

# The Gen Y business experience: Priorities for the new, digitally native workforce

There has been wide speculation that the behaviour of the Net Generation will shake up organisations. But direct feedback from this new workforce points to a subtler story

By Luke Harris, Fujitsu

“The twentysomethings currently pursuing early careers in business and the public sector grew up with many more information technology channels than their older colleagues. Digital technology – from universal broadband and MP3 players to smartphones and social media – has permeated and shaped every level of their experience, making them the first demographic to experience IT as fundamental to both their professional and personal lives.

But does this make Gen Y innately different? Should organisations be looking to tap into that new mindset as a source of innovation, change and growth? And do their experiences outweigh the similarities they share with their predecessors – Generation X and the Baby Boomers?

## A less-structured organisational design fosters an environment where an employee can put forward an idea that may have otherwise fallen on “deaf ears”

Perspectives on such questions have, to date, largely come from the latter groups, with little research seeking observations from the generation itself. That is something we have recently tried to address at Fujitsu through a series of themed discussions with employees from both Generation X and Y, covering such key issues as changing working practices, career development and expectations, desire for the latest technology, reliance on communication channels and individual contributions to the organisation’s success.

What the research shows is that in terms of organisational structure, Gen Y certainly starts with a higher expectation of working in a flatter organisation than their predecessors might have done at a similar age. The stripping away of organisational layers over the last decade (particularly

within SMEs and start-ups) has resulted in less bureaucratic and hierarchical forms of working and interaction – characteristics that could be seen as part of the DNA of a networked generation. While this offers the opportunity to tap into the adaptability and flexibility skills of twentysomethings, it does also present challenges to larger organisations that are still trying to move to a flatter structure. For the CTO/CIO function, the challenge lies in harnessing technology and methods of communication that penetrate these organisational layers, making interaction more open and fluid.

### Flattening the hierarchy

That comes through in the feedback from one Gen Y employee at Fujitsu: “I feel most comfortable with a less-structured organisational design, with some visible hierarchy and cross divisional working – this fosters an environment of being able to speak out as an employee with an idea that perhaps otherwise may have fallen on ‘deaf ears’.”

But that appreciation of the flattening of the organisation over the last decade spans generations. “Flat organisational design with little hierarchy, limited structure, fluid working” was the ideal modern working environment of one senior manager from the Gen X group.

In that context, new technology can be employed to provide relatively unhindered access to the insight of coveted executives – through the availability of “democratising” communication tools (from email and conferencing tools to corporate social networks and management blogs). Gen Y seems to be valuing these connections to senior leaders, with two-way communication offering the opportunity to raise questions and voice feedback through a familiar medium.

Not surprisingly, the feedback from Gen Y shows enthusiasm for social media. "These sites provide an extra channel of communication allowing you to correspond as a group in a way that, unlike email, is instant and easily accessible," said a Gen Y respondent. "I hope to see this being utilised in the workplace in the future to break down silos and encourage engagement."

One of her colleagues echoed that view: "I use Facebook and Twitter frequently during the day – they're a really great way to see what friends are doing. However, I wouldn't want certain people I work with seeing some content on my Facebook account. I do have separate accounts for personal and professional purposes – they are two distinct audiences. Twitter can be useful at work for finding industry news and LinkedIn is good for connecting with people in a more professional way." That level of engagement with social media is, however, not fully mirrored among the Gen X group, as one commentator demonstrated: "I check LinkedIn to keep in communication with previous and current work colleagues. However, I don't use Facebook." Another uses

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Facebook but purely as a personal communications tool; and Twitter, for him, is simply helpful in reinforcing the company brand and as a news aggregator.

The research also shows that Gen X and Y hold similar views on the desire for direction from above. The Gen Y respondents said they want managers who can provide coaching, training and frequent feedback. (Paradoxically, Gen Y may be resentful of bureaucracy and restrictive organisational structures but seems to crave the direct and clear employee-manager relationship it provides.) Gen X is no different, finding coaching and guidance on professional development highly valuable.

Where there is a significant difference is in "tech envy". Gen Y views the provision of the latest "must-have"

### What next?

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technologies by their employer as a clear measure of their status. "It never fails to impress (or evoke envy) when a friend gets the latest gadget," said one. That is a pattern only partially replicated within Gen X – and something that can depend on gender. The conclusion: Gen Y employees are heavily motivated by the devices their employers provide, a factor that needs to be considered in graduate recruitment and retention.

When it comes to technology, what both groups do have in common is a fear of not being connected. "Without my familiar communication channels I feel cut off and insecure" from one Gen Y-er is matched by sentiments such as "anxious", "isolated" and "increasingly dependent on apps" from Gen X respondents threatened with disconnection.

### New economy, new expectations

While the economic climate may have dented some of the Net Generation's infamous "inflated sense of worth", employers still need to make plenty of adjustments to ensure they recruit, retain and make the most of their Gen Y talent. The sense that new ways of thinking and working can deliver significant benefits is certainly evident among Gen Y, as two final comments demonstrate.

"I see my generation's greater desire to work in a more flexible manner – pursuing new virtual ways of working – as leading to organisations becoming more fluid. I've witnessed a growing interest from peers towards the innovative and creative side of business, bringing forward ideas that defy traditional approaches. I see this gradually eroding the traditional organisational hierarchy, with fewer structural tiers and a greater contribution to higher-level decisions regardless of an employee's level."

And, overall, that points more to opportunity than threat: "We think about things in a different way. This could lead to great benefits for the organisations we work for – if we are listened to, that is."



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