A new generation of recruits

Young job seekers have different expectations

Generation Y wants flexible, nurturing workplaces

BONNIE GOLDBERG
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

"If a particular firm will not provide me with the opportunity to do work in areas of interest to me, then I like to think that I'll be able to find some other place that will," says Nathaniel Lipkus, a student at the University of Toronto law school.

If that statement sums up an attitude toward work that seems alien to you, then you are probably of a different generation than Lipkus. Students today — the young workers of the future — expect from their careers flexibility, nurturing work environments and opportunities for unique experiences.

Many of us recognize differences among generations, and how they play out in the workplace can be instructive. The well-known baby boomers, born between the years of 1945 and 1964, want job security, define themselves by their careers, and are driven and eager to please. Generation X, defined as adults born between 1965 and 1980, are considered adaptable, straightforward, self-reliant and focused. Those belonging to the Generation Y cohort, born between 1981 and 2000, tend to work independently, be technoliterate, desire change and be

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civic-minded. The Gen Xer may ask an employer, "What can you do for me?" while the up-and-coming "Y" generation asks of its employer to "show me what you can do for me right now."

Sharon Lee, the recruitment co-ordinator for career services at the Student Development Centre at the University of Western Ontario in London, Ont., says, "Twenty-five years ago, everyone got a job. Nowadays, (the labour market) is not the same, but the students are different, too. They are far more sophisticated, career-ready citizens."

Because they have a different set of priorities than preceding generations, today's students are likely to find the most career fulfillment by finding a workplace environment that best satisfies those priorities, experts say. Consultants such as Adwoa K. Buahene and Giselle Kovary of n-gen People Performance Inc. (www.ngenperformance.com) analyze workplace issues through a generational lens. Kovary suggests that an Xer or a Y who is looking for work after graduation can pitch her skills in "a way that shows what she's done; not the title of the previous job, but the projects worked on and deliverables achieved."

Second, Kovary suggests evaluating the organization by "asking questions about developmental opportunities that are more than just training, such as mentoring and stretch assignments."

Third, she stresses the importance of a young job seeker learning to "navigate the waters" — in other words, understanding the business environment he or she is about to enter.

Lee refers to a job seeker's self-promotion and job search as "me-marketing" or "I-marketing" — a style that focuses on the individual and the strengths that one worker can bring to an organization.

An informal survey of recent graduates of Canadian law schools articling at Oslers Hoskin & Harcourt, a national law firm, demonstrates the pull of these generational attributes. These budding lawyers recall that they chose their firm because of the people and a supportive atmosphere.

Catherine Mitchell, a recent graduate of Dalhousie Law School in Halifax, sums up why a nurturing environment is critical for this generation of job seekers: "I want a setting where I can stick to my own personal style and principles."

The "people" factor is very meaningful to the new generation of workers. When Lesley Henry, a 22-year-old commerce student at Dalhousie University, starts her job search next year, she says she will look for an employer with "approachable and likable people," opportunities for the future and a good location situated close to her family.

Jessica Neufeld, a 22 year old pursuing a sociology and psychology degree at the University of Western Ontario, recently found a summer internship with the Children's Aid Society in Toronto. For Jessica, the significant factors in her search for a social work position included a reputable organization "big enough" to offer the potential for several different career paths, and a supervisor "who loves her job and who wants to share her experience and mentor me into the field."

Another decisive factor for today's students is their desire to work for an employer prepared to offer flexibility and unique experiences.

Yousuf Aftab, a student at the University of Toronto law school, wants an employer that would allow him to "take a leave of absence for a year to work at the UN or to spend time with my family . . . or the opportunity to be transferred to international offices."

If employers want to tap into the pool of young workers, they are going to have to recognize and respond to these generational expectations. Yvonne Rodney, director of the career centre at the University of Toronto St. George campus, notes that "recruiters today, especially those from the boomer generation, certainly have to speak to the needs and expectations of this generation" and adapt recruiting messages.

Buahene of n-gen People Performance reminds employers that they should seek to accommodate "the X and Y generational expectations and set the framework for what the employer can and cannot deliver." For example, employers should "recognize the need for speed." In a world of escalating expectations, rapidly shifting technologies and unimaginable world events, "Xers and Ys want things to happen quickly."

She explains that the "grace period" an employee will give an employer to make things happen in a career is much shorter than previous generations.

The younger generation of job seekers is particularly open to making a move for the right fit. "My candidates are open to other opportunities to ensure that they are progressing in their careers at the speed at which they personally desire," says Gillian Tessis-Shnier, an executive search consultant with The Bedford Consulting Group Inc. in Toronto.

This sentiment is echoed by campus career counsellors. Lee at UWO says, "Students expect to move around and, therefore, the more kinds of work they can experience, and the broader the type of work they find, the better off they are."

Generational attributes infiltrate the career search of today's students and job seekers. Employers keen to recruit new graduates must highlight the ability for growth, demonstrate the workplace is relaxed and supportive, and prove the organization is defined by a collegial group of people eager to share experiences and knowledge.

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