What's the Matter with Kids Today?
Why so many young professionals lack the basics, and what to do about it

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Here's a story that's being repeated, with varying details, across the accounting profession:

This first-year associate in a midsize accounting firm, a recent top graduate of a top school, was cutting-edge in his knowledge of a new set of tools and techniques for mining and analyzing data buried within evidentiary documents obtained during pre-litigation discovery. One of the partners said, "This kid had done some projects in school using this new approach and his technical knowledge in this area far surpassed anyone else in the firm. But he kept running into roadblocks because his communication made him seem so immature. At first, he couldn't get anybody to listen to him. Once we got him going on introducing the new process, I know it sounds petty, but he could barely look people in the eye or string three words together without saying 'like.'" In short, "His inability to speak in a way that seemed even remotely professional was just rubbing people the wrong way, especially in meetings, though it wasn't very much better when he was working with people individually." One of the other partners explained, "We had to send him to a class." "One of the other partners added, 'It took a lot more than one class.'"

Based on two decades of research, I can report that today's newest new young workers are increasingly likely to have significant notable weaknesses in one or several key soft skills — such as professionalism and interpersonal communication.

WHY IS THAT?
As they step into the adult world with youthful energy and enthusiasm, young workers often clash with their older colleagues.

That's always part of the story. But there is something much bigger going on here.

Generation Z (born 1990-1999) is the second wave of the great Millennial cohort. They represent a tipping point in the post-Baby Boomer generational shift transforming the workforce. With older Boomers now retiring in droves, they are taking with them the last vestiges of the old-fashioned work ethic. By 2020, more than 80 percent of the workforce will be post-Boomer — dominated in numbers, norms and values by Generation X (born 1965-78), Gen Y (the first wave of the Millennials, born 1978-89), and now Gen Z. In 2020, Generation Z will be greater than 20 percent of the North American and European workforces.

Generation Z is shaped by a confluence of epic historical forces:


- **The information environment.** Gen Zers are the first true "digital natives." They learned how to think, learn and communicate in a never-ending ocean of information. Theirs is an information environment defined by wireless Internet ubiquity, wholesale technology integration, infinite content, and immediacy. From a dangerously young age, their infinite access to information and ideas and perspectives — unlimited words, images and sounds — is completely without precedent.

- **Human diversity.** Generation Z will be the most diverse workforce in history in terms of geographical point of origin, ethnic heritage, ability/disability, age, language, lifestyle preference, sexual orientation, color, size, and every other way of categorizing people.

- **Helicopter-parenting on steroids.** Gen Zers have been insulated and scheduled and supervised and supported to a degree that no children or young adults have ever been before. Gen Zers have grown accustomed to being treated almost as customers/users of services and products provided by authority figures in institutions — both in schools and in extracurricular activities, not to mention in their not-infrequent experiences as actual customers. As a result, they expect authority figures to be always in their corner, to set them up for success, and to be of service.

- **Virtual reality.** Gen Zers are always totally plugged in to an endless stream of content and in continuous dialogue — through social media-based chatting and sharing and gaming — with peers (and practical strangers), however far away (or near) they might be. They are forever mixing and matching and manipulating from an infinite array of sources to create and then project back out into the world their own ever-changing personal montage of information, knowledge, meaning, and self-hood. Gen Zers are perfectly accustomed to feeling worldly and ambitious and successful by engaging virtually in an incredibly malleable reality.

In a nutshell, Generation Zers are the ultimate non-conformists in an era of non-conformism. Trying to make the adjustment to "fitting in" in the very real, truly high stakes, mostly adult world of the workplace is a whole new game for them. And it's not really their kind of game. They are less inclined to try to "fit in" at work, and more inclined to try to make this "whole work thing" fit in with them.

Is there anything we can do to help them? And us?

Yes. It's simple, but not easy. Become a true champion of old-fashioned soft skills in your firm.
HOW?

Recognize the incredible power of soft skills. Shine a bright light on soft skills in every aspect of your human capital management practices. But the real action is in your day-to-day working relationships with the new young talent in your firm. Make teaching and learning the soft-skills basics an explicit part of your mission and goals for your team going forward.

Just imagine the impact you could have if you were to spend time every week systematically building up the soft skills of your team:
You will send a powerful message, week by week. You will make them aware. You will make them care. You will help them learn the missing basics one by one. You will build them up and make them so much better.

Bruce Tulgan is the founder of Rainmaker Thinking. This article is adapted from his latest book, Bridging the Soft Skills Gap: How to Teach the Missing Basics to Today’s Young Talent, which is due out in September 2015.