Supporting Generation Z at work

Born in or after 1997 Generation Z or Gen Z are emerging as a population increasingly worthy of our attention.

For many Gen z's the back drop of their early years has included iconic moments like the first black American President and the legalisation of gay marriage. They are more likely to have grown up in diverse and blended family structures. As a result, they're more accepting of difference than previous generations (BBC Survey - IPSOS Mori 2017). They've also born witness to (and many have been part of) monumental collective responses to injustice – such as Black Lives Matter and the Me-Too movement. We've taught them to call out oppression and to be intolerant of behaviours that feel harmful. Ultimately, they are the generation with the potential to lead us closer towards creating a truly inclusive and just society.

They're also our first digital natives. Gen Z was born into a world of peak technological innovation. Their understanding and use of technology to form solutions is formidable already proving to be an enormous asset to teams and organisations.

However, we know that mental health challenges have become a concerning feature of Gen- Z. New data, reveals that mental health struggles among younger generations have worsened throughout the pandemic and beyond (Sapiens 2022). Although Gen-Z as a group are more likely to be well versed in the language of mental health and able to access information quickly, more time spent online means less time cultivating face to face relationships and that may increase vulnerability to feelings of isolation and depression.

 As political activism among Gen Z's has increased, this generation will have internalised the unrest surrounding them. All of this is before we even mention increasing inflation, crippling student debt and the cost of housing in London.

So, the question is how can we as managers, colleagues and employing organisations support this new generation who have the potential to make a real difference as they enter the workplace.

Work by Shaun Pichler and colleagues has produced a framework for leveraging the uniqueness of Gen Z using the acronym DITTO.

D stands for Diversity:

We know that Gen Z's are way more likely to come from diverse backgrounds and rightly have strong feelings on inclusion and equity.

Workforce diversity is most definitely related to better performance, but increasing diversity is ineffective for organisations and teams that don't have an inclusive culture (Pinchlet et al 2018). Gen Z's are likely to serve as strong role models for being open to diverse team members and helping us all think about inclusivity. However, they need to feel empowered and supported to do that.

The research suggests that it's important for us to be explicit about introducing new team members to policies and practices that promote inclusivity. These can include non-discrimination policies, diversity training, psychologically safe places to talk about diversity and inclusion such as team check in's, wellbeing conversations, networks for diverse groups, and Freedom to Speak Up Guardians. However, this also needs to be alongside widespread staff training and discussions which increase awareness of the challenges that staff from diverse backgrounds can face and the micro - aggressions they continue to battle every day they come to work. One colleague I spoke to recently told me she feels like she has to put on a protective cloak every time she leaves her house.

To quote the Kings Fund addressing inequalities and inclusion needs to be an ongoing, 'moment-by moment' activity that engages with and responds to people's lived experiences.

I Stands for Individualism and teamwork

One trend that does tend to come out of the literature is that Gen Zs seem more likely to lean towards individualism (Wilson et al 2017). So initially working in teams may be a challenge and they may need our patience and support. Organisational researchers talk

about socialisation or onboarding programs alongside induction that will help individuals adapt to cultures and work designs that emphasize collaboration and teamwork.

For many young employees, onboarding might be their first or second experience ever in a professional setting. What seems to be incredibly important, is that it establishes a container of mutual support. Onboarding is described as a community-building exercise where employees can simply make a new friend. It might involve buddying, or a speed-friending exercise, where new starts meet people across the organisation. One example of an increasingly popular onboarding activity is Late Nite Art: it's described as a learning experience involving live art and music that incorporates risk-taking, deep conversations, and problem- solving. Companies like Adobe and LinkedIn have used Late Nite Art to help employees go outside their comfort zone and get to know their colleagues in a meaningful way.

T stands for Technology

The closeness Gen Z has with technology presents opportunities and challenges. Gen Z are likely to be able to help teams to communicate and find online solutions that older generations have never even thought about. However, many employers observe that Gen Z is more comfortable sending emails and text messages instead of calling someone or communicating face-to-face (Schweiger & Ladwig 2018). The challenge is that Gen Z's may have difficulty adapting to face-to-face interaction and will need our support to become comfortable with that skill.

However, this is also an opportunity for us to consider how we can integrate technology with employee development and performance management systems. For instance, since Gen Z's tend to communicate with emojis, symbols, pictures, videos, and post reactions (Cilliers, 2017), digital performance tools that allow for instant feedback could be useful, in addition to simply incorporating the use of emojis and reactions into our online communication (Kaplan 2012). While some of this may seem over-the-top or

trivial from the perspective of older generations, it is important to realise how these things are ingrained in the behaviour of Gen Z's and how ignoring these can cause dissonance.

O Stands for Organisational Supports

Harvard Business Review States that "Now that their structured learning and early careers have   been upended, employers and employees may need to develop greater patience with Gen Z's adjustment to the professional world and a greater focus on intergenerational mentoring, coaching and support."

Research shows that Gen Z workers are likely to respond well to organisational support, including social support from supervisors and co-workers (Gassam Asare, 2018). The Work-Family Health Network at Harvard University provides free training materials and toolkits for managers and organisations to develop supportive supervisor behaviours and help employees achieve less stressful, more fulfilling lives and is well worth a look (WFHN, 2020). Their programme STAR is a clever but common-sense rethinking of how we work and live and can draw team's attention to simple things like noticing how we talk about our work and the way that makes us feel about it.

However, as already mentioned there are tough realities for Gen Z's working and living in London. Regular one-to-one meetings will allow you to check in on day-to-day tasks as well as the wellbeing of your team members. The mental health charity Mind has created Wellness Action Plans that can be used to support the mental health of team members in addition to signposting them to services such as Keeping Well NCL. In addition, Wellbeing Conversations allow for space to talk about how people in the team really are. This gives the opportunity to think either within the team or the wider organisation about how to support staff members including Gen Z's with the things they're really struggling with – be that workload, housing or loneliness.

Survey results show Gen Z have quite rightly healthy expectations of work/life balance and aren't afraid to ask for it. Whether that's wanting input over their work schedules, or taking their full holiday entitlement, this is a generation who work to live, rather than

live to work. In the long run when it comes to work life balance perhaps, they can teach us how to reset our own priorities and look after ourselves.

The main takeaways from the research demonstrate a simple truth: young people want to be treated with respect and consideration at work.

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Resources

The Next Generation is Here: Hopeful, Anxious, Hardworking and Searching for Inspiration, Workforce Institute at Kronos, 2019

Harvard Work Family Health network – STAR toolkit -

https://workfamilyhealthnetwork.org/toolkits-achieve-workplace-change

NHS Employers – Recruit and Retain Young people

https://www.nhsemployers.org/publications/recruit-and-retain-young-people-toolkit

Late Nite Art - https://www.lateniteart.com