

RETAINING THE GENERATION Y WORKFORCE IN THE COMPANY: SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE EMPLOYERS

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to discuss about the need for employers to understand Gen Y and eventually assist them to establish strategies or plan of actions to attract, maintain and retain Gen Y in the organization. Gen Y is deemed as being the future workforce having unique characteristics, behaviours and traits as compared to the earlier generations of Gen X and the Baby Boomers. It was found recently that the turnover rate among the Gen Y is high and organizations are trying to find the reasons for such a problem. Recruiting, maintaining and retaining the Gen Y is seen as the new challenge in managing the new breed of human resources. So, this paper provides some insights into the issues and problems, expose some unique characteristics, behaviours and traits of Gen Y, and provide some steps that can be taken by an organization to help them cope with this phenomenon.

Keywords: Gen Y; Gen X; baby boomers; retentions; work-life balance; tech-savvy

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the challenges in human resource management is managing the Generation Y (Gen Y). Many organizations are now focusing their attention and trying to find the best way on how to effectively manage the Gen Y. The reason is obvious that this generation will be the dominant group in the organization and is expected to play significant roles in the continuing organizational growth and sustainability. They are unique as compared to the earlier generation of the workforce, namely the baby boomers and Generation X groups of employees. A generation is defined as an identifiable group that shares birth and significant life events at critical development stages (Kupperschmidt, 2000). Each generation seems to have unique characteristics and behavioral traits with different perceptions and attitude toward jobs. Cennamo and Gardner (2008) opined that generations differ significantly in their goals, expectation and work ethics and therefore it posed a major challenge to manage this new breed of generation. Recruitment and retention have become major issues due to the influx of a more dynamic generation of late. The high turnover rate among this generation, who must be recruited, trained and then replaced, is costing companies billions of dollars every year (Sujansky & Ferri-Reed, 2009).

Thus the aim of this paper is to discuss on unique behavioral traits of Gen Y, and how organizations or employers can develop suitable workplace and feasible strategies to suit this new generation's needs. By doing so, future employers can expect to attract high performers among Gen Y and retain them in the organization.

2. WHO ARE THE GENERATION Y?

Tulgan and Martin (2001) described the Gen Y as a new group of workers born between 1978 and 1998, who are also referred to as the Net generations or Millennials and possess certain unique characteristics. The most common and dominant characteristics of Gen Y, as described by most literatures, is that they are rich with information and "media savvy", has a strong work ethic, entrepreneurial spirit and sense of responsibility, comfortable with change, a more open and tolerant society, networking, interdependent in achieving goals, self-confident and optimistic about the future, value skill development, thrive on mentoring and are well educated (Raman, Ramendren, Beleya, Aroklasamy, & Nadesan, 2011). It was observed that Gen Y had certain characteristics that are pertinent to organization development and success. With these kinds of entrepreneurial characteristics, it would be at the advantage of the organization if they are able to nurture and further motivate and capitalized on the Gen Y unique characteristics. In order to do that requires organizations to understand the dominant characteristics and behaviours of Gen Y. Table 1 below shows some of these characteristics as examined by Deloitte Consulting (2005).

Table 1 summarizes the demographic information about Gen Y in the United States. Though the findings may not be totally true in the Malaysian context, one should be able to gauge some of the general characteristics that the Gen Y possesses. Understanding these unique characteristics or behavioral traits would allow organizations to be in a better position to serve the needs of Gen Y and eventually help them to be effective in managing Gen Y. Gen Y value the kind of jobs that are challenging and has lots of autonomy for them to be creative and innovative. Partnership approach is more appealing and appreciative by the Gen Y as opposed to master servant kind of relationship. In addition, Gen Y is also found to be quite sensitive to compensation and rewards regardless whether it is financial or non-financial rewards. Thus, it is crucial for organizations to be well aware of the kind of rewards Gen Y value most to enable organizations to provide the right kind of rewards and eventually helps to retain and maintain this group of employees for a certain period of time.

Table 1: Demographics and Attitudes Among Millennials in the United States of America, Source: Deloitte Consulting (2005). Who Are the Millennials, aka Generation Y?

Demographics	Tech-savvy	Millennials at work
No definitive agreement on birth years; experts say somewhere between 1978 and 1995; most say 1981 to 1993	Connected...24/7	Work well with friends and on teams
	Self-confident	
	Optimistic	Collaborative, resourceful, innovative thinkers
Children of Baby Boomers	Hopeful	Love a challenge
	Independent	Seek to make a difference
	Comfortably self-reliant	Want to produce something worthwhile
Younger siblings of Gen Xers	Determined	Desire to be a hero
	Goal oriented	
Largest generation (75 million) after the Boomers (80 million), compared to the Gen Xers (40 million)	Success driven	Impatient
	Lifestyle centered	
	Diverse	Comfortable with speed and change
38% of millennials identify themselves as "non-white"	Inclusive	Thrive on flexibility and space to explore
	Global, civic- and community-minded	
Positioned in history to be the next "Hero generation"	Pulling together	Partner well with mentors
	Service oriented	Value guidance
	Entrepreneurial	Expect respect

3. GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES

Angeline (2010) explains that the behaviours, attitudes, and work values of different generations of employees were influenced by their historical, economic, social, and cultural experiences. Because of these, conflicts and work tension are inevitable if different generations could not or refuse to understand and accept each other's differences and cherish the similarities. Angeline (2010) also reported that 31.8% of the Malaysia populations are in the aged below 15 years old, while the majority (63.6%) of the Malaysian populations aged between 15 and 64 years old, and only 4.6% are in the aged above 65 years old. It means the Baby Boomers will be phasing out or retiring in the next few years, and most of job vacancies are expected to be filled up by Gen X and Y. Being the trend setter in terms of technological savvy and creative thinking, investing in attracting, developing and maintaining Gen Y is dubbed to be good for the company in the future.

Angeline (2010) illustrates (see Table 2 below) the generational differences of employees in Malaysia, the significant life events (economic, social, and historical), and their general characteristics, philosophies, and attitudes towards work. According to her, in Malaysia, the Gen Y employees (sometimes known as Millennials or Nexters) constitute about 40% of the workforce, and they are currently less than 30 years of age. This is something good for a developing country like Malaysia as this young generation who are known to be dynamic,

aggressive and creative will assist the country to elevate to greater heights. Zemke, Raines, & Filipczak (2000) also lamented the positive notion about Generation Y as opposed to other earlier generations. They uttered that comparatively, Gen Y is more cooperative, better team players, and more optimistic about the future than the Baby Boomers and Gen X. Gen Y employees are found to be more confident, civic minded, and fast learners who are easily motivated by prompt praises and recognition (Zemke et al., 2000). Some of these entrepreneurial characteristics are necessary and pertinent for a country like Malaysia to excel and compete in the global environment.

Earlier studies assert that Gen Y did not prefer inflexible working hours and rigid policies contrary to what has being practised by the earlier generation. Gen Y also seems to remain longer in an organization that invests in the latest technological equipments, and that which enhances their working experience (Angeline, 2010). As children of Baby Boomers and Gen X, Gen Y are also more concerned about environmental sustainability and rising social issues. This thought has been shared through borderless information, thanks to the Internet. Many of them have international friends and partners and do not mind working overseas. Looking at the current scenarios in many of the companies, Gen Y seems comfortable working with diverse ethnicity and gender orientation from various countries.

Table 2: The General Characteristics of Three Generations of Employees, Source: Angeline (2010), adapted from Zemke et al. (2000)

Birth years of each group	Baby Boomers (1946 to 1964)	Generation X (1965 to 1980)	Generation Y (1981 to 2001)
Significant Life Events: Historical, Economic, and Social Influences	Under British Administration	Indonesian Confrontation	Economic Crises
	Communist Insurgency Malaysian Independence	Separation from Singapore May 13 New Economic Policy Industrialisation	Look East Policy Mergers and Acquisitions
Individual Characteristics and Work Attitudes	Economic and Political Instability	Beginning of computer usage	Internet usage Beginning of Social Networking activities
	Diligent Focused Dedicated Loyal Self-motivated Thrifty Value Job Security	Idealistic Individualistic Materialistic Sceptic Pro-Work-life balance Mobile Value Prompt Recognition and Reward	Optimistic Creative Civic-minded Pro-Diversity Pro-Work-life balance Mobile Value Prompt Recognition and Reward Team player Willing to Learn Adaptable to New Technologies Casual Fun loving
Philosophy	Proactive Live to work	Reactive Work to live	Impulsive Live first, then work

4. ISSUES AND CONCERNS ON GEN Y

From previous studies and literatures, it has brought concerns to all organizations, locally and globally alike about the challenges and opportunities from the uprising of this Net-generation. Whether the organizations are ready to accept or not, this group of young, energetic, and technologically savvy workforce will make a big entrance into the workforce, as the children of the Baby Boomers is ready for employment starting as early as 2000s. Thus, a few issues have to be considered by organizations:

- What are their unique characteristics, expectations and perception of this group of workforce?
- How can organizations understand and value them as good resources?
- What strategies can be employed to retain them in the companies?

As discussed in the earlier part of this paper, understanding different generations' unique attitudes and behavioral traits will help contribute to the company gaining competitive advantages. Recruitment is only the beginning part of managing this kind of human resource, but retaining them is another major issue. Having high turnover rate is not good for any organization. If the turnover rate is high, it means the companies have to do more recruitment, which means incurring higher cost and time (Sujansky & Ferri-Reed, 2009). So this paper will discuss in detail some of the main expectations of Gen Y workforce, and with the clear understanding of these issues will help organizations to create a comprehensive and successful retention program.

5. CHARACTERISTICS AND EXPECTATION OF GEN Y IN THE WORKPLACE

Angeline (2010) highlighted that the expectation, work attitudes and behaviors of individuals from each generational group may be influenced by their significant life events, culture, and even their five senses. For example, companies must trust this Gen Y more with regards to their ability to solve technology related problems or issues as compared to other employees from other generations. They have the ability and speed in solving specifically computer related problems. However, if employers are unable to meet employees' expectation, it will create an imbalance in their target performance.

Broadbridge, Maxwell, & Ogden (2007) summarize from their findings, several noted and unique characteristics that can be expected from Gen Y in the workforce. As Table 3 demonstrates, Gen Y has been described as well-educated, confident, passionate, upbeat, socially conscious and as having integrity. They are also technologically savvy, independent, self-reliant and entrepreneurial thinkers (Martin, 2005). Morton (2002) claims they want jobs that provide training, fair compensation and a positive company culture. They want bosses who are open and positive and who empower them (Morton, 2002). They thrive on change and uncertainty (Harris, 2006), challenging work and creative expression, and hate micro-management (Martin, 2005). Table 3 depicts the unique characteristics of Gen Y in great detail based on the findings from the previous studies.

Martin (2005) claims that Gen Y do not only want clear directions and managerial support but they also demand the freedom and flexibility to get the task done in their own way and at their

own pace. While they work well alone, they work better together; they are more accustomed to team playing than previous generations. She proposed the need for organizations to customize training and career paths for this generation of employees (Martin, 2005). Gen Y employees expect to give and receive loyalty based on honesty and respect (rather than on time served with a company). They will show loyalty and dedication as long as they are achieving their goals but then they will go elsewhere for a new challenge should they find that the current company is not able to provide them with the required challenge (Kerslake, 2005).

Amar (2004) highlighted the difference in motivation among the Gen Y. He says that the motivation that attracts, retains and engages younger employees is quite different from that of previous generations. He mentioned that there are three sources of work motivation: the job; the outcomes of the job (i.e. rewards and sanctions) and the organisational system (including policies, practices, culture, image position in its market and industry). The biggest motivator of the younger generation is the lack of controls on them as this frees their mind and allows them to engage in activities that encourage creativity and bring about innovation.

Research shows that Gen Y is less interested in the lifelong concept of work. Baruch (2004) found that they seem to be less interested in a lifelong job, and more interested in challenging and meaningful assignments for their self-development. Whichever companies are able to meet their financial and non financial needs will be the one that they will choose to provide their services to. Prior work suggests that both men and women of the Gen Y seek a more balanced lifestyle between their work and non-work lives and have different expectations of their work role than Gen X and other older employees (Morton, 2002; Kerslake, 2005; Anon, 2006). More so than with any other generation, work for Gen Y is regarded as financing and complementing lifestyles (Kerslake, 2005; Anon, 2006).

Another unique characteristic is that Gen Y is very concerned about balancing their work-life. Morton (2002) highlighted that Gen Y want to enjoy their work but not let it rule their lives. They will put in extra time for a worthy and necessary cause as an exception rather than a rule (Kerslake, 2005). They make the most of their free time to fulfill the families' and their own personal needs. Employment flexibility is a way of achieving the work-life balance (Kerslake, 2005); therefore the management and culture of organisations must support such flexibility (Maxwell, 2005). Effective organizational commitment is related to such important employee attitudinal variables, as well as behavioral factors, such as turnover intention (Addae, Parboteeah, & Davis, 2006). By understanding the unique behavioral traits of Generation Y and their expectations, future employers could draw comprehensive solutions to retain them in the company for as long as the company wants to.

Table 3: Characteristics of Generation Y, Source: Compiled by Broadbridge et al. (2007)

Characteristics	Source
Independent	Lockyer (2005), Martin (2005) and Anon (2006)
Well educated	<i>Retail Merchandiser</i> (2003) and Eisner (2005)
Confident	<i>Retail Merchandiser</i> (2003) and Eisner (2005)
Upbeat	<i>Retail Merchandiser</i> (2003)
Passionate	<i>Retail Merchandiser</i> (2003)
Open minded	Eisner (2005)
Sociable	Eisner (2005)
Technically literate	Lockyer (2005), Martin (2005), Eisner (2005), Harris (2006), Foreman (2006), Anon (2006) and Foreman (2006)
Dislikes slowness	Francis-Smith (2004)
Highly informed	Eisner (2005)
Likely to rock the boat	Eisner (2005)
Entrepreneurial thinker	Martin (2005)
Self reliant	Martin (2005)
Ethnically diverse	Eisner (2005)
Positive	Francis-Smith (2004)
Politeness	Francis-Smith (2004)
Curious	Francis-Smith (2004)
Energetic	Francis-Smith (2004)
Respectful of parents and grandparents	Francis-Smith (2004)
Financially empowered	Foreman (2006)
Invest conservatively	Foreman (2006)
Has lived with strong social stressors	Eisner (2005)
Want to be famous	Harris (2006)
Hopeful	Eisner (2005)
Talented	Eisner (2005)
Patriotic	Eisner (2005)
Collaborative	Eisner (2005)
Inclusive	Eisner (2005)
Civic minded	Eisner (2005)

6. STRATEGIC BENEFIT AND COMPENSATION

Strategic compensation refers to the provision of intrinsic and extrinsic compensation that are perceived by employees as fair (Mahmoodi, 2006). According to Armstrong and Murlis (1994), implementing strategic compensation practices help the organization to achieve its objectives by increasing commitment and motivation. The positive impact of compensation, such as pay and incentives on work attitudes can be derived from the argument that an individual's perception of being valued by the organization may be significantly influenced by the organization's compensation for the individual's effort (Meyer & Allen, 1997). Gen Y is concerned not only on how much they are being paid, but moreover on how much they perceived the company has treated them with regards to fairness and equity of their performance and job responsibility.

Future employers should not feel that new package of benefit and compensation will increase their operational cost. Gen Y value the non financial aspect of compensation. They are more

concerned of feedback and positive response from managers, thus intrinsic rewards are deemed desirable to encourage and motivate them in their work and to induce good performance. Managers need to be more open in telling them how they perform, pat on shoulders for good job, and mention their name during the meeting. Giving them more authority to decide and make decisions related to their job would also motivate them tremendously and contribute more to the organization.

7. JOINING THE STRATEGIC PLANNING TEAM

As have been identified by previous studies, Gen Y is full of creative ideas. The way they think is like a gift box, content known only to the givers. Many empirical studies have supported the notion that Gen Y employees are creative and eager to share their ideas with others (Cennamo & Gardner, 2008; Zemke et al., 2000). Unfortunately, given their young age and handicap of experiences, this untapped resource has been brushed aside by some of employers. Management could address this issue and tap the ideas of Gen Y by getting them involved in their strategic planning team to allow them to share their creative ideas with others and to be part of a big family (Gursoy, Maier, & Chi, 2008). The feel good factors of being valued and important would inspire them to remain loyal and to contribute more towards the growth and expansion of their organization (Angeline, 2010).

8. LEADERSHIP STYLE

Even though the influx of Generation Y in the workforce is huge, they are still at the early stage of employment. This makes them to report to most probably Baby Boomers boss, known for their rigid protocol, and also Gen X, known for their individualistic approach, which can develop potential conflicts in the workplace (Angeline, 2010). The type of leadership practised by the previous generations might not be suitable and appropriate to the newer breed of generation. Thus, if organizations are serious in making efforts to retain Gen Y employees, they should at least adopt a consultative leadership style rather than autocratic-type of leadership and management styles (Arsenault, 2004; Gursoy et al., 2008). Gen Y is not afraid to question any differences in opinion, and expect feedback from their managers. Organizations could also organize a mentor-mentee program to address this issue and encourage better feedback from both parties (Gursoy et al., 2008). By having a desirable leadership style, managers can transform themselves and become supportive managers in assisting and sharing knowledge with employees.

9. SUITABLE WORKING ENVIRONMENT

Gen Y employees seem to be quite concerned with their work environment. Studies indicate that the physical work environment was an important factor in the Gen Y decision to accept or not to accept a job offer or position; and just as important for the decision to stay or not with an organization. They prefer a flexible and unconventional work environment that promotes creativity. Many have developed a work-to-live rather than live-to-work mindset that spills over into valuing the quality of the work environment as well as work-life balance (Eisner, 2005). For most people, the workplace is where they spend the majority of their waking lives. It makes sense that if an organization can provide an environment in which people enjoy being in, that makes them feel energized and valued by their employer, then they will want to stay there (Earle, 2003). Organizations can draw their working environment planning based on what have been done in Yahoo and Google offices. Their stimulating environment

provides a good and nurturing workplace, resulting in near zero turnovers among young employees.

10. COMMUNICATION

As they are aptly known as the Net-generation, this group values the existence of the latest technology in organizations. According to a PricewaterhouseCoopers (2009) study, 96% of the respondents are members of social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter, and would definitely expect to use these in their workplace. The study further exposed that 90% of the Generation Y possessed more than one active email and constantly communicate among them. Based on this scenario, perhaps organizations can adopt new ways of communication, from the conventional ways of using memos and letters, to more instant messaging systems such as Twitter, email, and Short Message System (SMS). By having instant response and feedback, it is easier for Gen Y employees to channel their ideas and issues in real time. Communication will become transparent and fast. For existing managers, mostly the Baby Boomers and Generation X, it is timely for them to incorporate the new usage of state of the art communication systems more than the traditional way of communications.

11. GLOBAL MOBILITY

Gen Y seems to be very excited to be on an overseas assignment or being permanently stationed at the overseas branch or subsidiaries. This is quite different from the earlier generations which are quite reluctant to be posted overseas for a long period of time. A study conducted by PricewaterhouseCoopers (2009) indicates that majority of the respondents agreed and would grab the opportunity to work abroad, even momentarily, and this would increase their motivation to stay longer in the company. As shown by previous studies, Gen Y expect and are ready to travel extensively if their job requires them to do so, This is somewhat different compared to their Baby Boomers parents, who are less adventurous and more complacent with the home country. Thus, the strategies to include opportunity going abroad as one of the employment benefits of the company and criteria might help attract and make the Gen Y to stay longer in an organization.

12. TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

This generation is anything but lack of working experience. Providing relevant and sufficient training for them, will help them complete their task efficiently with less or minimum degree of uncertainty. Generation Y has been found to stay with the same employer longer when training and development is made available (Beaver & Hutchings, 2005). They are very ambitious and would aim to climb the corporate ladder in a short period of time. Getting there would require them to have certain skill and competencies. By providing training and developing their skills, it can help Generation Y to possess a clear understanding and sense of direction in the workplace, as they anticipate that a company that provide and concern with training are also concern about the employees' growth and career development. So, companies with good training and career development program are more preferable by Gen Y as opposed to the one that done have specific training and career development plans for employees.

13. WORK-LIFE BALANCE

Generation Y is more focused towards achieving a balance between work and life (Kerslake, 2005). This is in stark contrast to the previous generations which focus more on job security and the concept of live-to-work. To provide this benefit and entice Generation Y employees to work longer in the workplace, organizations may introduce flexible working hours to accommodate their schedule. 58% of respondents from PricewaterhouseCoopers (2009) study favor to have flexible working hours, and believe they could accomplish tasks given in due time. Flexible working hours would also make them use their available time for more creative thinking and settling their chores. It motivates and encourages loyalty among Gen Y as are known to appreciate workplace that practices flexibility and tolerance.

14. STATE-OF-THE-ART TECHNOLOGIES

Gen Y is well known for being very sensitive to technology. The kind or level of technology organizations possess would greatly influence the Gen Y's decision to choose or not to choose a company to work for. Angeline (2010) study found that Generation Y tend to stay longer in organizations that invest and provide state-of-the-art technologies as opposed to the one operating on an obsolete technology. For them, speed is a major concern to ensure their work could be done in an effective and efficient manner. Unifi, high-speed processors, and latest gadgetries will make them feel convenient, comfortable and motivated to work. Future employers should see new technologies as an investment, as Generation Y can fully utilize these peripheral to increase job performance efficiency, and at the same time reduce processing time and cost for manpower which eventually bring greater efficiency and profitability to them.

15. CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

PricewaterhouseCoopers (2009) found that corporate responsibility plays a big role for millenials in their choice of employer with 86% of respondents choosing employers with similar corporate responsibility values, and 77% of respondents stating they would leave an employer whose value no longer matched their expectation. Contrary to society's belief that Gen Y put less emphasis on social values, it is now clear Gen Y do have concerns and interest in companies that value and have good social responsibility programs. For Gen Y, companies with good corporate social responsibility values are associated with having a greater concern for its employees and thus would be a secured place to work in. The current scenario verifies this idea where most of the big organizations strive to put CSR in their strategic objectives. Being associated with good values certainly instills pride among employees.

16. CONCLUSION

Retaining Gen Y in today's workplace is the major concern in many organizations. The retirement of the Baby Boomers from the workforce make it necessary for the organization to try to understand the needs of this unique generation. The turnover rate of the Gen Y is reported to be quite high and loyalty among the Gen Y is very fragile. This phenomenon is not a local but a global problem. The management approaches or leadership styles need to be adjusted to the needs and aspirations of this new breed of complex generation. The previously effective and successful approach enforced on the earlier generation might not be suitable or workable for the Gen Y. The autocratic, bureaucratic and master-servant

relationship is no longer applicable to the new breed of generation as they are more appreciative of the friendly, partnership relationship and those supportive of their creative ideas.

Retention strategies need to be developed correctly to accommodate the unique behavioral traits and expectations of Gen Y, though it is worth mentioning that not all retention strategies are costly. Gen Y are putting more emphasis on searching for a more meaningful working experience such as better and systematic training and development programs in the workplace, supportive managers, flexible working hours, and a balance between life and work. Although providing them with the latest technology will hike the cost of operation, it can also become a double edge sword as job loads can be accomplished faster with lesser use of manpower, and loyalty and commitment among Gen Y could be gained for a longer period of time.

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