

THE YOUNG AND RESTLESS WORK FORCE FOLLOWING THE BABY BOOM

GENERATION X

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?”

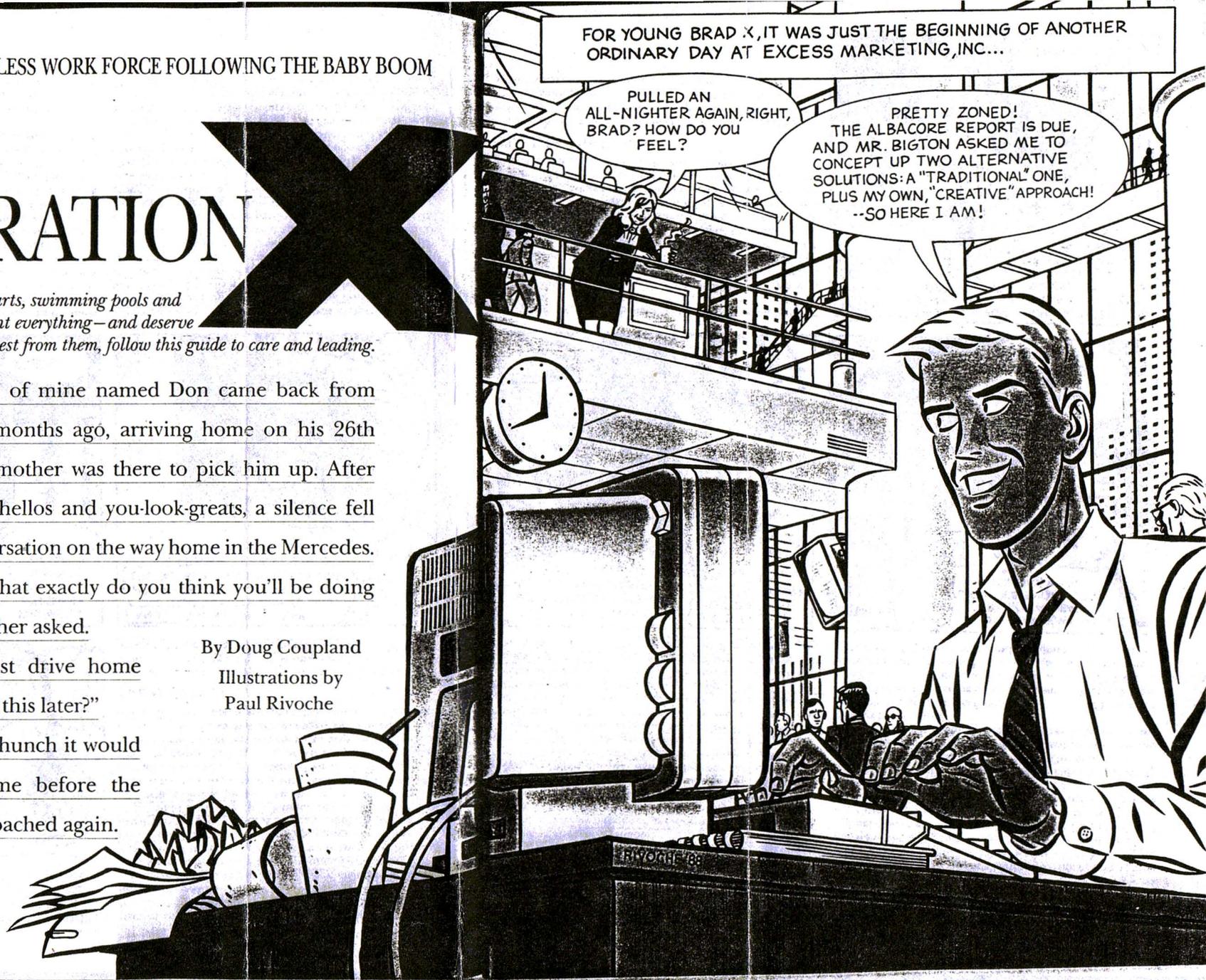
Mom had a hunch it would be a long time before the subject was broached again.

By Doug Coupland
Illustrations by
Paul Rivoche

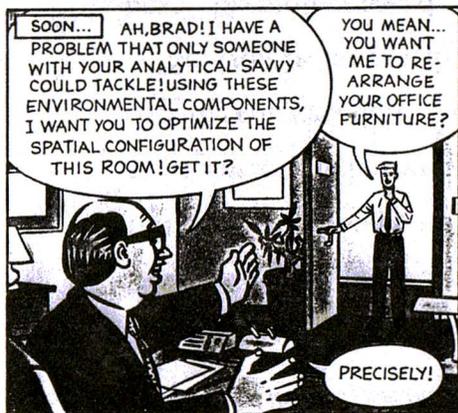
FOR YOUNG BRAD X, IT WAS JUST THE BEGINNING OF ANOTHER ORDINARY DAY AT EXCESS MARKETING, INC...

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!



VISTA 1989 Month ?

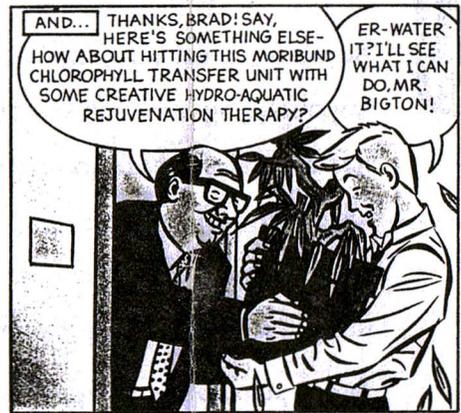


pattern and he has no long-range plan in mind. His biggest fear in life, like that of British aristocrats in Evelyn Waugh novels, is boredom.

Los Angeles sociologist Susan Littwin calls young people like Don members of the *The Postponed Generation*, in her 1986 book of the same title. British punk rock star Billy Idol calls them Generation X. Specifically, they are college-educated people born between 1958 and 1968 to middle and upper-middle class families. Numbering around 20 million in North America, people like Don are now entering the work force 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 by Depression-



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 lives in their condo. He cannot articulate any plans for the future beyond following his girlfriend back East, where she has lined up a job selling real estate, then maybe going back to school or, reluctantly, back to Japan if nothing else pans out. "I'd rather not go back," he says. "All of the foreigners there are losers trying to run away from the fact that they screwed up back wherever they came from. I don't want guilt by association."

Don, like so many people I know in their twenties, can do anything he wants, but instead he is doing nothing. Or, rather, he is doing many things, but there is no seeming

era parents who wanted to inculcate 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 upbringings, 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 fantasies 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 upbringings 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 have trouble growing up and leaving the security of their parents' homes; a generation profoundly disenchanted 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 adult resents 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.

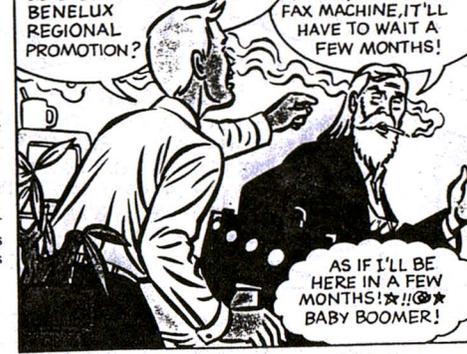
"Honestly," says Janet, a resident of Vancouver's upscale British Properties neighborhood and mother of three boys in their twenties, "down at Super-Valu, we mothers used to always ask each other what the kids were doing, but now we just don't do it anymore. We all know what the answer's going to be: Susan's just quit her job or Kenny's back home again. Are we never going to get these children out of our lives?"

Janet, whose earliest memories are of the Depression and war rationing, has, like parents of most Xs, mixed feelings. "It'd be cold to just throw them out on the street—I mean, we all know how expensive it is just to live these days. But I can't help but wonder if we've been doing the kids a disservice all these years by helping them too much. Our generation got married the first week after we graduated from university and that was that. It simply never occurred to us to ask our parents for anything."

Janet's youngest son offers his perspective: "There's just no way I'm going to come down in the world. Period. Forget some job that's boring and killing me anyway. If I hang in there long enough, something good's bound to come along. Until then, I'll just wait. Mom and Dad don't mind. I'm fun to



LATER... ER--JAY! DID YOU GET A CHANCE TO GO OVER MY IDEA FOR THE BENELUX REGIONAL PROMOTION?





have around."

Indeed, Type Xs seem to take far longer to cut the cord than did previous generations. They flip-flop a lot between chic 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 dump," 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 Littwin 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 bumming 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, "if I want to man a french-fry 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 perceive 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 14 months because, he says, "I'd go ahead and put 100 percent into a new series of knockdown chests, get lots of praise, but in the end they'd just go ahead and make what cost the least. They just wouldn't listen. I also started an in-house newsletter that I saw as being essential for a well-functioning company, but it died from upper-management indifference."

Management indifference is a common Type X complaint. Lynn Mason, coordinator of undergraduate placement services at Stanford University, in Palo Alto, California, advises employers to give this group input into decision-making processes—in such areas as management, product development and strategic planning—whether or not their ideas are actually used. "Members of this group no longer see the



glamor of working for a large firm as being all-important," she says. "They're not the least bit paranoid of making a wrong career choice. As a result, the strong trend is for them to go to smaller companies where their ideas at least get listened to instead of getting lost in 47 layers of bureaucracy. Most of the people in this age group who quit their jobs do so because they feel a frustrated sense of creativity. Their need to see their ideas materialized is important to them."

She adds that Type Xs shun work they perceive as routine because their strengths lie in other areas: "They're experts at interpersonal skills and marketing themselves. And because their educations have trained them largely as designers and analysts, they avoid jobs that make them mere implementers of policy. Careers are seen as a whole—an entity that combines all facets of their personalities rather than simply a way of making money."

The strongest trend Mason sees happening for this group is the choice of careers that exploit both the individuals'

academic backgrounds and personal passions. "A business major who likes tennis could well go into marketing with a firm like Nike rather than become an accountant. Ultimately, it makes far healthier emotional sense."

Mason's colleague Yolande Morales, director of graduate recruiting, agrees that certain careers appeal to the Type X more than others. "They're tending to avoid jobs dealing with repetition or number-crunching. They also seem to want to be in the pulse of things and are not so warm on manufacturing-related positions that take place in a plant rather than downtown. From the ideological standpoint, the military and companies with defense contracts are having hard times recruiting on campus these days, too."

The jobs that do satisfy the Type X self-perception as designer and analyzer are, she says, "communications, broadcasting, writing, technical research and development, marketing and the arts. And remember, these are people with business degrees." While investment banking is still a popular ticket, she adds, management consulting has also taken on a new allure. Finally, she points out, like Lynn Mason, that careers are no longer as degree-specific as they

- 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 realists and pride themselves on their ideals.

Bossing 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 dilettantish flights from experience to experience are attempts to build a broader base of understanding in themselves—as they were trained to do—and this 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 project 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 inevitable that employers are going to have to play give-and-take a bit more to adapt to their needs. Accommo-



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
- Impressive, credential-packed resume
- Well-traveled
- Good conversationalist
- Impressive, if overextensive, education
- Seemingly full of ideas

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

- They don't want nine-to-five jobs because they make them feel stifled and boxed-in. At the same time, they want security.

dations such as flex-time, sabbaticals, unusual working-hour arrangements or simply open-mindedness to new ideas will help employers best tap this group's skills. "It all boils down to that one phrase—nine-to-five," says Keith, 27, a semi-employed MBA and consultant. "I'd rather starve than work those hours. Oh, I know it sounds snooty and trite, but I'm a human being. Dad did nine-to-five for 30 years and it got him to a pretty good point, but he has his regrets now. He acknowledges that there are huge gaps in his life that will never, ever be filled. Imagine not being able to do it over again. I never want to have to feel that."

If you're in a position of managing Type Xs in an office, you might follow these pointers:

At entry-level, let your Type X know that a good performance will lead to a rapid move up the ladder. Possessing strong egos, Xs will be spooked if they feel they are only forgotten numbers or cogs in a machine.

Try to give Xs input on decisions, whether it is to rearrange

the office furniture or to establish a branch office in Beijing.

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 phrasology 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. □

