

# Cultural expert says youth now in charge

## HRPAO Conference was an eye-opener for aging participants

Do you understand the attitudes and desires of the young people in your house? (You know, the cell phone-addicted basement dwellers that come and go while you're at work or in bed.)

Do you believe that your lengthy career qualifies you as more of an expert than young employees? If you are over 35, and answered yes to either of these questions, let me respectfully suggest that you may be mistaken. I was similarly deluding myself until last month when I attended the Human Resource Professionals Association of Ontario's (HRPAO) annual conference.

The HRPAO succeeded in orchestrating another huge event at the Metro Toronto Convention Centre from January 30th to February 1st. Setting new high water marks for attendance, this year's "Innovate '08" conference welcomed over 6,000 attendees in three days, including almost 4,000 delegates and numerous exhibitors and speakers.

The conference's world renowned keynote speakers included Ian Thomas (no, not that Ian Thomas), wildlife guide and author of *The Power of the Pride*; Dan Heath, *Fast Company* magazine columnist and co-author of *Made to Stick* (the book

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## HUMAN CAPITAL



with the duct tape on it) and Benjamin Zander, conductor of the Boston Philharmonic Orchestra and co-author of *The Art of Possibility*.

The one keynote speaker's message I found to be well researched, highly thought provoking and acutely relevant to our future was Max Valiquette, youth culture expert, host of TV Ontario's *Vox Talk* and founder/president of Toronto-based *Youthography*, a research and marketing communications

agency that purports to "eat, sleep and breathe youth."

Valiquette unravelled the mystery of youth culture for the predominantly middle-aged conference audience with energy, charm and humour (the latter being no surprise since he has performed as a sketch comedian at *Second City*). He systematically explained the demographics and psychographics of youth culture and then translated these data into their behaviours, attitudes and desires.

According to Valiquette, today's young generation (defined as currently 10 to 29 years of age) is more powerful and influential than any before.

What they value most is relationships, communication, information, diversity, empowerment and, most importantly, technology.

We are a culture in transition. Our rate of change is growing exponentially. Consider this: it took twenty years for 70 per cent of households to own colour TVs; it took about six years for 70 per cent of us to own DVD players. The majority of today's youth have never known life without computers and the internet. Apparently kids don't even need to be taught how to use computers any more. To quote Jaron Lanier, computer scientist and techno-cultural theorist, "it is as if children were waiting all these centuries for someone to invent their native language."

Our youth are accustomed to being in

charge. Remember when you had to ask Mom and Dad to use the Hi-Fi (I could be dating myself) or to go to a movie? Remember when there were only half a dozen TV channels?

Today's youth have culture and communication at their fingertips and on demand. Cell phones, instant messaging, YouTube, iTunes, Facebook, Google, downloading movies and music. They have infinite choices for entertainment, culture and social networking and they are in control.

In the past, the older generation invented things and the younger generation asked permission to use them. Today, the younger generation is driving technology and culture. Think about Google, MySpace, Facebook, YouTube, blogging. All invented by people in their twenties. Facebook has become the number one communication venue in Canada for young people!

Another key trend is convergence. The lines between school, work, friends, consumerism and culture have all been blurred. Youth do not place the different aspects of their lives into neat little boxes. They have the choice to connect to everything any time they choose. (To see what I mean, check out their Facebook page - if they let you).

Our youth expect change. They expect control. If we have any hope of attracting this innovative generation ("digital natives") to our organizations, we need to bridge the gap between the generations.

Here are some of Valiquette's suggestions on how to attract and retain youth:

- Create a solid employer brand (I would add: rooted in integrity, social responsibility and "greenness")
- Involve younger employees in the interview process of youth candidates
- Highlight opportunities for advancement and contribution
- Offer flexibility (e.g. in duties, schedules, locations, conduct and dress codes)
- Develop a Facebook group (as Pepsi, Royal Bank and countless other corporations have already done)
- "Reverse mentor" - older, experienced staff can learn from youth
- Find commonalities among all generations (e.g. respect, interesting work)
- Allow for and respect blurring of personal/work lives (e.g. allow Facebook at work)
- Offer and embrace rapid change

It is imperative that we handle the shift of power and control from old to young effectively. I don't know about you, but twenty years from now I hope to be planted in a Muskoka chair somewhere, overlooking a lake, while our youth run things. They are tomorrow's corporate talent. And tomorrow's scientists, and politicians and educators and parents. Their behaviours and attitudes will shape the world - goodness knows whether it'll still be round!



Max Valiquette keynote speaker at '08 HRPAO at the Metro Toronto Convention Centre last month.

Photo by Peter McCusker




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