

Title: Who Moved my Cheese? Or the Cheese Transmogrified? : Generation Y and the Dynamism in their Work –Life



Theme: Reinventing Work, Reinventing Organization

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The Future is already here — it's just not very evenly distributed.

- William Gibson , Science fiction novelist

Introduction

Welcome to the new world! A world, fraught with great challenges and greater rewards, where knowledge is power and organizations run at the speed of thought! No more is the world confined to the proverbial oyster shell with traditional barriers of borders enchainning the enterprises and the enterprising. The world is a marketplace and organizations are game- changers.

There are some fundamental shifts occurring in this new world: reiteration of democratic principles, prevalence of free markets over statism and the emergence of a multi-polar world. At the same time, we observe real tensions and vigorous debates about sustainable resource utilization, nuclear proliferation, coping with pandemics and social inequity. To paraphrase Dickens in the contemporary setting: the new world experiences the best and the worst of times.

The impact of these rapid changes is amplified in modern worker's life. On a macro-level, they are impacted the most by the rapid uncertainties generated by economic, cultural and technological globalization. At an individual level, every worker deals with a fundamental change in the kind of roles being offered in pursuance of organizational objectives. Employees are no more operators in assembly lines, but expected to contribute to human capital, a key component of value in a knowledge-based society. It is a time when the employees face a combination of opportunities for advancement AND the greatest challenges. The New York Times business bestseller by Spencer Johnson, *"Who Moved My Cheese? An Amazing Way to Deal with Change in Your Work and in Your Life"*, published in 1998, cites a parable that seems befit to describe the immense changes that today's work force has to deal with.

Born between 1980 and 2000, Generation Y – also referred to as the Digital natives, Millennial Generation or the Net Generation – is techno-savvy, ambitious and achievement-oriented. These young people offer organizations the opportunity to quickly adapt to new technologies and the increasingly global economy¹.

What then, are the dominant ways in which work- life will change especially, for Generation Y employees in the next few decades of the 21st century?

Experiencing Work- life Changes: Generation Y at Work

As a transition manager in a global consulting organization, in the midst of the emergence of this new world, I too am trying to understand complexities of organizational change where I experience the thrust of dynamic market and societal forces, each day. At a macro- level, the changes are occurring at three broad levels for any organization and its industry environment: business models, operating models and communication models. In sync with these three levels, the fundamental "employee mix" is changing.

I entered B-school in a rather unfavorable "external environment". The worldwide recession was at its worst in 2009. International student education loans dried-up and competition for education intensified as many applicants flooded in their candidature. Organizations suddenly realized the importance of being lean and mean and employees had to find ways of adding new skill sets to retain their relevance.

I too decided to pursue higher education in management. I rested the dream of pursuing an international master's degree as India was where the growth was for the next decade. On the personal finance front, I didn't want a "credit squeezed -immigrant" life at that stage. It wasn't the best of years to gain corporate exposure in a growing economy like India too. New business shrunk all around and chaos gripped many growing organizations, which bore the uncertainty of the recession era. I could just sense paranoia, where co-workers returned to their desk every day, not sure whether they would be expected to return to work the next day. I joined a top B-school in India, partly to shield this paranoia, and partly to turn my life into something multiplicatively productive at the end of the 2 years. But something rapidly happened while I was away from the corporate world. Though B-school life seemed to offer plenty of opportunities to research and reflect and work with brilliant colleagues concentrated in the campus, yet I missed the pace of change, excitement and dynamism of business as usual. I became restless to be back to real action. Only to find the expectations from me had changed. *Not only had the cheese moved, the "cheese" itself acquired a different form and significance for new age workers like me.*

I returned to the corporate world with a global organization where the kind of work 'available' and 'sought after' changed while I was away. Ways of working rapidly evolved to become globally collaborative inter-connected and result-oriented. Today my work spanned communicating and coordinating complex projects with several time zones, spanning many continents and surpassing organizational team barriers. Yesterday, I was restricted to my desk area, designated as my "team", answerable to only my "boss". Now, my managers were everywhere: in cross-functional teams, in 'matrixed' project organizations, and then there was the customer. The tools of working changed. A few years ago, in a mid-sized yet growing multi-national company, I was expected to constantly schedule "face time" or meetings to conduct day to day work. Here and now, I had to conduct virtual live meetings for up to 25 participants joining in from various parts of the world, to solve a problem at hand. From hand-written sticky notes to fantastic communicator applications, from emails on desktop computers to push-email facility on mobiles, my every day tools transformed into smart and intuitive techno-devices!

The cheese for me really "transmogrified" when I realized that my location was nearly irrelevant. I realized that the effect of location either diminished for my organization also in some economic activities or got substituted or augmented by appropriate technology and method. Virtual marketplaces and organizations that offer benefits of speed, agility, round the clock operation and global reach can be created or, on the contrary, reinforced in some other economic fields. In the changing paradigm, the locational advantage is swiftly giving way to technological competence. And guess what, millions like me have to cope up with such new lessons every day.



Figure: The Mind of Generation Y, Andrew Baker for Egon Zehnder International accessible at <http://www.egonzehnder.com/global/focus/topics/article/id/71500024>

Dominant Trends for ‘Generation Y’ in the Knowledge Society Work- Life

The concept of a Knowledge Economy was popularised by Drucker in 1969, and was the title of Chapter 12 in his book, *The Age of Discontinuity*. The rules and practices that determined success of organizations in the industrial economy need rewriting in an interconnected, globalised economy where knowledge resources such as know-how, expertise, and intellectual property are more critical than other economic resources such as land and natural resources. The most important intangible resource is knowledge, a step ahead of ‘information’. Information when processed and disseminated by competent manpower results in knowledge. Knowledge when locked into systems or processes has higher inherent value than when it is retained in the human minds. Organizations, economy and society based on knowledge are more responsive especially in a globalised scenario. The economics in the new world is not of scarcity, but rather of abundance. Unlike most resources that deplete when used, information and knowledge can be shared, and actually grow through application.

The major questions are how will organizations create enablers for reaping the full benefits of knowledge centric systems in view of the changing work- life dimensions? What will be the implications for the Generation Y human resource?

1) Change in Employee Mix

“The dominant factor for business in the next two decades absent war, pestilence, or collision with a comet is not going to be economics or technology. It will be demographics.”

Peter Drucker in essay, “The Future That Has Already Happened”

Drucker was right. The most profound change over the past decades, overarching the change in demands from workers and the competitive landscape, is the change in “employee mix”. Besides the full-time employees, organizations utilize services of outsourced consultants, part-time employees, temporary employees, leased employees, job share employees and employees with co-employersⁱⁱ. Not only is the change in business models and operating models facilitating growth of these new kinds of workforces, they are changing the communication models, meaning of work and family life and definitions of work and leisure hours for employees, co-workers and their leadership. The demographic implication of this change is worth highlighting, especially for the young employees and those over 50 years—may not continue to work as traditional full-time 9 -to-5 employees, but will participate in the labor force in many new and different ways: as temporaries, as part-timers, as consultants, on special assignments etc.. Young people will have to work together harmoniously with older educated people, and this generational diversity will become increasingly important for organizations to manage.

The present generation of youth is the largest ever in historyⁱⁱⁱ. In light of their share, young people are critical stakeholders of society and economy. Their energy, motivation and vision are essential assets for positive development of the world. Remarkable 20-somethings have changed the way we lead our digital lives: Larry Page and Sergey Brin (Google), Kevin Rose (Digg), Chad Hurley, Steve Chen, and Jawed Karim (YouTube), Mark Zuckerberg (facebook), Bruce Livingston (iStockphoto), Matthew Mullenberg (Wordpress). “Generation Y” has emerged to be the first truly technologically connected generational cohort^{iv}. Just as unskilled manual workers in manufacturing sector were the dominant social and political force in the 20th century, knowledge technologists are likely to become the dominant force over the next decades^v.

2) Democratic, Decentralized Workplaces

Ninety percent of what we call ‘management’ consists of making it difficult for people to get things done.

- ***Peter F. Drucker***

Knowledge and information "leak" to where demand is highest and the barriers are lowest. The means of communication is fundamental to knowledge flows. Therefore establishing and maintaining efficient communication channels is of utmost priority.

At the same time gaining leverage from a 'flat' organization depends on the degree and available platforms of exchange between the leadership, its employees and even the external organization influencers like industry experts. Organizational structures, culture and means of communication are fundamental to knowledge flows in any organization. Decentralised workplace changes the pace of synthesis of knowledge. For the human resource, it means faster and efficient work and opportunity to extend conventional work roles to make meaningful contributions to the organization. Generation Y is highly achievement oriented and restless to find meaning and growth. They want to be heard and to be listened to. They want to excel and have little or no respect for traditional hierarchical structures. Their ideal workplace is a meritocracy where employees advance based on their accomplishments, not their seniority^{vi}.

3) Harnessing Human Capital through Networked Organizations

The 'web-lifestyle' that Microsoft chairman, Bill Gates talked about in his book 'Business @ The Speed of Thought' in 1999 is no more a prognostication but a reality for many. Opportunities for workers to access and distill information available to organization to knowledge are abundant, but time and attention are limited. Thus, established approaches of knowledge management practices will no longer guarantee competitive advantage. Organisations need to invest in effective 'Innovation Exchanges', where human capital can be truly harnessed. Employees choose their source and pace of knowledge gathering and contribution. New ideas can be generated and implemented. Innovation can be fostered. This has profound implications on how they view their role in the organization and can impact the motivation of the new breed of knowledge workforce. If knowledge workers are able to access information systems to synthesize knowledge at anytime, anyplace and through any possible digital means, business and innovations can really happen at the speed of thought. With innovations in cloud computing, and adoption of organizational policies like "Bring Your Own Device", the future is foreseeable.

4) Emergence and Rise of the Fourth Sector

Generation Y has witnessed growing concerns and global debates over income inequality, environmental degradation and social justice. They are eager to experiment with new ways to do business, and design their own organizations with social causes at its heart. The recognition by many people of the failure of business, governments and public policy to deal with these issues adequately and swiftly has led, among other things, to the proliferation of non-profit organizations all over the globe. They have doubled in number in the US alone in the past 15 years^{vii}. Management expert Peter Drucker believes that "the proper 'social responsibility' of business is to turn a social problem into economic opportunity and economic benefit, into productive capacity, into human competence, into well-paid jobs, and into wealth^{viii}". This underlying principle has spurred growing interest in sustainability as a concept and young knowledge workers are eager to join and start initiatives^{ix}.

Conclusions

With compounding environmental changes and immense dynamism and diversity in its own composition of a workforce, organizations need to be geared towards the new, dynamic world. The digital natives are achievement oriented yet faced with several demands on its limited time and attention. The change in “employee mix” is a major demographic change, which is accompanied by change in business models, operating practices and communicating modes.

Peter Drucker has both argued and shown, in general understanding the present enables you to dispense with futurology. A deep understanding of future trends most likely to be resonant with the Generation Y human resource is required to design and re-think organizations and identify opportunities for innovation. These changes include need for decentralized and democratized way of managing cohorts of the generation Y, providing avenues of networking and contributing in an “always on” society. Generation Y is well aware of expansion of business’ role in to economic and societal good.

As we sit in 2012 and try to look ahead, we can only imagine the possibilities and pitfalls that next few years will have in store for us. Almost one thing is certain- we need to wake up to a new world with a new set of rules because the game has altered.

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