

Hotel Business Review

Best practices, insights & trends

Hotel Employees: Meet the next generation

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When it comes to people, we tend to think of the workplace as pretty homogeneous. Certainly our inner circle of peers consists of people pretty much like us – in age, schooling, professional background, athletic and cultural preferences, family size, residential choices and even attire. Workers older than we may not seem quite "with it," while younger ones may dress a little funny. Nonetheless, the employees of any particular organization (be it corporate headquarters or manufacturing plant) seem to be cut pretty much from the same bolt of cloth – or are they?

Because behavioral patterns and personal expectations change gradually, it is difficult to look at someone who is five years younger or older and see much difference. But to think therefore that workers and their workplaces are static would be to make a huge mistake

Fifty years ago, Sloan Wilson's novel *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit* hit the bestseller lists as a stinging indictment of corporate conformity, advertising excess and suburban striving in postwar America. The book was translated into 26 languages and led to an award-winning film starring Gregory Peck. Its title passed into the culture as synonymous with a generation of men (there were few women executives then) marching to work instead of war.

One year later, William H. Whyte's non-fiction book *The Organization Man* described the growing legions of white-collar workers in the following words:

"They are the ones of our middle class who have left home, spiritually as well as physically, to take the vows of organization life, and it is they who are the mind and soul of our great self-perpetuating institutions. Only a few are top managers or ever will be".

Even though countless minions continued to toil in the corporate vineyards, the counter-culture movement and anti-war demonstrations of the late 1960s and early 1970s turned the world upside down. Suddenly bell-bottom pants, flowered ties and long sideburns found their way into business life, along with short skirts and vinyl go-go boots. Federal Express ("When you absolutely positively have to have it there overnight") altered our concept of speed, which was further altered by the fax machine. *Star Wars* came in 1977 to a new kind of theatre, the Cineplex, and Pong became the first video game in 1978.

Many who dropped out in the '70s dropped back in by the '80s, an era marked by personal greed (think Michael Douglas as Gordon Gekko in the movie *Wall Street*), power business suits and the earliest signs of Casual Friday (as if to atone for the

power suit). Word processors replaced the typewriter, and the phenomenally successful Pac-Man gobbled his way across video-game screens.

Even though the World Wide Web began in 1986, as a means of communication for a small consortium of government and academic scientists, it wasn't until the '90s that the Internet created first the "Information Superhighway" and then the Information Age. As the short-lived Dot-Com Revolution radiated outward from Silicon Valley, a growing number of workers witnessed the end of work-life and work-dress as they had known it. One played at work (whether foosball, volleyball or with one's dog) and worked all night to make up for it. Ties and pantyhose crossed to the Other Side, leaving everyone over the age of 35 perplexed as to what Business Casual really meant.

So here we are in 2006, somewhat dazed and confused (to borrow the title of a popular youth-culture "zine"). Instant messages with their ubiquitous emoticons and shorthand spellings clamor for our instant attention, while a spam pandemic clogs our e-mail servers. The Star Wars saga ends nearly three decades later, back where it began. Technology sharing blurs the distinctions between cellular telephones, digital cameras, PCs, iPods and TV receivers; the medium has indeed become the message (if anyone recalls Marshall McLuhan).

This is the world in which your next employee has grown up. In large measure, today's younger adults (the so-called "Generation X") are the sons and daughters of those corporate managers and advertising agency executives so finely chiseled in the Wilson and Whyte chronicles. They are usually not the first generation in their families to graduate from college and do not regard entry into "The Organization" as a rite of passage into the upper middle class. In fact, they have seen their fathers (and even a few of their mothers) downsized from corporate positions and tend to regard the concept of "corporate loyalty" as having little meaning in either direction.

Your next employee is certainly more restless and mobile than his/her counterpart in the 1950s and '60s, in part because of the lack-of-loyalty issue – but also because adults are marrying and raising families later in life. That means that individuals in their twenties and early thirties can afford to take more risk by moving from job opportunity to job opportunity. Also, they are likely to be social in terms of group relationships but less socialized in terms of one-on-one relationships. Not surprisingly, when (and if) they do begin a family, today's new adults are much more family-centric than was the Man in the Grey Flannel Suit, much more likely to leave at five to take young Jacob to T-ball practice (or Emily to soccer) and much less inclined to get ahead at any cost.

Meanwhile, a new book by Steven Johnson called *Everything Bad Is Good for You* (reviewed in the May 16, 2005, *New Yorker* magazine) examines a seemingly perplexing trend: Young adults of all educational backgrounds are getting smarter, as measured by I.Q. tests, at a time when pop culture of all kinds was believed to be making them dumber. How can that be? For one thing, television programming that fifty years ago consisted of Matt Dillon running a bad guy out of Dodge each week consists today of shows like *E.R.* and *Desperate Housewives*, which track five or six plot-lines simultaneously and require viewers to fill in a lot of the blanks. That kind of non-linear presentation stimulates the brain, as does a second clue: video games, which consistently grow more "life-like" and complex. The help guide to *Grand Theft Auto III* is 53,000 words long.

The young and the restless increasingly seem to be right-brain thinkers – impatient, creative and sensitive to others' feelings and lifestyles. Indeed, fewer college students are pursuing degrees in classic left-brain disciplines such as engineering and accounting. Accordingly, newer employees require greater variety and challenge and are less likely, according to a recent survey, to be satisfied with their jobs. Also, fewer young adults read books or newspapers today (preferring the visual stimulation of alternative media), and many have lost the ability to recognize – much less create – a grammatically correct sentence. It's an open question whether employers will need to develop remedial writing courses or rely on other means of communication.

Don't expect to keep your next employees forever. Do keep them longer by recognizing who they are.

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