

AGELESS GENERATIONS

Rethinking Generation Y

work
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The problem with Generation Y is not so much that it does not exist, more that the characteristics of Generation Y **are not restricted to a single generation**. As a result it is our contention that organisations are better off looking at what unites the different generations in their workforce rather than treating Generation Y as special case.



Generation Y NOT SCARED TO MOVE JOBS

QUESTIONING Gen Y

The importance of this debate can be summed up with two opposing propositions:

“ If generational attitude differences are as marked as the Generation Y proponents believe, then this is an issue of strategic importance requiring companies to intimately understand each generation and develop customised workforce strategies in response. ”

BUT

“ If generational attitude differences are not significant, these same broad generational customised strategies have the potential to disrupt generic workforce development, dissipate resources and erode generational harmony. ”

So this is something we need to get right. In this article we look at the many, many arguments that suggest Generation Y theories have more than a hint of hyperbole about them. In particular:

We highlight the work of social scientists who question the concept ● **We point towards a range of research that demonstrates people of different ‘generations’ have more in common than not** ● **We look at some of the key characteristics of Generation Y and ask how closely linked they are with Generation Y** ● **We look at the marketing strategies of some major FMCG companies, who were behind the growth of Gen Y theory, but who have now moved on to newer, cross-generational marketing.**

Although we would emphasise that we are not questioning the motives of those that have implemented policy based on Gen Y (the desire to improve retention and engagement with a younger workforce is a good one), we are suggesting that traditional Gen Y theory is not the best way to meet these policy objectives.

THE Beginning

A generation is normally defined as the period between birth and when individuals generally begin having children, so usually in the region of 25 years. Obviously there have always been generations, but only relatively recently have people taken to giving them names and apparent common characteristics. In the 20th century, among others, we had the Silent Generation (born between 1925 and 1942) and Baby Boomers (1943-1960). The recent trend has been to designate Generations by letter, starting with 'X' (first appearing in 1965 in a series of interviews commissioned by Woman's Own magazine) and latterly Y and now Z.

Generation Y has been defined in various ways, including:

1982 - 2002 on Wikipedia

1983 - 1997 again on Wikipedia

1977 - 2002 in USA Today

1978 - 1989 again in USA Today

1977 - 1995 by Chordas Lori

1981 - 1999 by Lynne Lancaster and David Stillman



Generation Y EGOTISTICAL AND NARCISSISTIC

It seems people define Generation Y according to their inclination and/or the point they are trying to make, which is fine as there is no absolute truth and the industries that have grown up around Generation Y are fairly fluid in their thinking. However, it does start to raise doubts as to how much confidence you can have in any sort of consensus view of what Generation Y stands for, when it cannot (and probably should not) be tied down to any specific point in time.

6-31

More significant, particularly from a graduate recruitment perspective, is the age range we are talking about for Generation Y: anywhere between 6 and 31. This means that a large part of the audience on which Gen Y research is based (i.e. those between 22 and 31) have in the main finished with further education and are well into their careers. They are liable to have a different mindset from those just entering higher education. At the other end of the spectrum it is difficult to believe that 6, 7 and 8 year olds will necessarily fall into the mindset Generation Y theory lays down for them. They may well represent something different altogether.

THE Characteristics

What then are the characteristics of Generation Y? The answer, as with many things Generation Y'ish, depends on who you ask. A web search for Generation Y generates over 13 million links so you have a lot of choice. We've picked a small selection.

“ Known for their optimism, education, collaborative ability, open-mindedness, and drive, Generation Y are the hottest commodities on the job market.

– Spiro ”

“ They care less about salaries, and more about flexible working, time to travel and a better work life balance.

– Observer ”

“ They are ardent environmentalists. They adore technology and understand it as no generation before them did. They practically invented the Internet”. ”

Through all the definitions some apparent commonality does shine through:

Techno-savvy, Connected 24/7, Self-confident, Parental bonding, Optimistic, Looking for work/life balance, narcissistic, put social networks before corporate information, anti-commitment.

Let's look at some of these of these characteristics in more detail. While there is some merit to these generalisations (for example, over 60% look to their parents for advice and feel close to them), if you look a little closer, many of these assumptions are easy to knock down.

Take **work/life balance** as an example. While it is true that in surveys graduates, many of whom are Gen Y, do highlight the importance of work/life balance (the recent Gradfacts survey revealed 91% of graduates believe a good work-life balance is very important), surveys also show that when it comes to applying for jobs work/life balance becomes far less important slipping to 5th or 6th in terms of priorities. Consider the quote on the next page:

GENERATION Y?*

On a sunny Sunday not long ago, Sociology Professor Carr B. Lavell of George Washington University took one of his students on a fishing trip.

Why had he gone into medicine, asked the professor. The student answered:

“ Medicine looked lucrative. I am just like anyone else, I just want to prepare myself so that I can get the most out of it for me. I hope to make a lot of money in a hurry. I'd like to retire in about ten years and do the things I really want to do. ”

And what are those?

“ Oh ”

said the brilliant student,

“ fishing, travelling, taking it easy. ”

*Except this quote is from Time magazine in 1951. Nothing much has changed!.

KNOCKING DOWN **assumptions**

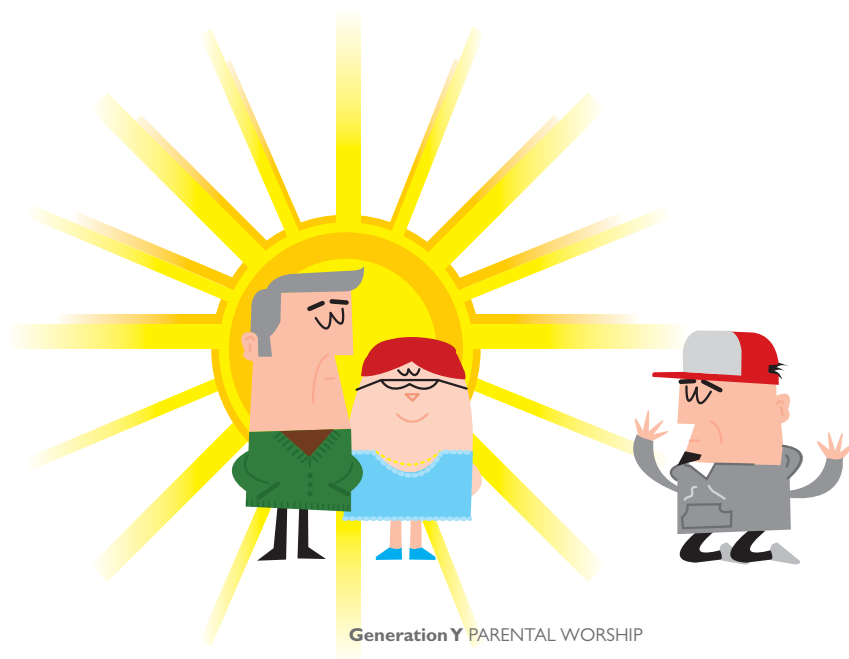
How about this ‘distrust of big corporates’? Well a recent survey by TMP indicated that 68% of graduates trusted corporate information more than forums and blogs.

Or the association between Generation Y and technology? Recent research by Ofcom states that

“ **the over-65s spend four hours a week longer online than 18-24s.** We suspect that factors specific to the individual, personality and background, are much more significant (in determining use of technology) than generation. ”

So, typical characteristics of Gen Y do not seem to be limited to Generation Y. To illustrate this further, we set up a mobile phone quiz, based on a selection of generational characteristics, so that people could match their attitudes to a generation (you can do it yourself by texting ‘GenY’ to 80199).

Not surprisingly the results so far show no strong correlation between age and attitude – you do not have to be between 6 and 31 to be ‘Generation Y’ in your attitudes and behaviour.



WHAT ABOUT THE **Social Scientists?**

It's not just me that believes Generation Y is a flawed concept. Two quotes from prominent social scientists illustrate a growing consensus in the social research community

The first from **E.Allan Lind of Duke University, USA**

“ ...as we try to understand the nature of generational differences we often fall prey to our natural tendency to stereotype, and this can make us perceive differences as greater than they in fact are. Second, we tend to see the differences in attitude or action that do exist as reflecting personality traits that prevail in each generation rather than reactions to age-linked differences in situation. The end result is that we accept the characterizations of ‘Generation X’ or ‘Generation Y’ offered by the popular press. ”

The second by **Dr Brad Jackson of Victoria University**

“ In the same way that generalisations about different national cultural groups can do more harm than good when trying to build authentic business relationships, so too the generational stereotypes that have gained widespread currency in the business world can divert and undermine our efforts to lead. ”



Generation Y OPTIMISTIC

WHY, **Generation Y?**

The obvious question at this point then is why, if it has so many flaws, this concept is so popular? For the answer I think we need to go back to the end of the last century when Generation Y first started to get widespread press. Business Week ran a main feature on Gen Y in 1999 and the editorial is very revealing. For example:

“ Asked what brands are cool, these teens rattle off a list their parents blank on. Mudd. Paris Blues. In Vitro. Cement. What's over? Now, the names are familiar: Levi's. Converse. Nike. "They just went out of style," shrugs Lori Silverman, 13, of Oyster Bay, N.Y

Lori is now 21 and I suspect her attitudes have changed (Levi's, Nikes and Converse are still going strong, but when was the last time you heard of Mudd?), but the motivators of the original Gen Y populists were clear – sell more product to the youth market.

As such Generation Y had something of the silver bullet about it - a straightforward route into the minds of an important demographic. On the back of this thinking a whole industry emerged – conferences, books, market research companies, research projects. Without wanting to be too cynical, this has become self-perpetuating: **without the theory the industry collapses.**

What about the corporates?

In the mean-time however the thinking of the corporates behind the emergence of Gen Y theory has moved on. They have undertaken new research and tended to re-segment their markets based around consumer segments that reflect the cross generational attitudes of consumers. For example, instead of blanket assumptions that all teens are deeply into social networking, marketers target the diverse cross-section across ages and social groups that actually use Facebook and sites like it.

The significance here is that although some segments have stronger representation amongst some age groups, all the age groups have representation amongst each sector. Behaviours span the generations and as a result marketing needs to as well. This is a lesson recruiters might well benefit from mirroring.