

From high maintenance to high productivity

What managers need to know about Generation Y

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Abstract

Purpose – To offer managers insights into Generation Y and practical suggestions on how to turn this high maintenance workforce into a high productivity workforce.

Design/methodology/approach – This research is based on RainmakerThinking Inc.'s ongoing workplace interviews with hundreds of Generation Yers and managers.

Findings – Like their Gen X siblings, the most talented members of Generation Yers are independent, entrepreneurial thinkers who relish responsibility, demand immediate feedback, and expect a sense of accomplishment hourly. They thrive on challenging work and creative expression, love freedom and flexibility, and hate micromanagement. Guided by managers who are willing to confront their challenges and meet their expectations, they have the potential to become the highest performers in history. They have 14 expectations of managers that can create the type of professional relationships they want to build.

Research limitations/implications – Generation Y is just beginning to gain pull in the workplace as full-time workers. Ongoing research is needed to see how our initial conceptions of them as high school and university students plays out as they mature in their professional lives.

Practical implications – This paper not only offers managers insights into this highly diverse, contradictory generation, but suggests best practices they can implement to communicate with and motivate this emerging workforce.

Originality/value – As organizations compete to attract and retain the best new talent, this paper offers managers a strategic advantage: a practical guide to the characteristics, needs and expectations of Generation Y.

Keywords Employee relations, Management strategy, Employee attitudes

Paper type General review

If you thought Generation Xers were demanding when they first entered the workforce, you are probably dismayed by their younger siblings in Generation Y. Born between 1978 and 1988, Yers are the blunt, techno-savvy, contradictory children of Baby Boomers who believe education is a key to success, technology is as transparent as the air, diversity is a given, and social responsibility is a business imperative.

Although jobs in their chosen professions dried up during the past five years, Yers who did find work met managers who had no notion how high maintenance this group could be. These managers were shocked when Yers said they would make a long-term commitment to an organization only to discover that “long-term” meant one year. Many didn’t know that Yers, like Xers, expected daily feedback to stay on track – or get back on track – quickly. Or, that this “X-treme sports” generation thrived on the adrenaline rush of new challenges and new opportunities, demanding managers learn their capabilities quickly and push them to their limits. That’s high maintenance.

But the good news is high maintenance can lead to high productivity – and Gen Yers have the potential to become the highest producing workforce in history. How? By challenging managers to capitalize on the “character” and expectations of these talented, demanding young adults.

What can you expect from the “real” Generation Y?

While experts have called them Millennials, Nexters, Generation www, the Digital Generation, Generation E, Echo Boomers, N-Gens, and, most often, Generation Y, these young generation offers much more creative descriptions of themselves. They’ve variously call themselves the Non-Nuclear Family Generation, the Nothing-Is-Sacred Generation, the Wannabees, the Feel-Good Generation, CyberKids, the Do-or-Die Generation, and the Searching-for-an-Identity Generation.

One 22-year-old aptly described the labeling challenge: “You can’t name a generation like ours as easily as others, because we aren’t as easy to typecast as the Boomers or Gen X. Maybe we should be called ‘X-Squared’, since our lives seem to be so much more diverse than [those] of our predecessors!”

Perhaps the last word belongs to a 20-year-old who bluntly said: “I think my generation has jumped through hoops and broken backs to ensure that no names ‘fit’ it.”

When asked what they were looking for in a career, these young people optimistically said they wanted to play meaningful roles doing meaningful work on teams of highly committed, motivated coworkers. They also had every intention of making lots of money while building their ideal career and personal life. And, with three to four part-time job experiences or internships under their belts before they enter the workplace full-time, they were emphatic about the type of manager they wanted to work with.

So, when you meet them – in interviews, team meetings, coaching sessions–what can you expect? While a highly diverse group, Yers share some common characteristics. How will you capitalize on those traits and turn high maintenance into high performance? Here are some insights and strategies.

Yers are self-reliant and independent

Like Xers, Yers are a “latch key” generation. With their parents’ high divorce rate and/or the rise of dual-income families, they were left to their own devices and taught to take care of themselves. Consequently, many hold a self-confident, “Of course I can fend for myself” attitude.

Mis-reading this independent spirit, managers often complain these young adults don’t want to be told what to do. But they miss the point. Gen Yers do want clear directions and managerial support, but they also demand the freedom and flexibility to get the task done in their own way, at their own pace.

Yers love to be given the results you want and the freedom to figure out the process to achieve them.

However, there’s another, seemingly contradictory, dimension to Gen Yers’ independent streak: a desire for collaboration. They work well alone, but they work better together. Since Yers—much more so than Xers— are accustomed to team play, you may also hear things like: “Can I get some assistance with this project from Bill in accounting.” “Who else has experience doing this task so I can shorten the learning curve?” “Who can I get to help me?”

The challenge for managers

The best Gen Y talent loves the challenge of figuring out “the best way to do the job” – whether they do it on their own or with a team. Your management style needs to be flexible enough to plan time for trial and error, factoring in their pacing and need for collaboration.

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Yers are techno-savvy

Technology has shaped the way this digital generation learns and the way they process information. Although the technology they grew up with has become increasingly more complex, it's also much easier to use. But Yers don't want to merely use it. They want to create with it – from their own web sites to teaching their teachers how to use technology in the curriculum. They're continually customizing how they gather and share information.

So can count on it: Young hires will be curious not only about your culture, mission and goals; products, services and customers; compensation and benefits, but also about the technology you use to support them.

The challenge for managers

Gen Yers have high expectations of technology – and when it doesn't measure up, they get impatient. How up-to-date is the technology you're already using? Is it competitive with other businesses in your industry? Are you poised to utilize the skills of young workers who may know more about technology than you? And, if they aren't adept yet, how will you get them – and all your employees, for that matter – up to speed?

Yers have an urgent sense of immediacy

Obviously, in today's world, the pace of everything continues to accelerate. A year is long-term to a Gen Yer and three years is just a mirage. They won't be lured by promises of climbing ladders, paying dues, and cashing out at retirement. They want to know: What value can I add today? What can I learn today? What will you offer me today? How will I be rewarded today?

Organizations who can't – or won't – customize training, career paths, incentives, work responsibilities will need a wake up-call.

The challenge for managers

Your task is to develop just-in-time systems that meet those requests. You'll need to become an expert delegator who gets teams up and running quickly with specific goals, parameters, and deadlines. You'll need to:

- customize training programs so young contributors can quickly prepare to tackle each new task;
- master coaching skills to keep these workers focused and motivated;
- create an incentive program that rewards them often for their performance; and
- challenge the obsolete policies that hold young talent back from forging ahead in your organization.

Yers are entrepreneurial

Gen X was touted as the most entrepreneurial generation in history – that is, up until Gen Y. Today's young adults are starting their own businesses in record numbers – from youth employment services to Web shows for teens– while they're still in school.

Schools have continuously expanded onsite opportunities for budding entrepreneurs to include businesses in computers, construction, catering, design and manufacturing, day care, and art sales.

The challenge for managers

Don't be surprised, then, when they ask, "Why?" to what you think is a legitimate request. Young workers will challenge you almost every step of the way. Don't be insulted when they throw an "Of course, there are other ways to do this" attitude at you. You're not dealing with mere adolescent rebellion. That would be too easy to dismiss.

You're facing the products of life-long exposure to the diverse points of view and the infinite possibilities that technology offers. Gen Yers have been bombarded by endless choices and options. They've been challenged by diverse core beliefs, opinions and points of view. They're frequently unwilling to settle for one solution until others are explored.

Yers want increasing responsibility

Baby Boomer managers have complained for years that no one on their staffs wanted to take on more responsibility. Well, they are in for a pleasant surprise. Gen Y sees increasing responsibility not as a burden to be avoided but as a proving ground for their skills and talents. Like Xers, Gen Yers request – even demand– more responsibility.

According to an 18-year old sales clerk, the unwillingness to offer responsibility is a managerial flaw.

"They never give you the chance to prove yourself as a valuable employee," she explained. "It was apparent to me that no one cared enough to say, 'Okay, you've proven that you can do *this* really well. Now let's see if you can do *this*.' I felt the need to grow and to be trusted with more responsibility (because I knew I could do it), but some never gave me the chance. I always hated that."

"I felt the need to grow and be trusted . . ." That's the motivation you can tap.

The challenge for managers

How do you position increasing responsibilities as rewards for your Gen Yers' accomplishments? It's an effective negotiating chip to keep your young talent focused and motivated.

Yers have a "get off my back" attitude

Every generation hates micromanagement, so it's no surprise that this is one of Gen Yers' pet peeves. The irony, of course, is when Yers do have time on their hands, they're easily bored. They haven't been taught to manage time for themselves.

The challenge for managers

One of the initial skills Gen Yers need to learn is time management. You'll need to coach them how to handle day-to-day tasks and responsibilities in the midst of daily interruptions. You'll need to train them how to break up larger projects into manageable pieces, plan their time, and meet deadlines. You'll need to give them realistic estimates – based on your experience – of how long they can expect tasks to take.

Yers seek flexibility

Gen Yers are ready to adapt to new people, places and circumstances. They not only expect change – they demand it. They are looking for work places where they can move from project to project, position to position, department to department, location to location. They'll seek out opportunities where they can continue to learn marketable skills and gather experience that will serve them in the future.

The challenge for managers

If options and opportunities for on-going education, socializing, and creativity don't exist within your organization, young talent will find it elsewhere.

How will you create the flexibility within your organization for Gen Yers to make it the hub of their creative energy? Projects, training, social activities, whatever. Give them a reason –

many reasons, for that matter – to stay with you. The more they have to lose if they leave, the more reasons they have to stay.

Yers have adopted the free agency attitude

Both Gen X and Gen Y witnessed the demise of the lifetime employment paradigm their grandparents retired from and their parents were disillusioned by.

After the tumultuous 1980s and early 1990s, when businesses told the workforce, “You’re no longer our business. You’re on your own,” free agency became the wave of the future. Today, people of all ages are riding it.

This trend will hold true for Gen Y. Whether working for themselves or others, Gen Yers have become the owners of what Tom Peters calls “Me, Inc.” The best young talent is learning to negotiate the best deals in ways older generations would never have conceived.

The challenge for managers

You need to become a talent scout and an expert negotiator yourself, making the best deals with the best talent on an on-going basis.

In the workplace of the past, your challenge used to be: How can I get good people to work here for the next twenty-five years? In the new workplace, that challenge has radically changed. It’s become:

- What work do I need done today?
- Who’s the best talent to get the job done?
- How can I ensure I have access to that talent when I need it?

High maintenance leads to high productivity

Once you’ve recruited Gen Yers into your organization, the key to retaining them is the same key to retaining all employees: The relationship they have with their immediate manager. Managers need to commit to the high maintenance work required to energize and focus a high maintenance workforce. Gen Yers have very definite expectations of their managers that define what they consider “a good relationship.” Here are six keys to building solid relationships with them:

1. Take the time to get to know each Gen Yer. Listen to them. Show them you genuinely care about their success in your organization as well as care about them as persons. Make building those relationships as much a managerial imperative as accomplishing results. Go for a walk, take them to lunch, have coffee: Yers feel more comfortable in informal settings than in formal meetings.
2. Establish a coaching relationship with them. Yers want managers who are teachers who can help them grow and improve. Since they’re the “education is cool” generation, position yourself as a dynamic source of their learning. Provide the resources, tools, and the learning goals they need to progress “just-in-time.” Gen Yers learn best, as most people do, when they know they will need the knowledge or skill to succeed.
3. Treat Yers as colleagues, not as interns or “teenagers.” They can’t stand condescending managers who yell and scream, and who are not approachable when they need their questions answered.
4. Be flexible enough to customize schedules, work assignments, projects and career paths. One-size-fits all is out; customization is in. Since many Yers are still in school, they

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appreciate a manager's attempts to balance work requirements with their other commitments.

5. Consistently provide constructive feedback. Don't wait for performance evaluations to tell Yers what they're doing wrong. Do it daily. Tell them how to improve today. That's what the best coaches do: They observe and give immediate feedback. Avoid harping on the negative, accentuate the positive, and, most importantly, get them back on track immediately.
6. Consistently let Yers know when they've done a good job. Give them immediate praise, recognition and rewards for great performance. Tie rewards and incentives to one thing only: performance. And make sure to deliver them in close proximity to the event.

Gen Y is already becoming a very resourceful, productive part of the workforce. Organizations who know how to energize and focus their talents, who know how to turn high maintenance into high productivity, will have a strategic advantage over their competitors. Who are your Gen Y employees? What are their characteristics? How can you create relationships that get the best work from the best of them everyday? When you learn how to do that consistently, you will have that advantage – and a high performance workforce.