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Getting Past Bias and Engaging the New Talent Generation

We are approaching the tipping point of having more Gen Z employees in the workforce than Baby Boomers, and there is growing commentary about whether Gen Z is prepared to meet workplace demands. One thing is clear: Gen Z is a different kind of employee, and Managers need to adapt in order to attract and develop the brightest minds of the New Talent Generation.

Concerns about work ethic, professionalism, communication skills and not being able to get work done are a few of the criticisms. In a recent survey, Intelligent.com found managers have started firing Gen Z employees, and some are planning to avoid hiring recent graduates in the near term. The challenge is that not tapping into the newest generation of talent is not a sustainable strategy. In fact, companies that learn to adapt to the New Talent Generation will be able to onboard some of the most purposeful, engaged, and creative minds available.

Bias - Differences in Values and Approach

There is a well-known 'familiarity bias' that is certainly at play. Our unconscious brains tend to be more comfortable hiring and working with people that share our general approach and values. We get along better. We trust that things will be done in a way that makes sense to us. Results feel more predictable. However, studies show that teams made up of people who all think alike tend to be less innovative, less productive, and ultimately less successful in driving key objectives.

What are Gen Z employees looking for, that distinguish them from the managers' generation? The tension stems from a clash of values and approaches. The traditional corporate world is often rigid, hierarchical, and positions 'career' at the center of an individual's identity. Information flows top-down on a 'need to know' basis, and each employee is expected to excel at their task without needing much context overall. Meeting business goals are accepted as a good enough reason to show up for work, and feedback should be accepted with humble gratitude and acted on without question.

Gen Z is growing up very differently. Their world is characterized by rapid technological advances, social movements (national and global), and the constant reminder of economic instability. They spent some part of their formative years in COVID-19 isolation and have watched their parents' generation experience waves of layoffs and economic disruption that shatter the "do a good job and your company will take care of you" mythology.

As a result, they prioritize work-life balance, flexibility, and purpose in their professional lives. Their motivation comes less from professional ladder-climbing, and more from having a work/life experience that leaves them fulfilled as a whole person. Engaging, motivating, and getting the best out of a typical Gen Z employee will not use the same recipe as for prior generations. Here are some suggestions:

Working with Purpose: Unlike previous generations, Gen Z views work not merely as a paycheck but to find personal fulfillment and contribute to meaningful societal change. This generation wants to know their values align with a company's mission, especially around issues like social responsibility, climate change, and diversity and inclusion. These values may rank above stability and financial gain.

On a more micro- level, it's important to help them see beyond being a “cog in the machine,” and ensure that they can connect the dots between their tasks and the stakeholders that your organization serves. If they see their job as pointless, it isn't surprising when they lack initiative.

Access to Meaningful Information: The days of the workforce trusting that they will be told what they need to know may be a thing of the past. Employees expect more business context, more explanation and more transparency. They need to understand not just the “what” but also the “why.”

And of course, if what they are hearing from management is different from what they are experiencing, they will give feedback (either directly, or through resignations). Authentic Leadership and trust are a required backdrop for a thriving Gen Z workforce.

Flexibility and Agency: Many offices celebrated the vast potential of remote work during the Pandemic, only to turn around two years later and institute policies that forced employees back to the office (or out of a job). Being able to work in the location and manner that suits them best will be an expectation of Gen Z. This may not require 100% remote work but allowing them to be involved in deciding how work happens will increase the likelihood that hybrid work policies succeed.

Modern Technology: Gen Z grew up with such pervasive access to technology, e-collaboration, and information processing that they are fast learners and highly adaptable. When companies rely on outdated tools or rigid processes, this Talent Pool gets frustrated. To retain them, organizations must embrace modern, intuitive technology and ensure that workflows support collaboration and innovation.

Learning and Development: The importance of giving feedback, mentorship, and investing in employee growth is nothing new. What the New Talent Generation brings to the table is an unwillingness to wait for the company to “get around to” their development.

Some articles comment that Gen Z can't handle feedback. In fact, few people take feedback extremely well when it's not tailored to the recipient's needs or style. Managers who make the attempt to develop trustful relationships with their Gen Z employees can ascertain the time, manner and place to give feedback that is well-received.

Mental Health and Wellness: Gen Z places a high value on mental health. They expect their workplaces to support their well-being through flexible hours, remote work options, and respect for boundaries. These expectations often clash with a work culture that still prizes long hours and presenteeism, leading to misunderstandings about Gen Z's commitment or readiness for the professional world.

Interestingly, many of the recommendations above show up in article after article of management best practices in general, and are hallmarks of an inclusive workplace where all employees can thrive.

Conclusion

There is major peril in generalizing an entire generation. But the narrative that Gen Z is not ready for the workplace overlooks the possibility for positive workplace evolution. By embracing flexibility, valuing purpose over visibility, and fostering an inclusive and supportive culture, organizations can unlock the full potential of the New Talent Generation (and employees in general!). Far from being a challenge, Gen Z represents an opportunity for innovation and growth—if management can meet them where they are.



Does this resonate? Did I miss something important? Let's have a conversation – john@silvergooseinsights.com or set up a discovery session at [my website](#).

References

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