

Generation Y in the Workplace

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The Department of the Navy is one of many employers trying to understand Generation Y. Who are they? What makes them tick? How do we recruit them—and more important, how do we retain them?

Generation Y (known to many as echo-boomers, boomer babies, millennials, the entitlement generation, or the digital generation), by the broadest definition, numbers more than 70 million Americans born between 1977 and 2000 and accounts for approximately 21 percent of the overall workforce. They are the fastest-growing segment of the workforce.

Known for their optimism, education, collaborative ability, open-mindedness, and drive, Generation Y are the hottest commodities on the job market. Generation Y'ers have always felt sought after, needed, and indispensable, and they are arriving at the workplace with higher expectations than any other generation before them. When Generation Y made their initial foray in the workforce, their positive reputation was built early because employers loved their energy, drive, and skills. However, many managers were a little taken aback by what they perceived as a short attention span and reluctance to perform tasks that lacked depth. Today, as the demand for intelligent workers intensifies, employers need to understand what motivates and inspires the loyalty of these high-performing employees.

Workforce Composition

Generation Y is only one of four workforce generations. In addition, today's workforce includes the Traditionalists (pre-1946), Baby Boomers (1946-1964), and Generation X (1964-1979). Each group has its own distinct set of values, view of authority, orientation to the world, loyalty, expectations of their leadership, and ideal work environment. Every generation is uniquely shaped by its own location in history, and this formative influence has enduring effects and brings something new and important to the workforce. That is why it is so important for high-level managers and executives to understand, respect, and regularly address generational differences that manifest themselves in the workplace.



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Everyone desires a workplace and culture that not only allows, but also encourages, him or her to be a productive and influential contributor. The challenge facing employers in the public and private sectors is to create an environment that meets the needs and expectations of all employees, regardless of the generation to which they belong.

Traditionalists grew up during World War II. They are familiar with hardship, value consistency, and are disci-

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plined and respectful of the law. They are familiar with the top-down style of management that disseminates information on a need-to-know basis, and they get satisfaction from knowing a job is well done. Traditionalists are known for staying with one company for their entire career.

The Baby Boomers are an enormous generation that grew up in relative prosperity and safety. They developed their opinions during the sixties and seventies, believing in growth, changes, and expansion. They seek promotion by working long hours and demonstrating loyalty. In general, they believe anything is possible and therefore strive for the corner office, top title, and highest salary.

Between the generation that preceded them (Baby Boomers) and the generation that followed them (Generation Y), is a small group of the population born between 1967 and 1979. This small generation known as Generation X finds itself wedged between two huge demographic groups and as a result feels somewhat overlooked. These are the employees who are determined to maintain a work/life balance. The days of a job for life became history with Generation X. According to "Generation Flex," a *Sydney Morning Herald* article by Bonnie Malkin, the number of people staying in a job for five to 10 years declined by 21.3 percent between 1972 and 2000. In *Managing a Multi-Generation Workforce*, Gerry Davis, managing partner for Heidrick and Struggles, states that intensely self-focused post-Boomers born during the late 1960s and 1970s often lack loyalty to their employers. Without clear career goals, Gen-Xers place family and community above work requirements.

Generation Y has always been familiar with the Internet, CDs, DVDs, cellular phones, and digital cameras. This generation is more affluent, more technologically savvy, better educated, and more ethnically diverse than any previous generation. They're always looking to develop new skills and embrace a challenge. They strive for success, and therefore measure that success in terms of what they've learned and the skills they've developed from each experience. Generation Y often takes longer to find stable careers and settle into lifelong relationships. Though Generation Y'ers often take longer to emerge into the professional world, they are more likely to obtain graduate degrees than previous generations because of their high regard for education.

What Makes Generation Y Tick?

Generation Y's characteristics put them in high demand in today's job market, but managers and employers are having an extremely difficult time understanding how to incorporate them in the work environment. Following are some of their most unique characteristics, which are proving to be beneficial on one hand, yet extremely challenging on the other.

High Expectation of Employers

Y'ers want fair and direct managers who are highly engaged in their professional development.

Need for Ongoing Learning

Generation Y'ers are known for their ability to multitask. They seek out creative challenges and view colleagues as vast resources from whom to gain knowledge. It is important for employers to continue giving them challenging projects in order to prevent boredom and attrition. Y'ers aren't eager to bury themselves in a cubicle and take orders from others in the workforce. They want ownership and control of their own fate.

Goal, Goals, Goals

Y'ers want small goals with tight deadlines so that they can build ownership of tasks. They should be challenged to find technological solutions to everyday issues.

Desire for Immediate Responsibility

They want to make an important impact immediately on projects they are involved with. They are looking for immediate gratification and an opportunity to excel.

Balance and Flexibility

The more psychologists and social scientists study this generation, the more they realize that Generation Y members are most drawn to flexibility and balance in their day-to-day life, so it's important for employers to understand how to incorporate flexibility and work life balance into their recruiting strategies.

Even in this time of lean staffing, Generation Y workers like to have a life outside work. Generation Y'ers don't want to repeat what they perceive to be the mistakes their parents made. Unlike the boomers, they don't want to work long hours at the expense of family, friends, and personal pursuits. Whereas the boomers put a high priority on career, today's youngest workers are more interested in making their jobs accommodate their family and personal lives. Money is important to them but maintaining work-life balance outranks money. In most cases, it's not the corner office or a large paycheck that drives Generation Y, but rather, the opportunity to work for a company that fosters strong workplace relationships and inspires a sense of balance and/or purpose.

Generation Y'ers want jobs with flexibility and telecommuting options that allow them to work, yet at the same time give them the opportunity to leave the workplace temporarily to care for children. They see work as one component of a balanced life portfolio that includes family, friends, fitness, and fun. Demonstrating flexibility, while focusing on goals and accountability, can go a long way toward inspiring loyalty in Generation Y employees. Affording employees some flexibility to balance family, educational pursuits, leisure, and community activities

often leads to better performance as well as higher retention rates.

The Challenge for Employers

Generation Y will most likely prove, if capitalized on, to be one of the greatest assets of companies today; however, many organizations are failing to formulate strategies to recruit and especially to retain this talent. The challenge that lies ahead is to find a balance between a work environment that leverages the benefits of Generation Y but does not alienate the rest of the workforce.

Coaching is one of the most successful methods for retaining Generation Y employees because it allows employees to thrive in an environment designed to enable their success. Frequent coaching and mentoring by higher-level employees challenges new graduates to take on more challenging work. It takes advantage of employee potential by playing to their strengths, while at the same time, it helps them recognize and understand their weaknesses. Many successful business entities are creating mentorship programs to impress and recruit younger employees. Generation Y employees accept that they cannot rely on their employers to take care of their careers, but they appreciate all the help they can get. In addition to required annual appraisals, feedback from managers is best when given frequently and in a constructive manner. This helps employees better understand what they're doing well and how they can improve upon their skills.

Mentors should be honest and clear with young employees, stating the specific behaviors and why they are good or bad. Together the managers and employees should establish desired goals, and ways in which to accomplish them. Additionally, mentors should keep in mind that Generation Y'ers—like most people in the working world—thrive on praise. Don't save recognition for a year-end banquet, but compliment and give positive reinforcement during an assignment. This open dialogue and understanding has proved to be very successful in organizations all over the nation.

To this goal-oriented generation of employees, training may be the most important aspect of workplace coaching. It may be even more important than bonuses and stock options to some young employees. So it's essential to provide Generation Y with a variety of training options—online, on-the-job, and classroom. And employers should keep in mind the technology expertise and productivity potential of this generation of workers. It is a wise investment to spend money out of the company budget on state-of-the-art equipment and cutting-edge training.

Personalized Motivation and NSPS

Managers of Generation Y workers should explore a New Age idea recently introduced into the business world: *per-*

sonalized motivation. This is method of profiling employees to determine how each individual prefers to be managed. These approaches can be easily implemented and, in no time, enable employees to give managers information on the best ways to motivate them and, therefore, maximize their potential. Some of the most basic questions used in this method are: What would you like to do more of? What would you like to do less of? How would you like to be managed?

The need to identify employees' critical motivators is important because most managers are not skilled at motivating their employees. When managers don't know what motivates an individual, they mistakenly assume that all employees like to be managed in the same way. The personalized motivation methodology increases open communication in the workplace and better understanding of what will get the best performance out of each employee.

The new Department of Defense National Security Personnel System will undoubtedly lead to this type of open communication, enabling employees and managers to establish goals and deadlines together as a team. NSPS is about performance and results. Generation Y values working in an organization where they know what is expected, where there is a shared vision of what needs to be accomplished, and where they are provided feedback about performance. NSPS encourages meetings between supervisors and employees to cooperatively establish goals, the monitoring of success, and communication of accomplishments. It is believed that NSPS will improve the way the DoD hires, assigns, compensates, and rewards its employees, while preserving the core merit principles. The change to NSPS is perfectly aligned with Generation Y thoughts, beliefs, and desires in fostering a high-performing culture of outside-the-box thinkers. The system is in the beginning stages but has the potential to be a great model not only for government organizations, but also for the private sector.

Generation Y is a powerful group of young individuals with unique attributes and a potential considered by most social scientists and researchers to be infinite. It is vital for organizations inside and outside government to take the necessary steps to better understand Y'ers. Above all, Generation Y wants to—and has what it takes to—balance workplace success with a healthy lifestyle. The challenge is now on organizations to provide the environment in which that can happen. The key is for employers to work with these young employees, to listen to them, and to understand what makes them tick.

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