
● **CHAPTER ONE**

**WHAT IS IT WITH YOUNG
PEOPLE IN THE WORKPLACE?**

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They keep telling me, “Here’s what you get in five years, ten years, twenty years . . .” But they expect me to come back to work tomorrow. What do I get *tomorrow*?

—*Twentysomething*

Not long ago, the president of a health care consulting firm told me he had just interviewed a twenty-five-year-old man for a job in his firm. The young candidate came to the interview armed with a number of ordinary questions about job duties, salary, and benefits. When these questions were answered, he made a request: “You should know that surfing is really important to me and there might be days when the surf’s really up. Would you mind if I came in a little later on those days?”

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At a major food conglomerate, summer interns are usually given an assignment, such as a big data-entry project, that they can complete during the course of their summer employment. An executive there shared with me the story of one of his latest interns: “On the first day, she announced she had invented a new cereal. She had a box, complete with artwork and a bag of her cereal inside, that she called her ‘prototype.’ Clearly she had gone to great lengths, including the recipe and nutritional information and preparing a slide show. She wanted to know when she would be able to pitch her idea to senior executives. ‘The sooner the better,’ she said.”

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An experienced nurse-manager in a busy hospital told me she stopped a new young nurse from administering the wrong medicine by intravenous drip to a patient. The manager pulled the young nurse aside and explained emphatically how serious a mistake she almost made. “I explained that this is how patients die unnecessarily. I told her, ‘You need to check the wrist bracelet, then the patient’s chart, then the charge list, then the IV bag. Then you need to check them *all* again.’” Before she was finished, the young nurse interrupted her. “Actually, you are doing this conversation wrong,” she told her boss. “You are supposed to give me some positive feedback before you criticize my work.” How did the manager respond? “Okay. Nice shoes. Now, about that IV bag . . .”

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A group of executives in the U.S. Peace Corps reported that program administrators receive e-mails on a regular basis from parents making suggestions and requests about the living accommodations and work conditions of their children stationed on missions around the world. One of the Peace Corps executives told me, “I just got an e-mail from a parent saying the meals being provided don’t meet his kid’s dietary needs. Could we get this young man on a nondairy diet?” The funny thing is that generals in the U.S. Army have told me similar stories about the parents of soldiers.

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Another experienced manager, this one in a retail organization, told me an even more striking story. This

manager was trying to correct a young associate who had just spoken rudely to a customer. The young man turned to his boss and said, “You know what? I’m thinking about buying this place. And the way you are going, you are going to be the first one out of here!”

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Managing people has never been easy. Stuck between employer and employees, managers are tasked with the tough job of negotiating their (often) competing needs and expectations. But as these stories illustrate, being a manager is even more difficult whenever a new generation enters the workforce—which is . . . *always*—bringing with it new attitudes and behaviors. Every day, leaders and managers in organizations of all shapes and sizes in just about every industry all over the Western world tell me stories of consternation about working with the newest generation of young employees.

Managers have been telling me, now, for decades . . . and I expect they’ll be saying these things for decades henceforth as well:

“New young workers walk in the door on day one with very high expectations.”

“Young people today don’t want to pay their dues and climb the ladder.”

“They walk in the door with seventeen things they want to change about the company.”

“They only want to do the best tasks.”

“If you don’t supervise them closely, they go off in their own direction.”

“It’s very hard to give them negative feedback without crushing their morale.”

“They walk in thinking they know a lot more than they know.”

And, of course, since the early 2000s, I’ve been hearing this one with increasing frequency:

“They think everybody is going to get a trophy in the real world, just like they did growing up.”

The vast majority of leaders and managers seem to think young people have an attitude problem and it seems this is always the case whenever a new generation is entering the workforce.

Does every new generation of young workers irritate the older, more experienced ones?

At the early career stage of life, young people are just learning to break away from the care of others (parents, teachers, institutions) and taking steps toward self-sufficiency and responsibility. Some do it more slowly than others. As they move into the adult world with the energy and enthusiasm—and lack of experience—that is natural at that stage—they are bound to clash with more mature generations.

And yet as much as human experience—such as the rite of passage into the workforce—stays the same over time, the world doesn’t. One epoch may be defined by an ice age, another by global warming. What makes each generation different are these accidents of history that shape the larger world in which human beings move through their developmental life stages. While every generation rocks the boat when they join the adult world, they also bring with them

defining characteristics that alter the rules of the game for everyone going forward.

Young people in the workplace of the past may have been expected to grow up, settle down, and become more and more like the grown-ups. Not so with young people entering the workforce these days. Their “attitudes” are probably not likely to become more like attitudes from the workplace of the past; their high-maintenance reputation is all too real. Still, the whole picture is more complicated. Yes, for the foreseeable future, young people will be more difficult to recruit, retain, motivate, and manage than new generations in the past. But they also bring the capacity to be the most high-performing workforce in history for those who know how to manage them properly.

Generational Change Is Real

I began conducting in-depth interviews with young people in the workplace back in 1993, when I was myself a young person in the workplace. Way back then I was a lawyer at Number Two Wall Street in New York City!

For decades now, we’ve been tracking the ever-emerging ever-“newer” new young workforce. By the late 1990s, we started tracking the first wave of the great Millennial cohort (born 1978–1989); by the early 2000s, we were tracking the second wave Millennials (born 1990–1996); and in 2013, we first began looking at Generation Zers, when they first entered the workforce as teenagers in part-time jobs. We’ve been following Generation Z ever since.

Since 1993 and every step of the way, we’ve kept our finger on the pulse of the new young workforce, maintaining a comprehensive picture of where they are coming from and where they are going in the changing workplace.

First, to understand the historical context, let me take a few steps back and help you glance at the accidents of history that have defined the generations leading up to Generation Z and beyond.

The generation born before the Baby Boom, some call “The Silent Generation,” and I call the Schwarzkopf Generation, after the famous American army general who led the amazingly short and successful first Gulf War in 1993, at the exact time I was beginning my research. Those of the Schwarzkopf Generation grew up mostly in the 1930s and 1940s. Their young adulthood was defined by a period of confidence and stability following the upheaval of depression and war. Then came the Baby Boomers, born between 1946 and 1964, who were defined by two distinct eras: the first was characterized mostly by the stability of the 1950s and early 1960s, while the second coincided with the major social change of the 1960s.

Generation X (born 1965–1977) came onto the scene in the 1970s, when adults were steeped in the self-absorption of the “me decade.” By the time Xers came of age in the 1980s and early 1990s, globalization and technology were making the world highly interconnected, rapidly changing, fiercely competitive, and information driven. Their first days at work were also the first days of downsizing—and the last days of job security. The older workers were hanging on to their desks groaning, “Hold on! It’s a workplace revolution! Please, don’t downsize me.” Meanwhile, Gen Xers, in the vanguard of the free-agent mind-set and self-directed career path, shrugged: “Downsize me. Whatever.”

The massive Millennial Generation came in two waves: The first wave (those born between 1978 and 1989) and the second wave (born between 1990 and 1996). Millennials are no longer the young people in the workplace anymore, as

Gen Zers are the Twentysomethings and teens filling up the rising global youth tide in today's workforce.

Here's the short story with Generation Z: Gen Zers are like Millennials to the tenth power, but with heavy doses of tragic realism, having come of age amid war, economic uncertainty, fear of environmental collapse, pandemic, and political upheaval. In many ways, they are more like the children of the 1930s . . . That is, if the children of the 1930s were permanently attached to hand-held supercomputers and reared on "helicopter parenting" on steroids. Overall, Generation Z embodies a continuation of the larger historical forces driving the transformation in the workplace and the workforce in recent decades.

Globalization and technology have been shaping change since the dawn of time. But during the life span—and in some cases before it—of today's young workforce, globalization and technology have undergone a qualitative change. After all, there is only one globe, and it is now totally interconnected. Young people today are well accustomed to connecting with their farthest-flung neighbors in real time regardless of geography through online communities of interest. As our world shrinks (or flattens), events great and small taking place on the other side of the world (or right next door) can affect our material well-being almost overnight. Great institutions—nations, states, cities, neighborhoods, families, corporations, churches, charities, and schools—remain in a state of constant flux just to survive. Authority is questioned routinely. Research is quick and easy. Anyone can get published. We all must filter through the endless tidal wave of information coming at us from an infinite number of sources all day, every day. Nothing remains cutting edge for very long. What we know today may be obsolete by tomorrow. What is beyond

belief today may be conventional wisdom by tomorrow. Meanwhile, the pace of everything continues to accelerate. A year is long term, and five years is just a hallucination. Short term is the key to relevance. In a world defined by constant change, instantaneous response is the only meaningful time frame.

Today's young people are comfortable in this highly interconnected rapidly changing web of variables. They've never known the world any other way. Uncertainty is their natural habitat. Globalization does not make young people feel small. Rather, it makes them feel worldly. Technological change does not make them feel as if they are racing to keep up. Rather, it makes them feel connected and powerful. Institutions may be in a state of constant flux, but that's no problem. Young people are probably just passing through anyway, trying to squeeze out as much experience and as many resources as they can. Authority figures and celebrities may disintegrate for all to see. Sure, this makes many young people plenty cynical. But it also gives them faith in everyday heroes. The information tidal wave may inundate us all with more data in one day than anyone could possibly sort through in a lifetime. But this doesn't make today's young people feel overwhelmed or uninformed. Rather, it makes them would-be experts on everything. The pace of everything may be accelerating to the point where we expect immediacy in all of our doings. But this doesn't make young people feel slow. Rather, it makes them impatient. Right now is the only real time. Constant change means you can't count on anything to stay the same. But the timelessness of the Internet allows young people to revel in nostalgia from any era. They are liberated to travel to any time at any time, abandon what bores them, embrace new things wholeheartedly, and reinvent themselves constantly.

Why are today's young people so confident and self-possessed, even in the face of all this uncertainty? One reason is surely that they grew up after the "Decade of the Child" (the 1990s). While Gen Xers were the great unsupervised generation (we made the latchkey into a metaphor in the '70s and '80s), Generation Z is the great over-supervised generation. In the short time between the childhood of Generation X and that of Gen Z, making children feel great about themselves and building up their self-esteem became the dominant theme in parenting, teaching, and counseling. Throughout their childhood, so many young people are told over and over, "Whatever you think, say, or do, that's okay. Your feelings are true. Don't worry about how the other kids play. That's their style. You have your style. Their style is valid *and* your style is valid." This is what child psychologists called "positive tolerance," and it was only one small step to the damaging cultural lies that somehow "we are all winners" and "everyone gets a trophy." In fact, as children, most young people actually *did* get a trophy just for showing up and participating.

Every step of the way, parents/teachers/counselors are guiding, directing, supporting, coaching, and protecting them. Young people are respected, nurtured, scheduled, measured, discussed, diagnosed, medicated, programmed, accommodated, included, awarded, and rewarded. Their parents, determined to create a generation of superchildren, extend and also accelerate their children's childhoods. On one hand, kids grow up so fast today (I often say that twelve is the new nineteen); on the other, they seem to stay tightly moored to their parents throughout their twenties. Their early precociousness, in fact, turns into a long-lasting sophomoreism. Many psychologists have observed that Gen Zers often act like highly precocious late adolescents well into adulthood. (I often say that thirty is the new twenty.)

The power of diversity has finally kicked over the melting pot. Generation Z is the most diverse generation in history in terms of ethnic heritage, geographical origins, ability/disability, age, language, lifestyle preference, sexual orientation, color, size, and every other way of categorizing people. Maybe this makes some young people feel alienated and threatened. But most of them are taking the concept of diversity to a whole new level. (I call it *infinite or total diversity*.) To Gen Z, every single person, with his or her own combination of background, traits, and characteristics, is his or her own unique diversity story. Young people today feel little need to conform for the purpose of gaining entry to institutions. For Generation Z, difference is cool. Uniqueness is the centerpiece of identity. Customization of the self is sought after with great zest and originality, through constant experimentation. In the world of the Generation Z, the menu of selfhood options is extraordinary and the range of possible combinations infinite.

How do today's young people continually shape and reshape their uniqueness? They want to customize anything and everything they possibly can. This goes beyond the services and products they buy. It goes very deep. Young people want to customize their very minds, bodies, and spirits. Young people customize their minds by customizing their information environment on the Internet. They voraciously pursue an ever-increasing array of mind food—images, sounds, experiences, written words—in an ever-increasing range of media and formats, from an ever-increasing number of sources, for an ever-increasing number of purposes (education, skills training, self-help, health, entertainment, news, household matters, consumer interests, life planning, death planning, spirituality, and so on). They are info junkies compulsively pouring

through bits and bytes, mixing and matching the perspectives that appeal to them. Young people know they have more and more information available to them, right at their fingertips, from more and more sources on every conceivable subject. In this environment, Gen Zers have always had the ability to create their own ever-changing personal montage of information, knowledge, and meaning. The ability to access and manipulate information from a wide range of sources gives every individual the opportunity to identify and create meaning with genuine use value and resonance, at least to some online community of interest they can locate or build. In a world with so much perspective, traditional thinking, knowing, and believing are impossible.

They customize their bodies by availing themselves of the wide range of natural and artificial tools and techniques, going way beyond tattoos and piercing and fashion statements. Their efforts range from food obsession to surgery; from Ritalin to naturalism; from yoga to steroids; implants, teeth whitening, tanning cream, and on and on. Beyond family, they customize their primary relationships across space and time in personalized networks. They even customize spiritual lives of their own devising, putting together bits and pieces of the teachings of one or more religious traditions, rejecting others, and ultimately settling on their own selection of values and beliefs and religious or spiritual practices.

For Generation Z, customization is the Holy Grail, and it has always been right there within their grasp. From the first day, they arrive in the workplace, they are scrambling to keep their options open, leverage their uniqueness for all its potential value, and wrap a customized career around the customized life they are trying to build.

Who Young Workers Are—and Are Not—at Work

Young people today don't look at a large, established organization and think, "I wonder where I'll fit in your complex picture." Rather, they look at an employer and think, "I wonder where *you* will fit in *my* life story." Every step of the way, Twentysomethings want to find a work situation they can fit into the kind of life they are building for themselves. Because they grew up overly supervised, coached, and constantly rewarded by their parents, today's young people will never be content to labor quietly and obediently in a sink-or-swim environment. They are less likely to trust the "system" or the organization to take care of them over time and thus less likely to make immediate sacrifices in exchange for promises of long-term rewards. Indeed, their typical career path will be a long series of short-term and transactional employment relationships: "What do you want from me? What do you have to offer in return now and for the foreseeable future? I'll stay here as long as it's working out for both of us."

They have very high expectations, first for themselves, but also for their employers. And they have the highest expectations for their immediate bosses. And yet they are more likely to disagree openly with employers' missions, policies, and decisions and challenge employment conditions and established reward systems. They are less obedient to employers' rules and supervisors' instructions. They are less likely to heed organizational chart authority. After all, they had incredibly close relationships with their previous authoritative role models, their parents, who treated them as equals. Instead, today's young workers do respect transactional authority: control of resources, control

of rewards, and control of work conditions. Because they look to their immediate supervisors to help them meet their basic needs and expectations, they freely make demands of them.

These are some of the things that today's young people are still telling us in interviews:

"My boss keeps telling me, 'This is where you are going to be in five years.' I'm dying to tell him, 'I hate to tell you, pal, but you don't know where you're going to be in five years.'"

"They act like their power is unquestionable, but anyone can be cancelled overnight."

"My boss doesn't fully trust me to work from home. What? Like I'm going to pretend to work? I could pretend to work just as easily if I went into the office."

"You don't like my attitude? Sorry, but 'I gotta be me,' you know? Maybe I don't like *your* attitude."

"They keep making long-term promises, but things can change. I prefer to stay focused on what we can count on in the short term."

Precisely because today's young people seem to both disregard authority figures and at the same time demand a great deal of them, leaders and managers often find them maddening and difficult to manage. Meanwhile, the truth, of course, is more complicated. You see, since I've been studying the matter, each new "new young" generation to enter the workforce has been much analyzed but, I believe, largely misunderstood. Since I began this quest as a lone voice calling attention to young people in the workplace

back in the 1990s, many so-called experts have jumped on the bandwagon of tackling the challenge of “managing generation _____” (fill in the blank . . . X, Millennial, and now Z). But nearly everyone I know of is simply reinforcing prevailing misconceptions about each successive generation.

Here are the fourteen most common myths about young people and their approach to work and career:

Myth #1: Young people are disloyal and unwilling to make real commitments to their employers.

Reality: They can be very loyal. But they don’t exhibit the kind of loyalty you find in a kingdom: blind loyalty to hierarchy, tight observance of rites of passage, patience for recognition and rewards. Instead, they offer the kind of loyalty you get in a free market—that is, transactional loyalty (whatever you can negotiate). This is the same kind of loyalty you extend to your customers and clients. We call it “just-in-time loyalty.”



Myth #2: They won’t do the grunt work.

Reality: They are so eager to prove themselves—to you and to themselves—that they will do anything you want them to do. But they won’t do the grunt work, or anything else, if they start to fear that nobody is keeping track of what they are doing and giving them credit. They are not about to do the grunt work in exchange for vague, long-term promises of rewards that vest in the deep distant future.



Myth #3: They don't know very much and have short attention spans.

Reality: They may not have the same shared knowledge base that people with a certain level of education used to take for granted, but they walk in the door with more information in their heads and more information available at their fingertips than anyone ever has before. They think, learn, and communicate in sync with today's information environment.



Myth #4: They want the top job on day one.

Reality: If they are "into" the mission, they'll take charge if you let them. Otherwise, if you want them to "get into" the work, help them hit the ground running as fast as possible. They'll want to identify problems that nobody else has identified, solve problems that nobody else has solved, make existing things better, invent new things. They'll want to make an impact.



Myth #5: They need work to be fun.

Reality: Young people don't want to be humored; they want to be taken seriously. But they do want work to be engaging. They want to learn, to be challenged, and to understand the relationship between their work and the overall mission of the organization. They want

to work with good people and have some flexibility in where, when, and how they work.

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Myth #6: They want to be left alone.

Reality: If they actually care one bit about the job, they want managers who know who they are, know what they are doing, are highly engaged with them, provide guidance, help them solve problems, and keep close track of their successes.

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Myth #7: They want their managers to do their work for them.

Reality: They want managers who will spend time teaching them how to do their work, get the resources they need, and help them avoid unnecessary problems.

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Myth #8: They don't care about climbing the proverbial career ladder.

Reality: Young people's career paths will be erratic and eclectic, but that doesn't mean they won't be progressive and developmental. Theirs will be what we call a self-building path, made up of learning, relationships, proof of their ability to add value, and lifestyle flexibility. Instead of climbing a ladder, they are making a tapestry.



Myth #9: Money and traditional benefits don't matter to them.

Reality: Of course, money and benefits matter to them. They want to get the best deal they can get. In fact, they are usually quite savvy about comparing what each employer offers. But money and benefits are only a threshold issue. If you offer money and benefits that are competitive with other comparable employers, then you can keep the conversation going.



Myth #10: Money is the only thing that matters to them (the opposite of the previous myth, but also widely held by managers who can't believe how brazenly young employees demand money.)

Reality: Again, money is a threshold issue. If they are asking for more, what they are really asking is, "What do I need to do to earn more?" Once you meet the threshold of competitive money and benefits and "this is how you earn more," young people care about five other things: schedule, relationships (especially supportive leaders,) task choice, location/workspace, and learning opportunities.



Myth #11: They don't respect their elders.

Reality: They do respect their elders. They are closer to their parents than any other generation has

ever been! But they want respect too. Their parents, teachers, and counselors have always treated them with respect, so they feel they deserve respect from their managers, too. Bottom line: they respect what you bring to the table and they want you to respect what they bring to the table.

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Myth #12: They want to learn only from hand-held super-computers.

Reality: From computers, they want to learn stuff that is easy to learn from computers. But they absolutely need the human element to do their best learning. They learn best from a combination of the human element—coaching, direction, guidance, support, shared wisdom—and the powerful capacity of menu-driven information systems to guide them through the tidal wave of information available at their fingertips.

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Myth #13: It's impossible to turn them into long-term employees.

Reality: You can turn them into long-term employees. You'll just have to do it one person at a time, one day at a time.

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Myth #14: They will never make good managers because they are so self-focused.

Reality: Of course they can be good managers. They just have to learn the basics and then practice, practice, practice.

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Bringing Out the Best in Today's Young Talent . . . and Tomorrow's

The premise of this book is that most of the so-called experts on each new young generation to enter the workplace, including Generation Z and probably beyond, have got it wrong.

Most experts have been arguing that since today's young workers are in such great demand, their demands should be accommodated by employers: "Just give them what they want." They argue that, because young people today are growing up with self-esteem-based parenting, teaching, and counseling, therefore the right way to manage them is to praise them and reward them with trophies just for showing up. These "experts" tell managers to create special programs to thank, praise, reward, and otherwise attend to the new young workforce, especially in today's uncertain environment. They recommend turning recruiting into one long sales pitch; transforming the workplace (if there is a place anymore) into a veritable playground; rearranging training so it revolves around interactive computer gaming; encouraging young workers to find "best friends" at work; and

teaching managers to soft-pedal their authority. In my view, this approach is out of touch with reality.

I tell employers that what young workers need is not always the same as what they want. The problem is that successfully giving them what they need is much harder than simply handing them what they want. Today's high-maintenance young workforce calls for strong leadership, not weak. Managers should never undermine their authority; should never pretend that the job is going to be more fun than it is; never suggest that a task is within the discretion of a young employee if it isn't; never gloss over details; never let problems slide; and never offer praise and rewards for performance that is not worthy of them. Instead, managers should spell out the rules of their workplace in vivid detail so young workers can play that job like a video game: if you want A, you have to do B. If you want C, you have to do D, and so on.

The rest of this book is meant to help managers and leaders get past the myths about young people in the workplace and tackle the issues that make managing them so challenging. In the chapters that follow, I offer nine proven strategies for bringing out the best in young talent through every step of the employment cycle:

1. Get them on board fast with the right message.
2. Get them up to speed quickly and turn them into knowledge workers.
3. Practice strong, highly engaged leadership.
4. Give them the gift of context. Help them understand their role in your company and where they fit in *your* picture.
5. Get them to care about great customer service.

6. Teach them how to manage themselves.
7. Teach them how to be managed by you.
8. Retain the best of young talent one day at a time.
9. Build the next generation of leaders.

The message of *Not Everyone Gets a Trophy* is simple: if you want high performance out of young workers, you better commit to high-maintenance management. Whether you like it or not, young people need you to help them form new bonds with your organization, their new roles, new colleagues, and you, their manager. They need you to guide, direct, and support them every step of the way. In return, you could get the highest-performing workers in history.

