COMPANIES ARE JUST NOW WAKING UP TO THE HAVOC THAT THE NEWEST GENERATION OF WORKERS IS CAUSING IN THEIR OFFICES.

SCENES from the culture clash

By Danielle Sacks

BEVERLY HILLS psychiatrist's office is an unlikely triage center for the mash-up of generations in the workforce. But Dr. Charles Sophy is seeing the casualties firsthand. Last year, when a 24-year-old salesman at a car dealership didn't get his yearly bonus because of poor performance, both of his parents showed up at the company's regional headquarters and sat outside the CEO's office, refusing to leave until they got a meeting. "Security had to come and escort them out," Sophy says. >>
“In high school I did everything—student council, golf, volleyball, theater, choir. . . In the past two years, I've run a marathon, gone skydiving, been to surf camp, learned how to shoot a handgun. Once I finish one thing, I check it off my list and look for the next thing.”

A 22-year-old pharmaceutical employee learned that he was not getting the promotion he had been eyeing. His boss told him he needed to work on his weaknesses first. The Harvard grad had excelled at everything he had ever done, so he was crushed by the news. He told his parents about the performance review, and they were convinced there was some misunderstanding, some way they could fix it, as they'd been able to fix everything before. His mother called the human-resources department the next day. Seventeen times. She left increasingly frustrated messages: “You're purposely ignoring us”; “you fudged the evaluation”; “you have it in for my son.” She demanded a mediation session with her, her son, his boss, and HR—and got it. At one point, the 22-year-old reprimanded the HR rep for being “rude to my mom.”

The patients on Sophy's couch aren't the twentysomethings dealing with their first taste of failure. Nor are they the “helicopter parents.” They're the traumatized bosses, as well as the 47-year-old woman from HR who has been hassled time and again by her youngest workers and their parents. Now the pharmaceutical company that employs her has her in therapy, and she's on six-month stress leave.

And she's going to have plenty of company. Managers and their companies will have to deal with the 76 million children of baby boomers, born between 1978 and 2000, who have started pouring into offices across the land. Four generations are being asked to coexist at once: traditionalists (born before 1945), boomers (born 1946–1964), generation X (1965–1977), and millennials (alternately known as gen Y, echo boomers, Net gen, and even “generation why,” because they never stop questioning the status quo). Managers will be challenged to minimize the friction and maximize the assets of four distinct sets of work values and styles simultaneously.

The latest generation to join the mix is disruptive not only because of its size but because of its attitudes. Speak to enough intergenerational experts who study such things [and we spoke to more than a dozen of them], and you begin to get the picture: Millennials aren't interested in the financial success that drove the boomers or the independence that has marked the gen Xers, but in careers that are personalized. They want educational opportunities in China and a chance to work in their companies' R&D departments for six months. They have no expectation that the first place they work will at all be related to their career, so they're willing to move around until they find a place that suits them,” says Dan Rasmus, who runs a workplace think tank for Microsoft. Thanks to their overinvolved boomer parents, this cohort has been coddled and pumped up to believe they can achieve anything. Immersion in PCs, video games, email, the Inter-
net, and cell phones for most of their lives has changed their thought patterns and may also have actually changed how their brains developed physiologically. These folks want feedback daily, not annually. And in case it’s not obvious, millennials are fearless and blunt. If they think they know a better way, they’ll tell you, regardless of your title.

Meet any of the millennials now embarking on their careers, and this picture comes to life. Impatience with anything that doesn’t lead to learning and advancement? “Nothing infuriates us more than busywork,” says 24-year-old Katie Day, an assistant editor at Berkeley Publishing, a division of Penguin Group USA. Fearlessness? “I don’t have time to be intimidated,” says Anna Stassen, a 26-year-old copywriter at the advertising agency Fallon Worldwide who treats her bosses like “the guys.” “It’s not that I’m disrespective; it’s just a waste of energy to be fearful.” Permanently plugged in and juggling? “I’m constantly playing video games, on a call, doing work, and the thing is, all of it gets done, and it gets done well,” says Beth Trippie, 26, a senior scheduling specialist, aptly enough, at Best Buy’s corporate offices who’s also finishing her MBA.

“If the results aren’t great, then fine; but if not, who cares how it gets done?”

Can some of this be chalked up to simple naïveté and brit, hallmarks of every generation in its youth? Sure. But experts believe that this won’t wash away with age. “It’s not a case of when they grow up, they’ll see the world differently,” says Joseph Gibbons, research director at the Future Work Institute. “These values don’t change over time.” So if companies want to attract, retain, manage, and motivate the next generation of workers, they’re going to have to adapt.

And if they don’t want to—well, they’ll have to, because this is our future workforce.

Eighty million boomers will retire over the next 25 years, and there are only 46 million gen-Xers. Millennials will dominate the workforce for, oh, the next 70 years.

They represent Elvis, multiculti Barbie, cell phones, peace signs, disco balls, puddle skirts, even a TV dinner. A bunch of thirty, forty-, and fiftysomethings have been sent to this room in Sonoma, California, by their companies as they wake up to what happens in the office when the millennials land. This is a three-day seminar led by intergenerational consultant Lynne Lancaster—and another unlikely front in the generational clash. The nostalgic stickers serve as therapy. She asks these reps from health-care companies, banks, law firms, manufacturers, and city governments to plaster the stickers to their name tags to identify every political, social, and pop-culture icon that’s influenced who they are today. The point: to understand that what’s shaped us as children directly correlates to who we are at work. Know where the millennials are coming from, Lancaster says, and you’re that much closer to getting along with them.

After a cathartic exercise in which boomers and gen-Xers role-play the “clash points” they have with millennials (a chance

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“I grew up in the Bay Area in the ’90s, when secretaries were driving Ferraris.... We hear about the cynicism from the Enron scandals, but it hasn’t really rubbed off on us.”

for them to get improvised tongue rings and the word “phat” out of their systems), the silliness ends and the real issues rise to the surface. Cindy Pruitt, a professional development and recruiting manager with the national law firm Womble Carlyle Sandridge & Rice, shares with disbelief a recent incident in which one of the firm’s summer associates broke down in her office after being told his structure on a recent memo was “a little too loose.” “They’re simply stunned when they get any kind of negative feedback,” Pruitt says. “I practically had to walk him off the ledge.”

Womble Carlyle, like many companies, is also dealing with an incentive structure and culture that doesn’t work for this new generation. Young lawyers were once willing to sacrifice the next 10 years of their lives chained to a desk in the law library, working 100-hour weeks, for the chance to make partner. But increasingly, law-school grads want work-life balance, flexible schedules, and philanthropic work. They can’t care less about partnership. “The older lawyers think the younger lawyers are lazy,” says Kristin Carretta, director of professional development at Womble Carlyle.

Womble Carlyle can’t afford to think that way. Top-tier firms all compete for the same elite law-school grads, and Carretta says that it costs firms $400,000 to lose an associate. So this October, Womble formalized a part-time track, in which attorneys can work with supervisors to shape personalized schedules. Carretta tells the group that so far two lawyers have decided to pursue it—but not without lingering resentment from the top. “I think the struggle going forward is opening the eyes of the other generations that it’s okay to have a different type of law employe,” she says.

A handful of other companies are making profound changes to harness the talents of the new workforce. Deloitte & Touche USA, the accounting and consulting firm with 32,000 U.S. employees, heard from its gen-Y workers that brutal audit schedules, in which teams had to camp out at client companies for weeks or months at a time, seemed superfluous in an age when client records are digitized. They felt they could get the same work done remotely. Deloitte’s clients told the firm that they didn’t care whether auditors were on-site or not, as long as the quality of the work didn’t suffer. After a successful test in its New York office in which employees had the choice to work off-site, Deloitte is rolling the program out nationally over the next 18 months.
Marriott International decided it had to change its approach to training in recognition of millennials' multisensory, rapid-fire style of information consumption. "They have exacerbated the need for brevity—on-demand, short sound bites," says Michelle Lapierre, a baby boomer who helps run Marriott's global salesforce of 415 people across 70 countries. She's now developing bite-size "edutainment" training podcasts so workers can download information to their cell phones, laptops, and iPods as they need it.

Although companywide initiatives are encouraging, it's the grassroots practices that reveal how individual leaders can truly energize their youngest employees. Sheila Gallagher, director of the restaurant segment of General Mills' bakeries and food-service division, knew last summer that she'd soon be hiring a batch of fresh college grads. So the 18-year veteran of the company rethought her management style. To address their desire for a lot of feedback, she decided she'd connect them with senior staff, including herself. When she hired Frank Brodie, 22, as a marketing associate, Gallagher made sure to devote time to building a relationship with him, and paired him with a sales manager to act as a mentor. Brodie also joined the company's "newcomers club," where General Mills' youngest employees can socialize with its oldest.

Her team was also prepared last September when Brodie, then a grizzled veteran of four weeks, sprang a surprise. He'd had an idea to sell Totino's Pizza Rolls (a late-night snack he and his college buddies knew well) to restaurants that were trying to reach folks just like him. Huge opportunity, Brodie figured, and he'd backed it up by researching market data, prices, and emerging restaurant trends on his own time. While sitting in the audience at a four-day marketing and sales meeting, Brodie decided there was no better time to pitch his plan. Between sessions, he took the idea to Gallagher. "Our first reaction was, 'We've tried it before!,'" she says.

But because Brodie had facts behind him and a new spin on an old idea, Gallagher opted to bend the rules and let him present the idea to the sales team so they could decide. The following morning, Brodie ran out to the supermarket, whipped up 200 pizza rolls, and made his pitch between tightly scheduled sessions. "General Mills is a fairly hierarchical organization," Gallagher admits. "But being flexible is really key. It ended up inspiring a lot of enthusiasm on the team." The sales managers are now actively pitching pizza rolls to fast-food chains and sub shops, and Brodie, still glowing from his triumph, has learned that when he does his homework, his ideas are respected regardless of his title. "That's what we want from employers," says Brodie. "A chance to learn, to be challenged, to be taken seriously."

And ultimately, that's what it comes down to. Millennials aren't asking for signing bonuses or the right to bring their dogs (or parents) to work. They just want to be heard, which, when you think about it, really isn't that much to ask.

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