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The Private Sector: Challenges of engaging Gen Y workers reap rewards

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Retiring baby boomers are leaving gaps in our work force that can be filled by only young people born between 1978 and 1990. But the transition comes with challenges and clashes. Never before has a generation been more enigmatic to Pittsburgh companies and more at odds with traditional work styles than Generation Y. This may not apply to all Gen Y's, but our experience tells us that it is, indeed, true of a great many.

College grads in particular come to the workplace bursting with leadership potential. Helicopter parents -- so called because they've hovered over these young people from birth -- have raised them to believe they can achieve anything they want.

They've groomed Gen Y's with a sense of leadership entitlement.

Understandably, Gen Y's get along well in companies that help them develop their leadership potential. Gen Y's want to participate in decision making, yet want independence in putting their ideas to work.

Even though they like autonomy in their work, they value feedback, especially when it acknowledges their skills and talents.

Gen Y's can lock horns with companies employing more traditional employees. Gen Y's can seem cocky, brimming as they are with urgency and impatience. But what they lack in patience and experience, they often make up for with technical savvy, multitasking ability and determination.

Gen Y's need to become more sensitive to the impact their behavior can have on others.

Their impatience can come across as arrogant and annoy others who may then be less inclined to cooperate with them. Managers can coach Gen Y's to improve their behavior, and elicit ideas from them about how to do things differently or better.

Luckily for Gen Y's, they are fast studies.

Their reach may initially exceed their grasp, but they measure up quickly and thrive on responsibility.

The more challenge the better. They're not slackers. If there's work to be done, Gen Y's will be ready, but they need to see value in the time they spend at work.

Playing purely functionary roles douses their motivation like water on glowing embers.

The Gen Y approach to work time also can create misunderstandings. For them, the work day need not equate with working 9 to 5.

They value the flexibility to set nontraditional work schedules for themselves. If they complete work by 3:30 p.m., they'll likely find it irritating to hang around until 5 busying themselves with contrived work.

Many Gen Y's would rather work four days a week, 10 hours a day, so they can enjoy three-day weekends.

In our high-tech world, employees can more easily work flexible hours, job-share or telecommute.

Gen Y's do not equate the workplace with a specific place to work. Their workplace is wherever they happen to be with their laptops, remote access and BlackBerrys.

Making allowances like these shows them that a company values the lives they have outside the office.

There's no question that Gen Y's have reacted against the way many of their baby boomer parents devoted their lives to companies while missing soccer games, recitals and family dinners only to be laid off at age 55 without much hope for finding other employment.

Hence, their sentiment is, "We're not going to let that happen to us." That's why they seek companies that make work-life balance a priority.

Gen Y's live in the present and expect personal fulfillment and professional advancement to happen now, if not sooner. Biding time for personal and professional fulfillment is not in their playbook.

In fact, some have been known to change jobs two or three times in as many years. But they're not job hopping just to change jobs.

They may be looking for more responsibility, less structure and increased pay or flexible benefits.

In many ways, Gen Y's are mature beyond their years. They may look young, but if you engage them, you'll find many have matured in the harshness of the 21st century.

They've grown up in a world charged with violence and terrorism.

And most have excelled in high school and college while standing strong against the pressures to use drugs and to deal with a hypersexual culture fraught with sexually transmitted diseases.

They've earned their maturity by making tough decisions -- a talent that can overlap into the work environment.

The reality is that Gen Y's are out to make their mark in our society and will make their presence, personalities and contributions felt largely within the corporate sphere.

Let's not get so caught up in their seeming bravado that we lose sight of the gifts they bring to the workplace.

More than anything, they want to be our valued and valuable colleagues.

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