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Integrating “Gen-Y” as Employees and Members

One of the more challenging issues that organizations will have to deal in the next few years is how to successfully integrate “Gen-Y” into the workforce.

Born between the years 1977 to 1999, they make up almost one-quarter of the entire population. And while there has been a lot of news coverage about Gen-Y, most of it has focused on marketing and consumer issues, with no shortage in the availability of statistics on how much they spend, and how they influence the spending of their parents.

Yet there hasn't been a lot of thought given as to how to successfully integrate this new and diverse age demographic into the workforce, an issue that is becoming more important with every passing day. The fact is, these kids are unique in more ways than one, and hence, forward thinking executives should take the time to learn how to take advantage of their uniqueness, and how to best manage and motivate them.

They are certainly technologically adept – they are the first generation to grow up with microcomputers, the Internet and other online systems. They are of a mindset that if you don't have knowledge about something, you simply enter a few keystrokes to get it. In that sense, they are uniquely prepared for a world of work that is becoming more and more complex, given the rapid rate of change that now swirls around every organization. You should be prepared to harness their ability to generate just-in-time knowledge, and use that to take on some of the more challenging and pressing issues that you face.

But with their technological prowess comes a potential challenge. They've been weaned on Internet chat services such as ICQ and MSN, have mastered Nintendo and Xbox from an early age, and have never known a world that has less than a few hundred TV channels. This brings to them a certain scatter-shot approach to things and an attention span that can be easily challenged. It's not unusual to see them surfing a few Web sites while flipping back and forth between various TV channels, all while they carry out an Internet chat and talk on the phone at the same time!

From this perspective, they are certainly capable of multi-tasking. And that brings a unique challenge that the corporate sector hasn't really had to deal with before – a generation of workers who can become extremely bored, extremely quickly! Because they are used to a world in which they can be doing multiple things at once, and which their minds are always very active, they'll come to expect the same degree of heightened stimulation in the workplace.

This means they'll have to be provided with a regular stream of new projects and varied assignments and responsibilities. Not only that, but they will have to be provided a career path that allows for multiple different jobs and careers throughout their lifetime. Certainly that fits in with contemporary thinking about where we are headed in terms of the future of careers: a recent article in *The Daily Telegraph* noted that “*workers of the future will change jobs 19 times during their lives.*”

Policies that provide for multiple jobs and career paths will be critical if an organization wants to have any hope of retaining these folks for a longer term. And even that might not mean that they will stay for very long – during a seminar on change for a scientific crowd last week, I pulled out a statistic that indicated that newly graduated consulting engineers thought of a period of time ranging from 2 to 5 years when asked about a long term job!

The unique experience that Gen-Y has with the world of chat also means that this is a generation that is fiercely collaborative and extremely team oriented, with the result that they'll be able to take on the

most complex of projects, and work in a manner which draws together the talents of many, many people. I believe that we will see a real change in the manner by which organizations can take on new and complex issues, because of the unique collaborative culture which will be embedded in the workplace.

Their background also suggests that they will reject most of the current norms of what we believe to be a “workplace.” They have never known a world that doesn’t have e-mail or cell phones. They’ve long been accustomed to the idea that you can do anything from anywhere at any time. And despite being so team-oriented, they are also fiercely independent at the same time, perhaps because 75% of them are the children of dual-working parents.

This means that they work well on their own, regardless of where they might happen to be located. How can we possibly expect them to subscribe to a corporate work philosophy that says you have to come to a certain location every day to do things? I think they will find the concept to be completely laughable, with the result that those organizations which have yet to adopt a workplace culture that supports teleworking, timeshifting, work-at-home and other methods of location-insensitive working arrangements will be forced into dealing with the issue pretty soon.

Another important fact is that we will likely see the issue of “change-resistance” take on far less importance in the future. Boomers today are best characterized as the generation that has been most resistant to change, perhaps because they are the only generation that has witnessed first-hand the gut-wrenching twists and turns that has come with the introduction of technology in the workplace. The result has been a world in which gazillions of dollars are spent on workshops, seminars and courses on how to “deal with change.”

I expect that type of thinking will soon come to an end. Gen-Y has grown up in a world which is far more complex than that of previous generations, and one in which change has been constant and relentless. The result that they’ve developed a mindset that is creative, curious, and quite used to dealing with the complexity of change. This means that we will likely witness with the Gen-Y crowd a mindset that thrives on innovation, and one that embraces change in all of its various forms.

Related to the issue of change is that they will find (and do find) many of our current business processes to be truly laughable. I remember being stunned when my 9 year old son asked me what a cheque was a few weeks ago. Think about that – he’s already growing up in a paradigm of electronic business transactions. That’s the mentality coming into the workforce, with the result that companies will find a constant pressure to bring more efficiency to the workplace through the absolute elimination of the many paper-based business processes which surround us still.

And last but not least, they definitely have strong perceptions on the issue of work/life balance. According to a survey by Manchester, MA based Silver Stork Research of woman aged 17 to 28, most think the most important thing they could give to their children compared to what their parents gave them is “time.” That’s why 90% of them said they would even take a pay cut to spend more time with their children. The survey went on to examine how the workforce should change to support their ideals. 78% per cent said flexible work schedules were a must, and 59% said that the establishment of “parenting hours” (i.e. a workday that goes from 9am to 3pm) would also be a requirement.

That’s but one aspect of their work/life philosophy. They will come to expect a career in which work is but a means to an end – rather than a life in which the career defines who they are, they will live with an understanding that their career or job is but one component of an overall, rich, complex and busy life.

Put it all together, and they are unique in more ways than one.

As association executives, you’ll need to give a great deal of thought as to how your members can prepare for the challenges and opportunity this generation brings into the workplace. But you can’t stop yourself there – you have to start thinking about the role that they will play as members of your association.

The same attributes they bear when it comes to work – multi-skilled, easily bored, teamwork oriented – will influence the expectations they have of the associations to which they belong. It is quite likely that they will demand far different programs and activities within a conference, sufficient to keep them

interested at the scattershot pace at which they operate. They will expect fewer, long drawn out committee studies and meetings, and will instead demand instant analysis of an issue in an online discussion forum. They'll use their methods of online interaction to form powerful and effectively online lobby groups that will be able to quickly propel any type of issue into national consciousness.

From this perspective, start taking the time now to study who they are, how they think, how they interact – and what it might mean to you in the future. Because the future is now.

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