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How Generation Y is Changing the Workplace

Gen Y is the most educated and most diverse generation in history, and the first to have more women than men obtain postsecondary education credentials. They have also been using computers, mobile phones, the Internet, social media tools and other technologies since childhood – the youngest of them essentially since birth.

In just 15 years, by 2028, the last of the boomers will be reaching retirement age and leaving the labour market. Generation Y will make up roughly ¾ of the work force by this time and the oldest millennials, still quite young at just 47, will be entering leadership positions in corporate Canada in large numbers.

More than 12 million strong and representing more than one-third of Canada's population, Generation Y is the largest demographic cohort to come after the baby boomers. These young managers, directors, vice-presidents, presidents and CEOs won't just be rearranging the furniture and hanging their diplomas in their new corner offices – they will be making sweeping changes to the way organizations and their people work.

The majority of millennials' parents both worked, creating positive role models for Gen Y as they went to school and prepared to enter the work force. Millennials are already accustomed to working alongside female leaders and, as more of them reach leadership positions, they will bring in even more Gen Y women into the fold.

When it comes to offices, less is more.

Millennials aren't fond of the top-down leadership style that has until now dominated the professional world, preferring instead to collaborate in teams. Cubicles, walls, closed doors and even assigned desks will be removed in favour of open-concept work spaces that promote engagement between all workers – regardless of their seniority.

Already making waves at forward-thinking organizations, concepts such as telecommuting and "hoteling" (temporary workstations used on an as-needed basis) will become the norm rather than the exception under Gen Y leadership. According to a 2012 study, organizations are set to reduce office space by 17% by 2020, leaving as few as 6 desks for every 10 workers.

Millennial-dominated offices will have smaller footprints and, as a result, generate numerous economic and environmental benefits for their organizations. Under optimal conditions, each telecommuting employee can save employers about 34 gigajoules of energy a year – enough to heat a typical Canadian home for four months – and a single hoteling employee saves slightly less, about 32 gigajoules a year.

Forget work-life balance, it's all about blending

The term “work-life balance” implies an equal amount of one and then the other; a separation. Boomers are obsessed with finding work-life balance and, as a result, many prefer to disconnect completely from work when they're not in the office.

Used to working anywhere, everywhere and any time of day or night on their laptops, tablets and smartphones, millennials won't be satisfied to just punch in and sit at a desk from 9 to 5, Monday to Friday. That's so 20th century.

Gen Y workers will have even more demanding family responsibilities than previous generations did, looking after not only their children but also their aging baby boomer parents. They might leave the office in the early afternoon to bring mom to the hospital for routine tests and then pick up their children from daycare – daily.

The trade-off is that they'll be available on their mobile device throughout the day and, thanks to improvements in cloud computing and telecommuting technology, they'll be able to hop on their computer after grandma and the kids have gone to bed to finish up the work they would have done at the office that day – masters of the work-life blend.

Say goodbye to e-mail and meetings

Recent surveys show that, like voice mail and snail mail before it, e-mail use is declining among younger millennials in favour of interacting on social networks and by text and instant messaging.

Furthermore, instant messaging is already starting to replace e-mail, phone calls and in-person meetings at workplaces around the world because it increases productivity, reduces interruptions and results in shorter, faster conversations.

Welcome to the results-only work environment

How will Gen Y bosses know if and when their telecommuting and hoteling employees are actually working? It won't matter in the new results-only work environment (ROWE), where employees are evaluated on performance, not presence. This management strategy allows employees to do whatever they want whenever they want – as long as their work gets done.

While ROWEs may not be possible in all workplaces, (such as hotels, restaurants, retail stores and so on), they will become the norm in the knowledge economy once Gen Y workers get a taste of it because a ROWE provides the flexibility to work when and where they want, and greater opportunity for work-life blending and perks such as the potential for unlimited paid vacation time.