

Working with Generation Y

Understanding and supporting their workplace needs

by Alan Ekblad and Timothy Hathaway

The new groove is entering the workforce now! Generation Y's 32 million U.S. workers will increase to approximately 21% of the workforce in the next 3 years. In a child care and early education industry dominated by young workers, that means Generation Y-ers (16-30 year olds) are members of your staff.

- Are you working to move them professionally forward or does it feel like you are fighting with your teenager about cleaning his or her room?
- How can we engage young workers' interests, knowledge, and skills to greater effect?
- How can the early childhood community successfully support professional development in this dynamic workforce?

Dr. Ekblad has been involved in Early Childhood and Early Childhood Special Education for more than 20 years through supervision, consultation, and teaching. He currently serves as Associate Professor in Early Childhood Special Education at Minot State University.

Mr. Hathaway has worked in Early Childhood Services for 20 years with infants through school-agers as a teacher, manager, and program director. He currently works with Head Start programs in North Dakota supporting professional development efforts.

In a recent survey by Lee Hecht Harrison (2005), a leading workforce development firm, more than 60% of employers say they are experiencing tension between employees from different generations and more than 70% of older employees are dismissive of younger workers' abilities. Much of the tension occurs when Baby Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964) and Generation X-ers (born between 1967 and 1984) perceive Gen Y-ers' vibes as lack of commitment to the job, unreal expectations for advancement, or attitudes that reflect, "I'm not going to give this 100%." For us lifers in early education, that sounds a bit like blasphemy! All is not lost; there is hope for us, and yes this Gen Y group can be trusted to care for our youngest children.

Who is Generation Y?

Generation Y's view of their role in the work world reflects a change in what is considered important for the 21st century. Since the late 1980s our accelerated technological advancement has supported rapid social change in a world that has become increasingly unstable and insecure. Young workers find security in this 'high connectivity' environment that allows for any-

mous intimacy; filling a generational need for both secure association and safe emotional distance. For those comfortable with this fast paced technology, rapid change is not daunting, but commonplace. Technology has not only created new professions, but it has revolutionized the support structure of current professions. In a recent e-community meeting (an online blogging session), a 50-something colleague lamented, "Why can't we just call each other?" This example of fundamental change in how we build connection is fertile ground for opportunity and unfortunately misunderstanding. Technology has changed the learning curve experienced by young employees. To keep up with this fast pace, young workers move in and out of jobs faster and put more emphasis on individual satisfaction and development. Movement, change, and challenge become the motivating factors behind job selection and retention.

Strategies for employers

The challenge for established professions trying to entice and retain a younger employee base is to understand how central the above-mentioned motivating factors are to

the Generation Y identity. Employers wanting to meet this challenge and create an effective workforce will:

■ **Provide access to technology.**

Generation Y-ers know how to use technology and they are good at it. They can use this ability to improve their (and your) work environment. With fast-paced technology and sharing of information, they are accustomed to immediacy in information sharing, feedback, and turnaround for others. In addition, Generation Y-ers tend to be success-oriented and view their adeptness in multi-tasking as an intricate component of their success. Finally, Generation Y-ers have been found to be increasingly tolerant of differences. This may again be attributed to technology, as with it the world has become more accessible and therefore more understandable. The unknown, no matter from what perspective, is viewed as less of a threat and more of a challenge.

Example: Gina, the infant room teacher has expressed interest in creating a blog that parents could link into to receive information about the happenings in the infant room — lesson plans, interesting information, and also a way of broadening parent/staff communication.

■ **Establish mentoring as a means of providing supportive direct feedback.** Generation Y-ers have grown up with more parental involvement and structured time from adults (Wray, 2008). Therefore a 'community of learners approach,' where workers are supported through activities such as mentoring, job shadowing, and shared project assignments may be viewed by Generation Y-ers as less intimidating. They want to participate in

tasks and learning experiences that support their growth, are relevant, and can be applied immediately.

Example: Fiona began working with preschoolers five weeks ago. Although she has a great approach with children and is eager to learn, she is having difficulty connecting with parents effectively. Maria, a lead teacher from the toddler room whom Fiona seems to respect, is excellent in this area. Recognizing the need, the program director creates a six-week mentoring experience with specific outcomes in mind for Fiona. The planned experiences consist of Fiona observing Maria working with her children, Maria observing Fiona with her children and time together to debrief and to read and discuss an article on building links with parents.

■ **Support their values by inviting input in decision making.**

Generation Y-ers are used to being active participants in family and other decision-making matters from an early age. They bring a similar expectation of active participation and decision making into their work environment. They demonstrate little understanding or tolerance for work environments thought to be governed by top-down methods or driven by a seniority system.

Example: Andy, a part-time college student and after-school caregiver, really enjoys working with the school-age group, and his energy and enthusiasm is a bright spot for the program. He is working on his marketing degree and has expressed interest in contributing to the marketing plan of the center. The director invites him to come up with a few ideas for an upcoming newspaper advertisement.

■ **Individualize and customize career and growth opportunities.**

Generation Y-ers are innovative. They are used to change, personally and professionally, and have experienced change at home, school, in the community, and at work. This flexibility is needed to navigate change successfully and to help ascertain a sense of security. Motivation to remain in a situation is based on movement, however not just upward. In fact, some Generation Y-ers have no desire to 'climb the corporate ladder' but want to feel valued, appreciated, and challenged where they are.

Example: Schedules in the infant room will need to be revised again due to staff turnover. As a result, the lead teacher, Ramona, a young woman in her early twenties, has expressed frustration and a desire to try a new approach with the staff orientation plan to combat the staff turnover. Also, the director discusses a lateral move with Angie from the toddler room who has been looking for more challenge but not a supervisory position. This provides some stability for Ramona, a new challenge for Angie, and fresh perspectives on how new staff can be supported in the environment.

■ **Provide training and skills development that can be connected with broader work applications.**

Gen Y workers get the idea that they may be changing jobs more frequently throughout their lives. Despite perceptions by older generations, Generation Y-ers are goal oriented. They have high expectations for themselves and those around them: employers, family members, and peers. *Example:* Alyssa spends a lot of time talking to the other staff in her room and sometimes seems less interested in attending to children's activities. After discussion with the teacher it is decided that more training is a

potential solution. Alyssa is given an article on developing great customer service and another on the importance of adult-child interaction. The teacher follows up with a discussion a week later at nap time. Alyssa is asked if she will complete observations of children's interactions with adults and peers and report what she sees to the teacher, coordinator, and director in two weeks.

So great! We have a new set of workers with a new set of expectations. Most early childhood programs do not have unlimited flexibility and resources to cater to employees' wishes and desires, nor does any employer. However, programs can identify specific strategies to implement, prioritize those strategies for maximum impact and map out stages of implementation to create an environment that achieves the level of support desired by these staff.

Creating a supportive work environment

Above all else, involve your staff. They can be a great source of ideas. Inviting staff to brainstorm ideas by texting in suggestions or creating a Google® Group to post discussion ideas might get the ball rolling. Other examples of enhancements that result in a supportive environment for this new generation of workers include:

- Upgraded use of technology in the program. This may entail investment in new equipment such as palm pilots — perfect for data collection and brief observances noted throughout the day — and advanced cell phones to video children in action and capture visual artifacts.
- Rethinking use of current technology to facilitate conference calls among staff, parents, and professionals to save time and travel, and

technology-based games — to add new dimension to children's learning opportunities.

- Use of e-community meetings, via My Space,® Facebook,® blogging, or texting — to communicate with parents and expand parent communication. Many parents are also from the Y Generation and tech savvy. Use of such forms of communication extends and deepens relationships between them and the program.

- Involve Gen Y-ers in policy-making processes. Two examples of how that may be accomplished are: establish a non-voting staff representative position on the parent committee — perfect for staff and parent relations, sharing of information, and building a better understanding of program functioning — and choose promising young staff to lead mini development/self-improvement teams responsible for improved program functioning.

- Use 15 minutes of staff meetings for staff sharing of innovative ideas they would like to explore. This could be paired up with individualized career development activities and/or self development plans.

- Create a staff training plan that includes 'transferable' skills such as customer relations, team development, public speaking, and critical thinking. Each of these improves the general ability of your staff and provides you with better qualified workers.

In conclusion

Many other ideas may be available to your team; the key is selecting a few that fit your programmatic style and setting them in motion. Given the pressures facing early childhood programs, there is no alternative but to maximize

every staff person's ability and energy. Providing technology, supporting values, customizing growth opportunities, and creating an open work environment are all vital in providing this, as identified by Gen Y-ers themselves. Organizations engaging Generation Y-ers with growth opportunities that match well with their generational experience build leaders in quality care.

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