

# Promises and Perils of Managing Gen y

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## The Promises and Perils of Managing Gen Y

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Last updated 5/11/2014

Command and control? Tethered to a desk or workplace? Forget it! Gen Yers are not responding well to the traditional styles of management still popular in much of today's hierarchical workforce. It really isn't that they are trying to be disrespectful of our traditions. It's just that they (our traditions) do not fit their reality.

Gen X and Boomers, for example, expected to earn the right to be heard. They learned to gain credibility through time, commitment, and production. Gen Yers, on the other hand, have grown up having both the freedom and the voice that technology gives them. They can make their "voice" heard anytime they want to do so through Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, The Vine, and probably many, many more that most of us Boomers and Xers don't even know about yet. All their lives, their input has been valued, and they are not going to accept that it has changed just because they are employed.

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So, here's the challenge: We must figure out how to bring this very unique and interesting generation to and through the workplace and help them be successful. It will be easier for future generations, because technology will already be the driving factor in the business world but we, lucky us, get the opportunity to be the ones who convert the workplace and the workforce around technology. Unfortunately, it's sort of trial and error that we learn what does and doesn't work. Still, one way or another, we have to figure out how to lure the incoming talent to the workplace and how to keep them, and that means we have to change. If our work environment isn't Gen Y friendly, we should not expect them to stay. They are truly a different breed of worker and the paycheck alone isn't motivating enough.

We have learned that they really don't want to be job hoppers, but they are, because today's workplace doesn't "fit" Gen Yers very well, so they keep job-hopping and looking for that right fit. In fact, Forbes magazine reports that, according to data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the average worker today stays at each of his or her jobs for only 4.4 years but the expected tenure of the workforce's youngest employees is about half that. Of Gen Yers (born between 1977-1997), 99.1% expect to stay in a job for less than three years, according to the Future Workplace "Multiple Generations @ Work" survey of 1,189 employees and 150 managers. They move from one job to another either by choice or by force and many do not have either the focus or the drive to succeed in traditional environments. We believe that they will have both as soon as we figure out how to lure them and motivate them and potentially let them drive some of the innovation our companies need.

Skills

Why? Because they are looking for something, and they are having a lot of trouble finding it. Here are some of the things they want:

- to work for an employer who is honest, up-to-date, speedy, and green
- to be totally connected and at the same time totally untethered
- to be able to access their social networks and online games at work
- to be able to work on things they are passionate about
- to have full benefits and a lot of vacation
- to have customizable roles and responsibilities
- to have customizable schedule options such as part-time, flextime, temporary project-based work, job sharing, seasonal employment, shift work, and of course, telecommuting
- to have great technology and to have their employer pay for it
- to do collaborative work as a team
- to solve problems
- to receive lots of feedback—constant, immediate feedback
- to receive personal attention from their boss
- to work on interesting and challenging assignments—they do not want to start with grunt work and climb the ladder to higher levels.

Interestingly, money is not one of their driving factors.

So, what are employers to do?

As difficult as it all sounds, organizations can do a lot to adjust and many are. Leading organizations place a huge emphasis on getting the right people in the right places at the right time, and that includes bringing this young generation into the mix. Here are some ways organizations can prepare and position themselves for success.

- Create clear policies for access and use of social media, including work gaming, cell phones including text messages, and the internet at work.
- Have a clear telecommuting policy and offer flexibility with work hours and/or location when possible. Start by thinking about the position and the specific job tasks that are able to be accomplished from home or a mobile location. Don't worry. There are plenty of ways to track productivity.
- Provide employees with opportunities to work on stretch assignments and then be available for immediate feedback and coaching before, during, and afterwards.
- Practice collaborative vs. directive communication skills by asking questions, listening, and communicating your intent.
- Be open to hearing honest feedback about the impact of your behavior, the workload, assignments, and more.
- Develop team goals and create opportunities to partner with co-workers on assignments or to work on project teams.
- Ask Gen Yers about their interests and involve them in writing roles and responsibilities
- Mentoring is a great way to develop Gen Ys, and it will help to create a formal process, with set meetings and a more "fatherly/motherly" attitude on the mentor's part, one that is caring and helpful and also somewhat directive
- Share the vision, mission, values, and talk about the future; focus on how your organization will make a difference (feed the hungry, save the trees, etc.)
- Position your organization to attract Gen Y by establishing your reputation for creating positive career paths and a reputation of excellence in your field

Once you hook them, you're going to need and want to develop these young up and comers. Remember this is part of what they need and want, a lot of development and a lot of feedback. Still, just because they want feedback doesn't mean that they are going to politely say thank you when you give it to them. They are a casual group. They feel free to address just about anyone. If the President of the United States were in the room, they would most likely feel fairly comfortable having a conversation and complaining about Mrs. Obama's school food program, so don't think they won't share their thoughts with you. They may not like the feedback you give them but they will demand that you do it anyway; if they don't, Human Resources will probably hear about it.

Pouring some energy into their development doesn't have to be as daunting as it may seem at the moment. They are eager and energetic. Focus on a few core competencies that they will need and then try to be flexible in the delivery method. One Gen Y'er may learn best through mentoring while others may learn best via online learning, podcasts, discussion groups, or instructor-led training. Some of the core competencies that we see as critical for their success are these:

**Communication:** Each organization has its own unique culture that guides appropriate behavior and affects the way people interact with each other, habits such as dress, flexibility with hours worked, and decision making authority. Gen Y has grown up with technology, text messaging, and immediate answers to questions at the push of a button. While in an innovative, fast paced, high tech company forwarding an e-mail message to the CEO might get a response--it may take some dedicated coaching time to help this generation understand appropriate communication within a traditional hierarchical organization. Clarifying the types of decisions that must be approved, the chain of command, and the level of information required, as well as the format for the recommendation up front, will save embarrassment of a Gen Y going directly to the top with questions or ideas lacking in information. Upfront discussions about the methods of communication (phone, e-mail) and who needs to be informed within the first 90 days on the job can help prevent communication mishaps in the long run.

**Self-Awareness:** In the last 10 to 20 years many organizations have relaxed the rules for how and where we get work accomplished and offered greater flexibility with hours, work location, and dress. While this flexibility can be an incredible benefit, a Gen Y employee may not comprehend the negative impact being consistently late to meetings with upper management, or showing up for an interview for an internal promotion in torn blue jeans, sandals, with purple hair or a visible tattoo may have a negative impact on their long-term career in some organizations. They wonder, "Why would it matter when I'm effective at getting the work done?" Clear guidelines about what is expected when it comes to managing one's own professional image and what is acceptable when it comes to dress, or work hours, conduct in meetings can prevent misunderstandings. Consistent communication and enforcement of policies related to dress, work hours, and work location is also necessary.

**Financial Acumen:** They saw the World Trade Center towers fall and found a job in a tough economy, but they have grown up in a more materialistic world full of gadgets and frequent upgrades. According to many financial advisors, it appears as though Gen Y would rather spend than save. Gen Y has also been less independent than the preceding Gen X population. This generation may benefit from help understanding how financial decisions made today can impact the organization in the long term. Studies suggest that implementing tools such as automatic 401k enrollment plans can significantly reduce the number of non-participants in retirement savings. Providing tools and resources for effective financial management or suggesting activities as simple as scheduling routine meetings a department finance representative can help develop financial acumen.

**Critical Thinking and Problem Solving:** In most organizations the true answer to a complex question involving people and departmental boundaries isn't always the clear, easy, step-by-step answer. For a new graduate of any generation with limited experience, used to having the textbook answer at hand, it may be a challenge to understand how some problems are solved. Research says Gen Y enjoys a team approach; it may be even more troubling for this generation to understand why sometimes in organizations we may leave a meeting thinking the answer is clear only to find new information later or a critical opponent and head a different direction. Critical thinking tools can help Gen Y think through all aspects of a problem, including the support needed within an organization to guide an idea from concept to implementation. They can also help think through alternative approaches when Plan A doesn't work and there is a need to be adaptable and move to Plan B.

**Writing Skills:** The rapid pace of communication, texting, blogs, social media, and high technology has contributed to a deterioration of spelling, grammar, and use proper English with Gen Y.

Managing Gen Y may seem like a daunting task, but all is not lost. Remember that the landscape is changing in more ways than one. Gen Yers face a fiercely competitive job climate, and this environment benefits employers. They may be a little slow getting focused due to the technology revolution but this group is going to get their bearings and when they do, the combination of their techno-savvy, constant collaboration, and over-communication may just serve up the most productive, multitasking, and interesting new recruits the workplace has seen in decades. Put that together with the slow economy, and it's a hiring manager's dream.

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