

The Y Generation

They're Coming;
Are We Ready?

by Darcy Loy



They were born between 1980 and 2001. They are perceived as being the “I’m entitled to...” the “What’s in it for me?” generation—the “trophy kids.” They have been exposed to technology from birth: e-mail, IM, the Web, cell phones, MySpace, Facebook, and text messaging. They are independent thinkers and have been raised to voice their ideas and opinions. They are “team” oriented; they

should be, as organized play dates and extracurricular activities have been their norm.

They are the Gen Yers—the Millennial Generation and they are beginning to file through the doors of businesses across North America, bringing with them not only a new point of view and an entirely different set of expectations, but also challenges in regards to how they “fit” into our day-to-day operations. As facilities management leaders, are we ready for them?

Gen-Yers entering the workforce today are finding themselves working side-by-side with three other generations. Each group brings their own work ethic, expertise, and style to the table creating a challenge for facilities managers in regards to how we bring this varied palette together to form a cohesive and successful unit. The Gen-Yers are perceived by other generations as being a group of over-indulged, overprotected, and self-absorbed individuals who have a weak work ethic. They are viewed as wanting everything they believe they're entitled to without working their way up the corporate ladder, and they don't want to sacrifice their personal and family life for work. They expect hours that allows them time with family or to pursue their personal interests.

Kate Foster-Cheek, vice president for human resources at Johnson & Johnson, sums it perfectly, "For this generation, work is not a place you go; work is a thing you do." (Alsop 2008, p.2) As Derrick Bolton, assistant dean and M.B.A. admissions director at Stanford University's Business Graduate School, states, "They really do seem to want everything, and I can't decide if it's an inability or an unwillingness to make trade-offs." (Alsop 2008, p.1) Their Baby Boomer parents are to blame; they've given them everything since birth, and what is most ironic as stated by Joyce Grillo, "is that the Boomers who profess not to understand this new generation and are frustrated by their so-called demands are the very ones that helped shape them." (Grillo 2008, p.3)

ALWAYS A WINNER

The Gen Yers have been raised by "helicopter parents" who have indulged them with constant praise and positive reinforcement; the "never a loser, always a winner" parenting approach that helped nurture the "entitled to" attitude that some have. They come into the workplace leaving structured lifestyles where they have been showered with constant praise, that they in turn have a difficult time adapting to setting their own guidelines and are needy for attention and guidance from their leaders.

One of the biggest challenges employers are facing in regards to Gen-Yers entering the workforce is communication; or actually their inability to communicate on a personal level. This is the generation that has grown up socializing from a

computer or cell phone via e-mail, instant messaging, and text messaging. Ken Groh, vice president for communications at Chicago-based Aon, states that, "The new generation is using these mediums as their version of the water-cooler chat. It's their electronic grapevine" (McIlvaine 2009, p.3). Their tendency to rely on technology as their communication vessel leaves them lacking in interpersonal skills, and their Boomer bosses and coworkers see that as a serious problem.

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The Gen-Yers view technology in the workplace in an entirely different light than their baby boomer counterparts. In April 2009 LexisNexis released results of its Technology Gap Survey. The survey of 700 working professionals found significant differences in the way that these two generations perceive technology in the workplace. More than two-thirds of boomers agreed that PDAs contributed to a decline in proper workplace etiquette and believe the use of laptops during in-person meetings is "distracting." Fewer than one-half of Gen Y workers agreed. The younger generation is also far more comfortable discussing workplace-related topics online than boomers: Only 28 percent of boomers think blogging about work-related issues is acceptable, while 40 percent of Gen Yers do. (LexisNexis, 2009)

GEN-Y FOR FM?

So are you sitting there wondering why you as a facilities leader would want a somewhat self-centered individual,

lacking in intrapersonal skills and needy of attention, with a whole different perspective on communication and work ethic as a member of your team? It's simple; we need them to assist us in the advancement of our departments as well as help us meet our needs of the future. With all education facing budget and staffing cuts, as well as an onslaught of soon-to-be retiring baby boomers in the workplace, we need the talents and attributes that this younger generation can bring to our units. They are creative and innovative and bring with them a skill set that will to help us persevere and excel in the difficult economic times that higher education is facing.

The Gen-Yers have spent a great deal of their lives being "overscheduled" individuals. Their parents have had them involved in a multitude of extra-curricular activities since birth, and it has forced this younger generation to become multi-task orientated; and they are good at it. Juggling

tasks and priorities is the day to day norm for us as facilities managers and we need employees that have the capability of assisting us so that our units can be as efficient and productive as possible in order to meet our goals and visions. This generation has spent a great deal of their free time in organized, group activities, as well as on sports teams and are more than familiar with the “team concept.” They’ve grown up with the concept that to be successful as a team everyone has to assume and execute their specific role, thus they will probably do their best work in a team situation. These activities as young adults have also contributed to their ability to socialize easily.

They want to be liked by their coworkers and managers and they tend to be very loyal and committed to those they perceive as friends. They have been taught that it’s okay to voice your opinion and idea, and they like to share their knowledge. They will be essential in arena of advancing technology. They’ve grown up with it; helped develop some of it; they are savvy at using it. Just look around you and you’ll see how our facilities offices have evolved. We rely on laptops, wireless connections, and cell phones to keep us connected; PDAs to keep our days organized; the Internet for our research and connectivity to our colleagues across campus and the world. We deal with centralized irrigation systems,

keyless entries, work-order management systems and computerized payroll on a daily basis. Technology is seen today as a critical component to the success of an organization and we need employees that help us keep up with current trends; the Gen-Yers can do that; it comes naturally to them.

Taking all of this insight in regards to the personality traits and skill sets of the Gen-Yers, how do we as facilities leaders successfully and effectively mainstream them into our organizations? For starters we need to “cross-mentor” these individuals; provide them the opportunity on a daily basis to learn from the “other generations” that they are working side-by-side with. If it is personal communication skills that they are lacking, we teach them through interactive training—how to deal with a customer on the telephone, why it’s important to use complete sentences and proper grammar when drafting a report or sending an e-mail, why it’s important to meet deadlines.

Facilities management is a customer service oriented business. We have daily face-to-face contact with our clients and our employees must be able to verbally communicate with them in an intelligent and courteous manner in order to meet their needs. We help them develop better conversational skills and we send them into the field with a mentor that can give them a firsthand look at how we operate. The Gen-Yers want

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to learn and need strong mentors that are willing to give them honest feedback and encouragement. In turn, we learn from them; new concepts in regards to daily operations, communication, and technology. We share the vision and mission of our department and emphasize that they are key players in the success of reaching our goals.

THE NEW SKILL SET

The Gen-Yers bring numerous skill sets to the table and as facilities leaders we need to capitalize on what they have to offer. In order for our units to be successful we must go to our staff for new ideas and practices. No longer can we work under the practice that new ideas and concepts need to come from upper management. Our employees are the ones that are spending their days on the “front-line” and can share concepts that have the potential of working better or being more efficient. The Gen-Yers are not afraid to challenge what is perceived as being the normal; they like to ask “why?,” which leads to reevaluation of processes and a possible better and more efficient solution.

They are the social generation. They thrive on being “connected” and want honest communication from their leaders regardless if the message is good or bad. Gen-Yers want to be part of the process. Remember they have been raised to feel free to render their opinion; they want to contribute and will be more than willing to give feedback or share ideas. We do, however, need to mentor them in the proper process; you can’t just go to the president or chancellor of the university with an idea; there is a procedure that needs to be followed. As leaders we are responsible for making them feel like a part of our team—that we value what they do and how they contribute. We acknowledge a job well done and when necessary we critique in a positive manner that is critical to their personal development. We *listen* to them, to their ideas, their concerns, and we follow through and relay information back to them.

As leaders we need to utilize to our fullest potential the technological savvy of the Gen-Yers. Technology is critical to our success as we continue to move in the direction of more automated systems in our units. They allow us to be cost effective and more efficient and we need key employees that can help us stay on the cutting edge of technology. They’ve grown up with technology and participated in its creation. Who bet-

ter to lead our units into the future then the Gen-Yers?

With emphasis in education on becoming more environmentally sound and sustainable, we need individuals in our units who can be stewards of this message; employees that can embrace the importance of the sustainable practices that are appearing, and are expected on our campuses today. The Gen-Yers passion for a greener world will make them strong advocates for our units as we look for ways to make our campuses more sustainable.

As leaders we must embrace this new generation. Even with their little quirks they are intelligent, talented individuals that bring a fresh perspective to our workforce. It is our job as leaders in facilities management to perceive the potential they bring to the table and capitalize on their skill sets. We need them in order to succeed in fulfilling the mission and vision that each of us has for our units that will result in efficient and competitive organizations.

As Ronald Reagan once stated, “Each generation goes further than the generation preceding it because it stands on the shoulders of that generation. You will have opportunities beyond anything we’ve ever known.” Prior generations have given us solid foundation to build on. It’s time for this new generation—the Gen-Yers, the Millennials—to stand on the shoulders of those before them and take us to that place of endless opportunities. ☪

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NOTES

1. Alsop, Ron. (2008) *The Trophy Kids Go to Work*. Wall Street Journal, October 21. Author’s adaptation from his book *The Trophy Kids Grow Up: How the Millennial Generation is Shaking up the Workplace*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
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4. McIlvaine, Andrew T. (2009) *Bridging the Generational Techo-Divide*. Human Resource Executive Online: www.breonline.com. May 20.
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