

Getting the Best Out of Generation Y

BY F. MARK GUMZ AND CARYN DASHUKEWICH

The tales of Baby Boomers and Generation Yers battling it out in the workplace are legendary, and gallons of ink have been spilled detailing their differences and the divergent expectations of younger workers.

Some have positioned their challenges in getting along as insurmountable.

However, at Olympus Corporation of the Americas, we couldn't disagree more.

The character traits we seek when acquiring talent—a can-do attitude and a desire to learn—are the same for good workers of any generation, and those qualities are more important than any stereotypical generational divide or specific skill sets. We've also found that the areas in which the generations seem to have the biggest differences are actually the areas in which they have the most to offer each other.

WHAT CAN THEY OFFER

We've found that Gen Yers are willing to look to Boomers for mentorship and advice, because they were raised in a family environment where their opinions were listened to and valued. Whether you have a formal training program or not, you need to enable Gen Yers to be successful by providing them with mentors. The institutional and tacit knowledge Boomers have to share will be incredibly valuable as long as Gen Yers can demonstrate appropriate humility and realize that there are many opportunities to learn.

Having lived their entire lives with access to computers and the Internet, Gen Yers are technologically savvy; in return, they can learn ways to present the latest corporate technology tool set solutions in a respectful way. They were raised to be team players, so they excel in a collaborative workplace and can show more seasoned colleagues how to work efficiently and happily in virtual teams.

WHAT COMES NEXT

In order to get the best results for their teams, all leaders and managers must consider how different generations can best work with and learn from each other, with a special focus on Generation Y as its members enter the workplace and start training to assume leadership roles.

Throughout the next 20 years, employers will have to replace millions of retiring Baby Boomers—often with Gen Yers. Skillful junior employees, raised to excel in today's collaborative environments, will have their pick of employers, so planning now is crucial for your organization to be well positioned to compete.

At for-profit companies, shareholders are interested not only in your succession plan, but also in the programs you have that will develop a broader leadership and future management base over the next two decades. Gen Y hires who develop deep relationships with a company and feel a sense of investment tend to repay that by creating long-term careers with the company, staying with you through both extremes of the economy.

WHO IS GENERATION Y...?

Born between 1983 and 1997, these people have a healthy sense of entitlement, but previous generations may view their confidence and outspokenness about their wants as arrogance. Gen Yers may seem high-maintenance, but also place high demands on themselves and are typically high-performing. They need to feel that all aspects of their jobs have meaning and purpose. They are comfortable with rapid change and often expect fast-track career positioning and lots of positive feedback and on-the-job training. Though they want greater flexibility and work-life balance, they're used to having 24-hour access to people and resources. They have a strong sense of social responsibility and expect the same of their employers.

...AND HOW ARE THEY DIFFERENT?

Some Boomers and members of Generation X feel that younger generations don't have as strong a work ethic as they do. Gen Yers, however, will tell you that their work ethic is just as strong, it's just different—they work better on a more flexible schedule. More seasoned workers may prefer to have face-to-face or phone meetings. Gen Yers may be more comfortable using e-mail and even text messages to communicate, which serve them well in a virtual team environment, but can feel impersonal to their Boomer colleagues.

Much has been written about Gen Yers' demand for immediate gratification and responsibility, but we haven't seen any of them come in and ask to run the company tomorrow. They do come in with a lot of good ideas and ask provocative questions, but they need to learn how to navigate the corporate work environment and take advantage of their high levels of confidence

to present their ideas. They also may need to learn the best ways to influence more senior staffers in order to get things done. They work well in teams, so with the understanding that there are people in an organization who know more than they do, they can approach them with respect and work together to find solutions.

AN ANSWER

We've found it productive to help Gen Yers understand the most productive ways to “manage upwards” in order to get more senior workers to listen to and implement their ideas. The following examples from the Olympus Fellows Program, a two-year rotational leadership development program for recent college graduates, reflect our experience with a key educational initiative we've invested in greatly throughout the last several years.

- ▶ One Fellow identified a business need and solution for streamlining an entire customer service process in the life science area and presented it to senior executives who saw the potential efficiency, savings, and improved service. The new process is currently being implemented, and its name is expected to be trademarked later this year.
- ▶ Another Fellow within the credit and collections department drove the implementation and deployment of a new software program. The successful implementation of this program significantly improved the collections process with a 37% more effective deduction resolution.

THE OLYMPUS FELLOWS PROGRAM



Programs that train graduates how to create a future and build a career with the company, including some outside of typical urban locations, are becoming more and more desirable. Instead of applying for jobs only in New York, Chicago, or Los Angeles, top talent may decide to apply to best-in-class companies outside of urban areas yet still have high-level opportunities for career growth.

Olympus Corporation of the Americas offers the Olympus Fellows Program, a full-time, benefits-eligible, two-year rotational profes-

sional development program launched in 2004. The program is intended to encourage recent graduates from prestigious colleges and universities to pursue careers with Olympus. Mark Gumz and other senior managers founded the program and are personally involved both at the recruitment stage and throughout the program, including active participation in management presentations delivered by Olympus Fellows at six-month intervals.

Olympus Fellows rotate through multiple business areas (marketing, sales, product management, human resources, and corporate planning, to name only some) and are involved in a variety of hands-on projects that support the company's strategic objectives and provide career development and high visibility with senior management. Their experiences help them identify their strengths and areas where they can best contribute to the company. When the two-year period concludes, many Fellows in good standing are offered a regular, full-time position with the company.

The program is designed to provide practical, hands-on, skills-based training that new college graduates most need to succeed and grow. Last year, Olympus initiated a significant upfront investment in training for these Fellows, an intensive, week-long “Boot Camp” program. It proved so popular—and so valuable—that the company is planning on using it as a model for on-boarding all new employees.

“Bridging generation gaps and decreasing intergenerational tensions raise morale and lowers turnover, since everyone has to respect each other and learn from each other.”

Here are some other answers:

- ▶ Help Boomers and Gen Xers understand that members of Gen Y may require more hands-on management, but it is typically worth the effort.
- ▶ Help Gen Yers understand praise won't be forthcoming if their work doesn't merit it, but that processing constructive feedback is a valuable skill.
- ▶ Help Gen Yers understand that even in a world where access to information is immediate, access to key relationships and corporate responsibility needs to be built over time.
- ▶ Encourage Gen Yers to share their technological expertise to drive results in ways that more seasoned employees can understand and appreciate.
- ▶ Remain committed to socially responsible causes and allow Gen Yers on-the-job time to volunteer.
- ▶ Pay attention not only to generational categories but to each employee's unique work and life experiences—the person is more important than their generational stereotype.
- ▶ Provide mentors to help members of Generation Y to learn what's expected of them in the workplace, how to thrive in a corporate culture, and how their work supports the organization's big-picture goals.

BRIDGING THE GENERATIONAL DIVIDE

Good employee development programs are key to keeping staff happy and motivated. Olympus is committed to ensuring that employees are successful in their work and have opportunities to build careers. Bridging generation gaps and decreasing intergenerational tensions raise morale and lowers turnover, since everyone has to respect each other and learn from each other. [MW](#)

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