

## Managing the Nintendo Generation

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Once we just had the half-life crisis. Now we have the quarter-life crisis. This is at a time when institutions such as the World Bank and the International Labour Organization are urging Asia to focus more on youth issues and employment.

In Japan they call it “freeting.” In Taiwan they call them “the strawberry generation.” They bruise easily, are spoiled by the good life and crumble under the slightest pressure. According to some employers, many simply disappear after the first day at work without giving any explanation. “Sometimes we have to send them wake up calls to make sure that they turn up for job interviews,” says Ms Lee Fang-yi of the 1111 Job Bank, a Taiwanese employment agency. A common excuse for quitting is “the job is too tiring.”

According to a survey conducted in Taiwan, a third of young Taiwanese have changed jobs at least three times in the last three years. This figure includes graduates. Part of the reason: the 1980s and 1990s were boom times for Taiwan. Young people’s expectations increased as a result of being nurtured to expect more and not less. Family size too was shrinking with most couples having no more than two children. As such there is every opportunity and incentive for young people to live off their parents. There are other factors to take into account, such as changing social attitudes. *Global Views* magazine revealed that young Taiwanese people define success differently from earlier generations. Among other things “a carefree life” is high among their priorities.

Japan’s freeters also emerged during the boom and bust days of the 1980s, a period characterized by short periods of economic growth when jobs were plentiful. In Japan freeting is partly a response to a decline in jobs for life, which offered young people career structures. According to the Japan Institute of Employment and Training “jobs for life have declined by a third during the last decade.” Another contributory factor is a change in attitudes of the younger generation towards work that is summed up by Yoshinari Nozakia, a young design school graduate: “I couldn’t be a salary man, getting up in the morning, crushing myself into a commuter train, working late and drinking with my bosses. Where’s the freedom in that?” The freeter population in Japan is estimated to have reached four million. Recently a new variation of the term “freeter” has emerged: “neeter” — not in education, employment or training.

With the economy poised to take off, young people in Vietnam are catching the freelancing bug. According to Hong Tam from, HCM City “freelancing gave me the chance to balance both sides of my life.” But it’s not necessarily an easy life. According to Minh Anh, also from HCM and who works in the creative services industry, “those who lack the motivation are unlikely to make a success of it.”

Across the Pacific many young people have watched their parents lose their jobs as a result of mergers and acquisitions. In America, one of the outcomes is a realignment of the attitudes; young American US College graduate Francine Mederazz says, “our generation is a lot more curious — ideally I would love to change jobs every three years.”

A recent survey conducted in Singapore revealed that four out of ten employers considered labour retention to be a problem especially among the young, Chuang Peck Ming (*Business Times*) reports.

A survey conducted in the UK revealed that 67% of young people were “unhappy at work,” and that work was a disappointment and had not “lived up to their expectations.” Significantly more and more young people are “opting out” — giving up a conventional career and embarking on something less conventional. This might include areas such as charity work, outdoor leisure industry, acting and entertainment, or the arts and crafts. Boredom and lack of fulfillment are two of the principal factors motivating them to opt out.

Another survey conducted of young professionals found that 83% of those surveyed considered themselves as “stuck in a career.” Many complained of being treated like “corporate machines” and said that their work “offered no real value to the world.” Sixty-five percent of all young people in the UK expressed a fear of dying before they did anything significant with their lives.

According to Cary Cooper, Professor of Organizational Behavior at the University of Lancaster UK, one reason many young people today aren’t fulfilling their desires and expectations is changing global educational profiles. For example, twenty years ago less than 10% of young people in the UK went to university. Today that number has reached 35%. In a society that is perceived to be meritocratic, failure to achieve one’s personal goals can cause loss of confidence and introspection.

“The Office” is a highly popular British-made comedy series screened in many countries including

Singapore. Though it is fictional, it depicts a reality which we all recognize. It focuses upon the pathos that defines the lives of a group of bored office workers who spend most of their time trading gossip, staring blankly at their computer screen, playing practical jokes, discussing the previous evening's television and looking forward to the next office binge drinking session. The backdrop is boredom, frustration, disillusionment and inertia. Virtually all the employees are under the age of 30.

According to Microsoft's Madam Ong, the Nintendo Generation grew up expecting to challenge what they are told. You can't expect them to just shut up and carry out instructions once they start working.

Recognize the differences but don't judge. Dismiss any preconceived ideas that you may have formulated about the Nintendo Generation as slackers, time wasters who indifferently drift from job to job. Apathy doesn't necessarily denote lack of motivation or laziness. Sometimes it can simply be a symptom of a round peg in a square hole.

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The Nintendo Generation don't expect job security. Instead they want the skills and experience that will keep them employed. Usually they are technologically savvy. Also, growing up in the age of the Internet and media liberalization has exposed them to a wide range of media and information, thus enhancing their creative potential. They are also natural multitaskers.

Internet has also facilitated business start-ups and encouraged various forms of experimentation that were unavailable to earlier generations. The spin-offs have nurtured an entrepreneurial culture.

Whereas yesterday's generation expected jobs for life, the Nintendo Generation expect a job and a life. Free time and flexibility are welcomed, as are challenge and responsibility.

So should you meet a young person whose idea of fulfillment is selling printed tee shirts on the Internet rather than working in a bank, perhaps it's because they actually have something to offer. Maybe it's the bank that has to rethink its HR policy.