

# Emerging Generation: Mend the Gap

■ by Brian Draper



**This talk was given at to the Wholeness at Work conference on the morning of Saturday 12 April 2008.**

**I** wonder when you first identified yourself as part of a generation. What were the beliefs and values you shared with others? How did you feel about belonging to it? Did there come a time when you felt apart from that generation – if so, when? And who were the heroes and mentors for your generation?

We live in an age when it feels as if there is a pernicious disconnect between generations. It is exemplified by the cold fear felt by many of a gang of hoodies on the street corner, or the fear built into children about talking to strangers. What have you learnt from a child recently? It is becoming increasingly difficult to have a conversation with a child such as to make that a possibility.

Recently I tried to do my bit to bridge the generation gap by sending a friendly text to my 12-year-old niece. I signed off in what I thought was a trendy way with 'lol', which I intended to

mean 'lots of love'. I received from her a highly compressed text message with half the letters from words missing and a PS that put me right: (lol=laugh out loud lul=luv u loads). A steep learning experience!

Post-war generations have been categorised into Generation Y (ages 18 to 31), Generation X (ages 32 to 42) and Baby Boomer (ages 43 to 61). Baby Boomers may still dominate senior positions in many large organisations, but Generations X and Y are increasingly influential and are already leading many smaller organisations. To understand what is happening in the world of work and the direction it is heading, we need to know more about their beliefs, values and expectations – especially those of Generation Y.

First, however, a word of qualification. Many dominant characteristics span the generations. Ott, Blacksmith and Royal summarise their research

by saying 'Interest in work, quality of management, compensation (salary), and the opportunity to grow are considered the most important aspects of a potential job or workplace, regardless of age.'<sup>1</sup>

That said, research<sup>2</sup> reveals the following:

- Job seekers in Generation Y (53%) are more likely to place importance on *the amount of creativity* that the job they're seeking allows for than those in Generation X (33%) and Baby Boomers (39%)

- Job seekers in Generation Y (39%) are more likely to place importance on *the potential impact of their job* than those in Generation X (32%) and Baby Boomers (27%). Potential impact is understood in terms of concern about whether they can make a difference, care about the world, and care about green issues.

■ Job seekers in Generation Y (41%) are more likely to place importance on the potential organisation being ‘*a fun place to work*’ than those in Generation X (32%) and Baby Boomers (32%)

Overall, people in Generation Y have high expectations of self and of employers. They are interested in ongoing learning, looking for immediate responsibility and are goal-oriented. They are less responsive to a ‘command and control’ approach. However, some in older generations feel that Generation Y people are sleepy, brash and don’t know when to shut up!

Ryan Healy believes he is speaking for Generation Y when he says ‘What Does Gen Y want from work? The ability to work wherever they like, an identity that isn’t defined by a particular profession, and flexible ways of experimenting with entrepreneurship even while benefiting from traditional employment.’<sup>3</sup>

It’s interesting to see how different generations are, to some extent, ‘branding’ themselves. We might usefully ask:

- How do you brand yourself, as a human being and a Christian?
- What do you wish to be known for?
- How deeply do your brand values travel within you?
- How are these brand values – on any level – *counter-cultural*, at work, at home, or at church?

Brian Amble concludes his analysis of research on Generation Y by saying: ‘There are an increasing number of management terms to describe best practice in attracting, progressing and keeping young talent. But the two key attributes are HONESTY and UNDERSTANDING.’<sup>4</sup> This seems consistent with a Christian approach. We need to make the effort to understand people, and we need to be honest with them about whether an organisation can meet their expectations and give scope to their aspirations. If Generation Y is harbouring after a more holistic approach which integrates the different aspects of life and gives free rein to the whole person at work, these are hopeful signs.

As Myles Downey, often described as the coaches’ coach, says, ‘We are on the brink of discovering the extraordinary benefits of letting humanity loose in the workplace – and beyond. When the whole human being, with all its capacities – intelligence, creativity, imagination, sensitivity and pragmatism, to name but a few – freed from the tyranny of fear and doubt, expresses itself in the workplace, then extraordinary results accrue.’<sup>5</sup> That is surely good news not just for Generation Y, but for everybody. ■

*Brian Draper is Creative Director at Michael Carson & Associates and Associate Faculty at the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity, where he worked for 7 years.*

## Notes

1. Bryant Ott, Nikki Blacksmith and Ken Royal, ‘Job Seekers Ask: Who’s the Boss?’, *Gallup Management Journal*, 13 December 2007, [gmj.gallup.com/content/103114/Job-Seekers-Ask-Whos-Boss.aspx](http://gmj.gallup.com/content/103114/Job-Seekers-Ask-Whos-Boss.aspx)
2. ‘Motivating Generation Y’, *Management Issues*, [www.management-issues.com/2006/8/24/research/motivating-generation-y.asp](http://www.management-issues.com/2006/8/24/research/motivating-generation-y.asp)
3. Ryan Healy, Guest Post: ‘What Gen Y Wants from Work’, [webworkerdaily.com/2007/07/16/guest-post-what-gen-y-wants-from-work/](http://webworkerdaily.com/2007/07/16/guest-post-what-gen-y-wants-from-work/)
4. Brian Amble, ‘Motivating generation Y’, *Management Issues*, [www.management-issues.com/2006/8/24/research/motivating-generation-y.asp](http://www.management-issues.com/2006/8/24/research/motivating-generation-y.asp)
5. Myles Downey, *Effective Coaching*, Texere Publishing, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 2003.

## WORK

Close by the careless worker’s side,  
Still patient stands  
The Carpenter of Nazareth,  
With pierced hands  
Outstretched to plead unceasingly  
His Love’s demands.

Longing to pick the hammer up  
And strike a blow,  
Longing to feel His plane swing out,  
Steady and slow,  
The fragrant shavings falling down,  
Silent as snow.

Because this is my Work, O Lord,  
It must be Thine,  
Because it is a human task  
It is divine.

Take me, and brand me with Thy Cross,  
Thy slave’s proud sign.

*Geoffrey Studdert-Kennedy*  
from *The Unutterable Beauty* (1927)