

Hiring Young Guns

By Marc Hendrix

Hiring millennials has its advantages if you can keep it from backfiring.

When Marlo Lorenz got her first job in the fashion industry, she was ready to tackle any task. "I'd make my boss's tea, I'd pick up dry cleaning, I'd sweep the floor--whatever it took to prove my work ethic," recalls Lorenz, 40. Today she sees it from the other side as founder of 12-person Thro Ltd., a home furnishings design firm. To her, the young people she hires just out of college to cut fabric swatches, send express packages and do data entry are very different.

"I hire them with the hope that they are hungry and willing to do just about anything with a smile on their faces to prove themselves," Lorenz says. "I will tell you that's not been the case." Older employees at the \$10 million company will wash dishes or do other menial tasks without objection. But not the entry-level youngsters, Lorenz says. "There's a lot of clucking of tongues and rolling of eyes."

If you haven't experienced Lorenz's disillusion yet, you soon may. Millennials, the approximately 80 million North Americans born since about 1980, are entering the labor force in larger numbers than any generation since the baby boomers. The stamp they will put on the workplace will change it enormously, says Elissa Tucker, a leading HR research consultant.

Also known as members of Generation Y, Millennials tend to be better-educated, more tech-savvy, more achievement-oriented and better at problem solving than boomers and the smaller Generation X, which arrived between the baby boom and the Millennials.

They also tend to be impatient with their career progression, demanding about salary and job flexibility, and quick to move on if something better beckons. "Employers can feel that they're high-maintenance, they feel entitled, they're critical and they're not loyal," Tucker says. "But it's important that employers try to look at the positive side."

Employers can make the most of Millennials by leveraging their technical skills. "This group grew up with e-mail, cell phones and instant messages," notes Tucker. "Technology is not something they have to think about." Employers should also give Millennials lots of chances to learn, develop skills and accomplish goals. It's important to supply ample feedback along the way. "This generation grew up with boomer parents with a highly focused parenting style," Tucker explains.

You may just have to live with some things about Millennials, such as their seeming lack of respect for elders. "Rather than looking at them as being critical, welcome their problem-solving abilities," Tucker suggests. Understand that, while they may have high salary expectations, that's partly because they are the most indebted generation in history. And recognize that, having grown up during the mass layoffs and delayerings of the 1980s and 1990s, they feel that any disloyalty on their part is abundantly returned by employers.

Diversity is another Millennial trait. Millennial workers encompass more ethnic variety and more women than previous generations. This means that whatever kind of worker you want--even one with boomer-like devotion to duty--you can probably find it. You do, however, have to be patient and thorough when interviewing applicants. That diversity means you should get to know any Millennial applicant individually before putting him or her on the payroll, Tucker says.

Bear in mind, though, that Millennials will become the dominant players in the labor market only if the mass of boomers retires on schedule beginning in a couple of years. That may not happen, which wouldn't be bad news for Lorenz. She's looking to hire a design assistant to

replace the Millennial currently holding the job. What's she looking for? "I'm interviewing middle-aged women who want to re-enter the work force."

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