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A LOOK AT GENERATIONS: GEN Z AND ITS EXPECTATIONS OF LEADERSHIP

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Abstract: *The emergence of Generation Z (Gen Z) on the labour market has had a major impact both on the economy and on the working life itself. Generation Z, born from the mid-1990s onwards, shows many differences to previous generations. With the Baby Boomers and Generation Z, two generations that could not be more different are coming together on the labour market. The Boomers, who grew up in prosperity, have lived by the motto 'live to work', Generation Z on the other hand, fits in best somewhere between smartphones and social media. The guiding principle of this generation is: 'Here is work, there is my life'. In order to remain competitive, companies and managers in particular must adapt to the new generation and their values. The present work provides a detailed overview of the last four generations and highlights different approaches that leaders should consider when working with Gen Z. The literature search is based on sources from journals, textbooks, studies and online articles. Generation Z represents a new type of employees for most companies. They reject work-life blending and because of their so called 'helicopter parents' are often not self-reliant. But Generation Z still has a significant role to play in the future: at 19.7%, this generation proves to be the largest age group as of December 31, 2023. An open and modern corporate and leadership culture is needed in which achievement is recognized. Rigid hierarchies and orders given by superiors no longer work in the same way. The optimal manager of today should lead at eye level and act more as a mentor rather than a boss. Recognition, open communication and honesty are the most important demands that Gen Z places on leaders. Because of the strong urge for self-determination, important factors in the management of Gen Z are also the promotion of responsibility and the ability to share one's own ideas. Successful leaders of the future should be both team coaches and facilitators; a large range of skills and knowledge, good communication skills and flexibility are also a prerequisite.*

Keywords: *Generations, Gen Z, changing values, leadership, recognition*

INTRODUCTION

The emergence of Generation Z in the world of work presents a new challenge, but also brings with it new opportunities. Like all previous generations, this generation also has a significant impact on the working life, the economy and the talent management (Parment 2024). According to international economic forecasts, by 2030 Gen Zers will make up around 30% of the workforce in Germany, the UK, France, Australia, the USA and the Netherlands (Oxford Economics 2021). Combined with the ever-increasing shortage of skilled labour in Germany, these figures make it clear that Gen Z is absolutely relevant for the future of business and management (Statista 2025).

In order to remain competitive in the long term, managers and companies need to move with the times and be open to new generations and their values. Therefore, appropriate management is a key performance driver for a company's success.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This publication is based on a literature review focusing on an overview of the different generations with a focus on Generation Z and their leadership requirements. The literature review includes books, online articles, journals and studies. First, an overview of the existing generations is presented in order to understand how and why they differ. This is followed by a closer look at Generation Z and in particular how leadership needs to develop in the age of the new generation.

RESULTS

Daily working life in many companies is often determined by the different generations employed there, these are the Baby boomers and Generations X, Y and Z. Baby boomers, who were born after the World War II, still characterise the term Baby boomer today. Generation X owes its name to the Canadian Douglas Coupland and his book of the same name, in which he describes generation X and how it feels (Mangelsdorf 2015).

But what exactly does the term *generation* stand for?

Sociology describes the term *generation* as follows: “The totality of people of approximately the same age group with a similar social orientation and a view of life that has its roots in a person’s formative years.” (Mangelsdorf 2015).

Formative years are defined by sociologists as between the ages of 11 and 15, i.e. the years between childhood and puberty. During this time a young adult begins to consciously perceive their environment. This is the time when individual preferences and values are shaped by the perception of political and social events. The shared experience of these events significantly defines the individual generations. Such binding experiences of the formative years are more important than the precise determination of birth dates. Different sources sometimes provide slightly different years of birth, but transitions are always fluid.

A generation is therefore identified when various social conditions shape the development of values, behavioural preferences and characteristics of people of a similar age (Mangelsdorf 2015).

To get a clear idea of the common terms, the individual generations will now be analysed in more detail.

Table 1. Generations at a glance (Mangelsdorf 2015).

Generations in Germany	Years of birth	Age groups (as of 2024)	Formative years
Traditionalists	1922 – 1945	79 – 92 Jahre	1933 – 1960
Babyboomers	1946 – 1964	60 – 78 Jahre	1957 – 1979
Generation X	1965 – 1979	45 – 59 Jahre	1976 – 1994
Generation Y	1980 – 1995	29 – 44 Jahre	1991 – 2010
Generation Z	1996 – ?	28 Jahre und jünger	2007 – ?

The four generations that are part of the working world today are defined in more detail below.

Baby boomers

Baby boomers owe their core characteristics mainly to the traditionalists who raised them – a generation defined by altruism, conformity and respect for authority. In the post-war period, the lives of Baby boomers were largely characterised by optimism and increasing prosperity, in contrast to the gloomy and traumatic youth of their parents. The ‘economic miracle’ and the new social policy revealed previously unimagined opportunities for the baby boomers: they stormed into universities, schools and the labour market, had ambitious goals and either wanted to fulfil their parents’ expectations or rebelled against them. The traditional family framework consisted of a married couple with several children, in which the division of roles was clear: the mother looked after the children at home, the father went to work and provided for the family. The father was regarded as head of the family and made the decisions, while the mother and children complied (Mangelsdorf 2015).

On the one hand, there seemed to be no limits any longer; suddenly travelling abroad was possible and people were walking on the moon. On the other hand, however, the limitations that resulted from the growing prosperity could not be concealed, starting with the Berlin Wall and extending to apartheid in the USA. Over time, the world of work changed from a patriarchal, homogeneous environment to one that was increasingly defined by diversity. An ever larger number of women received higher education, which changed the prospects for women and made them aspire for roles different from that of a mere housewife,

meanwhile migrant workers from abroad also added to social diversity and intensified competition in the low-wage sector. In terms of numbers, Baby boomers are the largest generation in history and therefore learnt early on to assert themselves and work hard. Those who wanted to climb the career ladder had to assert themselves in competition. This made social advancement possible (Mangelsdorf 2015).

Generation X

While the Baby boomers were able to grow up optimistic and carefree in their youth, the next generation, Generation X had to become independent more quickly and spent less time with their parents than any generation before. Mothers began to contribute increasingly to the household income and it became common for both parents to work. Thus the offspring of the 'Golf generation' were often left in the care of their siblings or to themselves. There were more and more patchwork families or single parents, divorce rates rose and the traditional family framework gradually dissolved (Mangelsdorf 2015). Social and political order and stability gave way to certain doubts about existing systems. Trust in institutions and politics was shaken by terrible events such as the Chernobyl disaster, IRA, RAF and ETA terrorism. At the end of the 1980s, the global economy entered a period of crisis, which made Generation X realise that the ever-increasing prosperity of their parents' generation could hardly be achieved. Resignation and disorientation gradually spread; autonomy and independence substituted respect for authority and were viewed as a logical consequence of Generation X's childhood (Mangelsdorf 2015). Technological progress continued to move forward and the desktop computer soon became part of everyday life. The first mobile phones appeared on the market and the advent of email accelerated the pace of work.

High salary, long working days and a prestigious job title were considered professional success, making fashionable luxury such as long-distance travel and expensive cars possible. All ambitious graduates dreamed of the position of management consultant or a banker. It was accepted that one should sacrifice leisure and quality of life for the sake of desirable status symbols and attractive remuneration. Effort as a prerequisite for reward was the world outlook of Generation X. Generation X questioned authority more frequently and demanded that respect first be earned, both from individuals and from politicians and companies alike. A trend towards the formation of social groups and individualization began; many no longer wanted to 'belong'. Young people increasingly rejected the established socio-political and moral values of their parents' generation and so the era of protesting punks, nuclear power opponents and eco-movement supporters began (Mangelsdorf 2015).

Generation Y

For the Baby boomers the future still looked rosy, for Generation X more depressing, and Generation Y wondered if a future existed at all. At the face of pollution threats, global warming, school shootings and natural disasters, Generation Y chose to enjoy life. Unlike their ancestors, they did not express their fears in resignation or frustration. The parents of Generation Y didn't get much attention as children, that is why they wanted to do better with their own offspring. From an early age Generation Y's were showered with recognition, attention and appreciation. The well-meaning parents of the new Generation Y stopped at nothing to provide their kids with good education and to make their path to adult life as smooth as possible. Generation Y children were praised and rewarded for every little effort they made and when in doubt, their parents even allowed them to decide about family holidays (Mangelsdorf 2015).

The numerous studies that have been carried out confirm some important characteristics of Generation Y, for example, the ability to use freely new technologies and the Internet, as well as their tendency to differentiate between their own lives and the world around them. Because of the many opportunities available, people now have the chance to consider different paths of life. The young members of Generation Y get inspired by the endless possibilities of modern society to plan their life and future in new ways (Parment 2013).

Generation Y, now grown up, has high expectations in terms of co-determination and recognition. They often rely on the advice of their parents and are irritated when managers and superiors at work do not offer the same support and protection that they are used to receiving at home. It's not by accident that their parents have gained the nickname 'helicopter parents', as they tend to circle over their brood like helicopters.

Generation Y sees work as an opportunity for self-development and fulfilment that should be designed in such a way as to fit into their current life model. Due to the fast pace of everyday life, the Ypsilonians strive for immediate fulfilment of their needs and goals. ‘Waiting’ does not exist in their world. This generation has grown up with the internet and their everyday life is determined by technological achievements and multimedia communication. Immediate feedback is demanded. Although the ‘spoilt’ Ypsilonians have been raised without feeling the lack of anything, they display a great need to optimise the world and to find meaning and inner fulfilment. Despite all the distractions of everyday life, they seek content and emotional connection that go beyond the superficial (Mangelsdorf 2015).

Generation Z

In some cases, it is still difficult to define Generation Z precisely. On the one hand, because they are partly similar to Generation Y and on the other, because they are still in the middle of their formative years.

Similar to the Ypsilonians, Generation Z has been growing up in a world of abundance. For the most part, they have lacked nothing in terms of material comfort, even though the number of children in Germany that live on the edge of poverty is increasing. This generation is growing up in relative prosperity and secure political conditions, and they also benefit from a wide range of educational opportunities (Mangelsdorf 2015). Both Gen Z and the previous generation tend to have a pronounced international outlook, an embracing attitude towards foreign cultures and a high level of education (Geibel, Tiffert 2020).

The most significant event in the life of this generation has been the wide spread of the Internet, which is why they are often referred to as ‘Generation Internet’. The unlimited access to information in every part of the world and the spread of social media platforms have led to a natural use of new communication technologies (Geibel, Tiffert 2020).

At the same time, Gen Z is part of a large and globalised world that is characterised by conflicts, environmental disasters and financial crises. In this context, the family serves as a safe haven while its framework can be structured more diversely than ever before, from patchwork families to single-parent families that often replace the traditional family concepts. All parents have something in common though – they want to enable their children to grow up carefree (Mangelsdorf 2015). It is not surprising then that their offspring should become accustomed to being constantly protected, pampered and catered for and that their resulting need for a secure and carefree life should be taken for granted (Mangelsdorf 2015).

In a study of 12,000 participants conducted by Celepedia in 2016 it was found out that Gen Z place the highest value on friendship, partnership and family. These were followed by values such as security, self-fulfilment, professional success and financial independence (Bödeker, n.d.).

Labour market expectations

For most companies, Generation Z represents a new type of employees that reject work-life blending and because of their helicopter parents are often regarded as less independent (Rosenstiel et al. 2020). The question that arises here concerns the importance of Gen Z for the companies of today and its relevance for the labour market of the future (Bürkle 2023).

A closer look at the age groups in Germany clearly shows the importance of this generation for the future. With a share of 19.7% of all inhabitants in Germany, Gen Z proved to be the largest age group as of 31.12.2023 (Statista 2024), a sure sign for its significant labour market potential.

Generation Z and the Baby boomers represent two segments of the labour market that couldn’t be more different. On the one hand, the boomers who grew up in prosperity and followed the principle ‘live to work’; on the other hand, Gen Z, who as digital natives, live between smartphones and social media. They are guided by the motto: ‘Here is my work, there is my life.’ (Jäger, Randstand 2021). Generation Z is often accused of being picky and lazy. A survey of all older generations (traditionalists, Baby boomers, Generations X and Y) showed that over two thirds of the participants believe that Gen Z is less productive at work than the other generations. 49% of Gen Z themselves shared this opinion. However, the other side of the coin also needs to be considered: the majority of Generation Z put a high value on being successful at work (Statista 2024a).

A study conducted in 2021 aimed at establishing those values that are particularly important to

Generation Z when it comes to organising their lives. For this purpose, 1059 employees aged 16 and over were surveyed (Jager, Randstand 2021).

Table 2. Generation clash? What is particularly important when organising your life? (Jager, Randstand 2021).

	Generation Z	Babyboomer
Material prosperity	83%	87%
To feel needed	68%	76%
To have a lot of free time	53%	27%
Self-fulfilment	56%	43%
To make a career	53%	36%

The study clearly shows that material wealth and the notion of ‘feeling needed’ play an important role both for Gen Z and the Boomers. Leisure time, self-fulfilment and career, on the other hand, are particularly important for the young Generation Z.

The conclusion is that members of the younger generation should not be tarred with the same brush; similarly, when it comes to superior management at work, they also have different needs and expectations from those of previous generations (Statista 2024a).

Expectations of the managers

Gen Z shows a skeptical attitude towards hierarchies and instructions issued from superiors, its representatives demand transparency in terms of communication and decisions. While Generation Y strove for freedom and flexibility, Generation Z has a strong need for structure, clearly defined working hours and a fixed personal workplace. Work and leisure time are strictly separated. Should these requirements not be fulfilled by the employer, Gen Z staff are likely to resign and move on. This internet generation is considered the most disloyal generation that the labour market has ever known (Geibel, Tiffert 2020).

Gen Z strives for a modern and open leadership culture in which performance is recognised and valued (Statista 2024a). The most frequently mentioned characteristic for the ‘perfect manager’ is the ability to do his/her job on the principle of equality (Bürkle 2023b quoted from Bürkle;Tawadrous). Increasingly more young people of today are looking for ‘mentors rather than bosses’ (Bürkle 2023b cited by Rabhansel & Scholz).

Apart from this, Gen Z’s pronounced need for self-determination emphasizes the promotion of responsibility and the personal contribution of new ideas. According to a study by SwissSkills, these two characteristics ‘only’ come in third place. The most important requirement for a superior has to do with acknowledgement, which also includes respect and trust. Open communication and honesty are also at the top of the list. It is important for men to be able to contribute their own ideas (31%) and participate in decisions (18%), while equal rights (25%) are very popular with women (Stamm 2023).

Table 3. The 3 most important managerial qualities for Gen Z.

Values such as trust, respect, etc.
Honesty and open communication
Contributing with personal ideas
Promoting personal responsibility
Clear and well-structured instructions
Participation in decision-making
Regular feedback
Equal treatment
Directness
Sympathetic support in case of personal difficulties

Future requirements profile

The role of the new generation in the labour market and the rapid world changes have placed new demands on managers and have resulted in some changes in their area of expertise:

- In the future, instead of the “best professional” we will be looking for a coordinator, which means the leader will become a consultant, coach and moderator of the team.
- Interdisciplinary-minded generalists will be needed to drive innovation. Strictly located career in one department will not be enough to develop broader professional horizons; the motto here will be: personnel development.
- Communication skills will be of particular importance for managers, Generation Z values appreciative communication with regular feedback.
- Confident and skilled employees cannot perform well under pressure over time. More importance will be attached to leadership as a role model, also on authentic behaviour, persuasiveness and motivation.
- In an increasingly fast-moving world, agility is becoming ever more important; managers will be required to cope with changes at ever shorter intervals. Existing business processes should be continuously optimised. As ‘change managers’ leaders will have to steer and shape these change processes successfully, to embrace innovations and convince employees to do the same (von Rosenstiel et al. 2020).

CONCLUSIONS/DISCUSSION

In conclusion, it can be argued that Generation Z presents new challenges to the world of work which managers and companies need to acknowledge if they want to remain competitive in the long term. Each generation has grown up differently and experienced different peaks and crises. The values of Generation Z show that traditional hierarchies and strict instructions issued from senior managers will no longer be accepted. Generation Z demands a clear separation between work and leisure time and wants an open management culture which acknowledges performance. Therefore, the future role of managers will be that of mentors and role models rather than superiors.

In summary, it can be argued that the latest transitions in terms of generations offer enormous opportunities for companies and managers to establish themselves in the market in the long term, provided that they are willing to accept these and adapt to them.

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ПОГЛЕД КЪМ ПОКОЛЕНИЯТА: ПОКОЛЕНИЕТО Z И НЕГОВИТЕ ОЧАКВАНИЯ ЗА ЛИДЕРСТВОТО

Резюме: Навлизането на поколението Z (Gen Z) в работната сила оказва голямо влияние върху икономиката и професионалния живот. Поколението Z, родено от средата на 90-те години на миналия век, показва много разлики с предишните поколения. С бейбибумърите и поколението Z на пазара на труда се срещат две различни поколения, които не биха могли да бъдат по-различни. Бумърите – израснали в благоденствие – живеят под мотото „живей, за да работиш“, докато поколението Z е някъде между смартфоните и социалните медии. Това поколение живее според мотото: „Тук е работата, там е моят живот“. За да останат конкурентоспособни, компаниите и по-специално мениджърите трябва да се адаптират към новото поколение и неговите ценности. Този документ предоставя подробен преглед на поколението и показва различни подходи, които мениджърите трябва да вземат предвид при работа с поколението Z. Литературното проучване се основава на източници от търговски списания, специализирани книги, проучвания и онлайн статии. Поколението Z е нов тип служители за повечето компании. Те отхвърлят съчетаването на професионалния и личния живот и понякога са трудно независими поради родителите хеликоптери. Въпреки това поколението Z е значителен фактор за работните места в бъдеще: с 19,7% това поколение е най-многобройната възрастова група към 31 декември 2023 г. Те искат отворена и модерна корпоративна и управленска култура, в която резултатите се признават. Строгите йерархии и инструкциите отгоре вече не работят по същия начин. Идеалният мениджър ръководи и действа по-скоро като ментор, отколкото като началник. Признателност, открита комуникация и честност са най-важните изисквания на поколението Z към мениджърите. Поради ясно изразеното желание за самоопределяне насърчаването на поемането на отговорност и възможността за принос на собствени идеи също са важни фактори в управлението на Gen Z. Успешните мениджъри на бъдещето са треньор и модератор за екипа, имат добри комуникационни умения, генералисти са и могат да действат гъвкаво.

Ключови думи: поколения, Gen Z, промяна в ценностите, лидерство, оценяване

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