



THE GMP GROUP & TEMASEK POLYTECHNIC

# 'Y' ARE THEY DIFFERENT?

A STUDY OF GEN Y AT WORK,  
THEIR VIEWS &  
HOW THEY ARE VIEWED

**Report Extract**

A joint research report by



# how do generations fit in today's workplace

The corporate world has long been accustomed to the need to constantly recruit, develop and retain fresh talent. In recent years, however, this once-familiar rhythm seems to have been disrupted by the latest wave of young entrants into the workforce. Generation Y – or “Gen Y” for short – is the term most commonly used to refer to the cohort of individuals born in the 80’s and 90’s. Gen Y-ers began trickling into organisations as early as a decade ago. After the turn of the new millennium, they have come of working age and today represent a tidal wave of fresh jobseekers and employees entering the front doors of organisations worldwide.

There is overwhelming evidence and consensus that Gen Y is here to stay. Even in today’s economic reality, companies’ measures of freezing headcounts and rescinding job offers are but temporary measures which may curtail, but not stem the tide of Gen Y-ers entering the workforce. It also does not change the fact that Gen Y already makes up a sizeable portion of employees in organisations today, with a recent Straits Times estimate placing their numbers at close to 400,000 in the Singapore workforce.

What has made Gen Y’s entrance into today’s workforce so unsettling for their more senior colleagues and managers? Author and Gen Y theorist Lindsey Pollak said that when it comes to dealing with Gen Y, “what used to be common sense isn’t common sense anymore”. Of late, there has been a growing recognition that strategies and approaches that have been successful in engaging older employees are not quite as effective or even relevant for this new breed of executives.

Exactly what makes Gen Y so different from the other generations at work? The perception of Gen Y’s observers seems to tend towards negativity and even exasperation. “They’re ambitious, they’re demanding and they question everything, so if there isn’t a good reason for that long commute or late night, don’t expect them to do it”, CNNMoney.com reports. “When it comes to loyalty, the companies they work for are last on their list – behind their families, their friends, their communities, their co-workers and, of course, themselves.”

Justified or not, such negative perception will only be exacerbated by the current economic climate. As the prospect of retrenchment looms overhead, employees may be tempted to adopt an “us versus them” mentality towards members from other generational age groups. When the ax falls on an employee from a particular age group, it may be perceived by members from that age group as an indication of the organisation’s bias against their generation. As job security becomes a primary concern, sentiment such as “first in, first out” and “last in, first out” feed the feelings of animosity between members of differing generations at the workplace. Clearly, in the current climate, emotions may run high and cross-generational tension can only be on the rise.

All organisations recognise the fact that tension at the workplace is detrimental. In today’s hierarchically-flat organisations, cross-generational tension in particular will inhibit teamwork, cripple communication and severely limit an organisation’s effectiveness and performance. This is something that many organisations cannot afford if they want to remain economically viable in the current economic climate.

How can we help the generations at work understand each other better, and collaborate more effectively? While many experts have offered opinion on issues related to “understanding” and “engaging” Gen Y at work, relatively fewer have actually sought the views of Gen Y-ers themselves or used an empirical approach to obtain an objective, unbiased portrayal of the nature of cross-generational perception and tension in today’s workplace.

This empirical research study aims to address these gaps in the Singapore context.

This critical study and report is a materialisation of the committed and collaborative teams from The GMP Group and Temasek Polytechnic.

**TEMASEK POLYTECHNIC**  
TEMASEK HUMANITIES &  
SOCIAL SCIENCES SCHOOL

Chua Ping Tzeun  
Eunice Wong  
Wee Xun Ming Elijah

**THE GMP GROUP**  
Goh Koon Hao Josh  
Lissa Johari

*with design work by*  
Daniel David Chan

# the impetus for this report

This is a joint research collaboration between The GMP Group and the School of Humanities & Social Sciences, Temasek Polytechnic. The purpose of this study is to understand Gen Y's job-related preferences, attitudes and beliefs, as well as senior colleagues' and employers' perception of Gen Y at work. We aim to help the generations at work understand each other better, so that they may correct any mindsets and adjust their expectation, attitudes and behaviours towards one another. This will enable organisations to achieve synergy between the generations, attain positive outcomes and move ahead in the current economic climate.

Our research covers the following four broad areas:

## generational diversity in today's workplace

How is Gen Y perceived by others at the workplace? How do they perceive their senior colleagues and managers in turn?

## recruiting & retaining generation Y

How do the practices of organisations in attracting and retaining workers relate to Gen Y's job search strategies. What are the factors that motivate them to remain in an organisation?

## work-life harmony

How much work-life harmony (WLH) do Gen Y-ers and their senior colleagues experience? What WLH practices work best for Gen Y-ers?

## leading generation Y

Are the beliefs of managers about leading Gen Y in alignment with how Gen Y prefers to be led?

The value of our research lies in the following key areas:

## empirical research

Survey data was collected from 2,601 respondents in Singapore, making it an objective account of Gen Y's work-related beliefs and attitudes.

## comparative study of the diverse workforce

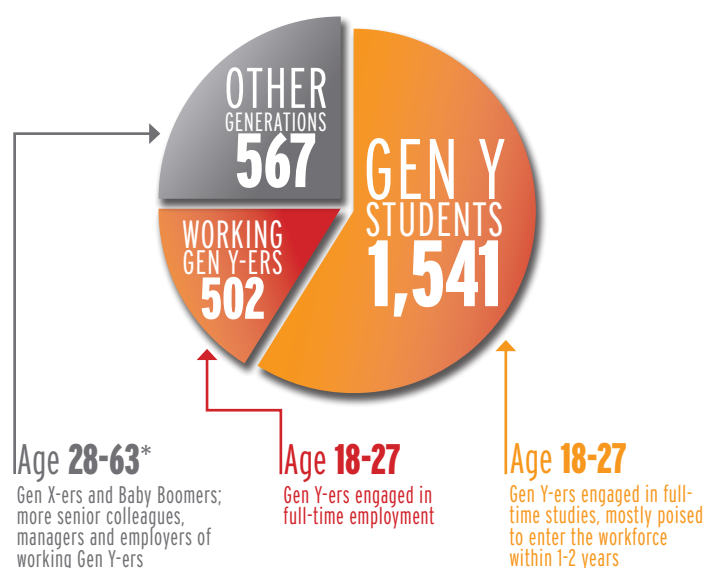
Gen Y and senior colleagues/managers were both surveyed on work-related issues and their perception of one another.

## up-to-date data for HR professionals

The research survey was conducted in the November-December 2008 period, after the Singapore Government announced in October 2008 that Singapore had slid into technical recession.

# methodology & respondent profile

The views of 2,610 respondents were obtained through an online survey that was conducted during the Nov-Dec 2008 period. The following pie-chart provides an overview of the key populations of interest in the research study:



Survey sample sizes are statistically representative of the population of interest within a 95% confidence interval and +/- 5% margin of error. The sample size for Gen Y Students is representative of local polytechnic and university populations.

\*78% of respondents from Other Generations were above 30 years old.

# selected sample of key findings & implications

## GENERATIONAL DIVERSITY IN TODAY'S WORKPLACE

### Perception of Work Ethic Across Generations

We explored Gen Y and the Other Generations' perception of each other's work ethic, defined as the degree of commitment and enthusiasm towards work. The Other Generations were found to have a less favourable perception of Gen Y's work ethic, as compared to Gen Y's perception of the Other Generations' work ethic. Where such negative perceptions exist, it is important to examine their validity, bearing in mind the detrimental impact that unfounded stereotypes and biases may have on generational harmony at the workplace.

### Perceived Organisational Bias

We explored Gen Y and the Other Generations' perception of the extent to which their organisations' practices and policies are biased against them. Both Gen Y and the Other Generations generally perceived their organisations to be equally fair to employees, regardless of age.

RESEARCH QUESTION	GEN Y'S PERCEPTION OF OTHER GENERATIONS	OTHER GENERATIONS' PERCEPTIONS OF GEN Y
<b>Work Ethic</b>	Slightly positive	Slightly negative
<b>Favourable Treatment by the Organisation</b>	Slightly disagree	Slightly disagree

## RECRUITING & RETAINING GEN Y

### Starting Salaries

Our findings are based on data collected in Nov-Dec 2008, after the Singapore Government's announcement on 10 Oct 2008 that the economy had slid into technical recession. Gen Y-ers expected higher salaries (S\$2,957 for University students and S\$1,987 for Polytechnic students), as compared to what was earned and reported by fresh job entrants in 2007 (S\$2,867 for University graduates and S\$1,805 for Polytechnic graduates). It appears that Gen Y-ers had high salary expectations in spite of the economic climate during that period.

RESPONDENT GROUP	EXPECTED GROSS MONTHLY SALARY (S\$) IN END 2008	GROSS MONTHLY STARTING SALARY (S\$) OF GRADUATES IN 2007*
<b>University Student/Graduate</b>	2,957	2,867
<b>Polytechnic Student/Graduate</b>	1,987	1,805

\*Based on data from the Ministry of Manpower (MOM).

### Retention Strategies

Based on Gen Y-ers' inputs, the top factors that motivate Gen Y-ers to remain in an organisation are: opportunities for career advancement, good work-life harmony, and good relationships. Respondents from the Other Generations rated their Organisations' most-utilised retention strategies as: opportunities for career advancement, emphasis on learning and development, and good compensation. These results suggest that organisations are on the right track when it comes to retaining Gen Y-ers through the provision of career advancement opportunities. However, the other most-utilised retention strategies may not be as effective in retaining Gen Y-ers.

TOP FACTORS THAT MOTIVATE GEN Y TO STAY IN ORGANISATIONS	RETENTION STRATEGIES MOST UTILISED BY ORGANISATIONS
1. Opportunities for career advancement (63%)	1. Opportunities for career advancement (43%)
2. Good work-life harmony (41%)	2. Emphasis on learning & development (37%)
3. Good relationships (40%)	3. Good compensation (24%)

\*Numbers in parentheses reflect percentage of respondents who selected this as a preferred strategy.

## WORK-LIFE HARMONY

### Work-life Harmony in Singapore

Both Gen-Yers and the Other Generations held a slightly negative view of the degree of work-life harmony in Singapore. Respondents from both groups gave a rating of about 3 points on a 6-point agreement scale, indicating that they “disagreed slightly” with the notion that “in general, there is work-life harmony in Singapore”.

### Working Hours

Gen Y-ers reported working an average of 9.2 hours on a typical workday. The results showed that both Gen Y and the Other Generations are in agreement that Gen Y-ers work longer hours than what is typically stipulated in work contracts (usually 8 to 8.5 hours a day). However, the average number of hours put in by Gen Y, as perceived by the Other Generations, is a lower 8.8 hours.

### Challenges to Establishing Work-life Harmony in Singapore

Gen Y and the Other Generations agreed that the key challenges to establishing work-life harmony in Singapore are workload, time, and a lack of support from senior management. In light of the current economic downturn, it is important to recognise that these challenges may prove to be even more difficult to surmount, as organisations shift their core emphases to issues of economic viability and survival.

RANK	KEY CHALLENGE TO WORK-LIFE HARMONY IN SINGAPORE
1	Workload (75%)
2	Time (70%)
3	Senior Management does not care about Work-life Harmony (55%)

\*Numbers in parentheses reflect percentage of respondents who selected this as a key challenge.

## LEADERSHIP

### Most Important Leadership Characteristics for Leading Gen Y

Gen Y-ers believe that it is most important for their leaders to be caring, inspiring and competent. On the other hand, managers from the Other Generations believe in demonstrating competence, honesty and a forward-looking orientation to the Gen Y-ers they lead and manage. The overall pattern of results clearly suggests that there is a gulf between the Gen Y workforce's expectations, and their managers' beliefs about how to lead them. The results suggest that Gen Y prefers relationship-oriented leaders, while their managers believe in demonstrating a relatively more task-oriented approach to leading them.

LEADERSHIP CHARACTERISTICS THAT GEN Y-ERS WANT THEIR LEADERS TO DEMONSTRATE	LEADERSHIP CHARACTERISTICS THAT MANAGERS FROM THE OTHER GENERATIONS BELIEVE IN DEMONSTRATING TO GEN Y-ERS
1. Caring (54%)	1. Competent (52%)
2. Inspiring (45%)	2. Honest (32%)
3. Competent (44%)	3. Forward-looking (31%)

\*Numbers in parentheses reflect percentage of respondents who selected this as an important leadership characteristic.



# what are our key takeaways?

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR GEN Y-ERS

### *"Adjust salary expectations"*

Graduating Gen Y-ers might need to adjust their starting salary expectations. Given the dismal economic climate Singapore faces, the starting pay for fresh graduates is expected to decrease by 5% to 15% in 2009. Gen Y-ers also need to be prepared to take on more job responsibilities within their organisations due to corporate downsizing.

Instead of using salary as a deciding factor when looking for a job, Gen Y-ers should focus on opportunities for career progression instead. They could also do research on the nature of the industries they are interested in, and familiarise themselves with the roles and functions of the various positions prior to their job applications.

### *"Just do it!"*

Gen Y-ers prefer working with relationship-oriented leaders, while managers from the Other Generations may be more comfortable with a task-oriented leadership approach at the workplace. While Gen Y-ers may want their managers to show their softer, more people-oriented side, this is not always possible in a highly competitive business environment. In order for organisations to succeed in times of economic uncertainty, managers are often required to be very task-oriented in meeting multiple challenges with limited resources. It is essential for Gen Y-ers to recognise this, in order to interact more effectively with managers and leaders from the Other Generations.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR GEN Y'S MANAGERS & LEADERS

### *"Communicate to inspire commitment"*

Gen Y-ers consider "opportunities for career advancement" and "good relationships" as key factors that motivate them to remain in organisations. Communication is the key to achieving these dual objectives. Regular dialogue between Gen Y-er and supervisor should start from the first day at work, as a means for supervisors to build and maintain a good working relationship. Managers also need to communicate regularly with Gen Y-ers about their professional development, and to show recognition to Gen Y-ers' work contribution. This is necessary to sustain positive relationships and ensure that Gen Y-ers remain committed to the organisation.

### *"Engage Gen Y through coaching"*

Gen Y-ers want their leaders to demonstrate "care" at the workplace. Coaching is a practical means by which to demonstrate care to subordinates and help them to achieve performance objectives at the same time. Coaching is a performance-driven process which is focused on relatively short-term objectives, tasks and goals. Through the process of coaching, leaders spend time with their followers to help them improve their performance in practical and concrete ways, and to meet business objectives. Therefore, not only is coaching one of the key strategies to engage Gen-Y at the workforce, it is also a major driver of organisational performance.

All managers should be responsible for coaching their subordinates. Coaches need to be willing to invest the time and effort - and have the moral courage - to provide quality feedback to Gen Y-ers in areas both positive and negative, so that true learning and development can take place.

### *"Recognise the unintended consequences of retrenchment"*

The process of retrenchment is one of the restructuring strategies used during tough economic times. Even as organisations engage in this practice, they also need to recognise its potential unintended consequences. While our research findings indicate that people generally do not feel that organisations are biased against any particular generation, the situation may take a turn for the worse when retrenchment is not implemented carefully. For instance, whenever groups of employees from a particular generation are retrenched, employees may form the perception that organisations are retrenching along generational lines. This may invariably lead to perception of organisational bias against particular generations. Over time, these negative perception will lead to increased generational tension, resulting in cross-generational conflict and disengagement at the workplace.

Senior management needs to ensure that organisational practices and policies accentuate a philosophy of fairness and equity across the generations, even during retrenchment exercises. There needs to be transparency that the entire retrenchment process is based on performance merit rather than age or seniority.

## IN SUMMARY

In this research study, we have sought to understand Gen Y's job-related preferences, attitudes and beliefs, as well as their senior colleagues' and employers' perception of them. From the findings, we note that there are certain areas of alignment. However, differences in perception and opinion have also surfaced, suggesting the existence of biases, negative stereotypes and perception, and potential areas of disagreement and even conflict at the workplace. If these negative perception and disagreements are left unchecked, organisations will lose their competitive edge.

This points to a critical need for one thing: mindset shift. Both Gen Y and the Other Generations at work need to reflect upon their own perception, recognise unconstructive mindsets, and take positive steps towards change. The research findings serve as useful signposts to help identify areas of necessary mindset shift. The recommendations presented in our report serve as a useful springboard for Gen Y-ers, their managers and organisations to launch the change process - the success of which will enable organisations to achieve synergy between the generations, attain positive outcomes and move ahead in the current economic climate.

The table below charts the various topics and issues that are covered within the full report.

AREA OF FOCUS	WHAT IS THIS AREA ABOUT?
<b>1. GENERATIONAL DIVERSITY IN TODAY'S WORKPLACE</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Work Ethic</li> <li>b) Perceived Organisational Bias</li> <li>c) Antipathy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) What do Gen Y and the Other Generations think about each other's work ethic?</li> <li>b) Do Gen Y and/or the Other Generations think that organisations are biased against them?</li> <li>c) Do Gen Y and/or the Other Generations have negative perceptions towards each other?</li> </ul>
<b>2. RECRUITING &amp; RETAINING GEN Y</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Most preferred methods for seeking/advertising employment opportunities</li> <li>b) Most important types of information in recruitment advertisements</li> <li>c) Expected starting salaries</li> <li>d) Most important retention strategies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) What methods do Gen Y-ers and organisations use to look for jobs/advertise job openings?</li> <li>b) What types of information do organisations typically include in recruitment advertisements? What information does Gen Y look out for?</li> <li>c) What are the expected salary levels of Gen Y-ers from polytechnics, universities and different courses of study?</li> <li>d) What retention strategies do organisations typically use? How do they relate to the factors that motivate Gen Y to remain in organisations?</li> </ul>
<b>3. WORK-LIFE HARMONY</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Perception of Work-life Harmony in Singapore</li> <li>b) Importance of Work-life Harmony</li> <li>c) Success rate of current initiatives in promoting Work-life Harmony in Singapore</li> <li>d) Gen Y's working hours</li> <li>e) Reasons for working overtime</li> <li>f) Personal experience of Work-life Harmony</li> <li>g) Organisations' emphasis versus implementation of Work-life Harmony initiatives</li> <li>h) Challenges to Work-life Harmony in Singapore</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) What are Gen Y's and the Other Generations' perceptions of the degree of Work-life Harmony in Singapore?</li> <li>b) What Work-life Harmony initiatives do Gen Y-ers most prefer? What do the Other Generations <i>think</i> Gen Y prefers?</li> <li>c) How many hours do Gen Y-ers report spending at work? How many hours do the Other Generations <i>think</i> Gen Y-ers are spending at work?</li> <li>d) What are Gen Y-ers' reasons for working overtime? What are the Other Generations' perception of why Gen Y-ers work overtime?</li> </ul>
<b>4. LEADING GEN Y</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Most Important Leadership Characteristics</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) What leadership characteristics do Gen Y-ers want their leaders to demonstrate, and what characteristics do managers from the Other Generations believe in demonstrating to Gen Y-ers?</li> </ul>
<b>5. FORGING AHEAD: ACHIEVING SYNERGY BETWEEN THE GENERATIONS</b>	<p>Expanded range of recommendations for both Gen Y-ers and their managers/leaders, to help organisations achieve greater synergy between the generations at work</p>

## the gmp group

Founded in 1991, The GMP Group is one of Asia's leading staffing and human resource consultancies. Since its inception, the group has progressed to become a regional human capital solutions provider across all industries. All this while, the group has upheld its vision to provide ethical, efficient and effective recruitment through friendly and professional service.

With six specialist divisions dedicated to providing industry-specific HR solutions, GMP prides itself as truly a 'one-stop' solution to its clients and candidates. Today, GMP is headquartered in Singapore with offices in Hong Kong, Malaysia, Shanghai and Thailand. The group's extensive network and comprehensive services once again reaffirm GMP's role as one of the most dynamic staffing professionals in the region.

1 Raffles Place #57-00  
OUB Centre Singapore 048616  
Tel: (65) 6736 2022  
Fax: (65) 6736 2155

[www.gmprecruit.com](http://www.gmprecruit.com)  
[info@gmprecruit.com](mailto:info@gmprecruit.com)



## temasek polytechnic

Established in April 1990, Temasek Polytechnic (TP) is a significant contributor to the field of para-professional education in Singapore. It is a pioneer in Problem-based Learning (PBL), which forms the cornerstone of the Polytechnic's educational philosophy to prepare school leavers adequately for the world of work and a future of dynamic change. The Polytechnic is a firm believer in forging partnerships with industry to keep students close to current industry practices. TP currently offers 50 full-time diploma courses in the areas of Applied Science, Business, Design, Engineering, Informatics & IT and Humanities & Social Sciences. It offers over 30 part-time courses, up to the Advanced Diploma level.

21 Tampines Avenue 1  
Singapore 529757  
Tel: (65) 6788 2000  
Fax: (65) 6789 8220

[www.tp.edu.sg](http://www.tp.edu.sg)  
[corpcomm@tp.edu.sg](mailto:corpcomm@tp.edu.sg)



**To purchase the full report, please contact the Corporate Services department of The GMP Group at (65) 6736 2022.**

The views expressed in this extract report are based on the survey data and do not necessarily reflect the views of The GMP Group or Temasek Polytechnic. Whilst every effort has been taken to verify the information, neither The GMP Group, Temasek Polytechnic, nor their affiliates can accept any responsibility or liability for reliance by any person on the information in this document.

© 2009 The GMP Group and Temasek Polytechnic. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the authors.