Air traffic control crisis: a case of Gen Y nightmare?

Patrick Jaska
University of Mary Hardin-Baylor
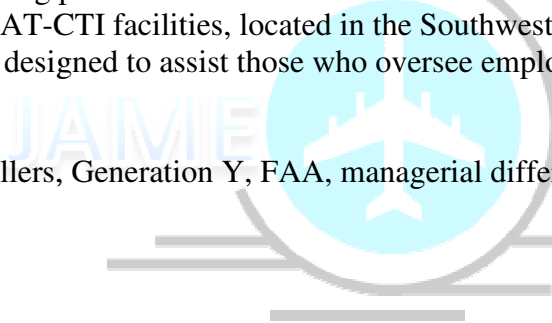
Patrick Hogan
Columbus State University

Paul Ziegler
University of Mary Hardin-Baylor

Abstract

In this study, the managerial differences for Generation Y students studying to be air traffic controllers is compared to those of Generation X and the Baby Boomer generation. This study addresses the research question of how much do the general attitudes of Gen Y members differ from the general attitudes of Gen Xers and Boomers? If there are significant differences, this may necessitate changes in the management styles practiced in the air traffic control towers. This study was conducted using personal interviews of Air Traffic Control faculty instructors at one of the FAA's approved AT-CTI facilities, located in the Southwestern United States (US). The results of this study are designed to assist those who oversee employee service operations for air traffic controllers.

Keywords: air traffic controllers, Generation Y, FAA, managerial differences

INTRODUCTION

The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) is concerned about the nation's air traffic control system because of several humiliating incidents where controllers were caught sleeping while on duty and other slip-ups (Lowy, 2011). The agency is also reassessing lower level staff performance in addition to management. A Cleveland air traffic controller was viewing a DVD on the job and was suspended while other incidents in the New York center reportedly showed controllers taking naps while on duty (Forer, 2011).

The FAA officials plan to replace three-quarters of the present air traffic controllers in 2010 by hiring 10,544 controllers by 2020. Officials say that 10,000 controllers will exit the workforce in the current decade. This mass exodus would come from a total 2010 air traffic controller population of only about 15,000 active FAA controllers. This mass exodus is due to the 1981 Professional Air Traffic Controllers Association (PATCO) strike when several thousand controllers walked off the job due to a labor dispute. President Ronald Reagan subsequently decided to fire the controllers who went on strike, and the FAA then had to hire substitute controllers to fill the vacant positions. Those controllers are nearing retirement and need to be replaced (Federal Aviation Administration, 2011).

One of the current FAA hiring requirements for new controllers is that they "be no older than age 30" (Federal Aviation Administration, 2011, pg. 42). As a result of this age requirement, a large number of the replacement air traffic controllers who are being hired in the current decade will continue to be members of Generation Y (Gen Y). People from Generation Y were born between 1977 and 1994 in the US. They are also known as Millennials, whose current ages are 35 and under. With a population approaching 72 million, Generation Y is the most educated, proficient in technology, ethnically diverse and soon to be the largest generation that America has ever seen. The Gen Y attitude towards work is in stark contrast to Gen X who believe the Gen Yers are lazy and undisciplined (Gelston, 2008) and Baby Boomers who say "I worked hard for forty years. Now I would like to retire." While Baby Boomers lived to work and Gen Xers work to live (Dogan Gursoya, 2008), Generation-Y members work to fund their lifestyle (Aquino, February 2012).

BACKGROUND

The replacement controllers who were hired since 1981 fall under the FAA's mandatory retirement age of 56. This mandatory age requirement applies if they are a first line supervisor or a working controller. In other words, if they are actively engaged in the control of air traffic, they are included under the mandatory retirement age of 56.

However, if they are a staff specialist in the FAA, or if they are a second-level manager, then they do not directly supervise those are controlling air traffic. This group of controllers can stay as long as they are effective. The other exception to the mandatory-age-56-rule applies to rehired PATCO controllers. They can also stay until they qualify for retirement.

As noted earlier, the PATCO Controllers went out on strike in 1981. Some of these former controllers were rehired over the years, and at that time the logic that was presented against rehiring them, was that these individuals have been out of air traffic control for some time. Furthermore, these controllers would not be able to stay long because they would soon hit 56 years old, and they would not have accrued sufficient retirement benefits. So an Executive Order was promulgated stating that the FAA will allow them to get enough time to retire.

The FAA divides controller hiring sources into three major categories:

- Previous Controllers – Individuals with prior experience in the FAA or Department of Defense as air traffic controllers.
- AT_CTI Graduates – Persons having completed and passed an air traffic control program taken at a school following the FAA's AT_CTI program.
- General Public – Other individuals having no previous air traffic control experience who apply for vacancies as they come available and posted by the FAA (Federal Aviation Administration, 2011).

The agency maintains its recruitment efforts to find qualified applicants for the controller positions to meet staffing requirements. For example, of the 988 controllers who were hired in 2010, 252 graduated from AT_CTI institutions, 226 had air traffic controller experience, and the remainder were previous controllers (Federal Aviation Administration, 2011).

As noted earlier, a large number of the replacement air traffic controllers hired in the last few years are members of Gen X or Gen Y. Members of Generation X were born between 1963 and 1981. Gen Ys general attitude towards life is enigmatic, and they like being individualistic and bringing change to their environment. They dislike bossiness and the status quo in corporate culture.

RESEARCH QUESTION AND METHODOLOGY

This study addresses the research question of how much do the general attitudes of Gen Y members differ from the general attitudes of Gen Xers and Boomers? If there are significant differences, this may necessitate changes in the management styles practiced in the air traffic control towers.

The organization of this paper will be to address each of the five descriptor groups of Generation Y identified by Meier and Crocker (2010) as having a high impact on the respondant population. The approach used by Meier and Crocker studied the responses of Generation Y members as they actually entered the workforce. The five categories are detailed below in Table 1 (Appendix).

One of the FAA's approved AT-CTI facilities, located in the Southwestern United States (US), has agreed to give the authors access to interview Air Traffic Control faculty instructors and their perceptions regarding Generation Y students and these five attributes. The methodology used in this study is a survey using personal interviews as the primary method of collecting information. The personal interview is appropriate for learning the instructor's perceived significance of several traits possessed by the students in question. The personal interview permits the instructor to consider and expand on his or her own attitudes about these matters in question, helping to increase the value of the responses to enrich the research.

This study is designed to assist those who oversee employee service operations. In the case where an agency, such as the FAA, is experiencing more severe employee service issues, this study can be used to help diagnose which issues may be due to differences in their attitudinal positions caused by generational factors. This analysis can help agency managers understand what they need to start doing, stop doing, and continue to do, in order to create a sustainable employee service balance with their younger employees.

DISCUSSION

Using the five descriptor groups of (1) Leadership,(2) Compensation, (3) Interesting Work, (4) Work Atmosphere, and (5) Job Features as previously identified by Meier and Crocker (2010), the following discussion outlines Gen Y reactions in these areas. Each bear directly upon the work environment required for efficient and safe operation of an Air Traffic Control function.

1) Leadership –

Management Style – Gen Y members in the workplace value feedback, both good and bad, from their supervisors. Managers should be able to communicate their expectations to the employee. Gen Y employees wish to be enabled in the place of work and are confident in their ability to get the job done (Meier & Crocker, 2010). Managers can motivate Gen Y workers by creating interest in the assignments that they perform every day. Gen Ys need to be motivated through constant reward and recognition.

Employers should also realize that Gen Y is entering into the job market expecting of their managers to be competent and willing to work to meet Gen Y's needs. Their expectations are for their supervisors to know what to do and to have an education comparable to theirs. Gen Yers want their supervisors to adjust to their way of doing things and abandon their old practices.

Supervisory Practices – A free work environment motivates Gen Y workers. They want some guidance, but do not want a supervisor hovering over them constantly. A manager needs to give them regular feedback without over doing it. Gen Y employees need to feel good about their work and know that it is important. Communication is very important in interacting with Gen Y members. Gen Ys have been multi-tasking since they were old enough to communicate. From education, to athletics, to web and cell phone applications, they are capable of carrying out these varied functions. This multitasking orientation contributes to limited interest for only a short period of time, which demands they be acknowledged and rewarded immediately.

Supervisor Employee Relationships – Managers should create an atmosphere to promote mentoring among their employees. Experienced employees can then help the Gen Y employees and get them up to speed on what is expected of them. Mentoring is a useful tool to allow Gen Ys to become acquainted with the culture and expectations of the organization. They will appreciate good mentoring that gives them a feeling of worth and accomplishment (Meier & Crocker, 2010).

Response to Leadership – The AT Control subject matter experts from AT-CTI have mixed reactions to the leadership traits discussed above. They have observed that Generation Y members' approach to authority is often casual. It is not that Gen Ys do not respect authority; they are just unimpressed by authority. They grew up watching authority figures fall from grace.

As an Air Traffic Controller progresses through their career, part of their job description is participating in on-the-job-training (OJT) as an OJT Instructor. The OJT Instructor is part of the "old school" establishment, and adapting to the need for immediate gratification of the Gen Y trainee may be difficult. Many AT Controllers have been training new employees on and off for 15-20 years, and they grow weary of the training experience. Training consists of the same old questions over and over again. "Why do you come from the FAA Academy and you cannot do this?" "Why do you come up here to the Tower when you cannot learn that?" Additionally, the attitude that the Gen Ys bring in with them does not help them. They often act like they are entitled to their jobs and they may not respect their Training Controllers.

When new controller trainees get through the FAA Academy, they go to a FAA Control facility. At this training facility, the new controller trainees go through additional classroom

time, sometimes as much as six more months. After they are through with the additional classroom activity, they have to prove their mastery of the technology through extensive testing. Subsequently, they move into the radar room and the control tower for even more training. At this point, they receive a radio headset and microphone. They use this to plug-in next to the training controller's plug. If the trainee does something wrong, it's the OJT Controller's certificate upon which the incident is written, not the unlicensed trainee. This training with the OJT Controller can last another 12-18 months. That is why OJT instruction is so critical to the trainee's future.

2) Compensation

Salary and Benefits **-** Generation Y employees want to be promoted quickly in the organization. Their desire is to develop skills in the organization and become a productive individual as did generations before them. The distinction for Gen Ys is that they do not want to wait to move up in the organization. They feel if they can perform the job then they should be recognized and not take a second seat to those more senior in the organization. More than half of the Gen Y respondents said that adequate compensation, benefits, medical insurance, copious vacation, and other incentives are expected as an employee. Gen Ys feel that they can do what it takes to get these perks because they deserve it (Meier & Crocker, 2010).

Gen Ys will take another job opportunity if they are offered a better deal. Loyalty is not a concern of Gen Ys. According to Balderrama (2007), almost thirty percent of the Gen Y respondents have had at least three different employers in the short time that they have been employed. Gen Y members want more financial and personal incentives than their Boomer and Gen X colleagues. (Balderrama, 2007).

Response to Compensation **–** The AT Control subject matter experts from AT-CTI unanimously appreciated the fact that Gen Y members may be more money motivated than some of their predecessors. The Air Traffic control job places many stressors on its members, and the discipline required comes from many sources, including excellent compensation. One possible problem with Gen Y members may be their readiness to move on to another job if they dislike certain features of their present job. The FAA considers the Air Traffic Control environment as a professional career. Given the technical nature and cost of its training program, the FAA is searching for individuals who can enjoy 25 years of service before the mandatory retirement of 56 years old.

Additionally, in order to attract the most qualified candidates, the FAA pays controllers well and offers very good employee benefits. As far as Salary levels for Controllers, their median annual wages were $111,870 in May, 2008 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010).

The Air Traffic Control wage system has eight levels with subsequent pay scales. In this wage system, a controller's pay is regulated by the facility rating, along with their experience level. Higher facility ratings usually translate into higher controller salaries. However, the more highly rated facilities also expect controllers to have excellent judgment, skill, and decision-making ability (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2010).

It is very important to Gen Ys that they have quality time with their family. They have very little allegiance to anything that they have not previously incorporated into their value system. However, a career with the FAA as an Air Traffic Controller may attract some Gen Ys because of the importance of the job and its excellent compensation.

3) Interesting Work –

Task Oriented Work Issues - For many organizations, grasping how to handle Generation Y can be a first step in creating an open work environment allowing innovative where every

employee can enjoy the working environment, no matter what their age. For a successful recruiting effort, organizations need to understand Gen Ys and adjust to their needs to be seen as a great place to work offering great career fulfillment (Yeaton, 2008).

An additional issue that Gen Y members find important is the nature of the actual work performed on their job. Some Gen Y employees dislike a repetitive job because they can become bored in this type of environment. To counteract this tendency towards boredom, an employer can cross-train a number of employees on their respective job content. This technique introduces variety into their workplace, and may be beneficial to the employer in cases of employee sickness or retirement (Meier & Crocker, 2010).

Response to Interesting Work - As noted above, Generation Ys would prefer a casual and informal workplace. Anything that makes work less formal resonates well with Generation Y. The AT Control subject matter experts from AT-CTI have shown definite reactions to the casual preferences discussed above. These preferences create a major problem with Gen Ys and the reality of the Air Traffic Control workplace, which can be an extremely stressful work environment.

Part of the reason that OJT instruction is so difficult is due to the trainer's experience in previous training environments. In many training exercises, the trainer feels like the FAA is trying to take their Certificate away in the event of training errors. These experiences result in a strained attitude that the ATC instructors have towards OJT training.

Occasionally, it is possible that a trainee can get things so screwed up that it would be nice to say "Okay, everybody just stand by while we fix this situation." Unfortunately this is not possible in the Air Traffic Control Tower. Everyone is going 400 MPH at each other, so there is no possibility of a pause to fix to your individual problem. So the solution is to unplug-your trainee, send him/her downstairs to the break room, and then the trainer fixes the problem. After a successful fix, the trainer then goes downstairs to find the trainee who was responsible for the mistake(s). Certainly if the trainee is willing to learn from the experience, then the trainer will be more willing to help get the trainee back on track.

Unfortunately, the attitude that the Gen Y often takes when he/she makes mistakes is to not take responsibility for their own actions. They often blame the classroom training for insufficiency. They may respond with "It's not my fault," or "They didn't teach me that at the FAA Academy." In these circumstances it makes the OJT trainer think twice about going out on a limb for the Gen Y trainee. In the hectic AT Control workplace, there may not be room for casualness and informality.

4) Work Atmosphere -

Work Environment – In order to attract Gen Y employees, a company should create a workplace that is conducive to employees making choices that are good for them and the organization. Collegiality and friendship with co-workers is a major motivational force for Generation Y. A dynamic work environment with give and take communication among fellow employees is a plus for the Gen Y member (Meier & Crocker, 2010).

Normative Attitudes and Work Culture - In today's world, organizations must keep up with technological changes. Technology is not well accepted by all generations in the workforce. Baby boomers are the most reluctant to this change. In contrast to Boomers, Gen X and Gen Y members grew up in this new technology era and are therefore familiar with technological change. The simple fact is that Gen Y thinks that computers and tech gadgets are a natural part of life (Tulgan & Martin, 2001).

Gen Y is so familiar with technology that they even teach older generations how to use it.

Gen Y is ready for any new technological development. Gen Y is entering the job market more knowledgeable than any other generation with the latest technology.

Response to Work Atmosphere - The AT Control subject matter experts from AT-CTI have shown a decidedly mixed reaction to these issues of work Atmosphere. The first issue of AT Controller trainees having a good time at work and making them feel comfortable in the work environment is certainly not the reality at this time. These issues of enabling a more worker-friendly job atmosphere are all part of the management shake-up at the FAA that is going on now. The effects on the FAA work atmosphere and this turmoil are still uncertain. However, our AT Control subject matter experts have shown a definite positive reaction to the techno-savvy skill-sets of Gen Y also discussed above. The next new FAA technology issue is the Automatic Dependent Surveillance Broadcast System (ADSB). The major benefit of NextGen systems such as ADSB is airplane recognition. Using the current FAA system, a radar antenna system can only look out a maximum of 56-58 miles. Whereas using ADSB, there is actually equipment in the aircraft that will communicate down to a ground-based station, which is connected to other ground-based stations. Effectively, there is an electronic mosaic and that network would cover the US. So if a ground station in one location receives information on an aircraft, that information is transmitted via multiple network channels throughout the ADSB system. The data is thereby communicated to other FAA Centers. For reliability purposes, the ADSB system is double or quadruple redundant.

With regards to ADSB, the largest concern to air traffic is that the system wide installation would replace radar as we know it. Members of the easy techno-generation, that represents the Gen Ys should be able to easily adapt to the new FAA technology, and this could be a major plus for the hiring of Gen Y controllers.

5) Job Features

Work Hours and Schedules – The Gen Y employee responds well to adaptable work hours and schedules. The nature of work in many companies has changed considerably in recent years. A significant portion of an employee's work content can be performed flexibly with regards to space and time. Young people, today, do not consider the workplace as important as did their parents, and these Gen Y employees often place their personal life needs ahead of career issues (Meier & Crocker, 2010).

Co-Worker Relationships – With different generations in the work environment, conflicts can erupt among co-workers. Currently, there are at least three generations functioning in the workplace: Baby Boomers Generation X, and Generation Y. These three generations have different characteristics, beliefs, and objectives creating challenges for managers to keep unity among employees. Managers are challenged to promote a working environment that is positive for all employees. Generational differences will always be present in the workplace. Each generation does things in a different way with the attitude that their approach is the best (Meier & Crocker, 2010).

Job-Related Communications – There may be language barriers among workers based on generational issues. Gen Y employees desire understanding and respect. They have enjoyed access to cutting-edge technology, films with special effects, and video games throughout their short lives. As a result they are skilled at multi-tasking and expect communication in real-time. The more spontaneous and interactive methods that management employs in the workplace, the less anxious, and more open the Gen Y employees will be. Gen Y employees like to be given challenging tasks with prospects to excel. They respond well to special projects with opportunities to optimize their multi-tasking skillsets. On the other hand, if their ideas are

disregarded, the workplace risks receiving a half-hearted effort and a mediocre work product from Gen Y employees (Spiro 2006).

Response to Job Features - As noted above, Generation Ys would prefer flexibility in the work/life balance. Anything that increases the social side of work appeals to Generation Y. The AT Control subject matter experts from AT-CTI have shown definite reactions to the free thinking preferences discussed above. These preferences create a major problem with Gen Ys and the reality of the Air Traffic Control workplace, which can be an extremely stressful work environment.

Unfortunately, there is a high attrition rate in the training of air traffic controllers:
- At the level of the FAA Academy, the failure rate is about 10%;
- At the level of the FAA Control Center, the failure rate depends on the location:
  - At DFW the failure rate is very high, almost 95% of those left after the FAA Academy do not complete training.
  - At Chicago O'Hare the failure rate is even higher, almost 98% of those left after the FAA Academy do not complete training.

As a result, the FAA has recently begun sending the new hires to a smaller secondary control center to get their feet wet, before allowing them to subsequently transfer to the primary control centers. These newly minted air traffic controllers need to get their early experience at smaller control centers such as Longview, TX or Lubbock, TX. These beginners need to build-up their experience levels initially from the secondary control centers for several years.

SUMMARY

On balance, the interviews with the subject matter experts supported the importance of these five managerial differences between Generation Ys and the other generations. Each of these five differences was expected to affect the management of younger controllers as they replace Boomers who are retiring over the next decade. They were especially optimistic about the Gen Y members exhibiting money motivation and possessing strong technology skill-sets. On the other hand, they were less sanguine about the Gen Y's casual and informal approach to leadership in the highly stressful working environment of the FAA control tower. The interviews with the experts support the research question that differences exist in the general attitude of Gen Y members from those of Boomers and Gen Xers. These differences may necessitate changes in management style in the air traffic control towers. Further research is necessary to determine the types of management change required by the FAA.

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APPENDIX

Table 1

Gen Y Descriptor Groups Identified as High by Meier and Crocker (2010)

Primary Groups	Secondary Groups
1. Leadership	Management Style Supervisory Practices Supervisor/Employee Relationships
2. Compensation	Salary Benefits
3. Interesting Work	Task Oriented Work Issues
4. Work Atmosphere	Work Environment Normative Attitudes Work Culture
5. Job Features	Work Hours & Schedules Co-Worker Relationships Job-Related Communications