

Get Ready for the Net Generation

By Mark L. Alch

They're technology savvy, mobile, and cool with chaos.

The group following on the heels of Generation X is being called the Net or Echo-Boom Generation—people born between 1977 and 1997. Employers will have to face the new realities of the Net Generation's culture and values, and what it wants from work if they expect to attract and retain those talents and align them with corporate goals. As this 80 million-strong generation enters the workforce in stages, it will easily displace the baby boomers, who number 77 million, and the 44 million baby busters, Gen X. Netters—like their parents, the baby boomers—will redefine business as they stream into the corporate world.

The oldest members of the Net Generation—those just turning 22 and graduating from college with a baccalaureate degree—are starting to slip quietly past Gen Xers to occupy center stage. Not only is the Net Gen more populous than Gen X, it's also the first generation to grow up in the digital age. Due to their number and influence soon to be felt in the business arena, they're destined to shake up current manage-

ment practices and have a great effect on how work is done.

In the 1960s, the generation gap was over differences in values, lifestyles, and ideology between parents and their children. A yawning generation gap between boomers and their children is that the offspring have a huge edge on information technology. Bombarded with information and media-savvy, the newest generation displays a strong work ethic and has grown up understanding the electronic economy. They're comfort-

able with changes brought about by new technologies and e-commerce. More than any previous generation, they're conversant with a communications revolution transforming business, education, health care, entertainment, government, and every other institution.

But rather than reject wholly the lifestyle choices, values, and outlooks of previous generations, they accept some of the old with the new. In that respect, they're synthesizers.

Netters exhibit several major differences from boomers and busters.

Sharing the load. Netters have held part-time jobs in high school and college and haven't been as overindulged as busters. As the cost of a college education has risen, they have had to help defray the expense.

Global orientation. Netters have grown up understanding the need for interconnectivity to the worldwide community. They're aware of global warming and the eroding of the ozone layer. They've observed how the Asian financial market crisis is affecting the

The Gist

- ❑ The 80-million strong Net generation is comfortable with change and doesn't expect or want lifelong employment or company loyalty.
- ❑ The new generation gap is one of understanding information technology.
- ❑ Companies will need to find new ways to motivate the incoming workforce of the Echo Boom.

American economy. And they've been connected globally via the Internet. Not the Cleavers. The concept of how a family is defined has changed. Fifty years ago, the typical unit was a working father and a mother who stayed at home to rear the two children. Now, only about 15 percent of U.S. households fit that description. Many baby busters are children of divorce, but Netters tend to view various family configurations as normal. Reality bound. Members of the Net Generation have seen their parents cut from organizations one or more times due to downsizing, mergers and acquisitions, takeovers, and closings. They've witnessed little company loyalty or job security. They understand that their training, skills, and abilities are the currency for a getting a job and establishing a career path.

Cool with chaos. The Net Generation has come to regard constant and turbulent change as normal. As a result, they're more attuned to the need to make adjustments in midstream and have contingency plans.

A domino effect

The generational changing of the guard in the workforce will have wide-ranging HR and OD implications.

As a group, the Net Generation mixes creativity with an investigative bent regarding electronic media. The resulting culture is one of free expression and strong views. That free form allows a great deal of independence without restraint or hindrances. Because of that, Netters tend to use a blend of collaboration, interdependence, and networking to achieve their ends. The American educational system has had a lot to do with that. Students learned to work together to prepare and deliver group or team projects. That will serve them well in companies with team-based environments. As much as Netters are helping redefine and restructure the new workplace, they'll be looking to use their talents in companies that pose no barriers to freedom.

It's not surprising that a new kind of worker would emerge—one who would rather work for him- or herself or for companies that provide development opportunities project by project. After a project ends, they're ready to move on to new challenges and opportunities. That can create a problem for companies try-

ing to direct employees in traditional ways. Many managers face the difficulty of guiding cross-functional team members who don't care about hierarchy and career ladders. These new employees view themselves as contract workers lending their services and expertise for a time. Middle and senior managers need to understand that such employees are at their best in terms of productivity, creativity, and work satisfaction when they work on projects that enhance their skills and competencies.

As these workers move from one company to another, it will be up to them to ensure that their assemblage of training and areas of expertise is up-to-date and portable. Likewise, companies have the responsibility to keep employees current with new technologies and bleeding-edge training.

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Ease with computers as a business and personal tool places the Net Generation on a plane no previous generation has been. It lets companies orient, train, retrain, and develop new programs without having to teach these workers how to use a PC. Online delivery of learning over an intranet is and will continue to be highly acceptable to these new workers.

Netters are strong advocates of lifelong learning. They understand that they need to update and maintain their training at cutting edge to ensure their employability. More than previous generations, they accept and recognize that they'll go through numerous job changes and perhaps five to eight different careers in their lifetimes—aided by distance learning.

Netters will use the Internet to obtain a formal degree or certification, or just take courses on topics of interest. These working adults want to be able to join a class online when it suits their schedule.

Companies with self-managed, self-

directed teams will find the new labor force well equipped to work individually as well as in groups. Merit increases in salaries and bonuses, usually a sore point in the context of group efforts, will have a better chance in the short-term teams of the future, in which office politics won't have a chance—or time—to intrude.

Recognizing that company loyalty is a relic of the past, employers mustn't judge or feel betrayed when employees ready for their next work role leave for other offers. Empowered employees, accountable to their companies for results, can operate best.

This new breed of change-hardy and change-ready intrapreneurs will be a welcome addition to companies going through transformation. With more emphasis on teamwork and group performance, companies that gear their systems to the new economic realities will come out ahead. Those that don't understand the makeup of the new workforce entrants will have trouble assimilating and keeping employees. Bosses who think they can act as an authority on everything will turn off the new employees. Netters respect people who demonstrate expertise and knowledge; they don't care about organizational rank, age, or tenure. One can't expect this generation to be interested in ladder climbing. They're interested in using their knowledge and skills, participating in decision making, collaborating, and establishing interconnectivity with others. Companies using such traditional motivators as promotions, bonuses, and merit-pay increases will find they need other rewards to retain high performers.

Evidence suggests the Net Generation will thrive in environments where they have a direct say in how work is done and where they can add, innovate, or create in order to turn out the best product or service possible. The new workers readily accept the accountability all of that requires. As for managers, they must help keep the objectives of self-managed teams aligned with corporate goals, through effective strategic planning and constant internal communications. The new way of working will require flexibility, multitasking, the running of numerous projects or programs concurrently, and working with different people as they enter and leave the company.

Companies can prepare for the newest workforce entrants, not forgetting to upgrade the skills of baby boomers still working. Many U.S. schools have had computers for a long time and are hooked up to the Internet, but there's still an information lag. Business communities need to support local school board initiatives to get technology into the classrooms. It's also imperative for schools to offer additional time on computers for children who don't have them at home. Companies can help by setting up and staffing computer training centers to instruct teachers on new technology. Employers can underwrite the purchase of

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home computers for employees. In a bottom-line sense, when employees take home a computer, their children will learn how to use it and teach the parents, thus closing the digital gap. And the computer literacy of the company's workforce will rise dramatically.

The new wave of 80 million young people entering the workforce during the next 20 years are technologically equipped and, therefore, armed with the most powerful tools for business. That makes their place in history unique: No previous generation has grown up understanding, using, and expanding on such a pervasive instrument as the PC. It will be up to HR and OD professionals to lead their companies in understanding the needs, motivations, and behaviors of the Net Generation. □

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