**Headline:** What We Can Learn from Gen Z Workers

**Teaser:** Rather than blame young workers for bad attitudes, we need to understand why Gen Z prioritizes its well-being over company health—and learn from them.

By Sonali Kolhatkar

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**[Article Body:]**

My oldest born is a high school junior, taking his first steps into the hypercompetitive and bewildering world of undergraduate college applications and future careers. So, I was drawn to a recent [headline](https://fortune.com/2024/09/26/bosses-firing-gen-z-grads-months-after-hiring/) in Fortune proclaiming, “Bosses Are Firing Gen Z Grads Just Months After Hiring Them—Here’s What They Say Needs to Change.” The story covers a new [study](https://www.intelligent.com/1-in-6-companies-are-hesitant-to-hire-recent-college-graduates/) about hiring trends among employers and rather than examine what employers need to do to attract and retain new graduates—generous salaries, good benefits, work-life balance, creativity, and job security—it was a diatribe against new graduates.

Not only do [employers](https://fortune.com/2024/09/26/bosses-firing-gen-z-grads-months-after-hiring/) accuse young people of a “lack of motivation or initiative,” they complain that they are “late to work and meetings often, not wearing office-appropriate clothing, and using language appropriate for the workspace.”

Nowhere in the story is it mentioned that the class of 2024 entered as freshmen the year the world shut down. The COVID-19 pandemic and its resultant lockdowns [impacted](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9535459/) young people disproportionately. At a time in their lives when social interaction was just as important as academic work, if not more, they were forced to isolate, albeit for good reason. But their mental health suffered and we as a society made no systemic effort to address it. Instead, they were left to their own devices, to care for their mental health, and to sort out their attitudes toward work and careers.

Also, nowhere in the story is there an acknowledgment of the fact that young people’s futures have been sacrificed on the altar of corporate oil profits. As the world [burns](https://weather.com/news/climate/news/2024-09-17-hottest-summer-on-record-global-2024) and [floods](https://www.nytimes.com/2024/09/24/climate/climate-change-europe-floods-boris.html) and faces [storms](https://yaleclimateconnections.org/2024/09/four-ways-climate-change-likely-made-hurricane-helene-worse/) and as [catastrophic climate forecasts](https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/22/opinion/environment/climate-change-death-toll.html) erase Gen Z’s future, society demands they sport good attitudes and behave as though nothing is wrong and no mass intervention is needed to rectify the situation. Instead, Gen Z has to face climate devastation as individuals.

What the Fortune [story](https://fortune.com/2024/09/26/bosses-firing-gen-z-grads-months-after-hiring/) covering the study of newly graduated employees *does* mention is how schools are trying to prepare kids for the corporate grind, citing one high school in London that “is trialing a 12-hour school day to prepare pupils for adult life.” This is shared with no sense of irony about the fact that workdays in a civilized society ought to be no more than 8 hours long.

Employers are [apparently](https://finance.yahoo.com/news/bosses-firing-gen-z-grads-111719818.html) looking for workers who have “a positive attitude and more initiative.” If that sounds out of touch, there’s more. A career adviser told Fortune that young hires would do well to “[b]uild a reputation for dependability by maintaining a positive attitude, meeting deadlines, and volunteering for projects, even those outside your immediate responsibilities.” In other words, if you want to keep your job, take on more work than you were hired to do.

Long hours and extra work are part of the ethos of a dying corporate culture where workers sacrificed their lives and well-being for their bosses, and—a few decades ago—might have been rewarded with enough to live on. That capitalist contract is defunct. A [separate September 2024 study](https://www.resumetemplates.com/9-in-10-gen-z-workers-say-theyre-underpaid-including-those-making-six-figures/) of Gen Z salary satisfaction showed that 87 percent of those surveyed felt they were underpaid. A Pew study from May 2020 [concluded](https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2020/05/14/on-the-cusp-of-adulthood-and-facing-an-uncertain-future-what-we-know-about-gen-z-so-far/) that today’s youth “are on track to be the most well-educated generation yet.” This naturally leads to high expectations of employers. But nearly half of those surveyed in September earn only between $30,000 and $60,000 a year, which in today’s economy is not enough to live on. If young workers lack a positive attitude, they have good reason.

[Pew](https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2020/05/14/on-the-cusp-of-adulthood-and-facing-an-uncertain-future-what-we-know-about-gen-z-so-far/) also found that “Members of Gen Z are more racially and ethnically diverse than any previous generation.” In the past year especially, young Americans have watched an unfolding genocide in Gaza aimed at people who look a lot like them. That genocide, funded by their parents’ tax dollars and their college endowments, has played out in horrifying detail on their Instagram and TikTok accounts, inuring them from the political punditry downplaying Israel’s culpability. Their college campus protests and encampments haven’t worked to stop U.S. funding to Israel.

It’s no wonder that Gen Z is breaking from older generations by being [disproportionately](https://www.northjersey.com/story/news/2024/02/01/israel-hamas-war-gaza-generational-divide-gen-z/72296726007/) and unapologetically pro-Palestinian. It’s also no wonder that they are jaded about their own future in a nation whose government actively cheers on the extermination of their Palestinian peers.

Gen Z is left to deal with massive systemic failures—climate change, pandemics, and genocide—as individuals. Why are we shocked then that they are prioritizing their own physical and mental health? No one else is doing so.

A February 2024 [Stanford Report](https://news.stanford.edu/stories/2024/02/8-things-expect-gen-z-coworker) article on Gen Z workers interrogated the employment values and expectations of young people and concluded that they “question everything and everyone—from their peers, parents, or people at work,” and “[t]hey are also not afraid to challenge why things are done the way they are.” They prefer collaboration and consensus over hierarchy and, most importantly, they value mental health and work-life balance.

Gen Z workers grew up seeing their parents bring work home, work after hours, work overtime without compensation, and make themselves available to answer phone calls and emails at all hours. In return, they watched older generations suffer mass layoffs, failed union drives, and stagnating salaries. If they reject the idea of one’s work life ruling one’s home life, it seems that young workers have a lot to teach their older peers and employers rather than the other way around.

In spite of myself, I often urge my 17-year-old to focus on getting good grades so that he can get into a good college and land a good job that pays well enough to live on. But such logic assumes we live in a merit-based economy where hard work pays off. Those of us who are 40 and older know firsthand how much of a lie this is. I can tell my snarky teen barely humors me when I urge him to prioritize his grades. And I can imagine him doing the same to a future boss who might urge him to have a “positive attitude” at work.

Rutgers University public relations professor Mark Beal, author of *Decoding Gen Z*, [told](https://fortune.com/well/2024/09/25/gen-z-boomers-millenials-remote-work-mental-health-employees/) Fortune, “Gen Xers, boomers, even older millennials, they live to work. Work is driving them. It’s energizing them.” Meanwhile, “Gen Z works to live.” They prioritize their mental health over Wall Street’s financial health.

Are they on to something? Instead of excoriating young people for prioritizing their well-being overwork, we would do well to learn from them. Gen Z is shifting our collective ethos to normalize asking what bosses owe workers instead of the other way around.