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## Edge@Work **Generation Y Turns Tables on Employers**

*Companies learn different approach needed with younger workers*

By Ian Harvey - Business Edge  
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Your next young hire will probably make no secret of their plans to leave in a couple of years, will demand more money than you're budgeting and want the latest and coolest tech toys on the market. Guess what? You'll probably be happy to comply, because finding staff is only going to get tougher as the new cohort known as Generation Y becomes the only game in town when it comes to hiring.

The Boomers' offspring - Gen X - those born circa 1963 to 1980, are well along their career paths, leaving the entry-level jobs for their younger siblings Gen Y and to a lesser extent the Gen We babies coming behind them.

With between 55 and 57 per cent of Boomers themselves retiring over the next eight to 10 years, there's going to be a vacuum in the workforce that will pull Gen Xers up and create a fierce competition among companies for entry- and lower-level employees.

The effect is already being felt in the labour market, says the Conference Board of Canada in Industrial Relations Outlook 2007 report.

"By 2015, there will not be enough qualified people in Canada to fill the jobs available," the report's author Christopher Hallamore says.

"Employers will struggle to hire and retain qualified workers and unions will struggle to maintain their membership base. Employers will become locked in a war for employees as they struggle to hire and retain qualified workers.

"Unions will also be affected as older members get ready to leave the workforce and the labour movement struggles to encourage younger workers to join unions."



Eitan Sharir

Recruiting and retaining this group of workers is going to be a challenge, says Eitan Sharir, president of Dynamic Achievement Group Inc., a Vancouver consultancy, more so when the supply of workers can't keep up with the demand for employees.

"In heated job markets here in the West, a lot of them aren't qualified or trained for the positions or level of pay, but generally speaking it's a supply-and-demand issue," says Sharir, whose clients include Coca Cola, Telus and the London Drugs pharmacy chain.

The upshot is employers need to take a different approach with Gen Y than Gen X. "There's no sink or swim, you can't throw them in and see if it works after three or six months," he says. "You have to work with them."

That, says Sharir, means not just training programs attuned to their learning style, but creating a corporate culture that is stimulating and structured to allow them to grow and gather transportable skills.

Recruiting is just the start. Unlike past practice where companies simply posted jobs and waited for the resumé to roll in, employers need to get more proactive, like the Alberta operations of Canada Safeway Ltd., which has a paid recruiter at an immigration centre to refer potential workers to the grocery retailer and offers up to \$1,000 in finder's fees for referrals in hard-to-fill jobs such as meat cutting.

It also offers incentive programs like Air Miles reward miles and special ESL training for new immigrant employees. In fact, it's an environment that is diametrically opposed to that of post-war Boomers who worked in a top-down, ask-no-questions, do-as-you're-told-and-you'll-be-here-35-years-and-get-a-pension world.

Most expected their loyalty would be reciprocated by the corporation, but that vanished as mass layoffs became the norm while the economy contracted and expanded. "There is no loyalty anymore," says Sharir. "They plan on staying three to five years maybe and moving on. You have to understand that and sell them on the organization, that they can get the skills they need with you. Tell them this will be the springboard to their career."



Gerry Madigan

Instead of newspaper ads, post jobs online and internally with the latter being the best bet for suitable candidates.

"Your own people are your ambassadors, they'll tell their friends about jobs," says Gerry Madigan, president/CEO of MMI Training of Calgary, who has just published a book, *The TMI (Ten Minute Interview)* on the subject [www.thetmi.com](http://www.thetmi.com). "And you have to be prepared. You can interview 15 people and, by the time you're ready to make an offer, 14 of them will have already taken another job."

Being honest is also crucial, says Madigan, because Gen Y's social networking skills mean they will either know someone directly who works for you or can find someone on sites such as Facebook.

"They'll ask: 'What's it really like working there,' " says Madigan. "What they're looking for is a sense of belonging and a creative working environment. You have to touch them on an emotional level."

Once they're on the job, the key is training and mentoring, say both Madigan and Sharir. "You have to have face time, at least half an hour one on one, in which you are totally focused on them. What are you working on? What's important to you? How can I support you? What are the challenges you face and how are you going to overcome them?" says Sharir.

It's important, too, that managers shift away from the "control-and-command" style of interaction, adds Madigan.

A Gen Y'er is a much more collaborative and social employee who seeks an environment where co-workers are "friends" and willing to share their thoughts.

At the same time, they're goal-oriented, but not in the traditional 9-a.m-to-5-p.m. sense. They'll deliver if given parameters, but don't like managers hanging over their shoulders at every stage. In fact, empowering workers, especially Gen Y, often leads to some interesting results, as electronics retailer Best Buy found when it launched its results-oriented work environment (ROWE) five years ago at its Minnesota head office.

Just as it sounds, employees were given tasks, goals and deadlines, but were left with the responsibility for delivering. They could set their own hours, work from home and were told only the quality of their work and their ability to meet the deadlines would be the standards by which they were judged - and compensated - for at end-of-year reviews.

Despite some misgivings - and hostility - among senior managers who feared that if they couldn't "physically" see their employees, they couldn't manage them, says co-founder Cali Ressler, it was so successful that Best Buy spun it off into CultureRX, a separate HR consulting company and is testing it in its retail stores.

"Once you stop thinking of it as a risk and see it as an opportunity, everything changes," says Ressler. "It scares the hell out of people in the beginning, but companies know they have to change their HR policies to recruit and retain the best talent."

Generation Y is the most confused group in the workplace, says Jodi Thompson, the other co-founder of Best Buy, because they've come from a social, empowered, collaborative and technology-driven environment only to find themselves in a cube with a desktop.

ROWE's results are impressive: A 35-per-cent gain in productivity and happier workers who report getting more sleep, have less stress and say the program is key to their continued desire to stay at the company.

As both Thompson and Ressler admit, ROWE was an idea whose evolution was brought about by technology. Gen Y is also the first generation to grow up in a completely digital world and, as such, is more likely to adopt and use the benefits of technology such as unified communication, which melds together e-mail, desk phones and mobiles into cohesive packages.

Far from resenting the technology as an intrusion, Gen Y'ers embrace it and integrate it into their lifestyle, further blurring the lines between work and their personal life.

Best Buy workers e-mail from home, their cars, take conference calls while hiking or shopping and generally work on the principle that being chained to a desk doesn't make them any more productive.

The result is an engaged workforce. While most companies would still balk at such wholesale change, their evolution can be incremental, say Madigan and Sharir, starting with a rethink of their corporate culture.

Such workplace changes are inevitable and won't end with Gen Y, not with the younger sibling Gen We on its way through the public schools and ever more engaged in the social sharing of Web 2.0. Gen Y workers want to break down silos at work and share - everything from their life stories to their current projects.

"They really want to be heard," says Madigan. "They will listen, but they also want to have their voice heard and contribute. They may know only a little about a lot of things but they have an amazing capacity to learn. And they will do a deep dive on something when they have to learn it."

Even though they may not stay for a long time - some Gen Y'ers will likely have four or five "careers" - there's no reason they won't come back.

That's what financial services giant KPMG is betting on with its alumni program - a newsletter and annual networking party - which seeks to maintain ties with employees who have left with an eye to letting them know the door is always open.

The newsletter, for example, is peppered with testimonials about young accountants - KPMG's most prized employees - who left after their initial start and then returned when their new-found experience combined with opportunity.

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