

Tales from the Retail Sector: Lessons for Everyone

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n-gen will be presenting at the Retail Council of Canada's STORE conference on May 31, 2010, so we thought it apt to focus this newsletter on the retail sector. However, even if you are not in the retail sector, the challenges that this sector faces are similar to the types of challenges that you may face.

What is unique about the retail sector, from which every sector can learn, is that retail is often the 'early warning system' of people practices. Particularly true when it comes to understanding, responding to and managing the expectations of Gen Y employees. The retail sector tends to have the greatest percentage of Gen Ys at the front-line level. Retail is also an interesting macrocosm of all organizations, because it is still common to have significant numbers of Traditionalists working with Baby Boomers and Gen Xers (BBs and Gen Xers -especially at the corporate levels). This newsletter is devoted to challenges found in the retail sector, which equate to challenges found in every sector.

Let's Give Back

This month, n-gen is teaming up with **Green Toronto** to help in the revitalization of Toronto's parks, and we'd like for you to join us! We have arranged a private wildflower planting, mulching, and weeding event, followed by a picnic lunch. The event will take place on June 15, from 10am-12pm at Cedarvale Ravine Park. For more information, or to sign up, please contact [Tracy Yan](#).

Challenge #1: Retention of Gen Ys - All for one & one for all

During the strong economy of the early 2000's, many of our retail clients would lament their ability to retain younger employees, from front-line to supervisory roles. They blamed the economy and the apparent intrinsic disloyalty of Gen Ys to an organization. Leaders would say "for .50 cents, they will move across the food court/mall hall to another employer." This is parallel to complaints we have heard across industries, the sum of money might be different, but the reality was the same - Gen Ys appeared to have a choice, and more often than not, they took it.

Congratulations!

Congratulations to **Kathy Sidhu**! She won our monthly GAC Survey draw for a \$50 gift certificate!

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First, we need to recognize that , in general, employees simply don't move just because of money. That's what they tell you, because they don't want to tell you the real reason. Among the factors that cause employees to leave, the top 2 usually are: relationship with their manager and lack of challenging work. For Gen Ys, an additional top reason they will leave is because of the way other Gen Ys in the department/store are being treated. Gen Ys are loyal to their colleagues - the peers in their pack - and the decisions to go, stay, be engaged and be productive is very much relative to the way the pack is treated. They expect each individual to be treated fairly; like the motto 'one for all and all for one'. We have had many retail clients give us examples of entire teams who have quit on the same day. Sometimes they might not quit, but behavioural indicators of Gen Y engagement levels would be absenteeism, lateness, shift switching, lack of active participation and poor performance.

The retail sector needs to acknowledge the pack mentality of Gen Ys as an organizational risk, and respond accordingly. Managers and supervisors need to be skilled at performance management, team-based collaboration, and inter-generational teambuilding. However, the inability to retain and engage Gen Ys also has causal roots at home, which brings us to challenge #2.

Challenge #2: Happy parents - Happy Gen Ys

The percentage of HR colleagues, managers and supervisors who have challenges dealing with parents of Gen Ys is increasing yearly. Initially in workshops, one or two hands went up and everyone else laughed when we asked the question: Who has had a parent call? Today, 25% -50% of hands go up and everyone else looks shocked. One might argue that in retail this makes sense, since many of the employees are under the age of 18. But when you think back to the previous three generations, many of us did not have the level of parental involvement that Gen Ys do now. Parents now ask to attend interviews. They also call to complain about schedules, or even cancel a shift because their Gen Y child has too much homework or an extra-curricular practice. ***Perhaps the most egregious story we have heard was the parent who walked up to her son working cash, and told him to close up the till because they were going to his aunt's house for dinner (this was mid-shift)!***

Retail employers need to communicate the value of these front-line jobs, as that may not be evident to parents or Gen Ys. There are many fundamental business skills to be learned by working in retail, including customer service, business etiquette, and persuasion skills at the front-line. Communication also play a role in challenge #3 - scheduling.

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Challenge #3: Do I work for you, or should you work with me?

Perhaps the greatest challenge in any organization in which there are shifts, is scheduling. This is never more apparent than in retail. Gen Ys expect work to fit into their life, rather than life fitting around their work schedule. For managers and supervisors who are responsible for scheduling, managing scheduling expectations of all employees is often a job in itself. In many organizations, the way a schedule is determined can also lead to inter-team strife. For years Traditionalists, Baby Boomers and Gen Xers had to take the shifts that no one else wanted, until they got seniority. They are now irked that Gen Ys think that they can come in to an organization and demand that their needs be met. (In non-retail sectors, this translates into expectations of flex-hours and flexible work arrangements).

Retailers have to be open to designing new scheduling processes, whether those processes are determined through a democratic self-selection process, a lottery system, or by rotational seniority. Granted, more senior team-members may not be initially be happy with the change, but if it means greater team engagement and less turn-over, then the new process will benefit them as well.

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