

Generation Y Takes Center Stage

Strategies for Attracting and Retaining Generation Y

By Melanie Douglas

Canadian employers scrambling to replace Baby Boomers leaving the workforce have their work cut out for them. Baby Boomers' offspring - Generation X - is significantly smaller in size and not all that interested in following in its parents' footsteps.

What to do? Organizations are starting to focus their energies toward an instrumental generation, one poised to fill the Boomer gaps with much optimism. However, the youngest generation entering the workforce comes with its own challenges.

Generation Y

Generation Y, born between 1981 and 1999, goes by many names: Millenials, Echo Generation, Internet Generation, Nintendo Generation, Digital Generation, Sunshine Generation, Nexters, and Boomlets.

For a group as large, diverse, and keen at multi-tasking as this one is, having a multitude of names to describe it isn't surprising. What might be more surprising is how little Generation Y has in common with its predecessor, Generation X. In fact, Gen Y is most closely aligned with the Traditionalists than any other generation. With a population rivaling the Baby Boomers, there are more than 70 million Gen Yers in North America alone.

Gen Yers are very confident in themselves and optimistic about the future. Unlike Gen Xers who were latchkey kids and children of divorce, Gen Yers were given full attention by their parents. As a result, this generation is strongly family-focused, sharing a fundamental Traditionalist view of the importance of family. Gen Yers are sociable, collaborative, and open-minded. Having grown up with more interaction from other ethnicities, cultures, and sexual orientations than any previous generation, they prefer working together for a cause. They're global thinkers and attuned to the 'big picture', seeing everything as connected. Gen Yers were raised with busy schedules as their parents sought to plan out every minute of their time with various activities.

Generation Y at Work

Generation Y expects a workplace that is:

- Challenging. They are looking for opportunities to learn, grow, and develop.
- Collaborative. They are group-oriented and inclusive. They want to work alongside friends, not just 'coworkers'.
- Flexible. They have a lot to do in life and will not tolerate a rigid schedule.
- Respectful. This is a two way street. They'll listen to you, but they're used to their voices being heard, even if they have very little experience.
- Goal-focused. Don't be surprised if they show up with a list of their career goals on day one.
- Tech-savvy. Companies who communicate via MSN Messenger are right up their alley.
- Financially-rewarding. They've got future families to think of and a long list of employers with competitive pay.
- Positive and fun. They're looking for a friendly atmosphere and colleagues who know how to laugh.

The Challenges of Generation Y

Bill Gates recently bemoaned the lack of science and math skills among recent graduates. And a recent survey of HR professionals takes it even further than the tech mogul: the survey reported that overall professionalism, written and verbal communication skills, analytical skills and business knowledge are lagging in workers entering the workforce.

There has been a undeniable shift in the importance of self-expression at home and at school which has begun to surface in the workplace. Traditionalists, Baby Boomers, and even Generation Xers would agree that growing up, there were less grey areas in life than there exist now. You respected your elders, your parents, your teachers, and all forms of authority. At home, there was a right and a wrong way to do things, and if you disobeyed your parents' rules, you were punished. The same went for school. When you spelled a word wrong, the teacher would circle your error with red ink, and have you correct it. Today, we are a red-ink-free society. Teachers are told to use blue or black ink, or better yet, pencil, to correct their students' work, for fear of discouraging them. Seeing a paper full of red marks (formerly known as 'corrections') has been deemed too overwhelmingly negative for a student to handle. Spelling a word wrong has become a form of self-expression, even a choice.

However, this shift in logic makes sense when children are teaching their parents how to defrag their hard drives: children are put on an equal playing field with their parents, because mom and dad no longer know best. With the advent of online communication -- its automatic spell checks and instant messaging (where it takes too long to write "You made me laugh out loud"), this generation doesn't need to know how to spell, or even speak English properly, for that matter. Acronyms will suffice. It LOL, CSL, DKDC, HAGO, and confesses ILY. Not that this the generation is bad or worse than its predecessors; it's just really different. It speaks a language others don't understand... literally.

More than any other generation, Generation Y enters the workforce with extremely high expectations. After all, they were taught that life should be positive, creative, and challenging - that whatever they set their minds to, they can accomplish. This type of attitude can be seen as off-putting and even threatening to other generations who may view Gen Y as a bunch of overconfident, inexperienced kids unwilling to pay their dues. We must remember that Generation Y has never really had much of a struggle.

Gen Yers' multi-tasking talents have a flipside - an inability to concentrate for long periods of time on a single task. This trait is carried into the workforce. A recent poll found that 46% of this year's graduates are planning to stay with their first employer for less than two years -- not a promising statistic for employers who are planning on investing in this next generation. This generation wants to learn as much as it can in a short period of time and then move onto something bigger and better.

Eric Chester, author of *Employing Generation Why and Getting Them to Give a Damn*, says that "the only way to convince a worker, young or old, that loyalty is reciprocated is by demonstrating that value in your employment practices. If young people see older employees being casually discarded, they know that it will be just a matter of time before the same happens to them. If they see that longevity is rewarded, they'll feel more inclined to invest themselves fully."

What's most important to remember is that what Generation Y wants isn't so different from what every other generation wants; the only difference is that this generation is asking for it.