

How to Get Ahead in a Recession

The tech-savvy and eerily confident millennial generation was supposed to rule the world. Then the crash happened, jobs disappeared, the boomers refused to retire and the world suddenly doesn't seem worth ruling anymore. Weirdly, they're not fazed. They have a strategy **By Katrina Onstad**

You want the tie, you buy the tie.

The inability to pay \$200 for a really nice tie is, of course, only the tiniest part of what's different, but he thinks about it.

You want the tie, you buy the tie.

That's how it was before. There was constant movement, an upward thrust. You worked hard and you were pulled along in the wake of the boom. Just out of university, you had your pick of jobs. The firms came to you. He says, "You could picture something in your mind—a promotion, a bonus—and it would happen."

You want the tie, you buy the tie.

James, whose identity is masked here because he's hoping to be hired back when all of this is over, tells his story in a downtown café. He owns a condo in this condo-pocked neighbourhood of art galleries and organic markets. He paid for it fully after only five years in a six-figure job at a Bay Street boutique investment firm. James, who is lanky and pensive, got used to \$150 dinners on weeknights without a second thought, a nice vacation here and there.

James is 28.

The part he keeps going over is that he saw it coming. How he told people, and no one believed him. He saw it because one aspect of his job was buying and selling stocks and bonds for investors, and in the spring of '08, he noticed that companies were losing interest in his products. Over the next few months, he saw deals fall apart at the last minute. He went out with his friends, many of them graduates of prestigious Canadian business schools, guys like him working 12 hours a day and on weekends, exhausted and loving the exhaustion. He advised one of them not to buy a house, saying things were about to get worse. His friend laughed at him. Soon after, James was doing the laughing, at a colleague who asked, "What kind of bonus do you think we'll get this year?" Said James, "You'll be lucky if you have a job at the end of the year." Ha ha.

"I plan to be famous, I'll admit that. Right now, I'm acting in an on-line comedy series called Starving Artist. My friends are behind it. So far, 120,000 people have seen my ass on YouTube. I assume the money will come later"

– Isaac Kessler



But he really got nervous when he saw the senior managers not getting nervous, ignoring the obvious. James remembers being taken to a hockey game at the ACC by a client. Usually, on top of free seats, the company would open the box, invite the firm guys inside for drinks, food, perks that probably ran the corporation thousands of dollars. This time, they didn't open the box.

Associates took him out for lunch less. And when they did, the restaurants were just a little less nice.

And then the crash, and the bleeding.

And then the call to the office last fall.

It was weird to get fired. Younger staff were mostly the first to go. James could see that things were bloated, there were too many guys like him in his office. He recognized his firing as good business, even as he walked out the door.

Now, in the middle of what used to be his workday, he's in a café. He brings with him an air of busy-ness, usefulness, with a notepad and a pen, a thick text-like book on the markets. He has been replaying it all in his head, thinking about how he got here. James knows that, from the outside, there might be a touch of schadenfreude in this moment, that people could look upon his entitled generation as finally getting their comeuppance. He has been thinking about this a lot lately, and he doesn't disagree. He heard his friends grumbling when things didn't go their way: The boss is an asshole for not promoting me. I deserve more. Faster. Now.

"It goes back to, What does the world owe you?" he says. "Maybe you don't buy an Audi. Maybe you don't need the three-quarter-million-dollar house." His studied sobriety breaks, and James seems a little angry. But he's not angry about the economic crisis that's torn into his life like a wolf with a rabbit in its jaws. He's a little angry at himself, maybe, or his friends, definitely, for being so oblivious to the coming disaster. But he's coming up with a plan to navigate this recession. "My friends and I, we're going to learn some harsh lessons. We're being introduced to a level of hard work we haven't experienced in our lifetimes. We've been babied. It's funny—until now, our biggest concern was, Don't let it end."

What was supposed to end was the boomers' reign. The baby boomers, born from 1945 to 1960, will be between 60 and 75 years old by 2020. It has always been expected that they would head toward retirement in droves between now and then, and the great handover would occur. For the kids, the upside of that great inheritance—a pick of jobs in a wide-open market; the end of classic rock radio—was supposed to outweigh the downside: fewer tax revenues, more health-care spending, all those handicapped parking spaces.

"We were taught that the quality of our lives would meet or exceed that of our parents'. I never thought I was going to be a lawyer or a doctor, but I figured I'd live in a nice home, raise children, maybe have a cottage. I still think that's going to happen"

– Jessica Hall–Cummings



There are 6.8 million Canadians between the ages of 15 and 29, a generation born from the late '70s to the early '90s and variously—and usually unflatteringly—referred to as Y, Millennials, Generation Me and the Echo Boom. The boomers' early, long-abandoned rock 'n' roll attitude is often attributed to growing up in unparalleled post-war prosperity. But in fact, they did experience a few recessions and market crashes along the way, as well as some bad fashions. Gen Y, on the other hand, has known virtually no economic pain thus far. Perhaps an understanding of trauma grows faint with lack of proximity. Generation X, the relatively small population born between the early '60s and mid-'70s, at least had grandparents with some first-hand recollections of the Depression. Gen Y is thrice removed from the last big fall, and the images of hard times have faded; history starts to look like a photocopy of a photocopy, borders blurred, no impact. When James came out of university, it was two years after 9/11, the last time the world economy faltered.

This January, 71,000 jobs disappeared in Ontario. As the province's manufacturing sector absorbs the blow from the collapse down south, citizens and businesses are freezing their spending, and the chill keeps moving along the chain. The provincial unemployment rate in February was 8.7 per cent, the highest level since April 1997. In Toronto, it hit 8.3 per cent. In March, a TD economist released a report stating that unemployment in Toronto is expected to climb to 11 per cent over the coming year, and that the recession will hit Ontario the hardest.

The jobs that went poof are the kinds most young university grads aspire to: full-time, with benefits and the promise of upward mobility. What's left may be an unappetizing array of piecemeal contract work, with no built-in vacation or stability. Work is less stable, the cost of living is higher, and wages are lower today than 20 years ago. The consumer price index increased by 60 per cent from 1988 to 2008. Meanwhile, median wages for the 25 to 29 age group declined during the 1980s and right on to the new millennium. The boomers, still clogging the most secure positions as they have for decades, show no intention of leaving. A Royal Bank report from last October found that 37 per cent of surveyed boomers have decided to work three to five years longer than initially planned, presumably to make up the cash that drained from their investments so suddenly in the past year.

With fewer jobs available, under-30s—the most educated generation in Canadian history—are retreating to the safety of school, and all its attendant promise. In Ontario, applications to the province's 24 community colleges for programs starting in January jumped 10 per cent from a year earlier, and U of T's Rotman School of Management reports at least a 10 per cent increase in MBA applications over last year. (These eternal students will be adding to an already substantial debt load: six out of 10 recent graduates had borrowed at some point to pay for their education, accumulating an average debt of \$24,000.)

There's a schism between what Generation Y—by some accounts a group of privileged, coddled, over-educated idealists—thought they would get when they took their first steps into adulthood and what the world had in store for them, even before the crash. And in that schism, millions of young Canadians are floundering. Weirdly, they don't seem too tortured about it.

The boomers were determined to see their successes reflected in their kids, imposing high expectations with flash cards and sticker charts. The number of books on child-rearing skyrocketed over the decades of boomer parenting; kids weren't just raised, they were engineered.

The Ego Boom, a book by the Toronto writers Lianne George and Steve Maich, charts the rise of “self-esteemism,” the '70s and '80s institutionalization of the me-so-great mantra. Can't make the team? Here's a B-team. Red pen stressing you out? The teacher will now mark in lavender. But study after study has shown that indoctrinating a kid with the belief in his inherent specialness—dubbed the Mr. Rogers effect—doesn't turn him into an award-winning high achiever, but a first-class narcissist, or at least a pain in the ass to work with.

Last fall, *Industry Week*, a magazine for business managers, posted an article on its Web site suggesting that employers had better adapt to Gen Y's ways or risk competitive disadvantage. The response was vitriolic. Posters complained about their Y colleagues and employees as lazy, social network-obsessed and rude: "They are slackers! They cry and whine until they get their way." A Gen Yer cockily entered the fray, berating the first poster for selling out his ideals and buying into a work model that's all about long hours and "crappy mid-level manager positions." He got in one last dig about global warming—"We're the ones stuck cleaning up the mess your generation left"—and signed the post with a sarcastic flourish, referencing the tech-assuredness that is a young 'un's bragging right: "I need to go update my Facebook profile now...TTYL."

To soothe this intergenerational chafing, a sub-industry of consultants has risen up in the past few years, advising such companies as Four Seasons and Kraft on how to "maximize" Generation Y's productivity. These consultants told their corporate clients what Gen Y wanted in the workplace: flexibility, more teamwork, less hierarchy, less face time (Generation Y has no idea why it matters that their bodies are in seats during the day if they can work remotely; boomers can't imagine why it wouldn't matter). Fine. On the brattier end of things, they required long holidays and high pay, had no patience for the phrase "entry level," liked to have their birthdays celebrated at work, and expected praise, please, just like the kind Mom gives. One Toronto consultant described "snowplow" parents, who clear all obstacles out of the paths of their grown children, to the extent that Mom would even call and book a job interview for her university graduate son. Then she'd accompany her kid, possibly having picked his outfit, and wait in the reception area.

"I graduated from Guelph last year with a psych degree and a \$20,000 debt. Since then, I've had a data entry job I got through a temp agency. My goal: be a playwright. Before that happens, I'll probably have another five or 10 years of boring jobs to pay off my debt"

– Myles Stocker

Maybe the most significant difference between 22-year-olds today and 22-year-olds two decades ago is that today's expect to be seen and heard. Now public space is ubiquitous, commentary instantaneous. If they see something on-line, they comment on it. If they can't get a job, they make a sitcom and post it on YouTube.

Lisa Cullingworth, an executive recruiter who runs the Fathom Group, a Toronto headhunter for Fortune 500 companies, noticed an unusual softness among her youngest clients. Last year, before the crash, she was recruiting junior investment bankers to join an industry where new employees are often expected to work 100-hour weeks. This hazing-like survival mechanism has endured for years: if you can get through the first year, you move up. But Generation Y just wasn't into it. Cullingworth says that of the 200 young clients she met last year, 50 to 60 per cent wanted out, saying, "I can't do this. I need a life."

These days, the Fathom Group is receiving 100 résumés a day, from all age groups. Cullingworth is having a hard time simply logging everyone in to her database. She's noticed a shift in her Generation Y clients already, a little more deference. They don't demand the big entry-level salary anymore, willing to take \$60,000 where they might have demanded \$80,000 a year ago. "Egos have been hit," she says.

Brad Dworkin has moved back in with his parents. We meet at Manic Coffee at College and Bathurst on a Wednesday afternoon, and virtually every table is filled by people alone with their laptops. Dworkin has taken buses, subways and streetcars to get here from his parents' house in Thornhill. He used to live downtown but can't afford to anymore.

A recent Statistics Canada study on "boomerang kids" revealed that nearly a third of parents with a youngest child between the ages of 20 and 34 had at least one offspring at home with them. Living at home is no longer a sign of failure, or a culturally defined tradition. Boomer parents allow their kids to stay at home until that perfect job appears, and they're happy to have them around, reporting better relations with their offspring than parents whose children have moved out.

Dworkin, who is 24, has a little Max Fischer about him, handsome and upright, with the sweetly nerdy air of a gearhead. He knew he wanted to be a filmmaker when he made a video for his Grade 9 English class at Vaughan Secondary. "They gave us a poem, something awful, like Wordsworth, something about daffodils. Cheesy," he says. Dworkin took his parents' video camera out into the electrical fields of his suburban neighbourhood and read the poem over shots of hydroelectric towers (I wandered lonely as a cloud / That floats on high o'er vales and hills...). It was a hit.

In 2004, Dworkin enrolled in film studies at Ryerson. Optimism was in the air: the new \$60-million Filmport mega-studio was announced; production was thriving. By the time he graduated last spring, the then-rising dollar had decimated the industry.

Since graduating, Dworkin has sent out more than 50 résumés to galleries, film and television production companies, corporations with video divisions, anything he sees on Craigslist, or TalentEgg, or Workopolis, or hears about from friends. The response is usually silence, or a come-by-if-you-want-to offer of unpaid work.

And yet he seems unfazed. Dworkin has a strategy. (Note: the word "strategy" is particularly Gen Y. As a Gen Xer, unemployable in my early 20s, I met every failure by weeping, drinking and then writing a poem about weeping and drinking. Gen Xers didn't have strategies; we had angst.) Taking a job at RadioShack or Blockbuster, both of which employed Dworkin during the double cohort year when he didn't get into university, won't help him reach his end goal of filmmaking, so he's not going to do retail. Instead, he and his friends are working on their own projects, including a documentary about songwriters that he's shooting for no money on equipment he's acquired over the years. And he's interning for free two days a week at the Canadian Film Centre, and doing the occasional corporate job from time to time. The money he gets from a few days' work as a videographer is just enough to live on, only because he doesn't pay rent, and he's cut back on anything resembling a social life. He's concentrating on creating a little industry called Brad Dworkin—branding himself with his Web site—and helping his friends build and brand their own little industries. Collaboration is characteristic of the anti-hierarchy child-rearing fashionable in Dworkin's youth (the kids are like road maps of their parents' generation's shortfalls: If not the commune, then a kid with communal tendencies).

Says Dworkin, "I don't want to have a life wedged in the cracks between work. We've seen our parents worked to the bone. Your life doesn't have to be this horrible self-sacrifice for some end goal. It's more about the journey."

Martin Dworkin, Brad's father, says he enjoys having his son back home. His 27-year-old daughter also returned home after a breakup led to some real estate shuffling. She's waiting to hear back from law schools.

The full house is harder on his wife, an elementary school teacher. "She sometimes forgets that they're adults," Martin says. "It's, 'Why are you coming home so late?'"

“I always pictured myself in a power suit and with a briefcase. After I graduated from health management at York, I sent my résumé everywhere. I landed a contract job at SickKids. It was renewed seven times, but it wasn’t renewed this spring, and now I’m thinking of enrolling in nursing school”

– Tammy Chong

The elder Dworkin speaks in a gentle voice, but he’s prone to boomerish can-do boosterism when it comes to his kids. “Before Brad left for a gala where he was nominated for best cinematographer, I called him and said, ‘Call when you get your award.’ He said, ‘You mean if.’ And I said, ‘No, when.’ And he won!” If it’s possible to beam with pride through a phone line, there it is.

When Brad’s parents saw him struggling after graduation, they offered to buy him a plane ticket to Los Angeles to stay with relatives in Pasadena and make the rounds with his reels. Brad isn’t sure about that yet; he wants more experience in Toronto first.

In any case, the offer may soon be off the table. In February, at age 61, Martin Dworkin was laid off from his accounting job. He is applying for work right now, looking on-line, following up on a tip from one of Brad’s friends. “I’m not really the retiring kind,” he says. “My mother worked until she was 83. And now, you know, I look at my investment portfolio, and I can’t really afford to retire anyway.”

It’s easy to regard the younger generation with a scathing backward glance. Doing so, tapping into our own Freudian terrors, is a version of the *Seinfeld* joke: “Make no mistake about why these babies are here—they are here to replace us.”

If there is a single quality that distinguishes Generation Y, it’s an intense, unflagging confidence, a scarce quality these days. Many under-30s exude a kind of televisual poise that seems directly linked to their deftness with technology. A few seem less like themselves than like projections of themselves, smooth and unflappable. Maybe there’s something admirable, enviable, even, in their certainty that they matter. But up close it’s strange, like encountering a robot army cranked up to “Perfect.”

Jessica Hall-Cummings, a 25-year-old redhead with a paper-white complexion, graduated from McGill two years ago with a degree in art history. She travelled around Europe for a few months to look at the art she had studied and then returned to Toronto to find a job. She was surprised when she sent out dozens of résumés over several months and heard nothing back. “There are people with PhDs applying for entry-level jobs in galleries,” she says.

A friend of hers, working as a receptionist at *Now* magazine, told her about a job as the fashion editor’s assistant. Fabulous—except it was an unpaid internship, two mornings a week. Hall-Cummings took the job anyway and loves it, even the menial tasks of organizing information, tagging products for gift guides. After her morning of free labour, she hustles to the subway and rides to north Toronto, where she babysits two toddlers until their parents come home from work. One and a half days a week, she looks after a baby downtown. All of this brings her about \$1,500 a month, enough to live off and even save a tiny bit, but only because she’s semi-transient right now, living part-time with her mom and stepfather near Yonge and Lawrence, and part-time with her boyfriend downtown.

Hall-Cummings has never wanted a nine-to-five kind of life. She saw her mother working in public schools (“Like a slave. It’s amazing, but brutal”) and her father working from his Cabbagetown house as a financial advisor. The

latter kind of life—working at home, being one’s own boss—is a relatively new way of looking at labour, one the boomers introduced with some success. It’s possible that Generation Y’s legacy will be the one their workaholic parents never fulfilled: a more self-determined way of working.

“I don’t want to have a life wedged in the cracks between work. We’ve seen our parents worked to the bone. Your life doesn’t have to be this horrible self-sacrifice to some end goal. It’s more about the journey”

– Brad Dworkin



To that end, she’s applying to the communications program at Sheridan. “I don’t see myself as having one job. I’m sure it will be a hodgepodge of things,” says Hall-Cummings. Maybe she’ll start an art gallery, do some writing on the side. Web design. On-line publishing. Most of it, preferably, from home. Where the money for any of this will come from is a mystery, and yet, God love her, she describes her mood as “optimistic.” It is a word they all use—James, Dworkin, Hall-Cummings—and it’s striking since all signs indicate this generation is going to be worse off than their parents.

“We were taught that the quality of our lives would meet or exceed that of our parents’,” says Hall-Cummings. “I never thought I was going to be a lawyer or a doctor, but I figured I’d live in a nice home, raise children, maybe have a cottage. I still think there’s a good chance that’s going to happen.”

Generation X’s expectations out of university ranged from low to zilch, and we were right, met by an early ’90s recession and several years of humbling McJobs. So, from that place, in the well-worn subjectivity of my generational perspective, confronted with this shiny, smiling ball of hope, I can’t help but blurt out, “What if it’s not OK? What if it’s breadlines for everyone? What if it’s *Grapes of Wrath*?”

She looks genuinely puzzled. “I don’t go there,” she says. “I just don’t think that way.”

In a way, our collective sense that we deserve credit and all the stuff credit can buy triggered this recession in the first place. The word “entitled,” thrown around to describe Generation Y, is probably the keyword of this economic downturn. If they have an inflated sense of entitlement, so do we all. But there’s a difference: even chronically underemployed, barely meeting rent and shouldering debt, they have a wide-eyed faith in their special power to come out OK.

The recession might be the great equalizer, with the specific needs and complaints of each generation falling away as everyone shares the same experience of fragility. Lisa Cullingworth is seeing the change in her clients at the Fathom Group, even Generation Y. “People are now saying, ‘I just want to learn,’ ” she says. “They’re more humble, more open-minded.”

These days, James is using his contacts. He doesn’t send out a résumé unless he knows someone at the company. Because the financial world is so quiet, people have time on their hands, and he often gets a meeting. These meetings sometimes go on for a while, and are filled with mutual admiration, but also weighted down by the tacit knowledge that there is no job at the end of the conversation. Thanks for coming in, say the bosses, not insincerely.

A former Bay Streeter he knows just moved back in with his parents. Some of his friends, also laid off, are talking about taking trips. Before, everyone had money, but no time. Now, time is endless. James is giving himself a year to find a job he wants. He's sticking it out, grateful he paid off the condo, thinking about the guy who is one roof repair away from missing his mortgage payments and losing everything. James is turning off the taps, he says. No restaurants, for now. No expensive ties.

He worries about getting stale. He's watching the Business News Network, reading. His job is to be on the ground floor of information. But the information is always changing. That's the hard part. The information is always changing, and there is always someone right behind who knows better how to harness it, how to use it to highlight the inadequacies of the generation ahead of them. The generation with the power. The generation with the jobs.

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