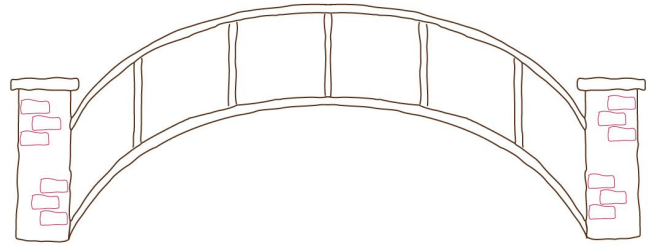


From C-Z



Bridging the divide

A new generation has arrived, are you Gen Z ready?

Generation Z will soon surpass Millennials as the most populous generation on earth, with more than one-third of the world's population counting themselves as Gen-Zers. In the US, Gen Z constitutes more than a quarter of the population and in 2020 it became the most diverse generation in the nation's history.¹

And watch out world of work, as Gen Z-ers are stepping onto stage. Their impact will be swift and profound. Armed with their smartphones, memes, a variously amusing and baffling language informed by TikTok (Rizz, Sigma anyone?), mass in-jokes only they understand, and an unwavering desire to challenge the norm, their effect will ripple through the workplace, retail consumption, technology, politics, and culture. From work/life boundaries to societal issues, Gen Z are redefining the meaning of work.

Radically different than Millennials (and one million larger), this generation has an entirely unique perspective on careers and how to define success in life and in the workforce.

Entire industries and businesses will rise and fall in the wake of Generation Z. Yet few industries or organisations seem to be ready for it. Are you? Seemingly not so much. In our experience with the leaders we work with, we find almost all of them banging or scratching their heads interchangeably, lamenting 'Why are they like this? Why aren't they like us? I just don't get them....Help!'

¹ Deloitte

Fear not dear leaders, we are here to demystify!

Gen Z get a bad rep, from their bosses and the wider media alike. We wanted to look beyond the negative headlines and unhelpful stereotyping to help the C suite begin to genuinely understand and connect with Gen Z - to bridge the divide between C-Z.

To do this we started by going straight to the source – our very own Gen Z panel! We asked them to collaborate on an open letter to an imaginary CEO. In it they give a snapshot into their lives, attitudes, core beliefs and needs. We've combined this insight with our own research and informed by conversations with our own C suite clients to offer you a way to start to bridge the gap from C-Z.

Let's spill the tea on Gen Z

Broadly categorised as having been born between 1996 and early 2010s, they are first truly technological generation. In fact, over half believe their first job will come through digital or social connections.



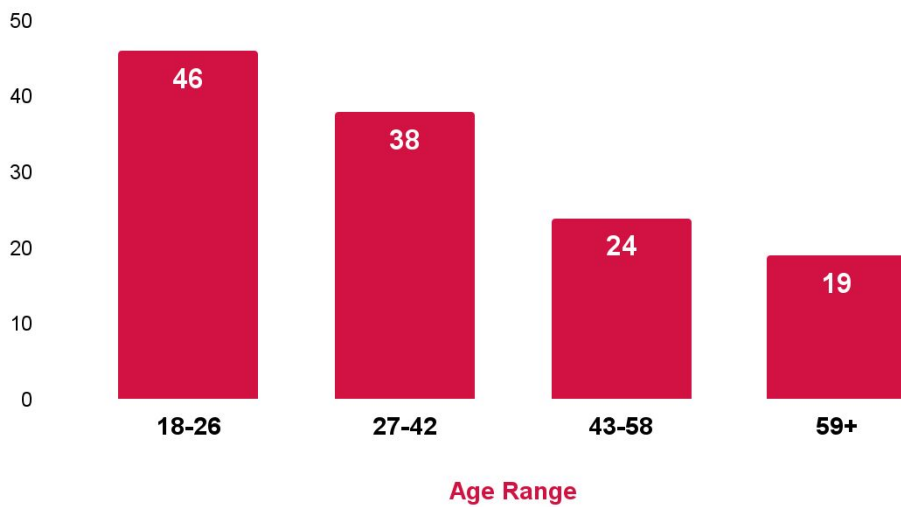
They have a seemingly insatiable thirst for information, which they get 24/7 through Insta, TikTok, Snap and X. Super creative, they are constantly creating their own content as well as looking at others'. They look to influencers to get ideas, inspiration and recommendations from what to wear, where to work, how to vote, as proven by Taylor Swift's recent endorsement for Kamala Harris resulting in a 500% spike in voting registrations in the days following the post on Instagram.

Here are some of the key themes that define this unique generation in the workplace

Gen Z push for more meaning at work

They bring the outside world into the workplace. Not just from a blurring of home and work but also in terms of the broader societal issues. Contrast the percentage of Gen Z feeling that they are 'regularly so distraught over what is happening in the news', with their Boomer bosses.

I am regularly so distraught over what is happening in the news that I am unable to function at work²



Our Gen Z-er (Emily, 21, 2024 UCL Graduate) affirms this:



The kicker is that, when we say our generation is talking more politics, isn't really politics - it's human rights. The past few years have seen so much suffering, injustice and horror and, whilst this has gone on, we've witnessed ineptitude, excuses and sickening displays of privilege. We've watched this unravel and now we're entering the workplace with knowledge, anger and a desire to partake in the change that, for us at least, has to come.

We're not trying to say that we expect every form of corporation to be leading some sort of heroic campaign against the tyranny of one government or another - but we do expect a reflection of our morals, or at least a degree of morality, in the practices and spirit of the company. How can we be expected to put aside the moral compasses we've been building through our teenage years? None of us wish to enter, or stay, in an environment that fails to uphold a basic sense of moral duty.



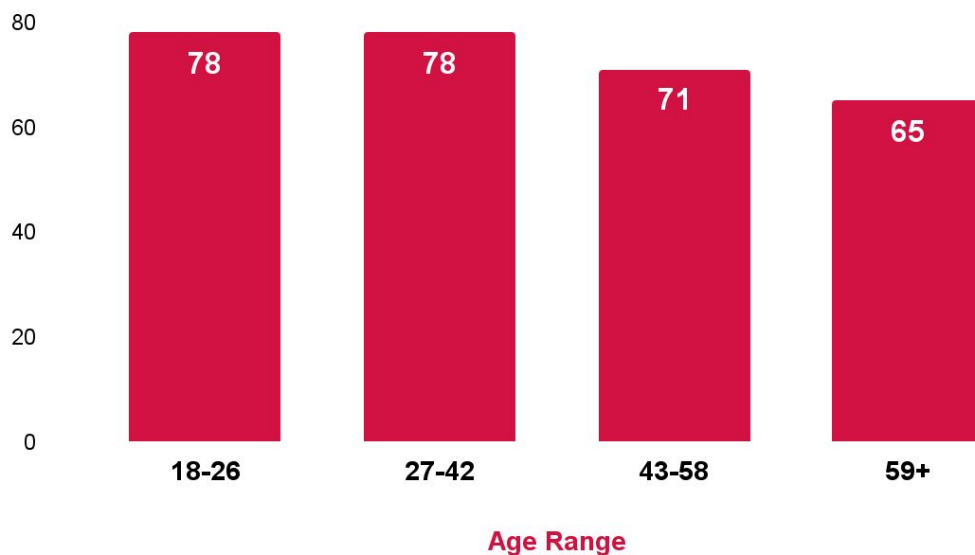
² 2023 Edelman Trust Barometer [<https://www.edelman.com/trust/2023/trust-barometer>]

A recent example of when this was needed was during the unrest in the UK this summer. It was more important than ever that leaders, from the perspective of Gen Z in particular, were seen to respond to this. At Woodreed, we encouraged our clients to make formal and informal statements to their people about their organisation's position on this and offered support and guidance where necessary.

Demonstrate your commitment to societal issues but make sure you mean it. Lead through action, not talk. Walk the talk.

They want their work to shape the future, to have impact and meaning

When considering a job, I want the opportunity to do work that will shape the future in some meaningful way³



This means organisational purpose.

Gen Z and Millennials are more interested in understanding and aligning with an organisation's purpose than generations that came before them. As consumers they'll do their research to make sure what they are consuming is in line with their ethics. As employees or future employees, they need to understand that what they do contributes to a higher purpose. Be clear about your purpose, use it in your attraction strategy and make it crystal clear internally.

³ 2023 Edelman Trust Barometer [<https://www.edelman.com/trust/2023/trust-barometer>]

ED&I

Equality, diversity and belonging are central for Gen Z. Diversity matters to them through many dimensions, not just isolated to race and gender but also related to identity and orientation.



Access to the internet, along with other sociological changes, has meant that there is more opportunity than ever to explore subcultures and communities and reassurance of our developing identities. As a result of this shift, Gen Z is stereotyped to be hyperbolically expressive in their identities, sometimes being caricatured in narratives like Netflix's Sex Education. We just want you to know that our generation will of course conform to professional standards and partake in the etiquette of workplace respectability politics, but we will do so in ways that allow us our self expression.

Our Gen Z panel



Health and Wellbeing



Quite frankly, as a generation who spent time in our teenage years locked inside in lockdown and the impact this had on us, we are going to make sure our mental health is our priority, even if it's not yours.

Mia, 20. 2nd Year University of Manchester, History and Politics BA



Our Gen Z-er touches on an important point. Covid and the interruption on their school or university studies and the isolation many felt as a result has likely intensified their focus on mental health and self care.

Combine this with research that shows that social media impacts their wellbeing more negatively than any other generation.

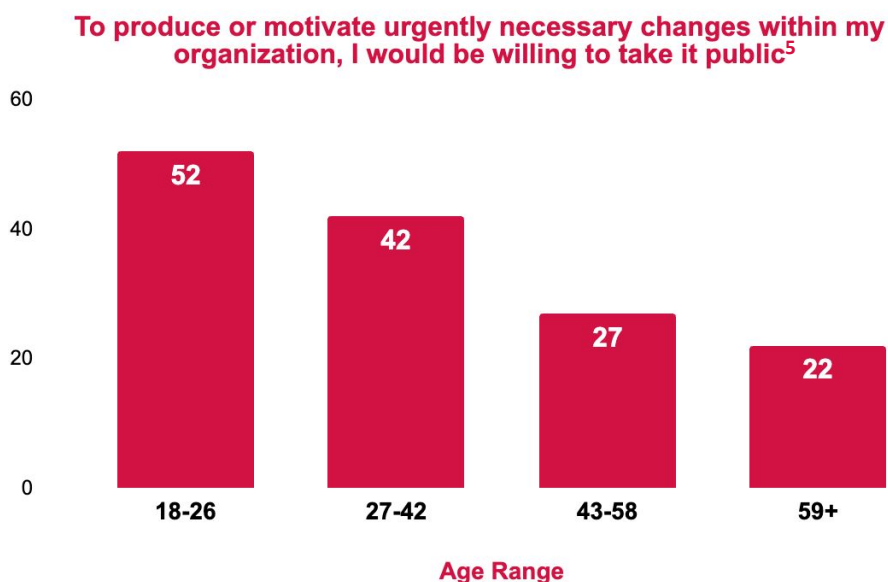
They are not being precious or awkward, or (clutches pearls) 'snowflakes'. They need to know their employer cares about them and has support in place should they need it. It's not a nice to have or lip service, it's a mandatory requirement for them to be able to give of their best.

Another side effect of this ruthless focus on their own priorities and (Gen Z watchword alert) boundaries is reflected in the new revelation that 52% of Gen Z professionals don't want to take on middle-management roles.⁴ These roles have long been viewed by HR and leadership as the 'glue' that keeps everything from communication, to engagement, to delivery on customer promises on track. And middle management isn't for the faint hearted. Gen Z see these roles as "high stress, low reward". So, if you want to retain them, addressing the perennial challenge of supporting front line managers is critical. Or you could take the Gen Z lead and consider shifting to flatter or less hierarchical structures.

Employee voice

Gen Z love to give feedback. They do it every day in the comments section on their socials. As consumers they are also more likely to give their feedback than other generations. They'll be expecting this at work too so reflect this with regular employee listening (and action).

But beware, If they don't like something they're going to shout about it, and they have all the platforms at their disposal to do it. It's going to be LOUD! Be that campaigning on social media, whistleblowing, protesting or leaking internal documents.



⁴ Robert Walters, 2024

⁵ 2023 Edelman Trust Barometer [<https://www.edelman.com/trust/2023/trust-barometer>]

The whistleblowing that went on at BrewDog back in 2021 is a cautionary tale. It was publicly accused by more than 250 whistleblowers of having a toxic culture that was damaging the mental health of the people who worked there. An open letter was written and posted on Twitter and all hell broke loose, the beer well and truly spilled. While clearly whistleblowing isn't the exclusive preserve of Gen Z, they are statistically more likely to engage in it when they feel things aren't right.

Retention and attraction

Notably some 65% of Gen Z talent quit within 12 months and it's expected that they'll change jobs 10x or more. It's easy to write this off as flakiness or a lack of loyalty, but what Gen Z expects from work is different to generations before them and, let's be honest, the days of jobs for life, final salary pensions and loyalty rewarded with security are long gone. So why stay if you are unhappy and jobs aren't as secure as they once were? And Gen Z are master social networkers. Finding greener grass is far easier for a digitally native generation. How you retain their talent is a top priority.

What does this mean for leaders shaping the world of work for Gen Z?

What can you do? Here are 10 things to think about

- 1.** Gen Z will have the ability to demand greater personalisation in how they move along their career journey. For organisations to attract and retain the best and brightest of the generation, it will require a different mindset. Much has been written about personalising the employee experience and matching it up to the consumer experience. In reality for many organisations that takes significant investment.

There are more immediate and agile ways to personalise work for them. Start with involvement. Create clear development pathways to show opportunity and progression and identify how they can build skills and experience to meet them.

Involving people to co create these provides the autonomy and agency that Gen Z (and all of us, if we are honest) really value.

We partnered a global insurance company to do just this; involving everyone from apprentices to senior leaders in creating a clear framework, tool and manager support for ongoing career development. Everyone's voice was represented from the start.



We had feedback from our teams that they really wanted greater clarity on how they could progress and develop within our function. We approached Woodreed to support us as they already understood our people, strategy and culture. Their approach has been to galvanise and involve the entire team with shaping the solution. Together a project team comprising of representatives from Apprentice to Executive level have built and shaped a tool that everyone can use to help understand career pathways and how to take ownership of your personal development within Claims. We noticed a massive shift in engagement and an enthusiasm to share ideas which we'd not seen before. How Woodreed ran this piece of work really showed us what is possible when you co-create involving everyone from our Exec to our Gen Z apprentices.



- 2.** Make learning relevant and less formalised. Nothing turns a Gen Z-er off more than mandated e-learning as many Instagram memes are testament to. Find ways to minimise these lazy soul suckers and instead think about how you create opportunities for learning and stretch in their jobs, exposure to projects and additional responsibility and clarity about how they develop and progress – including clear expectations for performance and behaviour.



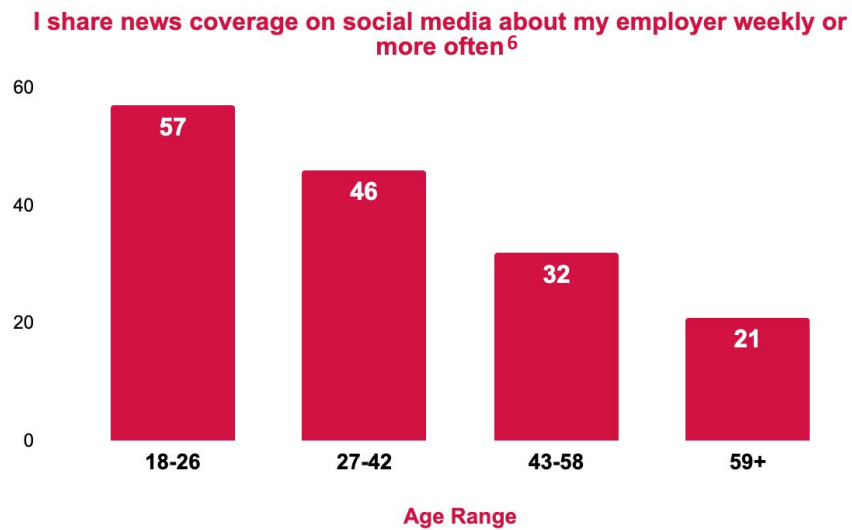
3. Make real and visible changes aligned to your ED&I promises. Nothing frustrates Gen Z more than the 'Say-Do' gap. Be seen to be actively addressing ED&I challenges and show you are listening to feedback. Following feedback about the underrepresentation of Black and minority ethnic employees in leadership, one of our clients, a leading London NHS Trust, developed a pioneering future leadership programme that makes sure at least half of the participants are from minority ethnic backgrounds. Importantly they have made sure these new leaders are vocal and visible and have taken time to actively communicate the changes being made in ED&I more broadly. In time this will create a senior leadership team with the diversity it needs to better reflect its people and the communities they serve, and build trust that change is possible. Their pioneering approach has recently been recognised by the CIPD as the programme was Highly Commended in the CIPD's annual awards.

4. Leverage the expertise of Gen X, Gen Y, and Boomers to help mentor Gen Z. Consider 'reverse mentoring' schemes to help breakdown boundaries and stereotypes and address language that reinforces beliefs that Gen Z are naive, flighty or difficult. Be really brave and have a Gen Z representative on your board. We're considering keeping our Gen Z panellists on the payroll to keep us in touch with their generation. Think about how you can use the unique skills of each generation in cross generational projects.

Kamala Harris' team has latched right onto this and had a social media team comprising only under 25s. They are using what is called 'digital rapid response' with her Gen Z experts practically working around the clock, tapping the trends and rhythms of internet culture to create an online presence that had never been seen in politics before. What's interesting here is the level of trust given to them "you just gotta trust your people" (Rob Flaherty, Deputy Campaign Manager). The team faces minimal content approval checks with everything going on a 5-minute warning, that's just 5 minutes to approve any new content.

5. Look at your organisational structure. If you aren't ready for non-hierarchical self-led or leaderless teams, consider how you develop existing leaders to be inclusive, brilliant listeners. Leaders who are able to collaborate, empower their people and carry on learning with humility.
6. Made a commitment to a genuine work-life balance. This is more than words. It's an ethic that runs through resourcing and commercial decisions and requires brave thinking on the part of CFOs and COOs alike. Be really clear on expectations and the behaviours that need to be in place to make this work for everyone, whatever their generation. We've talked to team leaders who are furious and frustrated that their younger colleagues are leaving the office at 5.30 "When I am here until 8pm regularly". Presentism and a focus on input not output are still hardwired in the older generation psyche. It takes open and honest dialogue rather than letting resentment fester.
7. Make mental health a focus and make sure this is visible and genuine. Gen Z-ers are turned off – quite rightly – by a performative bowl of fruit or lunchtime yoga class. Think about how to build mental health awareness in your cultural DNA and encourage a culture of open and honest conversations.
8. Watch your [say-do gap](#). Make a commitment from the top to model and lead with your values at the heart. Review your cultural ecosystem (as we call it) to identify gaps and work to close them. Work to define your Employee Value Proposition (i.e. why people should come and work for you and stick around) and make sure that everyone who has influence on it is focused on making sure that promise is kept.
9. If you haven't already, ditch the corporate robot tone of voice in communication. We're not saying be down with the kids (cringe) but we are saying encourage and model a culture where people write and speak as people, not corporate automatons.

10.



You don't have to have a Democratic Party level of Gen Zs at your disposal to create good content. Get wise on the art of storytelling and empower your Gen Z's to create content that can be shared internally and externally, giving your younger employees a project they'd love and creating brand advocates out of them as you do.

Leverage the power of Gen Z

Your youngest colleagues are leading the workplace reset, redefining the meaning of work and how workers engage with management. Employees need to feel like they're making an impact; show how the organisation is doing so.

We hear you, it's hard for leaders to ditch the memories of how they felt when they were entering the world of work. Deference, presenteeism, long hours, a corporate face, saving for the mortgage, tolerating or, worse, excusing bad behaviour.

BUT maybe this is an opportunity for leaders to remember what mattered to them before they donned the corporate armour? Are these things really the things they want? That matter to them? Time and time again in Exec Coaching the topics of congruence with values, work life balance and how to address toxic behaviour come up. Perhaps Gen Z are giving the boardroom the shot of courage they've always needed to do things differently?

⁶ 2023 Edelman Trust Barometer [<https://www.edelman.com/trust/2023/trust-barometer>]

And talking of armour and to finish on an optimistic note (as that's how we 'vibe'), check out the hilarious trend doing the rounds on TikTok (or it was when we wrote this Thought Paper - it'll be long gone or languishing on Instagram by the time you read this). 'Boomer' leaders are reading scripts written by their Gen Z employees promoting their business or brand using stereotypical Gen Z language. The juxtaposition of the language of the different generations is so funny and so clever, and so British. It also shows that with compassion and a willingness to embrace and celebrate the generational differences, maybe there isn't such a gap to bridge after all. If the Royal Armouries Museum can do it "Brat summer is over besties, time to enter your historical era, Royal Armouries is the most sigma day out in Leeds", maybe you can too?

And the final word from our own Gen Z



What we've discussed is nothing radical, it's just some things we'd like you to consider whilst you invite our generation into the workforce. We are ambitious, aware and incredibly able and every headline claiming otherwise is losing its footing. We're going to watch as your generation attempts to understand the world we are making, and we'll continue to watch as some companies bend, and others go brittle and snap.



About us

Woodreed combines deep expertise in culture, change, communication and coaching to create impact and make lasting positive change for a wide range of organisations and their people. From global financial services, to complex NHS Trusts, via Automotive, Energy and some globally recognised brands.

With extensive experience in the public, private and third sectors, we bring our wealth of knowledge to you and your people. Whatever your challenges, we have likely seen it before. We've been there, done it and absolutely got the T shirt (it's probably got a band slogan on).

Driven by our ambition to make workplaces better places to be, we demystify culture and identify and solve culture challenges – the big, the small, and everything in between. We do it with our values of courage, compassion and creativity as our north star, and our promise to you.

We help our clients develop their organisational values and behaviours to drive the positive cultures that fuel strategy and purpose. We work to embed that culture across the organisation, by identifying where in your cultural ecosystem the biggest impacts can be made.

We coach and develop leaders and their senior teams to equip them with the skills to face the challenges of the modern workplace – culture starts at the top.

We create strategies to bring your people on the journey of change, engaging, involving and motivating them as you go.

We develop compelling Employee Value Propositions and Employer brands to attract, retain and inspire talent.

We help you tell the story of your organisation and its strategy, bringing it to life, making it meaningful for all. Our creative team creates consumer grade campaigns designed to cut through and move your people.

We present and podcast, we write and publish on culture, we chair conferences and sit on industry judging panels. We win awards with our clients for the impact we've made on their organisation.

We'd love to do this for you. Please [get in touch](#) to hear what we're doing for organisations like yours and ways we can help make your place a better place to be.

About the authors

Lorna Leeson, Director

Lorna spent nearly two decades in senior HR and Transformation leadership roles, driving people-centered change and continuous improvement in global organisations. Prior to joining the Woodreed team, she ran her own Change, Coaching and Organisational Development consultancy for 8 years. Lorna has an MSc in Strategic Human Resource Management, a degree in Theatre and Performance and is a Fellow of the CIPD. She's an Executive Coach, working with transformational leaders to recognise their role in creating cultures that thrive. She has also led large global, multi-generational teams of her own.



Lorna is driven by helping clients create more human workplaces and loves nothing more than unpicking a cultural or change puzzle. When she isn't working with the best clients in the world to shape people-centered cultures, she sings in a band, attends the odd improv class and is Cool Auntie (their words, not hers) and Godmother to a tribe of incredible Gen Z and Gen Alpha future leaders.

Charlotte Dahl, Director

Charlotte is an accomplished culture and communications consultant, speaker, writer, trainer and facilitator, with a unique view on culture, engagement and internal communications, having spent equal parts of her career in consumer, then employee communications. Having worked for clients spanning every industry sector, she brings the insight and quality from consumer brand marketing into organisational culture and communication.



She is passionate about raising the profile, standards and effectiveness of internal communication and employee experience, believing employees deserve the same care, consideration, and creativity in communication as customers. Proud owner of 2 x Gen-Zers and one Alpha with her finger firmly on the pulse of these wonderful generations of young people.

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