

A GEN-Y VIEW OF THE FUTURE OF WORK & ORGANIZATION

I represent one voice out of many from the next generation workforce and I can only hope that more of my peers will rally around what I have to say and feel that they can relate to and connect with the statements I am about to make in this paper.

If you are reading this paper as a member of the jury, you are likely to be from one of the preceding generations before ours. In recent years you have probably begun to experience working with and interacting with some of my peers in a variety of situations and context.

These interactions probably left you with a certain impression of what our generation is all about.

You may be familiar with the various tags that bestowed upon our generation- commonly we are known as Gen-Ys, in some circles we have been dubbed the Strawberry Generation because of our tendency to 'bruise easily' having grown up through a relative lack of hardship.

In some quarters we have been accused of not being ready to get our hands dirty and do grunt work or whatever work that is available as a means of sustenance for the short term because we have been brought up to believe that we are 'too good to flip burgers' and that our paper qualifications indemnify us from ever having to do any sort of blue collar work while we still either aspire towards expectations of having a comfortable, well-paying job upon graduation or for the rare few, dare dream of being the next Mark Zuckerberg.

How GEN-Ys perceive work, how they choose to be productive and how they choose to eventually contribute value to the world in the next few decades will very much shape and define how work is being performed and how organizations are being modified, dissolved and created in the most organic and practical ways that will serve the needs of the future workforce.

Based on my interactions with and insights gleaned on the attitudes of many similarly motivated GEN-Y peers in my diverse international network, I have reason to believe that we are at another defining point in the history of work as we move beyond the age of knowledge work and into the age of the freelance / entrepreneurial economy. This calls for a change in our mindset as a collective society, our approach to education and our definition of the true value of work and how work is performed.

The case that I will be making in this paper with regards to the changes that are happening and how we are expected to adapt to it will be based on these four big ideas and how they relate to each other. The trends are global in nature, but certain examples are definitely more evident in certain parts of the world.

Being Selfish and Taking Personal Responsibility

The first challenge that we face as a generation is a challenge of taking personal responsibility for our own learning and development as well as the choices and decisions we make in life.

Our is a generation that grew up with parents who think that they know what's best for their child and take up on an active role in decision making on behalf of their child especially during the formative years. With such an active participation and in some extreme cases, an imposition of a parent's will or ambition upon a child, there is a tendency for them to grow up believing that it is their responsibility to live the lives that their parents would want for them or to help fulfil certain ambitions that their parents failed to complete within their own lifetime.

I concur with Charles Handy on the need for people to be properly selfish. I think it is extremely important for us to become aware of what our true purpose in life is, to stand tall in the face of opportunities, distractions and obstacles that life may throw at us and to be clear on what metrics really matter to us when we decide to measure our success on our own terms.

It is only possible for us to become properly selfish when we decide to take personal responsibility of what is really important to us in life and to feel the weight of responsibility on our own shoulders instead of playing it safe by doing what everyone else is doing and doing what other people tell you to do.

Most if not all parents advise, make decisions on behalf of or impose their will on their children with the best of intentions but sometimes in order for their children to really grow and experience what life has to offer, getting bruised is inevitable.

By being personally responsible, you no longer have someone to blame for the outcome of your decisions and you begin to learn the importance of living consciously in an engaged manner, instead of being on autopilot and simply following a flight path that has been charted by other people.

This may sound like a tremendous undertaking, but this does not mean that parents or educators should totally wash their hands off guiding the next generation. Now that we are clear on the importance of every individual being properly selfish and taking full personal responsibility for themselves, let's look at how the other aspects come into play.

Re-defining Education: Enablement & Empowerment

Education remains a fundamental aspect of ensuring the proper learning and development of an entire generation. However, there is a need to re-think our approach to education and what we believe and expect of it.

What is perhaps the biggest misguided beliefs that has been widely perpetuated, is the one where we over-emphasize on the importance of a good education and paper qualifications.

By now, it should be abundantly clear that getting paper qualifications is by no means a guarantee of a job and even if there was a job available, the job may not necessarily be what you expected or envisioned it to be because it is simply no longer a guarantee of stability nor security. When we take into account the stories that we hear of disgruntled employees who

feel like their lives, personality and passion is being slowly sucked out of them on a daily basis as they are stuck in a cubicle job where there is little sense of fulfilment, satisfaction or accomplishment; the prospects of following in the exact footsteps isn't at all very alluring.

As we also know, the current conventional education system is in general, quite biased towards analytical, numerate, linguistic and factual intelligence while being rather ill-equipped to nurture, reward and build up students whose strengths veer towards spatial, practical, interpersonal and emotional intelligence.

Charles Handy advocates that education becomes more like work and work becomes more like education so that there is a more direct and practical relationship between the two. While I agree with that train of thought, I would take it a step further and say that work whilst important, is but a mere component of life. We need to question if the sole purpose of education is to merely prepare us for work so that we can be productive for the rest of our lives or is it a process where we begin to learn about ourselves and how we can equip ourselves to handle the challenges and adventures that we will gain out of life.

As we go about re-thinking education, we can either continue to overemphasize the importance of formal education or to acknowledge it for its limitations and work on finding ways to enhance it.

Ideally, we would like to have a system that is so comprehensive and efficient that it is able to identify the core strengths, talents and intelligence of every student passing through and then nurturing their development into adults capable of fulfilling their fullest potential.

Since such an efficient system of sorting and development may not be entirely plausible, we can start by developing the relevant supporting structures that will guide individuals in taking ownership and personal responsibility of their own learning and development.

The objective of such a supporting structure is to enable individuals to curate their own life curriculum with formal education as the foundation piece in a life-long journey of exploration and active learning.

When you are personally responsible for your learning and development, you are likely to make strategic choices that will be best suited to enhancing your core strengths and expediting your progress towards realizing your true potential and passion in life. The content for such value-added experiences, growth and opportunities for contribution can be scoured from existing platforms and opportunities such as self-development courses, volunteer opportunities with NPOs or from participating in and initiating community projects.

Further support and guidance can come in the form of mentorship, coaching or peer support 'Mastermind' groups where individuals in the group are mutually committed to each other's growth. The truth is that support can come in many different forms. Sometimes, all you need is a sounding board, sometimes you just need a kick up the rear as a reminder of what you ought to be doing and sometimes lessons present themselves in the form of stories shared by others in the group. What all these does for the individual is that it gives them the 'go-ahead' they need to pursue what they set out to do knowing that they are adequately supported and empowered by those around them to do so.

Collaboration instead of Unnecessary Competition

As we dive into the topic of collaboration instead of unnecessary competition, we will begin the discussion from an education perspective.

Academic grading, while useful as a tool to track the actual progress and development of students in comparison to their peers, conditions students from a young age to believe that competition is a way of life and that winning and coming out tops against your peers is important.

Ultra competitive parents who fear that their child would lose out to their peers in both current and future opportunities often start piling undue pressure on their children to excel in school and start signing them up for all sorts of tuition and enrichment lessons designed to equip students with a variety of studying, examination and cramming techniques specifically prescribed to help their child get good grades in school.

Such a myopic competitive focus on grades as the sole purpose for getting an education, in my opinion is not all healthy because this is simply a case of competing for the sake of competition and as a result, both parents and students have lost sight of the true purpose and intention of getting an education.

What I am proposing is not an abolishment of all forms of competition. I am of the opinion that healthy competition is vital in creating an environment in which participants will strive to do their best. In addition when applied to broader context of industry and technological advancement, competition can be a catalyst for which new advancements or efficiencies can be brought about as a result of a competitive rivalry.

What I am advocating is for people to stop and pause for a moment to consider if it is necessary for them to compete with each other when there are easier ways to defeat the competition simply by re-defining the parameters in which you choose to compete and operate in.

This is similar to the concept of defining your own niche. Often times, we find ourselves having to compete on the same terms as everyone else because we don't know any better than to just play by the same rules as everyone else.

If you choose to play by the same rules set by others, you are approaching life as a constant race to seek approval from an authoritative figure by giving them exactly what they want.

This is often the norm when applying for university admission, applying for your first job and being considered for a promotion. In order to be considered, you need to check off all the boxes of what they expect of you and there is a certain mould or scope you are expected to walk into and fill.

This often leaves very little room for you to be able to reconcile with the parts of your personality, passion and desires that are not in sync or related with what is expected of you as a 'desirable candidate'.

What if I were to challenge you by asking if it's possible to colour outside of the box, to be true to who you are, what you are passionate about and to actively choose only to compete on

your own terms and at things you are naturally good at and you are so passionate about that you have developed a wealth of undisputed knowledge and expertise in it?

Isn't it possible then that you no longer find yourself having to compete on the same terms and in the same space as everyone else and you might actually get rewarded more handsomely for your depth of expertise within your own set parameters and you get to focus on doing the things you truly want to do instead of having to deal with all the things that come in a pre-defined role given to you?

In the age of specialists, freelancers, experts and entrepreneurs, collaboration immediately becomes extremely important because everyone needs everyone else for their skills or expertise in areas that they are not well-versed or trained in. Instead of feeling frustrated or flustered at trying to work on things you are not good at, you will be able to outsource them to other freelancers or experts and focus on what you are truly interested in doing. Your self-esteem is boosted because you know exactly what you are good at and what is the value you are bringing to the table as your contribution to your clients and to the community.

Linus Torvalds sums it up nicely in his description of the success behind the open source movement. He believes that the real idea of open source is for people to be selfish and that it is not a case of people wanting to come together to do some common good. Open source only really works when people contribute for selfish reasons.

Whatever selfish reason it may be - to learn how to do it, to show other people that you are good at it, the success of the open source movement underlines the future of collaboration and co-working where you have individuals equipped with different skills rallied together around a common theme, belief or ideal, contributing for their own selfish reasons to create something that is bigger than themselves.

Competition as a concept will still be very much alive but it is hoped that with a heightened sense of awareness of one's own capabilities and objectives, there is greater clarity on being strategic in competing in order to maximize one's chances of winning.

'Life-work' not Work-life

The final point of my argument will also serve as my conclusion. As we recap the broad points discussed in this paper, we can see that it is important for individuals to step up and take personal responsibility for their decisions, to be fully engaged in what they are doing and to be properly selfish in planning for their future.

We also discussed the role of education and how our attitude and approach towards learning and development needs to go beyond our current reliance on the existing formal education framework as the sole platform for learning and development.

In calling for a personally responsible approach in being able to craft out personal life lesson plans with formal education as the foundation of each plan, there is a need to facilitate support that will enable and empower individuals to seek out their own learning and development opportunities on an active basis.

As we talked about the need to be strategically competitive and to pursue collaboration as a way to create something larger than ourselves with the help of other people, it becomes evident that we go through life exploring and hoping to gain clarity on what our true identity

and sense of purpose is through the experiences we go through, the growth that we experience and the contribution we can make to this world.

I think the biggest paradigm shift that we could be experiencing is that Work is no longer seen as a separate component or aspect of your life. We are not striving for a work-life balance because one simply does not put their life on hold in order to work and one should not work just to be able to live on the weekends or after working hours.

Instead we should turn the phrase around on its head and call it 'Life Work'. Life work gives us a new refreshing take on what work is about because everything that you are working on presently and in the future is done with the intention of exploring and fulfilling your true purpose in life.

The single greatest project that you have on your plate is yourself and in keeping true to your purpose and passion, work is no longer the thing you do for financial sustenance. It is a responsibility you have to yourself to constantly work on increasing the value of your experiences, growth and contribution so that your Life Work at the end of your time on earth has made a difference in the lives of others within your community.

This sums up my personal take on what the future of work and organization is about and my desire for more people to dare try and live up to their true potential.

Bibliography

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