

Insurance Times: InVESTing in Generation X - The insurance industry's new allure
Given the Dotcom bust and the Enron and WorldCom scandals, insurance could be a stable career option for Generation Xers

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by Peter Stevens, AAI

From above it must have looked like a herd of some kind; hundreds upon hundreds of people rushing the doors of a hotel auditorium as the job-fair commenced, pushing and shoving their way to employer booths. As the dust settled, swarms of job-seekers gathered around company representatives busy defending themselves against the flying quality-stock paper of resumes. For an observer, all signs would indicate that this is an employers' market. Well, until you caught a glimpse of the deserted areas surrounding the booths of local insurance agencies and companies.

It's no secret: The insurance world generally does a poor job of recruiting and enticing new people to come into the workforce. When you mention insurance to many in your potential workforce, they barely give it a second thought before dismissing the idea like a dog shakes off water. Yet, we all readily acknowledge that recruiting is still a critical component of running a successful agency. What has gone so terribly wrong?

The philosopher Epictetus said, "What concerns me, is not the way things are, but rather the way people think they are."

Perception is a large obstacle for the insurance world. The industry has been viewed as downright unfashionable. Most of us have heard the "male, pale and stale" stereotype, or the "stodgy and regulated" label. Many more believe that to pursue a career in the industry, you must be a salesperson. Those of us leading fulfilling careers in insurance know the insurance industry is more than just sales, service and marketing. There are many career tracks to select from...accounting, finance, law, engineering, information technology, marketing and, of course, sales. We need to educate these students before they have made their career choices.

Insurance is a dynamic and growing field, and insurance executives of the 21st Century will need to be well rounded in the areas of insurance, banking and securities if they want to succeed. By educating these students now, we will be laying the intellectual foundation for tomorrow's industry while simultaneously improving the image of the insurance industry in local communities.

There are many reasons we need to target the current applicant pool. They are not only potential recruits, but clients as well. We need to begin targeting this "generation" of buyers if we want the industry to flourish. There has been much press lately about Generation "X." Studies have proven that people who have lived through significant events together often share some of the same principles and values. Understanding and learning to deal with the coming generations is going to require a re-education of your producers and support staff. One definite way to cut the learning curve is to actively recruit Xers as producers and support staff.

Now that the Dot.com euphoria is over and the glamour of some of the big related conglomerates has been tarnished – Anderson, Enron, Tyco, and WorldCom to name a few – many potential recruits are looking for positions in stable companies offering growth potential. Along with the self-satisfaction you gain from being a part of a services industry, that's exactly what our industry offers! Insurance is a stable, multi-million dollar industry. Sure, we may not be looking at the cascade of applicants who flooded the Dotcoms. The wave of enthusiasm for Dotcoms, often compared with the California Gold Rush, has dried up, along with many of their stock dollars and mine...rrrrr. However, those who will lead lasting careers in insurance aren't in the business to get rich overnight.

The good news is that there are quality programs to educate these potential recruits while educating consumers about the world of insurance – programs proven to attract students to the insurance industry. The key is to grow them.

As a small-to-medium sized agency, approaching our 100th anniversary, we don't have the resources or time to recruit, educate and train new employees that are available to larger organizations. We are in the process of bringing in an intern from our local InVEST program, a part of Lafayette High School's Academy of Finance in the Buffalo Public School. This is an inner-city school, where the Academy of Finance is a "magnet" component within the high school. The program partners private industry and the public sector in order to provide quality, industry specific education and work experience for high school students nationwide as preparation for careers, college and all areas of their lives. These students are being taught how to function in a business environment and are fluent in office software, including word processing, spreadsheets and e-mail management. Many have even completed Dale Carnegie courses. These students are enrolled in the National Academy Foundation, which has population of 280. In order to participate in Lafayette's Academy program, these students make a commitment of coming to school one hour early every day in order to fit these extra classes into their schedules.

These students, whether they choose to enter into the workforce or continue their education, will have a healthy respect and appreciation for insurance. At the very least, will help us lose the "stodgy and regulated" label and for me, that's a great start.

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InVESTing in Generation X

How do agents tap into this pool of industry-savvy individuals?

InVEST typically is administered in independent agents' communities by a local committee comprised of industry professionals and school administrators who support and evaluate the program. The committee acts as a liaison between the school and insurance industry, making recommendations on facility organizations and serving as an advisory board that counsels both the business education staff and school administration. Industry members of the committee train the teachers on the insurance industry and arrange for off-site program activities such as job shadowing, field trips, and part-time jobs/internships.

There are 6,000 InVEST graduates each year from high schools and community colleges across the country. These students already have been introduced to basic business skills and insurance career opportunities. In fact, many have held internships at local agencies.

To find out more about InVEST and how you can get involved in an InVEST program in your area, visit www.InVESTProgram.org or call (800) 221-7917.