

# The Washington Post

## Millennials accused of lax work ethic say it's not all about 9-to-5

Advertisement

By Ian Shapira  
Washington Post Staff Writer  
Saturday, April 3, 2010; B01

Jared Rogalia, 25, a Hertz rental car manager-trainee in Alexandria, is as cranky as someone twice his age when he complains about his generation's work ethic. Here's how Rogalia characterizes his age group: "The first is, really spoiled and lazy. The second is, we're free-spirited. And the third is, they'd rather be poorer and have free time than have a lot of money."

The millennial generation -- about 50 million people between ages 18 and 29 -- is the only age group in the nation that doesn't cite work ethic as one of its "principal claims to distinctiveness," according to a new Pew Research Center study, ["Millennials: Confident. Connected. Open to Change."](#) The Washington-based nonprofit group found that young adults and their elders agree: Baby boomers and Generation Xers have better work ethics and moral values than those in their 20s.

In a survey of about 1,200 people of all ages, millennials chose other traits to define themselves: 24 percent said "technology use," 11 percent went with "music/pop culture," 7 percent chose "liberal/tolerant" and 6 percent said "smarter." Only 5 percent noted their generation's "work ethic" -- the same portion as who chose "clothes."

Among older generations, at least twice as many people cited work ethic as a badge of their age group's identity: 17 percent of boomers, 11 percent of Gen Xers and 10 percent of those 65 and older. The older three generations also take pride in their strong values or morals and in being "respectful," terms that hardly any millennials in the survey used.

"Millennials may be a self-confident generation," the study concluded, "but they display little appetite for claims of moral superiority."

Some young adults -- [much like Generation Xers who found themselves labeled as slackers in the 1990s](#) -- believe such generalizations are nonsense.

Maya Enista, 26, chief executive at [Mobilize.org](#), a District-based advocacy group for young adults, said the term "work ethic" is misleading. "It's not about being at a desk from 9 to 5. I work part of every hour I am awake." Enista said her fellow 20-somethings' constant connection to technology keeps them at least as tethered to their jobs as older workers are. "It's a given that we work hard, because the reality is that millennials are the most educated and most in debt."

But other young people in the Washington area -- and their older managers -- can be their generation's harshest critics. At Potomac Pizza in Chevy Chase, Omar Haleem, 22, an assistant manager, said he likes being with his colleagues but is often put in the awkward position of haranguing those who are his own age.

"I have to call out their faults and make it real obvious that they're not doing their job," he said. "If they're standing there watching TV, I say, 'Okay . . . you don't want to work as many shifts?' They leave food on the

line that's ready to be delivered to tables or put in bags. They'll order food in the middle of a dinner rush and enjoy their slice and not answer phones, which is really annoying. And they talk on the phone to their friends outside."

Rea Pyle, 34, Potomac Pizza's owner, said many younger workers do not accept that it takes long, concerted effort to build a career. "They've been blessed with parents and grandparents laying the foundation to give them a better life," he said. "But that hunger is not really in them. But the desire for success is. They want to make money" but don't want to put in the required hours or effort, he added.

In the high-salary realm of management consulting firms, which hire hundreds of young adults annually, the youngest employees are far more likely to request the flexibility to work from home or during off-hours, executives say.

Nicole Furst, 38, a senior executive at Accenture in Reston, said the younger generation at her firm has little interest in putting in long hours simply because that's what previous generations did. "They make it clear that it's not a pattern they would adopt," she said. "They look at all the Generation Xers and say, 'I don't want to put in all those hours when I am at that point.' "

Furst said younger workers' emphasis on a better balance among work, family and friends even at the start of a career is "admirable. You sit here, and say, 'That makes sense.' "

The influx of a bulge of workers into the economy, especially at a time of starkly higher unemployment, has spawned an industry of pollsters, authors and consultants seeking to explain the young generation. The titles of books about millennials appear to reveal a certain condescension from older generations: "The Dumbest Generation" and "The Trophy Kids Grow Up."

Even more-neutral studies focus on the generation's supposedly weak work ethic. In a book due out this month, "The M-Factor: How the Millennial Generation Is Rocking the Workplace" (Harper Business), authors [Lynne C. Lancaster](#) and [David Stillman](#) report on a survey they conducted last year showing that almost nothing bothers older workers as much as having colleagues who put in fewer hours, while millennials seem wholly unperturbed by that reality of the workplace.

Jennifer Miller, 44, director of talent acquisition at Sibley Memorial Hospital in the District, said younger nurse recruits in job interviews frequently make demands about when they can and can't work. "The younger candidates start talking about how their shifts need to fit into a predetermined schedule, rather than working around whatever the hospital needs," she said. "They say, 'I can't work evenings.' I was schooled in you don't put up roadblocks at all in an interview."

Some young Sibley nurses crave more responsibility and grander titles without putting in the years of grunt work that previous generations saw as the gateway to advancement, Miller said.

"We had a new grad [last fall], she finished a master's degree and she wanted to be a nurse manager. But she had no nurse managing experience. I wouldn't have made the assumption that the mere fact I had finished this new degree meant that my employer would find me a new job."

At Hertz in Alexandria, Rogalia said his peers at work are sometimes easily distracted. "We've had to take disciplinary actions," he said. "We had a new hire who was watching video on his iPhone with his headphones

on, and the customers were kind of looking around to see what this kid was doing. He was laughing. He stopped showing up after a while."

Rogalia, who wakes at 5 a.m. for work and does not get home until about 8 p.m., said it was only recently that he felt he had a decent work ethic. After graduating from college in 2007, he lived at home in New York with his parents.

"Life was great, but I didn't feel good about myself," he said. "I was lazy. I was working two part-time jobs. I think the older generations do have a better work ethic. My parents pampered me and gave me anything I asked for."

One busy Friday night at Potomac Pizza, Haleem evaluated his younger colleagues, all in their early 20s and still in college: Ryan Mooney, a sophomore at Montgomery College; Bill Lustig, an American University senior; and Chris Healing, a Catholic University senior.

"Mooney's always in the back room at the computer, trying to win online betting," Haleem said. "Bill, he's always getting yelled at by his girlfriend. Everyone will tell you that she's a great girl. She keeps tabs on him. Let's keep it at that. Chris is always texting with his girlfriend."

They all seemed busy enough, except Mooney, who was looking to skip out for a break at a nearby bar. "Why can't I just leave?" he asked nobody in particular as he clutched a piece of paper with predictions on that evening's college basketball games.

Lustig, hungry for tips, overheard Mooney and shot back, "You can leave, if you want -- more tables for me."

[View all comments](#) that have been posted about this article.

© 2010 The Washington Post Company