

Bridging the Millennial Divide

Leading the new generation of workers poses specific challenges that finishers must address.

At 8:00 a.m., I asked the young man to call the supplier and expedite our order. Around lunchtime, I followed up to make sure the call had been made.

"I emailed him," he responded.

I hadn't asked him to email anybody. I had asked him to make a phone call.

Later, I asked another team member to stop by the office of one of her co-workers to discuss the status of a project. I followed up later in the day to confirm that the meeting took place.

"I texted him," was the response.

A recent shopfloor recruit resigned somewhat unexpectedly citing a challenging work environment.

"I was tired of being hollered at," was the explanation.

"Hollered at? Who hollered at you?" I inquired.

"My supervisor did."

"Hollered at you?"

"Yes."

"Raised his voice?"

"No."

"What do you mean 'hollered at'?"

"He kept telling me how to do my job."

Welcome to the world of so-called "millennials" in the

workplace. Members of this generation (roughly comprised of those born between the early 1980s and the early 2000s) have been steadily entering the workforce in recent years.

As conventional wisdom goes, this generation is the product of coaches who didn't keep score at basketball games, teachers who didn't publicly post grades, parents who protected self-esteem at all cost and public policy that now affords them the option of remaining on their parents' health insurance programs until the tender age of 26.

Anecdotal evidence demonstrates that effectively leading millennials poses its own specific set of challenges, and the examples at the outset of this column begin to tell the story.

I admit to generalizing somewhat, but the basic take on millennials is that they cling to technology and are "always connected," as social networking and the advent of smart phones enable them to have real-time contact with their friends at almost all times. Their cell phones have replaced the automobile as their principal source of freedom. Many don't carry cash, are practically addicted to video games and have short attention spans. According to the Pew Research Center, a full 40 percent of them have a tattoo and 18 percent have more than six. If you're sitting across the interview table from a millennial, the odds that said-individual has a piercing

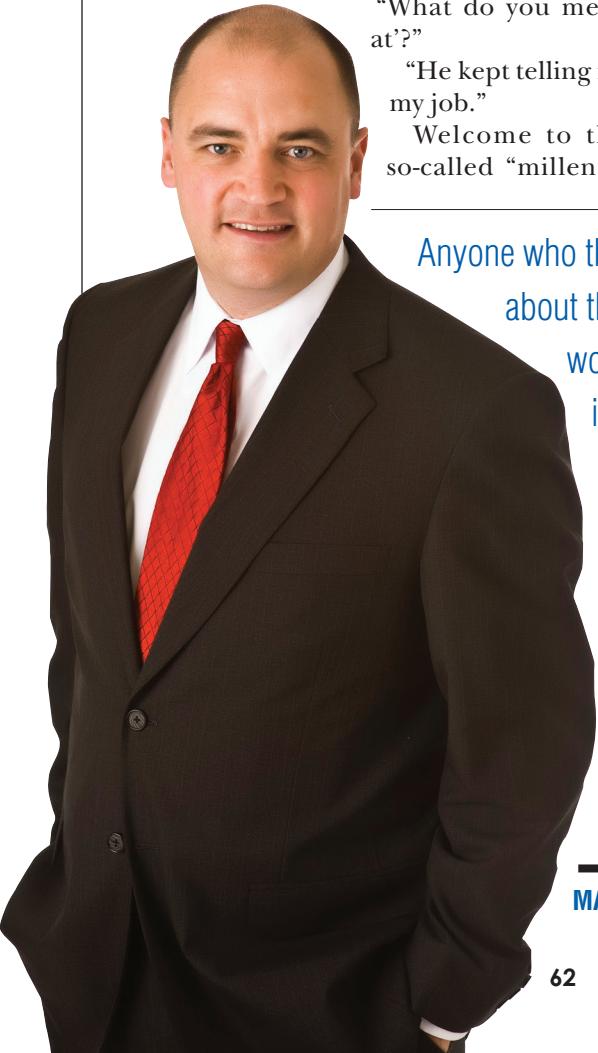
Anyone who thinks that the baby boomers and Gen Xers are the first to grouse about the next generation ought to spend a few minutes listening to the words of The Who's hit "My Generation." The generational divide is nothing new. The challenge for those leading today's finishing companies is what to do about it.

in a part of his body other than his ear is one in four.

Millennials pose a challenge to many finishing companies whose current leaders are members of preceding generations, as they struggle to fill their ranks with "qualified" team members who "get it."

By "get it" perhaps we mean that we need our people to show the kind of company-first loyalty that we did to our first employers. We need them to demonstrate the professionalism that we did in seeking our first jobs and starting our careers. We want people who are equally

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comfortable picking up the phone or having a personal meeting as they are sending a text message. We need people that can go a day without checking Facebook or Twitter. You know ... we need people that “get it.” Good luck with that.

So we lament the challenge of finding good people.

Lance Secretan, in his book *Inspirational Leadership*, argues that “painful shortages [of qualified people] already exist in crucial sectors such as technology and many craft professions” and “if old-story leaders continue to run organizations in ways that alienate people and diminish their souls, the problem of finding good people will simply become more acute.” That quote may not come as much of a surprise. What is surprising, though, is that the book was published 14 years ago. The current challenge of finding people who “get it” has been coming for some time.

But what if the problem is not the millennials? What if the problem is their leaders and their definition of “get it?” Anyone who thinks that the baby boomers and Gen Xers are the first to grouse about the next generation ought spend a few minutes listening to the words of The Who’s 1965 hit “My Generation.” The generational divide is nothing new. The challenge for those leading today’s finishing companies is what to do about it.

I don’t have all the answers, but I believe the solution starts with coming to grips with the idea that the values, habits and traits of the millennial generation may not be exactly like mine. While making comparisons in terms of work ethic, loyalty or approaches to interpersonal relationships might make today’s business leaders feel better about themselves, doing so does nothing to prepare the business for its next generation of leadership.

The companies that lead the finishing industry of tomorrow will be those that figure out how to not just accommodate but leverage the unique personality of the millennial generation. Have you started? ■

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