

How to motivate Generation Y

Payroll and career prospects are no longer effective motivators to Generation Y (Gen Y) in the workplace. Managing young employees has become the new challenge for many employers nowadays. Here we propose a new motivator and how employers can earnestly use it in three simple steps through their front-line managers.

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What is Generation Y?

Gen Y is generally categorised as people between 20 to 30 years old and often mentioned as the 'post-80s' by local media. It accounts for over 23% of the population in Hong Kong¹.

Traditional motivators become ineffective

How will you, as an employer, respond to the following situations?

- After hearing your feedback on her work, your management trainee is so upset that she cries right there in your office.
- Your trainee applied for no-pay leave just one day prior to the leave date and thought it was appropriate because the holiday was not paid. Having the request subsequently rejected, he then felt very frustrated and has had a bad relationship with you ever since.
- Your young employee quits his job in the afternoon without even collecting his personal belongings.

- Your star employee reveals to you his plan to take a gap year to travel around the world.

Job expectations and work styles vary greatly between the Gen Y and the previous generations. New management challenges thus arise.

After coaching over 2,000 Gen Y from 8 universities in Hong Kong and many leading multinationals, we have discovered that the motivators for Gen Y are drastically different. Traditionally, payroll and career path served as key motivators for employees. Though still necessary, alone they are insufficient to drive Gen Y. With financial support from their families, most of Gen Y can afford temporary unemployment and a longer time for job hunting. They want to find purpose in their life and work.

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¹ Census and Statistics Department, 2006



Without an effective motivator, expectation gaps emerge. In a round-table meeting with representatives from major investment banks and Big Four accounting firms, FDMT has identified 3 major employability gaps of Gen Y, namely:

1. **Accountability:** Young employees perceive responsibility differently. Some of them are unable to articulate the difference between taking orders and taking up responsibilities. Others demand that the employment experience be enjoyable rather than being responsible for their own work.
2. **Communication:** Being identified also as the “Net Generation”, Gen Y might have excellent technology skills but less so in business writing and interpersonal communications. For instance, many retail companies found it difficult to obtain incident reports from their young employees over the phone. The communication habits of our young generation are often limited to instant, pictorial and synchronized information.

3. **Execution:** Getting used to constant immediacy to information and resources, from SMS and instant messaging to fast food, Gen Y is less patient and experienced in doing detailed planning for their own issues and tasks.

Seeking new motivator

Facing the problems above, some employers have started using a so-called “partnership approach”, in which managers spend more time with young employees and try to be their friends. Other companies try to enhance Gen Y’s employment experience through providing recreational facilities in the company to create a more interactive and interesting work environment.

In fact Gen Y is greatly concerned with self-image and personal development. Therefore the key to motivate Gen Y is to turn their self-centeredness into self expectation.

Employers' Focus

Simply focusing on Gen Y's preference for fun and friendship, these measures have not, in my observation, enhanced the productivity of Gen Y significantly.

In fact Gen Y is greatly concerned with self-image and personal development. Therefore the key to motivate Gen Y is to turn their self-centeredness into self expectation.

Sustain the new motivator: empower the front-line managers

In many companies, front-line managers have been working closely with Gen Y. Therefore, it is vital to support these managers in inducing spontaneous self-expectation in their Gen Y employees, by being able to:

1. *Describe specifically what their Gen Y employees want*

Can your front-line managers list the top 3 desires of their team members?

Gen Y employees have their own aspirations, though these may not all be job-related or well-articulated. Many young employees are

less committed to their current job as they are backed by abundant resources and opportunities. Besides this, many young employees are not clear about exactly what they want.

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Despite these apparently negative aspects, Generation Y is energetic and motivated, as is vividly shown in their active engagements in social movements, online networks and blogs. Moreover, they care about their future and their family. They also have a strong desire to be understood, accepted and respected.

Employers could lever on these positive aspects to build a closer relationship with Generation Y. Front-line managers should be encouraged to guide their young employees in exploring and crystallising what they want. The way to do this could vary across different companies, from 1-to-1 coaching to team hiking. The key lies in the ability and willingness of front-line managers to help the Gen Y employees identify their goals.



This is the first step to creating sustainable productivity. When it is well designed this can become a very fulfilling team-building practice for the company.

2. *Translate performance expectation into self expectation*

Given your plan of visiting 100 countries by the age of 30, how fast do your promotion and hence your performance improvements have to be? Or, given your goal of attaining your qualification to be a lawyer in 2 years, what should you do to achieve this?

After knowing what their young team members want, your front-line managers can then articulate the performance expectation in relation to the interests of the employees. Your front-line managers will become consultants or mentors of your Gen Y employees to bring them what they want in the organisation.

Align Gen Y employees' self-expectation with their work requirements by showing how the present work can help them to achieve their goals.

3. *Inspire Gen Y employees to articulate their expectations themselves*

Instead of giving direct instructions to Gen Y employees, managers need to communicate expectations with skillful questioning. This helps Gen Y to think of and to work out the solutions themselves. Training may be needed to empower front-line managers to master the techniques of performance coaching.

Here, the manager should ask more specific questions with regards to the tasks their employees are dealing with. Following the abovementioned, the manager can then ask: Do you think the way you drafted the land contract for your client is up to the professional standard you want to attain?

The groundwork for all above: Trust

Many employers, especially front-line managers, fall into the classic trap of the generation gap, and end up developing an 'anti-Gen-Y' mentality. Clearly, this kind of negative emotion will only have negative effects, and can hinder the effectiveness of all the actions proposed above. Senior management may alleviate this situation by recognising the challenge facing front-line managers in taking additional care of their team members on top of their operational duty.

About the author:

Coming from a multinational corporate background, Almon Kwan is the Managing Director of FDMT. He has trained over 3,000 young employees and their front-line managers from many leading multinationals as well as students and teaching staff from 8 universities and IVE in Hong Kong.

About FDMT:

FDMT is a HR Consulting and Outsourcing company focusing on Generation Y employment. Since 2005, FDMT has helped connect over 2,000 students to over 1,000 multinationals. The boutique consulting also helps various multinationals to recruit and engage their Generation Y employees.

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