



**MANAGING  
THE NEW  
WORKFORCE**



It was a question with no good answer, but one Simon Boardman felt compelled to ask. Frustrated by the caliber of applicants he was interviewing, the CEO of Enterprise Development Services Inc. placed a call to a University of Georgia business instructor wanting to know: Is it me or them? That is, had he become an out-of-touch relic or is it that the incoming workforce is out of touch with vocational realities?

## The answer might have assuaged his ego,

but professionally it was troubling. "I wouldn't hire a large percentage of them," says Dr. Tom McPeak, an assistant professor of marketing at UGA and former business owner. "There's a growing sense of entitlement in America, and it's been passed on to this generation of job seekers. They feel it shouldn't be necessary to work more than 40 hours a week and be successful in corporate America. They feel entitled to work the 40-hour week, no more, get a good salary and move up the corporate ladder quickly. It's difficult to tell them otherwise."

Naturally, heightened expectations of success tend to clash with lowered expectations of output. Factor in a weakened economy and you have an outlook on the part of many workforce rookies that even Pollyanna would dismiss as naïve. "We have these young workers brought up in an economic boom who don't know what the workplace is all about," Boardman says. "They expect to be chairman of GE or something in two years. Of course, it's never been like that. You have to earn your spurs. You show up on time. You look and act professionally."

These are generalities, of course, and proactive companies are doing their part to better manage an increasingly complex workforce, one that may lack a Ross Perot-like work ethic yet brings more smarts and savvy to the table. EDSI has developed a mentor program that Boardman says seeks to give both employer and employee a greater sense of ease about their job decision.

"It's about eliminating surprises," he says. "We had people coming in here for one week and then wanting to leave because they didn't know what the job entailed. We look at training as an ongoing thing, and we believe it's important for the new employee to have someone that they can go to for all the day-to-day questions."

It's a rather unstructured procedure as far as time and expectations go, and once the employee achieves a comfort level in his or her position, the intensity of the relationship wanes. Although many companies have dropped such mentoring programs — labeling them as overhead — Boardman says his company has seen positive bottom-line effects because of it.

"We've cut down on turnover, which saves us money," he says. "We're no longer throwing these new workers to the wolves, which can easily happen in a smaller company like ours with only 60 people," he says. "We don't have the infrastructure for training or development, so the tendency has been to let the new employees sink or swim. But I've found in business today you have to maintain the learning environment."

The program is set up so those who are mentored will eventually become mentors themselves, contributing to an organizational cohesiveness. Tobias Stanelle is one of those who has been both student and teacher at EDSI, a concept he was unfamiliar with at his previous jobs.

"For me it was invaluable," he says. "I had a really good experience with my mentor, who had four years experience himself and is one of the top analysts in the company."

Stanelle lists three areas in which his mentor's help was crucial. First, there's adapting to the company "culture." "Just the

way that things are done here, what's expected and what's not allowed," Stanelle says. "I also got a lot of help on my phone skills. Tactical stuff like getting past gatekeepers and overcoming objections. And then it was helpful in just being a knowledge piece for different systems and application areas."

"One of the biggest things that struck me about EDSI is people's willingness to help," he says. "It is a part of the culture here."

Contributing to the program's success is a strict adherence to confidentiality. "The relationship and communication that takes place between the mentor and the 'mentee' is something that's very special and reserved," Stanelle continues. "Everything that goes on, any question that's asked, is kept between them. That builds trust which, in the end, makes the company better."

Young employees like Stanelle are typically appreciative of having more of a stake in their company's fortunes, and not just financially. The search for meaning is a hallmark of the new workforce, says Bill Kahnweiler, a professor of human resources at Georgia State University. Every generation tends to reinvent, and with Generation X making up the largest share of visible casualties from the dot-com breakdown, Generation Y tends to place more import on the spiritual instead of material.

"Given the choice, many would prefer what they view as meaningful work over just making money," Kahnweiler says. "They want more structure and less flexibility. They don't want to be married to the job. What I sense them saying is that they need more from work than just the basic benefits of working. Those don't have staying power anymore."

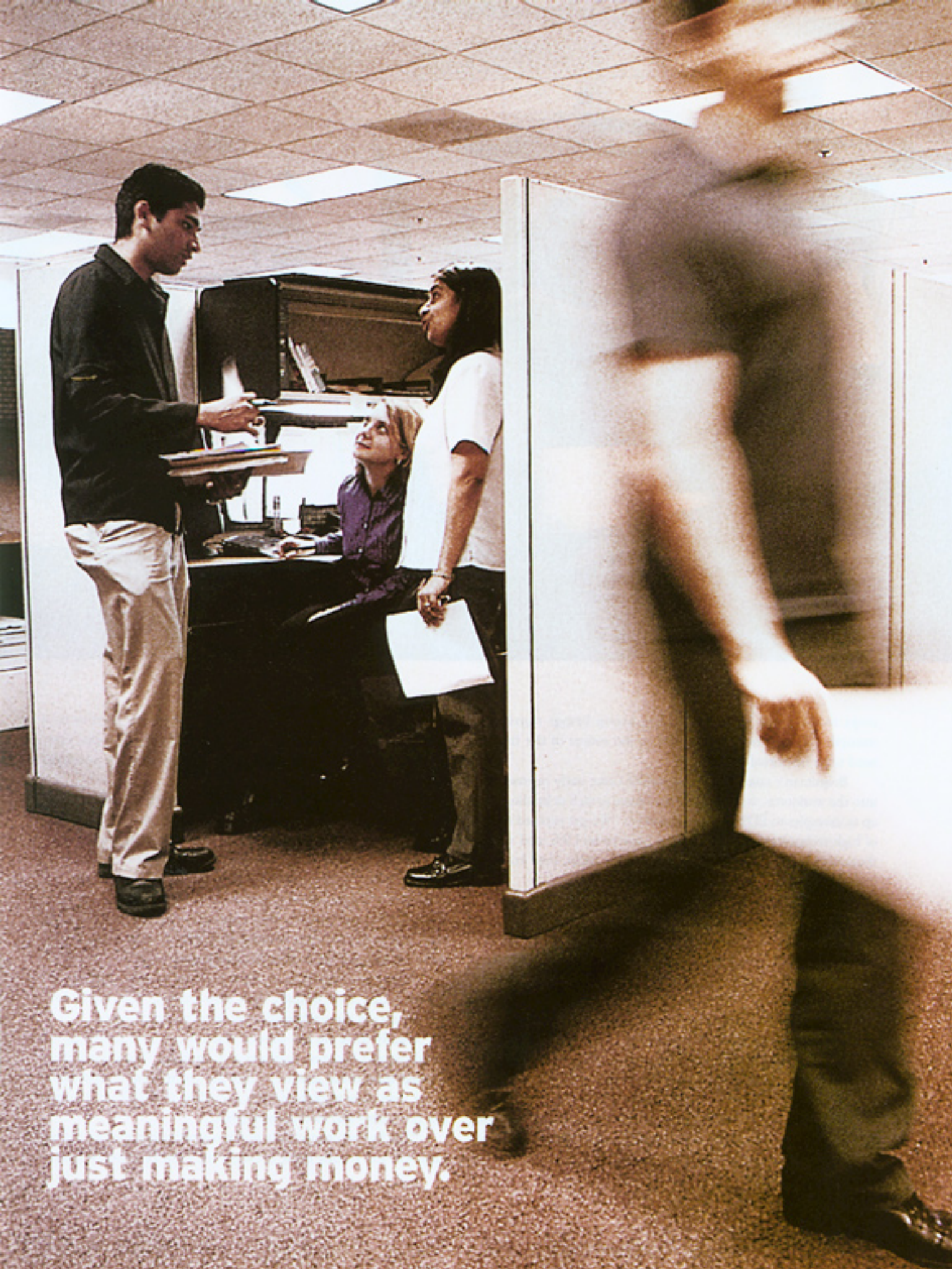
Unsurprisingly, this has led to some generational conflict among the workforce. "You've got the younger workers, the Gen X types, who feel largely responsible for much of the money made in the last 20 years," says Gregory Smith, president and CEO of Chart Your Course International, a management development company based in Conyers. "And the Baby Boomers perceive them as not having the loyalty or the work ethic they have."

Smith's website, [www.chartcourse.com](http://www.chartcourse.com), contains some familiar complaints from both sides of the age spectrum, such as this comment from a 25-year-old marketing assistant: "I can't imagine that people actually thought their companies would take care of them through their retirement and that promotions were handed out almost solely based upon the length of time a person worked at a company."

Counters a workplace veteran: "What Boomers want out of Xers is responsibility and pride in their work, not overtime. Boomers are tired of Xers' incomplete, inaccurate work, poor attitude and smart mouths."

And back and forth it goes. Today's rookie employees view their parents as slaves to the vocational grind. "Younger folks see us as not just 9-to-5ers but 9-to-8," Kahnweiler says. "They see their parents putting all this time in and after 25 years getting laid off. So they have a skepticism that I believe is healthy."

Such generational schisms have proven as problematic as cultural and racial differences in maintaining a harmonious workplace. "I see this trend as troubling as those issues were in the past," Smith says. "Companies need to take some positive



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steps to fix these issues. Each age group brings significant strengths. Those strengths, as well as the source of the friction, need to be identified."

Boardman's company has recruited some early retirees back into the workforce, mining their experience as well as holding them up as examples to EDSI's younger workers. "We got exposed to a lot of high-technology sales guys in the early to mid 90s, and we find them very helpful," he says. "They know the ropes, they know the high-tech sector."

"Some have been successful here, others bloody awful," Boardman admits. Those who failed typically proved to be more ready for retirement than they originally thought. "But for the most part the experienced workers we've brought in have displayed a healthy dose of reality to the table. They have a better grasp of the work regime."

When working with dot-com clients, Boardman noticed a dearth of seasoned employees, a factor he says contributed to a too casual workplace atmosphere. "With older workers you get more of the traditional values of showing up on time and looking proper for the job," he says. "There is a happy medium."

Punctuality and dress codes aside, the fact remains the young overtake the old, a reality Smith says the organizational culture must face. While not recommending capitulation to the expecta-

tions of the new worker, Smith believes companies have to do a better job understanding them or risk losing talented people, especially as the economy stabilizes and the demand again overtakes the supply.

"Companies who think the solution is returning to the old way of doing things will lose people once the economy improves," Smith suggests. "They have to prepare for that eventuality."

But overcoming the Gen Y skepticism won't be easy, according to Kahnweiler. "I don't sense the old bonds between employees and employers will be restored anytime soon. Most organizations can't afford to offer job security; they need to be flexible, too. What we have now is an unspoken contract that says 'do more than an adequate job and we'll try to give you challenging work.'"

Again, job security is an alien concept to most graduates. "I tell them they have to make their own security," Kahnweiler says. "Job security in the traditional sense doesn't exist anymore."

Clearly there are few answers when it comes to rehabbing the social contract between employer and employee. Transitional times demand transitional answers, a fact the young seem to understand better than their workplace heirs, according to Way Kidd, a corporate consultant and motivational speaker.

"The first big change I saw in this regard came in the late 80s and early 90s, and I really think it caught the Baby Boomers off guard,"

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Kidd says. "They were used to long-term contracts and stability. I think the younger generation understands this but the older generation is still confused about it. Companies need to think, and their employees need to understand, that five-year plans are obsolete. We're talking three-year plans now."

Some of that instability stems from an uncertain economy. But Kidd agrees with Boardman that all too often new employees

take a job without knowing what's expected of them. "Goals aren't clear and roles aren't clear," Kidd says. "There needs to be a clarity of roles and a stating of goals. Those are building blocks to creating a solid team."

Expectations and responsibility need to be clearly communicated, he asserts. "If employees feel unstable, then your business is going to reflect that."

Although he "hates performance reviews," Kidd believes some type of employee assessment is necessary.

"I'm seeing a lot of confusion among management these days," he continues. "It's like everyone's a free-lance writer. I have clients who bring people in on 90-day contracts. So with all this going on, it's more important than ever to clarify expectations and demands."

Dr. McPeak says this period of transition is just beginning. "We've been living in an unprecedented period of prosperity, and it's coming to an end," he says, adding universities and colleges have done an inadequate job in responding to such change.

"I feel very strongly that the academic institutions aren't properly reflecting how fundamentally different the world is from their parents' time," he says. "We need fundamental institutional change. It's never been more difficult to get a high-paying job, but the students' attitude is reflective of their parents. It just doesn't resonate."

For those in charge the challenge is clear, though difficult. How do you attract quality without lowering your standards? And, how do you create an atmosphere that will assist in keeping the quality you attract? The workforce is becoming increasingly freelance, an obstacle to the stability most companies crave (and require for their success).

"Boards are becoming increasingly aware of the relationship they have with their stakeholders, and that includes employees," says Joel Koblentz, founding partner of Boardroom Consultants. "They've invested enormous amounts of money into their brand, and they are realizing more and more that the employees are the face of that brand."

Along with increased employee satisfaction, such concern parlays into diversity issues: "The employee base should reflect their customer base," Koblentz suggests. As to maintaining a happy workforce, "the key is communication," he says. "Consistently when you see the rankings of best places to work you see a company where the paths of communication are open. Those are sacrosanct to a business achieving its goals."

Yet a weakened economy makes the process of building trust more difficult. "Businesses are being forced to cut their costs, which of course usually means cutting employees," Koblentz says. "Layoffs diminish the trust and social contract and not just for the person being let go but the people left behind. They are left to believe that if it can happen to their friend, it can happen to them. And that diminishes the bond."

"That's why you have to be open with your employees about your situation as a company, financial and otherwise," he says. "And, if layoffs are needed, be sure to treat employees fairly and with dignity. That sends a message to the workers who remain. The goal is to maintain the reputation of your company in good times and bad."

Even rumors should be addressed, even if the response is necessarily vague. "That's not to say you address every rumor, but if it's persistent speculation, then it's best to say something," Koblentz says. "It's a difficult balancing act because obviously you don't want to hurt the stock but you also don't want your employees working feeling uneasy."

Koblentz says boards are becoming increasingly involved in employee relations, from the attraction of human capital to their development and, if necessary, their release. "Companies are realizing that if they want to maintain their bond with their workforce they need a full-court press to improve relations with their human capital," he says.

Among Koblentz's suggestions: offering educational opportunities, allowing lateral moves and basing promotions on meritocracy instead of entitlement.

"In the 90s we got away from treating people like they want to be treated," he says. "There was a lack of investment in this, but now they know that this is a critical investment, particularly when you're looking at a 'free agent' workforce." \*