The Young and Restless: Generation Z and the Workplace

As we learn from the business world, we want to share that information with our community of educators and business professionals. Recent focus panels have shed light on an emerging phenomenon: Businesses are struggling to integrate younger generations into their workplaces. By investigating the apparent rift between Generation Z and their predecessors, this Action Brief seeks to understand the current challenges facing talent acquisition and training and discuss how employees and employers can better coexist in the years to come.

There's No 'Z' in Team

Today, there are over 17 million members of Generation Z ("Zoomers") in the United States workforce. This generation—commonly defined as those born between 1997 and 2012—are slated to inherit the business world of the near future, with over 50 million Zoomers projected to enter the labor pool within the next 5 years.

So far, however, Gen Z's initiation into employment has been less than seamless. Across multiple futuring panels, professionals in business management, finance, marketing, and sales described significant challenges associated with recruiting and onboarding younger employees. The panelists attributed several problematic traits to Zoomers, including selfish behavior and unrealistic workplace expectations.

And these panelists are not alone. According to a recent survey, 74% of managers identify Gen Z employees as the most difficult to work with. At the moment, every generation of employees (including Gen Z employees themselves!) seem to have some serious problems getting along with their Zoomer cohorts.

But what exactly are these problems? And why are these issues manifesting in Generation Z?

Based on feedback from our own focus panels and reports from organizations like Yahoo Finance and Resume Genius, the specific complaints surrounding Gen Z employees typically fall within one of two categories: interpersonal issues or work environment expectations.

Interpersonally, Zoomers are often criticized for lacking communication skills and demonstrating self-centered behavior. Panelists lamented Gen Z's poor work ethic, emotional intelligence, and adaptability, going so as far to characterize their mindset as an "it's all about me" mentality. According to business leaders, this has resulted in increased turnover, absenteeism, "tantrums," and even bullying.

There are also increasing reports of Gen Z having unrealistic expectations of their work environment and arrangements. Many young employees have come to expect fully remote or hybrid schedules, and many organizations are not meeting that demand. As one panelist noted, "5 years ago, we never thought about remote work. Now, if you require 5 days a week in the office, you lose 8% of your potential workforce."

Understanding the Zoomer

The charges against Gen Z paint a bleak picture of their future in the workplace. But does this picture tell the whole story?

While some might place the blame solely on the Zoomers for their interpersonal struggles in the workplace, others argue that organizations have not made enough effort to accommodate Gen Z's communication styles. For example, older generations may be intimately familiar with email, while Gen Z is much more familiar with texting and direct messaging, two communication modes better suited for team collaboration platforms like Slack and Microsoft Teams.

What managers might perceive as selfishness or a lack of motivation could actually be Zoomers simply questioning the purpose of or meaning behind certain work. As young, curious employees enter the workforce, they will inevitably interrogate the preexisting norms with fresh perspectives and ideas of their own. For example, surveys show that Zoomers place a greater emphasis on mental health, a commitment to DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion), making a positive impact on the world, and the need for a healthy work-life balance.

The desire for a healthy work-life balance also helps explain Gen Z's "unrealistic" expectations for their workplace. Flexible schedules and hybrid work opportunities are popular amongst Zoomers because they enable this young generation to care for their personal life and feel comfortable pursuing their own interests outside of work. Professionals in recent panels even acknowledged the benefits of the "working to live" mindset—employees are often happier and more productive when provided a flexible schedule, resulting in more efficiency and less worker turnover.

Closing the Generational Gap

Here's some more good news for Gen Z: History tells us that Zoomers are not the first to cause a cultural clash in the workplace. Not long before them, Millennials were creating similar headaches for Boomers and Gen Xers. What's more, Millennials now stand as the preferred generation to work with.

So, how can Gen Z follow a similar trajectory? Do Zoomers need to adapt to the current business world? Or do businesses need to adjust their own policies and culture to appeal to the younger generation? The true solution likely involves the two parties meeting each other in the middle.

Young employees can better prepare for the workplace by pursuing professional development that goes beyond technical skills. Zoomers would do well to remember that communication, professionalism, teamwork, and enthusiasm are not just corporate buzz words—they are essential components of a functioning business. At the same time, employers must recognize the differing needs of younger employees and adapt to meet those needs as appropriate. Mental health awareness, DEI, and work flexibility are important to Gen Z for a reason, and businesses should do their part in cultivating a responsive and supportive work environment.

Perhaps the most important way to bridge the intergenerational gap is simply to create spaces for employees of all ages and roles to share knowledge and ideas. Professionals from a recent focus panel explained that many supervisors have taken to spending one-on-one time with their younger employees to help them acclimate to the workplace and improve their soft skills. And on the flipside, a growing trend in the business world is reverse mentoring, where younger employees are given opportunities to share their experiences and insights with older generations, including managers and executives.

Generation Z's ideas of work culture may be novel (even unworkable, in the eyes of some), but companies should be hesitant to dismiss them out of hand. The business landscape—and even the concept of work itself—is truly a great experiment, constantly evolving to better meet the needs of the employee, employer, and consumer. And every generation, from Boomers to Zoomers, deserves a say in that experiment.

Links for Further Reading:

- "Meet Generation Z: Characteristics and Values of America's Most Diverse Generation"
- "10 Problems With Gen Z in the Workplace: Understanding What Motivates Them"
- "Work in Progress: Emerging Trends in Workplace Flexibility"
- "Bridging Generational Divides in Your Workplace"
- "Gen Z Communication Style: How to Grasp the Generation With the Briefest Attention Span"

Discussion Questions:

- What are some stereotypes of younger and older employees? How do you think these stereotypes came to be? Are they fair assumptions?
- A common criticism of remote or hybrid work is that employees are unable to build relationships and collaborate with each other. Do you agree? What are some ways a company can foster relationships and collaboration in a remote work environment?
- How must employees demonstrate trust when navigating generational differences? What about accountability?
- Brainstorm some ways employees of different generations can connect in the workplace.
- As a member of Generation Z, what values or ideas do you think you will bring to workplace someday? In what way(s) do you feel unprepared for the workplace? In what way(s) do you feel prepared?

Sources:

- "Zoomers Will Overtake Boomers at Work Next Year"
- "Generation Z in the Workplace"

- "3 in 4 Managers Find it Difficult to Work With Gen Z"
- "Gen Z Is the Worst Generation to Work With"
- "Gen Z Is the Most Challenging Generation to Work With, New Survey Says—Here's Why"
- "2024 Hiring Trends Survey: What Makes a Great Job Candidate"
- "Gen Z Really Does Have a Work Ethic Problem"
- "Exploring Remote Work Trends: Millennials + Gen Z Lead the Way"
- "What Remote-First Gen Zers Want at Work"
- "The Rise of Messaging: How Gen Z and Millennials Prefer to Communicate"
- "Perhaps Gen Z Isn't the Problem"
- "The Gen Z Effect—And How the Youngest Employees Are Shaping the Future"
- "Wealth, Work, and Happiness: The Life Goals of Gen Z"
- "What the Generations Want From Work: New Data Offers Surprises"
- "It's Not a Stretch: Gen Z and Millennials Want Flexibility and Balance"
- "Understanding the Living to Work Vs. Working to Live"
- "Why You're Having a Hard Time With Your Millennial Employees—And What to Do About it"
- "Gen Z Is the Worst Generation to Work With"
- "Soft Skills: The Competitive Edge"
- "Gen Z In the Workplace: How Should Companies Adapt?"
- "Why Reverse Mentoring Works and How to Do it"