tables are going to turn [and if] employers will become more competitive for talent," or if, instead, they'll hunker down and say, "If you want to have a good job, you have to do what we do."

If that happens, the latest generation will have to leave behind the nurturing they're used to and

learn to conform to employers' expectations. "Generation Y need to be much aware that employers are focused on key skills," Redmond adds. "They need to develop a narrative of employability, a story of how they gained these skills." And they need to express this narrative skillfully, not just over the Internet but also in phone calls and face-to-face interviews.

If millennials and their employers can manage to smooth the way, say experts, we can expect great things from Gen Y. "For the first time in employment history, the youngest generation knows more ... than their parents and their grandparents put together," Henry says. They "could be bringing great changes originating from their idealism," Redmond adds. Nadler sees Gen Y as being "on the track to be a very high achieving generation."

"My advice to companies that have to employ the young generation," says Vendramin, "is to be confident and give them recognition and give them a future."

Elisabeth Pain is contributing editor for South and West Europe.	Comments, suggestions? Please send your feedback to our editor .
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