



FOR YOUTH DEVELOPMENT®
FOR HEALTHY LIVING
FOR SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

#NEXTGENNEEDS

EMERGING LEADERS RESOURCE NETWORK

#NextGenNeeds – Human Beings, not Human Resources

The ELRN #NextGenNeeds framework is a collection of preferred workplace conditions that research shows younger generations seek from their employer. ELRN advocates for all YMCAs to review this material and work towards adopting these measures to increase the retention and development of young staff members. Adopting these measures will support the process of securing and cultivating a leadership pipeline critical for the future success of the YMCA movement.

Why #NextGenNeeds Matters

The YMCA is a vibrant, diverse, intergenerational workforce. This diversity of perspective can be a strategic asset for a YMCA and help ensure that a Y is aware of and responsive to the needs of its community. However, a traditional rigid hierarchical work environment is increasingly at odds with the expectations of younger generations. While developing for years, COVID significantly accelerated these trends during the disruptions. As much as ELRN advocates for particular changes to YMCA culture, the more significant underlying theme is a need to embrace flexibility and engage in meaningful, sustained dialogue with staff. In the process of co-creating, a workplace environment grounded in the YMCA mission of being “For All.”

For those new to the Y or seeking Y employment for the first time, a YMCAs culture and its HR policies are largely unknown. For many staff, their initial experience with the Y was as a member. Frequently a Y’s staff culture can be very different from how a YMCA engages with the community. In addition, for many, the YMCA is their first job. Unlike many traditional first jobs, the YMCA has tremendous potential for career progression.

According to Y-USA figures, as a percentage of the total full-time workforce across the country, there are fewer employees under the age of 40 today than there were ten years ago. The YMCA workforce is aging as the rest of the country’s workforce is getting younger. COVID and the upending of how YMCAs conduct their work have exacerbated this situation, with nearly 14,000 staff under the age of 35 leaving the YMCA since 2020. Our opportunity is to make it easier for YMCA associations to implement policies proven to attract and retain younger generations.

Preferred Workplace Conditions

For several years, the ELRN steering committee members have researched, tracked trends, and synthesized information regarding younger generations in the workforce. This work led to the development of the framework (including key learnings) below, highlighting three areas of the employee-employer relationship needing attention.



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Work-Life Harmony

Flexible Work Environment

Flexible Scheduling

Though the concept of work-life balance is over 200 years old (Robert Owen, 1817), the impact of the COVID pandemic has helped reintroduce and redefine what it means to the current workforce. During the pandemic, the line between work and life blurred significantly as businesses and organizations tried to stay afloat, resulting in many discussions on how to avoid or deal with burnout.

As we exit the pandemic, the discussion of burnout is still prevalent. In a 2021 study by YouGov, participants identified no commute and flexible hours (63%) as benefits experienced while working from home. We believe the Y can better support its staff by establishing new structures that embrace flexibility in work. This flexibility includes both where we work as well as when we work.

We recognize that the degree of flexibility is not uniform across all positions and work assignments. The challenge for a YMCA is to allow flexibility where desired and warranted, communicate this meaningfully, and seek ways to carve out flexibility for employees whose work is predominantly fixed in time and place.

In balancing this new structure, here are some ideas to consider:
Non-traditional hours (due to direct delivery and staffing challenges)
Using virtual platforms to stay connected
Intentional use of time to avoid burnout

Professional Development

Feedback

Mentoring

Continuous Learning Opportunities

The YMCA is an expert at developing human potential. Each year the YMCA helps more than 4 million youth help discover their potential. And at the local and national levels, the YMCA offers a wide array of professional development opportunities. For staff, however, we know that not all are afforded these opportunities. NextGenNeeds advocates for the YMCA to lean on its organizational strengths and consider employment as a developmental opportunity at all levels. This frame is essential for growing leaders within the Y organization and the general workforce. The good news is that younger generations want this from their employers. Continuous learning is more critical to Millennials and adult Gen Zers than to previous generations when it comes to updating professional skills. Reskilling and upskilling are increasingly important in 2021, with 59% of learning & development professionals ranking them as top priorities.

Additionally, feedback is essential to the success of any organization or business and the continued success and performance of an employee. In addition to providing timely and constructive feedback, research has shown that emerging leaders desire:

Regular check-ins (60%), either weekly or daily
Shorter feedback sessions (67%) that are more interactive
In-person feedback (75%), which can be accomplished through a high-tech/high-touch approach

Furthermore, given the increasingly diverse nature of the workforce, supervisors require training that strengthens their cultural competencies.



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Organizational Culture

Collaborative Environments

Cause-Driven Purpose

Flat Management and Decision Making

Organizational culture affects employee retention and sets operations and work-life balance standards. It is constantly called upon to adjust to social, governmental, generational, and cultural influences and changes. Through our research, we have identified three areas of focus to consider when promoting productive organizational culture:

In addition to the other areas, these focus areas support the advancement of a thriving inter-generational workplace. They align with the YMCA's mission and organizational values and seek to ground the work of the YMCA in greater authenticity. They express the value of healthy living for staff to create opportunities for mental wellness in life and workplace relations. And by lifting social responsibility in employment, Y's nurture activism and equity in work, encourage collaboration and reinforce a Cause-Driven Purpose in work. Much of this work calls for reimagining management structures and decision-making processes.

A Note Regarding 2020-2022:

COVID has upended many aspects of our lives. This disruption upended many practices, policies, and assumptions overnight. Many Y's made the difficult decision to furlough or terminate large numbers of staff, which significantly impacted young people. What many are realizing, however, is that COVID magnified and accelerated trends that were already in play. Growing dissatisfaction with the workplace environment, inequity in employment and quality of work throughout the organizational chart, and a lack of empowerment to perform work are just a few of the issues ELRN has learned impact the quality of life for young professionals. We celebrate the thriving work environment the YMCA can be and call on the YMCA movement to learn from the disruptions brought about by COVID and transform the work environment For Good.