

► THE PROBLEM

Generationalism is a modern form of ageism.

► WHY IT MATTERS

It can lead to stubborn stereotypes and unhelpful management decisions.

► THE SOLUTION

Understand the life span of careers and create jobs that are fulfilling at all ages.



# New Kidz on the Block

Gen Zers will soon represent one-third of the workforce. They've been called defiant. Unprofessional. More hype than hustle. But many of these tropes are misguided. Here's what leaders need to understand about their junior employees.

By **Meghan Walsh** (age 36)

Reporting contributed by **Vindhya Burugupalli** (age 23)

In November, Joanne Gonzalez-Forster, a public relations specialist, launched the beta version of Wishly, a social media fundraising platform targeting Gen Z. The idea came to her when she watched her own children—her son is now 19 and her daughter 26—looking for ways to donate to the many social causes that were aggressively competing for their attention over the last several years. The first thing Gonzalez-Forster did when she began work on the startup in March 2020 was to create an advisory board of Gen Zers and young millennials representing the full spectrum of socioeconomic backgrounds, races, and education levels. Some came from Ivy League universities. Others were military recruits and high-school dropouts.

What did she learn? “They are not on e-mail,” she says. “They hate e-mail.” And the research that says they have a seven-second attention span? “I would actually say it’s more like four seconds. You have to get your message across fast. Simple and fast.” Where these young adults excel, Gonzalez-Forster says, is in their reach, ability to motivate, and willingness to do the work. Within hours, her team can rally hundreds of acquaintances and colleagues to participate in a survey or impromptu meeting. “If you can make it easy,” Gonzalez-Forster says, “they are more than willing to engage.”

Whenever a new generation hits the scene, there is a wave of pseudo-moral panic, as organizational psychologist Cort Rudolph calls it. “The ‘Millennials’ Are Coming,” warned *60 Minutes* in 2007. “The 37-Year-Olds Are Afraid of the 23-Year-Olds Who Work for Them,” proclaimed a *New York Times* headline last year. The zoomers—whose entire adolescence has been synced with smartphones and social media—have been characterized in some scary ways. After months of interviews, reading, and surveys,

Gonzalez-Forster learned that some of those generalities hold true across demographics (such as contempt for e-mail). Other qualities adapt in real time in response to external factors, like the pandemic or personal prospects.

Gen Z—some 2 billion people born between 1997 and 2009—is sputtering into the workforce at a time of crisis and revolutionary change, which experts say they are responding to more than driving, contrary to news headlines. Young workers were hit hardest by layoffs in 2020, per the “last hired, first fired” custom, and had fewer resources and relationships to fall back on. It wasn’t supposed to be this way. While the millennials came of age during the Great Recession, their younger siblings and even their children were in line to inherit an economy with record low unemployment. But overnight, possibility turned to uncertainty as COVID-19 called into question the very efficacy of our social, political, and economic structures.

The prevailing narrative says these new hires will quit on a dime if they don’t get their PTO. That they demand executives take progressive stances on issues of social and climate justice. And that there’s no way they’re showing up to an office from 9 to 5, Monday through Friday. But in my conversations with young workers, I found that their employment expectations and career motivations vary. As with other age groups, their boldness is often directly correlated with their sense of security. What’s more pronounced is their longing for stability. They want to know that the skills they are developing today will be relevant tomorrow. More than anything, they want to earn a living wage. Which doesn’t sound that different from what workers of every generation are asking for. “The idea of youth often gets burdened with all our hopes and fears for the future,” says Dan Woodman,



a University of Melbourne sociology professor who researches the social conditions that steer the trajectories of young adults. “They start to take on a symbolic significance. Right now, the big ethical questions that an entire culture is grappling with are being put on a new generation.”

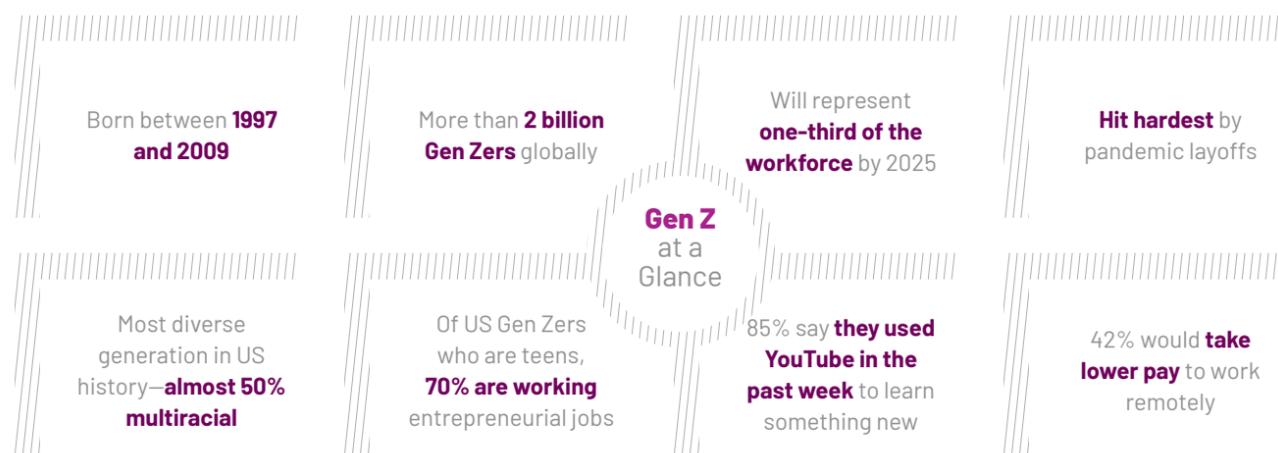
As millennial managers and Gen X executives bump up against the working styles and foreign cultural norms of their new hires, and as workers in the final stage of their careers try to orient themselves in a rapidly digitizing environment, it’s perhaps more useful than ever to develop generational IQ. Effective leaders need to understand how age influences motivation, how culture is created, and how the life stages of a career play out. “We put on these generational goggles,” says Jason Dorsey, who runs the Center for Generational Kinetics, a research and consulting firm. “It’s urgent for leaders to separate myth from truth.”

Older people have always complained about younger people. Researchers call this the “kids these days” effect. Accounts of elders describing youth as lazy, brash, and entitled go back thousands of years. And for just as long, young

**“As a leader, I’ve had to get more willing for my job to include a lot of emotional labor.”**

people have dismissed older people as rigid and traditional. Since companies are run by older people, blaming younger generations for changes in the workplace is standard practice.

It’s easy to attribute declining interest in baseball or craft-beer preferences to generational differences—and just as easy to use those differences to explain a declining work ethic or increased job-hopping, explains Rudolph, who lectures on work across the life span at Saint Louis University. It’s a chicken-or-egg paradox: Do characteristics inherent to a generation drive societal change, or do changes in society—including at the office—shape young attitudes? “Generations put a simple lens on what’s a really complicated set of moving pieces,” Rudolph says. “More modern perspectives say culture changes people.” A recent consensus



Getty Images: Tetra Images

study by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine concluded, “Categorizing workers with generational labels like ‘baby boomer’ or ‘millennial’ to define their needs and behaviors is not supported by research, and cannot adequately inform workforce management decisions.” Essentially, we were all young once, and the era we grew up in influenced who we’ve become as much as the color of our skin, the salaries of our parents, and the houses of worship we attended. So rather than bat around generalities, experts say, managers should strive to better understand the circumstances in which today’s junior workers are coming of professional age.

The oldest Gen Zers were just applying to their first jobs when the pandemic sent white-collar employees home and millions

## GEN Z: WHY CULTURE MATTERS

**PRONOUNS:** She/her

**AGE:** 21

**JOB TITLE:** UX/UI designer

“The most important thing to me is the people and company culture. My company prioritizes playfulness and people putting their most creative self forward. That is what helps me do better.”

to the unemployment queue. They were just becoming aware of the institutional forces that operate the machinery behind the velvet curtains of Oz when the video of George Floyd’s murder circulated and protests erupted across the country. Their teenage years were

marked by one dire climate warning after another. They’re not old enough to remember 9/11 firsthand, but some did experience the aftermath of the Great Recession. They use mobile technology to bank, learn, and date. They are the most racially and ethnically diverse bunch, and the most educated. Meanwhile, Woodman says, the typical career trajectory has gotten messier over the last couple decades. “Recent cohorts are more aware that a job can look very different over three to four years, so they think of job security as building skills that will give them future

opportunities,” he says. “What happens with Gen Z will be determined by what happens to the economy.”

**Z**iad Ahmed talks fast as he verbally swipes through his surprisingly lengthy—at least for a 22-year-old—resume. He founded his first company, a nonprofit aimed at furthering equality in education, when he was in eighth grade. At 16, he launched JUV Consulting, a purpose-driven Gen Z consultancy that currently has 25 full-time employees. At 19, he was named to *Forbes*’s 30 Under 30 list. Last year, he graduated from Yale. While this young Muslim Bangladeshi American is clearly exceptional, he is also, in many ways, a Gen Z archetype: he speaks frenetically,

## GEN Z: CREATING CHANGE

**PRONOUNS:** She/her

**AGE:** 23

**JOB TITLE:** Content writer

“Nothing is going to change unless you bring it to the boss. They’re surprised how willing I am to bring things to the boss, and I’m surprised how unwilling they are. I’m going to give this place a year, see if it’s willing to grow and change like it says it wants to.”

but carefully considers his words; he has a well-developed progressive agenda; he’s an entrepreneur; and he wants to be heard. “I’m fighting for a world where more of us have access to a microphone,” he says. The JUV staff is majority people of color and women, as well as 40 percent queer, and they’re talking about what neurodiverse inclusivity looks like.

I’m an older millennial, but when I think back to when I was Ahmed’s age, my context was vastly different. I’d never heard of Facebook. I’d never owned a smartphone or laptop or been subjected to standardized testing. Climate change wasn’t a commonly accepted certainty—even skin cancer still seemed abstract, with at least a half dozen tanning beds within a mile radius at all times. And growing up in a mostly White conservative suburb of Phoenix, I had very little awareness of concepts like institutional racism. I did, however, graduate college just as the economy was crashing, which imposed a kind of cynicism on me, as well as sense of duty.

Technology and social media, in both their possibilities and their perils, have in every way shaped Ahmed’s age group and all those who will follow him. Historically, technological innovation and adoption have been driven by older workers. Today, for the first time in history, that dynamic has been turned on its head. Now, 91 percent of zoomers say technology is a deciding factor in choosing an employment offer. The majority are confident that they have the tech skills needed in the workforce; they’re less confident they have the non-tech skills. Some forward-thinking firms have been conducting the entire onboarding experience via text message during the pandemic. But leaders should be aware of the effects of this form of instant communication. For instance, it has created a feedback loop where junior employees now expect frequent touchpoints. “Older generations were taught if the boss is talking to you you’re doing something wrong,” Dorsey says. “Gen Z thinks the opposite.”

Countless books have been written on how social media affects young people psychologically, but—beyond its long-term legacy—it’s also influencing perspectives in real time. There has been growing backlash against both the political polarization of Facebook and the filtered aesthetic of Instagram. The result has been an emphasis on authenticity,





**GEN Z: STABILITY STILL REIGNS**

**PRONOUNS:** She/her

**AGE:** 22

**JOB TITLE:** Audit analyst

*“Salary and opportunities for growth are my top priorities. I want to know my skills are not going to be irrelevant tomorrow.”*

imperfection (acne positivity!), and an unapologetic audacity that often gets interpreted as narcissism. “TikTok was a huge part of this pandemic moment,” Ahmed says. “It fundamentally changed our psyche.” With more than 1 billion users, TikTok has become a platform for exploring personal identity, learning, and, of course, connecting. Many executives have even inserted themselves into the dialogue on TikTok.

Because of social media and the racial reckoning of recent years, young people are much more aware of social justice issues, and they expect injustices in the workplace to be addressed—promptly. Woodman points out that this isn’t just a matter of moral righteousness. If a company gets publicly called out for impropriety—a common occurrence in the age of social media and whistleblowers—that’s a black mark for those who worked there.

But researchers have found that those entering the labor force today care most about salary. “We’ve never seen a shift this dramatic before,” says Dorsey about the rapid, tenfold prioritization of wages. Many teenagers have also become accustomed to on-demand pay, an expectation they’re bringing to white-collar jobs. “Companies are still trying to lure younger workers with surface-level perks,” says Molly Barth, a senior cultural strategist at cultural intelligence consultancy sparks & honey. “But they should be focusing instead on creating real structural change.”

That goes for Gen Z-run firms as well. After hearing from staff, Ahmed decided to postpone growth at JUV in order to prioritize wellness. “A lot of my job is making sure people feel OK,” he says. “As a leader, I’ve had to get more willing for my job to include a lot of emotional labor. That wasn’t really something I knew I was signing up for when I started the company, but it’s more and more what execs will be tasked with doing.”

**T**he workforce is more age-diverse than ever before. People are living longer, and they need to work longer to pay for those extra trips around the sun. But along with that valuable diversity—which allows for both the energy of youth and the wisdom of experience—comes heightened inter-age conflict. Social media has stoked polarization. The older folks in legacy media used to be the only ones with a platform to create generational tropes, but social media has leveled the playing field, making way for a full-blown war of the ages. For every dire admonition to Gen Z, there’s an “OK Boomer” meme. Everyone is

Getty Images: Morisa Images

**GEN Z: ASKING BIG QUESTIONS**

**PRONOUNS:** He/him

**AGE:** 22

**JOB TITLE:** CEO

*“Young people were forced inside and had more time to think than perhaps ever before—and what a dangerous thing thinking is. Every one of my peers, we are all in a state of existential crisis in a way we weren’t two years ago.”*

attacking everyone (except for Gen X, of course, which remains all but invisible as it enters prime executive-leadership age). But “talking about generations is far from benign,” says Rudolph. “It promotes the spread of generationalism, which can be considered ‘modern ageism.’”

The categories we use to distinguish different generations aren’t based in science. They’re made up. Arbitrary lines drawn through history. That’s not to say that younger employees don’t differ from older ones—of course they do. John Solymossy, a 36-year-old strategic account manager at personalized advertising agency Aki Technologies, oversees a team of early- to mid-twenty-somethings. He says they have competencies very different from his own. They have innate skills that he’s had to learn, but he’s also had to coach them in other areas: turning on their cameras,

**“All they’ve known is working remotely, which is a bizarre phenomenon.”**

the importance of meeting deadlines, how to have hard conversations, and, yes, how to draft e-mails to clients. While he’s eager to go back to the office at least a few days a week, he finds that they aren’t. “At times, I feel like it’s easy to paint them as having a different mentality,” says Solymossy. “All they’ve known is working remotely, which is a bizarre phenomenon, but most of the differences are person-to-person, not generational.”

Turns out, good leadership is ageless, and the most successful job designs cut across all demographic features. Regardless of whether people grew up entertaining themselves with cat’s cradle, Sega Genesis, or smartphones, they largely respond to the same intrinsic motivators. They crave autonomy, a sense of control over their process. They need to feel competent and have opportunities to use their creative faculties. They want constructive feedback, positive social interaction, feelings of being connected, purposeful, and valued. “We view generations not as a box but as clues that help us connect, build trust, and drive influence,” Dorsey says. “At the end of the day, we’re all human.”