

Rising Stars

How to engage & Develop 'Generation Y'

The author writes about her research exploring how best to engage 'Generation Y' in the workplace. Her doctoral research involved a sample of c.500 young professionals in law, accounting and engineering



A recent TIME magazine cover provocatively described 'Generation Y' as the 'Me, Me, Me Generation' and explained how they are 'lazy, entitled narcissists who still live with their parents' and 'why they will save us all!' This sentiment encapsulates the key challenge and opportunity with this cohort.



Who are 'Generation Y'?

'Generation Y' or 'Millennials' as they are often referred to in the US – are expected to make up 75% of the global workforce by 2025. I decided to undertake my doctoral research in this area as I was fascinated at the trends I was seeing in Deloitte, where I worked for seven years as Head of Talent Development. Deloitte Ireland has about 1,300 staff across offices in Dublin, Cork and Limerick and my role was focused on the succession, attraction, development and retention of key talent in the firm. It was a workplace dominated by twenty-somethings. In particular, high levels of self-confidence, an insatiable appetite for feedback and an expectation for responsibility and challenge from day one.

Carolyn Martin in her book 'Managing Generation Y: Global citizens born in the late seventies and early eighties' defines Generation Y 'as employees born between 1978 and 1988'. They are 'independent, entrepreneurial thinkers, who relish responsibility, thrive on challenge, love freedom and hate micromanagement' and they are the most technically literate,

educated and ethnically diverse generation in history – rather different to the Time magazine caricature! Work life balance is of the utmost priority for Generation 'Y'; no longer is the career goal to 'get to the top', it is to 'get the most from life'. So having fun in work is very important to them, as is friendship; indeed being with their friends has been identified as a strong motivator for Gen Ys in choosing a job.

Engaging Generation Y

One of the challenges today is how to engage Generation Y. Given their different drivers engaging them will be quite different to previous generations. Gen Y are more optimistic, entrepreneurial and more technologically advanced and the most rewarded, recognised and praised generation in living memory. As a result of feedback from over 500 respondents in my doctoral research, I developed the **MOTIVATE** Framework as an approach to enhance engagement and performance levels of this cohort in the workplace.

Meaning and Purpose

Generation Y want their work to have a purpose, to contribute something to the world, as they are extremely socially conscious. They are looking for meaning and impact in their work and be engaged by work they are passionate about. They want to give back so Corporate Social Responsibility is a big factor for them. In order to entice them into the organisations, it's important to spell out how they will be making a difference early on. Programs such as Pfizer's Global Health Fellows Program (that places Pfizer colleagues and teams in short term volunteer assignments with leading international development organizations in key emerging markets) is an example of an initiative that allows Generation Y to give back.

Opportunity & Challenge

Generation Y are hungry for challenge and embrace opportunities to travel as well as taking on stretching assignments.

Mentoring is another key strategy to afford opportunity and challenge to this cohort. Interestingly, baby boomers are the preferred mentors as their wisdom

and experience is valued by Generation Y. Also, many of their parents are in this category and typically they have strong friendships with their parents. Mentoring is a low cost, high impact development initiative for organisations to roll out but it is critical that such initiatives are properly supported by the organisation with appropriate training. David Clutterbuck, international mentoring guru, recommends the 'chess move' for the ideal mentoring pairing, the mentor should be a level above and in a functional area 'across' from the mentee.

Timely, Honest Communication

Generation Y are feedback junkies, they are looking to expand and grow and want continuous feedback on their progression. They have grown up in an era of instant communication. Despite being the tech generation, they value face-to-face feedback and interaction. Feedback early and often is key and future forward, meaning coaching feedback in terms of how they can improve going forward as opposed to criticising past performance.

O'Toole & Bennis (2009 p.1) describe how we will not be able to rebuild trust in institutions 'until leaders learn to communicate honestly and create organisations where that is the norm'. They explain how leaders need to 'make a conscious decision to support transparency and create a culture of candour.' The traditional yardstick of success to create wealth for investors has shifted to a new metric of corporate leadership that requires executives to create organisations that are 'economically, ethically and socially sustainable.'

Interest in Personal Career Path

Taking an interest in the employee's personal career path is vitally important to maintain motivation and performance levels. It is about creating an environment where they feel 'someone is looking out for me'. Development programs leave a strong impact on Generation Y, as they play into the notion of meaning and significance. Generation Y are likely to take development-oriented assessment programs seriously, since they view such

programs as opportunities for growth and future considerations. According to a 2012 survey by staffing agency Adecco, 68% of recent graduates identified good opportunities for growth and development as one of their top professional priorities.

Values & Vision

A company's employer brand is very important to attracting Generation Y and the values of the company need to be closely aligned to the employee's own personal values. According to Taylor & LaBarre (2006) in their book *Mavericks at Work*, companies should use values to help define a corporate purpose because "high minded values can drive cutting edge corporate performance".

They went on to say that "Great companies are built on genuine passion, plus a day-to-day commitment to great execution. Employees won't feel the passion, and can't maintain the operating discipline, unless they feel good about what the company sells and the values that it stands for".

Attentive Management

Remember, this is a generation that experienced helicopter parenting and they are used to high levels of involvement and engagement from their parents which feed into their expectations at work. They want to be listened to, they want to be heard and having input is increasingly important to this cohort. They really appreciate the 'personal touch', a manager taking a genuine interest in them, in terms of their ambitions, values and in essence tapping into their value systems and understanding what is most important to them in life generally and in the workplace.

Managers who are successful at this in my view will generate high loyalty and trust with their staff. Consider 'personalised motivation', a 'method of profiling employees to determine how each individual prefers to be managed'. This approach can enable employees to give managers information on the best ways to motivate them and therefore maximize their potential. Performance reviews every

three months instead of annual reviews may prove to be a good motivational force and aim for frequent communication and interaction between the employee and manager, as this will ensure candid communication and in turn generate feelings of security and appreciation.

Terms & Conditions

Money matters to Generation Y but not to the same degree as their Boomer counterparts. They understand there are trade-offs and they will forego financial gain for meaningful work where they can make a difference or flexibility. The research shows that even though compensation is important, to retain top talent employers need to pay more attention to issues such as job quality, flexibility, and individual differences (Lockwood 2007). Money does remain a universal motivator but learning opportunities, personal growth, work variation, autonomy at work and intellectual stimulation must feature highly in the strategy to retain this workforce.

Energy Management

Generation Y want to work with the ebb and flow of their energy levels, an approach termed "blending", so at work they want access to social networks and at home they will check work emails at the same time as personal emails. If they want to log on at midnight and work until three in the morning, they see this as perfectly OK, and they value flexibility in terms of time off. Concessions such as remote working are highly valued by them, not necessarily all the time, but once a week can be sufficient.

Both males and females in my research reported that in the main, they were planning for the future and a core consideration was to work with an organisation that was 'family friendly' that is, good maternity/paternity benefits and the opportunity to work flexibly if required in the future.

Generation Y are certainly a different generation from those past, sculpted by greater access to education, a nurturing "helicopter parenting" environment and rapidly improving technology. For companies looking to attract Generation Y

talent, they need to ensure their employer-value proposition fits in with the needs and values of this rising proportion of the talent pool. Attracting them early, retaining them by meeting their mobility, flexibility and continuous feedback demands and communicating an employee-value proposition that appeals to their desire for collaboration, contribution and global altruism are key if employers wish to vie successfully for their attention.

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Corporate social responsibility isn't just talk for Gen Ys. They are seeking a tangible opportunity to make a difference through the workplace. Generation Y have great expectations – they want to work for organizations they believe in. A job is not just a job and they are willing to prioritize meaningful work over pay. By focusing on making a positive difference in the lives of others, rather than on more materialistic markers of success, they are setting themselves up for the meaningful life they yearn to have.

Bruce Tulgan has written extensively on the intergenerational workforce and concludes: 'Generation Y are the most high maintenance workforce in the history of the world... the good news is they are going to be the most high performing...'

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