

Jean Twenge: What Employers Need To Know About iGen

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I spoke to Jean Twenge, who is the author of the new book *iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy—and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood—and What That Means for the Rest of Us*, about how she got interested in studying generations, the impact of technology on younger generations, what makes iGen different, how can businesses limit the use of technology and her best advice.

Dr. Jean Twenge Dr. Jean Twenge

Twenge is a professor of psychology at San Diego State University, and is the author of more than a hundred scientific publications and two books based on her research, *Generation Me* and *The Narcissism Epidemic*, as well as *The Impatient Woman's Guide to Getting Pregnant*. Her research has been covered in *Time*, *The Atlantic*, *Newsweek*, *The New York Times*, *USA TODAY*, and *The Washington Post*. She has also been featured on the *Today* show, *Good Morning America*, *Fox and Friends*, *CBS This Morning*, and National Public Radio.

Dan Schawbel: How did you originally get interested in studying different generations, narcissism and how technology influences our psychology?

Jean Twenge: When I was working on my undergraduate honors thesis at the University of Chicago in the early 1990s, I noticed that students' scores on a standard measure of gender roles were very different from the averages in the text manual from the 1970s. At first I thought my fellow U of C students were just weird (and they are — that's one of the charms of the place). But I got the same result from the comparatively normal University of Michigan undergraduates after I started graduate school there the next year. I decided to gather all of the average scores on this scale that other researchers had published in psychology journals, and sure enough, there was a steady increase in more male-typical gender roles (such as feeling like a leader and being assertive), especially among women. I realized this made sense: Young people in the early 1970s grew up with a fundamentally different idea of the proper roles for men and women than young people in the early 1990s. That was my first exploration of generational differences, and I kept on looking at how generations differed as the young generation turned from GenX to Millennials, and then Millennials to iGen. Based on trends from large surveys, it looks like iGen began with those born in 1995 — a little earlier than I and others had thought originally.

Schawbel: Do you feel like technology has created the illusion that we are more connected, especially young people, yet are more isolated, lonely and unhappy? Explain.

Twenge: These days, I research generations primarily using data from very large, national surveys of teens and adults conducted every year. Around 2012, I started to notice sudden increases in teens saying they felt useless, hopeless, or that they couldn't do anything right, which are classic symptoms of depression. Teens' feelings of loneliness and being left out also started to spike upward around that time. I didn't realize this until the data later became available, but 2012 was the year when the percentage of Americans with a smartphone crossed 50%. Sure enough, in these same surveys, teens who spent more time on screens, or on social media or texting, were also more likely to be unhappy or depressed.

Of course, both of those findings are correlational, so it's difficult to tell which way the causation goes. Could it be that unhappy people use social media more? Three studies suggest not. Two longitudinal studies found that more social media use led to unhappiness, but unhappiness did not lead to more social media use. A third study was a true experiment (which can determine causation); it randomly assigned adults to give up Facebook for a week, or not. Those who gave up Facebook ended the week happier, less lonely, and less depressed.

Depression causing social media use also can't explain why depression would increase so suddenly after 2012. If the increase in depression occurred first, some other, unknown factor would have to cause depression to rise so sharply, which would then lead to more smartphone and social media use. It seems much more likely that smartphone and social media use went up, and the increase in symptoms of depression followed. By far the biggest change in teens' day to day lives between 2012 and 2015 was the spread of the smartphone and the growth of social media. Nothing else even comes close.

Schawbel: How do you believe Gen Z (or iGen) is different from Millennials, Gen X and Baby Boomers? How do these differences impact their work preferences and how companies will have to support them in the future?

Twenge: iGen teens are less confident and less optimistic than the Millennials just before them. They are very interested in safety and are risk-averse, and are more willing to work overtime than Millennials were at the same age. In many ways, iGen is good news for managers — they are a cautious, hard-working generation who wants to build a career in a stable environment. However, they will need more guidance and reassurance than Millennials to reach their goals. iGen also has less experience with independence at an early age — they go out without their parents less and are less likely to drive and work during high school. Thus they may need more precise instructions for tasks and more encouragement to figure things out on their own. Managers who learned to be cheerleaders for Millennials will find they are more like therapists, life coaches, or parents for iGen.

By the way, I can't see Gen Z sticking as a label for this group — if Millennials aren't Gen Y (and they haven't been for about 5 years), then Gen Z makes little sense as a label for the next generation. iGen, after iPhones and iPads, captures the biggest change in day-to-day life in the last 10 years. The "i" can also stand for income inequality or individualism, two other big influences on this generation.

Schawbel:What can business leaders do to limit the use of technology and encourage more human connection in the workplace?

Twenge:For the most part, technology has made our lives easier and business easier to conduct. Still, it's difficult to build a relationship with a client or co-worker through e-mail or social media. Even if most of your communication is electronic, make an effort to plan some face-to-face time at least occasionally. When distance is an issue, a nice compromise is Skype or Facetime, which can reintroduce some of the advantages of face-to-face interaction. Managers may also need to become even more strict with policies around smartphones in the workplace – with iGen spending 6 to 8 hours a day of their leisure time on their phones and providing immediate responses to friends' texts and social media posts, many will find it very difficult to put down their phones and focus at work.

Schawbel:What are your top three pieces of career advice?

Twenge:

1. Don't be afraid to take the risk of trying new things, even if it scares you a little bit. I once had a graduate student TA tell me she "wasn't comfortable" giving a guest lecture. The only way to get comfortable with doing something is to do it. Even in extreme cases like phobias, psychology research has found that the best treatment is exposure. I was terrified of public speaking when I was in high school. But I did it, at first because I had to, and eventually because I got better at it. Now I really enjoy giving talks to large audiences and rarely feel nervous, even when (as happened once when I was speaking to business leaders in Turkey) I hadn't slept in 2 days and the audience was listening through translation headphones. They still laughed at the jokes and asked good questions about the talk, so all was well.
2. Treat sleep, exercise, healthy food, and family time as necessities, not luxuries. A few years into my job as a professor when I was still untenured, a dean who had seen my publication record asked, "Do you ever sleep?" At the time I wasn't sure what to say, but now I'd answer by saying that the only reason I'm able to write so many research articles and books is because I sleep enough (which for me is a solid 8 hours every night). It's tempting to think you'll be more productive if you cut back on taking care of yourself, but you probably won't be because you'll feel so much worse and your thinking will be muddled. (And if you feel like you don't have enough time in the day, cut out reading your newsfeed or going on Facebook so often).
3. Don't be afraid to ask. When I was in my 20s I read an advice book for female academics that said when offered a salary for a new job, you should always ask for more, because future raises are often calculated as a percentage, so one ask has long-term benefits. I don't think that would have occurred to me otherwise. So I asked, and for two different jobs, I was able to negotiate a higher starting salary. Especially when you were a female, it's often tough to ask (and you risk being judged for it). But just about everyone else is also going to ask, so you might as well as long as you're polite about it.