



## MAY 2009 SEMINAR SUMMARY

### FUTURAMA: GENERATION Y AND BEYOND

#### Panel

Anita Modok	SAMAG Committee Member
Lisa Walsh	Head of Audience Research, Australian Broadcasting Corporation
Jeff Gilling	McCrindle Research
Deidhre Wauchop	Manager Creative Arts, Curriculum K-12 Directorate, Dept of Education and Training.

Nowadays the term Generation Y, or Gen Y for short, is often used as a handy surrogate for other less complimentary phrases such as non-committal, unreliable, fickle, or lazy. It seems that nothing strikes as much fear in the hearts of employers than this band of high maintenance prima donnas. While the generation gap has been a cause of friction between traditional and emerging ways of thinking throughout history, the fact remains that there are many changes that have occurred between Gen X and Y. Generalisations aside, there is still a lot to Gen Y that could do with some explaining.

Gen Y is the generation born between 1980 and 1994. They currently make up 18 percent of today's workforce, a figure that will rise to 35 percent by 2020. As Gen Y, and the generations beyond it, increase their share of the workforce, the professional characteristics that define Gen Y will, for better or worse, alter traditional work ethics. Given this, SAMAG has assembled a panel of experts to break down what makes Gen Y tick.

#### Who are these strange creatures? What is different about Generation Y?

The aspect of Gen Y that most obviously indicates the differences between them and previous generations is their values. Jeff Gilling, from McCrindle Research, a firm specialising in trend analysis, summarises the changes in values thus:

#### Generational Values

Previous Generations	Generation Y and Beyond
Tradition (valuing history and longevity)	Innovation (new and exciting, constantly changing and developing)
Reputation (linked with tradition, history and longevity)	Recommendation (peer group influence)
Sit and listen (deferring to the knowledge of more experienced others)	Try and see (experimental and actively engaged)
Long term needs	Short term wants (a return on invested time)
Trust in authority	Trust in authenticity and substance
Valuing technical intelligence	Valuing relational intelligence



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So things are different. Gen Y doesn't see things the way previous generations do. This seems reasonable; the generation gap has long been an issue of concern for society. Each one of the above changes can be viewed as being both positive, and negative. For example, a defining characteristic of Gen Y is their ability to multitask, and change focus at alarming speed. While this could be construed as simply a short attention span, Gilling assures us that this is not the case. He stresses that the defining factor that determines Gen Y's attention span is their desire for authenticity and substance; for *real* experience. Lisa Walsh, Head of Audience Research at the ABC, agrees with this, pointing out that one of the most popular genres of TV show to emerge is 'reality television'. Although not strictly representative of everyday reality, these types of shows generally present real people being challenged to push themselves.

Deidhre Wauchop, Manager Creative Arts in the K-12 Curriculum Directorate at the Department of Education and Training (DET), also sees this shift in values as a double-edged sword. Wauchop speaks of an interview she held with a small group of Gen Ys in which she posed questions about what might be lost through Gen Y's changing values.

Wauchop asked, among other things, if a focus and reliance on new technology and communication methods such as SMS and email language threatens to undermine traditional methods of communication and the use of proper English. Does it threaten this generation's ability to take part in sustained and critical engagement with others? Will a shift from a day dictated by the clock and the demands of others, to a structure based on self-directed activity threaten to leave Gen Y disorganised and with a distrust of structure and discipline?

Wauchop's questions to the group do not suggest that the negative possibilities of Gen Y's values are certain. Her questions relate to her role at DET and illustrate the view that traditional ways of living and learning simply do not apply any more. As such, fundamental changes have been made to the education system.

### **Where have they come from?**

Generally speaking, education has moved from the tradition of norm-based assessment, where students are assessed based on their performance in relation to that of their peers, to assessment based on specifically defined criteria. Students know what the criteria they are being assessed against is, and they are able to talk about it with their teachers. This allows them to be actively engaged in how they are taught and gives them an opportunity to give feedback. Wauchop says that this method of teaching aims to encourage metacognition - which is the ability to think about the process of thinking, rather than accepting it as a unchangeable human function - as well as encourage self sufficiency and confidence.

The reasons for recent changes in social values are not mysterious; the changes are a direct result of Gen Y and beyond being born into a fast paced and quickly changing world. A simple example might be that, just a few days ago, I was watching *Superbad*, a movie released in Australia in 2007. In it, a creepy older guy asks the two young main characters if they are on myspace. It occurred to me that in order to make the same joke, any new film using myspace would need to



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reference facebook or twitter instead. This may seem like an inconsequential change, but keep in mind that many people have online social networks that are just as important as the ones in 'real life'. The speed at which myspace was replaced by facebook required millions of people to alter the infrastructure of their online social life at short notice and yet, they were able to do it quickly, easily, and most importantly - enthusiastically.

As already mentioned, there are two ways to look at this. Does it mean that Gen Y and beyond will be fickle, impatient, and easily bored? On the other hand, will they be mobile, fluid and adapt to change easily? The answer is that they will probably be both. Gen Y and beyond crave innovation and new experiences, which is dramatically different to having a short attention span.

### So what does Gen Y want?

#### At home

It's commonly accepted that Gen Y is the most technologically savvy generation yet to emerge. As we have already seen, Gen Y has grown up in a rapidly changing environment where technology is assumed to date quickly, and there is no problem keeping pace.

As far as entertainment goes, Gen Y has mastered the art of consumer driven content. The clock does not dictate a day in the life of a Gen Y; they are able to choose the activity they want to undertake, and when they want to do it. Content providers – television stations, radio broadcasters, and music stores to name a few – are more than happy to oblige. Worried about missing your favourite TV show? Stream it on your computer, or series link it on your Foxtel IQ. Either way, most popular entertainment content can now be customised to suit any particular lifestyle.

It's a common concern that the shifting of media such as TV and radio online will sound the death knell of traditional media. Not so, Lisa Walsh assures us. Walsh believes that TV still has strong social currency, but it *is* changing in terms of how we interact with it. Online discussions about shows *while they are screening* is common, as are SMS conversations. Again, this shows the need for Gen Y and beyond to be involved. By going online and posting their conversations about their shows, music, movies etc, they have themselves become content producers, not to mention an indispensable hoard of network marketing experts.

#### At work

So emerging generations have their home and social life geared just how they want it. But what about work? The workplace could be seen as the battleground of the generation gap, where boomers, Gen X, and Gen Y all have to find common ground. For employers who are interested in shaping their workplace around emerging generations, let's look at what a work environment most suited to the values of Gen Y might look like:



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### *Social*

The emerging Gen Y workforce does not separate their work and home life as easily as previous generations. The compartmentalised view that we work in order to do the things we enjoy in our personal time is no longer as widely subscribed to. The Gen Y workplace is personal and has opportunities for social connection and support beyond the nod in the hall and secret Santa at Christmas.

### *Engaging*

The structure of the workplace is geared around the staff's involvement in the work that is done, and how that work is approached. Management wants to hear their staff's opinions, and while they may not act on every nutty scheme presented, they will always listen.

### *Creative and challenging*

Gen Y workers want to be challenged intellectually. They want to exercise their creativity and higher order thinking, have the opportunity to think strategically, and tackle complex problems. The increased focus on metacognition (thinking about thought) means that they want to develop their thinking abilities, and use multiple perspectives.

### *Positive and supportive*

The workplace is understanding and flexible. There is a positive attitude to the work being undertaken and management are supportive of the staff's ambition and personal needs.

### *Collaborative*

Workflow is structured around collaboration between staff. Knowledge sharing and communication are a high priority; Gen Y want to be able to share and talk about their experiences with others.

As Generation Y and beyond start to emerge as a more dominant social group, the changes in values that they represent will undoubtedly cause change across all society. What these changes will be exactly, we will just have to wait and see. Emerging generations are increasingly calling for a greater say in how society functions, and it is important that their voice is heard and accounted for in our planning for the future.