

Gen Trends

August 2006

Catching the Wave of the Generations to Come!

"I'm Bored"

It is one of the most common phrases used by children throughout the United States. In the past, parents would respond, "Well, find something to do." But as society has evolved in the past two decades, it seems that many parents are increasingly responsible for the scheduling of every waking minute. From the beginning of daycare through high school graduation, parents push their kids to stay involved. "That way, they'll stay out of trouble," they say. Or, "I want my kids to make something of themselves and not just vegetate."

Then there's the impact of technology and entertainment. We see high schoolers armed with a complement of picture-taking cell phones, personal digital assistants and iPods, connected 24/7/365. We find ourselves competing with the rest of their lives for attention.

At age 16 or so, they go to work for the first time and everything seems to stop. "Turn your cell-phone off. Take that iPod out of your ears. Check your e-mails when you get home and, by the way, work and don't just socialize with your friends."

Then, in most entry-level positions, we ask them to perform the same task over and over and over and over. At that level, that's what work is all about. One almost has to feel sorry for them. As a society, we've sold many in the youngest generation a bill of goods. What a rude awakening! This must be especially true for emerging college graduates who quite naturally want to conquer the world like Bill Gates or the Google guys.

But how do we, as managers, motivate these young people? After all, they've had years of experience watching other people do the work.

Begin by helping them understand the big picture. Make sure they know they're not just existing. They're contributing in a critical way to the success of the organization. They have to believe this to find inspiration and pride in the work they do.

Continue by setting clear expectations. What, specifically, are they supposed to do? Within what parameters? They can't read minds and, sadly, many have not seen good models of initiative and hard work. Show them yourself.

As they evolve into the job, look for ways to genuinely praise the work they do. The key word here is *genuinely*. Giving out random "atta-boys" is a worthless effort. As the One Minute Manager would say, "Catch them doing something right," and do it often.

Finally, find the line between hard work and livable work. Sure, you want everyone to work as hard as you do. Concentrate. Get the job done first. As a business owner, I know those feelings first hand. But remain open to compromise. Maybe they can get the job done *and* listen to music. Maybe they can text-message their friends *and* meet the quota. Maybe they can finish the project *and* surf the web at the same time. Obviously, they need to accept that the work comes first. But maybe they can perform repetitive work and entertain themselves at the same time.

With the enormous number of young people flooding into the workplace, this struggle with repetition and the desire for non-stop stimulation isn't going away anytime soon. So take the initiative to adapt, beginning today.

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"GenTistics"

According to the US government, obesity among children has climbed from 14% to 17% since 2002.



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To ponder . . .

Even as they live out the melting pot myth, today's immigrants and their children are searching for new ways to think and talk about it, and together, they and the rest of the nation face the challenge of updating the traditional ideal. This rethinking need not be destructive. On the contrary, it could ultimately strengthen one of our most hallowed tenets. The ferment is already taking place—in immigrant neighborhoods, on college campuses, in the media, among scholars and social critics. The essays that follow reflect and crystallize that important debate. Just what kind of assimilation is taking place today? What is possible? What is desirable? And how can we reframe the melting-pot vision to make it work for a cosmopolitan, twenty-first century America?

The truth is that difference is as American as the Stars and Stripes. Assimilation has always left room for a hyphen. And finding unity amid diversity, be it national or religious or some other kind, is a thread that runs throughout our history, arguably the most important one. True, in recent decades, the balance between clan and commonweal seem to be tilting out of whack, with too many people dwelling too much on the differences and too much ethnicity seeping into the public square. But there are also signs that the balance may now be starting to right itself. And although plenty remains to be done to find a workable equilibrium, that is not an argument for overcorrecting.

To read . . .

Reinventing the Melting Pot: The New Immigrants and What It Means to Be American. Tamar Jacoby, Ed. Basic Books, New York, 2004. ISBN 0-465-03634-1. While not specifically addressing age diversity, this collection of essays provides a balanced and thoughtful perspective on the emerging generations and how they are impacted by cultural differences.

Case Study Corner

As a project manager for a building contractor, I supervise people in all four generations. With most of my trades-people in their forties and fifties, you can imagine the challenges I face because of how the younger workers seem to define work ethic. I spend half my time listening to gripes about the 20-somethings who can't seem to please these older workers no matter what they do. What's your solution?

There is no specific solution, but this is becoming an increasingly critical issue. On one side, you've got older workers who have been socialized to work in a certain way and are justifiably proud of what they have produced over the years. On the other, you've got young people who have been socialized to believe that work is only a means to an end, something you have to do to pay the bills.

I would offer several suggestions. Number one, stay out of the middle. You don't have the time to mediate between these two factions. If someone gripes to you about work ethic, ask him if he has spoken to the offender(s) directly. If not, that should be the first step.

Number two, beware the hearsay. Put a group of like-minded veteran workers in a room and they will make a mountain out of a molehill. Just because they think these "kids" are slackers, doesn't make it so. Verify for yourself whether the younger workers are performing to your expectations.

Number three, ask the younger workers if they're having an issue with the older workers. If there is a concern, take time to process it with them. You certainly want to head off any incident between the two groups. But these are all adults and they should be able to settle their differences in a mature way.

Number four, stay abreast of the issues. Don't be afraid to bring up these concerns every once in a while as you talk with workers. Seek them out individually about how they feel about the different attitudes about work. Chances are you'll find many more similarities than differences. If you practice these four strategies, the rest should take care of itself.

Who Says It's Cheating?

University of Arkansas professor Tim West and three colleagues offer some insights into how young people sometimes justify cheating in an article they co-authored in the *Business and Professional Ethics Journal*. A few years ago, when West was teaching a managerial accounting class, he assigned a take-home test to his 64 students, unaware that a colleague had posted the answer key on the Web.

He discovered that at least two thirds of the class had looked up the answers on-line. When he surveyed the cheaters about why, he found their anonymous responses fell into four categories. Some said they didn't usually cheat and were unsure this was wrong. Others blamed West for assigning a test whose answers were on-line. Still others focused on the "valuable" lesson they had learned from the experience. Finally, there were those who cited the "fact" that everyone cheats and that this is how the world of work operates.

Don't Forget . . .

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