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A Generation of Slackers? Not So Much

By [CATHERINE RAMPELL](#)

YOU'D think there would be a little sympathy. This month, college graduates are jumping into the job market, only to land on their parents' couches: the unemployment rate for 16- to 24-year-olds is a whopping 17.6 percent.

The reaction from many older Americans? This generation had it coming.

Generation Y — or Millennials, the Facebook Generation or whatever you want to call today's cohort of young people — has been accused of being the laziest generation ever. They feel entitled and are coddled, disrespectful, narcissistic and impatient, say authors of books like "The Dumbest Generation" and "Generation Me."

And three in four Americans believe that today's youth are less virtuous and industrious than their elders, a [2009 survey](#) by the Pew Research Center found.

In a sign of humility or docility, young people agree. In that 2009 Pew survey, two-thirds of millennials said older adults were superior to the younger generation when it came to moral values and work ethic.

After all, if there's a young person today who's walked 10 miles barefoot through the snow to school, it was probably on an [iPhone](#) app.

So is this the Laziest Generation? There are signs that its members benefit from lower standards. Technology has certainly made life easier. But there may also be a generation gap; the way young adults work is simply different.

It's worth remembering that to some extent, these accusations of laziness and narcissism in "kids these days" are nothing new — they've been levied against Generation X, Baby Boomers and many generations before them. Even Aristotle and Plato were said to have expressed similar feelings about the slacker youth of their times.

But this generation has had it easy in some ways.

They can access just about any resource, product or service anywhere from a mere tap on a touch screen. And as many critics have noted, it's also easier to get A's. The typical grade-point average in college rose to about 3.11 by the middle of the last decade, from 2.52 in the 1950s, according to a recent [study](#) by Stuart Rojstaczer, professor emeritus at Duke, and Christopher Healy of Furman University.

College students also spend fewer hours studying each week than did their counterparts in 1961, according to a new [working paper](#) by Philip S. Babcock of the University of California, Santa Barbara, and Mindy Marks of the University of California, Riverside. That doesn't mean all this leftover time is spent on PlayStation 3's.

There is ample evidence that young people today are hard-working and productive. The share of college students working full time generally grew from 1985 onward — until the Great Recession knocked many millennials out of the labor force, according to the Labor Department.

And while many college students today — like those of yesterday — get financial help from their parents, 44 percent of students today say that work or personal savings helped finance their higher educations, according to a [survey](#) of recent graduates by Rutgers University.

“I don’t think this is a generation of slackers,” said Carl Van Horn, a labor economist at Rutgers. “This image of the kid who goes off and skis in Colorado, I don’t think that’s the correct image. Today’s young people are very focused on trying to work hard and to get ahead.”

Defying the narcissism stereotype, community service among young people has exploded.

Between 1989 and 2006, the share of teenagers who were volunteering doubled, to 26.4 percent from 13.4 percent, according to a [report](#) by the Corporation for National and Community Service. And the share of incoming college freshmen who say they plan to volunteer is at a record high of 32.1 percent, too, U.C.L.A.’s annual incoming freshman [survey](#) found.

Perhaps most important, many of the behaviors that older generations interpret as laziness may actually enhance young people’s productivity, say researchers who study Generation Y.

Members of Gen Y, for example, are significantly more likely than Gen X’ers and boomers to say they are more productive working in teams than on their own, according to Don Tapscott, author of “Grown Up Digital: How the Net Generation is Changing Your World,” a book based on interviews with 11,000 millennials.

To older workers, wanting help looks like laziness; to younger workers, the gains that come from teamwork have been learned from the collaborative nature of their childhood activities, which included social networks, crowd-sourcing and even video games like World of Warcraft that “emphasize cooperative rather than individual competition,” Mr. Tapscott says.

Employers also complain about millennials checking Facebook and Twitter on the job, or working with their ear buds in.

Older workers have a strong sense of separate spheres for work and play: the cubicle is for work, and home is for fun. But to millennials, the boundaries between work and play are fuzzier, said Michael D. Hais, co-author of “Millennial Makeover: MySpace, YouTube, and the Future of American Politics.”

Think of the corporate cultures at prototypical Gen Y employers like Facebook and Google, he says, where foosball, volleyball courts and subsidized massages are office fixtures.

The prevailing millennial attitude is that taking breaks for fun at work makes people more, not less, productive. Likewise, they accept that their work will bleed into evenings and weekends.

Some experts also believe that today’s young people are better at quickly switching from one task to another, given their exposure to so many stimuli during their childhood and adolescence, said John Della Volpe, the director of polling at Harvard’s Institute of Politics. (The jury is still out on that one.)

Of course, these explanations may be unconvincing to older bosses, co-workers and teachers on the other side of this culture clash. But at least they can take comfort in one fact: someday, millennials will have their own new generation of know-it-all ne’er-do-wells to deal with.

