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Restless generation

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Readers of The Sunday Times between the ages of 11 and 30 who read editor Sumiko Tan's column about marking her 25th year of work with The Straits Times last week, probably uttered a collective "what?".

The idea of a job for life is almost inconceivable to the likes of Mr Marvin Poh, 29, who works in an events company and has held five jobs in the last five years, gaining what he calls "important experience" at each post. He says: "I cannot really think more than five years down the road. Who knows what will happen?"

Mr Poh is part of Generation Y, the tech-savvy, restless, multi-tasking, impatient, lifestyle-driven segment of employees who make up about 20 per cent of the two million-strong Singapore workforce.

Ms Chery Liew-Chng, CEO of Lifeworkz, a human resources consultancy, notes that many Gen Y employees stay in a job for an average of 18 months, often making up their minds in the first month whether they will stay. She says: "The definition of loyalty has evolved. It is not so much a matter of whether they stay with the company, but what their contribution is."

The traditional incentives of job stability and long-service awards no longer appeal. Instead, Gen Y is looking for a varied job scope, instant rewards and a better work-life balance.

Ms Joanne Chua, manager of the HR division at recruitment consultants Robert Walters, notes: "The Gen Y workforce typically has a 'me-first' mentality, and thrives on instant gratification of their needs in terms of career development and progression, as well as diverse working experiences."

HR consultants told LifeStyle that Gen Y, often characterised as 'soft' and unable to take hardship, simply does not see things the same way baby boomers (those born between 1945 and 1965) or Generation X (1965-1980) do.

Mr Josh Goh, assistant director for corporate services at recruitment agency The GMP Group, notes: "They are considered one of the smartest and most connected generations and they view job changing as a natural means to gather varied experience."

Middle managers also report that it is a refreshing change to work with Gen Y employees.

Head of business development at Maybank Singapore Marc Leong, who manages about 50 Gen Y employees, says: "Many are outspoken and contribute practical ideas to the workplace. Their energy and passion can be very infectious."

He adds that there is a down-side to this: "Many are excessively outspoken during or after meetings. When the team is negatively affected, it is not easy to steer the rest back to the original objective."

There are sociological and economic reasons why Gen Y has turned out this way.

Associate Professor Paulin Tay Straughan, a sociologist, notes that Gen Y grew up in "a very affluent Singapore" which has managed to bounce back from crises. This has created an expectation and optimism that things will continue to grow and flourish.

However, she disagrees that Gen Y is "soft", noting that far more demanding job conditions, especially with performance-based evaluation, means a lot more is expected of workers today.

As for the charge that Generation Y workers are job hoppers, she says: "If you were paid less each time you changed jobs, I do not think it would happen very often. So how can we blame you if the organisational culture encourages and rewards that kind of behaviour?"

NTUC deputy secretary-general Halimah Yacob agrees that Gen Y is simply responding to a working environment where lifetime employment no longer exists. She acknowledges that companies here are "still adapting" to the needs and wants of Gen Y.

She says: "Companies need to provide a much more challenging environment in order to retain workers. It is not just about managing the people but also providing leadership."

Mr Goh suggests that making work less monotonous and providing opportunities to develop such as overseas postings would appeal to Gen Y.

Some companies offer bonuses every six months, instead of the usual one year, to cater to their desire for more immediate rewards. Others offer lifestyle-related incentives, such as nightclub memberships.

Ms Chua of Robert Walters notes: "Much depends on employers' realisation that their current retention strategies have to be adapted to meet the needs of this different group of employees."

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Do you think that Generation Y workers are spoilt and impatient? Write to **suntimes@sph.com.sg**