

The Tethered Generation

With access to technology since a young age and a perpetual connection to parents, the millennial generation brings new challenges to the workplace.

By Kathryn Tyler

At 11 years old, Kate Achille had a pager for her parents to reach her when necessary. At 13, she had a cell phone. Now 22 and working for a school, she e-mails her mother as many as five times a day and calls her on the cell phone several times a week.

Her mother, Jeanne Achille, CEO of Shrewsbury, N.J., public relations firm The Devon Group, says technology allows her to communicate regularly with Kate and her other daughter, who is 18. "I know where my daughters are constantly because we use these communications technologies to update each other: 'I'm still at work,' 'I'm going to the gym,' 'I'm picking up dinner,' etc.

"I would have never given my parents visibility into this level of detail in my day!" she admits.

But this is a different day. Kate Achille and her sister are part of the so-called millennial generation, now ages 8 to 29. This group, also called Generation Y and the Net Generation, is made up of 80 million people in the United States born between 1978 and 1999. They are the first generation to use e-mail, instant messaging (IM) and cell phones since childhood and adolescence.

Especially as millennials born since 1985 begin to show up in the workforce, HR professionals and psychologists are just beginning to see what effect the constant "tethering" to technology has had on the way millennials work, communicate, make decisions and interact. That effect, along with a tethered relationship to their peers and parents—sometimes to the extent that they have been deemed "helicopter parents"—presents challenges for HR professionals integrating millennials into the workplace.

For those who remember life without cell phones and the Internet, it may be difficult to understand how ingrained technology is in millennials' lives. To prepare for millennials, it's important to understand how cell phones and computers have changed their brain development, the enormous role their parents play in their lives well into adulthood, and what policies and training programs HR professionals will need to implement to transition these young people into the workplace.

Millennial Connectivity

Older generations that couldn't wait to proclaim their independence can't comprehend this generation's need for parental guidance and influence. Years ago, "most college dorm rooms had one land line, and, if parents were lucky, kids called home once a week. Now, students may be going across the country, but they call their parents on the cell phone three to five times per day," says Claire Raines, author of *Generations at Work* (AMACOM).

Good News...

Millennials have a lot of skills and enthusiasm to offer companies. Experts say they are:

- Techno-savvy. "They're enormous consumers of information and can locate details about anything within seconds," says Jeanne Achille, CEO of The Devon Group and mother of two millennials. "We employ millennials to help with research because they can find in-depth data through sources we older employees don't even know exist." (The flip side is training millennials to adequately vet the research they find on the Internet.)
- Adept at global and diversity issues. "Millennials' world is far more expansive than previous generations' because, through online social networks, they can reach well beyond the confines of geography and establish relationships with others. They're ideally positioned to support our global workplaces, and HR people should tap their skills accordingly," says Achille.
- Team-oriented. With millennials, "decisions are made in a team environment," says futurist Jim Taylor. "They measure themselves by their peers. They will form communal tribes and communicate astonishing amounts."
- Multitaskers. "For today's young people, multitasking is as natural as eating," says Robert Epstein, visiting scholar at the University of California in San Diego, and West Coast editor of *Psychology Today*.

According to a study by the Fort Lauderdale, Fla.-based staffing firm Spherion, 90 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds feel that listening to an iPod while working improves their job satisfaction and productivity. Susan Revillar Bramlett, an HR generalist for a defense research contractor, and a millennial herself, confirms this phenomenon. "The constant stimuli from video and computer games have caused millennials to be bored if there isn't enough information coming in to keep our brains busy."

—Kathryn Tyler

Another big influence on this generation is their peers. While previous generations also looked to their friends for advice and direction, today's technology allows a perpetual connection to peers, leaving little time for autonomy. "Except for their mothers, these kids don't have relationships with people outside of their generation. They spend 72 hours per week of connected time—by phone and IM"—seeking advice and input on the smallest decisions, says Jim Taylor, a futurist, author and vice chairman of Waterbury, Conn.-based The Harrison Group, a marketing consulting and research services firm, which has consulted for large companies on tapping the teen market.

What could be wrong with young people using cell phones and IM to keep mom and dad abreast of their every move? New research reveals a lot.

Scientists once believed the brain was almost completely formed by age 13. But, in the past two years, neuroscientists have discovered that parts of the brain—specifically the prefrontal lobes, which are involved in planning and decision-making—continue to develop well into the late teens and early 20s.

"The prefrontal cortex is important for decision-making, planning, reasoning and the storage of knowledge," explains Jordan Grafman, chief of the Cognitive Neuroscience Section at the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke in Bethesda, Md.

That means millennials' brains are still developing reasoning, planning and decision-making capabilities while they are depending heavily on technology—cell phones, IM and e-mail—as well as parents and friends at the other end of the technology. As a result, some experts believe millennials struggle to make decisions independently.

When parents give teens cell phones, it's a double-edged sword. "On the one hand, this arrangement gives the adolescent new freedoms. On the other, the adolescent doesn't have the experience of having only herself to count on; there's always a parent on speed dial," says Sherry Turkle, licensed clinical psychologist and professor of the social studies of science and technology at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge.

Stephen P. Seaward, director of career development for Saint Joseph College in West Hartford, Conn., agrees. "The majority of millennials never experienced life without a microwave, computer, ATM card or television remote control. Many had

their first cell phones in their early teens with parents footing the bill," he says. "This instantaneous gratification ... may have fostered unrealistic expectations with respect to goal-setting and planning. That, in conjunction with extreme parental influence, can prohibit creative problem-solving and decision-making."

Research bears this out. Roughly three-quarters of executives and HR managers at 400 companies surveyed said that recent four-year college graduates displayed only "adequate" professionalism and work ethic, creativity and innovation, and critical thinking and problem-solving. Only one-quarter reported an "excellent" display of those traits in recent college graduates, according to *Are They Really Ready to Work?*, a report by the Society for Human Resource Management, The Conference Board, Corporate Voices for Working Families and the Partnership for 21st Century Skills.

Helicopter Parents

While technology has enabled children's dependency, it has also abetted parental oversight, making it easier for overbearing parents to "hover" well into adulthood. "Some hovering is good since some mistakes can be catastrophic. But small errors induce critical thinking," and if children are not allowed to make small errors, they don't learn through experience, argues Grafman.

"Parents' most important task is to help young people to become independent and autonomous. When we infantilize our young, we stifle their development," says Robert Epstein, visiting scholar at the University of California in San Diego, and West Coast editor of *Psychology Today*.

Epstein tells the story of a helicopter parent meddling in his college-aged daughter's courses. "In class, I announced I expect hard work and sacrifice from my students and any professor who said less than that was cheating his students. This young woman's father—a California Superior Court judge—sent a letter to the chair of my department saying his daughter was intimidated by my warning. His letter arrived on judicial stationery."

Epstein brought the matter to the attention of the judicial regulatory board, which later reprimanded the judge. Imagine when this young woman enters the workforce and her father dislikes her workload, he wonders.

"Parental involvement in the lives of their offspring seems to be increasing every year. I've seen parents come to campus protesting a low grade. When I caught one student cheating on a paper, his mom called and demanded I let him write a new paper," says Epstein.

Most colleges now hold orientation sessions for freshman students and their parents, separately. The parent orientation talks about how to “cut the apron strings.”

However, it often doesn’t achieve the desired effect, says Robert W. Wendover, director of The Center for Generational Studies, a research and training company in Aurora, Colo.

“The kids leave everything to mom and dad,” says Wendover. “The kids encourage it; they’re used to it. It’s easier to use the parent as a surrogate than to think for yourself. There is a point at which the child fails to learn resourcefulness. It’s a learned helplessness.”

Not everyone agrees this is detrimental or even prevalent. Barbara Dwyer, CEO of The Job Journey, a soft-skills training firm for high-school and community college students in El Macero, Calif., says, “This generation is closer to their parents than any other generation. They see their parents as friends. It’s a good thing.” Dwyer believes helicopter parents are a small percentage of the total parenting population.

However, many college professors and career counselors say otherwise. “Parents have called to set up interview appointments for their children. The students lose a sense of self-reliance,” says Toni McLawhorn, director of career services at Roanoke College in Salem, Va.

... And Bad News

According to experts, the millennial generation as a whole lacks the following traits:

- Discretion. “If you give up your privacy on MySpace about everything from your musical preferences to your sexual hang-ups, it is harder to understand others’ concern for privacy invasions, says Sherry Turkle, a licensed clinical psychologist and MIT professor. “They get the idea one’s privacy is dispensable.”

Clearly, this lack of confidentiality can have dramatic repercussions in the workplace. “There will be no secrets,” futurist Jim Taylor warns. “A conversation that would normally be judged as a private discussion between a boss and subordinate” will become public.

- Independence. “Because parents overscheduled their lives, they don’t

know what to do next. They will need more direction” in the workplace, says Jean M. Twenge, associate professor of psychology at San Diego State University and author of *Generation Me: Why Today’s Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled—and More Miserable Than Ever Before* (Free Press)

Claire Raines, author of *Generations at Work* (AMACOM), says millennials may look to managers to “take on that ‘mom role’ in some ways. We have to show that we really care about the person, know what their goals are and help them with their career paths,” she says.

- Realistic expectations. Barbara Dwyer, CEO of The Job Journey, a soft-skills training firm, notes this generation believes they can change the world on the first day of work. “The problem is that they don’t have the track record to support these statements. When they’re told their entire lives how wonderful they are, and then they’re challenged in the business environment, they are crushed,” she says.
- Patience. “They’re used to instant gratification. They tend to be impatient and want things yesterday. From an HR perspective, the advantage is that, in their impatience, they may become more efficient, but the disadvantage is that they may not have the patience to work through a complex problem,” says Twenge.
- Work ethic. When asked how the work ethic of today’s young professionals compared to that of previous generations, 49 percent of executives polled by Korn/Ferry indicated that it was worse.

“One problem HR professionals are already facing is many young people entering the workforce have unrealistic expectations about what it means to work,” says Robert Epstein, West Coast editor of *Psychology Today*. “Many are unwilling to work hard or make personal sacrifices to get ahead.”

- Soft skills and the basics. “Students’ grammar may suffer from an over-reliance on computer programs that correct language errors, which will perpetuate poor written communication skills. E-mail and instant messaging reduces the opportunity for face-to-face interpersonal interaction. The lack of strong interpersonal skills impacts other soft skills, such as conflict resolution,” says Stephen P. Seaward, director of career development for Saint Joseph College in West Hartford, Conn.

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Helicoptering in the Workforce

As millennials move into the workforce, their hovering parents do, too. "Parents are writing resumes, applying to jobs and even attending interviews," reports Steven Rothberg, president and founder of the CollegeRecruiter.com career site, headquartered in Edina, Minn.

Ann Reynolds, director of university career services at Texas Christian University in Fort Worth, says she has received feedback from employers about "parents calling to find out why their child was not hired or offered more money. A few want to be involved in negotiating salary."

Susan Revillar Bramlett, PHR, an HR generalist for a defense research contractor in Fort Wayne, Ind., and a millennial herself, "overheard a parent yell at the HR person because her daughter was turned down for a promotion."

Wendover has another disquieting but increasingly common tale from a pharmaceutical company. "They had a 23-year-old new employee with a pharmacy doctoral degree show up for the first day of work with her dad. He wanted to see where she worked. The dad stayed for about four hours. The manager was aghast," he says.

Another HR professional, who asked not to be identified, tells of withdrawing a job offer from a young candidate after he failed a required drug test. "Within 24 hours, his mother called me to say their family takes a lot of herbal supplements and we shouldn't hold this against him. Then she kept talking about what a good person her son was and how he could do great things for our company. After I refused to discuss the situation with her, I didn't hear from them again."

When it comes to dealing with helicopter parents, there are two schools of thought: beat 'em or join 'em. HR professionals will need to decide to which school they subscribe and develop policies and procedures accordingly.

Some companies are courting the parents and applicants simultaneously. At many Enterprise Rent-A-Car offices, for instance, the company offers to provide information to the parents of prospective candidates, and about half of the candidates accept. Remember, though, any parental involvement should always be at the request or discretion of the candidate.

In contrast, if a company chooses not to communicate with helicopter parents, it will need to enforce strong privacy policies and train managers on how to deflect parental interference. The unnamed HR professional above refuses to discuss anyone's employment with his or her parents. "I remain polite and explain we don't

discuss employment-related issues with [outsiders]. If they continue to push, I suggest they discuss the matter with their [child]. If the employee follows up with me, I say why it's inappropriate, and I hope it won't happen again."

How To Prepare for the Millennials

Policies to manage helicopter parents aren't the only preparation companies will need to consider for the millennial generation. Experts suggest HR professionals plan to:

- **Increase basic skills training.** Many millennials may lack basic spelling and writing skills because they have come to rely on spell check. Moreover, some millennials have become so accustomed to using IM abbreviations, such as "b/c" for "because," that some don't know how to spell it correctly. Wendover recommends asking candidates to write a letter from scratch without the benefits of grammar or spell check. "Then, you'll know what their writing skills are," he says.

In addition, millennials need to learn how to conduct old-fashioned research in books and other primary sources. "It doesn't occur to them to go to the library, but there's a whole bunch of stuff not on the web," says Wendover.

Millennial Bramlett agrees. "New college grads strongly believe all Internet information is valid, and if it's not available on the Internet, then it doesn't exist. This can create problems in work quality if someone is relying 100 percent on Internet resources."

- **Explain the reasons behind processes.** To gain compliance from millennials, you need to give the rationale behind your instructions, says Wendover. If you tell a person to stock a grocery shelf but to be cautious opening the boxes, he won't be. "This person takes a box knife to open a case of Wheaties and slices across all the boxes. Then you have to discount that box. But, if you explain, 'In the grocery industry you only have a 1 percent profit margin, the box sells for \$5, you're only making 5 cents, and by being forced to discount the box you have lost any profit that could have been made,' [this is how] you engage them. You need to teach them why they're doing what they're doing," says Wendover.

- **Place clear parameters on communication frequency and methods, particularly IM.** Millennials need to be told when it is acceptable to call and how to reach their superiors. Don't assume they have traditional standards for appropriate behavior, such as knowing it isn't acceptable to make a business call in the restroom.

"Some of our interns expect staff members to be available to them instantly, even

when the issue is not urgent. They don't appreciate that our workdays are full and we need to prioritize our tasks. Sometimes, their requests must wait," says Rothberg.

- **Provide more frequent job performance appraisals and other feedback.**

"This generation has grown up sitting in front of a monitor playing video games. Players always know how they're doing by the score on the screen," says college career director Seaward. "Therefore, this generation won't want to wait for a semiannual or annual performance review. They will require ongoing feedback."

Bramlett agrees: "If I do something wrong, I expect my manager to let me know immediately, not at my next performance evaluation. If I've given a major presentation to company executives, I immediately follow up with someone who sat in on the call to gain feedback on how I did and how I can improve."

- **Focus on outcomes.** "They can do their job, surf the web, IM friends, have a chat with colleagues on the side and pay attention to everything," says Wendover. "It's unrealistic to expect them to have no personal calls during the workday."

HR must measure outcome-based performance. "If they are getting the job done faster than you anticipated, give them more to do," says Wendover. Don't settle for poor quality, but don't fuss if they are also conducting personal conversations while they're working.

- **Keep them engaged.** "I will stay with a company as long as my skills are developing. If something major doesn't change, I move on. This happened with my last HR position," says Bramlett. "The only reason I didn't leave [right away] was because I felt responsible for a major project where employees were depending on me. Millennials can be loyal, but it's based more on relationships than on the company."

Therefore, HR professionals will need to be vigilant about helping millennials with career planning and job rotation assignments. "If a company doesn't have a good internal placement program, they may find many of these folks leaving to gain new experiences," says Bramlett.

- **Expand work/life balance programs.** According to a study by Spherion, a recruiting and staffing firm headquartered in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., millennials highlight "time and flexibility" as the most important thing in keeping them loyal to their employers (followed by financial compensation and benefits). No other age group named "time and flexibility" in their top three retention drivers.

Bramlett confirms this. "Just because a person is single or doesn't have kids doesn't

mean they will accept responsibility of having to work a majority of the overtime or travel more than others in the same position," she says. "Work/life balance is important to this generation, and it shouldn't matter why they want the time off."

Great Expectations

"My generation is going to be high-maintenance," acknowledges Bramlett. "We were brought up to reach for the stars. Many millennials don't recognize the idea of starting at the bottom and working their way up. Millennials come to work on their first day with great ideas on how they're going to change the world. Management will need to be sensitive to their aspirations when responding to their ideas so as to not shoot them down."

Dwyer agrees: "This generation is going to come to work with higher expectations than any other. They will be quickly disappointed if it's not as good as they had hoped. With one click of the mouse, they can tell thousands of other people, 'Don't go to work for XYZ company.' It's going to be challenging."

Concludes Taylor, "The main thing HR people have to deal with is how to take people who are well-educated, intelligent and quick to draw remarkably accurate conclusions and immerse them in the organization."

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