

Preparing Gen Z for the Workplace: What Businesses and Educators Can Do to Help Them Succeed

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ABSTRACT

It is important to understand how Gen Z differs from their predecessors, the Millennials. To attract candidates, a company needs to understand what is important to Gen Z workers. This study provides insights into the workplace expectations of Gen Z students through a quantitative study. The research questions guiding this study centers around job arrangement preference and work-life balance, including technology's impact on it, as self-reported by Gen Z job seekers. By asking Gen Zs what is important to them and about their work expectations, the researchers were able to better understand this subset of the workforce. Practical implications for businesses and educators were developed. This study finds Gen Zs prefers a hybrid work arrangement and that work-life balance is still important to them. Respondents indicated that they were not confident in how to ask about work-life balance in the job search process.

Key Words: Gen Z, Workplace Motivation, Remote Work, Gen Z Employee Expectations, Psychological

INTRODUCTION

Businesses are constantly evolving based on a wide array of external factors. One such factor that can sometimes be overlooked is differences between generations. It is important to understand how the newest generation entering the workplace, Gen Z, is different from their predecessors, the Millennials. Schroth (2019) noted that “Generational or cohort differences in traits occur because the pervasive cultural values and practices change over time. While Gen Z shares many traits with the Millennial Generation, it also brings in new patterns of behavior” (p. 5). Therefore, it is essential that businesses know what a Gen Z is looking for in a job. If a company wants to build a strong pipeline of qualified recruits, it needs to understand who the prospective workers are and what is important to them.

While the Millennial generation pushed for remote opportunities, more research is needed to identify what will attract and motivate the Gen Z workforce. To better understand the workplace expectations of Gen Zs, this study aims to answer the following research questions:

- What job arrangement is the most attractive to them?
- Is work life balance still desired among this group?
- To what extent will the use of technology impede their work life balance?
- How comfortable are they mentioning any desire for work life balance during the interview process?

For educators, this study provides insight into the current expectations that Gen Z has when entering the workplace. Given that many Gen Z students may not have any work experience, business educators have an opportunity to educate their students on common workplace practices as well as instruct them on how to properly ask questions during the interview process. Teaching students about the business world before they enter it can help Gen Z to enter the workforce with realistic expectations. Additionally, it can help them know how to ask questions to gauge their fit with an organization before they accept a job offer, which is helpful to both the business and the prospective employee.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Before engaging in research concerning the current generation entering the workforce, it is necessary to consider what is known about their predecessors, as the previous generation has shaped the organizations that Gen Z students will be entering. Millennials, those who were born between 1979 and the mid-1990s, are currently the largest generation in the workforce (Nabawanuka & Ekmekcioglu, 2022). This generation is often referred to as the “Look at Me” or “Me, me, me” generation (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010; Smola & Sutton, 2002; Wood, 2019). As the nicknames imply, this generation is historically stereotyped as being overly confident and self-absorbed, lacking in loyalty and work ethics. However, younger members of this generation were the first to be born in the digital era, making them technically savvy and more open to adopting new technology (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010). This affinity for technology has changed the way organizations respond to new technologies, which is increasingly important in the age of remote and hybrid work.

Millennials are known as having a “work to live” ideology (Baum, 2020). It is this frame of mind that may lead to the perception that they are a disloyal generation. However, Millennials have shown to be loyal to organizations that support their need for wellbeing and work-life balance. They are known to not look for new opportunities unless their current situation is no

longer meeting their needs. Millennials are also a generation focused on achievement and success and expect to be recognized for their efforts (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010). This generation is the most likely to shape the new work world post-pandemic as they are not willing to compromise their desire for work-life balance (Nabawanuka & Ekmekcioglu, 2022).

Contrary to their “me, me, me,” label, the Millennial generation is known for their desire to contribute to their community and the world (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010). As such, their social life and work life often overlap, and they value organizations who offer work life balance. They are also more comfortable working in teams than in past generations (Howe & Strauss, 2000). Millennials often seek out opportunities to gain new skills or experiences and have high expectations of having their contributions recognized through career advancements (LaCore, 2015).

Gen Z

The post-millennial generation, or Gen Z, includes those born between the years of 1997 and 2013 (Schroth, 2019). Gen Z is the latest generation to enter the workforce and makes up almost 24% of the U.S. population (Pichler et al., 2021). While this generation shares many characteristics with their predecessors, the Millennials are also distinctly unique.

While Millennials adapted to the use of technology, Gen Z were born into a world driven by technology and social media (Schroth, 2019). This has earned them the nickname of “Digital Natives.” However, being raised with the integration of technology into their lives via smartphones and social media has led this generation to suffer from technology addiction, attention deficit issues, and sleeping issues (Pichler et al., 2021). Along with the influx of technology, Gen Z has also been raised in a world of political uncertainty, social justice movements, and a pandemic (Pichler et al., 2021; Schroth, 2019).

Perhaps as a result, Gen Z has the highest reported rates of depression and anxiety, with 67% of Gen Zers stating that stress keeps them from taking on leadership responsibilities (Schroth, 2019). Unlike Millennials who prefer group or team work, Gen Zers are anxious about working in groups and prefer to work alone with 70% of Gen Zers say that they struggle with in-person communication (Pichler et al., 2021).

Gen Z is the most diverse and most educated generation in history. This generation also values opportunities to expand their skills. They would rather work for a company that gives them unique opportunities to learn these new skills than own their own business (Alter, 2019). One study found that 51% of the Gen Zers who responded to a survey stated they wanted to work in the tech industry (Alter, 2019).

While they are highly educated, Gen Z are entering the workforce with the least amount of work experience compared to previous generations. To compare, 30% of Millennials report working between the ages of 15-17 while only 19% of Gen Z at the same age report having worked at all during the prior calendar year (Schroth, 2019). This lack of work experience may lead to unrealistic work expectations as the Gen Z enters the workforce.

Workplace Motivation

When considering what motivates people in the workplace, it is essential to keep in mind the shared life experiences of the generations. While there are certainly individual differences, common struggles or difficult life circumstances can shape how a generation views work. For example, Millennials experienced the Great Recession, a time when unemployment was high and it was hard to get a job. The fact that this occurred early in their careers was very defined, as it

proved difficult for many to secure full-time employment in their desired fields (Joyce & Barry, 2016). In turn, this lived experience shaped their views on work and what they wanted from employers. Joyce and Barry (2016) provide several workplace recommendations targeted for Millennials such as offering work life balance, including paid time off (PTO), work from home options, and paid maternity or paternity leave.

Joyce and Barry (2016) also note the importance of defining job expectations and growth opportunities. This should include both growth opportunities within the company and outside the company. For example, discuss what opportunities exist for advancement within the organization. In addition, offering tuition reimbursement can also be a way to attract and retain Millennial workers and provide them with growth opportunities inside and outside the organization. Joyce and Barry (2016) advocate for “Having clear, straightforward discussions with millennials during the recruitment process about what is expected of them and what their average day will look like...” (p. 23).

Gen Z, on the other hand, is the “most achievement-oriented of the generations” (Schroth, 2019, p. 5). This will likely impact what they are looking for in their careers. There are several contributing factors to why Gen Z may have less work experience than previous generations, but one potential explanation relates to their achievement orientation. Schroth (2019) noted that due to an increased level of competition to get into top schools, “the summer is filled with extracurricular activities and summer enrichment classes” (p. 6). Gen Zs’ focus on achievement spills over into the workplace as well. This generation tends to desire ongoing professional development opportunities, as well as the ability to promote within their company (Schroth, 2019).

When considering what people want most from their boss, Millennials cited open communication and feedback (42%) and clear targets (38%). However, Gen Zs said they wanted their boss to have a positive attitude (42%) and set clear targets (38%) (Schroth, 2019). Companies need to know what various generations are looking for and what they find motivating to ensure that businesses are doing what they can to attract the right people and improve employee performance, job satisfaction, and commitment to the organization (Schroth, 2019).

Another problematic ripple effect of the lack of work experience among the Gen Z is that holding a job helps teenagers learn how to manage themselves in the workplace, about workplace expectations, and how to interact with others. This is important in helping prepare them for the world of full-time employment, and “without this early work experience new entrants [to the job market] can often have unrealistic expectations of work, which in turn fosters lower levels of commitment and higher turnover” (Schroth, 2019, p. 6). The prevalence of technology is also affecting Gen Zer’s’ communication skills (Schroth, 2019), which may impact their interactions with managers, fellow co-workers, and customers.

Gen Zer’s tend to be more focused on collaborative learning instead of a “telling” approach to workplace coaching. According to Schroth (2019, p. 12), “Consultative coaching helps employees explore alternatives and challenges the employee’s thinking by asking the employee questions rather than telling them what to do.” This is important to note because younger Millennials and Gen Zs often report that a top desired workplace benefit is having their ideas valued. Critically important is the fact that they view managers “not listening to their ideas or being dismissive of their ideas” as disrespect (Schroth, 2019, p. 9). Consultative coaching can help Gen Zs develop a growth mindset and adapt to the world of work that many of them are insufficiently prepared for.

Regardless of the generation, there are things an organization can do to help manage expectations. Providing a realistic job preview is one strategy. There are many benefits to providing a realistic job preview including decreasing turnover rates and increasing employee motivation (Schroth, 2019). Including a discussion on the job responsibilities, travel demands, organizational culture, career path, and both positives and negatives of the job, the organization, and the manager can help a person, regardless of their generation, assess the alignment between what the individual values and what the job entails. Because many Gen Z lack work experience, managing expectations is necessary. Unfortunately, “Gen Z employees often have an idealistic picture that the work will be interesting and meaningful, that their managers will want to hear and implement their ideas, that they will have flexibility in the schedule, and that they will enjoy everyone they work with” (Scroth, 2019, p. 7). Anyone who has worked knows this is unlikely to be the case!

PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACTS

Psychological contracts can be defined as “individual beliefs, shaped by the organization, regarding terms of an exchange agreement between the individual and their organization” (Rousseau, 1995, p. 9). This intangible agreement is based on employees’ expectations and how well organizations meet those expectations. For example, if an employee works hard and meets his or her goals, the employee may expect to be promoted. If a promotion does not happen, a breach of psychological contract may occur. Breaches of psychological contracts may lead to negative work behaviors such as lower levels of commitment and poor job performance. It may also lead to higher turnover intentions (Matthijs et al., 2010).

Previous studies indicated that generational differences in psychological contracts exist. Lub et al. (2016) found that older generations, such as the Baby Boomers and Gen X, have psychological contracts based on social atmosphere, while Gen Y, or Millennials, are more motivated by job content and career development. Likewise, Eyoun et al. (2020) found that differences in psychological contracts existed between Gen X and Gen Y. Therefore, it is important for organizations and educators alike to understand how the psychological contract for Gen Zers may be impacted by what motivates them and their previous work experience, or lack thereof. Accordingly, psychological contracts provide theoretical underpinning for this study.

Work-Life Balance

As the name implies, work-life balance often refers to the balance between an individual’s personal and work demands. It has also been defined as “an overall level of contentment resulting from an assessment of one’s degree of success at meeting work and family role demands” (Valcour, 2007, p. 1512). Work-life balance can be impacted by several work factors such as job demands, job resources, job flexibility, and supervisory support (Haar et al., 2018; Hill et al., 2001; Greenhaus et al., 2012). Likewise, the level of work-life balance achieved may also depend on the family demands and resources as well as the amount of support an employee receives from their spouse or significant other (Ferguson et al., 2012). Kossek and Lautsch (2012) argue that an individual’s personality style may also impact on the level of work-life balance they achieve.

The impact of work-life balance has been studied extensively through literature. Work-life balance has been positively linked to work outcomes such as engagement, job performance, and organizational commitment. It has also been found to mediate relationships between job stressors and mental health (Brough et al., 2020).

Organizations can help their employees achieve work-life balance by creating a culture that supports and understands that its employees also have family or personal obligations. They can support their employees by implementing family-friendly benefits and initiatives, including programs that give employees the resources they need to address both work and personal obligations. Companies can also create policies, such as flex time and paid parental leave policies, to support working parents (Lockwood, 2003).

Job Arrangements

While varying types of work arrangements have existed for decades, the use of flexible work arrangements has increased over the last five years. The most common types of location-based work arrangements are:

- In office: An employee reports to an office for their required work schedule.
- Remote: An employee works their required work schedule outside of the organization's office. This can include a home office or a shared workspace.
- Hybrid: An employee splits their required work schedule between working in the office and working remotely.

The type of work arrangement can have a great impact on job and employee related outcomes. For example, the type of work arrangement can impact how an organization or manager communicates with employees as well as the processes used. Mabaso and Manuel (2024) found that the performance management process should be adapted for remote and hybrid workers to ensure consistency for all worker types. Likewise, Lang et al. (2022) found that working remotely directly impacts team dynamics. The authors suggest that even if teams are working remotely, they should periodically meet face to face to improve team performance. Remote and hybrid work can also impact individual workers. A study by Flores (2019) found that communication and separating family and work life were top challenges for remote and hybrid workers. Based on existing research, it is apparent that job arrangement can have a significant impact on an employee's work life balance and perceptions of their employer.

TECHNOLOGY

Use Among Generations

Gen Z is the first generation of digital natives, meaning that things such as technology, the internet, and social media have been around for their entire life (Francis & Hoefel, 2018). The youngest generation in the workplace is used to using mobile systems and social networks for entertainment, news, and interpersonal connections. O'Boyle et al. (2017) highlight that much of the conversations surrounding Gen Z entering the workplace have focused on the impact of always available personal technology on the young generation. Even Gen Zers themselves report being concerned about their ability to develop and maintain interpersonal relationships. According to O'Boyle et al. (2017), "while these digital natives may bring an unprecedented level of technology skills to the workforce, there are some apprehensions about their ability to communicate and form strong interpersonal relationships" (para 9). As such, this is an area prime for developmental activities, both in the classroom and in the workplace.

Millennials, on the other hand, tend to be comfortable with technology, but they are not digital natives. Millennials had to learn to navigate a changing technological landscape, whereas Gen Z was born into a world with smartphones, personal computers, and social media. Ashford (2024) noted that there are key differences between Millennials and Gen Z in the ways technology is used. For example, Millennials tend to gravitate more towards Facebook while

Gen Zers prefer TikTok or Snapchat. It is not just the websites that are different. There are very different strategies behind the platforms in terms of types of content posted and length of videos. Ashford (2024) highlighted that Gen Z's preference for bite-sized content, such as short video clips, is aligned with their shorter attention spans. Alternatively, Millennials are more likely to prefer longer form content such as videos, podcasts, or articles. A key distinction between the two generations is how they use technology. According to Ashford (2024), Millennials "often turn to technology for information, rather than to cultivate social identities" (para 6).

The prevalence of technology in society today cannot be understated. However, it is important to recognize how different generations use it to better understand the impact it has in forming identities and shaping expectations in life, including in careers. For better or worse, technology is mainstream and has played a formative role in the development of Gen Z. Businesses would be wise to recognize this and consider how this reality has shaped and is shaping Gen Z in the workplace.

Work-life Balance

According to Berry and Hughes (2020), much of the boundary crossing that occurs between work, family, school, and leisure time is enabled via mobile communication technology. In essence, this technology "removes both the temporal and the physical boundary" that exists between the different domains of life (Berry & Hughes, 2020, p. 92). Personal devices such as smartphones and laptops allow individuals to accomplish work tasks as well as personal obligations. Because of electronic devices such as these and other technological advances, people have experienced notable changes in how they live and work in the 21st century (Berry & Hughes, 2020).

Much of the previous research on the impacts of mobile technology on work life balance centers on the ways that mobile technology use increases the expectation of always being available, thereby undermining healthy work life balance (Berry & Hughes, 2020; Matusik & Mickel, 2011; Sarker et al., 2012). Berry and Hughes (2020) noted that, "Because work can be done 'anytime, anywhere' this can be translated into work being 'all the time, everywhere'" (p. 94). However, the authors also noted that not much focus is given to the inverse of this statement. The alternative to using mobile technology could be worse on work life balance as it would require being physically present in a time and place, without consideration for availability or personal convenience (Berry & Hughes, 2020).

Policies in the Workplace

The changes brought on by technological tools' impact in the workplace can significantly impact employees (Adisa et al., 2017). To help employees properly navigate technology usage in the workplace, as well as after hours, it is crucial for companies to have clearly defined technology policies and procedures that are followed by leadership. Such policies provide guidance to employees and set clear expectations for how and when technology should be used and whether after hours communication is expected or required. Business practices have shifted because of the growing prevalence of technology (Duxbury & Smart, 2011), and company policies should therefore keep up with the challenges modern workers are facing. For example, Gualano et al. (2023) called for further research to be done on employees' right to disconnect, even when working from home. This highlights the workplace transitions that are occurring and the fact that workers and businesses alike are facing new challenges related to technology allowing for some work to be done anywhere, at any time. Documented policies that are

successfully followed allow for mutual understanding and set the tone for workplace expectations and psychological contracts.

GEN Z EXPECTATIONS AND MOTIVATIONS

To find out what Gen Z students want in a workplace, the researchers administered a survey across undergraduate business classes at a regional, comprehensive university in 2023 and analyzed the results. The study received IRB approval prior to survey administration. Seventy-two of those who completed a survey indicated that they were a part of the Gen Z generation based on their birth year. The following results focuses exclusively on Gen Z survey participants.

The researchers asked about the preferred work arrangement when considering full-time employment. Nearly 70% of the Gen Z respondents indicated that they would prefer a hybrid work arrangement where they report to the office a few times a week. Perhaps surprising is that only 7% indicated that they would want a fully remote job. Approximately 23% indicated they wanted a full-in-office job. It is important for businesses to understand the type of work arrangement the Gen Z is seeking, especially since it may differ from what Millennials advocated for in the recent past (i.e., a fully remote work environment).

The survey presented participants with 11 job related factors and asked respondents to choose their top 3 factors based on their importance in the job search process. Based on the survey results, the top three most important factors to a Gen Z when looking for a job are 1) salary and benefits, 2) opportunity for growth and advancement, and 3) having time for a personal life. On the other side, a low-pressure job, working on a team, independence on the job, and intellectual challenges were selected the least often, each receiving less than 2% of responses.

Gen Z respondents indicated that work life balance is especially valued to them. However, 50% indicated that they have never asked potential employers questions about work life balance prior to being offered a job. Likewise, they said they would only be moderately comfortable with asking questions pertaining to work life balance during an interview. This is an area prime for educational interventions to help better prepare students for the workplace and the job search process.

When asked what questions they would ask potential employers related to work life balance, common answers included:

- “What are your expectations for out of work contact?”
- “How much outside of standard business hours work will I be expected to do?”
- “What are the expectations when it comes to work/life balance?”
- “How much free time will taking this job allow in my life?”
- “How do you balance the workload of this job and personal needs?”
- “How often do they find themselves having to work at home due to being behind?”
- “What are my responsibilities when I’m not in the office? What are my responsibilities on weekends/evenings?”
- “How much PTO would I have?”

When it comes to the use of technology and the perceived impact to Gen Zs’ work life balance, respondents had neutral responses regarding technology negatively or positively impacting their work life balance. In general, they felt that having email or IM on their phones would hurt their work life balance more than it would help it. However, they also indicate that

they were still likely to add these communication tools to their phone despite the potential negative impact on their work life balance.

IMPLICATIONS

For Businesses

The results of this study provide valuable insight into what a Gen Z is looking for when it comes to a job. While many organizations are seeking to find the balance between remote work and being in the office, it is positive that the newest generation entering the workforce highly prefers a hybrid opportunity to that of 100% remote or 100% in office.

While they would like more time for their personal life, it appears that Gen Z does not see having to go into the office as taking away from that. This may mean that organizations need to find ways to allow Gen Z to both report to an office while still having time for their personal life. For organizations looking to attract this generation, offering flex time may be appealing to them. It will be important for businesses to show Gen Z that they can work and have time for their personal life, which should be modeled after their managers.

This study's findings also aligned with existing research concerning Gen Z's view towards teamwork. According to the data analyzed in this study, Gen Z is not motivated by teamwork. While Millennials gravitate towards this type of work environment, companies need to be aware that Gen Z does not find this type of work environment appealing. Knowing that Gen Z is motivated by opportunities for advancements, organizations can frame teamwork to gain new skills that can lead to more opportunities in the future.

The findings of this study also indicate that while Gen Z highly values work life balance, they may be less likely to ask direct questions to gauge if the organization is the right fit for them. To curb this, organizations can proactively highlight during the recruiting process how they offer their employees work life balance opportunities. This is also an opportunity for business educators to teach students how to ask good questions during the interview process and discern whether a potential company offers what the student is looking for both personally and professionally.

Results also show that Gen Z is comfortable with adding workplace communication technologies such as IM tools or email to their phone. However, they were neutral as to whether this would negatively or positively impact their work life balance. Knowing that having time for their personal life is a top motivator for them, organizations should put policies in place that limit the use of these tools outside of working hours or at least clearly communicate the expectations.

For Educators

This study also has numerous implications for educators. Given that this study supports the previous research that a Gen Z often lacks work experience, it is important for educators to consider how they help their Gen Z students have clear expectations for entering the workforce full-time. This includes helping students understand their own values and expectations as well as having an accurate idea of workplace culture and requirements.

This can be achieved by giving students assignments focused on this area. This may include activities that are geared towards helping students define their own value system and what is important to them in a job. Having students interview professionals in their desired field may give them a better understanding of what to expect in that career. Likewise, having guest speakers who share their work experience can help students set realistic work expectations and attitudes. Lastly, having assignments targeted on building professionalism, both in person and

virtually, may help this generation to meet the expectations of their future employers and develop realistic psychological contracts in relation to work.

The following are examples of assignments that could be assigned to students to help them prepare for the workplace:

- **Practicing Virtual Presence:** Educators can start by reviewing best practices for joining and hosting a virtual meeting. Students can practice joining a virtual meeting through popular platforms such as Microsoft Teams and Zoom. Educators can also hold a virtual class and have students practice their virtual presence. Basic things like being on mute when not speaking, camera angles, and using a professional virtual background or ensuring that the background is neat and uncluttered can go a long way in projecting a professional appearance in a virtual meeting.
- **Work-life Balance Interview Questions:** Educators can have students draft questions regarding work life balance that they would ask during the interview process. Students could share their responses with the class to gather feedback. Based on the questions listed in response to this survey, some of the possible questions were better than others. Students should be guided on how to ask good questions as well as ways to professionally word questions to ensure that the questions gather the desired information without harming the applicant's reputation.
- **Onboarding Research:** To gain a better understanding of what to expect when students begin their first full-time job, students could be required to interview people in a field of their choice about their onboarding experience. They should be encouraged to ask them questions about the time at their new job including what surprised them about the job, what resources they received, what the work environment is like, and what they wish they would have known about the job before they started. Like the previous example, students could draft questions around the onboarding process that could be asked during the interview process. This can help students form more realistic expectations of what their transitions to the workplace will be like and therefore form more realistic psychological contracts.
- **Technology Policies:** Students could be required to research technology policies that are currently in place at various companies. They could then state whether or not they agree with these policies. Discussions could be had regarding why such policies exist and what organizations and employees can do to ensure they use technology correctly while not negatively impacting their work life balance.
- **Defining Their Values:** Students could be asked to define the values in life that are important to them. Using sites like Glassdoor.com and LinkedIn, students could be required to research companies to determine if they align with their personal values. Students should be provided with specific examples to show how this alignment exists.

CONCLUSION

Gen Z is noticeably different in workplace preferences when compared to Millennials. However, there are things companies can do to attract and retain workers of various generations. This study found that Gen Z preferred a hybrid work arrangement, as opposed to fully remote or fully in the office. The participants rated salary and benefits, opportunities for growth and advancement, and having time for a personal life as the most important factors when seeking employment. Work-life balance is still desired among Gen Z, but participants lacked the

confidence to ask potential employers questions about work-life balance prior to being offered a job. In addition, participants were unclear whether technology will positively or negatively impact their work-life balance. These are opportunities for businesses and business educators to make an impact and help a Gen Z successfully acclimate to their careers.

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