

Generation shocked

Having known only boom times, Gen Y faces the toughest adjustment in career expectations during the current crunch, pros say



WALLACE IMMEN
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You can do whatever you want. That was the refrain that Jessie Behan heard from her parents, professors and career counsellors.

Their thinking ran this way: "Everyone said there will be tons of different opportunities in all types of fields. The baby boomers will be retiring and there are going to be all these jobs just waiting when you want them," recalls Ms. Behan, who graduated in 2005 from McGill University with a BA in political science and humanities and a minor in cultural studies and theatre.

Ms. Behan took them at their word and, indeed, enjoyed success over the past four years, moving easily through four different jobs in Toronto as she sampled potential careers in marketing, management and sales. Each time she left one employer that didn't meet her expectations, another one was waiting to hire her.

Suddenly, things have changed for the 26-year-old, who has decided she now wants to leave her position as a sales assistant at a brokerage firm to pursue her passion: a job in broadcasting.

But trying to get an interview this fall, "everyone says the same thing: 'It's not a good time, we're not looking to hire,'" she says.

Now, her only option is to stay put at her job, so that she can earn money to pay off her student debt.

"I'm scared and frustrated, and I've never felt this way before," Ms. Behan says.

She's not alone. The economy's sudden dizzying downturn has poured a cold shower on many Generation Yers such as Ms. Behan - workers in their 20s who grew up coddled, courted, spoiled, feeling entitled and figuring the world was their oyster and they'd have an easy career ride.

But the financial crisis is putting some unexpected roadblocks in their way.

Such an environment is all new for Gen Y workers - those born after 1980 - who entered the job market in boom times. Because they have never before encountered a shrinking job market, they will face the toughest career adjustments of any employees during the downturn, career experts say.

This is going to force them to rethink their career expectations and require deft handling by managers to keep these youngest workers motivated and loyal, the pros say.

The shock is much greater for Gen Y than for Gen X, the generation of workers who came just before them, says career expert Barbara Moses.

Gen Xers, now in their 30s and 40s, entered the working world in tough financial conditions, she says.

"They know how to look after themselves. They're independent, they're plucky, they've internalized that nobody is going to look after them, they know they can't rest on their laurels and that they will have to be scrappy to get any kind of career goodies."

Not only are they better positioned psychologically but also on the job-cut totem pole, she believes. "When organizations downsize, they are going to look first at their most expensive workers, which is their older workers. And they are going to get rid of their workers who they feel have no so-called 'runway,' which is also their older workers," says Dr. Moses, a Globe and Mail columnist and author of *What Next? Find the Work That's Right for You*.

Not so prepared is Gen Y, Dr. Moses adds. "When organizations start to cut, we're going to see a leanness and meanness which they've never seen before. Less recruiting means less opportunity for young workers. In the short term, they are going to find some of their career goals blocked, and they're not accustomed to that."

Yet, Gen Y's outsized expectations for attention, promotion and their personal time are so deeply engrained that, while they will have the rudest awakening of any age group, they will also be the most stubborn in demanding that workplaces play by their rules, predicts Giselle Kovary, principal of consultancy n-gen People Performance Inc. in Toronto, which advises on managing younger employees.

"We won't see Gen Y employees abandoning their core values. They are likely to defend their independence, even if their options to move are limited at the moment," adds Adoua Buahene, another principal at n-gen. They won't stick with employers who don't, she adds, because they can fall back on living at home or being supported by their parents until times get better.

And while "there's no question that the generation has been very much overindulged, we can't be mad at them for being that way, because their parents and culture have shaped their attitudes," says Karyn Gordon, a Gen Y expert with dkb Coaching in Toronto.

"I am concerned for them because they have not become very resilient," Ms. Gordon adds. "Despite their surface confidence, the young generation is tremendously insecure. They come across as cool and entitled, but behind that is insecurity about performance and their future."

Managers will need to tread carefully, making sure that they cater to the needs of these young workers, the pros say.

For one, Gen Yers are not as loyal to organizations as previous generations, but rather to colleagues, who they keep in touch with on Facebook and on e-mail about good places to work, Ms. Buahene says. "Managers must remember that how well employees are treated and how socially responsible an organization is are paramount concerns for this generation. They will expect their managers to be collaborative and provide flexibility regardless of the economic situation."

So how best to manage them?

Ms. Gordon recommends managers give Gen Yers a great deal of feedback on expectations and the company's concern for their career development. "They want not just an annual or quarterly review, they want feedback on how they are doing on a weekly or daily basis."

Gen Yers also expect to be involved in any decision that involves them, she says. "Unlike older generations, Gen Y doesn't believe that authority comes with rank, it has to be earned and they will respect you, if you respect them."

Because opportunities for advancement based on title and perks may be limited in a tight economy, discussions of career aspirations with younger workers should focus on long-term development opportunities, suggests Bill MacKenzie, senior consultant at KWA Partners, management consultant in Mississauga.

"Younger workers are going to be asking: 'Where do I fit in the current reality, with the economy going in the dumper?' " he says.

Managers should encourage younger employees to reflect on what they want to be doing three to five years down the road, he says. "This is something that younger workers have not taken time to do because they are so wrapped up in their immediate careers."

Managers should encourage Gen Yers to look beyond specific job titles they may aspire to, because they may not be available for a long time or the role may change in the future, Mr. MacKenzie adds. Instead, encourage them to look for new challenges and ways to broaden the scope of their current job, he suggests.

There are ways supervisors can give promising younger employees experience at the next level that will give them the satisfaction of a bigger role without an actual title, suggests industrial psychologist Guy Beaudin, Toronto-based managing director of leadership development firm RHR International.

Managers should investigate having promising younger employees job shadow or work in tandem with someone in a role they aspire to take on. "Teaming an enthusiastic young employer with an experienced older one gives them the opportunity to take on more responsibility and broaden their skill set, which are things that high potential employees crave and need," Mr. Beaudin says.

Other opportunities could include lateral assignments in a new area of the organization or more decision-making responsibility in their current role, he says.

"Point out that these will add experiences to their résumés which will make them more valued by the organization in the future," Mr. Beaudin recommends.

"If they don't feel they're being used to their advantage and valued to the organization - tight job market or not - younger employees will start to look for alternatives."

For their part, young employees who have been hoping for a promotion can show enthusiasm by asking managers for such added responsibilities, says Beth Snyder, president of Beth Snyder Coaching and Consulting in Toronto.

"Look for projects that take you out of your own scope and into a new areas of the organization that you find attractive. It may be that your manager can't spare you from your current role, but volunteer any way.

"If you have good ideas and become part of the project, you may be able to get seconded. Even if you take it on as a part-time role, you will gain more visibility and your work will be noticed and appreciated and that should give you more satisfaction and a different viewpoint," she says.

Continue to broaden you skills with classroom training, sign up for projects and stay visible in your work.

All this is as important to employers as it is to Gen Yers. After all, "how younger employees are treated during this downturn won't be forgotten when we go back into an upswing," Ms. Buahene warns.

COUNSELLING: A GUIDE FOR GEN Y THROUGH THE TOUGH TIMES

FOR MANAGERS

Don't blame them

The young generation may have a sense of entitlement but it has been encouraged by those around them. Work with them and they will be loyal.

Use influence, not authority

Young workers believe respect is to be "earned" not "given." Listening, praising work well done and being genuinely interested will inspire them to work in support of your goals.

Get their input

Younger workers will become frustrated by top-down management. Involving them in discussions will keep them engaged.

Explain your expectations

Traditional work habits are not obvious to Gen Yers, who question all assumptions. Spelling out what you need, by when and why will avoid misunderstanding.

Set boundaries

As long as you are clear, and your expectations are reasonable and spoken in a tone of respect, Yers will usually step up.

Listen and respond

Gen Y employees often complain that their requests for more work are ignored or played down. Providing challenging work will motivate them.

Alternatives to promotion

Discuss what alternatives to titles and pay may be available to help meet their goals and expand their skills until things improve.

FOR GENERATION Y

Look at positives

Tough times don't last; tough people do. Remind yourself that the current testing will make you more resilient later in your career.

Remind management

Point out your successes and aspirations to management and ask for feedback and advice on expanding your horizons.

Beyond the roadblock

Set goals for what you want to be doing three and five years down the road.

Be a self-starter

If advancement seems to be blocked, look for unofficial paths to broaden your experience. Volunteer for an internal project, mentor another, help out a swamped colleague.

Broaden your skills

Take a night course, work on professional certifications, get training on new technology.

Network informally and formally

Work on expanding your acquaintances of all ages in your profession and other areas of interest.

Optimize technology

If. Write blog or an on-line newsletter to raise your visibility and establish yourself as an authority.

Seek out mentors

Tap past experience of others in how to handle a downturn.

Wallace Immen

(Thursday, October 30, 2008 on Page B2)

CORRECTION

The first name of management consultant Adwoa Buahene was incorrectly spelled in the Careers section yesterday.



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