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Millennials—The Future Generation of Your Workforce

BETWEEN 2011 AND 2029, 77 million baby boomers will transition into retirement. The natural offset will be found in the 70 million or so “millennials” taking their place.

Workplace demographics in the United States have traditionally been categorized into four segments:

1. *Traditionalists*—born prior to 1946
2. *Baby Boomers*—born 1946–1964 (who will begin retiring in 2011)
3. *Generation X*—born 1965–1980
4. *Millennials*—born 1981–2000

It’s this fourth group that seems to be getting the most press coverage because it represents the future of corporate America. Being the largest generation since the baby boom, millennials represent a huge economic and social force and may already be the most-studied generation in history.

The millennial generation, also known as “Generation Y,” the “Net generation,” and the “IM generation,” is the most tech-savvy generation that’s ever graced our planet. And navigating generational politics in the office has never been as critical as it is today, thanks to this workforce that has no recognition of life without cell phones, the Internet, iPods, instant messaging (IM), e-mail, text messaging, and personal electronic entertainment.

Millennials grew up in a society where children’s self-esteem was consciously nurtured, and they’ve benefited from the longest economic boom in history. As a result of their experience, unique values have developed that make them different from generations that have come before them. And due to their sheer size and the key responsibility that’s befallen them—picking up where the baby boomers will leave off—they’ve become a force to be reckoned with, both in terms of hiring and retention.

This generation is known for its confidence—not just the natural confidence of youth, but an assuredness that comes from growing up in prosperous economic times. They demonstrate high levels of trust and optimism and can balance ambition with practicality. They're socially conscious, focused on achievement, diverse, and fairly street smart. In short, most demographers would sum them up as bright, ambitious, concerned, and amazingly connected through technology.

That being said, millennials represent specific challenges to employers. Negatively characterized as narcissistic and entitled, these newcomers have been accused of demonstrating a penchant for self-indulgence, IM shorthand illiteracy, and shorter attention spans. In addition, you'll be faced with a generation that is used to getting a lot of praise and not much censuring, so the traditional understanding of what constitutes constructive criticism may become a common workplace issue—and one that needs to be addressed during the interview process.

In addition, remember that millennials tend to blur private and public communication. Because of the availability of technology that's allowed them to post their innermost secrets on MySpace as well as videos of themselves on YouTube, their level of sensitivity toward protecting company confidential information may not be well developed.

Most important, remember that this generation communicates differently. Shorthand IM and text messages don't require a lot of face-to-face negotiation, and they may be less inclined to communicate in person. This is particularly an issue when there is conflict. As such, you may need to provide special care when it comes to the appropriate amount of structure, direction, and feedback that they'll require on a daily basis, as well as guidance in terms of face-to-face communication with customers and older co-workers.

That being said, you may very well find that this younger group of newcomers may be looking for more appreciation and open communication than you're normally used to giving—especially during the initial interview process. And maybe they're right. Perhaps it's time to simplify the interviewing equation on both sides so that the interview itself becomes an exercise of value rather than a game of wits, strategies, and defenses that simply provides gateway access into a company.

The key to this kind of simpler, more open interviewing style lies in engaging candidates' hearts as well as their minds by employing an open and honest dialogue that focuses just as much on the candidate's needs as on the needs of your company. If you tend to hire lots of workers under age 30, this chapter is for you. Let's look at some interview questioning strategies that may identify the best and brightest that these younger workers

have to offer while avoiding some of the potential pitfalls that may come your way.

37 *If you were to accept this position with us today, how would you explain that to a prospective employer five years from now? How would this job provide a link in your future career progression?*

Why Ask This Question?

If millennials are looking for employers to meet them halfway, so to speak, in providing a work experience that truly benefits both parties, then it's critical to begin the interview by understanding how candidates see the job helping them over the long run. It's a tougher question for candidates to answer at first glance because it demands a fairly significant amount of career introspection and individual insight, but the selfless nature of the question will help them understand your desire to make it a mutually beneficial relationship.

Analyzing the Response

Forcing someone to make the link between accepting a position now and its benefit to their career five years from now places you into the role of executive mentor and coach, which in and of itself portends well for the relationship. Few interviewers employ this technique, which forces the candidate to sell himself on accepting the position or self-selecting out of the process. Think of the beauty of the query, however: You'll have shifted the career development paradigm to the preemployment process, which makes for a positive impression of your company. And the candidate will naturally think, "Wow, if they challenge you with these kinds of questions during the interview process, they're obviously serious about career development and growing their people once you're on board."

And you certainly can expect candidates to think, "Wow! I've never been asked that before and haven't really given it much thought." However, you'll end up with a great opportunity to observe candidates talk through their immediate career needs and longer-term goals out loud and on the spot. Talk about getting to know the real candidate during the interview process!

Let's look at an example. A senior financial analyst from a competitor firm is interviewing for the same position at your company. He's been at his current company for three years and has a total of five years of experience as a senior financial analyst and senior staff accountant. You're thinking, Why would he want another senior analyst role right now? Why isn't he

looking for a manager-level position, and what's blocking his progression at this current company?

The candidate responds to your initial "five-year impact" question as follows:

"Well, I haven't quite thought of it that way. I feel blocked at my current company from getting ahead, but you're right [wincing]: If I were to accept this lateral position right now, it really wouldn't do all that much for my résumé five years from now. I guess maybe this wouldn't be the right position if I want to grow in my career and assume greater responsibilities and title progression."

And voilà, your career-counseling skills thrust the interview into a whole new direction, allowing you to help this candidate get to the real reason behind his job search and the ultimate fit within your organization. In this case, it didn't work to your advantage in terms of hiring the individual. However, that doesn't mean that you wouldn't hire him six months from now when a finance manager role becomes available.

This question may seem like it's primarily for the candidate's benefit. In reality, though, it's primarily for your benefit. The selfless nature of the question will always be well received, but you'll get the bottom-line answer you're looking for: Is this candidate thinking through his career options sufficiently, does he have the necessary longer-term career mentality that you're looking for, and will he remain around long enough for you to recoup your upfront investment in on-boarding and training? If not, then asking the question now will save you lots of time and money by avoiding the turnover which certainly could have happened six months from now, once the honeymoon was over and the individual realized he was pursuing change for change's sake. (Note that this question works particularly well whenever you're interviewing someone who appears to be overqualified for a position.)

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What was the most difficult ethical decision you've ever had to make in your career or during your education, and what was the outcome?

Why Ask This Question?

The millennials were affected by a number of historic events in their lifetimes: September 11, the Iraq War, the Columbine High School tragedy, and, in the workplace, the Sarbanes-Oxley Act of 2002. If that last one doesn't register quite as high as the first few mentioned, its effects are certainly felt in the office.

Millennials are known for being a "corrective" generation, committed

to bettering the environment, strongly responding to sexual harassment in schools and at work, and ending corporate greed and corruption. The Sarbanes-Oxley Act of 2002, also known as “SOX,” has mandated codes of conduct and workplace ethics statements in publicly traded companies that require ongoing training and certification as well as disclosure of potential conflicts of interest. And this workplace ethics standard has found its way into private and not-for-profit institutions as well, which makes this question fair game for the younger generation.

Analyzing the Response

Some of the more astute candidates may have answers right off the bat to your initial inquiry, but others may need a little prompting, like this: “Ethics in the workplace has to do with sexual harassment, discrimination, and even potential violence in the workplace. Have you been involved in any of those types of events?” If you’re still getting a clueless look back from the candidate, ask: “Has anyone ever asked you to speak off the record at work, and if so, have you granted that request?”

A typical answer may be, “Sure. People have asked me to talk off the record on more than one occasion. Is that an ethical issue?” And your response might be, “It certainly could be. We all respect others’ privacy, but when it comes to maintaining workplace confidences, how do you know when it’s best not to say anything versus when you have an obligation to disclose the information to your supervisor and to the company?”

This will generally trigger a conversation about workplace sensitivity levels, confidentiality, loyalty, and the like. Remembering that this generation has grown up sharing private information on personal Web pages that grant access to “invited” friends, the conversation could easily turn toward matters of corporate confidentiality and nondisclosure as follows:

“Mary, if someone asks you to talk off the record and you grant their request, what if they tell you that they’re being harassed by their supervisor? Do you have an obligation to disclose that to the company or not?”

Similarly,

“If someone makes an off-handed remark that they’re feeling like they want to take one of their hunting rifles and ‘do some justice’ back in the office, how would you respond in terms of being torn between protecting their confidence and sharing that potential threat with management?”

“Finally, what if a coworker said that he wanted to post internal company information to a corporate gossip blog because he was very dissatisfied with the way management handled a particular issue? Would you feel compelled to say something to management in advance, or would you simply let it be?”

These aren't meant to be easy questions, and younger candidates may often assume that you're looking for them to be more concerned about others' privacy rather than risking being seen as a disloyal snitch. However, younger workers, because of their tech-savviness and penchant for sharing personal feelings via electronic means, may indeed jeopardize your company's interests if they're not sensitized to these matters both during the interview and during the initial on-boarding process in orientation.

Before letting the candidate ponder these challenging questions too deeply, this gives you a good opportunity to jump right in and outline your expectations:

"Mary, I'm not asking you these questions to make you uncomfortable. However, I know that these very issues typically come up in the workplace as well as in corporate ethics training seminars and that most people have had some sort of experience with them, either firsthand or as an observer.

"I want to be clear about this as it's a very important workplace expectation here: In our company, we ask that employees do not engage in public blogging about confidential matters. In addition, if someone were feeling harassed or discriminated against, we would expect their fellow workers to help them by letting management know about the problem, under the assumption that people are sometimes afraid to get help for themselves for fear of retaliation. Simply stated, if we don't know about it, we can't fix it. Same thing with the gun example: We take potential threats, whether direct or veiled, very seriously and always want to provide our workers with a safe environment, even if that means meeting with an employee who made a flippant comment for a laugh.

"If you were to accept a position with our company, we'd want you to know in advance of your starting with us how strongly we feel about helping others and ensuring safety in the workplace. It's all about corporate responsibility and good citizenship. These values are simply too important for us not to address in the initial candidate screening process.

"Oh, by the way, the next time a coworker asks you to speak off the record about something at work, tell the individual, 'Maybe. As long as it doesn't have to do with harassment, discrimination, potential violence, or some other conflict of interest with the company, then you're free to talk away to your heart's content. Otherwise, I'm afraid I won't be able to keep it confidential.' See how it works now?"

And once again, you'll have provided candidates with quite a gift: workplace training and sensitivity to real-life issues that could very well happen to them in the office. You'll have addressed your corporate expectations of honesty and confidentiality, while demonstrating your commitment to ethics and corporate responsibility. Now that's a question geared toward the millennial generation's heart!

39 *How would you describe “professional behavior” in the workplace?*

Why Ask This Question?

Millennials generally define themselves as casual and laid-back in terms of dress code and appearance. This is the generation of lip rings, tattoo “sleeves,” body art, and all sorts of self-expression. Whether you notice any of these items during your interview, addressing your expectations during the interview is probably a good idea, especially if you have a more conservative dress code.

Analyzing the Response

Candidates will typically address a question regarding professional behavior in terms of employee conduct, behaviors, and attitudes. And that’s a very good place to start. You might embellish your initial query by asking something along the lines of:

“What constitutes exceptional customer service in your opinion? Give me an example of a time when you exceeded a customer’s expectations.”

“Job security often comes in the form of customers and clients who find that they couldn’t live without you. Have you ever had a customer write you a letter of recommendation or otherwise insinuate that you’re the reason they keep coming back for more business?”

“Have you ever experienced poor customer service either by a coworker or as a customer yourself? What did it look like, how did it make you feel, and what lesson did you take away from the experience?”

Next, your goal will be to move this question into the “appearance” direction. Remember that just because a candidate appears to interview in what you would consider very appropriate dress doesn’t mean that the individual won’t appear at work one day proudly demonstrating a new fashion decision.

Therefore, you might want to lead the conversation as follows:

“Michael, you’re dressed very appropriately for this interview, which is great, but I like to address the issue of appearance during meetings like this because it’s an important aspect of who we are as a company.

“Let me start off by saying that I don’t mean at all to dictate what people do in their personal lives and spare time. But I’ve got to ask you: Seeing that we’re a bank and deal with high net worth individuals throughout the day, is there anything appearance-wise that you feel might be inappropriate to wear or sport in front of our clients?”

Understanding where you're going with this question, an astute candidate might answer, "Well, sure. I would expect every employee's attire to be neat and crisp at all times so as not to offend any clients and to be consistent with the image the bank represents."

This, in turn, would give you a grand opportunity to jump in with this natural follow-up query:

"Yes, I agree with you and feel the same way. Let me ask you one other question though. If you were in a management position here and noticed that one of your subordinates came to work sporting a lip ring or an eyebrow piercing or a huge neck tattoo, would you be comfortable asking that individual to remove the lip ring or cover the tattoo when dealing with the public so as not to alienate any of our clients?"

The value to this approach lies in its subtlety and reasonableness. Few companies have policies restricting facial hair on men or insisting that women wear dresses in the office. And even the Big 4 accounting firms' consultants now arrive at their consulting assignments in more of a casual dress mode than in the blue suit and red tie combinations of the past. Still, body piercing and body art tend to result from revelations and epiphanies of what's cool, what's important in life, and what rights people believe they have over their own destinies. In short, it's not something to brush over lightly.

If your conversation leads to some kind of reasonable compromise where the candidate agrees that it would be reasonable to ask a subordinate to leave the hardware at home or to take it off whenever dealing with customers (if possible), then you'll have accomplished your goal. That's because if he would ask it of a subordinate, he would probably find it reasonable to do himself. Employees who feel they've been treated respectfully and not simply been told "what to do" will almost always agree to some kind of modification, which will please the company and also allow the employees to maintain their individuality. It's all about maintaining respect and dignity in the workplace, even in matters having to do with personal taste and self-expression.

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I see you've had a tango or two at the Job Hoppers' Ball. Let's discuss how you plan on building your résumé from a longevity standpoint.

Why Ask This Question?

One of the red flags frequently documented about this younger generation has to do with its flightiness—a commitment to "Me, Inc." rather than to a company. And there may be nothing wrong with that. Much like the baby boomers who saw their parents commit themselves to a company for life-

time employment only to be laid off and cast aside, the willingness to act as a free agent makes intuitive sense for a generation surrounded by new technologies and new opportunities.

That being said, though, too much change may damage their candidacy, even if they don't realize it. Therefore, the interview once again provides a unique opportunity for getting inside individuals' heads in terms of how they see longer-term commitment while educating them about the importance of longevity in building their résumés and careers.

Analyzing the Response

We've addressed issues surrounding career stability in Chapter 4: Questions About Career Stability. However, with millennials, this takes on even greater importance. If you're recruiting for skilled professionals in a tight job market, you may be forced to engage job-hopper candidates with spotty employment histories and little apparent staying power or commitment to their prior companies. And because of market competition, you may not have the discretion to simply pass on individuals who have held four jobs in the last three years. Indeed, these individuals sometimes appear to be holding all the cards in terms of negotiating for signing bonuses and other perks once reserved for senior levels of management.

True, markets slow down, and a sense of normalcy gets restored from time to time. *Translation:* These career opportunists who pride themselves on being "recruiters' bait" waiting to jump at the next offer with an exponential increase in pay or perks may have the wind taken out of their sails. Indeed, prime jobs may actually return to those candidates who have been managing their careers correctly, according to more traditional norms: longevity with one company, progression through the ranks, and a broadening of responsibilities.

Still, the technical marketplace is morphing so quickly that identifying and retaining talent in areas such as information technology, digital gaming, and biotech research remains exceptionally challenging for employers. As such, you may find that entertaining younger candidates with spotty résumés may become a mainstay of the recruiting landscape. The key to your interviewing strategy will lie in discussing the merits of longevity with the candidate.

Historically, that part of the equation was the candidate's responsibility. Employers didn't baby-sit and ask interviewing questions based on why joining the new company would make sense for the candidate from a career progression standpoint. No more. The only real way to determine if candidates will provide you with a satisfactory return on investment for hiring them is to question their career development and career management goals.

Once you understand if your job makes sense to them from a career-building standpoint, then you can estimate how long they'll remain with your company once the honeymoon phase is over.

Here's how you might kick off the questioning string:

"Ashley, I see that you've held four full-time positions since you graduated from college three years ago. That's a fairly significant amount of movement. What would you say is a healthy amount of time to remain with a company—any company, not just ours?"

From there, you might want to reverse-focus your question as follows:

"Let me ask you this: If you were hiring someone for this position at your company, how important would prior longevity be to you in terms of a candidate's background, and how much would you expect to see?"

Finally, your closer would sound something like this:

"Yeah, I agree. I think that one of the most important things that companies look for is longevity. In short, it's their ultimate return on investment, seeing that all the costs relating to recruitment, on-boarding, and training can be very expensive. Every company wants to have stability in its ranks. But I'm sharing this with you not only to point out the benefits to the company but to you as well.

"You've been out of a school long enough now that an employer like me would expect you to have kissed all the appropriate frogs and started to hone in on your prince. Whether it's with our organization or some other company, make sure that the next position that you accept will be broad enough and have enough challenge so that you could make a good solid two- to three-year commitment. No one's expecting you to retire with your next company, but you'll want to build that longevity to strengthen your candidacy and build your résumé."

Now, that's a good response because it speaks directly to the candidates' career interests while once again emphasizing your expectations. Besides, if you don't shed some light on the damage they're doing to their career, who will? And by qualifying your response by saying, ". . . whether it's with our organization or some other company," your advice will be taken as objective and in the candidates' best interests.

41 *Who is your typical reading audience when you're writing something and what level of language do you use?*

Why Ask This Question?

The evolving lexicon of instant messaging (IM) has often been referred to as "E-illiteracy" and "IM-glish" in the sense that the writers have created their

own jargon that may save them time and prove they're cool but may also alienate the non-IM generation. In fact, rules of grammar and syntax have in many cases fallen by the wayside in a world where kids grow up reading "TY TYL" and understanding "Thank you. Talk to you later."

How much negative impact this Net lingo's lazy shorthand will have on the workplace is just now being seen, but it's certainly worth addressing in light of this younger generation's pride in expressing itself in its own unique way. Yes, to some it's just a creative twist on dialogue—a harmless version of teen slang. But to your workplace, new acronyms, abbreviations, run-on sentences, and emoticons (keyboard characters that resemble human gestures or expressions, like smiley faces) may leave some of your more mature workers feeling a bit isolated and unimpressed with this younger generation's grammatical shortcomings. Focusing your question on a so-called typical reading audience may help uncover applicants' penchants for expressing themselves appropriately in the workplace.

Analyzing the Response

One fairly common response to this question may be, "I live by IM and by e-mail, and I'd typically address anyone within the company who needs my help or who could help me solve a problem." That's a fair enough response, but it's also logical to take it to another level: "How would you define your overall writing style? And from the standpoint of traditional grammar, punctuation, and syntax, would you consider your writing abilities basic, intermediate, or advanced?"

Now, this is where the fun begins. Truth be told, this is a valid question for any job candidate—not just for the millennials who may indeed suffer from bad writing habits. But in the context of generational analysis, it certainly lends itself well to the preemployment screening process.

"I feel my writing style is fairly informal but appropriate for a business audience, although English wasn't my favorite subject in school, and writing more than a few lines in an e-mail isn't typically necessary to get your point across."

A logical follow-up query might be: "Hmmm. Tell me about a longer and fairly complex document that you've had to put together recently. Who was your audience in that particular situation, and how did you tailor it to fit their needs?"

The candidate, a contract administrator, might respond like this:

“Well, we had gotten approval to award an executive under contract with a 6 percent annual contractual increase. The merit range for people under contract was 4 to 6 percent, so this was within guidelines and didn’t raise any eyebrows.

“However, once I got it approved, the supervisor came back to me and asked that we increase the 6 percent annual merit increase to 10 percent, which was out of guidelines and would require a number of additional approvals.

“As a result, I created an e-mail string that first went to Corporate Compensation to ensure that, from an internal equity standpoint, we wouldn’t be overpaying this executive relative to her peer group. With the written approval from our compensation group, I forwarded the e-mail to our corporate finance person to ensure that there was money in the budget for the expense variance, which I confirmed. I was then able to send that entire e-mail string to our COO, outlining again my case for the exceptional increase, along with Compensation’s and Finance’s approval. It was approved on the first shot because it had all the necessary blessings contained within the e-mail text string. The supervisor was very appreciative of my turning things around so quickly.”

And voilà. The response demonstrates the individual’s problem-solving abilities in addition to the audience he’s capable of writing for—in this case, human resources, the finance department, and the company’s COO.

Combined with what you saw when you reviewed the individual’s résumé and employment application, you probably have good reason to believe that even if this person grew up in and participates in the world of IM shorthand, he certainly can write for a corporate business audience.

However, what if this candidate had a different response: “I don’t write memos or narratives very often, but I do rely on text messaging to my coworkers to get information on new and existing accounts”? In that case, it’s a fair comeback on your part to address appropriate business writing skills and expectations in your workplace. For example, “Janet, when you write your coworkers using your company’s IM system, do you write in what I would call ‘Internet shorthand’ or do you write in *English*?”

That should generate a chuckle. More important, it will get the candidate talking about when she feels that it is acceptable to use IM shorthand among workplace friends and peers and when that type of written communication might be inappropriate.

You might follow up with, “Are there times when you feel it could make others feel uncomfortable to use shorthand terms when writing to a broader audience?” or “When do you feel that ‘IM Speak’ might even cast someone in a bad light from the standpoint of the individual not coming across as literate and well educated?”

Your close might then be, “I agree. I understand that, at times, IM shorthand and ‘keyboard vernacular’ may be appropriate in the workplace, but please understand our expectations that this would be an exception to internal written communication rules. Of course, if you have agreement with a friend at work to communicate that way, we would understand that. More often than not, though, coworkers, especially older coworkers, may find that type of written communication offensive because if they can’t understand it, they may feel isolated or simply ‘not cool.’ Are you comfortable with that level of sensitivity in your writings and internal communications?”

Again, your educational interviewing style will make for a powerful communication session because you’ll not only be assessing the candidate’s qualifications but also sharing your wisdom and insights into success in corporate America—advice and counsel that works in the best interests of the candidate and, ultimately, your company.

And because there’s such demand for more information about millennials, please see the two following bonus questions to help you round out your evaluations of these candidates.

Bonus Question: Where do you relate best: up one level, down one level, or with peers?

Why Ask This Question?

As a rule, the younger an employee, the more comfortable he or she will be dealing directly with peers. It will naturally be more of a challenge dealing with supervisors (up one level) or subordinates (down one level), because earlier-career workers are learning how to navigate the subtleties of interpersonal communication and corporate etiquette. Still, some candidates may surprise you in their responses, both in terms of their selections as well as their justifications.

Analyzing the Response

If a candidate responds, “I’m probably most comfortable dealing with peers at this point in my career,” you might ask: “What is it about peer relationships that makes you more comfortable?” and “How would you intend to develop that same level of comfort with supervisors and subordinates?”

A typical candidate response might sound like: “Well, I think it takes time to get to know people and to get them to trust you. People respect competence, and over time, I would hope that both my supervisors and sub-

ordinates would respect the work I do and develop a trust in my abilities so that they could feel as comfortable with me as I would feel with them.” Bravo! That’s a very enlightened response.

Be a bit wary, however, of earlier-career candidates who respond that they’re more comfortable relating to supervisors and/or subordinates, as there may sometimes be some gratuitous intentions in their response. First, keep in mind that a candidate who responds that he is most comfortable dealing with his supervisors (one level up) may indeed have a thoroughly good reason for doing so. “I tend to focus on my work when I’m in the office, and I don’t do a lot of gabbing with my peers, so I’ve always seemed to have a stronger relationship with my boss than my coworkers” is a perfectly reasonable response.

Likewise, if someone answers: “I’ve always had the strongest bond to my subordinates—I love managing and leading others as I consider myself a natural-born teacher, and nothing gives me more satisfaction than putting their needs above mine while watching people thrive and grow,” you may very well have a natural leader on your hands who feels protective of his staff and encourages their growth and development.

On the other hand, other responses may throw up red flags that require additional vetting via a reference check. For example, “My bosses have always loved me and said that they didn’t know what they’d do without me” is an arrogant and self-aggrandizing response that smacks of brownnosing. Similarly, “I enjoy supervising because I’m a leader, people love to follow me, and that’s where the company gets the greatest value out of me” sounds a bit pretentious and bombastic. Someone with that high a level of self-esteem may get in the way of the teamwork and camaraderie that you’re trying to build in your workplace.

Likewise, you might follow up on your initial question by discussing contemporary sociology in the workplace: “They say that millennials get along well with baby boomers but have a hard time with Generation X-ers. Have you read much about that or studied generational politics in the workplace? If so, I’d love to hear your thoughts about that.”

In any case, asking how a candidate sees himself in light of those above, below, and beside him in a workplace context may reveal aspects of his business maturity, social well-being, and natural communication style. More important, your conversation may lead to insights in terms of how he sees himself creating harmony in the workplace and building strong interpersonal ties with those around and above him (people of different generations)—a critical link in the hiring process for a generation that is known to suffer from a lack of developed face-to-face communication skills.

***Bonus Question:* How would you grade yourself in terms of face-to-face communication, especially in terms of negotiation or confrontation? Do you consider that a strength or an area for personal development?**

Why Ask This Question?

Well, we always want to save the best and most compelling questions for last! In this chapter, we've addressed everything from IM illiteracy to workplace confidentiality to corporate ethics and the importance of professional workplace behavior. Still, the chapter wouldn't be complete without discussing the "mother" of all workplace issues having to do with millennials—holding their own when it comes to communication, negotiation, and disagreement.

From the time they were young, millennials had cell phones. And they called each other directly, avoiding the need to speak with parents who answered the home phone and engage in small talk like, "This is Sam Falcone. How are you, Mr. Cleaver? Is Theodore home?" Likewise, to the chagrin of many high school teachers, these students managed to plant an ear bud from their iPods into their ears, which ran from their hip, up their undershirt, over their collar, and under their hair to drown out any unwanted "noise" coming from the front of the classroom. And their response to any undesirable communication with former friends was simply to use a software solution to block all incoming messages from that ex-friend's screen name.

Now those youngsters have grown up. However, their ability to tune out and disconnect, which electronic tools make so easy, is a bit more limited when dealing with real people who won't go away just because you don't like them.

As they say, the path of least resistance is avoidance. And people will tend to avoid confrontation at all costs, if at all possible. So why would we hold these early-career members of the workforce to a higher standard than the generations that came before them? Because prior generations were at least tested in this area. The newer generation, for all its advantages and positive characteristics, still has yet to reveal its true colors in this universally human realm.

Analyzing the Response

Don't be surprised to see candidates shy away from this question. "Well, negotiation isn't a typical part of my current job, and I guess no one really

likes confrontation, so I guess I'd say this is more of an area for development than an area of strength for me."

With this open admission, you've got *carte blanche* to launch into a discussion that truly sets the stage for a successful hire:

"Dennis, we hire a significant number of younger adults in our organization who would fall squarely under the millennial category—basically, people born after 1980 and now somewhere under age 30. And this younger generation has some unique talents and abilities, especially in terms of its tech-savvyness. However, some of the folks of my generation have had challenges with the generational politics that come along with working side by side with younger workers who have different ideals and expectations. Let me ask you this—"

At that point, ask one of the following questions using a behavioral interviewing format like this:

"Have you ever disagreed with your boss? If so, how did you voice your opinion, or did you voice it at all?"

"Can you give me an example of how you've handled confrontation with a workplace peer? What were the circumstances, and did you feel a need to escalate the issue to management?"

"Did you ever find yourself in the midst of what I would call generational politics, meaning that typically an older worker had a harder time relating to you or agreeing with your recommendation? How did you handle it, and what would you do differently in retrospect?"

"Have you ever had to supervise someone who was significantly older than you or who didn't take you seriously? What was your approach to strengthening that working relationship?"

"Give me an example of a time when you were given constructive criticism but disagreed with the advice you were being given. Did you simply respectfully listen or did you voice your disagreement?"

"Negotiation can be a win-win or it can be a war of attrition, with one side winning by simply wearing the other side down. What's your natural negotiating style, and how do you define compromise in light of tough negotiations?"

"If someone accused you of focusing more on your lifestyle and friends than on 'blind careerism,' would you consider that a compliment or be offended? What is it about you that makes you feel that way?"

You'll have opened Pandora's box and given the candidate the opportunity to self-assess in light of your biggest concerns. Of course, there's no right or wrong answer here, but you can expect to see candidates who either pride themselves on their association with their cool generation—"Yes, companies are going to have to conform to our generation's way of doing business because there are more of us than there are of them"—or who can

objectively differentiate themselves in certain ways. For example, a candidate who responds, “Yes, in many ways I can see what you’re saying, but I’ve always been a hard worker; I’ve held at least a summer job since I was 14, and my parents taught me to respect my elders and prove my worth,” will probably transition into your workplace with enough sensitivity to make for a very successful hire.

And there you have it: A strong enough relationship in the interview process to outline your core concerns about a younger generation and its ultimate fit into your organization. Of course, you’ll be able to close a desirable candidate at this point by aligning his responses with your company’s expectations.

“Dennis, I’m listening to your responses, and it sounds to me as if you have the proper perspective and business maturity to excel in our organization. I read all the literature about millennials, their workplace expectations, and their strengths and shortcomings because, as you know, we tend to hire a lot of earlier-career candidates in our firm. So, it becomes important to me to vet all applicants, so to speak, and ensure that they’ve got the business maturity and objectivity to assess themselves in light of generational differences in the workplace.

“I feel that you’ve got that maturity and objectivity, and I’d like you to seriously consider the opportunity of joining us. Think about this interview overnight, and if you’ve slept on it and are still excited about the opportunity in the morning, give me a call so I can line up additional meetings for you. You’ve built your résumé and career very impressively, and strong companies like ours are always looking for candidates who excel and who stand out as rarities among their peers. I very much believe you’re one of those candidates, and I’m looking forward to hearing from you.”

Now that’s a close! And you’ll certainly have addressed your key concerns so that you won’t lay awake at night wondering if you really got into the candidate’s head and truly learned what makes him tick.

Is this interviewing strategy for millennials too much to ask? If you go to this depth of interviewing just to see if the individual has the necessary business maturity and career introspection to excel in your company, will you be accused of coddling and coaching rather than bossing?

Maybe. On the other hand, it’s very possible that all job candidates—not just millennials—should come to expect this level of commitment from the stewards and guardians of the companies where they’d like to work. But the truth is, if you’re not matching the individual’s personality to your company’s corporate culture during the interviewing process, you may end up having to fill that position again six months later.

Instead, think out loud and share your opinions up front. In a way, you’ll be putting the candidate’s needs before the company’s, and that kind

of goodwill goes a long way with all hires, not just with the idealistically young.

I know that it's so tempting to hire the individual and let him worry about his own career progression and fit factor. Truth be told, though, you want all the pieces of the puzzle to fit together both for the company and the candidate. If this new hire reveals all the benefits of the millennial generation—hardworking, resourceful, and committed—and your position offers a learning curve, new skill sets, broader responsibilities, and appropriate compensation, then everyone will be happy and the hire will stick.

In essence, you'll not only have helped junior members of the workforce gain new insights into how they should be looking at their own careers but you'll also develop a reputation as a skillful and selfless leader and developer of people. You'll have shifted the employee development paradigm to the preemployment stage. And maybe candidates deserve those few extra minutes of your time to benefit from your expertise. You may just find that a little short-term sacrifice and career counseling on your part will lead to greater stability in your staff and a lot of goodwill in your own career.