Young Adults at Work:

What They Want, What They Get, and How to Keep Them

monsterTRAK®

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Today's young adults are different. More than previous generations, they are looking for more than a steady job and good career. They value a high quality of life that views work as just one role in a variety of roles that contribute to this life. However, this characteristic of young adults poses challenges for organizations that need to attract and retain new talent. This white paper describes survey results from over 10,000 young adults between the ages of 18 and 30 as well as survey results from over 700 managers who employ young adults. The surveys were conducted by a joint research project between MonsterTRAK and the Michigan State University Collegiate Employment Research Institute. The purpose of the surveys was to compare young adults attitudes toward work and general life with managers' perceptions of these young adults. This white paper focuses on how managers perceive young adults at work and what they are doing to attract and retain them.

What You Will Learn From This White Paper:

1. Young adults rate interesting work, good benefits, job security, and chances for promotion as the most important characteristics of job in a job search. These characteristics were generally rated more important than a high income.

2. Managers held slightly more pessimistic views of young adults than did young adults themselves. Specifically, managers perceived young adults to be less focused on work as a central life interest compared with young adults' self-ratings. Overall, even the young adults' own ratings of work centrality indicated that they did not perceive work to be a central life interest.

3. Managers perceived today's young adults to hold beliefs that they were superior to others. In addition, managers did not perceived today's young adults as having clear goals for themselves. These perceptions were slightly more negative than the young adults' self-ratings on personality dimensions related to superiority and goal instability.

4. Sixty-four percent of managers believe that retaining young adults has become more difficult in recent years.

5. The most commonly used organizational practices to retain young adults are generally focused on the job. The least commonly used organizational practices to retain young adults are generally career focused or involve parents of young adults.

6. Managers can address young adult needs for interesting work and opportunities to learn by utilizing organizational practices that provide a variety of job responsibilities, challenge, training opportunities, and tuition reimbursement benefits.

7. Managers can address young adult needs for job security and opportunities for promotion by utilizing organizational practices that provide feedback about their performance, rewards for performance in the form of praise or bonuses, and linking young adults with senior organizational members for mentoring relationships.

8. At a specific level, good health care benefits are valued by young adults and are perceived by managers to be an effective practice to retain young talent.

Work typically plays a central role in the lives of many adults. For many, an occupation or profession helps define a person by giving him or her a sense of identity, meaning, and accomplishment. However, many changes in general society and organizations in particular, have served as catalysts to new values and perspectives on work. At the societal level, a shift from an economy based on production to an economy based on consumption has resulted in a rise of values associated with comfort, convenience, and covetousness of material goods (Currie, 2004). At the organizational level, technological innovations, organizational restructurings and outsourcing no longer guarantee work for a good employee. Lessons learned from these changes can prompt young adults to hold work values that differ from older, more established workers.

What makes this generation of young adults different from previous ones? Economic, cultural, medical, and historical trends have enabled today's young adults to put off financial and familial responsibilities. Unlike previous generations, most of today's emerging adults are likely to have parents who can still afford to support them well after high school and college graduations. Cultural attitudes are more tolerant of premarital sex and medical advances in birth control and fertility have made it possible for more young adults to postpone marriage and children. Finally, recent scandals in government, business, and religion have eroded young adults' trust in traditional institutions and leaders from these establishments. Inappropriate and unlawful behaviors from government leaders, corporate implosions in financial scandals, and large-scale lawsuits convicting religious leaders of sexual misconduct have helped produce a generation of emerging adults who are less likely to trust the basic institutions of our society. Correspondingly, they are less likely to follow advice from their elders and more likely to take their time to make life-changing decisions.

Descriptions of emerging adults reveal positive and negative pictures. On the positive side, delaying marriage until the late 20's may help reduce teenage pregnancies and early divorces. Delaying career choices may also give young adults more time to carefully consider alternatives and develop a realistic preview of a chosen career. On the negative side, many young adults choose to live with their parents and drift in a series of low paying, disconnected jobs, saving their money to buy luxury items. They have a sense of entitlement to special attention, extra favors, and rewards; but don't feel obligated to put in the work that might merit these considerations.

From these trends, the current generation of young adults is qualitatively different from previous generations. Many names have been used to describe people between the ages of 18-30 who have not assumed full adult roles; including: emerging adults, twixters (people between adolescence and adulthood), Generation X, Generation Y, and the Millennial generation (See Arnett, 2004; Grossman, 2005; Howe and Strauss, 1991, 2000). Most of the current research is comprised of qualitative studies, or interviews, conducted on relatively small numbers of people. In late 2005, MonsterTRAK launched an electronic survey and collected data from over 10,000 young adults. The purpose of the survey was to develop a profile of this generation of young people. Results from the survey are described in a series of white papers available on Monster.com and some results are highlighted in this report. In 2008, MonsterTRAK launched an electronic survey and collected data from over 700 managers who employ young adults. This report focuses on the managers and examines three issues: (1) How do managers' perceptions of young adults compare with the young adults' perceptions of themselves? (2) What organizational practices are used to attract and retain young adults? and (3) How do managers rate the effectiveness of these organizational practices on retaining young adults?

YOUNG ADULTS: WHAT THEY WANT

Young adults were asked to rate fifteen common job characteristics on how important each was in their job search. These ratings were used to determine the rank order of importance of the job characteristics and are presented in Table 1. Job characteristics that are related to long-term career success tended to be ranked higher than job characteristics that are more short-term oriented. Thus, characteristics such as having interesting work, good benefits, job security, and chances for promotion were generally rated as most important to a job search. In contrast, limited overtime, working in a prestigious company, travel opportunities, and limited job stress were rated as less important. The high rankings of benefits and job security most likely reflect current work trends related to reductions in benefits and organizational downsizings. The current rise of health care costs have highlighted organizational efforts to cut benefit costs, perhaps making young adults more aware of the need for employee benefits.

Two relatively low rankings shed light on the current generation of young people. Despite a stereotype of young adults being preoccupied with money and materialism, a high income was rated only moderately important to a job search. In overall rankings, a high income placed 8th out of 15 job characteristics. In addition to long-term career success features, job characteristics related to quality of life (ex. geographical location and vacations) were rated as more important than a high income. Second, "being able to work independently" was ranked 11th of 15 job characteristics. Research on autonomy at work often views it as a core job characteristic that would influence work motivation and job performance (Hackman & Oldham, 1980). Perhaps these young adults prefer to work in teams rather than by themselves. Such a change would match organizational strategies to move toward team-based work.

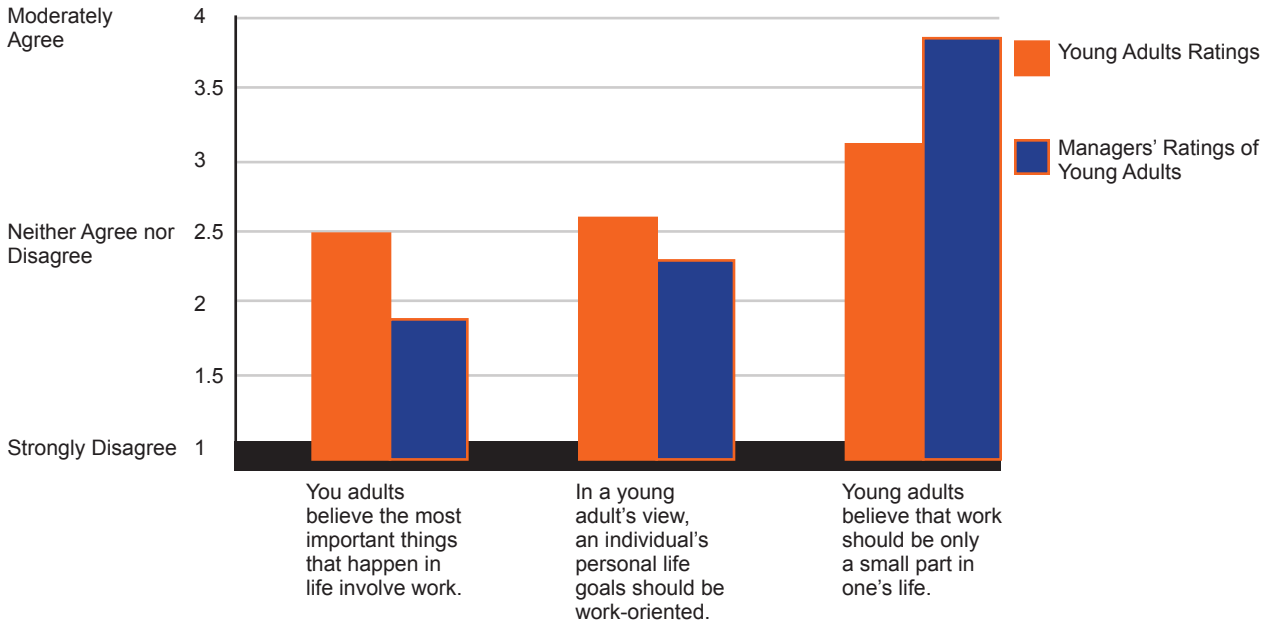
Table 1: Job Characteristic Rankings

Rank Order	Job Characteristic
1	Interesting work
2	Good benefits (e.g., health insurance)
3	Job security
4	Chances for promotion
5	Opportunity to learn new skills
6	Geographical location
7	Annual vacations of a week or more
8	High income
9	Flexibility in work hours
10	Regular hours – no nights/weekends
11	Being able to work independently
12	Limited job stress
13	Travel opportunities
14	Prestigious company
15	Limited overtime

DESCRIBING YOUNG ADULTS: HOW THEY VIEW THEMSELVES AND HOW MANAGERS VIEW THEM

Work centrality was measured by the Work Involvement Questionnaire and consisted of six items: (1) *The most important things that happen in life involve work,* (2) *Work is something people should get involved in most of the time,* (3) *Work should be only a small part of one's life,* (4) *Work should be considered central to life,* (5) *In my view, an individual's personal life goals should be work-oriented,* and (6) *Life is worth living only when people get absorbed in work.* Young adults were asked to rate themselves on these items. In contrast, managers were asked to rate how young adults believed work was a central life interest. Across all items, managers rated young adults as having lower work centrality than the young adults' self-ratings. Results for three items with the largest differences between the young adult and manager samples are shown in Figure 1. The items in Figure 1 were worded for managers to rate young adults' beliefs about work.

Figure 1. Work Centrality: Comparing Young Adults' Self-Ratings with Managers Perceptions of Young Adults



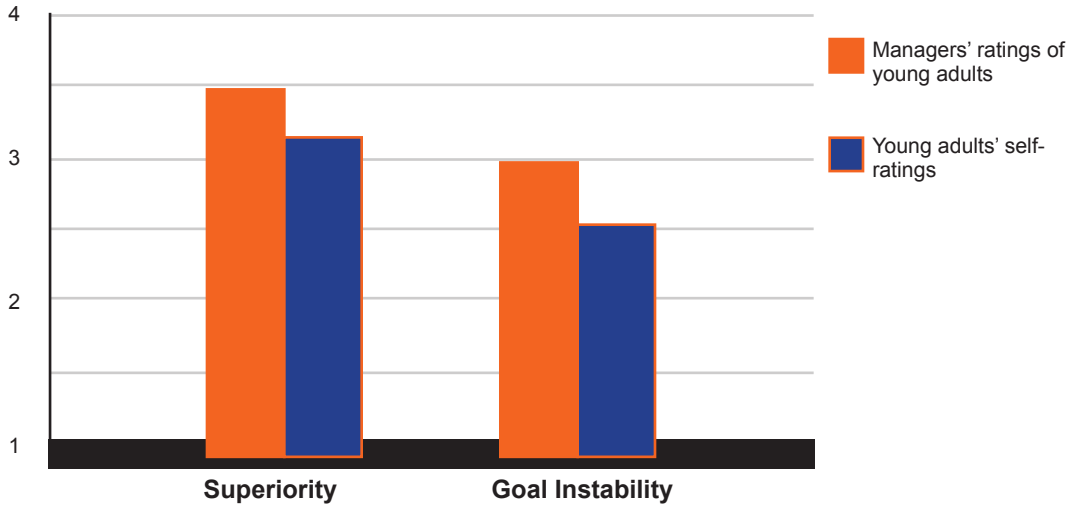
In all three cases, the average manager ratings indicated that they believed work was not central to young adults. Managers disagreed with statements such as: *Young adults believe the most important things that happen in life involve work and In a young adult's view, an individual's personal life goals should be work-oriented*. In addition, they were more likely to agree with statements like: *Young adults believe that work should be only a small part in one's life*. These ratings indicate that managers perceive young adults' work centrality to be relatively low. Their perceptions are supported by the young adults' self-ratings. Across all six items, young adults disagreed or were neutral to statements describing work as a central life interest. Furthermore, comparisons of the current generation of young adults to a sample of young adults in 1982 showed the current generation views work as less central than the previous generation. As one young adult put it, "*work is not the #1 priority, we want more of a personal life*".

PERCEPTIONS OF YOUNG ADULTS

Two survey scales were used to compare how young adults and managers view two personality dimensions that have been associated with young adults. One dimension tapped beliefs that one is superior to others (named the Superiority factor) whereas the second dimension tapped beliefs that one is not sure about oneself or doubts he/she can follow-through on goals/work (named the Goal Instability factor). The Superiority factor was measured by items such as: "I deserve favors from others" and "I know that I have more natural talents than most", whereas the Goal Instability factor was measured by items such as: "I wonder where my life is headed" and "I don't seem to get going on anything important" (Robbins & Patton, 1985). These personality dimensions were selected because both were theorized to describe younger adults more than older adults.

Comparisons between the young adults' self-ratings and the managers' ratings of young adults were consistent with the results measuring work centrality. Managers generally thought young adults viewed themselves as superior to others and were unsure of their goals more so than the young adults perceived themselves. Comparisons on these personality dimensions are shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Perceptions of Young Adults on Two Personality Dimensions



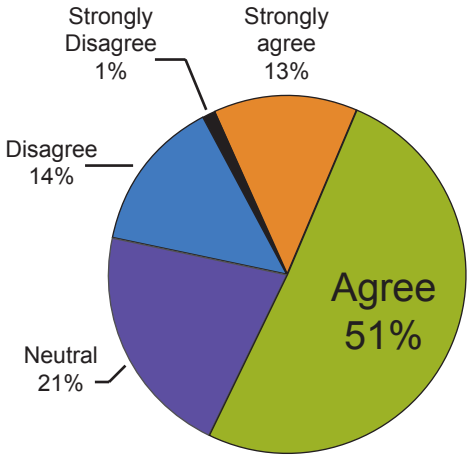
From these results, it appears that many managers perceive young adults in a negative light. They believe work is not a central life interest for young adults, young adults feel superior to others, and that young adults may not have clear goals for themselves. These perceptions may affect how managers recruit, select, and manage young adults.

YOUNG ADULTS: WHAT THEY GET AND HOW TO KEEP THEM

A survey by the Saratoga Institute estimated that 22% of new hires voluntarily quit their jobs within the first year. Our survey on young adults found that many change jobs frequently. They are surfing for the right job in much the same way that they surf on the internet for the right information. If some young adults perceive themselves to be better than others, they may feel entitled to better things in life. This sense of entitlement may encourage young adults to avoid compromises or concessions and to continue their search for an ideal job and career. They may not know what they want, but they know after working a particular job, that that job is not "it". Thus, job surfing is used to gain different experiences in order to determine what kind of career would best fit them.

Managers from our survey have indicated that it is getting more difficult to attract and retain young talent. Responses to one item on retention are depicted in Figure 3. Almost two-thirds of the managers agreed or strongly agreed that retaining young adults has become more difficult.

Figure 3. Manager ratings to: *Retaining young adults has become more difficult in recent years.*



Many organizations are motivated to minimize the turnover problem, but few solutions have been identified. A list of 40 organizational practices was identified from the general job design literature as well as managerial practice articles that specifically addressed the retention of today's young adults. These practices are listed in Appendix A. Practices that were most or least frequently utilized are reported in Figure 4.

The most frequently used practices can be generally described as job-oriented practices. Jobs that provide challenge, variety, responsibility for a complete task and good feedback are likely to be jobs with high interest and appeal to young adults. These practices would match young adults desire for interesting and engaging work.

The list of least frequently utilized practices can be generally described as career-oriented practices. Fewer than 40% of the managers reported using promotability forecasting, career planning workshops, or developmental assessment centers. Two practices that specifically involved the parents of young adults also received low utilization ratings. Although some managers have described benefits with parental involvement in the selection or orientation processes, these practices have yet to gain widespread traction in many organizations.

The organizational practices listed in Figure 4 were also rated on their retention effect. The average ratings are shown in Figure 5. Frequently used practices were generally rated as more effective than less frequently used practices. All of the frequently used practices were rated at least moderately effective on retaining young adults. In contrast, of the least frequently used practices, only "special onboarding experiences" was rated moderately effective.

Figure 4. Percentage of managers utilizing a specific organizational practice

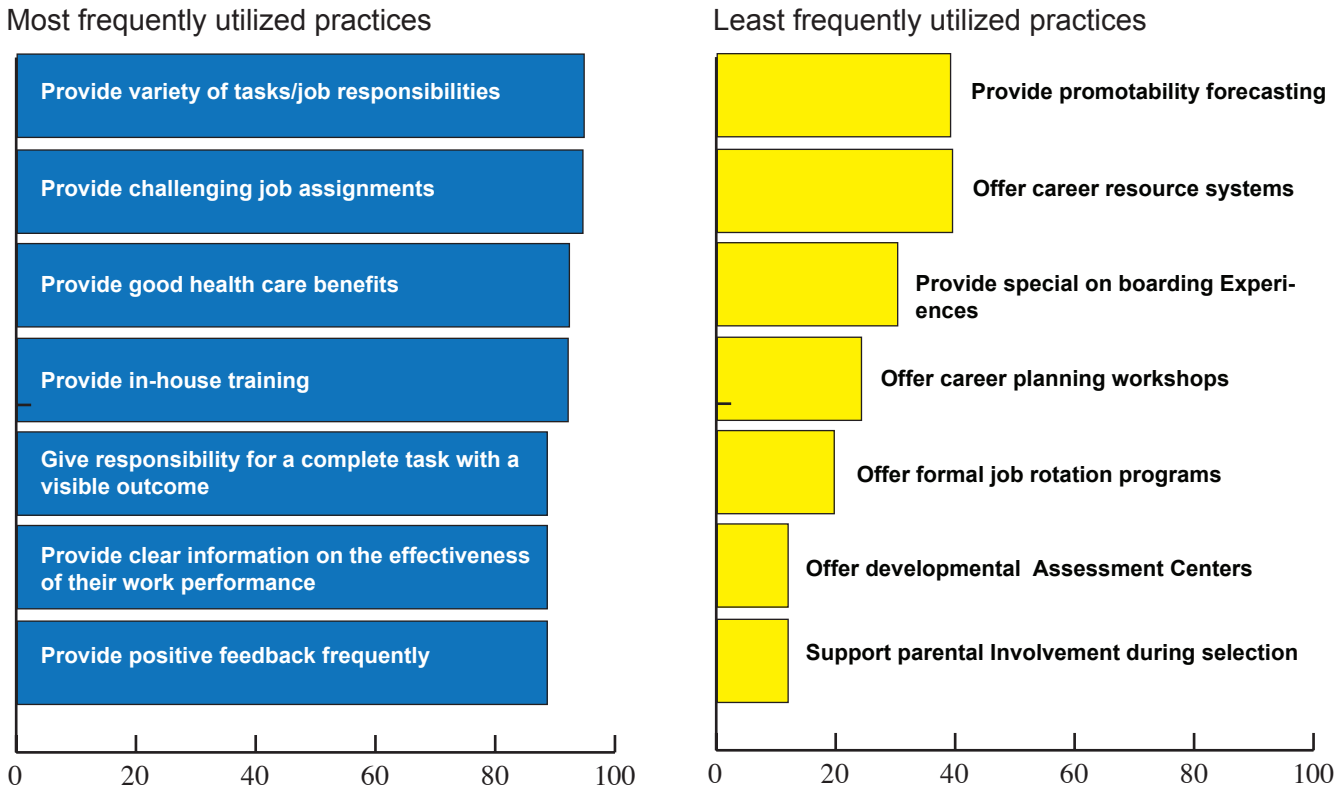
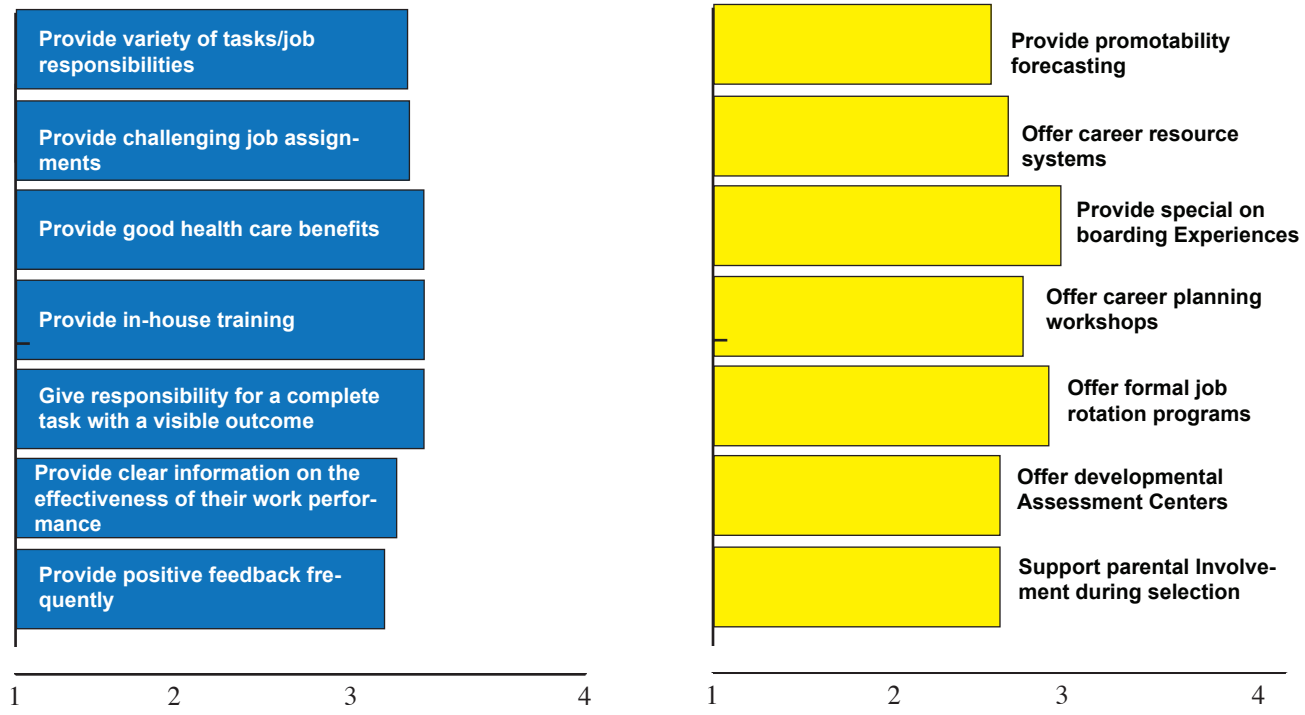


Figure 5. Ratings on the effect a specific organizational practice has on retaining young adults

More frequently utilized practices are rated more effective in retaining young adults



Perhaps the most surprising finding is that none of the organizational practices were rated uniformly as being highly effective in retaining young adults. There was substantial variance in all the ratings. In other words, every organizational practice was rated as having little to no effect on retention, having a moderate effect, or having a strong positive effect. These findings clearly show that there is no magic bullet to retain young adults. It is not just a matter of offering a particular practice or benefit, there are many variations of managerial practices that can have a profound impact on retention rates. Thus, poor in-house training can encourage turnover but good in-house training can retain talent.

We also looked at specific organizational practices that had the highest percentages of managers who used the practice and who rated it as having a "strong positive effect on retention of young adults". The top ten organizational practices are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Top 10 Organizational Practices Rated High on Retaining Young Adults

1. Offer tuition reimbursement (26%)*
2. Provide good health care benefits (24%)
3. Provide in-house training (24%)
4. Provide performance bonuses (22%)
5. Offer flexibility in work hours (22%)
6. Provide job posting (22%)
7. Provide young adult with a formal mentor in the organization (21%)
8. Encourage experienced employees to informally mentor young adults (21%)
9. Provide a job that gives the young adult responsibility for a complete task with a visible outcome (19%)
10. Provide special onboarding experiences for young adults (19%)

**Percentage of managers who utilized this practice and who rated the practice as having a strong positive effect on retention is shown in parenthesis.*

Results from the two surveys on young adults and managers show three areas of convergence between what young adults want and what managers perceive will be effective in retaining young talent. First, at a general level, young adults want jobs that are interesting with opportunities to learn new skills. Managers who provide a variety of job responsibilities, challenge, training opportunities, and tuition reimbursement benefits are more likely to retain young adults. Second, young adults want jobs that can give them a sense of security and provide opportunities for promotion. Managers may be able to help young adults assess their potential for a future within the organization by providing them with feedback about their performance, rewards for performance in the form of praise or bonuses, and linking young adults with senior organizational members for mentoring relationships. Third, at a specific level, young adults want jobs with good health care benefits and managers perceive this benefit as an effective organizational practice to retain young adults.

THE CHALLENGE FOR EMPLOYERS

Several books have been written that describe today's young adults. They range from optimistic predictions that this generation will be the next greatest generation (Howe, Strauss, & Matson, 2000) to dour predictions of a narcissistic generation that believes it is entitled to fame and fortune without having to work for it (Schneider & Stevenson, 1999; Twenge, 2006). Few of these books have systematically examined large numbers of young adults. More recently, books have been published that address young adults at work (Alsop, 2008, Martin & Tulgan, 2006; Marston, 2007). Most of the recommendations for managing the current generation of young adults are based on interviews or general impressions. The results in this white paper are based on empirical data provided by over 10,000 young adults and over 700 managers.

Attracting and retaining young adults at work may be as simple as providing them with what they want. They want interesting work -- give them challenging job assignments. They want opportunities to learn -- give them training and tuition reimbursement benefits. They want health care benefits -- give them health care benefits. However, if young adults don't know what they want, or if they think they want something that really doesn't matter, then the solution to recruiting and retaining these young people may not be so simple. Organizations are challenged to identify what their young adults want and how to manage these needs within the larger context of managing all of its human resources. To a certain extent, the current generation of new talent can be shaped or socialized by organizations. In other words, employers can help young adults identify what they want via direct management practices (ex. Performance feedback) or via indirect guidance (ex. Informal mentors).

Organizations are also challenged to dive deeper into specific organizational practices and to learn exactly what or how practices should be implemented to maximize their effects on employee retention. For example, onboarding experiences may help young adults learn how they fit into their new organization, but what differentiates effective and ineffective onboarding experiences? Specific information on the best practices has yet to be gathered in a systematic fashion across a large number of organizations. This information is likely to represent a competitive advantage for organizations to attract and retain the latest generation of new talent.

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Additional information about the young adults in this research is reported in earlier white papers:

Chao, Georgia T. and Philip D. Gardner (2006). Important characteristics of early career jobs: What do young adults want? White paper prepared for Monster TRAK.com.

Chao, Georgia T. and Philip D. Gardner (2006). Today's young adults: Surfing for the right job. White paper prepared for Monster TRAK.com.

Chao, Georgia T. and Philip D. Gardner (2007). How central is work to young adults? White paper prepared for Monster TRAK.com.

RESEARCH PARTNERSHIP

About MonsterTRAK

MonsterTRAK is a leading online resource that connects college students and recent graduates with employers looking for qualified entry-level and internship candidates. With more than one million registered users, employers gain extensive reach, and today's emerging workforce benefits from MonsterTRAK's suite of career development tools designed to help them highlight their strengths and identify the best opportunities. Additionally, college and university career centers are able to showcase specific, relevant opportunities to students based on their individual interests using Career Ad Network, Monster®'s patent-pending job syndication technology.

Founded in 1987 as JobTRAK, MonsterTRAK was acquired by Monster, the leading online global careers and recruitment resource, in 2000. More information is available at www.monstertrak.com or by contacting us at 1-800-999-TRAK.

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in 32 countries worldwide. More information is available at www.monster.com or by calling 1-800-MONSTER.

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About Collegiate Employment Research Institute (CERI) at Michigan State University

CERI, established in 1985, is nationally recognized for its research on the transition from college to work; employment readiness of college graduates; and the transition experience through college ("the sophomore year"). The Institute is also involved in the assessment of learning in the workplace; assessment practices for University accountability (outcome assessment); and evaluation of integrated learning opportunities. CERI annually publishes Recruiting Trends that provides an analysis of the college labor market. For information on the Institute visit http://ceri.msu.edu,or call us at 517-355-2211.

About Dr. Georgia Chao

Georgia T. Chao is Associate Professor of Management at the Eli Broad College of Business at Michigan State University. Prior to joining the MSU management faculty, she was Section Head of the Department of Management at the General Motors Institute. Her primary research interests lie in the areas of career development, organizational socialization, and cultural issues in organizational behavior. Dr. Chao has published a number of articles in these areas and has conducted training and applied research at General Motors, Ford, AT&T, Singer, and other organizations. She received the Academy of Management award for the Outstanding Publication in Organizational Behavior in 1995 with Dr. Gardner. In 2000, she was named a Fellow of the American Psychological Association and the Society of Industrial and Organizational Psychology. Dr. Chao currently serves on four editorial boards.

About Dr. Phil Gardner

Phil Gardner is the Director of the Collegiate Employment Research Institute at Michigan State University. Prior to joining MSU, he was on the faculty at the University of California, Riverside. His primary research interests cover the transition from college to work, early career dynamics of young adults, impact of co-curricular activities on career aspirations and achievement, and college labor markets. Dr. Gardner has published his work in a variety of publications and speaks frequently on college campuses and before employer associations. He received the Academy of Management award for Outstanding Publication in Organizational Behavior (with Dr. Chao) in 1995. Dr. Gardner currently serves as senior editor of the Journal of Cooperative Education and Internships.

APPENDIX A:

List of Organizational Practices Used in the Survey for Managers:

1. Provide a job that gives the young adult responsibility for a complete task with a visible outcome
2. Cultivate an informal work environment that encourages young adults to learn about other parts of the organization
3. Offer a dual career-ladder program to promote people outside a managerial track
4. Identify career ladders and paths
5. Establish extracurricular activities that are not related to work (e.g., volunteer/charitable activities, sports teams, environmental activities)
6. Provide performance bonuses
7. Provide young adult with a formal mentor in the organization
8. Offer flexibility in work hours
9. Offer tuition reimbursement
10. Offer individual counseling
11. Offer career planning workshops
12. Provide job posting
13. Provide challenging job assignments
14. Provide a variety of tasks/job responsibilities
15. Offer career resource systems
16. Communicate how the young adult's job makes a substantial impact to the organization
17. Identify career paths and career options available after the 1st position
18. Offer formal job rotation programs
19. Provide promotability forecasting
20. Provide competitive salary increases
21. Provide young adults with role models
22. Provide clear information on the effectiveness of their work performance
23. Provide special onboarding experiences for young adults
24. Offer a position that involves a variety of different activities to make the job more interesting