To Protect and Serve:
What Generation Y Brings to Law Enforcement and How Police Agencies Can Benefit
by Sgt. Drew Sanders, West Jordan Police Dept.; Angie Stefaniak, MPA, CPPA

Introduction

Local law enforcement officers help protect the lives and property of their residents and keep the peace in their communities. Traditionally, a lifelong career in law enforcement was sought after by many young people. Becoming a police officer meant a good salary and excellent benefits - from time off, to medical insurance, to a guaranteed pension. However, while many of these benefits are still in place, police agencies nationwide are currently experiencing difficulty with recruiting qualified law enforcement officers to fill new job openings, as well as replace the positions of those who are leaving or retiring from law enforcement. In addition, there is evidence that police officers who are members of the youngest working generation – Generation Y – may not view law enforcement as a lifelong career. They may enter and exit the profession at higher rates than previous generations.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) states that a society more focused and concerned with security issues, as well as overall population growth, will drive the need nationwide for police and sheriff's patrol officers, and detectives and criminal investigators in the decade between 2006-2016. The BLS projects job opportunities these positions will grow 11 percent for police and sheriff’s patrol officers, and 17 percent for detectives and criminal investigators during this time period (see Table 1).[1]

Table 1: Employment Projections 2006-2016 Nationwide

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Employment 2006</th>
<th>Projected Employment 2016</th>
<th>Number Change</th>
<th>Percent Change</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>*Police and Patrol Officers</td>
<td>654,000</td>
<td>724,000</td>
<td>70,000</td>
<td>11.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>**Detectives and Criminal Investigators</td>
<td>106,000</td>
<td>125,000</td>
<td>18,000</td>
<td>17.0</td>
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Note: Adapted from the Bureau of Labor Statistics Projections Data National Employment Matrix.
*Defined as officers who maintain order, enforce laws and protect life and property in an assigned patrol district. [2]
**Conduct investigations to prevent or solve crimes.

The Utah Occupational Projections estimates the need for police and patrol officers will grow as much as 20.6 percent from 2006 to 2016, and the occupation for detective and criminal investigator will grow 28.5 percent.[3] Overall, according to the Utah Department of Workforce Services, these law enforcement positions in Utah “will experience slower than average employment growth, but there will be a moderate volume of annual job openings. The need for replacements, rather than from business expansion, is projected to make up the majority of job openings in the coming decade.”[4]

Table 2: Employment Projections 2006-2016 in Utah
### Police and Patrol Officers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Current Employment</th>
<th>Projected Employment 2016</th>
<th>Number Change</th>
<th>Percent Change</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3,870</td>
<td>4,670</td>
<td>800</td>
<td>20.6</td>
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### Detectives and Criminal Investigators

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Current Employment</th>
<th>Projected Employment 2016</th>
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<tr>
<td>490</td>
<td>630</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>28.5</td>
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Note: Adapted from the Utah Department of Workforce Services Occupational Projections Report for Police and Sheriffs Patrol Officers.[5]

Some Baby Boomers (and some members of Generation X) are retiring from local law enforcement agencies after completing their 20 years (law enforcement officers in Utah are eligible for pension benefits after completing 20 years of service). Within the next 10 to 15 years, the retirement en masse of the Baby Boomer generation will become a critical problem that will affect all government agencies, including law enforcement, and few agencies are prepared to handle it. According to Bob Lavinga, a client services manager in Wisconsin, the mass retirement of workers will hit government hardest for two reasons: 1) “public workers are, on average, older than private sector workers,” and 2) public sector workers are eligible to retire at an earlier age than those in the private sector.[6]

The growth in the need for law enforcement officers combined with increasing numbers of Baby Boomers retiring from their careers is leading some law enforcement agencies to realize they do not now, or may not in the near future, have enough experienced officers to protect their communities. So what happens when the experienced Baby Boomers start to leave the workforce and replacement workers are not available in the numbers necessary because the younger generations are choosing different, often multiple, career paths? Part of the solution involves creating a workplace that attracts and cultivates high caliber employees and leaders who fully understand generational issues. Understanding how different generations act and interact can aid in addressing these problems so law enforcement entities can achieve their missions and look forward to a future where, once again, a job in policing is sought after and coveted.

Research on how different generations work together is beginning to explain some of the dynamics experienced daily with co-workers in different age groups. While generation gaps are not new, they are more complex today than those previously experienced. Most studies focusing on generations in the workplace concentrate on the private sector; however, these gaps impact the public sector as well. In addition, law enforcement leaders are recognizing the issue, examining the problems, and exploring solutions for recruiting and retaining members of Generation Y. The focus of this article is to look at what skills and traits members of Generation Y bring to law enforcement, and to examine how these traits can be harnessed and used by police leaders. In the end, the inability to recruit and retain new talent will threaten law enforcement’s ability to adequately protect the public and meet community expectations.

The first section of this article answers the question: what is Generation Y? Understanding who this generation is, and what defines it, helps to lay a foundation for better understanding its impact on the workforce. Next, it explores the differences between Generation Y and other generations. Following this, the article examines specific occupational components including work ethic, ease with technology, and career goal achievement. Finally, it concludes with considerations and suggestions for police leaders.

**What is Generation Y?**

Demographers define generations based on common experiences and shared values. That is to say that each generation has experienced common events, such as World War II or the Space Shuttle Challenger explosion. Because generations share a place in history, having events, images, and experiences in common, they develop their
own unique generation-wide personalities.

Generation Y – about 76 million in number is also known as the Echo Boom, Millennial, and Generation Next. Unlike its predecessors, Generation Y is an optimistic generation, largely coming of age in a period of economic expansion. Members of Generation Y are individualistic, yet group-oriented. Raised by parents (largely Baby Boomers) who got in trouble in their younger years, Generation Y kids were kept busy. They were the first generation of children with schedules and kiddy day timers: soccer at 3pm, piano at 4pm, etc. They are ambitious, but not entirely focused. They look to the workplace for direction and to help them achieve their goals. They possess an especially high expectation for bosses and managers to assist and mentor them in attainment of their professional goals.

Generation Y members are focused on themselves; therefore, they don’t make sacrifices. They pursue what is in their best interest.[7] Not surprisingly, members of Generation Y also tend to identify themselves as their heroes, which makes a certain amount of sense since they are focused on "Me." However, they also think the older generation – the Matures - is “cool” and they often consider their parents and grandparents their heroes as well.

**Perplexing Perspectives: I’m right. No, I’m right.**

The characteristics of the generations are as different as are their perspectives. The following table provides a summary of workplace characteristics and, briefly, how each generation responds to those characteristics (see Table 3). So, how do the characteristics convert into potential workplace problems? Note the differences between those leading law enforcement agencies – largely Baby Boomers and to a smaller extent Generation X.

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<th>Table 3: Summary of Workplace Characteristics</th>
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<td>Motivated by</td>
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The Baby Boomers make up 45 percent of the today’s workers, largely in management roles. Matures, with similar values to the Baby Boomers, make up another five percent. The other 50 percent are members of Generation X and members of Generation Y and create a challenge for their Boomer bosses. These younger workers are unconcerned with how their predecessors approached work, and the traditional chain of command system means little to them. In his book, Motivating the What’s In It for me? Workforce, Cam Marston, founder and president of Generational Insight, states, “The younger generations view their predecessors’ experience as a warning, not a road map. And the traditional rules of management, motivation, and reward fly out the window.”[8]

Marston also points out that since World War II each generation has assumed two things about the younger generations entering the workforce:

1. Senior generations assume that the younger generations will measure “success” the same way they themselves have.
2. Senior generations also believe that younger workers should “pay their dues,” following the same paths to achieve the same levels of success.[9]

Generation Y is different. It does not measure success the same way previous generations have, and also does not believe in “paying its dues.” Translating the variations of “success” and “dues” into views about specific work components helps us understand perspectives that often lead to misunderstanding at best and mistrust at worst. According to Marston, the attitudes and ambitions that characterize Generation Y workers are:

· A work ethic that no longer mandates 50+ hour work weeks
· An easy competence in using existing technologies and facility in mastering even newer ones
· Changed priorities for lifetime goals that can be achieved and affected by employment[10]

A work ethic that no longer mandates 50+ hour work weeks

How much time should work take in our lives? Each generation views time at work slightly differently. While all have strong work ethics, the difference comes in their commitment to work time contrasted with commitment to personal time. Baby Boomers believe that visibility is the key. They are generally workaholics and invented the 50+ hour work week, believing that being seen at work all the time ensures success.[11] In fact, time on the job has increased by one month since Baby Boomers have been in the workforce. Generation X members, in contrast, are project-oriented. [12] They want to be paid to get the job done. They will do it efficiently and quickly because they value time away from work more than time at work. Generation Y members are also effective workers, but when their shift ends they are ready to leave. Generally, they view work as a "gig," something that fills time between weekends. [13] Similar to Generation X, Generation Y is not interested in overtime or concerned with “face time.” It does, however, contribute some of the most productive employees to the workforce because its members are
energetic, enthusiastic and technologically savvy. Their aim is to be efficient, get the job done and get on to the next part of their lives. They will seek ways to work smarter, not longer, and can become dissatisfied or disengaged when bureaucratic systems, structure and hierarchy stand in their way. Balance is the key. Generation Y is following Generation X and values its lifestyle over upward mobility. If presented with a work promotion that would throw their lives out of balance, they will choose their lifestyle over the work opportunity.

Herein lies a problem for law enforcement agencies, especially at the local level. Law enforcement is 24 hours per day, seven days a week, year in and year out. As much as law enforcement leaders try to create work schedules that balance the needs of employees with the need to effectively handle workloads, the reality is that when criminal activity occurs, law enforcement agencies are not in a position to say “sorry we are closed.” Nor can they end operations (especially during critical incidents) merely because a shift is coming to a close. Law enforcement agencies are in place to handle criminal problems in real time. To have it otherwise would put lives and property in jeopardy.

For the Matures, Baby Boomers and Generation X, who tend to view their work as an obligation, contract, or who they are, the fact that a critical incident occurs at an inconvenient time or day is all just part of the job. In the words of Chief Kenneth McGuire of the West Jordan City, Utah Police Department “This is what we signed up for.” It is important to point out that this did not necessarily come naturally for members of Generation X. They were, however, able to adapt to this environment with time and maturity, coupled with their desire to “get the job done.” For members of Generation Y who might value their lifestyle and personal time or commitments over work obligations and/or upward mobility, this has the potential to pose a conflict that is not easily reconciled. Additionally, these circumstances can directly equate into recruiting difficulties for agencies when large numbers of qualified potential candidates forego a career in law enforcement for reasons such as time commitment.

An easy competence in using existing technologies and mastering newer ones

Unlike its predecessors, Generation Y has not known a time without technology as defined today. When asked, Generation Y members will not define technology; to them it is intangible - it’s just there. They started using computers at very young ages and by the time they entered school most had computers. As young children Generation Y played with computer toys and technology literally became part of every day life. Generation X members have tremendous ease with technology as well since they grew up during the early development of technology – the personal computer and the Internet. James Henchey, a Captain in the Alhambra, California Police Department, points out that while these two generations have a similar ease with technology, there is a difference in how they use it. “Xers use the technology such as email and home shopping opportunities as a means to avoid personal contact. [Members of Generation Y] use it to enhance their ability to connect with others, as with chat groups and interactive game playing.”

There is more to ease with technology among Generation Y than just knowing how to use it and being comfortable with it. It is called gaming. While some view gaming as a waste of time, according to John Beck and Mitchell Wade, who conducted a survey on the impact of video games, 80 percent of workers less than 34 years old have had substantial gaming experience. In their book, Got Game, they argue that the systematically different ways of working between Baby Boomers and Generation Y is attributable to growing up with video games (Gamers are defined as those who grew up playing video games). The researchers state that in the workplace today, Baby Boomers and members of Generation Y differ in what skills they choose to learn and how to learn them. They differ in the way they think about their careers, their employers and their coworkers, and this is largely because one generation grew up gaming and one did not. Beck and Wade’s survey concluded that how hard members of Generation Y work, how they compete, how they work in teams, and how they take risks are all different. Why does this matter? Beck and Mitchell argue that gaming is a definitive part of Generation Y’s reality and has created many attributes worth harnessing:

- Gamers think differently – individual control, trial and error, and constant change are all part of life.
Gamers are global – gamers are exposed to world cultures through gaming. Gamers are tough – they have learned the only limiting factor to success is a person’s own willingness to keep trying. Keep in mind, too, that gaming offers a chance for everyone to be a superstar and an expert. Gamers teach themselves – gamers are self-educating, believe there is always an answer, and everything is possible.

Bob Harrison, a retired police chief from Vacaville, California, says there are similarities between the traits gaming instills and the traits needed by law enforcement. Police managers could consider several ways to take advantage of these attributes to attract members of Generation Y to police work by focusing on these norms carried by Generation Y gamers:

- Comfortable working in teams
- Seek to make a difference or affect change
- Have flexibility in their daily environment
- Enjoy activities consistent with heroism

**Changed priorities for lifetime goals that can be achieved and affected by employment**

Many individuals choose a career in law enforcement because they want to keep people and communities safe and make a difference in the lives of others. Authors Gwendolyn Hubbard, Robert Cromwell and Ton Sgro, in an article published in *The Police Chief* magazine, say members of Generation Y share this desire to contribute to the world. “The exciting news is that Generation Y behaviors and career choices are driven first and foremost by their quest for opportunities to play important roles in meaningful work that helps others.” Mark McCrindle of the Australian Leadership Foundation says that when members of Generation Y decide to accept a job, salary ranks sixth in order of importance after training, management style, work flexibility, staff activities, and non-financial rewards. Other important considerations for members of Generation Y include: a fun workplace where friendships are created and valued, and a job that has a fulfilling purpose to them.

Wanting to save the world and help people are worthy aspirations, however, members of Generation Y need direction and guidance and seek jobs that can provide both a fulfilling career and skill development.

Providing professional development and training are vital to the value and development of human resources. Each generation views professional development and training differently and managers will benefit from approaching skill building from the generational perspective of the employee. Baby Boomers tend to believe skills are an ingredient of success, but they are not as important as work ethic and "face time." Members of Generation X believe amassed skills will lead to their next job; the more they know the better. To them, work ethic is important, but not as important as skills. Generation Y views training and professional development as important and believes new skills will ease stressful situations. Members of Generation Y are motivated by learning and want to see immediate results.

Henchey states that traditionally, law enforcement leaders have left career planning and skill development to the individual, and they must do a better job of providing structured career development for current rank and file officers. “Historically, law enforcement organizations focus well on the task of serving their respective communities but tend to neglect internal personnel development needs due to logistical or budgetary reasons. As a result, police organizations risk promoting weak or inexperienced leaders.” However, Generation Y members are loyal to their managers when they receive what they need, which is assistance in building their skills and helping them attain their goals.
want their managers to be mentors, supporters, and educators. If they are not, there is little stopping them from changing jobs.

Conclusion

Generational differences can lead to either strength and opportunity or stress and conflict.[27] Law enforcement leaders as well as those in other government organizations, can view Generation Y in two ways: a problem to be reckoned with or an opportunity to be harnessed and used.

Members of Generation Y...

- Are comfortable working in teams
- Seek to make a difference
- Want leaders with honesty and integrity. They want to be leaders someday, but need help, guidance and mentoring to gain the skills necessary, and they are okay with that.
- Want learning opportunities and a career plan, and they want managers to help them with these
- Want collegial work environments. They want friends and people they can work with.
- Want some fun at work. They are used to working hard and playing hard – at the same time.
- Want to be treated respectfully. Even if they haven’t been around as long as others, they bring value and skills to the workforce.
- Want the flexibility to pursue activities and interests outside of work. It’s a job to a member of

Generation Y, and they are not going to give up their activities just because of a job. A rigid schedule may be the quickest way to lose them.[28]

Finally, if leaders view the characteristics and traits that members of Generation Y bring to the workforce as the opportunity it appears to be, then the positive results will likely be great. Will law enforcement leaders merely manage this issue, or will they step up and use this as an opportunity to lead the way for the future of law enforcement?

[2] Ibid.
[4] Ibid.