

Gen Z workers demand flexibility, don't want to be stuffed in a cubicle

The young generation of professionals is entering the workforce with new demands — including increased flexibility, wellness perks and authenticity — shaped by their experiences during the height of the pandemic

By [Danielle Abril](#)

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When Ginsey Stephenson moved to San Francisco for work in February, she finally met and mixed with her colleagues for the first time. It was something the 23-year-old had longed for since entering the professional world out of college seven months prior.

The boutique public relations firm she works for follows a hybrid schedule of three days in the office per week, meaning she no longer has to nervously message people on Slack she had never met in person. Most importantly, being in the office has helped her transition from working from her parents' Virginia home — much like she did in school — to life as a working adult.

“I actually love going into the office — it feels more organic,” Stephenson said. “But I don't know how anyone went into the office every day. I don't know if we were cut out to work in a pre-covid world.”

Stephenson represents a generation entering the labor market at a time when businesses and employees are redefining work and the workplace after the pandemic hit. Unlike the generations that came before, one of the biggest struggles for the new crop of professionals is interpersonal connections and relationships in the workplace, after the pandemic left them isolated during some pivotal years of development. To Generation Z — those born between 1997 and 2012, as defined by Pew Research Center, and also known as Zoomers — money may not always be the top job priority. Instead, their list includes flexibility to work from the office and remotely, wellness and mental health initiatives as well as meaningful work and culture. And many are willing to job hop to find the best fit.

For employers, accommodating these preferences may become increasingly important. Gen Z workers are expected to more than triple to 87 million people by 2030 in Australia, France, Germany, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and the United States, accounting for 30 percent of total employment, according to a study by Oxford Economics.

“We’re seeing this young cohort of workers demand that employers care about them as whole people,” said Linda Jingfang Cai, vice president of talent development at LinkedIn. “And the ability to understand their career path is worth more than a paycheck.”

Gen Z can be an enigma to some of their older counterparts. They are often labeled as “lazy” or “entitled.” But Allison Williams, a 2022 Pepperdine University graduate, said people need to remember that the coronavirus pandemic hit right in the middle of some of the most influential years for Gen Z — when they were forming who they are and what they value as adults. The pandemic changed the way they formed friendships, received their education and got their first internships and jobs. It had a big impact on the way they view work and how it can and should be done, she said.

“My generation is going to embrace ... flexibility and is taking a different approach rather than going straight to the corporate ladder,” Williams said.

Some companies are trying to rise to the challenge of luring Gen Z by expanding benefits and flexibility. Handshake, a San Francisco-based online service that connects college students and employers, points to General Mills and Procter & Gamble as examples. General Mills updated its benefits to include mental health offerings, which are now also available to summer interns. And Procter & Gamble now offers candidates a stress management app to help them during the process.

Tips for luring Gen Z hires

Employers aiming to hire more young people have a lot to consider. Here are some tips from LinkedIn’s Jingfang Cai and polls of Gen Z conducted by Gallup.

- **Flexibility is key.** Gen Z either wants hybrid or remote options, Jingfang Cai says, so companies may want to consider offering flexible options that allow workers to choose what makes sense for them.
 - **Communicate and demonstrate values.** Gen Z wants to know what their employers value, how that’s being prioritized and what investments are being made as a result, she says. Wellness is often a value the generation prioritizes, according to Gallup.
 - **Review the wording of the job listing.** Ensure that entry-level jobs don’t require years of experience, as you may be missing out on an entire crop of young talent, Jingfang Cai says.
 - **Prioritize learning.** Gen Z wants to grow and learn, she says, so make sure your openings also include opportunities for training, professional growth and mentorship.
 - **Create diverse and inclusive workplaces.** Gen Z considers it imperative to work at a job that promotes respect, equity and inclusion, according to Gallup surveys.
 - **Ethical leadership is a must.** Gen Z wants to know their leaders are ethical, expect action to address moral blind spots and want to know their work has a positive impact on the world, Gallup polls show.
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Many Gen Z workers say they place a big emphasis on opportunities that consider their mental health and wellness. Sam Folz, a 22-year-old software engineer at Capital One, said his company offers unlimited mental health days, a benefit he considers “huge” given Zoom fatigue and other mental exhaustion that workers might experience.

Kenny Colon, 23, who graduated this year from the University of Central Florida, said he believes a company’s office policy ultimately demonstrates whether it supports employee wellness. After he attends graduate school the next couple of years, he said he could be lured by wellness perks. For example, he said, EY, where he is currently interning, offers its workers a reimbursement of up to \$1,000 for wellness needs such as mattresses.

“This generation wants to open up more; they want to talk about mental health,” Colon said. “It’s a very big thing.”

Leo De La Uso, a fully remote marketing and communications specialist for a Texas nonprofit who graduated from Texas A&M San Antonio this year, said his first priority in a job is knowing a company is genuinely interested in investing in its employees. He ideally prefers a hybrid work environment.

“The compulsory notion you have to be [at an office], I don’t think it’s something that meshes well with me and my generation,” the 23-year-old said.

For Sam Purdy, a 2022 graduate of the University of South Carolina who’s currently job hunting, a job ideally would give him some sense of long-term stability and security, in addition to flexible work options. He’s not interested in “being stuffed in a cubicle” every day, but also wants to know that amid all this change, his job won’t disappear.

“It’s weird because we don’t have a lot of leveraging power,” he said. “But you’re going to see us prioritize things other than work and push back on things like [having] to be in the office.”

For Pittsburg State University graduate Weston Charles-Gallo, remote options represent the chance to hop around and experience different cultures at an early age. He’s still hoping to land his dream job in the field of communications.

“You hear of older people who ... wait until they retire to travel,” he said. “My generation is taking advantage of working remotely to go to the airport and travel.”

But Folz, the Capital One engineer, said leaders shouldn’t discount the importance of the office entirely. He said the office plays a big role in getting settled as he’s moving from Cincinnati to Arlington, Va., for his job.

“You’re in a brand new city with maybe no people you know,” he said. “Work is the best place to meet those first friends.”

And for some jobs, the hands-on experience is invaluable. Isabella Hickey, who works as a planning technician for the town of Juno Beach in Florida, said she prioritized remote jobs during her search, but ultimately landed a full-time, in-person gig.

“Being [at the office] in person has helped me grow and learn much more versus being at home trying to learn,” she said.

Building work relationships requires a concerted effort for some people.

“A bustling office is something I’d like to experience sometime,” said 22-year-old Selena Tran, a 2021 graduate of the University of California, Berkeley, who works fully remote for a Bay Area fintech company. Tran voluntarily meets with co-workers at the office every week or two to have lunch. “You don’t get the same interactions in remote work.”

Tran prefers to work some days from home, but she also wants to work for a company that cares about its people. So she looks at social media and Glassdoor reviews to see engagement levels and get a better sense of culture. She wants to see a priority placed on people's well-being as well as diverse teams and inclusivity.

The assumption that Gen Z workers are just a bunch of entitled TikTok addicts who don't want to work is unfair, said Stephenson, the public relations professional. Instead, she said, they're a group of young people who were just "dealt an interesting hand of cards" and want something better than what was offered to previous generations.

"It's not that we're not hard working," she said. "We just see the workforce without the lens of people who had been in it pre-covid."