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LIFE'S WORK

## When Whippersnappers and Geezers Collide

By [LISA BELKIN](#)

SHORTLY after they reported for work this summer, groups of interns at Ernst & Young were invited to an orientation program that included a PowerPoint presentation titled "Hello. W U?!"

For those out there who need translation, that's how Generation Y, to which these 20-somethings all belong, might ask "What's up?" in a text message.

And this meeting was all about translation. "Strategies to Connect With Baby Boomers" was the title of one of the slides. Its advice? When the boss comes in to complain that the young team is "spending too much time text-messaging each other and listening to iPods," it is just not the best time to explain that you have to "leave early to meet your volunteer commitments."

Summer is the season of culture shock in the working world, when the old guard comes face to face with a next wave of newcomers, and the result is something like lost tribes encountering explorers for the first time.

Add to this the favorite fact of human resource managers everywhere: this is the first time in history that four generations — those who lived through World War II, Baby Boomers, Generation X and Generation Y — are together in the workplace.

Managers tell stories of summer associates who come to meetings with midriffs exposed, baring a belly ring; of interns who walk through the halls engaged with iPods; of new hires who explain they need Fridays off because their boyfriends get Fridays off and they have a share in a beach house. Then there is the tale of the summer hire who sent a text message to a senior partner asking "Are bras required as part of the dress code?"

"They have an attitude toward work that looks like laziness and looks like impatience," said Janice Smith, who leads the Ernst & Young seminar, carefully putting the best light on Gen Y qualities that are flummoxing managers, "but they don't understand that's how it looks."

There have always been overconfident 20-year-olds, just as there have always been elders to say, "When I was your age. ..." Perhaps poetically, the last group to upend the working world with its ambition and drive are now looking down from the C-suites at their children, Gen Y, who are as single-minded in their search for balance as their parents were in their quest for success.

Surveys over the last few years have found that this group is looking for work that includes a "flexible work schedule" (92 percent, according to a Harris Interactive poll), "requires creativity" (96 percent) and "allows me to have an impact on the world" (97 percent). And when the polling firm Roper Starch Worldwide did a

survey comparing workplace attitudes among generations, 90 percent of Gen Yers said they wanted co-workers “who make work fun.” No other generation polled put that requirement in their top five.

So the de rigueur summer event at many companies now, as much a part of signing on as the human resources forms and the ID card, is a seminar designed to close this generation gap. At Arrow Electronics it is “Generations in the Workplace,” while Michelle Marks, an expert on organizational behavior at George Mason University, calls hers “Managing the Challenges of the Gen X and Gen Y Work Force.” Aflac has “Generational Differences.” All are less than two years old.

Much of the purpose is to teach Gen Y the basics, which have often been neglected along the way. “They all have amazing résumés,” said Mary Crane, the founder of a Denver-based consulting firm and part of a new crop of experts teaching companies to navigate generational conflicts. She has been traveling the country “taming” Gen Y at workplaces from the law firms of Dewey Ballantine and Simpson Thacher, to the Orange County Employee Benefit Council.

These young employees, she said, had to overachieve to get through the most competitive college admissions process in history, so they don’t feel particularly inclined to pay their dues. “They have climbed Everest and excavated Machu Picchu,” she said, “but they have never had the experience of showing up for work at 9 a.m.”

When speaking to this group, Ms. Crane lays out scenarios. When you e-mail a client, do you use his or her first name in the salutation? Only if he or she has indicated that would be all right. At a business lunch, who sits in the chair pulled out by the waiter? “The client always goes first,” she said, “unless that seems to make the client uncomfortable, in which case, just sit down.”

Some of the blame for this knowledge gap lies with the very elders who are scratching their heads.

“This is the largest, healthiest, most pampered generation in history,” she said. “They were expected to spend their spare time making the varsity team,” not working part-time, Ms. Crane said. Their parents, she said, showed their love by staying late at the office to bring home more money. The children expect to be home for dinner. Career dominance, their thinking goes, can be achieved by 5 p.m., can’t it?

Billy Warden, an account director at the marketing company Capstrat in North Carolina, learned all this anew recently when he was being interviewed by an intern who was working on a booklet about Gen Y and work. The topic was job interviews, and, as Mr. Warden remembers it, the 20-year-old was explaining “that job interviews are a two-way conversation, where the company puts out what they want and expect from me, and I put out there what I want and expect from the company.”

Mr. Warden didn’t think that’s what interviews were. “Maybe in 10 years you’ll get to state your expectations,” he said he told the intern. “Right now, you’re a box of cereal and you’re going to have to sell yourself and hope that someone decides to put you in their grocery cart and give you a try.”

It is a concept that has all but disappeared from internship programs, where employees make it clear they have no patience for busywork.

“I walked away from one internship because it was a waste of my time,” says Ryan Healy, who last spring founded Employee Evolution, a Web site that gives advice to Gen Yers entering the work force. “We have limits.” He is 23.

For all the talk of teaching Generation Y, with a worker shortage looming, workplaces everywhere are bending to their needs.

So while Ernst & Young is teaching its Gen Y employees how to talk politely to partners, it has also started teaching those partners how to send text messages. Similarly, Liggett Stashower, an advertising and public relations firm in Cleveland, encourages summer interns to blog about their experiences. Deloitte & Touche runs a summer film competition (the winner will be posted on YouTube), on the theory that this is an area where interns in particular can show off. And the technology company Avnet changed its internship program so that interns spend the entire summer in one department, a response to suggestions from previous groups who felt they weren't doing enough substantive work.

Which leads to the question — who exactly is grooming whom?

A quick tally would seem to show Gen Y in the lead, setting the life-work agenda. But it would be rash to underestimate the Me Generation. As boomers learn to text more quickly and interns learn to wear suits, the only sure bet is that the tug of war between these generations will shape the workplace for decades to come.

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