

News Watch

Generation Y?

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By Mary M. Byrne

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ATLANTA -- Mary Crane leads workshops on business etiquette for major law firms and Fortune 200 companies, so she's answered her share of thorny workplace-life questions. But two years ago, she heard a problem that boggled her mind. She had just finished telling a group of law students that sending handwritten thank-you notes to their interviewers will help them stand out from the pack, when one said, "But I've never written in the cursive style."

Welcome to Generation Y, the newest crop of lawyers-in-training.

Most were born between 1980 and 1984; at the age when earlier generations learned cursive, these tykes tossed out pencil and paper and learned to type. They've grown up wired to laptops, plugged in to iPods and seamlessly connected to the global info-matrix.

Industry analysts say this generation—which often self-refers as “millennials” rather than “Gen Y”—heralds a paradigm shift in the culture and business model of today's law firms. And as this year's class of tattooed summer associates lands at Atlanta law firms, expect some intergenerational hilarity to ensue. But firms had better adapt quickly, says one analyst, because demographics are squarely on the side of young lawyers.

“Associates are in a seller's market, with them being the sellers,” says Larry Richard, a consultant on leadership and organization development for Hildebrandt International. “They're able to call the shots.”

Richard says that in the U.S. workforce, 80 million baby boomers are on the cusp of retiring, with only 40 million members of the Generation X following behind them.

“When you replace a cohort of 80 million with 40 million, you have a serious problem,” he says.

In the legal profession, he says, the shortage is exacerbated because 70 percent of law-firm partners are baby boomers. “Law firms are going to lose almost three-quarters of their partnership. That is a wake-up call,” he says.

The precise demographic boundary between Gen Y and Gen X isn't fixed, but the latter often refers to those born between the mid 1960s and 1980.

Richard says that right about the time the legal industry may have adjusted to Gen X's dramatic shortfall, it will face a bottleneck with Gen Y, which number around 80 million.

“When you have a shift, and change your entire structure to accommodate a demographic shift, those structural changes don't undo themselves automatically,” says Richard. “When a new generation comes in [to an industry] structured for a much tighter talent market, we are likely to have not a restoration of life as we know it, but more contortions, more fallout.”

Add in what some have observed as Gen Y's tendency toward a more fluid career model—where the “up or out” partnership track has lost its luster—and the splendid array of non-law job possibilities available to top law graduates. The resulting situation, says Richard, is “head-spinning.”

The question of undergarments

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Crane's company, Denver, Colo.-based Mary Crane & Associates, has been coaching firms on business ethics, diversity and etiquette since 1999. But in the past few years, says Crane, she's been fascinated to see the emergence of a new kind of young professional in her seminars.

"The nature of the questions I started to receive was a real indication to me that something was different about this particular generation," she says. The kicker was a question from a young woman in a seminar last year, who asked, "Do I really have to wear a bra to work every day?"

Crane was taken aback. Even throughout the social and political changes of the 1960s and '70s, she says, "You still knew that if you were going into an office setting, there was still a certain attire you were expected to wear. That's disappeared for this generation."

But if one visits the campuses from which this woman and her peers have come, the bra question doesn't seem so strange, says Crane.

"Students are permitted to wear flannel pajamas into class," she says. "When you realize it's OK to wear flannel pajamas into class — well, the next question is, 'Do I really have to wear undergarments when I go into an office?'"

For the Gen Y, using technology is as effortless as breathing, but the culture of handheld devices may jostle old-school office manners. The cell phone is just one breeding ground for comic cross-generational exchanges. Many young lawyers are "absolutely surprised" to learn they must provide their cell numbers to more senior lawyers, says Crane, and some do not know how to answer the phone in a businesslike way.

And "millennials" comfort with iPods as an extension of their very anatomy has caught some of their elders off guard. A recruiter recently told Crane that a summer associate who never took off her iPod in the library raised the hackles of partners, who wondered whether the associate was doing any research at all.

"The reality for that generation is that they are wired to the max, and most have grown up listening to iPods and grown up multitasking," says Crane.

It's a historic moment: Senior partners who remember the arrival of the first refrigerator-sized IBM computers — and labored to transition from yellow legal pads to keyboards — will be working for a few short years alongside 20-somethings for whom technology is a natural language.

"It will be a huge change from those days when you have senior partners who don't get the technology, to the point where we see a generation of technology-savvy partners coming into that position," says Richard. He predicts Gen Y will bring a dramatic increase in the use of technology in business development, targeting small slivers of the legal market, as well as more sophisticated uses of online systems for hiring and screening new talent.

But their savvy has come at the price of some interpersonal skills, says Crane. She has begun to warn firms that some in the new generation, while competent and eager to learn, may be more at ease with online chat rooms and cell phone text messages than in-person interactions.

"We're finding the folks coming out of school are not as comfortable with face-to-face conversations as previous years," says Crane. "In the interview setting, we are finding that some of the young folks are not thinking and speaking on their feet as well as prior generations have.

"Folks in the younger generation are failing to recognize the importance of face-to-face contact," she adds. "[They need to see] how critically important it is to build these relationships."

While a technology-driven Gen Y culture will bring profound changes—not just in law firms but also in the industries that comprise law's clients — Crane believes a meeting of the minds between old and new will take place.

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“Eventually we will all become more and more reliant on technology, but I don’t think people will ever completely lose the importance of face-to-face contact. In fact, I think face-to-face contact will become more critical,” she says.

Coaching and mentoring

The way through this new landscape, says Crane, starts with a core understanding: “This generation really responds to coaching.”

Crane calls them the “T-ball generation” — kids whose parents steered them away from baseball (“too difficult on their self-esteem”) and toward a sport where, she says, “they can swing as many times as they want or need until they hit this ball on a stationary stick.” At the end of the season, every player received a trophy. Reproaches were rare, and support was the norm.

“‘Let me help you succeed’ — those are the messages they received at the critical phase of their lives,” says Crane. “People who will sit down and really spend time coaching these folks — I think they will get tremendous rewards out of them.”

She advises lawyers to be careful about how they approach the mentoring process. A good start might go like this, she says: “‘Here, I want to coach you and help ensure that you’re going to be very, very successful.’ Rather than saying, ‘Don’t wear your iPod into the office.’”

Theresa Kimble, Atlanta recruiting administrator for Hunton & Williams, says the firm has revamped its summer program with an eye toward greater feedback and closer mentoring.

“Our goal is, not only are the attorneys filling out written evaluations, but they also are sitting down with them face to face, and making sure the summers are given the opportunity to ask questions and hear, ‘How am I doing?’

“We normally would just have a midterm evaluation and the exit interview, but we’ve ramped that up quite a bit. The goal after each assignment is completed is to have a face-to-face discussion with the assigning attorney.”

Hunton’s program now includes a four-person mentoring model, with each summer associate receiving mentoring from a senior associate, a junior associate and a partner.

“We’ve asked the partners to keep in touch on a daily basis with them, let them know you’re there and you’re available,” says Kimble.

Working to unlock Gen Y’s potential is a good thing, says Crane, because they bring a key advantage to the workplace. “This is the most culturally diverse generation we have ever seen in this country, and they are very, very accepting of other people,” she says. “What your color is, what your gender is, what your sexual preference is, whether you have pink hair or black hair — it just doesn’t matter to them.”

Hildebrandt’s Richard cautions that there is a lot of talk and little hard data about the supposed “shift in values” in Gen Y. However, he says, it seems apparent that today’s students “have been steeped in community. And they grow up with the assumption that we all work together and we try to erase our prejudices about our differences.

“They come to a law firm not just wanting an interesting job with interesting, challenging cases, but when they look around the room, they want to see people they like,” he says. “Law firms are paying much more attention to a collegial climate, to building the culture, and getting rid of jerks.”

In satisfaction surveys, he says, young associates consistently bring up three requests: more training, more mentoring, more feedback.

“Firms that get that right are going to do much better at attracting and retaining the best people,” says Richard.

Meanwhile, the phenomenon of “helicopter parents” — so-called because they hover in their children’s lives long into adulthood — has burst forth as well, says Crane. Recruiters tell

Crane that parents are accompanying their law-student kids to interviews; some are calling the firm to complain if their children don't get hired or receive a less-than-stellar evaluation.

"I will say that is something the firms are struggling with to some extent," she says. "The interesting thing is whether they will figure out how to turn this to their advantage." Rather than fight this trend, she says, smarter companies are learning how to court students and their parents as well.

A new culture

Jonathan W. Lowe, hiring partner for Alston & Bird, says that while the firm hasn't reworked its summer program in response to Gen Y, it has made significant changes to Alston's working environment in response to younger lawyers' concerns.

Thirty years ago, he says, new lawyers generally were prepared to do whatever it took to make partner at their first law firm, and to stay there for the rest of their working lives.

"Today, while young people are willing to work hard, want to work hard, want to be successful — are used to being successful — they also want to have a life," he says. "That is what in fact presents a conflict with the typical business model in a big law firm.

"The smart big law firm doesn't try to remake the young people to fit an old mold; it needs to do something," he says. "And what we have done is try to understand the differences ... and make it possible for people to have a life and still be successful at Alston & Bird."

Alston's changes include a new bonus policy that recognizes achievement at three different levels of billable hours — 1,900, 2,000 and 2,100 — whereas the old policy rewarded lawyers only at the 2,100 level. The firm recently revamped its alternative career-track policy, which now allows lawyers to remain on a partnership track but work on a reduced billable-hour and compensation schedule for a period of time.

Other changes include a more generous parental leave policy, concierge services, expanded options for telecommuting, on-site child care, in-home elder care and counseling services. There's even on-site massage therapy and a newly designated room for nursing mothers.

Hildebrandt's Richard agrees that firms must adapt to the demographic changes.

"This is forcing law firms to think about an entirely new business model," he says. "The number of associates has to grow geometrically to support the number of partners. Well, that doesn't work when the pool of talent from which associates are drawn is shrinking."

He calls law firms' quandary a "perfect storm": At the same time the firms' baby-boomer leadership is retiring, firms are growing dramatically, expanding the need for leaders within smaller business units and practice groups.

"The irony is, we are at a time in the legal profession when we have a need for more leaders in a quantitative sense than ever before, at a time when the pool from which those leaders will be drawn is about to become the smallest," he says.

And because the best and the brightest Gen X and Gen Y law students enjoy a dizzying range of options—including abandoning law entirely— many law firms are watching helplessly as other industries, such as consulting firms, investment banks and insurance companies, cherry-pick law's top candidates.

"Everyone's told them [students] there's so much you can do with a law degree," says Richard.

Firms may fill the gap with increasing numbers of contract attorneys, and some firms are exploring the possibility of hiring lawyers from other English-speaking countries, such as the United Kingdom, South Africa, Philippines and India, to train for practice in the U.S.

Larger firms must step up their leadership training to compete, says Richard— and train not just senior partners but all partners in leadership skills. "The skills that make a good leader are the same skills that make them good at acquiring and retaining talent," he says.

Douglas Ashworth is director of the State Bar of Georgia's Transition Into Law Practice program, a mandatory one-year mentorship and education program for newly admitted members of the bar. He says he's been surprised to see many new lawyers changing jobs repeatedly during their first year — sometimes switching firms after just three or four months on the job.

“Not to get real old-fashioned, but my father told me if you take a job, you take it for at least one year,” says Ashworth. “We very quickly had to come up with an administrative form to help us track folks who changed jobs within one year.”

To maximize chances of retaining the best people, a firm's process of identifying talent must become more precise and professional, says Richard. Firms must hone in on their hiring criteria far in advance of selecting candidates, compiling a list of skills that goes beyond mere mastery of legal issues to include business development, rainmaking and leadership and interpersonal skills.

“When a law firm identifies this, and when it gets somebody that fits, they're more likely to stay,” he says.

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