

SDR

Selecting and Developing Generation Y

MANY ORGANISATIONS are becoming concerned about their ability to attract and retain Generation Y. Currently 20 per cent of the UK workforce is Generation Y, i.e. under age 30. The workforce is getting younger and, because of demographic changes, young talent is going to get scarcer and scarcer. Already, some of our clients in the professional services sectors are experiencing problems finding and keeping enough good people to be able to deliver their business. It is not uncommon for 40 to 50 per cent of the workforce in professional services to be under age 30.

Demographic changes mean that competition for good people is going to increase. Finding and keeping the right people has never been more important. The question I will address in this article is whether current selection and development methods are right for the new context that we are now working in. The context is one of a changing workforce. The workforce is Generation Y and they are proving to be a catalyst for change. They are challenging prevailing organisational cultures, ways of managing and people practices.

Some would say that the changes they are demanding are long overdue. I would certainly argue that much of what Generation Y wants from work we (the Boomers and Xers*) would have quite liked too, but we were conditioned not to expect. Some see Generation Y as a problem, or at least a challenge. Others see them as an opportunity. Whatever your viewpoint, ignore their changing needs at your peril.

Current methods of selection and development can inadvertently be biased towards the older generations. That's not surprising because they were devised with those people in mind. It was not a bad thing. However, the values, attitudes, approaches and skills-sets of the younger generation differ markedly from those of Boomers and Generation X.

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Our research

We began a longitudinal research project in 2007. To date, it has more than 3800 survey respondents from around the world. The research shows some specific ways in which Generation Y differ from the other generations. One of the notable differences is their tendency towards, and preference for, collaborative working. This is in large part due to their use of technology. The implications of this are changes in the way they work, the way they communicate and the way they learn. These changes may not be reflected in current competency frameworks and other assessment criteria. In addition, many organisations are grappling with how to adapt their development approaches and methods to reflect the ways Generation Y learn and communicate.

The majority of competency frameworks were devised by Boomers and Xers as were psychometric and other tests. Existing norm groups are of course made up of Boomers and Xers. For many companies competency frameworks and psychological tests play a crucial part in a number of HR processes: recruitment and assessment, talent management, succession, leadership development and performance management. However, the competency benchmarks that companies are judging their people against could be out of date or at least in need of examination in today's context and in relation to the contemporary workforce. For example, norm groups of senior managers in large corporations are commonly used. The assumption is that these are good, or at least useful, comparators and that the up and coming talent inside a company should aspire to be like those who are running companies today. Generation Y or no Generation Y – I would want to re-evaluate what

we want from our future leaders and whether what we want is the same as what we have now. That aside, current leadership styles are arguably still predominantly command and control based. That is not to say that these styles are ineffective in some contexts. However, Generation Y is inherently more collaborative in their working style. My hypothesis is that when they are in charge of companies (and they are of the age where they are getting into junior and middle management positions already), the prevailing leadership style will be collaborative and enabling not controlling and commanding. But many organisations are, perhaps unintentionally, judging a future generation of leaders against an outdated model and thus perhaps mistakenly excluding good future leaders from their talent pool or high-flyer development programmes.

Inevitably we look at the world through our own filters and from a standpoint of the prevailing paradigm. The dominant organisational/leadership paradigm for many years has been one that is located in hierarchical organisation structures and is based on the assumption that people need to be controlled and monitored. Evidence of this is the 9-to-5 working hours culture (flexible working is still not the norm – many companies struggle to trust their employees enough to manage outcomes rather than the process) and power-based organisational cultures. The problem is that the paradigm is shifting radically. The reason for the shift is the entry of Generation Y into the workforce. Here is a generation who has grown up with the internet and technology. They are used to having access to information and people via the internet and social networking sites. The world has become more democratic and transparent because of that, this includes the world of work. They are less concerned about the hierarchy and more concerned about getting to the right person, whoever that person may be. They often know more than their manager about the content of their job and there is a blurring of their work and life. Why would they want to work 9-to-5? Surely the most important thing is that they deliver the goods?

The world of work is more complex. One size does not fit all (I actually believe that it never did, but we acted as if it did because it made life easier). Boomers and Generation X put up with this standardised approach to employment and people policies. Generation Y is less willing to do so. They are not used to standardisation – they

can customise their mobile phones, their Nike trainers and their clothing, why would they want to accept standardisation in the workplace?

I digress, but this is all relevant. The point is that the younger workforce is a catalyst that is starting to create change. I would argue that it means that it is time to review the very assumptions and foundations upon which some existing selection and development approaches are based.

Aside from examining the competencies that are important to us in the workplace of the future, I also suggest that it is necessary to look at how we make selection decisions – whether we are judging people solely on their ability to do the job or whether we find out whether they actually want to do. Ideally we want to know if they would love to do it. The relatively new positive psychology movement has made a great contribution to the field of selection and development. It advocates knowing and working with people's strengths. Doing a job that plays to your strengths leads to better performance as well as more satisfaction.

This makes perfect sense, yet deficit-thinking is still so central to many HR and development practices. Even though we know that helping someone to recognise and use their strengths is productive and effective, we still spend lots of time and effort figuring out people's 'gaps' and trying to get them to an acceptable level of performance by providing training, coaching or whatever, to get them to improve. Small improvements are usually possible, of course, even big improvements can be achieved, but fantastic performance comes not from people making improvements to their weaknesses but from them understanding and maximising their strengths. Despite the growing body of evidence linking strengths-based approaches to selection and development, relatively few organisations are going that route.

Summary

Our research shows that doing work that they love and playing to their strengths were the number one factor in why a graduate chose an employer and in their motivation when they started work.

It is nothing new that the best performers are those who have both the capability to do the job as well as loving to the job. All of us would prefer to have a job that we love to do, but Boomers and Generation X probably don't expect that that is always possible.

I have outlined just a couple of areas that may need examining if we are to select and develop the right people in productive ways. I would say that such a review is probably long overdue, and even if much of what exists now remains it cannot be a bad thing to make sure that we are basing our practices on appropriate assumptions for the contemporary context and changing workforce. Generation Y could be viewed as a useful catalyst – they could be viewed as presenting a call to action to recruiters and developers to review their practices and examine the extent to which they are relevant and helpful to all four generations in the workplace today.

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***GENERATIONS IN THE WORKPLACE**

