

Fearless and Flexible. Views of Gen Y

The Dusseldorp Skills Forum commissioned research from Irving Saulwick and Denis Muller and from Newspoll to find out what young people – those aged 16 to 24 – were thinking about education, work and the future. The research, plus data from the Forum's quantitative analysis, *How Young People Are Faring*, and from the ABS's General Social Survey, paints a comprehensive picture of how young Australians see the world.

By Denis Mullerⁱ

Generation Y have adjusted fully to the globalised world. In that way they are dramatically different from their parents, and represent a point of change in Australian social and economic history.

Evidence for this comes from focus-group research conducted among Gen Y for the Dusseldorp Skills Forum in July 2006.

The focus-group research showed Gen Y:

- have grown up understanding and accepting that the future of work is all about mobility, adaptability and change;
- have little or no expectations of a "job for life", thinking it a form of imprisonment;
- have not a trace of awareness about the convulsive social and economic changes wrought by globalisation and the information revolution over the past 20 years;
- regard the changed social and economic landscape as completely normal;
- have no fear of an economic downturn;
- robustly believe their future is in their own hands.

The contrast with the attitudes of their parents' generation could not be more stark.

Six years ago Irving Saulwick and I conducted a similar study among people in the workforce who were, for the most part, in their thirties, forties, and fifties.

We found that the effects of globalisation had profoundly undermined their sense of job security, fairness, and personal capacity to survive. Many unskilled or semi-skilled jobs had gone offshore. Companies were being restructured constantly in response to takeover, technological change, and a more relentlessly competitive environment.

The idea of a "job for life" had been rudely taken away. Many people had felt the lash of unemployment and were determined never to feel it again. People often held their jobs in a precarious state of mind, fearing that yet more restructuring and technological change could see them cast aside without warning.

Many had been displaced, and those who had been unable to adapt or learn new skills felt they had been thrown on the scrapheap.

As a prelude to this, many of the old protections had been dismantled by successive governments, Labor and Liberal. Tariff barriers protecting industry had been removed or minimised. The dollar had been floated and was now subject to the daily vagaries of the international markets. The labour and capital markets had been progressively deregulated. People felt no one was looking after them, that their future was going to be decided by some screen jockey on Wall Street.

To Gen Y, this is like talking about the Napoleonic Wars. It is remote from their experience and of no conceivable relevance to their lives. They have grown up in a period of sustained economic growth. They have never experienced a recession. What's new about the unregulated flow of labour and capital? In Australia people who want to work can always find it. Can't they?

With this transcendent certitude, among the majority comes a robust sense of self-reliance: in a country like Australia – the best country on earth – you can make it if you want to. A smaller group of less able or less confident souls are not quite so sure.

The ambitions of Gen Y are, in the main, materialistic and conventional – the car, the house, marriage, children. Few express a desire to change the world.

That, anyway, is the view from the broad middle. It is not, of course, the whole picture.

In the focus groups, we spoke to some who were on the economic margins. Some were unemployed, and some had chosen to be carers, even though they were in straitened circumstances.

The critical difference between those at the margin and those in the broad middle was educational attainment. Of the nine people in the group of unemployed we spoke to, one had a university degree and two had completed TAFE courses, but none of the others had completed secondary school.

In the group of carers – all young mothers – one had a university degree but all the others had left school in Year 8 or 9.

Some in these two groups now found themselves trapped in a vicious circle. They realised they were under-educated and therefore uncompetitive in the labour market for anything other than menial jobs, but education would cost money – both for course fees and services such as child-minding. This was money they did not have and had no hope of obtaining because their earning capacity was limited by their lack of education.

Among the people who felt entrapped, morale was low and they could see no way out. Among the rest, however, the attitude was that they might be down but they were not out.

These findings broadly accord with data from the General Social Survey conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, and from the Household Income and Labour Dynamics Australia panel study (HILDA). This paper by Mike Long from Monash University, is called **The Flipside of Gen Y**, and is available on the DSF website (<http://www.dsf.org.au>).

In particular, the data show that young people who do not complete Year 12 are less likely to be fully engaged in work or study, as are young people who have grown up in low-income households.

The data also show that those young people who are not fully engaged in full-time work or study are generally less satisfied with life, in particular with friendships, the education they received, and with their future job prospects.

This indicates the propensity for disengaged or under-engaged young people to feel isolated socially and disempowered economically. If this is so, there is potential for a substantial gulf in well-being to develop between the robust broad middle and the brittle people on the margins.

There are other marginalised groups in Australian society whom we did not reach, and for whom life's chances might look much poorer than for the broad middle. These include people in Indigenous communities, and people who belong to religious and ethnic minorities who are currently the object of prejudice such as Muslims and people of Middle Eastern origin.

For many in the broad middle, Indigenous people already get too many favours from government, and as for people from the Middle East – and anywhere else for that matter – they should learn to speak English and be like “us”.

In these matters, the attitudes of Gen Y are absolutely no different from those of the generations who have gone before.

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