Case Archive

# Case 4.1: Net-Gen Takes Over the Workforce: How the Younger Generation is Challenging Organizational Culture

A new generation of workers is pushing the Baby Boomers and Generation X out of the way. Take your pick of labels—Generation Y, the Millennials, or the Netgeneration (from the explosion of the internet in recent years), but those born from the late 1970s to the early 2000s are moving in and taking over. They are huge in number, are very different in orientation according to every study, and pose big challenges for the way complex organizations work.

Net-Geners are “digital natives,” one government report explains. They’ve “grown up with technology in every aspect of their lives” and information technology “capabilities are often second nature to them.” The generation is “the most demanding generation in history, demanding challenge, meaningful work with impact, committed co-workers, and the ability to reach personal and financial goals.” What are their ideal employers? A recent survey found that 55 percent of respondents aged 13 to 30 said the private sector, 25 percent said nonprofit organizations, and 20 percent said the public sector. [[1]](#footnote-1)

In 2006, in-depth interviews of Net-Geners revealed eight norms that shape their interests and behaviors.[[2]](#footnote-2) These norms pose big challenges for those trying to design and manage organizations. This new generation also pose sharp tests for many generations of organization theory.

1. Freedom. Net-Geners expect to be able to define their own priorities. They expect their job to fit into their social and personal lives, not vice versa.
2. Customization. Net-Geners expect to be able to create their own worlds, from the pictures on their credit cards to how they get their entertainment.
3. Scrutinzers. Net-Geners expect to make tough comparisons among their choices and expect high levels of trust and transparency from the organizations that employ them.
4. Integrity. Net-Geners expect to work for organizations with high levels of ethical practice.
5. Collaboration. Net-Geners expect to engage in highly interactive work with significant personal impact on the tasks to which they devote themselves.
6. Entertainment. Net-Geners expect to enjoy their work, want to learn new things, to be part of the action, and to have fun in the process.
7. Speed. Net-Geners expect to use instant messaging and other high-speed means of communication, instead of the telephone and email.
8. Innovation. Net-Geners expect to use information technology heavily, because it’s always been woven heavily into their lives.

Government information technology analysts, after looking carefully at these trends, have identified important characteristics of the “Net-Gen world”:[[3]](#footnote-3)

* They don’t want to be labeled.
* They want continuous feedback and recognition.
* They value genuine mentoring.
* They want autonomy, responsibility, and challenges.
* They need structured accountability.
* They’re not interested in “paying their dues.”
* They’re used to having their opinions heard.
* They’re used to group/team problem solving.
* They expect high tech/constant stimulation.
* They’re used to living in a 24/7 environment.

# Questions to consider:

1. Compare these characteristics with the foundations of organization theory. What similarities and differences stand out for you?
2. What special challenges do you see for bringing Net-Geners into large hierarchical organizations?
3. What innovations in organization theory do you think will be required to lead and motivate Net-Geners?
4. If you could design the ideal government workplace for Net-Geners, what would it look like?

1. Chief Information Officers Council, *Netgeneration: Preparing for Change in the Federal Information Technology Workforce* (Washington: Chief Information Officers Council, 2010), p. 39, at h[ttp://www.cio.gov/Documents/NetGen.pdf](http://www.cio.gov/Documents/NetGen.pdf)  [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Don Tapscott, quoted in ibid., pp. 38-39. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. CIO Council, *Netgeneration,* p. 40. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)