

Articles

"Spoiled or Special? The Over-Scheduled, Over-Praised Generation Goes to Work at the Firm"

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I'm starting to feel a little bit like a mother whose children have informed her that they don't intend to reproduce.

"Wait a minute, I went through all the work of parenting you and your brothers and sisters, and now you're telling me I don't get grandchildren?! That's supposed to be my reward for putting up with you guys!"

What, you may ask, am I blathering on about now?

Well, it turns out that the whippersnappers of today aren't as keen on making partner as my generation was. To those now entering the legal profession, the practice of law isn't necessarily a career, but more of "something I'll do until the universe reveals another path."

Every generation has its quirks, and for the Millennials (as those born between 1980 and 2000 have been dubbed), it seems that, not only are they more apt to change jobs, they seem perfectly happy to change careers two or three times during their lifetime.

Remember, these new lawyers are among the first to enter the profession who spent their childhood being shuttled from activity to activity, never letting a moment's boredom cross their voracious little minds. The upside to all those lessons and practices and tournaments and recitals is that this is one overachieving little generation. They thrive on challenge and are constantly on the hunt for the next opportunity.

The downside is that, according to experts in the human resources field, they're not so keen on dues-paying and menial tasks — the kind that all associates, at least occasionally, are called upon to perform. This stems in part, I'm sure, from the still evident self-esteem movement, which tells parents that their child's delicate self-esteem must be continually propped up with ceremonies, trophies, plaques and awards for everything from merely being a participant in a contest to showing up at school every day.

The Millennials also, in the words of one HR guru, like to keep their career options open, and intend to have at least a couple of vocations during their working years.

These characteristics would be troublesome under any circumstances. But now that firms have once again started having salary wars, the ante has been upped.

Even before this most recent rash of associate salary pay hikes, firms were already investing hundreds of thousands of dollars into training their young lawyers, only to see that investment walk out the door when the associates left. But back when the movement was primarily between firms or, even better, from firm to client, firms were arguably still getting a return on that initial investment, when the lawyers-turned-in-house-counsel sent business back to their former firms, or the firms hired fifth- or sixth-year associates who had been trained and broken in elsewhere.

But now, not only can firms not count on seeing returns on their investments, but they're actually investing more in them than they were just six months ago.

Shock to the System

What's the solution? Well, the curmudgeon in me says this generation needs to get over its infatuation with itself and realize that firms, like all employers, are in business to make a profit, not to provide them with the exact combination of challenging work and properly timed kudos to keep them motivated.

Articles

But the realist in me knows that were firms to cop that attitude, they'd probably lose out on those new lawyers who, under the right circumstances, could be the next generation of leaders.

Even the biggest curmudgeon has to admit that what the Millennials (and their predecessors, Generation X) want isn't really all that different from what older lawyers wanted back when they started out. The young ones want challenging work, flexible schedules, kudos, mentors, rewards, rapid career advancement and a host of other perks. We all want/wanted those things. It's just that this generation is actually asking for them — and expecting them.

But lawyers of all ages may be in for a rude awakening.

Still, law firms would be well advised to study up on this new generation making their way into our halls of power. They may require stroking, and their egos may be a bit more fragile. But a lifetime of juggling schoolwork and piano lessons and lacrosse tournaments and volunteering at the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals has prepared this generation well for the multitasking and time demands that are an intrinsic part of the practice of law.

For their part, the Millennials may have to dial down their expectations a bit. The real world doesn't give out participant ribbons, and their moms are not going to be able to talk their bosses out of giving them failing grades now and then. But the shock will wear off. I promise.

I predict that this generation will do one of two things: drive us completely nuts, or exceed our wildest expectations.

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