

Still in the making

Charles Woodruffe makes some predictions about Generation Z

Everyone seems to agree that people born since 2002 count as members of Generation Z¹. Some people, however, would date the start of this latest generation rather earlier. Wikipedia, surely part of the stamping ground of Generation Z and its Generation Y predecessor, puts the start as “sometime after 2000” while McCrindle Research, an Australian consultancy, dates Generation Z from 1995². The Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development (CIPD) goes for an even earlier start – 1992³.

These are quite big differences and could call into doubt the whole basis for separating this latest generation from Generation Y. After all, the legitimacy of generational labels is that there is something distinctive about each period in terms of upbringing and backdrop that leaves its mark on traits and behaviour. If the period is ill-defined, so presumably is the experience that is meant to be distinctive and the resulting traits.

However, there is some common ground between writers on this generation. Not surprisingly, people draw attention to these youngsters having been born into a digitally connected world. It is not particularly clear that they have had a substantially different digital experience to Generation Y but it has perhaps started at an earlier age – ie right from the moment they could make use of technology.

As a result, the generation is labelled by some the “silent

generation”, referring to their communication with machines rather than people. They are also potentially a physically supine generation and one that reportedly has two thirds of its members getting less sleep than is recommended for them. The reason is that their bedrooms are no longer havens of tranquillity but some kind of mission control centre for their network. In turn, their lack of sleep could have an impact on their receptivity to education.

The issue that remains is whether people born since the millennium (or thereabouts) have a sufficiently different experience in these respects to become a different generation.

Hardly more convincing is the notion that this generation is peculiarly aware of diversity, having grown up with so much anti-discrimination legislation and – in the UK – a government equalities office. Is Generation Y really any less diversity aware?

In order to distinguish Generation Z, we need to find differences in their experience that will affect their traits, attitudes, outlook and behaviour. Perhaps these special experiences have arisen just in time to validate Generation Z. At last, we have a set of changing economic and political circumstances for the children who are either in their pre- or early teens that will surely have a dominating impact on them.

Generation Y grew up in an era of boom and plenty. They benchmarked themselves against people who enjoyed the mantle

of celebrity, either because of their talent or because they were just plain odd. We now have a generation who will have witnessed a period of significant unemployment and who will also be picking up the tab for the government financial rescue that has recently taken place. They will also grow up with a very different accepted wisdom to the reverence for the free market and the City which was all their forbears knew. They will start to work in an era when, even without the recession, the markets of Asia ceased to be emerging and took over the mantle of economic and perhaps political leadership.

Maybe our UK members of Generation Z, then, will be the first in many generations not to enjoy the natural advantage of being born into a nation that is in the dominant pack economically and politically.

Of course, the recession has still to play out and so has its effects. But we can see that the experience of the last and future years will be sufficiently different to genuinely create a new generation – a Generation Z.

I must admit that I am cautious about making wild extrapolations to what these people will be like at work. For a start, such speculations are just that and, furthermore, they insult individual differences. However, it does not take a soothsayer to suggest that Generation Z is likely to be less confident – or is it foolhardy – than those before it when it comes to taking risky decisions, either with its own or its employer’s money and futures.



Indeed, its members are likely to be working in an era of greater regulation in which government has a larger role, being part-owner and lender to a significant proportion of the 'private' sector.

So we arrive at a generation that will, of course, be entirely at one with IT and the global connectedness it offers. It will also, of course, have been aware from the start of its schooling of the environmental threats we face and the need to act in the face of those threats. The global perspective of the Internet should help make it as diversity-aware as many writers predict. However, it also seems destined to be cautious and engage in virtual worlds and adventure that might be a concern for employers who need people to engage with the real thing.

Depending on how you define its members, they might,

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of course, have a good ten years to go before they enter employment. However, if we are to define generations by the formative experiences, there is surely a strong argument for making Generation Z include all those who will mainly have been affected by the post-boom era before seeking employment. There is, then, a strong case for following the Australians at

McCrindle and including today's early-teens in Generation Z, and limiting Generation Y to those born before the mid-1990s. ■

References

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Dr Charles Woodruffe is MD of business psychology consultancy Human Assets Ltd. He can be contacted at +44 (0)20 7434 2122 or via www.humanassets.co.uk