

Meet The Millennials

They're young, self-confident, and different from any generation that came before them. They question conventional wisdom about the practice of law and strike many Boomer partners as irresponsible. But the truth about the Millennial generation is far more complex — and law firms that don't get it are risking their futures.

By Heather Greenwood Davis

They wear their iPods while they're working. They decorate their offices "like college dorm rooms." They expect to be told they're doing a great job (when they are). And if you don't meet their expectations, they'll walk out on you in a heartbeat.

Meet the Millennials — the name coined to describe the generation of young people who were born between 1980 and 1995. They're getting a lot of attention — not all of it positive — for bucking age-old practices and having a potentially defining impact on what the practice of law will look like in the future. And they've opened up a massive generation gap with their more senior colleagues.

Adam Pekarsky, now a partner with Korn/Ferry International but until recently the director of professional development and recruitment for Fraser Milner Casgrain LLP's western offices, constantly fields questions from both sides of the gap. Partners are mystified and irritated by a generation of associates who seem cavalier about their professional careers, while young associates



Adam Pekarsky

Partner, Korn/Ferry International, Calgary

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reject most of the conventional aspects of legal practice and are determined not to let their firms control their lives.

It's undeniable, says Pekarsky, that each group is getting on the other's nerves. Millennial lawyers (also known as "Generation Y'ers") who have body piercings, dress casually unless directly instructed otherwise, and talk about "work-life balance" can be infuriating to older



colleagues, who built their firms and careers through intensive work and buttoned-down commitment to the job.

Warren Smith, a legal recruiter and Vancouver-based regional director for The Counsel Network, says partners tell him they're having real trouble relating to these associates.

"I was out for lunch with one of the managing partners of one of the biggest firms in Canada," he relates. "And she said, 'I don't know what happened, but I feel like I woke up a couple of years ago and somebody switched all my associates on me. I don't even recognize these people anymore.'"

In many ways, she's right. Extensive research shows Generation Y is dramatically different from the ones that preceded it.

Joanne Clarfield Schaefer

Director of Student and Associate Programs,
Bennett Jones LLP, Toronto

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Technologically savvy, a family-first-career-second attitude, and a strong desire to control their own destiny are its hallmarks — characteristics that are often perceived by baby-boomer partners as signs of arrogance, laziness, disrespect, and the oft-cited “sense of entitlement.”

But with many of these associates unmotivated by the lure of partnership or even more than a five-year sojourn, plus an aging senior partnership rapidly approaching retirement, law firms need Millennials — and despite themselves, are scrambling to give them what they want.

Don't let me be misunderstood

But the lawyers who make up this new generation are crying foul at the “spoiled brat” perception that is preceding them into the workforce. And the legal professionals who work most closely with them agree that the situation isn't as cut-and-dried as the stereotypes would have it.

“I think they do get rightly upset when they are characterized that way,” says Joanne Clarfield Schaefer, director of student and associate programs at Bennett Jones LLP in Toronto.

“What is bearing out for the firms, at least from my perspective, is that they are mobile, and they crave individual attention and feedback. I think that is a different characteristic than we have seen in previous generations. They are not all driven by partnership, but I think they still very much want to succeed and want [to do] good work.”

Marie-Hélène Fandrich, a fourth-year associate at Lavery, de Billy in Montreal, agrees.

“It's more of a misunderstanding between the generations on what we believe and what we need,” she says. “Generations who are older than us think that it's just laziness, and this to me is unfair.”

“We're another generation, so we have different views, and every generation has its own ways. I don't think it's bad or good. I think it's just new, and that we have to be aware of it.”

“There has definitely been change,” says Jordan K.M. Brown, a third-year associate at Cox and Palmer in Charlottetown and the CBA-P.E.I. chair of CBA Young Lawyers. “It's not just a generational shift. It's a complete shift in the personalities that are working in law firms and in private practice, and the way they think.”

Time is on my side

At the top of the list are divergent attitudes towards time. Associates frequently express disdain for careers that try to control how they use time and for systems, like the billable hour, that define their productivity in narrow terms.

“A lot more people are saying, ‘I want to have the freedom to direct my own career and start a family, or have free time to do whatever I might feel I want to do outside of the workplace,’” says Brown. “That's a big driver now, in terms of what people of my generation find to be wrong with the legal practice — that everybody has become a slave to the billable hour.”

Equally problematic, he says, is the concept of face time: that



Marie-Hélène Fandrich

Associate, Lavery, de Billy, Montreal

“We want to build a great career, but we don't want to leave our personal life on the side.”

whether lawyers arrive before (and leave after) certain times of the day is a useful measure of whether they're working hard enough. Millennials aren't the first group of associates to balk at the idea, but they are probably the first to openly dismiss it.

“I think some of it is just these people have traditionally done things that way, and so they're going to have that ingrained in them, and other people are just coming into things,” says Brown, who's asked several partners how the “face time” era got started, and none of them can say. “I don't personally think that anybody should be told to work in any particular way.”

Pekarsky points out that “face time” is a good example of a practice that could be abandoned for the good of the entire profession. “[Millennials] are not afraid of hard work; they just

work differently,” he says. “This is a generation that is able to watch a TV show on their computer while downloading music, while writing a letter, while being on MSN, and can keep it all straight.”

Talkin’ ‘bout my generation

Partners who refuse to adapt to this reality are at greatest risk of disconnect. Leaving a document on a chair or a post-it note on a computer screen, without any further interaction, is no longer an effective tool for communication, Pekarsky says.

“We give these people BlackBerries. We give them Citrix to access the system remotely. We will even loan them a laptop, for crying out loud,” he says. “We give them all of these tools so that they can work away from here, and then we communicate with them in a manner that assumes just the opposite.”

“Leaving a sticky note on someone’s monitor? I mean, you might as well bang out Morse Code in terms of people’s ability to relate to that as an acceptable mode of communication.”

Millennials also feel insulted by suggestions that they lack commitment to their careers because they make no apologies for wanting to eat dinner at home, or lack loyalty because they’re far more mobile than their predecessors. “They’re driven by a different set of priorities, and I think that often is confused with whether they’re actually committed to the profession,” says Smith.

“They absolutely are committed to the profession. I think they are committed to it on their terms, as opposed to what everybody else thinks the terms should be.”

“We want balance,” says Fandrich. “We don’t want to commit 100% for work. We also want to have some time to eventually have a family, and be with our friends, and travel and see the world. We have access to many means of communication. We want to build a great career, but we don’t want to [leave] our personal life on the side.”

Alana Parashin, a junior lawyer with Manitoba Justice’s prosecutions department, agrees. “It’s very important because it’s my career,” she notes, “but I don’t want it to be my life.”

“Firms need to re-evaluate how they deal with their associate ranks, what kinds of terms they are going to recruit them under, what kind of work expectations they are going to have and how they go about trying to keep them on,” Smith says. “We are seeing much higher attrition as firms begin to understand and deal with what is really a new generation of lawyers.”

Clarfield Schaefer agrees. “I can’t make somebody want partnership, and I can’t pretend that this is not a job based on available hours,” she says. “But for those who are engaged — and I do find them engaged — you want to make sure they’re getting meaty work, because they need to constantly be challenged. They want to be stretched.”

Can’t get no satisfaction

But while Millennials are self-assured and ready to take risks, at the same time they’re also struggling under the weight of their own aspirations.

“It’s hard to give effort everywhere at the same time,” says



Jordan K.M. Brown (seated)

Associate, Cox & Palmer, Charlottetown

“That’s a big driver now, in terms of what people of my generation find to be wrong with the legal practice — that everybody has become a slave to the billable hour.”

Fandrich. “We’re not superheroes, and we can’t do everything. It is hard, and that’s probably why we’re reacting, because you can’t be the most successful lawyer in Canada while having four kids, traveling and doing hobbies and skiing....”

Much of it can be traced back to how Millennials were raised — ironically, by Boomer parents. After growing up with a say in everything — from where the family would vacation to what cereal they should buy — Generation Y isn’t content to simply sit back and wait for a review that might never come.

In a recent *60 Minutes* documentary about Millennials, career consultant Mary Crane blamed the advent of T-ball. While previous generations played regular kids’ baseball — with winners and losers, no second chances, and opportunities to fail — in T-ball you could keep swinging until you hit the ball, no one failed, and the main thing was to feel good about yourself. The result, she suggests, is a generation of adults addicted to praise.

“I see it play itself out in a law firm environment every day,” says Pekarsky, who has seen star associates crushed when partners to whom they feel particularly close don’t bother to fill out an evaluation form — even when the same partners have ladled out compliments on them day after day.

“That’s the big disconnect, because this is the group that grew

up where, if you hung your coat up properly in the back hall, your mom would say, "Good for you, sweetie, thank you for hanging your coat up like that, I'm very proud of you. You're very good at that," says Pekarsky. "You know, 10, 15 years earlier, if you didn't hang your coat up, you were yelled at."

Fandrich admits that on issues ranging from work product to maternity leave, there's a strong desire to get approval from the firm: "You'd want them to be not only saying, 'Okay, it's fine.'" You want them to say, "Okay, it's good."

Bridge over troubled waters

The fact that many law firms have now created the position of Director of Associates reflects a gradual acknowledgment of a new generation that needs more attention, says Smith.

"In Vancouver, if you go back five years, the number of firms that had a director of associate development or student associate programs, you could probably count them on one hand," he says. "Stikeman Elliot in Vancouver does not even have 50 lawyers, and they have a person dedicated full-time to ensuring that their associates are developing properly. That says a lot to me."

Clarfield Schaefer sees her role at Bennett Jones as a bridge between generations. In her case, a coaching certification enables her to apply a two-pronged approach of delivering individual attention (via mentoring and informal personal individual coaching) and adapting firm processes (debriefing files in a wine-and-cheese setting, for example) to best meet those needs.

She adds that Generation Y's need for affirmation may also be a product of the information overload unique to the generation. Accustomed to technology that allows work to come streaming in 24/7, associates often don't take the time to sit and take stock of their own achievements. As a result, they

might act on incorrect information.

"Sometimes they leave [the firm] because they haven't processed. Whereas if they actually sit down and think about it, they realize they're not that unhappy, and they're getting good work and they're being challenged, and it has only been three weeks since they have had a really deep assignment," she notes. "But there's no high-level process time built into the Millennial generation lifestyle."

For a generation of partners who had to wait their turn to call the shots, earned far less at similar stages in their careers, and wouldn't have thought to question the established rules, this can all seem a bit much, she adds. "The partners are saying, to me, 'Wait a second, I own this place! Am I not allowed to just make decisions without seeking the opinion of the employees?'"

For now, at least, the smart answer appears to be "no." But that could change if the market does.

Both sides now

"You have to appreciate that an associate in the market today has yet to see a downturn," explains Smith. "They've come to the bar at a time when the economy has been rock solid and quite strong. They've witnessed firms from New York and London coming after them incessantly, saying 'Look, why don't you come work for us? We'll pay you double the money and you can live in one of the biggest cities in the world.' Big firms are throwing around signing bonuses to try and woo their competitor's associates away."

"To [Millennials], the world is their oyster ... how can you fault them? I think it's a combination of all these factors that

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lead you to a group of people who are quite prepared to ask some bold questions and think about things on their terms as much as they would in terms of the firm.”

What firms should do, says Smith, is develop an understanding of how the generation best responds. “My experience is that associates in today’s market actually don’t have a problem working hard,” he says. “There are a lot of them that are really quite prepared to put in good hours.”

In fact, many associates wish they had more exposure to the information at the heart of the work they do. Teams that leave lower-level players clueless as to why they’re doing something aren’t motivating or inspiring, says Brown.

“Responsibility is ultimately going to be [held by] the team leader or the top person in the food chain, right? So when you start delegating work, but still keep the responsibility at a higher level, it becomes harder for the lower-level people to identify with the work that they’re doing.” And without that identification, many Millennials assume they’re wasting their time.

Improving mutual understanding between each generation can fix that, says Clarfield Schaefer. “Give your associates an inkling into how we grew up and why we have the views that we do and vice versa,” she says. “Look at educating the firm about, ‘Okay, this may be what you see, but this is what’s behind it.’”

Lavery, de Billy has already started — the firm recently brought in an expert who spoke to partners about generational differences, says Fandrich. And Millennials are being educated as well. At Fraser Milner, law firm economics training offers associates a better understanding of what it costs to operate the firm and why billable hours are necessary.

“[Firms] don’t apologize for being revenue-generating machine[s], and [they] hit them with that on day one,” says Pekarsky. “[Firms] know they want to become great lawyers — that is absolutely of critical importance, and technical excellence is non-negotiable if you want to be a lawyer [in these organizations]. The sooner you can get your head around the fact that this is also a business, the better.”

Partners would do well to learn some lessons, too. “This is not your father’s Chevrolet. This is different,” warns Pekarsky. “It’s just an entirely different brand, and the organizations that are better able to adapt to that reality sooner will be more successful.” ■

Heather Greenwood Smith is a freelance writer based in Toronto. Her previous article for *National*, on mandatory continuing professional development, appeared in our March 2008 issue.