

SA12092

AIR TRAFFIC CONTROL CRISIS:  
A CASE OF GEN Y NIGHTMARE?

Patrick Jaska

University of Mary Hardin-Baylor, USA

Patrick Hogan

Columbus State University, USA

## AIR TRAFFIC CONTROL CRISIS A CASE OF GEN Y NIGHTMARE?

### Introduction

The Federal Aviation Administration is shaking up the management of the nation's air traffic control system following embarrassing incidents of controllers sleeping on the job and making errors (Lowy, 2011). The agency is also reassessing lower level staff performance in addition to management. An air traffic controller was suspended in Cleveland for watching a DVD movie at work and a whistleblower complained that controllers at the New York center routinely took naps during late-night breaks (Forer, 2011).

The Federal Aviation Administration officials continued a plan in 2010 to replace three-quarters of the air traffic controller workforce by hiring 10,544 controllers during the current decade. The hiring surge is designed to offset the effects of an ongoing wave of retirements. Officials have projected that 10,000 air traffic controllers will leave the agency by 2020. This mass exodus would come from a total 2010 air traffic controller population of only about 15,000 active FAA controllers. The surge in retirements is linked to the 1981 Professional Air Traffic Controllers Association strike, when thousands of workers walked off the job to protest pay rates, working hours and retirement benefits. President Ronald Reagan fired the air traffic controllers, and the FAA hired replacement workers. Those replacement employees are now nearing retirement age (Federal Aviation Administration, 2011).

One of the current FAA hiring requirements for new controllers is that they “be no older than age 30” (Federal Aviation Administration, 2011, pg. 42). As a result of this age requirement, a large number of the replacement air traffic controllers who are being hired in the current decade will continue to be members of Generation Y (Gen Y). People from Generation Y were born between 1977 and 1994 in the US. They are also known as Millennials, whose current ages are 35 and under. With a population approaching 72 million, Generation Y is the most educated, proficient in technology, ethnically diverse and soon to be the largest generation that America has ever seen. The Gen Y attitude towards work is in stark contrast to Gen X who believe the “younger generation” lacks a good work ethic (Gelston, 2008) and Baby Boomers who say “I worked hard for forty years. Now I would like to retire.” While Baby Boomers lived to work and Gen Xers work to live (Dogan Gursoya, 2008), Generation-Y members work to fund their lifestyle (Aquino, February 2012).

### Background

The replacement Controllers who were hired since 1981 fall under the FAA’s mandatory retirement age of 56. This mandatory age requirement applies if they are a first line supervisor or a working controller. In other words, if they are actively engaged in the control of air traffic, they are included under the mandatory retirement age of 56.

However, if they are a staff specialist in the FAA, or if they are a second-level manager,

then they do not directly supervise those are controlling air traffic. This group of Controllers can stay as long as they are effective. The other exception to the mandatory-age-56-rule applies to rehired PATCO controllers. They can also stay until they qualify for retirement.

As noted earlier, the PATCO Controllers went out on strike in 1981. Some of these former controllers were rehired over the years, and at that time the logic that was presented against rehiring them, was that these individuals have been out of air traffic control for some time. Furthermore, these controllers would not be able to stay long because they would soon hit 56 years old, and they would not have accrued sufficient retirement benefits. So an Executive Order was promulgated stating that the FAA will allow them to get enough time to retire.

The FAA has three major categories of controller hiring sources:

- Previous Controllers – These individuals have prior FAA or Department of Defense (civilian or military) air traffic control experience.
- AT\_CTI Graduates – These individuals have successfully completed an aviation-related program of study from a school under the FAA's AT\_CTI program.
- General Public – These individuals are not required to have prior air traffic control experience and may apply for vacancies announced by the FAA (Federal Aviation Administration, 2011).

The agency continues to attract and recruit high quality applicants into the controller workforce to meet staffing requirements. For example, of the 988 controllers hired in FY 2010, 252 were graduates of AT\_CTI schools, while an additional 226 had previous air traffic experience (Federal Aviation Administration, 2011).

As noted earlier, a large number of the replacement air traffic controllers hired in the last few years are members of Gen X or Gen Y. Members of Generation X were born between 1963 and 1981 and Generation Y members were born between 1977 and 1994 in the US. Gen Ys general attitude towards life is enigmatic, and they like being individualistic and bringing change to their environment. They dislike bossiness and the status quo in corporate culture.

#### Research Question and Methodology

This study addresses the research question of how much do the general attitudes of Gen Y members differ from the general attitudes of Gen Xers and Boomers? If there are significant differences, this may necessitate changes in the management styles practiced in the air traffic control towers.

The organization of this paper will be to address each of the five descriptor groups of the Generation Y identified by Meier and Crocker (2010) as having a high impact on the respondent population. The approach used by Meier and Crocker studied the responses of Generation Y members as they actually entered the workforce. The five categories are detailed below in Table 1.

Table 1

Gen Y Descriptor Groups Identified as High by Meier and Crocker (2010)

Primary Groups	Secondary Groups
1. Leadership	Management Style Supervisory Practices Supervisor/Employee Relationships
2. Compensation	Salary Benefits
3. Interesting Work	Task Oriented Work Issues
4. Work Atmosphere	Work Environment Normative Attitudes Work Culture
5. Job Features	Work Hours & Schedules Co-Worker Relationships Job-Related Communications

One of the FAA's approved AT-CTI facilities, located in the Southwestern United States (US), has agreed to give the authors access to interview Air Traffic Control faculty instructors and their perceptions regarding Generation Y students and these five attributes. The methodology used in this study is survey research, with personal interviews as the principal method of gathering information. The personal interview can be very helpful in learning the instructor's intentions or attitudes about a belief, such as his or her perceived value of several attributes possessed by the students in question. The personal interview allows the instructor the opportunity to expand on his or her own beliefs about these issues, thereby adding to the richness of the response.

This study is designed to assist those who oversee employee service operations. In the case where an agency, such as the FAA, is experiencing more severe employee service issues, this study can be used to help diagnose which issues may be due to differences in their attitudinal positions caused by generational factors. This analysis can help agency managers understand what they need to start doing, stop doing, and continue to do, in order to create a sustainable employee service balance with their younger employees.

## Discussion

### 1) Leadership –

**Management Style** - Management style is a leading motivational characteristic that Gen Ys are interested in from an employer. They wish to be treated on an individual basis and acknowledged, whether it is positive or negative. One way for managers to increase the motivation from Gen Y workers is to challenge them at their daily tasks. Gen Ys need to be motivated through constant reward and recognition.

Employers should also understand that Gen Y is coming into the workforce with high expectations of their managers. They expect their managers to have all the answers and be as

educated as themselves. Gen Y expects their managers to adapt with them and leave the "old school" practices behind.

**Supervisory Practices** - Gen Y employees are motivated when given the freedom to work as they please. These employees do not want a manager telling them what to do at every second, but they do desire regular feedback. They prefer a guiding hand to a micromanager. Gen Y is not a generation that can remain happy without seeing the significance of their work. This is why communication is one of the most important aspects of dealing with Gen Y members. Gen Ys grew up multi-tasking in multiple aspects of life. From school, to sports, to internet, they are able to complete tasks without hesitation. This multitasking orientation contributes to a short attention span, which demands that recognition and rewards arrive quickly.

**Supervisor Employee Relationships** - A very important role for managers is to create mentorships within the company. This allows the senior employees to reach out to the Gen Y employees and offer them advice and counseling in a new environment. Mentoring is a very successful way for Gen Ys to learn about the values of the organization, as well as gain insightful knowledge in an industry that is foreign to them. They appreciate a good mentor who will give them a sense of direction rather than aimlessly reaching. (Meier & Crocker, 2010).

**Response to Leadership** – The AT Control subject matter experts from AT-CTI have mixed reactions to the leadership traits discussed above. They have observed that Generation Y members' approach to authority is often casual. It is not that Gen Ys do not respect authority; they are just unimpressed by authority. They grew up watching authority figures fall from grace.

As an Air Traffic Controller progresses through their career, part of their job description is participating in on-the-job-training as an OJT Instructor. The OJT Instructor is part of the "old school" establishment, and adapting to the need for immediate gratification of the Gen-Y trainee may be difficult. Many AT Controllers have been training new employees on and off for 15-20 years, and they grow weary of the training experience. Training consists of the same old questions over and over again. "Why do you come from the FAA Academy and you cannot do this?" "Why do you come up here to the Tower when you cannot learn that?" Additionally, the attitude that the Gen Ys bring in with them does not help them. They often act like they are entitled to their jobs and they may not respect their Training Controllers.

When new controller trainees get through the FAA Academy, they go to a FAA Control facility. At this training facility, the new Controller trainees go through additional classroom time, sometimes as much as six more months. After they are through with the additional classroom activity, they have to prove their mastery of the technology through extensive testing. Subsequently, they move into the radar room and the Control Tower for even more training. At this point, they receive a radio headset and microphone. They use this to plug-in next to the training Controller's plug. If the trainee does something wrong, it's the OJT Controller's Certificate upon which the incident is written, not the unlicensed trainee. This training with the OJT Controller can last another 12-18 months. That is why OJT instruction is so critical to the trainee's future.

## 2) Compensation

**Salary and Benefits** - Generation Y employees do not want to be stuck at one level for a long time. They want to learn how to grow within the organization and to develop into a well-

rounded individual, which is no different than their predecessors. The difference with Gen Ys is that they not only expect to move up through a company quickly, they demand it. They prefer a job that recognizes performance and not tenure. More than half of the Gen Y respondents listed high salary, good benefits, and other compensation as a major motivational characteristic of their job. They expect to receive medical insurance, paid holidays, ample paid vacation, and other perks from their employers. Gen Ys will also do whatever it takes to earn these benefits in a job, because they expect it (Meier & Crocker, 2010).

Gen Ys have no problem moving on to another job opportunity that will offer them what they want. Dedication to one organization is fast becoming an idea of the past with Gen Ys. This may explain why almost 30% of the respondents have had at least 3 employers in their short careers. Gen Y members expect their employers to provide more benefits and other perks than their Boomer and Gen X colleagues. (Balderrama, 2007).

**Response to Compensation** – The AT Control subject matter experts from AT-CTI unanimously appreciated the fact that Gen Y members may be more money motivated than some of their predecessors. The Air Traffic control job places many stressors on its members, and the discipline required comes from many sources, including excellent compensation. One possible problem with Gen Y members may be their readiness to move on to another job if they dislike certain features of their present job. The FAA considers the Air Traffic Control environment as a professional career. Given the technical nature and cost of its training program, the FAA is searching for individuals who can enjoy 25 years of service before the mandatory retirement of 56 years old.

Additionally, in order to attract the most qualified candidates, the FAA pays Controllers well and offers very good employee benefits. As far as Salary levels for Controllers, their median annual wages were \$111,870 in May, 2008 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010).

The Air Traffic Control pay system classifies each air traffic facility into one of eight levels with corresponding pay scales. Under this pay system, controllers' salaries are determined by the rating of the facilities, along with their experience level. Higher facility ratings usually translate into higher controller salaries. However, the more highly rated facilities also make greater demands on the controller's judgment, skill, and decision-making ability (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2010).

It is very important to Gen Ys that they have quality time with their family. They have very little allegiance to anything that they haven't previously incorporated into their value system. However, a career with the FAA as an Air Traffic Controller may attract some Gen Ys because of the importance of the job and its excellent compensation.

### **3) Interesting Work –**

**Task Oriented Work Issues.** For many organizations, understanding Generation Y is the first step to create an environment that is open to new ideas and where all employees can enjoy the working environment, no matter what their age. Recruiters need to learn how to recruit Gen Y employees that fit the organization. For a successful recruiting effort, organizations need to understand Gen Ys and adapt to their needs to ensure that they are perceived as a desirable place to pursue a career (Yeaton, 2008).

Another way for managers to increase the motivation with Gen Y workers is to challenge them at their daily tasks. Work can easily become boring and un-motivating to an employee who

is constantly doing the same thing every day. To combat this, managers can assign different tasks to the employee; allow them to work on different projects and to keep an open mind to how the employee can bring new and motivating ideas to the company.

**Response to Interesting Work.** As noted above, Generation Ys would prefer a casual and informal workplace. Anything that makes work less formal resonates well with Generation Y. The AT Control subject matter experts from AT-CTI have shown definite reactions to the casual preferences discussed above. These preferences create a major problem with Gen Ys and the reality of the Air Traffic Control workplace, which can be an extremely stressful work environment.

Part of the reason that OJT instruction is so difficult is due to the Trainers' experience in previous training environments. In many training exercises, the Trainer feels like the FAA is trying to take their Certificate away in the event of training errors. These experiences result in a strained attitude that the ATC instructors have towards OJT training. Although, some of the most experienced instructors are those who feel that they have seen almost all situations and are not concerned that the trainee is going to get into any trouble from which the trainer will not be able to extract them both.

Occasionally though, it is possible that a trainee can get things so screwed up that it would be nice to say "Okay, everybody just stand by while we fix this situation." Unfortunately this is not possible in the Air Traffic Control Tower. Everyone is going 400 MPH at each other, so there is no possibility of a pause to fix to your individual problem. So the solution is to unplug-your trainee, send him downstairs to the break room, and then the trainer fixes the problem. After a successful fix, the trainer then goes downstairs to find the trainee who was responsible for the mistake(s). Certainly if the trainee is willing to learn from the experience, then the trainer will be more willing to help get the trainee back on track.

Unfortunately, the attitude that the Gen Y often takes when he/she makes mistakes is to not take responsibility for their own actions. They often blame the classroom training for insufficiency. They may respond with "It's not my fault," or "They didn't teach me that at the FAA Academy." In these circumstances it makes the OJT trainer think twice about going out on a limb for the Gen Y trainee. In the hectic AT Control workplace, there may not be room for casualness and informality.

#### **4) Work Atmosphere -**

**Work Environment.** A company's work environment has risen to the top of the list for many Gen Y individuals as a reason for choosing an organization for which to work. It is important for different generations to understand the realities of today's working environment. Collegiality and friendship with co-workers is a major motivational force for Generation Y. A dynamic work environment with give and take communication among fellow employees is a plus for the Gen Y member. Gen Y is looking for a place where they will be successful, while having a good time (Meier & Crocker, 2010).

**Normative Attitudes and Work Culture.** In today's society, a company must continue to embrace new changes in technology. Technology has created a large barrier between many of the workers in today's society. Baby boomers are on the slow end of a movement that is only becoming more useful and effective on the working environment. In contrast to Boomers, Generation X and Generation Y members were born into the technology era and the use of

technology is an integrated part of their lives. The simple fact is that Gen Y (digital generation) has never experienced life without computers (Tulgan & Martin, 2001).

Generation Y has far surpassed their parents and teachers in the technology world, in fact, teachers often become students, when dealing with technology. Advancements in technology are coming quicker than ever before and Generation Y is already on the forefront of the advancements. Generation Y will be the first generation to enter the workforce with a full knowledge and understanding of the technology around them.

**Response to Work Atmosphere.** The AT Control subject matter experts from AT-CTI have shown a decidedly mixed reaction to these issues of work Atmosphere. The first issue of AT Controller trainees having a good time at work and making them feel comfortable in the work environment is certainly not the reality at this time. These issues of enabling a more worker-friendly work atmosphere are all part of the management shake-up at the FAA that is going on now. The effects on the FAA Work Atmosphere of this turmoil are still uncertain. However, our AT Control subject matter experts have shown a definite positive reaction to the techno-savvy skill-sets of Gen Y also discussed above. The next new FAA technology issue is the Automatic Dependent Surveillance Broadcast System (ADSB). The major benefit of the NextGen systems such as ADSB is airplane recognition. Using the current FAA system, a radar antenna system can only look out a maximum of 56-58 miles. Whereas using ADSB, there is actually equipment in the aircraft that will communicate down to a ground-based station, which is connected to other ground-based stations. Effectively, there is an electronic mosaic and that network would cover the US. So if a ground station in one location receives information on an aircraft, that information is transmitted via multiple network channels throughout the ADSB system. The data is thereby communicated to other FAA Centers. For reliability purposes, the ADSB system is double or quadruple redundant.

With regards to ADSB, the largest concern to Air Traffic is that the system wide installation would replace radar as we know it. Members of the easy techno-generation, that represents the Gen Ys should be able to easily adapt to the new FAA technology, and this could be a major plus for the hiring of Gen Y controllers.

## **5) Job Features**

**Work Hours and Schedules.** Flexibility in the workplace is also very important to Gen Y. They expect flexible summer hours, to be able to work from home, and paid time off if they were forced to work beyond their normal hours. Generation Y is one that is more open to working anywhere at any time compared to the Boomers and Gen Xers. They have no problem traveling and working away from home, where previous generations have often hesitated. However, while they easily accept traveling and being away, they also expect to be compensated for it (Meier & Crocker, 2010).

**Co-Worker Relationships.** Multiple generations in the office can often cause clashes among colleagues. Currently, there are at least three generations functioning in the workplace: Baby Boomers Generation X, and Generation Y. These three generations, each with different traits, values, and goals creates a challenge for many managers who have to create unity in the workplace among such a broad age group. Understanding how to manage the different traits of each generation is the most important step for managers to create a positive working environment for every employee. There will probably always be problems as new generations



enter the workforce. Each generation seems to have their own way of doing things, each thinking their way is the best (Meier & Crocker, 2010).

**Job-Related Communications.** Generation Y wants significantly more flexibility in the work/life balance, compared to the Boomers and Gen Xers. Gen Ys craves their relationships with friends and family and are more interested in making their jobs accommodate their family and personal lives. Not only are they seeking a good work/life balance, but they enjoy company outings that benefit both the business and social side of work. Building on the lifestyle benefits noted above, managers can reach out to Generation Y, understanding that with new technology work can be mobile. Managers who allow their employees to think freely and work as they please, may get better results, than if they were to lay a firm hand on the employees (Spiro, 2006).

**Response to Job Features.** As noted above, Generation Ys would prefer flexibility in the work/life balance. Anything that increases the social side of work appeals to Generation Y. The AT Control subject matter experts from AT-CTI have shown definite reactions to the free thinking preferences discussed above. These preferences create a major problem with Gen Ys and the reality of the Air Traffic Control workplace, which can be an extremely stressful work environment.

Unfortunately, there is a high attrition rate in the training of Air Traffic Controllers:

- At the level of the FAA Academy, the failure rate is about 10%;
- At the level of the FAA Control Center, the failure rate depends on the location:
  - At DFW the failure rate is very high, almost 95% of those left after the FAA Academy do not complete training.
  - At Chicago O'Hare the failure rate is even higher, almost 98% of those left after the FAA Academy do not complete training.

As a result, the FAA has recently begun sending the new hires to a smaller secondary Control Center to get their feet wet, before allowing them to subsequently transfer to the primary Control Centers. These newly minted Air Traffic Controllers need to get their early experience at smaller Control Centers such as Longview, TX or Lubbock, TX. These beginners need to build-up their experience levels initially from the secondary Control Centers for several years.

#### Summary

On balance, the interviews with the subject matter experts supported the importance of these five managerial differences between Generation Ys and the other generations. Each of these five differences was expected to affect the management of younger Controllers as they replace Boomers who are retiring over the next decade. They were especially optimistic about the Gen Y members exhibiting money motivation and possessing strong technology skill-sets. On the other hand, they were less sanguine about the Gen Y's casual and informal approach to leadership in the highly stressful working environment of the FAA control tower. The interviews with the experts support the research question that differences exist in the general attitude of Gen Y members from those of Boomers and Gen Xers. These differences may necessitate changes in management style in the air traffic control towers. Further research is necessary to determine the types of management change required by the FAA.

## References

Aquino, J. (February 2012). Gen Y: the next generation of spenders. *Customer Relationship Management* .

Balderrama, A. (2007, 12 26). *cnn.com/2007/LIVING/worklife/12/26/cb.generation*. Retrieved 12 30, 2011, from CNN.com: <http://www.cnn.com/2007/LIVING/worklife/12/26/cb.generation>

Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2010). *air traffic controllers occupational outlook handbook, 2010-2011*. Washington, DC: US Department of Labor.

Gursoy, D., Maierb, T.A., and Chi, C. G. (2008). Generational differences: An examination of work values and. *International Journal of Hospitality Management* , (27) 448–458.

Federal Aviation Administration. (2011). *10-year strategy for the air traffic control workforce 2011-2020*. Washington, DC: US Department of Transportation.

Forer, B. (2011, April 14). head of FAA's air traffic quits after another controller sleeps on the job. *ABC News* .

Gelston, S. (2008, January 30). Gen Y, Gen X and the Baby Boomers: Workplace Generation Wars. *CXO Media Inc.*.

Lowy, J. (2011, April 29). FAA orders air traffic control management shake-up. *Associated Press* .

Meier, C., & Crocker, M. (2010). generation Y in the workplace: managerial challenges. *The Journal of Human Resources and Adult Learning* , 6 (1).

Spiro, C. (2006, November 12). *generation Y in the workplace*. Retrieved December 30, 2011, from [www.dau.mil](http://www.dau.mil): [http://www.dau.mil/pubs/dam/11\\_12\\_2006/11\\_12\\_2006\\_spi\\_nd06.pdf](http://www.dau.mil/pubs/dam/11_12_2006/11_12_2006_spi_nd06.pdf)

Tulgan, C., & Martin, B. (2001, September 28). *managing generation Y - part 1*. Retrieved September 30, 2011, from [businessweek.com](http://www.businessweek.com): [http://www.businessweek.com/smallbiz/content/sep2001/sb20010928\\_113.htm](http://www.businessweek.com/smallbiz/content/sep2001/sb20010928_113.htm)

Yeaton, K. (2008). recruiting and managing the "why" generation: gen Y. *CPA Journal* , 78 (4).