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Feature

Attitude Adjustment: 5 Things Gen Y Can Do to Survive Recession, Layoffs

Workplace experts agree that Generation Y professionals may have a difficult time surviving a recession because they're not used to having to make sacrifices and because they've never lived through an economic downturn before. Here's what members of Generation Y can do to prove those experts wrong.

– Meredith Levinson, CIO

In some ways, Generation Y professionals may be better positioned than Baby Boomers and Generation X workers to survive a recession. For one, they don't have the same strong allegiances to their employers that their Boomer and Gen X counterparts have, which some experts say might make it easier for them to cope with being laid off. Nor do they have the same financial burdens as Baby Boomers and Gen Xers. So if Gen Y professionals do get laid off, they have fewer expenses to worry about. (For more reasons why Generation Y is well prepared to survive an economic downturn, see [5 Reasons Gen Y May Survive Recession, Layoffs Better than Gen X and Boomers.](#))

But in other ways, a recession could come as a complete shock to Generation Y. They've never before experienced an economic downturn as working adults, and the resulting budget and job cuts may come as a rude awakening for this entitled, coddled generation that expects special treatment from its employers. (For more reasons why the economic crisis could be a sobering experience for Generation Y professionals, see [5 Reasons Gen Y is Unprepared to Survive Recession, Layoffs.](#))

Whether they're poised to withstand the economic storm or whether they're going to get soaked by it, Generation Y workers will have to change their expectations of their employers and their behavior in the workplace—if they want to hold onto their jobs, career experts say.

1. Gen Y workers must understand that they can't have it all during a recession.

Generation Y is notoriously demanding of employers. In a 2007 CareerBuilder survey, employers reported that millennials expect raises and promotions within a year of starting a new job, access to consumer technologies and lots of vacation time.

It's no wonder that they're so demanding: Lisa Orrell, a generational relations expert and author of Millennials Incorporated, says that when members of Generation Y began entering the workforce four years ago, job security was a given, and some of them received generous signing bonuses. But that rosy economic picture is now history, says Orrell, who notes that starting salaries are going to be lower for millennials and perks like signing bonuses are now but a dream.

She says Gen Y professionals have to change their expectations of their employers. They can't expect to get a job, let alone a high starting salary or signing bonus. Nor can they expect their employers to cater to all of their training and technology needs.

"They're going to have to be very understanding of the challenges their employers are facing," says Orrell. "They have to be more patient with their employers. If they're not getting everything they want, they can't just jump ship to another employer because the job market isn't very good right now."

2. They need to market themselves and show some investment in their employers.

Millennials have a pretty bad rap in the workplace. In addition to being viewed as demanding, they're also known for not being particularly loyal to employers. Their transactional relationship with their jobs could hurt them as their employers contemplate staff cuts.

If Gen Y professionals want to hold onto their jobs, they need to change their managers' and co-workers' negative perceptions of themselves by showing some investment in their employers, says Mary Crane, a business consultant who's worked with graduating MBA students.

One way millennials can demonstrate that they care about their jobs and their employers is by acknowledging the challenges their organizations are facing and by offering solutions, says Rosemary Haefner, CareerBuilder's vice president of human resources.

"They're going to have to do a sales pitch for themselves and say, 'Here's how I can be helpful. I understand we're short-staffed, here's what extra projects I can work on,' " says Haefner. She adds that offering specific ways to help demonstrates an employee's creativity and ambition.

3. They need to change their work habits.

For Gen Y employees—who grew up on the Internet, chatting with friends over IM and text messaging systems—the importance of "face time" in the office strikes them as an antediluvian notion. But they would do well, in these desperate times, to spend more time in the office, says Orrell.

"This is clearly the time to show up early and stay late," she says. "That's kind of a foreign concept for millenials. They grew up in a world where as long as they were getting work done, it didn't matter [where or when]. It would behoove them to recognize that for some key decision-makers that face time is a way for them to build relationships. It's not just about keeping tabs on their work."

4. They need to take an active role in their professional development.

An economic downturn is not the time for Gen Y employees to ask their employers for tuition reimbursement. Training budgets are often the first line items slashed in a recession.

If they want training, CareerBuilder's Haefner says, millenials will have to suggest low-cost programs, such as peer mentoring, to their employers.

5. They need to assimilate and make friends with older workers.

Speaking of mentoring, now's a good time for Generation Y to get chummy with the gray hairs in the office, say Crane and Haefner. Boomers and Generation Xers have been through layoffs and economic downturns before. Millenials can learn from older workers what to expect during a recession and how to survive in the workplace.

Crane also recommends emulating the most successful people in the organization. "Dress in a like manner, communicate with people in a like manner and comport themselves in a like manner," she advises members of Generation Y. "Right now their goal is to understand the culture of an organization and to fit in," she says, not to boast about how young and cool they are.

That's an awful lot of ego-swallowing for Gen Y'ers to accept. Will they weather this downturn better or worse than Generation X managed the bursting of the Internet bubble in 2001 (or better or worse than the Boomers managed the recession of 1991)? That remains to be seen.