



GenY'ifying Your Help Desk: Ready or Not, Here They Come

As the first wave of Generation Y (roughly those born in the 1980's and 1990's) rolls onto the corporate scene, companies are facing both an intimidating challenge and an exciting opportunity. Although impressively skilled, Gen Y also brings a host of attributes to the workplace causing many managers to cringe. Serving as the launching ground for many young professionals, the help desk industry stands first in line to face Gen Y. Are you ready?

Gen Yers, also called Millennials, iGeneration, Babyboomlets, etc., were raised in the most affluent society in history and have been surrounded by technology their entire lives. Although typically dubbed as high-maintenance, they have the potential to be super-performers if motivated and managed effectively. This article takes a look at Gen Y in three key areas and provides some real-world advice for rethinking your management strategies.

1. Expectation:

Gen Y grew up in an "always on" culture, simultaneously texting, IM'ing (instant messaging) and Web surfing while listening to their iPods. Their hunger for the latest and greatest technology brings an array of new IT demands to the workplace. This leaves many help desk managers wondering how to best cope with these high (and often unrealistic) expectations.

Lack-luster technology is the reality in most companies. Budgets, security and privacy concerns all act as roadblocks to implementing the latest tech tools on Gen Y's wish list. Effective management communication will play a key role in bridging this part of the generation gap. Don't immediately dismiss their requests as frivolous—listen to what they have to say. Gen Y has a fundamental connection to technology and can use it to solve business problems in a progressive and profound way.

Many Gen Yers can't conceive of living in a world without IM. So if possible, implement some Web 2.0 tools within the employee community and loosen up on the 'big brother' mentality. Be aware, however, that they may be impulsive and eager to try new tools without the proper regard for security and privacy concerns. Use your experience to guide them and explain why certain parameters and protections are in place.

In addition to being tech-savvy, they tend to also be financially astute. In areas where budget matters trump technology requests, simply share as much of the big picture rationale with them as you can. Gen Y will listen, but may not accept it unless you take the time to explain things adequately and honestly. And, make sure you know what you're talking about. They are keen "garbage" detectors.

2. Stimulation:

These intense multi-taskers need a fast-pace, stimulating work environment to reach their performance potential. They may be easily bored with projects and business processes that move slowly.

There's a new workforce out there that brings a whole new set of rules and expectations to the real world. Work with them or against them- they're not going anywhere.

Let's be honest, the typical help desk environment is not always stimulating. Most jobs have a learning curve of a few months, and then redundancy sets in. Once boredom occurs, the Gen Yer already has one foot out of the door. So, how do we keep them engaged?

Try to set an atmosphere that fosters ongoing learning. Implement mentorship relationships and job share duties to help keep things interesting. Gen Yers display a strong sense of loyalty to their peer group, so creating an environment that allows them to support their peers will lead to greater overall productivity. And as the pioneers of social networking, Gen Yers thrive in a collaborative atmosphere and work extremely well in teams. Managers should keep that in mind and use it to drive performance.

Loosen the reigns and give these young employees additional responsibilities more quickly than you would have in the past. Provide short-term goals with tight deadlines and praise them along the way. This generation desires to make an impact and is generally curious about all areas of the business. So, teach them—it will benefit everyone.

3. Motivation:

Gen Y tends to value work/life balance and flexibility over money, so motivating this group involves a shift in the traditional way of thinking. Get creative with incentive programs and rewards for your employees. Praise individuals publicly for a job well done. Look for opportunities to reward them individually in "real time" when you see someone handle a situation well or provide excellent customer service. Their need for constant affirmation is a direct product of our education system and modern parenting styles. We created this paradigm, so accept it as reality and use it as an effective management tool.

Gen Yers place great value on flexibility, and in most cases feel entitled to it. Consequently, many help desk managers share a common frustration in getting these new employees to show up to work on time. To be effective, managers may need to experiment with a fresh approach to scheduling and motivating punctuality. When possible, try to meet them half way. Offering choices such as staggering schedules and extended lunch options are a step in the right direction. Be creative and try team-based motivation and accountability strategies. A heavy handed approach is not the answer and will more likely produce rebellion than the desired result.

4. Conclusion:

Gen Y will soon be the largest segment of the workforce, and thus the future of your help desk. It's time to proactively develop strategies to attract, recruit, manage and retain top young talent, or be left behind. Although this generational gap may seem more like a canyon, a little understanding and an open mind goes a long way. The amount of energy you put into your new Gen Yers will directly relate to the productivity they get out of them. Good luck.

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