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The Gen Y reshuffle

26 March 2010 | by Michael Bradley

Gen Y: A highly mobile, ambitious and inventive group, or a bunch of overly-pampered brats? How a generation coped with the GFC, despite the (sometimes worst) intentions of the generation before it. Michael Bradley writes

ALMOST nobody at Marque knew who Boz Scaggs was until we put the Lido Shuffle on high rotation over the iTunes system. Now they know, although they're not happy about it.

It was this incident that reminded me of the ostensible divide between me and Gen Y. Although it's not that clear a dividing line - while one of them was suffering through Whitney's train wreck of a concert on the weekend, I was discussing with my kids the relative merits of will.i.am and Fergie (proving both that my kids are cool and that I'm a try-hard).

Working as I do in a firm overflowing with people born after John Lennon died, I've been thinking quite a lot about Gen Y lately. There is a conventional truism that they are either, depending on your perspective, a highly mobile, ambitious and inventive group who are unbound by tradition or fear, or a bunch of overly-pampered brats who have it coming to them and a good thing too. Either way, it's accepted that "handling" them is hard work.

When the idea of a GFC first emerged, my generation (X, which should have been V, for Victim), rubbed their collective hands together and said: "Excellent, Gen Y's going to be slaughtered. Suckers!" After all, we'd been through a real recession before and we understand the concept of unemployment. So should they.

As a friend sagely observed, it's all very well being clever, well-educated and in a hurry, but there's no substitute for hard work and that's hard to get when there's no jobs. So we all expected Gen Y to come to grief. Which they did, to the extent that a whole heap of them got retrenched or couldn't get jobs, something definitely not in their life plans. But then they did what we least expected, although we might have known - they brushed it all off like a bad choice of cocktail and moved on.

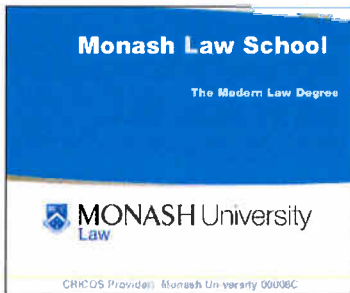
That's not to say that all the unemployed graduates out there are happy about this. Of course they're desperate to get a job and the timing, for them, has simply sucked. But my anecdotal and unprovable observation is that Gen Y have handled this travail magnificently, accepting that sometimes life just goes pear shaped and you have to roll with it. So they've brought forward or extended travel plans, gone back to uni, found whatever work can be got, and told their parents that they'll be living with them for some time yet.

What hasn't changed is Gen Y's attitude to life and career. They still think it's full of endless possibility and they're determined to have and exercise choice. Gen X still thinks they're deluded, but I don't.

I admire Gen Y's resilience and positivism, particularly in the face of tough odds like they face right now. The economy will recover, they'll get the jobs they want eventually and I hope they maintain their attitude as they climb to positions of influence. With the Baby Boomers (finally) giving up power over the next decade, and Gen X largely incapable of escaping their generally pessimistic outlook on life, we can only speculate on the immense changes that Gen Y will bring about as they come through. Call them naive if you like, but I say they're just what we need.

Still, they could do with some more intensive music education. Watching The Who play at the Super Bowl, the most insightful comment they could make was "Oh, did they write the CSI theme?" Kids today, what can you do.

Michael Bradley is the managing partner at Sydney-based Marque Lawyers.



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