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**Generation Y talk about work-life balance: Not so different after all?**

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## Generation Y talk about work-life balance: Not so different after all?

**ABSTRACT** *Generation Y employees have been argued to bring different values and expectations to the workplace than previous generations. They are also highly technologically savvy, which has relevance for the blurring of boundaries between work and personal life. This paper presents findings from a qualitative study that investigated the factors that influence Generation Y's perceptions and understanding of the issues surrounding work-life balance. In dealing with these issues, members of Generation Y were not as different from their older colleagues as much of the commentary would suggest. However, further empirical research is required to understand both the similarities and differences for this generation in the workplace.*

Keywords: demographic change; engagement; Generation Y; work-life balance

As their numbers rise in the workplace, there has been increasing attention given to the characteristics of Generation Y employees. Much of the commentary has been critical of this generation, with managers and the media bemoaning a lack of work ethic and a need for constant affirmation. Some of the views of older generations can be gleaned from the different labels applied to Generation Y: 'Baby Boom Echo', 'Dot.com generation', the 'iGeneration', the 'Me Generation', 'Generation-D' (digital), and the acronym KIPPERS (Kids In Parents' Pockets Eroding Retirement Savings) (Cennamo & Gardner 2008; Glass 2007; Shaw & Fairhurst 2008). However, much of the writing about Generation Y has been based on observation rather than large-scale empirical findings (Shaw & Fairhurst 2008). If organisations are to achieve high motivation and performance from their Generation Y employees, then it is crucial that the workplace goals, expectations and values of this generation are understood.

This paper presents findings from an exploratory study that investigated the factors that influence Generation Y's perceptions and understanding of the issues surrounding work-life balance. We argue that the concept of work-life balance provides a useful entry point, as it focuses attention not only on how individuals balance the competing demands of work and non-work but how they view the interaction between different aspects of their lives. While the term work-life balance has clearly become part of the public lexicon (Lambert & Haley-Lock 2004; Lingard & Francis 2005), we approached this study by exploring the meaning our Generation Y participants ascribed to both 'work' and 'life' before considering how they viewed the connection between these two concepts.

## GENERATION Y AND WORK

Cennamo and Gardner (2008) identified a generation as an 'identifiable group sharing birth years, age location, and significant life events at critical development stages' (p. 891). This collection of attributes and attitudes has also been termed "peer personality" (Strauss & Howe 1991). The notion of generational difference identifies values as being imprinted for life (Lowe, Levitt & Wilson 2008), with each generation developing distinct preferences and traits about their feelings towards work and what they desire from work (Kupperschmidt 2000). It has been argued that understanding generational differences and their influence on work environment preferences and motivation is important for recruitment, retention and approaches to training and development (Glass 2007; Shaw & Fairhurst 2008; Westerman & Yamamura 2007). A failure to address these differences in each generation's values and preferences can lead to workplace conflict, misunderstanding, miscommunication and poor employee well-being (Wong, Gardiner, Lang & Coulon 2008). Each generation has grown up with different social and historical events occurring that have impacted upon their work values. Therefore every generation has different expectations of what the workplace will be like and how their work experience should be (Lowe et al. 2008).

### Characteristics of Generation Y

While there is some difference of opinion in the start and ending dates for Generation Y, the most common consensus is that it represents those born between 1980 and 1995 (Shih & Allen 2007). Generation Y have been argued to be quite different to the preceding generations (Eisner 2005), and are seen as being confident, passionate, technologically savvy and entrepreneurial thinkers (Martin 2005). Members of this generation have been identified as welcoming change as they see it as a new experience providing endless opportunities where they can develop new skills (Eisner 2005). Technology provides Generation Y with new opportunities as it is always changing and being upgraded; new technologies both fascinate and challenge Generation Y members to master them (Howe & Strauss 2000). Generation Y are generally considered to be technologically knowledgeable, as they have grown up in technology-savvy world where people commonly communicate with each other

across the internet, even if there are in the same office space (Eisner 2005). Often other generations do not understand this way of communicating, and so Generation Y see them as being behind in the technology world (Cennamo & Gardner 2008). Due to this focus on technology, Baby Boomers and Generation X were found to view Generation Y as being independent, self-reliant, and entrepreneurial thinkers (Barron, Maxwell, Broadbridge & Ogden 2007). Furthermore, Yeaton (2005) found that among accounting firms, it is expected that when Generation Y apply for jobs, they will examine the organisation's website as the primary source to gather information rather than freely talking to people who have been involved there. As Generation Y have grown up with increases in technology, they are quite content with having it as a regular fixture in their daily lives (Wong et al. 2008; Yeaton 2008).

From an early age, members of Generation Y have been involved in family decisions, with their views being seen as important and often changing those of other family members (Martin 2005). Generation Y are often the children of Baby Boomers, with their parents having them later in life than previous generations. This generation tend to view their relationships with their parents as being very important. Some authors argue this is because Generation Y like to talk through the issues they face (eg. Reynolds 2005), while others believe that by having a peer-to-peer relationship with their parents, Generation Y received what they wanted and rarely were told 'no' (Lowe et al. 2008). Generation Y's parents focused on building self-esteem, so that when they were older they would believe they could do anything (Eisner 2005; Shaw & Fairhurst 2008).

When it comes to the workplace, it has been argued that Generation Y are not afraid to ask what they want when they want it (Broadbridge, Maxwell & Ogden 2007; Lowe et al. 2008). As Generation Y are extremely direct about what they want, they are prepared to make cut-and-dried decisions to get the task completed successfully (Spiro 2006). Martin (2005) found that members of Generation Y are not willing to settle for one solution until all possibilities have been explored. It is not surprising then that they expect transparent, committed and adult-to-adult relationships with their peers and supervisors to get the job done the best possible way. Generation Y are also presented as being capable of multi-tasking (Freifield 2007), results-oriented and having an appetite for work and pressure (Shih & Allen

2007). This generation is thought to want greater flexibility at work than previous generations, as they are more loyal to their lifestyle than their job. As such, members of Generation Y have been identified as looking for careers with social significance that will provide them with high self-esteem and confidence. They will however, if forced, select their family and friends over work (Crumpacker & Crumpacker 2007). This view is further supported by Barron and colleagues (2007) who found Generation Y to value diversity, equity and tolerance in their working and non-working lives. Furthermore, Generation Y value freedom-related items and are prepared to leave an organisation if their needs are not met. As Sturges and Guest (2004) found, Generation Y can be quite upfront about achieving a good work-life balance and enjoy a full and balanced life with work not being a barrier for them to live a happy life.

#### **Work-life balance and Generation Y**

Consideration of the interface – and conflict – between work and personal life now has a substantive research history, characterised by such concepts as work-family conflict (eg. Frone, Russell & Cooper 1992; Greenhaus & Beutell 1985), work-family spillover (eg. Crouter 1984; Grzywacz, Almeida & McDonald 2002), work-life balance (eg. Higgins, Duxbury & Lee 1994; Sturges & Guest 2004) and work-life integration (eg. Lewis, Rapoport & Gambles 2003). Essentially, it is argued that interference often exists between work and non-work aspects of life, involving ‘interrole conflict in which role pressures from the work and family domains are mutually incompatible in some respect’ (Greenhaus & Beutell 1985:77). The changing definitions and terminology can be viewed as the result of both changing family structures and workplace arrangements. As current research shows, the notion of work-life balance has gathered increased attention due to the changing demographics of the working population, such as dual-earner couples, sole parents and individuals living alone (Casper, Weltman & Kwesiga 2007; Michel, Mitchelson, Kotrba, LeBreton & Baltes 2009; Parasuraman & Greenhaus 2002).

There have been limited studies that look to gain a specific understanding of how Generation Y view the balance between their work and personal life domains. Broadbridge and colleagues (2007) draw a

conclusion that this generation will seek more balanced lifestyles between their work and non-work lives as they enjoy being social, and therefore also want to have fun at work. These authors go further in arguing that Generation Y see employment flexibility as the way to achieve work-life balance and they do not want their work to rule their lives. However, it has been argued that while members of Generation Y will seek a work-life balance, their concern for career success will actually draw them into working increasingly long hours and experiencing unsatisfactory relationships between their personal and work lives (Sturges & Guest 2004). Other authors also assume that Generation Y do not want to work long hours at the expense of their family and friends, so they are more interested in making their jobs accommodate their family and personal lives (Campbell Clark 2000; Spiro 2006). Gerson (2004) argues that, as Generation Y are aware of their persisting work-family conflicts, they will be inclined to postpone marriage and parenthood so that they can first create a 'satisfying work life' (p. 171). However, little research has asked members of Generation Y directly about their perceptions of work-life balance. The findings presented here seek to further our understanding.

## METHOD

Due to the exploratory nature of this study, a qualitative research approach was adopted, as the aim was to gain an insight into the perceptions and attitudes of the participants rather than a quick look at the surface of these issues (Lofland & Lofland 1995). This research is built on an interpretive paradigm in order to 'generate descriptions, insights and explanations of events, so that the systems of interpretations and meanings are revealed' (Gioia & Pitre 1990:588). In particular, interpretive enquiry enables exploration of patterns of behaviour from an individual's viewpoint (Miles & Huberman 1994). People act in different ways according to their own perceptions about the reality of what is perceived (Neuman 1991).

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect the qualitative data, enabling the researcher to gain an insight into what the interviewees were feeling and the reasons they behaved in a certain manner (Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell & Alexander 1995). Cavana, Delahaye and Sekaran (2001) contend that interviewing provides opportunities to uncover 'rich' information from individuals expressing their

opinions and perspectives on the matter. This method also allows the interviewees to 'tell their story as they wish, identifying the issues they see as important to them' (Bouma & Ling 2004:177). A number of open-ended questions were asked, inviting participants to discuss their perceptions and understanding on a range of issues relating to work-life balance and the influences that have affected their perception of this concept. Each interview conducted took between 45 and 60 minutes to complete, with extra time for a 'warm-up' period to establish trust between the interviewer and respondent (Sorrell & Redmond 1995).

The research aim to understand what factors influence Generation Y's view on work-life balance required a sample of participants to unveil their personal experiences. Creswell (2007) argues that participants are selected purposefully to best answer the designated research question. In the study, participants were selected from the Australian workforce, were Generation Y (born 1980-1995) members and had at least 12 months working experience. The selected participants were employed in positions that required a university degree such as teachers, nurses, a pharmacist, and journalists. This provided a cross-section of how Generation Y employees in different industries viewed work-life balance. Participants were recruited using a chain referral technique (Penrod, Preston, Cain & Starks 2003). Intermediaries (friends of the researcher) were asked whether they knew anyone who would like to participate in the research, based on the sampling criteria set out above. The intermediaries asked the potential participants for permission for the researcher to contact them to explain the purpose of the study. Potential participants were then contacted via telephone and email to determine their suitability for inclusion in the study and their willingness to participate. In total, there were eleven participants involved in this research – six females and five males.

Thematic analysis of the data was undertaken, with the aim 'to identify and describe the contents of an individual's perceptions, ideals and values' (Reece, Davis & Polatajko 2008:434). Aronson (1994) argues that thematic analysis focuses on the identifiable themes and patterns of an individual's behaviour. The following discussion presents two of the themes that emerged from the data analysis: the meaning of work-life balance for participants, and the key influences on this meaning. Quotes have



been chosen to exemplify the participants' common experiences and meanings, with all participants having been given pseudonyms in the discussion.

## DISCUSSION

### The meaning of work-life balance for Generation Y

#### *Balancing time*

There is often a belief that work-life balance implies that managing one's time is like balancing a scale 'in that the more time one puts on one side of the scale the less will be available on the other' (Blyton, Blunsdon, Reed & Dastmalchian 2006:3). However, achieving a 'balance' need not mean that equal time is spent in both domains but rather, it points to the ability to fulfil roles in each domain (Greenhaus & Beutell 1985). Greenhaus and Beutell's argument supports what was found in Tina's interviews when she explained what work-life balance meant to her:

*Work-life balance isn't about achieving an equal balance, as trying to schedule an equal number of hours for work and personal life activities never seems to work. Life is more important than that. A good work-life balance means something like, 'to work to support my life', and not the other way around.*

Tina's comments support the research of Nippert-Eng (1996), who argued that people deal with differences between their employment and personal life either in terms of segregation or integration. For Tina, it is important to separate her work from her personal life and hence she fits within Nippert-Eng's notion of 'segregation' to understand work-life balance. Another participant, Liz, differed from Tina in her interview, as it was apparent from her comments that she integrated her two domains:

*I guess to me work-life balance is all about trying to fit both your work and your personal life into the day. That's the way I do it. I know some work in the day and then socialise at night. But that doesn't really work for me. I seem to work and have a social life at the same time. I think it's because that is my job [journalist].*

There are some authors who suggest that when an individual is satisfied with their work environment they will be motivated to achieve and have a desire to work towards something (Cinamon & Rich 2002; Scandura & Lankau 1997). The level of satisfaction an individual finds in their job is important, as

work forms our identity and our perception of who we are. This supports what Wendy said throughout her interview. It was clearly evident that Wendy believed that being a doctor provided her with an identity:

*You know I work pretty much everyday. ... And the thing is, I wouldn't do it any other way. Because I know that what I am doing is meaningful and it's for a reason because I could save a life by working more hours than what others think is reasonable.*

Respondents' stories about dealing with issues of balancing their time between work and non-work had many similarities to other studies – and other generations. However, it was not solely time that was discussed in relation to work-life balance. The blurring of the boundaries between work and personal life (Hardill, Green & Dudleston 1997; Lewis et al 2003) through technological advances and intensification of work led to a need to also find a mental balance between the two arenas.

#### *Balancing “headspace”*

A number of participants expressed how, although they spent time at work, they also found themselves spending significant time thinking about work while they were not working. These members of Generation Y found work to be so important that it was hard to forget about it when not physically working, with the end result being work had a tendency to take over their lives. This finding was evident in Dave's interview, with Dave believing that his work impacted everything he did because everything related back to his job:

*I know people say they can stop thinking about work, but really you can't. Like when I sit down to read a magazine just for fun, I can't read it without finding myself criticising it. Being in this profession means you're always a journalist when you are reading something and, well, that's something that you can't stop.*

Dave's view illustrates that, for him, being a journalist meant that work was always going to be important as it was going to be difficult for him to be away from work. This provides support for Kelly and Kelly's (1994) findings that the boundaries of work have expanded and employees' perception of what constitutes work has been altered. Other participants shared the impact of technology on what work meant, such as Bill, who said he could 'work from home as I have a computer hooked up that

connects to my office'. Furthermore these views support Cennamo and Gardner's (2008) findings that, as the workplace becomes more technological, so do employees with the 9-5 working hours being no longer seen as normal with employers expecting their employees to access work all the time.

However, Dave also identified that such a manner of working is not ideal – and cannot necessarily be sustained:

*When I first began working I thought that just knowing the difference between my work and personal life would be all that I needed. And I got by like this for the first couple of years at work. But now it has completely changed. Just knowing what it should be and actually trying to achieve it are completely two different things. I guess as you grow you experience new things that end up contributing to how you perceive your personal life.*

Dave's view towards the changes that have altered his understanding of personal life shows how he is moving through the 'stages of life' (Werner & DeSimone 2006). Individuals experience many changes during the course of their life (such as changes in social roles), which result in changes to what they value and see as important (Hellevik 1993). As Hellevik (2001) found, Baby Boomers have different values in their later stages of life compared to what they had when they first began working. The values Baby Boomers had when they first entered the workforce are quite similar to younger employees, namely Generation Y, who have just entered the workplace. These young workers in turn will also change their preferences so that they may end up where the older workers are today (Hellevik 1993).

### **Influences on Generation Y's view of work-life balance**

The work environment is one of the most important contexts in which individuals function during their lives. It has been seen that long before entering the workplace, children and adolescents develop conceptions of what it means to work and form expectations regarding their own place in the world of work. The following factors emerged as key influences on participants' understanding of work-life balance: parents' approach to work-life balance; work colleagues; communication media; and life stage.

#### *Parents' approach to work-life balance*

Parents play a key role in the early development of children's values (Erikson 1980), and this influence was also evident amongst participants' discussion of work-life balance. Responses involved both replicating parents' approach or doing the opposite, as Elle exemplified:

*And I guess in a way also my parents' approach to work. I believe Dad always worked hard and worked for a long time and when we were growing up I think he tried to work too many hours and so I don't think I will follow him. I will probably copy his later approach to work and try and to make it compulsory to be home at tea time.*

#### *Work colleagues*

As graduates enter the workforce, the process of organisational socialisation assists in the development of individuals' workplace values (Anakwe & Greenhaus 2000; Garavan & Morley 1997). The influence of work colleagues was also evident among participants' discussion of work-life balance. As Wendy's interview progressed, it was evident that she was still determining how to achieve a balance in her life and thus she followed her colleagues' approach to work and life:

*Well I've got to say fellow colleagues. I often work alongside other doctors who are well known and respected across the board. So I look at them for inspiration in how to try and achieve a balance.*

Various participants' comments suggested that when employees are in the early stages in their career they look towards their fellow colleagues to provide answers to questions they may have regarding their working and personal lives. These comments provided evidence of social cognitive theory, where learning through observation includes behaviour imitation and also the adoption of attitudes, values, and aspirations observed in others (Bandura 2001).

#### *Society*

During the interviews it became clear that there were other factors that had influenced and altered the participants' understanding of work-life balance. Wider societal influences, such as television and other communication media, were seen as major influences that had influenced their understanding. Signorielli and Kahlenberg (2001), for example, believe that television is an important force in young

people's lives, as it provides many relevant and attractive role models to be followed. There has been evidence to support this view, as young people often learn values, beliefs and behaviours that media personalities exhibit (Valkenburg, 2004). These authors' findings were evident throughout Dave's explanation into what he thought had influenced his understanding of work-life balance.

*Oh especially the media, you know movies and TV shows. And you've been brought up watching these people go about their everyday life. People on TV and in the movies always seem to have a balance. So you copy them to try and replicate their success.*

Members of Generation Y have been identified as the most television acculturated generation ever (Bakewell & Mitchell 2003). Dave's comments illustrate how he has grown up with television characters and thus may have developed a close identification with some of them.

#### *Life stage*

Regardless of the different influences in developing their views on work-life balance, participants' life cycle appeared to be a critical factor in their descriptions. There were occasions when respondents felt that their work-life balance had altered with age. One participant, Ben, believed that when he was younger he found it easier to work long hours and not have to worry about his life away from work. However, now that he is older, Ben believes that his work-life balance had changed:

*When you're young you work, work, work as you think that you need to so that you impress and develop a reputation that you are prepared to work hard. But as you get older and start thinking about a family, you know that you are going to have to change how you perceive your balance to be. ... The balance that works for me has changed over time.*

Ben's comments on the changes to his work-life balance were not uncommon. Bill also believed that achieving work-life balance was easier when he was young because he did not have any other commitments other than to himself and his work. Whereas, now that he is older, it is more difficult to achieve as there are so many other things going on. This highlights that the respondents' goals and life stages change with other life responsibilities. For others, critical events had played a role. For example, it was quite clear throughout Sarah's interview that she enjoyed teaching and watching the

children learn and experience new things. However, as the interview progressed, Sarah noted that her work involvement had changed, and so work was not as important as what it was once before:

*Last year was the be-all-and-end-all. I'd worked four years at University and I was like, 'I'm a teacher' and that was sort of who I was. And then my dad passed away and it completely changed me. Now I view it more like I'm here for the kids rather than it's a career. That sort of woke me up last year and I thought, stop thinking about it as my life, it's just part of it.*

Having to deal with family responsibilities is important as it influences individuals' decision-making into what areas of their everyday life they choose to allocate time to. The type of household in which one lives has an impact on their structure and understanding of what work-life balance means. Of our eleven participants, only three currently had children. Thus, discussion of issues of family were not as prominent as might be expected of a group of older employees in relation to work-life balance. Most participants had certainly considered how a growing family might impact their working lives in the future, but their projections may not match their future reality. As members of Generation Y age, and the various aspects of their non-work lives alter, their views on work-life balance may also change.

## CONCLUSION

For the Generation Y participants in this study, work-life balance was an important concept in their lives. Achieving a successful work-life balance (whatever that meant for each individual) did not come easy, as outside pressures can create incentives or disincentives for individuals to spend more or less time at work and home. In dealing with these issues, members of Generation Y were not as different from their older colleagues as much of the commentary would suggest. Younger respondents believed that staying at work longer meant they were more committed at work compared to others who left early. However, family responsibilities, stage in the life cycle and wider societal factors were also seen to influence their view of work-life balance. While the current exploratory study has highlighted important concerns, further empirical research is required to determine whether these issues hold true for different members of Generation Y - and to better understand both the similarities and differences for this generation in the workplace.

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