

Attention, Millennials: Here's What Your Bosses-to-Be Want From You

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This year Millennials surpassed Baby Boomers as the largest segment of the workforce, and employers have taken note. They've commissioned study after study to find out what Gen Y workers want (meaningful work and flexibility top most lists), and are trying to accommodate them so that they'll stay more than a couple of years.

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So sharpen your pencils, Millennials—this is what recruiters say you're doing right and wrong, and how you can improve.

The Good

Stefani Markowitz, President and CEO of New York City real estate brokerage Charles Rutenberg, LLC, says Millennials are extremely energetic, ambitious, hard-working and physically active, not content to stare all day at a computer screen.

Markowitz should know—at 27, she's a Millennial herself. "I wake up at 5:30 a.m., work out, go to meetings, and look at apartments," she says. "I'm on the phone, networking, on-the-go. I look for the same drive in the Millennials I hire."

And she finds it. The only problem she sometimes sees is a lack of focus. "They say 'yes' to everything and spread themselves too thin," Markowitz says. "I tell them they have to find their target demographic and become an expert in that field. They're incredibly successful when they do that."

Markowitz, whose nearly 600 agents range in age from their 20's to their 70's, says older agents sometimes take Millennials under their wing. The younger agents learn the business, and the older ones "have the fervor of Millennials saying, 'I'll do this showing, I'll do that showing.' It's a beautiful partnership."

Other plusses: Millennials are highly social and work well together in teams, says Aaron Ziff, vice president of recruiting firm International Strategy & Consulting.

Despite their rap as selfie-lovers and social media junkies, Millennials are actually idealistic—they care about others and want to change the world, says Sarah Dabby, head of talent for ClickTime, a company that sells a time- and expense-tracking app. And, of course, Millennials' tech skills are legendary. "No other generation to date has grown up so immersed in technology," Ziff says.

The Not-So-Good, and How to Turn It Around

“There's an over-reliance on social networking and crowdsourcing” to make decisions, Ziff says. “I hear about it from employers. Instead of asking for help from a more seasoned colleague or thinking it through, there's a knee-jerk reaction to trust what they get from the Internet.”

Millennials also tend to focus on the task at hand, sometimes failing to see the big picture, Ziff adds.

Consulting with older workers is definitely a good idea for Millennials. “Leverage other people's strengths instead of focusing on your own. Build a network,” Ziff suggests.

Better yet, find a mentor. The right coach can have a profound effect on your career. Sometimes Millennials are dissuaded from asking for help. “They think, ‘Why would someone waste their time counseling me?’” Ziff says. “But reaching out to someone is flattering; it shows a level of maturity and awareness. And people believe in paying it forward.”

Millennials aren't afraid to speak up, but they sometimes fail to make eye contact and use acronyms and references unfamiliar to a business audience, Ziff says. Joining a public speaking group like Toastmasters might help. “Learn to understand how others hear you,” he says.

Learning the Right Pace

Many Millennials like the idea of working at a startup or small business, Duffy says. “But what that means is you're wearing multiple hats, filling seven jobs at once, often in a loft or studio with 10 other people.” It's important to establish rapport and pitch in to do tasks that may not be part of your job description.

“We screen for it very thoroughly,” Duffy says. “Initiative and ownership will make or break your career.”

Millennials who join large corporations sometimes need to learn patience, says Kristin McDonald, Coca-Cola's Global Employee Engagement and Work Environment Manager. McDonald works with Millennial Voices, an internal group that engages Millennials to point the way to the future, both inside and outside the company.

Maybe because they're less mature professionally—not necessarily because they're Millennials per se—younger workers sometimes get frustrated with the time it takes for career progression or change in a large organization, McDonald says. “They don't have that historical perspective,” she says. “Change does come, but it's an evolution.”

Be Creative... But Don't Forget to Listen

In the end, Millennials who demonstrate energy and initiative while also showing that they listen to the voices of other generations are the ones most likely to succeed.

But then, hasn't that always been true? Perhaps Millennials are more like their bosses were 20 years ago than bosses care to remember.

"I do think we over-inflate the difference between Millennials and everyone else," McDonald says. "It's really about gaining professional maturity and getting used to work culture."