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Career advice? Talk to a millennial



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Twentysomethings prefer to consult people their own age when they need help with life and work



House prices, ambition and over-involved parents. These are a few of the reasons that millennials, born after the early 1980s, are seeking advice from coaches of their own generation, who have had the same experiences.

London-based Alice Stapleton, 33, says many clients cite her youth as one reason they want to work with her. “I know what it’s like to be part of their generation and understand the pressures and challenges,” she says.

Smaranda Dochia, head of digital learning at the Association for Coaching, a professional body, has seen an increase in the number of young professionals interested in either becoming coaches and wanting to be coached: “They prefer coaching to on-the-job training as it is more personalised.” That shift has also been observed by Magdalena Mook, chief executive of the International Coach Federation . Anecdotally, she says, younger individuals who seek coaching say they want to work with someone their own age. “They seem to relate better.”

Sarah Vermunt in Toronto is an organisational psychologist turned careers coach. She offers the “careergasm” — through online courses and traditional one-to-one coaching — which promises to give her clients a “warm hug and a kick in the ass”.

She sees her clients’ frustrations rooted in their high expectations. “This group have grown up being told the world is their oyster and they can have pretty much anything if they put their mind to it.” “Entitled” is an alternative description — Ms Vermunt says that is unfair. “There’s an awful lot of pressure that comes along with being told you can do whatever you want. It can be paralysing.”

Clients want to find work that is meaningful or has purpose, says Lindsay Boccardo, a 31-year-old from Indianapolis. Since she started offering guidance to twentysomethings through online modules, group work and traditional one-to-one coaching, she has seen the numbers of millennial coaches increase. Online programmes are important, she says, in reducing costs for this cohort starting their careers.

The transition from teenager to adult has always been fraught with anxiety. The “quarter-life crisis” is nothing new — its coinage is rooted in marketing. (The same could be said for the term “millennial”).

What makes this generation different, say the coaches, is that clients’ employers are less willing to invest in their long-term development, which puts the onus on the individual. At the same time, many young people feel uncertain about making decisions for themselves, because their parents have been very involved in their lives.

“They haven’t had to make big life decisions on their own before, so they feel lost,” says Ms Vermunt.

Clients can also feel in the shadow of their parents, particularly if unable to get a toe on the housing ladder while also swamped by debt from their university education.

Ms Stapleton puts it like this: “We think we should be achieving what our parents did by that age — married with kids and a house by the age of 30. We set these goals and feel disappointed when we realise we’re nowhere near those milestones.” This has been dubbed an “expectation hangover” by Christine Hassler in the US who wrote *The 20-Something Manifesto*, based on her millennial coaching.

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Ashley Stahl, a “Gen Y” (another term for millennial) coach who worked at the Pentagon before switching to coaching, says the recession brought home to those entering the workforce that there was no such thing as company loyalty.

“We witnessed companies cutting employees of 40 years and learnt to focus on oneself versus the organisation. Employee-employer trust was absolutely shaken and it’s triggered this heavier focus on self.”

She believes those in their 20s and 30s yearn for work that expresses their personality or creativity, rather than merely providing a means to an end.

Ms Boccardo feels uneasy describing herself as a career coach, although the focus tends to be on work, because it gives the impression that she is helping clients navigate the corporate ladder. In fact, she says, the issue with which they are grappling is how to find a career that expresses their values.

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Some of these coaches have had experiences similar to their clients. Take Ms Stapleton. Having studied to become a probation officer, she became disillusioned. In 2008, after a holiday in New Zealand she quit; then she hired a coach to explore her options.

It led to her becoming a coach to millennials at the age of only 28, having studied a masters in coaching and mentoring practice. “I didn’t think enough was being done to help and support young people [moving] from education into their first careers and early adult life.”

Many of her clients feel they are the only one in their group of friends, struggling to find their way in life, she says. “Some feel it is self-indulgent to even consider their options and work with a coach.” Others feel guilty that despite their opportunities they are not happy.

Stephen Tucker is a financial systems consultant in his 30s who came to see Ms Stapleton after he realised things were not as he had hoped for: single, working long hours and living an unhealthy lifestyle. “Instead of taking on every task, I changed my work pattern, asking myself ‘from which of these tasks will I learn more?’ or ‘what interests me most?’” It helped put him in control of his career.

Social media can compound clients’ feelings of inadequacy. “We have 24-hour access to the lives of friends and celebrities obtaining fame and success on a seemingly overnight basis. We think it should be easy and beat ourselves up about the fact that we’re finding it hard,” says Ms Stapleton.

London-based millennial coach Laura Ahnemann, originally from Germany, says it also compounds loneliness. “They have 500 Facebook friends but still feel isolated. They are on Snapchat and Instant Messenger but they don’t talk properly. They miss the human connection.”