

feature story

Curb your enthusiasm

Gen Ys should learn the language of older generations, writes **Anne Fawcett**.

If you were born between 1980 and the mid-1990s, you're a card-carrying member of generation Y, one of the most heavily researched generations in history.

"This age group has seen what work has done to their parents and grandparents and has grown up with an attitude that 'it won't happen to me,'" says Melinda Muth, senior consultant for business growth strategist Streamwise. "They view work as only one portion of their life and want immediate gratification."

In the workplace, gen Ys have a reputation for being tech-savvy, high-maintenance, over-confident and easily bored. They expect success early in their career and a high salary to boot.

In contrast, generation X-ers (born between 1961 and 1979) tend to be sceptical, highly individual workers who value job security. Their predecessors, baby boomers (born 1945 to 1960), are known for conservative values and are considered technophobic. Unlike gen Y, boomers value loyalty to employers.

"Many gen Ys see the Xs as whingers and don't understand why they continue in a particular job if they hate it," Muth says. "Gen Ys believe there are so many opportunities in the workforce to experience different jobs. Gen Xs see gen Ys as lacking a work ethic."

Gen Xs and boomers frequently comment that gen Ys have never experienced true economic hardship. Little wonder that gen Ys' confidence can rub them the wrong way. "Gen Ys come with a lot of attitude," says KPMG

demographer Bernard Salt. "This has been reinforced by their parents, who indulge them and tell them how special they are, and schoolteachers who never fail them. No wonder gen X are bitter. They've been biding their time waiting for the top job but management seem to focus on gen Y: 'Are we paying you enough, gen Y? Are people being mean to you, gen Y? Can we get you a pillow, gen Y?'"

But life for gen Y isn't as peachy as gen Xs seem to believe.

Elise Whitelaw, 22, account manager for Polkadot PR, found it frustrating when previous employers bought into the stereotype that gen Ys are serial job-hoppers. "When long-term projects were discussed I wasn't really involved," she says. "I think there was an assumption that I was going to jump ship just for the sake of jumping ship. I felt a lot of my creative input wasn't taken seriously."

So how do you get by if you're a gen Y in a gen X workplace?

Organisational psychologist Christopher Shen says that regardless of generation, it is always helpful for employees to keep in mind the motivations and values of those around them, particularly clients and superiors.

Shen is regularly asked to advise organisations experiencing intergenerational conflict.

"I recently worked with an AFL team where almost every person in a position of responsibility was a baby boomer or a gen Xer, whereas the gun players were gen Ys," he says. "There were quite a few misunderstandings and the



We're not all the same . . . Elise Whitelaw from Polkadot PR. Photo: Marco Del Grande

'I felt like a lot of my creative input wasn't taken seriously.'
Elise Whitelaw

gen Ys were frequently surprised and bemused by the behaviours and reactions of their superiors.

"When communicating with gen Xs and baby boomers, gen Ys should check their natural assuredness and exuberance, and demonstrate recognition of their senior colleagues' achievements and tenure.

"It's not about stopping your normal behaviour but being a bit pragmatic and prudent until you get a chance to critically analyse the working environment."

In other words, don't invite your new colleagues to become your Facebook friends until you get to know them.

It can help to understand that many gen Xs feel threatened by gen Ys. "As recently as five to seven years ago, gen Xs were the up-and-coming generation," Shen says. "They were the ones who were perceived to be go-getters. Now they've been overtaken by a new generation with a flair for creativity and innovation."

Monique Harrisberg, chief executive of the Voice Clinic, recommends gen Ys adopt the communication style of their workplace. For example, if a colleague sends a formal request for them to join them in a meeting, they should reply in a similar style.

If they are going to negotiate a pay rise, they should frame their case in terms of what they can contribute to the company, rather than what they think they deserve.

Julanne Martin, director of recruiter Odin Consulting, says it helps to demonstrate your willingness to bridge the communication gap. Even if you think two years in a job is an eternity, reassure the boss that you'll put in the hard yards.

"Communicate your commitment to the job at hand," she says. "Even though you may not stay in the role as long as gen X would perceive reasonable, you will do a very good job in the time you are there."

first gig



Taryn Fiebig, soprano

"I started my first job when I was 17. It was at a trendy place called the Oriol Cafe in Perth.

I was called the 'busboy'. I was responsible for most of the menial tasks, such as putting bread on the tables, taking out the garbage as well as rolling knives and forks into their napkins.

I remember one night there was a table of people who ordered some drinks. I brought them over on a huge tray and on the way one of the customers asked where the bathroom was. As I pointed with one hand, my other hand relaxed and I dropped the tray of drinks on the table and soaked the patrons in their coffees and shots of Sambuca.

The people I worked with were fantastic and as most of my shifts started after university I'd bring my cello with me. When service was over and the cafe had cleared out, the guys I worked with bleached the floors. Meanwhile they would ask me to play whatever I was working on, so they'd be cleaning in their boxers with my tunes in the background.

As a performer, work is about pleasing an audience and there is definitely a parallel to be drawn with my first job. Customer service and keeping people happy were two elements that I learnt there that certainly continued into my later life."

Samantha Day

Taryn Fiebig plays Eliza Doolittle in My Fair Lady, which opens at the Theatre Royal on October 9.

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