

What Generation Z really means for the Future of Work

From all the articles written about “The Future of Work”, most only focus on technology. The talk has centred around AI, chatbots, automation: all of which are incredibly important. But what about the most human element of all, the latest generation of young people entering the workforce? I am, of course, talking about Generation Z.

First, a disclaimer: I am a Generation Z-er. We are the age group following on from the Millennials, born between 1995 and 2010.¹ As a 1995 baby, I find myself on the cusp of the Millennial and “Gen Z” groupings. With a foot in both camps, I’m therefore well positioned to ask the question: is Gen Z really that different from previous cohorts, the Millennials, Gen X and Baby Boomers? What do I and my peers want from an employer and a career, and what might this mean for the future shape of the workplace?

Saving for the future

Despite the perceived wisdom that my generation is happy to rent and loan, not earn and own, I’m currently saving for a mortgage. A stable career and good salary is therefore important to me (something which apparently Gen Z favours less than other elements of a career²). What is undoubtedly different compared to previous generations is the timeframe within which I can achieve this. According to the ONS, in England and Wales the average house now costs eight times the average annual income – as recently as 2002, when Gen X were buying houses, it was just five times the average income.³

Owning my own place is something I strive for, but not having a mortgage does mean that I have the luxury of being more flexible with my career choices and location. I place a great deal of importance in flexible working and work/life balance – a typical Gen Z trait, and understandably so given that our 20s and 30s will largely be insecure, moving at the behest of landlords or an unstable economy (not to mention climate).

So, should companies look to attract Gen Z workers in a different way, or offer packages specifically tailored for them? Remember that Gen Z is only now graduating from university and/or entering the workforce for the very first time. Most of the traditional HR, onboarding best practice remains just as relevant. As with any new employee excited about a new job and new horizons (especially if they have just made it through a very thorough recruitment process), Gen Z need to be welcomed and nurtured into the workforce and organisational culture. Ensure they have access to the right knowledge and training right away, so they can be productive faster.

1 - <https://www.businessinsider.com/generation-z?r=US&IR=T>

2 - <https://dynamicsignal.com/2019/09/19/generation-z-in-the-workplace/>

3 - <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/business/news/uk-house-prices-average-earning-ratio-latestunaffordable-housing-crisis-a8323086.html>

This is also the most tech-savvy generation ever, so up-to-date digital and cloud services are very important. Oracle HCM Cloud enables new employees to hit the ground running, immediately connecting new hires with critical knowledge and training. Using engaging media content and automated processes also sets the tone for their whole employee experience, not just the onboarding process.

There will need to be some ‘upskilling’ of this generation, of course, as there is with anyone new to the world of work. But Gen Z also bring new skills, aptitude, and attitude that will benefit the wider workforce. For example, an updated technology skill set, social media communications, data science, and cyber security. Degrees based around computing, information science, and statistics are amongst the fastest growing for this generation, all of which are crucial to any organisation.⁴

Retention in the gig economy

Many organisations are therefore recruiting the top talent from Gen Z in a fairly traditional way, by reviewing and adjusting working environments, and offering flexible packages. Retaining them, however, is sometimes harder.

For this article I spoke to a number of Gen Z-ers who have entered the world of work, to gauge their collective opinion (admittedly this was a small data set, but qualitative research can often uncover nuances that stats do not). Wellbeing, mentorship, and a strong career development path were the top of the list of ‘career wants’ for those I interviewed. Salary was important, but was majorly surpassed by the company’s ethos and dedication to the happiness and welfare of their employees: not just in a ‘mission and purpose’ document, but as something that tangibly exists in practice.

The group were clear too that micro-management would deter them from staying within a company - they wanted to be trusted to lead on their own projects, albeit with support readily available if needed.

Think of it this way: in today’s self-service, consumer-driven society, we are used to doing things for ourselves. We can set up a new iPhone with ease, whereas our parents’ generation may have wanted to follow a weighty instruction manual. However, we do expect a human to be on hand should we face any significant challenge (enter the Apple Genius squad). It almost seems like an oxymoron – needing both less help yet more human interaction – however, this is just the way it is for those growing up in the modern world.

Let’s ditch the fear factor

Support, a good culture, and independence therefore seem to be the top attractions for my Gen Z peers. That isn’t so different from other workforce age group. Why, then, do most HR articles on the topic of Gen Z give us such a bad press? Articles typically say that managers should be ‘afraid’ of Gen Z, that we’re ‘disconnected from their elders’, ‘less equipped to handle uncertainty’, or ‘uncurious about others’ amongst a raft of other knee-jerk conclusions.⁵ If we look back at articles when Millennials or Gen X entered the workforce, we find many of the same fears. The young are always viewed with distrust.

4 - <https://www.forbes.com/sites/remyblumenfeld/2019/10/15/gen-z-at-work8-reasons-to-be-afraid/#7c760ef633a9>

5 - <https://www.straighterline.com/blog/top-degrees-demand-future/>

We also obsess about the coming age of people working alongside robots, whereas perhaps the real challenge is having five generations of humans working together, arguably for the first time ever. Talent management is therefore more important than ever, and tools such as Oracle HCM Cloud are fast becoming indispensable.

There is one big difference between a Baby Boomer and a Gen Z, the latter has grown up with today's technology only ever a click, finger-swipe or Alexa-request away. The context that people have grown up in shapes and influences how they behave at work too. Expectations are changing inside and outside the office, and the pace of change is accelerating. In less than 10 years, social media and mobile technologies have transformed both our personal and professional lives. This has raised the bar for workforce applications and Gen Z is ready to hit the ground running.

Focus on the individual, not the label

Much as we like to segment age groups in the workplace and attribute broad definitions to them, we all like to see ourselves as individuals at heart. Take my mother, for example: she's a Baby Boomer, but also a sucker for scrolling through Instagram or tapping at her Apple Watch for her daily steps every five minutes (#instamum – though she still doesn't fully understand hashtags, so I have the upper hand there at least).

Like it or not, the future workforce is here. Fear and distrust will get us nowhere. If you really want to know how to manage Gen Z, then think back to how you were in the first years of your career. What were your hopes, dreams, needs and expectations? Chances are, they are exactly the same for Gen Z now. But the best news is that the HR and IT software available today is way better now than it ever was for previous generations starting work. In many ways, HR and management are now dealing with knowns rather than unknowns, with live dashboards and real-time employment data replacing spreadsheets and once-a-quarter updates. Oracle Strategic Workforce Planning can help to model future workforce needs and skills requirements, while Oracle HCM Cloud can monitor how your plans are being implemented and use machine learning to make recommendations for change.

So, who are Gen Z? They are simply the latest wave of eager young employees in need of support to grow into capable and inspiring leaders and be challenged in a supportive and flexible culture. Oracle can help to attract, recruit, retain and engage the very best of Gen Z and the generations that will follow. In time, your Gen Z employees will inject new thinking into your workplace and business strategies. This generation is ready to go in the modern, cloud-based, mobile, nimble world of work – just make sure that you're ready for them.

To learn more around recruiting and retaining your future workforce, why not try [Oracle HCM Cloud?](#)

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