



FEATURE



WHY WE'RE ALL  
MILLENNIALS NOW

# 14

## MYTHS

ABOUT THE MILLENNIAL  
GENERATION'S ATTITUDE  
TOWARD WORK AND CAREER

By Bruce Tulgan

**G**lobalization and technology have been shaping change since the dawn of time. But during the life span of the millennials, globalization and technology have undergone a qualitative change. After all, there is only one globe, and it is now totally interconnected. Millennials connect with their farthest-flung neighbors in real time regardless of geography through online communities of interest. But as our world shrinks (or flattens), events great and small taking place on the other side of the world (or right next door) can affect our material well-being almost overnight. World institutions—nations, states, cities, neighborhoods, families, corporations,

coming at us from an infinite number of sources all day, every day. Nothing remains cutting edge for very long. What we know today may be obsolete by tomorrow. What is beyond belief today may be conventional wisdom by tomorrow. Meanwhile, the pace of everything continues to accelerate. A year is long term, and five years is just a hallucination. Short term is the key to relevance. In a world defined by constant change, instantaneous response is the only meaningful time frame.

Millennials are comfortable in this highly interconnected, rapidly changing web of variables. They've never known the world any other way. Uncertainty is their natural habitat. Globalization

may be in a state of constant flux, but that's no problem. Millennials are just passing through anyway, trying to squeeze out as much experience and as many resources as they can. Authority figures and celebrities may disintegrate for all to see. But this doesn't make millennials cynical. Rather, it gives them faith in everyday heroes. The information tidal wave may inundate us all with more data in one day than anyone could possibly sort through in a lifetime. But this doesn't make millennials feel overwhelmed or uninformed. Rather, it makes them would-be experts on everything. The pace of everything may be accelerating to the point where we expect immediacy in all of our doings. But this doesn't make millennials feel slow. Rather, it makes them impatient. Right now is the only real time. Constant change means you can't count on anything to stay the same. But the timelessness of the Internet allows millennials to revel in nostalgia from any era. They are liberated to travel to any time at any time, abandon what bores them, embrace new things wholeheartedly, and reinvent themselves constantly.

The power of diversity has finally kicked over the melting pot. The millennials are the most diverse generation in history in terms of ethnic heritage, geographical origins, ability/disability, age, language, lifestyle preference, sexual orientation, color, size, and every other way of categorizing people. But this doesn't make millennials feel alienated and threatened. Rather, they take the concept of diversity to a whole new level. (I call it infinite or total diversity.) To millennials, every single person, with his or her own combination of background, traits, and characteristics, is his or her own unique diversity story. Millennials feel little need to conform for the purpose of gaining entry to institutions. For millennials, difference is cool. Uniqueness is the centerpiece of identity. Customization of the self is sought after with great zest and originality, through constant

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churches, charities, and schools—remain in a state of constant flux just to survive. Authority is questioned routinely. Research is quick and easy. Anyone can get published. We try to filter through the endless tidal wave of information

does not make millennials feel small. Rather, it makes them feel worldly. Technological change does not make them feel as if they are racing to keep up. Rather, it makes them feel connected and powerful. Institutions



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experimentation. In the world of the millennials, the menu of selfhood options is extraordinary and the range of possible combinations infinite.

For the millennials, customization is the holy grail, and it has always been right there within their grasp. From the first day they arrive in the workplace, they are scrambling to keep their options open, leverage their uniqueness for all its potential value, and wrap a customized career around the customized life they are trying to build.

Millennials don't look at a large, established organization and think, "I wonder where I'll fit in your complex picture." Rather, they look at an employer and think, "I wonder where you will fit in my life story." Every step of the way, millennials want to find a work situation they can fit into the kind of life they are building for themselves. Because they grew up overly supervised, coached, and constantly rewarded by their parents, millennials will never be content to labor quietly and obediently in a sink-or-swim environment. They are less likely to trust the "system" or

the organization to take care of them over time and thus less likely to make immediate sacrifices in exchange for promises of long-term rewards. In fact, the millennials' career path will be a long series of short-term and transactional employment relationships: "What do you want from me? What do you have to offer in return now and for the foreseeable future? I'll stay here as long as it's working out for both of us."

They have very high expectations, first for themselves, but also for their employers. And they have the highest expectations for their immediate bosses. And yet they are more likely to disagree openly with employers' missions, policies, and decisions and challenge employment conditions and established reward systems. They are less obedient to employers' rules and supervisors' instructions. They are less likely to heed organizational chart authority. After all, they had incredibly close relationships with their previous authoritative role models, their parents, who treated them as equals. Instead, millennials respect transactional authority: control of resources, control

of rewards, and control of work conditions. Because they look to their immediate supervisors to meet their basic needs and expectations, they freely make demands of them.

### From the Mouth of Millennials

These are some of the things that millennials tell us in our interviews:

*"My boss keeps telling me, 'This is where you are going to be in five years.' I'm dying to tell him, 'I hate to tell you, pal, but you don't know where you're going to be in five years.'"*

*"I know they think they are masters of the universe, but, gee, the Soviet Union disappeared overnight. So could they."*

*"My boss thinks I have a bad attitude. I don't know why he thinks I have a bad attitude! I told him I'll work alongside him on any project until he drops from exhaustion."*

*"They keep telling me, 'This is what you get in five years, ten years, twenty years.' I feel like—what's that expression—they are trying to sell me a bridge."*

Precisely because millennials seem to both disregard authority figures and at the same time demand a great deal of them, leaders and managers often find millennials maddening and difficult to manage. Meanwhile, the truth, of course, is more complicated. You see, the millennials have been much analyzed but, I believe, largely misunderstood. Though in recent years many so-called experts have jumped on the bandwagon of tackling the challenge of "managing millennials," nearly everyone I know of is simply reinforcing prevailing misconceptions about millennials.

## Common Myths about Millennials

Here are the fourteen most common myths about the millennial generation's attitude toward work and career.



**Myth #1:** Millennials are disloyal and unwilling to make real commitments to their employers.

**Reality:** They can be very loyal. But they don't exhibit the kind of loyalty you find in a kingdom: blind loyalty to hierarchy, tight observance of rites of passage, patience for recognition and rewards. Instead, they offer the kind of loyalty you get in a free market—that is, transactional loyalty (whatever you can negotiate). This is the same kind of loyalty you extend to your customers and clients. We call it “just-in-time loyalty.”



**Myth #2:** They won't do the grunt work.

**Reality:** They are so eager to prove themselves—to you and to themselves—that they will do anything you want them to do. But they won't do the grunt work, or anything else, if they start to fear that nobody is keeping track of what they are doing and giving them credit. They are not about to do the grunt work in exchange for vague, long-term promises of rewards that vest in the deep distant future.



**Myth #3:** They don't know very much and have short attention spans.

**Reality:** They may not have the same shared knowledge base that people with a certain level of education used to take for granted, but they walk in the door with more information



They may not have the same shared knowledge base that people with a certain level of education used to take for granted, but they walk in the door with more information in their heads and more information available at their fingertips than anyone ever has before.

in their heads and more information available at their fingertips than anyone ever has before. They think, learn, and communicate in sync with today's information environment.



**Myth #4:** They want the top job on day one.

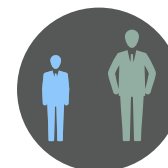
**Reality:** They have no interest in taking their time to “get a feel for the place.” They want to hit the ground running on day one. They want to identify problems that nobody else has identified, solve problems that nobody else has solved, make existing things better, invent new things. They want to make an impact.



**Myth #5:** They need work to be fun.

**Reality:** Millennials don't want to be humored; they want to be taken seriously. But they do want work to be engaging. They want

to learn, to be challenged, and to understand the relationship between their work and the overall mission of the organization. They want to work with good people and have some flexibility in where, when, and how they work.



**Myth #6:** They want to be left alone.

**Reality:** If they actually care one bit about the job, they want managers who know who they are, know what they are doing, are highly engaged with them, provide guidance, help them solve problems, and keep close track of their successes.



**Myth #7:** They want their managers to do their work for them.

**Reality:** They want managers who will spend time teaching them how to do their work very well and very fast.



**Myth #8: They don't care about climbing the proverbial career ladder.**

**Reality:** Millennials' career paths will be erratic and eclectic, but that doesn't mean they won't be progressive and developmental. Theirs will be what I call a self-building path made up of learning, relationships, proof of their ability to add value, and lifestyle flexibility. Instead of climbing a ladder, they are making a tapestry.



**Myth #9: Money and traditional benefits don't matter to them.**

**Reality:** Of course, money and benefits matter to them. They want to get the best deal they can get. In fact, they are usually quite savvy about comparing what each employer offers. But money and benefits are only a threshold issue. If you offer money and benefits that are competitive with other comparable employers, then you can keep the conversation going.



**Myth #10: Money is the only thing that matters to them**

(the opposite of the previous myth but also widely held by managers who can't believe how brazenly millennials demand money).

**Reality:** Again, money is a threshold issue. If they are asking for more, what they are really asking is, "What do I need to do to earn more?" Once you meet the threshold of competitive money and benefits, millennials care about five other things: schedule, relationships, task choice, learning opportunities, and location.



**Myth #11: They don't respect their elders.**

**Reality:** They do respect their elders. They are closer to their parents than any other generation has ever been. But they want respect too. Their parents, teachers, and counselors have always treated them with respect, so they feel they deserve respect from their managers too. Bottom line: they respect what you bring to the table, and they want you to respect what they bring to the table.



**Myth #12: They want to learn only from computers.**

**Reality:** From computers, they want to learn stuff that is easy to learn from

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## After A Robbery It Can Be Business As Usual...



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computers. But they absolutely need the human element to do their best learning. They learn best from a combination of the human element—coaching, direction, guidance, support, shared wisdom—and the powerful capacity of menu-driven information systems to guide them through the tidal wave of information available at their fingertips.



**Myth #13: It's impossible to turn them into long-term employees.**

**Reality:** You can turn them into long-term employees. You'll just have to do it one day at a time.



**Myth #14: They will never make good managers because they are so self-focused.**

**Reality:** Of course, they can be good managers. They just have to learn the basics and then practice, practice, practice.

### Workers of All Ages Have Changed

The millennial mindset isn't just for millennials, however. The forces that have impacted the millennial generation have also changed the nature of work for everyone of all ages.

Workers of all ages today rely every day on their immediate managers for help meeting their basic needs and expectations and dealing with a whole range of day-to-day issues that arise at work.

Workers of all ages today are more likely to disagree—often privately and sometimes openly—with their employers' stated missions, policies, and decisions.

Workers of all ages are more likely to question or challenge employers' rules, managers' instructions, employment conditions, and established rewards structures.



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The free-agent mindset is now the prevailing workforce mindset.

Employees of all ages today are much less likely to believe employers' promises about long-term rewards. While many employees may doubt the sincerity of long-term promises, that is not the biggest problem. Many more employees worry that their prospects for receiving long-term rewards are vulnerable to a whole range of external and internal forces that might shorten the natural life of the organization employing them. Workers worry openly about events or circumstances that have little or

nothing to do with business, such as politics, diplomacy, war, terrorism, and natural disasters. They worry about broad business-climate factors, including monetary policy, global market shifts, changes in particular industries, and organizational changes. As well, they are acutely aware that the organization employing them might simply lose out in the fiercely competitive marketplace. Workers also worry about the continued employment of their immediate supervisors and other leaders who know them best.

Without credible long-term promises from employers, employees of all

generations no longer labor quietly and obediently. Rather, most employees work anxiously to take care of themselves and their families and try to get what they can from their employers—one day at a time. People of all ages and at all levels realize nowadays that they are “free agents” because they have no other choice.

**Workers of all ages today know that job security is dead.** Most workers today—regardless of generation—assume that most employment relationships will be relatively short term and transactional. In relative terms, older workers tend to lose, and younger workers tend to gain—at least in the short term—from the diminishing importance of seniority and longevity of employment.

**Workers of all ages today are under more pressure than ever as work becomes more demanding for everyone.** In every industry, in nearly every organization, individuals are working harder and facing increasing pressure to work longer, smarter,

faster, and better. Meanwhile, workers must routinely learn and utilize new technologies, processes, practices, skills, and knowledge, all the while adjusting to ongoing organizational changes that cause growing fear of imminent job loss. While younger workers may have certain advantages in this environment, they tend to suffer more than older workers when they receive less management guidance and support.

**Workers of all ages today want, expect, and often request greater flexibility in work conditions.** As the pressure increases, so does the need for some relief from the pressure. That’s why “work-life balance” is such a powerful counter-trend. What work-life balance means most of the time is “more control over my own schedule.” The rest of the time it means “flexible location” or “flexible dress” or “flexible something.” Sometimes it means an employee can bring his dog to work. People of all ages want greater flexibility in their work conditions. The biggest difference with millennials is that they are more

comfortable making specific requests for immediate (rather than long-term) increases in pay, benefits, and work conditions, and they are more likely to make those requests earlier in their tenure of employment than workers of previous generations would have. ■



BRUCE TULGAN is an adviser to business leaders all over the world and a sought-after keynote speaker and seminar leader. He is the founder and CEO of RainmakerThinking,

Inc., a management research and training firm, as well as RainmakerThinking.Training, an online training company. Tulgan is the best-selling author of numerous books including *Not Everyone Gets a Trophy* (revised and updated, 2016), *Bridging the Soft Skills Gap* (2015), *The 27 Challenges Managers Face* (2014), and *It's Okay to be the Boss* (revised and updated, 2014). He has written for the *New York Times*, the *Harvard Business Review*, *HR Magazine*, *Training Magazine*, the *Huffington Post*, and *LP Magazine*. Tulgan can be reached at [brucet@rainmakertinking.com](mailto:brucet@rainmakertinking.com). You can follow him on Twitter @BruceTulgan or visit his website at [rainmakertinking.com](http://rainmakertinking.com).

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