

BY WAYNE ROSENKRANS | FROM ORLANDO

# Positive Space for Gen Y

Engaging young aviation professionals without stereotyping strengthens multi-generational safety culture.



Fascination with generational differences among today's working aviation professionals has moved beyond specialists in recruiting and training to others with direct responsibilities for operational safety. A recent indicator was the number of presentations and discussions during the World Aviation Training Conference and Tradeshow (WATS 2012) in Orlando, Florida, U.S., in April about integrating Generation Y (Gen Y) into the industry. Gen Y — one of several popular terms, such as *millennials* — refers to people born between 1982 and 2004 by some definitions (Figure 1).

People who train pilots, maintenance technicians and flight attendants for regional and major airlines raised a few concerns relevant to safety, but also pointed to advantageous attributes based on their experiences with this generation (see “Cabin Crew Adaptations,” p. 28). Several Gen Y college students acknowledged the concerns and encouraged collaborative solutions free of stereotyping. They also shared their personal ambitions and adaptation to industry safety culture. Maintenance technology students said that most Gen Y classmates have had lifelong mechanical interests and hands-on experiences, quickly adapt to the most advanced instructional/reference technology and now expect to earn international certifications.

“As a group, Millennials are unlike any other youth generation in living memory,” Neil Howe and William Strauss, specialists in generational issues in the United States, wrote 12 years ago in one of their series of books.<sup>1</sup> “They are more numerous, more affluent, better educated and more ethnically diverse. More important, they are beginning to manifest a wide array of social habits ... including a new focus on teamwork, achievement, modesty and good conduct. Only a few years from now, this can-do youth revolution will overwhelm the cynics and pessimists.”

They predicted that Gen Y would be differentiated from older coworkers in the degree to which they are *special*, that is, raised with the sense that they are collectively “vital to the nation and to their parents’ sense of purpose”; *sheltered*, that is, partly “the focus of the most

sweeping youth safety movement in American history”; *confident*, with high levels of trust, optimism and a sense of their generation’s power and potential but, individually, relatively fearful of failure and prone to pursue “less risky career goals”; *team-oriented* with “strong team instincts and tight peer bonds”; *achieving* in relation to standardized testing with a “mindset of planning ahead for an orderly future”; *pressured* in terms of expectations “to study hard, avoid personal risks [and] excel”; and *conventional*, that is “comfortable with their parents’ values” and supportive of social mores.

Shelby Beauregard, ambassador for recruitment and outreach for the College of Aviation at Western Michigan University (WMU), spoke on behalf of about 30 WMU students who consider many Gen Y attributes valid, though not necessarily applicable outside the United States or to specific individuals. Overall, this group is concerned that aviation employers will prejudice them as members of Gen Y without knowing them as individuals, she said.

“When I [attended] last year, I learned that some aviation professionals were afraid to retire because they were afraid of what my generation was going to do,” Beauregard said. “So how do we bridge this generation gap we all feel? ... There are many stereotypes that have been placed on Generation Y, and many of these stereotypes are seen as weaknesses. But I think

### Workforce Generations Today

Birth Year Range <sup>1</sup>	Generation
1922–1945	Traditionalists
1946–1964	Boomers
1965–1980	Generation X
1981–2000	Millennials <sup>2</sup>

#### Notes:

1. Depending on research cited, birth dates for Generation Y typically vary from the early 1980s to the early 2000s.
2. Some demographic specialists prefer this term instead of *Generation Y*.

Source: Sherry Saehlenou, Boeing Commercial Airplanes

Figure 1

that these weaknesses are often misunderstood and misinterpreted, and that they can actually become strengths for companies.”

The assertion that this generation sees itself as “entitled” is the most common stereotype she has heard, but she said that “achievement-oriented” is a truer descriptor. However, their lifestyle aspirations often are seen by older aviation professionals as out of synch with aviation workplace demands. Citing a few tragic, news-making events that have shaped their ideas about spending time with family since 2001, Beaugard said, “All of the [life] events that have happened to us constantly remind us that life is short, so we enjoy flexibility in our schedules ... a work[-life] balance. ... Generation Y is ambitious; we are not afraid to take on the big tasks. And we appreciate when our creativity and our input are accepted into the workplace.”

Craig Bentley, a captain and vice president of operations, Cape Air/Nantucket Airlines, also mentioned these professional/lifestyle aspirations. “What has that translated to for those of us in the hiring community at the regional airlines?” he said. “We see new-hire pilots who request vacation time prior to serving the customary one year ... at the airline, [the point] where most [airlines] would begin to offer that benefit. We

also see numerous requests for time off and restrictions on the days that they can work, which was unheard-of years ago. But they have busy social calendars, their families are important. ...

We definitely see that at our airline.”

Some of the Gen Y attributes that ring true to the students also are relevant to aviation safety. “We like clear instructions,” Beaugard said. “We work in groups.

... I have been taught from a young age that working in a group and working as a team is the way to get things done.”

At the same time, this generation’s penchant for high-stimulation digital environments — such as habitually texting, accessing social networks and listening to music during study, work and leisure activities — and its reputation for leaving employers after one or two years are among topics worth cross-generational dialogue in aviation environments, she suggested.

“We have to remember that we are four generations working in this industry together, and we all have one dream,” Beaugard said. “[Gen Y] wants to learn from you, so talk with us, not to us. ... We also we need mentorship, [so] connect with us ... and share your passion.”

### Gen Y First Officers

John Colquitt, describing his preparations before being hired by American Eagle Airlines, recalled that he had spent an unexpectedly long, and sometimes discouraging, period as a flight instructor. He applied to four air carriers and two cargo operators, and received interview invitations from two. Colquitt said that his interview preparation was a team effort by a study group, and included Internet-based research on current questions that other applicants to airlines had posted after actual interviews.

Members of the study group role-played to practice answering expected interview questions, then “took it a step further” by imagining how interviewers might ask more probing questions and rehearsing how they would buttress answers. They also practiced attitude instrument flying and conducting instrument flight procedures on personal computers equipped with Microsoft Flight Simulator, a control yoke, rudder pedals and a throttle quadrant, he said.

Flight time as a certificated instrument flight instructor and familiarity with analog instrumentation proved to be advantages after being hired in August 2010, recalled Colquitt, who described his training experience on two aircraft types. “[If the simulator] instructor says, ‘Hey, we are going to shoot NDB



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[nondirectional beacon] approaches' ... [I'm] like 'OK, I can do this because [I] taught that,'" he said. Sometimes, however, his simulator partner would struggle to recall how to conduct that type of approach "because he was raised on GPSs [global positioning system avionics] and GPS approaches," he said.

Colquitt fielded a question about how disconcerting economic news affects his outlook about his new airline career. "I bring myself to the airline and to the situation [with] the sense that I am not entitled to anything; this is an incredible opportunity," he said. "[I think,] 'You're going to let me fly this \$30 million airplane? Awesome, let's go — this is fun!' ... That is what drives my positive attitude a lot of the time. ... Now, I do see the signs ... and I am trying to be smart with my decisions professionally."

### Surprising Failures

Areas of failure by Gen Y and other pilot applicants in regional airlines' pilot hiring processes also were highlighted. "We have found in our own syllabus that if somebody is not getting through the simulator training program ... either they can't keep up with the pace of the program, or they are far behind on instrument skills and procedures," said Paul Preidecker, a captain and chief instructor, Air Wisconsin Airlines. "I am not talking about [instrument] scanning, although that is certainly part of it. I am talking about fundamental knowledge of instrument procedures. This, of course, is a surprise to us. ... Maybe we are taking an 'old school approach' and trying to apply it to the 'new school,' but I don't think so."

During the technical portion of face-to-face interviews by the airline, "we put a METAR [aviation routine weather report] in front of them and just say, 'Read this to us,'" he said. "There are people coming to us who cannot do that. In moments of exasperation, when I say, 'What's the problem?' [their] common comment is, 'Well, I don't get it in raw format. I pull out my iPhone and read the decoded version.' [Then I tell them,] 'That's great, except we don't do that in our airplanes. We hand [flight crews] raw



data and say, 'You need to know the weather.' So that's a weakness.

"We give them [the type of instrument approach chart] that they are used to using and say, 'Alright, the glideslope is out of service on this runway. What is the missed approach point on a non-precision approach?' We hear a variety of disappointing answers. ... We make an assumption that a commercial-instrument-rated pilot knows those things. If we discover [such weaknesses] in an interview, the chance that they will get hired is not so good."

Research by Air Wisconsin into the underlying causes of such applicant failures suggested that some Gen Y pilots may be unfamiliar with piloting fundamentals associated with legacy systems because of their sometimes-exclusive experience with advanced avionics and flight systems.

When asked the question about the missed approach point, one applicant erroneously "said very confidently, 'It's at the end of the runway,'" Preidecker recalled. "We said ... 'Suppose you are in the clouds, and you can't really see? He said, 'I don't know, I just look on my [Garmin] G1000.'<sup>2</sup> Has there become an over-reliance on automation? Perhaps. ... A lot of the people we are hiring right now ... only know the new way.

Some leaders of U.S. regional airlines said they highly value pilot applicants who bring advanced jet training, flight instructor experience and high academic performance.

## Cabin Crew Adaptations

Integrating Generation Y (Gen Y/millennial) flight attendants into the airline industry has required a bit of flexibility in the training community, according to several specialists. “The millennials are coming up with their own experiences, their own ways of communication — which we need to learn,” Sherry Saehlenou, cabin safety instructor, Boeing Commercial Airplanes, told a session of the World Aviation Training Conference and Tradeshow 2012. “They want to know what is expected from them right from the top, and then [to be shown] the steps leading up to it. ... They want their information in chunks, they want it right now. ... They want it simple, and they want you to be honest. So eliminate the unnecessary.”

She said that one Gen Y student explained to her, “We get 80 texts in a day. We are so connected. ... So you [had] better tell me in the first two sentences why I need to read your email. ... Life is moving so quickly that I don’t have time [otherwise].”

Generational differences can exacerbate interpersonal communication barriers, a potential safety issue for crewmembers, said Colette Hilliary, flight/cabin attendant program manager, FlightSafety International. “We don’t want to box anyone in [with stereotypes], but we do understand that the generations are diverse. ... [Gen Y people] are very confident [about] their preferred methods of communication ... and sometimes are impatient with people like me who haven’t kept up with the leading edge of technology,” she said.

One effect is that a choice of communication method can be emotionally divisive, said Shari Frisinger, president, CornerStone Strategies. “I hate when people text me ... especially if [they] are in the next room. My thought is, ‘You’re texting me? I am not worth [the] five steps to come over and talk to me?’ So we have to look at this, again, from the other person’s point of view, from the different generations.”

In 2011, Austrian company Flight Attendant Safety Training trained 2,000 new flight attendants for Lufthansa with particular attention to the attributes of Gen Y students, said CEO Wolfgang Jabornik. “They are used to doing last-minute learning, and they do not read manuals because they [prefer to] learn with trial-and-error,” he said. “They also have a shorter attention span than earlier generations, and they lose interest very quickly if the learning environment does not facilitate [creativity].”

Johan Bostrom, a captain and director, training operations, Novair, focused on lessons learned while teaching a six-week course in 2011 at the Swedish charter airline. “We graduated 36 brand-new cabin crew between the ages of 21 and 45,” he said. “The majority of the students actually were born in the late 1980s and early 1990s — [Gen Y] people.” Trainers had been “nervous” that their exciting new computer-based training modules and online testing were not ready in time for this group, he said.

“To our surprise, [Gen Y students] weren’t so eager to go online for the course-related issues,” said Anna Mellberg Karlsson, chief cabin safety instructor, Novair. Moreover, in post-training feedback, they rarely mentioned technology and preferred studying a printed manual in the classroom. Gen Y students, however, immediately adapted to using a new Internet portal outside the classroom to access online manuals and weekly company bulletins. “[Other flight attendants] from age 37 and up ... didn’t like it at all when we put our manual on our portal and took their books away, and there is also hard resistance against Web-based training among them,” Karlsson said.

In the airline’s crew resource management (CRM) course, Gen Y pilots and flight attendants “actually are very assertive,” Bostrom said. “Today, we [still] need to train our crew to be assertive, but to understand when [to be assertive].” Karlsson added that among Gen Y CRM students, “The majority are ‘blind’ to hierarchy.”

Ann-Charlott Strandberg, head of training and quality manager, Cabin Aviation Training, said that about three-fourths of the Swedish company’s first 500 students were born between 1981 and 1990. “We’ve had to change our methods of training to suit the students,” she said. This involves taking a learning-style inventory and customizing lessons accordingly for each category of student.

Instructors encourage appropriate classroom Internet uses, such as Google/YouTube research conducted on smartphones, but struggle to enforce a “Facebook-free environment in the classroom during classes,” Strandberg said. They ended up creating a Facebook group for students and instructors to post after-hours questions, answers and comments about the course.

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Somewhere in between [the old way and only having automation experience] is probably what we are looking for.”

A counter-impression of recently hired Gen Y pilots came from Cape Air’s Bentley. He noted that pilot applicants trained by professional

academies or flight programs accredited by the Aviation Accreditation Board International have experienced a washout rate of less than 5 percent in company training. As a result, the airline’s hiring process for these applicants omits simulator checks and written exams, he said.

“The most important thing that we look for ... is a safety mindset,” Bentley said. “Where do they get that? Early in their training, hopefully, where they understand what a just culture is and the value of open, non-punitive reporting programs. ... Some of the key things we look for are fundamental stick and rudder skills ... good communication skills, leadership qualities, the ability to be a lifelong learner [and] to change to the demands in the industry, whether they be regulatory or economic. ... So I would put it to ... the industry that [given Gen Y technical prowess], we will spend a lot less time training the new aviators on the gadgets that we have in our airplanes, and a lot more time teaching them the fundamentals of flying an airplane.”

Chief pilot offices and airline training departments swap anecdotes about Gen Y pilot behavior that falls outside company expectations, and companies’ corrective responses. “Stories from my colleagues ... sort of let me know that what I experience at Cape Air and our group is not unique in the industry,” Bentley said. “There is the story of a first officer at a [major air] carrier who was skateboarding across the ramp on his way to preflight his airplane for the first flight of the day. ... There is the story of the [commuter air carrier] captain who was jumpseating home and thought it would be a great idea if she used the [skate shoe wheels] in her sneakers to get down the jetway to ask for [a] ride home. In the past, those indiscretions might have been met with stiff consequences.” He advised mentoring and leadership to “help steer [young aviators] in the right direction so that we have what the public demands.”

### Contextual Issues

“Any way you cut it, this is a difficult business ... the last 10 years since 9/11 have been extremely difficult,” said Paul Railsback, a captain and director of operations, Airlines for America (formerly the Air Transport Association of America). “Anybody who comes into this industry needs to realize — and needs to be emotionally prepared for the fact — that this is ... probably going to remain a tough business

for some time, although I think that the consolidation that is taking place is probably going to be good for the industry and good for the employees. ... We may end up hiring entry-level [airline] pilots for their first airline to be a major airline, which we have never done before. This would be a major paradigm shift for us if it happens.”

Gen Y’s professional/lifestyle aspirations have been reiterated in two surveys, including one with responses from 206 University of North Dakota (UND) aviation students, primarily concerning the proposed rulemaking to implement a 2010 U.S. law mandating airline transport pilot (ATP) certificates and 1,500 hours of flight time for airline first officers (ASW, 9/10, p. 12), said Kent Lovelace, chairman, UND Department of Aviation.

“It goes back to those generational priorities that some of these young people have,” Lovelace said. “Time away from family and friends is a big concern, and it is a priority. ... We all maybe have those feelings.” He suggested industry consideration of explicitly setting up schedules and other practices to make aviation careers more attractive to Gen Y.

“Another [theme in the UND survey] was the kind of flying they want to do, which is more hands-on flying as opposed to autopilot-FMS [flight management system], which obviously for an airline career isn’t necessarily realistic,” he said.

Other responses reflected firm commitments to stay the course to airline flight decks, however. “So, we still have a lot of determined young people out there that want this career,” Lovelace said, quoting a student who wrote, “I’ve had the dream to fly for an airline forever, since I was three or four years old. I won’t let anything stand in my way.”

### Notes

1. Howe, Neil; Strauss, William. *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation*. Cartoons by Matson, R.J. New York: Vintage Books, 2000.
2. The Garmin G1000 is an all-glass, integrated avionics suite designed for installation by original equipment manufacturers.

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