
Making the Workplace Work for Gens X, Y and Z



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All three generations share an increasing enthusiasm for entrepreneurship, but differ globally in their fears about the future of work.

Members of “Generation Y” or the “millennial generation” as they’re commonly known, have forced a great deal of change in the workplace. A sizable body of research has tried to understand this incredibly visible and demanding generation, born between the early 1980s and mid-1990s. With unprecedented access to technology, millennials have changed the game for leaders, redefining how they expect them to behave and to give them the opportunities they feel they deserve.

In 2014, INSEAD, Universum and the Head Foundation uncovered in a [global survey](#) that millennials wanted to lead, but their expectations were not as clear cut as many pundits had made out. They were willing to be coached and mentored and although becoming a manager was important to them, so was work-life balance, most choosing it over a big salary. Millennials’ views on whether and why they wanted to lead varied considerably by culture.

What shone through clearly was that this generation yearned for self-control. Millennials wanted to be supported by leaders, but not bossed around by them.

In an [expanded global study](#) this year, including Gens X and Z, the age cohort born before the millennials and the one after (from 1994 onwards), we find some interesting similarities in expectations but also fears, which have big implications for leaders and organisations.

Brave new world?

A survey of 18,000 professionals and students across the three generations from 19 countries, ranging from the most developed to the emerging economies, reveals that all three generations, but particularly those already in the workforce, have a keen interest in start-ups and entrepreneurship. More than one in four students and one in three working professionals are interested in starting their own businesses. There is notably high entrepreneurial fervour in Mexico and the United Arab Emirates. While this reflects the “cult of entrepreneurship” led by transformational icons such as Elon Musk, it also demonstrates how many are also falling out of love with the idea of working for a Fortune 500 firm. Among working professionals, more want to start their own business than work for an international company or organisation. Across the generations, no more than 9 percent want to work for the government.

These findings represent some key imperatives for companies looking to attract, grow and retain talent across these generations. The interest in entrepreneurialism demonstrates that it’s not only millennials who are bored with hard-to-influence giant global enterprises more akin to super tankers than speedboats. The bigger the company, the greater the hierarchy, structure and silos. This used to offer financial security and perks, but today, Gens X, Y and Z are more interested in whether their personalities fit with the companies they work for and, crucially, whether it gives them meaning and purpose.

In our 2014 findings, the biggest fear for 40 percent of respondents was getting stuck in a job with no development opportunities. In our latest multi-generational study, we find that Gens Z and X share this concern, Gen X to a lesser extent.

This was reflected across other questions in the study that asked about meaning and alignment at work. Fully half of Gen Y and Z students and professionals are either “afraid” or “very afraid” that they won’t get a job that matches their personality. 40 percent of Gen Xers concurred.

Hope for the future of work was where differences emerged amongst the generations. In some countries, the gap between Gens X and Y is large. In Germany, for instance, Gen Y has greater hope about the future than they felt as students, whereas the opposite is true for Gen X. We observe the same pattern in Italy, Mexico and Russia. These divides are important, given research showing that job insecurity reduces mental health, job satisfaction and performance while increasing burnout.

The challenges women face and their fears about their careers vary significantly by country and generation, which will be important for multinationals rolling out initiatives across many borders. A common fear for Gen Z women in India, for instance, was that “no one will listen to me”, while peers in the United States worry more that they won’t be seen as valuable to their organisation. This was also a key concern for Gen Y professionals in China. For Gen Xers around the world, women are worried that they won’t be able to realise their career goals and enjoy their retirement.

Keeping them all happy

Gens X, Y and Z are keenly interested in agility and making sure they reach their lofty goals. Organisations can respond by making their big firms feel small and nimble. Some are applying agile project management principles, which structures teams to allow them to adapt quickly, focusing on specific sets of tasks across a tight timeframe. In other situations, firms are trying “intrapreneurship”, giving employees the ability to work on start-up projects within the firm.

All generations are concerned about whether their personalities fit with the companies they work for (Gen X to a lesser extent of around 40 percent of respondents) and, crucially, whether it gives them meaning and purpose.

This purpose needn’t always concern social causes, something that emerged in our first report on millennials, which found an overwhelming desire to contribute to society. In our report, we cite the example of David Kalt, founder and CEO of Reverb, a marketplace for musicians to buy and sell their kit, who motivates his employees by giving them real-time access to

information about the company's current performance. "An annual review shouldn't be the only time responsibilities, successes and failures are out in the open", he wrote in [The Wall Street Journal](#) in September. Sharing the vision and progress of the company motivates his employees and gives them a sense of shared purpose, he says. The need for constant feedback has been commonly associated with eager millennials.

Other ways to promote the "fit" that half of Gen Zers and Gen Yers yearn for is to provide a clearly articulated and authentic culture. It is important to promote this culture internally but also externally to attract outside talent.

The extent of fear across the generations was also a stand-out part of this paper. Given that fear can undermine job satisfaction and also performance, organisations should take steps to combat fear and stress. Benefits that resonate particularly well with millennials include "go dark" vacations with no access to emails or company phones and helping Gen Zers pay off their mounting student debt. Employers can help by offering access to platforms like Student Loan Genius to help them pay off their loans in a contribution scheme similar to the way retirement plans work.

In summary, our report shows the similarities but also the crucial differences between generations. It is crucial for firms and leaders to understand these differences so they can make better decisions about training, leadership development and culture-building for a multigenerational and diverse workforce.

This article is part of a three-part series on the future of work. To see other articles in the series, click [here](#).

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