

Is Gen Y 'for real'?

What is the real story with the Generations?



We have been hearing about the Generation Y and Baby Boomer stuff for some time now. My question remains, what are the real differences? I can get inside the head of Generation Y, after all, I am one! What separates a Gen Y from a Gen X or a Baby Boomer though? Is it so clear cut I can put a marker in the sand?

On 19 May 1986 TIME magazine published an article entitled "[Growing pains at 40](http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,961401,00.html)"¹ – the article announced the coming of age of the Baby Boomers, they had reached middle age. In the article Senator Al(bert) Gore (then 38 and Democrat of Tennessee), said "We wanted to change it all, to do it our way". Sound familiar? Sounds like what Generation Y are shouting out right now. They have the energy and the passion to do so. With little to worry about apart from themselves they have the mobility to move around whenever and wherever they like. The article continues by referring to the Baby Boomer as the 'enelegant': *"Pig in the python," a moving bulge that distorts and distends everything around it as it rumbles through the stages of life. Locked together in a crowded race, many Boomers have learned to use their elbows. The most outspoken members retain a kind of generational arrogance...* Again, sounds familiar. Well, what about loyalty? *'...Not only that, long absorbed in themselves, the Baby Boomers are a generation that has avoided or postponed commitment to others. Many have little loyalty to their employers and less to political leaders or ideas...'*² You can draw your own parallels I'm sure but allow me one just briefly; This is exactly how Generation Y are being described by Gen X and Baby Boomer commentators right now: 'arrogant', 'self absorbed' and 'increasingly mobile'.

So are there any differences? Of course there are. And Yes, they are dependent on how they were raised, and Yes they are dependent on the environment in which Generation Y is growing up, and Yes it does have to do with Technology and the WWW.

Growing up

First though, Nurture. The Baby Boomers were brought up by the 'Builders' or 'Veterans' (generally those born 1925 – 1945). Many having been through World War I ('WWI') as children and all will have experienced in some way World War II (WWII). They were naturally conservative with food and possessions, taught to reuse and conserve what they had. 'Builders' were guided by the military discipline instilled through the course of the military action; were affected directly by the economic

¹ <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,961401,00.html> "Growing Pains at 40", TIME Magazine (19 May 1986)

² <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,961402,00.html> "Growing Pains at 40", TIME Magazine (19 May 1986)

events of the Wall Street Crash in October 1929 and the years to follow, so named the 'Great Depression'. (Rightly or wrongly) they communicated these learned values to their children – the 'Baby Boomers'. Born in 'two chunks' (in the UK) between the generally accepted range of 1946 – 1964, the Boomers formed their own identity too. The preceding 20 years had made starting families challenging (not least because of the physical separation of families as they went on duty with their various military 'outfits'), but now with men returning to handle the economy women were able return to raising a family.

Boomers took on these learned values and pursued careers – taught by their Builder parents that a job provided income security – Boomers forged for themselves 20 or 30 year careers with one firm. Generation X witnessed the collapse of this trust as long term 'expectations' of job security between employer and (Baby Boomer) employees was shattered in the 1987 stock-market crash. Within 2 days the FTSE 100 had lost 22% of its value and panic struck (even though the FTSE 100 actually finished two percentage points higher overall that year³! Look at this [FTSE 100 \(1985-2005\) chart](#)⁴ from Yahoo! Finance and see how the index had been rising for the previous seven months and then 'corrected').

This was happening as this X-er Generation was entering the workplace! Loyalty, as you might expect, towards (multi) national firms went down the scale considerably. Gen X-ers were much more independently minded, ensuring their survival they learned 'transferable skills'. And it wasn't just business shaping the minds of Generation X: the birth of the single-parent family became acceptable and this generation thus carries the 'latch-key' tag as parents in single-parent families were forced to work to provide for their family. Generation X was cultured to be independent and in work will 'ring-fence' their 'bit' and look after it. This is also the generation that started to interact with the Internet and online communication – at least as 'early adopters'.

So what about Generation Y? "Self absorbed" "Brash" "[Divas](#)⁵" "[Ambitious](#)⁶" "Demanding" "Confident" – Yes! So let's unpack why.

Love Generation

Baby Boomers have been noted for their love and involvement with Generation Y. Termed 'Helicopter Parents'⁷ Baby Boomer parents have developed a 'love blanket' for their children. Generation Y have grown up on praise. Every (Gen Y) child is a winner according to their parent (watch the reaction if anything is suggested to the contrary), and is taught they are able to make a difference in their own right. Gen Y grew up on compliments and validations as if it were oxygen. Any surprises, then, that they come across as a little *over*-confident? Enter Gen Y into the world of work... they see managers or

³ [The Motley Fool UK: Market Comment 19/10/2001](#), 'Learn the Lessons from Black Monday' (19 Oct 2001)

⁴ <http://uk.finance.yahoo.com/q/bc?s=%5EFTSE&t=my&l=on&z=m&q=l&c=>, 'FTSE100 basic chart' (15 May 2008).

⁵ http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life_and_style/career_and_jobs/recruiter_forum/article1813031.ece, "How to Connect with Generation Y" TimesOnline (20 May 2007)

⁶ <http://www.managementtoday.co.uk/news/786810/mt-freshminds-work-20-survey-generation>, "Work 2.0 Survey - My generation" (29 Feb 2008)

⁷ http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life_and_style/education/article3734696.ece "Helicopter Parents: Hovering" (13 April 2008)

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Managing Directors about the age of their parents and expect the same acknowledgements will come. But, alas, there is money involved now. With nobody to validate their achievements – as generally they will be living away from home – and nobody to nurse their wounds if they are criticized, or to go back to their ‘teachers’ (managers/ boss) to challenge feed-back. So... they went ‘Online’. In search of like-minded individuals with whom to share their grief. Generation Y are notoriously bad at being internal processors – they externalize their feelings, and express in digital language! They talk online. No fears about sharing company information, there is no pride involved – just an expression of the injustice to them – and so within a few moments they perceive the grass to be greener somewhere else. Unfettered and disenchanted they move, to realize the same is true in ‘pastures green’ after all. But... the information is still out there – it forms a record in the online world and a reputation begins to develop. An exponential reputation. Information is published, shared, discussed, linked and noted. It becomes... like a ‘truth’. In some senses it is a truth - an ethnographic account of what happened from an individual’s point of view, just... expressed differently to the (Baby Boomer and X) generations before them.

So, what (if anything) can we learn in the middle of all this hype, subjectivity, pride and (essentially) just another point in time? Crucially, no judgment of any other Generation. Allow for individualism. I have been asked, “will Gen Y’s just become like Gen X’s and Baby Boomers eventually?”

‘If some Boomers have resignedly become the organization men and women they once mocked, others have unleashed innovative and entrepreneurial energies that in the long run may provide enough growth and opportunity for them to realize their dreams after all...’ (TIME Magazine, 1986)

So, that depends... on you (as a Baby Boomer managing X and Y’s; X-er in the middle; Y responding to Baby Boomers and X-ers).

Leaving that aside for a moment, what is the world like that Gen Y (and soon to be very relevant Generation Z) are growing up in, and what does this mean for real business?

Another World

So, what’s all the fuss about ‘online’ and Web 2.0? What has changed? The World Wide Web (WWW) has fundamentally shifted up a gear in terms of what it can do now. Web 2.0 has changed the online experience from being ‘talked at’ to being able ‘to be in conversation’. It is perhaps this ongoing concept of interaction that is most distinctive. Web 2.0 has opened the door (for example) to Collaboration (Wikis/ Blogs), Recommendation (Tagging/ Digg’ing), Convergence (MySpace/ Second Life), Casting (Narrow/Wide/Video/Pod), and VOIP (Skype). What impact does that have on the average business in the real world? Take for example the ‘futuristic’ (but nonetheless, here today) world of [Second Life](#) [created by Linden Labs⁸]. Just wasting time? Well, not so for Rob Hof of BusinessWeek who went ‘*inworld*’ and discovered a whole new parallel world with an economy that genuinely crosses over into our ‘real’ world (listen to the podcast [here](#)). Hof (a Baby Boomer) found creating his avatar (Rob

⁸ <http://lindenlab.com/>

Cranes) very involving. He describes the ability to have a ‘...social experience. You can do almost anything... Create homes, buy islands and create a resort...’

Virtual Property Developer

[Anshe Chung](#) is the online identity for a Chinese-born language teacher living near Frankfurt, Germany. She's the best-known executive in *Second Life*, an online world run by Linden Lab of San Francisco. Known inside the world as the Rockefeller of *Second Life*, she prefers to keep her real name private to deter intrusions into her human life. Chung runs a very real business buying plots of virtual land, developing them into communities complete with houses, beaches, mansions, and other features, and reselling or renting those properties to Second Life players. Since she began two years ago she has amassed land and *Second Life* currency -- which is convertible into real U.S. dollars -- worth more than \$250,000.

Source: BusinessWeek (1 May 2006)

“ This is not just a business phenomenon... it's entertainment at its root [but] there is an economy developing here...[Linden Labs] not only let people create their stuff (e.g. clothing)... they have ownership of the intellectual property they create [inworld]... they can sell it... it gives them an economic incentive to create it...” and they can turn it into real product outside ‘Second Life’, explains Hof.

There is an internal online currency that is in fact exchangeable into real world money. The currency online is ‘Linden dollars’. The rate to exchange it into real dollars is roughly 300:1 (Lindens to USD). Money is exchanged back and forth through the creators ‘Linden Lab’ and Hof reports some people are taking out ‘thousands of dollars a month’.

People could do this for a profession! Too far-fetched? Well, you aren't alone – [not everyone is a fan](#). What about ‘real’ businesses? How is this relevant?

Virtually, anything is possible

So who's actually in ‘there’? A quick look at the [Second Life map](#)⁹ (powered by Google, notably) through a programme called ‘Slurl’ revealed some interesting facts: CNN has set up a news station to report on events in Second Life! Sun Microsystems has bought land for advertising and Coca Cola launched a campaign¹⁰ (‘Virtual Thirst’) in 2007, through a viral¹¹ You Tube format (of course!) to design vending machines to be used inside Second Life (see case study, overleaf). Coca Cola also (indirectly) sponsored a music concert in Second Life. The ‘early adopters’ of these new online worlds are there for extended periods of time – multiple hours. These companies raising brand awareness inside these virtual worlds have an individual's attention for a considerably longer amount of time than is possible in the real, fragmented, media world we are used to. Not only this. One London creative agency ‘Rivers Run Red’ has taken to creating ‘[immersive workspaces](#)’ online. Rivers Run Red boasts these virtual opportunities to communicate with each other all around the globe cuts down on carbon footprint, air fares, and time. Moreover, clients can see their work in progress. So, it would seem reasonable to assume that their

⁹ www.slurl.com/secondlife, last viewed 15 May 2008.

¹⁰ <http://mashable.com/2007/04/17/coca-cola/> “Coca Cola Launches Second Life Contest for New Coke Machine”, Mashable.com (17 April 2007).

¹¹ ‘Viral’ (marketing/ advertising) refers to marketing techniques that use pre-existing social networks to produce increases in brand awareness through the distribution of content that by nature ‘wants’ to be shared.

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clients would be only the one's on the leading edge of online and web technology (Google, Microsoft, Apple...?) Not so, it is [Boots](#) (No. 7); [Penguin Publishing](#); and the charity [Bernardos](#) that show up in their online portfolio. So is this all play? River Runs Red has a multi-million pound (Sterling) turnover. 'Collaboration' says John Chambers (CEO and Chairman of Cisco Systems) 'is the next step in terms of productivity' (FT.com¹²).

So where does all this leave us in terms of Generation Y and your workplace?

Case Study: Coca Cola in Second Life

Coke set the online community the challenge of building a vending machine that could vend the 'essence' of Coke – the Coke experience (*refreshment, joy, unity and experience*). The contest challenged individuals to submit concepts for new world vending machines, an appliance that could vend virtual experiences. Coke assembled a virtual avatar board of advisors and worked with a marketing firm 'Crayon' and 'Millions of Us'. Submissions were made through YouTube, MySpace and VirtualThirst.com. The winning concept 'Lucky Puzzle Bottle' by Ann Marie May, was a concept that meant avatars had to 'solve' puzzle bottles in return for a coke experience ranging from 'virtual snowball fights' to 'giant bubble rides'. The virtual contest was Coke's first interaction with the virtual world – it was an opportunity for them to learn about virtual worlds.

More at: www.VirtualThirst.com

Jerry Maguire

You might imagine that Y Generation feel so 'entitled' to access this online world, that they are just doing it to be noticed, maybe even that because the rules have changed and multi-million pound businesses are being created through online worlds that they are just trying to make a fast 'buck' – chasing the cash. To an extent, you'd be right. Thankfully/ sadly it's not that simple. Generation Y like the generations before them, recognise the need for work, and they aren't all as technology crazed as the next Gen Y. Nonetheless they want to work for inspirational leaders. Leaders who teach, trust and give ownership.

In the film Jerry Maguire (Tom Cruise) – famed for its '[Show me the Money](#)' clip – there is a parallel story line to the one between Jerry and his Sports Stars. It's between Jerry and Dorothy Boyd (one of the financial clerks (played by Renée Zellweger). Jerry and Dorothy leave to set up another firm after Jerry gets fired. Later in the film Dorothy explains why she left with Jerry:

Dorothy: **The truth? I care about the job. But mostly, I just want to be inspired. That memo you wrote... that inspired me. I'm here because of that memo. I love that memo.**

¹² <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/4a72efd4-1260-11dd-9b49-0000779fd2ac.html> "View from the Top: John Chambers, chief executive of Cisco Systems", FT.com (25 April 2008)

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Zellweger is drawn to Cruise because of a vision that he has for how business should be done. The challenge is delivering the vision, and together they do. When Baby Boomer CEOs cast their vision, their challenge is similar – to align all the Generations behind that vision and to deliver, together.

After their (2 week, 2 year or 5 year) training programmes Y Gens will pick teams/ bosses/ colleagues on the basis of ‘reputation’. Experience, you see, is everything for this Generation, and they are somewhat unforgiving. Experiences are shared. Online.

Communication

Networking, socialising, interacting, selling and learning: it has all changed.

Companies that are realising this include Mercedes Benz who signed a media broadcasting deal with the online networking site [A Small World](#) (ASW) – their mission: ‘to aggregate the world’s most interesting people with the world’s most interesting information’ (as explained by CEO Joe Robinson¹³). Olaf Göttgens (VP Brand Communications) from Mercedes Benz Cars explains how along with their competitors Audi and BMW they have launched Mercedes Benz TV in order to keep up with online representation. So, is TV, Radio, Magazine, dare I say it ,face-to-face’ communication obsolete for the next generation? Emphatically no. Nonetheless, they communicate in many more ways than the Baby Boomers, even the Xers do. Online is a trend, more than a fad.

Generation Y grew up with technology. They were encouraged to use it. You could drive from London to Paris in a time of 4 hours 46 minutes (according to [ViaMichelin.com](#), and it would cost you about 60 Euros to fund the petrol). Instead you could fly in 1 hour 20 minutes with a low-cost airline for less money (alternatively you could meet up online).

The mentality for this generation is: ‘It’s here so let’s use it’. To have over 300 friends on [Facebook](#) is quite normal. Imagine being able to harness those networks through your employees for the reputation of your company. Its sheer innovative capability. The distribution opportunities. What will be the value of individuals in the 16-30 age bracket as influencers, or consumers in your industry over the next 3 years? With so many people vying for their attention, what will you do to secure your distribution channels of the future? What are they saying about your brand online?

Change Matters

‘It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent that survives. It is the one that is the most adaptable to change’ (Charles Darwin, 1809-1882).

Christopher Lomas is the founder of ‘Naked Generations’. Naked Generations works with CEOs of FTSE 100/ 250 companies to map generational trends within their business. This process is ‘wrapped’ in an in-depth educational process for CEOs and their Executive Management Teams using a unique IP set.

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¹³ http://www.asmallworld.net/press2/movie/asw_ceo/ “ASW News” (July 2007)

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