The Building Blocks for Gen Z Job Success

The top behaviours for Gen Z hires and how this might change for the future
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When I opened the news today, the very first article I saw was titled ‘UK unfilled vacancies hit record as workers leave labour market’. We are regularly reminded of how the last two years of rapid economic, political and social change has tilted the world of work on its axis. Now more than ever, employers are coming to terms with how to acquire the right people, with the right skills, at the right time to face the growing demands of their business. Many are asking ‘what is the best way to fill these ‘unfillable’ vacancies?’

Strategically, employers are turning to Gen Z in increasing numbers to build their talent pipelines at both the school and college leaver level, and at graduate level. These early career hires offer employers the opportunity to develop the right skills, as well as offering Gen Z the opportunity to engage in meaningful employment as they enter the job market.

This report explores the important role of ‘soft skills’ in the recruitment of Gen Z. Employers are increasingly focusing on recruiting for behaviours, rather than experience or technical skill. This is an exciting shift in the early career labour market, and in this report, we detail what behaviours are particularly important to employers.

Yet, regardless of the opportunity that comes from refocusing on behaviours, employers need to pay attention to the recruitment methods they use to rate behaviours, especially in a virtual recruitment process to ensure their processes are inclusive and equitable.

Considering the increasing aims of hiring diverse students hires, understanding best practice in evaluating behaviours in the recruitment process is pressing. Opportunities are arising for new forms of creative recruitment practices to rate important behaviours in candidates.

One thing is clear, there has never been a greater need to invest in early talent recruitment and development. A strong, engaged, early talent pipeline is key to meeting future talent needs.
Foreword

Competition for talent is fierce; the skills gap continues to make it difficult for employers to find the talent they need and, as graduate positions recover to pre-pandemic levels and job vacancies hit record highs, there is more choice than ever for graduates entering the job market.

Against this backdrop, employers are re-evaluating recruitment strategies, transitioning from the clear-cut and deeply entrenched hiring model of grades and institutions to a more effective framework of behaviours and strengths.

The response we’ve seen to the survey reflects what we’re seeing in our discussions with clients – the focus has shifted from hard skills to behaviours or ‘strengths’ that translate across professions and are not confined to a specific industry, job or company.

Refocusing on behaviours is also at the top of the agenda for universities looking to prepare their students for a much-changed world of work.

In partnership with the Institute of Student Employers (ISE), we engaged with employers and universities across the UK to understand what behaviours they are focused on for 2022 and beyond.

In this whitepaper, we examine the key findings of the survey, Cappfinity and Strengths Profile global strengths data, and ISE research to look at priority behaviours for Gen Z and how this is evolving.

We aim to highlight what employers and educators can and are doing to engage Gen Z and improve employability outcomes.
147 universities and employers from sectors including finance, legal, tech, energy, retail, health, the built environment and the public sector responded to the survey, sharing their thoughts on the top behaviours for Gen Z hires, how this might change for the future, and the impact of the pandemic on their outlook.
Data Insights

90% of universities focus on developing Collaboration skills

85% of employers assess for Collaboration

97% of employers said graduates have strong teamwork skills at the point of hiring
Data Insights

**Collaboration is key**

85% of employers said that they assess for Collaboration in their recruitment process and ranked the behaviour first for importance. Employers also still see Collaboration as key in two years’ time.

90% of universities said they were focused on developing this behaviour in their students but ranked it behind Resilience, Learning Agility and Critical Thinking in terms of importance.

“Working with others is key to delivering outcomes as hardly any work is completed in isolation.”

“Collaboration is a key value of our organisation and every single hiring manager stresses that it’s a vital skill.”

Employers see Collaboration, along with Critical Thinking, as core foundation behaviours that are needed in order to develop other strengths such as Agility and a Growth Mindset. In our work with leading global businesses, Collaboration has been an in-demand strength for over a decade with its universal appeal being seen across businesses of all sizes, regions and industries.

Research by the ISE found that 97% of employers felt graduates possess strong teamwork skills at the point of hiring and 88% felt school and college leavers also demonstrated this skill. The positive feedback highlights that, despite the impact of the pandemic, those entering the workforce for the first time are strong in this critical behaviour.

While recognising this, with the continuation of hybrid working, being intentional about Collaboration will continue to be vital for businesses, including finding new ways to collaborate virtually.

Employers can also help to build Collaboration skills by finding opportunities for graduates to apply their knowledge to real-life business challenges. They can then be teamed with employees from other generations for two-way knowledge sharing, leveraging the voice of early career professionals as well as providing an opportunity to learn from experienced employees.
Data Insights

New strategies to combat talent shortages

When employers look to fill tech roles, they’re typically more interested in a graduate’s capacity to learn to code or consult. For these types of roles building block behaviours might include Curiosity, Critical Thinking skills, Learning Agility and Collaboration.

More than 60 behaviours were cited by 76% of employer respondents and 65% of universities. The most common behaviours mentioned by employers were Communication, Passion, Customer Focus, Innovation and Motivation, and the key behaviours for universities included Global Awareness, Intercultural Awareness and Information Literacy. ISE research also flagged that Creativity is increasingly rising in the ranking on the World Economic Forum (WEF) for behaviours and skills.

The flexibility of behavioural frameworks means there are multiple ways of assessing for different traits. Organisations know that the same 6-8 identical behaviours won’t work for each job role, and they appreciate there is value in difference and spiky profiles, where students may not be high achieving in all areas. The acceptance of such profiles also provides the employer with the opportunity to hire broadly and more diversly.

The search for scarce skills is driving employers to delve deeper into the strengths and behaviours linked to success in a role. Employers are typically now looking for a broad range of behaviours to help them identify potential.

We can see this happening with the recruitment of tech roles where competition is high. Just 36% of employers said they were recruiting for technology focus – instead they are changing their strategy to focus on a combination of strengths.

“Tech focus is still important, but we also look at Learning Agility and encourage exploring.”
Data Insights

The key for employers is to find the right combination of behaviours that can lead recruiters and hiring managers to find the talent that they need for the role and for their organisation.

“Team working, contributing ideas and being creative in finding solutions to problems are key to our business. It is essential that all of our employees behave with integrity in order to build trusted relationships with our clients. Our junior employees also need to demonstrate the ability and desire to learn quickly and demonstrate an interest and aptitude for business.”

This is positive for diversity, although the ambiguity might add complexity for university career services as they work to prepare and match students to the right jobs and careers.

For career services, practical considerations like resources and time drive the focus and the emphasis differs across courses. Many are trying to simplify the picture for students by concentrating on what is important now.

“To try not to overwhelm students, we are focusing on skills that are immediately important, such as Resilience.”
Data Insights

In-demand behaviours are evolving

The WEF predicts that the double disruption of Covid and automation will displace 85 million jobs by 2025 and 50% of employees will need to be reskilled. Skills have a limited shelf-life and employers who are able to pivot with the market and proactively reskill will have a significant competitive advantage.

The impact can already be seen in many industries, and this is reflected in responses from employers.

In a work environment that is constantly changing, resilience will be key. Ranked 6th by employers for 2022, Resilience is predicted to become the most important behaviour for early talent in two years’ time.

"The working world is challenging and being resilient is becoming more and more critical."

People strong in Resilience work well under pressure, and in the face of change they are determined and have a positive attitude in overcoming obstacles.

ISE data over the last three years shows a division in how employers have rated the resilience of school and college leavers and graduates. Resilience for graduates has been rated as going down since the pandemic, whereas the resilience of school and college leavers is seen as increasing. It will be key for businesses to take this difference into account in designing onboarding programmes for graduates who may need additional support.
Data Insights

Alongside Resilience, employers also want employees who can quickly adapt and thrive in a rapidly changing environment. Agility also increases in importance from 8th place to 3rd for employers, and from 5th to 1st place for universities. In our analysis of Cappfinity’s global strengths data, we’ve also seen the importance of Adaptability increase.

“Our organisation is always changing and we need people who are able to adapt quickly.”

Analysis of Cappfinity data also indicates that strengths we have historically seen as highly important, including Numerical Reasoning, Growth Mindset and Learning Agility, remain in the top 10 but have gone down in top ranked position and prevalence.

Instead, we’ve seen a rise in the ranked positions of Relationship Builder, Initiative and Moral Compass.

For universities, the breadth of focus and pace of change could create difficulties. With limited resources and large numbers of programmes and students, universities face challenges in keeping pace with the changes in demand.

“Programmes aren’t as agile as they might be, so recognising the importance of these doesn’t immediately translate into action.”

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The Building Blocks for Gen Z Job Success
Data Insights

Gen Z is driving a change in workplace communication

Communication was mentioned by both universities and employers as key. However, employers may have very different expectations to candidates on what it means to have good communication skills.

The opportunities for graduates to develop offline communication skills over the last two years have been scarce, and employers tell us that while they have lots of early careers talent who can write an email, they have far fewer who can pick up a telephone and have a conversation with someone. The ISE Development Report also found that business appropriate communication was the least possessed skill for school and college leavers at point of hire.

Employers will need to differentiate between essential communication skills and desirable skills at the point of hiring, based on the key stakeholder groups the employee will need to communicate with.

They will also need to put support in place to help new recruits develop the range of communication skills they will need in their job in the longer term.

It's also important to note that while Gen Z have had limited opportunities over the last two years to develop in-person communication skills or gain work experience, they will have their own communication skills that can add value to the business.

Multi-generational Workplace Expert, Lindsey Pollak, highlights that Gen Z are experts when it comes to promotion and sharing positive company messages via social media. Their work-related posts are generally positive for employers; they share their attendance at events, selfies with senior leaders whom they admire, and recognition and awards, helping to showcase a positive workplace culture and enhance the company’s employer brand.
Call to Action for Engaging Gen Z

By 2030 Gen Z will account for 30% of the working population.

Digital natives who value transparency and inclusivity, Gen Z candidates entering the workforce are looking for a personalised approach to recruitment, authentic insight into company culture and a demonstrable commitment to tackling societal challenges.

In this section we explore the key actions for engaging and supporting students and graduates as they prepare to start their careers.
Call to Action for Engaging Gen Z

Put strengths to work

Understanding the unique blend of strengths for Gen Z candidates provides key insight into what motivates and energises this talent population.

**Strengths Profile data for 2021 indicates that:**

Under 25’s report greater

- Competitiveness,
- Unconditionality,
- Humour,
- Adherence,
- Listener and
- Drive strengths than the general population

Employers who can showcase opportunities for candidates to use their strengths in role will have a key advantage in the competition for top Gen Z talent.

Understanding more about their own strengths can also help candidates become more self-aware and select the right opportunities for them, as well as standing out in recruitment processes by being able to use the language of strengths with prospective employers.

Educators can support this process by helping students discover their strengths and use this knowledge to identify future careers that play to what they are naturally good at and enjoy.
Call to Action for Engaging Gen Z

Demonstrate social purpose

Dubbed the sustainability generation by Forbes in 2021, Gen Z want to work for companies whose values align with their own.

According to Deloitte's 2021 Global Millennial and Gen Z survey, 44% of Millennials and 49% of Gen Zs surveyed said that they have made choices about the types of work they do and the organisations they will work for, based on their personal values.

Survey respondents reinforced this point:

“They are setting more challenging expectations of employers to demonstrate their commitment to purpose and social value.”

“They look more at the organisation for fit than the opportunity, interested in values, D&I activities, culture.”

“Gen Z are a purposeful, driven group, and so organisations that want to hire from this talent pool will need to demonstrate a strong purpose and mission in action.”

Multi-generational Workplace Expert, Lindsey Pollak, also notes that Gen Z have never worked on a 'need to know basis' as they have information at their fingertips through websites, social media and apps, and it’s important for employers to demonstrate Environmental, Social & Governance (ESG) commitments through the mediums that they use the most, including social media platforms.
Call to Action for Engaging Gen Z

Prioritise wellbeing

Research by the WEF states there has been a deterioration of mental health since the start of the pandemic, leaving 80% of young people across the globe vulnerable to depression, anxiety and disillusionment.

Mental health and wellbeing are highlighted multiple times throughout the survey responses by both employers and universities.

“They [students] are much more fearful and the pandemic has caused/brought about a huge amount of mental health issues in young people.”

Also noting that there needs to be:

“More focus and emphasis on wellbeing and mental health.”

This is a key concern when Gen Z enter the workplace, as research from Adobe suggests that Gen Z are affected most by the demands of virtual work, with 57% of this age group reporting that they feel pressured to be reachable at all times of the day, when compared to 39% of the Baby Boomer generation.

Recent research by the ISE shows 61% of employers reported that demand for mental health support has increased throughout the pandemic for early career hires, with nearly 17% of all early career hires seeking mental health support at work.

With sites like Glassdoor, employee perspectives are more visible than ever. It is vital that what candidates read about the experiences of employees aligns with the marketing messages that the company is using on their websites and social platforms.

Promoting a healthy workplace culture, where overwork and constant digital connectivity is discouraged and sharing employee experiences that reflect this, will be a significant advantage in engaging Gen Z candidates.

Employers can help new employees to form healthy work habits during onboarding activities by explaining at the start of the employment journey exactly what is expected. Setting the right example is also key – managers and senior leaders should be seen to have work-life balance and take time away from the office.

Workplace digital wellbeing consultant, Alex La Via, suggests that employers can model healthy work habits through their digital culture. This can be something as simple as agreeing a standard for email etiquette by only sending emails during working hours and being clear about the need to only respond within the employees’ working hours.
Call to Action for Engaging Gen Z

Create real-world experiences

Research from the WEF found that students are eager for more hands-on experiential learning and opportunities to try real-life work with professional mentors.

This was also reflected in survey responses, with respondents saying they felt there was more uncertainty and fear over lack of ‘real-world’ experience.

Employers can help students overcome this by bringing in activities for students to get involved – for example hackathons, purposeful projects, and bringing the role to life by including virtual intray exercises in assessments based on real-life projects and challenges.

The ISE Development Report found that work experience pays off with regards to workplace readiness, with employers rating graduates who have work experience as more skilled than those without.
Call to Action for Engaging Gen Z

Reimagine roles and work

The pandemic has caused a seismic shift in how Gen Z view jobs and their career. Some survey respondents feel that their experience is contributing to a higher turnover.

“I’m finding that they are less loyal and move more frequently.”

“I think they see it easier to move between employers.”

“Experience hasn’t been as in-depth and hasn’t showcased culture as strongly as in-person, focused attraction has. It’s made students less committed to roles – without the personal (in-person) element students are perhaps less committed in their choices.”

There isn’t consensus on this point, however, as some survey respondents felt graduates were seeking ‘job security’ and ‘stability’ and were more likely to stay for longer because of the uncertainty they had experienced during the pandemic, and ISE research found that most graduates and school leavers remain with their employers five years after hire.

While opinions are divided on the impact of the pandemic on length of service, it is clear that the experiences of the last two years have led to more Gen Z workers bouncing back by embracing the gig economy and side hustles. EY’s 2021 Gen Z Segmentation Study reported that 45% of respondents said they were very or extremely likely to start their own business, and Microsoft’s annual report found that 70% of Gen Z are considering earning additional income through a side project or business.

Traditionally frowned on by employers over fears of divided loyalties, organisations are now changing their view on side hustles, as they recognise the value young entrepreneurs can bring to roles, including commercial awareness and creativity.

In some industries, employers are starting to rethink how roles are structured for early careers employees. Gen Z candidates may not be looking for full-time, on-site roles, but positions that give them the flexibility to develop outside interests and enable them to have more input into the structure of their working week.
What Does the Future Hold?

Designing recruitment and onboarding processes based around Gen Z key strengths and development needs, demonstrating social purpose, a proactive commitment to wellbeing and building flexibility into roles will be key in engaging and retaining this talent population and future-proofing talent pipelines.

While the range of behaviours employers recruit for is likely to continue to increase to support the predicted growth in new jobs, the research indicates that there is some stability in the core strengths that employers will need.

Focusing on supporting the development of these building block behaviours in students will be critical for educators as they prepare students for the world of work, as will helping students to develop self-awareness by understanding their individual strengths and considering how these might match the behaviours employers are looking for.
References


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