

A thundering herd that needs direction

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BY [DAVE NEWBART](#) Staff Reporter

As Generation Y descends on America's workplaces, a harsh reality sets in. Jobs, until recently, have been hard to come by, and average salaries in real dollars are lower than those their parents earned at the same age.

With salaries low, many will have trouble maintaining the standard of living they enjoyed while growing up.

And some young workers, used to lifelong praise from their parents and grade inflation in the schools, will feel the lack of constant positive feedback, workplace experts said.

Having been heavily scheduled with activities for most of their lives, they now need structure in a work world where it's scarce, experts said. It's a generation that Steven Mintz, author of *Huck's Raft: A History of American Childhood*, says has been "coddled."

THE CODDLED GENERATION

[PART I:](#) Baby Boomers' coddling has left their children heavily reliant on them.

[PART II:](#) Low salaries could leave Generation Y living at a lower level than with their parents.

"This is going to be the most high-maintenance work force in the history of the world," said Bruce Tulgan, author of *Managing Generation Y*.

Still, many are high achievers, having been pressed to work hard most of their lives. They are fluent with new technology and able to complete multiple tasks at once. They are "the most savvy, capable, knowledgeable new generation of workers in history," said Tulgan, a Connecticut-based workplace consultant who has worked with Chicago area companies.

But unlike their parents, they aren't willing to sacrifice their social lives for a job, and aren't expecting long-term commitment from an employer. They are asking for more flexibility and have no intentions of becoming a slave to their jobs.

"There is a clear dividing line between work and the rest of their lives," said Mary Corbitt Clark, executive director of Winning Workplaces, an Evanston not-for-profit that provides consulting and training to small and mid-sized businesses.

Motorola, which has signed on several hundred college graduates over the last two years, said it limits hires to the best and brightest Gen-Y'ers.

Victoria Yates, director of global university relations for the Schaumburg company, said managers generally are impressed with what the "freshly hired" have done. Those workers, she said, are constantly seeking more to do.

"These folks are highly energetic," Yates said. "They want to continuously be challenged."

Other companies, like Baxter International, don't even recruit on college campuses because they are looking for more experienced workers. They do, however, recruit younger workers at their offices abroad.

"There is growing work force at a younger age that is highly trained in Asia," spokesman Tom Kline said.

Need strong management

At places that do seek a younger set, new employees sometimes seek more oversight than is provided.

For Nnenna Odim, 22, who graduated from Knox College in western Illinois last June, working as an English as a Second Language coordinator for the Crete-Monee school district has been an eye-opener.

"Coming out of college, you are so idealistic," said the Chicago Ridge resident. "Than you hit the real world. It's more jarring than I thought it would be."

She had a difficult time when she started this last fall. Unlike her college experience, now she has few people she can bounce ideas off.

"You are out working in the world and trying to prove yourself, that you are not just a college kid," she said. "There is no one there to ask, 'Am I heading in the right direction?' Only when you completely bomb they say, 'You shouldn't have done that.' But on the way there, there is no one there."

Tulgan said that reaction to the "sink-or-swim" environment is common for today's college graduates.

"If they are not managed well, Gen-Y'ers tend to get very frustrated," he said. "They are coming out of an institution that is all about coaching and guiding and monitoring and measuring."

Steve Baker said he has seen the Millennials' need for closer supervision as director of training for the Chicago-based Morton's The Steakhouse, which has 4,000 employees nationwide.

"They want to have very clear-cut expectations," he said. "If you communicate with them, the commitment is there."

Although many are willing to work hard, they want a flexible schedule that doesn't dominate their lives.

'Nothing better than a day off'

"They don't live for their job like their parents did," said Karen Bloom, of the Chicago executive search firm Bloom, Gross & Associates. She has spoken to many Gen-Y'ers (or parents, calling on their children's behalf) who are seeking jobs in marketing.

Chris Morgan, 23, was a mechanical engineering major at Duke and now has a job doing exactly that for WMA Consulting Engineers in Chicago. But Morgan, of Lincoln Park, really appreciates that his day is pretty much 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.

"Some firms work the young guys like crazy," he said. "There is nothing better than a day off. They've been good about that."

The schedule allows him to pursue his dream: becoming a comedy writer. He has taken classes with Second City, writes frequently and found time to compose a couple of rap songs about HVAC engineering.

Others want to make sure the job takes them where they want to go. If not, they are willing to leave it.

Sarah Levine, an associate project manager for Hubbard One, an information technology management firm in the Loop, said she would have no problem making her objections known if the higher-ups wanted to move her into a different position.

"What I am interested in doing and my career development is important to me, but it's important to them as well," said Levine, who lives in Wrigleyville. "If it's something that isn't taking me in the direction I want to be going, then I wouldn't be interested and there wouldn't be much value putting me there."

John Challenger, CEO of the Chicago-based Challenger, Gray and Christmas outplacement firm, said Gen-Y'ers "are looking for meaning in their jobs. They are not just looking for a job, but they want to do something significant."

Some of their demands are made easier by having parents to back them up. Many of Morton's younger employees still live at home, even though they have the means to move out, Baker said.

Odim -- who said despite her frustrations she really likes helping children -- said she is able to work for a low salary for the schools because she pays no rent while living with her mom.

Salaries dip for young men

Many have to rely on their parents to maintain the lifestyle they've been accustomed to. When adjusted for inflation, median salaries for male workers in their early 20s dropped from more than \$31,000 to less than \$22,000 in the last 35 years, according to the U.S. Census. For those in their late 20s, salaries dropped from \$40,000 to less than \$32,000. Salaries for women increased slightly.

"Their parents have taken very good care of them," Bloom said. "There is a lot to suggest that a lot of them will not live as adults on their own as they lived as children of their parents."

Still, too much parental attention could lead to problems in the workplace.

Tulgan worked with a fire chief who received a call from a firefighter's mom protesting how often her son had to work the overnight shift.

Bernardo Carducci, a professor of psychology at Indiana University Southeast who has studied shyness in Generation Y, said some people expect their workplace to adapt to them -- not the other way around.

"You get used to having things on your terms," said Carducci. "That doesn't happen in the world of work. You can't tell your boss, 'I don't think I'm coming in today. I'll do my stuff at home.' You have to get used to adjusting to the lives of other people."

They do seem generally concerned about the well-being of others, managers said.

More than 80 percent report doing community service in high school (30 percent were required to do so by their schools), according to a University of California at Los Angeles survey. Although the level of volunteering dips when they graduate from college, Baker said potential management hires have actually asked in interviews "what we are doing to support various causes," he said.

And they prefer a relaxed work environment without strict dress codes.

Levine's office permits shorts and flip-flops. There is only one no-no: "Your jeans shouldn't be ripped," she said.

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GENERATION Y GROWS UP

At his two previous tech start-up companies, Chris Gladwin followed the "standard model" for finding employees.

"You hire a lot of thirtysomethings and fortysomethings," he said of his companies, which include FullAudio, a digital music subscription service that eventually became MusicNow and was bought by Circuit City and then AOL.

But for his latest venture, a digital storage company known as Cleversafe, Gladwin decided to experiment with hiring employees still in school at the Illinois Institute of Technology. Now 15 of the company's 22 employees are either enrolled at IIT or recent grads.

He says he likes his workers' enthusiasm, energy and ability to learn new technology and multitask. Plus, they come cheap when compared to workers with years of professional experience.

"It's working out great," Gladwin said. "They are much more cost-effective. And it's a much better opportunity than they are used to doing."

Cleversafe has an office in a tech incubator building on the IIT campus. Although the IIT employees are working exclusively on software development, Gladwin plans to stick with the youngsters even as he adds finance, marketing and other positions.

Although green, today's students have experience beyond their years, he said.

"In their free time since they were 12, they bring up operating systems just for fun," he said. "They have learned four, five, six computer languages before puberty."

And being able to multitask is great in the work world where you often "have 20 things to do at once," he said.

That description fits John Quigley, 24, a computer science student at IIT and a part-time technical operations engineer for Cleversafe. He also does remote tech support for a magazine advertising company in New York and is president of a 100-member Linux users group.

"It's not unusual for me to carry on two to three conversations at once" via e-mail, a cell phone and instant messaging, he said.

He traces his ability to juggle so many balls at once to his upbringing, when he would shuttle from hockey practice to violin lessons. "In high school I was notorious for taking on too much," he said.

Still, he admits that at times he has trouble focusing, and he'll blurt out something that is irrelevant to a discussion because he has so much on his mind.

Dustin Hendrickson, 22, a computer science student from Biggsville in western Illinois, also knows what it's like to be busy. He works 40 hours for Cleversafe while going to school full-time.

"It's hard to give your all to something when you know something just as crucial is due for someone else," said Hendrickson, a graduate of the Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy in Aurora.

He likes that Gladwin allows employees to work on a very flexible schedule.

"We don't have eight-in-the-morning meetings, we don't wear ties," said Hendrickson. "It meshes well with the student life."

Company's experiment with IIT students paying off with cheap, tech-savvy workers

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