



Gen Y insists on 'working with, not working for' and that is turning the workplace upside down

Meet the boss: your new employee

By Ian Harvey

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Meet newly minted university graduate, Karen. She's an honours student from a fine business school whose second major was sociology. She wants a career path in marketing and she volunteers at the local women's shelter. All in all, a fine job candidate. Let's sit in on the interview.

"How many hours do you expect me to work a week?" she asks, as soon as the pleasantries are exchanged and before the interviewer can get a question in.

"The standard work week here is 35 hours a week, although we expect our employees to work the hours necessary to get their deliverables completed," the interviewer stammers, a little put off.

"Hmm, doesn't sound like a great work/life balance. And what's your environmental policy? Has that effluent spill in South Asia been cleaned up to the satisfaction of the UN monitoring agency? And closer to home, do you offset your company's carbon footprint created by your shipping and packaging policies, corporate travel and the lack of transit accessibility here at your headquarters, where I see pretty well everyone drives?"

"Well, it's free parking..."

"Hmm. And does the company sponsor any social programs either locally or internationally?"

"We have a United Way drive every year. Casual Friday, you get to wear jeans and donate a \$1..."

"You mean there's a dress code?"

"Well, not a strict one, just no jeans, no sandals, no piercings except for earrings..."

It's not going well. Karen doesn't look like she's interested.

Wait: she isn't interested? Isn't it the employer who makes the decisions?

That was then, this is now. Get ready for the generation revolution. Half of Boomers now working are set to exit the workforce by 2015, leaving Gen Xers to move up the ranks as Gen Y enters the workforce.

The trouble is, there just aren't enough of the best and brightest to go around, a Conference Board of Canada warned in a recently updated report: "By 2015, there will not be enough qualified people in Canada to fill the jobs available," the original report stated. "Employers will become locked in a war for employees as they struggle to hire and retain qualified workers." In a February update the board said the recession has delayed the inevitable but underlined its previous position: "If organizations fail to adequately plan for tightening labour markets, they could lose out on employees with the required skills, which could dampen their future growth prospects."

As the Conference Board suggests, this is a long-term workplace shift and it is cutting across all sectors; that same interview is happening in retail, insurance, financial services, law, IT, manufacturing and more.

"Ten years ago, asking how many hours a week you'd be expected to work or how long it took to make partner would have gotten you laughed out of the interview," said Brian Grant, managing partner of the Toronto law firm Lerner LLP. "Now, we expect those questions and we're prepared with the answers."

For example, the interviewer may have noticed Karen glance at her mobile. That's probably because she received a job offer over Twitter while she was talking to you. Think fast or you'll be down to hiring that kid who barely completed high school, because there's no one else available.

Giselle Kovary, who co-founded n-gen People Performance in Toronto with Adwao K. Buahene, consults with clients in banking, insurance, oil and gas, and retail around how to create a workplace and culture that is not only attractive to Gen Yers but also in harmony with everyone else. She and Buahene have also penned a book, *Loyalty Unplugged: How to get, keep & grow all four generations*.

It is important, she said, not to alienate the Boomers and Gen Xers by slavishly accommodating the whims of the new kids on the block, but instead to subtly ensure everyone is comfortable. Still, "the old way of top-down management isn't going to work for this generation."

Earning your employees

Indeed, the credo is that they want to “work with, not work for” and with that the silos are falling. Gen Yers tend to be inquisitive, creative and unafraid of social boundaries. They want to write their own job description, offer their opinions at all levels and don’t see a line where work begins and ends. To them work is fun and fun is work and technology, like smartphones and go-anywhere laptop connectivity, means they’re just as likely to be on Facebook at work and answering e-mails or preparing documents after supper or before bed.

Not adapting to Gen Yers, Kovary said, may mean companies will miss out on opportunities for growth and things like “reverse mentoring,” in which younger employees help management understand and use popular social networking tools.

Traditional conservative corporations, like the insurance sector, are struggling the most to respond to this shifting concept of the workspace, said Rob Salkowitz, author of *Generation Blend: Managing Across the Technology Age Gap*. He also advises companies on the social implications of new technology.

“Manufacturing, too, is behind the eight ball,” he said, noting Gen Yers don’t see those sectors as exciting career options. Given the fluidity with which the generation moves, the concepts of work and socialization also have to morph and that requires some attitude adjustment on the part of the corporation. “HR departments love it when they can go to MySpace or Facebook and learn all kinds of things which aren’t on people’s résumés,” he said. “But they don’t like the idea that it’s a two-way glass and candidates are also learning all kinds of things about the company before they come in.”

In an age of peer recommendation, companies with reputations as stuffy and outmoded are going to struggle to attract the right candidates.

One of the ways to counter that is with an outreach strategy, he said. Ford Motor Company, for example, employs Scott Monty as its head of social media, and he is active on both Twitter and Facebook.

Cultivating online communities within the company also works, he said, pointing to Best Buy, whose 28,000 associates have access to the Blue Shirt Network, a social media intranet tool that allows them to connect, form groups and talk about work or other social issues.

In fact, Best Buy has been consistently innovative in an effort to reduce employee churn by two-thirds. Six years ago, head-office workers were given goals and deadlines and left to their own devices. No punching in, no more “seen to be working” pressure. Set your own hours, work where and when you need to and deliver. Middle management worried: how could they manage absent workers? But productivity went up 35 per cent, employees reported being happier, sleeping better and wanting to stay at the company.

Technology caught in the middle

It's only by breaking the paradigm and taking risks that real change results, however, and the same technology that empowers Generation Y is also regarded as a threat by many corporations.

IT and HR policies that forbid accessing sites like Facebook or MySpace or streaming music or videos over the network and accessing personal e-mail are likely going to be the first frontier of friction between the old school and the new guard. Those policies are there to protect the security and integrity of the network and system but, rigidly enforced, they don't create the kind of work environment Gen Ys crave.

A study by Intel in late 2008 of 200 U.S. and Canadian IT professionals found 75 per cent thought Gen Y will positively impact their company and 82 per cent believed their "enthusiasm" would drive wider adoption of digital tools. At the same time, more than half thought Gen Ys were a security concern because of their willingness to work around policies and their propensity to use their own software and hardware to access company networks.

Clearly, something has to give, said Intel's Elaine Mah. "You can't lock down these digital natives, as we call them." Still, she said, about a quarter of respondents say they have changed their work policies and many more plan to do so, enabling company e-mail or Web access to personal smartphones (60 per cent), allowing non-company PCs to connect to the corporate network (39 per cent) and relaxing rules around participation on social media sites as company representatives (34 per cent).

While traditional IT concerns over spyware, viruses, worms and other malware still exist, there are enough tools available to manage the risk, Mah said.

The downside of not adjusting policies is the failure to retain the best and brightest of this new cohort, Salkowitz said. Collaboration in the modern sense is a technology-driven world of unified communications, virtual meetings, smartphones, blogs, wikis, portals, social networking and instant messaging. If those aren't offered, younger workers will drift away, or worse, try and sneak them in the back door and run afoul of corporate policies.

"The real danger is that it's almost better not to get [new young employees] and invest all that money in training and have them go off to a competitor," he said, suggesting if attracting Gen Y hires is a priority, then HR departments should have conversations with their IT departments to see if some compromises can be worked out.

Five fearful facts about Gen Y's expectations

1. They're here for a good time, not a long time. Career paths are fluid and most employees don't expect to stay more than a year or so at any position. It's not unusual to see résumés listing four markedly different jobs in four years.

2. They don't wait to be asked. Don't be surprised if your newest hires blog or broadcast an e-mail to the entire staff, listing myriad ways the company could be improved. "They view all relationships as peer to peer," said n-gen's Giselle Kovary.

3. They don't understand top-down management. To these kids, a top-down manager is someone who drives a convertible. They don't work for anyone, they work with people.

4. You must give out toys. Company-issued smart-phones, cool computers and access to all the latest software and unified messaging allows Gen Yers to work anywhere, anytime, blurring the line between work and play.

5. You may have to offer bribes. Incentives like iPods, trips and concert tickets are often great ways to get Gen Yers to recommend friends for job postings. Other young workers are more likely to be interested in bringing their skills and qualifications if their friends already work there and pronounce it a "cool" place to work.

Who's who

Boomers: Born 1946 to 1964

The post-war generation that founded the counterculture. Went from black-and-white TVs to colour to seeing a man walk on the moon to the birth of the digital world.

Gen X: Born 1965 to 1979

The Boomers' kids were indulged, coddled and had the best of everything. They were generally better educated with a strong, traditional work ethic. They went from teen house phones to cellphones, vinyl to CDs.

Gen Y: Born 1980 to 1995

Also called millennials, they grew up in a global village with satellite TV and the Internet as we know it today. They were also immersed in the digital gaming culture.

Gen Z: Born 1996 to 2011

Also known as Gen We, Gen I, Digital Gen, Net Gen, Next Gen, but whatever you call them they're the next wave. These kids are the future. Will they reject the random, customized preferences of their older siblings, or will they want more of the same?
