

Article

Is Work Ethic Really the Issue?



By Robert W. Wendover

The Center for Generational Studies

Much has been made about the lack of work ethic within the emerging generation. “These kids are lazy,” veteran employees will say. “They take the easy way out. They have no self-initiative.” Even managers in their twenties have been known to complain, “What’s wrong with this younger generation?”

When I hear these laments, the first thing I say is “Describe work ethic for me.” It is only natural for people as they age to compare their sense of work ethic to those in the emerging generations. Of course this is like comparing apples and oranges. While older generations tell their grandkids to keep their noses to the grindstone, the grandkids are thinking, “What’s a grindstone?” It can be difficult for people in their fifties or sixties to accept that today’s teenagers are a product of their environment. These young people are simply enjoying the conveniences that older generations created for themselves. It is unrealistic however to expect the emerging generations to learn the old basics before embracing these conveniences. (“I’m sorry, you’re not allowed to use the microwave until you learn how to cook with pots and pans.”)

Older generations can’t have it both ways, conveniences for themselves and manual labor for everyone under 25. Every generation learns about work from watching others do it. The stories are nice, but the modeling is essential. Is it any wonder that young people aren’t quite sure what work is when they watch parents work from home, in the coffee shop, on an airplane and dozens of other places? Then there is the issue of what work looks like nowadays. Less than two percent of the population works in agriculture, the number of manufacturing jobs shrinks every day, and manual labor seems to be too dirty for the texting set. Besides, their parents keep telling them, “Go to college and get a good job.”

When you get past the sectors listed above, you’re left with people working retail and people tapping on computers, cell-phones, PDAs, and a host of other gadgets. But is work being done? It can be hard to tell. “Yes,” someone might tell you, “I’m writing a business proposal. But I’m also surfing the web for a flat-screen TV, buying concert tickets, texting my friends, and responding to a party invitation from *E-vite*.”

If work ethic isn't the issue, why do people keep complaining about young workers? The real issues are performance and self-initiative. In working with a wide variety of managers and supervisors, I have heard endless stories about young people who appear to do the minimum, stop work at the end of every task, and don't seem to understand that looking around for other ways to contribute is a part of being a responsible employee. I've had a college store manager tell me that he's added "empty the trash bag under the counter" to the job description for student employees. I've had a manufacturing manager tell me that young workers lean on their brooms when they're finished sweeping the floor. Then there's the painting helper who watched his boss paint my office a few months back. When I talked asked his boss about this, he smiled. "I know," he said, "But it's easier do the stuff myself than give him specific instructions on every single thing."

"Why keep him?" I asked.

"He's good for some stuff," replied the boss. "Besides, he shows up consistently. The last three kept calling in sick. That left me lugging everything back and forth."

This is about more than performing simple tasks, however. A few years back, someone invented the "boss button." This is a few lines of code that allow computer users to toggle back and forth between the spreadsheets they're supposed to be working on and the latest episode of *Desperate Housewives* or some other distraction. A partner for an accounting firm tells of emerging professionals whose work needs to be checked carefully. The young auditors seem to rely so heavily on the software that it doesn't occur to them to look outside of the computer environment when they see an anomaly in a customer's books. Then there are the countless managers who have related stories of spending hour after hour answering questions to which young workers already know the answers, but upon which they seem afraid to act.

Some will take me to task for accusing these individuals of laziness. They're missing the point. Every generation is a product of the training they receive in coming of age. In this convenience-oriented world, it is easy to understand why they would gravitate to jobs and responsibilities that require the least amount of work. They've not seen it modeled any other way. On top of this, they have grown up immersed in marketing messages that tell them they deserve anything they want 24-7-365.

Finally, this convenience needs to be coupled with the influences of technology. Regardless of economic level, most young workers live their lives based on the series of menus in front of them. These screens can be so mesmerizing that it does not occur to

them to look around. The parents of the Baby Boom used to complain about the “boob tube.” It might be argued that handheld devices are the boob tube on steroids. There’s always another text message to answer, a website to surf, a game to play, or a *YouTube* clip to watch.

Am I making excuses for those who don’t throw themselves into their jobs? No. But if we want to engender performance and a sense of self-initiative in those under 25, we’d be better off teaching them what work looks like rather than complaining that they have no work ethic.

Robert W. Wendover is director of The Center for Generational Studies. Contact him at robert.wendover@generationaldiversity.com.