

# Know youngsters so you can mold them

Author Eric Chester says HR execs need to recognize the "shift away from the traditional work ethic."

By Janet Wiscombe

**E**RIC CHESTER KNOWS what you're thinking: Young workers just don't give a damn. He knows you watch in horror as a steady flow of new employees at your company streams out the door. And he knows you are spending more time than ever recruiting people who are in the 16- to 24-year-old age group—with worse results.

Members of this generation have shoddy work habits; they are often rude, uncommitted and self-centered, Chester says. But if human resources executives take the time to understand what makes them tick, they are far better able to transform them into committed, productive, even loyal employees, he says.

Chester is the author of several books, including *Employing Generation Why* and the recently released *Getting Them to Give a Damn: How to Get Your Front Line to Care About Your Bottom Line*, which is also the topic of his session at 4 p.m. today. He is well aware that there are plenty of conscientious young adults. Still, he doesn't mince words when talking about stark new trends.

"They are nothing like you and me," he says flatly. "Now there are many more service jobs. If one doesn't work out, you can get another one by the weekend. Our parents were more do-it-yourselfers. They valued jobs."

"This generation is totally different. They were born to buy. They have completely been wired from birth to buy. Marketers—not their mothers—have told them what athletic wear to



MIND SHIFT ▲ Younger workers have profoundly different attitudes about work, and how to do it.

buy, what cereal. They are very affluent. They have cell phones and iPods."

What they don't have is a strong work ethic, he says. Social attitudes have changed from "Work hard and get ahead" to "In order to win in life, you've got to get more than you put in." Get yourself a piece-of-cake job that doesn't require much effort for a paycheck.

To successfully find and keep members of this age group, companies must understand their expectations. "In my presentations, I say, 'Let's take a look at who we're talking about and why they approach the workplace

so differently from any other generation,'" Chester says. "People in HR only spend a little time studying this generation. That is a big mistake. If they spent even the very smallest fraction of time studying this generation the way marketers do, they would be much better off."

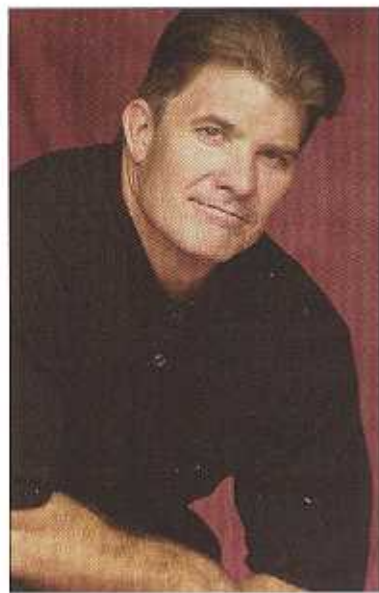
"You have to know your labor base," he adds. "The only way companies can drastically reduce their turnover is by paying attention to who their workers are."

Chester, a nationally recognized expert on Generations X and Y and president and founder of Generation Why Inc. in Lakewood, Colorado, is a consultant for such companies as Cold Stone Creamery, Wells Fargo, BellSouth and Harley-Davidson. He helps employers understand the values, expectations and skills that teenagers and young adults bring to the workplace.

It isn't that this generation is bad or wrong, he emphasizes; but it is different—very different.

Until the economic boom of the early '90s, companies were in the driver's seat. "If you wanted to land a job, you knew you had better clean up, buck up, suck up and shut up," he says.

In his latest book, Chester writes about how today's new service economy has profoundly changed the way people approach work: "There's been a shift in the importance of self-expression, in the way the game is played, a shift away from a traditional work ethic." **wfm**



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