

How to Speak Millennial

Society, Also known as Generation Y, the Millennials want it now, now, now! That has made them the generation everyone else likes to pick on.

Abby Ellin of *Psychology Today* translates what's really going on in this war (in AFR Weekend, March 29 -30, 2014- reprinted Psychology Today, 2014).

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 of 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 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, those born between 1946 and 1964, who adhere to long-established rules of behaviour and have radically different ways of conducting business. They also irritate the 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 multi-task 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.

And they outnumber their elders: there are about 76 million American GenYers, more than 6 million in Australia, compared with 79 million United States Boomers (about 5 million here) and 51 million Gen Xers (also about 5 million in Australia).

“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 magazines 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 analysed 9 million US 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 specifically 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.

They’re just solving their basic needs for community and communication differently from anyone before them.

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 US 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 particular – that is 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’ behaviour is totally functional for the world they inherited. They don’t respond to traditional hierarchical organisation? 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,” Avallon says. “Efficiency is at the heart of the perception gap about Millennials.”

In a world drowning in information, their MO is to put out the extraneous.

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,” Arnett says. “It seems out of proportion.”

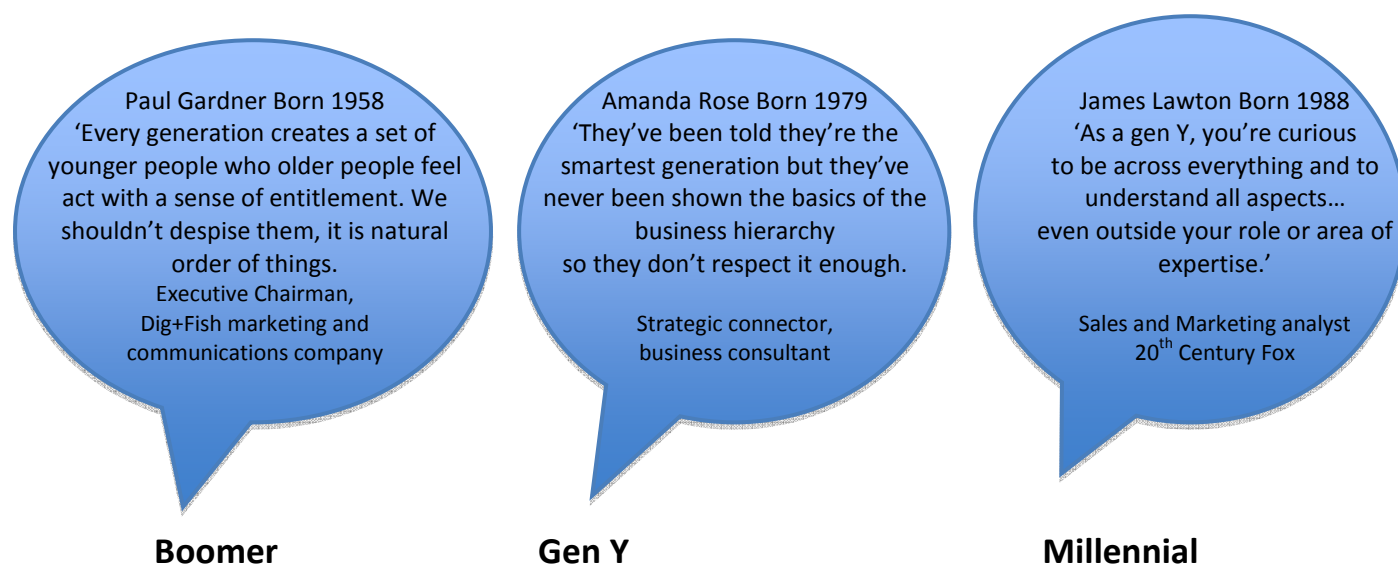
A large part of the antipathy stems from the fact Millennials and Boomers have drastically opposing perspectives on work and life. Unlike Boomers, who toil during the day and leave it behind when they go home, Millennials blur the lines between work and life. Every day is Casual Friday. They can’t comprehend why they must go to the office at all. According to a 2013 study by Spherion, a recruiting firm headquartered in Florida, 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,” Clarke says. “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 apposed to Millennials who can sit in Starbucks and work on a laptop.”

According to a survey of Australian and New Zealand Gen Y attitudes by recruiting firm Hays, just 2 per cent view a career as a job for life compared with 12 per cent of the remainder of the

workforce. A paper by HRCoach Research Institute found 58 per cent of Australian Millennials were motivated by lifestyle while 30 per cent were seeking money and 5 per cent social status.

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."

According to the Hays survey of Australian and New Zealand Gen Ys, 42 per cent said they would not accept a job if it did not provide any perks. "Employers who learn to be flexible will be able to tap into the energy, drive and ambition the younger workforce has to offer. This can mean offering full-time positions with flexible hours, part-time work to suit their schedule (taking into consideration many Gen Yers will still be studying) or the possibility to swap shifts with other workers.

Millennials thrive on it;

Boomers don't get it;

But if anything. Millennials' behaviours, 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,” Buffington says, “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 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 by IdeaPaint of 600 employed Millennials, 40 per cent believe that poor management is dragging their company down; 45 per cent 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 by product 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 on online presence and a personal brand or someone else will. They have to gain control by being accountable.”

Millennials also have a different take on the concept of respect. They want to be praised – often – 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, and adult-learning specialist in River Falls, Wisconsin, and the co-author of *Nine Shift: Work, Life and Education in 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 multi-task 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 expectation, 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 Baby Boomers.

Buffington believes such an outlook comes from Millennials' mindset about winning and losing – much of which was shaped by technology. Boomers, for example, learnt about winning from sports and war. But the younger generation learnt 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'."

This ambitious attitude is reflected in the Australasian Hays survey, where 14 percent of Generation Y said they were very interested in involvement in decision-making and the bottom line of business, and 52 per cent of the same sample group are ready to be groomed as future leaders.

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 for Boomers. "Millennials know that," Buffington says, "They're the most willing to walk because they have no problem with working 15 or 8 jobs in their life-time. That puts them at an advantage.

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

In Australia, 30 per cent of Australian Gen Ys spend more time connecting with online friends than with friends in person, according to a global survey by networking multinational Cisco.

They're used to Being Noticed, putting their personal stamp on everything from their cars to their mobiles. But they have also been working collaboratively since primary school. Being left alone is their idea of hell, which explains why they need a constant stream of feedback. (One survey found that 80 per cent of Millennials said they wanted regular feedback from their managers and 75 per cent 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.

While cultural factors and technological advances have certainly shaped much of Millennial behaviour, 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. In addition, their brains are still developing. The prefrontal cortex, home to judgment, impulse control, and decision-making, doesn't mature until the mid-2-s. 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, *Nine Shift's* Coates says, 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,'" Coates says. "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 infantilised them. One recent study found that 52 per cent 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 15th place – often accompany their offspring into the workforce, applying for jobs, attending interviews, even negotiating salaries for their offspring. A 2012 survey of more than 500 college graduates by Adecco, a human resources organisation, noted that 8 per cent of them had a parent accompany them to a job interview – and 3 per cent 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 2000 parents attended. In November, LinkedIn hosted a similar event which also involved Australia.)

The extended parental connection is unnatural, Schawbel says, 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.

Hr4Change’s Deblauwe recalls a young recruit he interviewed for a finance position. After meeting her in the waiting room another woman extended her hand – her mother. “I started walking with the candidate and the mum 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.

The Kids are All Right, and Australian website “for parents of teenagers”, quotes survey results suggesting that 30 per cent have had a parent submit a resume for their child, 25 per cent have been contacted by a parent who feels their child should receive a job and 15 per cent had a parent complain when their child wasn’t hired.

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 US, 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 1,000 young adults between 18 and 29. Eighty-seven per cent of Millennials said it was important to have a career that betters the world around them. Seventy-nine per cent said it was more important to enjoy their job than to make big money.

“They’re accused of being selfish and narcissistic,” 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 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 change because they’ve constantly been in it,” says Gail Romero, CEO of Collective Changes, a women’s global mentoring program.

“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 ageing 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 say myself. It was an out of body experience.

“I sounded like one of those 55 year olds who had a negative reaction to me.

Less Irritation, more clarity: Gen Y decoded

Most of the behaviours older workers find annoying among Millennials are actually well attuned to the world the youngsters inherited. Their disrespect for hierarchies? Don't take it personally. In an economy that runs on constant innovation, it's Millennials racing for a solution; it's their form of efficiency. Here's a look at the attitudes and actions of Millennials and how the wires get crossed between the way they're interpreted and how they're actually meant.

CONSTANT NEED FOR FEEDBACK

How others see it: as a bid for attention or a lack of know-how. It irritates supervisors.

How Millennials mean it: Eager to please; wanting to know they're doing a good job; looking for mentorship. "They want frequent feedback and guidance, but they also want extreme autonomy for when and where they do the work," says Christine Porath, associate professor of Management at Georgetown's University's McDonough School of Business and the author of *The Cost of Bad Behaviour*.

RESTLESSNESS

How others see it: Impatience; arrogance; Millennials think they're more capable and accomplished than they are.

How Millennials mean it: Action-oriented; self-motivated; eager to achieve goals. "Having action-oriented employees who are motivated by having their ideas make an impact is not a bad thing, but it can come off as impatience," says Jeff Avallon of IdeaPaint. "when their ideas have a quick impact they're satisfied employees."

CONFIDENT IN THEIR ABILITIES, ESPECIALLY REGARDING TECHNOLOGY

How others see it: Entitled; expecting fast promotion; unwilling to pay their dues.

How Millennials mean it: Want a meaningful important job giving a sense of purpose and a positive impact on society. "Most people want meaningful, fulfilling work that pays the bills," says Hannah Selingson, author of *Mission Adulthood*. "I don't think that makes you entitled."

OVERLY CONNECTED TO PARENTS

How others see it: Coddled; unable to make decisions for themselves; can't work alone.

How Millennials mean it: Family oriented; long to remain connected; think about the community at large rather than just themselves. "Growing up, we were all made to feel special and that we could

accomplish anything," says Millennial consultant Dan Schawbel. "Parents are integrated into our lives. We're very family oriented. That has really given us high expectations for the workplace."

CRAVE IMMEDIATE GRATIFICATION

How others see it: Disrespectful; unable to show deference to authority.

How Millennials mean it: Data-driven; not concerned with emotion; dealing in hard facts. "We are all about equal rights at every level," says Schawbel. "That's why everyone thinks we want to be Ceo on day one- because we want our voices to be heard. We don't believe in those big corporate hierarchies."

SELF PROMOTIONAL

How others see it: Narcissistic; self-obsessed; solipsistic.

How Millennials mean it: Instagram, Facebook, Pinterest, Twitter – these days, everyone markets themselves and their very own personal "brand". In order to stand above the competition, Schawbel says, Millennials have no choice but to invest in and develop an online presence. An effective web profile conveys important information about the user's skills, credibility, and potential.

NOT INTERESTED IN NIN-TO-FIVE (PREFER NON-TRADITIONAL HOURS)

How others see it: Having a short attention span; unwilling to put in the time.

How Millennials mean it: Open to change, flexible; willing to work any time, provided they're able to do so on their own schedule. "They're used to being on 247 – so if they want to do their work in the middle of the night, so be it," says Porath. "They want and expect... the freedom to do that kind of thing."

JOB HOPPERS

How others see it: Disloyal; unable to stick with one thing for any length of time.

How Millennials mean it: Concerned with the work environment; don't want to be taken advantage of Match Marketing Group, an international marketing and recently surveyed 36 new graduates and MBA students. The key finding? They lack trust. "They're looking for a company to build confidence in," says chief talent officer Lorinda Nepal. "They're hard workers and willing to put in the hours. But they're more interested in the work environment."

