

Are Gen Yers Being Underutilized?

By Joyce Grillo

“If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.” “We tried that once before and it didn’t work.” “That’s an interesting idea but it won’t fly here.” How often have you heard these words? More times than we care to remember? Yet this kind of thinking is what stifles creativity and it’s happening in workplaces every day between seasoned older workers and younger employees.

According to a study done by Mercer Delta, one of the key business challenges U. S. corporations face is the failure to innovate and to exploit emerging technologies. They also found that our leadership ranks are rife with people strong in cognitive skills – business acumen - but not enough in the leadership competencies that are necessary for growth, innovation and to respond quickly to emerging opportunities.

Even though the current economic downturn has forced U.S. industries to focus on cost efficiencies and managing risks, we cannot lose sight of the global competitive pressures, which will only increase in the coming years. Where will we find tomorrow’s new breed of leaders? The answer is right before us – Gen Y (a.k.a. Millennials)!

A few years ago I attended an event for small business owners. One of the panelists made a comment, which at the time didn’t have an impact on me. We were talking about business innovation and she said, “Any business person who doesn’t have someone on his or her staff who is 25 and younger will not be competitive in today’s world.” In my work as a leadership and generational consultant I’ve come to realize she was spot on. This new wave of workers packs a lot of power and has tremendous untapped potential. We desperately need their talent and creativity. America will not regain stature in the world economy if we do not once again excel and lead the way in innovation and technology. We just need to look at President Elect Obama’s agenda to realize the myriad of challenges and opportunities that lie ahead of us.

So how can we effectively leverage the talents of younger workers? To answer this question we need to first understand the current work environment and then Gen Y – what defines them and how they got to be the way they are.

Current Environment

For the first time in history we have four generations working side by side: Matures born before 1946, Baby Boomers 1946 - 1964, Gen X 1964 - 1994 and Gen Y 1994 – 2000 all with differing values, work styles and work ethics often causing conflict and frustration for many managers. Due to these generational differences, a schism exists between the more experienced seasoned workers and the new entrants.

Who Is Gen Y?

What Shaped Them

There is no definitive agreement on their birth years; some say somewhere between 1978 and 1995; most say 1981 to 1993. Narrower definitions put Gen Yers as those ages 20 – 26 in the workplace today. As children of Baby Boomers they were coddled since birth and overprotected. These “helicopter” parents hovered over them with unprecedented parental supervision and advocacy. They were raised by overly indulgent parents causing this generation to have an overly inflated ego, and a “what’s in it for me?” attitude. They could do no wrong and the world was theirs for the taking. The challenge now facing many companies and managers is how to channel their “sense of entitlement?”

What Defines Them

It is not surprising that the way they came into the world is the way they want to enter the workplace. They are seen as arrogant, self-centered, not wanting to pay their dues and having a poor work ethic. What is interesting is that the Boomers who profess not to understand this new generation and are frustrated by their so-called demands are the very ones that helped shaped them. Many corporations experience their biggest conflict between Boomer managers and younger employees that do not fit the mold they created.

Yet, according to Marcus Buckingham, “Their (Gen Y) demands and sense of entitlement mesh perfectly with the demands that companies have for employees who are creative, innovative, resourceful, resilient, persistent and engaged.” Unfortunately these differences overshadow the value added by each of these cohorts. Organizations are focused more on what separates the Boomers from the Gen Yers than what they could do together to be a powerful force.

It is important that these disparate groups join forces and combine their talents to create the workforce that will get us through the difficult times ahead. Patricia Martin in her book, “GenRen: The Rise of the Cultural Consumer and What It Means to Your Business,” believes we will eventually evolve from a mentor-mentee model and into a master-apprentice relationship. That time has arrived!

With maturing careers and retirement on the horizon, Boomers want to leave a legacy and are looking for renewed meaning in their lives and jobs. They have a wealth of knowledge and experience that only comes with lessons learned. Gen Y has an optimism that brings a freshness and naïveté untarnished by the notion, “we’ve already done that.” Gen Y wants role models to look up to and guide them about career choices, personal growth and the ability to make a difference.

The need of Boomers to be recognized and acknowledged for their business savvy meshes perfectly with Gen Y’s voracious appetite to learn. Following the master- apprentice model, Boomers can teach Gen Y the soft skills of Emotional Intelligence – the organization and political savvy they lack and in return reap the benefits of what Gen Y has to offer. As Bogey’s character Rick in Casablanca said to Claude Rains at the movie’s conclusion, “It’s the beginning of a great friendship.”

What Value Do Gen Yers Add?

Technology is part of their DNA

Gen Y has never known a world without computers, the Internet, cell phones, texting and instant messaging, You Tube, Facebook, MySpace and Twitter. They are techno-savvy like no other generation – it's in their genes. They not only grew up with it, they participated in its creation. This is one area they know they excel in, which gives them their "sense of entitlement" and for which they want to be acknowledged and respected and rightly so.

Technology is universally recognized as critical to a company's success and is often seen as a necessary evil to Boomers. To stay at the cutting edge of a rapidly changing marketplace, companies must keep up with the most current technology, which comes easily and naturally to Gen Y. This is an area where they can add value and yet are not being utilized as much as they could. This represents a role reversal for Boomers relegating them to a back seat and admitting they can learn from Gen Y. For Boomers who have ruled the corporate world for the last 40 years, this can be both humbling and difficult. Companies can benefit from drawing on the knowledge and seasoning of Boomers while learning from the technical sophistication of Gen Yers.

Inspire a Climate for Innovation

Gen Yers are independent thinkers and were raised to speak up and challenge the status quo and they are not afraid to do so. They refuse to blindly conform to the traditions of time-honored institutions. Instead they ask, "Why?" according to Eric Chester in "Employing Generation Why?" They don't want to hear, "that's not the way we do things here." As a client recently said to me, "they ask a lot of questions, which can often lead to answers and solutions that are actually more efficient and effective. It's a good thing." And as one Gen Yer put it, "It's not only about having experience. It's about having good ideas and having someone to listen to you." Gen Yers want to work in an environment where creativity and independent thinking are looked upon positively. This can be frustrating and aggravating to a 50-year-old manager who is working 24/7 and who just wants to get the work done. Older generations have to be more open to opposing views and differing ways of approaching things. For example, Xerox is using the slogan "Express Yourself" as a way to describe their culture and appeal to Gen Yers desire to be innovative. Boomers have ruled for years and are comfortable with the world they created. However, the time has come to step back, listen and learn.

Embrace Social Media

Social media is changing the world and how business works. Business Week recently published an article about the power of social media and how companies are beginning to embrace it because they really don't have a choice. They are desperately looking for ways to be part of the Web 2.0/user-generated content, MySpace, Facebook, YouTube phenomenon.

The global company, IBM with 400,000 employees uses social networking with its in-house version of Web 2.0. They view it as a substitute for face-to-face meetings. They believe it allows their people to share knowledge and experience, which ultimately will lead to innovation. Starbucks is another example of a company embracing social networking. When things were on the downturn for them they started a social networking site to ask for

help from customers. This was a strategy to reach “the customer” en masse in a way, which without social media would never have been possible. In order to survive companies have to come to realize that they must meet their customers on their turf or risk falling behind.

Gen Yer’s natural affinity for social networking has not been tapped into yet. They are connected to people from around the world, friends, family classmates, colleagues and even strangers in ways that are shattering traditional communication concepts. Who better to guide companies to the transition to social networking than Gen Yers?

Capitalize on Their Affinity for Networking

Collaboration is a business imperative. For years, companies have been trying to break down silos and build relationships across functional areas domestically and globally. To be competitive they need employees who can work collaboratively in a team based and highly matrixed organizational structure. Used to “play dates” and doing things in groups, Gen Yers do their best work as part of a team. They want to work with people they like and want to be friends with their coworkers. This generation is very loyal and committed to one another. They also have a desire to want to share knowledge, which ultimately will benefit corporations in terms of sharing best practices. However, they lack the seasoning that the older generation has which is invaluable. Many believe the reason dot.coms went bust is that Gen X and Gen Y started them without the wisdom of the Boomers. Carving out a way for different generations to work together and to learn from one another can be very powerful. As one Gen Yer who sits next to a 65-year-old worker said, “He helps me all the time with gas industry questions and I help him with computer stuff. The knowledge he has – you can’t replace that. I’m trying to soak it in.”

Employees With Multiple Skills

Overscheduled as children they learned how to juggle school, sports, music lessons and other activities. This is a generation of exceptional multi-taskers. They can be emailing on their iPhones, talking on cell phones and simultaneously surfing the Net – all behaviors frowned on by many Boomer managers.

A client recently told me that they took instant messaging away from their interns because they saw it as “slacking off” on the job. In fact, the interns were using it as a way to more efficiently get and receive information to do their jobs. Technology has also played a role in making it easier for them to learn multiple tasks. Their ability to do things faster, quicker and easier than have been done in the past can help organizations as Gen Yers will likely have to fill the gaps of downsized staffs and retiring Boomers. Cross training and learning multiple tasks and jobs comes naturally to Gen Yers and to them it’s just another way to build their portfolio of skills.

Boomers need to keep in mind that there is more than one way to get things done and it may not necessarily be their way. Provide Gen Yers with appropriate challenges and support and recognize the value of their proficiency with technology for obtaining information and getting the work done – their way.

A Feedback Rich Culture

For years, human resource professionals have tried everything and anything to get employees to give each other honest and direct feedback without success. Feedback is important for building one's self-awareness and continuous growth and development. Gen Yers view feedback as critical to their need for on-going learning. They want strong coaches and mentors who can help them with their personal development. This is a way for Gen Yers to calibrate their learning and determine if they are on the right track to building their portfolio of skills. Not only do Gen Yers like to receive feedback, they are also at ease giving it. I predict that because of the way Gen Y embraces feedback, feedback will not just be a yearly event during an annual review, but will become part of the fabric of day-to-day interactions among employees at all levels.

Environmental Activists

Highly developed social consciousness and their concern for the environment, Gen Yers make great advocates and champions for a greener world. Social responsibility is on the agenda of most corporations including President Elect Obama's. With concerns about climate and sustainability becoming key business drivers, companies are looking for innovative ways to meet these challenges. Gen Yers passion for a better environment and world combined with their knowledge of technology make them ideal candidates for companies looking to advance in these areas.

An "Inclusive" Generation

Gen Y is the most multi-cultural generation to be born in the 20th Century. They are characterized as being more racially and culturally tolerant than previous generations. Technology has also helped shape Gen Yers view of culture as distinctly international and diverse and without boundaries.

Gen Y is tolerant of diversity and working and interacting with people outside of their own ethnic group is the norm. Their desire for inclusion of people from all races may well diminish the word "minority" to future generations.

The best leaders are often those distinguished by their ability to work with a diverse range of people managing across organizational boundaries and building strategic relationships. We can learn from Gen Y to whom this is as instinctive as the air they breath.

What Lies Ahead

In the near term Boomers will continue to reign and Gen Yers will similarly be measured against their standards for success of working long hours and following the rules they put in place. The wheels of change inevitably move slowly. However, with companies such as Xerox, IBM, Google and others, who view this emerging workforce as the future of their organization, there's hope!

These companies envision a future where knowledge is shared thus leading the way to innovation. Gen Y will have an incredible impact on making this happen. Boomers have been trying to change the world for years; Gen Yers will make it happen.

This change can't happen in isolation. The best companies capitalize on the talents and strengths of all generations. Or as Jack Welch said, "Any company wanting to succeed must engage the minds of all its employees."

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