

Generation

Challenge or Opportunity?

Members of the London HR Connection meet monthly to lunch, network with their peers and hear from leading figures in the industry. Over lunch at November's event more than 50 members heard from Sally Bibb, a co-founder and director of leadership and talent consultancy, talentsmoothie, who argued that understanding how to attract, engage and manage Generation Y will be an important competitive differentiator for organisations.

Most managers these days are aware of the term 'Generation Y' (those born since 1980) who have been entering the workforce in the last few years. The common stereotypes bandied around are that they are demanding, over-confident, self-centred and spoilt. On the positive side – they are talented, go-getting, energetic and ambitious. Whichever view you subscribe to, you will probably agree that this generation is making waves and providing a certain amount of challenge for managers and HR professionals.

In talentsmoothie's recent survey of HR professionals a slight majority (52%) saw Gen Y as a problem and the rest viewed them as an opportunity. However, demographic change means that in the next three to 10 years, Gen Y will make up the largest proportion of the workforce so, whether you believe that Gen Y is a problem to be solved or an opportunity to grasp, they are here to stay and cannot be ignored.

Generational theory says that our age, experience and the conditions that we grew up under all shape us and our values and behaviour. Gen Y has grown up with the internet which has brought them the ability to connect and collaborate with people all over the world. They have experienced 'helicopter parenting' with parents who are very involved in all aspects of their life and decision making and they have the confidence to believe that they have any number of possibilities

open to them. The result of all this for employers is a group of people that is not too concerned about respecting the hierarchy (they talk to who they feel they need to regardless of their position or status), who challenge assumptions and who want constant attention and feedback. This is causing a certain amount of conflict in the workplace.

Sally related the story of a young Gen Y in a big company who emailed the CEO to tell him that he disagreed with a decision that he had taken. The CEO, although he had always said he welcomed feedback, had an 'open-door' policy etc was indignant at this email from some young junior person but the graduate had sent the email because he thought the company was great, cared about it and didn't want to stay silent when he thought a mistake was being made. It did not occur to him that he may annoy his boss and their bosses by going over their heads and emailing the CEO direct. He did not know that the hierarchy and your status in it was such a big deal. In stark contrast an insurance company who embraced the talent and enthusiasm of their Gen Ys was rewarded with transformational improvements to their business when one of them devised a wiki to capture and share solutions to customer problems.

Many organisations are keen not to repeat the mistake made during the last recession where cutbacks were made on graduate recruitment and development with some companies still suffering from the resultant skills gap. The global talent pool is shrinking due to demographic changes so they are even keener to keep investing in skills and to be seen to be doing so. Will tough economic times change Gen Y behaviour? Research suggests that Gen Y believes that the talented will always find jobs and their only change will be to not leave a job without having another lined up.

The key is to create a workplace where all generations can thrive and do the best work possible. According to



talentsmoothie's research, most of what Gen Y wants from work is the same that Gen X and Boomers would like - but have been conditioned not to expect, so change should be beneficial to the whole workforce.

Member Feedback:

Sarah Bissell from The Hyde Group said: *"An excellent presentation which was thought provoking and provided interesting insights into attitudes that we need to consider for our own reward, recognition, recruitment and retention."* *"Sally was a most inspiring speaker and gave me plenty of food for thought,"* said Ruth Parmenter from the City of London Corporation.

"It really highlighted the need to educate senior management (Xs and Boomers) so that they understand how Gen Y think, communicate, work and play! Only then can they hope to recruit, train and retain the best people in the market," said Allesley Management Services' Michael Jones.

The London HR Connection is a professional network providing regular informal lunches – away from the daily grind – for anyone with a vested interest in HR, to network with their peers and hear from experts on challenging and stimulating topics. For membership information and details on our forthcoming events, please visit us at www.londonhr.org