Candid Advice for Transitioning New Professionals

by Robert W. Wendover

He graduated with a 3.85 GPA from a top school. You hired him because he said all the right things during the interviews. Now, you and your team are wondering why he doesn't have any common sense. His work lacks detail. He asks questions rather than thinking things through. Last week, he texted back and forth with a customer for hours rather than picking up the phone over a mistaken delivery.

Does this sound familiar? You're not alone.

You're not alone. Employers across the US are discovering that many of today's college graduates lack the "work smarts" required to work independently, anticipate obstacles, and navigate the communication challenges of working with customers, vendors, and coworkers. Is this true of all of them? Certainly not. But it is common enough to have become a topic of discussion in every seminar I conduct.

Whenever I write or speak about this issue, I am accosted by Millennials who say, "You just don't know how brilliant we are." But this has nothing to do with intelligence. It has to do with whether these individuals contribute to the firm in a productive way, without requiring constant instruction and coaching.

We should stipulate, of course, that millions of Millennials are creative, driven, and doing amazing things in the marketplace and workplace. But for every one of these, there are a number who seem to lack the basic problem solving skills and situational awareness that most employers expect from day one. Consider the following:

- The Council for Aid to Education tested 32,000 college seniors at 169 US colleges and universities. They found that 40% were unable to perform the tasks associated with white-collar work.

- According to a PayScale, Inc. survey of 64,000 managers, 60% said the new graduates they see taking jobs within their organizations do not have the critical thinking and problem solving skills they feel are necessary for the job.

Why the Lack of Common Sense?

So why do so many in this generation seem to lack these basic skills? Experts argue there are a number of factors including:

The Influence of Digital Technology – Digital technology has become both a blessing and curse within our society. On one hand, it creates efficiencies and allows instant access to information. On the other hand, it overwhelms us with data and choices that can confuse and foster dependence. Millennials are the first generation of what technology writer Marc Prensky calls digital natives. Older generations developed the art and science of trial and error and have learned to adapt to today's digital wizardry. Millennials, and those following them, have come of age with devices in their hands 24/7. For many, trail and error is something you think about when you can't find the answer on a screen.

The Emphasis on Content Rather than Application in Formal Schooling – The past 20 years has witnessed a tremendous focus on assessment throughout public education. Since content learning is easier to measure than application, policy makers have compelled districts to cram more and more subjects into their curriculums. Consequently, educators have learned to "teach to the test." In turn, this has produced millions of graduates stuffed with knowledge but lacking in application. In many ways, higher education duplicates this regimen. The result has been students who can pass tests, write papers and create dazzling slide decks. Ask them to apply practical skills on the job, however, and many feel overwhelmed by the gravity of real work and the associated consequences.

The Shortage of "training jobs" in Today's Economy – In the summer of 1978, 60% of teenagers were working or looking for work. This past summer, that number was down to 35%. Several factors have contributed to this decline. Millions of traditional summer jobs have been eliminated by automation or changing consumer tastes. A number have been absorbed by the rise in low-skill immigration. Government-funded summer jobs have also declined. And as the minimum wage has increased, employers have been discouraged from hiring inexperienced workers.

Finally, millions of teens have enrolled in summer coursework to accelerate their education rather than sacking groceries, mowing lawns, working at the pool or flipping burgers. Consequently, many of those graduating from high or college have never been formally employed prior to applying for a full-time job with you. Therefore, basics such as punctuality, what to wear, completing time cards, filling out W-4's and the general rhythm of work are completely new to them.

Taking all of these factors together, however, we can't simply accuse Millennials of lacking common sense. After all, they are a product of the times in which they came of age. In other words, they are a product of "us."

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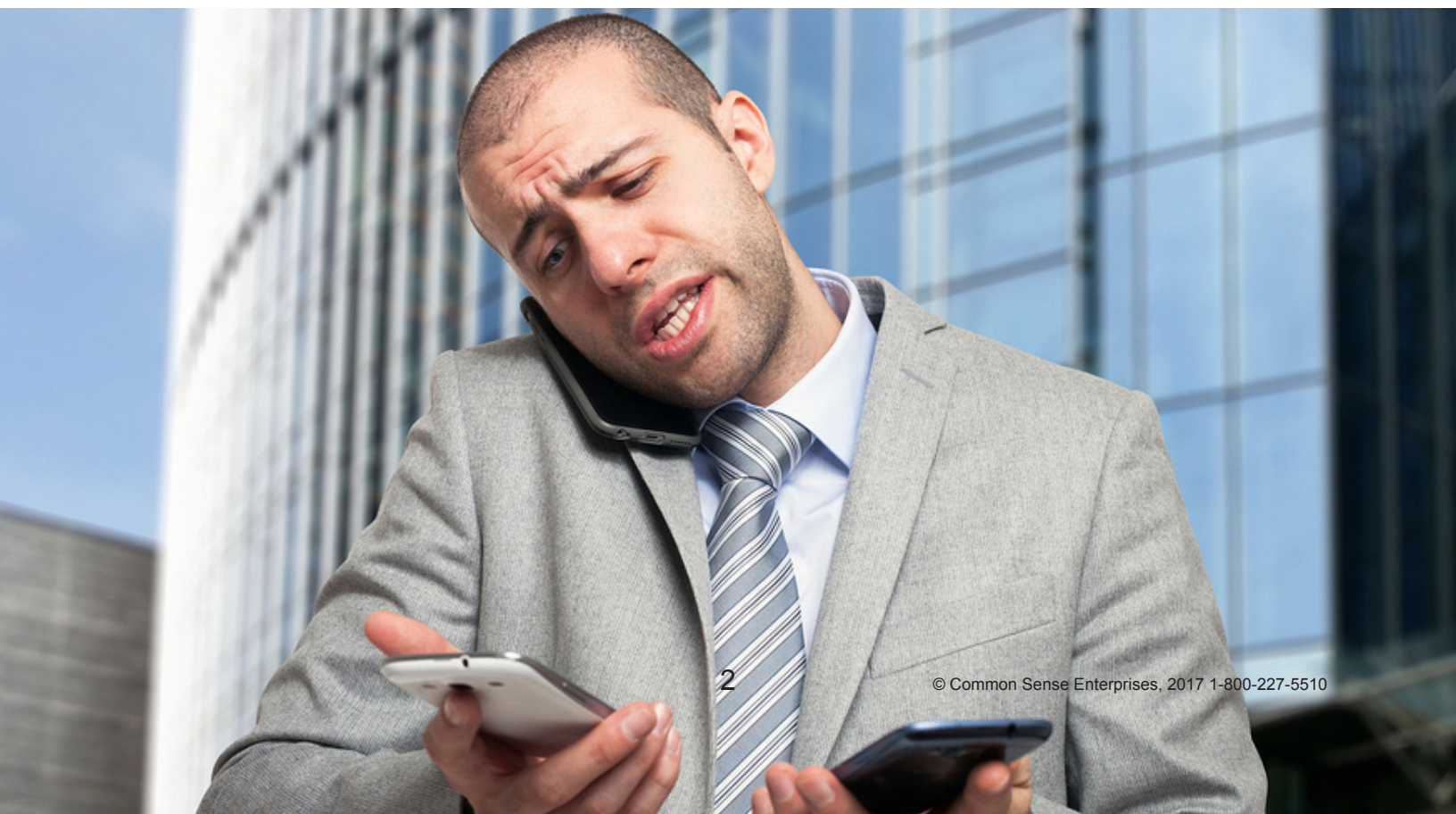
At the same time, employers are now saddled with the responsibility of helping these emerging professionals make the transition to full-time contributors. Like it or not, this is something you will need to factor into your firm's daily functions.

From Book-Smart to Work-Smart

So what are employers to do? Here are three strategies I encourage every firm to practice as the Millennial generation grows into a driving force within the workplace.

First, rethink your selection process. I I recently asked a senior executive of a quarter-billion dollar contracting firm how he hired new professionals. "I usually interview them for 30-45 minutes," he said. "If I like what I hear, I pass them along to a couple other people. If they like what they hear, we make a decision."

"How long would you like to keep them?" I asked. "At least three to five years," he said. "So if you're paying them $50,000 a year to start, you're making a quarter-million dollar decision on the basis of three 45-minute interviews and a resume," I summarized. "How much time do you spend researching and making a decision about purchasing a quarter-million dollar piece of equipment?"

"Hell," he laughed, "I spent two hours last weekend just researching tool boxes for my new pick-up."

I'll be the first person to stipulate that there is a shortage of emerging talent within a number of industries. But don't you want to know more about applicants' strengths and weaknesses before bringing them on board? Sure, you may still hire them, but you'll know where they need extra attention as they come up to speed.

I don't care what applicants know. I want to know how they think. Put them through simulations. Have them serve in internships. Ask them to perform the specific tasks they will perform on the job, especially those requiring communication, problem solving and dealing with ambiguous situations. As the saying goes, "Actions speak louder than words."

Second, don't just assume that they'll "figure it out." It's one thing to adapt to a new job once you know what work looks like. It's quite another learn the expectations, discover your new surroundings and get used to showing up every morning and performing like you've never been required to before.

Cushion this transition by assigning "buddies" to help each of these newcomers adjust to the rhythm. Match them up with relative newcomers who still remember what it was like to make this transition. Create a "typical day" video that you can send new hires in advance of their start date. Include information on "this is what we wear, this is how we communicate, this is how we get paid, these are the systems we use" and so on. Make a comprehensive list based on the input of those on the job for the past year. Don't take anything for granted. You'll discover pretty quick who "gets it" and who will need more coaching for a while.

Third, coach your supervisors in helping this generation make the transition to work-smarts. Most Millennials you hire will be anxious to learn. But they are also impatient. They want to see immediate progress while lacking the skills and experience to do so. The best managers find a balance between helping these emerging professionals think through problems

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and compelling them to act on their own, especially when the pressure is on. Effective professionals become comfortable with being uncomfortable when having to make decisions that involve significant risk or personal feelings. The young people who thrive in your firm will embrace the growth this takes.

Instruct these newcomers on context and situational awareness. It's one thing to pass a test on how to develop a proposal, for instance. It's quite another to have a seasoned proposal writer explain all the nuances involved as he or she goes through the process. It's one thing to have a marketing manager explain how the many components of a campaign come together. It's quite another to shadow that marketing manager while he or she explains all the considerations that go into instantaneous decisions involving hundreds or thousands of dollars. Over time, the burden for some of these decisions should shift to the person being coached with the manager as a backstop.

Finally, kick them out of the nest. After years of hitting the escape button and learning to work the system, making decisions and solving problems when it's all up to you can be daunting. But there's no other way to grow except through the discomfort of this transition. All of this is the beginning of turning book-smarts into work-smarts.

Does all this take time and attention? Of course. But once again, each of these individuals represents a substantial monetary investment and the future of the firm over time.

Bob Wendover has been teaching employers how to manage the generations for more than 20 years. He is the award-winning author of *Figure It Out! Making Smart Decisions in a Dumbed-Down World.* His new program, *DecisioNinjas! Building Tomorrow's Generation of Workplace Problem Solvers,* teaches employers how to transition emerging professionals from book-smart to work-smart. Contact him at bobw@commonsenseenterprises.net.