

Generation Y: Graduated! Now what?

Trend study of final year students' career perspectives

Final year students will be busy burning the midnight oil with that much-coveted degree in sight. But what happens after that? They throw themselves onto the job market in good spirits and full of expectation. What are their career plans? And has the crisis affected their expectations?

Researchers at the [Centre for Excellence in Career Management](#) at Vlerick Leuven Ghent Management School investigated job market expectations of Generation Y for the sixth year in a row. Almost 1100 respondents participated in the survey, which included students at Flemish colleges of higher education and universities, particularly in economic sciences (43.41%), as well as the Masters in Management (15.94%), Law (9.74%), Communication (10.33%), Behavioural Science (15.06%) and Science and Technology (5.51%). The majority of the sample were people with a master's degree, but people with a bachelor's degree or an advanced master's degree were also represented.

Reports of cutbacks, bankruptcies and lower recruitment rates have painted a sombre picture of the career prospects facing young adults at the start of their professional career. Yet the young people in the sample remained relatively optimistic about their first steps on the career ladder. At the same time the figures confirm the existing tendency that young people occasionally have (unrealistically) high expectations. They are "children of their time" and the latest boom period has left an impression that doesn't really appear to want to change despite the current socio-economic context.

The conclusions

Continue studying or start working: Optimism remains high

In comparison with previous years it is those with a bachelor's degree in particular who want to continue studying: only 34% want to find a job (master: 61%, advanced master: 85%). Despite the fact the jobseekers view the current economic climate as unfavourable, they still believe their own chances of success to be high. They are optimistic and believe they'll be able to find work quickly given their degree and skills. 60% are already actively looking for work; 55% have already sent off applications and 15% have already managed to get a contract. There has been a slight increase in respect of the previous study in 2006.

Preferred sectors remain stable

We have not observed any real changes in respect of previous years in terms of preferred job sectors. The government remains a popular employer (at fifth place with 22.7%); however, the economic crisis has not led to any increases here. It is remarkable that the traditional sectors remain attractive to graduates despite the crisis: consultancy (39.3%), banking and insurance (35.4%), telecommunication (26.7%) and distribution and logistics (25.4%).

The search for work: How?

The top five of the most popular sources appear to be fairly traditional: Internet/company website, job site, university/college, job fairs/events and adverts. It is remarkable, though, that the social network sites – one of *the* communication means for Generation Y – are at the bottom of the list. Therefore companies are advised to continue to invest in more traditional though often more expensive means when trying to attract young people for jobs.

Self-management: All in their own hands?

The Gen Y-ers feel responsible for the course of their careers: 87% agreed with statements such as: “I’m responsible for my career succeeding or failing” or “I rely on myself to develop the career I want”.

Although the scores in the areas of planning, networking and practical preparation were somewhat higher than in previous years, concrete initiatives in terms of self-management remained modest. 48% reported they regularly think about their future careers. 43% were making efforts to develop a relevant network for their careers. And 50% had an up-to-date CV and were doing student jobs and activities that were relevant and would look good on their CVs.

Influential factors and employers’ promises

A good balance between work and private life ended up right at the top of the wish list.

Autonomy and expertise were the next two items. There was a noticeable decrease: The job security factor scored considerably lower compared with the 2004 study.

The number 1 aspect that responders to the survey listed as being important in the “package” offered were the promises the future employer made in terms of social atmosphere, followed closely by interesting career opportunities and an exciting job. It is surprising that the Generation Y students still maintain high expectations despite the current situation on the job market.

The “soft” side: A great need for career support

Generation Y has a particular need for feedback on performance and opportunities for continuing education. More formal HR instruments such as a Personal Development Plan or a system of mentoring score relatively low.

The “hard” side: Material expectations

Remuneration expectations do not appear to have been tempered by economic conditions: This group does not appear to differ from previous years with a median of 1500 euros after tax. They even scored higher in terms of their expected net pay over 5 years: A median of 2200 euros compared to 2000 euros in 2006 and 2008. There is also a large difference between men and women: Whilst male respondents expect a net salary of 2500 euros after 5 years, women's expectations are only 2000 euros.

In terms of the benefits expected there are no changes in the top 3: healthcare insurance plans, pension plans and paid overtime. So-called “new benefits” such as a laundry service, childcare and sports facilities continue to be considerably less important.

Giving and taking: Personal engagement

Generation Y has a considerable amount of expectations, but what are they willing to offer in return? Employers will find some assurances in terms of performance, collegiality and ethical behaviour. The Gen Y-ers are also prepared to take courses on their own initiative or read trade literature in order to improve their deployment opportunities.

The lowest score was for loyalty. Just over half the respondents view their first job as a step-up to a better job: They want to stay no longer than 3 years with their first employer.

Authors: Ans De Vos & Sara De Hauw