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When Gen X Runs the Show

By Anne Fisher

By 2019, Generation X — that relatively small cohort born from 1965 to 1978 — will have spent nearly two decades bumping up against a gray ceiling of boomers in senior decision-making jobs. But that will end. Janet Reid, managing partner at Global Lead, a consulting firm that advises companies like PepsiCo and Procter & Gamble, says, "In 2019, Gen X will finally be in charge. And they will make some big changes."

They'll have to, because the workforce Gen Xers will be leading will have altered almost beyond recognition. For one thing, Generation Y — the tattooed, techno-raised bunch born from 1979 to 2000 — is unlikely to follow in their parents' footsteps. They think putting in long years of effort at any one company in exchange for a series of raises and promotions is pointless — not that they'll get the chance. "Paying your dues, moving up slowly and getting the corner office — that's going away. In 10 years, it will be gone," says Bruce Tulgan, head of the consulting firm Rainmaker Thinking, based in New Haven, Conn., and author of a new book about managing Gen Y called *Not Everyone Gets a Trophy*. "Instead, *success* will be defined not by rank or seniority but by getting what matters to you personally," whether that's the chance to lead a new-product launch or being able to take winters off for snowboarding. Tulgan adds, "Companies already want more short-term independent contractors and consultants and fewer traditional employees because contractors are cheaper. And seniority matters less and less as time goes on, because it's about the past, not the future."

Superannuated boomers won't vanish from the workplace altogether: people in their 60s and 70s — because of either need or desire — will be among the 40% of the U.S. workforce that will rent out its skills. "Boomers will be working part-time as coaches, strategists and consultants," predicts Joanne Sujansky, a co-author of a book due out in June called *Keeping the Millennials*. "By 2019, there will be many more of those opportunities than there are now because boomers will need the income and companies will need their expertise." Says Reid: "We'll see an increase in job-sharing at very senior levels. You might have two boomers who share the job of chief financial officer, for instance, which lets them keep working and also have some leisure time."

The Gen X managers who will be holding all this together will need to be adept at a few things that earlier generations, with their more hierarchical management styles and relative geographical insularity, never really had to learn. One of those is collaborative decision-making that might involve team members scattered around the world, from Beijing to Barcelona to Boston, whom the nominal leader of a given project may never have met in person. "By 2019, every leader will have to be culturally dexterous on a global scale," says Reid. "A big part of that is knowing how to motivate and reward people who are very different from yourself."

They don't teach that in B school — at least not yet. In fact, Rob Carter, chief information officer at FedEx, thinks the best training for anyone who wants to succeed in 10 years is the online game *World of Warcraft*. Carter says *WoW*, as its 10 million devotees worldwide call it, offers a peek into the workplace of the future. Each team faces a fast-paced, complicated series of obstacles called quests, and each player, via his online avatar, must contribute to resolving them or else lose his place on the team. The player who contributes most gets to lead the team — until someone else contributes more. The game, which many Gen Yers learned as teens, is intensely collaborative, constantly demanding and often surprising. "It takes exactly the same skill set people will need more of in the future to collaborate on work projects," says Carter. "The kids are already doing it."

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