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Letting the Gen Y out of the bottle

Sport, leisure and culture has always been a people industry and young people at that. As a new generation moves into the workplace will the old guard be able to cope? Liz Jones explores the culture clash we can expect as Generation Y meets the Baby Boomers.

The lack of good human resources is as big a crisis as climate change argues renowned educationalist Sir Ken Robinson [i]; and he has a point. Within the next eight years over half of the working population will be “digital natives” [ii], workers who have grown up and, most significantly, been educated, in the digital age. Gone are the chalk and blackboard from the classroom, replaced by interactive whiteboards and compulsory hours of IT each week. The average age when a child is first given a mobile phone has fallen from 18 to eight in only a few years and, with new spatial tagging technology becoming more accessible, it is only a matter of time before parents expect their primary school children to virtually ‘check in’ throughout the day. And for whom are these tech-savvy people going to be working? The Baby Boomers. Born soon after the second world war, these are now C-suite executives and managers with 20 to 30 years of business experience who think that a firewire is something to with the circus.

As the 21st century finishes its first decade we are faced with the meeting of three very different generations in the workplace and no industry is going to be left unaffected. The businesses that will thrive will be those that embrace change, utilise the specific skillsets of their people and, crucially, attract, retain and develop key talent. Generation Y will certainly throw up its fair share of talented people but who are Gen Y and what do they want?

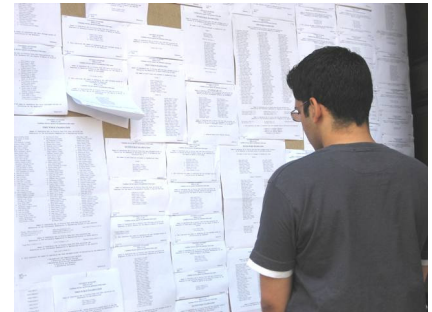
Much has been written on generational theory and opinions are divided on its significance. The problem with any generalisation, of course, is that there are a plethora of factors to be taken into account; economic, social and geographical factors all affect how pronounced generational traits will be. However, the importance of studies on any large group, for example a generation, is that they highlight important trends and patterns which in the work place can, and should, be considered when making plans for your human resource.

What generations are we talking about and how are they defined? First came the Builders. Born between the early 1900s and mid 1940s, their idol is Winston Churchill who led them through the second world war and defined an age of industrialisation and hard graft. Next came the Baby Boomers, born between 1945 and 1965, a post-war generation brought up on free love and idealism. After them, ‘Generation X’ (1960 – 1980) were a smaller generation in number who saw friends as the family they could choose and lived through the tough economic times of the 1970s. And then Generation Y was born into the affluent 1980s and early 1990s to families with 2.4 children, a Volvo and annual holidays to Europe.

What are these Gen Y-ers doing now? The generation that saw university places as a birthright are now in their mid to late 20s and are making a stir in the business world. Disloyal, non-committal, disrespectful and lazy, just four of the traits that have become associated with Generation Y, albeit mainly in the media, this is a generation that grew up surrounded by parental guidance and were told that it’s not the winning but the taking part that counts. In his book Not Everyone Gets a Trophy, Bruce Tulgan [iii] explores these Gen Y ‘isms’ and begins to look at ways of engaging with the people who display them, which is something that business leaders need to be looking at, and tackling, now.

For over four years I have been running graduate recruitment programmes for various businesses and my main challenges have been with companies who do not listen to the younger generations and who still think pension schemes and sabbaticals for long service will attract the best young talent. These dated establishments are often the businesses who have the highest staff turnover and the lowest morale among staff. If I had one piece of advice for business leaders it would be to learn to listen to their teams. The most interesting challenge I see businesses facing is not just attracting but retaining their key talent. In the current economic climate, and with governmental cut backs across the board, no business is in a position to simply throw money at talent. So what will keep staff engaged, working hard and investing emotionally in their jobs?

There are hundreds of ways to attract and retain these young workers. Think about flexible working, a robust corporate social responsibility (CSR) programme, structured development platforms, the opportunity to do voluntary work, all of which



Generation Y: has your business got what it takes to get them interested?

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Liz Jones: Gen Y in action

can be actioned by all types of business. The smart ones already are. Beware the company, though, that attempts to lure Gen Y in with offers that they do not then deliver. These guys are smart and see through false promises, gimmicks and short-term incentives. The most popular companies to work for are Innocent, Apple and Google, all big brands that make big noise about how their staff love working for them and how they are the driving force and culture behind their success.

The sport, leisure and culture sector has long been known for rapid turnover of staff. When the National Association for Sports Development (NASD) was formed in 2000 the average time spent in a job in sports development, a graduate profession, was under 18 months. Bearing in mind that it takes an average of three months to settle in, a further six to feel comfortable in a role and it is not until after a first annual review that the average worker feels in a position to make positive changes, losing staff at 18 months means the majority of them never reach the developmental stage of their roles. Which means neither they nor the company progresses. The cost of recruitment and induction to businesses is huge and is a figure that all human resource (HR) and financial teams should have as an annual target to reduce. When people leave a business, which has an inherent knock-on effect on their former teams and managers, they take with them their experience and that is priceless.

But it is not all bad news. The best thing about Generation Y is that if the right staff are attracted to a business and are motivated in a way that works for them and the company, the workforce created is more willing to work hard, progress (both as individuals and as teams) and be passionate about achieving results. Gen Y-ers want to be on the winning team, want responsibility and want to be rewarded for their efforts.

I believe there are four key things that business leaders must do or understand in order to create synergy within their present and future work forces. First, embrace technology; 96% of Generation Y is on at least one social network and that is a very powerful tool to be utilised. If I love my job I can instantly tell my 578 "friends" on Facebook where and for whom I work. Equally if I were unhappy I could tell the same number of people and why. If you want to attract young people you need to be speaking the right language. A well-written Tweet, a clever post on LinkedIn or in a Facebook group will have a wider and more instant reach than any advertisement ever posted on a leisure centre notice board.

Second, think about reward. Gone are the times when free gym membership was enough to attract the best young people. The most successful reward schemes now allow staff to pick and choose the benefits that suit their lifestyle. You will be amazed by the number of Gen Y-ers who will choose a job or, more importantly choose not to leave a job, based on the ability of the company to be flexible around their needs.

Third, remember that Gen Y questions everything. The glory days of change management programmes are gone. We want change, we drive change and we see companies that don't change as companies to avoid. There are no jobs for life anymore so Gen Y are looking for roles where they can get stuck in and get on.

And finally don't forget that we want the same thing. Boomers, Gen X and Gen Y, if they are honest, all want more money, better benefits, flexible working and the chance to progress as well as a vocation that is challenging and exciting. The difference is that Y will tell you what they want and how they want it. The challenge then is to marry the wants and needs of the business with that of its varied work force.

When it comes to the Gen Y challenge there are really only two options: ignore it, continuing with the traditional ways of working while you watch competitors expand and develop into industry leaders at your expense; or embrace the change. It will be down to the strength of Boomer and Gen X managers to lead the way and drive businesses to work harder and smarter using the relentless digital prowess of Gen Y. What cannot be denied is the rapid speed with which technology, communication and working practices are changing. And all the while, waiting in classrooms across the world, are the next lot, Gen Z. Don't even get me started!

Liz Jones is a trainer and consultant who specialises in helping businesses to attract, retain and develop their Gen Y talent. Using 1:1 coaching, group facilitation and digital forums she audits, trains and evaluates individuals and companies to offer practical solutions to increase productivity and engage teams.

Liz was born in 1984.

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Sir Ken Robinson – his latest book, The Element, is available from Penguin.

'Digital Natives' – a term coined by John Palfrey and Urs Gasser in their book Born

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Digital. Used to describe those born after 1980 (Generations Y and X) 'They learned in digital the first time around; they only know a world that is digital'.

Bruce Tulgan – published in 2009, Not Everyone Gets a Trophy, is available from Jossey-Bass.

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