

Generation Z Is Going to Work. What are its Expectations?

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Abstract

The first wave of Gen Z is starting to graduate from college and is rapidly entering the workforce. But what is Gen Z expecting from a workplace? We aim to answer this question in this qualitative study. Through a survey with open questions, we asked 57 university students from Generation Z to state their opinions regarding the perception about themselves and the expectations regarding a future job and employer. One of the main findings is the increased interest in having an understanding and supporting superior. The respondents rejected the traditional idea of a boss, wanting a supportive leader who motivates them. The number of Gen Z employees will only increase in the next years, thus we consider that this research is valuable for employers, human resource specialists, and educators who want to smoothen the transition from academia to the work environment.

Keywords: Generation Z, job expectations

1. Literature review

It is widely accepted that Generation Y was born between 1981 and 1994, and Generation Z between 1995 and 2010 [12, 21]. Generation Y is the first technological generation [10] with strong ambition, good communication skills [11], multi-tasking [4] and having success, career, and money as top priorities. Being the first digital native generation, Gen Z is also called Post-Millennials, Centennials, Digital Generation, Digital Natives, .com Generation, Facebook Generation, iGeneration [20]. They are characterized by freedom, individualism, addiction to technology [15], speed, entrepreneurial spirit and a “do-it-myself” mentality [6].

The “Younger Millennials”, born between 1989 and 1994, and generation Z, have new values and life goals, different employment requirements [16] and more realistic expectations [5, 37] than Older Millennials (born between 1981 and 1988 [14]), because they have lived in harsher economic realities. Their independent and entrepreneurial view is carried over to the workplace, where frequent feedback is disliked and independent work is preferred over teamwork [2]. This could be explained by their constant virtual communication, which affects their listening and socialization skills [1]. They want employers who will accept their free spirit and will not micromanage them, giving them the opportunity to develop themselves. They want to be valued by their employers, feel that their efforts are making a difference and have financial benefits as a result [8]. Less loyal, they are frequently called job-hoppers, being three times more prone to change jobs than their predecessors [19]: 30% from Generation Z is more likely to quit the first job in less than a year, men being more likely to quit faster [13].

Even if they prefer independent work, they value communication. In a study from 2015 [19], communication was a key factor, 43% stating that they would get irritated by poor communication with colleagues. In terms of benefits, along with good salary, they appreciate a flexible schedule and remote work [7]. Furthermore, they seek jobs aligned with their values. Personal relationships, growth and learning opportunities and simply enjoying work are important [21]. They want a culture that enables change and has a technology-driven environment. They do not like to rely on traditional office hierarchies and the main traits appreciated in a leader are inclusivity, curiosity, self-motivation, generosity, perseverance [9]. A study conducted in 10 countries [18] revealed that 61% of Gen Z wants leaders who listen and value their opinions, and 46% values managers who allow them to work independently. They perceive themselves as having good technical skills and fresh thinking. At the same time, they are self-critical, believing they should improve communication skills, conflict handling and meeting deadlines [17]. Regarding higher education, they want to be part of the learning process, representing the generation that learns by doing, enjoys interactive classes and expects digital enhancements to traditional learning. Therefore, it is the perfect timing for educators to embrace innovation [3].

2. Methodology

In this qualitative study, we explore the expectations of Gen Z in a future job. Our research questions are:

RQ1: How does Generation Z perceive itself?

RQ2: What are its expectations in a future workplace?

We created a questionnaire with 7 open questions and recruited 57 students (26 men) from Generation Z in a faculty of business from Iasi, Romania. Questions 1-3 asked the subjects to assess their strong and weak points. Questions 4-7 referred to a future job: ideal job, criteria when choosing an employer, reasons for leaving a job.

We established a set of codes through content analysis. We started open coding upon the second reading of the transcripts, when we coded each question separately and we completed a codebook with categories, subcategories and codes.

3. Results

The first three questions asked the subjects to assess their strong and weak points. We grouped them into categories: work-related (83 codes for strong points, 50 for weak points), communication (33 codes, respectively 14), personal attributes (27 codes, respectively 20), positive attitude (19 codes for strong points), critical thinking (19 codes for strong points), and teamwork (18 codes, respectively 5), emotional health (31 codes for weak points). The most frequent quality is ambition, followed by being responsible, curious, open to changes and adaptable. The respondents also mentioned qualities such as patience, punctuality, being organized, ability to manage crises, attention to details, critical thinking. At the same time, the subjects admit that their generation is more immature, lacks patience and is more stubborn. Stubbornness is considered both a quality, associated with ambition, and a weakness, interfering in social relationships. Some students admit on lacking patience and getting annoyed easily. The lack of patience can be related to a lack of team spirit. However, in comparison, more respondents mentioned qualities helpful in a team: friendliness, team spirit, tolerance, and empathy. Teamwork can be also related to communication, another important perceived skill. While 26 subjects described themselves as good in communicating or listening, 14 admitted about having struggles in communicating: they cannot express themselves or are afraid of public speaking. Furthermore, the need for extrinsic motivation is a recurring theme in the study. Other weaknesses mentioned are the inability to keep focus for a longer period, superficiality and not knowing what that they want. Emotional health is frequently mentioned. Even though 15 respondents mention their positive attitude, there were more mentions (25) regarding poor emotional health: lack of self-confidence, fear of failure. Regarding the expectations in a future job, we established the following categories: the boss (132 codes), fulfilment (88), team (45), work environment (44), encouragements (28), salary (26), communication (23), and leadership (10). Our respondents reject the idea of a boss, wanting an understanding and supportive leader, who knows how to motivate them and who values them. Thirteen respondents said that they would leave a job because of their boss. Some students would dislike the boss' superior attitude towards them or any employee. Nonetheless, the respondents focused also on the hard-working side of the leader: they said the leader should be serious, ambitious and should strive for performance.

A sense of fulfilment in a future job is also important. The students want a workplace where they "continuously develop" themselves, get promoted, and they want to work for pleasure. Unfulfillment derives from the impossibility to advance more in a job, a feeling of not fitting in, a lack of challenges or routine. In the workplace, they want a sense of belonging, a friendly team, valuing good working relationships. The team can help create a welcoming work environment, which is frequently mentioned, while an unpleasant work environment is a reason to abandon a job, the same as a lack of communication in the team. Furthermore, we identified our respondents' constant need of being encouraged and motivated and their fear of reproaches. They display a constant need for validation, being unsure of their capabilities. However, they want to take leadership roles. There are subjects who mentioned that the perfect job would be as a manager or a job where they feel they have power. For some respondents, a fair salary, aligned with the market, represents a reason to leave or choose a job. Furthermore, the desire of having a flexible work schedule and the possibility of working remote were mentioned.

4. Conclusions

We explored the expectations of Generation Z regarding a future job. We have found that our respondents consider themselves ambitious, even stubborn, eager to embrace challenges, open to change. Although tech-savvy, they appreciate face-to-face communication, while admitting they have to improve it. Also, they know they need external motivation, have emotional health issues and a strong fear of failure. This fear is associated with a lack of self-confidence and with the continuous need to be appreciated. Educators can offer them better emotional support in this sense.

Regarding expectations in a future workplace, we have identified two important desires: to have a leader, not a boss, and to feel fulfilled in a job. The feeling of fulfilment comes from being appreciated in the workplace and from constant growth opportunities. Our respondents need to be encouraged and valued. The need of belonging in the workplace is identified as well. However, there are limits of this study. For extrapolating the results, the research should be continued with a large-scale quantitative study.

Acknowledgements

This work was cofinanced from the European Social Fund through Operational Programme Human Capital 2014-2020, project number POCU/380/6/13/125015 "Development of entrepreneurial skills for doctoral students and postdoctoral researchers in the field of economic sciences".

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