

A job for life?

Attitudes to work amongst Generation Y

By Rebecca Huntley



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In the course of writing my book *The World According to Y: inside the new adult generation*, I became friends with a former student of mine, Laura. When I first encountered Laura, as a first year communications studies student at the University of Wollongong, she seemed at a loss about what to do with her life. She came across as fiercely bright and opinionated in class but it was clear that she wasn't enthusiastic about being at university. She was expected to be there rather than wanted to be there.

Laura grew up in the Sutherland Shire, and was living with her parents: her mum, a semi-retired primary school teacher, and her dad, a manager of a medium sized company. Her father had been fired a few years back for refusing to move interstate when the company relocated.

Laura excelled academically at high school. Looking back, she now wishes she had taken a year off between finishing school and starting uni in order to travel. Annoyed with her own lack of interest and drive, she deferred her university degree for a year. She spent a few weeks in the Army Reserve but dropped out due to injury and her tendency to question orders. When we had lunch together, she was working three days a week as a waitress. If she had her choice of any job in the world, it would be a theatre director. However, enrolling in the necessary course would mean moving toward the city and away from family and friends.

Some of Laura's friends are doing commerce degrees 'because there is a job at the end'. Others are doing the course that interests them with 'no idea what the job at the end of that will be'. Whilst she doesn't worry too much

about job security, she was worried enough to choose psychology over theatre when she first applied for university entrance.

Laura's attitude to work and career is typical Y. They are highly educated and value institutionalised learning; a generation that kick-started positive trends in educational achievement, especially for girls.¹ Well before they entered high school, many Y'ers were subject to extreme pressure to perform at school. They are used to the bar moving ever upward when it comes to academic standards.

However, once out of the high school system and road-testing their independence, things have changed. They find themselves struggling to find meaning and purpose when it comes to work and career. They want to learn, succeed and earn money to fuel their high-level consumption habits. However, they value a balanced life. They want to feel passionate about what they do. Until they find their calling, many are content to settle for a series of 'McJobs' to fund a life of fun, travel and time with friends. Job insecurity isn't that big a deal. Most know there are plenty of 'crap jobs' out there they can get. A bigger concern is finding your 'dream job', one that provides financial security *and* personal fulfilment.

The statistics on young people and employment paint a fairly grim picture of the career and financial prospects for Laura and her peers. Labour force figures show that youth unemployment remains high, with at least one in five young people out of work.²

Since 1993 there has been a significant decline in apprenticeship places in the major trade occupations.³ Previously there was a close nexus between unemployment and lack of education and training. Not so for Y'ers (or indeed their Xer counterparts). Educated Y'ers, especially those who have come out of tertiary

education rather than trades, are facing a highly competitive job market. In the United States, the college class of 2003 graduated 'into the nation's worst hiring slump in 20 years', with only about 15 per cent leaving school with jobs waiting for them.⁴ Many university graduates face the terrible realisation that after years of expensive study, they may well be applying for jobs they could have landed *without* a university degree. Changes in our economy and industrial base have created a job climate where there will be no shortage of low-wage jobs. Interesting and secure employment for everyone coming out of university is a thing of the past.

In the face of these facts, the line spun to Generation Y by their parents, teachers and broader society—work hard, do well at school and you will have a successful career—is exposed as a pernicious lie, up there with 'stop it or you will go blind'.

The certain belief in the power of education as the path to success was passed from Boomer parents to their offspring at an early age. Investment in Y educational achievement started almost in the crib. Competition for the best schools, universities, courses and marks has driven even low-income parents to pour all of their resources into their children's education. For most Y'ers, even those with parents on low incomes, the move from high school to further education and training seemed non-negotiable. Once out of high school and into higher education, the pressure to perform doesn't stop. University was once a place where, not only to learn, you also could skip class to attend meetings, see films and generally revel in campus culture. Almost extinguished is the romantic view of university as a place to broaden your mind, find yourself and dabble in radical politics. It is now a place to get qualified for a job that helps pay off education debts as soon as possible. This pressure to get through and get qualified ASAP is exacerbated by the fact that most university students have to work as well as study full-time in order to live.⁵

The price of an education

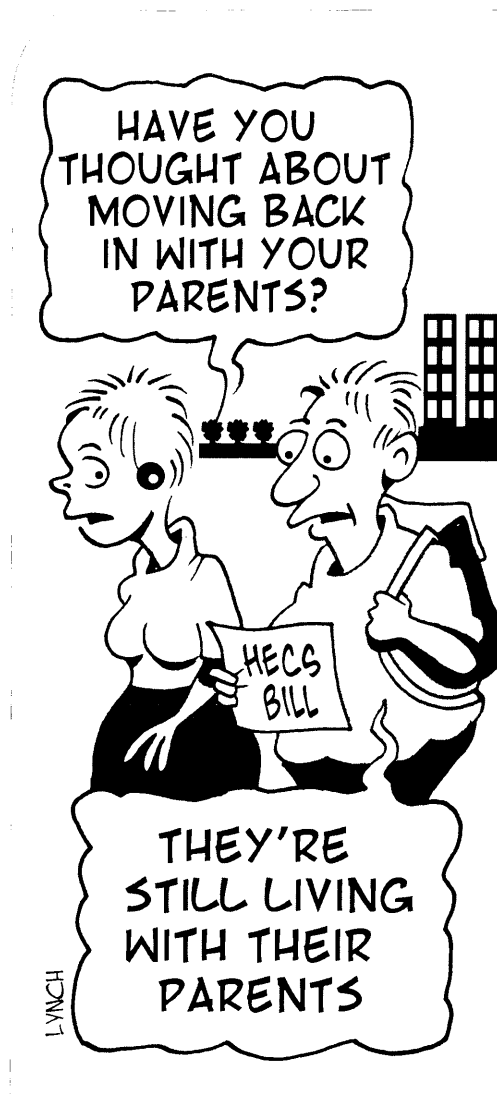
After years of educational achievement and investment, many Y'ers are graduating into an environment where there are more graduates than quality jobs. Y'ers are leaving university with big HECS debts that many will struggle to pay off quickly. One in ten Australian students who graduated university in 2004 had debts of

more than \$40,000.⁶ Most graduates had debts between \$20,000 and \$30,000 (a sum usually reserved for a house deposit).

Whilst current levels of HECS debt haven't retarded enrolment rates, they do constitute 'a significant liability' for Y'ers entering the workforce at a time when they may want to establish a stronger and more independent financial base.⁷

Paying back a big HECS debt is not the only financial hurdle Y'ers face—even fully employed ones. The question of living expenses, in particular the cost of housing, is an even bigger concern. Renting in urban areas, where the majority of young people live, work and socialise, is high. Housing prices are even more prohibitive.⁸ HECS debts and the cost of Y-style living combine to prevent the majority of young people from saving any money, let alone enough for a house deposit.

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Starting out is always a hard task. But for Y'ers, moving out of home and establishing true financial independence may take more than a decade after graduation. Until then they will zig-zag from shared accommodation to parental hearth. Indeed, Y'ers consistently rely on family to keep them from financial hardship and provide a roof over their heads. The majority of young people aged 15 to 24 live at home, with nearly 46 per cent of 20-24 year olds still with their parents.⁹ Successive Democrats Youth Polls have showed that the main source of income for over half the population of young people is their family, well above employment, social security or youth allowance.¹⁰ Even if Y'ers leave the family home for a period, many return, 'boomeranging' sometimes again and again, due to financial or relationship difficulties.

This situation creates a strange double bind. The Boomers were in the right place at the right time, in terms of the property market, buying up big when paying a mortgage was cheaper than renting. Having locked up the housing market, many have chosen (or been forced) to continue to support their young adult children, providing them with low-cost rent, or rent free accommodation, lending them the deposit for a house, or leaving the family home to them entirely and moving away. However, the stress on the Boomers will mount as they near retirement and need to save more money. (Students aged between 18 to 25 still living at home are the 'most expensive age group to maintain', approximately \$322 per week in 2002.¹¹) This may well frustrate and disadvantage Y'ers still dependant on their parents. Used to the high living standards of their childhood, many will struggle with 'homeowner envy' exacerbated by current 'inequalities in employment and income in the adult labour market'.¹²

Change for the better?

In the face of all this—an insecure job market, the diminished value of a uni degree, HECS debts, and ridiculous housing prices—how have Y'ers reacted? Y'ers have made 'a realistic adjustment to an unstable world'¹³ by taking employment instability as a given and adopting a self-reliant, survival-of-the-fittest attitude to career success. Most are repelled by the idea of 'a job for life'—the kind of employment stability as understood by their parents and grandparents. In fact, the majority would view staying with the same company, or same job, for more than a decade the equivalent of a

death sentence. Many enjoy the opportunities and sense of freedom an unsure career path can provide. When asked where they would like to be in their career in two or three years time, they talk about the same role in a different company, the same company in a different country, or a different career altogether. This professional wanderlust contributes to Y'ers relative lack of concern about job security.¹⁴ Most are unfazed about this situation because they know there is always unskilled work available to them. They also know that, at present, it is an employee's market, especially if you aren't too picky about the kind of job you want.

So Y'ers have reworked employment insecurity into vocational freedom and the opportunity to travel, experience new workplaces, expand skills and stave off boredom. Above all else, they value flexibility and diversity in their working lives. Researcher Rosemary Herceg found the majority of young people 'talk about a way of working that is smarter rather than harder'. 'They speak about things like working from home, marketing their ideas rather than their time, and moving away from the daily 9-5 grind'.¹⁵

In order to manage Generation Y workers effectively and get the most out of this highly educated cohort, employers are going to have to rethink their management practices. They are going to have to embrace, rather than grudgingly allow, the whole range of flexible work options available—job sharing, quality part-time work, flexible hours, working from home, and all sorts of education, training and travel opportunities. They are going to have to keep 'a loose grip' on Generation Y employees or risk losing them altogether.¹⁶

This lack of a deeper connection to the world of work is not only a reaction to the broader economic climate, but also a consequence of their childhood experiences. Y'ers were born in the 1980s, an era of downsizing, deregulation and leaner, meaner corporations. A time when both public and private institutions hardly thought twice about firing hundreds of loyal employees for the sake of a profit margin. Y'ers, like Laura, have seen their hard working parents dismissed from their jobs after years of service. Generation Y learned a number of lessons from these early experiences: don't expect much or trust big institutions, corporate or otherwise; and, more profoundly, don't invest too much in your job because your bosses aren't that invested in you. It has become a truism that

Y'ers lack deep commitment to their current job, lack long-term loyalty to their employer, and have a tendency to change employers frequently.¹⁷

The example of their parents also taught Y'ers to value life outside work. Y'ers are living witnesses to the personal cost of their parents' workaholicism—broken marriages, absentee parenting, stress-related illnesses—and have been left disillusioned and determined to achieve balance in their own lives. Generation Y expert, Mark McCrindle, argues that young people 'do not live to work, rather, they work to live'. They value jobs that 'provide the income to do what they want to'—have fun, travel, and spend.¹⁸ But they also want to achieve the work/life balance that still eludes their parents. Many of them are therefore turning down jobs or overtime that spills over into their social time, regardless of the pay on offer.¹⁹ If Y desires to achieve a balanced life are strong enough and can be sustained into home ownership and parenthood, this generation may yet transform the world of work.

If the life patterns of Generation Y pan out as predicted, it will be at least a decade or more before they commit to the kinds of obligations that keep people in work whether they like it or not—namely a mortgage and children. Until then, the bulk of Generation Y will constitute a volatile sector of the workforce, switching career paths, changing companies, travelling and moving back home to take on further study.

A job for life isn't an option—even if it was, they aren't invested enough in work to want that. Why not? They want to avoid the harried lives of their parents. Instead, they want an interesting job that can fund a balanced life, one that involves a harmony of work, relationships, friends, fun, travel and life experiences. At present, this generation presents a challenge to employers to be more flexible in their employment practices. If both Y men and women stick to their guns about achieving the right work/life balance, they may alter the world of work—for everyone.

Endnotes

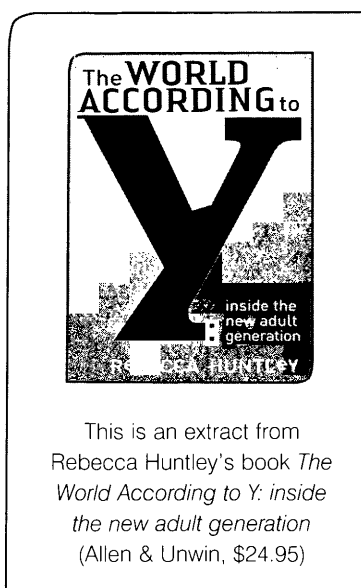
1. High school retention rates to Year 12 have doubled since the early 1980s and over the last decade going onto tertiary study has increased by 80 per cent. See the ABS's Youth Australia Report <www.abs.gov.au> at 20 March 2006.
2. Australian Bureau of Statistics Labour Force Figures for February 2005. see <www.abs.gov.au> at 20 March 2006. More broadly, half the world's unemployed are under 24, according to the International Labor Organisation. Although young people represent 25 per cent of the working age

population, they make up as much as 47 per cent of the 186 million people out of work worldwide in 2003. 'Youth Unemployment at all Time High'. *Brainbox*. 15 April 2005 <www.brainbox.com.au> at 15 April 2005.

3. Phil Toner argues that had this sustained decline in the training rate over the last decade not occurred there would be nearly 19,000 job opportunities available for young people aged 15-24. Phillip Toner, 'Declining Apprentice Training Rates: Causes, Consequences and Solutions'. Research paper. *Industry Studies*, University of Western Sydney, July 2003.
4. Jared Bernstein, 'The Young and the Jobless'. *The American Prospect*, October 2003, 17.
5. Pitman et al found that 'the amount of time students overall are working is increasing with potential detrimental effects on their study'. Susan Pitman with Tania Herbert, Clare Land and Cas O'Neil, *Profile of Young Australians: Facts, Figures & Issues*. Foundation for Young Australians. Melbourne, 2003, 4.
6. Ebru Yaman, 'On pay, students mean business'. *The Australian*, 17 November 2004. Many university students now pay \$20,000 for a science degree, \$40,000 for a law degree and nearly \$15,000 for an arts degree.
7. Pitman et al. *Profile of Young Australians*, 4.
8. On the rising cost of buying and renting property in Australia see generally Marion Powell and Glenn Withers, 'National Summit on Housing Affordability', Resource paper. Canberra, 27-29 June 2004. <www.appliedeconomics.com.au>. In 2003 housing affordability across Australia slipped to its lowest level in 13 years. First home buyers must now put aside 25.3 per cent of their income to meet mortgage repayments. CPM Research argues that 'the recent rise in housing prices can be attributed to the decreased number of first home buyers in the market'. The fact that young Australians face serious difficulty buying a home has affected the entire market, driving up prices for everyone. CMP Research, 'Housing affordability falls to 13 year low'. July 20 2003. <www.propertyweb.com.au>.
9. In 2001, 62 per cent of young people 15 to 24 lived at home. Pitman et al. *Profile of Young Australians*, 7.

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△ ...they want an interesting job that can fund a balanced life, one that involves a harmony of work, relationships, friends, fun, travel, and life experiences. △



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10. See <www.democrats.org.au>.
11. Pitman et al. *Profile of Young Australians*. 5.
12. Pitman et al. *Profile of Young Australians*. 3.
13. Adele Horin and Alexa Moses. 'The class of '91 grows up'. *Sydney Morning Herald*, June 18 2003.
14. The attitudes and behaviours of Y'ers to the world of work present a particular challenge to trade unions. Because Y'ers move in and out of professions and workplaces and are employed in hard-to-unionise sectors, they are difficult for unions to reach and retain. Their acceptance of job insecurity and dog-eat-dog attitude to career success doesn't help. The statistics are evidence of this. Only 18 per cent of young people joined a union in 2002. Pitman et al. *Profile of Y Australians*, 35.
15. See <www.pophouse.com.au>.
16. Brigid Delaney. 'The Young and the Restless'. *Sydney Morning Herald*. 23 October 2004.
17. Bonnie Malkin. 'Generation flex'. *Sydney Morning Herald*. July 26 2003.
18. Mark McCrindle. 'Understanding Generation Y'. *Prime Focus*, May 2003.
19. Annabel Stafford. 'A Generation so good at saying no'. *Australian Financial Review*. 22 March 2005. That being said, a survey of 7500 people by recruitment firm Hudson found that it was Xers who nominated 'more interesting work' as the single biggest motivating factor in terms of employment, whereas Generation Y were 'more materialistic' and were inspired to work for 'better money'. Jackie Woods. *Sydney Morning Herald*. July 28 2004. My view if given a choice, is that some Y'ers might opt for more money for boring work and find fun and stimulation outside the office.

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areas is the erection of a well-documented and fair contractual process which is known and agreed to by those concerned, or imposed as a condition of involvement in the activity. Another theme is the recurrent nature of the type of dispute and the expertise which has been developed within sport to deal with it. In addition, each of the areas is confined to a sporting context—they do not have the general commercial flavour that would attract the routine interest of the courts.

It is likely that the courts will maintain this 'demarcation' between areas in which they will and will not become generally involved. The legal/sporting landscape is one of change, and one can envisage that other areas may emerge to join this group.

Endnotes

1. See, for example, *News Limited v Australian Football League* (1996) ATPR 41–521; *News Limited v South Sydney District Rugby League Football Club Limited* [2003] HCA 45; *Hospitality Group Pty Ltd v Australian Rugby Union Ltd* (2001) ATPR 41 831; current 'C7' litigation.
2. *Australian Football League v Carlton Football Club* [1998] 2 VR 546 at 549–550. The reasons of the three appeal court judges varied widely. A majority appeared to believe that the trial judge went further than was necessary in reviewing a determination of an internal tribunal and overturning it.
3. *Watherston v Woolven* (unreported, South Australian Supreme Court, 21 October 1987), noted in *The Australian*, 9 November 1987, 4.
4. *Forbes v Australian Yachting Federation Inc* (1996) 131 FLR 241.
5. *Raguz v Sullivan* [2000] 50 NSWLR 236.
6. *Australian Football League v Carlton Football Club* [1998] 2 VR 546 (Tadgell and Hayne JJA; Ashley JA dissenting).
7. Hedigan J at first instance and Ashley JA in dissent on appeal would have given the court a broader role.
8. A competitor does have the right to apply to the Administrative Appeals Tribunal for a review of a decision to place his or her name on the register.