

The NET Generation and Family Centered, Neighborhood-Based Services

Our system is constantly looking to hire and maintain a competent, confident and committed workforce of professional social workers. As a result of staff turnover and burnout, hiring is a challenge that, depending on the day, can seem insurmountable. There is a new generation of young adults emerging that, unlike past generations, has a set of unique technology-based characteristics. Child welfare agencies would do well to pay attention to these as they seek to fill vacancies and round out our staff roster.

We have heard of the Baby Boomer generation, they are 77 million strong; the baby busters which are 44 million strong and our most recent Gen Xers. But, slipping quietly by the Gen Xers is the newest generation to hit the employment lines - the Net generation. This group of young adults (born between 1977 and 1997) are 80 million strong. It is the first generation to grow up in the digital age.

Whereas in the 1960's the generation gap was over differences in values, lifestyles and ideology between parents and children, the gap between boomers (parents of the Netters) and Netters is the huge edge the Netters have on information technology. As a result of growing up in a media-savvy, information hyped technology accessible world, Netters are comfortable with change brought about by new technology more than any previous generation.

Netters are used to hard work; have grown up understanding the need for interconnectivity to the worldwide community and, as a result of growing up in fragmented families, tend to view various family configurations as normal. Members of this generation understand that their training, skill set and abilities have everything to do with getting a job and establishing a career path and are not willing to blindly give their loyalty to an organization that is unsupportive (they witnessed downsizing, mergers and acquisitions and the impact on their parents' careers). These young Americans regard chaos and change as normal and as a result they are more attuned to the need to make adjustments mid stream and have contingency plans.

What is the potential impact for the field of child welfare and the work of integrating a family centered, neighborhood based approach to service delivery? Family centered, neighborhood-based (FCNB) service delivery requires individuals to embrace change, have a willingness collaborate, find the similarities rather than the differences, build on strengths and be flexible when crisis hits. This approach to children, families and communities requires us to withhold personal judgments, support families (however self defined) by connecting them with, and creating support systems where none (or minimally) existed. This new breed of change-hardy, change-ready Americans will be a welcome addition to organizations like ours that are going through transformation. Netters are team-oriented, respect people who demonstrate expertise and knowledge and want to work for agency's that will utilize their knowledge, skills and ideas. They want to participate in decision making and establish interconnectivity with

others inside and outside of the organization. They are NOT interested in ladder climbing rather, they seek to be part of organizations that give them a direct say in how work is done and where they can add, innovate or create in order to turn out the best service possible. These new workers readily accept the accountability and all that it requires. Netters want flexibility, they need opportunities to multitask and operate numerous projects concurrently. The work of child welfare is perfect for this population of young adults.

How can we attract and keep Netters in our agencies? To attract and keep these workers, child welfare organizations must keep the objectives of self-managed teams aligned with agency goals through effective strategic planning and CONSTANT INTERNAL COMMUNICATION. Our organizations MUST improve internal communication NOW and share information widely and regularly. Data and information reports generated by these professionals must be shared with them. Distributing reports to management staff only will be a BIG turn off to Netters who will feel disrespected and under utilized as a result. Organizations must provide opportunities for networking inside and outside of the agency and allow these workers to establish relationships that have been historically reserved for upper management. Netters view themselves more as contract employees and as such, are at their best in terms of productivity, creativity and work satisfaction when they work on projects that enhance their skills and competencies. We must give these young professionals opportunities to grow their expertise and find new and creative ways to maximize their contributions in the hope of keeping them interested in the work, the field and our organizations. Doing so will greatly increase our collective chance at integrating a family-centered, neighborhood-based approach to service delivery. ■