What do Gen Z really want from a workplace?

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Abstract

Purpose   This paper offers a deeper understanding of Gen Z professional attitudes and expectations in the workplace through a large data set.

Design   We provide reference to a unique survey of 1,234 adults who work full- or part-time across different age groups. Gen Z data were compared to three other generational cohorts, namely Millennials, Gen X and Baby Boomers.

Findings   Broad findings reveal that Gen Z have lower satisfaction levels with their job compared to other generations. Furthermore, the findings show that Gen Z craves progress, challenge and better mental health and diversity commitments from employers. Related to that, mental health is reported as significantly lower amongst Gen Z participants.

Originality   The research reinforces that there is often a negative view of 'other' generations. Indeed, the findings here indicate there are often negative assumptions made about Gen Z. Importantly, these are not aligned to how Gen Z perceive themselves. We offer some reflections and recommendations for strategic HR approaches.

Keywords   Gen Z, job satisfaction, mental health, diversity, inclusion, strategic HR

Paper Type   Viewpoint

Current perspectives on Gen Z perspectives

Gen Z's introduction to work has been challenging, especially following the COVID-19 pandemic. Gen Z is thought to have unrealistically high expectations of work (Nguyen Ngoc et al., 2022), yet it is essential to recognise that there are different factors contributing to these high expectations. There is an argument that Gen Z and their work expectations are so starkly distinct that priority should be given to adapting HR approaches to cater for their needs and preferences.

This paper offers a deeper understanding of Gen Z professional attitudes and expectations in the workplace through a large data set, i.e. a survey of 1,234 adults who work full- or part-time across different age groups. We compare Gen Z data with three other generational cohorts, namely Millennials, Gen X and Baby Boomers. The aim is to increase understanding of the Gen Z workforce and present some recommendations to potential employers and their strategic HR approaches.

Instant gratification and lower satisfaction

Gen Z are said to avoid wasting time learning about matters deemed superfluous to them and have a short attention span (Pandit, 2015; Shatto and Erwin, 2016). Indeed, multi-tasking is a key characteristic (Chillakuri and Mahanandia, 2018), and linking short attention span and extreme tech-savviness is a key factor in understanding Gen Z and their high expectation of their career progress (McIlvaine, 2019; Lanier, 2017). These aspects could be central as to why our study also found higher expectation levels and lower satisfaction in the workplace for Gen Z compared to other generations.

Linked to their need for instancy, Gen Z wholly expect new technologies and wish to incorporate them in their work (Dolot, 2018). Technology is an essential social tool for young people, despite potentially augmenting feelings of loneliness and stress (Bertolone-Smith and Spagna, 2019). Gen Z has had accessible technology for their entire lives and have grown up in a connected world through their mobile devices, Wi-Fi, and on-demand entertainment (Seemiller and Grace, 2018).

Lack of resilience and anxiety

Pre- and post-pandemic literature strongly presents an exacerbation of anxiety and lack of resilience amongst Gen Z caused by numerous factors. One factor can relate to more regular access to stressful headlines than previous generations (Bethune, 2019). Another factor can relate to the concept of

reward for participation and effort at school rather than results (Segal, 2022), thereby altering coping abilities, e.g. learning from academic challenges and failure (Bishop, 2022). Post-pandemic, Gen Z appear susceptible to experiencing burnout and higher rates of anxiety and depression (e.g. Poswolsky, 2022; Hoffhower, 2021). Similar to Twenge and Campbell (2018), our study finds mental health for Gen Z to be profoundly lower than other generations and therefore a significant priority to address.

The importance of diversity

The aspiration for an equitable workplace is of the highest importance to Gen Z when considering a future organisation (NSHSS, 2022). They look for potential employers who can respect diversity as this generation are the most diverse generation yet (e.g. Alayande, 2022). Reasons can include the ease of accessing information about social issues at a younger age than previous generations, and this can cause them to be considered the most passionate generational cohort on social justice and equality issues (Deloitte, 2022). Our findings support this position of Gen Z and the importance of diversity and equal opportunities.

Career expectations and work life balance

Despite lower resilience and higher anxiety, Gen Z have very high expectations of their career progression (McIlvaine, 2019). However, their philosophy to achieving their career ambitions is different to previous generations and that is because, despite a desire to progress quickly, many are disinclined to go 'above and beyond', instead placing enormous value on personal time, as seen in media articles about 'quiet quitting' (Pyman, 2022; Espada, 2022; Yang, 2022).

Gen Z is thought of as reticent to prioritise work above everything (Gibby, 2022) and the survey data shows that Gen Z do highlight work life balance as being very important, putting this as the element that they believe that most describes them. However, it is notable that all generational cohorts rate 'work life balance as being very important', and, interestingly, the Gen Z data has a lower mean than other generations.

What Gen Z want from future employers

In short, Gen Z appear to want clear opportunities for progression, clear goals and expectations, mental health benefits, diversity and equal opportunities, and regular pay reviews (with less emphasis on hybrid working). So, what can we learn from this?

Recommendations for strategic HR approaches to optimise Gen Z performance and experiences

1. We should appreciate the attitudes and needs of Gen Z, but also compare them to other generations to evaluate differences and address misconceptions. We need to appreciate that there are often misconceptions and negative assumptions made about younger generations. The perception gap between Gen X and Baby Boomers is even wider than for Milliennials, and these are the generations most likely to be in senior decision-making roles. Therefore, encouraging a self-awareness of differences is important.

2. It is crucial we recognise and prioritise the need for mental health benefits. Further research may be required to understand which specific benefits are of most value and benefit to employees.

3. As Gen Z see themselves as having a shorter attention span, we can consider applying this to the type of work carried out by the organisation. If there are lengthy tasks to do, encourage managers to break them into chunks with frequent check-ins and encouragement (Gnepp et al., 2020). Furthermore, if long tasks are unavoidable then prepare for resistance or reluctance from Gen Z employees by providing training and support for how to manage fatigue, boredom, or pressure (Behrens et al., 2022). This can be linked to their desire for clear goals and expectations. Furthermore, we can positively leverage Gen Z's comfort with technology to research and develop automation of tasks wherever possible.

4. We should formalise knowledge of potential career paths for Gen Z to understand requirements for progression. This is of critical importance as a future employer could appear off-putting if such information is not readily obtainable (Goh et al., 2021). As seen even within educational settings, regular conversations about progress and attainment with positive encouragement is required to maintain motivation (Alcott, 2017).

5. It is important to prioritise diversity within the workplace and communicate how the organisation is supporting initiatives and efforts to increase diversity. This is of particular importance to Gen Z compared to other generations and is therefore an important prioritisation.

6. Gen Z are the least motivated by the notion of regular pay reviews of all the generational cohorts. Whilst this does not mean salary is not important, it should not be used as the only

motivational tool for progress, hard work and achievement as this will have less impact on Gen Z than other generations.

7. Gen Z are divided as to whether they wish to work fully in an office, or to work in a hybrid way. However, to be fully remote is the least popular option for this generation (and indeed all generations). Adopting a flexible approach to working location where possible is critical for all employees depending on their circumstances and individual attitudes.

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