



WORKING WITH GENERATION Y

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Avril Henry spoke to FEAL members at a luncheon seminar in Sydney and Melbourne in May 2008. The following article draws on some of the main points Avril raised in relation to working with Generation Y.

Approximately 70% of the Australian workforce has a negative view of Generation Y (born 1980 – 1995), which I believe is largely due to their lack of understanding of what the key characteristics, behaviours and motivators of Gen Y are.

Understanding Gen Y will be the key to working and engaging with them. Generation Y are:

- Self confident and self aware
- Stimuli junkies
- Educated and fast learners
- Technology savvy
- Informal
- Independent
- Focused on “having a life”
- Motivated and inspired by good managers and leaders

However, what does this actually mean to Gen Y, because it certainly is different to what it means to Generation X (born 1965 – 1979) and Baby Boomers (born 1946 – 1964)?

The most important thing to know about working with Gen Y is that they are the first generation who will demand **mutual respect**. Their attitude is that “you don’t get respect because you are old, grey, bald, more senior or experienced than me, you get respect because you lead by example and give respect first!”.

The biggest complaint Gen Ys have in the workplace whether as employees, colleagues or clients, is that the older generations have no respect for them because they are younger and less experienced, and therefore are treated as though they have nothing of value to offer. This is the quickest way to cause Gen Ys to ‘switch off’, as they feel respect is something you earn, it is not given automatically.

Gen Y are self confident and self aware having being raised by Baby Boomer parents, and taught by Baby Boomer teachers, who have said to them: “You can do anything, be anyone, don’t let others tell you what to do, and challenge the status quo.”

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So, as a generation they were given permission to be challenging, but once they entered the workplace, they have discovered this is not necessarily so, in fact, quite the contrary, they are often instructed to “do as you are told”. This does not sit comfortably with a generation whose key word is “Why?” However, this is often interpreted in the workplace as challenging authority or agreed ways of doing business, when the reality is that they are asking “Why?” because they want to understand how what they are being asked to do fits into the bigger picture.



The more we answer their questions openly and honestly, the more we will engage them, and connect with them, which leads to a sense of making a difference and “connectedness” for them.

As Gen Y are stimuli junkies, this can offer businesses some great opportunities. Gen Y are the most over-stimulated generation, and this since they were mere toddlers. This means they are easily bored, impatient, intense and therefore great multi-taskers. They are also enthusiastic about the things that interest them, and if they feel “included” and valued at work, they will approach their tasks with the same intensity, energy and enthusiasm they put into their outside interests. They thrive in a high pressure environment with lots happening, and are great multi-taskers so won't get flustered when things get really busy. The busier they are, the more productive they become, and therefore they have no time to be bored. One of my own Gen Y employees has staggered me by her capacity to work on multiple tasks in a short space of time. The key is give them clear instructions, appropriate training and keep them busy!

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They are also the most educated generation in employment history, and due to being stimuli junkies, they are also fast learners. It is one of the key reasons they ask so many questions at work – they want to learn, in their words in a recent focus group “anything and everything!” Gen Y love change, and this makes them valuable in terms of innovation and utilising technology to improve productivity and performance. If there is a better system out there, they will know about it before you do, and are likely to have done the research, and then tell you why your business needs it, without being asked! The key to working with Gen Y is ensuring they get the appropriate training they need to understand your business and its needs, then explain why.

For Baby Boomers and Generation X computers and mobile phones have always been business tools first, for Gen Y they have always been social communication tools and a way of life. They are the first generation in the workplace to know more about something than their grandparents, parents and managers – technology! This means that businesses can utilise Gen Y to test new technology before investing large sums of money or time in new systems. As they are comfortable with both change and technology, they are the perfect people to do such work, and again it engages them in a way that works for them. They are often seen as trying to take short cuts, when the reality is that their motto at work is “Work smarter, NOT harder”, and I personally think that is a smart and logical approach, which will benefit everyone at work.

Gen Y have an informal approach to both work and relationships, which is sometimes misinterpreted as bad manners or lack of respect. Gen Y are seen as not understanding business etiquette, and the reality is, they were probably not taught it, and therefore don't know how to use it. They are also very direct in their communication style, which is seen as lacking tact, but this is not how they see themselves. However, they are open to feedback, provided it is constructive rather than negative. One of the key business advantages of this lack of formality is that they see things in a different, new light, rather than “that's the way we have always done things around here”. This leads to greater creativity and innovative problem solving, which businesses should embrace rather than resist.

While Gen Y wants to be independent, and have the freedom to make choices, both at work and in their personal lives, they still want the security of others helping them to meet their needs. Hence they place enormous importance on the opinions and support of their immediate family (parents and siblings), friends / peers and immediate manager or supervisor.



This means that in the workplace they are open to coaching and mentoring, seeing this as a way of being empowered to make more informed choices. However, they want to be mentored by “cool, older people who like and respect young people”, and remember they have the best BS detectors – they know if you don’t really like them, and are simply mentoring them as part of a formal program in the workplace. Bad managers and bad mentors damage people – if you are not interested, then quite simply, don’t do it!

Gen Y are focused on “having a life”, as they see their Baby Boomer parents and managers as being constantly stressed with no life! They want to work in positive work environments and do work which is meaningful and makes a contribution, and if you can show them how what they do does this, they will be motivated, enthusiastic, and more importantly, they will strive to please you and make themselves and their team members look good.

We should actively embrace the fact that Gen Ys are the most collaborative generation at work, as they see this as key to getting the work done, and getting it done properly and quickly. They may be impatient, but they are definitely not lazy, just constantly looking for new, better and more efficient ways of getting the work done.

Finally, the number one motivator for Gen Y at work is to work with, and for, colleagues, managers, clients and suppliers who respect them as people, and who have a positive attitude to them, the organisation and the workplace. Pessimism and criticism will have Gen Ys running a mile (and not returning) before you even worked out what happened.

They want to work with people who LOVE what they do and are willing to teach them what they know, and share their knowledge and experience – THAT’S WHY THEY KEEP ASKING WHY? So, just answer their questions openly and honestly, ask for opinions and views, but then be prepared to listen, and just possibly change YOUR behaviour and way of thinking!

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Avril Henry’s FEAL presentation was made possible with the support of PIMCO Australia.

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