

A Theoretical Paper on Generation Y as a Workforce

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Abstract

The workforce of organizations is composed of different generational cohorts. Among them, Generation Y has become the largest segment that recently enters into the workforce, which requires organizations to acknowledge and understand their expectations in order to survive and compete. Therefore, this brief theoretical paper investigates the workplace characteristics of Generation Y for providing organizations with a better understanding. After reviewing cohort-specific characteristics of Generation Y, this paper concludes with managerial implications of working, managing, and retaining employees from Generation Y.

Keywords: Generation Y, Gen Y, workforce, work attitudes

1. Introduction

Generational Cohort Theory was first introduced by Inglehart (1977) to classify populations as generational cohorts. A generational cohort is typically described using years of birth, varying from 20 to 25 years, or the period during which one group of birth is born, gets older and gives birth to their own children (Meredith & Schewe, 1994). Generational cohorts are believed to have similar attitudes, opinions, beliefs and values based on their time period of birth and live with shared experiences including social, economic and political events during their young adulthood (age from 17 to 24) (Strauss & Howe, 1991). Their basic values and expectations about work, money, and tolerance represent such experiences and events (Meredith & Schewe, 1994). Furthermore, such values, attitudes, and behaviors are considered to be steady throughout the life of that generation and establish a generational identity (Strauss & Howe, 1991; Inglehart, 1997; Hung et al., 2007).

Cohorts have been defined using various names by scholars; however, there is a consensus on general attitudes and behaviors of the cohorts (Wellner, 2000). The generational cohorts defined in the literature are Baby Boomers (1946 - 1960), Gen X (1961 - 1979), and Gen Y (1980 - 1999) (Gurau, 2012).

Among these, Generation Y, which is also known as the Net Generation or Millennials, is a population larger than the one before, the Baby Boomers. Generation Y has been also defined by many terms including *Echo Boomers*, *Millennials*, *Techsavvy* (Beaton, 2008), *Easy Life Generation* (Irish Independent, 2006), *Generation MyPod* (The Chronicle, 2006), *Gender Why?*, *NextGen*, *the Internet Generation*, *iGeneration*, *BabyBoomlets*, *Boomerang Generation*, *Generation Now*, *Generation Waking Up* (Carlson, 2010) or *The Tethered Generation* (Tyler, 2007). Scholars define the birth period of this generation differently, such as 1977-2000, 1977-1994 (Regine, 2011), 1980-1994 (Cubit, 2011), 1979-1990 (The Chronicle, 2006), and 1978-1999 (Tyler, 2007).

Despite different names, Gen Y is a large group with a great potential. This large group constitutes the most powerful target of marketing professionals around the world (Paul, 2001) as they are the largest consumer segment of products and media (Howe & Strauss, 2000). This generational cohort includes around 80 million people born between 1980s and 2000, and represents the most recent cohort entering the workforce. Therefore, organizations are compelled to change the working environment and adapt to this new group of people.

2. General Characteristics of Generation Y

Every generation has its own features, beliefs, strengths, and weaknesses. Generational cohorts are suggested to have common and unique characteristics caused by their life experiences (Scheme & Noble, 2000; Strauss & Howe, 1991). In this sense, Gen Yers, the most recent group of the workforce, have grown up in prosperity with continuous advances in information technologies (Robbins & Judge, 2010). Therefore, they are comfortable with technology, diversity, and online communication methods. This causes them to have an enhanced sense of flexibility toward new inputs and opportunities compared to the previous generations.

The core characteristics of Gen Y include the following:

This group has grown in a technologic environment and thus, they count upon it for a better performance (Zaptçioğlu Çelikdemir & Tukul, 2015). Generation Y is plugged-in 24 hours every day as equipped with high-tech gadgets and tools (Belch & Belch, 2001). This generation prefers emails and texting classes for presentations and conferences instead of conventional methods (www.people-press.org). Learning is not just a conventional school system for this generation.

Gen Yers do not opt for a fast-track life; they prefer flexible working schedules and a good balance between work and life. Their expectations are often high and they want to find a meaning in work (Robbins & Judge, 2010). According to Gen Yers, work is basically a curriculum vitae builder and they do not believe that prolonged commitment or attachment to any organization is not necessary (Howe & Strauss, 2000). They also desire flexibility and fun at work (Howe & Strauss, 2000). This attitude may be considered less committed, disciplined and driven by the members of former generations (Ayhün, 2013); however, Gen

Yers have different expectations of workplaces and they give preference to family life (Tufur, 2011).

Generation Y has been raised by parents who aimed to change the upbringing style of the previous generation, and thus, they have self-confidence, passion and desire for achievement (Zaptçioğlu Çelikdemir & Tukul, 2015). Their expectations of employers are high, they always pursue novelties and they can easily challenge the authority (Chester, 2002). They want work to be meaningful and to provide continuous learning opportunities (Çoban, 2006).

The members of Generation Y have participated in group activities during their childhood, as a result, teamwork is important to them and they desire for the approval of other people. Gen Yers are committed and loyal people since they belong to a population that does not leave anyone behind, and therefore, they value involvement and inclusion.

Generation Y seeks guidance and feedbacks as a form of attention. Appreciation and reassurance are also important to them due to their sense of involvement. Therefore, mentors and coaches who would guide their career are likely to be beneficial to this generation.

Generation Y is regarded as hypersensitive as they value support and guidance of their family members, and thus they can be easily affected by their peers (Tyler, 2007). Gen Yers are a more hopeful population than their parents are; they are self-confident, accept the rules, are fond of advanced technology and curious spiritually with a concern for life quality (Roberts, 2001).

Generation Y uses social networks efficiently for communication and social interactions (O'Keeffe et al., 2011). As a younger generation, Gen Yers usually use cell phones as a way of expressing their individuality and they prefer unique ring tones, wallpapers and other specific features in their phones (Totten et al., 2005). Additionally, cell phones serve as a tool to be in contact with their families and friends, and to expand their social relations through social media (Kolsaker & Drakatos, 2009; Pertierra, 2005).

The Internet and information stream have a great influence on their perspective. Despite the shared characteristics describing a generational cohort, the attitudes and opinions of the Generation Y vary across early and late stages of the population (Francese, 2003). This generational segment has been generally raised in a solid economic environment (Blackwell & Mitchell, 2003). As a result, they are more involved in consumption than the generations before and they are used to prosperity (O'Donnell, 2006). There is a broad research suggesting that the highest level of Internet use is among the Gen Y members, which are also called the 'Wired Generation' due to their need to stay always connected. Digital environments make them feel comfortable. This generation has been born and raised mostly in the nuclear families living in the cities, and they have accessed to communication tools in their early life, and their three main beliefs are Expectations, Expressions and Acceptance (Rai, 2012). In this context, Jansen et al. (2010) tried to differentiate the attitudes of Gen X and Gen Y members about sharing opinions and highlighted specific implications in favor of expressions and acceptance.

3. Work Attitudes of Generation Y

As the most recent entrants to the workforce, Gen Yers have brought digital technology, social networking sites, and higher expectations to the conventional workplaces and turned that into a flexible environment (Rai, 2012). The members of this generation have increasing demands, stay always connected, challenge and question conventional practices, share their disagreements easily and openly with no interest in organizational and cultural norms. Therefore, this generational cohort is likely to be well aware of their desires with respect to their individual space, comfort zones, or communication styles. They easily express themselves and voice their expectations, tend to cooperate and have the skills to quickly exchange information and seek out acceptance through networking, all of which challenge the conventional functioning of workplaces (Rai, 2012).

The most specific characteristics defined by various researchers include the need for a strong leadership, convenient rewards, socialization and teamwork, friendly workplaces, opportunities to learn, guidance and assistance, well-timed feedbacks and constructive comments (Cubit, 2011). In this regard, the study by Martin (2005) found that Generation Y members are generally independent and entrepreneurial individuals, and they expect immediate feedback from their supervisors. Her findings also indicated that Generation Y members demand a challenging work environment and supervisors who meet such expectations. Leahy et al. (2011) supported these findings and stated that the members of Generation Y prefer teamwork, fun, and challenge at a workplace. Likewise, Hin et al. (2015) found that Generation Y prefers a leadership that provides support and guidance, acting as mentor. They also reported that Generation Yers are highly focused on achievement, resulting in higher levels of ambition compared to other generational cohorts. Horeczy et al. (2011), in turn, concluded that the members of this generational cohort demand leaders who are determined, competent and take responsibility. The scholars also indicated that Generation Y specifically values honesty as a key quality of a leader.

Gen Yers pursue a career that can provide fulfillment, safety and security with organizational, social and environmental ethics (Beaton, 2008). According to the study by Brown et al. (2009), Generation Y members place the greatest importance on benefits, monthly payment, and health insurance, while they consider training and telecommuting less important. They are highly motivated to perform better, they aim for competence, they reject social statuses and hierarchies, they utilize hi-tech technologies to communicate and the Internet is essential to their daily routine (Schmidt et al., 2011). Although Generation Y is known to have high expectations on career (e.g. Ng et al., 2010; Broadbridge et al., 2007), the study by Maxwell and Broadbridge (2014) established gender differences in terms of career expectations. Their findings demonstrated that the expectations of female Gen Y members are lower than the level of male members.

Adult Gen Yers are objective-driven, self-assured and optimistic about their future with a continuous sense of being right. This causes pressure on them since they want to be successful and they want flexibility during conflict resolutions. They prefer groups and opt

for working in a group rather than working alone (Howe & Strauss, 2000). Supporting this, the study by Sa'baan et al. (2013) reported that flexibility & multitasking and teamwork have a positive impact on the workplace behaviors of Gen Y members. As they have an optimistic viewpoint, Gen Yers adopt positive and innovative ways of problem-solving (Gibson, 2009). On one hand, they tend to follow the rules and they show respect to authority. On the other, they are autonomous and they can easily challenge the authority (Walker et al., 2006).

This generation has the ability to multitask and cooperate. They perform well in groups and they appreciate activities involving socialization. As stated before, Gen Yers are technology fans but they do not use it just as a tool, they define their lifestyles by it. This makes them be connected at all times (Skiba, 2005). For instance, the study by Brown et al. (2009) reported that Generation Y prefers social networks as a means of recruitment, which demonstrates their preference of technology.

The members of the Generation Y have the ability of quick information processing. But, their attention span is rather short as they can easily get bored (Lower, 2008). Likewise, because of their multitasking tendency, they may not be focused on one single activity and it may be difficult for them to be involved in conventional communication, reading, and writing (Pardeau & Morgan, 2008). In this regard, Lamm and Meeks (2009) have found stronger positive relationships between fun at workplace and personal outcomes in Gen Y members compared to other generational cohorts. Thus, workplace fun may be considered not as a benefit but as a requirement by this generation (Lamm & Meeks, 2009).

A global survey conducted by IABC (2009) to reveal the requisites of Gen Y employees demonstrated that the sense of being connected, updated and involved is highly important to this group of employees. According to this survey, Gen Y employees value frequent, updated, and brief communications as well as seek certainty and honesty in communication. The dynamic Gen Y employees tend to cooperate and respect honest and open leaders, which suggest that their perception of the leader is as important as their perception of the organization as they build their relationship with the organization. They constitute a young workforce that is willing to offer much to their organizations with novel ideas and informed opinions, which sometimes can be challenging for a traditional management. On the other hand, immediate acceptance and open feedback are very important to Gen Yers, and the key factors underlying their satisfaction and dynamism toward the organization.

The Generation Y and Workplace Annual Report 2010 mentioned similar factors about the Gen Y workforce, but provided further details on workplace ergonomics, sustainability, and environmental awareness with influence on their engagement levels. Based on this report, Gen Y employees are cooperative, flexible, mobile, and untraditional, and give importance to sustainability and environmental adaptability. The report further details how this generation place importance on certain factors such as working environment, which is regarded as a place of emotional engagement, socialization and learning. Such environment is a space specific to them and highly associated with their well-being in that organization. Due to their emotional and stylish nature, Gen Yers do not like boundaries, prefer open and dynamic

workplaces with recreational and conversation zones enabling them to be innovative and cooperative. The report outlines that personal spaces are the most important aspect to this generation since they consider such places as a representation of their identity. Furthermore, the report states that except the Chinese Gen Yers, the Gen Y employees like stylish and sophisticate workplaces. Another important fact of the report covers the reasons of Gen Y employees to choose specific organizations. The main reasons include the opportunities to learn and develop, quality of life and co-workers (Gen Y and Workplace Annual Report, 2010).

3.1 Cultural Acceptance

Generation Y is the most diversified population in cultural and ethnical terms, with one-third of children aged under 18 belonging to a racial or an ethnic minority group. Furthermore, multicultural families and different lifestyles have been more rooted in the daily lives of Generation Y members than other generations (Erickson, 2008). According to Cole et al. (2002), Generation Y has greater tolerance of diversity in terms of religion, race, culture, economic status, and sexual orientation than the previous generation. They have been raised in a more diversified community, causing them to be ready to accept cultural differences (Erickson, 2008). Moreover, the feeling of cultural superiority is less in Generation Y members compared to older generations (Erickson, 2008).

3.2 Entitlement

Entitlement is a specific feature of this generation so that it is sometimes called as the Entitlement Generation. This generation has continuously received emotional and financial support from their parents, leading to a sense of entitlement both in and out of the workplace. Gen Y members have had close and favorable relationships with their parents during their early life (Patalano 2008). In their adulthood, such support and appreciation has been turned into an optimistic view of life in some, whereas into false self-assurance and an entitlement feeling in others (Erickson, 2008). In workplace context, such entitlement feeling translates into their expectation to a fast advance in their career, which can be deemed as irrational by other generational cohorts (Karefalk et al., 2007). Gen Yers do not hesitate to jump into new opportunities for better appreciation when their expectations are not fulfilled (Felix 2007). The research by Lyons (2012) among Generation Y members concluded that the psychological sense of entitlement among Gen Y do not have an impact on their career expectations for their first position. Additionally, Gen Y employees expect their employers to appreciate them as key organizational components, and to consider their opinions and inputs in a full context (Blain, 2008).

3.3 Volunteerism

Generation Yers are willing to be engaged in public service. Reminding of the previous generation, this is a new stream of volunteerism (Erickson, 2008). A vast majority of Generation Y were found to be involved in volunteerism either by being engaged in charities or an active member of various organizations (Deloitte, 2014). Sengupte and Theodore (2015)

reported that the primary driver of the Generation Y members participated in their study to undertake volunteering activities is to gain individual satisfaction and peace. In a similar vein, the study by Cone Inc. (2006) indicates that the Gen Yers feel concern about the world and take individual responsibility to make a difference. They try to behave accordingly and volunteer, recycle, inform their close circle about social and environmental causes and make donations in this regard (Cone Millennial Cause Study, 2006).

3.4 Technology

As stated before, technology is one of the most important aspects of Generation Y. Gen Yers are the most technology-friendly and connected members of the workforce, and thus they are able to communicate and reach information immediately and easily (Erickson, 2008). However, such desire of technology is likely to shade the work and personal life of this generation. For instance, Gen Yers are likely to respond a call for business while they are having dinner at their home and to reply a personal text or email before a personal meeting at work (Cruz, 2007). According to Trunk (2007), there is not an actual line between personal and work domains due to the increased accessibility of mobile phones and emails; they believe that their time should be spent meaningfully and beneficially regardless of their location. Besides its effect on work, technology has also influence on the workplace attitudes of Gen Yers. Contrary to the former generations, this generation do not define themselves by their work, but by their identity outside of the career. In addition, the Generation Yers feel a lower sense of association with their organization and a greater sense with the type of the job. Lloyd (2007) suggests that the identifier is the job, not the organization. They also do not spend long hours for quality work or they do not feel devoted to the organization. Because they believe that job can be completed away from the workplace and they can provide quality outcomes.

3.5 Flexibility

Work and career need to be flexible for Generation Y. This generation, on one hand, believes that more can be done with less; as a result, they believe they should be granted freedom to work less but still get challenging tasks (Lloyd, 2007). On the other hand, the concept of more can be done with less does not represent income, but means their belief that they can complete the same assignment in less time than other generations do. In addition, Gen Yers have self-confidence in efficient working because of their technology knowledge. They can eliminate face-to-face interactions of a typical workplace, which they considered not necessary, and do not waste any time (Erickson, 2008). In terms of career, flexibility of Generation Y reflects frequent job changes. They can easily change their job when there is a new opportunity with more appreciation (Cruz, 2007). Brown et al.'s (2009) finding indicates that a great majority of Generation Y members believe that they will experience different fields of business, supporting the literature on the claim that fluidity in career is common among Generation Y members. Besides, Gen Y employees feel less engagement to a certain organization, but more to the type of their job (Lloyd, 2007).

3.6. Continual Learning

Supervisor feedback and advice are very important to Generation Y, which is likely a result of their powerful bonds with and continuous feedback from their parents (Cruz, 2007; BSG Concours 2007). Gen Yers want to receive frequent direction from their supervisors about how they perform. As they are aware that the positional information is important for career advancement, they try to learn from supervisors and older generations (BSG Concours, 2007). As well, failure is a motivator for the Gen Yers. They consider failures as opportunities for a better performance (Blain, 2008).

3.7. Team Orientation & Individualism

Generation Y desires to be flexible so that they can work outside the office; however, they feel no discomfort in groups. Although Generation Y is comfortable with working in groups and other colleagues, they have a slightly different mindset than other generations (Cole et al., 2002). For instance, scholars suggest that Baby Boomers possess a strong ethic of teamwork because they prefer teamwork to cooperate and succeed a single group task (Buahene & Kovary, 2003). On the contrary, Gen Yers prefer teamwork to succeed independent tasks because they benefit from the skills, information and resources of team members in order to meet their own needs (Karefalk et al., 2007). Nevertheless, Gen Yers feels more appreciation when their supervisor works with them individually (Spiro, 2006). Based on the literature, the team-oriented nature of Generation Y is about their desire to cooperate and exchange information with other members of the team, while their individualism is about their desire to be guided and coached as an individual (Spiro, 2006).

In conclusion, the work attitudes of Gen Y are different from other generations. They do not see work as their parents did. They want to have a meaningful life rather than working hard. In other words, they work to live, not the opposite. Their sense of work does not involve the conventional 9-to-5 schedule. They are not interested in the way or time of performing as long as the task is completed (Alch, 2000). Due to their different work attitudes and habits, human resources departments worldwide commonly use the three 'D' words as responding to these employees; difficult, demanding and direct. Therefore, organizations may experience actual difficulties in dealing with the members of Generation Y. Gen Yers do not prefer to do all the same throughout their life. They are likely to change jobs from time to time. They wish for everything and they want to have them immediately, leading to instant satisfaction. Because of such differences from the former generations, conflicts are likely to occur in workplace, especially troubles between the older generation and the Gen Yers. In this sense, Generation Y's most important challenge may be their desire for an effective communication with the members of Generation X and the Baby Boomers (Ballenstedt & Rosenberg, 2008). Generations have different values, perceptions and styles of communication, which can result in workplace conflicts (Bassett, 2008; Lloyd, 2007). Therefore, it is critical to establish a clear means of value expression for an effective and compatible workforce (Ballenstedt & Rosenberg, 2008). According to researchers, the work and career attitudes of Generation Y

include three basic themes: a flexibility desire, a continual learning desire, and a teamwork preference (Lloyd, 2007; Karefalk et al., 2007; Cruz 2007).

4. Conclusion

This theoretical paper aimed to offer a brief review on Generation Y as a workforce. Since this generational cohort is recognized as the largest part of the workforce, an understanding of their unique characteristics and expectations from their professional life is of critical importance.

Due to the obvious and important differences between Generation Y and the previous cohorts, organizations have to develop strategies specific to Gen Y in order to achieve an effective management of these employees. Based on the literature, it seems that the organizations that can offer a challenging, flexible, but also enjoyable work environment equipped with technology as well as a supportive and guiding leadership would drive the Generation Y employees to bring out their most beneficial talents, leading to a greater level of organizational performance.

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