

# WHO'S the BOSS?

Employers from various industries have plenty to say about their Gen Y employees. Some shower praise, while others aren't so impressed. But with an unprecedented surplus of jobs, today's youth hold all the cards

As told to **CalgaryInc staff** • Illustrations by **Anthony Brennan**

## Food Service

### Humpty's Restaurant Inc. Don Koenig, president

**The Scene:** Employing hundreds of 20-somethings since the original Calgary Humpty's Family Restaurant opened in 1977, I have seen a huge shift in employees' attitudes in the past three years. Gen

Yers, who make up half of our staff, have created a revolving door at our restaurants, as they are constantly searching for better-paying work and opportunities elsewhere.

**Gen Y strengths:** Socially well-adjusted (perhaps too much so), some are energetic.

**Gen Y weaknesses:** Lack initiative, create instability, disregard start times.

**Trendsetters or system busters?** Young workers are destroying a system I had set a couple of decades ago. With abundant jobs in Calgary's food service industry, Gen Yers know only too well that there are thousands of vacant jobs throughout the city and that translates into employees holding all the cards. There is a marked difference between recent immigrant employees and Canadian-born workers. Foreign staff members work harder and are more grateful to have a job, at least until they become "Canadianized" and pick up bad habits from lazy Canadians who think nothing of calling in sick the morning after attending a big party.

**Their unique demands:** I have tried several strategies to retain employees — including transit allowances, free meals and complimentary uniforms. I used to give \$500 bonuses to staff on their six-month anniversaries, but the incentive program was cancelled at most locations because many workers quit immediately after collecting their bonuses.

"It's a little bit tougher to get that extra effort out of an individual, because it's not important to them anymore."



# Government

## Canada Revenue Agency

Lorne Anderson, assistant director,  
Calgary Tax Services

**The Scene:** Every three to five years, about 500 western Canadian managers from the Canada Revenue Agency meet to discuss topical interests. In November, I led a seminar in

Winnipeg about generations in the workplace. To prepare for that, I e-mailed participants a questionnaire, receiving 350 responses. The following comments are from those respondents as well as my personal observations about Gen Y.

**Gen Y strengths:** Computer savvy, great ideas and add vibrancy to the workplace.

**Gen Y weaknesses:** Impatient.

**Who they are:** Many Gen Yers work entry-level jobs within the agency, often starting at call centres, working front counters, as well as apprenticing to become auditors. All have minimum Grade 12 education; many hold university degrees.

**Trendsetters or system busters?** The federal agency is so regulated by legislation and policies, Gen Yers couldn't change the system much even if they wanted to. Most usually adapt; those who don't, leave.

**Unique demands of employers:** Baby Boomer managers found that Gen Yers tend to be impatient and they expect immediate results; they regularly walk into the supervisors' offices to talk whenever they want to, which is frustrating for older managers who prefer the old style: the boss is in control, no news is good news, 'send me a memo.'

**Why hold such a seminar?** It's a hot topic. There was universal support to speak about the topic; managers are looking for tips on how to manage various generations.

**Perks:** Great benefits, especially pensions, and flexible hours. The atmosphere isn't as "fun" as some companies, as taxpayers wouldn't be too pleased to see federal employees playing on a pool table.



"We like to lament how young folks don't have the same work ethic as we do, but I think my supervisors when I was 21 might have said the same things about me."

## GENERATIONAL TRAITS AND CHARACTERISTICS

	Millennials (Gen Y)	Generation X (Gen X)	Baby Boomers
<b>Born</b>	1980 to 2000	1961-1979	1943-1960
<b>Characteristics</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sheltered</li> <li>• Uncomfortable with risk</li> <li>• Conventional</li> <li>• Confident</li> <li>• Feel pressured</li> <li>• Cyber literate</li> <li>• Global minded</li> <li>• Politically engaged</li> <li>• Well behaved</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adaptive to change and technology</li> <li>• Comfortable with risk</li> <li>• Self-directed</li> <li>• Pragmatic</li> <li>• Skeptical</li> <li>• Feel alienated/misunderstood</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Entitled</li> <li>• Idealistic</li> <li>• Optimistic</li> <li>• Value-driven</li> <li>• Hedonistic</li> <li>• Self-absorbed</li> <li>• Non-conforming</li> <li>• Dependable</li> </ul>
<b>Work Traits</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Team oriented</li> <li>• Seek praise</li> <li>• High maintenance</li> <li>• Require structure</li> <li>• Value job skills over security</li> <li>• Balanced values</li> <li>• Seek meaningful work</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Independent</li> <li>• Entrepreneurial</li> <li>• Flexible</li> <li>• Motivated</li> <li>• Distrustful of institutions</li> <li>• Competitive</li> <li>• Need work-life balance</li> <li>• Seek portable careers</li> <li>• Work to live</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Achievement-oriented</li> <li>• Workaholic</li> <li>• Competitive</li> <li>• Driven/ambitious</li> <li>• Desire to succeed at career</li> <li>• Seek money, title and recognition</li> <li>• Work hard, play hard</li> </ul>

# Communications

## Critical Mass Inc.

Evelyn Cutts  
vice-president, people

Dell. With 300 people at the Calgary head office and 200 others in North America and Europe, Critical Mass offers a flexible work environment that appeals to the 40 per cent of its workers younger than 30.

**Gen Y strengths:** Technology experts, creativity, flexibility and team work.

**Gen Y challenges:** High expectations, demand employer appreciation and expect quick promotions.

**Trendsetters or system busters:** Gen Y employees have a lot of say over how our organization runs and have unfettered access to company bigwigs. In a fast-moving organization with high turnover, it's possible for Gen Y to get satisfaction from quick promotions and increased responsibility.

**Atmosphere:** Inexpensive cafeteria breakfasts served every morning, no dress code and a masseuse help encourage employees to work long hours. A special room called "the hive" is a comfy space for hanging out and playing with the latest technology, from the Nintendo Wii to the Apple iPhone. Gen Y workers demand corporate responsibility, a commitment to social justice and environmental standards.

**The Scene:** Some of the world's biggest companies use Critical Mass to refine and expand their Internet presence, including Nike, Mercedes-Benz and



"The office atmosphere is very relaxed. The people here don't fit your normal office, downtown culture mode, and that is very appealing to a lot of young people."

# Manufacturing

## Ingrained Style Furniture Co.

Michael Dopf, owner

retail business and selling our furniture only to companies, I offer workers flexible hours and a variety of tasks to attract the interest of today's super-busy-minded generation to this time-honoured craft.

**Gen Y strengths:** Enthusiasm, creativity, thinking outside the box.

**Gen Y weaknesses:** Short attention span.

**Percentage of young people:** I hire inexperienced but enthusiastic workers that I believe can be trained. About 90 per cent of employees at my small furniture shop are under 30.

**Unique demands:** After a while, I realized that young employees don't mind working, but they want to do it on their terms. While Baby Boomers were once okay with sweeping shop floors as they learned the ropes, Gen Yers want to jump right into challenging and exciting jobs. I have instituted an open-door policy where good workers who quit to travel or pursue other jobs are welcomed back. ■

**The Scene:** I learned the hard way how to retain Gen Y: we closed the doors of our Kensington custom furniture store last fall due to a shortage of workers. Now, after getting out of the



"We can expect a maximum of five or six years out of someone before they want to do something else. In the beginning, that was hugely disappointing, but now we understand that."

# Scrutinizing special 'snowflakes'

Two generational social experts talk about the unique traits of Gen Ys, a.k.a. Millennials: creative, social and packed with self-esteem



## Neil Howe

Author of *Millennials Go To College*, who coined the Gen-Y term, Millennial. An American economist and historian, Howe heads a publishing, speaking and consulting company built on generational differences.

## Prepping for perfection

**Like all generations, Millennials have their own location in history.** In the early 1980s, with the birth of Millennials, adult behaviours toward kids started to improve. Books and articles appeared about how badly kids had been treated in the 1970s, Child-as-devil movies, that had done so well in the 1970s, suddenly bombed at the box office. No one wanted to see negative images of children anymore. At the same time, Baby Boomers started thinking of themselves as parents. A telling bumper sticker first appeared on cars in 1982: Baby on Board.



**Millennials are special in the eyes of their parents, the community, the media and political leaders.** The media spotlight has followed them throughout their lives. Politicians have placed importance on them. Their parents are attached to them, and Millennials are attached to their parents. In a survey for my book, *Millennials Go To College*, college-age students who were away from home were found to stay in touch with their parents seven or eight times

a week – through instant messaging, e-mail and phone calls. Freshmen stayed in touch about 13 times a week. Today, the cell phone is the world's longest umbilical cord.

**A number of employers report that parents come to them, asking for information about their kids' place of work.** From the kids' point of view, it's all perfectly natural. After all, they're a special generation. Why shouldn't their parents take an interest in them? To appease parents, some companies offer parents' nights, with parents coming to the workplace to learn about the company. Other companies have started sending out newsletters to keep parents up to date.

**One thing employers often notice about this generation is confidence.** While Gen Xers thought they might succeed individually, often they didn't think they would succeed collectively. Millennials think

they're ALL going to get ahead. They've been encouraged to work as teams throughout school with group projects and team grading. Some schools' valedictory awards and speeches are going to groups of young people, rather than individuals. If interviewed as a group, they often confer among each other to give a consensus answer. A number of college faculty members tell me it's very difficult to get Millennials to debate each other. They think, "Why can't we just agree

**In contrast to Generation X, Millennials don't want to bang around at a lot of different jobs until they find something they like.** They want the perfect job right away. They want to prepare for the perfect job. So they'll go on internships, pursue an extra degree, do an apprenticeship, until they line themselves up for the perfect job, the long-term career to structure their lives. They want a close relationship with an employer, and to be part of a team that will protect them from the vagaries and buffeting of global forces.

**The way employers see it now is we've got this really spoiled, entitled, pampered generation, and in a couple of years, they'll find out how the world really works, right?** Well, I am almost positive, looking at how other institutions have adjusted to Millennials, the change is going to come from employers. Very quickly, employers will discover that if they want the best of these kids, the quality kids, they're going to have to change.



## Hal Niedzviecki

Canadian cultural critic who has written several books, including *Hello, I'm Special*, a commentary on the Millennial generation. He refers to Gen Ys as "snowflakes" because each one is unique.

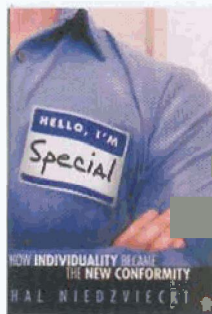
## The snowflake generation

**The traits we see in Millennials are really traits that began with the Baby Boomers.** The sense of entitlement, the feeling that you're number one, the sense that you can do whatever you set your mind to – and don't let anyone get in the way. Baby Boomers taught their children these concepts, and with each generation, they get progressively more embedded in our culture. A popular kindergarten song, sung to the tune

of Frère Jacques, goes, "I am special, I am special, look at me." They really sing that. And then kids continue their education, and teachers talk about self-esteem, believing in yourself and being able to achieve anything.

**It's unrealistic to think you can achieve anything, especially when it's all just code for celebrity.** If you ask high school students what they want to be when they grow up, most

of them say they want to be movie stars and entertainers—not doctors, police officers, teachers or librarians. And if they say they want to go into business, they want to be billionaires, and their role model is Donald Trump. You don't



want to tell people that they shouldn't have big dreams; however, at the same time, we have a society in which we're coddling our young people and feeding them nonsense. Eventually they go out into the real world and find out they're not special.

**Employers are trying to convey the message, "We appreciate you and your special snowflakeness."** They offer things like yoga, massage, nap time and Friday beer carts. They tell employees they'll have the opportunity to flex their intellectual and creative energies at work. So we're seeing a shift in the workplace. Is the objective for employers to cater to this new generation, to make them happy?

**Fundamentally, people are searching for community, and the meaning that community provides.** People want to feel like they belong to something. Unfortunately, as a society, we put so much emphasis on fame and celebrity, promising identity and community, but deliver neither. You are not likely to be famous, and you're not likely to be born into a small-town community that knows and values you. And that's ultimately where self-worth comes from — community. It doesn't come from reinventing yourself and having a million friends on Facebook. Employers can provide meaning and a sense of community by finding opportunities for employees to give back to the community, like working on an ad to raise awareness about poverty. By contributing to their community, employees will find value in themselves, and a sense of identity. ■

# IMMERSE COMMUNICATIONS INC

Communications for remote and tricky locations.

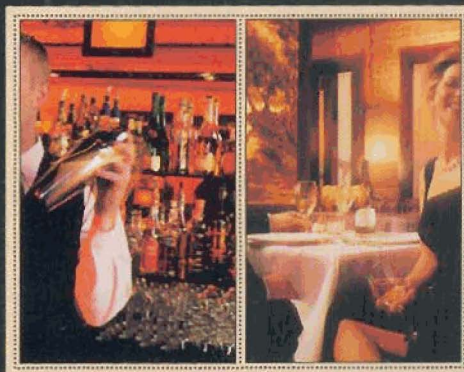


Own  
Control  
Save

[www.IMMERSECOMS.com](http://www.IMMERSECOMS.com)

VSAT's - Mobile Office / Classroom - Cell Boosters - VoIP - Global

*Indulge Yourself in a True Fine Dining Experience*



Wine Spectator Magazine  
**THE BEST OF AWARD OF EXCELLENCE**  
2002-2007

THE  
**BELVEDERE**

**RESTAURANT & LOUNGE**

107 Eighth Avenue SW    Reservations 265-9595  
Please visit our website at [www.thebelvedere.ca](http://www.thebelvedere.ca)

# Generational business experts provide tips on how employers can engage Gen Ys

## How can employers optimize Gen Yers' work performance?

**GK:** We use a model where we talk about organizations being engaged; that's being transparent, responsive and partnering. In particular for Gen Ys, they may be in an entry position that's not all that exciting or fun; they need to have a clear line in sight between the role that they are completing and how they are contributing to the big picture. Transparency is about being open and honest about what your motives and intentions are. And also about ensuring that information is distributed freely.

## Does today's shrinking labour pool come into play?

**GK:** Oh, absolutely. Part of the struggle that employers in Calgary are facing is the shrinking labour pool and with so many different opportunities, people can move around very quickly. Gen Ys are entering out of the school system where they've been told, 'You're wanted, you're special,' and they come out into a marketplace where employers are saying, 'You're wanted, you're special.' So they have very much the sense and the understanding that they have human capital; they have knowledge and skills and abilities and time and effort that they can choose to put somewhere, to invest in an organization. And they are going to look for the best deals.

## How can employers engage Gen Ys?

**AB:** We know that there are certain factors that Gen Yers are looking for. They are looking for meaningful work, activities and tasks, even if they are in entry-level positions. They want to have fun at work and a social life through work, so they almost expect employers to create those social activities. You need to create conditions in the workplace in which your employees want to give more discretionary effort, are emotionally connected to the organization and accept



**Adwoa K. Buahene** (left)

**Giselle Kovary**

Managing partners of n-gen People Performance Inc.

accountability. And if you have an employee that does those three things, you have an engaged employee.

**GK:** We say to solicit their feedback and suggestions. This is a way to keep them engaged and involved. They are accustomed to having their opinions solicited and acted upon, so managers should do so. They should also ensure greater levels of flexibility within the work day.

## You make them sound like they are spoiled, that they always get what they want.

**GK:** When we ask groups to describe an adjective of Gen Ys, often we hear the terms 'spoiled' or 'entitlement.'

**AB:** Employees now hold greater bargaining chips than they ever held before. It's not about catering; it's about creating an environment that will create a win-win situation. The win for the organization, frankly, is that the employee performs above and exceeds expectation. And just because we are creating this environment for Gen Ys doesn't mean that we shouldn't have created it earlier on. We should have had this work environment when Baby Boomers were entering the workplace. We didn't because the conditions didn't force us to. The world has changed; times have changed.

## These days, do you see many Baby Boomers with baby bosses?

**AB:** It's starting. I think they have middle-age

bosses, in the sense that Gen Xers are quite frequently managing Baby Boomers. We haven't seen as many Gen Yers doing that yet. But they will. Give it another couple of years and for sure Gen Yers will be managing Gen Xers and Baby Boomers also.

## Is loyalty dead these days?

**AB:** We say that organizations should not be focusing on loyalty; they should be focusing on creating engagement. We also argue that loyalty isn't dead. What has changed in the way that each generation defines and demonstrates loyalty. So if we look at it from a historical viewpoint where you are loyal to the organization in an abstract concept, that is dead. Because Baby Boomers are loyal to the teams, your Gen Xers are loyal to the manager and the Gen Yers are loyal to their colleagues.

## How are HR strategies different when it comes to Gen Ys?

**GK:** In many cases our clients have noticed that they are not tapping into the Gen Ys. For example, in retention strategies, the reward-recognition might have just been a pin or a letter from the chairman or a sweatshirt with a logo on it. Guess what Gen Ys want? They want time off. They want coin so that they can go buy an iPod.

— Questions by Carol Harrington