

Managing the Net Generation

One of the greatest challenges of the skilled leader is to seamlessly blend work teams of mixed generations by enhancing the strengths of each generation. The new wave of professionals entering the workforce has had lifelong exposure to the Internet which has worked to shape unique expectations, needs, and definitions for success. This group of new professionals was labeled the “Net Generation” by Don Tapscott in his 1997 book, *Growing Up Digital: The Rise of the Net Generation*.

A new government study outlines the work characteristics and expectations of the Net Generation:

GENERAL NET-GEN CHARACTERISTICS *

The Net Generation can be generally characterized as the most demanding generation in history, demanding challenge, meaningful work with impact, committed coworkers, and the ability to reach personal and financial goals. While recognizing that Net-Geners prefer to be viewed as individuals as opposed to “a group,” managers can benefit by understanding where this generation is coming from and where they want to go.

Many Net-Geners are products of hectic, dual-career families and grew up during a time of significant economic prosperity when Boomer parents were able to bankroll their technology-driven lifestyle. Additionally, this was a generation exposed to a concerted, nationwide movement by parents, teachers and counselors in the 1980s to build their self-esteem. During this period, it became general practice for trophies and certificates to be awarded for every participatory endeavor, regardless of skill or contribution. The result is generation with a strong sense of entitlement and self-confidence, as well as a need to be recognized.

Both employers and employees will need to manage their expectations, and strive to achieve mutually beneficial expectations. For the Net-Gener, this means coming to the realization that they probably won't become superstars in the workplace overnight. At the same time, employers must understand the Net-Geners expect to receive challenging assignments shortly after arriving onboard, to be recognized for achievement, and to be paid for performance.

Growing up on the go, Net-Geners have been steered to maximize their time, particularly with parental influence and guidance, and may not have learned how to set work priorities themselves. They believe they can do it all and expect managers to feel the same.

Fame and fortune are high on the list of Net-Geners' personal goals. In a January 2007 report from the Pew Research Center, 81% of 18 to 25 year olds polled said that getting rich is their generation's most, or second most, important life goal; 51% said the same about becoming famous. Money, in fact, is by far their biggest problem, with 30% citing financial concerns as their top worry. Net-Geners may earn more than their parents did, but their earnings have less purchasing power. Additionally, many do not have health care coverage and may come into the workplace carrying more educational debt than any previous generation. While the Net

Generation may view getting rich as their own generation's top goal; it is not always a top response in work-related surveys. One of their personal top drivers when job hunting is the need to feel as though they are making a difference, according to research and surveys commissioned by the Council for Excellence in Government.

Managing in the Net-Gen World will take more time, and perhaps more patience. Net-Geners will expect more feedback, more often, both to recognize their accomplishments and to help them move to the next stage in their work project. While they will want flexibility in how they do their work, they also need structured accountability and deadlines. Routine meetings will bore them and the formality, slow speed, and repetitiveness of bureaucracy, will frustrate them. It will be important to educate them in the reasons for procedures, processes, and the repetitiveness of some tasks. Additionally, expect there to be give-and-take on

communications. Older managers will need exposure to the greater efficiencies from text messaging and wiki collaboration, while younger workers will need tutelage on the need for documentation to meet statutory and regulatory requirements as well as verification that they can adequately judge the credibility of online sources of information.

In their quest to succeed, Net-Geners will be looking for genuine mentoring. This is a generation that when asked to write about someone they respect, often selects their own parents. They respect the knowledge that others have to share, and while they may overplay their own assets, they do not underplay the skill sets that older generations have. The challenge for coaching this generation will be to know when they need supervision and when they need growing room and to make time to help them improve.

Net-Geners are also used to being heard. They will want to share their ideas with senior leaders and decision-makers. Organizations would do well to determine how to balance protocol and openness to ensure they do not stifle the creativity and energy that the Net Generation will bring to the workplace. At the same time, Net-Geners may need some mentoring on office politics and the chain of command. There is a place for both protocol and openness, but the balance is starting to tilt toward the Net-Geners as organizational hierarchies begin to flatten under the positive weight of collaboration.

As the Net Generation is integrated into the workplace, managers and leaders may discover more similarities than differences among all four working generations. Also, “cuspers” – those at the beginning or ending years of a generation – may possess a mix of norms, characteristics and values, based on their upbringing and other influences in their lives. The end goal is to help teammates of different generations find common ground, mutual appreciation, and respect.

Net-Gen World

They don't want to be labeled.

They want continuous feedback and recognition.

They value genuine mentoring. They want autonomy, responsibility, and challenges.

They need structured accountability.

They're not interested in “paying their dues.”

They're used to having their opinions heard.

They're used to group/team problem solving.

They expect high tech/constant stimulation.

They're used to living in a 24/7 environment.

* Source: Net Generation, <http://www.cio.gov/Documents/NetGen.pdf>