



Bridging Generational Workplace Chasms: Setting the Stage for Gen Y Leaders

By Michelle Rodwell, Ambius

All baby boomers that grew up during the period between 1946 and 1964 are afraid of technology.” “Gen Y/Millennials (born between 1982 and 2001) don’t want to work hard.” Have you heard these stereotypes? As a boomer who oversees thousands of people in North America and Europe, I believe there are inherent challenges in managing divergent generations of colleagues, but the opportunities for growth and renewal are far greater.

Generation Y will account for the majority of the workforce by 2025, and with it they will bring to the marketplace a work style that’s different from any previous generation. “Managers currently struggle to understand, collaborate with, and integrate Gen Y employees into their teams,” says Gustavo R. Grodnitzky, Ph.D., who works with corporate leaders and organizational teams to create work environments where success and prosperity can flourish. What should managers be doing to attract, engage and retain this generation who will be our future leaders? We recently surveyed our colleagues across North America and found that the majority of people classified as boomers incorporated personal computers, laptops, and tablets into their daily life and were anything but “afraid” of technology. Alternately, while it is commonly accepted that virtually all Millennials embrace everything technological, some of our millennial population prefer face-to-face interaction versus the Internet. While it is an accepted practice to attribute stereotypes to broad demographic swatches of humanity, it is short-sighted and limits everyone’s opportunity for growth.

How can companies ensure that each generation works harmoniously together and respects each other’s strengths and differences? What is your organization doing to support younger managers’ interactions with older employees or contractors? What is your company doing to support older employees’ successful interactions with colleagues or contractors that are a generation or two younger? At Ambius, our Learning and Development team employs a variety of traditional classroom and workshop engagement sessions, in concert with a comprehensive learning management system online. While the median age of an Ambius colleague in North America is 46 years old, the average age

of the clients we service is a decade or more younger. For the first time in history, there are four generations of people working together in the workplace and Ambius is one of the companies experiencing this unique event. Our goal is to ease generational chasms and ensure that we are developing future leaders, while keeping current managers engaged and productive.

The U.S. Department of Labor projects that by age 32, today’s young adults will have had about eight jobs, an average of about one-and-a-half years at each company. What can a company do to keep these future leaders engaged to minimize their urge to jump ship? “Looking at the 2010 census data, there is no escaping the demographic reality that 84 million baby boomers will soon be retiring – with only 68 million up-and-coming Gen Y workers to replace them,” says Dr. Grodnitzky. “This will create an unprecedented employee ‘vacuum’ that increases the demand and competition for Gen Y employees. Where will we make up the difference? Every company in every industry will have to be looking at Gen Y to fill the gap. Gen Y has the demographic fortune of timing. They are in the right place at the right time as there is no escaping the demographics.”

The following are some best practices that my company employs to attract and retain Gen Y/Millennials workers to our company, which also honor and empower our Gen X (born 1965-1981) and boomer employees, which I hope may be of value to your organization:

Creating a Team Culture – “Decisions are made in a team environment for the Gen Y’s,” says Dr. Grodnitzky. “They crave communication. Online social networks allow them to reach beyond geography and establish relationships with others easily.” While the Gen Y population is heretofore more tech reliant than any other generation and reach out to friends and colleagues online, they also crave in-person, real-life (RL in Netspeak) connections. Our company’s cross generational workshops and overall company culture fosters a team dynamic that values the input of everyone. When a new colleague is hired, they are assigned a mentor with whom they can call on at any time to ask questions and get advice – without judgment. The new colleague can select her own mentor if they don’t jive with the selected one.

Encourage Commitment to Company-Wide Cause-Driven Dynamic – Just as boomers are attracted to social activism, Gen Ys find great meaning and purpose

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in being part of a cause and being central to the “big picture” of positive environmental and social changes. During 2009, we started on a journey to a more sustainable future. While we had long-recognized and promoted the environmental benefits of the services we offer, especially interior plants, we realized that, as a company, we needed to manage ourselves in a more sustainable fashion. That is why we measured our carbon footprint in North America, the British Isles, the Pacific region, Europe and South Africa, and implemented a comprehensive carbon action plan. As a team, we worked to reduce the volume of greenhouse gas emissions from our vehicle fleet and the energy used to heat, illuminate and cool our buildings.

Recognize that Life is a Game – In the game of life, our universal goal is to fulfill our calling and exit having achieved our life's purpose. Every person needs help, encouragement, and guidance in this “game of life,” and creating a work culture that is fun and engaging helps each person recognize his true potential. We are rolling out *Sales Advantage*, a new interactive e-learning technology in the form of an online game that walks a person through the entire sales cycle, including lead generation and how to effectively communicate with prospects in a way that empowers prospects to tell you what they want and how they want to be sold. “People are learning and having fun navigating this system,” says Shannon Tipton, director of Learning and Development for Ambius.

Embrace Non-Linear Learning – “I believe one of the ways we fail children and young adults today is that we continue to educate them in the same fashion that was devised during the Industrial Revolution,” says Tipton. “Everyone is seated in a row, facing forward with the wise leader pontificating about a subject from his perspective. Today's young generation in the workforce does not want to be mentored in this fashion. Many Millennials won't even interview at a company if they don't have access to their mobile devices, tablet and Internet. Restricting them from viewing social media applications such as YouTube, Facebook, or Twitter during company time alienates them since these tools are not simply for finding out what your best friend had for lunch, but are links to their professional networks.”

“I believe it is our obligation as learning and development professionals to break away from the shackles of this Industrial Revolution model of education and provide less linear learning paths,” Tipton added. “We offer a *Career Advantage* program, which provides a wide variety of professional and personal education classes, available online and in group settings, where colleagues can decide what they want to pursue, when they want to pursue it. It is entirely self-directed.”

According to Tipton, “The power in asynchronous learning is for the learner to have the learning they need exactly when they need it, giving them the tools to be successful, further aligning the learning needs with the business goals and strategy. It becomes a win-win when you have an empowered learner within your business as this is the type of learning that a Gen-Y (and other upcoming generations) requires.”

Honor Blended Life – “*All work and no play make Jack a dull boy* is a proverb recognized by the 76 million-strong Gen Y generation who demand balance. Work-life balance is a Gen X construct,” says Dr. Grodnitzky. “Gen Y thinks work-life balance is bunk because it requires them to separate their work life from their personal lives. Gen Y believes in living a ‘blended life,’ which means that everything they do has meaning and is important – hence, the importance of purpose and cause – and it doesn't matter where the work gets done but that it gets done. The desire to work from anywhere using technology fits the blended life paradigm of Gen Y.”

They are drawn to work environments where they can work with friends, not just associates. They don't live for work, but rather work to live and prioritize family and friends over their career. “Offering flexible scheduling improves morale and helps our colleagues achieve a more holistic work-life balance,” says Tipton. “Encouraging employees to work from home and leverage technology to work anytime, anywhere, clearly is important for helping colleagues honor a work-life balance.”

“Change is the fundamental constant in business – just as it is in life,” says Dr. Grodnitzky. “A leader's ability to effectively manage change ensures a competitive advantage in any dynamic business environment.” A successful organization is defined by what steps they are taking to nurture the leaders of tomorrow.

About the Author



Michelle Rodwell is vice president of Marketing for Ambius, responsible for leading the branding and marketing strategy for its European and North American businesses. She believes all five senses play a role in brand image and employee satisfaction. Ambius provides more than just products and services; it provides an experience. Rodwell was integral to the worldwide rebranding of Ambius, which won a “Best Rebranding” award from CorpComms in the United Kingdom. She is the co-founder of Ambius University, providing development programs and tools to Ambius colleagues all over the globe. She has more than 20 years of expertise including strategic brand building, direct marketing, Internet marketing, website development, market research and promotions, and has held a variety of leadership positions within several industries. She is currently a member of Vistage International and the Chicago chapters of the American Marketing Association and Business Marketing Association. She can be reached at michelle.rodwell@ambius.com.