

Hira: Gen Y Has Bad Reputation but Great Potential

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By Theresa Minton-Eversole

LAS VEGAS—To staffing professionals who struggle to recruit Generation Y and supervisors confounded trying to manage them, journalist Nadira Hira says: “What did you expect?”

This generation is a product of its environment, which has been influenced heavily by helicopter parents, rapid technology advances and, yes, instability. But while they might be a tough nut to crack collectively, this group of workers is full of potential just waiting to be tapped.

Hira shared her observations on how the current economic climate is affecting Generation Y and how this will ultimately affect their employers in her April 29 keynote presentation here during the Society for Human Resource Management’s 2009 Staffing Management Conference & Exposition.

“Yes we [feel] entitled, we’re coddled, we’re annoying and basically all the things 20-somethings have been since time in memoriam. But if [age] 50 is the new 40, and 40 is the new 30, then naturally 25 has become the new 15, right?” quipped Hira. But she said that the recession will force this group to come off that mantle, making many feel a little less entitled and more unsure of themselves. This will present some great opportunities for employers to adjust their own strategies for how they attract and retain Gen Y.

Cultural Factors Influencing Gen Y

Gen Y are the products of Baby Boomer parents who have been and remain extremely involved in their children’s lives, Hira said. They marry later, have children later and have fewer responsibilities tying them down than previous generations of 20-somethings. Plus, their parents have raised them to speak their minds.

Technology advances have made their world simultaneously smaller and bigger. What that creates in this generation is a uniformity of perspective that’s never been experienced before. “We’ve all been raised by our TVs; we all have access to social media technologies; and so we’re coming to you with the same expectations: We have access to the American Dream, and we expect you to help us achieve it.”

But technology has created a different approach to work, she said. “When you come to the office, you think of work as just meeting goals. But whether I’m at home on my computer at three in the morning or I’m physically in the office, work is whenever I’m achieving my goals that you set for me, and technology allows me to do that in myriad different ways. They don’t do PowerPoint; they don’t do podiums. This is a difficult thing for older managers to understand.”

On the back end, this generation, with its reliance on technology-aided connecting, has moved away from natural one-on-one interaction and struggles with interpersonal communication. Consequently, “we will struggle with leadership, with management, and all that starts from the communication gaps that are related to the overuse of technology.”

This generation has lived through so much insecurity, she said, from Columbine to Katrina to watching their parents lose jobs and now getting laid off themselves. “Through all of this recent uncertainty you’re seeing this generation say ‘I’m going to really search for what matters to me because all the things that are supposed to be essential to live your life won’t be around when I retire.’ ”

On the other hand, “they are more wealthy, they are competitive, they are driven to excel and are

excited to come to work because that is so fundamental to the way they were brought up," she said. "So if [employers] can focus on those advantages and challenge those qualities while [they] mitigate some of the more difficult ones, you really can get great use out of this generation."

Hira said there are three key things employers can do to recruit and retain this generation:

Have a mission. "I'm not talking about a mission statement. I'm talking about sharing a succinctly communicated message of what the company stands for with them, so that they can get on board with it and see how they can help achieve it."

Present opportunities. "Help them, especially after the recruiting, with career planning to help them figure out how they can take advantage of opportunities available to contribute to the company's goals. But let the Ys take the lead; sometimes they're more excited about the company than you are."

Open a dialog. "Gen Ys can be taught. All of us stay for relationships or go because of bad ones. And we have technology to help us get back to where we used to be, where small communities raise you."

The bottom line is this: "You've got four generations in the workforce, and you've got to meet with each of them individually to see what you can do for them so they can all work together effectively."