

Gen Y

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The Melbourne Age of Monday 24 July carried an article by Christopher Scanlon entitled "Gen X, Gen Y – it's generation con, actually". This seemed like an omen – Peter Sheahan, Gen Y guru, was conducting an interactive lecture and workshop at the State Library of Victoria on 26 July on the topic "Understanding the mindset of Gen Y". I must admit to being somewhat sceptical already and the item in *The Age* only reinforced my prejudices.

I am not Gen Y or Gen X or even a 'baby boomer': I am a GOFER (Genial Old Fogey Enjoying Retirement) and the only other label I will admit to is NIPPLE (Northern Irish Professional Permanently Located Elsewhere). On the whole I dislike the idea of grouping people and expecting them all to behave in the same way.

However, within 5 minutes I was hooked. Peter is not a stuffy Business School graduate spouting management jargon – he is himself a member of Gen Y (defined as those born between 1978 and 1994) and he exhibits the characteristics of the group. He's fast (talking and thinking), technologically savvy and he's had a number of jobs, but he confided that he needs encouragement.

He began by convincing us that, for a number of reasons we need to understand and attract Gen Y.

- As managers, we need to attract Gen Y because of the shrinking available pool of workers and the ageing population.
- As employers we are looking for a more complex skill set – because of their varied experience, Gen Y often has this skill set.
- As service providers, we need to appeal to Gen Y because what is attractive to Gen Y today is attractive to everyone tomorrow – for example, iPods.

Attracting Gen Y

What would it take to make libraries attractive to Gen Y as a career? The first thing to realise is that we have to approach Gen Y through others. The biggest influences on their choice of careers are first, their parents and second, their school career advisers. These are the people we should be trying to reach. Alas, perception is everything and that old image of buns and pearls continues to haunt us.

Because of competition for scarce employees we must position ourselves as the 'profession of choice' in schools and the media.

Keeping Gen Y

Once we have attracted them, how can we keep them? Most

members of this generation will have an average of 25 jobs in their lifetime. The old social contract of a 'job for life in return for loyalty' has been replaced by 'I'll stay with you as long as you help me develop my cv'. This means providing good professional development activities and varied

work opportunities both inside and outside the organisation (but within the profession).

Because Ys have been brought up in a collegiate and co-operative atmosphere at home, school and university, they look for the same experiences at work. Don't control them. Spend time with them and listen to their ideas.

Of course, this kind of workplace is not only attractive to Gen Y, but is the sort of place that we would all aspire to work in or manage!

The other thing that members of Gen Y demand of their employer is flexible employment and this is where libraries have an advantage. Possibly because of our predominantly female workforce, we've always had a mixture of part-time, full-time, casual and contract positions and the ability to move between them.

Warning! Gen Y are high maintenance, but (probably) worth it.

The Gen Y mindset and metaphors

Peter used these words to describe the Gen Y mindset.

- Fast
- Stimulation
- Relevant
- Connection
- Control
- Respect – reward, encouragement, recognition
- Latest – model, version

He used metaphors to assist in understanding the values of this mindset. For 'Fast', he suggested 'McDonalds' v 'Home-cooked meals'.

Gen Y – McDonalds	Traditional – Home Cooked Meals
Fast	Nutritious
Consistent	Requires Planning
24/7 (almost)	Creates Mess
Freebies	Slow
EASY	HARD WORK

Most of you will be shuddering at this, but Peter warned us not to make value judgments using only our values. Another metaphor for this mindset could be 'Google, not libraries' – Peter admitted that for his own research he uses Elance.com, an online consulting website, not libraries. For the mindset 'Stimulation', think MTV not ABC. Unfortunately we ran out of time before the other mindsets could be explored in the same way.

So, am I a convert? I certainly enjoyed the session and am sorry that I could not stay for the workshop, which promised to explore more of the mindset examples and strategies. However, I'm not convinced that this generation can be pigeonholed so easily or indeed that earlier generations don't exhibit some of the characteristics of Gen Y.

They say that if you learn one new thing then your time hasn't been wasted. I learned that 'Norrath' – an imaginary country in the online role-playing game Everquest – has the 70th largest economy in the world in real terms!

Seriously though, the session was a worthwhile and enjoyable exploration of a topic that has serious implications for the future of our profession. *

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