



Adapt For Gen Y, Or Die

| By **Victor Finkel** |

The generally accepted definition is that ‘Gen Y’ constitutes those who were born between 1982 and 2000, which means they are between 12 and 30 today. By this criterion, there are 4.5 million Gen Ys in Australia. So what exactly do the crusaders of Generation Y stand for and what is it that people commonly say about them? A lot of people conclude that Gen Ys are impatient, disloyal and demanding. If this is the case, then why would anybody in their right mind hire them? The devil is in the detail – employers have to hire Gen Ys, because they simply have no other choice. Gen Ys are the future employees and leaders of Australian businesses, and employers have no choice but to get them into the ranks and on board.

So where exactly do these claims about Gen Ys stem from? Let’s start by looking at the Baby Boomers, who are those born post-1945. There was literally a boom of babies. Often referred to as the pig in the python, you can clearly see the stack in the population demographic. After the Baby Boomers, the generationologers (if we can call them that) called the next generation ‘X’ – for ‘unknown’, because they could not work them out. It seems as though after Gen X, confusion struck. It was not quite clear what the next generation should be called, and the most logical solution was to stick with ‘Y’, simply because it follows ‘X’.

Articulate your purpose. Express and articulate exactly what you are doing and why – and make sure you go beyond just generating profit. Demonstrate what your purpose is and how you are making the world better – but always keep it real.

There is no wonder that this has probably not filled you with much faith in generational systems and typologies, but let us spend some time thinking about it and play with a few words and theories, in particular nominative determinism. Nominative determinism is the theory that names determine attributes and that people grow to become representative of their names. There are some fantastic examples of this. Take Thomas Crapper, who was the inventor of the flushing toilet; Sue Yoo, a trial lawyer in LA; Amy Freeze, a weather presenter in a very cold part of America; Bishop Bishop, Justice Judge; and the leading vasectomy practitioner in America, Dr Richard Chopp.

So what are the attributes that distinguish Generation Y from other generations of potential employees? One of the most prominent characteristic of Gen Ys is that they always ask ‘Why?’. The difference between Gen Y and the Baby Boomers, who also questioned the existing status quo, however, is that Gen Y actually listens to the answers they are given – assuming they are well explained.

Baby Boomers, in many ways, were defined by what they stood against, such as the massive protests against the Vietnam War and the hippie movement that rejected the status quo of the time. A survey from 1974 showed that a staggering 40 per cent of Baby Boomers thought their lives were worse because of their parents. Gen Ys, on the other hand, are totally different. One of the biggest stereotypes of Gen Y is that many of them still live at home well into their late twenties, and this contention is supported by the fact that around 30 per cent of 20- to 30-year-olds in Australia still live at home. Furthermore, 90 per cent of Gen Ys say they have great relationships with their parents.

Let’s look at the defining questions that Gen Ys ask and then look at some of the ways that organisations can adapt in order to cater for this large volume of future employees. And in case you are wondering about why you should care about any of this – as an employer and a

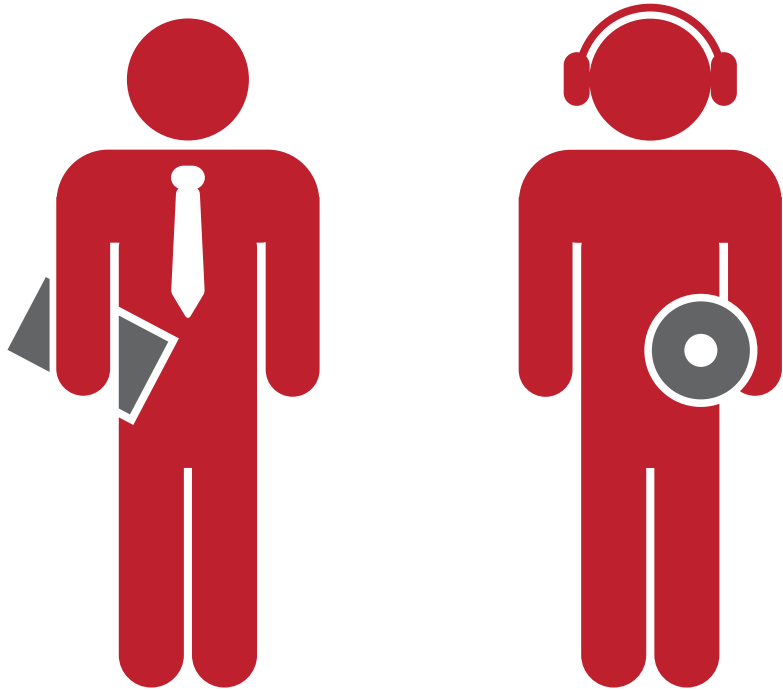
business, you have no other choice. Over the next 20 years, 4.5 million Gen Ys are going to be employed in every organisation around the world. And while they are already in the mix, in 20 years time, you are not going to be able to get past them. Just like any other trend, you have to grab it by the horns and change your ways, or quite frankly get left behind.

The defining questions typically asked by Gen Ys are: Why am I doing this?; Why do things have to be this way?; Why can I not cite Wikipedia? The first question recognises that Gen Ys want to be doing rewarding and stimulating work, right from day one. And if they are not getting that from one organisation, they will simply find it in another. And when they cannot find it, many Gen Ys will simply start their own organisation in order to start bringing about the change they want to see.

A lot of Gen Ys are often perceived to be all

over the shop when it comes to their careers and life choices, but if you look at their career and life paths from their perspectives, you will see that they have made a very serious set of decisions to get to exactly where they are. It is likely that they have looked at what was most exciting, most engaging and most meaningful to them, and then decided to pursue exactly that. From an outsider’s point of view, this often looks as though Gen Ys have no idea what the hell is going on, that they cannot commit to anything, and they have no loyalty to the organisation they work for. But surely there are a number of benefits to people taking convoluted paths as they gain experience working across different sectors, from business to government to non-profit.

The thing to understand about Gen Ys is that they do not work as an end to a means, and there are two reasons behind this. Firstly, Gen



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Support the life trajectories of Gen Ys. Implement flexible time and assess people on their performance rather than the hours they are in the office. Provide development opportunities and career paths for Gen Ys so that they will not feel the need to leave to pursue their interests elsewhere.

Ys grew up in an era that had a lot of prosperity. As a generation, Gen Y is the richest and most educated generation in history, but they have seen that wealth alone does not bring happiness – the dream of simply owning a house and a car is not enough for them to live a meaningful existence. The second reason is that they have seen peoples' loyalty to businesses go unrewarded. From their perspective, people in their parents' generation spent 10 to 20 years giving their loyalty to one organisation, only to be retrenched in economic downturns and laid off.

For Gen Y, work is not the goal that it once was for other generations, and the reason that Gen Ys always ask for more is because they have been raised being told that they are great. This idea has usually been established early on in their education, and from a young age they

were probably told that they could succeed at whatever they put their minds to. A lot of Gen Ys will remember getting more praise at school for participation than for success.

Because Gen Ys have always been told that they can do and achieve whatever they want, they genuinely believe it, and in turn they strive for whatever path they want to pursue at the time. It might be a little bit arrogant and a little bit based in fantasy, but it shapes the way that they think. In turn, it shapes the way they look at work. The ideal job for Gen Ys is one that makes them feel as though they are paid volunteers. They want something that is so exciting and so interesting that they are almost doing it for fun. They want to feel as though they are passionate hobbyists.

The second question – why do things have to be this way? – is Gen Ys challenge to the status

quo. Gen Ys were born in a time of peace. In fact, the late 1980s and early 1990s were so peaceful that noted historian Francis Fukuyama termed it 'the end of history'. However, while Gen Ys have grown up and matured in a world that was peaceful, it was also challenging and complicated. They could see that the status quo was beginning to show cracks and fail. Gen Y has seen the failure of individualism and capitalism, and has also seen the global financial crisis. They have continually seen the inability of society to take collective action to stop the threat of climate change. These are real issues for Gen Ys, and they are aware and open to discussion (that will result in action) about the plethora of threats the world faces today.

But this sets up a little bit of a paradox; on one hand Gen Ys are full of self-belief, and on the other hand they are very aware of the threats



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Encourage Gen Ys to take risks and give them the freedom to exercise their creative thinking. The more risks they take, the more they will learn from their mistakes – and it is the organisation that will capture this benefit.

they face. From this paradox comes Gen Y's sense of community mindedness. They have recognised that in order to achieve what they want for themselves, the need to pay attention to and look after the best interests of the community they live in.

There are many questions that Gen Ys ask about society, especially when it comes to why things are the way they are. They want to know why, in some companies, women still find it difficult to advance to the top. In the minds of Gen Ys, there is no doubt that men and women are equal in society and in business. And because that is their status quo, they will not understand why it is not the same throughout the entire business sector. Take gay marriage as another example. A lot of Gen Ys do not see why this issue is perceived to be controversial, and why gay marriage is not legal in Australia. Over 80 per cent of Gen Ys see this as a complete non-issue and support it absolutely. As a business owner or leader, who will be employing and working with Gen Ys, you should start to challenge yourself to think about your own responses to these questions.

The third defining question that Gen Ys tend to ask is why they cannot cite Wikipedia. This question opens up a discussion about Gen Y, the internet, and how it shapes knowledge. Nature, the very respected science journal, ran a study in 2005 that analysed the scientific articles on both Wikipedia and Britannica, and found that there were an equivalent numbers of serious errors in both. Britannica was obviously furious about this and published a long series of responses that Nature responded to comprehensively. The point is, for Gen Ys the internet is not a revelation, it quite simply is. If it were to be switched off, life would cease right there and then. The fact that

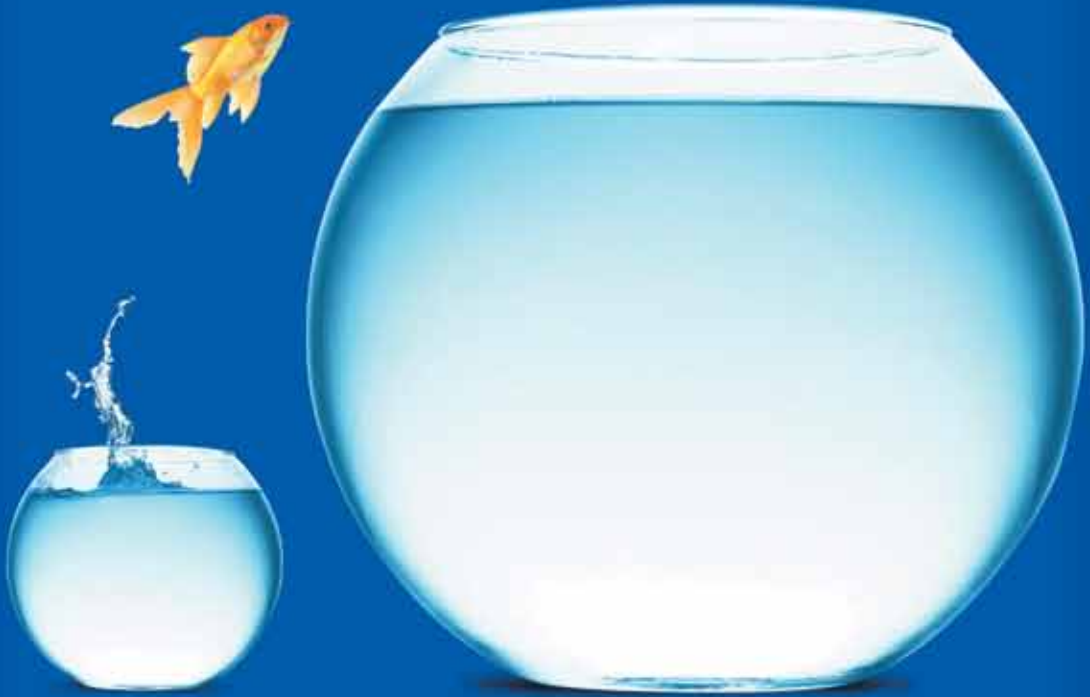
the world is on the fast-road to a technological future is not a concern to Gen Ys. Any time an issue comes up, or a discussion unfolds, Gen Ys Google it. Google is part of Gen Y's genetic makeup.

The ubiquity of knowledge has changed the way Gen Ys relate to learning, and it has also changed how they perceive the value of information. When growing up, knowledge was never difficult for Gen Ys to acquire, and any questions they had or any facts they needed to know could generally be found on the internet. The challenge they now face is actually understanding what is important and what wisdom really is.

The other reason why Gen Ys relate so intimately to the internet stems from their desire to receive constant feedback. Many Gen Ys live their lives on the internet, in a world of constant feedback, where they put forward their ideas and their opinion in return for instant responses from their peers. The feedback could be about what they are wearing, what they are thinking, or what they are doing – no matter what the subject, the feedback is critical.

So what do these three questions mean for organisations that will be employing Gen Ys? Firstly, you must be able to articulate your purpose beyond profit. While every generation will have a handful of business leaders who are interested in profit alone, Gen Y, more than any generation before it, is seeking purpose. Organisations need to be able to express and articulate exactly what they are doing and why – far beyond generating profit. To retain valuable Gen Ys, organisations need to be able to demonstrate what their purpose is, and how they are making the world better. Answers to these questions are what high-performing Gen Ys are

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If you can create an organisation that has purpose and meaning, that supports people in their life trajectories, gives them meaningful development opportunities, and also supports their learning, you will attract high-achieving people from not only Gen Y but from all generations.

looking for. And these have to be earnest. Gen Ys are incredibly good at sniffing out hypocrisy. The internet brings everything to light. Take WikiLeaks, for example – it is the ultimate watchdog and no organisation is safe. Being able to live and articulate a purpose is critical in creating an organisation that Gen Ys actually want to be part of.

Secondly, organisations must strive to support the life trajectories of Gen Ys. Work is far from the be all and end all, and having a balanced and meaningful life is a critical part of what they want. This might be something as simple as recognising that your organisation can implement flexible hours. Do you need all of your employees to be in the office from 9am until 5pm every day, or could you instead assess people on performance and set specific times when they have to be there? If you

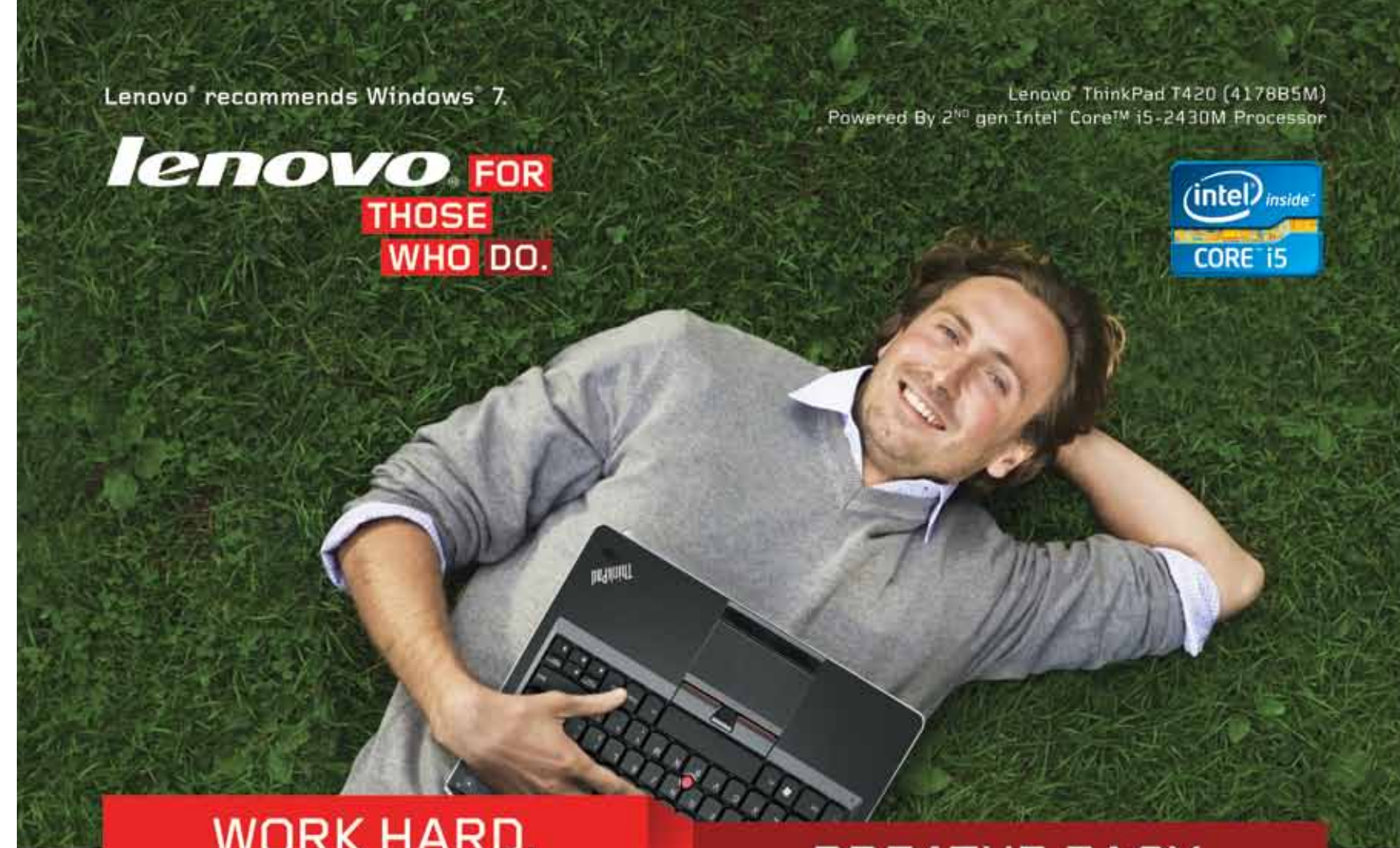
can provide development opportunities and paths for Gen Y employees to grow within your business, they will not feel the need to leave and pursue their interests elsewhere.

As an organisation, you should also encourage your Gen Y employees to take risks. In their younger school years, it is likely that they were mollycoddled and this probably did not prepare them properly for the working world out there. Giving Gen Ys the freedom to take risks allows them to learn from their failures, and it is the organisation that will capture this benefit.

If you can create an organisation that has purpose and meaning, that supports people in their life trajectories, gives them meaningful development opportunities, and also supports their learning, you will attract high-achieving people from not only

Gen Y but from all generations. There are a lot of negative stereotypes about Gen Ys but they need to be seen for what they are – a pool of talented people with a challenging way of thinking that you can harness for success. **ABS**

Victor Finkel is an eclectic Gen Y with too many interests. Victor studied music performance and aerospace engineering at Monash University, which he represented when he won the 2011 World University Debating Championships. He currently works as a management consultant and will be heading to Oxford in September to study Public Policy as a Rhodes Scholar. This article is based on a speech Victor gave at Creative Innovation 2011 (www.creativeinnovationglobal.com.au).



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