

## Wired and Worldy

### Engaging Gen Y Learners

Something strange was happening. The facilitator, with a lifetime's experience presenting a technical topic to a variety of audiences, was being challenged on every single point by his audience. Despite limited knowledge of the topic, the learners—a cohort of new graduates in a state government entity—felt confident enough to argue their points with the subject matter expert. Even when they were wrong, they didn't give up. When the session covered content they already knew, they looked bored, twiddled with their pens, or chatted in pairs.

This happened recently to a colleague of mine.

No doubt about it, things have changed. Instead of mixed Baby Boomers, Gen X, and Gen Y, your audiences more and more are going to be fully Gen Y. You had better be prepared, because L&D is going to have to change fast to keep up.

And it's not just facilitators and educators who are experiencing the shift. Marketing experts, employers, entertainers, and broadcasters are having to come to terms with the newness of Gen Y's presence. Gen Ys are even confounding Hollywood by failing to go to films that have traditionally attracted their age group.

*The most media-literate generation, Gen Y tends to be immune to traditional marketing and promotion. Instead, it relies on movie information it receives through word-of-mouth critique spread through peers via the Internet .<sup>i</sup>*

### So who are Gen Y and what makes them different?

Sometimes called *Millennials*, members of Generation Y were born between 1977 to 1994. Optimistic, tech savvy, and entrepreneurial, Gen Y's have been rewarded and praised their whole lives. They are more community-minded than previous generations, and like working in groups.

As Marcus Buckingham, author of *Go Put Your Strengths to Work* and *Now, Discover Your Strengths* said recently in an interview <sup>ii</sup>

*They are the most rewarded, recognized, and praised generation in living memory. So they walk into a workplace feeling massively entitled. After six weeks on the job, they expect a promotion.*

In an excellent study of Gen y as hospitality employees, authors David Solnet, Anna Hood sum them up this way:

*This new generation is extremely technology literate, self-reliant, independent, and looking for instant rewards, where long-term means 12 months . . . n the whole they dislike menial and repetitive work and seek new challenges regularly.<sup>iii</sup>*

## What is Gen Y's attitude to workplace learning?

Comfortable in a digital, fast-paced world where knowledge is constantly changing, Gen Y's expectations of a learning experience are markedly different from those of previous generations

Members of this generation expect to be continuously learning and improving their skills. They see learning as a personal investment, and want the benefits that accrue from professional development.

Moreover, they want that learning to be individualised for them. With a low tolerance for boredom, they prefer information given in short, sharp, entertaining bursts. Accustomed to randomly accessed information, lecture-style presentations delivered in a linear format will not appeal.

Marc Prensky, an international expert on games and learning, refers to them as *Digital Natives*.

*Digital Natives accustomed to the twitch-speed, multitasking, random-access, graphics-first, active, connected, fun, fantasy, quick-payoff world of their video games, MTV, and Internet are bored by most of today's education, well meaning as it may be.<sup>iv</sup>*

They expect blended online learning to be available to them so that they can cover the material in their own way in their own time.

Rachel Smith, a GenYer herself, HR Consultant at GenRe Insurance says:

*Gen Y is all about engagement: engaged at work, engaged during training, engaged in their own leisure time. I'm always learning. If I have some spare time, I'll listen to a webinar. Webinars are great. I can do them at my desk at any time, and can fit them in with my other commitments.*

## Expect development

Recruiters are finding that the provision of professional development programs is a major draw when Gen Ys choose an employer. They expect to enjoy their job, and to progress quickly.

Gen Y employees respond positively to coaching and mentoring because it allows for more individualised and flexible learning – which suits them perfectly. They are willing to take on board honest feedback.

Mentoring does not have to be one way either – there is plenty that Gen Y can teach the older employee.

They like to see how their work fits into the big picture, and embrace recognition and reward. They expect direct access to senior management.

## **Skills gaps**

All this sounds great from an HR point of view, but there are significant skills gaps among this group.

While they are good at multi-tasking and taking initiative, Gen Ys don't enjoy the more mundane aspect of big projects. They quickly become demotivated by repetitive tasks or long working hours and leave.

As a group, their writing skills are, as any manager will tell you, patchy. Basic errors in composition and grammar are common.

One employer told me that she has to teach young interns how to write an address on an envelope—something they have never had to do before.

## **How can L&D cope?**

The frustrations that L&D are experiencing are similar to those felt by educators in the school and university systems. Just as the music industry had to reinvent itself in the digital age, so will learning will have to adjust and reposition itself for the new generation.

Here are some obvious strategies already being adopted:

- Blended and self-paced learning
- Individualised career development programs
- Just- in-time learning: not giving learners everything they might possibly need. Just give them the tools to access information as and when they need it.

## **Tips for facilitators**

- At beginning of a workshop, show relevance of the skill to career development.
- Leverage Gen Ys enjoyment of working in groups and use pairs and buzz groups in the training room. Have them frequently change groups.
- Keep it short, sharp, and fun. Wired and worldly, Gen Y prefers programs that have humour and emotion.
- Use short video clips (three to five minutes long) rather than 20 minute purpose-designed training films, or break a longer film up into segments.

- Be prepared to be challenged on issues. Realise that their challenges are not always backed up by knowledge of the subject, but rather are a way of assimilating the information.
- Re-think traditional manuals and lecture methods. Some employers, including the US military, have successfully used video games to train new recruits.

So, is my colleague re-thinking his approach to facilitation? You bet.

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Viva Training

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<sup>i</sup> B. Orwall, 'Buying Gen Y: It's Hollywood's turn to scream, *Wall Street Journal*, (2000, August),10.

<sup>ii</sup> Interview with Marcus Buckingham, 'Engaging Generation Y', *T&D Magazine, ASTD*, August 2006, 27.

<sup>iii</sup> David Solnet, Anna Hood et al 'Generation Y as Hospitality Employees: An Examination of work attitude differences'. Hospitality Training Association & University of Queensland School of Tourism, 10 [http://www.tourism.uq.edu.au/docs/GenY\\_Report.pdf](http://www.tourism.uq.edu.au/docs/GenY_Report.pdf)

<sup>iv</sup> Marc Prensky, *Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants, Part II*, 5. [www.marcprensky.com](http://www.marcprensky.com)