





By Ryan Bartelmay

Every day, Aaron Kulik, a recent graduate of Arizona State University, rides his motorcycle to work. He strolls into Dick and Fritsche Design Group (DFDG), an architecture and interior design firm in Phoenix, at 8:30 a.m., an hour after most of his older colleagues have sucked down their first cup of coffee. Kulik is an interior designer, but like most staff members at DFDG, he doesn't have a title.

In his first year at the firm, he played many different roles – construction administrator, design assistant, graphic designer – and was even allowed to design the bathrooms and lobby of a 230,000-square-foot corporate office project. When his boss, Staci Seyer, IIDA, Vice President at DFDG, assigned the project, Kulik was nervous, but at DFDG, employees are given a long leash. “They trust their employees,” Kulik says. “It’s a learning environment, and if I mess up, they aren’t going to fire me. They hired me to build up my talents and strengths.”

Kulik is one of 70 million Millennials (also known as Generation Y) – those born after 1977 – who currently make up 20 percent of the U.S.

Ready or not, here they come

Millennials at work.

population. While as many as 78 million Baby Boomers may be planning their warm-weather retirements, ultimately creating a hole in the workforce, design firms like DFDG are reaching out to Millennial employees, hoping they will choose to grow with the company and shape its vision for decades to come.

A NEW BREED

Millennials have been called everything from “narcissistic praise hounds” in a recent episode of “60 Minutes” to “demanding” by CNNMoney.com. Ryan Healy, a Millennial and Co-founder of employeeevolution.com, was pushed into the spotlight on “60 Minutes” for the blogging efforts on his site, which attracts 150,000 unique visits every month. And he disagrees with the media’s portrayal of his generation. “Millennials want meaningful work, and they want to see how the work they do is benefiting someone,” he says.

The desire to do meaningful work is not a new generational trait. What is new, however, is the fact that Millennials aren’t afraid to walk away from an unfulfilling job. Unlike some of their Baby Boomer parents,

Millennials refuse to climb the corporate ladder rung by rung and won't sit behind a desk for 30 years waiting for their retirement plaque. Instead, Millennials blaze their own career paths and are hungry to fill their toolbox with a plethora of job skills. If that means trying on four, five or six jobs, they'll happily do it.

"Millennials don't come out of school wanting to land leadership roles," says Dorothy Russel, Principal, Essential Futures, a Toronto consulting firm that specializes in assisting design firms manage succession, risk and change. "They want challenging work, they want to belong, they want to be part of a team, and they want to contribute. Those are human, fundamental needs."

Millennials also don't want to be shackled to a Sisyphean existence where day after day they push the same rock up the hill, only for it to roll back to the bottom after they finish. "Millennials are ambitious and optimistic, but they don't buy into the system," Healy says. "If they're learning new skills and being challenged, they'll stay focused and not want to leave the job."

But they need to see where they fit in. They'll happily engage themselves in something as nominal as a "paper push," Healy says, as long as they can see how their contributions affect the company's big picture.

Diane Bender, Ph.D., ASID, IDEC, Assistant Professor in the Department of Interior Design at Arizona State University, coordinates the school's interior design internship program. She often hears students complain that if someone in a leadership role would have taken the time to speak or listen to them, they would have made more of a contribution. She also says many students become frustrated if they aren't able to make decisions, even simple ones like the color of a wall. "It's all about feeling valued," she says. "Students who are offered jobs at the end of an internship won't take them if they don't feel like the firm values them. Even if the firm is offering a great salary, the student will hold out for one that will value them."

While the money issue may be a head-scratcher for some Boomers, who have spent their careers chasing cash, it's not the driving force for many Millennials. Initially, money may attract a Millennial, says Russel, who delivered the 2007 NeoCon session, "Ownership and Management Succession: Is Your Firm Prepared?" But old retention methods – like the 3- to 5-percent raise – won't keep them punching the clock.

"It doesn't matter how much money is thrown at a Millennial," Healy says. "If there isn't personal or career growth potential, they'll jump ship."

FEEDING THE FIRE

In Phoenix, DFDG is a medium-sized firm with 30 employees, but firm leaders are considering expanding it, which means additional junior staff members like Kulik will need to be brought in. With potential growing pains looming, DFDG leadership has talked extensively about the new generation.



A Peek Into the Mind of Millennials

Like most Millennials, Ryan Healy wanted a job where he could make a difference. After graduating from Penn State University with a business degree in 2006, he found himself working as a financial consultant for IBM in Washington, D.C. But he dreamed of doing something more meaningful. That's when he and college chum Ryan Paugh decided to launch employeeevolution.com, a site dedicated to helping Millennials smoothly transition into the working world. The site features blog columns written by Co-founders Healy and Paugh, as well as other Millennials, that voice the needs of Gen Y, as well as expectations and attitudes about the working world. Design firm managers and HR professionals can use the site to peek into the collective mind of the largest generation to descend upon the modern workforce.



“In the design world, the designers tend to be younger employees because the older ones attrition out,” Seyer says. With this in mind, Seyer and her colleagues know they need to come up with innovative ways to attract the incoming generation and keep them around the office for more than a couple of years.

One reason Kulik keeps riding his motorcycle to DFDG every day is the firm’s flattened hierarchy. Seyer describes the DFDG staff member as someone who can wear multiple hats. “On one project, a staff member may be the project manager, and on the next project, he or she may be the junior designer or the project engineer,” she says.

Kulik adds, “Principals will do CAD work, whatever is needed to get a project completed. Right off the bat, [the firm gives] you responsibility and let[s] you start contributing. The firm doesn’t hire CAD monkeys or anything like that.”

In Cincinnati, architecture and design firm FRCH Design Worldwide – ranked one of the Top 15 Small Workplaces by *The Wall Street Journal* in 2007 – employs 10 times as many employees as DFDG, but is equally as conscious about the incoming generation. “It seems that Generation Y selects the firm as much as the firm selects them,” says Donna Szarwark, Senior Vice President, Human Resources, FRCH Design Worldwide. To ensure Millennials choose FRCH, the firm dedicates itself to helping them load their toolbox with necessary skills.

Five years ago, FRCH launched FRCH University as a way for employees to expand their knowledge and share information. “It started out as a way for employees to develop leadership skills. We offered management classes, classes about how to deal with conflict, classes about how to conduct a job interview or a performance review,” Szarwark says. Soon the in-house program expanded to offer career development classes, like crash courses in Photoshop and In Design, and workshops on how to give a presentation to a client. Today, not only does the university offer leadership and career development classes, but also painting, drawing and other art classes.

In the same vein, FRCH also heightens junior-level employees’ exposure to the latest trends in Interior Design by sending them to conferences like Global Shop and NeoCon. But the exposure doesn’t stop there. At least once a year, FRCH ships a group of employees off to New York, Las Vegas, Chicago or another city for a week of photography, contemplation and generally soaking up the vanguard of Interior Design. “We invest a lot of money to make sure our employees experience firsthand what’s going on in the interior design world,” Szarwark says. “To us, though, that’s an investment in our employees’ development.”

MENTOR ME

Millennials crave feedback. And while the group recognizes their bosses have more responsibility than simply mentoring them, it’s important that Millennials receive some feedback weekly or bi-weekly from someone in the

organization – and that person doesn't have to be in a leadership role. "Millennials trust their peers," Healy says. "They don't need someone with 20 years of experience. They'll listen to and benefit from feedback [given by] a second- or third-year employee."

In the past, DFDG has used a structured mentoring program – every staff member is paired with a principal – to nurture younger employees. The original intent of the program was to promote constant feedback, which in turn would foster employee growth. However, a recent anonymous employee survey showed younger employees at DFDG crave more communication.

Armed with new insight, the principals re-evaluated the mentor program and, upon closer inspection, found it wasn't the well-oiled machine they thought it was. "We get so busy that it's hard to stay in touch with your mentor relationship," Seyer says.

In the interim, as DFDG continues the mentor program evaluation, it is working with a facilitator that will conduct in-house training seminars and team-building workshops. Through these exercises, the principals hope to let younger staff members identify strengths and weaknesses. "We're hoping the [increased efforts] will make them feel more connected and make them feel like they have a purpose at DFDG," Seyer says.

But mentoring doesn't have to be a formal process. A few years ago, a young staff member told Seyer that, as DFDG Vice President, she needed to be more available and visible. Now, every day she tries to take an afternoon stroll through the office to check in with her team. Kulik sees and appreciates his boss' efforts. He likes working for someone who can "take 20 minutes out of her day to see how the team is doing."

CREATING A CULTURE

Part of attracting and retaining Millennials involves providing a collaborative and welcoming workplace culture. Like many design firms, FRCH has an open work environment and clusters employees in studios to foster creativity and idea-sharing. But culture is more than an open floorplan at FRCH.

From wedding anniversaries to birthdays to jobs well-done, every milestone is an opportunity to eat some cake and share laughs with those you may otherwise only see while waiting for the elevator. The firm also periodically closes its doors and sends all 300 employees to a place like Keeneland Horse Track in Lexington, Ky.

"Around Cincinnati, we're known for our events," Szarwark says. An event at FRCH is more than the obligatory Christmas party. This summer at the company picnic, held at Pyramid Hill Sculpture Park, there were activities for kids, a wine tasting, three bands, a fireworks show and even an appearance by a portion of the University of Cincinnati's marching band.

"To attract people, you can only hope you're offering competitive salary and good benefits," Szarwark says. "But to really retain people, it's about the total culture of the company." 