

## TOWARDS A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF GENERATION-Y EMPLOYEES AT THE WORKPLACE FOR ORGANIZATIONAL COHESION AND SUCCESS

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**ABSTRACT:** Over the last couple of years, the realities of massive generational change have dawned on many business leaders. While the issues of an ageing population and a new attitude to work have literally been emerging for a generation, it has been a sudden awakening for many organizations. In fact dealing with these demographic changes and specifically recruiting, retaining and managing 'Generation Y' has emerged as one of the biggest issues facing employers today. Based on a library research and a review of existing literature, this paper examines the employers' perceptions of Generation-Y employees with a view to proposing ways to improving relations at the workplace for organizational cohesion and success. From the existing literature, it is documented that employers mostly consider Generation-Y employees as: spoilt/entitled, lazy, having poor work ethics, showing little respect for authority, being too self-centred and individualistic, having overinflated/unrealistic expectations, not committed to work, exhibiting little or no loyalty to their employers, lacking in social skills and a needy lot. Scholars suggest that, to improve work relations and organizational performance, employers need to make necessary adjustments to their perceptions of Generation-Y employees. These adjustments include, among others: approaching younger workers differently, providing constructive criticism that reflects confidence in them; accepting that there may be multiple ways for workers to accomplish their tasks as exhibited by Generation-Y employees; offering flexible work schedules, adjusting the belief that workers need to "put in the hours at the desk" to be effective, and developing a work culture that is pleasant and positive; realizing that asking Generation-Y employees questions can often lead to answers and solutions that are actually more efficient and effective; finding the right mix of individual and team projects that allow these workers to grow professionally; redesigning and rebuilding some of the old career ladders that were destroyed with the flattening of organizations and greatly expand telecommuting and remote working arrangements, and developing a stronger commitment to keeping employees even in bad economic times.

**KEYWORDS:** Better Understanding, Generation-Y Employees, Workplace, Organizational Cohesion, Success

### 1 INTRODUCTION

The integration of the newest generation into today's workforce, often referred to as Generation-Y, is forcing organizations to re-evaluate traditional training and on-boarding processes (Frank, Finnegan & Taylor, 2004; Martin & Tulgan, 2002). This generation has its own work-related values, attitudes and behaviours which are inherently different from those of past generations.

Generation-Y workers venture into the workforce with very distinct workplace preferences. Often criticized for their sense of entitlement and exhaustive questioning, this generation expects continuous recognition and need daily feedback (Hastings, 2008; Tulgan & Martin, 2001) which sometimes strain the limited management resources of companies that are operating more efficiently with less human capital today than in the past.

To be successful in today's global rivalry tourism market, for example, enterprises need to focus more on transforming their working environments to motivate and retain their employees to engage in behaviour that is consistent with their goal (Amar, 2004). Agarwal *et al.* (2001) say that the ways of motivating and retaining young employees in the present day business activities are different from those of motivating older employees because the young employees have different

expectations. Employers not only need to understand the importance of employees' retention and motivation, but should also comprehend the variances in preferences of motivation factors between various groups of employees' generations. Failure in satisfying these aspects could result in a decline in an organizations' total effectiveness. Subsequently, this could result to working environments not conducive for employees which would hinder their contributions towards the success of an enterprise (Fazul, 2011).

Giancola (2006) has found out that many organizations in Africa still view generational diversity and differences with doubt and are not satisfied with their significant differences. Many organizations still continue with their old methods and procedures of guiding and monitoring their generational diversified employees, including employment activities, operation processes organizational procedures, evaluation criteria, appraisal methods, and remuneration packages.

Currently, organizations and researchers alike discuss the effects of 'Generation-Y' joining the workforce and possible challenges entailed by their entry. This group of individuals grew up experiencing another world than generations before them, characterized by rapid change, technological advances and globalization (Edmunds & Turner, 2005). As a result, they are thought to have developed a different set of values and outlooks, affecting their behaviour in a different direction than other generations (Hershatter & Epstein, 2010). As a result, they have been portrayed as hard to interact with (Deal, Altman & Rogelberg, 2010), narcissistic (Twenge & Campbell, 2008), lacking in loyalty (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010) and overly concerned with extrinsic rewards (Twenge, Campbell, Hoffman & Lance, 2010).

Popular media embrace the business case of a possible generational gap. While the literature is replete with publications suggesting how to manage across generations, a mini industry has been built on the hype (Twenge, Campbell, Hoffman & Lance, 2010), making statements like "The Workplace Generation Gaps" (Elmore, 2010, p. 8) commonly appearing headlines. By some, a generational clash has even been portrayed as inevitable (Reisenwitz & Iyer, 2009), raising concern because it may lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy (Hershatter & Epstein, 2010), spurring narcissistic behaviour through the share effect of Pygmalion (Cherrington, 1989). Furthermore, stereotypes may generate group effects at work, complicating organizational interaction (Passer *et al.*, 2009). Thus, refusing to consider expectations of 'Generation-Y' may contribute to potential for conflicts at work (Angeline, 2011).

The possible presence of generational differences is also important in other respects. If they exist, current reward and recruitment strategies may fail to meet the newcomers' needs, resulting in low motivation at work and a reduced number of applicants (Armstrong, 2005; Posner, 2010). By contrast, increasing the knowledge on how 'Generation-Y' works may enable the development of tailor-made designs for this group of individuals.

Hence, the efficiency of human resource management schemes may be improved (Chen & Choi, 2008) suggesting a valid rationale for why this knowledge needs to be enhanced. Kenya is a developing country with a competitive advantage of the young workforce. Two-thirds of Kenyans in formal employment aged below thirty are not satisfied with their jobs (Synovate, 2011). To effectively attract, manage and retain this new cohort of employees, organizations need a clear understanding of the work values of 'Generation-Y' and how they may differ from the values of previous generations. Organizations that fail to acknowledge generational differences among employees and focus their efforts on only keeping current employees happy are at a large disadvantage over competitors. 'Generation-Y' is a dynamic workforce that holds specific expectations with regards to work factors; that subsequently may not align with perceptions held by their managers (Twenge & Campbell, 2008).

#### **STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

Over the last couple of years, the realities of massive generational change have dawned on many business leaders. While the issues of an ageing population and a new attitude to work have literally been emerging for a generation, it has been a sudden awakening for many organizations. In fact, dealing with these demographic changes and specifically recruiting, retaining and managing 'Generation-Y' has emerged as one of the biggest issues facing employers today (McCrindle, 2008).

Excessive employee turnover negatively impacts many functions of a business and impacts the bottom line with its adjacent expenses (Dalton *et al.*, 2001). The need to understand turnover and factors that influence the decision of young employees to leave a business are increasingly being recognized as an issue that is important to the success of organizational business (Waters, 2003). Kenya is a developing country which has the competitive advantage of the young workforce. Two thirds of Kenyans in formal employment aged below thirty are not satisfied with their jobs. These young people, also known as 'Generation-Y', are giving employers sleepless nights since a majority are not willing to stay in the same job for more than a couple of years. As a result, the cost of recruitment for companies has risen and will continue to rise as more of 'Generation-Y' enters the work force (Synovate, 2011).

In the PricewaterhouseCoopers twelfth Annual Global Chief Executive Officers Survey (2009), 61% of the chief executive officers admitted that recruiting and integrating younger employees is a challenge. The survey findings reported that it has become more evident that this younger generation is not clearly understood. Besides, 66% of the respondents of the PricewaterhouseCoopers (2009) National Human Survey reported that 'Generation-Y' employees already make up between 25% and 75% of the work force. With such a high proportion of the work force falling in this bracket, the interest in 'Generation-Y' cannot be considered as a passing fad. This is because 'Generation-Y' individuals are not just the next generation of employees, but the next generation of consumers who will ultimately determine whether businesses will succeed or fail. Employee turnover of 'Generation-Y' is a significant challenge for human resource management strategies and therefore needs to be addressed. Understanding how to work with 'Generation-Y' employees is an opportunity to make the transition of employees in organizations smoother and easier for all involved. It is a chance to determine what does and what does not work for 'Generation-Y'.

## 2 MAIN DISCUSSION

In his book entitled *'Generation Y Perceptions and Realities'*, Hansen (2009) outlines ten perceptions that employers hold for Generation-Y employees. He, however, goes further to demystify these perceptions and gives what he considers the realistic perceptions of this generation and illustrates what should be done by both 'Generation-Y' employees and the employers in order to work harmoniously and achieve organizational goals. Discussed below in this paper are some of the perceptions and what needs to be done to ensure they do not become detrimental to organizational success.

### SPOILT/ENTITLED

To an extent, the individuals in this generation do have a sense of entitlement, but it is not an entirely inherent personality flaw but partly the fault of Baby Boomer parents who coddled their children, constantly telling them how special they were and that anything they sought was possible, and rewarding them for every little thing, providing trophies and prizes simply for participating.

These parents stunted their children's growth by proactively removing all obstacles and potentially negative experiences. So, on the surface, 'Generation-Y' workers appear entitled. The key for employers is approaching younger workers differently, providing constructive criticism that reflects confidence in them. 'Generation Y' workers must realize that their bosses are not going to be like their parents, and that part of growing as an employee is learning from past mistakes and accepting constructive criticism.

### LAZY

Technology has allowed this generation to multi-task and to find shortcuts in achieving results. Texting, instant messaging, social networking, and Web surfing have all made Generation-Y workers more competent, efficient and productive (if not sometimes overwhelmed). The key for employers is to accept that there may be multiple ways for workers to accomplish their tasks. Generation-Y workers may need to demonstrate that they are working just as hard as everyone else, but perhaps simply performing the job more efficiently.

### HAVE POOR WORK ETHICS

'Generation-Y' is the first generation to expect employers to realize there is more to life than work. Just as many Baby Boomers are now discovering later in their careers, 'Generation-Y' sees work as a means to enjoy life and, to them, life comes first. 'Generation-Y' wants work to be fun and flexible because the line between work and life is seamless. They also follow a mantra of working smarter, not harder. The key for employers is offering flexible work schedules, adjusting the belief that workers need to "put in the hours at the desk" to be effective, and developing a work culture that is pleasant and positive. 'Generation-Y' workers may need to readjust some attitudes about work, especially for entry-level positions in which workers have traditionally been expected to work long hours to earn their due.

### HAVE LITTLE RESPECT FOR AUTHORITY

While some people refer to this cohort of people as 'Generation Why', for a reason, it is not so much an issue of a lack of respect for authority as much as it is that this group has been raised by their parents to question everything and raise questions when they do not understand something. This generation is very independent and not afraid to challenge the

status-quo. Many 'Generation-Y' employees want a relationship with their employer like the ones they have with their parents. It is not that they have little respect for authority; on the contrary, they feel employers do not respect them. The key for employers is realizing that asking questions can often lead to answers and solutions that are actually more efficient and effective. Unlike with any other set of workers in the past, employers must also provide more autonomy and trust 'Generation-Y' workers to complete the work. 'Generation-Y' workers should learn to choose battles carefully, not question every single decision made, and give employers a chance to adapt to their style of work.

#### **TOO SELF-CENTRED AND INDIVIDUALISTIC**

This iPod Generation (named such because iPod commercials focus on individuality while selling the product to every Gen-Y) works well in groups and teams, especially with people their own age. They also have been taught the value of individuality and independent thinking. They see themselves as unique individuals and not tied to any specific labels. And unlike any previous generation, these workers do not plan to let their jobs define who they are. The key for employers is finding the right mix of individual and team projects that allow these workers to grow professionally. 'Generation-Y' workers need to realize that almost all work will be some combination of individual assignments and teamwork with people of all backgrounds and ages.

#### **THOSE WITH OVERINFLATED/UNREALISTIC EXPECTATIONS**

While this generation may be more anxious than others to rise quickly to the top, it is less about unrealistic expectations than it is about being better prepared for work than previous generations. They display a touch of the need for instant gratification thrown in. This generation also has no interest whatsoever in working in a cubicle, not because it is beneath them, but because they feel advances in technology should let them be able to choose to work from home, or anywhere there is a Wi-Fi connection. The key for employers is to redesign and rebuild some of the old career ladders that were destroyed with the flattening of organizations and greatly expand telecommuting and remote working arrangements. 'Generation-Y' workers need to see a progressive promotion path or they will move on to the next employer. 'Generation-Y' workers should learn to pace themselves and gain the necessary experience and skills before expecting a promotion to the next level.

#### **NOT COMMITTED TO WORK**

This generation has the most educated workforce ever, and partly because of this level of education, 'Generation-Y' workers believe their work should have meaning. This group quote from *Office Space* and have a mistrust of management. More than ever, these workers are seeking greater fulfilment and are only willing to work hard at jobs that provide it.

The key for employers is changing the way they view work and employees. To keep Gen-Y workers, employers may need to not only develop better jobs, but also consider strong corporate values and corporate volunteering programmes. Employers also need to clearly show how the work Gen-Ys complete directly impacts the organization's success. 'Generation-Y' workers should conduct more research on prospective employers to find organizations that not only have meaningful career paths, but also share some of the same values.

#### **THOSE WITHOUT LOYALTY TO EMPLOYERS**

Because of more work experiences and greater education, Gen-Y workers are simply more mobile, making it easier to move from one employer to another if they are unhappy with the work. They have also been raised during a period of great downsizing and rightsizing, and many witnessed the grief and frustration their parents felt when being laid off and they do not want to experience that emotion. These are also some of the reasons many Gen-Y workers are diligently planning to start their own businesses. The key for employers is to develop a stronger commitment to keeping employees even in bad economic times. Employers should also do a better job in training and retaining the workers of this generation, possibly including such benefits as sabbaticals, professional development opportunities, and other options for Gen-Y workers who seek deeper fulfilment. 'Generation-Y' workers should try not to be so sceptical about the motives of employers and learn to trust them more while continuing their professional development as a hedge against any downturns.

## THOSE LACKING IN SOCIAL SKILLS

'Generation-Ys' are some of the most social of any generational cohort; it is just that they communicate and socialize much differently from the rest of older or even younger employees. The key for employers is to realize and accept that people communicate differently and to embrace the new techniques while also teaching the Gen-Y workers that business sometimes still needs to use traditional methods of communication. 'Generation-Y' workers need to use those excellent communications and diversity skills to learn to socialize and communicate with people of all ages and backgrounds.

## A NEEDY LOT

'Generation-Y' employees are indeed very needy. This is, however, not their fault but their parents' who trained them to be overly needy. In fact, there are stories of 'Generation-Y' job-seekers taking their parents along for the job interview or to help negotiate a job offer. The key for employers is to realize that this generation needs special care and handling. There's no way they can go months without a review; they need constant feedback. 'Generation-Y' workers need to realize that the reality of the workplace is that it is not like home or college and that they are expected to do an excellent job without always expecting praise or prize.

## 3 CONCLUSION AND WAY FORWARD

On the attitude of the Generation-Y employees seeming spoilt or an element of being entitled, the key for employers is approaching younger workers differently, providing constructive criticism that reflects confidence in them. 'Generation Y' workers must realize that their bosses are not going to be like their parents, and that part of growing as an employee is learning from past mistakes and accepting constructive criticism. On whether or not Generation-Y employees are lazy, the key for employers is to accept that there may be multiple ways for workers to accomplish their tasks. Generation-Y workers may need to demonstrate that they are working just as hard as everyone else, but perhaps simply performing the job more efficiently.

To cope with the seeming poor or lack of work ethics among Generation-Y employees, the key for employers is offering flexible work schedules, adjusting the belief that workers need to "put in the hours at the desk" to be effective, and developing a work culture that is pleasant and positive. 'Generation-Y' workers may need to readjust some attitudes about work, especially for entry-level positions in which workers have traditionally been expected to work long hours to earn their due.

On their seeming lack of respect for authority at the workplaces, employers should realize that asking Generation-Y employees questions can often lead to answers and solutions that are actually more efficient and effective. Unlike with any other set of workers in the past, employers must also provide more autonomy and trust 'Generation Y' workers to complete the work. 'Generation-Y' workers should learn to choose battles carefully, not question every single decision made, and give employers a chance to adapt to their style of work.

To understand the seeming sense of self-centredness and individualism exhibited by the Generation-Y employees at the workplace, the key for employers is finding the right mix of individual and team projects that allow these workers to grow professionally. 'Generation-Y' workers need to realize that almost all work will be some combination of individual assignments and teamwork with people of all backgrounds and ages. On whether or not Generation-Y employees have overinflated/unrealistic expectations, employers should redesign and rebuild some of the old career ladders that were destroyed with the flattening of organizations and greatly expand telecommuting and remote working arrangements. 'Generation-Y' workers need to see a progressive promotion path or they will move on to the next employer. 'Generation-Y' workers should learn to pace themselves and gain the necessary experience and skills before expecting a promotion to the next level.

On commitment to work, to keep Gen-Y workers, employers may need to not only develop better jobs, but also consider strong corporate values and corporate volunteering programs. Employers also need to clearly show how the work Gen-Ys complete directly impacts the organization's success. 'Generation-Y' workers should conduct more research on prospective employers to find organizations that not only have meaningful career paths, but also share some of the same values. To improve the loyalty of Generation-Y employees to the organization, employers should develop a stronger commitment to keeping employees even in bad economic times. Employers should also do a better job in training and retaining the workers of this generation, possibly including such benefits as sabbaticals, professional development opportunities, and other options for Gen-Y workers who seek deeper fulfilment.

'Generation-Y' workers should try not to be so sceptical about the motives of employers and learn to trust them more while continuing their professional development as a hedge against any downturns. Moreover, to improve communication and cohesion in the organizations, employers should realize and accept that people communicate differently and to embrace the new techniques while also teaching the Gen-Y workers that business sometimes still needs to use traditional methods of communication. 'Generation-Y' workers need to use those excellent communications and diversity skills to learn to socialize and communicate with people of all ages and backgrounds.

To meet the needs of Generation-Y employees, employers need to realize that this generation needs special care and handling. There's no way they can go months without a review; they need constant feedback. 'Generation-Y' workers need to realize that the reality of the workplace is that it is not like home or college and that they are expected to do an excellent job without always expecting praise or prize.

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