



ATTORNEY SEARCH

By Carey Bertolet

## **OMG, Can We Take It Easy on the Millennials? There's a New Generation of Lawyers; Please Remain Calm**

Law firms (along with the rest of corporate America) have their sights set on Generation Y, the coming-of-age individuals who are today's most targeted consumer demographic and make up the youngest of the workforce population. Today's newly minted lawyers are coming from Generation Y, also called "Millennials." For those of us who focus on recruiting talent for a living, understanding the Millennial zeitgeist has become a priority.

Generation Y is the generation born to the Baby Boomers between 1980 and 1995, according to a November 2007 report on CBS News's *60 Minutes*. *60 Minutes* estimated that there are 80 million Generation Y-ers moving into their early years of gainful employment. Not surprisingly, Generation Y has been carefully studied for years by marketers and managers to best exploit the generation both as consumer base and workforce. In Generation Y spirit, I surfed the Internet to divine what characteristics conventional wisdom has assigned to our newest young professionals.

There were three common characteristics of the Millennials that I saw over and over. First, the generation is defined as the "Net Gen" who is always online and constantly multitasking. At ease with computers and mobile phones, Generation Y is technology friendly and highly networked. Social relationships develop with text messaging, Facebook, and MySpace – uncharted territory for the rest of us. The Millennials never wistfully say, "Remember before we had cell phones?"

Second, Generation Y – a significantly more diverse population – is often defined as optimistic and volunteer-oriented. This is widely attributed to coming of age in a culture where self-esteem and a "you can do anything you set your mind to" attitude pervade. Many opine Millennials are used to praise and loathe criticism. Most relevant to employers is the generalization that Millennials are less likely to identify with an employer. Loyalty isn't a priority, but individualism is. Is Generation Y the death of the "company man"?

Third, the Millennials are far more casual in their interaction, favoring speed in communication over formality. If you don't know that "TIA" means "thanks in advance," you were probably born before 1980. Generation Y has been accused of dressing sloppily for work, being overly familiar with superiors, and being unwilling to pay their dues in the workplace. My research found this generation associated with the words "entitled" and "demanding."

In attempting to distill the popular characteristics assigned to this generation, I noticed another interesting theme in my research. Apparently, it is "us" versus "them." In December CNN.com published a CareerBuilder.com article asking, "Generation Y: Too demanding at work?" San Diego State Associate Professor Jean Twenge wrote *Generation Me: Why Today's Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled – and More Miserable – Than Ever Before* and explores whether this new generation is markedly more narcissistic

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than those that came before. I found one article on a website ([www.management-issues.com](http://www.management-issues.com)) titled "Surviving Generation-Y" with an introductory sentence that tells us that we "are just beginning to wake up to the havoc that the newest generation is causing." The *New York Times* (in an article published on July 26, 2007, and written by Lisa Belkin) described the integration (or lack thereof) of Generation Y into white-collar jobs as "When Whippersnappers and Geezers Collide."

It's getting a little too *War of the Worlds* for my tastes. Are we really being invaded by preening Internet celebrities who will chip away at the foundation of the business world?

Recently, I prepared for a speech I was giving to an audience of law students. I was reminded by several people that I needed to tailor my comments to the peculiarities of the Millennials. I wanted to talk about the economy, the credit crisis, and what I expected the market for lawyers to look like in the coming years. But, it was suggested, maybe I should spend my time reminding them that they are all special. Maybe Generation Y would like me to limit my speech to the pro bono opportunities of law firm junior associates.

Although I risked being pelted with iPods and flash drives, I delivered the speech I wanted to give. The information focused on the sometimes harsh realities of today's New York legal market and the challenges of having a successful career in a law firm. I declined the opportunity to pander to the stereotypical student of this burgeoning generation. What I found was a thoughtful and appreciative audience. In fact, in speeches and meeting on a one-on-one basis, I find law students today to be a very goal-oriented, professional group for the most part.

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When I do get seemingly naïve questions about public interest opportunities in the corporate law firm environment or demands about quality of life, I can't say that this sense of entitlement (if you want to call it that) is anything different from what young associates always seem to focus on as they enter their professional years. I was optimistic and demanding too when I started out. Hopefully I still am.

Certainly, the newest generation is different. We Generation X-ers (barely grown-ups ourselves) did not grow up in the same highly tech-savvy Internet world of our younger counterparts. These differences absolutely warrant distinctions. I would never discourage an employer from understanding how to communicate with and integrate a new generation and the culture they bring in tow. But is it really us versus them?

I recall lots of talk when I was a young associate in a law firm about all the advantages I had that my partners didn't. I remember being teased because (along with my peers) I was focused both on a favorable work-life balance and on being well compensated. I heard a lot about the old days and how everyone who came before me walked uphill, both ways...you know the rest. I remember being called the instant gratification generation, and we only had dial-up! Now we're wagging our canes at the high-speed connectedness the newest and hottest generation enjoys.

Obviously, corporate culture as it exists won't dissolve when the Millennials report to work. Members of the "what's-in-it-for-me" generation will have to adapt to some of the non-individualistic realities of banks, law firms, and corporations as they mature in the professional world.

A friend of mine recently hired an assistant. Her assistant openly exchanges personal instant messages with her friends all day, every workday.

"So you fired her?" I asked.

She responded no, explaining, "She's the best assistant I've ever had."

Those multitasking Millennials. They may even teach us a few tricks. v