

# DO YOUNGER EMPLOYEES REALLY HAVE LESS OF A **WORK ETHIC?**



A common complaint about younger employees from their employers and supervisors is that Millennials don't seem very motivated, and they often don't display a good work ethic. This complaint does not just come from Boomers but also is frequently voiced by managers and supervisors who are in their 30's to 40's (Gen X).



**Warning:** While there are often trends that can be seen across groups of individuals, it is dangerous to make assumptions about individuals solely from group tendencies.

## The Problem of Generationalizing

Groups of people (same age, from the same region, same gender) can share similar characteristics. But there are obviously individual differences within or across group members. Also, the characteristics also can be true of other groups (for example, not every 50 year old employee is a “hard worker”).

For example, in discussing this topic with a large group of multi-generational workers, one young woman stated, “I’m tired of everyone assuming that I’m a slacker because I’m only 23. It is offensive to me.” And in this case it was true, she was identified as a hardworking, young, and rising star.

Additionally, you need to be aware that your view as to what “motivated” or a “good work ethic” looks like may be biased from your personal worldview. For example, just because a younger employee stays up late, into the early morning hours, and then sleeps in does not mean they are lazy. It may mean that their schedule for working is different than yours.

## Does a “good work ethic” look different for different generations?

As I’ve worked with companies across the country with a range of age groups among their employees, three key questions that need to be answered have risen to the top. As we’ve discussed and explored these questions, the following points became clear:

## 1 BY WHOM IS A GOOD WORK ETHIC DEFINED?

Believe it or not, employers or supervisors are not the true source of understanding what comprises a good work ethic.

A good work ethic is defined first by one’s customers. You and your employees are there to provide goods or services that your customers want or need. Therefore, what customers want defines what you try to provide, like being open when they need your assistance, providing quality service, or delivering goods on time.

Employers then develop expectations of appropriate work behaviors from their employees in order to serve their customers well. What you expect from your employees then (hopefully) reflects those behaviors that enable your company to serve your clients well. So these behaviors (showing up to work regularly, arriving on time, listening to and following directions) have nothing to do with generational bias. They are foundational to a company serving their clients well.

## 2 WHAT, REALLY, COMPRISES A GOOD WORK ETHIC?

Older generations (Baby Boomers and Seniors) are notorious for focusing on and lecturing younger individuals about the need to have a “good work ethic.”

While many of us know (or think we do) what we mean when we use the term “good work ethic,” I have found that it is helpful to define the term behaviorally. This then lets us explore potential biases that may be added.

### HERE ARE THE BEHAVIORS I HAVE GATHERED FROM EMPLOYERS AND SUPERVISORS:

1. Showing up (regularly).
2. Arriving on time, ready to work.
3. Listening to and following instructions.
4. Willingness to learn (learning attitude).
5. Performing quality work (vs. “going through the motions”).
6. Displaying a positive, “can do” attitude.
7. Completing work in a timely fashion.
8. Being a “hard worker.” This also needs to be specified, because many assume others know what they mean when using the term.

#### A HARD WORKER IS ONE WHO:

- A. Stays on task; doesn't need close supervision to do so.
- B. Puts forth consistent, good effort, not taking excessive breaks.
- C. Continues to work hard even when they are tired or not supervised.
- D. Completes the job given, then looks for other work to be done.

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– Dr. Paul White

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## SO, DOES A GOOD WORK ETHIC (AND A “HARD WORKER”) LOOK DIFFERENT FOR DIFFERENT GENERATIONS?

As we look at this list of behaviors, the conclusion seems to be both “No” and “Sometimes.”

“No,” because the behaviors that together comprise a “good work ethic” are consistently desired by customers regardless of their generation.

“Sometimes,” because a caveat exists: The specific behaviors may differ according to the need (and generation) of the client. For example, “being available” to answer a client’s questions may differ depending on the expectations of the client—which are often framed by the client’s generation. For a Millennial client, getting answers via a text message, an email, or through a chat room may actually be the preferred means of communication. And often they want an immediate response (maybe while they are working between 9 p.m. and 1 a.m.) In contrast, a Gen X’er may want to schedule a call or videoconference in the next day or so, while a Boomer may want to meet in person.

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## WHAT IS THE PROBLEM? WHY DON’T YOUNGER EMPLOYEES SEEM TO KNOW HOW TO WORK?

I believe the number of complaints are sufficient in frequency, from numerous sectors, and even different ages of supervisors to conclude that many (not all!) younger employees don’t have well developed work behaviors. And it seems that the quality of their “work ethic” may be less developed when they enter the workforce than prior generations. (This is a tough comparison to make, however. Our memories often deceive us. I know I had much to learn and grow in, as a 25-year-old employee.)

So the question becomes, “Why does this become the case? Why do so many employers and supervisors report dissatisfaction with younger employees? Are they not motivated? Do they not care?” I don’t think it is a motivation issue or “caring” issue in most cases. And I think it is dangerous to judge others’ internal thoughts and feelings.

I believe the problem stems from this question: How do you learn how to work?

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We learn by working (and receiving instruction and feedback). It’s not by watching TV or movies, and I haven’t seen a video game that teaches young people how to work. (I’d love to be the creator of one, if it is possible!) Many, not all, Millennials have far fewer work experiences than their cohorts from prior generations.

Generally, I believe, it is not their fault. It is ours (their parents).

Why? Because many twenty-something’s didn’t work in high school during summers or vacation breaks (or have a part-time job). And a lot of younger adults didn’t work much during college—summers or otherwise. In fact, (a minority to be sure), their first “real” job (that is, not working for a relative or a friend’s parent) isn’t until they complete college.

The result? The amount of work experiences and resulting growth and development of work related behaviors is more like that of teenagers in past generations.

## What to do?

Grumbling and complaining doesn’t help (So quit!), Employers, managers, and supervisors can do the following, in response to the reality of the situation.

First, adjust your expectations. Many younger workers need help learning what it means to “work hard.” Don’t expect them to already have a well-developed work ethic.

Secondly, retool your training for younger employees. Intentionally instruct them in the behaviors you desire and explain why they are important to the success of the organization.

Finally, actively encourage high school and college students you know to start working earlier, and provide opportunities for them to do so.

You have a tremendous opportunity to positively impact the next generations of workers—take it! **VICTORY** ■



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