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Rethinking How to Help Gen Z Thrive at Work:

Strategies to motivate, inspire, and reward

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Abstract

Generation Z now makes up around one in five Americans[1] and is on track to become the most racially and ethnically diverse generation yet[2]. Given the growing presence of Gen Z in the workforce, we set out to understand the challenges Gen Z employees face when they show up at work. Our survey of 2,000 Gen Zers and 600 bosses identified five key challenges that are common to the relationship between Gen Z employees and their bosses[3]. As a follow up to that study, we asked 130 racially and ethnically diverse Gen Z influencers what it would take to help them thrive at work. This report shares Gen-Z 'approved' strategies and game-changing ideas to elevate the workforce experience and help Gen Z succeed.

Introduction

Gen Z, the generation of individuals born between 1997 and 2021, is estimated to make up one-third of the total workforce by 2023[4]. As digital natives who grew up online and on social media, they bring new and unique perspectives on work and how to define success in and out of the workplace. Additionally, many began their careers remotely and have never experienced a pre-pandemic work setting.

Gen Z brings different values and expectations to the workforce that are already challenging workplace norms. In March of 2022, we shared <u>What Gen Z actually wants at work</u>[3]. Our research revealed key challenges and gaps that leaders should address as Gen Z increasingly enters the workforce.

The challenges can be summed up as

1	2	3	4	5
Contrasting views on the importance of empathy	*Divergent views about mental health & work*	*Importance of work as a part of identity*	*Insufficient training & job-readiness for success*	*Contrasting ideal reward & recognition structures*

In brief, Gen Z wants to be seen for who they authentically are, heard, supported, and given the space and opportunity to thrive as they develop their personal and professional selves.

So, what can leaders to do bridge the gap?

We collaborated with <u>Gauge</u> to ask influential Gen Zers this very question. In total, we heard from over 130 racially diverse Gen Zers employees who shared unfiltered stories and ideas for what their boss and/or employer could do to help them thrive at work. All names and stories have been altered to protect the anonymity of research participants.

[1] Statistica, "Generation Z in the United States," February 20, 2023
[2] Pew Research Center, "On the Cusp of Adulthood and Facing an Uncertain Future: What We Know About Gen Z So Far," May 14, 2020
[3] Amelia Dunlop and Michael Pankowski, "Hey bosses: Here's what Gen Z actually wants at work," Deloitte Digital, March 28, 2023
[4] Johns Hopkins University, "Gen Z In The Workplace: How Should Companies Adapt?" April 18, 2023

Our Segmentation

Total Respondants 132

Note: Percentages exclude those who selected "prefer not to say" and so do not total 100%

Women	**61%**	Black/African American	**41%**	Employed in a Blue-Collar Job	**24%**	Employed Full-Time	**73%**
Men	**35%**	Asian	**19%**	Employed in a White-Collar Job	**76%**	Employed Part-Time	**27%**
Gender Non-Conforming	**2%**	White	**13%**				
		Hispanic	**12%**				

Rethinking how to help Gen Z Thrive at work

The future of work depends on helping Gen Z thrive and find their place at work, but traditional approaches are not meeting Gen Zers' expectations. Roughly half (52%) of Gen Zers feel burned out[5] and only about a quarter (26%) are very likely to recommend their organization as a place to work[6]. This illustrates a pressing need for leaders to rethink how to cultivate a more supportive and positive work environment for Gen Zers and for all employees.

52%
of Gen Zers feel burned out

26%
are very likely to recommend their organization as a place to work

From our research, we've concluded that employers can demonstrate their investment in helping Gen Z succeed by rethinking how to motivate, support, and reward Gen Z across five key areas: 1) onboarding, 2) learning and growth, 3) time-off, 4) recognition and feedback, and 5) the boss' toolkit.

[5] Deloitte, "2023 Millennial and Gen Z Survey," 2023
[6] Courtney Sherman, "Research shows workforce experience drives loyalty and retention," Deloitte Digital, January 05, 2023

1 Rethinking... Onboarding

Poor onboarding has been a significant source of employee turnover across generations, long before remote and hybrid work became the norm. However, for Gen Zers starting their careers in a pandemic or post-pandemic workplace, this is particularly challenging. The Gen Zers we spoke with shared stories of lackluster onboarding experiences and of bosses who disregarded their lack of previous experience and underestimated the coaching and hands-on support they needed to be successful in their roles. This experience impacted their confidence and delayed the time it took for them to feel comfortable and productive on the job.

When Oliver started a job in finance after graduating from college, it felt like he was left alone to figure things out on his own.

> *My first month, I was thrown into [it] and wasn't given any help to get started besides, 'Ask us for help when you need it.' I had a rough start and [it] affected my performance. My management was not understanding, despite me explaining multiple times that I am new and have never done this type of work before."*
>
> **– Oliver, Finance**

Many Gen Zers are starting their careers and forging their professional identities in a fully remote environment. Those we spoke with said this can be incredibly isolating. The serendipitous connections that might naturally occur in-person aren't happening, and Gen Zers may not feel comfortable setting up networking calls with more established colleagues or asking for help when they need it.

Alison, who started her career in government affairs, felt she lacked the foundational support and guidance needed to feel confident in her new role.

> *"My manager could walk me through things versus throwing me to the wolves. This is my first job out of college, and sometimes I need more guidance than she thinks. For example, she will send me to industry meetings and sometimes I feel too incompetent to contribute because the other attendees have worked in this industry for 15+ years."*
>
> **– Alison, Government Affairs**

Building a workplace where Gen Z employees can thrive starts with empathy-led and socially focused onboarding. The first few weeks are an opportunity to help Gen Zers build their support network so they can feel comfortable reaching out for help. The more connected Gen Z feels to their colleagues, the better and more quickly they'll be able to learn.

**Related Gen Z workforce challenges:** *Contrasting views on the importance of empathy* *Divergent views about mental health & work*

How to rethink onboarding

1 **Help Gen Zers build a trusted network of peers they can learn from and lean on for support.** For example, Imperative's peer coaching platform uses AI to match employee peer coaching pairs[7]. The video-enabled platform guides the peer coaching pairs through 3-5 conversations by providing the questions and coaching prompts, supporting the peers to reflect on their real-time work experiences and encouraging them to make meaningful commitments to fulfill action items before their next conversation.
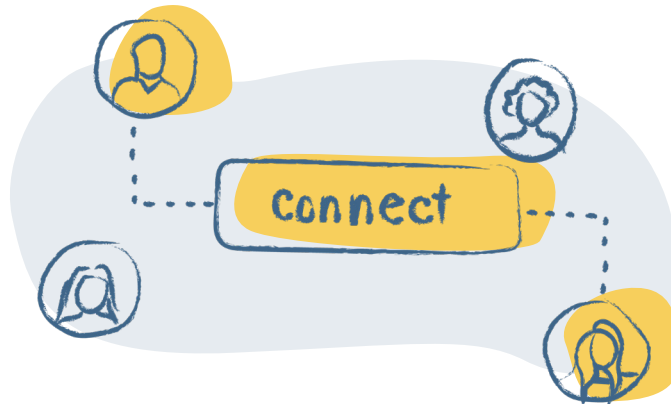
connect

[7] Zeryn Sarpangal, "How Code For America Implemented Peer Coaching On Imperative To Build A Coaching Culture And Empower Employees" Imperative, June 21, 2023

2 **Make onboarding a social experience that fosters connection and belonging.** Deloitte onboards new consulting employees in part by sending them together to Deloitte University, a 700,000+ square foot campus where they learn consulting skills, meet other new hires and senior leaders, and get excited about career paths and growth opportunities at the firm.

Why rethinking onboarding matters

Of employees who believe they get the support needed to perform well at work, 82% feel that they have a future with their current organization. Additionally, these employees are 1.5x less likely to leave their current organization in the next 12 months[6].

3 **Involve teammates in the onboarding process** and invite them to celebrate the new hire's accomplishments and milestones. At Humu, after the official onboarding period ends, the new employee's teammates and peers are invited to provide early positive feedback. The responses are aggregated and sent to the employee and their manager on their one-month anniversary[8]. This helps set the tone for Humu's culture of genuine appreciation and gratitude, while fostering a sense of belonging for new hires.

[8] Lynn Chikasuye, "6 tips for successful dispersed onboarding," Humu, March 2, 2022

2 Rethinking... Learning and Growth

Now more than ever, employees of all generations are placing greater emphasis on learning and growth. Gen Zers see mentoring and professional development as a necessary path to greater confidence and less anxiety about performance. The standard approaches involving webinars, long online modules, and once-a-year classroom training don't align with how Gen Z prefers to learn and consume information. 40% of Gen Zers prefer using social media (e.g., TikTok, Instagram) as a search tool for advice and how-to's[9].

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We heard from Mohan, a consultant who felt the training he had received did not help him prepare for the job.

> *"I wish we could have more practical training that could be directly linked to the work I do; that would help me thrive at work."*
>
> **– Mohan, Consulting**

Gen Zers may benefit from bite-sized learning that's presented in the flow of work (e.g., pop up tools to help employees navigate new tasks). Additionally, leaders should continue to pair Gen Zers with more experienced colleagues and empower Gen Zers to improve the workplace.

Celina, who works in the medical field, highlighted the importance of being paired with experienced teammates who could help round out her skillset.

> *"I feel well prepared when my manager sets me up for success by putting me with preceptors that will challenge me and allow me to learn. My manager does a good job at matching me up with people that will help me grow in my role."*
>
> **– Celina, Medical**

[9]Samantha Delouya, "Nearly half of Gen Z is using TikTok and Instagram for search instead of Google, according to Google's own data," Insider, Jul 13, 2022

For Melody, learning and growth happens on-the-job where she's encouraged to think of ways to make the job better, leverage her strengths, and pursue her personal interests.

> *"I was given the freedom to take control of a project to make our building accessible for myself and others. My employer gave me the tools I need to do my job while [disabled] and gave me space to pursue my passion for creating accessible spaces."*
>
> **– Melody, Writing**

To help Gen Z develop the skills they need for their jobs and for the future, employers should explore ways to facilitate social and experiential learning opportunities and make training content more practical and digestible.

**Related Gen Z workforce challenges:**   *Importance of work as a part of identity*   *Insufficient training & job-readiness for success*

How to rethink learning and growth

1 **Deliver practical, bite-sized learning in the flow of work.** For example, a large professional social network has adopted the short-video presentation style with their nano tips courses[10]. Employers could embed similar nano explainer videos into their programs to help Gen Zers navigate new tasks.
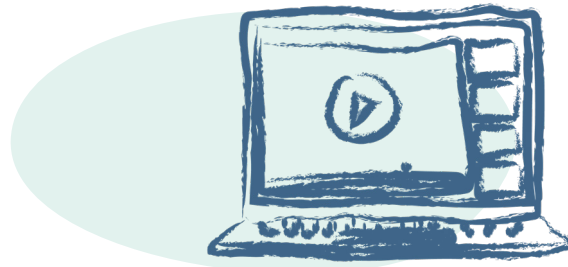
[10]LinkedIn, "Nano learning on LinkedIn Learning - FAQ," October, 2022
[11] Sarah Haberman, "Co-founder Sarah Haberman shares her perspective on the importance of passion projects," Haberman, May 2023

2 **Create opportunities for special projects that tap into employee's intellectual curiosity, entrepreneurial spirit, and personal passions to enable skills development.** A marketing agency funds employees' intellectual curiosity and passion projects to encourage experiential learning and personal growth. The agency reimburses associated expenses up to a certain amount and provides three days of paid time-off[11]. The project is approved by their manager and the employee must present their learnings within 30 days of completing their project.

Why rethinking learning and growth matters

Employees who do not feel they are growing their career with their current organization are 2.5x more likely to leave for another organization in the next 12 months[6].

[11] Sarah Haberman, "Co-founder Sarah Haberman shares her perspective on the importance of passion projects," Haberman, May 2023

3 Rethinking... Time-off

Employees across generations want to feel that their employer cares for their overall mental and physical health, but for Gen Z, mental health support and policies are very important criteria when considering a potential employer[5]. With nearly half of Gen Zers (and four in ten Millennials) saying they feel stressed all or most of the time[5], it's essential for employers to rethink policies to support mental and physical health.

Lisa, who works in social media marketing, described her experience with her current employer's mental health day policy. The extra encouragement from her boss to use the benefit and take that time signaled that the company cares for her as a person.

> *"My company has a mental health day or self-care day once a month, which is not included in your personal time-off. We're constantly being reminded to use our mental health days before the month is over. For example, when the ban on abortion happened in the United States, our management had told us if we needed to take any time away from our computers or if we're slow to respond, take that time."*
>
> **– Lisa, Marketing**

In contrast, some Gen Zers felt that it is frowned upon or not culturally acceptable to leverage these benefits and that working overtime is seen as a reflection of a person's dedication. Kim described feeling self-conscious or unsure about whether it was okay to take time-off for personal days or sick days.

> *"The company and managers always state that our mental health is important. However, we are always overwhelmed with work for six months a year. I work overtime, regardless of my physical and mental state, to meet my deadlines. I feel uncomfortable taking the personal care days and sick days that are available.."*
>
> **– Kim, Accounting**

This gap between stated values (e.g., mental health days) and lived realities (e.g., the expectation to work nights and weekends) can fuel resentment and dissatisfaction. To support Gen Zers' well-being and mental health, employers should consider taking action to reduce the stigma around taking off that can be experienced by employees.

**Related Gen Z workforce challenges:** *Divergent views about mental health & work*   *Contrasting ideal reward & recognition structures*

How to rethink time-off

1 **Foster an environment where it's psychologically safe to take time-off.** This could mean establishing company-wide days off or extended breaks. For example, a large consulting firm shuts down for a company-wide summer and winter disconnect. During this period, employees are granted extended holidays to unplug, reset, and recharge. This way, many employees feel less self-conscious about taking time off and worry less about work piling up while they are away.
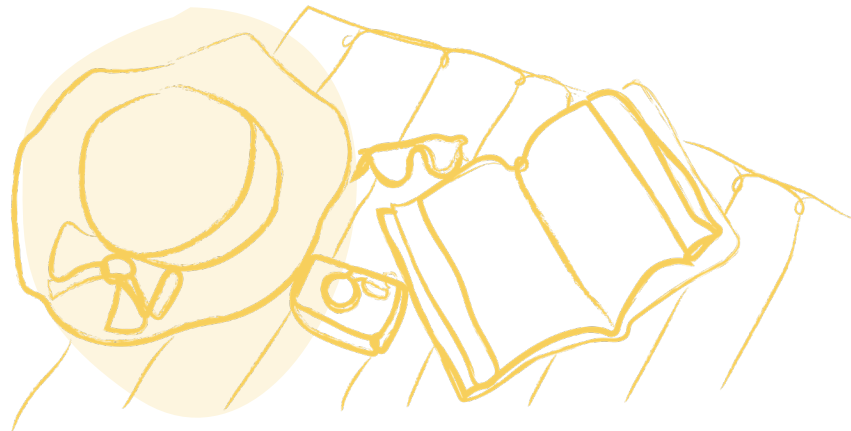
2 **Explore ways to give employees more choice and flexibility with how they use their time-off.** For example, a business manufacturing & supply company implemented a paid-time-off policy that allows employees to take accrued leave in half-hour increments[12]. Rather than taking a full day off or sick day to run errands, employees have flexibility to take bits of time-off as needed. Warehouse employees also have the option to work a compressed, four-day schedule in the summer and take part in staggered work shifts starting between 6:30 and 9 a.m., depending on the requirements of the job.

Why rethinking time-off matters

Employees who disagree that their organization cares about their well-being say they are 2x more likely to quit in the next 12 months[6].

[12] Marina Krakovsky, "How HR Can Promote Flexibility in Blue-Collar Jobs," SHRM, March 20, 2017

4 Rethinking... Recognition and Feedback

Employees want to be recognized for their contributions. For Gen Z, recognition and feedback are paramount to feeling motivated at work. Gen Z is motivated by social capital and want to engage in online behaviors that makes them feel like part of a larger movement. When asked about recognition, Gen Zers we spoke to yearned for public praise and recognition that would reach a larger audience (and help them build social capital).

Rasha shared how although she had experienced micro moments of recognition, she yearned for something that felt more substantial.

> *"I haven't had a big moment of recognition. There are smaller moments in group meetings where my name might get mentioned followed by a "good job", but nothing very noteworthy. These usually occur in my team meetings, so the recognition doesn't reach the entire organization."*
>
> **– Rasha, Marketing**

The idea of recognition that reaches the entire organization was echoed by Michelle and Eli, who shared a proud moment when their hard work and efforts were thanked and recognized in front of the whole company.

> *"At the beginning of our 3rd quarter, our leadership team and CEO recognized 5 different employees at our firm, including myself in front of the entire company. After working really hard, I felt gratitude from my team lead and CEO."*
>
> **– Michelle, PR**

> *"One day we had limited staff and I stepped up and survived the [restaurant] rush while prepping chicken the whole time. My manager rewarded with a free break meal on that day and applauded me at the end of the shift amongst all my fellow team members."*
>
> **– Eli, Hospitality**

How to rethink recognition and feedback

1 **Provide an easy way for all employees to publicly recognize and shout out their peers, teammates, and bosses.** For example, a talent-software company enables companies to collect employee stories and display them on a page for all employees to see. The platform guides the respondent through a series of prompts, including describing specific behaviors and impact made[13]. Select stories can be read aloud at monthly all-hands so can be recognized in front of the whole company. This practice helps understand what "good" looks like.

2 **Formally incentivize a culture of continuous recognition and feedback.** For example, a software as a service company uses merit money in its employee rewards program. Employees are given play money called typecoins at the start of each month, which they can use to reward other employees for helping them in different ways[14]. The typecoins can be converted to gift vouchers at a number of large consumer companies.

Why rethinking recognition and feedback matters

For employees who are regularly recognized for their contributions, 85% agree that their organization cares about their well-being. Care for well-being, along with recognition and having fun at work, exhibit the strongest influence on key workforce experience metrics like eNPS and employee experience[6].

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[13] Erik Ayers, "15+ Great Ways to Use Employee Stories," Goodseeker, February 5, 2023
[14] Preethi Jathanna, "12 Companies with Best Employee Recognition Programs That are Winning Hearts", Sorry, I was on mute, November 21, 2022

5 Rethinking... The Boss' Toolkit

Gen Zers agree that bosses have an outsized impact on their job satisfaction. In our survey of Gen Zers and their bosses, nearly half (41%) of Gen Zers did not believe their boss understands their generation, only a third (33%) of bosses strongly agreed that they know what their Gen Z employees want in the workplace, and only a quarter (24%) strongly agreed that it's easy for them to deliver on what their Gen Z employees want in the workplace[3].

41%
of Gen Zers did not believe their boss understands their generation

33%
of bosses strongly agreed that they know what their Gen Z employees want in the workplace

24%
of bosses strongly agreed that it's easy for them to deliver on what their Gen Z employees want in the workplace

Gen Zers in our study were asked to share examples of actions their bosses take to show empathy towards them and to create healthy work environments. David described how his manager protects his time, maintains an open line of communication, and helps him learn from mistakes.

> *"My manager frequently checks in to see how I'm doing and actively looks out for me both professionally and personally. There is constant communication between us and I know that they are there to help. They've helped me by spreading the workload, pushing me to develop in areas I'm interested in, teaching me after a mistake instead of blaming me, and just by being generally available for any question. Finally, they make sure that I don't overwork myself."*
>
> **– David, Project Management**

At the core of each story is consistent, open lines of communication and regularly occurring meaningful conversations rooted in curiosity and empathy.

When bosses have the tools to be aware of what's on Gen Zers' plates in and outside of work, they are better able to identify where support is needed the most and act accordingly (e.g., redistribute the workload, offer coaching, or show their employees how to find resources).

Naima described how her boss uses polling software to take a "pulse check" on how the team is feeling. The poll responses serve as a data point for her boss to address concerns and invite feedback.

> *"My manager makes a poll to check on our mental health. The chart has a very wide range of emotions, and we are allowed to pick how we feel. If it is anything outside the ordinary, our manager will ask us what's going on and how they can help."*
>
> **– Naima, Advocacy**

Gen Zers should also keep in mind that their bosses may not be trained to fully assist them in caring for their mental health, and so it's crucial for leaders to make it easy for Gen Zers to find and utilize mental health resources both inside and outside their companies.

Related Gen Z workforce challenges: *Contrasting views on the importance of empathy*   *Divergent views about mental health & work*

How to rethink the boss' toolkit

1   **Equip managers with actionable insights to better coach and connect with Gen Zers.** This could look like continuously measuring and tracking Gen Z employee sentiment and using the data to recommend actions to bosses. For example, a software company has a system for nudging that can be configured to deliver just-in-time nudges to bosses aligned with specific behavioral goals (e.g., seek feedback)[15]. Drawing on survey data from employees, it helps bosses identify employee needs and provides actionable tips to try out in the flow of their day-to-day work.

[15] Talia Bailey, "New features to make every manager a great manager," Humu, September 14, 2022

**Why rethinking support
for managers matters**

If employees are satisfied
with communication
from managers AND senior
leadership, they are 4.3x
more likely to have a positive
overall experience. Trust
and effective communication
with leadership exhibit
the strongest positive
influence on workforce
experience metrics.

2 **Equip bosses with tools to have more productive and meaningful
one-on-one conversations with Gen Zers.** For example, an application
developed for managers allows bosses and employees to create
shared meeting agendas, integrate their meeting notes and track next
steps. It also provides conversation starters on topics ranging from
growth and development, performance, and motivation. A new AI-powered
feature analyzes one-on-one notes and other data points to provide
managers with high-quality performance reviews[16].
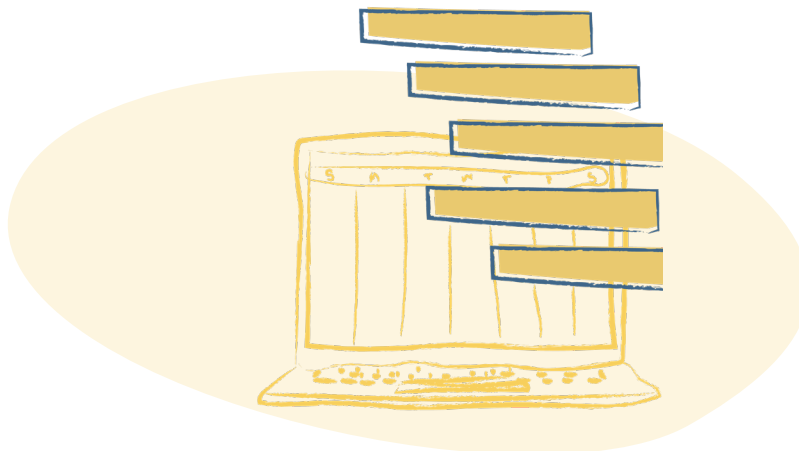
[16]Isabelle Kirkwood, "Hypercontext completes HR pivot with new AI-powered performance
management tool," Betakit, July 20, 2023

Conclusion

Gen Z is transforming and disrupting the modern workplace. The strategies that worked for past generations don't align with what Gen Z wants at work. Gen Z seeks employers with policies and cultures that support their mental health, personal well-being, and professional development.

To motivate, engage, and support Gen Z in the workforce, business leaders should consider rethinking how they approach onboarding, learning, time-off, recognition, and the boss' toolkit. In designing new solutions, leaders should seek input from Gen Z employees and their bosses, co-create, iterate, and keep what works. As members of a generation used to having their voice heard on social media, Gen Zers will likely be happy to offer ideas for improving the workplace experience – which can ultimately lead to a happier, more engaged, and more productive workforce.

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