

# THE PROPER CARE AND FEEDING OF YOUR **GEN Y** EMPLOYEE

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Let's play a game. You'll be a frustrated Generation Y ("Gen Y") employer and I'll be my usual contrary self. Now, just blurt out whatever comes to mind when describing that Gen Y employee and I'll do the same. Ready? Let's go:

**You:** They insist on instant gratification.

**Me:** They expect fair and timely rewards.

**You:** They are disloyal and will quit a job with little provocation.

**Me:** They are pragmatic and understand that there are no "jobs for life."

**You:** They need constant praise.

**Me:** They want to know where they stand.

You've got the picture, right? The conventional wisdom about Gen Ys or "millennials," identified as those born between 1978 and 1990, is that they are spoiled, demanding and unwilling to pay their dues. How this manifests itself in the workplace has been the subject of much discussion, particularly at a time when so many people are leaving the collision industry.

For business owners who have made their way by force of will and hard work, the specter of embracing (and integrating) a generation of employees who one minute want to know when they'll get equity in the business, and the next minute need a hug, is almost too much to bear.

Like it or not, there are over 70 million people belonging to this generation, and avoiding them is not an option. This article is offered to both dispel a few myths about Gen Y employees and, hopefully, provide some suggestions on how to attract, manage, motivate and retain this important segment of the workforce.

**"Why should I let you be my employer?"**

Attracting quality Gen Y employees to the collision industry isn't easy. For some, like 27-year-old Aaron Schulenburg, administrator of the Database Enhancement Gateway (DEG) and WMABA Treasurer, the feeling that anyone with commitment and desire could get involved and make a difference, even on a national level, confirmed he had found his calling.

Schulenburg admits he got into the industry "completely by chance." After attending college in Richmond, Va. for a year, he made an impromptu decision to move to San Diego, Ca. His first exposure to the industry came while working in the auto physical damage department for an insurer, a job he was originally attracted to because it offered good benefits. This position introduced Schulenburg to the collision repair industry through his daily interaction with the shops while in the field. Apart from the training he received from the insurer, he primarily credits his knowledge of repairs to the education he received from people he met in the collision shops who were willing to help a young adjuster understand proper repair techniques and procedures. Always feeling a close affinity to the shops he worked with, after transferring with the company to Tucson, Az., Schulenburg eventually took a job as an estimator at Dan's Paint and Body. Apart from taking on the usual duties of an estimator, shop owner Dan Hunsaker allowed Schulenburg to exercise his creative side and work on marketing the shop. Hunsaker also invested in Schulenburg by sending him to classes and encouraging him to attend industry events like CIC and NACE. Schulenburg describes Hunsaker as a "great mentor."

Kris Shannon never planned to enter the family business, but after completing a degree at the University of Maryland, he stepped in to manage Shannon Auto Body, located in Gaithersburg, Md. At 27, with a business degree, I-CAR certification (he is Platinum certified; his shop is Gold Class), AMI coursework,



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20 Group participation and three years of shop management experience under his belt, Shannon concludes that if shops want to attract the best and brightest young people, they need to “sell themselves,” “uplift their image” and generally provide a work environment where people want to spend their day. He points to the need to upgrade both the physical environment (get rid of the wood paneling and the milk crate with the adult magazines in the bathroom) and the attitudinal environment (invest in training).

Barbara Chase, 29, manages Sisk Auto Body, a family-owned business located in Owings, Md. She began working in the shop at the age of 14. Although she states that most of her training has been “on the job,” she has completed an Associates Degree in Business Management and management courses through I-CAR and her paint vendor. Like Shannon, Chase believes that training, both formal and informal, as well as benefits like paid vacation, 401(k)s, health insurance and flex time, are all critical to attracting the very best Gen Y employees.

### **“You want me to do what?”**

Gen Ys are often perceived as being impatient and having a short attention span. Because of this, they are sometimes labeled “hard to manage.”

According to Dan Nagy, associate dean for global business development at Duke University, “They [Gen Ys] crave stimulation and fear boredom. The ultimate obscenity is to be in a boring job.” This is echoed by Jordan Hendler, the 27-year-old Executive Director of WMABA, who was introduced to the industry through her father, industry icon Jeff Hendler. “Our generation, with the technological overload, can become easily bored,” she says. “It’s an unfortunate side-effect of the society we’re in.” She recommends that employers who want to effectively manage this group “keep it interesting.”

Both Hendler and Shannon also emphasize the importance of not coming down on employees who have a suggestion to



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improve the business. Hendler says, “They’re not being insubordinate; they’re trying to make the business better.” Shannon adds that employers should “keep us challenged” and suggests that employers not be afraid to try new things. “Don’t be complacent because then we will become complacent,” he says.

Call it a *lack* of complacency or just plain gutsiness, but Shannon knew he needed to build a team that bought into his vision of a more progressive work culture and style of operations. He also knew that he would need to drive that change. As a result, all of the people who worked at the shop when he started three years ago have either quit or been replaced. He describes the change in personnel as “an opportunity for improvement.” By all accounts, this critically transformative and successful change would not have occurred if his father was still managing the business. Shannon credits his parents for giving him latitude to make key decisions for the business, even if they were initially somewhat tentative.

### **“Tell me that you love me.”**

There is much criticism of the Gen Ys’ need for constant praise and affirmation. Theories abound about a “coddled” and “spoiled” generation raised in an “everyone plays,” here’s-your-gold-star environment. (“Everyone plays” is the motto of the A.Y.S.O. — American Youth Soccer Organization. One side effect of this ever-positive message is the magical assumption that there are no bench warmers or poor performers, or at least no one calls them that because, hey, *everyone plays*.)

Respect and open communication seem to be at the heart of the appeal for this generation. And that means two-way communication – not just top (you)/down (them) communication.

Kris Burton is the 27-year-old vice president of his family’s two Northern Virginia collision centers, Precision Auto Body and Rosslyn Auto Body. He also serves as the manager at the Rosslyn location. Burton’s job responsibilities include marketing, hiring and “motivating personnel.” He also lists

“Professional Hand Holder” as part of his duties. Burton advocates patience, pointing out that, “Not everyone cleans like a new broom and some start off slower but win the race in the long run.” At the same time, Burton is quick to point out that this generation is not afraid of working hard and linking performance to compensation. In fact, they find performance-based pay plans quite attractive.

Notwithstanding the desire for personal affirmation, Gen Ys are receptive to the collaborative process and working as a team. Hendler notes that affirmation from teammates can be a powerful motivating factor. This is very compelling when considering that many forward-thinking shops are moving away from a “flag” or commissioned-based compensation model and implementing a team-based model where effectively, every person on the floor is responsible for every car in the shop. At DCR Systems of Cleveland, Oh., the team concept goes even further, with *all* members of the shop – from the front office to detailing – being compensated based on the overall performance of the shop.

### “I’m outta here”

Every employer knows the high cost of the loss of a trained employee. According to a Right Management survey of 444 human resource professionals, between the cost of recruitment, training, potential severance and lost productivity, the loss of an employee may cost a business many multiples of the employee’s annual salary. To that, add the perception that Gen Ys are disloyal, or at the very least, more than willing to walk away from a job that does not quite suit their needs, and hiring from this segment of the workforce can seem very unappealing.

But consider this: Even if this so-called disloyal generation of employees with their short attention span could be convinced that spending their life working for one employer could be professionally *and* financially rewarding, would they be foolhardy enough to believe that the viability of their employer, say 20 years down the road, could be assured today?

This generation knows better than anyone that there is no “sure thing.” They have witnessed the collapse and degradation of once-stalwart institutions such as the airlines, banks *and* car manufacturers. Some argue their perceived disloyalty is an intuitive response to the ever-changing domestic and global economies, and that their skepticism of hook-line-and-sinker loyalty is well-founded.

Gen Ys are also keenly aware that seniority and blindly climbing the ladder is no guarantee of success in an organization. Many already know about today’s performance-based work environment from their first jobs as baristas and burger servers, where details about the performance of their store relative to other locations in the enterprise are shared openly, and success is often rewarded with time off, parties *and* additional compensation.

The literature on Gen Ys repeatedly emphasizes that “engagement is key.” This means clear communication, including how what they do impacts the bottom line, and of course, how they will be compensated for it. “Tell me and I will forget, show me and I may not remember, involve me and I will understand” is an apt Chinese proverb quoted by Schulenburg. He adds, “If Gen Y employees understand their role in the business, they often feel a greater attachment and ownership in the results.”

In response to the question, “What advice would you give to employers to retain Gen Y employees?” our esteemed panel of Gen Y industry insiders offered the following advice – and not too surprisingly, the common denominator is good communication skills: “Listen to their ideas even if you know they are wrong” (Burton); “Always listen to their ideas and suggestions. You never know how a small change could help, “Treat them with respect,” “Clearly communicate what is expected so that employees can do their best.” (Chase); “Let them grow,” “Try not to tell them what to do, show them. Then let them be; they’ll figure it out.” (Hendler); “Everyone likes to see their name in lights” (Shannon); “This generation is exceptionally goal-oriented. A performance evaluation is an excellent opportunity to establish goals, discuss successes and define room for additional growth” (Schulenburg).

Gen Ys *do* desire a long-term relationship with their employers, but they need to feel a sense of trust first. According to Neil Howe, an expert on generations and co-founder of Life Course Associates, who was interviewed for [www.entrepreneur.com](http://www.entrepreneur.com), “...small businesses are very popular with millennials because they might not be as solid a company [as Google or Disney] but they’ll have a very close personal relationship with the person in charge.” Needless to say, this presents an opportunity for collision shops willing to take the plunge with Gen Y employees. And if along the way, these brave employers splurge on a few extra high fives or “job well done” e-mails distributed throughout the company, all the better to fortify the relationship.



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