Original Paper

Organizations Prepare: Generation Z Has Arrived with a New Learning Style

Lorinda F. Lewis[1] & Lisa M. Rohloff[2]

[1] Ph. D, DBA, Lakeland University, United States

[2] MS, United States

Abstract

Generation Z (Gen Z) is just entering the workforce, currently comprising about 5% and growing rapidly. As 30% of the total population, they are positioned to flood the workforce. At the same time, Baby Boomers are retiring at a rate of 10,000 per day. Organizational leaders should prepare for coming shift where Gen Z and Millennials are the majority of the workforce. A key concern in this workforce adjustment is how leaders will train and develop these new workers. Gen Z is the first generation to grow up in a world of technology, therefore their learning process is unique. Leaders should be prepared to adjust their existing training and communications to accommodate this new cohort. This research offers insight into how digital technology has influenced Gen Z, particularly how their use of it has adapted their brains to require more visual methods of learning. It culminates with suggested training adaptations to recruit, engage, and retain this cohort in organizations.

Keywords: Generational workforce, training Generation Z, Gen Z, generational characteristics, Gen Z brain development, reverse mentoring, employee engagement

1. Introduction

Generation Z is here, rapidly joining the workforce. They have had many influencers, including a global world mindset, and digital technologies. A heavy reliance on social media means they are *always on* and *super-connected*. Gen Z enters the workforce with unique skills as well as different expectations for their work environment; and that is especially true with how they learn and develop. Their use of technology and smart devices has adapted their brains to require more visual communication that is delivered in smaller packets of content. To make sure training is effective with Gen Z, organizations can employ some adaptations.

2. Generational Landscape

This is the first time in history that five generations are active in the workforce. A generational cohort is defined as a group of individuals born in a defined twenty-year period who have shared the same social experiences (Lewis & Wescott, 2017; Lyons & Kuron, 2014; Weingarten, 2009). In the existing literature, there is some inconsistency in the birth dates and labels for each cohort. Generational cohorts have been a popular research topic since the early 1940s, including the seminal work by Kingsley Davis who documented the potential for factional conflict amongst co-working generations (Gusfield, 1957; Lewis & Wescott, 2013). While each of the cohorts has been assigned many labels, they are commonly known as Traditionals, Boomers, Gen Xers, Millennials, and now Gen Z.

In 2017, the population of the United States was comprised of 90.5M Gen Z. Boomers and Millennials were about even at 72.6M and 72.1M respectively; and Gen X represented approximately 65M (Statistica, 2017). Gen Z is the largest cohort to date and, when combined with Millennials, they compose nearly 70% of global employees (Bennett, 2017). The remaining 30% of the workforce consists largely of Gen Xers who are retiring early, and a few straggling Baby Boomers (Lewis & Wescott, 2017). As a small number of the Silent Generation (2.1M) exits the workforce, the landscape will once again revert to the more common four generation makeup (Statistica, 2017). Each of the cohorts and their descriptions are outlined in Table 1.

It is important to note that not everyone fits into the generalizations made about their generation. Each generation grew up with different experiences and they bring unique perspectives, biases, and skill sets to the workplace. There are many external influences that contribute to an individual's behavior (Arli & Pekerti, 2016; Lewis & Wescott, 2017). We should be cautious of assuming these generalities apply to everyone in each cohort. We can, however, use this as a starting point to baseline our training and communications plans. Understanding how the digital revolution has influenced these cohorts is essential to developing successful training and development programs. Some of the characterizations for Gen Z have not been identified yet because their values and desires are still taking shape, and they present a fresh challenge for organizations. Firms that accurately anticipate their training needs and adjust their practices will have the best chance of success with them.

Table 1. Generational Overview

Generation (Bold/ underline indicates the term used throughout this text)	Birth Years	Characteristics & Values	Experience / Influencers
<u>Veterans</u> Traditionals Matures Silent Generation Greatest Generation	1922-1945	Dedication Sacrifice Hard work Loyalty Honor Optimism Respect for authority Conformity - Law and order Adherence to rules Patience - Delayed reward Team orientation Uncomfortable with change Focused on stability	The Great Depression World War I World War II Korean War Television Labor Unions
<u>Baby Boomers</u>	1946-1964	Optimism Team Oriented Goal Oriented Work for personal fulfillment Self-absorbed Optimistic Personal gratification/growth Health and wellness Competitive Strive for possibilities/change Hard work - *workaholic*	Assassination of political icons Civil Rights Movement Women's Rights Movement The Vietnam War Moon Landing Free Love Abortion

Gen X'ers	1965-1980	Alienated	President Nixon Impeached
Generation X		Cynical - Skeptical	Fall of the Berlin Wall
Syn-Tech		Individualistic	Fall of the Soviet Union
		Diversity	Downsizing
		Think globally	Increased divorce rates
		Balanced	HIV/AIDS
		Techno-literate	Introduction of computers
		Fun - Informal	Latchkey kids
		Self-reliant	Video games
		Pragmatic	
		Ambivalent to authority	
Millennials	1980-2000	Optimistic	Wars
Nexters		Civic duty	Natural disasters
Generation Y		Confident	Obesity epidemic
Generation Me		Achievement Oriented	Facebook
Trophy Generation		Sociable	Myspace
		Moral	Cell Phones
		Street smart	Pop culture
		Need positive reinforcement	The Age of Technology
		Autonomous	Online social networking
		Empowered to execute work	Terrorism
		Positive attitude	Identity theft
		Prefer experiences over things	
Generation Z	2001-2020	Global thinkers	Changing gender roles
iGen		Individuality	Technology
Nexters		Entrepreneurial	Viral Videos
Always on Generation		High expectations	Technology celebrities
		Prefer things over experiences	Social media
		Technological Savants	Constant, instant
		Collaborative	connectivity
		Embrace diversity & inclusion	Very involved parents and
		Competitive	teachers
		Highly visual learners	Global, digital world
		Value education	
		Dependent of social media and digital technologies	

3. The Shaping of Gen Z

There are many characteristics that make Gen Z unique, and those characteristics were shaped by the key influencers in their lives. This cohort is entering the workforce more highly educated than earlier generations and see themselves as life-long learners, expecting to continue their education as they move along in their careers. Research by Broadbent et al. (2017) confirms that they place high value on education, reporting 80% of global respondents indicate the increase in education is a source of hope They are more ethnically and racially diverse than earlier cohorts and have less work experience. Schroth (2019) reported only 19% of this cohort had work experience compared to 30% of millennials. Gen Z has experienced a more affluent upbringing, with older, more financially and career stable parents, with fewer job opportunities in the market (Schroth, 2019). This new generation has had many influencers such as parents, teachers, and a globally digital world. Their parents have been integrally involved with their lives, giving constant scheduling, directing, and coaching; they are often called helicopter parents (Allen, 2019). Reassuringly, global research surveying members of the Gen Z cohort confirmed that parents are the most influential element of their development with 89% of respondents in agreement with friends (78%) and teachers (70%) following in impact (Broadbent et al., 2017). All these influences have shaped how Gen Z learns and develops.

4. Technological Influences

Gen Z is the first generation to grow up in a *globally* digital world, and their preferred method of keeping in contact is through social media. Innately connected to web and app platforms such as YouTube, Tik Tok, Instagram and the like, Gen Zs are accustomed to collaborating virtually and sharing images and information in the virtual world (Densai & Lele, 2017). Their constant connection to members of their sphere of influence allows them to engage repeatedly throughout each day. They tend to prefer instant gratification, work at a faster pace, and are more individualistic (Nair & Sadasivan, 2019). They have never known a world without cell phones, iPads, social media, or the internet (Densai & Lele, 2017; Dwivedula et al., 2019; Nair & Sadasivan, 2019). They are experts at using technology and maintain a lifestyle of being in constant contact with others – and they know and expect that they can contact anyone, anywhere in the world, in real time. The world is a much smaller place for them, and they think of life and work in terms of being global.

Gen Z trusts in technology, expects it to be in place for all transactions, and believes that it will help to build a better future (Broadbent et al., 2017; Solomon, 2018). In Solomon's (2018) research with Gen Z, 89% of respondents were confident in a future including human-machine partnerships, 51% of them believe that humans and machines will become integrated at work, and 38% see machines as tools for humans. Their comfort with advancing technology demonstrates their readiness for and even expectation of the technological shift in the workplace.

Gen Z's heavy use of digital media has influenced how they learn. Video gaming and smart device use has trained their brains to be highly visual. This adaptation in their learning preferences causes them to be associated with visual, rather than lecture, or reading. Additionally, they are accustomed to fast-paced activity and information streams allowing them to rapidly analyze complex information (Rothman, 2016). Their experience with technology, and therefore their world view, blurs the lines between the digital world and the physical world and they see them interconnected if not one in the same (Sladek & Grabinger, 2014).

5. Attention Span and Task Focus

Another characteristic of Gen Z which is causally related to their use of technology is their agility to rapidly switch between screens, and therefore tasks. While psychologists agree that it is not truly possible for people to multi-task, we instead switch our attention to various things in short spurts (Park, et al., 2019). This has become a problem for Gen Z as many of them have a difficult time with paying attention for long periods of time, which is how previous generations design and deliver training (Nair & Sadasivan, 2019; Rothman, 2014). This has had a significant impact on our society, so much so that Harvard Medical has coined a new disorder Acquired Attention Deficit Disorder (AADD) to describe changes occurring in the brain due to technology (Rothman, 2016). It is believed that the constant receiving of information from technologies is rewiring the brain to expect information to be delivered

in short, rapid bursts (Rothman, 2016). As a result, many industries have adjusted their marketing and advertising initiatives to shorter, more visual ads. These ads give small, quick pieces of information with plenty of visual stimulation to catch the attention of this generation.

Digital technology has introduced new ways to search and find information at the stroke of a key or a simple voice request. Gen Z is accustomed to on-demand bursts of knowledge and information rather than researching and reading comprehensive works. They trust the technology to return accurate information, with speed of response more valuable than the accuracy of the information (Desai & Lele, 2017). They search, click on what they need, and move on. Their focus on visual cues and their ability to quickly synthesize and analyze elements of information surpasses their ability and patience to analyze longer, mostly text-based articles. Rothman (2016) explained Gen Z focuses on the images rather than text, reading less than 20% of the words on a given page (Rothman, 2016). Well-written and research supported articles are usually more accurate and provide more context than short videos and posts on social media but are not desirable to this generation. This is supported by the rising position of YouTube as the search engine of choice with over thirty million visitors per day and three billion searches per month (Merchdope, 2019; Wagner, 2017).

6. Potential Challenges with Gen Z Workforce

While some of the characteristics of Gen Z are easily viewed as desirable competencies for a new workforce, there are also those that can be problematic for organizations bringing them onboard. Changes to the social contract with these new employees is necessary to recruit and retain them as contributing members of the organization. This section will address some of those concerns.

Gen Z's heavy reliance on social media can be problematic for leaders welcoming these new employees to their teams. Although these young workers are experts at using technology and their ability to adapt to new forms of technology and social media can be a great asset, many of them lack interpersonal communication skills. This is attributed to their extensive use of smart phones and social media as the primary form of communication (Kick, et al., 2015). Their underdeveloped interpersonal communication skills may contribute to conflict in multi-generational teams and negatively affect organizational efficiency if not addressed through a cultural and operational shift toward technological infrastructure. Their constant use of smart phones and access to social media is commonplace for Gen Z, which can cause an increased level of anxiety when they are separated from them (Kick, et al., 2015). Most organizations are steeped with policies, regulations, and customary practices that limit or discourage personal use of smart phones during the working hours.

7. Suggestions for Organizational Adaptations

The workplace expectations for Gen Z require employers to change a variety of elements including onboarding, training, career pathing, professional development, and more (Dwivedula, et al., 2019; Lewis & Wescott, 2017; Nair & Sadasivan, 2019). One of these elements, as presented in this paper is how digital media can be used to provide effective workplace training for Gen Z. Employers must recognize the need to adjust internal processes and training to fit the incoming cohort. Recognizing the need to change is the first step to positioning organizations to recruit and retaining Gen Z talent and remain viable in their industries. Suggestions to prepare the organizational development environment for Gen Z's entry into the workforce follow.

8. Multi-generational Training

Since much of organizational training has been developed to fit the needs of previous generations, it might not work very well for Gen Z. Andragogical theories and processes have advanced along with the expansion of technology and should be updated to meet these digital natives (Montiel et al., 2020). Updated training that incorporates gamification, visual stimulus, interactive features, drip content and other modern techniques is needed to meet the cohort's expectations and learning style. Where handbooks and written and verbal instruction worked well with earlier generations, training videos will be necessary to accommodate the learning style of Gen Z. Converting existing standard work, policies, and procedures to a library of three to five-minute videos available to learn on demand follows the concept of YouTube and will meet the cohort's expectation. Accessibility to these videos serve as on demand microlearning that aligns with their technology experience and expectation. This follows adult

learning theory and self-directed learning (Parker & Rossegar, 2019) and is in line with the recommendations of Rothman (2015), Nair and Sadasivan (2019), and Dwivedula et al. (2019).

Several key factors influencing Gen Zs learning style should be considered when developing training for them. Their perception of the world is through the lens of digital connectedness, and their expectation of the workforce is framed by this experience (Densai & Lele, 2017). This generation finds technology to be second nature, they are fully adapted to it, and they expect their work environment and tools to operate like their social media platforms. Leveraging videos, virtual reality, gamification, and other highly visual elements can ensure engagement and efficacy of training.

9. Professional Development and Career Paths

To recruit and retain Gen Z, we should look at the broader perspective. Opportunities to develop personally and professionally are viewed as an employment benefit to this cohort. It is important for organizations to consider this in developing employee benefits, recruiting, and training programs. Tailoring these programs to Gen Z and their unique learning characteristics will ensure talent acquisition and retention.

Give Gen Z opportunities to improve their face-to-face and written communication skills. Since this cohort loves to learn and values educational opportunities, they will be likely to embrace learning new skills to improve themselves in the workplace if presented in a manner that aligns with their learning styles. These learning opportunities should also be aligned to a documented career path that gives them visibility into their own career growth (Lewis & Wescott, 2017).

Members of Gen Z will appreciate opportunities to work closely with more experienced employees of previous generations. Gen Z grew up with ample (some would say excessive) input, direction, and influence from parents and teachers, so they can work well with previous generations, developing trusting partnerships in the workplace. This is best suited for knowledge harvesting and upgrading written policies to technology-based alternatives (Lewis & Wescott, 2017). By positioning Gen Z to bring innovative technology into the organization, leaders can capitalize on their technological prowess and offer a sense of motivation. This cohort can help teach other generations about the latest in social media and digital technologies. Providing them with the task of harvesting the knowledge of the departing generations and creating knowledge would be a perfect fit for this cohort, establishing a channel for their tech talent and connecting with their intrinsic motivation of making a great contribution to the organization (Dwivedula, et al., 2019). They can also help brainstorm new ways to use existing social media platforms and digital technologies to help the organization.

10. Technology Friendly Policies

Companies will need to rethink policies related to the use of personal technologies while on the job (Sheth et al., 2016). Policies for using electronic devices during training will need to take into consideration the stress that workers may experience if they cannot use their phones. Employers should provide an atmosphere where smart devices can be used (and checked periodically), but within certain boundaries to ease this stress. Make the boundaries clear as Gen Z are accustomed to plenty of direction. Encouraging them to help define the boundaries will ensure adoption of the expectations. This suggestion can be helpful for more than just Gen Z as people from all generations have become accustomed to checking their devices often throughout the day (Dwivedula et al., 2019).

11. Additional Research Opportunities

Additional research is needed to generate more suggestions of organizational process and culture modifications necessary to meet the needs of Gen Z. Primary, especially phenomenological research is needed to gather the experiences of this cohort as they enter the workforce and engage with existing organizational culture and processes. Case study research could also offer insight into the efficacy of an organization's efforts, although there may be industry specific variables to consider. Research such as this will provide additional insight into changes that resonate with the cohort and provide best practices for other organizations to follow.

12. Conclusion

As the older generations progress toward retirement, Gen Z and Millennials will lead our businesses. Rather than trying to make them conform to the training that worked for Veterans and Boomers, adaptations that suit their characteristics is necessary. This cohort will be at the helm, carrying the businesses into the future with their own leadership style and approach, and leaders must clear the path for their success.

This research highlighted how digital technology has influenced Gen Z, particularly how their use of them has adapted their brains to require more visual methods of learning. It culminated with suggested training adaptations to recruit, engage, and retain this cohort in an organization.

References

Allen, V. (2019, March 26). *Controlling helicopter parents are to blame for 'Gen Z' youngsters struggling at university, psychologists say*. https://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-6852541/Helicopter-parents-blame-snowflake-Gen-Z-youngsters-struggling-university.html

Arli, D., & Pekerti, A. (2016). Investigating the influence of religion, ethical ideologies and generational cohorts toward consumer ethics: which one matters? *Social Responsibility Journal*, *12*(4), 770-785. https://doi.org/10.1108/SRJ-08-2015-0112

Bennett, M. (2017, February 7). A Breakdown of the Five Generations of Employees in the Workplace [Web log message]. *Navex Global*. https://www.navexglobal.com/blog/article/formal-introduction-five-generations-employees-your-workforce/

Broadbent, E., Gougoulis, J., Lui, N., Pota, V., & Simons, J. (2017). Generation Z: Global citizenship survey. What the world's young people think and feel. https://www.varkeyfoundation.org/what-we-do/research/generation-z-global-citizenship-survey/

Desai, S. P., & Lele, V. (2017). Correlating Internet, Social Networks and Workplace – a Case of Generation Z Students. *Semantic Scholar*, *8*(4), 802-815. http://dx.doi.org/10.5958/0976-478X.2017.00050.7

Dwivedula, R., Singh, P., & Azaran, M. (2019). Gen Z: Where are we now, and future pathways. *Journal of HRM*, *22*(2), 28-40. http://www.jhrm.eu

Gusfield, J. (1957). The problem of generations in an organizational structure. *Social Forces*, *35*(4), 323-330. doi:10.2307/2573321

Kick, A. L., Contacos-Sawyer, J., & Thomas, B. (2015). How generation Z's reliance on digital communication can affect future workplace relationships. *Competition Forum*, *13*(2), 214-222. https://www.questia.com/library/p150669/competition-forum

Lewis, L. F., & Wescott, H. D. (2017). Multi-generational workforce: Four generations united in lean. *Journal of Business Studies Quarterly*, *8*(3), 1-14. http://www.jbsq.org/

Lyons, S., & Kuron, L. (2014). Generational differences in the workplace: A review of the evidence and directions for future research. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, *35*(S1), 139-157. doi: 10.1002/job.1913

Merchdope. (Sept 29, 2019). *37 Mindblowing YouTube Facts, Figures, and Statistics*. https://merchdope.com/youtube-stats/

Montiel, I., Delgado-Ceballos, J., Ortiz-de-Mandojana, N., & Antolin-Lopez, R. (2020). New ways of teaching: Using technology and mobile apps to educate on societal grand challenges. *Journal of Business Ethics*, *161*(2), 243. https://doi-org.cosc.idm.oclc.org/10.1007/s10551-019-04184-x

McQueen, M. (2011). *Ready or Not... Here Come Gen Z: A look at the generation about to hit high schools, workplaces and society-at-large*. http://michaelmcqueen.net/phocadownload/parents-teachers/Ready%20or%20not,%20here%20come%20Gen%20Z.pdf

Nair, A., & Sadasivan, R. (2019). Winning the talent game: HR gamification experience for Generation Z. *International Journal on Leadership*, *7*(1), 44-49. http://publishingindia.com/ijl/

Park, S., Xu, X., Rourke, B., & Bullur, S. (2019). Do you enjoy TV while Tweeting? Effects of multitasking on viewers transportation, emotions, and enjoyment. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, *63*(2), 231-249. https:doi.org/10.1080/08838151.2019.1622340

Parker, D. A., & Roessger, K. M. (2019). Retrieval practice as process in self-directed learning: New philosophical Directions for self-directed learning. *Adult Education Research Conference*. https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2019/papers/10

Rothman, D. (2016). *A tsunami of learners called Generation Z.* https://mdle.net/Journal/A_Tsunami_of_Learners_Called_Generation_Z.pdf

Schroth, H. (2019). Are you ready for Gen Z in the workplace? *California Management Review*, *61*(3), 5-18. https://doi.org/10.1177/0008125619841006

Statistica. (2020). *Resident Population in the United States in 2017 by Generation.* https://www.statista.com/statistics/797321/us-population-by-generation/

Sheth, P., Wasti, K., & Smith, A. M. (2016). Privacy in the workplace: Organizations must find ways to accommodate employees' personal technology use while also meeting regulatory and other requirements. *Internal Auditor*, *73*(5), 42. https://internalaudit360.com/journal-of-internal-audit/

Sladek, S., & Grabinger, A. (2014). Gen Z: The first generation of the 21st century has arrived. *XYZ University*. https://www.xyzuniversity.com/wp-ontent/uploads/2018/08/GenZ_Final-dl1.pdf

Solomon, S. (2018, November 21). As Generation Z enters workforce, study reveals they are tech savvy yet insecure [Web log message]. *The Times of Israel*. https://www.timesofisrael.com/as-generation-z-enters-workforce-study-reveals-they-are-tech-savvy-yet-insecure/

Wagner, A. (May 15, 2017). Are You Maximizing the Use of Video in Your Content Marketing Strategy? *Forbes* [Blog Post]. https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesagencycouncil/2017/05/15/are-you-maximizing-the-use-of-video-in-your-content-marketing-strategy/#294372b93584

Weingarten, R. M. (2009). Four generations, one workplace: A Gen X-Y staff nurse's view of team building in the emergency department, *Journal of Emergency Nursing*, *35*(1), 27-30. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jen.2008.02.017