

Baby Boomers Compromise for Generation Y

Just over a year ago at the Inside Counsel Superconference two well respected attorneys by the names of Scott Greenfield and Dan Hull lambasted Generation Y for their lack of work ethic, inability to sacrifice for clients and general sense of entitlement. [There was push-back](#) and [considerable blog outrage on both sides](#) as you can see in the comments of the Wall Street Journal Law Blog. But in the end the Boomers claimed victory over Generation Y as reported in Jordan Furlong's article [The legacy of work-life balance](#). The economy was just too tough for Generation Y to keep up the fight. Nothing more to see here folks, go on home. Fast forward a year- and we are hearing a different tune. Yesterday the Gen-Y panel was revisited at Superconference.

“One of our young attorneys approached us and said,

‘I’d like to take a year off to live in New Zealand. Can you hold the for job for me until I get back?’

“We went back and forth on it, but in the end we decided to grant his request and to hold his position for him. It came down to the fact that he was a very talented attorney, and we didn’t want to lose him.”

-Joseph Perkins, Senior Counsel of Cummings Inc. at the 2010 Superconference in Chicago.

Another Baby Boomer audience member explained:

“We wanted the same things as Generation Y, we just didn’t dare to ask.” (Very true, I’m sure everybody agrees that spending a year in New Zealand sounds like a lot of fun.)

To simplify the multiple threads, comments and discussions running from yesterday’s event I’m going to narrow it down to three complaints the Baby Boomers have of Generation Y- and how the panelists and audience members felt they could be handled.

Complaint 1: Generation Y doesn’t want to work long hours.

“Generation Y aren’t asking for less hours- just for a more flexible schedule in which to get the work done.” -Boomer audience member.

Members of Generation Y that have made it through the ranks of law school to work at the big firms know that they are expected to work very hard long hours. They just want a little flexibility. After 8pm at night they are far more comfortable doing legal research in their flannel pajamas on their couch with a laptop than they are sitting in a stuffy office late at night. Do younger attorneys need to earn this type of flexible work environment? I don’t think so. If it’s really about getting the best work for the client, it makes sense to have focused attorneys working where they are comfortable and motivated.

“Generation Y are always plugged into their Blackberry’s- we never stop working.” -Generation Y audience member

Is it possible to get more out of Generation Y than previous generations? Definitely, but it won’t work with the traditional office model. To lead Generation Y it requires a little more creativity.

Complaint 2: Generation Y want the big paycheck, but aren’t willing to work for it.

“Most Gen Y-ers would prefer a 15% cut in salary and a better teaching environment in their 1st year as associates.” -Panelist Arin Reeves, JD., Ph.D.

In my last year of law school I had two offers that I seriously considered. One was at a big city firm with hourly requirements in the 2100 hours-per-year range, and the other was in a local mid-size firm working from 1500-1800. Even though the second offer was just over half as much money- it wasn't a hard decision. I had a wife and new child at home to care about- working 8 in the morning until 9 at night just wasn't attractive to me. I wanted to see my son grow up while it was still light outside.

Even large firms are starting to give reduced hour requirements as flex-time options. Dorsey & Whitney for example will on a case-by-case basis allow attorneys to bill 75% of full time and receive a 25% cut in pay. What an idea, huh?

For Gen Y the money isn't as important as the flexibility. What good is a huge salary if you only have two weeks of vacation per year to enjoy it?

Complaint 3: Generation Y demands explanations for everything ad naseum.

“Generation Y grew up extremely compartmentalized- from soccer practice to day-care groups. There was always such a tight schedule that Generation Y is used to having clearly outlined expectations because that is how they are wired. That is how Baby Boomers have raised them. You have to accept that this younger generation won't ever be Baby Boomers-their experience is far too different.” -Panelist Arin Reeves, JD., Ph.D.

“Generation Y is full of perfectionists. Just set clear expectations for them and they will blow you away.” - Generation X audience member.

Is it worth it? Is it really worth it for Baby Boomers to compromise- to adjust the way they are managing Gen Y? Does Gen Y have something truly unique to offer, or is the best hope to transform them into Baby Boomer doppelgangers?

“How do you remember September 11th?” Arin Reeves asked the audience. “For Generation Y they were teenagers when the towers collapsed. They have grown up in a world where they aren't sure if there will be a tomorrow- so they want the most out of life today.” Nothing is permanent in the minds of Generation Y. Life can end suddenly, they saw parents who lost jobs or marriages suddenly. They want to make the most of their life, and employers that understand this will get the most out of them.

“Generation Y are going to make great leaders, because they see the world in such a different way.” -Arin Reeves

In a couple years Generation Y will outnumber Baby Boomers. The firms and companies that get the very best out of Generation Y going forward will know how to motivate them.