



MEETING THE NEEDS OF GEN Y LEARNERS

BY TAMARA J. ERICKSON

Generation Y, also known as the millennial generation, has joined the workforce over the last decade. The Y's are the largest employee group in U.S. history, some 70 million strong born between 1980 and 1995. They represent an even larger proportion of the population globally. And, the large size of this generational cohort means that they will have a significant influence on the world of work, including the way we approach learning.

Individuals are shaped by experiences they have as pre- and early teenagers.

Members of this generation wrestled with the implications of events occurring in the mid-1990s through much of the 2000s. The interpretations they drew influenced what they came to value, how they measure success, whom they trust, and the priorities they set for their own lives. The habits and preferences they developed now influence their learning needs in the workplace.

Y's formative years were dominated by escalating terrorism and school violence. These acts, unpredictable and inexplicable,

left Y's with a conceptual model of a random world – one in which something unexpected could happen to anyone at any time. As a result, living life to the fullest today has become an important and understandable priority for many Y's. This sense of immediacy and living in the moment will be the single most salient characteristic defining this generation throughout its existence.

In contrast to the external world, and perhaps in part because of it, Y's were blessed with an almost cocoon level of

parental attention—immersed in a very pro-child culture. This is a generation that grew up eating off red plates with “You Are Special Today” on the rim. They are confident and willing to tackle big and new challenges. Most have positive relationships with their parents and interact comfortably with people their parents’ age.

Generation Y is also the first generation of unconsciously competent users of digital technology. They have never known a world that wasn’t wired. Ubiquitous technology is an essential part of how they operate day to day – coordinating and interacting in the moment, on demand. They use technology to reach out openly to peers for vetted sources of information and tap and share information with wide groups of friends and acquaintances.

These characteristics of Generation Y’s formative years shape their outlook and behavior and provide the foundation for their learning needs. Therefore, companies should develop learning programs for Y’s that are:

- **Experiential:** Taking advantage of Y’s desire to tackle challenging projects and learn by figuring things out.
- **On Demand:** Providing coaching and learning tips on an as needed, as requested basis.
- **Person-to-Person:** Offering the opportunity to interact with individuals who can offer specific, customized input.
- **Multisourced:** Creating a learning-rich environment that allows the Y to draw from multiple sources.

EXPERIENTIAL

Y’s learn by doing. They are happy to handle “big” jobs and tackle them with confidence. They are not the slightest bit deterred by what older workers might perceive as a lack of experience or even limited qualifications for the task at hand. The most important element of a learning program for Y’s is the fundamental design of the work itself, making each task as challenging as possible. Design Y’s work

assignments in ways that require them to figure out the approach as they proceed, maximizing the opportunity to learn.

Special programs can also provide valuable experiential learning opportunities. For example, IBM offers its high potential staff a six-week long program designed to develop leadership skills while addressing novel socio-economic challenges in emerging markets. During the six-week program, self-organized teams, armed with technology, use IBM’s best problem-solving skills to address local needs. Individuals gain leadership opportunities and IBM gets leaders who can function in a global context. To apply, candidates must be rated in the top 15 to 20 percent over a three-year period. In a recent year, more than 5,000 high potential employees applied for the 100 available slots.

Other examples include Pfizer’s Global Health Fellowship and Ernst & Young’s Americas Area Corporate Social Responsibility Fellows.

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ON DEMAND

Rather than being sequential learners – focused on learning first, followed by doing – Y’s are “on demand,” iterative learners. They start a task, uncover a need for additional information, seek that specific bit out, and move along. This cycle might happen multiple times every day.

The second key element of a successful learning program is the ability to provide easy access to immediate input and guidance, geared to the task at hand.

When a Y says “I’d like some feedback,” they are almost always expressing a desire to learn. They are not in the assessment/judgment mode, along with its inevitable prize or demerit outcome. Additionally, they are not looking for trophies – (although they’re not looking for lumps of coal, either). They don’t want you to judge them, but rather to teach them. They hope

you’ll share ideas, input, suggestions or coaching.

Technology can create a platform for providing this type of coaching. For example, Work.com (formerly Rypple, now part of Salesforce.com) is a social networking tool that allows individuals to request feedback from colleagues they select and trust as frequently as they’d like. Workbrain also has an online, on-demand assessment system, allowing a broad set of people to provide the user with short snippets, 140 characters long, of quick, directional, digestible feedback.

PERSON-TO-PERSON

Y’s like to learn from experienced, knowledgeable individuals – people who are able to cut through the data clutter and pinpoint the optimum approach. And, today’s challenges present the need to curate or make sense of complex information.

In designing learning for Y’s, it is important to keep in mind that Y’s prefer personal interaction over neutral technology sites for learning, contrary to many popular perceptions that Y’s demand e-learning approaches. Y’s may also use technology to reach the relevant individual, but they are accustomed to tapping friends and family for suggestions, coaching or factual input on any number of topics, as they go along.

Mentoring, therefore, is a powerful component of a Y’s learning program in the workplace. By far, the most effective approach is to establish a mentoring relationship, which allows the mentee to seek out the mentor. First, give the mentee the names of two or three people, and encourage them to reach out if and when they need input. Then, shape the initial relationship around specific work needs – a project or business goal that one person

has and to which the second person has expertise to contribute. This gets the relationship going in a comfortable way. Beyond mentoring, companies should work to create a “gift culture” throughout the organization by encouraging anyone and everyone to give freely of their time and insight to help colleagues.

Companies can also use technology to help the right people connect – essentially, online mentoring programs that mimic online dating services. Triple Creek’s Enterprise Mentoring Software connects people based on job skills, leadership qualities, or the experience they wish to gain. It puts responsibility for establishing and maintaining the relationship in the hands of the mentor and mentee, and allows them to select on factors important to their own development.

Similarly, the My Dow Network allows employees, as well as alumni, retirees and employees on leave, to connect, find people with specific skills and expertise, expand contacts, or return as an active employee.

MULTISOURCED

The final component of meeting the learning needs of Generation Y is to provide access to a rich set of resources and potential sources of collaboration. Physical co-location is one approach to creating a multisourced learning environment.

Express Scripts moved 1,100 employees into an office located on the University of Missouri campus to encourage the easy exchange of ideas. BMW AG opened a joint automotive research-and-education center on the Clemson University’s campus. IBM has set up “collaboratories” in China, India, Ireland, Saudi Arabia, Switzerland and Taiwan, with more in the works to collaborate with outside partners – linking their researchers with experts from governments, universities and other companies.

Beyond these approaches, technology

again provides many options for collaboration – even honoring the principles of on demand and personalization. Today, free and virtual education provides small, “bite-sized” learning segments, each designed to fit a specific learning need. Companies should provide user-centered, simple tools, available to anyone, any time, “on demand” to supplement Y’s learning needs.

The best learning networks not only help learners access the information they need when they need it, but also help to interpret it and maximize its value. For example, the U.S. Army’s collaborative platform MilSpace is a learning and development ecosystem designed to provide U.S. Army company commanders with a forum to get advice, share best practices and improve individual leader performance.

The collaboration site itself is deliberately designed to reinforce a learning philosophy of “connecting leaders in conversation in context” through personal profiles, microblogs, “Front Porch Conversations” or open community dialogues, “Jams” on specific discussion topics and “LeaderCast” that presents specific leadership challenges for members to discuss. The home page features active community members that have been invited to share more about themselves and their experiences, contributing to a climate of trust and personalization.

One of the most interesting examples of leveraging a community of learning partners is in the credentialing space. Open Badges is a community-based learning system, sponsored by Peer-to-Peer University and Mozilla, allowing learners to gain credit or recognition for skills that they’re developing outside the classroom leveraging their personal learning ecosystems. Using an open badging system, organizations can issue “badges” using their own performance criteria and seal of approval making it

TAKEAWAYS

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possible to identify and give recognition for developing microskills. Ultimately, a broad community-based system could allow learners to collect badges from a variety of different credentialing sources creating a life-long or life-wide resume that is more descriptive of what has been learned than a traditional resume or college transcript, while extending employee development to a community of learning partners.

Generation Y is an important segment of your workforce with a unique set of learning needs that can be met by providing challenging experiences, on-demand coaching, personal interactions and multisourced supplements.

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