



TALKING 'BOUT MY GENERATION

Tammy Hughes and Steve Fiehl tell us why a tailored approach is needed when incorporating Generation Y into the workplace.

Generation Y is the first generation to grow up immersed in digital media, with two-thirds of them having used a computer by the age of five. The economic downturn has affected Y'ers more than any other generation, but they remain optimistic and energetic. The future is in their hands.

Yet managers and colleagues are often challenged by their approach to work. What makes them tick? How do you provide suitable learning and development? How do you give feedback without ruffling feathers? And, more importantly, why should organisations accommodate the wants of the new generation of employees? Generation Y is the largest of four groups of employees in the workplace (see *boxout*).

WORKPLACE GENERATIONS

Each generation saw a pendulum swing in parenting styles, from authoritarian to permissive, from adult-focused to child-centred. Childhood was a fun time for Y'ers. They were shaped by the times in which they lived with scheduled, structured family-oriented lives in contrast to the economic crisis and wars affecting adults. Phrases like 'helicopter parent' and 'soccer mum' reveal a time of child-centric, hands-on parenting. This style is at the heart of how this generation has been imprinted. It looks likely that it will be 'the most entitled generation ever' because they were given more than any generation.

Integrating them into the workforce and providing suitable learning and development is challenging. A common expectation from Generation X managers might be that Generation Y should be grateful for a job, grow up and fit into the workplace. But to attract this new young talent it is necessary to understand what makes them tick. It doesn't mean that employers need to bend over backwards to accommodate all their preferences. But management needs to

appreciate that if they want to retain the best and brightest of Generation Y, they need a better understanding.

Every older generation feels that the generation following must pay their dues and perhaps take jobs they don't like in order to climb the career ladder – just like their forefathers did. In fact, Generation X managers would do well to recall that they did not accept the workplace of their predecessors and fought long and hard for more flexible working. They rejected the 'live to work' ethos of the War generation, they worked to live. They achieved flexi-time and home working, all concepts unknown before Generation X joined the workplace.

RESPONDING TO NEEDS

Generation X managers need to accept that the priorities and drivers of the new generation are different. The future success of the business depends on strategies that recognise these differences and exploit the energy of new generation workers. Understanding how to respond to the needs of Generation Y with practical action will create a harmonious and productive working environment for all ages.

- **"Help us learn"**: Generation Y was brought up to believe 'you can be anything you want to be' and received lots of positive feedback. In the workplace this translates into a heightened positive response to coaching. Keep the work challenging and also the learning. Generation Y will leave if they feel there is nothing new coming down the pipeline. This group learns fast. A PowerPoint presentation might put them to sleep, whereas computer-based and modular learning works well. Make sure training is fast and engaging and consider delivering learning modules through mobile devices that allow people to learn on the move
- **"Believe in us"**: Generation Y is less likely to respond well to traditional recognition such as a certificate or plaque for their office wall. Not all employees are wired the same way. If you want to recognise the new generation give them a half-day off or provide a free car wash coupon
- **"Tune-in to our technology"**: Generation Y employees are the first digital natives in history and will expect to use technology to work and communicate quickly. There is an expectation that Generation Y will be computer literate. However in reality, often they are not. This is the text generation; proficient with their thumbs but they may not know how to use Word and PowerPoint for business. This is an area where employers can create learning. Employers may also have to coach Generation Y'ers to lift their heads out of their mobile devices and interact with the real world

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- **"Connect us"**: Generation Y likes working as part of a team, in comparison to the X generation, which was more resistant to team and collaboration working. Generation Y is very receptive to online community learning. Consider pairing with mentors so that they get face-time to help them to learn the business
- **"Avoid micromanagement"**: It is important to avoid micromanaging or discounting ideas and risk quashing the Generation Y spirit. No-one likes a manager who is inconsistent and disorganised, least of all Generation Y which has grown up under clear parental structure. This is a positive generation that does not respond well to (or understand) cynicism. Most importantly trust them to get the work done
- **"Tell us how we're doing"**: Generation Y thrives on feedback, as a result of the parenting style they experienced and their experience of regular assessment through the education system. That is not just because they need positive strokes. If they are making mistakes and not being corrected, thereby not learning from their mistakes, then they are wasting their time. They want managers to coach them like their parents did, providing clear direction and structure with short-term goals. If they get a manager who only wants to give them feedback once a year in a traditional performance review, they probably won't stay
- **"We are hungry for knowledge skills"**: Generation Y loves to work for managers who teach them new things and are interested in learning new things themselves. This workforce needs supervision and structure, and they expect to be guided. Traditional hierarchical organisational styles will not work with people who want to enjoy what they do every day. Enterprises that can move with the times and tap into Generation Y's young, positive spirit without quenching it, will be fuelled for success

For a generation weaned on social networking, Generation Y is responsive to face-time with people and likes to feel supported. They respond to collaborative peer working with approachable managers; and they simply do not recognise the hierarchical systems of 20 years ago. Young workers think nothing of using the CEO's first name; and they expect others to be as genial as they are.

INCLUSIVITY

Choosing the right type of learning platform and using it efficiently and interactively, is critical in order to maximise the training for Y'ers. Mobile learning can provide learning on the move – perhaps to and from work. Keeping Generation Y engaged with flexible format and relevant content is key. Organisations need to appeal to young talent to ensure the future, while maximising the skills of mature employees whose experience and contribution is also invaluable. There is much to be gained by a multi-generational workforce.

The war for talent has begun. Attracting talent as well as identifying and winning applicants' loyalty is becoming a general management obsession. Skills development policies have become a sales pitch to attract candidates. As demonstrated by a survey carried out by the Hay Group of 500,000 people in 300 British companies, "a company's ability to train its staff and continuously develop skills has become the number one key to attracting and keeping business partners."

My Generation

Generation Y is the largest of four groups of employees in the worldwide workplace

- **The World War II Generation**, born before 1940, now makes up less than 1% of the global workforce
- **The so-called Baby Boom Generation**, born 1940 to 1960, accounts for 12%
- **Generation X**, born 1960-1980, represents around 43% of the workforce
- **The largest – and still-growing group – is Generation Y**, at 44% of employees

Source: Percentages based on figures from the International Labour Organisation, Switzerland

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