

PREOCCUPATIONS | ALEXANDRA LEVIT

Make Way for Generation Z

Its members are independent, curious, mature, driven and ready to change the world.

I RECALL THE exact moment the temperature changed in the workplace. It was 2005, and I was speaking to an audience of 100 young professionals. I was relating my experiences building a career as a Gen Xer (born 1964-79) in a world of traditionalists (born before 1945) and baby boomers (born 1946-63).

Every time I threw out phrases like “paying your dues” and “playing the game,” the audience stared at me blankly. This was not the reaction I had come to expect from early twentysomethings. Usually they took notes on how they could get ahead in corporate America as quickly as possible.

I would soon learn, however, that the millennial generation (also known as Generation Y, born after 1980), had come on the scene. Generally speaking, these guys didn’t like my advice about coping with bureaucracy and office politics. It seemed to me that some of them didn’t want to grow up, but at the same time they felt they deserved to do meaningful work right away. Many were not afraid to speak their minds and made it clear they wanted to change the status quo. And at 80 million strong, they had the numbers to do it.

It took 10 years before most organizations identified the millennials as a talent issue on fire. By now, the oldest millennials are 35. They aren’t children anymore — in fact, a majority of them are leaders with decision-making power and direct reports. While executives have been fretting over the millennials, though, a new generation is growing up behind the scenes — Generation Z (born starting in the mid-90s to the early ’00s depending on whom you ask). Within the next three years, Gen Zers will be the college grads in my audiences, and they are poised to be somewhat different from the millennials.

I’VE NOW HAD the opportunity to meet lots of Gen Zers, and here’s what I’ve noticed. To start, they tend to be independent. While a 2015 Census Bureau report found that nearly a third of millennials are still living with their parents, Gen Zers are growing up in a healthier economy and appear eager to be cut loose. They don’t wait for their parents to teach them things or tell them how to make decisions. As dem-

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onstrated by the teenagers attending the recent Generation Z Conference at American University in Washington, Gen Z is already out in the world, curious and driven, investigating how to obtain relevant professional experience before college. Despite their obvious technology proficiency, Gen Zers seem to prefer in-person to online interaction and are being schooled in emotional intelligence from a young age. Thanks to social media, they are accustomed to engaging with friends all over the world, so they are well prepared for a global business environment.

Gen Z is also diverse. My 15-year-old next-door neighbor is a quarter Hispanic, a quarter African-American, a quarter Taiwanese, and a quarter white. That’s Gen Z — they are often a mix of ethnicities.

Doug Anderson, managing partner of the Washington-based education company Bisnow Ventures, organized the Gen Z conference. He is trying to create a movement around Gen Z with the goal of harnessing the excitement high-school-age Americans have about their careers and helping them explore their options.

At the conference, a few hundred teenagers gathered to take that first step. The mood was electric.

Among those who attended was Sejal Makheja, 16, a sophomore who lives in McLean, Va. When she was 14, Sejal founded the Elevator Project, an organization that aims to lift people out of poverty through apprenticeship, vocational training and job placement. She said she went to the Gen Z

Conference because she wanted to cultivate the skills she’ll need to take the Elevator Project to a national scale.

“The young people at the conference want to take an active role in their communities and their futures,” she said. “It’s an upbeat group that’s full of passion.”

Sejal signed up for sessions on finance, investing and networking. She says that her parents did not push her to register for the Gen Z event, nor do they help her with her nonprofit organization. “My parents are supportive, and they’ve had to drive me around, but generally they’re pretty hands-off,” she said. Many Gen Zers intend to go to traditional college, but after that, their lives and careers are likely to be anything but traditional.

Even well-known organizations will have to rethink their recruiting practices to attract this group, and now is the time to start. Those who want to take advantage of Gen Z talent in the future need to develop relationships today with teenagers in grades seven through 12. Get into their schools, provide mentorship and education, and put yourself in a position to help shape their career decisions. They are eager to listen.

Filling the talent pipeline has never been so critical now that the United States is facing a skills gap in most industries. Even if you’re a small operation, you can still have a Gen Z internship program. These children are so mature and they learn so fast, they might just be ready to take over by the time they’re 22.