

Research Brief: Preparing for Generation Z

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Coming to an Organization Near You

The next generation of employees, born roughly between 1995 and 2000, is graduating from universities and trade schools around the globe. As they enter the world of work, Generation Z will begin to represent a larger share of the workforce with common expectations. Their influence on organizational workspaces, policies, and cultures will grow. What should you expect?

Unfortunately, there are many misconceptions about Gen Z. For example, some say they are lazy, entitled, and unwilling workers.¹ However, Gen Z is simply just the next generation in a series of generations falsely accused of these same misleading traits.² Frequently, their strong preference for a quality work-life integration—where their work and personal lives complement each other—is misunderstood as entitlement. Adhering to these incorrect assumptions can prevent organizations from harnessing the true capabilities of the next generation.³ Instead, Gen Z's upbringing is preparing them to change the way the world thinks by challenging the status quo and prioritizing their own well-being.

Is Gen Z's Impact Inevitable?



Historically, societal shifts were slow-moving. Children lived very similar lives to their parents. Technology has sped this up. We now experience large-scale societal shifts quickly. New emerging generations like Gen Z will continue to play a major role in these changes

just like previous generations have shifted away from their predecessors.⁴ Today, it's a certainty that Gen Z's differences will be felt in the workplace. As such, there is much to suggest Gen Z will inevitably impact your organization. For instance, they could use their excellent understanding of technology to create meaningful changes on both small and large scales.

Perhaps more importantly, Gen Z tends to view humans ourselves as the most important part of any situation. They value well-being of employees more highly than other success indicators.⁵ This human-centric perspective will gain traction as Gen Z fully enters the workplace. Altogether, their unique view of the role of work in life sets the stage for large organizational shifts.

Haworth's Gen Z Research

The increasingly important trend of preparing for the next generation of employees prompted us to conduct an 18-month study investigating Generation Z's workplace expectations. Our approach included three methods. We conducted 51 personal interviews and administered 88 survey responses with two cohorts of interns (2018 and 2019) at a large Midwestern manufacturing organization. We also conducted an exploratory field study involving 45 high-school students in a Midwestern metropolitan area. Our findings of Gen Z expectations are consistent with trends and center around how they view these three areas of the workplace:

- Organizational culture
- Their job or role within an organization
- The physical workspace

Additionally, it's very important to remember the life experiences of Gen Z individuals as a group. Consider the major life events or other societal shifts that have occurred in their brief lifetimes, and how these things might have an effect on their values and desires. This, along with their educational and other personal experiences squarely frame their worldview and their expectations in the workplace moving forward.

Welcoming Gen Z can help your organization achieve its goals in innovative ways. Preparing your organizational culture, workspaces, and policies—such as allowing for more remote work opportunities, or greater flexibility in where to work—can attract, retain, and fully empower a generation of workers ready to change the world.

1. Perna, 2019.
2. Norton, 2017.

3. Miller and Yar, 2019.
4. Parker, Graf, and Igielnik, 2019.

5. Kessler, 2018.

Adapting an Organization to Gen Z

While members of Gen Z will inevitably join the workforce soon, attracting and retaining the best ones will greatly benefit your company. Adapting to their specific needs and desires will therefore set your organization up for more success. A better way to break down the impact of their values, desires, and expectations is to consider their influence on three key areas of an organization: the organizational culture, the job itself, and the physical workspace reflecting their preferred workstyles. Through tailoring these areas to Gen Z's needs, they will be more likely to join your organization, be happy with their job, and deliver better results.

Organizational Culture

Communal Relationship with Others



Given Gen Z's desire for all employees to be happy and healthy in order for everyone to succeed, a strong, positive organizational culture is key among their desires. Gen Z values a highly positive and communal culture where employees are friendly and open with one another. They want to feel comfortable and relaxed within the workspace, where good relationships with many different coworkers can help foster a positive sense of community. This expands to include their supervisors and company executives as well, as Gen Z generally seeks good relationships with their superiors. They also expect honesty and transparency from executives, whom they view as their peers rather than distant decision-makers with little connection to lower-level employees. In terms of the Competing Values Framework™ that addresses organizational culture type, Generation Z generally aligns closest with a Collaborate culture.⁶ Ultimately, Gen Z tends to view everyone in an organization as working towards shared goals, and therefore they should behave like supportive teammates working together.

Lived Organizational Values

Your organization's values are also very important to members of Gen Z. In the modern business world, companies are increasingly adopting and displaying new organizational values to show customers and employees that they are committed to making good choices. This is a great step, as Gen Z strongly desires a positive value system at a company that is aligned with their personal values. However, Generation Z is quick to pick up on disingenuous value statements or recognize when the values aren't being fulfilled. In the end, the value system of a company and individual must be both shared and actively lived out. If a member of Gen Z perceives your organization as one with superficial values, or values in opposition to their

own, they will likely want to work elsewhere.

Well-Balanced Work/Life Integration

Finally, Gen Z demands a better work/life integration in which their work and personal lives are in sync with one another. Gen Z is perhaps the first cohort to fully perceive work as a means to live the life they desire, rather than the main focal point of their entire life. They want jobs that allow them to build strong synergy between their work lives and their personal lives. This means they want their job to allow them to balance their home/family life, community, whole personal well-being, including their physical, emotional, and cognitive health. To meet these needs, they strongly desire a company culture that gives them reasonable flexibility in when and how they complete their necessary work. As such, Gen Z is a group that will greatly appreciate opportunities to work remotely, or leave work to attend important appointments, while still accomplishing their tasks and goals. Despite the demand for flexibility in their work, Gen Z will still work hard and complete quality work if they are given the freedom and responsibility to do so.

The Job Itself

Of course, the job an individual is doing is also very important to their well-being and overall success. The tasks they must accomplish and the workstyles in which they accomplish said tasks are crucial. For the job itself, Gen Z seeks positions where their skills or college degree—which they likely have obtained—are well utilized. Like many other employees, members of Gen Z value their own knowledge and skills and want the opportunity to regularly use their experience within the workplace.

A Growth Mindset



Gen Z also recognizes the importance of both personal and professional growth in their lives, and they seek jobs that give them opportunities to learn new things. Members of Gen Z routinely expressed a strong desire to work in a position where they could improve their professional skills, like business etiquette or working within a corporate environment. As for personal development, Generation Z wants work that lets them slowly learn new skills useful in their lives or future careers. Along these lines, Gen Z has a strong desire for mentorship. Generation Z tends to seek mentorship from coworkers or senior peers who can teach them new things while being a resource for questions and concerns. Members of Gen Z regularly expressed their interest in having a friendly ally in the workplace outside of their teams who is willing and able to support them when they need help and would prefer to talk to someone other than their supervisor. With strong, positive, and direct connections with those who can teach them new things, Gen Z will flourish in their positions within your organization.

6. Cameron, et al. 2006.

The Workspace

Freedom and Flexibility



Optimizing the workplace to suit the workstyles and needs of Gen Z is another important way to attract and empower the youngest employees. In terms of the spatial layout, members of Gen Z tend to prefer an open concept floorplan that allows for easy collaboration and transparency among peers. It is also extremely important for Gen Z individuals to have a wide variety of workspaces to choose from, as well as the freedom to work where they want. Additionally, spaces should be clear in their intended uses and functions, allowing for seamless transitions between spaces without too much thinking.

As for variety, there needs to be enough space for both individual and collaborative work, allowing individuals to choose where they feel their work is best supported. Next, there needs to be a balanced mix of more formalized spaces—such as one’s assigned desk or a conference room—and more casual spaces. Casual spaces include more leisurely lounge or social spaces for groups, or unassigned individual touchdown spots for solo workers. Members of Gen Z need to know they have permission to use whatever spaces they feel are most beneficial to them and their work when they have the chance. Within these spaces, user control is also very important to Gen Z. They appreciate the opportunity to choose their workspace, and adjust it to their specific needs through tools, technology, or moving around the actual furniture.

Finally, Gen Z strongly desires biophilic features within their workspace—features that bring the feeling of nature into the workplace. This could be an actual outdoor patio space, an indoor fountain, or a large number of plants throughout the building. Overall, it’s about adapting the workspace to the desires of Gen Z in order to allow them to perform their best work with the necessary tools to do so.

One Last Thing

Perhaps most importantly though, we recommend carefully considering the lived experiences of Gen Z and how this impacts their perceptions of work and the world. The desires, values, and expectations of Gen Z closely reflect their experiences growing up in a rapidly changing, uncertain world where everyone is trying to get by while living their best lives. For example, members of Gen Z frequently refer to their educational experiences when thinking of where and how to accomplish their work.

It’s important to remember that the oldest members of Gen Z who are now entering the workforce were only born in the late 1990s and have a much more limited lifetime of experiences. However, this also means the experiences they do have are particularly impactful to the ways in which they view work and its role in their lives. Major world events and large societal shifts over the last few decades have shaped Gen Z perspectives on the role of work in the life of an individual. As such, these experiences will continue to impact Gen Z’s views throughout their lives. Ultimately, it is through recognizing and understanding the expectations, values, and desires of Gen Z individuals that organizations can adapt their jobs, policies, and spaces in order to get the most out of their young employees. And of course, satisfied employees who feel supported are more likely to join an organization, remain with the organization, and perform high quality work for the organization.

Contributor

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