

What have we done?

Baby boomers have always hovered over their kids - from grade school to play dates and right through to university. Now, they continue to stay involved - even at the office. The result? Gen Y workers and their parents are changing the workplace.

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It's a new phenomenon - parents hovering around companies' human relations offices, quick to sing the praises of their kids or complain if they don't get a good performance review.

They're helicopter parents, and they are us.

When the baby boomers' children were younger, primary and secondary school was the focus of our hovering. Now, however, some boomer parents are hovering around the university and the workplace.

There's a reason for this.

One thing baby boomers learned as we populated the workplace since the 1970s is how tough it is to get ahead. We grew up questioning authority, but found out pretty quickly that the people we worked for wanted none of that and, given the population bulge, could replace us easily if we rocked the boat.

So we sucked it up and worked hard, but made sure when we had our own kids that those bastions of authority - school, church, sports teams - weren't going to be slavishly obeyed by our offspring. No way.

We joined school committees, got involved in our communities and made sure no one messed with the rights of our children. We taught them that just because someone is older doesn't mean they know everything. Question authority, we told them. People have to earn your respect.

Giselle Kovary and Adwoa K. Buahene have built a business around the intergenerational dynamics in the workplace, and they've come across these parents who drop by their kids' workplace and attend their orientation sessions.

Their company, n-gen People Performance Inc., advises companies on how to deal with the stresses of having four generations in the workplace: the traditionalists, baby boomers, Generation X and, now, that pesky Generation Y.

"What we're finding with our clients is that parents are much more involved right from the recruitment phase," said Kovary, who claims there are now organizations that are including parents, up to a point.

"Companies will have information night for parents, and the universities and colleges are doing the same thing as well," she said.

But what about the parent who gets on the phone with the recruiter, listing all of her son's attributes?

"If he doesn't get the job, then they're calling to ask why Johnny didn't get the job," Kovary said.

"HR is getting calls from parents, asking how their kids did in performance reviews."

There was one senior executive at an oil-patch company in Calgary, Buahene recalls, who pigeonholed them after a leadership briefing.

"He told us that he had been planning to call the company where his 24-year-old daughter worked because he didn't feel she was being well treated."

"Generally, when we think of helicopter, we're thinking of baby boomers parenting a Gen Y offspring," Kovary said. "Part of the reason they hover is they're looking to provide opportunities and to protect children from the work world they have experienced, which included downsizing and recessions."

Once boomers got to a certain age, it was understood that we would be independent adults, moving away from parental authority. But our relationship with our offspring is different: we've brought them up to be our friends, so even after adulthood we maintain a closeness.

This changes the type of workers they are, and has had an impact on the dynamic of the workplace.

"Traditionalists were respectful of authority because it existed," Kovary said, referring to the oldest generation now in the workplace. "Baby boomers had some anti-authoritarian attitudes and struggled with that, came into society but had to work within the system.

"Now, your Gen Xers aren't impressed with authority, not for its own sake. They respect competency and results: it's what have you done and can I learn from you.

"The Gen Ys have been raised in peer-to-peer parenting models," she said. "They view CEOs or managers as any other colleague because they're used to a more informal relationship with authority."

These are the young people who call teachers by their first names, she pointed out, and besides that they've come of age at a time when there's a huge focus on them. In the family, their opinions are solicited and acted upon, "in every family decision they've had a voice."

It's no surprise that, as a just released poll from Business Week magazine indicates, young executives and managers are now far less likely than their elders to put work first in their lives or to be content with their bosses.

Here's the clincher: "People under 30 are more likely to have accidentally called their boss Mom or Dad."

So the boomers, says Buahene, who have been coaching their children to speak up about salary, recruitment and so on when they enter the workplace - and will do it for them, in some cases - now see the Gen Ys coming into the office - and are shocked to discover that they have no respect for our titles or hard work."

Mind you, she says, the baby boomer parents are often proud of the way their Gen Y offspring behave. And in truth, the way we work has already changed because of the generation that preceded them "in the sense we collaborate more, form more strategic partnerships."

One of the areas where companies must change is to make coaching and performance managing so objective it can't be misinterpreted, the partners say. Wouldn't want that Gen Y or his "helicopter parent" claiming prejudicial behaviour on the company's part.

"You have to quantify and justify it," Buahene said. "If someone thinks they should have gotten a promotion, justify why they didn't get it. That requires a lot more work."

When baby boomers were in the workplace, she says, organizations didn't have to change anything because there were so many options lined up outside the door.

But because there will be so many fewer Gen Ys, they will demand that their needs are met, she says.

Either that, or their helicopter parents will do it for them.

For more information on n-gen, log on to www.ngenperformance.com

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Generations defined

Today's workplace consists of four generations with very different work styles and expectations:

Traditionalists (born between 1922-1945): They have a linear style, like to follow the rules, are focused on the process, follow the leader and describe change as something that is broken.

Baby Boomers (born between 1946-1964): They have a structured style, like to challenge the rules, are people focused, work in teams, see change as something to be cautious about.

Gen Xers (born between 1965-1980): They have a flexible style, like to change the rules, are results focused, work independently with little supervision and see change as opportunity.

Gen Ys (born between 1981-2000): They have a fluid style, like to create the rules, are technology focused, work independently with supervision and see change as improvement.

Loyalty Unplugged: how to get, keep & grow all four generations

by Adwoa K. Buahene and Giselle Kovary