The Massive “Generation Y”—individuals born during the twenty years spanning 1980 to 2000—has begun pouring into the workforce in earnest. Seventy to ninety million strong in the United States, Y’s are the first generation born “wired” and reared in a global, networked world. The good news is, employers desperately need Y’s. The bad news is, today’s managers—heralding from older generations with very different values, aspirations, and approaches to work—tend to view Y’s as impatient, demanding, and hard to work with. How can Y’s change that perception—and find a way to connect with a world of work that’s not quite ready for them?

In *Plugged In: The Generation Y Guide to Thriving at Work* (Harvard Business Press; Publication Date: November 3, 2008; $16.95; hardcover), Tamara Erickson argues that as the changing demographics of the workplace shift power away from Boomers, Y’s will find themselves with increasing opportunities to reshape their relationship with those who employ them. The key to success, Erickson says, will be for Y’s to find constructive ways to “plug in” to corporations and connect with the colleagues they find there. This won’t be easy in today’s multigenerational workforce, but it will be essential if Y’s are to embrace the incredible opportunities opening up for them. Based on five years of eye-opening research on the needs and preferences of Generation Y, *Plugged In* provides a detailed profile of this influential generation as a whole—who they are, what they value, and what they’re looking for in their life and career—and then shows Y’s how to use this information to customize a career path that suits their own passions, values, and goals.

Erickson explores how Y’s diverse cultural backgrounds, increased life expectancy, and educational patterns will change the structure, length, and context of their “working life,” and how events and trends like terrorism, advanced technology, and growing up in a strong pro-child culture shaped this generation’s self-esteem, sense of social responsibility, and life and career expectations.

The book then provides a six-step framework Y’s can use to sort through their options and find a career they can really plug into:

1. **Find Your Passion:** Think about the kinds of experiences that engage and energize you
2. **Identify Your Preferences:** Decide what work is really about for you: Creating something of lasting value? Being a part of a winning team? A secure path to success?

Representing one third of the global population, Generation Y will dominate the workforce for the next forty years and beyond. More than any generation before them, “Y’s” will have opportunities to experiment with careers, choose jobs they love, and to leverage their unique talents and viewpoints to change the workplace in unprecedented ways. This savvy career guide shows them how.

**continued on next page**
Tamara Erickson writes the “Across the Ages” blog for harvardbusiness.org which takes a look at the future workforce and generational differences in today’s workplace. Her provocative posts have raised some thoughtful questions about the state of today’s organizations and how the different age cohorts are engaging with one another. Here are some of her most popular posts:

**DO WE NEED WEEKENDS?**
“I’d like to see companies re-think the idea of a pre-set “week day” and a “weekend” and look instead at which jobs actually need synchronous activity with what frequency. If the job doesn’t require it, why not let the worker decide his or her own schedule?”

**TROPHIES FOR EVERYONE? DEBUNKING ANOTHER GEN Y MYTH**
“One of today’s popular data points on Gen Y is the number of trophies that were handed out at a typical little kids’ soccer match or softball game. Commentators are quick to observe that a lot of kids got a lot of trophies and jump to the conclusion that Gen Y’s as young adults are in constant need of praise and reassurance.”

**DO WE NEED TITLES?**
“I’ve been thinking a lot about redesigning our organizations because I don’t think incremental change is the answer. We need to question some of the fundamental assumptions upon which our organizations are built.”

**10 REASONS GEN XERS ARE UNHAPPY AT WORK**
“I’m worried about Generation X and corporations. As far as I can tell, these two have a tentative relationship at best—and are likely headed for some rocky times ahead.”

**THE BABY BOOMER — GENERATION Y LOVE FEST**
“The reality is there’s a love fest underway in many corporations. Y’s and Boomers are finding that they enjoy spending time together—and learning from each other. Y’s, when faced with a new challenge, tend to function like a heat-seeking missile—single-mindedly pursuing the person in the organization with the most relevant experience. In many cases, this person is a Boomer—often in some distant part of the organization, or several hierarchical levels removed. This approach reflects how Y’s like to learn—from an expert, just-in-time, and in response to the specific challenge they need to address.”
Why is Generation Y so important?
The sheer size of Generation Y makes it unquestionably influential—both in terms of shaping global tastes and buying patterns, and in terms of how they’ll dominate and likely change the workplace in many significant ways. By 2010, Generation Y will already represent a component of the U.S. workforce approximately equal in size to that of the Boomers. Overall, their numbers ensure that Y’s will be the most powerful group in the workforce for the next four to six decades! Y’s also have a very different view of what “work” and “career” should be, based on the events and trends that they witnessed growing up. And because technology has always been ubiquitous for them, they have innovative ideas about how to do all kinds of things better, and of course, faster. This, together with their sheer numbers, will give Y’s opportunities to influence the relationship between employees and employers in ways previous generations could not.

More Y’s will graduate from college than any previous generation—yet you say the increase won’t be enough to keep pace with demand. Is it possible that this growing shortage of college-educated employees could actually decrease the value of a college education over the next several decades?

Without question, those with a degree and the necessary skills will have their choice of work and
will be in high demand. But as competition for college-educated employees increases, companies will become more motivated to use those without college degrees effectively in the workforce, in jobs that today would routinely require a diploma in-hand as the price of admission. They will come to screen candidates in different ways—relying less on the stamp of a university and more on their own judgment of the individual’s inherent capabilities and attitude. I believe companies will also eventually join professional sports franchises in recruiting individuals earlier and earlier in the pipeline. It will become a sign of exceptional talent to proclaim that you were hired in your junior or even sophomore year in college—only those in the lower ranks of the class will make it through as seniors.

What about the competition from developing countries like India and China?

The rise of a highly educated workforce around the world will certainly heighten competition for some of the best jobs. India in particular among the rising economies possesses the highest potential for providing qualified young employees for global corporations and will be a strong draw for companies seeking to build or staff international operations. However, the anticipated demand for educated workers means that Y’s with degrees will have little to worry about, no matter where they live. There will be work for all of them.

How will the greater life expectancy of Y’s affect long-held notions of “middle age” and “retirement”?

The longer life expectancy most likely will not prolong the years of being “old” for Y’s; it will extend the period of an active “middle.” Much of this additional time will be spent in good health. I suggest that Y’s think in terms of a career (or multiple careers) spanning sixty or so years. They will almost certainly live long enough that the idea of “retiring” into complete relaxation in their sixties will seem ridiculous.

Your research shows that as a generation, Y’s have very strong family support. How does this impact their career choices?

The strong ties this generation has with their families and confidence in their parents provides a “safety net” of support that will allow Y’s to approach their careers with a greater sense of experimentation than past generations enjoyed. According to the U.S. census, four million people between the ages of 25 and 34 live with their parents—that number is probably even higher now. They are comfortable relying on their parents for advice, emotional support, and often, financial help. This safety net makes it possible for Y’s to take some risks, to experiment until they find work that suits them. Y’s are in the enviable position of beginning their career search by seeking their passion, rather than looking for a “must-succeed” first job aimed at paying the mortgage.

Employers frequently complain that Y’s are too impatient—they want everything now and don’t want to have to “put their time in.” Is this a fair assessment?

This generation has grown up under an unprecedented cloud of random, threatening events. Incidents of human-caused terror and natural disasters have made the world a very unpredictable place. It’s no wonder that Y’s conclude that “living now” is a sensible thing to do. For many in Generation Y, living life to the fullest each day is an important and understandable life priority. I believe that impatience—what I prefer to call Y’s remarkable sense of “immediacy”—will be a lasting and perhaps defining characteristic of their generation. They will not “outgrow” it, and it will have a significant impact on their career choices and ways of working.

What about when Y’s become the bosses of their older colleagues? How can they make this work?

The key, as with any relationship, is to recognize that both people bring something to the party. The older worker may well have more experience in the specific industry than the younger boss, but the younger boss may have some new perspectives that will improve the way things have “always” been done. Each individual needs to be open to learning from the other. One of the most common mistakes a young manager can make is thinking that
the way it has been done so far has no value. The way things are done may need to change, but it’s worth understanding why intelligent people have made the choices they have in the past. The younger boss needs to think in terms of “what can I learn here?” as well as “how can I make it better?”

What can we expect to see from corporations beyond “flexible schedules” to cater to Generation Y employees?

One of the most exciting options looming on the work horizon is the switch to task-based rather than time-based work arrangements. In this approach, employees are assigned specific tasks and required to put in only as much time as it actually takes to get the work done. This practice removes the need to keep regular hours or to show up at the office each day. It allows people to work asynchronously, instead of in standard nine to five routines, from virtually any location. This arrangement is very appealing to many Y’s, who as a whole are extremely frustrated with how slowly work gets done and decisions get made in today’s organizations.

Y’s are the first generation of unconsciously competent technology users. How will the ways they use technology bring positive changes to the workplace?

Y’s are highly accomplished at “time-shifting”—doing things when it is most convenient for them rather than when it’s “scheduled” to occur (think TiVo replay). They use technology to do many activities anytime, anywhere—and hopefully they’ll teach older coworkers this skill. They may even help free the workplace of corporate life’s rigid schedules. Y’s propensity to coordinate in the moment, rather than plan everything out, as well as their need for speed and the habit of using the most effective technology for each task, will lead to efficiency in many areas of business. They are also good at tapping communal wisdom to find answers quickly, and are comfortable working from anywhere—as long as they have the right technology to do so.

What is the most important incentive companies should be able to offer a Generation Y employee if they hope to keep them?

Without a doubt, the most engaged Y’s in our research were those who felt that they had been given very challenging assignments. I often advise corporations that the favorite job of any Y is one that is critically important but that he or she has no idea how to do. They want significant challenge and meaningful work without necessarily getting boxed into traditional steps on the corporate career path that hold little appeal for them. Companies that want to keep Y’s will have to, among other things, give them ample opportunities to learn and grow experientially through the work they do.

PLUGGED IN

The Generation Y Guide to Thriving at Work

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TAMARA ERICKSON is a respected, McKinsey Award-winning author and popular and engaging storyteller. Her compelling views of the future are based on extensive research on changing demographics and employee values and, most recently, on how successful organizations work. Well-grounded and fundamentally optimistic, Tamara’s work discerns and describes interesting trends in our future and provides actionable counsel to help both organizations and individuals prepare today. She is President of The nGenera Innovation Network.


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