

EMBRACING THE WORKPLACE REVOLUTION

*It's official: Gen Z is not here to inherit the world we built; they're here to reinvent it, claims Edhec's **Geneviève Houriet Segard**, as she talks us through how the latest cohort of business school alumni plans to upend the world of work*



For those of us in business education, dealing with Gen Z students isn't just an HR puzzle – it's a wake-up call. A generation is entering the workforce not with demands, but with ideas and plans for real change. They're not tweaking old structures – they're discarding them in order to reimagine them entirely.

This past spring, Edhec Business School and Job Teaser, a European job board that focuses on emerging talent, surveyed nearly 9,500 young adults, aged 18-30, from seven European countries (Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, Spain and the UK) about what they want from their careers. The results may be startling, but they are also incredibly inspiring and hopeful.

The answers portray a generation of employees who have a fundamentally different relationship with work compared to older cohorts. Gone is the 20th-century model of strict processes, rigid schedules, top-down corporate hierarchies and a decades-long commitment to a single, large corporation.

The survey results showed that Gen Z isn't disengaged; they're focused on a completely different list of professional goals compared to the Boomers and Gen X.

Say goodbye to a linear career

Let's start with their attitude towards careers. A first job? It's a test run. Half of respondents said they'd like a fixed-term contract or to be self-employed, but most indicated that they don't want to stay long, at least not in their first job after university. How long will they stay? A year at most. The majority already anticipate switching sectors or roles – sometimes entirely – more than once in their lives.

However, this is not a sign of indecision – it's strategic. Gen Z has grown up in a world of permanent crises: financial shocks, a pandemic, war, climate upheaval and now AI disruption. These shifts have transformed how young people think about their jobs and long-term career aspirations. They're not resistant to long-term plans; they're just realistic about how quickly those plans can collapse.

Far from being disloyal or unfocused, this generation is in fact simply not interested in outdated concepts of career stability. Moreover, those surveyed no longer separate their work and private lives; instead, the two intertwine and feed off each other. For most young people (nine out of 10), work is considered central to personal growth and a fulfilling life. However, they are not giving up on their work-life balance and expect companies to offer them the opportunity to reconcile the two.

Speaking of the corporate world, young people view it as both positive and negative. They are keen to join businesses that offer interesting team projects and congenial work environments, but they won't tolerate excessive stress and an overly complex hierarchy. They favour simplicity over sophistication and are eager to begin work so they can contribute to this critical transition in corporate structure.

Going for purpose over prestige

Our findings also show that meaning trumps money. While salary matters (and it does), Gen Z prioritises purpose over financial rewards. In fact, their top priority is not a pay cheque, but a sense of alignment: between their job and their values; their work schedule and their life; their career and the world.

They want jobs that offer more than tasks: they want a mission. Environmental and social impact are no longer 'nice-to-have' values for this generation; they are central to their career choices. They want to feel useful to society and they want to matter.

This has profound implications not just for employers but also for educators. We need to ask ourselves whether we are preparing students to fit into systems or to challenge them and if we are cultivating vision in addition to offering technical and soft skills.

One of the most misunderstood aspects of Gen Z is their openness to change. Nearly 60 per cent already foresee pivoting completely from one profession to another in their lifetime, not out of anxiety, but out of curiosity. They are building portfolios rather than résumés and designing careers that can stretch, flex and evolve along with them.

This makes them highly adaptable – but also harder to predict. Traditional career models, with their emphasis on linearity and ‘perfect matches’, are outdated. Those institutions that will thrive are the ones that help students learn how to navigate change, not avoid it.

Gen Z doesn’t trust public institutions when it comes to transforming society. They view the private sector as the most effective place to bring about change and are more inclined to work in business than in government, politics, academia or religious institutions. They believe the business world can be a powerful engine for change, provided it is transparent and accountable.

This generation is not anti-structure, but they reject onerous corporate frameworks and detest red tape. They want a seat at the table from day one and expect to have a voice on their team and regular exchanges with their managers. They appreciate a work-life balance that feels human, not corporate.

Creating the workplace of the future

This straightforward approach should also be evident in job postings. Gen Z job seekers are looking for recruitment ads that clearly present a job’s mission, compensation and corporate vibe, including its core purpose and values. For them, the hiring process should be relatively quick, lasting no longer than 24 days. If there’s a snag during recruitment, such as a scheduling mix-up, this generation won’t take it lightly, with three out of four saying they would form a bad impression of the company afterwards. Last but not least, once they’ve landed the job, this generation is eager to get to work, not waste time on endless meetings or mindless tasks.

Despite popular assumptions, Gen Z is not looking to work from their bedroom. Yes, they want flexibility, but they also crave collaboration and a sense of community. Remote work is a tool, not a goal.

They want to connect, receive feedback and experience growth, but they want it all on terms that respect their individuality and rhythm. This is not a lazy generation – it’s a thoughtful one. And the workplace they are imagining is healthier for everyone.

Too often, we hear about ‘managing’ Gen Z, but the real opportunity lies in learning from them. They are not asking for more beanbags or a better coffee machine. They are requesting authenticity, impact and a future they can believe in and help build. The companies that recognise this will not just attract Gen Z but also evolve with them – and that evolution is overdue.

We are not dealing with a crisis of motivation. We are witnessing a redefinition of ambition, which raises a challenge for business schools. We need to create environments where students feel heard and supported in their professional and personal projects, as well as preparing them to transform business by embedding dialogue, co-construction and experimentation into the learning experience itself.

At Edhec, we’ve long believed that education must serve not just markets but society as a whole. This generation is calling us to do precisely that – louder, faster and more urgently than ever before. We would do well to listen.

Genevieve Houriet Segard, PhD, is associate director of the Edhec NewGen Talent Centre, a centre of expertise on youth career aspirations and job skills. With in excess of one million data points from surveys of more than 80,000 business students and recent graduates, the mission of the centre is to detect, understand and explain the changing career expectations of young people

