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Getting by with Generation Y

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They are choosy, want to make their own schedules and demand immediate respect.

By 2025 Generation Y members are projected to constitute 40 to 60 percent of the workforce.

Employers, however, shouldn't be scared.

"They are the most high-maintenance yet potentially most high-performing generation ever," Gina Whalen said quoting Dr. Carolyn Martin at a Northeast Pennsylvania Manufacturers and Employers Association roundtable on Generation Y on last week at the Pottsville Club.

Whalen, MAEA's director of education and member services, spoke to chief executive officers and human resource managers from 13 businesses and corporations about Generation Y — who they are, what they want, what their talents are and strategies companies can use to attract and keep them.

There is no consensus over the exact birth dates that define Generation Y, also known by some as echo boomers and millennials, but the broadest definition generally includes the 76 million Americans born 1978 to 2000.

Since today's workforce spans more age groups than ever before with four "generations" — Baby Boomers, Generation Jones, Generation X and Generation Y — clashes may arise from generational differences.

"We don't understand one another," Whalen said. "We all have our strengths and our weaknesses whatever generation you're from. A lot of it has to do with your values."

Technology and parental influence shaped Generation Y, Whalen said.

The tools Generation Y had at their disposal growing up — digital cameras, cell phones and the Internet — are different from previous generations.

"It's important that every young generation has a voice and they have more of a voice than ever," Whalen said. Generation Y is also known as the "coddled generation," which became evident as stories of parents calling in sick for their Generation Y children and parents listening to interviews via cell phones were shared.

"This generation is unique from any other generation in the past because of their close ties to their parents," Whalen said. "They don't feel the need to separate as much as past generations and a lot of people in this generation talk to their parents every day."

Generation Y's closeness with their parents is a drastic switch from Generation X — those roughly born between 1965 and 1976 — who had the least amount of parental involvement.

"There tends to be some clashing," Whalen said. "Generation X says 'we fought for everything we have, did it on our own' and there are conflicts between generations."

Generation X lacks the "pack mentality" that Generation Y possesses.

"Generation X is more individualistic and can get things done on their own," Whalen said. "Generation Y tends to need teams to be more productive. It's more difficult for them on their own."

Generation Y members also want feedback and flexibility.

"They want to be held accountable but also want to have flexibility in their lives, including work schedules, telecommuting, home-office arrangements and dress code," Whalen said.

Two members of Generation Y, Sara Hodon, 28, of Coaldale, and Courtney Whitecavage, 24, of Orwigsburg, are the directors of work force development, The Northeast Pennsylvania Manufacturers and Employers Council Inc., as well as for the Your Employability Skills Certificate Program, a work-force-readiness program targeted at high school seniors. The program teaches students basic workplace knowledge and is designed to bridge education and the world of work.

Although Hodon and Whitecavage say they don't fall under all of the descriptions of Generation Y, there are some

similarities.

"I feel that I work to live, not live to work," Hodon said.

Whitecavage enjoys the freedom to have a flexible schedule.

"I also like the challenge," she said. "We have high expectations for ourselves but we're also willing to work for what we are earning."

Being in Generation Y is beneficial when working with the YES program, the two said. "Since we're on the younger side we're a little more in tune with what the kids are into these days," Hodon said. "And we can relate to them a little more than someone say in their 40s or 50s."

After hiring Generation Y members, Whalen advises businesses to make sure there are programs that extend beyond orientation and include relevant training, consistent communication and the opportunity to offer opinions about what could be improved upon.

Hodon says she thinks employers need to be open-minded to what the younger generation can do and what they can bring to the company.

"A lot of us are there to learn and make our own mark at the company," she said. "I think that should be encouraged by the employer."

A clear indication of employer expectations is needed for Generation Y.

"With the YES program, Sara and I see a lot of people coming into the workforce that don't have a clear-cut idea of the expectations that they'll be facing," Whitecavage said.

Mentoring — pairing Generation Y employees with someone from a different generation or another segment of the business who cares about their success — is a great way to bridge gaps and build understanding throughout the workplace, Whalen said.

Hiring and retaining Generation Y are two different stories.

"Their loyalty is really based on the relationships they have with those directly above them," Whalen said. "Perception among management is that those relationships shouldn't be too personal, but that's how they know that you care."

The key to retaining the "coddled generation" is to use the same one their parents have used — loving, encouraging and rewarding them. Examples in the corporate world include a support network, work that challenged more than it bores and feedback. Whalen also suggests letting them shadow older employees, inviting them to a management meeting and that "no birthday should go uncelebrated."

Generation Y may want to be rich, successful and famous, but Whalen said there's more to that than meets the eye with 66 percent of college freshmen believing it's essential or very important to help others in difficulty.

"They have a strong desire to do something, to help," she said. "There's a lot of volunteering going on compared to past generations. They do want to make a change."

Tips

Suggestions for retaining Generation Y workers:

- Show them the value of their contribution
- Focus on what's useful
- Communicate outcomes
- Connect with your team
- Build their resume

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