

Gen Trends

August 2003

Catching the Wave of the Generations to Come!

Channel Surfing Through Life

I have the opportunity to speak with countless managers every year in the course of researching generational trends. Once in a while, one of these individuals frames an issue in just the right way. That happened this month. "Why," asked one manager, "does it seem that those in their teens and twenties seem to channel surf through life?"

A lot of it, it seems to me, has to do with the environment in which they have come of age. In the past 20 years, society has become increasingly inundated with the speed and pervasiveness of technology. Those of us over 30 have noticed the difference because we came of age prior to the proliferation of computers in everyday life. Those born in the past 30 years have been immersed in technology since birth. (Think baby monitors, for instance).

Some have hailed these young people as the multi-tasking generation. Anyone with kids knows that they can Instant Message™, surf the Web, talk on the phone, eat a sandwich, and do their homework all at the same time.

This phenomenon, coupled with a decade of extraordinarily low unemployment, has taught these young workers to think that a new job, friend, family, food, spouse, TV show, game, belief system or even life is just "a click away." Is it no wonder, then, that they appear to be "channel surfing" their way through each day, showing impatience anytime the present task fails to stimulate them?

The problem is that most of life is *not* a series of clicks, regardless of what the techies say. While there is

nothing wrong with automating that which is "automatable," critical thinking and common sense do not fall within this category.

Employers faced with this youthful expectation that repetition and the unknown can be clicked away, will need to set clear expectations up front and develop a balance over time between enforcing essential practices and allowing for the creativity that is dying to emerge from these over stimulated souls.

Unfortunately, society is teaching youngsters that nothing is worth doing unless it is stimulating all the time, every time. We have, in certain ways, set them up for failure due to unrealistic expectations.

How will this all turn out? Not as bad as one might think. The reality is that over time, this new generation of workers will find themselves adapting to the demands that any organization will place on them while finding ways to create an environment that is both pleasant and rewarding. This will not excuse the curmudgeon who continues to insist on "my way or the highway." But as with any transition, the outcome will produce a more productive, but impersonal workplace. *R. W. W.*

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"GenTistics"

**Homeowners under
25 have doubled in
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To ponder . . .

A common organizational mindset is to view jobs as “work to be done” and not as developmental assignments. Even worse, a rather simplistic definition of leadership governs development. There is little acknowledgement that different levels of leadership exist and that people need to make skill and value transitions at each level. Relatively few organizations are thinking about the core competencies and experiences necessary to be successful at each level. Few of them are considering the leadership development needs of a first-time manager versus those of a functional manager. Instead, there is a focus on personal traits and technical competence. Organizations promote people with the expectation that they have the knowledge and skills to handle the job rather than the knowledge and skills to handle a particular level of leadership. They assume that if they’ve performed well at one job, they’ll likely perform well at the next one.

Ram Charan, Stephen Drotter, and James Noel in
The Leadership Pipeline

To Read:

The Leadership Pipeline: How to Build the Leadership-Powered Company. Ram Charan, Stephen Drotter, and James Noel. Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, 2001. ISBN 0-7879-5171-2. With a succession-planning crisis on the horizon in many organizations, this book, by three of the discipline’s pioneers, provides the perfect primer for examining your organization’s leadership challenges from top to bottom.

Case Study Corner

“I have a 27-year-old employee who wants to do it all – rotate among functions, rotate among job roles, be a supervisor herself in a couple of years, get married within the year and start a family. She has worked for me for nearly two years and experience tells me that things do not happen that quickly. Is this a manifestation of her age and hence “age group” or is she still to learn that there are things in life you just can’t microwave?”

Yes, this is to some degree a manifestation of a younger generation’s impatient need to multi-task. But I would be careful how you share wisdom with regard to your perspective. There are some things in life that can only be taught through experience. Sharing too many of your stories may only reinforce her determination to have it all by age 30. When this does not happen, as it probably will not, she may come to the conclusion that you have been thwarting her in some way if she’s heard too many of your anecdotes.

I would recommend asking her to lay out a plan for her professional growth over the next few years. How will she accomplish all this? What resources will she need? What kind of deadlines will she set? Whose positions will she assume and how does she know they will leave? Hopefully, it will dawn on her that ambition has to be tempered by maturity. I would also refrain from delving into her personal goals even if she asks you. There are some things she simply needs to discover for herself.

Send your questions to wendover@gentrends.com. If we address your issue in the Case Study Corner, we’ll send a free CD or tape to you from the Center’s library of resources.

Older Boomers – those born between 1946 and 1955 – have a median net worth of just \$146,000, including home equity, according to an analysis of Federal Reserve data by AARP

Event Planning for the Next Generation

Pauline Parry, owner of Good Gracious! Events (www.goodgraciousevents.com) provides the following five guidelines for catering events for the so-called Generation Y:

1. Their favorite foods are those that suit a Super Bowl-trained palate – burgers, fries, meatballs, macaroni and cheese, guacamole and chips – in bite sizes.
2. Bombard them with images, yet keep the buffet clean and simple.
3. Provide a lot of variety in entertainment. As much as they like lounging, they also like loud up-tempo music.
4. This group likes comfort food that is easy to eat while walking.
5. As much as Gen Y’ers like clean and simple looks, they want to see something new and over the top.

Successful Meetings Magazine

Nancy Reagan tells the story of how President Ronald Reagan was once challenged by a college student who said it was impossible for Reagan’s generation to understand his.

“You grew up in a different world,” the student said. “Today we have televisions, jet planes, space travel, nuclear energy, computers . . .”

Taking advantage of a pause in the student’s litany, Reagan said, “You’re right. We didn’t have those things when we were young. We invented them.”

My Turn: The Memoirs of Nancy Reagan
(Random House) as quoted
by Readers Digest