

The Youth of Today...

Complaints and frustrations about “the youth of today” have been around since long before 1964 when Charles Hamblett and Jane Deverson wrote their book “Generation X” about interviews with British youth who told them that they took drugs, hate the Queen, don’t believe in God and slept with each other before they got married.

Today, in our law firms and the world at large, the debate rages on. The subject has been hyped up to such a point that some suggest that what we are experiencing is nothing short of a fundamental shift in the way young adults think (their “cognitive style”) as opposed to just an attitudinal or behavioral shift.

Hamblett and Deverson’s research subjects are now in their sixties. Smoking pot at rock concerts is a distant memory (for those that did) as they now contemplate retirement.



by Karen MacKay, MBA, CHRP
President

and Robert Millard

The youngsters that are entering practice today, though, seem in many ways to be a completely new species. They lack the youthful rebelliousness that characterized the late teens and twenty-somethings of the sixties, seventies and even eighties. They are more socially and environmentally aware. Lifestyle and work/life balance is very important. They are completely at home with technology. Unlike us “old people” who had to learn to use technologies like internet, email, blogs, instant messaging and wikis as adults, these kids never knew a world without them.

There is no compelling evidence to support the theory that what we are witnessing is a fundamental shift in cognitive style. The change is indeed attitudinal and behavioural. Psychologists specializing in how cognition develops through adulthood point out that young adults emerge from adolescence with their critical thinking and abstraction abilities fully formed. What happens during early adulthood and onwards through life is that an individual’s style of thinking is molded by experience. Views of life-work balance should therefore change at least somewhat as realities of mortgages and school fees take hold, and most leave their adolescent idealism behind.

Will this happen with the current generation of young adults beginning to practice in law firms around the world? The answer, without doubt, is “yes.” Today’s twenty-something associate will likely think differently with the maturity, wisdom and obligations of their thirties, forties and beyond. That does nothing to change the fact that today’s young adults do have significantly different attitudes to what those in positions of leadership in firms had at the same age, though. There is also no doubt that today’s young professionals have significantly more advanced technological skill sets than their seniors. They get very frustrated when their seniors don’t “get” what is obvious to them. These differences are causing issues that firms need to address.

Why is that? Members of the newest generation of your professionals were born since 1980. Like every generation they have been influenced by economic, political and personal events that influenced them during their formative years, mostly ages 10 through 15. These include:

- If they grew up in Europe or North America, they grew up in a time of economic growth with parents who wanted to give them everything. They are not familiar with going without or waiting for what they want.. On the other hand, they have also witnessed the dotcom crash and other economic crises, 9/11 and similar events in Europe, the threat of terrorism as a global phenomenon and a war in Afghanistan and Iraq that has involved many countries and has now lasted longer than WWII.
- They grew up with a far wider selection of communication technologies than even their Generation X colleagues (born between 1966 and 1979). They are therefore fully aware of the flexibility and efficiency that these tools allow, at a time when older adults are still struggling to get to grips with them. For Generation Y the cell phone and the PDA are a lifeline giving them freedom and flexibility; for their Generation X colleagues – just five or ten years older these same tools are a tether that ties them to the office and erodes their quest for a balanced life.
- Adult child relationships have evolved considerably in western society over the past few decades, which means that these young adults grew up with far more freedom of expression and disagreement as children than even the generation before them.

The effects are showing up in many ways.

- Career Development Officers at law schools get calls from parents, if not the students themselves, to question their son or daughter's marks.
- First year lawyers, while pleased with their job offer, question everything and attempted to negotiate the terms of their very first job.
- Rather than straighten up and tuck in their shirt when the senior partner goes by, they youngest lawyers are likely to call "him" over to discuss something about the firm.
- Where are they on Saturday morning? Out for a run, at yoga class or enjoying their lifestyle. If they are working, it is on a laptop at home. Who needs an office, especially if it is an hour or more commute away?
- A cell phone, a laptop computer and no watch? Sure. 'No watch' may seem an interesting contradiction in a business driven by the billable hour, but one can tell the time as easily with a cell phone as with an instrument strapped to the wrist!

As with many things, it is one thing to identify and describe an issue. It is another to solve it. How does one address the current generation of young professionals in such a way as to attract and retain the best talent and also to extract the maximum value out of them for the firm? There are many firms that are successfully meeting this challenge. What they say works includes:

- Accept that firms are not likely to retain most of them so make every effort to accelerate their development and make them profitable as quickly as possible.
- Clarify work expectations explicitly, involve them in discussions about the firm's future, acknowledge their contribution and support their development.

- Seduce promising youngsters with challenging work and performance targets BUT give them the tools to help them work their way, not yours.
- Don't only look not at law school and academic marks when choosing talent. Test for entrepreneurialism, drive and other characteristics too.
- Pay more but with performance-linked targets / deferred payouts etc to ensure that the higher compensation is balanced with improved productivity.
- Educate young associates in realities of law firm economics and share as much Page 3 of 3 financial data with them as possible, so that they can clearly understand the context both of their compensation and their performance requirements.
- Foster social networks within the firm and focus on developing a sense of community through use of Enterprise 2.0 tools. They might not be loyal to your firm but they typically are very loyal (even intensely loyal) to their friends.
- Invest proactively in professional development: teach your partners the critical skills of delegation, feedback, coaching and mentoring.
- Provide resources for self-development. These young lawyers are resourceful and dynamic so don't hold them back.

Most partners in law firms today remember being told: "if you stay with us you'll figure this stuff out". Our youngest lawyers have grown up with a different pace. They have never waited and are not going to tolerate being asked to start now. They are not interested in "paying their dues." They are not interested in the partners' stories about walking three miles to school everyday (up hill both ways). They do, however, need clarity in terms of expectations. Be very clear about your expectations in terms of timing and work product – worry more about results than about where and how they get the work done.

The good news, for those to whom the whole phenomenon of Generation Y is strange and frustrating, is that the challenge exists equally for all firms. Those firms that are coming to terms with it best are finding opportunities as well as challenges. Especially in terms of improving firm-wide efficiencies through deploying Enterprise 2.0 technologies and flexible work practices that, ironically, are greatly to the benefit of baby boomers wanting to retire gradually, too.

These youngsters are also far more adept at dealing with change. Strategically, they are a rich resource of ideas about how best to drive the firm forward in today's rapidly changing, unpredictable marketplace. They see change as a challenge to be conquered, not something undesirable to be feared. They don't yet have the depth of wisdom that comes only from experience, so their ideas often need to be tempered, but the sense of innovation, creativity and optimistic enthusiasm that many of today's middle aged professionals had driven out of them in university seems to have survived better in these youngsters.

The potential that this holds for firms in today's market, with the challenges that we face in this turbulent 21st Century, is enormous!



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