

# A Critical Examination of Generations in your Workplace

## an issues paper for ALPMA ACT

The question ‘what is Generation Y and what do I do about it?’ has spawned a micro-industry of self-styled experts, each vying to offer the latest method of inter-generational insight and workplace harmony. You could be excused for thinking that the Generation *du jour* is going to single-handedly redefine what work means by challenging values and forcing organisations to redefine their structures, reward systems and corporate ethos.

How true is the hype? Should you change your workplace and management habits to accommodate Generations X, Y and Z (yes, there is a Generation Z...)? Are the newest members of our workforce as alien as some commentators would have you believe? This paper provides a brief and critical review of the current state of play where generations in the workplace are concerned, and hopefully, provides some food for thought.

### WHO

Before you ask what the characteristics of each generation are, you must first know that there is **no consensus**, scientific or otherwise, about what defines a generation – it’s been an issue for centuries, and it’s going to be an issue for centuries to come. So-called generation experts have no greater claim to defining a generation or its characteristics than you or I – **fact**. If you took a small sample of Generation Y articles, you would quickly find that the qualifying dates for membership of this group can vary by as much as 21 (yes, **21**) years! Hardly a science. To give you at least some idea of who sits within commonly reported generational groups, the chart below provides average birth-date ranges for the major groups in today’s workforce, taken from a sample of 20 articles:

GENERATION	ELIGIBLE BIRTH-DATE RANGE
Baby Boomers	1945 – 1962
Generation X	1963 – 1979
Generation Y	1980 – 1988

Factors used to define a generation range from shared experiences (e.g. major disasters, war), a spike in birth rates, to simple age definitions (i.e. phase of life). Each of these is problematic in its own way but each has an underlying similarity: convenience. Clustering people together by virtue of a shared characteristic allows us to make quick judgements (not necessarily accurate) about a person or their likely behaviour. Humans are good at it and it’s called **stereotyping**.

## WHY

Managers may reasonably ask ‘why should I care about Generation Y? The typical answer is usually linked to the concept that changed work values and expectations will mean that **managers will have to adapt to suit their employees** – a scary thought for those used to the shoe being on the other foot. Is this a reasonable expectation for managers, though? Should they initiate wholesale change based on the supposed needs of the ‘new workforce’?

## WHAT

To answer this question we need to establish what makes Generation Y unique in the workplace, if indeed they are unique at all. The adjacent box outlines a few characteristics which are often used to describe what motivates Generation Y. Have a close look and think honestly about whether these are really unique to Generation Y. Patently, **none** of these characteristics are unique to Generation Y, nor to any generational group for that matter. But surely young people are very different today than they were 20 or 30 years ago? Undoubtedly they are, but this does not automatically mean that these differences will translate to the workplace. Did growing up without *Nintendo* and *Playstation* make Baby Boomer managers any less able to adapt to new technology? The answer is plainly obvious when you look at which generation group introduced the Internet, and the Personal Computer, and the Compact Disc... No one generation has a monopoly on change or adapting to it; to claim otherwise is just plain wrong. Managers need to be careful that they are not simply responding to base stereotypes, after all, it has been human nature for (literally) centuries to blame the woes of the world on what is inevitably viewed as an insurmountable ‘generation gap’.

### Generation Y are motivated by:

- high salary
- work-life balance
- personal fulfilment
- variety in work
- personal recognition
- career opportunities
- personal development
- learning opportunities
- respect...

## WHERE & WHEN

Admittedly, there is a major agent for change in play in today’s workforce, but it is only partially related to generations, and it has nothing to do with unique characteristics: the time and place in which people seek employment dictate what they are prepared to ask for and what they are likely to get – simple demand and supply. It just happens that over recent years we have witnessed a worldwide economic boom that has seen the demand for skilled labour expand at a rapid rate. When combined with deregulated labour markets and easy transfer of labour, not only within but also between countries, it is not difficult to understand why people are being paid more, demanding more, and are more ready to leave their jobs if their expectations are not being met. Interestingly, Generation Y (under various guises) has been identified as an issue across each of the countries that have been most exposed to this economic boom, including the United States,

China, Canada, Germany, Australia and the United Kingdom. Perhaps it may be accurate to say that Generation Y are not behind the wheel, but merely along for the ride? Next time you read a bold claim touting the uniqueness of Generation Y, ask yourself are these characteristics the **cause** of workforce changes, **or merely the symptoms**? The possible answers to this question each hold vastly different management and cost implications for organisations.

## PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

In order for organisations to accurately respond to current employment conditions, it is first necessary to acknowledge some basic truths; it is currently a seller's market for labour and it is forecast that more workers will leave the workforce than join it... **this year**. Combined with the fact that there are skills shortages across many professions and in many countries, Australian organisations can no longer guarantee that there will be a list of people ready and willing to fill vacancies.

Remember, in times of high labour demand it costs employees far less to quit a job than it does for employers to replace them.

Irrespective of any supposed generational differences, there are two basic areas that organisations need to focus on in times of high labour demand: keeping staff and attracting staff – retention and recruitment. The key to increased retention is not difficult in theory, it simply implies knowing the needs of your staff and meeting them. Of course, there is often a great gulf between theory and practice, but it is surprising how many organisations lose key staff for the simple lack of finding out what they actually want, need or expect from their jobs.

Arguably, it is the recruitment of staff that represents the most significant challenge to many organisations, especially those historically used to their reputations or prestige guaranteeing ready access to the cream of the crop. If economic conditions continue to favour a less stable workforce, organisations must not only plan for this by decreasing what it costs to recruit staff, but they must pay equal attention to **reducing what it costs candidates** to apply for jobs – the days of 'we'll call you in a few weeks' are long gone, and rightly so.

Surprisingly, it is still common for organisations to show surprise when it is suggested that they may have to actively 'sell' their organisation as an attractive place to work. The economic facts simply dictate that this must change if you want to attract the best staff, and there are few exceptions to this. Although it is anathema to many professional managers, we must all be ready to provide an answer to the question 'why should I accept a job here?' – do you have an answer?