Conversations with the Experts

Generational Differences in the Workplace

Jennifer J. Deal, Ph.D.

Bio: Jennifer J. Deal, Ph.D. is a Senior Research Scientist at the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) in San Diego, California, and the manager of CCL's World Leadership Survey and the Emerging Leaders Research Project. In 2002 Jennifer Deal co-authored Success for the New Global Manager (Jossey-Bass/Wiley Publishers), and has published in peer reviewed journals on a wide range of subjects including generational issues, executive selection, cultural adaptability, global management, and women in management. Her second book, Retiring the Generation Gap (Jossey-Bass/Wiley Publishers), was published in 2007. An internationally recognized expert on generational differences, she has spoken on the topic on six continents (North and South America, Europe, Asia, Africa, and Australia), and she looks forward to speaking to Antarctic penguins about their generational issues in the near future. She holds a B.A. from Haverford College and a Ph.D. in industrial/organizational psychology from The Ohio State University.

Bio: Yelizavetta (Liz) Kofman and Astri von Arbin Ahlander are co-founders of The Lattice Group, a grassroots non-profit that engages young people in a public dialogue about the issues that arise when trying to balance personal, family, and work obligations in a globalized economy. In 2007, at the ripe old age of 22, Yelizavetta and Astri became concerned about the inflexibility of the work culture they were about to enter and decided to take a proactive stand by founding the organization.

Yelizavetta Kofman   **Astri von Arbin Ahlander**

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An Interview with Jennifer Deal, Yelizavetta Kofman, and Astri Von Arbin Ahlander

by Judi Casey and Karen Corday

Casey: Jennifer, how did you get interested in studying the differences between generations at the workplace?

Deal: I actually started out having no interest in the topic at all! I thought it was much ado about nothing; in my opinion, age is much less important than what you can do and how well you do it. However, a friend of mine at work was on a team that was examining this question, and she asked me to attend a group meeting, as there was no researcher in the group and they needed one. As a favor to her, I went to the meeting. I still wasn't particularly interested, but learned at the meeting how important the issue was to our clients. I find it very interesting when people see something that I'm not seeing, so I decided to participate in the research to learn more about this dynamic. I wanted to know what people *believed* about generational differences and why there was so much attention paid to this issue.

Casey: Liz and Astri, how did you become interested in work-family issues and Generation Y?

Von Arbin Ahlander: Liz and I went to college together, and when we were graduating, we were talking with a lot of friends about the future and what they intended for themselves. We were startled by their answers. Many of our girlfriends hadn't thought about how they would balance having a family with working, and many of them said they would stop working when they had children, as they didn't see any other options. These answers

troubled us; the perspectives of these young professionals entering the work force seemed out of the Stone Age! We decided we wanted to make young workers more aware about these issues and about the choices that are available in negotiating work-life.

Kofman: As soon as we started looking into the issue, it became clear that the people who paid attention to work-family choices were older than us; they already had jobs and children. People questioned why we would ask 20-year-olds what their lives would look like with jobs and families; they asked "How could they know? Things will change between now and then." That is true, but we were struck by how much time people spent learning about their work options and their careers, but then they gave no thought as to how they would balance work with their family lives.

Von Arbin Ahlander: We found that there was a lot of power in talking about options. Our friends felt empowered after they considered the issues. People were relieved and wanted to talk more. That's why we decided to learn more.

Kofman: It was also a way for us to deal with these issues personally.

Von Arbin Ahlander: It's a new perspective to look at work-life issues from the point of view of people who are not yet married and don't have children, but plan to in the future. How can we empower people with knowledge at an early age? That's what we wanted to know.

Casey: Jennifer, can you talk about the research you did for your book?

Deal: We interviewed about 100 people at different organizations about what they saw as the primary issues. Between interviews and conversations with people who attended classes at the Center for Creative Leadership, we were able to understand people's concerns. We took that information, together with what was written in the media, and developed an online questionnaire. We gathered data in the United States, Europe, and Asia from more than 6,000 people. The book covers responses from more than 3,200 people in the United States, but we have a report out about the European data. The Asian sample was too small to report on anything substantial.

The purpose of the research was to see if common perceptions were actually true. People were saying that younger people had no values, that older people were stick-in-the-muds who resisted change, and that there was endless conflict among the different generations. Other perceptions included that different generations want different qualities in their leaders, it's difficult to retain younger workers, older workers will stay with their organizations forever, younger workers want coaching all the time while older workers want to be left alone, younger people are disrespectful…all sorts of things. We asked the different generations what they wanted in their workplaces to see if their answers were different.

Casey: Liz and Astri, what did you ask about in your qualitative interviews? What kinds of data did you collect?

Kofman: When we started the project, we knew we were looking at a small segment of the population: highly educated university graduates. We went to New York, Madrid, Stockholm, Paris, and Moscow and interviewed at least 20 people in each country, 10 students and 10 young professionals. Each interview was about 1–2 hours; we recorded all of them and filmed some for our website.

Von Arbin Ahlander: The interviews began with basic background questions, such as their educational background as well as that of their parents, and then included more in-depth questions about what they thought their lives would look like in 10 years and their ideal scenarios in terms of their professional lives, their geographic location, and their private lives. We asked what benefits they looked for from an employer and what they expected employers to provide outside of basic benefits.

Kofman: We also asked their opinions on the role of government, what they liked most and least about their jobs, what kind of family life they wanted, and their thoughts on the best way to raise children, division of labor within the home, and child care. As we mentioned before, we primarily interviewed recent college graduates and young professionals, but we did do about 10 interviews with older workers, and we published them on our website as inspirational examples of how people have combined their work and professional lives.

Casey: Jennifer, can you talk about the findings of your study? How prevalent is generational conflict at the workplace?

Deal: The results show that people are more similar than different across generations. People fundamentally want the same things at work, regardless of their age. It isn't clear how much of the conflict is actually a result of generational differences. If there is a conflict between workers of different generations, people tend to

attribute the conflict to generational differences instead of other possible reasons. For example, when a colleague doesn't deliver on a project, do you complain about the lack of delivery, or do you complain about them being younger? I'll often hear "this person didn't do what they were supposed to do, and the reason for this is their generation," as opposed to "the reason was that they didn't have adequate information" or "they are incompetent" or any other possible explanation. People default to generational conflict when it may be a possibility, so it's unclear if some of these conflicts are about generations or if generational difference is used as an easy scapegoat.

The data show that there are few differences among the generations in what they want, value, expect at work, desire in a leader, and their levels of trust. There *is* a difference in perceptions of respect; younger and older people define respect differently. Younger people talk about being listened to and heard; older people talk about their expertise and how others should defer to them because of it. This translates to older people saying younger people are disrespectful, and younger people saying they feel as if no one respects them. This makes sense when you look at the different definitions of respect. So most of the conflict is not about generational differences; it's about the violation of expectations, which happens within generations at least as often as across them.

Casey: Do people's expectations and sense of what is appropriate change over time?

Deal: Definitely. Think about clothing; what is acceptable to wear now wasn't 50 years ago. When you review popular literature over the last 2,000 years, you see this repeated pattern. Older people have always said that younger people are disrespectful; Socrates said it! It's an age issue, not a generational issue. As people get older, societies expect older people to receive more deference. For all the talk about the United States being a youth-centric culture, people are still taught to defer to their elders. In the book, I talk about "whippersnapper syndrome"; even people who are not chronologically young are seen as "whippersnappers" by those who are older; there's always someone older around!

Casey: Liz and Astri, what did you learn about Gen Y and their work-family concerns?

Von Arbin Ahlander: So much! This was a day-in, day-out, year-long project during which all we did was backpack and talk to people. We are just starting to do an in-depth analysis, so what we have now is preliminary, but we can see certain trends. In the United States, people's views of family and gender were surprisingly traditional; overall, interviewees definitely wanted to get married, and the average age by which people wanted to be married was around 25. In Europe, there was a debate among young people about the institution of marriage. Marriage was not considered essential, but a partnership of some sort was an important goal. In terms of creating families, European interviewees saw many possible options, as opposed to the United States, where even homosexual interviewees used the term "marriage" for their future partnerships.

Kofman: We also found that views of child care varied a great deal between the United States and Europe. In the United States, most interviewees had a very negative view of group day-care situations, especially public day care. Nannies were seen as slightly more desirable, but most people thought it was best if a parent was the primary caregiver. In Europe, there was a very positive view of day care, and some viewed public day care as *especially* positive. Several of our French interviewees were from wealthy families, and they still said they would choose to send their children to public day care, even though they didn't have to, because they thought it was an instrumental part of a child's social development.

In terms of people's knowledge about work-life options, in the U.S., people were generally unaware of them. When we asked how much time people should take off after having a child, most of the responses were "I don't know," or "How much time do I get?"

Von Arbin Ahlander: Not a single person knew about the Family and Medical Leave Act.

Kofman: In Europe, there was an overall greater awareness of available policies, especially in Sweden. These interviewees could answer about the amount of leave they were allowed and knew how much they planned on taking, as the leave would be divided between them and their future spouse.

Von Arbin Ahlander: This made us wonder why there was such a huge difference between the amount of awareness in the United States and in Europe.

Kofman: The role of government is very different in Europe than in the United States. American interviewees expressed discomfort with expecting leave from their employers or from the government and were unsure about what the government's role should be in this issue. In Europe, interviewees felt entitled to paid time off such as vacation time, sick leave, and parental leave. They were aware of what was available and were very willing to use these provisions. Several American interviewees, on the other hand, said, "I have 2 weeks of

paid vacation time, but I don't use it."

Von Arbin Ahlander: There was a sense of pride about not using their vacation time. When we mentioned this to our European respondents, they would laugh in disbelief. We asked interviewees "What kinds of benefits would you like to see from an employer?" Americans, by and large, mentioned health care. In Europe, health care is generally provided by the government, so there was more talk about flexibility and working from home.

In terms of generational differences, Generation Y is exceptionally mobile and expressed interest in moving not only between companies, but between industries. They see themselves as having a career that spans many different areas over their lifetime. Europeans were particularly geographically mobile.

Kofman: In terms of employment, the young people we interviewed wanted fulfillment that went beyond their paycheck. As we mentioned before, the people we interviewed are generally well off, so there's not the worry about financial situations that other groups may have. But, in the course of listening to conversations about generational differences, we had heard a lot about how Generation Y is lazy and disrespectful. We've found it's not quite that simple.

Casey: Jennifer, are there any bottom-line issues that surface between the generations?

Deal: The real issue is clout—who has control and who wants control. That is truly the bottom line; there is a power struggle going on.

There was an issue of *Fortune* from last year that talked about the Millennials and what they want. This article referenced an article on Baby Boomers from 1969; the descriptions of the Baby Boomers in that article in 1969 were almost identical to the descriptions of the Millenials in 2007. When people are entering the workforce, they want the same things, generation after generation. You want to contribute, you want your work to have meaning—everyone wants this, of course, but people are more outspoken about it at the beginning of their career.

Casey: Do your findings suggest anything for teams or supervisors in the workplace?

Deal: It's important that managers don't assume employee conflicts are about generations—they need to consider that the conflicts may have more to do with having and wanting clout. Within teams, age is often used as a proxy for experience; teams want to figure out their pecking order, and people use different methods to increase their status vis a vis others on the team, including age, years at the organization, schools attended, and money brought into the organization. People need to remember that age and experience are not perfectly correlated. People's experience level is not always obvious, but it's easier to tell someone's age or how long they've been with an organization, and people assume that greater age equals greater experience. It's important to find out people's experience level; someone could be quite young but have lived around the world and have a lot of international experience, for example, and this might not be visible on their resume, but could be incredibly useful to an organization. It's important to not slot team members into a particular cohort and assume that they do—or do not—have experience.

Casey: What can employers do to better support Generation Y employees?

Von Arbin Ahlander: I agree with Jennifer; there needs to be more feedback and more dialogue. If younger workers were able to express their opinions within their organizations, they might feel more respected. It's not necessary to let them take over meetings, but maybe allow them to *attend* meetings that have been closed to them.

Casey: I think there is a lot of effort devoted to how to be results oriented rather than face-time oriented. As people work more in teams, there are issues to resolve about how co-workers communicate when someone is working remotely.

Von Arbin Ahlander: Yes. One element that is sometimes missing from that conversation is representation from all affected groups. Younger workers might lack work experience but may know about new technologies that might be available to assist people to work off-site.

Deal: Younger workers have a different kind of experience. It's no less valuable; it's just different.

Von Arbin Ahlander: Traditional mentorship, for example, is important, but we've been hearing about reverse mentorship, in which younger workers' knowledge and experience can be shared with older workers.

Kofman: On the work-family front, it's important to Generation Y to have role models within the workplace. They need to see older workers, men and women, taking vacation and using family leave policies to validate that it's acceptable within their work culture. Not much will change if policies are in place but people are afraid to or are penalized for using them.
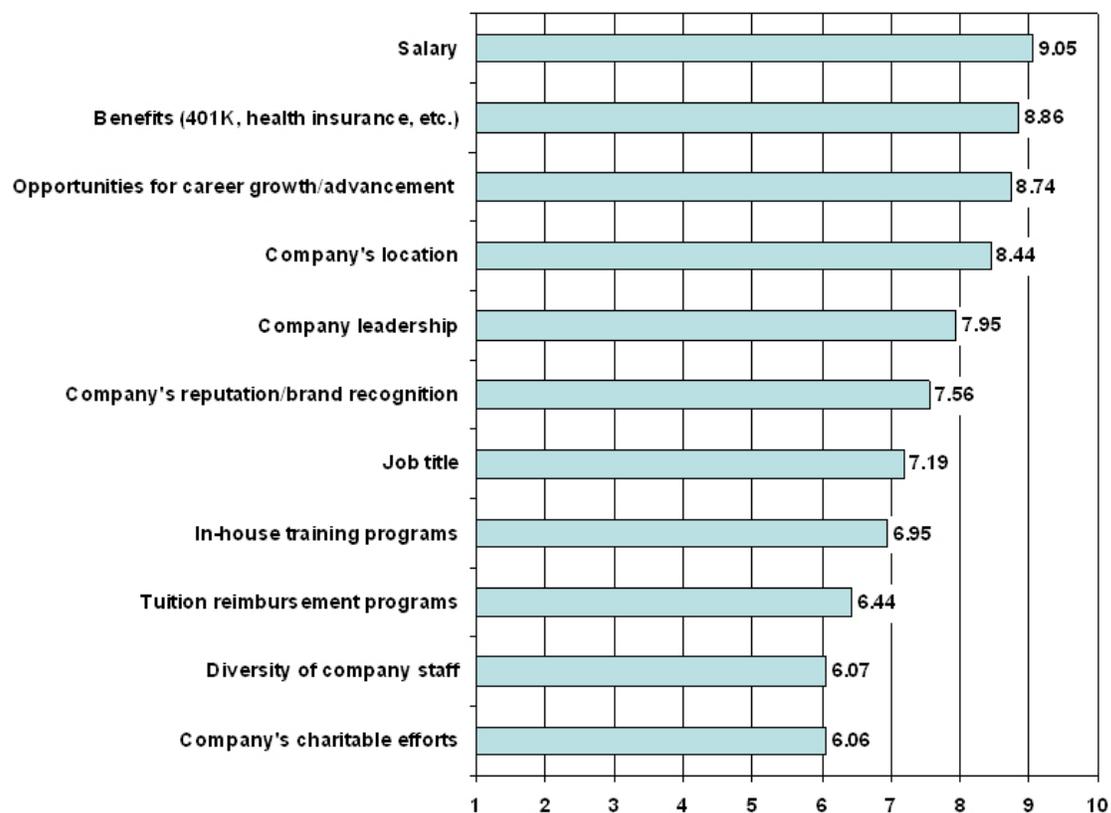
Casey: Any final thoughts?

Von Arbin Ahlander: I just want to reiterate how important it is to us that young people pay attention to these issues so they are prepared to make decisions in the future. It shouldn't be examined for the first time when you're having your first child; we're targeting a group that hasn't traditionally thought about these issues, but we think they should. If nothing else, there's a lot of power in discussion.

Deal: Absolutely. The further you think ahead, the more options you have later on. In this economy, having options is important.

Kofman: There's no one-size-fits-all approach that's going to work for everyone. Discussion is so valuable, and research, networking, and communication can improve the workplace for everyone.

Gen-Y Respondents' Rank of Job Considerations on a 1-to-Ten Scale

Consideration	Score
Salary	9.05
Benefits (401K, health insurance, etc.)	8.86
Opportunities for career growth/advancement	8.74
Company's location	8.44
Company leadership	7.95
Company's reputation/brand recognition	7.56
Job title	7.19
In-house training programs	6.95
Tuition reimbursement programs	6.44
Diversity of company staff	6.07
Company's charitable efforts	6.06

Source: Yahoo! HotJobs/Robert Half International. (2008). *What millennial workers want: How to attract and retain Gen Y employees*. Retrieved from http://www.hotjobsresources.com/pdfs/MillennialWorkers.pdf