

## **Resistance is Futile – Managing the Millennial Invasion**

By Scott Degraffenreid - 3/7/06

The fact is that at the time of this writing there have been no major terrorist incidents inside U.S. borders since 9/11/01. It could be argued that the Department of Homeland Security is doing a reasonably respectable job. On the other hand, however, they are apparently oblivious to an ongoing invasion that began over a year and a half prior to 9/11 at a scale larger than that of the D-Day Offensive in Europe. Alarmingly, this invasion has grown each year such that we have now been infiltrated by over 18 million individuals who belong to a culture that is more alien and unfamiliar to us than any Muslim or foreign-born invader could ever be.

Tom Ridge and company can perhaps be forgiven what might seem an intolerable oversight inasmuch as this silent incursion actually began in 1982 in delivery rooms all across America. This may in fact have been one of the most successful and insidious infiltrations ever perpetrated. Far and away the most clever and unique aspect of this invasion was the fact that it was completely unplanned and unintentional. The rebel hordes in our midst that will ultimately seize control, regardless of our resistance, are the product of a perfect technological and cultural storm.

If you have children born since 1982, if you employ or work with people younger than 24 in 2006, if you even interact with businesses that have employees younger than 24 – you have witnessed or been party to skirmishes with these rebel invaders. Employers of Millennials, the generation of children born since 1982 (also sometimes referred to as Generation Y), are on the front lines in dealing with this looming and widely misunderstood peril. Employers are not only unarmed for this conflict, they are comprehensively and tragically unprepared.

The analogy of the experience of Native Americans regarding European explorers for the 100 years subsequent to Columbus' first landing in the Americas is not entirely sufficient but offers some sense of the scenario. What we can assume the indigenous population thought when they first encountered the Europeans must have been something along the lines of very strange, very different and certainly not quite right (a few thought them gods but they were rather quickly disabused of this notion). This is approximately what we find with employers who depend on any participation from the Millennial workforce – very strange, very different and *not at all right*.

Because few employers have any context for understanding why Millennials operate so differently from any foregoing generation the general tendency is to assume that they are defective, dysfunctional or in need of some kind of repair. I have heard employers blame the school systems, the parents, gangs, drugs, and just about anything else that could be interpreted as some kind of toxic variable.

## Resistance is Futile!

In preparing employers to confront the brutal reality of this alien horde, the good news is also, unfortunately, the bad news. There is absolutely nothing wrong with them! In fact, they may be the first truly new generation since we began walking on our hind legs. The confluence of circumstances that created this startling and abrupt shift has some staggering implications that will only amplify as more and more of this new generation enters the workforce. As much as employers might prefer otherwise, there will be no turning back the clock or dodging this bullet.

Although an increasing number of employers are aware of this issue at some level, very few have managed to gain any effective understanding of it. The principle reason for this is the previously mentioned misapprehension that this generation is somehow damaged or broken. In fact, their brains are literally wired quite differently than earlier generations. This different neural wiring is even superior in many ways once it is recognized and understood.

The most crucial insights can be gained by focusing not on how they are different but how they came to be that way. The Millennial generation would have begun in 1982 regardless of what else happened for the simple reason that anyone born in that year would be eligible to enter the workforce in approximately 2000 (the millennium). But 1982 was an interesting year for a number of reasons. Many technologies and new cultural phenomenon were just coming on the scene:

- The PC was invented in that year.
- Video games, although slightly earlier began to proliferate and become widely affordable.
- Cable and MTV were becoming almost universally available.
- The first crude cell phones were entering the scene.
- Handheld calculators were becoming ubiquitous.
- Completely aside from and independently of the technological cascade, a movement was forming to make the Millennials a much more protected generation than had ever existed before. Megan's Law, Amber Alerts, child safety seats and numerous other child protection mandates proliferated all through the 80's and 90's.
- Also crucial was the exponential expansion of entertainment. Not just the variety but also the number of media as this generation matured. CD's, DVD's, iPod's, Satellite Radio and high speed Internet videos have made it possible for this generation to enjoy the privilege of customized entertainment on demand 24/7/365.

But how has all this technical and cultural good fortune created an entirely new mind? It is not just a different mindset but also a brain that functions very differently in nearly all situations. Just as importantly, how have Millennials become so problematic and challenging for most employers?

If you are not an employer or don't have children of this age, you may wonder in what ways they are different. For the moment, let's just discuss how they seem to

## Resistance is Futile!

employers. In my work with employers who are interested in improving their abilities to utilize Millennials, some of the words I frequently hear are disloyal, apathetic, dysfunctional and illiterate.

They also bemoan their unwillingness to undergo training, accept fixed schedules and comply with management instructions. Bare in mind these complaints are by no means universal. A substantial number of Millennials are still configured as Humans Version 1. For a few years there will still be holdouts and throwbacks but a growing majority will continue to appear to the uninformed employer exactly as described above.

I'm going to address just one of the common employer complaints regarding Millennials, which is their disloyalty. My primary work is improving retention and productivity in large corporations. Late in the year 2000, several of my long-term clients that had achieved and maintained very stable, low turnover rates began experiencing a small but significant increase in attrition. On closer examination, nearly 100% of the change could be attributed to very young employees, specifically Millennials, at the time barely 18. Although first jobs are notoriously confronting and often short, many of the individuals involved in this statistic had already worked several places. Compared to previous crops of 18 year olds, Millennials were leaving in less than half the time. Again, this was by no means universal but the incidence of employees leaving in just a few weeks or even days, was clearly significantly higher.

One client even created a new category for attrition tracking. They previously had a reason for leaving bracket called 'Failed to Report' which simply meant someone did not show up for their assigned shift. I was puzzled to see a new category called 'Failed to Return' and asked how that was different. *"Oh,"* they replied, *"that is for when they don't come back from lunch or a break or they just get up mid-shift and leave."* I asked if that happened a lot and they said, *"look at the report."* I was appalled to see it accounted for at least one or two occurrences every day – sometimes more.

Almost all of these occurrences involved Millennials. While this is anecdotal the general perception that twenty-something's are very likely to quit after a short time and no notice is widely held. Regrettably there are few reliable statistics on this subject but given the preponderance of employers I've spoken with who hold this assumption, it seems likely that it is grounded in more than a little fact. While we've been able to substantially address the issue with all of my clients it is still far more likely for employees in this demographic to quit with no notice after a very short term of employment.

A few employers have attempted to deal with this issue simply by raising the hiring age. Although short sighted and obviously doomed in the long run, this worked for at least a year or two, maybe even three. But as the age of the oldest Millennials progressively increases (currently 24) this approach is increasingly untenable for employers with a large number of entry-level positions.

Another widely used strategy is screening for probable loyalty. There are two problems with this "solution". First the distribution of what is being registered as loyalty in these

## Resistance is Futile!

assessments is becoming less and less common. Therefore, a very high number of applicants must be screened in order to select just a few. Aside from the obvious costs and time for the assessments, few entry-level positions can generate a large enough number of applicants for the assessment to screen from.

The second problem with assessments is that because they are so widely used, many Millennials quickly grow smart enough to game the system, giving answers they know will satisfy the assessment as to their loyalty.

So, the problem is real and as one manager put it *“I’m not sure how much we can do with a ten-minute employee!”*

What is actually happening here? Why would a particular age group suddenly become so willing to leave a job they may have spent quite a bit of time finding and in some cases quite a bit of time training for? The answer is remarkably simple. They have been trained by the technology they have grown up with to bail out at the first sign of trouble. Essentially, they instinctively hit reboot. Their apparent disloyalty is simply a function of the fact that CTRL ALT DELETE gets you out of a lot of trouble.

By the same token, video games train them to be not just failure tolerant but failure fans. Even if you have not played a video game, you are probably still aware of the concept that moving up to different levels and getting higher scores almost always involves repeated failures. Finding the tokens, getting the extra lives, reloading your weapons frequently require many futile attempts before the reward comes. Amazingly Millennials who play even a moderate amount of video games but from an early age have a very highly developed sense of counterintuitive learning. They can find hidden clues and leap to very advanced levels in a short period of time.

My good friend, Stan Carpenter, actually coined the term “Crash Test Geniuses” (© 2006 Degraffenreid). He has graciously allowed me to appropriate and copyright it. What it means is they learn faster from failure than practically anything else. When they find a type of job they don’t like, it takes them very little time to move on. This pattern of behavior is not without it’s advantages, although at this point they inure primarily to the employees. *Recognizing how Crash Test Geniuses adapt to and interact with their environment is crucial to disrupting the pattern of what appears as disloyalty.*

To say just a little bit more about how the Millennials neural pathways have been materially reconfigured by the constant use of computers and video games, as well as the perpetual immersion in some type of entertainment or other, it helps a lot to be over there in their world. Imagine having grown up using a computer your whole life.

Of course, the oldest Millennials, those born in 1982, didn’t have menu or GUI based systems but they did have, even in the dismal days of DOS, the need to think in a much less linear fashion. Using a computer requires a certain degree of multi-dimensional thinking. You need to be willing to go backwards, forwards and sideways in the system as circumstances and applications require. Likewise, you need a certain capacity for

## Resistance is Futile!

multi-tasking but you also have to remember how many windows you can have open at a time.

This immersion in non-linear thinking can create a pattern of thought and behavior that is easily and frequently misdiagnosed and treated as ADD, ADHD, etc. To re-emphasize the point - there is nothing wrong with people who think this way other than the problems that can be caused by unnecessary or inappropriate medication and treatment.

Millennials who exhibit high degrees of Crash Test Genius thinking are capable of quantum leap innovation and incredible process streamlining. They intuitively recognize hidden shortcuts that can take you from point A to point Z without any intervening steps. The difficulty for people capable of this kind of thinking is that they have little or no tolerance for people and organizations that can't see the efficiency of what they've discovered.

One classic example would be from one of my call center clients. They were primarily a help desk and tech support call center supporting products with very high degrees of technical sophistication. The users they supported generally didn't have simple problems. Consequently they employed a very complex and deliberate troubleshooting process. The process was usually effective but required at least a dozen steps before a resolution could even be attempted.

One of their most effective agents was an extreme Crash Test Genius. His resolution rate on calls was nearly 100% and his call-handle time averaged less than half of the contract target. Nonetheless he was always in trouble with his supervisor and quality monitoring because he could not bring himself to utilize the company's troubleshooting process.

I spoke to him about this and he told me:

*"I can very clearly see the caller's system in my mind. I know what I need to ask them and the company's system just confuses me and slows me down. Why do they care as long as I'm winning?"*

This is quite representative of Crash Test Genius thinking because when you think about it, video games don't have many rules and even fewer unbreakable ones. The point is just winning and if you can find a new way to do it – so much the better. So employers are dealing with minds that have been prepared to win without rules, minds that expect to be challenged and pushed to find new ways of winning.

Part and parcel to this, however, they have also been trained to expect to take losses in the course of learning to win. A typical video game player may be figuratively killed or dismembered many, many times in the course of just a few hours play. This is absolutely no problem for them. Accordingly, leaving a job is nothing more than an opportunity to find a better job. It is really no more significant than their 60<sup>th</sup>

## Resistance is Futile!

dismemberment. It just goes with the game. The ripcord is their friend; nothing to be feared from bailing out.

Now at first, hiring people like this may seem like a nightmare. They don't like to follow rules, they leave at the drop of a hat and the idea of giving notice is literally a joke to them. On the plus side, you've got that Crash Test Genius vertical learning curve. The problem is keeping them long enough to do anything with it. To do that, you have to earn their commitment and support. Generally speaking, most employers have been unwilling to reach out to this demographic in a meaningful way. Fully utilizing the Millennial mind requires major adaptation in nearly every area that businesses have come to accept as requisite.

Employers have to realize they are not quitting because they don't like work, they are quitting because *they don't like the way you make them work*. To redesign a workplace or job description to accommodate a highly non-linear, menu-driven mind that has been both entertained and challenged almost from birth is no simple task.

Even the best old-school leaders, managers and HR professionals should probably not attempt this on their own. It can only be accomplished in collaboration with Crash Test Geniuses themselves. Think of the process as somewhat akin to designing a video game. If, like most of us, you have no idea what even the first step in creating a video game would be then you have some sense of the obstacles.

If you are genuinely interest in creating a workplace that cannot just retain but optimize Millennials there are a few general rules to consider:

1. **Let me point this out** – A mind trained by video games requires constant performance updates. They like tight, objective feedback. Scoring points is like a drug fix for many Millennials. If they can't look at a tote board or some other kind of score keeping system by at least the end of the day and check their tally, they report a feeling of dissatisfaction and disconnectedness. It is not inaccurate to think of them as addicted to points. Given there is currently no Betty Ford or other rehab clinic for people with a point jones the simplest thing to do is give them points for the behaviors you want and don't give them points for the behaviors you don't want. For instance, showing up on time can be worth 100 points for the day. Showing up within 15 minutes of the start time would only be worth 25 points, after that 0 points. One of my clients decided to see what would happen if they gave 250 points for showing up at least 15 minutes early. Over 50% of the Millennials began showing up early for the bigger points!

I realize it is difficult to create a system that tallies and tracks points for all types of behaviors throughout the day. One simple solution is self-tracking. Let them report their own performance and then spot check them on suspiciously high scores the next day. You can also use pairs of individuals and have them track points for each other.

## Resistance is Futile!

We've found that even having a designated score keeper who observes and records points for as few as ten people more than pays for their position in increased Millennial performance. The point is (pun intended) is that while the rest of your workforce may not need or particularly care for this type of highly active feedback system, Millennials thrive on it. While the propensity to treat all employees as equals make this approach counterintuitive, common sense also tells us that it isn't smart to treat dogs like cats or try to make an apple pie with oranges.

Millennials are not just a breed apart, they are very nearly an entirely different species. They must be handled accordingly.

- 2. Expect them to be where they want to be when they want to be there –** Millennials report quitting over scheduling issues more than any other single reason. This isn't really difficult to understand either. Other than perhaps at school (not including elective activities like soccer, t-ball, karate, ballet, etc.), few of them have had to be anywhere or do anything at a particular time throughout their childhood. Because time shifting has always been a reality for them, they have always been able to see their favorite shows, listen to their favorite music or be on the phone whenever they choose, there really has not been much "planning around things" for them, time management is just not an important skill set.

The employer protests: *"But I need people here on time!"* – And you can have them there on time if they get something in return for being there. The aforementioned points work quite well but so does "fun!". Making the first 15-20 minutes of a shift something they enjoy doing or allowing the first 2 or 3 people who arrive for the shift to have their choice of jobs is also remarkably effective.

The employer continues: *"It's not just showing up on time, they want days off whenever something comes up (a concert, a friend's party, etc.). They never feel they should have to work just because we need them!"* – Yes that is correct.

They have lived on-demand lives. Their expectation is quite natural, having been raised privy to 24/7-everything (food, entertainment, shopping, etc.). They are completely unaccustomed to having to choose between one thing and another. They really don't ask the question: why can't I have it all? They are just annoyed that their employer doesn't realize they are supposed to have it all.

There are a number of ways to address these issues. The biggest problem is most employers just don't believe they should have to. For all of recorded history, it has generally been the employer's prerogative to tell the employees when to show up for work. This is an assumption so deeply ingrained as to seem non-negotiable. Trust me when I tell you it must be negotiated if you are to successfully employ Millennials.

A couple of very simple but proven strategies are team scheduling and bankable time off:

## Resistance is Futile!

- **Team Scheduling** – works like this: You take two or three people and make them responsible as a group for a certain schedule being fulfilled. You don't care which one of them is there when, as long as it doesn't result in any overtime. They work it out amongst themselves to decide who takes what time off. You may have to support them a little bit at first in learning how to collaborate and manage this but it is extremely popular and effective with Millennials. Again, you don't have to do it with everyone. The disincentive is if they don't cover the assigned schedule completely, they lose the opportunity to participate in team scheduling.
- **Bankable Time Off** – Another approach that sometimes improves coverage is to award schedule accommodations based on on-time days worked. An example would be for every five consecutive on-time days worked - give one hour off from an assigned shift. This would amount to about half a day per month. They can have off as long as they call in before the beginning of their scheduled shift. Candidly, this doesn't work as well but some employers can't abide the idea of team scheduling.

I often hear *“that won't work here”* or *“we tried something like that already and it doesn't work.”* That's okay, I'm not telling you what to do. I do want you to stop and look at what you are doing right now and how it is working with regards to Millennials. You're going to have to try something different because they're not going to “get better”.

3. **Have it their way** – Most businesses are very keen on consistent results so it makes sense to do most work in a consistent and systematic way. That means most entry-level jobs don't really reward creativity so much as compliance. Having been sold on the idea that imagination and creativity are always valuable everywhere, they dislike being treated as “drones” or “tools”. They want an opportunity to express their unique identity, which is why they all have tattoos or piercings (just kidding). Of course it would be great if every job were such that all you had to do was say “here's the result I want, get it for me any way that works for you”. I hope none of us are naïve enough to believe this is even vaguely possible in more than a very small number of instances.

What we can do is create some latitude for them to bring a little of their “flava” to work with them. This will look a little different for nearly every employer. In call centers we often let them pinstripe and flag their chairs or customize their headsets. Even little things like letting people customize their nametags can have value. One call center allows people to submit their own personal phone greetings for use with customers (i.e. *“I be Jimbo – how the who are you?”* – NOT approved!) The basic idea is simply that a little room for self-expression goes a long way with Millennials. They are paradoxically quite homogenous in their non-conformity. Give them something they can customize or make their own.

## Resistance is Futile!

Now these are just three general rules that will have to be addressed at some level in most cases to have things work better for Millennials. But as Steven J Gould said, *“In nature, nothing always works and nothing never works.”* There are always exceptions and there are many other principles and strategies too complicated to address here that can be very effective in successfully employing Millennials.

One other complicating factor we should mention in closing is there are many variations in the Millennial generation and some significant differences based on region, gender, race, etc. The very most significant difference, however, appears to be which generation the Millennial was raised by. At this particular moment, the majority of Millennials in the workforce are the progeny of the Baby Boomer generation (born from 1946 to 1962).

There will certainly be a new generation named before the last Boomers transcend their child-producing years. In the meantime, more and more Millennials will be born to parents of Gen-X (the intervening demographic born between 1962 to 1982). It may go without saying that Boomers and X'ers have very different parenting styles and these differences may contribute to varied Millennial attributes (if you crave further complications, consider that quite a few Millennials will have one Boomer and one X'er parent). Obviously Millennials are now coming into their childbearing years also, even if fewer are choosing to take the plunge.

Of course, the “third parent” of Millennials, all the myriad technology, continues to advance and proliferate incessantly. That makes it likely that any of the attributes already associated with video games, computers, etc. will only become more pronounced and common as time goes on.

For the time being, most employers will attempt to skirt the issue. The kinds of changes needed to be effective with Millennials will seem drastic or even dangerous. These are not the kinds of accommodations that can be lightly or easily made. Unfortunately, for better or worse, they will be almost unavoidable for the majority of employers over the next ten years. For many, they will be necessary much sooner. Earlier, I said the analogy of “the European Incursion into the Americas” was insufficient. That is because, at least hypothetically, Native Americans could have slowed or even stopped the calamitous takeover of their continents. We, however, have virtually no hope of preempting this coup. In the words of Star Trek’s redoubtable Borg, *“Resistance is futile”* – get with the program.

### **Biography for Scott:**

Scott Degraffenreid uses the tools of Social Network Analysis, a still new but versatile branch of mathematics, to unravel the business mysteries such as the Millennial paradox. He has spent the last 12 years consulting with organizations of all sizes, as a Social Network Analyst supporting companies on a variety of projects such as retention, recruiting and productivity issues along with referral marketing. One of his two books: “*Embracing the N.U.D.E. Model, The New Art & Science of Referral Marketing*” shows readers how to triple their word-of-mouth marketing by using Scott’s simple but powerful model. His second book: “*Blazing a T.R.A.I.L. to Success, The New Art & Science of Acknowledgment,*” explains why acknowledgment is the single most effective tool for building and developing social networks. He can be reached at [SDegraffenreid@aol.com](mailto:SDegraffenreid@aol.com) or on his website at [www.NecessaryMeasures.com](http://www.NecessaryMeasures.com).