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Generation Y and learning

Research by Carina Paine Schofield and Sue Honoré has identified the learning preferences and ‘missing skills’ of Generation Y. They make recommendations for those concerned with this generation’s development, and highlight the potentially positive impact of Generation Y on the future of learning for *all* generations.

Who are Generation Y?

Generation Y are known by many names: the millennials; the iPod generation; the me firsts; the internet generation; the echo boomers; the Nintendo generation; the digital generation; generation why; generation next; the I generation and the net generation. This article specifically refers to Generation Y as those individuals born after 1981. Other than being defined by their year of birth, who are they? Some common themes can be drawn from the

existing literature, relating to their formative years, attitudes to work and relationships with others (Figure 1).

Over recent years this generation has been discussed at length in newspapers, management articles, books and journal papers. Questions have been raised around the changing learning preferences and the approaches required to meet the needs of this younger workforce. The lectures, books and rote memorisation that shaped the

learning of the Baby Boomer and pre-Baby Boomer generations have been superseded by today's technology facilitated learning. This means that younger generations have been documented as learning in a way fundamentally different to previous ones. Recent articles have referred to a move from Learning 1.0 to Learning 2.0¹ with people as active collaborative participants not passive readers. Generation Y are typically described as technologically savvy, hands on, interactive and collaborative who want personalised learning^{2,3}. There have also been changes in the education system, with the Generation Y student a demanding consumer, who feels less responsible for their own learning and holds educators accountable. The traditional model of delivering material inside and outside the workplace in order to reach this new generation has been rethought.

purely on anecdotal evidence. There is a need to explore Generation Y in detail in order to go beyond the media hype, the assumptions and the stereotypes.

Ashridge research

Research was undertaken in late 2008 to identify the development needs and learning preferences of Generation Y compared to those of previous generations, and to provide recommendations to assist with future learning, teaching and workplace practice. The research questions were:

- Do young people learn differently from those who were young in the past?
- Is there something which has specifically impacted Generation Y?
- What does great learning look like in the future?

Research scope

Following a detailed literature review, qualitative and quantitative data collection methods were used:

- 59 organisations in both the public and private sectors (comprising 133 individuals) took part in face to interviews or focus groups
- 692 individuals responded to an online survey
- 284 participants completed a Kolb Learning Style Inventory⁴.

Respondents were aged from 16 to over 63 years to ensure data was gathered from multi-generational participants in today's workforce – Generation Y, Generation X and Baby Boomers – to provide an in-depth, intergenerational viewpoint⁵. The research was mainly UK-focused although online participants were global.

Generational definitions

The defining years used to categorise the generations were:

- Baby Boomers – 1946-1963
- Early Generation X – 1964-1976
- Late Generation X – 1977-1981
- Generation Y – 1982 onwards.

Surveys identify that Generation Y do value learning in the workplace (for example in a recent survey by Ipsos MORI⁴, learning and development was ranked in the top five important job factors), but there has been limited research into Generation Y and learning generally, with many of the discussions in the literature being based



Figure 1: Generation Y at a glance



Research findings

Generation Y have confidence

Generation Y emerge as 'confident'; 'honest'; 'demanding'; and 'vociferous' and they have high expectations, particularly when it comes to learning.

Experienced educators' comments include: *"In terms of learning you will get more honest, feisty responses from the younger generation. That is not about arrogance; I think it is about confidence. They are used to contributing. A classroom session is like a verbal blog. Why wouldn't you share opinion, because it matters?"*

– School teacher.

"Their [Generation Y] feedback is quite brutally honest sometimes. It makes us raise our bar" – University lecturer.

Generation Y learning preferences and expectationⁱⁱⁱ

When it comes to learning, Generation Y do not simply hold preferences, but expectations.

1. Doing is more important than knowing

Rapid technology advances have contributed to Generation Y having a much lower reliance on a personal knowledge database stored in their brain, and more on finding factual information at the moment it is needed. Knowledge is no longer perceived to be the ultimate goal of this generation; results and actions are now more valued than the accumulation or memorisation of facts.

2. A need for immediacy

Generation Y live in a 24/7 culture where there is little tolerance for delays, and like to receive information just in time and from several multimedia sources. For example, a university lecturer states: *"Learning is now very surface-level and last minute. In some respects that may be OK. In business, activities are date-driven and there is a demand for outputs."*

To this generation, issues of time and

difficulty in obtaining information are usually of more concern than accuracy. However, it is unclear whether this is because they are not concerned about accuracy, or because they are assuming most information is by nature accurate⁵.

3. Trial and error approach to problem solving

As a result of not wanting (or needing) to accumulate knowledge, Generation Y are more interested in problem based learning.

Generation Y game systems, such as Nintendo, often involve problem-solving and decision-making and require constant trial and error to win: *"The fastest way to winning is through losing, since each loss is a learning experience"*⁶. This contrasts with previous generations' logical, rule based approach to problem solving. *Trial and error experimentation was previously viewed as an expensive and time consuming, with options not tried until after all the consequences had been thought through; "but you'll never win a Nintendo game that way!"*⁷.

4. Low boredom threshold

In the media, Generation Y are often described as having low boredom thresholds and short attention spans. The research identifies very diverse views on this. For example, a university lecturer states: *"They are used to 'cultural snacking' – a bit of TV, a bit of internet, a bit of chat, but no sustained information gathering. Of course you do get good students who can focus, discuss and read, but the proportion of those who exist has lost critical mass."*

The research shows that some teachers are developing increasingly shorter segments of learning because of the expectation that Generation Y groups cannot concentrate.

5. Multitasking and parallel processing

Generation Y are most comfortable when they are engaged simultaneously in multiple activities such as listening to music, texting and writing. This is simply a way

of life for them. The information overload will increase as technology continues to advance and all generations will respond by multitasking. Consequently, spending time on investigating a problem will be a luxury⁸.

6. Visual, nonlinear and virtual learning

Visual modes of learning are preferred by a large percentage of the population, and are especially important for Generation Y who grew up with lots of visual stimuli⁹. Generation Y are also described as holistic learners – oriented towards a nonlinear and non-sequential learning¹⁰. This may be at odds with more 'traditional' delivery styles: *"Generation Y students are primarily visual learners, a style which research has shown will almost certainly conflict with the learning style and habits of almost any instructor"*¹¹. Weiler goes on to suggest how changing from a presentation style lecture to a more hands on approach will increase both interest and information retention.

Encouragingly, the majority of educators and HR managers in the research are aware of this. For example: *"You wouldn't attempt to do an entire chalk and talk training course any more if you were to have any credibility."* – Business manager

More recently, there have been descriptions of a move not only from a verbal to a visual to but on to a virtual generation¹². Virtual representations of learners are appearing in virtual worlds such as Second Life (see www.secondlife.com). The potential of such virtual worlds for learning services and any resulting issues are only just being researched¹³.

7. Collaborative learning

Generation Y do not want isolated lecture based information: they value interaction, networking, active participation and staying connected – anytime, anyplace.

Literature also describes the increasingly 'horizontal' structure of learning: *"Institutional learning tended to be authoritative, top*

down, standardised and predicated on individualised assessment measure on standard tests. Increasingly today, work regimes involve collaboration”¹⁴.

The research respondents agree with these learning approaches. For example: “There is a learning style in younger people which is learning by discussing versus sitting there and listening to other people. And now for the challenge... how do they get that seen as they are trying to be positive, they are trying to learn, and not trying to be arrogant? It’s just the way that they have been brought up to interact.”

– Business manager.

Asked for their preferred method of learning, respondents of all ages use similar terms such as ‘hands on’, ‘interactive’ and ‘collaborative’¹⁵.

8. Constructivist approach

The learning theory of social constructivism¹⁵ states that learners learn by constructing their own meaning and understanding collaboratively, within the context of social interactions, through a process of ‘meaning making’¹⁶, as opposed to passively absorbing the contents of lectures or books.

Technology can enable social constructivism¹⁷ and can also combine social learning with personalisation. Generation Y value both *social* and *personal* learning opportunities within the community context¹⁸. They see knowledge as an active creation process and are used to contributing and customising their work, knowledge and ideas to the community.

Generation Y’s missing skills

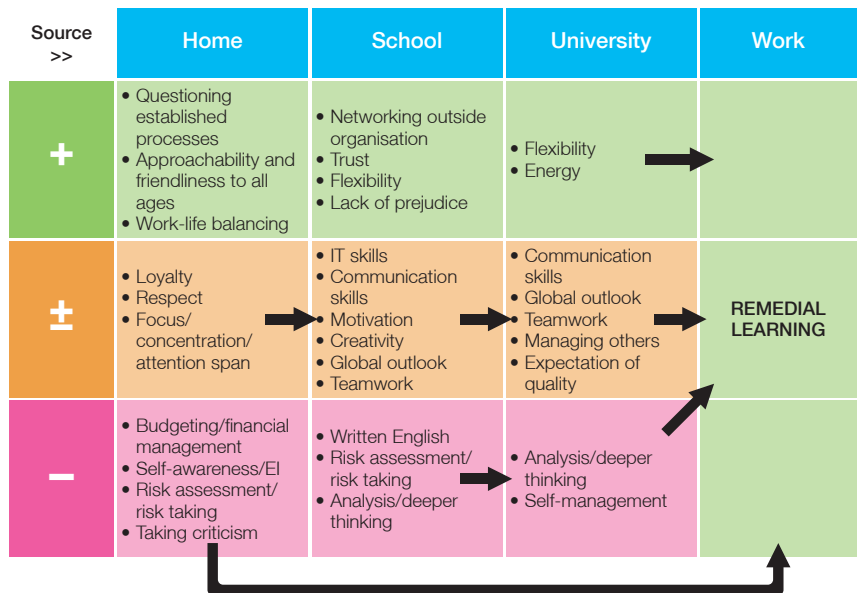
As the research progressed, an evolving thread building and shaping Generation Y from birth onwards was discovered. At certain points, key behaviours were set, challenges were created and adjustments were made either by Generation Y or by those around them. We call this

The Learning Journey¹⁹ and along with technological changes has meant that Generation Y may be missing out on exploring more deeply, enquiry and reflection. They struggle more than previous generations with ‘difficult workplace conversations’ and need more support in becoming self-aware. For this generation to be successful as future thinkers and leaders, they may have to acquire these missing skills in the workplace. Ideally, in the future the educational system will be able to build them in from an early age.

Generation Y strengths and weaknesses

Figure 2 shows Generation Y strengths in green; weaknesses in pink; and a mixture of strengths and weaknesses varying within the Generation Y population in orange. The critical point(s) at which those skills are (or should be) developed are shown along the top row. The green skills should be exploited more often by older generations, who often focus on the pink portion. Each member of Generation Y is an individual, so that areas in the orange or pink need to be considered on an individual basis.

Figure 2: Generation Y strengths and weaknesses



Some points to highlight are:

IT expertise

It is often assumed that all young people are IT experts and this is not true – some struggle with technology.

Risk

Young people have been cocooned and many have not developed an innate sense of risk assessment, whether that concerns crossing the road, conducting an experiment or taking on a new supplier.

Valid sources of information

Factual information is now acquired 'just in time' from many sources. The challenge to educators and business colleagues is to ensure that young people verify this information: "*Learning strategy shifts from a focus on information as such to judgment concerning reliable information, from memorising information to how to find reliable sources. In short from learning THAT to learning HOW, from content to process*"²⁰.

Communication

Many young people struggle with face to face communication, particularly in sending or receiving difficult messages from others. They also need development in understanding which medium is the best for a given situation. Although their intentions may be good, they may cause friction with others because of the methods they use.

Deeper learning

There is a concern, particularly amongst university staff and employers, that lack of curiosity is resulting in Generation Y having a shallow understanding about the world around them. In the UK the school system is geared to high examination pass rates, so driving a culture of 'know only the minimum to get the grade'. Generation Y may be missing the opportunity to reflect on data and to engage in more in-depth analysis. Their analytical skills often need developing, as they struggle with solving

complex problems and with 'grey' issues with no clear answers.

The challenge to all educators is to 'fix' any bad habits and develop skills missing from earlier life phases. Employers are finding that some of the 'pink' skills (see Figure 2) are not good by the time Generation Y employees start work and many years of missed learning need to be repaired in the early employment years.

Recommendations

How does the research help those concerned with the development of Generation Y? Figure 3 outlines some solutions and recommendations, some of which are described in detail below.

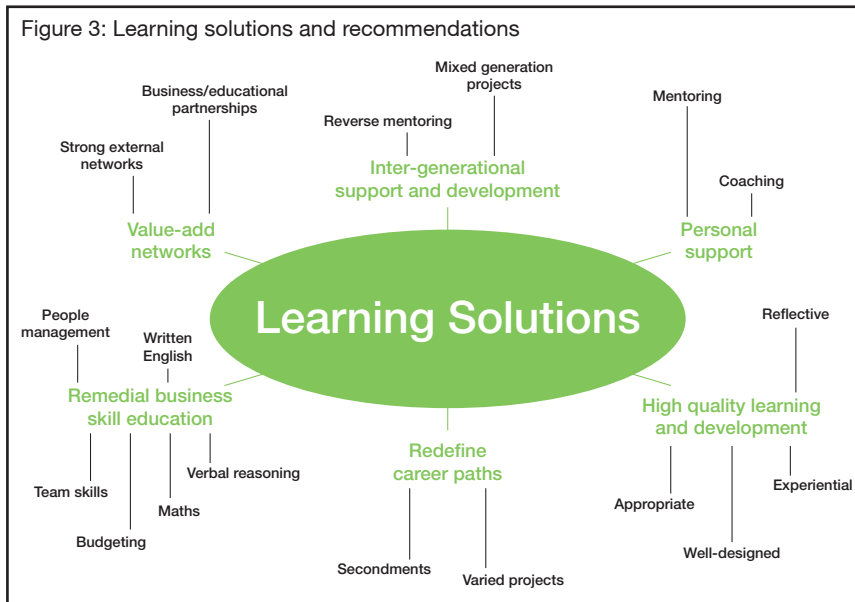
Remedial education

As a first step, members of Generation Y may need to be encouraged to develop some 'basic' skills that were not developed in their earlier education. For example, verbal reasoning and written English along with mental arithmetic and concepts of budgeting, were all listed as key items by respondents. Although Generation Y have completed many more team-based activities in their youth than previous generations, they require help in understanding team dynamics and how individuals support team goals. Other soft skills such as listening, understanding personal impact, persuasion, influencing and people management were also identified as areas for development.

High quality learning and development

Learning must be relevant to the learner, applicable immediately and relate to real life experience. It must be interactive to encourage the developed skills of Generation Y such as questioning, supportive and open to new ideas. Where applicable, sessions should be facilitated rather than taught, as Generation Y are more comfortable with this and it gives them greater ownership of the outcomes and responsibility for learning. Learning interventions should also encourage development of some of

Figure 3: Learning solutions and recommendations



Generation Y's 'areas for improvement': deeper thinking, validation of sources, assessment of risk and impact, logical reasoning and problem solving, critical thinking, self-awareness and emotional intelligence. The use of experiential learning to embed learning in real life scenarios is critical. Learning must also use a mix of media, learning styles and approaches to retain attention and interest.

Personal support

Members of Generation Y demand support in their growth and development. Personal coaching and mentoring are seen as successful methods of retaining Generation Y workers and motivating them to achieve higher goals. They are used to positive feedback and encouragement, so a trusted personal coach/mentor is best positioned to introduce critical feedback, which may not have been commonplace in school or home life.

Inter-generational support and development

Reverse mentoring, where a more experienced employee and a new Generation Y employee coach each other in different aspects (for example, office politics

and use of new technology), encourages the development of both parties and the sharing of ideas. The two people need to be well-matched in attitude with the same desire to make the relationship succeed. Equally, mixed generation projects provide learning for all team members and have been shown to break down stereotypical beliefs about different generations.

Value-added networks

Generation Y have grown up in a society where expertise and knowledge can be obtained from anywhere. These wider networks are rarely exploited in the same way by older generations and there is value in learning from Generation Y. One corporation has even developed a network which includes ex-employees, knowing that their contribution may continue to be high and that they may return one day.

Given that there is still some remedial learning to be done higher up the educational chain, some organisations and universities are looking at partnerships with those institutions which feed them, in order to tackle learning issues at source.

Redefine career paths

Most learning is now informal rather than formal, and much of that is achieved on the job. Rigid career paths do not suit modern business practice and are an issue with impatient Generation Y. There is a focus on finding ways of developing the individual, enriching learning and retaining Generation Y staff, such as involvement in small projects alongside the main job and secondments.

The positive impact of Generation Y on the future of learning

Generation Y are vociferous and demand high quality learning that meets individual needs, while older colleagues have the same needs but often have not asked for support. Technological advances provide new learning opportunities, but whereas there may have been pockets of early adopters in previous generations, Generation Y have

the numbers and force to demand the more rapid use of appropriate technologies.

Generation Y also question established processes and challenge organisations to change their thinking. They network extensively, accessing a wide group of contacts and bring in a more open attitude to knowledge sharing. Having grown up in a supportive culture, this generation needs coaching or mentoring to help it succeed.

Ultimately high quality learning and development is the goal of people of all ages, not just the younger generation, but Generation Y may be a greater driving force for change than those who have gone before, resulting in benefits for all.

Conclusion

Generation Y's collective and individual learning preferences have already made an impact on learning. This assertive group seeks personalised, supported learning and development and wants to exploit the same methods of communication at both work and home. The education system may have let this generation down in developing certain skills, but Generation Y wants to progress, and with help from more experienced colleagues, may act as the much-needed change agents to help the development of all generations.

As one HR manager concludes: *"the stereotypical so-called learning and development wants and needs of Generation Y are not exclusive to them; they are the wants and needs of the whole organisation."*

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Endnotes

- i. This sample was combined with a larger sample from the Hay Group, providing a total of 1017 individuals.
- ii. The importance of individual differences: every generation can be defined by different beliefs, circumstances, value systems and life events. As such, generational theory is described by some as simply a 'convenient shorthand', particularly for analysis. It is important to remember that a generation is made up of individuals who need to be treated as such.
- iii. This section describes 'typical' Generation Y learning preferences based on the research and a literature review which reviewed numerous texts including: Frand⁶; Manuel⁹; Oblinger²; Pletka³; Tapscott^{21,22}.
- iv. A tag cloud visualisation of word frequencies used in response to this survey item can be viewed in Honoré and Paine Schofield¹⁹ and is available online: www.ashridge.org.uk/GenYResearch