

Want to recruit and retain Gen-Y? Help them change the world. | Tod Maffin

by Tod on August 24th, 2009



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The three most common myths:

- “Generation Y employees will quit their job just to go snowboarding.” (More likely, they were being ignored or treated like a cog at work.)
- “Generation Y workers are used to having everything handed to them on a silver platter.” (Quite to the contrary, this generation’s work ethic is very strong, provided there’s just a little bit of recognition for a job well done.)
- “Everyone in Gen-Y are experts in technology.” (Not true. Many more than you’d think don’t have Facebook accounts, only use email that much, and couldn’t care less about anything Steve Jobs talks about.)

But one thing the pundits mostly have right is this:

Generation Y employees want to change the world.

They want their time working for an employer to be much more than helping to pay “the man’s” mortgage, or that of some shareholders. And by “world,” it could be that they want to change their community, or they want to change how the office runs, or they want to volunteer for a company-supported charity. But they want to have some direct impact.

Employees today no longer are happy with just getting a paycheque in exchange for their time. They want something to contribute to something that aligns with their personal values. And those values have changed over the decades.

1970s: Stability

Back in the 1970s, office workerbeers focused their work ethic toward achieving simple stability. Who could blame them? Times were uncertain: It was the age of Kent State, Nixon’s resignation, the fall of Saigon, and uprest in Iran. Financially, things looked gloomy — interest rates were pushing past 18 per cent.

Back then, the average office worker was happy to have a job, stay there for their entire career, and take the gold watch as they entered retirement. What these people sought was predictability, stability, and “staying the course.” Survival and prosperity of the company was paramount and individual goals were put at rest.

1980s: Money

Perhaps as a response to the measured, conservative work ethic of the previous decade, the 1980s saw a radical reversal of this spirit. Suddenly, people put the focus on themselves and their *personal* prosperity, often at the expense of the collective.

The primary concern for workers in the 1980s was themselves — it sometimes was even referred to as “The Me Decade.” Stability be damned; this was the era of high risk and the promise of high profits. Books with titles like “Make millions without lifting a finger” came out of the woodwork (and still, sadly, do today).

The media were rife with stories about the personal entrepreneur striking gold. For the first time, quirky, egotistical business executives became celebrities in their own rights (DeLorean, Steve Jobs, etc.). Pop culture became fascinated with themes of personal wealth, gluttony, and prosperity (Dynasty, Trading Millions, Ferris Beuller’s Day Off). Think about The Cosby Show — arguably, the most popular show in the 1980s — which starred a character who had a beautiful home, a perfect family, *and never seemed to go to work!*

Mid-1990s: “Balance”

Then came the Gen-X decade (commonly called “slackers” by the media) who demanded balance. Workers, especially in startup companies and technology firms, began pushing back against the long hours they exchanged for the promise of future profits.

“Balance” was a moving target. Technology and video-game executives heard “recreation” and created on-campus volleyball courts. They heard “family” so they started in-building daycares. All of which, of course, sent the message that workers should stay at work, rather than go home and enjoy the fruits of their labour.¹

Today: The Search for Meaning

Generation Y workers, though, don’t feel the need to work mindless hours in the pursuit of personal fortune. They want to work long enough to enjoy life and use their time for something bigger.

- Today’s young realtors want to know how that young family that they sold a home to is doing.
- Today’s young financial planners may very well pick up the phone to see how their client is doing — just because they genuinely care.

In a recent study of 4,700 people, more people said “fulfilling work” was the most important factor to staying with an employer — well ahead of job security (70s) and personal advancement (80s).

So as a result, if you expect to recruit and retain these people, your organization must *articulate* meaning — the actual difference that their time will make in their community, in the world, in the country, within their family, on their block.