Managing and leading across the generations: are Gen Y a different species?
Managing and leading across the generations: are Gen Y a different species?

“Children nowadays are tyrants – they gobble their food, contradict their parents, and tyrannise their teachers!”

Socrates 425BC:

1. Why are we talking about Gen Y and the workforce?

The generation gap is a 1960s concept. In the sixties, the gap was defined by politics, music, clothes, sex and drugs. But the different generations still spoke the same language, used the same technology and consumed the same type of media.

The generation gap in the 21st century is overwhelmingly defined by technology and communication. The impact of the technological change has created fundamental differences between the generations, not just stylistic differences.

This new generation gap creates a challenge for organisations in both how they market to, and how they manage, their workforce.

Generally, the three main generations of today are:

- Baby boomers - born 1946 to 1965 – currently aged 41-60

In less than 10 years, baby boomers will be a relatively small minority of workers and Gen Y will form 40% of the workforce while Gen X will make up another 40%. We therefore need to be putting strategies in place now to manage this transition. Some companies are already starting to feel the impact of this change, in particular those that traditionally have a higher proportion of younger workers and part-time workers (currently, about 30% of part-timers are Gen Y).

Workforce structure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Generation</th>
<th>2003-04</th>
<th>2015</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Matured</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baby boomers</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generation X</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generation Y</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>40%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Source: ABS data for 2003-04 and ABS population projection figures were used to estimate structure in 2015
2. Baby elephant story part 1

I now want to tell you a story about a baby elephant.

Olmeg, was just two weeks old when he was brought to Daphne, whose husband was the founder and warden of a famous national park in Kenya. Daphne was known for her work with baby orphan animals but Olmeg was much younger than any of the other baby elephants she had previously managed to save and nurture. Such a young baby elephant had never before survived infancy after being orphaned and hand-reared by humans.

Olmeg was orphaned when his family stampeded, running for their lives to flee poachers' bullets, and they inadvertently left the tiny calf behind after he fell into a deep trench. He was found a day later by herdsmen, sunburnt to a frazzle and more dead than alive from dehydration. He must have been a very physically robust calf to have survived such a trauma. Olmeg was brought to Daphne when the man who saved him quickly realised that his efforts to nurture Olmeg weren't working and Olmeg looked as though he was about to die. The baby was in a pitiful state, suffering from serious diarrhoea (due to an incorrect diet), extremely sun damaged ears and a very septic umbilicus oozing pus.

Daphne had no stable to accommodate an elephant at that time, nor any trained elephant handlers who could help her care for him, so he had to share a bedroom with Daphne's daughter, Jill, who lived in a small rondavel to one side of the main establishment.

Daphne knew that intensive 24-hour care of the two-week old Olmeg would be required, and he would need constant feeding, care and attention, with three-hourly feeds night and day. She shared this job with her adult daughter Jill.

Since he was so young, Olmeg was like their shadow, trusting and determined not to lose another "family"! He was a full-time job, and all other duties had to be shelved for a period of time. They had to devote all their attention to Olmeg just to keep him alive.
3. Research and learning phase

Why am I talking about elephants?

To me, on the surface Gen Y sometimes seem as different from me as an elephant is. They look, walk, talk, behave, and interact in a strange and foreign way.

But there are similarities between elephants and people, as I accept there are between Gen Y and baby boomers. Elephants:

- live for 70+ years
- have offspring until aged about 50 with 2.5 to 4 years between births
- have a very strong sense of family; elephants never forget their family units and will return to them often, but a family will split if they don’t get along
- exhibit a wide range of emotional traits; they can be happy or sad, volatile or placid, and they like to play. If a baby complains the entire family will touch, caress and comfort it
- display envy and jealousy, throw tantrums and are fiercely competitive
- they grieve for lost family and friends, or the loss of a stillborn baby. They can even identify the bones of a dead elephant that they once knew.
- and, of course, elephants have good memories.

Just as Daphne in Kenya could not ignore the baby elephant on her doorstep, we can’t ignore Gen Y. They are “in your face”, they are making their presence felt in a big way.

Daphne had to deal with the challenge presented by the baby elephant, and to do this she needed to learn about elephants, adapt to the situation, and make the most of it.

So too do we need to learn about Gen Y, try and understand them, their needs, behaviours, desires, motivators etc.
4. Defining characteristics and events across the generations

(Note: Gen X are the bridge generation. They understand and adopt the work ethic and focus of the baby boomers, yet they connect with Gen Ys culture, views and values.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sociology</th>
<th>Baby boomers</th>
<th>Gen X</th>
<th>Gen Y</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Defining life experiences/practical differences</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Prime Ministers</strong></td>
<td>• Harold Holt,</td>
<td>• Bob Hawke</td>
<td>• John Howard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Billy McMahon</td>
<td>• Paul Keating</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• John Gorton</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Gough Whitlam</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Malcolm Fraser</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TV / movies</strong></td>
<td>• Easy Rider</td>
<td>• Happy Days</td>
<td>• Reality TV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• The Graduate</td>
<td>• Countdown</td>
<td>• Pay TV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Jaws</td>
<td>• Star Wars</td>
<td>• The Matrix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Music icons</strong></td>
<td>• Elvis</td>
<td>• Madonna</td>
<td>• Eminem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Beatles</td>
<td>• INXS</td>
<td>• Britney Spears</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Rolling Stones</td>
<td>• Nirvana</td>
<td>• P Diddy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• The Monkeys</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Iconic technology</strong></td>
<td>• TV (B&amp;W then Colour)</td>
<td>• Cassettes and CDs</td>
<td>• MP3s / DVDs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Records</td>
<td>• Walkman</td>
<td>• Internet, email, sms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Cassettes</td>
<td>• IBM PC</td>
<td>• Play Station</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Computer games</strong></td>
<td>• Nil</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Street Fighter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Landmark events / social markers</strong></td>
<td>• Assassination of Robert Kennedy</td>
<td>• Berlin Wall down 1989</td>
<td>• New millennium 2000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Sacking of Gough Whitlam</td>
<td>• Challenger explodes 1986</td>
<td>• September 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Vietnam war</td>
<td>• AIDS</td>
<td>• Bali bombings</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• No-fault divorce</td>
<td>• Single-parent families</td>
<td>• The age of the internet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Moon landing</td>
<td>• Multi-culturalism</td>
<td>• Environmentalism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Learning experience</strong></td>
<td>• Formal</td>
<td>• Round table</td>
<td>• Café style</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Structured</td>
<td>• Relaxed ambience</td>
<td>• Music and multi-sensory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Classroom based</td>
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</tbody>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sociology</th>
<th>Baby boomers</th>
<th>Gen X</th>
<th>Gen Y</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Attributes</strong></td>
<td>• Born into world of economic growth and peace, but learned about war and depression from parents.</td>
<td>• Gen X grew up during a period of hurried childhood as their parents divorced and worked long hours.</td>
<td>• Gen Y developed during one of the most expansive economies in the past 30 years.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Had this peace disturbed by threat of Cold War and recessions.</td>
<td>• This generation developed a strong sense of resilience, relying heavily on themselves.</td>
<td>• They are optimistic, socially aware and confident. They are least likely to marry and have children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Company loyalty and sense of security undermined by experience of redundancies.</td>
<td>• Mass media, AIDS, the Cold War and technology shaped them – made them independent, goal-oriented entrepreneurs.</td>
<td>• With the highest level of education of any generation, they are likely to become life-long learners.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Marriage and family the norm, their parents didn’t divorce but they did.</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Grew up with a tidal wave of information and the technology to surf it. They’re comfortable with multiple points of view and many ways of doing things.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Values and traits**

<p>| Money | Work hard for it | It’s not everything | Give it to me |
| Financial values | Long-term needs (home) | Medium-term goals | Short-term wants |
| | Cash, cheques, credit | Credit-savvy | Credit-dependent |
| Respecting your elders | No question | Is polite | Whatever! |
| Change | Resist it | Accept it | Want it |
| Technology | Master the basics – means to an ends | Comfortable with it | Masters of it |
| Character | Visionary | Creative | Street smart |
| | Idealistic | Pragmatic | Aware |
| | Workaholic | Realistic | Lifestyle centred |
| | Enthusiastic | Low key | Well-educated |
| | Energetic | Innovative | Informal |
| | Bossy | Flexible | Tech savvy |
| | Passionate | Independent | Sceptical |
| | Principled | Adaptable | Stimulus junkies |
| | Hierarchical | Cautious | Impatient |
| | Relatively respectful of authority | | Civic-minded |
| | | | Moralistic |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sociology</th>
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<th>Gen Y</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Work style** | • Formal  
• Hierarchical  
• Task oriented  
• Competitive  
• Follow the rules  
• Do what you’re told  
• Work hard “for the family”  
• Emphasise learning | • Collaborative  
• Work in teams  
• Better educated than baby boomers  
• Less hierarchical more entrepreneurial  
• Less conscious of formalised rules and regulations and more likely to choose a career that offers a balanced lifestyle.  
• Environment characterised by widespread organisational change. | • Focus on outcomes – not how you do it but what you achieve.  
• Positions and titles mean little to Gen Ys. Rather, the person who has hands-on knowledge, can get the job done and accomplish their goals will win Gen Ys loyalty and admiration  
• Want and seek out mentors.  
• Career must fit the lifestyle.  
• Value experiencing versus learning.  
• Managers see them as having ‘self-esteem on steroids’ and confidence that exceeds their competence.  
• World has become incentivised – loyalty is bought with frequent buyer programs, points and discounts – motivated by reward and recognition strategies. |
<p>| <strong>Loyalty to employer</strong> | • Still exists but eroded by redundancies | • Shortcut to the top | • Give me Saturday off or I’ll quit! |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Gen X</th>
<th>Gen Y</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Communication style</strong></td>
<td>• They are most comfortable with print or face-to-face formats for serious communication, with electronic formats (TV and radio) used for entertainment.</td>
<td>• Visually appealing – headlines, quotes, models, case studies</td>
<td>• Multi-media, interactive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Phone is for essential communication only. Most would have hit 40 plus before they experienced email, the internet and mobile phones.</td>
<td>• Keep theory brief – it’s about asking questions and being interactive</td>
<td>• Short, sharp, straight to the point messages. Emphasis on speed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Traditional, structured in style.</td>
<td>• TV, newspapers, internet</td>
<td>• Blogging, pod casts, chat rooms, MP3s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Their emails will generally be written in standard English.</td>
<td>• Talk on the phone and send email</td>
<td>• SMS - 74% of text messages are sent by Gen Ys, Skype, multi-media messaging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Don’t like to be bombarded with information.</td>
<td>• Informal style of writing</td>
<td>• New lexicon and abbreviated writing style – LOL, GR8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Judicious style of writing</td>
<td>• Round-table collaborative style of communicating</td>
<td>• Spontaneous and interactive. No rehearsed talk or manufactured spiel</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“Whether sad, angry, distressed, eager, or playful, [they] are this in a big way” (Joyce Poole quoted in The Fate Of The Elephant)

This sounds like a description of Gen Y – everything is more extreme, bigger, more over the top, but it is actually a description of elephants. An angry or excited elephant is something to fear - you want to get out of their way or you’ll get trampled.
5. Why do these generational differences matter to organisations?

No matter how much automation takes place, people are a critical part of any business or enterprise, and they are absolutely fundamental for any service-based business. In Australia, the service industries sector accounts for 75% of all employment and is growing at twice the rate of the goods producing industries both in terms of people employed and gross value added. So people really matter for our economic prosperity.

How we manage and communicate with people at work makes a big difference – a difference that directly affects financial performance. In the last two decades, work places have been managed and led by baby boomers for baby boomers. But a one-size-fits-all approach, following baby boomer preferences, is no longer appropriate. If we don’t get it right the consequences will be:

- difficulties in attracting and retaining the right people
- lower productivity
- faster disengagement of employees and lack of loyalty to the company
- higher staff turnover as employees search elsewhere for that engagement
- behaviours not aligning to the company’s values and strategy
- changes not being accepted or bought in to.

All these factors affect the company’s bottom line.

To give ourselves the best chance of success given the changing nature of the employment population and increasing competition for workers, we need to learn about and understand the different generations, and adapt the way we do things.
6. Elephant story part 2

Like human infants, baby elephants need a nurturing mother and Olmeg became almost instantly emotionally attached to Daphne as his ‘mother’.

As Olmeg grew through his first year she tried hard to persuade him to spend his nights in a small stone chicken house (minus the chickens!) with one of her dresses bearing her scent to provide comfort. But he would have none of it and protested loudly, punctuating the night with his cries.

Gradually, Daphne recruited a small team of keepers and together they took on the challenge of raising Olmeg through the vulnerable infant years and into adolescence. Recruiting keepers wasn’t a simple exercise - Olmeg had his own views on who could look after him, and he vociferously rejected some of the keepers that Daphne recruited. Elephants are very sensitive, and very fussy; they don’t bond with everyone and can tell if a person does not have an honest “love” for them. They won’t accept you as part of their human “family” if they sense you don’t have a genuine emotional attachment to them.

Olmeg, was a true survivor, and coped with many unwitting errors the humans made in relation to his care. He taught Daphne and her team of keepers a great deal through a process of trial and error.

Olmeg was a complex character, deeply sensitive and easily wounded. As he grew up, new orphan elephants arrived and he became the first and oldest of a steady influx of orphans. He basked in the admiration of all those younger than him. It is normal for little bull elephants to indulge in “hero-worship” of those older, because in childhood rank begins with age and rank is all-important in elephant male society. Olmeg was unquestionably the boss in the nursery.

When they began weaning Olmeg, tantrums from him became a daily occurrence. His milk ration was cut to three bottles at a sitting, whereas the other younger orphans still needed four bottles. The keepers were puzzled when Olmeg behaved like a spoilt brat at every feed, and eventually Daphne was called in as the trouble-shooter. She worked out that the reason for Olmeg’s tantrums was that he could count, and he felt the others were being given preferential treatment. A fourth bottle containing just water was added to the three with his feed of coconut milk so that the bottle line-up was the same for all. Thereafter the matter was resolved to everyone’s satisfaction. It is very important always to treat each elephant exactly the same; never to give one something another cannot have, because it will be noticed and remembered.

Gen Y are a bit like baby elephants – they’re very selective about who they’ll have in their family of friends, but once you’re part of their family the bonds are very strong. But unlike elephants, they don’t respect someone because of age or seniority. You have to earn their respect – you’re measured by what you do and what you achieve.
7. Communicating effectively

Communication is an area where Gen Y’s behaviour is most similar to that of elephants – and perhaps most different from baby boomers. Both elephants and Gen Y are creatures of a multi-modal, wide-ranging world of communication. Both are constant communicators, keeping in touch with each other.

Elephants have a well-developed system of communication that makes use of all of their senses – hearing, smell, vision and touch.

**Acoustic** communication – elephants have an exceptional ability to detect vibrations over long distances and their sounds may travel a mile or more (it is possible for an elephant to have a calling range of 300 square km). Their acoustic signals are omni directional and can be broadcast to a large audience. Sounds a bit like SMS!

**Visual** communication – elephants make use of postures and displays and their sense of sight to communicate. They have a vast array of gestures to signal messages that involve their heads, eyes, mouth, ears, tusks, trunk, tail, feet and even their whole body. Sounds like Gen Y high school kids on the train in the morning!

**Tactile** communication – elephants are extremely tactile animals and use touch to communicate. They purposefully touch one another using their trunk, ears, tusks, feet, tail, and whole body. Tactile interactions can convey aggressive or caring, friendly or sexual, playful or loving and nurturing messages.

**Chemical** communication - elephants also use various secretions and an acute sense of smell to communicate.

Like the elephants, Gen Y use a vast array of methods and signals to communicate – they use their clothes, language, tone of voice, intonation, touch, physical stance, mobile phone, emails, SMS, blogs to communicate messages.
Gen Y is the mass communication, instant messaging, 24-hour communicating generation. Gen Y use multi-media and interactive communications to communicate with people all around the globe, even those they don’t know.

They use short, sharp, straight to the point messages, with an emphasis on speed.

Why is this constant contact and incessant communication so important for Gen Y? Why do they get desperate if they don’t have access to their mobile or email? For Gen Y, their friendship network is critical, and becomes like a family. They are intensely tribal, very loyal and supportive of their friends. In an insecure world where relationships break up and families disintegrate, their friends have become the one constant. The communication devices are therefore like a safety blanket, they’re the tool that helps Gen Y to maintain contact with their friends and feel connected.

Elephants too live in close family groups, which can be made up of 3 or more generations. They are always communicating with each other, interacting, playing, greeting, caring for the sick, or protecting those who need help. The females and the young stick together and support each other.

The communication chasm between baby boomers and Gen Y has a substantial impact on workplaces. To date, workplace communication has been designed around baby boomers. It uses baby boomer language and has a print perspective whereas Gen Y communication starts with an electronic perspective and their language and communication style is quite different.

Key characteristics of the Gen Y communication style are:

- frequent use of humour, which is quirky, funny, mocking, edgier
- like subversive, covert messages and irony
- value unvarnished, hard-hitting truth, see through false appeals, over-inflated promises, obfuscation
- reject the superficial, will be scornful of corporate spin
- absorb information in very short chunks, don’t want long, descriptive passages of material, they’ve developed a new lexicon and abbreviated style of writing (eg GR8 for great) that is not constrained by the rules of grammar (very unlike baby boomers). The emphasis is on speed, and getting the message across, not how it is done
- used to reading and interpreting graphical material, symbols, iconography
- used to communicating through an electronic interface and expect that anything can be done electronically
- expect to be able to access information immediately
- seek out alternative sources of information so that they aren’t just getting the information and messages that an employer sends them about their company
- used to handling multiple communications simultaneously, with different formats and a range of technology
- happy to receive a barrage of information and delete what they’re not interested in (unlike baby boomers).
The new technology creates new alternatives for employee communication, for example:

- Podcasts to reach different segments of the workforce
- RSS feeds to provide regular short reports on key aspects of the business eg, to report on sales results
- SMS text alerts
- Messages from the CEO through a blog
- Viral marketing techniques to distribute communications internally.

But we shouldn’t just focus on the technology. While this is an obvious and practical difference between generations the other aspects of communication such as the content, style of message, frequency, length, and level of honesty and directness can be just as, if not more, important. Therefore, while it may be quite some time before many organisations have the technical capability to use some of this technology, or the justification for the expense, we can make a lot of changes to other aspects of our communication that will appeal to Gen Y.

Some of these changes, such as using shorter and more direct messages, could bring about improvements that everyone would value.
8. Elephant story part 3

The mudwallow that they made for Olmeg provided some of the happiest moments of his daily routine. They made it especially for him; a miniature replica of a waterhole, with the right sort of red plastering mud, and just the right depth. Immersed in its glutinous depths, he was happy to play for hours, the only drawback being that he expected others to join in.

There were days when Olmeg was not quite himself and had to be given some medicine, which he hated. After this ordeal, he would be very upset and they would try and comfort him. But Olmeg would run off and stand dejectedly with his head in the box that housed the gas cylinder. He was seeking solace in the feeling of being underneath something, as a young elephant spends a lot of its early life tucked beneath its mother. The gas box seemed to give him comfort and a feeling of security when he was upset.

As he grew into a teenager, Olmeg’s games never ceased. He would play with the broom, the bucket, the hose, or anything that could be picked up and thrown down. He always tried to get everyone involved.

For Olmeg, playing games gave him a sense of friendship and connection in the same way that sharing MP3s or SMSs does for Gen Y.

Daphne had also inherited an adult elephant, Eleanor, who she’d taken in when Eleanor was wounded by poachers. As a matriarch, Eleanor was perfect to help with the next phase of Olmeg’s development. Daphne knew that she had to relinquish some of her influence on Olmeg and gradually hand him over to the guardianship of Eleanor to teach him how to ‘be an elephant’.

Being older and having a long memory of her own family, Eleanor had relatives of her own living wild in the park. Although Eleanor lived in Daphne’s orphan reserve, she was regularly free to roam with her wild elephant relatives. In her care, Olmeg was introduced to wild elephants and learnt to interact, stoush, play, tussle, challenge and compete with his peers away from the protective restrictions of his human family.

It was as much a lesson for Olmeg in development, independence and courage as it was for Daphne, who waited with baited breath for his arrival home after an excursion into the wild with Eleanor. She dreaded the thought of him being roughed up by his adolescent peers, or worse, being ignored or rejected.

As Olmeg grew in confidence, stature and survival skills, his trips into the bush with Eleanor became more frequent. Eventually, some days he even made his way out into the veld alone, although he always returned gladly and with joyous excitement to his human family.
9. Managing Gen Y effectively, achieving outcomes

Once we have similarly come to grips with this “beast” Gen Y, know how it operates and how to communicate with it, we’re ready to focus on mutual goals and the outcomes that need to be achieved. In our case, the goal must be for Gen Y to be able to take their place in the workplace and be successful, contributing employees.

For this to happen, they need the right management style, the right context or environment, just as Daphne had to provide the right environment to allow the baby elephant to thrive.

Gen Y require a different management style, and demand far more of organisations than the baby boomers did. Important characteristics of Gen Y that will influence how they respond to different management styles and organisational cultures include:

• they want to question things, not be constrained by tradition, how things have been done in the past, and they require explanations. “Because that’s the way it’s done around here” is not a good enough reason.
• given their comfort with multiple points of view and their acceptance of diversity, they don’t accept that there is “only one way of doing things”
• positions, titles and authority mean little, Gen Y value intrinsic characteristics (eg they don’t care who the boss is, but care who “really knows what’s going on around here”)
• respect authenticity, competence and accomplishment – ie Gen Ys will respect and admire the people they see as “knowing what they’re doing”, who they think makes a valuable contribution, not someone in a position of authority who they believe is incompetent
• want meaningful work, want to be sufficiently challenged
• want learning opportunities, and regard experience as the way to learn
• known as the “self-esteem generation”, have been told they can do anything so they expect respect and hate being “dissed”, they don’t respond well to intimidation
• their confidence and expectations about roles and responsibilities don’t seem to be in line with their experience and expertise, they have a sense of entitlement and self importance, appear to boomers as very self interested
• don’t understand or accept baby boomers’ focus on outward appearance and baby boomers’ standards; appearances and clothes matter to them and they want the freedom to express themselves.

Another key area of difference between Gen Y and baby boomers relates to their response to change. Gen Y are used to things happening quickly and expect fast responses eg that they’ll get feedback immediately, that promises or goals will be met quickly. For them, the types of trends or changes that used to take 10-15 years to come about now take place in months or just one to two years.

As a result, Gen Y actually like and want change. And because they are comfortable with change, and very adaptable, they get bored quickly.
To be an effective manager of Gen Y, some baby boomers might need guidance in how to respond to these Gen Y traits. HR managers should consider whether they need to include training courses or coaching programs in their learning and development schedules.

As well as helping individual baby boomers to cope with Gen Y colleagues and staff, organisations will also need to review their people policies and practices and make them more Gen Y friendly.

Just as an elephant won’t thrive if it’s not in its own natural habitat, Gen Y won’t thrive and succeed in the workforce if the people policies conflict with their expectations, demands and preferences.

One of the key generational differences from a policy perspective is that of the role of work for Gen Y, and the importance to them of work-life balance. They don’t have the same deep connection to the world of work as their parents did; it is not their main source of self-esteem and self value.

Many Gen Ys saw their parents, or parents’ friends, suffer from the massive “downsizing” of the 1980s. As a result, Gen Y don’t trust big institutions and don’t see them as being loyal to their workers, so they don’t have the same sense of loyalty to a company that their parents had.

They also grew up seeing their parents working long hours, they often had absent fathers, and this has made them reject such commitment to work and place more value on their life outside work. They saw and experienced the personal cost of their parents’ workaholism – stress, broken marriages, absent parenting – and this left them disillusioned and determined not to repeat the same behaviour. They think about, and value, work-life balance and ask what the employer will do for them.

Gen Y will therefore turn down or leave a job that requires more time of them than they’re prepared to give to work, even if it pays more money.

Because of their interest in life outside work and their view that employers have no loyalty to employees, Gen Y don’t expect to work full-time as an employee throughout their working years. They are more likely to work freelance and have a portfolio approach to earning an income than previous generations. They also factor in travel, personal development, and their social commitments and interests to their work plans.

Their perspective on work means that flexible work options are important to Gen Y. They will seek out employers who offer and truly support, job sharing, part time work, flexible hours, and working from home.

Given their focus on personal development and their personal goals, they’ll also be looking for companies that have strong personal development policies; training and educational opportunities, fast-track schemes for employees with potential, mentoring programs and the potential for travel. They will be more interested in organisations that encourage, and have programs to facilitate, gaining diverse experience within the organisation such as job rotation schemes. And they’ll seek out roles that will further their own development.

Gen Y want constant stimulation and attention, just like Olmeg the baby elephant.
Some companies are starting to accept that Gen Y workers are more itinerant, that they won’t stay long and will seek opportunities elsewhere. Such companies are putting in place programs to woo them back again at some time in the future eg alumni contact programs and websites for “keeping in touch”. This is a big shift from what often happens now. Employees who leave a company are often made to feel like traitors so they feel that they’d be unwelcome if they wanted to come back in the future.

Despite what many may think, Gen Y are very civic minded with strong commitments to social issues and the environment. These values do not apply only to their life outside work, and they will influence Gen Y’s choice of employer.

This means that they’ll look very carefully at what a company does, what it produces, and what commitment it has to the community. The corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs of companies will therefore be very important for Gen Yers when they’re seeking out employment. Companies that have strong CSR programs with genuine social commitment will become employers of choice with this generation. Organisations’ CSR policies and how they’re communicated to potential and existing employees will therefore be critical for attracting and retaining Gen Y.

They won’t be prepared to work hard for an organisation they don’t believe in, and their career choices will be driven by what they see as being meaningful and valuable.

Because of their requirements of work and employers, Gen Y don’t tend to stay in a job if it isn’t delivering what they want, they can be harder to keep and turnover can be a big problem. An important consequence of this is that, as the baby boomers retire, valuable corporate history is not passed on to the next generation of workers. Organisations may need to develop new techniques for capturing and passing on this important knowledge.
10. Elephant story part 4

During all the years that Olmeg was growing up, no keeper could begin to match the love he held for Daphne and Jill who had mothered him in very early infancy. Whenever they returned to visit the park he greeted them with unbridled joy and excitement, recognizing them instantly, even amongst a crowd of other visitors. When he became a teenager, Olmeg and the other orphan bulls started spending time away from Eleanor’s group seeking the company of other male friends, as is the way of teenage bull elephants.

For several years after Olmeg returned to the wild, he would come back fairly regularly, but these visits became less frequent as time passed. His rehabilitation back into the wild community is therefore successful and complete, and for Daphne this is a source of great satisfaction and pride.

By now, Olmeg would be a fine young bull of 20, no doubt with impressive tusks, for they were unusually long and thick even by the time he left. Obviously he is with his friends in a more remote section of the park and, being happy with them, he sees no reason to return to the Voi Stockades where he grew up, especially since Daphne and Jill were seldom there to greet him whenever he did return.

However, they have not given up hope of another visit from Olmeg, for two of the other orphans have come back after absences of eight years. Olmeg is a very special orphan – the very first infant African elephant to have been successfully hand reared from such a young age and released into the wild where he now prospers and will, all being well, sire an elephant generation of his own.
10. Conclusion

Olmeg has returned to his natural habitat and is fully and successfully functioning in his own environment. More than this, Olmeg’s independence means that he can now make an important and valuable contribution to the physical environment and welfare of other animals, as elephants do.

Elephants play a vital and positive role in the ecosystem they inhabit. They can provide water for other species by digging water holes in dry riverbeds, and the depressions created by their footprints and their bodies trap rainfall. An elephant’s journey through the high grass provides food for birds by disturbing small reptiles, amphibians or insects. Their paths act as firebreaks and rainwater conduits.

Elephants are compassionate and social animals and will aid injured animals even in the face of considerable danger to themselves.

Just as Daphne had to let go, let Olmeg become the wild animal he was meant to be and make his own contribution as an elephant, baby boomers have to learn to understand and communicate with Gen Y so they can then let go, let Gen Y become independent and take over organisations, and let them change workplaces to environments that suit them.

Gen Y’s style of operating and their norms and values will replace those of the baby boomers as we retire. Gen Y will create a new “normal” natural workplace environment.

What about the children of Gen Y– variously called the Z generation, millenials or Google generation – will they be baby elephants like their parents and so not need to instigate a revolution in workplaces, or will they be another species altogether?