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Gen Y

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What Is Gen Y and Why Should I Care?

Gen Y is short for *Generation Y*, also known as *Millennials*, *Generation Next*, and *Echo Boomers*. Gen Y includes individuals born between approximately 1977 and 1994; some demographers begin Gen Y in 1976 and some end the generation as early as 1984 or as late as 2002. Most agree, however, that Gen Y is a large generation of roughly 70 million people comprising 20-25 percent of the American population, a group nearly as large as the Baby Boomer generation's 26 percent.

Workforce Investment Act (WIA) youth programs currently serve Gen Y and will continue to serve Gen Yers for some years. Understanding some characteristic beliefs and behaviors of this generation will assist in designing and operating effective youth programs.

Characteristics of Gen Y

Gen Y has been shaped by events such as the Columbine shootings, Oklahoma City bombing, AIDS, technology and the tech bubble, 9/11, and the Iraq war. Many Gen Yers came of age during a long economic expansion, in an environment of child-centered parenting messages. Gen Y may also be the first generation that received the full attention of marketers. Much of the data about characteristics of Gen Y derives from marketing studies.

Gen Y is ...

- **Diverse.** Gen Y is more pluralistic and integrated than previous generations. One-third of Gen Y is composed of non-white minorities, including many immigrants. In 2004, 32 percent of immigrants were under age 25.
- **Tolerant.** Because of its racial and ethnic diversity, Gen Y generally is against judging by appearances. Gen Y opposes racism, sexism, and homophobia and accepts personal styles such as body art, tattoos, and body piercing.
- **Technologically savvy.** Gen Y has never known a world without computers, the Internet, and video games. Of 18- to 29-year-olds in 2005, 62 percent used instant messaging (IM), 84 percent used the Internet, and 46 percent downloaded music. Gen Yers often teach their teachers about electronic media and troubleshoot computer glitches for their parents. Gen Yers prefer to use electronic communications whenever possible, including at work.

Gen Y is ... (continued)

- **Impatient.** Accustomed to rapid technological and social change and the instant gratification offered by computers, Gen Yers are expert multi-taskers and are very result-oriented. They can become restless or bored with bureaucracy, cautious deliberation, or procedures that appear to impede change and progress.
- **Independent.** As latchkey children of divorced and single parents, Gen Y youth learned to amuse and care for themselves, often with the use of technology.
- **Dependent.** Paradoxically, Gen Y has both benefited and suffered from a lot of parental attention. Gen Yers have grown up in child-centered families where parents and other adults supervise childcare, play dates, music lessons, sports, and other structured activities. Consequently, Gen Y trusts and accepts institutional and adult authority, and most Gen Yers feel close to their parents. Some demographers believe that parents have been too involved in managing Gen Yers' lives, which may account for 57 percent of 2004 college graduates returning home to live (causing this generation to also be called the Boomerang Generation).
- **Self-Confident.** Because of the encouragement and support of their parents, Gen Y believes that it can achieve anything. Gen Yers are willing to work hard and want to contribute to their organization or employer, but they expect to see rewards quickly. They may also be blunt and not shy when offering their opinions.
- **Respects learning.** Gen Y expects to engage in lifelong learning. They know that a postsecondary degree – or more than one – is likely to be needed for career success. In 2003, 61.2 percent of males and 66.5 percent of females aged 16 to 24 were enrolled in college. Gen Y is also eager to learn on the job, add to personal skill sets, and do challenging work that matters. Gen Y respects people for what they know and can do rather than position or title and likes to understand how their efforts fit into the big picture.
- **Collaborative.** Gen Y values teamwork and working in groups. They like to be mentored and to have supervisors who interact with them and provide feedback. This generation uses online social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace extensively.
- **Socially Conscious.** From September 2004 to September 2005, 30 percent of 16-19 year-olds were volunteers. A survey of college freshmen reported that as high school seniors, 79 percent of males and 87 percent of females were volunteers, and 47 percent of males and 52 percent of females participated in a demonstration. Much of this is driven by high school requirements for service learning and the desire to burnish resumes, but Gen Y also genuinely cares about the environmental and social record of companies where they shop and work. However, Gen Y is less engaged with civic and political activities than they are with other causes.
- **Entrepreneurial.** Gen Y wants a work experience that is meaningful, flexible, and high-paying and often feels that starting a business is the way to achieve these goals. In 2005, 370,000 youth aged 16-24 were self-employed and the self-employed category is projected to grow 5 percent from 2004 to 2014 (substantially higher than the 2 percent growth rate for self-employment from 1994-2003). There is some indication that economic conditions, especially the high cost of health care, may make it more difficult for Gen Y to achieve its entrepreneurial dreams.

Implications for WIA Programs

- Gen Y expects information to be available 24/7 and is likely to use the Internet to check out programs of interest. To aid recruitment, WIA youth programs should put as much of their informational material on their website as possible. Programs should include information such as which documents youth need for WIA eligibility, forms (especially if they can be submitted online), and testimonials from youth participants.
- Gen Y expects parental involvement – but while parental support and interest are usually very desirable, they can also prevent youth from being responsible. For instance, youth may have

parents make appointments or intercede with an employer. WIA staff should be prepared to address parental overinvolvement while encouraging parents to provide needed support and encouragement.

- Gen Yers expect others to be tolerant of their personal styles and to treat them with respect, as individuals with skills to offer. Employers, on the other hand, typically expect youth to conform to standard business dress and traditional business behavior. WIA staff can help youth get and retain good jobs and help employers obtain good employees by helping youth and employers reconcile their differing expectations.
- Gen Y expects to make contributions rather than “pay dues” and prefers to achieve results rather than follow procedures. Gen Yers will cheerfully do routine or repetitive tasks if their boss or teacher explains the purpose of the task and how it fits in with desired business or personal outcomes. But, Gen Y also expects to move beyond routine and wants opportunities to learn or have more responsibility. Career paths and other planning that offers multiple benchmarks may make sense for many Gen Y youth.
- Gen Y expects rapid changes in technology, work, and education. They may be unwilling to invest in a long course of study that might be obsolete when completed. Career pathways, associate degrees, and transferable skills may be more attractive to many; others may be prepared to commit to a bachelor’s degree or Ph.D. in order to contribute to society or to do something they love.

Generation Next

Generation Next is a 2006 project of the Public Broadcasting System’s Newshour with Jim Lehrer with several partners, including USA Today. This initiative aims to provide a snapshot of the beliefs, strengths, weaknesses and concerns of 16 to 25-year-olds. The multimedia initiative includes a website (<http://www.pbs.org/newshour/generation-next/about/index.html>) with audio, video and text features and culminates with a January 2007 PBS documentary on their findings.

The Future

Gen Y is still a generation in the making. Youth born in 1994 are just entering their teen years and will be more influenced by present global uncertainties than the economic boom of the 1990s. Recent statistics suggest that Gen Y may face restricted economic opportunities because Baby Boomers may stay in the workforce longer to shore up sagging retirement funds. Even as today’s youth deal with today’s realities, Gen Y will continue to show the resilience and self-confidence that have led some commentators to refer to them as “the next Greatest Generation.”

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