

How Will Millennials Manage?

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Executive Summary: James Heskett is a Baker Foundation Professor at Harvard Business School.

Gen Yers or "millennials"—those born during the 1970s—are generally bright, cheery, seemingly well-adjusted, and cooperative, says Jim Heskett. Their work styles are sometimes confounding, though. As managers, how will they shape organizations of the future? Online forum is OPEN until Wednesday, August 29. Please feel free to post your comments.

Nothing seems to set off managers I talk with more than the topic of managing Gen Yers, otherwise known as "millennials," those born beginning in the late 1970s. Here's what they tell me:

They are generally bright, cheery, seemingly well-adjusted, and cooperative. They'll pull an "all-nighter" for a good reason, but they won't let that kind of thing intrude regularly on their personal lives. Their work styles are sometimes confounding. They need to work in a social environment, often one that would appear to some of us as chaotic. This means, however, that they are very good at working in teams. They are good at multi-tasking, understand how to employ technology productively, and as a result can often produce good work at what appears to be the last minute. They are focused on their own personal development. They want an accelerated path to success, often exaggerate the impact of their own contributions, are not willing "to pay the price," and have little fear of authority. As a result, they are often not a good bet for long-term employment, because they are quite willing to seek other employment (or no employment) rather than remain in a job in which they are not growing. They want their managers to understand their needs and lay out career options. As the authors of a recent book, *Managing the Generation Mix*, put it, they demand "the immediate gratification of making an immediate impact by doing meaningful work immediately." In short, they are high maintenance, high risk, and often high output employees.

The millennials with whom I work constantly are an exceptional subset of this group. While they exhibit some of the characteristics described above, they are incredibly bright and willing to do what it takes to get something accomplished, global in their outlook, and deeply concerned about social issues. In short, they are challenging and highly stimulating. So I may have an admittedly warped view of the generation. A great deal has been written about how millennials got that way. Of course, the rise of the Internet has influenced their outlook, behaviors, and skills. Some think it is a product of the affluence of their childhood. Others attribute it to Baby Boomer parents more devoted to their children than those of other generations, with children who regard them as "pals" as well as parents. Some ascribe it to a society in which children are taught to believe that there are no winners or losers. As one friend puts it, "They have a closet full of trophies without ever having won anything." Yet others talk about their having observed the way the rest of us have lived our lives (two jobs, too much time away from home, ironically perhaps to provide for their needs) and vowing that they will not live their lives that way.

There seems to a fixation these days on millennials as employees. But what kind of managers will they make? Given the earlier reflections, one might conclude that they will never make it into the ranks of management. Of course many will.

This raises a number of questions: Will they be as sensitive to the needs of those in their employ as they want their managers to be with them? Will they open up their organizations more widely to global opportunities? Will they create work environments in which jobs fit into personal life styles rather than vice-versa? Will they encourage mobility in their employees? Or will they express the same concerns as those for whom they currently work? What do you think?

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