

SERIES THREE · 24 ARTICLES

The *Gen Z* Employee

What shaped Gen Z - the world they grew up in

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Week 2: What shaped Gen Z - the world they grew up in

If you want to understand a generation, you don't start with their behaviours. You start with their world.

Every generation is, in significant part, a product of the formative experiences that shaped them - the events they grew up through, the norms they absorbed, the messages they received about what the world is and how it works. Millennials were shaped by the dot-com boom, the aftermath of 9/11, and the 2008 financial crisis. Boomers were shaped by post-war prosperity and a labour market in which loyalty genuinely was rewarded with security. Gen X were shaped by economic instability and an early exposure to institutional cynicism.

Gen Z grew up in something different again - and understanding what that was helps explain almost everything about how they show up at work.

A world of simultaneous abundance and anxiety

Gen Z grew up with extraordinary access - to information, to global culture, to peer communities across the world, to tools for creation and expression that previous generations never had. The internet democratised knowledge, talent, and platform in ways that fundamentally altered what ambition looks like and what seems possible.

But alongside that abundance lived a deep and persistent anxiety. Climate change was not an abstract future threat to Gen Z - it was the present backdrop of their childhoods. Economic instability was the water they swam in: they watched their parents navigate the 2008 crash and its aftershocks, and many of them entered the job market during or immediately after a global pandemic. Social violence, political polarisation, and the psychological toll of social media comparison and cyberbullying were realities of adolescence in a way that has no precedent.

This combination - of immense possibility and genuine systemic precarity - has produced a generation that is simultaneously more ambitious and more anxious, more self-aware and more sceptical, more values-driven and less patient with institutions that fail to live up to their stated values.

The pandemic as formative crucible

For those Gen Z employees now entering your workforce, the COVID-19 pandemic was not a disruption to an established working life. It was, in many cases, the context in which they first formed their ideas about what work even is.

Final school years moved online. University became a screen and a rented room. First internships were remote, disconnected, and often hollow of the mentorship and informal learning that had always made early career experience valuable. Some of them lost family members. Many of them lost time, opportunity, and the developmental experiences that their older colleagues took for granted.

This has consequences. It has made many Gen Z employees particularly hungry for in-person connection and community when they find it, even as they simultaneously value the flexibility that remote work offers. It has made them acutely aware of their own mental health in ways that their managers may find confronting. And it has given them an unusually clear-eyed relationship with time - having watched significant portions of their youth evaporate into a global crisis, they are not inclined to waste their working hours on things that feel meaningless.

The trust deficit and what it means for leadership

Perhaps the most significant formative dynamic for Gen Z is a profound erosion of institutional trust. They have grown up watching political institutions fail. They have seen corporations claim values and then act in ways that contradict them. They have watched social media platforms prioritise engagement over wellbeing. They have observed the climate crisis deepen while institutions debated rather than acted.

This is not cynicism as a personality trait - it is a rational response to evidence. And it means that Gen Z employees do not extend automatic trust to employers. They watch. They test. They pay close attention to whether what leaders say matches what leaders do. And when it doesn't, they draw conclusions quickly.

The leaders who earn Gen Z's trust and engagement are not those who demand it by virtue of their position. They are those who demonstrate, consistently and visibly, the values they claim to hold. Authenticity is not a nice-to-have for managing Gen Z. It is the price of entry.

Understanding why - understanding the world that formed their expectations — is the first step toward meeting them there.

