Today's Young Adults: Surfing for the Right Job

MICHIGAN STATE
UNIVERSITY

monster TRAK

MonsterTRAK

TABLE OF CONTENTS

White paper prepared for MonsterTRAK.com Winter 2007

Dr. Georgia T. Chao
Eli Broad College of Business
Michigan State University
East Lansing, MI 48824

Dr. Philip D. Gardner
Collegiate Employment Research Institute
Michigan State University
East Lansing, MI 48824
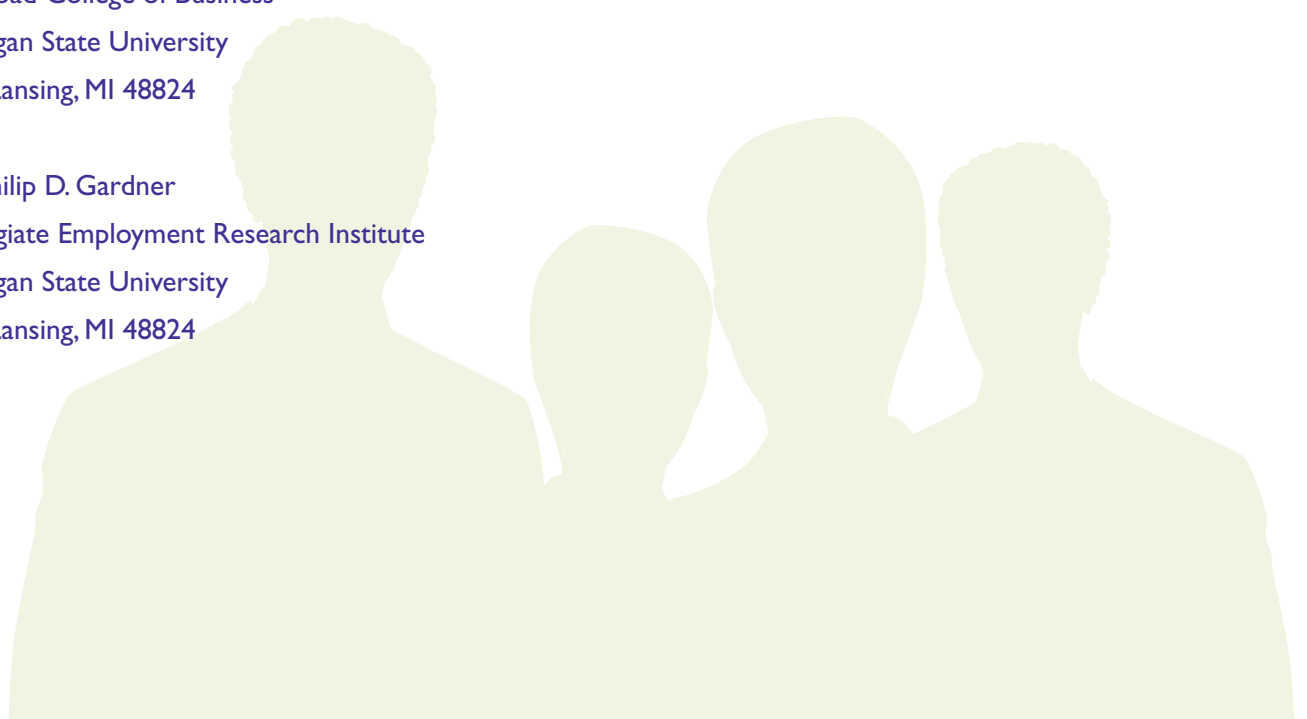
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Today's young adults are different. Many claim to want challenging and rewarding careers, yet they do not take necessary actions to plan and prepare for these careers. Compared to older generations, they are more likely to move from job to job, looking for the right job, much as these young people would surf on the Internet, moving from site to site, looking for the right information. Jeff Arnett (2004) revealed in his study of young adults from 18 to 28 that they become deeply self absorbed during this period as they search for their personal identity. They become involved in an array of experiences, jumping from job to job or experience to experience. Parents provide support by allowing them to come home to recharge and financing their activities. The young adults proceed with optimism believing that they will have a job when they end the journey.

This white paper describes survey results from over 10,000 young adults between the ages of 18 and 28. The study was conducted by a joint research project between MonsterTRAK and the Michigan State University Collegiate Employment Research Institute. The purpose of the survey was to profile young adults on their attitudes toward work and general life, with an emphasis on understanding why today's young adults are surfing for the right job.

What you will learn from the study:

1. Many young adults are not bound to organizations by any sense of loyalty or commitment; thus they would leave one organization if they perceived a better offer from another organization. Nearly 65% indicated that they would likely engage in job surfing behaviors during their early careers. They have seen parents, relatives or friends' parents suffer the consequences of organizational downsizings and eroding benefits over the past 15 years. If organizations are not loyal to their employees, these young adults question why they should be loyal to organizations.

2. Many young adults are confident that they could go back home and live with their parents. Nearly 65% felt they could return home if necessary as they established their post graduation career. This support system allows them the flexibility to seek a variety of experiences before settling down.

3. Some young adults perceive themselves to be better than others and thus, entitled to better things in life. Nearly 50% held moderate to high superiority beliefs about themselves. This sense of entitlement may encourage young adults to avoid compromises or concessions and to continue their search for an ideal job and career.

4. Some young adults do not have concrete career goals or plans. About 50% felt that their career-life plans were unfocused or only starting to take shape. Thus, job surfing is used to gain different experiences in order to determine what kind of career would best fit them.

BACKGROUND ON YOUNG ADULTS

Traditionally, adulthood is defined by three states: Financial independence, marriage, and starting a family. In contrast, today's young adults are delaying marriage and parenthood, and often still live with their parents. Popular motion picture films like *Failure to Launch*, attest to the growing trend of young adults who postpone traditional adulthood. Are these young people different from previous generations? If their attitudes and values toward life are different, what implications do these differences hold for employers and for society as a whole?

What makes this generation of young adults different from previous ones? Economic, cultural, medical, and historical trends have enabled today's young adults to put off financial and familial responsibilities. Unlike previous generations, most of today's emerging adults are likely to have parents who can still afford to support them well after high school and college graduations. Although some parents would rather see their adult children on their own, many encourage these young adults to stay home in order to avoid an empty nest. Oftentimes, the high costs of rent discourages young people from leaving their parents' home. Consequently, both young adults and their parents agree that living at home will allow young adults to build up their financial savings.

Cultural attitudes are more tolerant of premarital sex with television programs like Sex in the City supporting lifestyles that don't encourage marriage. Furthermore, medical advances in birth control and fertility, have made it possible for more women to postpone childbirth until they are in their 30's or even 40's. In 1970, the median age of marriage in the U.S. was 20 for women and 22 for men; and children were born shortly thereafter. In 2000, the median age of marriage was 25 for women and 27 for men; and parenthood was delayed until the late 20's.

Finally, recent scandals in government, business, and religion have eroded emerging adults' trust in traditional institutions and leaders from these establishments. Inappropriate and unlawful behaviors from government leaders, corporate implosions in financial scandals, and large-scale lawsuits convicting religious leaders of sexual misconduct have helped produce a generation of emerging adults who are less likely to trust basic institutions of our society. Correspondingly, they are less likely to follow advice from their elders and more likely to take their time to make life-changing decisions.

Descriptions of emerging adults reveal positive and negative pictures. On the positive side, delaying marriage until the late 20's may help reduce teenage pregnancies and early divorces. Delaying career choices may also give emerging adults more time to carefully consider alternatives and develop a realistic preview of a chosen career. On the negative side, many emerging adults choose to live with their parents and drift in a series of low paying, disconnected jobs, saving their money to buy cars, HDTVs, cell phones, etc. They have a sense of entitlement to special attention, extra favors, and rewards; but don't feel obligated to put in the work that might merit these considerations.

From these trends, the current generation of young adults are qualitatively different from previous generations. Many names have been used to describe people between the ages of 18-28 who have not assumed full adult roles; including: emerging adults, twixters (people between adolescence and adulthood), Generation X, 13th Generation, and the Millennial generation (See Howe and Strauss, 1991, 2000; Time Magazine, January 2005). Most of the current research is comprised of qualitative studies, or interviews, conducted on relatively small numbers of people. In late 2005, MonsterTRAK launched an electronic survey and collected data from over 10,000 young adults between the ages of 18 and 28 as well as data from over 1,400 adults between the ages of 29 and 61. The purpose of the survey was to develop a profile of this generation of young adults. Results from the survey are described here in three sections: (1) General description of the survey respondents, (2) Comparison of young adults to older adults, and (3) Detailed profile of young adults.

COMPARISON OF YOUNG ADULTS TO OLDER ADULTS

Five survey scales were used to compare the current generation of young adults with older generations. Two scales tapped personality dimensions related to beliefs that one is superior to others (named the Superior factor) and to beliefs that one is not sure about oneself or doubts he/she can follow through on goals/work (named the Goal Instability factor). The Superior factor was measured by items such as: "I deserve favors from others" and "I know that I have more natural talents than most," whereas the Goal Instability factor was measured by items such as: "I wonder where my life is headed" and "I don't seem to get going on anything important" (Robbins & Patton, 1985). Both factors were theorized to describe younger adults more than older adults. In addition, three factors were created to assess young adults' attitudes toward job surfing, career/life vision, and delayed marriage in order to assess how a large sample of young adults would describe themselves on these dimensions. The Job Surfing factor was measured by items such as: "I would rather try out different work experiences than settle down into one job" and I would be willing to endure frequent job changes in order to find a job that fits my interests and abilities." The Career/Life Vision factor was measured by items such as: "I do not have a well-defined career plan" and "I can't imagine what my life will be like 10 years from now." Finally, the Delayed Marriage factor was measured by two items: "Marriage is not a high priority for me at this point" and "I believe I still have a few years to be single before I settle down and get married." For all factors, respondents rated the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with each statement on a five-point rating scale, with higher numbers indicating stronger agreement.

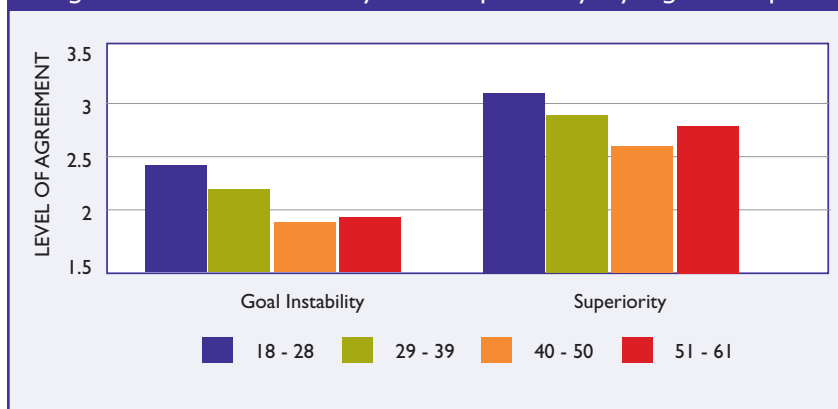### Figure 1. Goal Instability and Superiority by Age Groups

Figure 1 describes how adults in four age groups responded to the two personality factors: Superiority and Goal Instability. In both cases, young adults between the ages of 18 and 28 were statistically higher than other age groups, meaning that they were more likely to agree with statements that they were superior to others or that their goals were unstable.

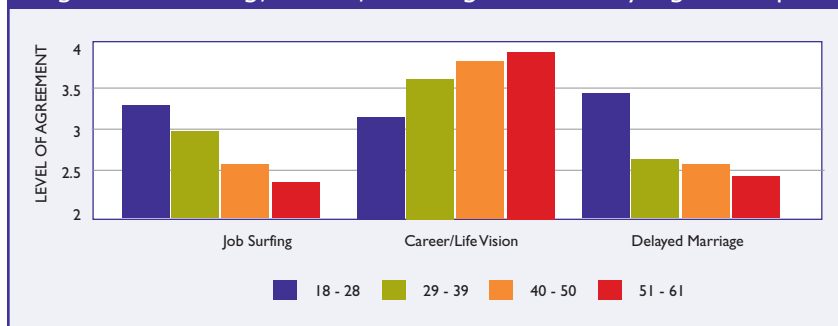### Figure 2. Surfing, Vision, Marriage Factors by Age Groups

Figure 2 shows the four age groups on the remaining three factors. Once again, the young adult group showed significant differences from the other groups, indicating that they were more likely to job surf and delay marriage and less likely to have a concrete vision for career or general life.

The results from these age comparisons provide empirical support for the general literature describing these young adults. To our knowledge, there are no other studies that empirically examine today's young adults with such a large sample. Next, an in-depth look at this group is provided to examine gender, race, college major, and family income effects on these attitudes and personality traits.

DETAILED PROFILE OF YOUNG ADULTS (AGES 18-28)

This section describes how different segments of the young adult sample responded to our survey scales and to particular items of interest. For the whole sample, one item asked respondents to agree or disagree with the statement: "I could go back and live with my parents if I needed to" (see figure 3).

Figure 3. Responses to item: "I could go back and live with my parents if I need to."

31% **14%** **12%** **33%** **10%**

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree
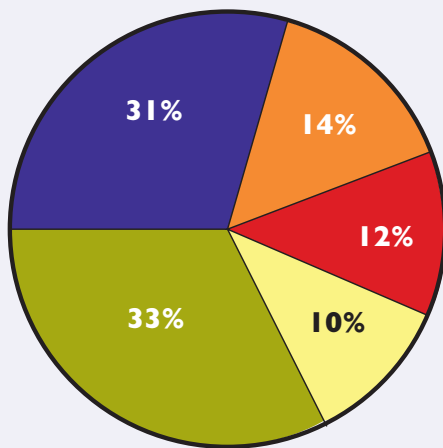
Sixty-four percent of the young adults agreed or strongly agreed to the statement, indicating that most of these young adults believed their parents could support them if they were unable to achieve or maintain financial independence. Some young adults cited the high costs of renting apartments as a reason for staying home with their parents. Others cited the benefits of saving their money for cars, computers and/or luxury items.

Differences Based on Race/Ethnicity

For the two personality traits, Superiority and Goal Instability, average responses based on race/ethnicity are graphed in Figure 4. The results for Goal Instability showed Asian respondents were significantly higher than other groups, indicating that these young adults were more likely to express uncertainty in who they were or doubt in completing work and goals. Likewise, Asians scored higher than other groups on the Superiority scale, indicating that they perceived themselves to be more talented than others and preferring others to "follow my lead."

Figure 4. Significant Differences in Personality Traits by Race/Ethnicity
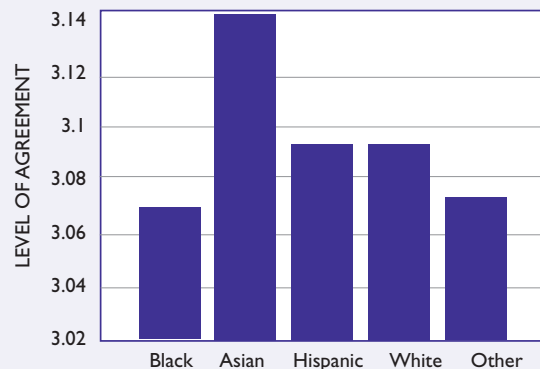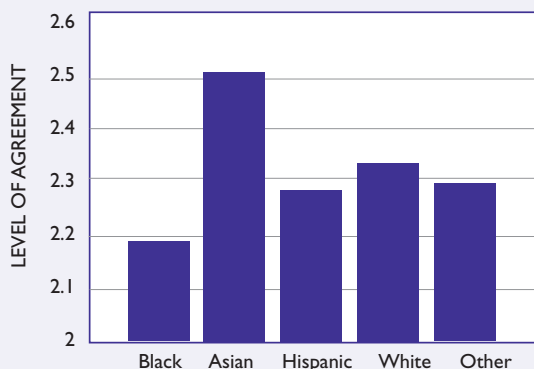
Goal Instability

Superiority

Figure 5 shows significant differences on the Job Surfing and Career/Life Vision factors. Asian and Caucasian young adults were higher than other groups on Job Surfing; thus they were more likely to try out different jobs before settling down into a career. For the Asian group, this finding may be linked with the previous finding that Asians had higher goal instability. Thus, if one did not have a good sense of direction in defining him/herself or goals, then one might be more likely to try out different jobs in search for the right job. For the Career/Life Vision factor, Black or African-American young adults were more likely to have career plans and specific goals than other groups. Compared to other race/ethnic groups, this group was most likely to be financially dependent on family and friends and reported the lowest average household income of their parents. We speculate that the greater economic need for a good job prompts African-American young adults to be more concerned with career plans and future goals.

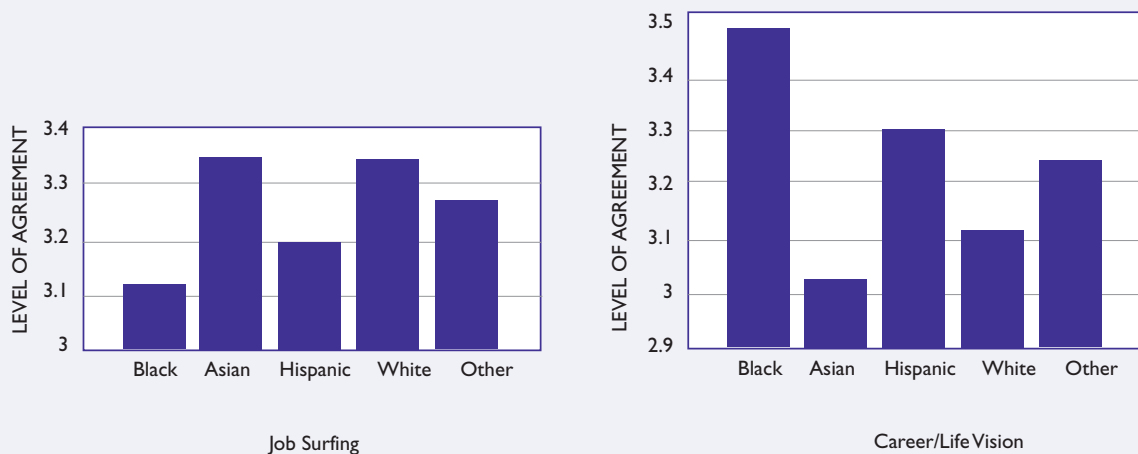Figure 5. Significant Differences on Job Surfing and Job/Life Vision by Race/Ethnicity

Job Surfing

Career/Life Vision

Figure 6. Average Ratings on Job Surfing Factor by Parents' Household Income

General Household Income of Parents
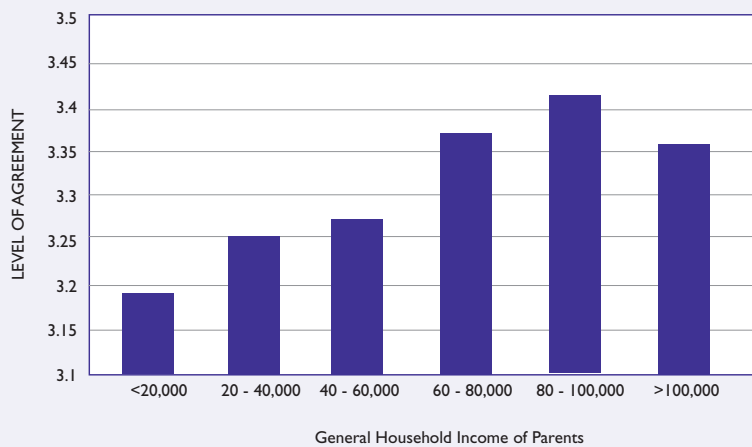
A young adult's socioeconomic status was measured by the general household income of that person's parents. Consistent with our findings on race and Job Surfing, we found that young adults from lower income families were less likely to support job surfing than young adults from higher income families. Thus, Figure 6 shows economic need may discourage job surfing behaviors.

7

Differences Based on Gender

There were few gender differences on the survey scales. The only differences were found on the Superiority scale, where young adult males scored higher than females; and on the Delayed Marriage scale, where more men believed marriage was not a high priority, compared with women. Average responses on these scales for men and women are shown in Figure 7.


Figure 7. Significant Differences on Superiority and Delayed Marriage Factors by Gender

Differences Based on College Major

For the Job Surfing factor, there were some significant differences based on a young adult's college major. These differences are shown in Figure 8. Young adults who declared education, health professions, or computer science as their college major were least likely to agree that they would try out different jobs. Conversely, young adults who declared communications, social science, or liberal arts as their college major were most likely to agree that they would surf for the right job. Thus, attitudes toward Job Surfing were more positive for young adults who majored in subjects that were less directed toward specific occupations.


Figure 8. Average Ratings on Job Surfing Factor by College Major
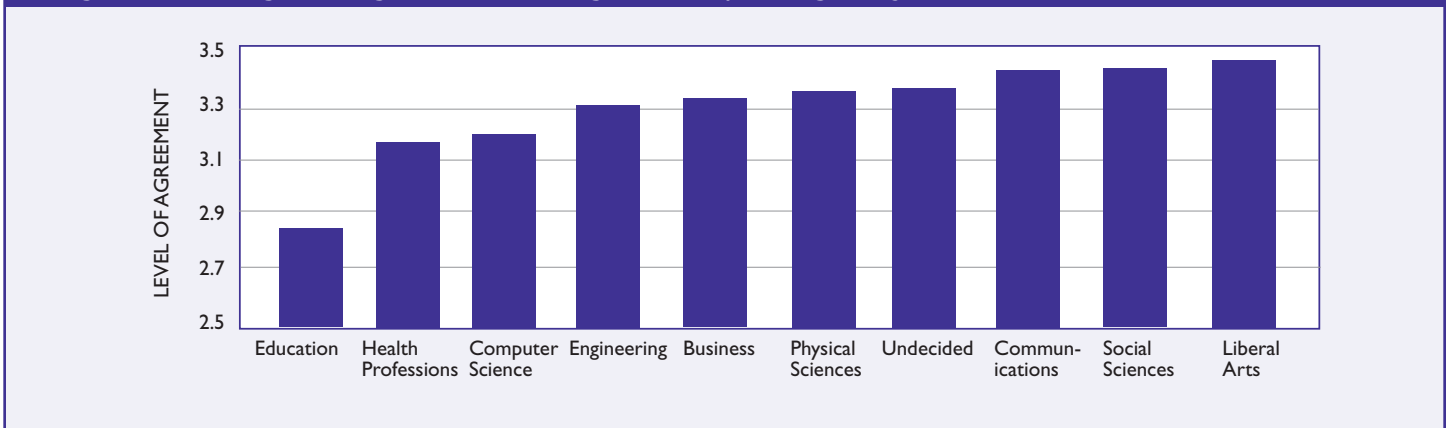
Reneging on a Job Acceptance Commitment

One consequence of job surfing behavior is that the job surfer is not committed or loyal to any organization. The survey contained one question that asked young adults to rate the extent to which they agreed with the statement: If I accepted one job offer and a better one came along, I would have no problems in telling the first company that I changed my mind and would take the better offer. Responses to this item appear in Figure 9 and show 44% of young adults agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. Many older adults interpreted this finding as a negative reflection on the younger generation, commenting that reneging on a job acceptance showed lack of character or ethics.

Figure 9. Average Ratings on Job Surfing Factor by College Major
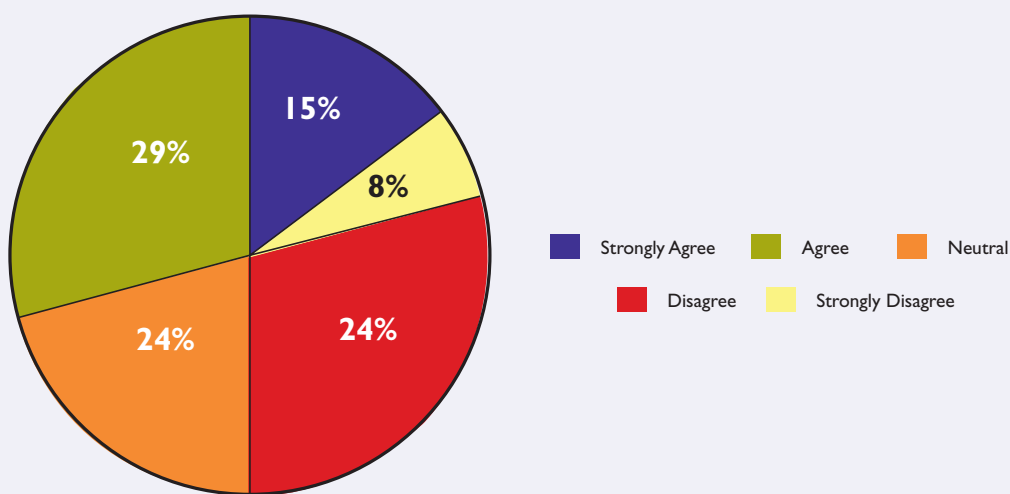
In contrast, several young adults interviewed expressed surprise that this percentage was not higher. Many commented that reneging would be an easy decision because the focus is always to get a better offer and the search for something better does not end when one offer is accepted. Others commented that they have observed friends and family members lose their jobs and/or benefits and have concluded that organizations are not committed or loyal to their employees. Thus, they question why they should be loyal to an organization and recognize that their career development may be contingent on changing jobs and changing organizations.

EMERGING PATTERNS

By comparing job surfing and career/life plans, we have identified four potential groups for further study.

Group 1 - Low job surfing intentions and low career plan development.
This group has not spent much time considering their career options and may not yet know the types of experiences they need to obtain to progress toward their career interests. We expect that these will be younger respondents who are focusing on their academic coursework and have not devoted much time to career planning. Their situation should change as they gain experience; however, we commonly encounter students who are so wrapped up in their academic pursuits that by graduation they have yet to post graduation plans.

Group 2 - Low job surfing intentions and high career plan development.
This group is best defined as motivated and directed. They know where they want to go and have a clearer understanding of how to manage an early career. We would expect members of this group to be eagerly sought after by employers as they can define their skills and articulate how they can help the company.

Group 3 - High job surfing intentions and low career plan development.
Members of this group may be characterized as aimless. After graduation they are not sure what they want to do and are having trouble defining themselves (self-identity). Thus, as Arnett has found, they engage in a variety of experiences to find out who they are. These experiences can be extremely valuable personally and to society from assisting with disaster relief, teaching English in foreign countries, and volunteering with community organizations. Others may seek short-term employment to try out different types of work. There is nothing wrong with this picture. The concern comes in whether these individuals have the ability and support to reflect on these experiences, to make sense of how they have shaped them, and to leverage these experiences into a successful career. If they are merely collecting experiences in hopes that something sticks (in other words they get lucky!), perhaps future research can identify predictors of this group and intervention programs to help them.

Group 4 - High job surfing and high career plan development.
These individuals are what Schneider and Stevenson (2000) characterized as motivated but directionless. They know where they want to go but they are not sure how to get there. Job surfing will serve as a means to find the right position in the right company. The length of time one stays in this directionless state will probably vary. Some will find their footing with only a few job moves while others can be expected to make numerous moves before they settle down.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The profile of today's young adults described in this report has also been used to describe young adults in countries outside the U.S. In the United Kingdom, a new acronym, KIPPERS, describes "Kids In Parents' Pockets, Eroding Retirement Savings." In Germany, nesthocker describes young adult squatters living with their parents; in Japan, freeter describes job hopping young adults who are living at home; and in Italy, mammone describes a young adult who won't give up mama's cooking and still lives at home. Thus, some of the concerns about how young adults are transitioning from college are also being experienced in many developed countries. These young adults may pose challenges for organizations, companies and societies for several years to come as we learn how to integrate them into the workplace.

Organizations that hire these young adults may benefit from a better understanding of this new generation of workers. Recruitment practices, orientation programs, and socialization practices should be designed to better integrate young adults into the workforce. Young adults are looking for the best fit between what they want (but may not be able to define) and the company. Recruitment practices would benefit from clearly branding the company's values and environment; for example, using blogs where recently hired employees can talk with potential new hires about the company. Orientation programs need to focus on more than the formal procedures and processes within the company. Time needs to be earmarked for activities that allow new hires to mix with a variety of co-workers and to express their personal and professional values. Allowing new hires to experience a variety of different positions or activities will provide the sense of job surfing but increase the probability of retaining new hires.

Future research on these young adults should be conducted to better predict who is likely to engage in job surfing, who may be likely to renege on an organizational commitment, and who is likely to develop a successful career plan and concrete life goals. This project is a step in this direction. Results from this research will not only help organizations recruit and retain young talent, but also help young adults find successful and satisfying careers.
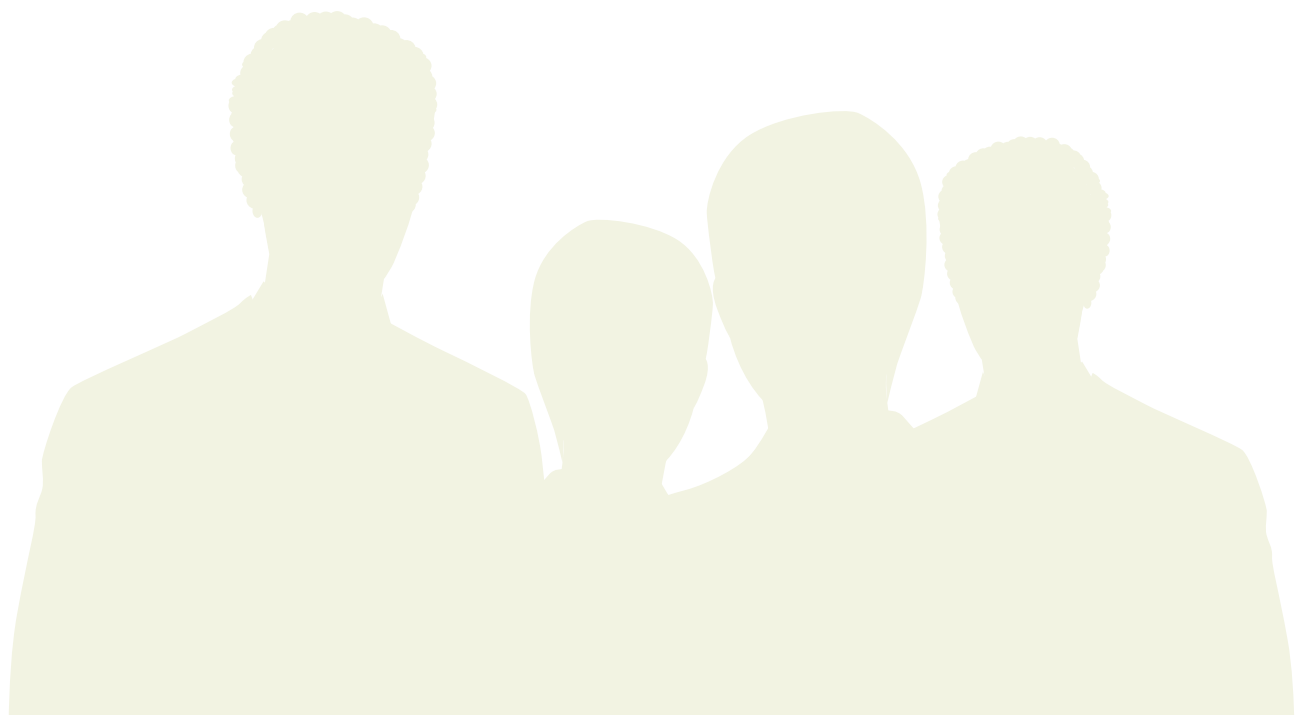
SUMMARY

Results from the survey revealed the following key points:

- Many young adults are confident that they could go back home and live with their parents. This support system allows them the flexibility to seek a variety of experiences before settling down. Parents provide a safety net for young adults to surf for the right job. Organizations can provide realistic job previews to these young adults during the recruitment and selection stages in order to maximize the fit between what a young adult wants and what an employer provides.

- Some young adults perceive themselves to be better than others and thus, entitled to better things in life. This sense of entitlement may encourage young adults to avoid compromises or concessions and to continue their search for an ideal job and career. They may not know what they want, but they know after working a particular job, that it is not what they want. Thus, job surfing is used to gain different experiences in order to determine what kind of career would best fit them. Men were more likely to describe themselves as superior, compared to women. In addition, Asian-Americans were more likely to describe themselves as superior, compared to other race/ethnic groups. This sense of entitlement may be one explanation for why young adults are job surfing. Future research would be needed to explore reasons for these group differences.

- Some young adults do not have concrete career goals or plans. Among race/ethnic groups, African-Americans were most likely to have a vision for their career or general life. These young adults may be attracted to organizations that provide career guidance.

- Job surfing is more likely for young adults who declared their college major in liberal arts, social sciences or communications. These young adults may benefit from managers who take an active interest in their careers and who are knowledgeable about career options within the organization. Conversely, job surfing is less likely for young adults who declared their college major in education, health professions, or computer science. In addition, job surfing is less likely for young adults who come from lower socioeconomic family backgrounds or from African-American and Hispanic young adults.

- Many young adults are not bound to organizations by any sense of loyalty or commitment; thus they would leave one organization if they perceived a better offer from another organization. They have seen parents and relatives suffer the consequences of organizational downsizings and eroding benefits. If organizations are not loyal to their employees, these young adults question why they should be loyal to organizations. Perhaps this is the price organizations pay for recent downsizings. However, this is a general attitude that may not describe a particular organization's practices, values, or culture. Recruiters may want to emphasize how the organization values employee commitment and how a job acceptance is a serious decision that should not be made lightly.

REFERENCES

Arnett, Jeffrey. (2004). Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens through
    the Twenties. Oxford: New York, New York.

Howe, Neil and William Straus. (1991). Generations: The History of America's Future.
    1584-2069. William Marrow: New York, New York.

Howe, Neil, William Strauss, and R.J. Matson. (2000). Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation.
    Vintage Books: New York, New York.

Robbins, S. B., & Patton, M. (1985). Self psychology and career development: Construction of
    the superiority and goal instability scales. Journal of Counseling Psychology, 32, 221-231.

Schneider , Barbara and David Stevenson. (2000).The Ambitious Generation: America's Teenagers,
    Motivated but Directionless. Yale University Press: Connecticut.

Grossman, Lev. (January 24, 2005). Grow up? Not so fast. Time Magazine. (pp. 42-54).

RESEARCH PARTNERSHIP

About MonsterTRAK

Founded in 1987 as JobTRAK and acquired in 2000 by Monster®, the leading online global career and recruitment resource, MonsterTRAK is a leading college recruitment solution that successfully connects employers with college students, recent graduates and career centers. MonsterTRAK provides a wide range of entry-level, part-time and internship job listings, along with resources that enable students to develop and execute their own career management strategies. Recognized for the last five years by Student Monitor for offering world-class customer service, MonsterTRAK maintains superior relationships with more than 3,100 college and university career centers, MBA programs and alumni associations nationwide. For more information, please visit www.monstertrak.com or call 1-800-999-TRAK.

About Monster

Monster is the leading global online career and recruitment resource. A division of Monster Worldwide, Monster works for everyone by connecting quality job seekers at all levels with leading employers across all industries. Founded in 1994 and headquartered in Maynard, Massachusetts, Monster has 34 local language and content sites in 32 countries worldwide. More information is available at www.monster.com or by calling 1-800-MONSTER.

About Monster Intelligence

Monster Intelligence provides groundbreaking information and custom market analysis to help Monster customers make informed decisions about today's most pressing human capital issues. By analyzing and collecting data from over 3.3 million unique job searches performed on Monster each day, Monster Intelligence provides insight to help HR professionals improve recruiting success, leverage best practices, accelerate worker performance, and retain top talent. For more information, visit http://intelligence.monster.com or call 1-800-MONSTER, extension 6513.

About Collegiate Employment Research Institute (CERI) at Michigan State University
CERI, established in 1985, is nationally recognized for its research on the transition from college to work; employment readiness of college graduates; and the transition experience through college ("the sophomore year"). The Institute is also involved in the assessment of learning in the workplace; assessment practices for University accountability (outcome assessment); and evaluation of integrated learning opportunities. CERI annually publishes Recruiting Trends that provides an analysis of the college labor market. For information on the Institute visit http://ceri.msu.edu, or call us at 517-355-2211.

About Dr. Georgia Chao
Georgia T. Chao is Associate Professor of Management at the Eli Broad College of Business at Michigan State University. Prior to joining the MSU management faculty, she was Section Head of the Department of Management at the General Motors Institute. Her primary research interests lie in the areas of career development, organizational socialization, and cultural issues in organizational behavior. Dr. Chao has published a number of articles in these areas and has conducted training and applied research at General Motors, Ford, AT&T, Singer, and other organizations. She received the Academy of Management award for the Outstanding Publication in Organizational Behavior in 1995 with Dr. Gardner. In 2000, she was named a Fellow of the American Psychological Association and the Society of Industrial and Organizational Psychology. Dr. Chao currently serves on four editorial boards and chairs the American Psychological Association's Committee on International Relations in Psychology.

About Dr. Phil Gardner
Phil Gardner is the Director of the Collegiate Employment Research Institute at Michigan State University. Prior to joining MSU, he was on the faculty at the University of California, Riverside. His primary research interests cover the transition from college to work, early career dynamics of young adults, impact of co-curricular activities on career aspirations and achievement, and college labor markets. Dr. Gardner has published his work in a variety of publications and speaks frequently on college campuses and before employer associations. He received the Academy of Management award for Outstanding Publication in Organizational Behavior (with Dr. Chao) in 1995. Dr. Gardner currently serves as senior editor of the Journal of Cooperative Education and Internships.

GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF SURVEY RESPONDENTS

Table 1 describes the young adults who participated in the survey. Most respondents are between the ages of 20-23, female, Caucasian, living on campus or at home with their parents. Respondents come from a variety of different socioeconomic backgrounds, based on the general household income of their parents. Finally, most of the survey respondents are either attending college or are college graduates with bachelor's degrees.

Table 1. Respondent Characteristics; Number and Percent ()		
Age: 18-28 year olds: 10,259 (88) 29-39 year olds: 1,046 (9) 40-50 year olds: 310 (3) 51-61 year olds: 89 (1)	**Race:** Black/African-American: 817 (8) Asian/Asian-American: 1812 (18) Caucasian: 6026 (59) Hispanic/Latino(a): 650 (6) Other: 934 (9)	
Gender: Males: 3120 (30) Females: 7122 (70)	**Lifestyle: Living on or at** Campus: 2831 (28) Home with parents: 2568 (25) Own with support from parent: 2383 (23) Own, supporting self: 1964 (19) Own, supporting self & others: 471 (5)	
Parents' Household Income: Under $20,000: 874 (9) $20,001 – 40,000: 1535 (15) $40,001 – 60,000: 1671 (16) $60,001 – 80,000: 1674 (16) $80,001 – 100,000: 1403 (14) Above $100,001: 1879 (18)	**Highest Education Level Completed:** High school grad. or GED: 188 (2) Some college: 3761 (37) Associate's degree: 555 (5) Bachelor's degree: 4283 (42) Some post-graduate: 423 (4) Master's degree: 915 (9) Professional (MD, JD, PhD): 104 (1)	
Note: Data for all categories, except age, are focused on respondents who are between 18-28 years of age.	Note: not all categories total to 10,259 due to missing data.	

monster®

today's the day ™

1-800-MONSTER (666-7837)