Generation X, Y and MySpace? An Introduction to How to Manage Different Generations

By Lynne Eisaguirre

Generation X is the generation that followed the Baby Boomers. The Xers were born between 1965 and 1976, or so, depending on whose research you follow. They have been defined by the media as a group vastly different from the intense, hardworking Boomers. Rightly or wrongly, the Xers have acquired the labels of slackers, more interested in having personal time than in going the extra mile to win a promotion. They value independence, technology, informality. They were the original latchkey kids and the first group to experience MTV.

Any generation is more than a demographic chart, and the Xers are no exception. They are the most diverse generation in history. According to the U.S. Census, about a third of them are nonwhite or Hispanic. Most of them grew up after the Civil Rights movement and are tolerant of all kinds of differences among people.

The generation that is following the Xers is young, brash, and just hitting the work force. You can catch them wearing flip flops to work. Anyone born in 1977 or after is considered part of the Y Generation, but some demographers consider the back end to be 1989 while others say it's as late as 2002.

Following closely on the heels of the Y Generation is the cohort recently dubbed by Newsweek as the "MySpace" generation—based on the popular online social networking site. Like their older Generation Y and X siblings, they are great multitaskers—adept at moving from phone to video to computer games to instant messaging, sometimes all at once. These generational groups are also willing and wanting to question the status quo. They push back against parents, and they do the same with employers. They've grown up with constant consultations about what they think and feel, in the classroom and at home. Employers, who don't readily embrace that practice, find themselves on the receiving end of blank stares at best, and at worst, outright or passive/aggressive rebellion.

How should you deal with these iPod-toting technical wizards (especially when you want to strangle them with their headphone cords)? Communication is key—but recognize that generations communicate differently. As a colleague or manager, you need to understand and work within that framework if you want results.

Talking with the Enemy

Experts report that there is more information in the daily New York Times than someone born in the 1700s knew in an entire lifetime. Instead of pouring through library stacks, students can Google what they need in an instant. They

may have access to more information than ever before but, they often don't have the time or the wisdom to make sense of the data deluge.

Also, consider the kind of information that the younger generation uses for references. The Beloit College Mindset List, released by humanities professor Tom McBride and public-affairs director Ron Nief, is an annual catalog of 75 cultural landmarks that give us some perspective on how the 2006 freshman class views the world. Check out these examples from the list:

- "They have known only two presidents."
- "The Soviet Union has never existed and therefore is about as scary as the student union."
- "Carbon copies are oddities found in their grandparents' attics."
- "Reality shows have always been on television.
- "Madden has always been a game, not a Super Bowl winning coach."

And of course, they're the instant and text messaging champs. The key question among responsible colleagues is when not to use these methods of communication. Ask people from different generations and you're likely to get different answers.

The recent crop of college grads, those born in the early 1980s, have brought with them a set of technological tools that make fax machines, voice mail and spreadsheet software look positively quaint. They've grown up with scanning, text

messaging and Googling, and they're not about to stop once they've hit the working world.

Nor should they. Those skills are big assets when it comes to multi-tasking and productivity. But they're also a nightmare for many of their over age 35 bosses, who understand that while technology is a useful tool, it doesn't replace in-person interaction as a primary means of doing business. Today's bosses, can't understand why their young employees, for all their brains and technical acumen, hardly ever walk in the door, sit down and actually talk to them. The Generation Y employees often use test messages, rather than walk over and talk to someone – frequently sending them messages without thinking. What some Gen Y'ers don't see is that the meaning and value of gestures and other nonverbal skills don't come through in a text.

Many organizations are finding that they need to emphasize face-to-face and telephone skills, which they see as lacking in IM-happy college grads. The good news is that most new hires are smart, talented and open to learning. Where they differ from their predecessors, is in their requests for more hands-on, interactive training. However, you may find that some do not have the patience to sit through and eight-hour class. You have to talk fast to keep their attention.

Is it possible that it's the older workers who will ultimately have to adjust, forced to do away with the personal touch in favor of pure speed and efficiency?

After all, the young tech-savvy employees of today are tomorrow's company bosses. The answer is yes—and no. While increasingly faster communications are here to stay, face-to-face skills have been a staple for getting business done for too long to think they will ever go out of style altogether. There will likely be a happy medium, if you can't build relationships with people, you can't do business.

Working out the Gen Gap

With all these differences, is it any wonder that the generations can piss each other off?

What is the solution? Ideally, the generations would try to learn from each other. Try to pair young with older workers. The young may be able to help the older with technology: the older with social and business etiquette skills. One of my clients, a pharmaceutical company did just that. Getting ready for a merger, they found the younger research and development scientists in a tizzy because they had never worked for anything other than a start-up organization. They were being acquired by large pharmaceutical giant. The solution: pair them with old hands who had been through more mergers and spin offs than could be counted. The surprising perk was that the older workers became more technologically savvy and learned some new research techniques-- not to mention picking up some tips on downloading oldies to their iPods!