



## Generation Y: Coming To A Workplace Near You

“They (Generation Y) communicate differently, they socialise differently and most importantly they expect to work differently than previous generations. They are used to an age of instant gratification – be it media, music or work.”

Generation Y: Moving With The Times,  
Deloitte & Touche, 2007

The newest entrants to the workforce, aged roughly 18 – 25 and known collectively as Generation Y, have arrived at a workplace near you, bringing their skills, expectations and demands. They are causing quite a stir. Why are these young upstarts so special?

Manuel Castells, the renowned sociologist, and his colleagues see the emergence of a new trend in global youth culture, which they call ‘networked sociability’<sup>1</sup>. Digitally connected or face-to-face, networked sociability is driving Generation Y to form peer groups that become the context for their individual and collective behaviour. Having grown up in the internet age, Generation Y are furious digital innovators. How they use communication technologies is creating both challenge and opportunity in the workplace<sup>2</sup>.

They are not having things all their own way though. Early clues that the new generation’s communication and collaboration habits will not be seamlessly absorbed within organisations are available in the large numbers of UK businesses banning access to social networking sites behind company firewalls<sup>3</sup>. It may be that some of these businesses have relented but management suspicions of time-wasting remain.

<sup>1</sup> Castells, M., Fernandez-Ardevol, M., Linchuan Qiu, J., Sey, A. (2007). *Mobile Communication and Society: A Global Perspective*. MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

<sup>2</sup> KPMG International Research Report, 2007. The Impact of Digitalization on the Generation Apart.

<sup>3</sup> The Guardian, Saturday 25.08.07

### What Are They Like?

It is of course not possible to type-cast a whole generation of young people. Not surprisingly, some commentators believe that using generational labels is unhelpful and that while “generations do possess certain commonalities, individuals possess many more intra-group differences”<sup>4</sup>. Bearing this in mind, and at the risk of stereotyping, the following brief review of Generation Y characteristics comes from diverse and publicly available sources.

Generation Y apparently believe they can achieve anything; they have been called ‘workplace divas’<sup>5</sup> and are supposedly ‘high maintenance, high risk and high output’<sup>6</sup>. They are said to be environmentally and socially conscious, strongly relationship-focused, collaborative, and seek meaning in work and opportunity to learn.

They appreciate clear direction, demand immediate feedback on performance, expect to be consulted, included in management decisions, and desire constant intellectual challenge. Generation Y are seeking, as a right, a new reality from work. They insist on working flexibly, choosing when and where to work.

Generation Y are full of contradictions or at least what is written about them is. They place a high premium on job security<sup>7</sup> and they job-hop<sup>8</sup>. They are value-driven and money-grabbing (due to being saddled with high student loans)<sup>9</sup>. They are conservative<sup>10</sup> and non-conformist<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> Managing An Age-Diverse Workforce, Sloan Management Review, vol 48, no 4, 2007.

<sup>5</sup> [www.spectator.co.uk/business/themagazine/entrepreneur/654421/part\\_3/the-workplace-diva-has-arrived.shtml](http://www.spectator.co.uk/business/themagazine/entrepreneur/654421/part_3/the-workplace-diva-has-arrived.shtml)

<sup>6</sup> Martin, C. And Tulgan, B. (2006) *Managing the Generation Mix*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, HRD Press.

<sup>7</sup> Howe, N. and Strauss, William (2007). *The Next 20 Years: How Customer and Workforce Attitudes Will Evolve*. Harvard Business Review, Jul/Aug2007, Vol. 85 Issue 7/8, p41-52

<sup>8</sup> Ask Gen Y Research Report, 2007. [www.askgeny.com](http://www.askgeny.com)

<sup>9</sup> [www.news.com.au/story/0,23599,22727730-2,00.html](http://www.news.com.au/story/0,23599,22727730-2,00.html)



Survey data from the UK, US, China, and Australia are beginning to appear and confirm many of the supposed characteristics of Generation Y revealed through the corporate research and less well-substantiated articles, although with quite marked differences.

The data indicate the high value Generation Y place on learning and development, career progression, and promotion. They also want to work in teams, be managed in an inclusive and participatory way, have variety in the work they do, work flexibly, expect access to lifestyle websites, and place relationships with peers among the top reasons for getting and keeping a job.

### Are They All That Different?

In countless articles and blog posts there are recurring themes. One is that some young people, understandably, dislike being pigeon-holed. Another theme is that so-called Generation Y have ambitions and expectations about work that are no different to their older work colleagues.

Take for example their desire for work that gives them opportunities for learning and developing. International research into employee engagement, based on eighty eight and half thousand respondents in eighteen countries, found that learning and development was a primary influence on employee engagement<sup>12</sup>. The need for learning and development is not restricted to one demographic group.

Generation Y's expectations of autonomy in how, where and when they work reflects continuing, decades-old calls for greater employee autonomy. Desire for greater self-determination in how work is performed is by

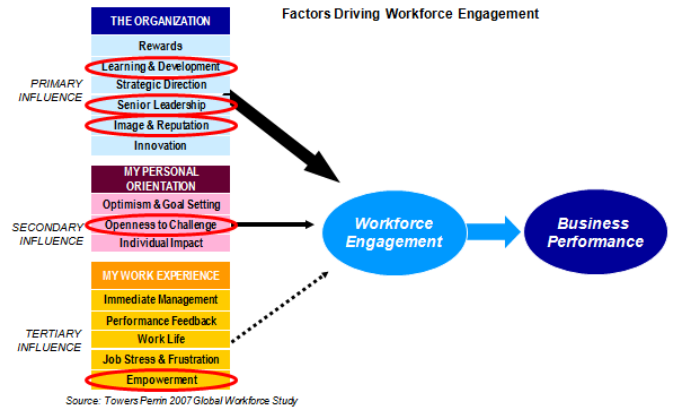
<sup>10</sup> <http://blog.penelopetrunk.com/2007/10/17/the-real-deal-about-gen-y-theyre-inherently-conservative/>

<sup>11</sup> [www.accenture.com/Global/Accenture\\_Blogs/Ed\\_Gottzman/November\\_2007/Talking+About+my+Generation.htm](http://www.accenture.com/Global/Accenture_Blogs/Ed_Gottzman/November_2007/Talking+About+my+Generation.htm)

<sup>12</sup> [www.2017.uwaterloo.ca/Attracting+and+Engaging+Talent+-+A+preview+of+new+insights+from+today's+workforce](http://www.2017.uwaterloo.ca/Attracting+and+Engaging+Talent+-+A+preview+of+new+insights+from+today's+workforce)

no means new and has certainly been an issue for earlier generations.

### While a number of factors are key, the organization dimension has the greatest impact on engagement



[www.2017.uwaterloo.ca](http://www.2017.uwaterloo.ca)

### How Do They Use Social Technologies?

This is where this generation really are different. They have grown up with the internet and use these technologies as second nature, absorbing data from multiple simultaneous sources and devices<sup>13</sup>. One of the consequences of how this young generation use social technologies is that they are familiar with self-organisation and distributed leadership in practice:

“Hundreds of thousands of players, sometimes millions, interact daily in highly complex virtual environments. These players self-organize, develop skills, and settle into various roles. Leaders emerge that are capable of recruiting, organizing, motivating, and directing large groups of players toward a common goal. And decisions are made quickly, with ample, but imperfect, information.”

‘Virtual Worlds, Real Leaders’. IBM Global Innovation Outlook 2.0 Report, 2007

<sup>13</sup> Mobile Work Futures Report for Microsoft, The Futurelaboratory, 2007



This also makes gamers skilled at multi-tasking, flexible and persistent in the face of change<sup>14</sup>

A Generation Y acquaintance of the Smart Work Company CEO recently discussed how he and his friends use social technologies. He described setting up a closed group on Facebook when they were looking for a new home. They used Facebook group to project manage the effort without the need for a single 'leader' to manage the group effort. When asked if he thought their natural way of behaving could be transferred into the workplace, he said that there is no difference between tagging and sharing photos, and tagging and sharing work documents. The collaboration and sharing behaviours they use for entertainment can easily transfer into the workplace.

His view of fears over time-wasting is that social networking conversations are likely to lead to greater social cohesion among work colleagues and facilitate closer teamwork. Companies allowing this incidental conversation could actually be creating competitive advantage, identifying people who know the right people and sources of information. Social technologies are taking over from email for Generation Y. Attempts to block these communication tools within the workplace will be circumvented and accessed from mobile phones.

## WHAT DOES THIS ALL MEAN?

Management practices are no longer fit for purpose and are evolving to fit the new business landscape.

### *Understanding Culture*

Managers are having to acquire sophisticated understanding of human interactions,

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<sup>14</sup> Connecting Across The Generations In The Workplace, Deloitte Touche, 2005

including the need to appreciate and take account of cultural differences. Culture<sup>15</sup> might be thought of as the lens through which people interpret meanings, and these in turn influence expectations in social interaction.

Culture exists in layers:

- high visibility - behaviours
- medium visibility - values and norms
- low visibility - basic assumptions

It is the unquestioned 'reality' of subconscious assumptions that are in fact at the core of cultural differences<sup>16</sup>.

Culture is commonly recognised within national, organisational and professional contexts. We now have sociologists such as Castells and digital ethnographers like Danah Boyd<sup>17</sup> researching youth subcultures which have identifiable behaviours and values associated with 'networked sociability'.

"We have this belief that kids are just addicted to social network sites. If anything, they're addicted to their friends."

Danah Boyd, Digital Ethnographer

Managers could choose to see this cultural Generation Y trait as a source of real competitive advantage. For example, the Smart Work Company employed a young animator last year who was permanently connected via Skype chat to his friends while he worked. He used to circulate his work to his friends for comment before showing it to the company. In effect, the company was getting the benefit of his friends' talent and time.

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<sup>15</sup> Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1997). *Riding The Waves Of Culture: understanding cultural diversity in business*, Nicholas Briely

<sup>16</sup> Schein (1985). *Organisational Culture and Leadership*, Josey Bass

<sup>17</sup> <http://research.microsoft.com/en-us/news/features/boyd-032009.aspx>



As an entry on an Accenture blog post<sup>18</sup> puts it:

“One of the most important assets Gen-Y will bring to the workplace is its Facebook account: an enormous “rolodex” of acquaintances... enterprises will be well-advised to encourage cultivation of this contact list ... it will serve as a source of new customers and recruits.”

### *Focusing On Outputs*

Generation Y seek autonomy in how, when and where they work. Co-incidentally, greater freedom and flexibility is beginning to emerge in workplaces for all demographics as work becomes more mobile and flexible in response to a number of drivers.

The pressures of attracting people whose skills and talents were in short supply in tight labour markets are now not so acute; retention of the best people remains a critical concern for businesses. Flexible working therefore remains a crucial tool for holding on to key people so that the business is ready for the up-turn when it comes<sup>19</sup>.

Many businesses are re-discovering in these challenging economic times what some have known for a while, which is that flexible working can create substantial cost savings on office overheads. A well-documented example is BT. The Smart Work Company CEO interviewed the senior executive responsible for initiating the policy of encouraging people who want to take the option of working full-time from home<sup>20</sup>, when she led a research project on new ways of working for the South East England Development Agency (SEEDA).

A major sticking point in implementing home working was the attitude and skills of some line managers. Old methods of management,

focused on inputs (i.e. monitoring time people spend in the office), are inappropriate for mobile and distributed working. Managers had to learn to put the customer at the centre of decision-making and to comply with staff-driven flexible working. So long as customer needs are met, staff deliver work how and when they choose. Managers found it difficult at first to define outputs. It took them a while to work out how to reward outputs rather than inputs, which of course they could no longer see as clearly.

### *Playing To People’s Strengths*

Recent research from the Chartered Institute of Personnel Development, investigating Smart Working in the UK, revealed a lack of awareness about job design<sup>21</sup>. If there really is a general lack of awareness in business about the benefits of job design, then this is a well-kept secret.

Job design focuses on processes and outputs. The tactic is most effective when bringing people together, who belong to different organisational functions or knowledge specialisms and who have different perspectives, cultures and values. Thoughtfully done and carefully managed, allocating roles forces collaboration across organisational boundaries and making people jointly responsible can concentrate minds wonderfully<sup>22</sup>. The same approach can be used to play to people’s strengths, to facilitate collaboration among young people, who are natural collaborators and skilled users of social tools, and their older peers, who have insight and deep tacit knowledge that comes from experience of work processes and human behaviour.

Environmental turmoil is placing enormous demands on managers skills and capabilities. Just one element of this environmental change is the demographic phenomenon of

<sup>18</sup> [www.accenture.com/Global/Accenture\\_Blogs/Ed\\_Gottzman/November\\_2007/Talking+About+my+Generation.htm](http://www.accenture.com/Global/Accenture_Blogs/Ed_Gottzman/November_2007/Talking+About+my+Generation.htm)

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/908bcd4a-bc26-11dd-80e9-0000779fd18c.html>

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.thesmartworkcompany.com/pdf/NWWCS1.pdf>

<sup>21</sup> How Smart Is UK plc?, CIPD September 2008

<sup>22</sup> [www.ukwon.net](http://www.ukwon.net)



Generation Y. Getting to grips with the consequences and impacts of cultural differences, managing outputs and designing cross-boundary job roles have significant implications for management development.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

“As the next generation of employees enters the workplace, their demands are likely to become more strident, making the provision of social networking tools critical to businesses looking to attract the best and brightest”<sup>23</sup>.

Financial Times, 27<sup>th</sup> January 2009

It will be interesting to see if Generation Y knuckle down and conform during this, for them, unprecedented time of economic turmoil. Although their confidence might be temporarily dented (who knows?), the genie is out of the bottle. Unless their collaborative ways change, their networked sociability is bound to influence ways of working. And even in the downturn, their widely-reported preferences of what they want from an employer will not change. That will include looking for employers that provide social tools, collaborative work with opportunities for learning and development, and with discretion on how, when and where they work.

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*About The Smart Work Company:*

Anne Marie is passionate about blending action learning and new management thinking. She has an international track record, having helped senior executives from London to Moscow to embrace new approaches to management, with startling results.

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<sup>23</sup> <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/d28887ea-eb49-11dd-bb6e-0000779fd2ac.html>