

# THE GEN



# WAY

**Gen Z is poised to outnumber baby boomers in the workforce this year, calling for a shift in career development and workplace culture.**

BY LAURIE HERRERA

**T**alk with older industry peers about generational differences in the workforce, and you might hear some common complaints about Generation Z employees: They want more vacation time. They challenge the ways things have always been done. They demand more empathy of employers. And darn it, they don't know how to address an envelope!

But with Gen Z (born 1997 to 2012) set to outnumber baby boomers in the full-time workforce this year, according to a report by the job search engine Glassdoor, adapting to Gen Z expectations is more important than ever when it comes to attracting and keeping young talent.

"[2024 represents] a pivotal moment of cultural change that U.S. companies cannot ignore as Gen Z workers — who care deeply about community connections, about having their voices heard in the workplace, about transparent and responsive leadership, and about diversity and inclusion — make up a rapidly growing share of the workforce," the report states.

Research also indicates this next generation of workers is less likely to stay in one place, moving from job to job — and even changing industries — if they don't believe their needs are being met.

"I feel like this industry can be inhospitable sometimes to young people," says Kelsey Thompson, AIFD, owner of Bloom Floral in Algona, Iowa, which has been successful in hiring young employees. "If you love this industry, then you need to be building people up to step in when you're done."

## **Provide Competitive Compensation**

Gen Z is less likely than previous generations to stay at a job if they don't believe the wages or benefits are up to their expectations. They'll even quit without lining up another job first.

"If you're paying somebody \$14 an hour, they're going to leave for a better opportunity," says Thompson.

Low retention rates can be a major financial drain on businesses. Employers might have to pay overtime to staffers who pick up the slack, the hiring process — from job posting to onboarding — takes



**SET FOR SUCCESS** Gen Z employee Olivia Thilges began working at Bloom Floral two years ago. The shop has made the success of its young workers a priority.

time away from other responsibilities, and even if the trainee is shadowing, the trainer usually is working at a slower pace.

That cost is not worth hoping to save on labor costs, Thompson says. About three years ago, Thompson reduced her staff, switched her full-time employees from hourly to salary, and increased their pay. "It has increased productivity, and everyone is a lot less stressed," says Thompson. "From a budget perspective, I love it."

In addition to competitive wages, Gen Z is looking for good benefits. Fernando Ortega, general manager and sales "captain" of Jet Fresh Flower Distributors in Miami, says his company offers the same medical benefits to its hourly staff as it does to its administration.

### Rethink Schedules

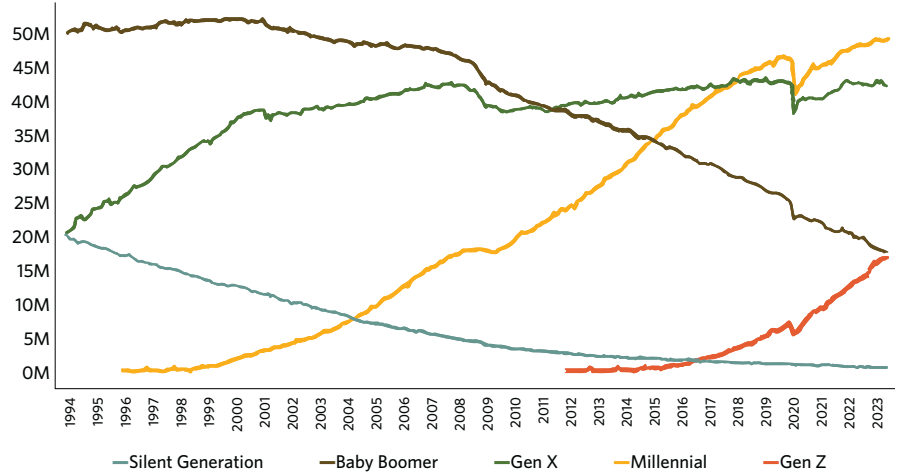
The COVID-19 pandemic changed the way many workers approach job opportunities. As many Gen Z workers were just beginning their careers, most jobs went remote. It created an expectation that if it can be done at home, it should be.



**BLOOMING CAREER** Sarah Mayer has a degree in interior design and for six years has mapped out Bloom Floral's sales floor and handled all things merchandising.

### Gen Z is poised to overtake Baby Boomers in the Workforce

Full-time (35+ hours per week) employment



SOURCE: GLASSDOOR ANALYSIS OF U.S. CENSUS BUREAU CURRENT POPULATION SURVEY MADE AVAILABLE BY UNIV. OF MINN. IPUMS-CPS.

According to a report by Glassdoor, Gen Z workers (born from 1997 to 2012) will be the third-largest group in the workforce. Millennials (born from 1981 to 1996) have held the top slot since they surpassed Generation X (1965-1980) in 2018.

Danny Sanchez, founder and CEO of South Florals Group, which operates high-end retail shops in several Florida cities, offers his employees remote or hybrid schedules if their jobs can be done from home. The flexibility is a nice

perk, especially in traffic-heavy locations such as Miami Beach, he says.

Other companies have also adapted work structures. At Smithers-Oasis, a hardgoods company based in Kent, Ohio, the marketing team works remotely four days per week, says Laura Walsh, AAF, PFCI, CFD, director of marketing and new business development. On Tuesdays, they gather in the office to work on collaborative projects.

Another shift variation that draws younger generations is the shortened work week. Thompson's full-time employees only work four days per week and one Saturday per month. There are exceptions for the busiest times, but because the employees are salaried, the pay is consistent.

Glenna Hecht, human resources consultant and founder of Humanistic Consulting, says experiences and traveling are important to Gen Z, so they want schedules that allow them to have fulfilling lives. If an employer doesn't provide flexible scheduling, they may struggle to retain young employees.

### Help Them Grow

When researchers ask young employees why they've left jobs, lack of professional development ranks high. In a fast-growing technological world, where software and skills can quickly become outdated, Gen Z worries they will become obsolete and replaceable.

Walsh says sending employees to industry events such as the Society of American Florists' annual convention, 1-Day Profit Blasts, or the Next Gen LIVE! conference allows them to learn new skills, hear fresh ideas, and network with other professionals.

She also suggests sitting down with employees annually to learn about their professional goals and then help them create milestones they can work toward.

When possible, it is important for companies to budget for their staff's professional development, Walsh says, not only for retention but also because well-rounded, educated employees become greater assets for their companies.

After employees learn new skills, Walsh suggests creating practical in-house projects where they can use and further develop their abilities.

Jet Fresh founder and "head coach" Mike Black focuses heavily on educating his employees on various aspects of the floral industry. For example, Black sponsors employees so they can receive certifications through the American Institute of Floral Designers. And every year he sends employees to farms across the world. One employee recently spent three weeks in Holland learning about the industry.

"You have a ridiculously strong appreciation for and [motivation] to sell the flowers you just saw after you visit a farm," says Ortega. "Floral people are passionate people. If you allow the farm manager to educate you, you're going to get a passionate lesson you'll never forget."

Not everything needs to happen outside the business. Seasoned employees can mentor young talent and provide on-the-job training, too, Ortega says. This allows the company to promote from within so its investments last longer.

"Coach them, teach them, get them a mentor so that they can grow and develop," says Ortega. "If you're not coaching and developing the young staff, you're never going to hold on to them."

### Keep Communication Open

Gen Z has grown up receiving regular, immediate feedback thanks to social media. The old way of withholding



**YOUNG WORKFORCE** Jet Fresh Flower Distributors in Miami has a young workforce that owner Mike Black (center) works hard to support with career development opportunities.

## FINDING TALENT THE GEN Z WAY

If employers want to tap into the growing Generation Z workforce, they need to be mindful of how to reach young talent. Because Gen Z has grown up in a digital-focused world, employers need to meet them online.

Laura Walsh, AAF, PFCI, CFD, director of marketing and new business development for Smithers-Oasis, a hardgoods company based in Kent, Ohio, uses a variety of online platforms to advertise jobs, including social media accounts. The posts include direct links to the company's website where prospective employees can submit job applications. Social media makes it easy for people to share the posts or tag friends looking for work, she says.

The job hunt doesn't stop there. Gen Z is likely to peruse the business's social accounts before applying to get a feel for the company culture. Fernando Ortega, general manager and sales "captain" at Jet Fresh Flower Distributors in Miami, says they work hard to authentically showcase all aspects of the company. While some posts are educational or feature what's in stock, others are fun and people-focused, such as a video of their Halloween costume contest.

Kelsey Thompson, AIFD, owner of Bloom Floral in Algona, Iowa, has netted some part-time employees by asking Gen Z students to put their social media savvy to work and to bring awareness to her business among their peers. In the weeks leading up to prom, she asks select high school seniors to take over her social accounts. She has also tasked students with posting Bloom Floral content to their own socials. These micro-influencers receive free corsages or credits toward their prom flowers.

While much of recruiting Gen Z is digital, in-person engagement is still important. Thompson visits her local high schools every year to present hands-on demonstrations. Some students get fired up about flowers and visit the shop afterward to submit job applications, Thompson says.

"It's so important to go into high schools because people don't even think this is a career option," says Thompson. "Even beyond just being a designer, there's breeding and suppliers, and marketing roles. Just letting people know this is a real job, this is a career path that is open to you."

—Laurie Herrera



**IN-PERSON LEARNING** Mimi Pacheco (left), Emilia Coloma (center), and Joel Serrano (right) at Jet Fresh Flower Growers' Ecuador farm during a marketing trip.



**MIXING WORK WITH PLAY** The Jet Fresh Flower Distributors team often engages in Nerf gun battles to keep the atmosphere fun.

feedback until an annual performance review doesn't suit them.

"The biggest issue I hear from Gen Z is they're not getting any feedback," says Hecht. That's problematic because "if I don't know what's expected of me, I can't hit a target," she says.

Gen Z workers end up feeling rudderless without feedback. If they're self-conscious about the quality of their work, the mental drain can negatively impact their production. Hecht suggests providing feedback at least once a week.

"Feedback needs to be timely, and it needs to be frequent," says Walsh, adding that while annual reviews are important, nothing should be brought up at that meeting that hasn't already been discussed.

Employers should be mindful to ensure they are having conversations with Gen Z workers, rather than talking at them, says Walsh. Employers can frame the feedback around how changes will help employees reach their personal goals, rather than the company's goals.

"They are often so career-focused that this feedback needs to lend itself to a process that leads to their growth and development," says Walsh. "Wrap that conversation in: 'How does this specific behavior or remediation get you to your goals?'"

## Re-evaluate Promotion Requirements

The long-held belief that employees must "pay their dues" to get promoted doesn't hold up with the next generation. Promotion guidelines such as "It'll take you three years to get there," or "When I think you're ready," appear arbitrary to Gen Z workers, says Hecht.

"It has to be something more tangible," she says. "Instead of the activity to get to the result, talk about the result and then the activity that helps you get there."

Driven individuals will find innovative and efficient ways to perform the activities to achieve the desired results. Because Gen Z is equipped with highly technological skills, they may reach targets earlier than previous generations.

"They may figure out an easier way to do it," says Hecht. "It's very possible that somebody could take 'X' hours and another person could do 'Y' hours and they're going to do the same thing."

Employers who base promotions on employment length rather than ability and production have higher turnover with Gen Z workers, she says.

## Stay Open Minded

Employers should recognize that Gen Z workers bring new experiences and education that can make the company

more effective, including a lifetime of technological savvy. Employers should allow young workers to show how technology, such as artificial intelligence, can help them complete tasks faster or more efficiently, Hecht says.

That's something Ortega has acknowledged. "The way we do things isn't the only way to do things," he says. "You've gotta give people an opportunity to show you that a certain task or a certain job can be done in a different way."

He gives employees three chances to try things their way. If they can yield the same results or better, he lets them continue with their method.

"It's easy to be close-minded and say, 'This has worked for me for so many years,'" says Ortega. "If you open your mind and give the younger generation a chance, you'd be amazed at how much easier it is to find young talent."

Employers should be receptive to employees' overall business suggestions, regardless of age. Gen Z workers feel unvalued when their proposals are ignored, so they quit, says Hecht.

## Respect Their Work-Life Balance

Gen Z is breaking barriers by being open with their mental health struggles

and expects their employers to support them. One way to meet their needs is to be understanding when they need a break, Walsh says.

"Some days you're doing great and some days you're not," she says.

Think of it this way: An employee who is struggling mentally is less productive and more susceptible to burnout. Giving them a break when they need it ensures they'll be more effective when they return, says Walsh. It also helps foster a stronger relationship with the management and the company.

Employers should watch for signs employees are struggling or burning out, which include becoming detached, disengaged, or less productive.

It is also important for employers to encourage — and even insist — that employees use their paid time off to help prevent burnout.

"We're under the constant pressure of a perishable product," says Ortega, which makes it hard to step away. "We want to make sure our people are fresh and refreshed."

Hecht suggests offering an employee assistance program that provides mental health services. Studies suggest those programs increase worker productivity. Some programs specifically cater to small business owners with limited budgets for benefit packages.

## Cultivate a Comfortable Work Environment

While work is serious business, a tense work environment can be a turnoff for young employees.

"I think sometimes some of the older generation has a tendency to conduct business in a very serious manner rather than creating a very fun environment," says Sanchez. "I keep the environment fun and fresh" by playing music and telling jokes to keep staff's spirits high.

At Jet Fresh, employees have 10 seconds to don protective eyewear after the "purge" siren sounds. After that, a Nerf gun battle breaks out. There are also pooches underfoot. "On any given day, there are going to be eight dogs in the office," says Ortega — and sales staff in their pajamas.

"There isn't a mold or model you need to fit," he says. "Everyone is allowed to be themselves."

Walsh has also found that to be true. Employees who can be their authentic selves at work are less stressed and more productive.

## Provide More Structure

Thompson has heard from other florists who are frustrated with Gen Z workers' inability to perform certain tasks. For example, she says some don't know how to talk on the phone because they only text in their everyday lives.

## LEARN MORE

Hear more about working with younger generations during a special session, "Tap Into Today's Talent," sponsored by the Society of American Florists at the AIFD Symposium, July 1-6 in Orlando, Florida.

"We can't assume they're dumb and they don't care," she says. "We just have to train them on it."

Thompson keeps a handbook in her shop that clearly explains jobs and tasks. New employees often feel unprepared and may be concerned how their generational ignorance will be perceived. Having the handbook readily accessible allows them to check the book and learn without judgment.

In addition, Thompson uses a digital task management system, Asana, so her employees know what's expected and what still needs to be done.

"My younger employees like having a digital to-do list and it encourages connection through devices," she says. 📱

**Laurie Herrera** is a contributing writer for *Floral Management*.



**CERTIFIED** Jet Fresh Flower Distributors supported employee Olga Ramirez, AIFD, in becoming certified by the American Institute of Floral Designers.



**GOING GLOBAL** Jet Fresh Flower Distributors sent employee Kris Yllescas (also known as Pinky) to the Netherlands where he completed an internship to learn more about the global floral industry.