

***Florida Underwriter
Generation Next Is Now by Tim Hoelle
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Insurance sales agent jobs are projected to increase nationally by 13 percent (436,000 to 492,000) between 2006 and 2016, according to the 2008-09 edition of the Occupational Outlook Handbook, U.S. Department of Labor. The report noted that insurance underwriter jobs for the same period should increase by six percent (104,000 to 112,200). Based on Florida's position in the insurance marketplace and population in general, the Sunshine State can expect to fill its fair share of those jobs.

Fortunately, there is a new wave of workers ready to take their place at that table. This group — known variously as Gen Y, Yers, Millennials, and Generation Next — is approximately 70 million strong (the group's birthspan is still under debate, but most researchers mark its beginnings in the mid- to late-1970s, then add 18 to 20 years). Like its parent Baby Boomer generation, Gen Y is bringing a new paradigm to the workplace and the social fabric.

One of the biggest differences between Gen Y and its immediate predecessor, the workaholic Gen X, is that with Gen Y there is a greater awareness and emphasis on a healthy work-life balance. Other characteristics frequently attributed to Gen Y include:

- They have high expectations for themselves in the workplace and of their employers. That may include a desire to make a significant impact with their new employers before they have finished training for the job.
- They value friendship and enjoyment in the work environment, sometimes so much so that they will rely heavily on those criteria in choosing a job.
- They are interested in an employer's commitment to their community and opportunities for volunteer involvement and other means to "give back."
- Perhaps more so than their predecessors, Gen Y college graduates are not opposed to moving back home for a time. Doing so gives them the financial freedom to wait for the right job opportunity.
- They seek immediate and frequent feedback and interaction with managers and fellow employees.
- They want managers, peers, and subordinates to share information so that all employees can grow their knowledge and capabilities more rapidly.

Making the Grade

Cassandra Cole, PhD, associate professor and Waters Fellow in Risk Management and Insurance at Florida State University, has had considerable interaction with Gen Y over the past eight years. Dr. Cole said, "I've noticed that current [Gen Y] students are more aware than their predecessors of what is going on in the industry. Also, they have more professional experience upon graduation than in years past."

Almost everything seems to happen faster today, and these young people may be looking for significant compensation and advancement more quickly than their employers can deliver. “We recognize this, and the school attempts to provide realistic information and expectations of salaries and career paths,” Dr. Cole said. “That is accomplished by bringing alumni and industry professionals in to address our students and talk with them about what is going on in the marketplace.”

According to Dr. Cole, college students who choose the risk management and insurance track at FSU typically do so intentionally. “Most students who choose risk management and insurance as a major don’t just fall into it,” she said. “Our introduction to risk management class provides a good look at insurance for 350 to 400 students per semester, and has something to do with many students choosing this major.”

She is encouraged by the enthusiasm of program graduates, and pointed to positive comments from a recent survey of alumni conducted by FSU and the Risk Foundation:

- Before entering the industry, graduates felt positively about insurance.
- The most positive perception was on the intellectual challenges provided by the industry.
- The weakest perception was on work-life balance.
- After working in the industry, perception improved on every dimension, particularly on the frequent intellectual challenges and the opportunity to work in teams. Alumni also cited job stability and high income as top reasons to join the industry.

Early Bloomers

For some, the insurance work experience starts before college. The national InVEST program provides an introduction to the world of insurance to high school students, most of whom are not necessarily on track to be insurance professionals prior to participating in the program. In Florida, InVEST is a joint effort of the Independent Insurance Agents of America, the Florida Association of Insurance Agents (FAIA), a local independent agents’ sponsoring group, and the local school system. The program is offered in over 20 Florida high schools and will involve 650 to 700 students in the 2009-2010 school year.

Lindsey Shank, the Florida task force chair for InVEST, has volunteered at the St. Petersburg Catholic High School’s program for 10 years. “The mission of InVEST is to improve insurance literacy of students and to attract new talent to the insurance industry,” Shank said. The program accomplishes that by traditional instruction and by creating a mock agency within the classroom, complete with sales, underwriting, and team projects.

Noting the differences between today’s students and those from a decade ago, Shank said, “Students today have a greater awareness of the end game and are much more goal-oriented. A greater number of high school students are at least thinking about having their own business. It seems each year more are able to recognize and seize opportunities to be mentored beyond the classroom by experienced insurance professionals. I think the challenge for them is just being taken seriously in spite of their age.”

Professional Development

Once Gen-Y members obtain employment in the insurance industry, there are organizations and associations eager to provide networking, education, and support. One such group is the Young Agents Council (YAC) at FAIA. The program is open to all agency personnel with less than 10 years in the business or who are under 40. FAIA Membership Coordinator/YAC Coordinator Melissa Champany reported that her chapter has 290 members (FAIA members and industry professionals) and is in its fourth year of operation.

“Looking to the future to insure our history,’ is our slogan, and perpetuating the independent agency system is our goal,” said Champany. “To accomplish that we seek to promote leadership and build relationships that last a lifetime.”

Champany said that YAC “also wants to engage the young agents in the legislative process. The current agents in leadership realize they need to help build new leaders. In a few short years, we have gone from simply being ‘young agents’ to being a recognized source of talent and value.” Five YAC members currently sit on FAIA’s board. “These five are not the only ones who are active,” Champany said. “There are many other young agents involved in local community leadership and service.”

As more members of Gen Y become full-time insurance professionals, it behooves managers, HR departments, and fellow employees to learn about them and how to meet both the challenges and opportunities they present. The more that senior managers know about Gen Y, the better equipped they will be to fully utilize their unique talents and abilities.