

The 7 Biggest Myths About Generation Y

What today's youth are really like beyond the hype

By Michael McQueen



In 410 BC, Socrates was famously quoted as describing the youth of his day as insolent upstarts who didn't know their place and had little regard for tradition, manners or their elders. It seems that very little has changed! In our modern day, the media describe young people in words very similar to those of Socrates!

Generation Y (those born from the 1980s-late 1990s) have received a fair bit of criticism in recent years in the popular media. But how much this has been fair? Are young people as different and 'bad' as the newspapers would have us believe? Having spent much of the last 7 years researching and working with over 80,000 young people around the world, I believe that much of what we have been told about today's youth is inaccurate and sensationalist.

I would argue that there are 7 very common myths about Gen Y which need to be dispelled:

Myth # 1: They are self-centered

Although Gen Y may be the most cool-obsessed and brand conscious generation the world has ever seen, it may surprise you that this group are not as self-centered and shallow as it would appear. On the contrary, Gen Ys a remarkably strong sense of civic duty and community mindedness. Indicative of this positive trend are figures released in 2006 which showed that 81% of young people aged 13-25 volunteered in the previous 12 months and 69% considered a company's social and environmental commitment when deciding where to shop. For Gen Y it has become cool to care!

Myth # 2: They don't think about the future

Parents often fear that their children approach the future with a sense of unfocussed flippancy and even passive indifference. Educators and employers also describe the fact that Gen Y's focus is almost entirely on the here and now at the expense of long-term planning. While it may be true that 5 year plans are seemingly irrelevant for young people, this is not to say they aren't thinking about their future – rather that they view it very differently. As opposed to seeing the future as a linear set of decisions and moves that need to be carefully planned this group see the future as a vague, exiting, uncertain and constantly changing adventure that one must prepare for. As such, young people are more interested in *preparing* for their future by developing skills and contacts rather than *planning* for a future they know will be vastly different from the world they have grown up in.

Myth # 3 – They have no moral compass

For older generations, morality and ethics were firmly rooted in an external definition of what was right and wrong. Otherwise known as a modernist mindset, from such a perspective there are moral absolutes that dictate and mandate behaviour, beliefs and actions deemed right as opposed to wrong. Gen Y, have been raised in a society that has taught them that truth is not absolute but is relative; known as a post-modern mindset. For a post-modernist, the notions of truth, ethics and morality are based on an individual's perspective, experience and perceptions. As such, two conflicting world views or versions of truth can be equally valid for Gen Y because they have been taught that there are very few if any moral absolutes in life. While such a mentality can be problematic in a corporate sense (in its purest form post-modernism can be perilously self-centered) it has resulted in young people becoming increasingly tolerant and accepting of diversity and differing points of view. The bottom line: it is not that Gen Y don't have a moral compass, but rather that their way of determining morality is very different to older generations.

Myth # 4 – They are Disrespectful

Far from being something that is unimportant to Gen Y, respect is actually a core value. They *will* show respect for older people or those in positions of authority, it is just that the pathway to respect is different for this group. Unlike older generations, Gen Y won't simply show respect based on a person's title, role or the institution they represent. With this group, respect must be earned. They will show respect but on two conditions only; if it is *reciprocal*, and if it is based in *relationship*. For today's young people, respect must be earned and not assumed. For Gen Y, being worthy of being respected is similar to being a nice person... if you have to tell them you are, then perhaps you really aren't.

Myth # 5: They are lazy

Many managers speak of the apparent lack of a strong work ethic in their young team members and dismiss this as laziness. While this may be true in some instances, the overwhelming majority of Gen Y are willing to work hard... they do aspire for great things and want to get runs on the board. However, their priority order is different to older generations. Having seen the heart attacks, strokes and broken marriages of their parents' generation, this group wants to get ahead but not at any cost. They are starting their careers with a commitment to work life balance and will often place relationships with friends and family above work.

Myth # 6: They only want to communicate online

Owing to the fact that Gen Y have been the group that has propagated and popularized online communication tools like Twitter, Facebook and My Space, it is often assumed that online is the only place this group wants to connect. On the contrary, I have found that worldwide there is a growing desire among many young people to engage in meaningful conversations offline too – particularly with older generations. Growing up in a digital age where families have become increasingly disconnected and dispersed, Gen Y are desperately keen to learn about their heritage and hear the stories of older generations. This leads on to the last myth most people believe.

Myth # 7: They don't want to connect with older generations

Often older generations look at the confident, brash and sometimes arrogant façade that Gen Y put up and assume that they have it all together and are not interested in connecting with adults. Nothing could be further from the truth. Having worked with so many of this group, I have consistently found that behind the tough outside, Gen Y are a group who are desperately looking for leadership, boundaries, mentoring and connection with adults. We hear it said that Gen Y are the Fatherless Generation and this is all too often the case. Young people are looking to make meaningful connections with adults who they can genuinely trust, look up to and respect.

While young people may only represent 35% of our population, they do represent 100% of the future. Despite all the bad press about Gen Y, there is a lot of good news that we very rarely hear! It is so important that parents, employers and educators develop skills in bridging the generation gap and engaging with this group. Be careful not to believe the myths... this connection is what the next generation are craving most!



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