# ThinkYoung perspective on Next Generation

If you were born between mid-80s and mid-90s, you can’t help struggling with the label you’ve been assigned to: “Generation Y” or its synonym “Millennials”. Although under this name goes a wide range of studies spanning from sociology to economics, aiming to portrait the distinguishing traits of those between 20 and 30 years old, the task of assessing the real impact of social variables, may these be technology, social forces or political events, is definitely a challenging one. ThinkYoung can rely on a slightly different approach compared to main academic researches: first-hand and on-the-field experience with youngsters, based on both tight relations with students or youth organizations, and a several-years-long tradition of European wide surveys. Lately, ThinkYoung has started looking as well to the Asian reality, namely to China and Hong Kong.

When in 2011 we started our first “Skills Mismatch” study, we have been confronted with a striking gap. On one hand, the common opinion throughout European HR managers and employers was of a lack of skilled workers able to fill specialized positions, claiming that the university system was detached from the job market and that youngsters tend to be short-term oriented; on the other hand, youngsters claimed to feel rather skilled both for their ideal job and for their actual job, meanwhile lamenting low entry-level opportunities, the omnipresent requirement of “past experience” and lack of a corporate long-term vision. How to address such a disconnection?

Usually the attitude of youngsters toward the job market is perceived from a mere economic perspective. The skyrocketing figures regarding youth unemployment in Europe, the declining employability of youngsters in some industries and, more broadly, the lack of high-innovative start-ups in Europe, have attracted most of media’s attention and have forced policy-makers to take strong decisions to relief the economic situation of under-30. In example, measures like the “Youth guarantee” of the European Commission or the simplified fiscal regime to start a company for those under-35 in Italy are just two example of how the “Generation Y” got at the center of policy-makers’ attention. Nonetheless, based on our experience, we argue that this simplified view does not reveal the underlying factors and the deeper cultural cleavages retaining the full potential of European youngsters.

In order to properly address these complex issues we need a step back. European youth is not a monolith, and it serves the cause of a clearer understanding using education and mobility as variables to spot a specific category of youngsters. According to Eurobarometer[[1]](#footnote-1), today only one European out of three has completed tertiary education (37%), with a variance of around 10% depending from the country; at the same time[[2]](#footnote-2), if we exclude islands’ States, on average only a mere 4% of the students studies in another EU member state (with the exception of Slovakia, where the figure is 12%). Although the Erasmus program in 2011/12 managed to move around 250000 students[[3]](#footnote-3), some of these already study abroad or stay for just a semester. Eventually, here we can spot a first strong cleavage: policies which address highly skilled youngsters, which have cross-country experiences and allegedly speak several languages will most probably fail if policy makers don’t bear in mind that those filling these criteria are a marked minority. Considering that the total population between 20 and 34 years old in Europe is around 98 millions, using the percentages of graduates and, among them, those which have studies abroad, we end up with an audience for these reforms of a less than 1,5 million youngsters, which is 1 out 50.

Another strong restraint to any further analysis is the actual structure of the job market in many European countries. Since early 2000 two strong forces have disrupted the former offers of carrier growth and pay raises. On one hand, the decreasing productivity and the shift toward a capital intensive economy asked for reforms of the legislation of job market (such as increasing precarious and short term contracts or lowering the salary for low-end tasks) leading countries toward either extreme market flexibility (see i.e. Germany) or production decline (as in France or Italy). On the other hand, the economic crisis along with the increased mobility led to an excess of offer of skilled youngsters in many sectors, flooding a stagnating market. Consequently companies have reacted raising the skills required for entry position, as they could hire better people for the same salary, but at the same time without viable candidates for specific jobs, such as IT or nurses, as the educational system proved slow to adapt to the new scenario and governments did not intervene.

With these restraints in mind, we have focused and conducted studies on: skills mismatch, entrepreneurship, attitude toward the future of the work place, mobile communication and social issues. The collage of these researches let us draw a picture of a European youth very mobile, optimistic despite the current dire challenges, extremely adaptable but, above all, far from the former idea of job for life. The job market is the reflection of the productive system of a society, and Europe has been facing a structural reform since the last industrial revolution IT-based. In this scenario, youngsters try to find their way reshaping the very idea of job. The literature on “generation Y” reflects three main factors: the collapse of the sense of authority, at least as intended before; the quest for a meaning for the role covered inside the company and more broadly for the company inside the society; a shift from strong top-down leadership to mentoring and entrepreneurship.

Starting with authority, as exposed in the first Skills Mismatch report, youngsters grew up in a much horizontal society than their parents (i.e. in the EU only 4 members still have a mandatory military service): authority is increasingly technocratic or meritocratic, and even in the domestic setting rights and duties are commonly recognized equal among members by the legislation, deeply changed during the last 40 years (see i.e. right to divorce or the end of the stigma for non-married couples). What is more, technology grants access to most of the information to any member of the company, regardless its rank. On the job, youngsters tend to recognize power and authority to leaders which are open to confront, which back their decisions with convincing arguments and master skills showing their legitimacy for the role they cover.

As a second factor to understand European youth, in our studies on skills mismatch as well as on the future of the workplace, we have witnessed a growing concern over the role of the company in the society. In 2011 we observed that the main long-term goals seek by youngsters in a job were “to became an expert in a field I am passionate about” (almost 50%) and “to improve the life of the others, improve the society” (42%), whereas “to afford a luxurious life” was chosen only by 12% of European youngsters. In our 2013 research, environmentally sustainable technologies were indicated as a must for an enterprise to be regarded as appealing, along with the capability to respond to customers’ input, and to external stakeholders in general. We observe here a view of the company as a political subject, as part of the society; no more an independent entity purely profit-oriented, but an actor in charge of innovation, social development and responsible progress[[4]](#footnote-4).

Thirdly, ThinkYoung has gathered during its Entrepreneurship Schools ideas and impressions from youngsters both in Asia and in Europe. We have seen a growing desire for mentoring, first-hand experience and for greater opportunities to became entrepreneur. Fear of failure is strongly linked to the social stigma associated with who have failed, consequently being able to rely on seniors willing to mentor and help youngsters’ full potential is a key challenge for any youth-oriented policy. Entrepreneurship and intrapreneurship are more and more at the center of European economic development and companies can widely benefit from innovative and creative employees as soon as a creative and flexible work environment is provided. This is even more relevant within tertiary value-added industries, where innovation is the corner stone of success.

Concluding, young Europeans are today everything but a “lost generation”. Maybe lost are the boundaries to living in a single city and to a job-for-life, and lost is probable the idea that innovation and creativity are niche activities. European youngsters, especially those highly educated and with experiences abroad, are extremely willing to move and to challenge themselves confronting demanding tasks, but are nonetheless very critic and very well aware of the big picture of the society where they live in.

1. http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/region\_cities/regional\_statistics/data/database?\_piref1715\_3143872\_1715\_3143865\_3143865.p=h&\_piref1715\_31438, 72\_1715\_3143865\_3143865.expandNode=doAction&\_piref1715\_3143872\_1715\_3143865\_3143865.nextActionId=1&\_piref1715\_3143872\_1715\_3143865\_3143865.nodePath=.EU\_MAIN\_TREE.data.general.reg.reg\_educ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/education/data/database [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. http://www.euronews.com/2013/07/08/erasmus-programme-reach-record-breaking-statistics-in-the-year-2011-2012/ [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The literature on corporate social responsibility has widely covered the impact of best practices on young employees. See i.e. Sobczak, A., Debucquet, G., & Havard, C. (2006). The impact of higher education on students' and young managers' perception of companies and CSR: an exploratory analysis. *Corporate Governance*, *6*(4), 463-474. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)