

Generation Y: They've arrived at work with a new attitude

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They're young, smart, brash. They may wear flip-flops to the office, or listen to iPods at their desk. They want to work, but they don't want work to be their life.



Jennifer Lewis, 22, finds it awkward that older employees report expenses to her.

This is Generation Y, a force of as many as 70 million, and the first wave is just now embarking on their careers—taking their place in an increasingly multigenerational workplace.

Get ready, because this generation—whose members have not yet hit 30—is different from any that have come before, according to researchers and authors such as Bruce Tulgan, a founder of New Haven, Connecticut-based RainmakerThinking, which studies the lives of young people.

Who is Gen Y?

There is no consensus over the exact birth dates that define Gen Y, also known by some as echo boomers and millennials. But the broadest definition generally includes the more than 70 million Americans born 1977 to 2002. Generation X was born roughly 1965 to 1976. Narrower definitions put Gen Yers as those ages 16 to 27, born from 1978 to 1989. This narrower view is based on the thinking that as the pace of change in society accelerates, the time frame of a generation gets shorter.

Effect on workforce

Under the narrow definition, as they take their first jobs, Gen Y would be the fastest-growing segment of the workforce—growing from 14% of the workforce to 21% over the past four years to nearly 32 million workers.

About Gen Y workers

High expectations of self: They aim to work faster and better than other workers.

High expectations of employers: They want fair and direct managers who are highly engaged in their professional development.

Ongoing learning: They seek out creative challenges and view colleagues as vast resources from whom to gain knowledge.

Immediate responsibility: They want to make an important impact on Day 1.

Goal-oriented: They want small goals with tight deadlines so they can build up ownership of tasks.

Source: Bruce Tulgan of RainmakerThinking

This age group is moving into the labor force during a time of major demographic change, as companies around the USA face an aging workforce. Sixty-year-olds are working beside 20-year-olds. Freshly minted college graduates are overseeing employees old enough to be their parents. And new job entrants are changing careers faster than college students change their majors, creating frustration for employers struggling to retain and recruit talented high-performers.

Unlike the generations that have gone before them, Gen Y has been pampered, nurtured and programmed with a slew of activities since they were toddlers, meaning they are both high-performance and high-maintenance, Tulgan says. They also believe in their own worth.

“Generation Y is much less likely to respond to the traditional command-and-control type of management still popular in much of today’s workforce,” says Jordan Kaplan, an associate managerial science professor at Long Island University-Brooklyn in New York. “They’ve grown up questioning their parents and now they’re questioning their employers. They don’t know how to shut up, which is great, but that’s aggravating to the 50-year-old manager who says, ‘Do it and do it now.’”

That speak-your-mind philosophy makes sense to Katie Patterson, an assistant account executive at Edelman Public Relations in Atlanta. The 23-year-old, who hails from Iowa and now lives with two roommates in a townhome, likes to collaborate with others and says many of her friends want to run their own businesses so they can be independent.

“We are willing and not afraid to challenge the status quo,” she says. “An environment where creativity and independent thinking are looked upon as a positive is appealing to people my age. We’re very independent and tech-savvy.”

A great deal is known about Gen Y:

- They have financial smarts.** After witnessing the financial insecurity that beset earlier generations stung by layoffs and the dot-com bust, today’s newest entrants into the workforce are generally savvy when it comes to money and savings. They care about such benefits as 401(k) retirement plans.

Thirty-seven percent of Gen Yers expect to start saving for retirement before they reach 25, with 46% of those already working indicating so, according to a September survey by Purchase, New York-based Diversified Investment Advisors. And 49% say retirement benefits are a very important factor in their job choices. Among those eligible, 70% of the Gen Y respondents contribute to their 401(k) plan.

Patterson, who works at Edelman, has already met with a financial planner and her co-worker, Jennifer Hudson, 23, is also saving for the future.

“I knew what a Roth IRA was at 17. I learned about it in economics class,” says Hudson, an assistant account executive in Atlanta and a University of Alabama graduate. “My generation is much more realistic. We were in college when we saw the whole dot-com bust.”

- Work-life balance isn’t just a buzz word.** Unlike boomers who tend to put a high priority on career, today’s youngest workers are more interested in making their jobs accommodate their family and personal lives. They want jobs with flexibility, telecommuting options and the ability to go parttime, or leave the workforce temporarily when children are in the picture.

“There’s a higher value on self-fulfillment,” says Diana San Diego, 24, who lives with her parents in San Francisco and works on college campuses helping prepare students for the working world through the Parachute College Program. “After 9/11, there is a realization that life is short. You value it more.”

- Change, change, change.** Generation Yers don’t expect to stay in a job, or even a career, for too long—they’ve seen the scandals that imploded Enron and Arthur Andersen and they’re skeptical when it comes to such concepts as employee loyalty, Tulgan says.

They don’t like to stay too long on any one assignment. This is a generation of multi-taskers and they can juggle e-mail on their BlackBerrys while talking on cellphones while trolling online.

And they believe in their own self worth and value enough that they're not shy about trying to change the companies they work for. That compares somewhat with Gen X, a generation born from the mid-1960s to the late-1970s, known for its independent thinking, addiction to change and emphasis on family.

"They're like Generation X on steroids," Tulgan says. "They walk in with high expectations for themselves, their employer, their boss. If you thought you saw a clash when Generation X came into the workplace, that was the fake punch. The haymaker is coming now."

Tulgan, who co-authored *Managing Generation Y* with Carolyn Martin and leads training sessions at companies on how to prepare for and retain Generation Yers, says a recent example is a young woman who just started a job at a cereal company. She showed up the first day with a recipe for a new cereal she'd invented.

Conflicts over casual dress

In the workplace, conflict and resentment can arise over a host of issues, even seemingly innocuous subjects such as appearance, as a generation used to casual fare such as flip-flops, tattoos and capri pants finds more traditional attire is required at the office.

Angie Ping, 23, of Alvin, Texas, lives in flip-flops, but isn't allowed to wear them to the office. "Some companies' policies relating to appropriate office attire seem completely outdated to me," says Ping, at International Facility Management Association. "The new trend for work attire this season is menswear-inspired capri pants, which look as dressy as pants when paired with heels, but capri pants are not allowed at my organization."

And then there's Gen Y's total comfort with technology. While boomers may expect a phonecall, or in-person meeting on important topics, younger workers may prefer virtual problem solving, Tulgan says.

Conflict can also flare up over management style. Unlike previous generations who've in large part grown accustomed to the annual review, Gen Yers have grown up getting constant feedback and recognition from teachers, parents and coaches and can resent it, or feel lost if communication from bosses isn't more regular.

"The millennium generation has been brought up in the most child-centered generation ever. They've been programmed and nurtured," says Cathy O'Neill, senior vice president at career management company Lee Hecht Harrison in Woodcliff Lake, New Jersey. "Their expectations are different. The millennial expects to be told how they're doing."

Matt Berkley, 24, a writer at *St. Louis Small Business Monthly*, says many of his generation have traveled and had many enriching experiences, so they may clash with older generations they see as competition, or not as skilled. "We're surprised we have to work for our money. We want the corner office right away," he says. "It seems like our parents just groomed us. Anything is possible. We had karate class, soccer practice, everything. But they deprived us of social skills. They don't treat older employees as well as they should."

Employers are examining new ways to recruit and retain and trying to sell younger workers on their workplace flexibility and other qualities generally attractive to Gen Y.

At Abbott Laboratories in Chicago, recruiters are reaching out to college students by telling them about company benefits such as flexible work schedules, telecommuting, full tuition reimbursement and an online mentoring tool.

Perks and recruitment

Aflac, an insurer based in Columbus, Georgia, is highlighting such perks as time off given as awards, flexible work schedules and recognition.

Xerox is stepping up recruitment of students at “core colleges,” which is how the company refers to universities that have the kind of talent Xerox needs. For example, the Rochester Institute of Technology is a core school for Xerox recruiting because it has a strong engineering and printing sciences programs. Others include Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the University of Illinois and Cornell University.

Xerox is using the slogan “Express Yourself” as a way to describe its culture to recruits. The hope is that the slogan will appeal to Gen Y’s desire to develop solutions and change. Recruiters also point out the importance of diversity at the company; Gen Y is one of the most diverse demographic groups—one out of three is a minority.

“(Gen Y) is very important,” says Joe Hammill, director of talent acquisition. “Xerox and other *Fortune*-type companies view this emerging workforce as the future of our organization.”

But some conflict is inevitable. More than 60% of employers say they are experiencing tension between employees from different generations, according to a survey by Lee Hecht Harrison.

The survey found more than 70% of older employees are dismissive of younger workers’ abilities. And nearly half of employers say that younger employees are dismissive of the abilities of their older co-workers.

As an executive assistant, Jennifer Lewis approves expenses and keeps track of days off for employees, which she says can be awkward because she’s so much younger than her co-workers. She reports to the president of her company’s design department.

“People who have been here 10 years and they have to report to a 22-year-old,” Lewis says. She also says in an e-mail that “I often have to lie about my age to receive a certain level of respect that I want from my co-workers.”

Lewis, a senior at Hunter College in New York, tries not to tell people she is a student for fear it will make her seem like “the young schoolgirl.” She pays rent and pays for her own school and spends her free time taking cooking and pottery classes.

But there are advantages to being young as well. “I am computer-savvy,” she says, “so people come to me for everything.”