

Gen Y and emergency management: How do we engage generation Y in the emergency management sector?

Wajs-Chaczko examines the values and expectations of the next generation of emergency managers.

Abstract

What are the broad implications of the values and expectations of Generation Y and what do they entail for the emergency management sector?

This article focuses on emerging community resilience issues, engaging Generation Y as volunteers and employees within the emergency management sector and the variety of changes for which we might expect or plan.

The article includes a series of considerations for planning by emergency management organisations. Gen Y is now entering the workforce and undertaking significant roles within the sector and the community. Therefore adjustments are needed to help the sector to adapt to changing societal values.

may mean for society. Baby boomers (circa 1946-1964) experienced the development and popularity of television, the space race, the emergence of Rock and Roll, both the Cold and Vietnam Wars, the emergence of the AIDS virus and the shift to decimal currency. Generation X (circa 1965-1977) saw the arrival of personal computers, experienced the AIDS epidemic, witnessed an increase in divorce rates and single parent families, public debate and growth in multiculturalism, the broader industrial relations issues relating to companies implementing popular downsizing techniques, and an increased attention to tertiary education.

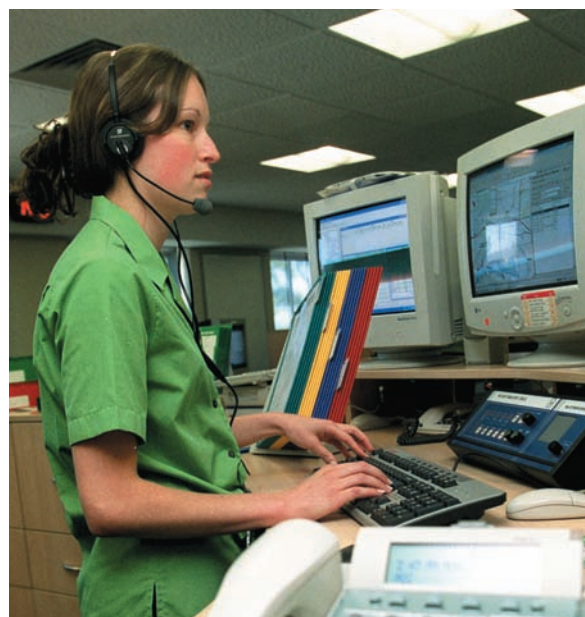
It is imperative for those involved in emergency management to understand the different experiences underpinning the value sets of various generations in our community, as these are inextricably linked to how we should prioritise preparedness, prevention, response and recovery measures in relation to community expectations. Thus the experiences of Generation Y could change the landscape of Emergency Management, for example.

Introduction

Defining exactly what we mean by Generation Y is a perennial source of debate. Whichever definition one chooses to use, whether it is Generation Y, Millennial, iGen or echo-boomer, most refer broadly to the those individuals born between 1977 and 1995. There is significant variance in precise definitions: Huntley (2006:2) deems 1982 to be the start of Gen Y, as does McCleneghan (2005:142). However, Howe and Strauss (2000:4); and Weiler (2004) and Krohn (2004:325) believe it started in 1980, and Freestone and Mitchell (2004:123) support Beard (2003:218) in setting the start at 1977. Regardless of the start date, there are around 5 million members of Gen Y in Australia. Contextually this equates to approximately 25-30% of the Australian population (ABS, 2006).

Characteristics, experiences, value sets and emerging risks

Defining key characteristics and comparing these with those characteristics of previous generations allows us to begin to discuss what the experiences of this generation



Phone operator Laura Grigg at the South Australian Ambulance Service state communications call centre.

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Gen Ys have lived through the emergence and evolution of the World Wide Web, internet, email and instant messaging and use the internet to obtain and disseminate information as part of their daily routine. Whilst such practices are now fairly standard in any developed nation—and across all generations—of critical importance is the fact that this generation has not known life any other way, thus causing a heavy community reliance on such services. The risk generated by this dependency has seldom been assessed by the emergency management sector. Potential impacts for the sector (after a more precise establishment of context and hazard analysis) may include the necessity to generate new plans for longer-term outages of such services.

The significant increase in “live” and “reality” television, the rollout of cable television services and development of community websites such as *YouTube*TM has meant that the ‘always on’ generation has not only been able to access a wide variety of up-to-date sources of information, but also the nature of the media has also allowed it to actively participate in generating content for global audiences. Community participation and the dispersal of mass-media by the community itself (without reliance on traditional journalism) may mean that community expectations of the speed, format, content and method of public information provision may need to be reassessed. The information-seeking habits of Gen Y have already had extensive attention in literature (Weiler, 2004). It has been established that only a very small percentage of the younger population prefers to learn by reading and an underlying dependence on television and the internet is emerging for information gathering.

Gen Y has experienced a plethora of new options in social networking and communication techniques, moving from the traditional social engagement to new media. The emergence and development of the publicly available mobile phone has progressed three technological generations. Current technology (3G) allows SMS, multimedia messaging (MMS) and mobile internet (and instant messaging). The reliance on mobile communications has created new community standards. Not only are individuals expected to be available regardless of location, but expectations of communications services provision have also increased. Social networking websites such as *Facebook*TM and *MySpace*TM have meant that information pertaining to individuals is immediately and readily accessed by their own social network. Equally, information dissemination across networks has become simplified to the point where information may become ubiquitous at a much faster rate. The potential implications for social and cultural capital in our communities and the consequent impact on community resilience may be highly significant. It has recently been argued that communities with higher levels of social capital are more resilient



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Generation Y consumers: laptops, ipods and mobile phones.

to the impact of hazards (Brenton, 2001; Maguire & Hagan, 2007).

Globalisation and its inherent networks and media of communication have meant that Gen Y is able to be aware of economic, social and political occurrences around the world. Participation in community actions surrounding emerging global community issues is also changing community expectations. A typical example could be the increased recent attention to environmentalism and expectation of corporations in performing corporate social responsibility. Issues relating to Climate Change will be of significance for this generation—a generation which has grown-up during times of drought, water shortages and the emergence of recycling. These same issues also have significance for the emergency management sector on a daily basis aligning the value set of the generation with that of the core business of emergency management. Further compounding these issues is the validity and reliability of the information obtained by Gen Y through these new sources of information. Regardless of the validity of information, community expectations may be altered as a result.

The events of September 11, 2001 and the London Bombings, as well as the more general threat of terrorism, has given rise to the general concept of what Beck (1992) has called the ‘Risk Society’. These events have had a significant impact on the perception of Gen Y. Whilst society has always been subjected to notions of risk, the notion of ‘Risk Society’ discusses exposure to hazards that are the result of the human development.

Natural hazards have always had negative effects on human populations, but these are seen to be produced by non-human forces. Modern risks, on the other hand, are seen to be the product of human activity. These two different types of risk are referred to by Giddens (1999) as “external risks” and “manufactured risks”. ‘Risk Society’ has a predicated interest in manufactured risks (see Beck [1992] and Giddens [1999]). If, as indicated by current literature, Gen Y is a key participant in the ‘Risk Society’, then clearly the community expectations of the emergency management sector to investigate ‘manufactured risks’, and their implications, will increase and the sector should pre-empt this expectation. It must be mentioned that many members of Gen Y have simply never experienced some of the more traditional significant disasters (such as flood), and this fact in itself could increase the risk posed to the community.

However, the perception of risk for Gen Y is not exclusive to the hazard of terrorism. The unprecedented attention in the media, in recent years, to events such as earthquakes, fires, floods and tsunamis, has instilled in Gen Y an awareness of these external risks. The very real perception of these risks held by members of this generation may instil some increased sense of vigilance. Conversely, either stronger social capital bonds or a feeling of community alienation—depending on the individual’s experience of community—could lead to a decreased sense of vigilance.

Implications for emergency management

The experiences of this generation will have a strong impact on the emergency management sector only when considered cumulatively. High dependence on advanced social networking, higher expectations of media and information availability, increased awareness and involvement in global community issues in a ‘Risk Society’ creates the platform for a dynamic emergency management sector, both in terms of its comprehensive approach to emergency management and for emergency management practitioners.

There are a number of factors which the emergency management community will need to respond to as Gen Y becomes more prevalent in community participation. These responses may include some of the below:

- Revisiting public information techniques both in terms of delivery mechanisms, speed of production, release and content, including that of disaster victim registration systems and enquiry methods to address the new information seeking habits of Gen Y.
- Participant-based approaches to community education through utilising new media and a focus on hazards from not only a local but international perspective to address the globalised perceptions experienced broadly by Gen Y.



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Organisations are increasingly employing Gen Y as volunteers and employees in the emergency management sector.

- Risk assessments as to the implications of technological dependency of community bonds (and community resilience) and reliance on technology for routine lifestyle functions.
- Redevelopment of volunteer and professional emergency management agency programs, adapting to changes in expectations.

In all likelihood the very fundamental nature of this generation in being quick to change and respond to change may mean that these recommendations are redundant sooner than expected.

Direct participation in the emergency management sector as either volunteers or salaried staff will also need to be examined to ensure relevant programs and careers, adjusted to the value sets of Gen Y. Further consultation and research involving members of Gen Y is paramount in designing programs to recruit and retain volunteers and staff. Aspects and attitudes which will need to be considered to ensure relevance may include:

- Innovative, creative, collaborative and engaging experiences in career development and volunteer programs;
- Immediacy, quick milestones being possible and immediate feedback being provided;
- Clearly articulated tasks and expectations and explanations as to how these tasks are relevant to the broader picture;
- An increased use of technology;
- Gen Y members being respected as an equals whilst still being directed, regardless of their actual experience;
- Experience being offered where appropriate and accepting that challenges to the status quo may be prevalent, but not necessarily meant to cause agitation.

Conclusion

Emergency management professionals will need to consider the shifting value sets of community members and also consider life experiences to date when delivering comprehensive approaches to emergency management. The same approach should be taken when considering all groups within our community, regardless of generation. Fundamentally this should already be in practice when *establishing the context* in line with the Australia/New Zealand Risk Management Standard 4360:2000.

Adaptation will be required both in the practice of emergency management and also in the professional development of the sector to align with these shifting values. Areas such as public information, education, technological utilisation and assessment of community expectations will require extensive revisiting. These recommendations are not necessarily unique to Gen Y, however they are integral to the practice of emergency management at any time and will mean that the sector evolves to reflect the continuous state of flux the broader community experiences.

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About the author

Emil Wajs-Chaczko is currently employed in Emergency Management for the NSW Government and is completing studies in Social Sciences, Digital Cultures, Government and Emergency Management. A member of Generation Y, he has a background in volunteer emergency service organisations and peak youth organisations at all levels. The author wishes to acknowledge the support provided by various staff at the NSW Office for Emergency Services.

Feedback and discussion is encouraged: emil@email.id.au

