

# Age of google

Joan-Maree Hargreaves, The Sydney Morning Herald, 1 March 2008

RAUL Vera may be considered the old bloke in his office, but the engineering manager of Google Australia doesn't see it as a barrier to getting on with his co-workers.

As a baby boomer, Vera is probably a rarity in a workplace like Google, which by its very nature is staffed by young and innovative IT types who are at the forefront of the technological revolution.

Generational differences aren't a big factor for Vera, or for the young guns he works with.

"The important issues for working with other people in any environment are mutual respect and communication," he says. "Age differences only matter to the extent that they make either of these harder or easier. In an environment like Google, where everyone is so good at what they do and the flat, non-hierarchical organisation promotes open communication, these issues aren't very significant.

"What matters is what you get accomplished and how well you get along with others, not how old you are."

Despite horror stories of generational differences, today's workplace is not a hotbed of conflict, according to Josh MacKenzie of Development Beyond Learning, a training organisation that runs courses for corporations on generational harmony in the workplace.

"A lot of the work we do is to manage the expectation of the younger generation of staff - generation Y as well as the leaders and managers they work with every day," MacKenzie says.

"What we find is there is really no difference in the way staff need to be managed. Generation Y is looking for the same kind of leadership as the generations before them."

Social researcher Mark **McCrindle**, from **McCrindle** Research, says diversity is a challenge in any workplace and there is always going to be some lack of understanding.

"We tend to think baby boomers don't understand gen X and they don't understand gen Y," **McCrindle** says. "But there has to be some sort of bridge from both sides for any place to function properly. The Ys have to understand the Xers and the boomers, and they may find themselves having to make a few changes to their own way of thinking to be able to work in what is still a boomer world.

"But boomers and Xers also have to remember that gen Y is only responding to the times they live in. They have never known anything except prosperity and economic growth. The more boomers and Xers try to understand the reasons behind the way Ys behave, it is much easier to work together."

Angela Lawrence, a Google gen Xer, reckons there's not really much difference between her generation and her younger co-workers. As Google's business development manager, she says despite the image of baby boomers being averse to the fast-moving technological changes taking place around them, they are in fact calling on their younger co-workers to help them out.

"In my experience, I don't think gen X and gen Y are distinctively different to each other - both share similar attitudes to life and have similar workplace expectations," Lawrence says.

"I think it's important to realise that new technologies are now becoming part of everyone's working life - regardless of your generation.

"The baby boomers, for whom these trends are perhaps the most foreign, are now embracing the use of workplace collaboration, flat management structures and new technologies that gen X and gen Y have come to expect as part and parcel of their working lives."

Of course every organisation is different. MacKenzie has worked with companies where the average age of employees is 47, and others where senior managers are still in their 20s.

"In the next three to five years we will start to see a wave of generation Y senior executives," MacKenzie says. "Gen Y is looking for a career path. They still want flexibility, but there is a shift in how organisations are now seeing the benefits of younger workers and how they have to work with them.

"There are more generation Ys in middle managerial positions and they are putting things in place the way they want them.

"Generation Y will see things through as long as they can see how it will meet with their values. What they are looking for is good training and development experience. They have always had security, shelter, money and they are expecting the same things in their work," he says.

"You find gen Y is choosing employers based on the types of training and development programs in place, but more importantly on the types of leaders that are in an organisation.

"They want leaders with whom they can form a relationship - if they don't trust them and respect them, they won't stay."

Being given respect and responsibilities has been one of the crucial factors for Susannah Raub, a gen Y software engineer at Google.

"I have been given responsibility and authority despite my younger years. I have been judged for what I know and do, not how long I have known it or have been doing it," she says.

"That's the ideal working environment that all gen Y workers are after. My older co-workers have years of wisdom to impart, but it's very much a two-way dialogue. Everyone here - baby boomer, gen X and gen Y - embraces this philosophy; it's essential to a modern, diverse workplace."