

Talkin' 'bout my generation

Traditionalists. Boomers. Gen X. Gen Y. With a little understanding, can't we all get along and work together?

By Roberta Staley

Illustration: Maurice Vellekoop



Erica McGuinness folds her tall frame into a chair in a 23rd floor boardroom of Ernst & Young's downtown Vancouver office, the NorthShore Mountains looming in the distance. E&Y's chic decor — blond maple wood set off by pale fern-green walls — is a dramatic contrast to the navy backdrop of tall peaks with their coronet of low-lying, rain-drenched cloud. A staff accountant in E&Y's assurance practice, McGuinness' dynamic smile is another counterpoint to the blue-gray West Coast palette. And why wouldn't McGuinness be sunny on this cold, wet Vancouver day?

As a card-carrying member of generation Y, 26-year-old McGuinness is part of a demographic cohort born between 1981 and 2000 that has received concessions and accommodations that would have been unthinkable during the reign of the traditionalists — those born from 1922 to 1945 — who founded a legacy for these young adults to inherit.

It is a truth universally acknowledged that those who don't evolve don't survive. But in a twist of Darwinian logic, a discombobulated business environment finds itself having to juggle the unique needs and wants of the various generations, including such whip-smart gen Ys as McGuinness. A basketball player in secondary school who became an all-star guard at the University of British Columbia, McGuinness studied for a commerce degree off court. After graduating with honours, she was hired at E&Y as a staff accountant in September 2008. A month later, she received a call to join a women's professional basketball team in the Czech Republic. "I communicated that this was important to me and E&Y was very encouraging that I take the opportunity," says McGuinness, who played one season on European soil. Both her parents and her fiancé's parents expressed surprise that E&Y was "so accommodating, which shows you the difference in generations," McGuinness says.

That a new employee could pack her gym bag for an extended leave so soon after being hired is indicative of a profound cultural change that has occurred within organizations due to seismic economic, demographic and societal shifts. CA Marc Belaiche, a consultant on staffing strategies and president of the Internet job board TorontoJobs.ca, says that during the bullish years of this nascent century, loyalty became an anachronism among 20- to 29-year-olds, who would jump for a couple thousand dollars more to a competing firm. The recent recession helped instill some humility, causing younger workers to place more value on stability. However, Belaiche says their perceived idiosyncrasies — exacerbated by gaping differences in technological know-how and work/life balance expectations — have resulted in miscommunication between the generations currently rubbing elbows in the workplace. The challenge for accounting organizations big and small is finding ways to maximize the skill set of each generation while managing the conflict points.

Easier said than done, of course.

Elena Shalygin, senior manager, human capital at Deloitte Consulting in Toronto, muses on the disharmony that is rooted in the younger group's ease with technology. The acceleration of technological change and the emergence of the digital age with its Hydra heads — e-mail, cellphones, PDAs, GPSs, Wi-Fi, MP3 players, Twitter and iPod and iPad apps — is a mixed blessing in the workplace. Gen Y embraces the latest gadgetry and software programs. Gen X, born between 1965 and 1980, tries to stay current with technology while baby boomers, born from 1946 to 1964, attempt to adapt, says Shalygin. But as the boomersaurus look over at yet another 20-something tweeting during a meeting, they might be heard muttering, "Generation why?"

Lenard Boggio, a 56-year-old senior partner at PricewaterhouseCoopers in Vancouver, is as at ease with the digital world as any of his peers. Age, however, has given Boggio the gift of perspective. Relying upon technology can supersede the most important tool within an organization: verbal communication. Boggio says he will watch eight or 10 youthful staff members working together and, rather than asking questions out loud, they will query each other via instant messaging. To Boggio, there are both positives and negatives to this mode of communication. "The reasons

they don't do this is so they don't bother the other people and they are comfortable with technology. That's OK, but if the people around them don't hear the question, they don't learn either."

Boggio warns of technology's potential dark side while re-calling his own struggles in the mid-1980s. "I was in the era when I had to design my own spreadsheets. Now I see students do things in hours that would have taken me three days to accomplish." The challenge, then, has shifted from coping with unwieldy, time-consuming processes to ensuring that technology doesn't usurp critical thinking. "When you build artificial intelligence into programs, people sometimes don't learn the reasons for doing what they are doing. Technology is an enabling tool. We still need to realize that it's the brain — not the computer — that needs to make the decisions about the service we provide our clients," Boggio says.

Management styles

| | TRADITIONALISTS | BOOMERS | GEN Xers | GEN Ys |
|---------------------|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|
| Definitions | Command and control | Participative | Collaborative | Hypercollaborative |
| Behaviours | Rigid: do what I say, not what I do | Political: do what we've all agreed upon | Straightforward: do what we need to do to get results | Personal: do what each of us is best at and wants to do |
| Expectations | Micromanagement | Flavour of the month management — newest management trend | Performance-based management | Just-in-time management |

Source: *Loyalty Unplugged — How to Get, Keep & Grow All Four Generations*, Adwoa Buahene, Giselle Kovary

The older cohort has much wisdom to impart; Boggio warns against throwing the baby boomer out with the bath water. "Whether it's providing tax advice, consulting or auditing, professional skepticism is very important and that is the skill we have to transition from our generation to the next." But skepticism is a learned skill, and without it, auditors can get burned, which can be "disastrous for a career." As a result, PwC has instituted a formal program whereby junior staff members are present at meetings with clients. Called Enhanced Working Practices, the program encourages all staff to help junior members develop their professional skills. This may involve attending a meeting with a partner or a manager, where the junior staff discusses the objectives of the meeting beforehand, observes or contributes during the meeting if the situation presents itself, and debriefs afterwards. Senior staff also discusses audit and accounting issues as they arise, to help less experienced staff understand how these issues are considered and ultimately resolved, Boggio says.

There is no truer Delphic axiom of modernity than "the medium is the message." But, like the ancient Greek oracle, the method of delivery may obfuscate what is being communicated, creating riddles that are misinterpreted, says Belaiche. For example, an older worker may think that the typical terse idiom of a younger colleague's e-mail is negative in tone, while a boomer's formal e-mail diction may be perceived as stuffy and condescending. Belaiche says younger employees ignore formalities, communicating the bare necessities via tweets, instant messaging or e-mail. "I respond accordingly — with one line. Mirroring helps alleviate that communication problem," Belaiche says. "It's learning to speak in their way: put smiley faces and 'u' instead of 'you.' You adapt to their style and, from a manager's point of view, it lets you talk to them in the way that they want to talk."

Gen Y also exhibits a nonchalance towards management that is anathema to boomers and even causes gen Xers to cock an eyebrow. Many gen Ys learned on the playground that participation — not winning — was the priority. They didn't receive negative feedback and they weren't allowed to fail. Everyone brought home a trophy, no matter who triumphed in the playoffs. As a result, gen Ys are guileless self-advocates as well as team players, able to shoulder a captaincy — or challenge it with equanimity — unimpressed by status and experience. "Gen Ys focus on credibility," Shalygin says. While boomers' and gen Xers' communication styles lean towards the "town hall meeting where senior executives stand and announce a change in strategy," gen Ys want to ask questions and receive answers — now. Their preferred channels of communication are tweets, Facebook missives, instant messages and e-mails to their network of friends in and outside the workplace. "They want the opportunity to ask questions; they want an immediate response and if the leaders don't respond, they don't accept that. They want the leaders to have blogs," Shalygin says. Such characteristics should not be interpreted as negative. "It's a very innovative generation, so using that mind-set and the level at which it leverages technology into new products to engage customers will be really powerful if done right."

Giselle Kovary, managing partner and cofounder of n-gen People Performance Inc., a Toronto-based training company that designs strategies to improve workplace performance, says such self-advocacy has caused a flap in the office. It opposes an entrenched cultural belief that the workplace is an honoured institution where personal needs are subsumed by corporate needs. It was an ideology that baby boomers cut their teeth on and gen Xers first began

to challenge. "There are some funny anecdotes, such as a gen Y, after not getting promoted, going out and getting drunk and calling his or her manager and berating him or her," Kovary says. "And there are the cases where the parents of a gen Y will call."

Kovary relates how an interning gen Y e-mailed the CEO because she couldn't find something she wanted on the organization's intranet site. By the end of week one, says Kovary, the young upstart had sent a company-wide e-mail to several thousand employees articulating her ideas about how to improve the organization. The company did not keep the intern. To be fair, Kovary says, it was not the young woman's fault that she overstepped an invisible but solid Berlin Wall of office etiquette. "She would have been coached by her parents and sports coach and school to be innovative and a go-getter and make a contribution. Then the organizations go, 'what's going on here?' Professional firms are still often functioning in a very hierarchical, traditionalist manner."

The ambitious gen Y intern may have been wrong for the firm's entrenched culture, but her self-confidence and innovation may have resulted in an unexpected return on investment for the company down the road. Kovary says that tailoring management styles to fit the needs and desires of each generation influences the bottom line. "There is a business case for why you should care — it has a direct impact on performance, which is linked to the bottom line. Highly engaged workforces produce, on average, annual revenue growth of 1% to 2% above industry average," Kovary says. So, how should an organization handle such swagger? Not, Kovary says, by making the upstarts with their unquenchable team spirit and ingenuity walk the plank.

The four generations

Four generational cohorts make up the modern workforce, although only a few traditionalist stragglers remain behind as executive figureheads, consultants or short-term contractors. According to Statistics Canada, about 518,300 traditionalists were still in the workforce in 2010, although most in the accounting sector have retired. The rest of 2010's 16.9 million-strong workforce was made up of three cohorts. Baby boomers — those born between 1946 and 1964 — have also started retiring. Generation X — unfairly maligned in the 1990s for a slacker attitude and rebellious outlook — is the smallest cohort, born between 1965 and 1980. Gen X smoothed the way for Gen Ys, many of whom are still in the formal education system. This is the generation reared on Google, Myspace, Facebook and YouTube who have entered the workforce happily entwined in the social network, thumbs keyboarding a BlackBerry as nimbly as a ballerina dancing Swan Lake.

Kovary says that gen Ys strongly benefit from workshops and training that teaches them how to deal with what they may perceive as negative feedback, having often been protected from such slings and arrows during their tender years growing up in a culture in which building self-esteem was the focus rather than results. Since gen Ys are accustomed to a peer-to-peer relationship with authority figures, they come across as being brash and rude, Kovary says. Yet they appreciate it when their organization involves them in orientation programs that allow them to understand the corporate culture and what the behavioural expectations are. "They say, 'I didn't intentionally mean to tick off my manager, I just didn't know.'"

Boggio adds that, due to a lifetime of positive feedback — win or lose — younger staff members have the expectation they will be recognized for doing things that the older generation would have taken as a natural part of the job. "They expect special recognition, so the challenge is to understand that," Boggio says.

Boggio, who has three gen Y offspring, says that doting boomer parents planned every hour of their kids' days when they were growing up. Since a firm's future is dependent upon keeping gen Xers and gen Ys happy enough to stick around, this nurturing attitude must be brought into the workplace. "If that means shortening their work week to achieve a better work/life balance and organizing events to socialize with the other people they work with, then that's what we need to do," Boggio says.

The generations' unique attributes

Even though traditionalists have ceased to stride the hallways, their nose-to-the-grindstone work ethic — cast by Depression-era and Second World War experiences — permeated corporations to the bone. When Canada's 9.5 million baby boomers eventually spilled into the workforce, individuals were grateful simply to have a job, tipping the balance of power in favour of demanding employers, says Giselle Kovary, managing partner and cofounder of Toronto's n-gen People Performance. "It's hard to negotiate when there are 15 people lined up at the door," Kovary says. Incentives were a monetary bonus or a gold watch following 40 years of dedicated service

that sometimes involved up to 80-hour work weeks. “The employee got a job — that was their win,” she says.

After the assiduous boomers came 6.8 million gen Xers, according to Statistics Canada, whose worldview was moulded by the recession-tainted 1990s. (X described the lack of identity that this generation felt.) High unemployment, soaring personal debt and falling business profits created a tight job market that ensured gen X never developed the same blind faith in the omnipotence of Father Firm. As gen Xers listened for the nth time to Nirvana’s 1991 anthem for disenfranchised youth, “Smells Like Teen Spirit,” while scouring newspaper employment ads, they couldn’t help thinking, “Smells worse than that.”

Elena Shalygin, senior manager, human capital at Deloitte Consulting in Toronto, says that such historical factors have huge implications for managing employees. Generally, says Shalygin, baby boomers live to work. “They believe in putting in ‘face time’ and separating work and life. I remember in the early days, I was taught to leave my life at the door when I came into work.” Moreover, boomers appreciate and are motivated by status, titles, plaques and promotions that elevate them up the corporate ladder, as well as personal expressions of appreciation and recognition.

If gen Xers didn’t love the workplace, it’s because the workplace didn’t love them back. These independent-minded individuals had no qualms about putting their Doc Martens down. No, they would not work 80-hour weeks. No, the workplace would not be their priority — they had a life. Yes, new fathers would take paternity leave. Yes, they would skip out of work early to take little Briony to dance class.

“Gen Xers tend to take a more work-to-live approach,” says Shalygin. “Work does not define who they are, nor does it define their lives.” Gen Xers nurtured their careers rather than the companies they worked for. It is not surprising, then, that entrepreneurial gen Xers’ motivators include time off as well as opportunities for development, showing a predilection for adding acronyms such as CA, MBA and LLB to their names, Shalygin says. On the other hand, gen Y — 3.4 million 20- to 29-year-olds were in the workforce by 2010 according to Statistics Canada — tends to “crave opportunities for learning and development,” says Shalygin. Playing video games, texting, blogging and Facebooking while relying upon the Internet for information has resulted in this immediate-gratification cohort being dependent upon a technology-based social network that is inseparable from work. “Gen Ys seize the latest technological tool and implement it into every aspect of their lives,” says Shalygin.

KPMG has caught the nurturing bug. Toronto’s Mario Paron, tax partner and chief human resources officer at KPMG, says that the firm helps employees by developing them both as professionals and as people. KPMG emphasizes leadership and education, including refining speaking and writing skills, “everything that contributes to being a polished professional. It’s about helping them reach their full potential,” says Paron. “I hate to use the cliché ‘the war for talent’ but you do have to put a compelling proposition in front of people to join an organization. It’s a circular process. The more we invest in our people, the more they believe that staying here to get that development is good for them — then the clients have a better level of service.”

Despite the differences between the generations, there are also many similarities. All desire flexibility and choice; it is how they define these things that sets them apart, says Shalygin. An older generation may want the flexibility to take care of elderly parents; for gen X mothers with young children it may mean telecommuting; for gen Y, whose personal lives tend to morph fluidly with work, it may be honouring a personal interest, such as McGuinness’ desire to play professional basketball in the Czech Republic. And this is the challenge for all CA firms: building management practices and operating models that allow the generations to “create an environment in which they can flourish and contribute to the organization,” Shalygin says.

The dual concepts of integrity and service — always the highest priority at CA firms where professional reputation equals survival — now extends to staff, no matter the generation. In the war for talent, the best way to engage in battle is to ensure that all the cohorts’ needs and desires for education and development are met. As Paron points out, this will only enhance relations with clients. But rest assured, the war between the generations will never disappear. When gen Ys are stodgy old accountants — and that time will come — they, too, will find themselves muttering, “What’s up with kids these days?”

Roberta Staley is a freelance writer based in Vancouver