
Book Review: *Plugged In: The Generation Y Guide to Thriving at Work*, by Tamara Erickson

Review: Gerry Griffin

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Generation Y – defined as those born between 1980 and 2000 – is the largest consumer and employee group in history, according to Tamara Erickson, author of *Plugged In: The Generation Y Guide to Thriving at Work*.ⁱ Also called the Millennial Generation, Net Generation and Echo Boom (children of the Baby Boomers), this group (dubbed Gen Y for ease of reference) is predicted to dominate the workplace for the next forty and possibly sixty years. Although this book is aimed at helping Gen Y make the best start in their careers by explaining the challenges and opportunities of the workplace, it is recommended for anyone who manages a multigenerational workforce, and is a must-read for those in organisational leadership who view Gen Ys arrival in the work world with bewilderment and trepidation.

Plugged In should also be a help to those who are charged with individual and organisational development, particularly those who are grappling with the dilemma of retirement of older generations and what that means for talent management and succession planning.

Previous studies of the multi-generational workplace have not uncovered significant differences in style, relationships or ambitions between the various age groups. However, a number of observers are offering evidence that Generation Y approaches work in radically different ways from older counterparts. Erickson is one of those. She devotes a major part of *Plugged In* to helping Gen Yers determine ‘what job is right for you?’ This represents a stark contrast with previous generations who are used to defending ‘why am I right for this job?’

A job that is right for members of Generation Y (although there will be different priorities for individuals within the group) offers:

- Learning opportunities
- A dearth of meetings
- Culture emphasising creativity, collaboration and special amenities
- Leading edge technology
- Reputation for ethics and social responsibility

Managers at employing organisations, from the top down, are expected to provide:

- Communication, information sharing and transparency
- Feedback and support
- Recognition of talent and contribution
- Encouragement for work/life balance
- Values-based leadership

Erickson is not alone in signalling seismic changes on the horizon for businesses and possibly other types of organisations. For example, the CIPD (Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development) in conjunction with the London Business School (LBS) recently reported the results of an online survey looking at 'management innovation' to respond to two important trends in the workplace: the arrival of Gen Y employees, and the emergence of Web 2.0 technologies.¹ Management innovation is defined as new ways of working, new organisational structures and new management methods and according to the researchers, it gets less attention than other forms of innovation.

According to this study, "Generation Y employees ... are expecting jobs that accommodate their family needs and personal lives, where their managers get highly engaged in their professional development."

The CIPD study indicates that although those surveyed understood the need for management innovation, they lacked "the tools, experience or time to make it happen." And although forty-six percent of respondents felt that Gen Y employees were significantly different from those of previous generations, most managers had not taken concrete steps to address those differences and seek ways to leverage them for benefit of their organisations.

The CIPD study did uncover some examples of management innovation, including use of Web 2.0 technologies for networking, communication, and teambuilding.

About the book

Tamara Erickson is President of the nGenera Innovation Network and has years of experience in the world of management consultancy, especially writing and speaking about inter-generation issues in the workplace. *Plugged In* is the result of extensive research over a five year period, including surveys, focus groups and other studies carried out by Ms Erickson and colleagues. She also uses information culled from that most Web 2.0 communications feature, her weekly blog *Across the Ages* (<http://discussionleader.hbsp.com/erickson>).

Erickson starts off by saying "[t]his book is about helping you [Generation Y] to plug in – connect effectively with diverse people of all ages and backgrounds and influence what's going on. ... Plugging in means channelling your energy in ways that get your ideas heard and your plans put into action."

For Erickson, Gen Y is special – in all the best sense of the word. While she acknowledges there is some truth to the common negative characteristics assigned to Gen Y, including impatience, narcissism, and a sense of entitlement, she believes these can be strengths in some contexts, and she highlights the positive characteristics as well: fresh perspective, motivation and willingness to take risks. Moreover, according to Erickson, Ys are confident and possessed of boundless enthusiasm. They have unrivalled technological competency, the result of growing up with personal computers and the Internet. Erickson believes this generation is a demographic dream, coming at just the right time to fill a spiralling demand for knowledge workers.

Plugged In is divided into three parts. In Part I the author describes the special characteristics of Generation Y and compares and contrasts them with other generations. In Part II she deals with the problem of matching individual skills and strengths to various work environments and career paths. Each person, she believes, has passions, which she describes as “life lures”. These lead to different attitudes towards work that can be categorised into ‘archetypes’. Each archetype displays different preferences for work content, forms of communication and levels of commitment. Exercises are provided to help Ys recognise their strengths, while a framework is offered to allow passions and preferences to be aligned with practical realities.

Part III is devoted to those Ys who have joined the world of work, and is designed to help them plug in and make a worthwhile contribution. Ms Erickson realises that many Ys experience frustration and isolation, coming face-to-face with unsympathetic workers from other generations. She examines three generations that populate today’s work environment: Traditionalists (born before 1945), Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964); and members of Generation X born after 1965, and highlights their attitudes to work, time, technology and money. This is done through a series of side-by-side comparisons of different generational perspectives, contrasting the actions and reactions of Gen Y with those of the older generations in the workplace.

Gen Y often comes up against a glass wall of misunderstanding by more senior people in organisations that have been designed by the grandparents of their Boomer parents, and are most often traditional and hierarchical. Sometimes the misunderstanding is strongest with those in the closest demographic group – Generation X – who feel Ys have not paid their dues but still expect to be invited to sit around the top table with company leadership. Erickson believes that the key to success for Ys in the workplace often lies with appreciating how others perceive them.

The side-by-side comparisons of workplace perspectives can provide insight for those tasked with leading Generation Y. For example:

Situation	Boomers see ...	Ys think ...
You get your first formal feedback from your boss. It focuses on how you rank against your peers and what you can do to get ahead.	A well-designed process. Comparative evaluative feedback is the most important input a boss can provide.	This is disappointing. Why isn't there more emphasis on acknowledging what I have accomplished?
Situation	Xers see ...	Ys think
Your boss assigns you to a new project and indicates that you'll be up for review in six months.	A normal performance management process, certainly the way it was done for us.	Are you kidding? You mean we're not going to touch base this afternoon? I'd rather have continual informal feedback.

Erickson advocates plugging in rather than fitting in. Instead of conforming (like their grandparents) or rebelling (like their parents), Gen Y is advised to work from within for changes. In the book's final chapter, entitled "Business Finesse," Erickson suggests that soft skills that can enhance how Gen Ys are perceived, and also help them to make a difference. These include communication (she thinks Gen Ys need work especially with written communication), initiative, learning from experiences (both good and bad), and perceiving the hidden logic in any situation.

The book is written in an engaging and conversational style, even when dealing with statistics, which should appeal to those who are used to getting their information online rather than from paper-based news sources or books. It is infused with optimism and encouragement, which may make readers from older generations sneer or grimace.

The changing workplace and the importance of engagement

In *Plugged In*, Tamara Erickson notes that new relationships are evolving between corporations and those who perform work. This evolution is driven in large part by technological innovation and the globalisation that this facilitates. Work is increasingly becoming cyclical and project-based and therefore is more about accomplishing the task whenever (and wherever) it can be done, rather than spending a certain amount of time during a specified time or day of the week.

Erickson and her colleagues think the “next generation enterprise” will look like this:

- connected communities with partners and contractor relationships
- collaborative
- continually informed
- technologically adept
- skilled at experimentation

Generation Y characteristics that are ideal for the evolving workplace include being comfortable living asynchronously, simultaneous use of multiple technologies, and solving problems/performing tasks collaboratively. Erickson notes that Gen Y is not interested in traditional steps on the corporate career ladder and values interesting and meaningful work, plus work/life balance more than financial reward.

The CIPD/LBS researchers concur and say that this generation is “expecting jobs that accommodate their family needs and personal lives, where their managers get highly engaged in their professional development.”ⁱⁱⁱ Erickson seems to reinforce the LBS/CIPD finding that most organisations have not fully embraced the needs of Gen Y – much less the opportunities afforded by Web 2.0. The LBS/CIPD researchers feel that while this low-risk, wait-and-see approach is understandable, opportunities are being missed for management innovation to attract and retain top employees, and build capacity for change and adaptation which will help organisations compete in the global business world.

Learning and development

Erickson urges Gen Ys to “get engaged with work you love” and says that when engagement is lacking, “companies suffer financially – high turnover, poor treatment of customers and a lack of innovative ideas.” The goal of the engaging workplace is to get employees who give discretionary effort – more than what is needed to just get by. And one way to engage Gen Y employees – from entry level to top talent – is to address their hunger for training and development.

According to Erickson, Ys thrive on challenge and recognition for meeting those challenges, and they are not really interested in advancement for advancement’s sake. They are comfortable being part of a team, or even forming a team, but they appear to resist hierarchical designations such as leader/follower. Engaging them in the fabric and soul of the organisation through learning opportunities can help them identify their own leadership potential and even joy its manifestation in a safe training environment. Then they may become hungry for more leadership experiences and challenges.

Learning and development are areas where the Web 2.0 technologies that are second nature to Gen Y can be employed. *Plugged In* confirms what I have been thinking about workplace training: it needs to re-invent itself (along the lines of the re-invention of the music industry to respond to the digital revolution) and take into account the special characteristics of Gen Y:

- Training on the move – training needs to be released from its fixed locations so it can follow the user
- Dabbing, not slabbing – trainees are increasingly unable or unwilling to give up large chunks of work time for development activities.
- Formal versus informal – more and more learning is achieved outside the framework of formal, structured programmes, for example on the job or skills transfer between colleagues. Informal learning can be configured to be focused and business-goal oriented.
- User-centred – focus on individual development needs rather than knowledge transfer to groups of employees. This will make it ideal for tailored soft skills training and leadership development, and gives trainees a sense of control of their development path.

Conclusion

Tamara Erickson never wants to dent the optimism of Gen Ys. She belongs to the Boomer generation, and she writes in the non-prescriptive tone of a benevolent parent who wants to advise but never interfere. She herself is an optimist; every problem she mentions is not really an issue - more a misunderstanding that can be resolved with goodwill on both sides. Her optimism is contagious – perhaps too contagious. If any criticism can be made of the book it is that it may present its core audience of Gen Ys with a world-view that many will come to view as divorced from the reality of an increasingly unsteady job market. The idea of having a choice about career paths, and choosing jobs that you feel passionate about, may seem far-fetched in a world where massive redundancies, especially in the financial sector, seem like the order of the day. The search for “the Perfect Job” may be replaced with the search for *any* job.

How might this impact on Generation Y? Its optimism may have been born under the blue skies of economic boom. How might this change if current economic problems are not just the odd rainy day but turn into a prolonged bout of bad weather?

A recent article in *The Economist*^{iv} notes that Generation Y “may be just the kind of employees that companies need to help them deal with the recession’s hazards,” and Erickson would no doubt agree. Gen Y’s ability to multi-task, eagerness for role or geographic mobility, and almost built-in knowledge of digital technology, should be valuable assets for organisations confronted with economic recession.

However, the downturn is creating problems for Y’s and their managers as “crisis-hit firms adopt more of a command-and-control approach to management – the antithesis of the open, collaborative style that young workers prefer.”^v Ys complain about heightened stress and demands in the workplace, but it is difficult if not impossible to job-hop as they previously did when times were good.

The Economist recommends compromise by both Generation Y and managers, with the younger group swallowing the need for decisive action and increased workloads, and with their leaders making “an extra effort to keep Net Geners engaged and motivated.”

The recession may offer unprecedented opportunities to challenge Ys to step up to leadership roles, and just as importantly, to convince them of the value of those roles. The alternative is two to three years of sullen acquiescence by younger workers – not only Ys but Xers as well – who may drag down organisational performance and then leave at the first opportunity when the economy improves.

Erickson's faith in Generation Y leads her to believe that the generation's traits are not ephemeral – not a phase to be worked through – but assets that will be retained by Ys throughout their long careers. This is another strand of her optimism that may be misplaced. Granted, the world of work is changing, as noted earlier, but the pace of change at large organisations may be slow because their set ways of doing things are enshrined in their culture.

But all in all, this is a very worthwhile publication, of value not just to Gen Ys but also importantly to anyone interested in how to lead, manage and develop those who are changing the face of work.^{vi}

To comment on this article, please contact Mark Stoddard, Associate Editor, at:
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References

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ⁱⁱⁱ *ibid*

^{iv} The Economist (2008), 'Generation Y goes to work', *The Economist*,
http://www.economist.com/business/displaystory.cfm?story_id=12863573

^v *ibid*

^{vi} Gerry Griffin is the founding Director and CEO of Skill-Pill M-Learning, and the founder of the Business Communication Forum. He was previously Director of Communications at London Business School and is the author of five business books, with another coming out at the end of 2008. He has trained a wide number of FTSE 100 and Fortune 500 companies.