



## New era of opportunity

**R**ecently, it seems that everything we hear is bad news about the economy and the challenges companies are facing. We hear about companies such as General Motors, the Ford Motor Company, and United Airlines, to mention a few, and how they are all facing severe financial problems. Many more companies in all sectors of the economy — including civil engineering — are making adjustments in how they operate to remain financially viable. Skyrocketing fuel costs, reduced availability of credit, increasing costs for materials and supplies, and upward pressures on health care costs are among the fiscal challenges making it difficult for engineering companies to operate in today's economy.

Despite the current economic situation, successful companies will weather the storm, begin to look to the future, and prepare for a new era of opportunity. These companies will need talented individuals on board who are prepared to seize the opportunities. This will not be easy for engineering companies for two reasons: a projected shortage of engineers as the Baby Boomer generation retires at a quickening pace and not enough students entering the engineering field to meet the demand. The stage is set for a highly competitive process.

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Nevertheless, there is good news. Colleges and universities throughout the country are implementing programs such as Project Lead the Way to attract talented students to the field of engineering. Many schools are working to engage potential engineering students at the primary school level by involving them in real life engineering projects.

However, even with the extra efforts by the university community, the availability of engineers will remain a problem for some time. Civil engineering will reportedly be one of the disciplines most affected. Therefore, companies will need to work diligently to retain their top performers through a variety of approaches, including increased flexibility, more benefit options, improved mentoring and training, career advancement opportunities, and exposure to challenging work assignments.

A new era of business opportunity is on the horizon, and companies will also enter into a new era of employee relations as they begin to bring on members of the Y generation.

The Y Generation — currently 13 to 27 years old —

### R.A. SMITH NATIONAL, INC.

Headquarters:	Brookfield, Wis.
Number of offices:	6
Total number of employees:	244
Year firm was established:	1978
Total billings for last fiscal year:	\$26 million

represents change unlike anything seen before. Numbering some 60 million (almost as many as in the Baby Boomer generation), Y Generation members are described as being bright, insightful, fascinating, challenging, and inquisitive. They dislike the status quo and are willing to examine new ways of doing everything. They have been raised with instant communications, are good at multi-tasking, and expect rapid feedback and decision-making. They want immediate respect; they see life as fleeting as a result of 9/11, the Iraq War, and the Virginia Tech shootings. They live for the moment. They expect to have many job changes in their careers. Engineers from the Y Generation are expected to help lead companies into the new era of opportunity with their strong engineering skills, enthusiasm, energy, and drive for their jobs.

Firm managers need to be prepared to shift the way they deal with the next generation of employees to keep them motivated and engaged. Management will need to create a more open work environment with open channels of communication. They will need to accept being challenged and pushed for answers and decisions. They will need to expect higher turnover rates and find ways of accommodating this change. They will need to rely less on policies, procedures, and status quo operations. And management will need to provide ongoing mentoring and training to keep Generation Y engineers fired up and focused.

Uncertainty about our current economy makes it difficult for companies to look beyond the present, but the era of new opportunity represented by the Y Generation and the promise of change is exciting. Management will need to welcome and embrace change and create a culture where employees will have flexibility, where they will have a voice, and most of all, where they are valued. ■

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