

Gen X in the Newsroom

BY SHARON PETERS, Ph.D

*Expectations, attitudes
don't fit traditional culture*



Kellogg School of Management and Medill School of Journalism

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Contents

Introduction	Page 7
Key Findings: Gen X Wants Something Different	Page 9
The Methodology	Page 13
Things They Want ... For Now	Page 17
Money Matters and Other Unpleasantries	Page 25
The Attractions and Detractions	Page 33
In Their Own Words	Page 39
Observations About Gen X Values	Page 47
Conclusions and Recommendations	Page 51



Gen X in the Newsroom

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Gen X in the Newsroom

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Preface

Young newsroom professionals and those about to emerge from journalism schools, have expectations and attitudes that are very different from those held by the older managers hiring and supervising them.

They are Generation X and they want better pay, more time for family and friends, more stimulation and more guidance and help with advancement — things that traditionally have been hard to come by in newsrooms.

The response of many veteran newspeople has been that this new group will just have to adapt. Why should newsroom managers jump through hoops to accommodate this cohort of employees?

One good reason is that Gen Xers are not wedded to the idea of any one career — and certainly not to any one job — as previous generations were.

Opportunities abound, so if they don't like it where they are they'll leave. Their inclination is to job-hop and they will do it with hardly a second thought.

That could be a serious problem because they are a smaller group than baby boomers, so those jumping ship will be very difficult to replace.

In what ways are these twenty- and thirtysomethings so different from the baby boomers now running the newsrooms? And what can managers do to accommodate them, given the restrictions of deadlines and bottom lines?

A research study by Sharon Peters, Ph.D., has some fascinating insights into Gen X and the leading edge of the next generation, Gen Y. A survey of 409 of them suggests some answers to this new generation-gap dilemma.

Introduction

They are a never-ending fount of exasperation and befuddlement for employers.

Generation X employees have a style and approach to work that bears little resemblance to generations of workers before them. They are, it is said, less committed, less dependable, less willing than their predecessors to pay their dues or go the extra mile. They are here-today, gone-tomorrow job-hoppers of the highest order. And, given their limited emotional investment in their jobs, they have extraordinary goals and expectations.

They are, to many of their elders, perplexing, discouraging and peculiarly enigmatic.

They are also unavoidable.

As Claire Raines, an expert on the group, points out in her 1997 book *Beyond Generation X*, “America’s primary labor supply for the next decade represents the smallest population group in history and the shallowest pool of entry-level workers in modern times. There simply aren’t enough [Gen Xers] to go around.”

Baby boomers are beginning to retire or downshift, the personpower pool is extremely tight, and Gen Xers must be relied upon to fill millions of jobs and ultimately to move into higher positions.

Employers the nation over are struggling to make sense of — and peace with — this group whose fundamental characteristics are anathema to the mostly baby-boomer-generation supervisors who are hiring and contending with them.

The newspaper industry seems to have some special difficulty dealing with this group because of the nature, traditions and culture of newsroom work: The 16-hour-a-day staffing requirements, the news-can-happen-anytime reality of the business, the 50-hour-a-week norms and the time-honored institutional conviction that news and work come before all else.

“I don’t get [young would-be journalists]. They lack fire in their bellies,” commented one former newspaperwoman, now a journalism instructor.

“They seem to regard this more as an 8-hour-a-day factory job than a career that sometimes requires more than that from its people,” said a midsize-newspaper editor.

“I have little hope that any of them have the devotion or the stamina to be doing this for the long haul. Most of their attention and energy seems directed to finding jobs that will be more convenient,” said a metro managing editor.

While there are undeniably some among the twenty- and early-thirtysomethings who have the same drive, commitment and work ethic that defined and

distinguished their predecessors, Gen Xers with those qualities are — by most accounts — exceptions to the generational rule. The majority of Gen X newspaper people, it is said, are at least as interested in their social and family lives as they are in their work, expect an unrealistic level of management interest in their advancement, and have hopelessly out-of-touch career goals. There is widespread agreement on those points.

Still, thousands of anecdotes do not reality make.

There are hundreds of assumptions about Gen X newspaper people, and many similarities in the stories their supervisors tell, but little hard data.

The intent of this research project was to provide some solid facts about this group. What, really, are their expectations? What is their level of commitment? What do they find acceptable and unacceptable about the line of work they have chosen? What differences would they like to see and make in the industry?

It is important to understand Gen X not only in order to establish a more acceptable coexistence, but also to prepare adequately for a future in which these people will, in many ways, be calling the shots. For this is a pivotal group. Hoping they will somehow, miraculously, one morning assume the cloak designed and fabricated by baby boomers is unrealistic. If social scientists are correct, the way Gen X is now is essentially the way Gen X will always be.

They cannot be ignored. They cannot be reconstituted. They must, sooner or later, be understood and accommodated.

Gen X Wants Something Different

CHAPTER ONE

Key Findings



IN some regards, baby-boomer managers are quite correct in their characterizations of this new generation of journalists.

Most Gen X newspaper people in this study do not, for example, have any interest at all in working 50- and 60-hour weeks; most expect to be fast-tracked to more interesting newsroom work; most don't expect to spend their entire careers in the newspaper business; a large number don't expect to be around for even the next decade.

Although most of the young reporters, copy editors, photographers, artists, editors and designers in this study said they were motivated to enter the profession for many of the same reasons as their predecessors — to put their creative skills to the test, and to engage in work that is more exciting and less routine than some lines of work — they do not seem to regard newspapering as a calling. Money and advancement opportunities are paramount to these people, and they are not willing to sublimate those needs to romantic notions of being society's watchdog or a protector of democracy.

They want to work at jobs that are fulfilling, that allow them to use and broaden the skills they have, and all things being equal, they would like to feel they are somehow contributing to a greater good. But work is work, not a lifestyle, and they do not intend to put in hours for which they are not adequately remunerated; they believe in working to live, not vice versa; and they see career as an ever-changing cascade of work options, not a linear continuum along which one moves throughout his or her entire worklife.

- About three-fifths of young journalists in this study said they will leave the newspaper profession or may leave the profession within the next 10 years; more than three-quarters said they will not or may not spend their entire worklives at newspapers.

- Nearly half name salary as the single greatest disappointment in the newspaper business; the long irregular hours is the second most mentioned gripe.

- Many seem to be finding the work less stimulating and exciting than they had anticipated. Some 46 percent named the need for new challenges, better wages and/or more flexibility as the reason they will most likely leave the profession, if and when they choose to do so.

- The perks paraded before baby boomers decades ago to entice them to enter the profession — solid pension plan and the prospects for longevity — are meaningless to this generation of newspaper people. What they care most about, in descending order, are salary, advancement and respect.

Students are similar

Newspaper executives who have held out hope that upcoming crops of would-be journalists would tend more toward traditional newsroom values are quite likely to be sorely disappointed. Journalism students scheduled to graduate in

the years 2000, 2001 and 2002, the leading edge of Gen Y, appear to be no more inclined to accept the newspapering status quo than their Gen X predecessors. Indeed, a significant number of print journalism majors are inclined to reject the very notion of newspapering, and are focusing their attention on Internet or other new media possibilities. Even those who said they are gearing up to enter

What they care most about, in descending order,
are salary, advancement and respect.

the newspaper world are, for the most part, disinclined to make it a lifetime pursuit.

- Nearly one-fifth of the journalism or communications students in this study are hedging their bets by seeking double-major degrees. Administrators of several of the study programs said this is a growing trend.

- Only about one-third of the current crop of journalism students who have declared themselves to be print majors expect to enter newspaper work upon graduation. Roughly one-third said they definitely will not, and the remaining one-third are not sure.

- About 40 percent have had internships, and one-third of them have decided they will not enter the newspaper world, or they are not certain they will enter the field after graduation. Their greatest issues: Lack of guidance, direction or editing from their bosses, followed closely by salary disappointments.

- This group's expectations for full-time work are similar to those of their older compatriots who are already in the business. Chance for advancement, adequate salary and flexible work schedule are what they list as most important to them.

Clearly there are among these people some strong sentiments that do not jibe well with existing newsroom patterns and practices. It will be necessary for newsroom executives to consider them and make choices about how to proceed.

The Methodology

CHAPTER TWO



To gather data on soon-to-graduate journalism students, the researcher contacted 14 universities with journalism or communications programs or departments early in the year 2000. Two were unable to participate because of strict human-subject research policies at their schools; the remaining 12 agreed to take part. Of that 12, eight returned completed forms from their students.

The participating schools were Northwestern University, Ball State University, University of Kansas, Southern Methodist University, Brigham Young University, University of Kentucky, Middle Tennessee State University and Western Kentucky University.

Contacts at the schools were asked to distribute to advanced journalism students a two-page form soliciting information about their intentions, their expectations and their work experience. The forms were distributed in classes with a preponderance of advanced journalism students with a print journalism preference and, where possible, a preference for newspaper work (as opposed to magazine, public relations or other print options).

Of the 321 students who participated, 30 percent expected to graduate in the year 2000, 36 percent in 2001, and 34 percent in 2002. The average age of the participants was 21.85 and the median age was 21.

Inasmuch as some of the required courses among upper level students in communications departments include students from all sequences, including broadcast, several students who completed forms were not print majors. These forms were discarded from the study.

Of the students included in the analysis, 82 percent were journalism or communications majors and 18 percent had double majors, in journalism or communications plus one other — foreign language, political science, economics and psychology chief among them.

To gather insights into the thinking of young journalists already employed in newsrooms, the researcher contacted editors at 16 newspapers of varying sizes during the beginning weeks of the year 2000. All agreed to distribute forms to all professional journalists on staff who were age 29 and younger.

Participation was voluntary and anonymous.

A total of 188 young journalists returned forms that asked questions relating to their newsroom experience, their career priorities and expectations, and their short- and long-term career goals. Of the respondents, 40 percent were from metro desks, 9 percent from features, 9 percent from sports, 17 percent

The Study

The participants were young working journalists from newspapers in 11 states: California, Colorado, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Massachusetts, New York, Ohio, Tennessee, Virginia and Washington.

from copy desk, and 20 percent from photo or graphics; 5 percent did not specify.

The average age of the participants was 24.85 and the average number of years employed full time in a newsroom was 2.3.

Additionally, a control group of 77 baby-boomer newsroom employees from three newspapers — in Florida, Oregon and Texas — filled out forms identical to those distributed to young working journalists. Baby boomers were asked to recall how they saw things when they were in their 20s and just entering the profession.

The Things They Want ... for Now

CHAPTER THREE



MOST of this study's young working journalists were moved to enter the profession by the same things that have motivated generations of journalists: 44 percent said they were prompted to go into newspapering because they like writing, reporting, editing, design or photography; 21 percent said it's a way to impact communities and society; and 20 percent said it seemed a fairly interesting way to earn a living. Of the remaining 15 percent, 6 percent said they entered newspaper work because they were encouraged to do so by a teacher or professor, 3 percent figured it would be good training to segue into whatever line of work they choose next, and 6 percent gave a variety of other answers, including it's a profession with a great deal of mobility, it affords the opportunity to travel for work, and it provides entrée to important people and places.

Whatever the attractions that drew young journalists into the profession, they do not appear, in most cases, strong enough to sustain Gen Xers for very long. Only 38 percent said they expect to still be in the business 10 years from

Longevity and Gen X, by Department

Do you expect to be in the newspaper business 10 years from now?

Department	Yes	No	Not sure
News/metro/city	54%	14%	31%
Features	25%	13%	62%
Sports	50%	25%	25%
Copy desk	33%	27%	40%
Photo or graphics	17%	39%	44%

now. Of the remaining 62 percent, 20 percent said they do not expect to be in the business in a decade, and 42 percent are fence-sitters, not sure which way it will go.

If these study respondents are any indication, photo and graphics departments and copy desks are at greatest risk of seeing a significant drop-out rate in the not-too-distant future, as rough-

ly one-third from each department said they expect they will not be in the business 10 years from now. The greatest could-go-either-way mentality exists in features departments, where only 13 percent said they definitely plan to be out of the business within the next 10 years, but a massive 62 percent are not sure. Metro and sports departments seem to be populated with people who are somewhat clearer about wishing to stay in the business: 54 percent of news/metro/cityside reporters and editors said they expect to be in the business in 10 years; 50 percent of sports reporters and editors said they do.

But there is a significant level of ambivalence among employees in all departments: Anywhere from 13 percent to 39 percent said they do not expect to be in the business for another decade; and between 25 percent and 62 percent said maybe they will and maybe they won't.

Few plan to stay long term

The numbers are more dismal when they try to predict whether they expect

to stay in the newspaper business throughout their worklives: 23 percent said yes, 36 percent said no and 41 percent are not sure. The disparity between the 10-year and lifetime self projections show nearly a doubling in the number who expect to bail out. And the number committed to staying reduces by about one-third.

Part of this might be driven by the fickleness of youth — the inability of anyone in his or her 20s to look ahead a decade or two and imagine a worklife similar to that which one is living at this moment. Part of it may be the generational need for financial security and professional advancement — career expectations that, in their short time in the business, young journalists have developed little hope of achieving. And part of it might be related to the much-publicized cohort tendency to engage in several careers over a lifetime.

Interestingly, the baby boomers in the control group, asked to think back to when they were starting out, recall being much more committed to a lifetime

Short- and Long-term Longevity Predictions

	Do you expect to be in newspapering for 10 years?	Do you expect to be in newspapering throughout your worklife?
Yes	38%	23%
No	20%	36%
Not Sure	42%	41%

in newspapering than the current crop of twentysomethings. Some 72 percent of baby boomers said that when they were in their 20s, they expected to be in the business for at least a decade; 59 percent said they

expected to spend their entire worklife in the profession.

It is acknowledged that no 50-year-old can recall precisely where his or her head was 25 years ago. Moreover, these are the people who did, in fact, stay in the industry, so they are a skewed response group. Thus, these boomers' current thinking about their former mindsets must be regarded as something less than highly dependable.

Still, they probably were more devoted to spending a long time or a lifetime in newspapering, partially because in the Watergate and post-Watergate years it was regarded as an important, exciting and respected profession, and partly because of a couple of strong norms and patterns of that era that fueled their thinking. First, the societal thinking of the time was that college-educated people would stay mostly within a single industry (although job-jumping, especially in the media, was acceptable) so most people started out in their first jobs and moved to their second without giving much thought to abandoning their current field.

Second, and perhaps more important, is that newspaper people of that generation felt the skills they had were of value only to the newspaper industry. So, in their minds, out-of-newspaper options were limited, and, for the most

part, totally unacceptable. Although it was not entirely true that their skills would not easily translate into other lines of work, it may have been more true then than now, a time when computer-literate designers, writers, editors and visual-arts people are in high demand.

Why they may leave

It is impossible to tell from this study if young journalists' sentiments are born of disenchantment with newspapering (there are indications elsewhere in the study suggesting many have found newsrooms less than hospitable) or whether they are merely a reflection of the special unwillingness of this generation to chart rigid paths for themselves.

This is undeniably an age cohort that has entered the work world with different expectations and mindsets than boomers, and an array of marketplace opportunities that previous generations of journalists did not have.

And newspaper executives would be unwise to assume that once they mature, have families and buy houses, the twentysomethings will suddenly grow more career-stable. They have sprung from a different culture than that which the boomers experienced, they are living in an entirely different world of challenge and opportunity, and they will not suddenly metamorphose into boomer clones, experts who have studied this generation say.

Gen X, as a group, has little confidence in the priorities and staying power of institutions, including those that employ them. They watched their parents (or their friends' parents) give their all to their work only to wind up exhausted,

Their Comments about Longevity

"I love my co-workers and my job, and I will stay here until that changes or something outside of work changes that makes me want to change jobs."

— **Copy editor, 27, midsize paper**

"I can see myself at newspapers for about 10 year, then end up teaching at the university level. It would be impossible to have a solid and positive family life in this biz with these hours."

— **Photographer, 24, midsize paper**

"If I can't find a company that values its employees with salary and respect, in the near future I will leave the industry."

— **Designer, 25, midsize paper**

"If I leave it will be due to poor wages and lack of integrity amongst managers."

— **Designer, 25, midsize paper**

"I can't imagine doing anything else, but I can't say for sure I won't."

— **Copy editor, 25, midsize paper**

"If I can make it to the next level quickly, I will continue to stay in newspapers."

— **News reporter, 25, small paper**

divorced, estranged from their children, and then laid off during the downsizing cycles of the 1990s.

So the go-or-stay numbers among this group of Gen X journalists are in keeping with those others have found with this cohort. The question that must be asked is would it be possible, with some effort, to preserve some of the 42 percent of newspaper journalists who said they are not sure whether they will be in the business in 10 more years? Getting them to stay would probably not be an easy feat, given their penchant for seeking out new challenges and keeping a reasonable balance between worklife and personal life. But there are Gen X experts who suggest that retention is possible (if not for a lifetime, then for a few more years) provided the workplace offers things of importance to this generation.

Clearly this group of journalists will not be easily seduced.

Among the 42 percent who may not stay in the business for another decade, there are a variety of reasons: Some are already mentally predisposed to leaving — 7 percent said they have already decided on another career path and 5

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percent have come to realize that it's not the right line of work for them. This 12 percent will, and probably should, depart quite soon. Of the remaining 88 percent, there are a variety of sentiments: 7 percent said the Internet and other new media are appealing and will eventually entice them; and 5 percent said they are concerned about the long-term future of the newspaper industry. A huge 76 percent said "other," offering explanations ranging, in descending order of frequency mentioned, from a desire for a solid family life, desire for a balanced life, returning to school for additional degrees, the need to find a line of work with better wage structures, and that they're simply too young to contemplate such matters.

Of those who do not plan to stay in the business for the duration of their worklives, the most frequently mentioned reason (given by 46 percent) was that they are not convinced newspapering will provide the income, flexibility and/or stimulation necessary throughout their worklives. Other reasons: 15 percent said they believe newspapers will be upstaged or replaced by other media and they will be forced to find another line of work; 10 percent simply can't imagine staying in one career their whole lives; 7 percent said they believe newspapering is a career with a high burnout rate, so they are already considering other possibilities. The remaining 22 percent gave "other" as their

answer, and their explanations included concern that newspaper work threatens family life, high stress, and diminishing hope that newspapering will actually allow them to make a difference.

What can be concluded is that 77 percent of those already in the business will or may abandon newspapering for other pursuits in the years ahead. It will be partly because of generational predispositions, partly because the reality of the work has not met their expectations, and partly because they are not especially hopeful that newspapering will provide them what they need from their worklives in the long run.

Students no different

Those who have not yet entered the newspaper field — but are training for it — seem to be similarly inclined.

Of the study participants who are newspaper or print journalism majors, there is a high level of ambivalence: 17 percent have second majors, mostly in foreign languages, political science, international affairs, economics or psychology; 65 percent said they definitely will not go into newspaper work, or that they're not sure they will go into newspaper work, and 20 percent are journalism majors only because it provides the instruction and skill building for whatever profession they ultimately will choose.

Indeed, only 35 percent said they expect to enter newspapering after graduation. Of the remaining 65 percent, 30 percent said they definitely do not intend to enter newspaper work and 35 percent said they are still not sure. And 36 percent of those who said they were not sure were slated to graduate five to eight months after completing this survey form.

Among those who definitely will not enter newspapering, 34 percent said they are concerned about the long-term future of the business; 20 percent said other emerging possibilities, such as the Internet or other new media, hold greater appeal; 17 percent decided after course work and greater familiarity with the field that newspapering is not the right line of work for them; 14 percent had already decided on another career path before entering J school; and 15 percent said "other." Explanations for "other" ranged from the incompatibility of the

What Prompted You to Study Journalism?

I like writing, editing, photography or design	50%
It provides instruction for whatever profession I decide on	19%
I expect to go into newspaper work after graduation	15%
I have a friend or relative in the media	2%
It's not as tough as some of the other majors	1%
Other (including I took it up in high school, it's a way to impact/improve society, it's a mobile profession, and it involves a lot of travel)	13%

work with a solid family life, stress level associated with newspaper work, and the belief that it is difficult to advance in the field with reasonable speed.

Even many of those who said they will or may enter newspaper work after graduation do not see it as a lifetime commitment: 13 percent said they expect to remain in newspaper work through their worklives; 43 percent said they do not expect to stay through their lifetimes, and 44 percent said they are not sure.

Their reservations about long-term commitment are similar to those young working journalists give: 35 percent of the students said they do not believe newspaper work will provide the income flexibility and stimulation they will need throughout their worklives, 17 percent said they cannot imagine staying in any profession throughout their entire worklife, 21 percent cited high burnout rate, and 9 percent said they have questions about newspapers' long-term viability. Of the 18 percent who gave "other" as their answer, explanations ranged from long hours to incompatibility with a balanced private life or family life to limited advancement opportunities.

Money Matters and Other Unpleasantries

CHAPTER FOUR



WHATEVER else young journalists might think about their chosen line of work, one of them is not that there is so much pleasure, stimulation or public-service satisfaction in doing it that money doesn't matter.

Newspaper stinginess comes up regularly as an issue among these people.

They name it as the greatest disappointment they have encountered upon entering the business, the second most important workplace perk or expectation, and the most likely reason they would leave the profession.

Baby boomers might make the assumption that the truly committed — those who said they definitely plan to be in the business for the next decade — would, logically, have less interest in money, because they would find satisfaction in the public-service aspect or the sheer joy of information-sharing. That assumption would be incorrect.

In fact, there is a remarkable counter-assumption correlation: The more committed one is to staying in the business, the more attached to salary considerations he or she is. This may be a position born of realism: Those who are devoted to the concept of newspaper work realize that if it is to become a long-term

endeavor, money issues must be addressed. Those who are less committed, on the other hand, quite possibly believe that when they shift to another profession, it will probably be a more lucrative one.

Salary considerations aside, there are many other aspects of newsroom culture that are not exactly compatible with the Gen X mindset.

What Gen Xers want

When asked to identify five of 16 work-related things that are most important to them and rank-order them, those that received No. 1 the most often:

- Chance for advancement, 28 percent
- Salary, 18 percent
- Respect, 14 percent
- Mentoring, 14 percent
- Flexible work schedule, 10 percent

These five are clearly first and foremost in the minds of young journalists.

Random Comments on Salary

“The pay rate is insulting.”

— **News reporter, small paper**

“Are we adequately paid for the critical role we play in society? Definitely not.”

— **News reporter, 25, small paper**

“This is a financially poor way to make a living, and therefore not an option for the long run.”

— **Photographer, 27, small paper**

When we calculate the perks/expectations receiving the largest number of total citations, without regard to whether respondents placed a 1 or a 5 beside them, the lineup changes only slightly:

- Salary, 92 percent
- Chance for advancement, 70 percent
- Respect, 60 percent
- Flexible work schedule, 60 percent
- Concerned/involved bosses, 45 percent
- Collegial atmosphere, 44 percent
- Mentoring, 43 percent
- Training, 32 percent

Of interest to participants when they were asked to choose five from a menu of priorities were: Liberal vacation/time off, 22 percent (gave this a 1, 2, 3, 4 or 5); prospects for longevity, 20 percent; weekends and nights off, 20 percent; casual dress code, 18 percent; solid pension plan, 7 percent; on-site child-care, 3 percent; and on-site health club, 1 percent.

Obviously there are some things of great importance to young journalists that traditionally have not been stressed in most newsrooms.

■ **Salary.** Pay is something that must be considered and ultimately addressed, but so are most of the rest of the things these people want/expect.

■ **Advancement.** This historically has been given little attention by newsroom managers. When someone showed promise, he or she was plucked from the ranks for a better beat or a supervisory position. Gen Xers, according to all the research, have little patience for languishing in the same position without the chance to learn new skills that ultimately make them more marketable. They expect their managers to pay attention to their goals and help chart courses to achieve them.

■ **Respect.** This is an intangible that most baby boomers believe is earned and that most twentysomethings see as an inalienable right. Young journalists know that they enter the profession with unprecedented computer skills and technological savvy. They also know that they are flexible and open to change, and they expect these qualities to be recognized and applauded. In order to retain Gen X, newsrooms will have to pay a lot more attention to recognizing and appreciating individual strengths and contributions.

■ **Flexible work schedule.** This may be the greatest challenge for newsrooms. Delivery of the newspaper can't be delayed simply because newcomers to the ranks don't want to work on a particular Saturday night or really prefer to work from home one day a week. But the logistical challenges involved in creating more flexible work schedules may be small stuff compared with the mental/emotional contortions that would be required of baby-boomer leaders

to consider and/or facilitate such a thing. Almost every baby-boomer editor has been heard to say, “I had to work every holiday for 10 years” or “I put in my 15 years working the desk at night and these kids have to do the same.” Fact is, these kids don’t have to. There are thousands of opportunities available to them that were not available to boomer newspaper people, and to foist antiquated hazing practices upon them will serve no good purpose.

■ **Concerned, involved bosses.** Newsrooms have always prized individual independence and autonomy. But much of the time this has translated, especially in recent years, into a cultural practice of letting everyone tend to her own goals and future. Many newsroom bosses may be quite concerned about their staffs, but they do not regard assisting in goal-setting as key among their constellation of priorities. They do not have regular feedback discussions with their people, they do not take an active role in helping them chart their futures, and they do not seem to express much interest in their employees’ outside interests or family lives.

■ **Collegial atmosphere.** Although newsroom employees tend to form social clusters, newcomers are often excluded. Moreover, budget considerations have led many newsrooms to cut such things as the annual company picnic or Christmas party, or departmental retreats. What must be recognized, according to Gen X experts, is that many twenty and thirtysomethings grew up with absentee parents and far-flung relatives who were not often around. So they tend to want to try to compensate in the workplace for what they missed in their formative years. It could be argued that it is not an organization’s responsibility to deal with whatever neurosis an employee may have brought to the workplace. And this is correct. But, just as organizations have sought to recognize and meet the special needs and desires of ethnic minorities, they may also have to pay attention to the special needs of this minority.

■ **Mentoring and training.** Training has become something of a buzzword in newspapers in recent years. Yet, whatever training has been provided has been mostly poorly chosen and ineffectual, if previous research is correct. As newsrooms assess what steps to take to enhance their employees’ performance and address their shortcomings, they should take special care to speak with Gen X. These people have a generational propensity for being great seekers and consumers of new ideas, new technologies and advanced skill-building opportunities, and are woefully dissatisfied when these do not take place in their work-lives.

Newsrooms must change

To provide such things will require, in most newsrooms, not only a realignment of priorities but a readjustment of the thinking that has prevailed for decades.

Historically, when newsrooms were faced with what were regarded as unrealistic expectations from young upstarts, newspaper leaders took the position that with time these insurgents would come to realize their desires were out of step with newsroom realities. And in most cases they did. Adapting was preferable to leaving.

But experts say Gen X is a group that will find leaving much easier than adapting. They will not sacrifice as generations before them have done.

Time will tell. Perhaps the experts are wrong. But if they are not, newsrooms may find hiring and retaining an even bigger ordeal than it is today.

For, as it turns out, the next wave of might-be journalists, those who are currently in journalism schools, hold some remarkably similar expectations.

What students want

When asked to rank in order, 1 to 5, what they believe will be the most important elements of full-time work, journalism students most often ranked the following No. 1.

- Chance for advancement, 30 percent
- Salary, 29 percent
- Flexible work schedule, 19 percent
- Collegial atmosphere 10 percent
- Other (most often defined as creative freedom, fulfilling work and sufficient stimulation), 7 percent

When the issues that received the highest number of citations, without regard to whether they were ranked No. 1, 2, 3, 4 or 5, are calculated, the picture shifts only slightly:

- Salary, 67 percent
- Chance for advancement, 60 percent
- Flexible work schedule, 55 percent
- Collegial atmosphere, 37 percent
- Weekends/nights off, 32 percent
- Liberal vacation/time off, 29 percent
- Training, 23 percent
- Solid pension plan, 22 percent
- On-site child care, 5 percent
- On-site health club, 3 percent
- Other (most often defined by the respondents as interesting, stimulating work; interesting co-workers; constant learning; or travel opportunities), 15 percent

One of the most remarkable things about the difference between the desires

of this group and those of already-working journalists is that there is much greater hope or expectation among college students that there will be concessions to their private or social lives — weekends and nights off, liberal vacation time and flexible work schedule.

This may be nothing more than naive, wishful thinking on the part of 19-year-olds who desperately hope not to wind up in inconvenient work situations, whereas Gen Xers already in the business are more realistic about workplace norms. Or it may signal an even stronger need among the younger group to find work that doesn't interfere with whatever other interests they may have.

College students' expectations are in many ways quite similar to those of young journalists.

It is also notable that three times as many of these college students are interested in a solid pension plan. This may be because some of them are of the age cohort known as Generation Y, a group that experts say is somewhat less cynical than Gen X. Perhaps they do, as billed, have more trust in institutions and what they offer than Gen X, and this may suggest that they might be more willing to consider a longer stint in a single profession than Gen X (although their answers to other questions do not suggest they are especially inclined to consider newspaper work a long-haul endeavor).

Another possible explanation for their stated attachment to pensions may be that this is nothing more than youthful aberration — that concern about pensions seems “adult” to them, and they were offering an answer based on what they think should be important to them.

It is acknowledged that the projections of college students are probably less than reliable. But it is worth noting that their expectations are in many ways quite similar to those of young journalists who have already entered the newspaper business.

Baby boomers differ

The expectations of both groups are quite dissimilar to those in the baby-boomer control group who said their five key expectations upon entering the business years ago were, in order:

- Other (defined, in descending order, as the chance to make a difference, the chance to write important stories, getting paid for existing skills, constant learning and challenge, prestige), 40 percent ranked this No. 1
- Career mobility, 28 percent

- Stimulating atmosphere, 16 percent
- Salary, 8 percent
- Being on the inside, 4 percent

Again, the boomer memories may have been altered by time. But newsroom recruiters who are attempting to hire from the Gen X pool, and benefits designers who are cogitating over what perks to offer in the future, would do well to keep in mind that there is little evidence that most of what boomers regard as important these days (and may have regarded as important when they were starting out) are seen as important to today's young people.

Rhapsodizing about a wonderful pension plan, for example, will not be likely to draw huge numbers of people from this younger age group.

The Attractions and Detractions

CHAPTER FIVE



NEWSPAPERS have been the target of many arrows in recent years. Public sentiment toward the media and toward those involved in the media is, according to most measures, increasingly negative. So newspaper work, once regarded as something of a glamour profession by the general public, is substantially less so these days.

Most people, given a reasonable education and the means to do so, will choose a line of work that provides some measure of respect. So the sullied reputation of newspapers may be something of a deterrent to drawing and keeping employees. And perhaps it is so among young people contemplating a range of possible professions or college majors.

But, as it turns out, among those who have made the commitment, newspapering is regarded as a very acceptable line of work in the hierarchy of American professions. Among young working journalists, 59 percent give newspapering a score of 6 or better on a scale of 1 to 10. Moreover, they are so attached to their notion of the relative importance of newspaper work (a common phenomenon, researchers say, as all people like to believe their career choices are sound ones) that most are not significantly impacted by the frequent negative criticism, public-opinion polls and the like. Only 2 percent said they are greatly impacted by criticism of their chosen profession. The vast majority, 61 percent, said they are impacted very little; 37 percent said they are somewhat impacted.

Thus, it may be assumed that Gen X newspaper people are not being dissuaded from remaining in the profession by external negative forces. If and when they leave, it is most likely a matter of the previously discussed predisposition to experience a two- or three-profession worklife, peppered with a substantial measure of disappointment with their newsroom work experiences.

Salaries disappointing

Salary is a huge factor in this regard. When asked to state the single most

Newspapering: The Yin and Yang

“I love writing and telling stories of everyday people, but unless the salary improves greatly, I won’t be able to stay in this career.”

— **News reporter, 26, midsize paper**

“I hope to find a position and a career path at a paper that is growing and aggressive/progressive, covering important stories. I struggle though with the pressures to change newspapers and locations, and the desire to become settled in a community and in personal relationships.”

— **Designer, 26, metro paper**

“While I love what I do and find it satisfying and challenging, low salaries and lack of appreciation probably will make me seek other work.”

— **Metro reporter, 27, small paper**

disappointing aspect of working in a newsroom, 43 percent said salary.

Other disappointments:

- Long, irregular hours and work weeks, 18 percent
- Lack of contact with and/or assistance from supervisors, 15 percent
- The atmosphere, which most defined as stressed, corporatized, homogenized, unfriendly, rigidly committed to maintaining the status quo or competitive, 7 percent
- Lack of training and/or advancement opportunities, 6 percent
- Inadequate vacation, health care and other benefits, 1 percent
- “Other” (most often identified as diminished newsroom autonomy and integrity, not as stimulating as hoped, or too political), 11 percent.

What they like best

Conversely, the things they find most appealing tend to be the variety and stimulation that newspapering can provide:

- Less routine and boring than that a lot of work, 35 percent
- An opportunity to report and write, or design or make photographs every day, 26 percent
- The chance to make a difference, 25 percent
- An opportunity to meet high-profile people and attend big-league events, 2 percent
- “Other” (which they specified as stimulating co-workers, diverse learning experiences and the chance to see evidence of one’s labors every day), 12 percent

These stated attractions and detractions may be interpreted as yet more evidence that Gen X does not regard newspaper work as a philanthropic pursuit, as generations before them have been convinced to do. “Think of the good you’re doing,” editors would often tell employees who complained about low salaries.

Gen Xers believe in getting a return on their investment — the investment they made to earn their college degree, and the work-week time investment. They see newspaper work more as a business pursuit than many baby boomers did. And while most may, in fact, feel they’re doing something for society by working for a newspaper, sentimentality is not part of their career lexicon. A bigger motivation for most of them is having an arena in which they can use the skills they learned in college, and being engaged in a line of work that has some diversity, some unpredictability. But paramount is receiving reasonable remuneration for their efforts.

Logic would suggest that to keep these people interested in continuing on in this profession, editors will have to make sure they are paid well, and that they get a relatively steady diet of challenging and interesting work.

Students' expectations

The soon-to-graduate young people are no less likely to see work as a place where skills are tested and built upon and employees get paid commensurate with their contributions.

The most-cited attraction of working for a newspaper for journalism students is entrée into the lives and events that they would ordinarily never experience; 32 percent gave that answer.

It's a wide open market out there,
and if newsrooms will not provide
the guidance, income, stimulation and balance
they want, they will look elsewhere.

Other big draws:

- A more interesting, less boring way to make a living than other careers, 13 percent
- The chance to make a difference, 13 percent
- The opportunity to write and report, 10 percent
- A profession that allows geographic mobility, 7 percent

Some of the collegiate notions may be born of naivete, but the answers indicate quite strongly what these people find important or appealing, and it is with these expectations that they will enter the field.

The role of internships

Only 40 percent of the college students in this study had had internships at the time they filled out the study form. And for many of them, it was an eye-opening experience. Although a remarkable 79 percent rated the experience 5 or higher on a scale of 1 to 10, one-third of those who had internships have decided they will not enter the business or are not sure they will enter the business. This seems to have less to do with shattered fantasies than with coming to terms with the reality of newsroom culture, which generally means low wages; harried editors who have little contact with their reporters, even their inexperienced reporters; and being fed a steady diet of routine work instead of getting the occasional shot at stories that are more substantial, challenging or interesting.

Among those who had had internships, 33 percent said insufficient direction or editing from managers was the most disappointing aspect of their internship; 23 percent named salary; 12 percent said the work was not interesting; 11 percent said bosses or co-workers were aloof or unfriendly; 10 percent said the work week was too long or the hours were bad or irregular, and 11 percent cited “other,” which they specified as too demanding, too stressful, too contentious or simply not right for their personalities.

Inasmuch as internships are intended as an introduction, it can be a good thing when young people are dissuaded from pursuing a career for which they are not particularly well suited. But what may be happening with this group is that while they regarded their internships in a highly positive light, they haven’t the patience to give a second chance to a career in which they discovered some significant flaws. They know they do not have to. It’s a wide open market out there, and if newsrooms will not provide the guidance, income, stimulation and balance they want, they will look elsewhere.

That is something they share with their compatriots who are already working in newsrooms. When Gen X journalists look ahead, a handful of things stand out as most likely to drive them out of the business. Among those who said they expect to stay in the business for at least 10 years, insufficient new challenges is seen as the most likely reason they will eventually leave the business, 32 percent; followed quite closely by salary considerations, 28 percent; insufficient attention by supervisors to professional growth and advancement, 14 percent; insufficient variety or stimulation, 6 percent; and bad hours, 3 percent. Some 17 percent gave “other” as their answer, and most of them cited family considerations, followed closely by decreasing faith in the leadership of their papers, and opportunities elsewhere too appealing to ignore.

In Their Own Words

CHAPTER SIX



OR all the attitudinal similarities among Gen X, it is obviously not a monolith of one voice, one opinion and one goal. Young journalists have some very individual viewpoints, concerns, desires and fears.

When asked to write down their predictions about their news futures, they shared a range of thinking. Among their comments:

“I want to eventually go into medicine or computer science. Without a doubt, journalism has contributed to my understanding of the world and how it works. It has also given me skills to deal with a variety of people and with stressful situations.”

— News reporter, 25, midsize paper

“It will hopefully be a long-term career where I can contribute on a daily basis and be rewarded for my efforts.”

— Copy editor, 28, small paper

“I will continue to work in newspapers until I write a novel. Even after the novel I may remain employed for the benefits.”

— Features reporter, 26, metro paper

“My future in newspapers is challenged by emerging media and newspapers’ emphasis on profit over quality.”

— Copy editor, 26, midsize paper

“I hope to get a Ph.D. in journalism so I can teach at the college level = \$, time.”

— Reporter, 25, midsize paper

“I need to learn and grow and will go into whatever profession that will help me do that.”

— News desk, editor, 26, metro paper

“I like the work now but I’ll get tired of it at some point. The longest I see myself at a newspaper is 5-7 years at most.”

— Copy editor, 26, metro paper

“I intend to give it one last all-out chance to prove me wrong, but I am not very optimistic. I expect to leave newspapers frustrated that my expectations were too high.”

— Copy editor, 25, small paper

*“I would like to continue in the field of journalism,
but not specifically as a journalist.”*

— News reporter, 23, small paper

*“It is a vital, fast-paced career, but I want
something more earth-shattering.”*

— Designer, 27, small paper

*“I see myself sticking with newspapers as long as possible
but switching to magazines eventually.”*

— Metro reporter, 24, small paper

**“Newspapers will be a springboard
for a career in a similar industry
but with better hours and better pay.”**

— Copy editor, 22, small paper

*“I knew what I was getting into when I got into this profession. But I had this idea that
my joy for the work would somehow make up for the awful wages. The reality is that
however much I love what I’m doing, I can’t continue much longer
living with three other people, driving an 11-year-old junker
and working one night a week as a bartender simply to make ends meet.*

More to the point, I don’t want to.”

— Metro reporter, 28, small paper

*“I’ll stay with newspapers as long as it doesn’t interfere too much with the rest of my life.
However, it is already interfering to the point that I feel stuck socially. The hours greatly
curtail opportunities to make friends or find activities outside of work. As a single person,
it is not easy. If I were to switch to daytime hours or get even one weekend night off, my
quality of life would be greatly improved. And in that kind of situation I would be happy
to stay in newspapers. If that kind of situation isn’t on the horizon for me
in the next six months to one year, it may be time for me to re-think my future.”*

— Copy editor, 26, metro paper

*“I love my job and my co-workers. The environment is challenging.
The question ultimately is what kind of support I’ll have to be promoted
and earn sufficient money to support a family.”*

— Metro reporter, 28, small paper

“The hours and lack of support for employees and few opportunities to grow have burned me out. This isn’t why I went to J school.”

— Designer, 28, metro paper

“I expect to push myself to my greatest potential without stressing myself out, though I don’t intend to stay in the business more than 10 years.”

— Features reporter, 24, small paper

“As long as newspaper work provides me with the challenges I need in writing, I will stay with it.”

— Sports reporter, 24, small newspaper

“I would like to remain in newspapers but that is unlikely, being a woman who also wants a family.”

— Designer, 23, small paper

What students said

Journalism students, of course, have little or no inside knowledge of newsrooms. Many of them, however, are relatively well informed about what newsroom work is all about. And here’s what they have to say about the newsroom careers they are contemplating:

“I imagine that with experience and a number of years under your belt, one could be afforded the time and flexibility by one’s supervisors to do the kind of in-depth reporting I would like to do. However, it seems from the outside [that] advancement can and does take a long time within the profession.”

— Grad student, 27, University of Kansas

“I like the fact that you can live and work just about anywhere. But it doesn’t seem like a family-friendly occupation.”

— Junior, 21, Middle Tennessee State University

“Newspaper work is a very competitive profession and is struggling with the advancements in technology. But it is a career where you can make a difference and be influential.”

— Junior, 21, Brigham Young University

“I love writing and reporting, I love being on the pulse of what’s happening. But you have to work odd hours, including Sundays, and that conflicts with going to church. And it’s very, very stressful work.”

— Sophomore, 21, Brigham Young University

“The advantages are a constantly changing schedule where nothing is definite and the ability to do something out of the norm. Journalism isn’t your average career. The disadvantages include a cut-throat market and a tiring, demanding schedule.”

— Sophomore, 19, Medill School of Journalism, Northwestern University

“Newspapers don’t pay as much as I would like, but the trade-off is that it’s exciting and enjoyable.”

— Senior, 21, University of Kansas

“I like that there is something new almost every day. I get to witness things I would not normally see.”

— Grad student, 27, University of Kansas

“The advantages are being able to make a difference, working with an element I love, being able to take something ordinary and give it an audience in a way that communicates something of importance. The disadvantages are the time requirements, irregular schedule, stress level, becoming the enemy when searching for news involving negative or sensitive situations.”

— Senior, 21, Brigham Young University

“You never stop learning, you have constant interaction with other people and it’s essential in society. But it can take a personal toll. You can never really get away from your job, you can’t leave it behind when you go home at night; it’s a physically and emotionally exhausting and thankless job.”

— Junior, 20, Brigham Young University

“A journalist is oftentimes a cog in the machine, forced to bow to pressures of an editor. There is, in my opinion, little autonomy and little creativity.”

— Sophomore, 20, Medill School of Journalism, Northwestern University

“The advantages are the ability to see events for free and get paid to write about it and the free food in the press box. The disadvantages are the deadlines, long (sometimes boring) hours, low pay and crazy hours.”

— Junior, 27, University of Kentucky

“I think it’s nice you can work at your own pace to some degree and that you aren’t stuck in the office all the time as a reporter.

However, I think it’s bad the hours can be crazy and the job doesn’t pay very well.”

— Senior, 20, Ball State University

“It takes over your life. I want to have a family and I think that’s almost impossible while working for a newspaper.”

— Senior, 21, Brigham Young University

“The salary and hours associated with newspaper work are not the best, but the rewards are high. You get to see that you are making a difference, you get to see something new every day and you are constantly challenged.”

— Senior, 22, Southern Methodist University

“It’s an exciting, liberating job where every day you can experience so much and ultimately have the power to communicate. The disadvantages are that neurotic, nosey busybodies often flock to newsrooms.”

— Sophomore, 20, Western Kentucky University

“The hours are awful. They vary from day to day and sometimes you can’t make definite plans.”

— Senior, 22, Southern Methodist University

“It’s stressful, time consuming, things are always changing, readers complain, there’s not much money in it, and some people hate the media.

But every day is different, you can be creative, you meet new people and you can always be learning and trying to get better by working with other journalists and editors. People do it because they are talented and they love it.”

— Junior, 21, Brigham Young University

*“It is stressful, low-paying, looked-down-upon and you have to be pushy.
But it’s interesting. And maybe, just maybe, I would make a difference.”*

— Junior, 21, Middle Tennessee State University

*“The work has historically been influential, meaningful.
Now the information is becoming more homogeneous, and much less impactful.”*

— Senior, 22, Brigham Young University

Observations About Gen X Values

CHAPTER SEVEN



OST newspaper people like to think they are a species apart.

What the results of this study shows is that Gen X newspaper people are in almost every way identical to Gen Xers in other professions.

They are, in all the attitudes and expectations measured in this study, in step with what other researchers and experts on this generation have observed.

It derives from the world in which Gen X grew up, and the group experiences they had. According to most who have studied this group, the fundamental shared values include the following:

■ **Career is not the most important thing in their lives.** This does not seem to have sprung from work aversion or frivolous attitude, but rather from what they observed as youngsters. They grew up convinced that job obsession has more downsides than upsides, and they are committed to not reliving what they regard as their parents' mistakes. They are devoted to balance. Time for family, friends and fun is important to them.

■ **They cannot imagine working for the same company or in the same line of work for their entire lives.** This is partly because, as products of the technology explosion, they require much more variety and stimulation than previous generations, but also because they have little faith that lifelong allegiance to a company or a profession will necessarily lead to financial security in their dotage. Many of them job- and career-hop in order to seize opportunities and build skills, the only means, they believe, to ensure that they have the wherewithal to support themselves in their elder years, because, they think, Social Security, pensions and the other systems boomers take for granted are not likely to come to their aid.

■ **They expect to be respected.** They do not believe that basic respect is something that is earned, but rather something that every human being should be able to assume will be given. Moreover, as they see it, they bring with them a constellation of qualities that their predecessors did not, which are crucial to today's marketplace: They are technologically savvy; they are self-reliant, having, for the most part, been latchkey kids who learned early to fend for themselves; and they are change-adept. They expect to be recognized and rewarded for those qualities.

■ **They are reluctant to commit to much of anything.** They are skeptical that there is an enduring quality to most matters professional and personal, thanks to the failing relationships and crumbling professional arrangements

Additional Reading

Two easy-reading books offer some solid insights into Gen X:

The Manager's Pocket Guide to Generation X by Bruce Tulgan, HRD Press, 1997, \$8.95

Beyond Generation X by Claire Raines, Crisp Publications, 1997, \$12.95

they witnessed in their youth. So they often take a wait-and-see approach, assessing whether the professional and personal involvements they engage in look worthy for the long term. And they are quite apt to jump ship during the assessment period because they have no real attachment or rationale for staying.

■ **They expect to get as much as they give.** This translates into a reasonable salary (partly because, experts say, they left college with unprecedented education-loan debt). It also translates into the expectation that supervisors should formulate ways to ensure workers will grow professionally and advance in their jobs.

What newsroom executives are experiencing with this latest group of inductees is a generation gap, a war of values between age cohorts.

So as it turns out, the expectations of the young people in this study mirror in most significant ways what experts have found to be the priorities and expectations of all members of this age cohort.

The difficulty most newsroom managers may have with all this is that these expectations are light-years from traditional newspaper values and traditions, which were supported and perpetuated for decades by boomers, who entered newspapering with tacit acceptance of hard work and long hours, virtual lifetime commitment to the profession and dues-paying. And it is the boomers who are now running the newspapers.

What, in short, newsroom executives are experiencing with this latest group of inductees is a generation gap, a war of values between age cohorts.

It is a diversity issue of giant proportion. The mostly baby boomer generation, inculcated with values, practices and beliefs that have served them and, presumably, the newspaper industry quite well over the years, are not being adopted by the newcomers to the ranks.

Conclusions and Recommendations

CHAPTER EIGHT

THIS new breed of young journalists and soon-to-be journalists is, indeed, a new breed. They are aware of the various problems and pitfalls with the industry and, quite unlike generations before them, seem much less inclined to accept them or restructure their entire lives indefinitely for the privilege of working in a newsroom.

Newsroom managers will probably find themselves in the position soon of having to make some adjustments to meet some of the expectations of this generation, for many of them are clearly on their way out, and the pool from which to hire replacements for them is not huge.

Already many smaller and midsize newspapers throughout the country are having a great deal of difficulty filling vacancies. And the situation may worsen in coming years because of marketplace competition; the growing tendency of college students to choose specialties that prepare them for work in magazines, broadcast and media other than newspapers; and the innate Gen X impatience for jobs that are not providing the financial or advancement opportunities they require.

The first hurdle in addressing these matters will be for managers to recognize that the attitudes these people bring to the workplace are not merely the naive thinking of youth, but rather cohort-intrinsic beliefs and expectations that will stay with them for the rest of their lives. In other words, they're not going to change much with age.

The second hurdle will be for (baby-boomer) managers to get beyond the very human tendency to denigrate thinking that is unlike their own, and to expect young people to suffer the same trials and indignities they did when they were coming up. Dues-paying, night shifts, weekend work and obit-writing may have helped build skills and character, but those kinds of proving-ground demands were going on in virtually every industry in the 1970s and 1980s, so there was a societal expectation that the early years of a career would be harsh.

There is no such pattern or expectation today. And while baby boomers may bemoan the impudence of 22-year-olds who expect attention, decent wages and advancement opportunities from the moment they enter, industry leaders probably have very little choice but to develop new structures and systems that will meet those expectations. To do otherwise could very well lead to even lower retention numbers and even greater recruiting difficulties.

Among the areas that newsrooms should address:

Salary. For many decades newspaper work was considered special enough and glamorous enough that news organizations could get by with paying wages lower than those paid in other creative fields. Such is no longer the case.

In this study, disgust with wages was more pronounced among employees at smaller newspapers, but those are the very places that most young graduates

start out. If an increasing number of Gen Xers bail out from these newspapers two or three years into their careers, the small papers will suffer, but so will the larger ones that use them as feeder lines.

Benefits. Good pension plans and paternity leave are no doubt appealing to many of the comparatively older employees. But 24-year-olds can't imagine either being of any real advantage to their lives. Most forward-thinking companies are now offering a pick-and-choose array of benefits. This cafeteria approach is something that can be advantageous to all employees, but will be embraced especially enthusiastically by Gen Xers. Having the option of buying an extra week off every year, or hauling in an extra \$1,000 to pay off college loans rather than being promised that money will be put away in a pension they know they'll never collect is very appealing to this age group. But whether news organizations go so far as to overhaul benefits packages into the a la carte approach or not, they would be wise to channel more of their attention into finding some things the Gen Xers will find more appealing.

Advancement. Few newsroom employees have experienced much or any career-advancement or -enhancement attention over the years. It is a time-honored tradition, in fact, that newspeople are subjected to the sink-or-swim, find-your-own-success route to career-building. And while this approach has no doubt contributed to stagnated performance on all levels, not to mention promotions of people who are ill-equipped to handle many of the challenges of their new positions, it has been an accepted and largely unchallenged part of the newsroom culture. It is not acceptable to the newcomers to the profession, however. They are acutely aware that progression is an important component in job satisfaction, and unlike their predecessors, they will not stick around long if they don't feel a pretty high level of job satisfaction. They want to move ahead, partly because that generally means more money, but also because they want to develop skills and have achievements that look good on their resumes and make them more marketable.

This is not to say that all copy editors want to be managers in two years, or that all reporters expect to be managing editors in the next five years.

Advancement to them generally means getting to do progressively more interesting and challenging work, getting better assignments, and being able to look back and see some evidence that they are in a better place now professionally than six months ago.

What many of the most frustrated young journalists in this study expressed was that they feel professionally invisible and that there are no signs anything positive will befall them in the foreseeable future. It could be argued that they should take control of their own professional lives and take whatever steps are necessary to move ahead. The reality, however, is that people low on the totem pole generally are working within such strict confines that such self-propulsion is severely hampered. They can distinguish themselves — within the

parameters that have been set for them — but they do not usually have the freedom or the wherewithal to forge ahead in any way that is meaningful to them.

They need — and, just as important, expect — attention, coaching and regular feedback to be able to figure out how to maneuver themselves into a better place. This would not be considered an extraordinary expectation in most other lines of work.

Hours. The assumption that anyone who loves his or her work will be willing to do lots more of it for little or no money is a singularly boomer position that must be extinguished. This kind of thinking is especially integral to newsroom culture. But attempting to get the Gen X generation to acquiesce to that practice is fool's folly. Short term, a few in Generation X will resign themselves to the prescribed routine, but there probably will be no long term.

Scheduling. This too will require some attention. Few people in the world enjoy working the night shift, but in most industries, people receive a substantial night-differential boost (and not just the puny bonuses many newspapers pay). Moreover, most industries that require night work are much more humane in parceling out how that gets assigned, making provisions, for example, so that at least one weekend night is a night off. It will not be an easy feat, but newsroom leadership must come up with more equitable ways of assigning and remunerating the really crummy shifts.

Some won't stay

It will not be possible to retain every Gen Xer who enters the industry, as their mindset is generally not in keeping with a lifetime career. However, with some effort, it should be possible to keep larger numbers of them for longer periods.

Still, one of the great intellectual and emotional adjustments newsrooms will have to make is accepting that a large percentage of those who are entering the business are just passing through. There may very well be a significant shortage of adequate talent in the years ahead.

The newspaper industry and individual newsrooms would do well to examine some of the strategies other industries use not only to retain employees, but, just as important, to entice them into their ranks.

Internships, for example, are an area in which newspapers may be sabotaging themselves. The journalism students in this study have indicated that one bad internship can dissuade a person from entering the business. Traditional newsroom thinking about interns was “if they don't want us, we don't want them.” And to a certain extent that makes sense. But some in this group of college students might well have developed into solid newsroom employees, except that they are constitutionally disinclined to give a second chance to a terribly flawed experience. Newsrooms must be much more attentive to

ensuring that interns receive the time, guidance and challenges that other industries give their 20-year-old visitors.

Also relating to the issue of college students, the industry, or at least progressive newsrooms within the industry, should make some deeper connections with young would-be journalists to publicize new thinking, new approaches, and anything else young people might find alluring. As it turns

Many of them are clearly on their way out,
and the pool from which to hire
replacements is not huge.

out, most journalism students are reasonably aware of the realities of newspaper work, and an increasing number of them are turning to other media outlets as a result. Newsrooms with something better or different from the negative stereotypes should make their bids to heighten the interest level and improve the numbers of those interested in entering the profession.

In conclusion, if the respondents in this study are reflective of the larger group in their generation, some changes in the fundamental precepts of how newspapers deal with their employees are in order. And once significant change occurs, some image polishing will be required to encourage larger numbers of college students to consider this, rather than other forms of media work. To cling stubbornly to the notion that newspapering is and has always been an honorable, and therefore an appealing profession, is to ignore reality. Newspapers have some work to do.



Sharon Peters

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