

Gamers, Millennials and Generation Next – Implications for Policing

"I see no hope for the future of our people if they are dependent on the frivolous youth of today, for certainly all youth are reckless beyond words. When I was a boy, we were taught to be discrete and respectful of elders, but the present youth are exceedingly wise and impatient of restraint."

Hesiod, "the father of Greek didactic poetry", 700 bc

By Bob Harrison

As long ago as Aristotle, adults complained about the younger generation's lack of motivation, their disrespect of elders and fears they will fail in their work life from a lack of "loyalty". Each succeeding generation laments about the next, even as that generation eyes the next one ruefully. With the advent of interactive technologies, social networking and a chasm between the wired and unwired worlds, never has the gap between the generation "in charge" and the ones following been as wide.

As Baby Boomers mature into retirement, how will those who are entering the workplace impact the norms and values of the industries to which they devote their efforts? As Boomers leave, does their absence sound a death knell for what we see as proper "law enforcement"? Can we recruit and retain peace officers who will be devoted to policing, or does the future hold only a cop who seemingly works in a video-game world looking for the next best thing? In fact, the transition to the next generation has already begun, and astute police executives are starting to realize there may be ways to bridge the gap for the public's good.

The Impact of Society and Culture

A recent survey of adults age 18-25, those coined as "Generation Next" (Pew Research Center 1), revealed some interesting perspectives regarding those now entering the workplace. Contrary to what some might think:

- More than nine in ten are satisfied with their relationship with their parents
- Eight in ten are satisfied with the work they do, and with their standard of living
- Eighty-four percent recognize their educational opportunities are better than twenty years ago
- Their heroes are often persons with whom they have had personal contact (a teacher or mentor), 14 percent cite famous persons as heroes, while only eight percent say their heroes are politicians
- Eighty-five percent say they probably want to get married (Pew 5-11)

Certainly, they also report norms seen by their elders on a daily basis, such as:

- Almost ninety percent use the Internet
- More than half text message daily
- Fifty-four percent use social networking sites, and almost half have created a profile
- Seven in ten say technology helps them make new friends
- Almost ninety percent believe e-mail and other electronic means of communications helps workers (as compared with 67 percent of Boomers and less than half of Seniors)
- More than half have gotten a tattoo, had a body piercing or have dyed their hair a non-traditional color (Pew 13-21)

Thinking of how this data might dispel (or confirm?) the views and fears of those in charge, we are wise to consider how technology has impacted Generation Next. To gain a better understanding of their views, let's look at the forces shaping their views.

The Complexity of Television

Steven Johnson, author of *Everything Bad is Good For You* concludes the increasing complexity of television and cinema, along with the impact of video gaming, has not resulted in the “dumbing down” of Americans. Instead, their influence has been to create a culture that is more intellectually demanding, not less. His argument for what he terms “The Sleeper Curve” is a result of the neurological appetites of the brain, the economics of culture and technology enabling new kinds of entertainment, and online communication. Reading books elevates skills of attention, memory, imagination, concentration and connection. Interactive technology is honing a different set of mental skills equally as important.

For those who grew up on a steady diet of television in the 1960’s and 1970’s, consider the changes in shows such as:

- *Dragnet* versus *CSI* or *NYPD Blue*
- *Marcus Welby MD* versus *ER*
- *Starsky and Hutch* versus *24*
- *Three’s Company* versus *The Simpsons*

How are they different? In what ways are they the same? Johnson draws comparisons of shows such as these to conclude television has increasingly encouraged the viewer to exercise his or her mind, to “fill in the blanks” and become comfortable with greater levels of complexity. This results in a comfort with ambiguity, more refined social intelligence and a competitive edge over those lacking similar skills.

Consider a typical episode of *The Simpsons*, *ER* or *24*. In each of these distinct entertainment venues, complex, blended and simultaneous story structures require the viewer to track multiple characters involved with loosely related story elements. Any or all of these elements may or may not possess information critical to the central storyline. In the case of *The Simpsons*, comedy is layered in such a manner as to allow an adult and child viewing the mishaps of Homer and Bart to laugh for entirely different reasons. The hallmark of the contemporary comedy is how much information the viewer must draw upon to “get” the full depth of the humor.

Television has moved from a passive medium to one requiring thought, effort and reflection on behalf of those who watch it. What it might lack in cultural depth may be compensated for in the way in which it sharpens analytic skills that can be transferred to the real world at work and home. In similar ways, video games have moved from the realm of diverting entertainment to a force shaping culture and reshaping what it might mean to “be intelligent”.

Video Games – Good for You?

Beyond the traditional orthodoxy of improving visual acuity and manual dexterity, video games are adept at creating a compelling cognitive challenge to those who immerse themselves in that environment. Interestingly, they attract many to an avocation that seems frustrating, repetitive and somewhat meaningless to those outside of the game world for reasons that may be hardwired into our brains (Johnson 33).

Like cocaine or other addictive substances, gaming taps into the brain’s natural reward circuitry. Johnson notes the study of this aspect of the brain has been prominent in work to understand addiction, with two insights pertinent to gaming. Research has uncovered results strongly indicating the brain’s dopamine system (the natural opioids, both painkillers and pleasure-providers) compels us to seek rewards in our environment (when you might be disappointed over a setback at work, the disappointment felt is a result of lowered dopamine levels induced by the lack of an anticipated reward). The dopamine system also urges us to “keep looking” for the reward to achieve balance. Those addicted to drugs artificially introduce opioid-like substances, kick-starting the pleasure response while also inadvertently activating the search for “more” (Johnson 34) Gaming, in many ways, also hits the reward circuitry of the brain.

In the game world, reward is everywhere. Most of the work in game play development focuses on “keeping players notified of potential rewards available to them, and how much those rewards are currently needed” (Johnson 36). The result is a game architecture designed to withhold objects, activities and “success” until certain levels of proficiency have been reached. This balance of reward and exploration to competence is what creates the draw to gaming. Non-gamers scanning the last few paragraphs might recoil in the horror of thinking video games are numbing an entire generation, but think; what skills might also be elevated through the experience? Johnson thinks two skill sets; probing and telescoping, could be amongst the most valuable.

Probing and Telescoping

Most video games withhold information about the means by which success might be achieved at the outset of the experience (like problem-based learning...). This forces participants to explore the rules, boundaries and constraints in their environment. Even the true goal of the game might not be readily apparent. The only way to move forward is to probe the setting, figure out what works and doesn't and start asking and answering questions about the challenge or threat in front of you. Probing is a four-part process of “probe, hypothesize, reprobe, think” (Johnson 45) in which the player must:

- Probe the virtual world, looking around, searching for hidden pathways and taking actions to explore reactions and responses
- Hypothesize the meanings of the responses seen; are they systematic? Might they be useful in this, and similar, situations? Will the objects, phrases or events be valuable later on?
- Reprobe the environment using the hypothesis formed to assess the effect of actions based in that frame
- Using the feedback gained, to rethink the hypothesis and re-model their actions

Telescoping is the management of the primary texture of the game and its complex objectives (Johnson 54). This skill allows the gamer to focus on immediate objectives while also maintaining a strategic view of the larger goals. Telescoping is not multitasking, which is the management of unrelated objectives. It seeks to construct hierarchies of tasks, and then move through them in the right sequence. This combined skill set may be useful in work settings in a number of ways:

- It encourages participatory thinking and analysis
- It seeks to understand the immediate environment in the context of the bigger picture
- It helps provide context to actions and assess both the short-and long-term impacts of one's interaction with the environment

Beyond the Myths

John Beck and Mitchell Wade, in *Got Game- How the Gamer Generation is Reshaping Business Forever*, reported the results of a large scale survey and hundreds of interviews on the impact of video games. Their data show more than 80 percent of workers less than 34 years old have substantial game experience growing up. For what Beck and Wade term as “the gamer generation,” video games were a “defining part” of their reality because they were:

- **Everywhere-** Atari sold three million video game units a year in the 80's; in the 90's, Game Boy Color sold six million units in three months. By 2004, Nintendo had sold 110 million Game Boy machines, and sales of new generation interactive controllers sell for hundreds of dollars as quickly as they can be moved to store shelves
- **Established-** Those now in their twenties have never known a world without digital gaming. They take for granted a forecast that 70 percent of U.S. households will own a next-generation game platform. A number of venerable colleges and universities offer graduate programs in game technology and programming. In early 2007, professional video gaming will be broadcast on cable networks, and “Madden 2007” is already a staple on ESPN2
- **Emotional-** An entire generation grew up with shared memories of the prominent games of their day. Spending time with friends until the early hours of the morning, testing one's

- skills against a peer; all have a deep emotional connection to adults who will now eagerly drop a week's salary on the newest version of their favorite game or the newest Wii platform to while away their leisure time
- **Expected** – In the business population aged thirty-four and younger, more than eight in ten are frequent or moderate gamers. The image of lone gaming is dispelled as one comes to realize that professionals and others on the “upper end of the pay scale” interact with video games regularly (Beck and Wade 9-10).

Beck and Wade make a number of thought-provoking conclusions regarding their findings. Amongst them are the impacts of the lessons gaming teaches (11-14):

- Unlike real life, gaming offers a chance for everyone to be a “star”
- You are the boss and expert in your gaming environment, and can experience any number of thrills, crashes and death without getting hurt
- In games, there is always an answer. Everything is possible, and trial and error is usually the best way to find the right answer
- Relationships are structured, and competition is not only natural but desired
- Edginess and attitude dominate; young people are in charge and have a chance to be the hero

Claire Raines, co-author of *Generations at Work*, concludes similarly. She writes the generation entering the workplace has a different work ethic than any other (Raines, par. 1). She refers to “Millennials,” born between 1980 and 2000, as being shaped by the pervasive presence of digital media (par. 6). They grew up in scheduled, structured lives often with active and involved parents. The emergence of a multicultural society is seen as the norm. Terrorism is merely a fact of life, and the global community is one connected 24/7. Interestingly, the violence of 9/11 saw a resurgence of the American hero; police officers, firefighters and mayors commonly appeared on the news and in print. One result of these acts is an emerging sense of patriotism and political interest. This translates to a generation that sees itself as:

- Special
- Connected 24/7
- Confident
- Hopeful
- Goal and achievement oriented
- Inclusive (Raines par. 7)

Raines expresses concern about the “digital divide” between Millennials and their predecessors. Those who grew up without access to a computer, and who may lack the requisite skills to cope with their complexity, will be left behind. Those in earlier generations might struggle to supervise and manage the tech-savvy Millennial; peers who grew up in poverty (which accounts for 16 percent of Americans) may never catch up (par. 12).

Taking in the possible impact of a generation entering the workplace from an interactive, self-reliant wired upbringing, with an instinctive mistrust of authority and reliance on trial-and-error, how might we go about integrating them into a work environment in public safety with strong hierarchy and no “reset button?”

The New Rules of Work

One might consider the task of merging the newest generation in the workplace as a daunting one. In fact, each generation moves from being “new” to a point where, by sheer numbers, they alter the norms of the work environment to suit their values, perspectives and needs.

As we move to the second decade of the twenty-first century, the task ahead is for aging Baby Boomers to meld the wisdom of their years as they welcome Gamers and Millennials into entry-level roles. Are there rules somewhere we might follow? Fortunately, the authors give some insight into what might work.

Johnson's work indicates those growing up with a diet of complex televised entertainment and interactive video gaming will be adept at probing and telescoping. They will thrive in an environment where structure is present, and where strategy and specific tactics are understood by those charged with implementing them. They will prefer a team environment.

Raines describes the six most frequent requests of Millennial employees (par. 14):

- Leaders with honesty and integrity; they aren't necessarily anxious to be the leaders themselves. They want to see some role models first
- Learning opportunities in the work environment, and a career plan that allows them to grow and develop
- Friends in the workplace with whom they can work; social outlets connected to coworkers will be seen as valuable ways to connect with one another
- Some fun at work; irreverence and a little humor will be seen as normal and positive
- To be treated respectfully, even though their tenure might be brief in the workplace
- The flexibility to pursue activities and interests outside of work. A rigid schedule might be the quickest way to lose Millennials to another employer

She recommends options to maximize the presence of Millennials, ranging from arranging the workplace to enhance the flow of ideas to project assignments allowing for group success. One noted idea is reverse mentoring, where Millennials could be used to mentor mid-career managers to adapt to new technologies (par. 18). One significant advantage of this approach would also be the transference of understanding to and from Millennials and Boomers who might otherwise tend to marginalize one another. In short, Raines encourages managers to be prepared for high expectations, while also recognizing the Millennial might not want to "pay their dues" (par 16).

Beck and Wade also provide insight regarding ways to integrate Gamers into the professional environment. Some of the more provocative are:

- **Provide structure for Gamers.** They grew up in environments with clear rules, goal-oriented tasks and social norms set within game-related competencies. Tap into those norms at work; traditional "team building" exercises might flounder much more than focused team development work. Special projects, whether real or simulated in a learning setting, would bring out better performance in Gamers used to such work (129).
- **Help Gamers learn the standards and norms of the workplace.** The Gamer's inclination to bypass the tech-illiterate could be seen as disloyal. Their penchant to communicate electronically might preclude them from many of the productive informal means of face to face communications common to the police environment. Their multitasking might be seen as advantageous to managers, but threatening to older peers. Helping them understand the social and professional conventions in internal and external settings, how to serve clientele and interact with other divisions, agencies and organizations is an essential task of those in charge (130).
- **Think of how the work of the agency might be structured in a way familiar to Gamers.** This doesn't mean you have to make everything electronic, or transform your work into a gaming environment. It might mean, though, that you would want to emphasize innovation and problem solving. Set clear boundaries and envisioned outcomes, and then let teams work without constraints within those boundaries to achieve success. For purposes of the organization's future, think of giving gamer/boomer team's room to explore your organization, your community's issues and the threats and opportunities on the horizon (Beck & Wade, 129-131).

Implications for Policing

From these general observations, police managers could consider a number of ways to take advantage of Generation Next's entrance into the law enforcement environment. Think of their norms as it relates to choosing a profession. They desire to:

- work in teams
- perform work of significance

- have flexibility in their daily environment; and,
- engage in activities consistent with heroism

The great likelihood is they will be attracted to public safety. Recent data from the U.S. Military reveals that all four branches of our armed services are meeting or exceeding recruitment and re-enlistment goals (Kruzel, par. 1). Our task, then, may be merely to provide recruiting tools, training and employment to address these values.

The U.S. Army already hosts an on-line virtual basic training experience for prospective recruits to familiarize them with the rigors of military life. Check military recruiting websites. Virtual warriors might guide you through the process and answer your questions about joining them. To attract the brightest and the best, much less to find those who would thrive in policing, we may wish to replicate these and other venues.

The Army has also spent hundreds of millions in the past several years deploying computer-based training modules for their personnel (Besserman, 1). “Advances in computer science, artificial intelligence and simulation technology have created an opportunity to improve the quality and depth of training...to law enforcement” (Besserman, 3) according to the report. The Army has found benefits to competencies as varied as team leadership to situational awareness in a fluid and changing combat environment. Compare this to the traditional police academy, with its student workbooks, long hours of lecture and pen and paper testing. The self-directed learning modules (SLIMS), role playing simulations and leadership modules seem well-suited to both tactical deployment and community policing. How might this shape the academy curriculum of the future?

Once in agencies, the opportunities to maximize the value of Gamers and Nexters are almost endless. Johnson, Raines and Beck & Wade would all point to the values deeply embedded in those starting their careers. Relying on seniority or rank structure will no longer wash. Astute managers will match Gamers with Boomers to cross-train their respective areas of strength. Teams will be formed to address organizational and community problems. Research and Development will gain a new emphasis as technology allows for more thorough analysis of issues and crime trends.

As agencies become more flexible, they will better meet the challenges of crime and disorder. Policing agencies adept at recruiting and retaining Gamers will thrive while those who prefer to remain “as is” will continue to experience the stress of inadequate applicants, poor quality recruits and an endless cycle of training and replacement. Far beyond merely becoming more proficient investigating high-tech crime, the integration of Gamers into policing offers a chance to break from the past to succeed for the future

Conclusion

The evidence is clear and compelling. One truth no one can escape is that younger generations will enter, and then change, the workplace in every industry. In policing, a profession bound by its legacy as much as the law, those entering the workplace can have a dramatic influence on the quality of life for communities across America.

Pushing Gamers away due to their differing perspectives and tech-first approach might seem natural. Drawing them into the future, providing significance to their work and integrating them into the fabric of the agency may be much more difficult. Convincing senior members of staff to work alongside these non-traditionalists might be a challenge. In reality, though, the choice is clear: do so or face a future without the means to succeed in a world where constant contact and flexibility are commodities no one can be without.

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