

The trope



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Is Gen Z turning its back on management?

More and more members of Generation Z are breaking with traditional career paths and refusing to take management positions. Shifting power dynamics and expanded civic ambitions are among the reasons why. Manuelle Malot and Geneviève Houriet Segard, respectively Director and Deputy Director of the EDHEC NewGen Talent Centre, unpack this trend.



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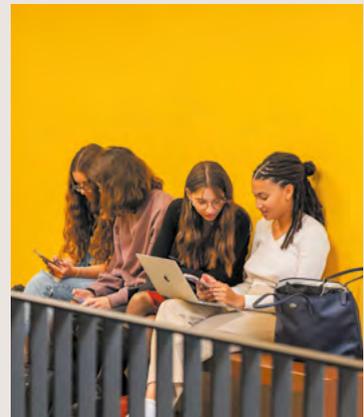
Management — once the hallmark of professional achievement — is losing its appeal. A 2024 Robert Walters study found that 52 per cent of Gen Z no longer want to be promoted to management roles.¹ The retreat from the symbolic prestige of managerial roles now has a name: “conscious unbossing.”

What explains this recalibration? This is a key question for research being conducted by the NewGen Talent Centre (NGTC), EDHEC’s long-established centre that examines newer generations’ professional aspirations. When it comes to this particular topic, stereotypes abound and nuanced analysis remains scarce. Asked about the supposed “workplace laziness” of employees born after 1995,² Director Manuelle

Malot is emphatic: “*Young people aren’t less engaged. They engage in different ways. Today’s graduates are driven by the public interest and pressing global challenges — and they’re holding firms accountable.*” The Centre’s research confirms this. 82 per cent of this cohort voluntarily dedicate time to civic activities, according to the NewGen for Citizenship barometer.³ “*Every generation tries to distinguish itself from its elders,*” says Deputy Director Geneviève Houriet Segard. “*In 1968, youth targeted political institutions in order to reshape society; today they’re challenging corporations to transform themselves and the world.*”

Flattening hierarchies

This power shift extends beyond management and manifests itself in new expectations around governance, Malot says. “*Complex,*



top-down structures are being scrutinised: young professionals want simpler, more lateral organisations. They’ve also grasped that middle management means an impossible balancing act — targets from above, demands from below. It’s lost its appeal.” This translates into “*rejecting authority based purely on rank in favour of authority earned through expertise.*”

An article published by the NewGen Talent Centre in the summer of 2025, which incorporated testimonials from 2,000 former business and engineering students, documented a growing distrust of micromanagement. “*Young graduates want supervisors who look out for them, not over them. They need managers who inspire, develop and motivate them,*” Malot says. The Centre found that over 90 per cent expect managers to trust them and give them independence, and to protect and advocate for their teams.⁴ This paradigm shift may require rethinking corporate power from first principles — making a distinction, for instance, between management and leadership. “*Leaders influence and inspire colleagues,*” Houriet Segard explains, “*while managers oversee teams from an operational standpoint.*”

Flexibility over permanence

Behind this scepticism of hierarchy lies a fundamental redefinition of success. “*Young people now rank acquiring skills and personal development as their primary career goals,*” Malot says. “*Our graduates leave when they stop learning and stop building employability.*” She attributes this partly to market volatility: as skills become obsolete more quickly, workers must constantly retrain to remain competitive.

Young employees therefore seek out roles that move them forward rather than constrain them. “*Consider cross-functional project management. As project lead, I oversee*



a team in a temporary capacity — perhaps for several months — without formal hierarchical authority, often including people outside my department,” Malot says. “*This means working on a project from start to finish.*” But people’s commitment depends on two factors, Houriet Segard adds: “*Understanding how projects benefit the company and its broader stakeholders.*”

Purpose over position

The Centre developed a “typology of professional ambitions” to map this shift. “*Three types coexist,*” Houriet Segard explains. “*The competitor — who pursues moving up the hierarchy — dominated two decades ago. Now we see more of those who are driven by the public interest and global challenges, plus intra-/entrepreneurs who are energised by innovation and independence.*”

Significantly, 53 per cent of surveyed youth cite a “loss of meaning” as their greatest professional fear. “Alignment with personal values” is the top quality-of-work criterion.

1 — Robert Walters, “Conscious unbossing – 52% of Gen-Z professionals don’t want to be middle managers,” *Robert Walters UK*, September 2024.

2 — “IA, télétravail, bien-être : sommes-nous plus paresseux que la génération précédente ?”, *Forbes France*, January 2025.

3 — EDHEC Business School, *EDHEC publishes the results of the first “Newgen for Citizenship” barometer*, December 2025.

4 — EDHEC Business School NewGen Talent Centre, *Baromètre NewGen NewJob : Bien-être au travail, nouvel enjeu du 1^{er} emploi*, March 2025.



equally compelling prospects. Second is training. *“You don’t improvise management. You need to restore a sense of purpose to the role by being supportive. This means developing managers who inspire, trust and energise is essential,”* Malot says. Finally, compensation cannot be ignored. Meaning tops people’s expectations, but pay also matters: 60 per cent cite it as a major source of appeal and 67 per cent as a retention factor, a NewGen Talent Centre & JobTeaser study found.⁶

When it comes to a manager’s duty to represent corporate positions, Malot says: *“Young managers struggle to champion messages they don’t believe in, where they neither grasp nor share senior management’s values or strategy.”* Senior leadership bears responsibility here too: *“Gen Z explicitly demands transparency and honesty, particularly on societal issues,”* Malot adds, citing a study entitled “First employment in France: what do young people want?”⁵

Reinventing the role

How can organisations improve their young talent’s view of management? First, by diversifying paths for advancement. *“Management can’t continue to be the only path with any value,”* Houriet Segard says. Technical expertise and cross-functional projects must also be

These findings challenge the model of the overwhelmed, under-equipped middle manager caught between protecting their teams and delivering executive targets. *“Trust this generation to reinvent management within a less rigid working culture that values autonomy and accountability,”* Malot concludes. ◆

5 — Premier emploi en France: que veulent les jeunes ?, EDHEC Business School, July 2025.

6 — JobTeaser and EDHEC NewGen Talent Centre, *Début de carrière : ce que veulent les futurs diplômés en 2025*, JobTeaser, June 2025, accessed 29 January 2026.