

Gen Trends

December 2003

Catching the Wave of the Generations to Come!

They Really Don't Get It!

It began with an e-mail. "Dear Mr. Wendover," it read. "I am writing a college paper on generations in the workplace. Please send me all the information you have on this topic as soon as possible. Thanks, Nancy N."

I wrote back, "Dear Nancy, please be more specific with the information you desire and I'd be delighted to comply."

She responded, "I need all the information you have on how older and younger generations can relate better where they work."

I wrote back, "What specific question are you trying to answer with your paper?"

She responded, "Old people and young people and how they work."

I wrote back, "Please go to our web site. There's lots of information there."

Now one might conclude that this is one poor soul who just doesn't get it. Wrong! I receive 2-3 requests like this a week and the VAST majority end this way. But before we assume that these young people are lazy, let's examine the situation a bit further.

Ask any teacher these days, and most will tell you stories of students who want to point and click their way to an "A." With the emergence of computer technology, American society seems to be fostering a generation of individuals who expect the world on a screen. Managers we survey tell us of employees who seem to get stuck when the answer can't be found on their monitor.

But is this laziness? I think not. Those who are roughly 30 and older grew up having to manually search for information by looking in books, magazines, and newspapers. We might have called a bunch of people until we got the best ideas possible. Even with the advent of computers, we had to

deal with the infamous "C:\\" and all the problem solving required with that.

In the past decade, however we have taught those coming of age that there is a convenient answer to everything, at least that's the way it must seem. Need a sound system? Go to Best Buy.com. Need a spouse? Register at Date-a-Mate.com. Need someone to clean up the backyard? Go to Poop-a-Scoop.com.

Is it any wonder that young people have assumed that the ease with which they can download music is the same ease with which they can download information for a term paper or even the paper itself?

My class syllabi used to say, "provide at least four references" for the papers I assigned. Students would then submit work that contained four references cited but whose contents had little relation to the paper. Now my syllabi say, "provide four references whose facts and data are synthesized into the body of the paper. (Do I have to explain what I mean? Yes, at the beginning of every course.)"

Is there a solution to this developing debacle? Yes, but it takes forethought and consistency. Imagine yourself in the shoes of the students or employees with whom you are working. What's *not* obvious? What could they be assuming that's *not* true? What is the logical path they might pursue to complete the assignment and where would they most likely go wrong?

Test policies and assignments before implementation. Ask a group of young people how they would approach the situation. Listen carefully. Their answers may not be at all what you had assumed. If they don't get "it," *you* lose!

Assign or delegate clearly and enforce consistently. When correcting behavior, remember that young people harbor no malice about the work given. They modify their behavior and move on. But they really don't get it sometimes until you let them know.

R. W. W

"GenTistics"

16% of all Americans sport a tattoo, but 36% of those ages 25 to 29 do.

Harris Interactive

Call 1-800-227-5510 to book us for your next meeting.



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To ponder . . .

Conversations should invite frankness. Instead, modern conversation is excruciatingly considerate; so determined are we to dodge discussion and the perils of disagreement that we dilute talk with unassailable phrases that do little more than lob back the ball to keep the game going.

For instance, I recently watched two people pass each other in the office. One greeted the other with, "Hey, how's it going." The second person, whose first language isn't English, stopped, thought for a moment, and began to answer the question sincerely: "Well, not so great..." Too late; Guy 1 was already past us and around the corner. Guy 2 looked at me bewildered. "Why did he ask if he didn't want the answer?"

It's as though we've turned the game of conversation into a ritual.

This is a short book about short words—the mainstays of speech that go unexamined, those throw-away words by which we reveal what we mean, no matter how hard we try not to.

This is a dictionary, in other words, to help you translate not only somebody else's speech but your own, from evasion to English, trick to truth. It identifies and interprets shibboleths of shamming, words we use either out of slackness of speech or because they get us what we want. Either way, whether daft or deft, we use these words to duck the truth.

Maggie Balistren

To Read:

The Evasion English Dictionary. Maggie Balistreri. Mellville House Publishing, Hoboken, 2003. ISBN 0-9718659-7-3.

This little book is like the perfect comment on the degradation of, you know, American English. It's so like fun to read and insightful even. What a great holiday gift!

Case Study Corner

Our 25-year-old receptionist was just transferred to another department in the building. When she left, she took her \$200 ergonomically correct chair with her. The problem is it belongs to our department. When my supervisor e-mailed her about it, she e-mailed back, "What's the big deal? Just grab another chair from someone else." Is this an age thing, or is she just plain rude?

This is probably a combination of the two. Unfortunately, some of us never received the finer points of consideration for others and their property. That aside, however, we need to consider how much this woman understands about working in an office setting and the expenses involved. For all we know, she came from a previous environment where stealing co-workers' chairs was a legitimate game or simply the habit of grabbing whatever chair was available at the time.

You are perfectly within your rights to ask for the return of the chair. At the same time however, it would not hurt to help everyone understand that the cost of chairs, desks, copies, lights and other overhead do come from a budget and not out of thin air. Discreetly labeling your department's moveable property is another option. You just have to develop that delicate balance between engendering trust and protecting what's yours. I would imagine that this woman will not make the same mistake twice. But you can no longer assume that everyone has the same set of office etiquette rules in his or her head as you do.

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.

RU Worried?

Teens chat in cyberspace using shorthand such as CUL8R, JK, and BRB (See you later, Just kidding and Be right back, just FYI). Now teachers say these abbreviations are leaping off the chat screen and into school papers. "At first, I thought they were just misspelled words," says Melissa Merritt, an English teacher at South Lake High in Groveland, Florida. Now she warns: "Fix your writing or you won't pass my class." Many teachers do the same, but others, including some language experts, say not to fret. After all, ASAP, OK and 24/7 were once oddities that are now in dictionaries. IMO (in my opinion), BTW (by the way), and LOL (laughing out loud) may also be accepted one day. But it's 2 soon 2 tell.

Joe Jones writing in the *Readers Digest*

"Now I know what I need . . . an exit strategy."

A 50-something contractor upon listening to my observations about the emerging workforce. *RWW*

Menu Driven Thinking

The Center is in the development stages of a book on what we've termed *Menu Driven Thinking*, that is, an impairment of critical problem-solving skills because of an over-reliance on computer technology to provide options and answers to every-day challenges. Retailers report seeing it in some young associates who seem unable to cope successfully with customer demands. We hear from educators who say some students rely totally on the Internet to research papers and assignments. Manufacturers complain about employees' hesitation about going the extra mile for lack of confidence in solving problems.

We would love to hear your stories about this phenomenon and the impact it's having on your business. Please e-mail us at research@gentrends.com and put "Menu Driven Thinking" in the subject line. Thanks.