FOR YOUNG BRAD, IT WAS JUST THE BEGINNING OF ANOTHER ORDINARY DAY AT EXCESS MARKETING, INC...

PULLED AN ALL-NIGHTER AGAIN, RIGHT, BRAD? HOW DO YOU FEEL?

PRETTY ZONED!

THE ALBACORE REPORT IS DUE, AND MR. BIGTON ASKED ME TO CONCEPT UP TWO ALTERNATIVE SOLUTIONS: A "TRADITIONAL" ONE, PLUS MY OWN, "CREATIVE" APPROACH! --SO HERE I AM!

THE YOUNG AND RESTLESS WORK FORCE FOLLOWING THE BABY BOOM

GENERATION

They were raised on Pop-Tarts, swimming pools and boundless promise. They want everything—and deserve room to go for it. To get the best from them, follow this guide to care and leading.

An old friend of mine named Don came back from Tokyo a few months ago, arriving home on his 26th birthday. His mother was there to pick him up. After some cursory hellos and you-look-greats, a silence fell over the conversation on the way home in the Mercedes.

"So, Don...what exactly do you think you'll be doing next?" his mother asked.

"Can we just drive home and talk about this later?"

Mom had a hunch it would be a long time before the subject was broached again.

By Doug Coupland
Illustrations by Paul Rivoche
Don is not stupid. In his 26 years, he has earned a business degree, worked in an ad agency, waited tables at the best restaurant in town, traveled to Europe and Africa. On his recent birthday, he was returning from a year coaching a hockey team in Japan. He speaks three languages, owes no money and theoretically has the world in his pocket.

But Don still has his parents pick him up at the airport, and he's in their condo. He cannot articulate an educational plan, worked in an ad agency, waited tables at the best restaurant that they screwed up back wherever they came from. I don't want guilt by association.

Rather, he is doing many things, but there is no seeming pattern and he has no long-range plan in mind. His biggest fear in life, like that of British aristocrats in Evelyn Waugh's novels, is boredom, but now we Los Angeles sociologist Susan Littwin calls young people like Don members of the Postponed Generation. In her 1989 book of the same title, British punk rock star Billy Idol calls them Generation X. Specifically, they are college-educated people born between 1964 and 1968 to middle and upper-middle-class families. Numbering around 20 million in North America, people like Don are now entering the workforce in bulk, carrying with them a set of inflexible attitudes that challenge traditional views of an employee's role. For people hiring them, or working with them, they present new challenges. But they can also be tremendous resources, as long as they are managed and integrated into office life in ways that best exploit their considerable talents.

The History of X

According to Littwin, Type Xs were "caught in a wrinkle of history." Of the millions of young people now in their twenties, Xs are an exclusive subgroup raised in Depression-era parents who wanted to inoculate their offspring with the sense of hope and optimism offered by the sunshine years of the 1960s and 1970s. Neither hippies, Baby Boomers nor yuppies, Xs were brought up living lives of Pop.Tarts and swimming pools, of liberal ideas and a belief in higher education as the pipeline to all worthy employment. Unlike Baby Boomers, Xs never went through a mass ideological catharsis, and they have no particular political affiliations. In fact, Xs consider themselves to be a part of no particular group at all, which is one of their key characteristics. Their upbringing, whether in Orange County, Mississauga or Shaughnessy, were safe and comfortable, and promised a life of privilege like their parents—a new aristocracy.

Circumstances like this, however, had certain ill effects on their personalities. In his book The Privileged Ones, child psychologist Robert Coles points out that distinct behavioral patterns once found only in the upper classes began seeping down in the 1970s—such characteristics as an inflated emphasis on the self and a dislike of answering to others. The belief that all families will come true, that things will somehow work out for the best and that the world is generously supplied with safety nets. All of these traits are characteristic of the Type X, who is always looking for the perfect career and believes there will always be someone to bail him or her out of trouble.

What ultimately happened as Generation X kids grew up? The brilliant world of opportunity promised by their parents, educations and sheltered upbringing never arrived for them. Instead came the highly competitive, bland and corporate 1980s. The personal development and self-absorption that Xs had come to cherish was no longer modish, nor were the "soft" liberal arts degrees touted by their parents. An age of diminishing expectations arrived for a generation totally prepared for the opposite. The result? A group of people who feel no job is ever creative or flexible enough to fulfill their sense of entitlement; young adults who haven't grown up and leaving the security of their parents' homes, a generation profoundly disillusioned with society that feels unable to effect change and that registers this sentiment by nonparticipation—by forever remaining on the fringe.

Mom and Dad's house conveniently offers Xs a place to retreat after a career avenue closes, and the freedom to continue hunting for ideal employment. It fulfills their dual emotional needs for luxurious security and for creative freedom, which is a possibly unhealthy arrangement. Littwin calls it the "rebellion and rescue dependency... which well may be the social disease of the 1980s. The young adults resent that he has been given so much, that he cannot give himself. He has been cared for too well and too conscientiously, but security is never absolute or permanent.

The X In the Family

I have never found any shortage of either parents or offspring willing to discuss the X phenomenon—and always with a wealth of personal experience and detail. They always know exactly what you are talking about.
have around."

Indeed, Type Xs seem to take far longer to cut the cord than did previous generations. They flip-flop a lot between the downtown hovels and colonial comfort chez Mom and Dad, often using Dad's BMW or Mom's Prelude to effect their frequent moves. "I can live in a damn," says Sharon, 26, an aspiring Toronto fashion designer, "or I can live in a palace with free food, laundry, a car and people around so I don't have to be lonely. Let's get real. I can afford style on my salary, but not luxury." (Sociologist Lisswin notes in her book that Xs tend to need stylish surroundings to reinforce their somewhat baronial self-perceptions.)

I have also found that nearly everyone knows of So-And-So's son or daughter who showed so much promise, yet now, as a young adult, is doing nothing more than tree planting in summer and bumbling around Mexico in winter. Don has his opinions on this issue, too. "Sure, I can get a job," he grumbles after a failed phone call with his dad, "but I want to man a free-fly computer the rest of my life. There's a difference between having a job and being employed."

The X and Jobs

Typically, Type Xs leave good jobs because they are either ignored or perceived themselves as being ignored at work. Such was the case with Douglas, a promising 23-year-old Toronto furniture designer who left a $25,000 entry level position after 16 months because, he says, "I'd go ahead and leave on a new allure. Finally, she points out, like Lynn Mason, that careers are no longer as degree-specific as they once were. Flexibility is the dominant philosophy.

Identifying The X

How can you quickly tell if you have a Type X on your hands? Check for the following traits:

-Conservative, stylish appearance
-Imposing, if overextensive, education
-Well-traveled
-Good conversationalist
-Confident, if overconfident, education
-Seemingly full of ideas

Indeed, all of the characteristics one might actively look for in an entry-level employee. But further investigation of these employers would also reveal the following key personality points:

-They don't like tasks that seem boring or repetitious.
-They place great emphasis on creativity and not doing jobs "just for the money."
-They often have an amusingly cynical attitude, yet call themselves realistic and pride themselves on their ideals.

Boffing The X

Are Type Xs worth the special effort it takes to deal with them? While they appear spoiled or pampered as they talk of their parents' winter in Gstaad or of their own inability to ride on buses, the answer is yes. Their seemingly disinterested flights from experience to experience are attempts to build a broader base of understanding in themselves—as they were trained to do—and that translates into a capable, broad-minded and flexible employee. Not as worried about losing their jobs as other employees, Xs will, once committed to a "sport or a boss, give total loyalty or in Lynn Mason's words, "a commitment to the whole."

Because of the number of Xs now in the labor force, it seems to me that companies are going to have to plan and take a bit more to adapt to their needs. Accommo-
When asking Type Xs to work on a problem, ask them for two sets of solutions: one more traditional and one creative. The latter may be too far out, but the stretching exercise is good and could lead to an unexpected answer.

If an X's job performance is no good, don't pussyfoot around—tell your X. They are out to improve themselves as much as they can, and if they do not have an aptitude for something, they will appreciate knowing about it as soon as possible and moving on to something else.

Give Xs projects requiring initiative: fact-finding assignments, research, investigation into possible further projects. Give Xs praise—more than you would give other employees—and over small things, too. Because of their dependence on parents and their long schoolings, they are used to it and respond better to it than other workers.

Let Xs work by themselves. While they need to know the details of a project, they do not enjoy being babysat. Type Xs excel at jobs requiring analysis, forecasting or marketing flair. It is their absolute forte.

Put Xs to work with older people. Xs and “Ward Cleavers” tend to get along famously. Not only will Xs enjoy the aura of stability older people provide, but older people appreciate and respond well to the generally polite and respectful tendencies of Xs.

Send Xs to conferences, put them on the road or put them in up-front positions. Excellent interpersonal skills allow them to enjoy these tasks, and they perform them with ease.

Give Type Xs deadlines. They find this sort of challenge highly reminiscent of school and term papers.

Give your X an impressive title. This seems cynical, and Xs will be the first to make a little joke of it, but it costs nothing and acts as an added incentive to perform well in a job that otherwise might be less glamorous.

Some Final Warnings
It is poor policy to hint that your firm fires people for performances that are less than excellent. Type Xs do not worry about choosing the wrong career and will cheerfully take this threat of job security as an opportunity to leave.

Using phraseology like “team spirit” or “it’s for the good of the company” will not cut any mustard with Type Xs. They will immediately suspect someone is out to get something for nothing. Likewise, try not to phrase projects in terms of “It’s dull, but we’ll make money.” The X idealism will be challenged, and will probably win out over you.

A curious point about Type Xs is that while they work well with people their own age, or people two decades older than themselves, they do not get along with members of the Baby Boom, currently those roughly 30 to 45. This in itself is too long an issue to be dealt with here, but the general antagonism Xs feel towards Boomers is one of the silent schisms of our era. Let it suffice to say that if the possibility exists of separating the two groups, it is not a bad idea.