

## TECHNOLOGY

# Corporate America Chases the Mythical Millennial

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If you're reading this article voluntarily, you're probably not a millennial, because everyone knows millennials don't read news. In fact, there's a pretty good chance you look down on millennials. Perhaps you consider them entitled, indulgent, needy and a little too much to bear — or maybe you're simply skeeved by their weird headgear, strange hieroglyphs and intricate courtship rituals.

I can predict all this because I work in the news media, and one of the primary functions of the media these days is to traffic in gleefully broad generalizations and criticisms of millennials, the more than 75 million Americans born about 1980 to 2000. Although millennials are now the largest demographic group in the country (sorry, boomers), and though they are more racially diverse than any other generation in American history, they are often depicted on TV, in movies and music, and in the news (including The New York Times) as a collectively homogeneous cliché.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in corporate America, especially in the technology industry, which has long been obsessed with the dubious idea that young people are in the cultural vanguard.

Corporations like LinkedIn and Oracle are now hiring an army of “millennial consultants” who charge as much as \$20,000 an hour for their expertise on how to manage and market to young people, The Wall Street Journal reported last week. The consultant bonanza follows a trend that has been shaping the business world for the last few years — millennials, executives believe, are coming for every industry, and businesses that do not appease them risk being trampled by them.

Yet there’s a glaring problem with these and other efforts to go after the younger among us: Millennials aren’t real.

Sure, the demographic group exists as an amorphous bloc. But you are as likely to come upon an archetypal millennial as you are to run into Joe Sixpack or be invited to a barbecue at the median American household. It’s hard to believe this even needs to be said, yet here we are: Macroscale demographic trends rarely govern most individuals’ life and work decisions. For most practical purposes — hiring and managing, selling to, creating products for — your company may be better off recognizing more discrete and meaningful characteristics in workers and customers than simply the year of their birth.

If your management or marketing theories involve collapsing all millennials into a catchall anthropological category — as if you’re dealing with space aliens or some newly discovered aboriginal tribe that’s suddenly invaded modernity — you’re doing it wrong. Or, as I believe my millennial friends say, “yass literal epic fail hashtag, bro.”

Consider the question of the best way to manage millennials. Say you have a worker who plays hooky from your online news site to go build a treehouse, or one who takes an extended leave to go on a snowboarding trip, then never returns to work. What should you do?

One approach is to blame these workers’ millennialness: They’re young, they’ve never had to shoulder any responsibility in life, and they really can’t even with all your rules, man.

Another might be to consider that maybe the problem stems from something

about your company, your management style or just the worker's personality, and that it has nothing to do with the fact that the employee was born in 1983 and really enjoyed "Animaniacs" as a kid.

In other words, break out of the stereotype. According to Laszlo Bock, who runs human resources at Google, pigeonholing workers into categories is nothing new, and it's rarely helpful in running a workplace.

"What we've seen is that every single generation enters the work force and feels like they're a unique generation, and the generation that's one or two ahead of them looks back and says, 'Who are these weird, strange kids coming into the work force with their attitudes of entitlement and not wanting to fit in?'" Mr. Bock said. "It's a cycle that's been repeated every 10 to 15 years for the last 50 years."

Google's human resources department, which the company calls "people operations," is famous for collecting and analyzing data about its work force to empirically back up its management techniques. Google's workers range from recent college grads to people in their 80s. And as far as Mr. Bock has been able to tell, millennials, as a broad category, simply aren't very different from everyone else.

"We measure this sort of thing closely, and if you look at what their underlying needs and aspirations are, there's no difference at all between this new generation of workers and my generation and my father's generation," he said. "Every single human being wants the same thing in the workplace — we want to be treated with respect, we want to have a sense of meaning and agency and impact, and we want our boss to just leave us alone so we can get our work done."

This is not to say that today's young people are identical to old people. Kim Parker, director of social trends research at the **Pew Research Center**, said demographers have noted large differences in millennials: Compared to older cohorts, they tend to be more socially liberal when it comes to issues like gay marriage and marijuana use, they marry later in life, and they are less enamored of traditional religious and political institutions. Looking at these shifts over time "is

a useful construct when you're trying to analyze a whole population," Ms. Parker said.

But these broad trends leave lots of room for individual differences that matter in the real world, and that are often papered over when we talk about millennials as a monolithic collective.

For instance, while it's true that millennials are more likely than older people to describe themselves as "religiously unaffiliated," the increased rate at which they do so isn't huge. In a 2014 Pew study, 29 percent of millennials said they weren't religious, versus 21 percent of people in Generation X, which Pew defined as those born from 1965 to 1980. What this means is that most millennials and most Gen Xers — and, indeed, most Americans — consider themselves religious in some way. Millennials: They're just like us!

Speaking in such broad terms also misses differences within the generation. For example, another Pew survey from 2014 found that while most millennials favored the legalization of gay marriage, millennials who described themselves as Democrats were more likely to favor it than Republican millennials. In fact, Republican millennials were for gay marriage at a lower rate than Democrats of every generation — meaning that a Democrat born in 1928 was more likely to favor marriage equality than a Republican born in 1990.

Considering that millennials are the most diverse generation — spanning many racial, ethnic and income categories — intragenerational differences are bound to play an important role when you're talking about individual people. Though both are "millennials," a young immigrant working three sharing-economy gigs is likely to look at the world very differently from a trust-fund baby who's tending his Tumblr in Brooklyn. Yet only one of these stereotypes tends to make it into media accounts of millennials.

That doesn't have to be the case. What's most bizarre about efforts to describe young people as a broad collective is that technology has rendered such generalizations mostly unnecessary. Thanks to social media, smartphones and

reams of searchable data, companies can now track their customers and workers in far more precise ways than simply noting their age cohort. They have your purchase and employment histories, your social media musings, your educational history, your credit report. Companies can break you down analytically, psychographically, financially and in just about every other way short of physically.

Joan Kuhl, one of the aforementioned army of millennial consultants, told me that one of her primary jobs these days was to undo companies' preconceived notions about millennials. (Oh, I should do that, too: It's not true that millennials don't read the news, as I implied above. Hi, millennials — thanks for reading!)

“It's unbelievable the stories we hear,” said Ms. Kuhl, 36, who runs *Why Millennials Matter*. “They all have stories about managers underestimating them, or recruiters having an impression that they can't live up to the demands of the job, or that they were a flight risk. People are perceiving them as the stereotype of their generation.”

As my millennial friends say: Ugh.

***Correction: May 27, 2016***

The State of the Art column on Thursday, about the nonhomogeneity of the so-called millennial generation, misspelled the given name of Google's head of human resources. He is Laszlo Bock, not Lazslo.

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