

Annual Report

2024

CULTIVATING EMPLOYABILITY OF GEN Z GRADUATES

*Should Company Culture Adapt to
Graduates, or Should Graduates Adapt
to Company Culture?*





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Foreword

As we reflect on the past year at Gradlinc, we are reminded of our commitment to fostering the employability of Gen Z graduates. This year's annual report, themed "Cultivating Employability of Gen Z Graduates: Should Company Culture Adapt to Graduates, or Should Graduates Adapt to Company Culture?", addresses one of the most pertinent questions facing today's employers and job seekers.

Gen Z, the newest cohort to enter the workforce, brings with them a unique set of skills, values, and expectations. They are digital natives, adept at navigating the rapidly changing technological landscape, and they prioritise diversity, inclusivity, and work-life balance. Their approach to work is distinctly different from that of previous generations, posing both challenges and opportunities for organisations.

In this report, we delve into the dynamic interplay between company culture and the evolving workforce. We explore whether it is more beneficial for companies to adapt their cultures to better suit the expectations of Gen Z, or for graduates to acclimatise to the established norms of their prospective employers.

We examine real-world examples, case studies, and data-driven analyses to understand how organisations can create a harmonious balance. Our findings highlight the importance of flexibility, continuous learning, and mutual respect in cultivating an environment where both companies and graduates can thrive.

At Gradlinc, we believe that the key to future success lies in collaboration and adaptation. Companies that are willing to evolve and integrate the fresh perspectives of Gen Z will not only attract top talent but also drive innovation and growth. Conversely, graduates who embrace the values and missions of their organisations will find greater fulfilment and opportunities for advancement.

As we move forward, it is our mission to bridge the gap between graduates and employers, fostering a symbiotic relationship that benefits all parties. We hope this report serves as a valuable resource for understanding and navigating the complexities of this important issue.

Thank you for your continued support and dedication to the future of our workforce.

Pria Panu
Gradlinc: Business Manager



Executive Summary

Introduction

Welcome to the Gradlinc 2024 report. This report covers various aspects related to the employment of graduates and the trends over the past year.

Background

2024 has seen significant changes in the graduate employment landscape. This report aims to provide a comprehensive overview of these changes, focusing on the key trends, challenges, and opportunities that have emerged.

Generation Z, also known as Gen Z, is the newest demographic cohort of graduates entering the workforce, bringing distinct characteristics and expectations with them. Gen Z receives a lot of media attention that is often less positive yet they come with a vast amount of skills that are underestimated as innovative leaders of the future. This generation is vocal and value individualistic approach. They exhibit a strong commitment to their careers but demonstrates loyalty to companies only when substantial benefits are provided. These benefits diverge from traditional offerings and emphasise work-life balance, opportunities for promotion, higher salaries, mentoring, respect, equal opportunities, and individualised approaches. Additionally, they value innovation and possess a significant entrepreneurial drive.

Financial burdens, such as higher study loans, do not deter them; instead, they are less fearful of taking risks to build their fortunes and careers. The conventional 9-to-5 work schedule does not appeal to them and the value flexibility and the opportunity for a work-life balance. They are quick learners, technologically adept, and easily bored with repetitive tasks, preferring to multitask despite having reportedly shorter attention spans. Companies that foster a culture of transparency, continuous feedback, and professional development, while leveraging technology to enhance work efficiency, are likely to attract and retain Gen Z employees.

Key Points on Company Culture with a focus on Gen Z

1. **Understanding generational differences:**
 - **Generational traits:** Gen Z shares some traits with Millennials but also brings new behaviours shaped by their unique experiences, such as growing up with smartphones and social media, and witnessing significant social justice movements.
 - **Economic and educational background:** Gen Z is characterised by greater economic well-being, higher education levels, and more racial and ethnic diversity than previous generations.
2. **Challenges with lack of work experience:**



- **Decreased early work experience:** Fewer Gen Z teens have held jobs compared to previous generations, leading to less familiarity with workplace expectations and dynamics. This gap can result in unrealistic job expectations and higher turnover rates.
- **Importance of realistic job previews:** Providing realistic job previews can help align new employees' expectations with reality, reducing turnover and increasing job satisfaction.
- 3. **Managing expectations:**
 - **Psychological contracts:** New employees have unwritten expectations about their relationship with their employer. It's crucial for managers to understand and manage these expectations to prevent dissatisfaction and turnover.
 - **Onboarding practices:** Effective onboarding practices are essential for helping Gen z employees adjust to their new roles, improving performance, retention, and satisfaction.
- 4. **Diversity, equity, and inclusion:**
 - **Commitment to equality:** Gen Z places a high value on diversity and inclusion, expecting workplaces to treat everyone equally and fairly. Organisations need to promote a culture that supports these values to attract and retain gen z talent.
 - **Challenges with free speech:** Gen Z may support restrictions on free speech that conflict with older generations' views, presenting challenges in managing a diverse and inclusive workplace.
- 5. **Mental health considerations:**
 - **High rates of anxiety and depression:** Gen Z reports higher levels of mental health issues compared to previous generations. Companies should invest in health and wellness programs to support their employees' mental health.
 - **Fostering autonomy:** Managers should help Gen Z employees develop autonomy by allowing them to make decisions and take ownership of their work, which can reduce anxiety and increase job satisfaction ¹

The graduate job market has become increasingly competitive. Companies are seeking not only technical skills but also soft skills such as communication, teamwork, and adaptability. The demand for graduates in STEM fields continues to rise, while there is also a growing need for expertise in digital marketing, data analysis, and project management. As businesses continue to digitise their operations, the demand for graduates with digital skills has skyrocketed. These skills include data analysis, digital marketing, and software development.

Employers are placing greater emphasis on soft skills. Graduates who demonstrate strong communication, problem-solving, and leadership abilities are highly sought after. Despite the growing demand for graduates, several challenges remain. These include the need for relevant work experience, competition for roles, and the evolving employer expectations. Many graduates struggle to secure their first job due to a lack of relevant work experience. Employers often seek candidates with practical experience in addition to academic qualifications.



1. Introduction

The workforce today is marked by the entrance of Generation Z, individuals born between 1997 and 2012 ². This cohort brings with it unique expectations and values, shaped by the digital age and socio-economic shifts. As digital natives or the “digital generation”, Gen Z employees prioritise technological fluency, work-life balance, and meaningful work ¹. These preferences necessitate a re-evaluation of traditional company cultures, which may be rigid or misaligned with the values of these new entrants.

1.1. Understanding employability in today's job market

The definition of employability is dynamic and adjust according to societal changes and preferences. Over the last few decades the job market had undergone major changes in many aspects but a golden thread noticeable throughout time is that employability is often misunderstood as merely the ability to secure a job. Employability encompasses a broader set of achievements, skills, understandings, and personal attributes that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations ³.

It goes beyond mere employment acquisition to include the ongoing capacity to remain employable throughout one's career. From a more recent perspective, Clarke^{4(p9)} redefined employability as *“employability can be reconceptualised as comprising the human capital, social capital, and individual behaviours and attributes that underpin an individual's perceived employability, in a labour market context, and that, in combination, influence employment outcomes.”*:

- Human Capital refers to the skills graduates acquire during their higher education such as problem-solving, critical thinking or team skills;
- Social Capital refers to the social influences that can impact a graduates employability for instance their ability to network, their social standing and the reputation of the university they attend;
- Individual behaviours and attitudes have previously been omitted to a large extend in the research but has since been proven to be critical to career success and refers to the graduate's own efforts towards building a career through self-management (self-awareness, attitude and abilities) and career building that relates to any tools needed to manage and advance in the workplace;
- Labour market variables refer to the supply of graduates in the marketplace and the demand for their skills that is not within their control.

According to Yorke ³, employability reflects a graduate's potential to secure a job and succeed in it, influenced by the individual's personal attributes (**individual behaviours and attitudes**) and the educational experiences provided by higher education institutions (**human and social capital**). It is a concept that extends beyond acquiring specific 'core', 'key', or 'transferable' skills. Instead, it involves a complex interplay of understanding, personal qualities, and the ability to apply skills in diverse and dynamic contexts (**labour market variables**).



The distinction between **employability** and **employment** is crucial. Employment is influenced by external socio-economic factors such as the state of the economy and regional job market conditions, which are beyond the control of the individual. Conversely, employability is an individual's intrinsic capability to navigate these external conditions effectively.

The employability of graduates in South Africa is significantly hampered by a lack of soft skills, which are essential for navigating the complexities of the modern day labour market. Graduates often overestimate their competencies in these areas, leading to a gap between their self-assessment and employer expectations⁵. This gap is a major obstacle to their employability, as employers are looking for candidates who can not only perform specific technical tasks but also demonstrate strong interpersonal and cognitive skills.

This research highlighted five key dimensions of soft skills that were critical for employability in South Africa⁵:

- Managing self;
- Managing others;
- Managing tasks;
- Managing career; and
- Managing enterprise.

Within these dimensions, specific skills such as communication, adaptability, leadership, and ethical behaviour were emphasised as vital aspects. By addressing these gaps through curriculum reforms, targeted training programs, and active collaboration with industry, stakeholders can better prepare graduates for the challenges of the modern workplace and enhance their employability prospects.

The new term to take note of ... Standout Employability

But there is new twist to consider when we talk about employability. What is becoming more and more evident is that we have (perhaps unknowingly so) transitioned from employability to standout employability. In the words of employers: *'they're all roughly at the same level in terms of how they've performed academically, they've all done equally well, but most of them are at the same level. So at that point it's like, "Well what is going to make them stand out really?'*^{6(p683)}

This study examined the challenges faced by international accounting graduates in securing employment in Australia, highlighting the critical role of social and cultural capital. Employers in small to medium-sized firms often preferred candidates with local cultural understanding and professional networks, which put international graduates at a disadvantage. These graduates frequently lacked the necessary 'feel for the game' required to navigate the local professional landscape, leading to higher rejection rates based on perceived deficiencies in communication skills, local work experience, and involvement in community activities.⁷



1.2. Understanding company culture and the graduate landscape in today's job market

In considering whether company culture should adapt to graduates or if graduates should adapt to company culture, it is essential to recognise the dynamics between the two. Graduates bring a fresh perspective, creativity, and adaptability to companies and are often seen as having the potential to infuse new ideas and approaches into the workplace, making them attractive to companies, especially startups ⁸.

This notion is increasingly pivotal as businesses seek to attract and retain a workforce that is not only skilled but also aligned with their organisational culture. Companies are beginning to realise that generational differences necessitate a significant re-evaluation of company culture and the incentives used to attract and retain top talent. Gen Z, having experienced economic downturns, does not prioritise job security in the same way as previous generations. Their goals—such as obtaining a degree, owning a pet, and building a personal brand—differ from those of older generations.

The concept of a personal brand is something that older generations don't seem to prioritise while Gen Z understand the possibilities behind it. This is also very clear in the popularity that influencers are gaining on social media, especially lifestyle influencers or vloggers as opposed to company brands that dominated the market until recently.

Young professionals are changing jobs more frequently than ever before, being three times more likely to switch jobs compared to Baby Boomers. This high turnover rate imposes significant costs on companies, including losses in time, money, and business opportunities with each departing employee ⁹.

With a keen awareness of high college costs, the need to fund their own retirement, and a desire to avoid traditional 9-to-5 jobs, many Gen Z individuals lean towards entrepreneurship and innovation. As a result, they are unlikely to stay in positions that do not meet their diverse needs and expectations ⁹.

2. Purpose of this report

2.1. To help employers understand the need for cultural adaptation

Employers face the dual challenge of maintaining organisational efficiency while ensuring that their work environment is attractive to new talent. Research indicates that a positive company culture is linked to higher levels of employee engagement, productivity, and retention. Conversely, a misalignment between company culture and employee values can lead to decreased job satisfaction and higher turnover rates ¹⁰.



2.2.To provide insights into the graduate perspective of company culture

By understanding the preferences and expectations of Gen Z graduates, employers can make informed decisions about adapting their company cultures. This adaptation not only enhances the employability of graduates but also contributes to a more dynamic and innovative workplace, ultimately driving business success.





3. The Changing Workforce

3.1. The evolving expectations of new graduates

Change is no longer optional for companies and Higher Education Institutions. It is enforced through the rapid advances of technology, the widely available information to anyone with an internet connection, the rise of influencers and new marketing avenues and the popularity of social media as a means to drive change. The graduates of today were born and raised in a digital world but employed by those who were born with either limited technology, or those who transitioned between the two worlds. And this is inevitably a source of multiple disagreements and conflict in an effort to align vastly different perceptions and drive companies and careers forward.

One also needs to consider the point that many of the current leaders in industry are Millennials who had their own share of generational stigmas to fight or disprove, just like Gen Z is having to do now, and just like previous generations did. It's a never-ending cycle as each new generation is shaped by the world they grow up in and within that context, there are unique characteristics to the way they think, act and adapt in the workplace. Even more so, what they expect from the workplace as a trade-off for their loyalty and/or skills they are willing to exert.

Gen Z is known to be the most vocal generation thus far, albeit purely because of the reach that social media provides, bringing the entire world together in the palm of your hand on a smart phone. But this enables a lot of bargaining power as they are able to connect with like-minded individuals across the globe and stand together when they share the same belief or value. Research on Gen Z is ongoing and varies from one context to another, but this report looked at a global perspective to understand the mindset of this generation of graduates and what the opportunities are to possibly find a mutually beneficial company culture for both graduates and companies.

It is important to understand that the actions and expectations of Gen Z is largely value-driven and the need for an individualistic approach. Gen Z values meaningful work and career development opportunities, often preferring flexible work arrangements and a strong alignment between their personal values and their employer's corporate social responsibility efforts. Their desire for a balanced work-life dynamic and transparent communication is transforming traditional workplace norms ^{2,11}

3.2. Characteristics of Generation Z

What are Gen Z's looking for in a career?

This is a question that is in the forefront of the mind of many talent acquisition specialists. And for good reason as it is their daunting task to not only find top talent but they also need to consider



standout employability while considering graduate-friendly interview processes and onboarding once they selected their candidates.

Gen Z exhibits a strong commitment to their careers but demonstrates loyalty to companies only when substantial benefits are provided. These benefits diverge from traditional offerings and emphasise work-life balance, opportunities for promotion, higher salaries, mentoring, respect, equal opportunities, and individualised approaches.

The available literature on Gen Z is heavily focused on workplace factors which highlights the challenge of successful Gen Z integration that companies and the rest of the labour market are facing.

3.3. Graduate expectations in the workplace globally

A study from Europe that focused on Gen Z perceptions and expectations when entering the workplace provided a detailed perspective on the workplace mindset of today's graduates ¹²:

- **Job security and financial stability:** Generation Z highly values job security and financial stability, having grown up during economic recessions. This generation prefers stable employment and places significant importance on earning a solid salary early in their careers
- **Preference for corporations and structured environments:** Gen Z tends to favour working for large corporations over small startups or entrepreneurial ventures. They are drawn to well-defined office spaces and prefer a structured work environment that offers clear career progression and training opportunities.
- **Mentorship and continuous learning:** This generation places a high value on mentorship and continuous learning. They expect their employers to provide opportunities for professional development, guidance from experienced mentors, and the ability to learn new skills on the job.
- **Work-life balance and flexibility:** Gen Z expects a relaxed and informal work environment that supports work-life balance. They value flexible working hours and the ability to work both remotely and on-site, preferring environments where they can bond with colleagues and freely express their opinions.
- **Diversity and inclusion:** Gen Z is more tolerant and inclusive than previous generations, valuing diversity in the workplace. They are comfortable working with people of different ages, genders, and cultural backgrounds, and prefer an inclusive environment that respects personal privacy and promotes equality.

In addition to this mindset, the study looked at certain workplace variables and how the graduates rated the importance of these aspects. The visual representation is shown in Figure 1 as presented in their article with a clear indication on the three most important aspects being ^{12(p25)}:

1. Being able to easily express my opinion
2. The impact I can bring through my work
3. My work represents me



And the three least important aspects being:

1. Material benefits (car/laptop/phone etc.)
2. Short- or medium-term leadership position
3. Being close to home

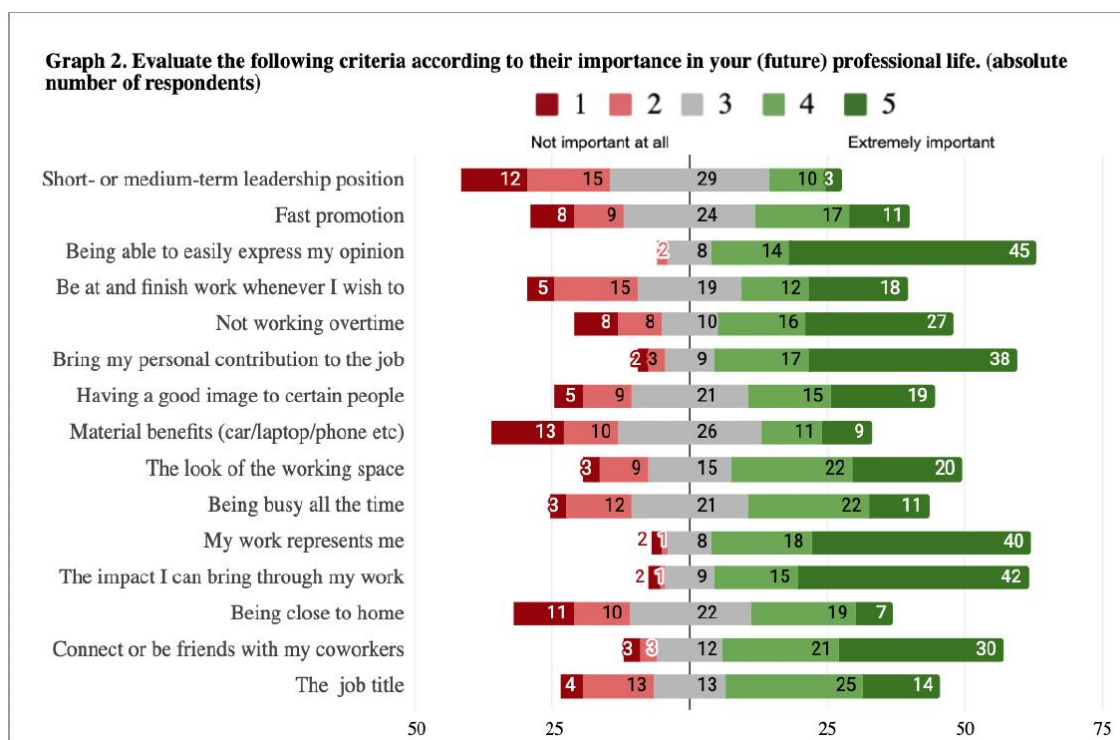


Figure 1: The importance of workplace variable for graduates ^{12(p25)}

From another perspective, Agarwal & Vaghela ¹³ summarised their findings of the career aspirations of Gen Z and expectations in the workplace:

- **A “heartening” work environment:** Gen Z values a smooth candidate experience during interviews and will rather avoid working with companies where they had poor applicant interactions.
- **Innovative technology:** We are dealing with a digital generation. Effective use of chatbots, AI, and recruiting apps can streamline hiring processes and better attract Gen Z talent.
- **Employer brand:** Access to information has never been easier (and so has the popularity of leaving reviews or testimonials). Actively manage and leverage employer brand on platforms like Glassdoor and LinkedIn to attract Gen Z candidates.
- **Cultural diversity:** Gen Z values inclusion and promoting diversity will increase an employer’s chances to attract Gen Z as they are by far the most diverse workforce.
- **Multifaceted roles:** Offer rotational programs and learning opportunities to cater to Gen Z’s preference for varied roles within one company and better learning opportunities.



- **Professional development:** As a digital generation, providing on-demand, mobile-first learning opportunities in short, digestible units will better meet Gen Z's learning preferences.
- **Communication:** Use texting, instant messaging and social media for communication to meet them on their level, but prioritise the professional growth by providing additional training in business communication and grammar.

These key points highlight the importance of creating a supportive, inclusive, and flexible workplace culture to attract and retain Generation Z employees. ¹².

In Figure 2 the study looked at the how much certain aspects of their career mattered and looking at the top three most important aspects ^{12(p27)}:

1. Liking what I do
2. Learning and developing as much as possible
3. Having my merits be acknowledged

while the three least important aspects were:

1. The reputation/size of the company
2. The opinion of former or actual employees
3. Large salary from the get-go

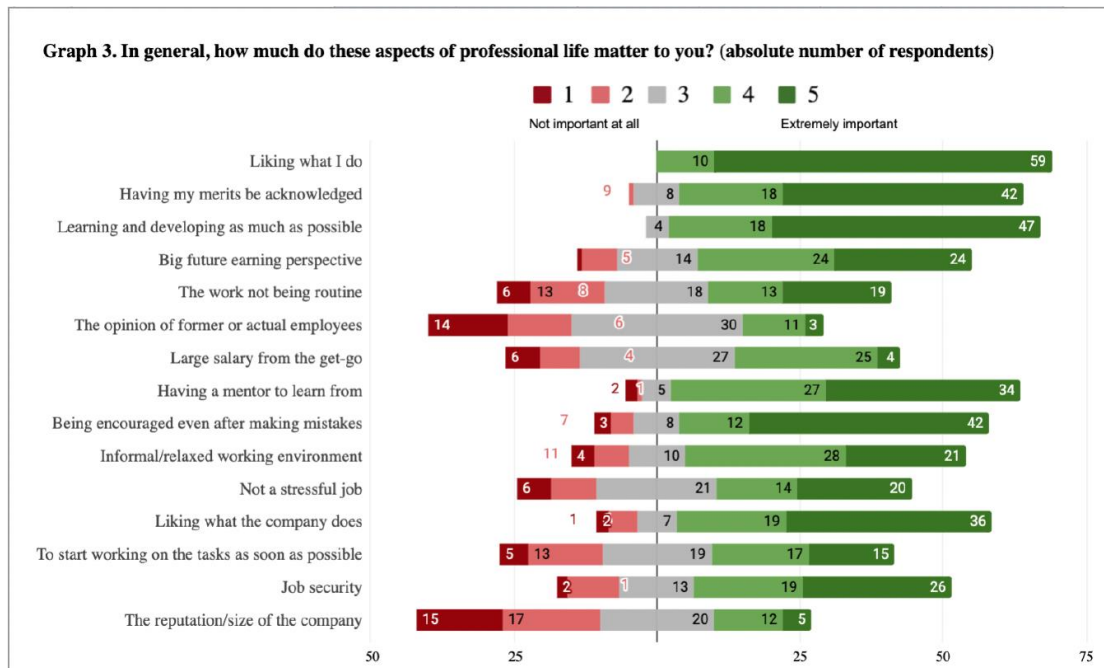


Figure 2: What aspects of professional life are important to graduates ^{12(p27)}



However, it is evident that the findings from these studies are context dependent and cannot be assumed as a blanket statement to describe the Gen Z mindset in the workplace. The study from Mărginean¹² was conducted in Romania while the study of Agarwal & Vaghela¹³ was based in India, with noteworthy differences as well as similarities.

The following quotes from these studies also challenged the stigma of ‘job hopping’ that Gen Z is often associated with.

“Furthermore, 50% of respondents expect to switch between 2 and 6 job types throughout their career, contrary to what other studies found - around 17 different jobs in a McCrindle study (2018). 17% of Gen Z-ers reported intending to stick with the same job type, whether in the same company or not. The question referred to a job type, not a specific position within a company”^{12(p28)}.

In comparison with the study from India:

“They would like to join those companies who would give them opportunities to grow within the company, so that they can stay there for long career (unlike Millennials) and appreciate the career benefits. Compare to what is known for Millennials, Gen Z sounds less materialistic”^{13(p18)}.

The difference in results might be contextually or perhaps part of a bigger thought process that job-hopping is not as much a choice as a necessity or unavoidable due to the increasing pace at which jobs are affected by technological advances.

Chillakuri & Mahanandia¹⁴ on the other hand, found that Gen Z graduates tend to remain loyal to their profession rather than to a specific organisation, often seeking higher salaries elsewhere (viewed as job-hopping). To retain them, companies should consider their career aspirations and engage in discussions about the additional benefits offered beyond salary. While absolute loyalty may not be ensured, this approach helps employees weigh the total value of their benefits compared to other employers before deciding to leave

For example, flexibility encompasses more than just working from home; it involves employers allowing employees to work at times that suit them best, whether through flexible hours or staggered shifts. When compared to the perspective from employers on the importance of certain variables to attract Gen Z, Figure 3 shows the differences from the viewpoint of Gen Z^{15(p5)}.



Figure 3: Gen Z vs Employer perspectives on attraction strategies

But it is rather interesting to note that the work values of Gen Z from various contexts do have a lot of similarities as well. The work values of Gen Z according to Agarwal & Vaghela ¹³ in the extract in Figure 4 highlighted the top three values as:

1. Helping others
2. Their career growth
3. Work-life balance

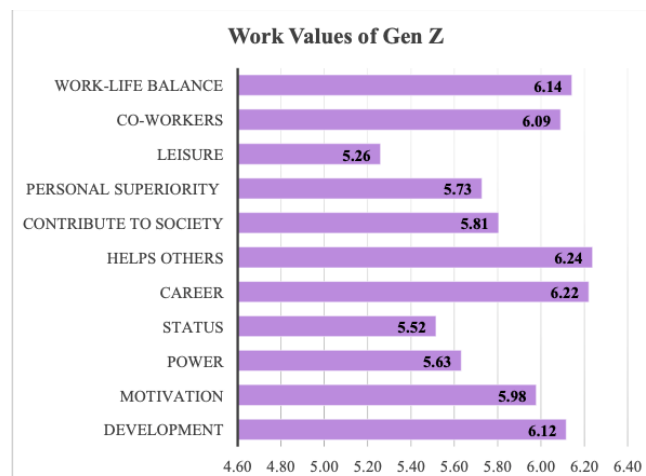


Figure 4: Gen Z work values ^{13(p18)}

In comparison, the study of Chhinzer & Russo ^{16(p112)} from Canada showed similar findings regarding the mindset of Gen Z for example wanting to be helpful to others, their eagerness and willingness to learn, and their desire to make their opinions heard – see Figure 5 for the extract from their study.



Comments identifying strengths	Comments identifying weaknesses
<i>Generic skills (time management, teamwork and attention to detail)</i>	
Time management (13.25%) “fast at completing work”, “focuses on speed of tasks”, “adeptly managed her time to complete assignment”	Inability to “balance outgoing personality with ensuring own work”, ensure that “work of others is not interfered with”
Working in a team (7.95%) “team players”, “fit in with the team”	Need to “increase [their] ability to collaborate”
Attention to detail (7.95%) “detail oriented”, “pays attention to detail”	“Attention to detail is lacking”, “needs improvement with attention to detail”
<i>General mental ability (18.54%)</i>	
“intelligent”, “logical”, “good memory” “strong analytic aptitude”	The need to focus on “developing critical thinking” or “understanding of context and scope”
<i>Subject-specific knowledge (12.66%)</i>	
“application of scientific knowledge”, “shows potential to show proficiency with entomological and ecological concepts”	A need for broad skills such as “general business approach”, “conflict mediation”, “project management”
<i>Willingness to work (11.26%)</i>	
“keen”, “willing to pitch in and help as required”	Needs improvements with “staying on task”, “be more forthcoming with ideas for institutional improvement”
<i>Professional attitude and behaviors (17.88%)</i>	
“positive”, “sincere”, “infectious”, “dedicated”, “hard working”, “diligent”, “resilient”	Poor “conduct during meetings”, “integrity” or “attentiveness to business communication”
<i>Responsiveness to feedback (7.95%)</i>	
“accepting feedback”, “wasn’t afraid to ask questions or seek clarification”, “responsive”	A need to “solicit feedback”, “improvement in receiving constructive criticism”

Figure 5: How employers perceive graduate attributes ^{16(p113)}

3.4. South African Context

From a local context the research is largely focused on graduate unemployment due to this particular crisis we are facing in South Africa. The adaptation of graduates in the workplace received some attention but is often associated with their graduate attributes and skills learned at higher education institutions instead of the employer’s perspective and cultural adaptability in the workplace.

Ismail ¹⁷ explored the relationships between graduate employability capacities, self-esteem, and career adaptability and found significant positive relationships. The results indicated that graduates who possessed higher levels of employability capacities and self-esteem were more likely to exhibit greater career adaptability. Specifically, graduate employability (or graduate attributes) contributed more significantly to explaining participants’ career adaptability than their self-esteem. This suggests



that enhancing employability skills such as problem-solving, decision-making skills, and continuous learning orientation can significantly improve graduates' ability to adapt to changes in the workplace.

Among the graduate attributes or competencies assessed, these had the highest influence on career adaptability (Ismail, 2017):

- Interactive skills;
- Continuous learning orientation; and
- Problem-solving skills

These competencies help graduates manage the transitions and challenges they face in the workplace. This study also highlighted the role of self-esteem in supporting career adaptability, though to a lesser extent than graduate attributes or employability capacity. Graduates with high self-esteem were better able to leverage their employability skills to navigate the workplace effectively. This emphasises the need for both Higher Education Institutions (HEI's) and employers to focus on developing these critical competencies to enhance graduate employability and adaptability in the dynamic South African work environment ¹⁷.

In a previous study, Ismail et al. ¹⁸ found that graduates with high self-esteem were better equipped to leverage their skills and attributes, which in turn facilitated smoother transitions from education to employment. The authors suggested that interventions aimed at boosting self-esteem could significantly improve the employability and adaptability of young graduates in the workplace ¹⁸.

Chweu et al. ¹⁹ pointed out that while technical skills are important, interpersonal and behavioural competencies play a more pivotal role in the successful integration of graduates into the workplace. Employers expect graduates to not only possess technical know-how but also to demonstrate adaptability, ethical decision-making, and a proactive attitude towards learning and development.

These findings suggest a dual responsibility: HEI's must enhance their curricula to better prepare students, and employers should continue to make more concerted efforts to provide on-the-job training and development programs ¹⁹.

3.5. The Future of Work for Gen Z

Several key trends highlight the impact of Generation Z on workplace culture. Firstly, despite their digital nature, they are also driving to an extent a revival of "dumb phones" to reduce digital distractions and enhance productivity ⁹. This reflects a broader quest for simplicity and mental clarity amidst a digitally saturated environment.

Secondly, the rise of the "DINK" (Dual Income, No Kids) lifestyle among Gen Z underscores their focus on financial stability and lifestyle flexibility, often glorified on social media despite underlying economic anxieties. In addition, the "anti-work" movement and trends like "quiet quitting" illustrate their rejection of traditional hustle culture in favour of work-life balance and personal fulfilment ⁹.



Lastly, Gen Z's influence on workplace language and communication norms, including the use of casual sign-offs and emojis, demonstrates their push for a more authentic and inclusive work environment. Companies must adapt by embracing these values by offering flexible and purpose-driven work environments, and recognising the importance of mental health and well-being to attract and retain Gen Z talent ^{2,11}

Barhate & Dirani ²⁰ suggested that Gen Z's expectations of meaningful work, flexibility, and continuous learning will require companies to adapt their HR practices and organisational culture as both intrinsic and extrinsic factors significantly influence Gen Z's career aspirations – as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Factors influencing Gen Z's career aspirations adapted from Barhate & Dirani ²⁰

Factors	Components	Description
Intrinsic Factors	Attitudes	Gen Z exhibits high self-confidence, tenacity, and an entrepreneurial spirit. They are self-assured and often prefer to rely on their abilities rather than their team.
	Relationships	Social contact and professional relationships are crucial. Gen Z values teamwork and collaboration but also shows a preference for working independently at times.
	Motivation	Recognition, a sense of purpose, and feeling valued are primary motivators. Instant gratification and career advancement opportunities are important for keeping Gen Z motivated.
Extrinsic Factors	Environmental	Gen Z is characterised as digital natives, heavily influenced by technology. Big events such as the 9/11 attacks in the USA and economic recessions have also shaped their career outlook.
	Familial	Family plays a significant role in career decisions. Gen Z values their family's perceptions and aspires to support their future families.
	Organisational	Gen Z prefers to work in companies that align with their personal values and offer flexibility, good pay, and a supportive work environment.
Career Expectations	Organisational Culture	Gen Z looks for engaging and diverse workplaces with open communication and activity-based engagement.
	Work-Life Balance	Flexible work hours, the ability to take time off, and remote work options are critical. Gen Z values work-life balance highly.
	Stability	Stability is sought through benefits, job security, and competitive salaries. However, salary is not the primary driving factor for career stability.
Career Development	Learning	Gen Z prefers informal learning methods that combine autonomy with collaboration. Continuous learning and technology use are vital for career advancement.
	Mentoring	Gen Z values mentorship from successful individuals and expects their supervisors to play a significant role in their career growth.
	Growth	Lateral career growth, acquiring new competencies, and developing professional skills are essential for Gen Z.

An important factor to consider is that Gen Z, having grown up with technology and high expectations, often feels dissatisfied if their job does not meet their expectations. This dissatisfaction leads to lower job commitment and higher turnover rates. The research underscores the importance of supervisor support in mitigating these negative outcomes. Supervisors who provide high levels of support can

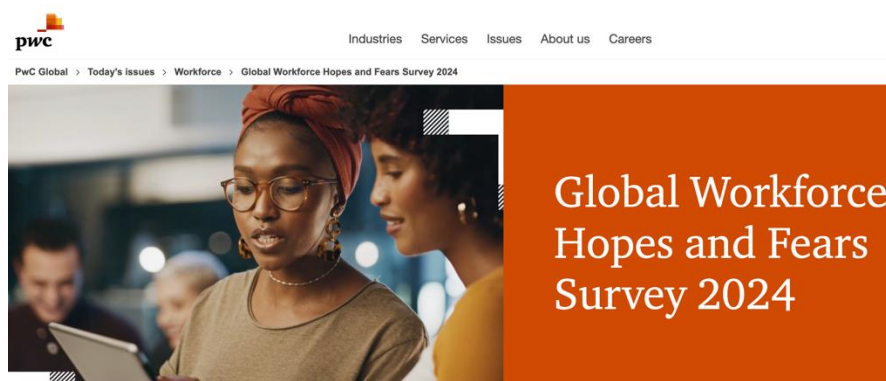


buffer the adverse effects of unmet expectations and work-related boredom, thereby reducing the likelihood of employees quitting.²¹

From the employer's perspective, the future of work also looks somewhat different to what they were used to in the past. Certain graduate and employee attributes will most probably always be a priority but there are variables that change over time. Anderson & Tomlinson⁶ looked at employer perceptions of graduates during graduate recruitment and found the following:

- Employers prioritise personal and psychological qualities like resilience, adaptability, and flexibility;
- Work-related experience is highly valued as a signal of a graduate's potential connection with a company's culture;
- Person-organisation fit in terms of personality, culture, values, and future contributions is essential;
- Employers value extra-curricular activities and life experiences as important signals of standout employability.

Additional resources on workplace trends in the future are:



3.6. A South African perspective

In South Africa, Sotshangane & Obioha ²² examined employers' expectations regarding the employability skills of graduates in the Eastern Cape, South Africa. This study provided insights into the skills that local employers prioritise and the gaps that exist between the skills possessed by graduates and those required by employers. It also offered recommendations for improving the alignment between higher education outputs and labour market needs in Table 2.

Table 2: Graduate skills prioritised by South African Employers

Skills	Description
Critical Employability Skills	Employers expect graduates to possess a range of employability skills for entry-level jobs. These include communication skills (both verbal and listening), teamwork, problem-solving, computer literacy, presentation skills, research skills, creativity, planning and organising, and ethical awareness.
Communication Skills	Effective communication is highly valued, with employers expecting graduates to have strong listening and speaking abilities. This skill is essential for workplace interactions and collaboration.
Teamwork and Interpersonal Skills	The ability to work well in a team and maintain good interpersonal relationships is crucial. Employers in the health and education sectors emphasise the importance of graduates being able to collaborate and interact positively with colleagues.
Problem-Solving and Analytical Skills	Graduates are expected to possess problem-solving skills to address challenges that arise in the workplace. This includes the ability to analyse situations and develop effective solutions.
Computer Literacy	In the digital age, computer literacy is a fundamental requirement. Employers expect graduates to be proficient in using digital tools and technologies relevant to their fields.
Quantitative Skills and Research Abilities	Although less emphasised compared to other skills, quantitative skills and the ability to conduct research are still important. Employers expect graduates to have a basic understanding of data analysis and research methodologies.
Creativity and Innovation	Creativity and the ability to innovate are valued by employers who seek graduates capable of bringing new ideas and approaches to their work environments.
Ethical Awareness and Professionalism	Ethical behaviour and professionalism are critical, with employers expecting graduates to adhere to ethical standards and demonstrate integrity in their professional conduct.
Leadership Skills	While leadership skills are generally developed over time, some employers still expect entry-level graduates to exhibit basic leadership traits and the potential for future leadership roles.

3.7. Motivational factors for Gen Z in the workplace

Research by Wennqvist ²³ investigated what motivates Generation Z employees at work and how leaders can create an environment that meets their motivational needs. The framework highlights the need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness as core motivational factors in Table 3. This involves providing opportunities for influence and personal development, maintaining open and supportive communication, ensuring equal treatment, and offering meaningful work.



Table 3: Motivational factors for Gen Z in the workplace ²³

Motivational theme	Motivational factor	Description
Need for Autonomy	<i>Influence</i>	Gen Z employees value the ability to influence their work and the company's development. They appreciate being able to discuss and implement new ideas.
	<i>Trust</i>	Trust between employees and leaders is crucial. Gen Z employees prefer not to be micromanaged and value the ability to work independently.
	<i>Clarity</i>	Clear instructions and goals are important for Gen Z employees to perform effectively. They need to know the desired outcomes but appreciate the freedom to decide how to achieve them.
	<i>Diversity</i>	Acceptance of diversity in working styles and personal characteristics is essential. Gen Z employees want their differences to be acknowledged and respected.
Need for Competence	<i>Personal Development through Variation</i>	Gen Z employees are motivated by varied work tasks and new challenges. They seek opportunities for continuous personal and professional development.
	<i>Advancement</i>	The potential for career advancement and the growth of the company itself are significant motivators. Gen Z employees want to see progression and new opportunities arise within the company.
	<i>Success</i>	Moments of success, whether small or significant, motivate Gen Z employees. They find satisfaction in overcoming challenges and achieving desired results.
Need for Relatedness	<i>Team and Interpersonal Relationships</i>	A positive team environment and good interpersonal relationships are highly motivating for Gen Z employees. They value a work culture that fosters trust and camaraderie
	<i>Open Communication Culture</i>	An open communication culture where employees feel free to ask questions and share their thoughts is essential. This includes a good relationship with leaders and an open dialogue
	<i>Relationship with Leader</i>	A supportive and approachable leader who is part of the team rather than a distant authority figure is crucial. Leaders should provide regular feedback, praise, and support.
	<i>Equal Treatment</i>	Fair and equal treatment from leaders is highly valued. Gen Z employees expect their leaders to be just and considerate of all team members.
	<i>Common Objectives and Goals</i>	Shared goals and a clear mission motivate Gen Z employees. They want to understand how their work contributes to the overall objectives of the company.
	<i>Feedback</i>	Regular and constructive feedback is vital. It helps Gen Z employees understand their performance and areas for improvement.
	<i>Compensation</i>	While some Gen Z employees prioritise a better work environment over higher pay, compensation remains an important factor. Competitive salaries and financial stability are significant motivators
Other Motivational Factors	<i>Flexibility</i>	Flexibility in work arrangements, including remote work options and adaptable schedules, is highly valued. Gen Z employees appreciate a balance between structure and autonomy
	<i>Purpose</i>	Knowing that their work has a meaningful impact is crucial for Gen Z employees. Leaders should communicate the purpose and significance of tasks to enhance motivation.
	<i>Awareness</i>	Being aware of the company's direction, goals, and values is important. Transparency from leaders regarding the company's mission and progress fosters a sense of belonging and purpose.



4. Bridging the Gap: Company Culture and Graduate Expectations

4.1. Definition and Components of Company Culture

While there are many definitions for company culture, broadly speaking company culture refers to the collective values, beliefs, and behaviours that shape how employees interact and work within an organisation. It encompasses the shared practices and attitudes that characterise an organisation and influence its internal and external relationships:

- **Values and Beliefs:** Company culture is fundamentally built on the core values and beliefs that are shared among its members. These values guide decision-making processes and set the standard for acceptable behaviour within the organisation. It is a collection of common attitudes, values, goals, and practices that define an institution or organisation ²⁴. Recent studies emphasise the importance of aligning these values with broader societal expectations and ethical considerations ²⁵.
- **Behavioural Norms:** The behaviour and norms within an organisation are crucial components of its culture. These norms dictate how employees communicate, collaborate, and resolve conflicts. Organisational culture can be viewed as a pattern of shared basic assumptions developed by a group as they address challenges related to adapting externally and integrating internally ^{26,27}. Recent research also highlights the role of inclusivity and diversity in shaping these norms, recognising that a diverse workforce can drive innovation and performance ²⁸.
- **Work Environment:** The physical and social work environment, including the leadership style, organisational structure, and workplace practices, significantly contribute to the company culture. It is the "social glue" that helps hold an organisation together by providing appropriate standards for what employees should say and do. Recent trends point towards flexible work arrangements, remote work, and the use of technology to foster connectivity and collaboration ¹⁰.

“Culture eats strategy for breakfast” – Peter Drucker



5. Survey Insights

A survey was conducted at Stellenbosch University during September 2023 that focused on the perceived employability of current and future graduates. The results are discussed below.

Demographics of the survey population are shown in Figures 6 - 8:

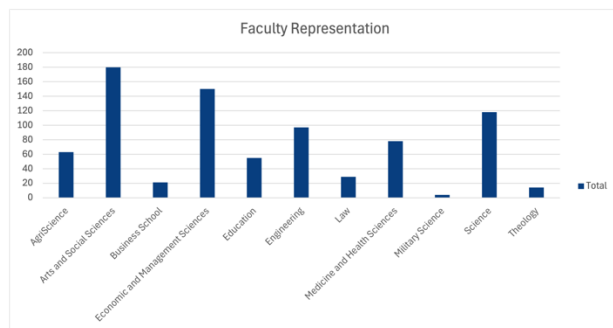


Figure 6: Faculty Representation

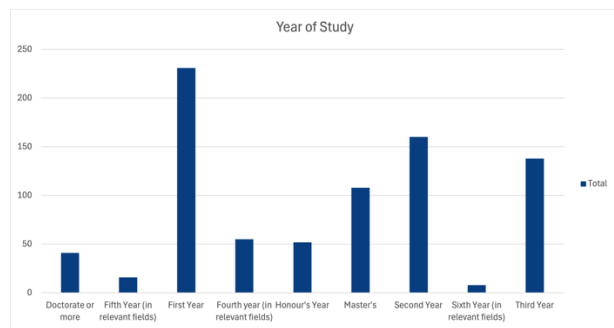


Figure 7: Year of study

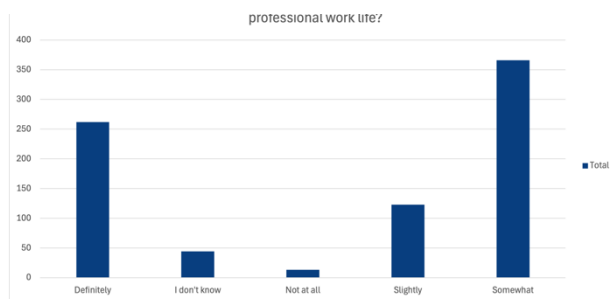


Figure 8: Preparedness for professional/work life

When students were asked to elaborate on their answers whether they felt prepared or not, Gradlinc received hundreds of answers, see some examples below in Table 4:

Table 4: Why or why not did you say that you feel work-ready?

Quotes from the survey
"I believe the world of work is changing too rapidly for a rigid university structure to handle."
"I feel there is a gap between being in the classroom and the working world"
"My vocabulary has improved alot and some modules even learn us some skills for using technology, like making documents and working on excel."
"The courses I take are highly informative, but I feel that I derive no practical skills from it. For example, computer skills; I know certain courses do demand rigorous computer work, but those that I take do not. Computer skills are highly valuable nowadays, and I feel that my underwhelming exposure to computer work weighs on my employment prospects."



<i>"I know that I have some measure of responsibility to toward my education, and I have independently taken action to equip myself with in-demand skills, but more exposure during my final year could have helped."</i>
<i>"University teaches you the basic concepts that are needed to function in an work en environment. But, there is a lack of real world experience within the university teaching model."</i>
<i>"We focus on practical application of the work done and also things such as ethics and professional conduct in our modules. In addition to this, the university hosts work readiness workshops that help us prepare for the work place and what to expect."</i>
<i>"There are many opportunities for self-development such as short courses and leadership roles these allow a person to learn communication skills and adaptability."</i>
<i>"I believe the university teaches you the foundation of the knowledge and skills that you need to have in your professional career, but every individual is responsible to enhance their abilities and knowledge based on what they already know."</i>
<i>"University equips you with the knowledge required to find work however it does not give you the experiential knowledge."</i>

Students were asked how helpful they found certain resources typically offered by institutions and/or industry to enhance their employability, of which the highest rates resource was **internship opportunities**.

In your opinion/experience, how helpful are these for you to have better chances of finding a job?

Table 5: Resources to enhance graduate employability:

Resource	Not helpful (0)	Somewhat helpful (1)	Very helpful (2)	Average Rating
Visiting guest speakers from different sectors	87 (10.88%)	406 (50.75%)	307 (38.38%)	1.27
Career events on campus for networking with professionals	51 (6.39%)	275 (34.46%)	472 (59.15%)	1.53
Industry contact encouraged in classroom context (guest speakers, updates from sector etc)	53 (6.67%)	301 (37.86%)	441 (55.47%)	1.49
Internship opportunities	28 (3.50%)	88 (10.99%)	685 (85.52%)	1.82
Providing career guidance	41 (5.11%)	250 (31.13%)	512 (63.76%)	1.59
Soft skills such as communication, decision making skills, team work etc	41 (5.11%)	227 (28.30%)	534 (66.58%)	1.61
Hard skills such as Computer skills, research skills, contacts with employer etc	18 (2.24%)	176 (21.95%)	608 (75.81%)	1.74
Career Fairs on campus	95 (11.90%)	368 (46.12%)	335 (41.98%)	1.3

This question was followed by another question touching on opportunities that students can use to enhance their own employability, when the responsibility to upskill is placed on their shoulders. Again, students indicated an interest to take up various opportunities but the highest rated opportunity was job shadowing.



Which are you more likely to make use of to increase your own employability and chances of finding a better job?

Opportunities	Not likely at all (0)	Somewhat likely (1)	Most likely (2)	Average Rating
Attend Career Fairs	117 (14.74%)	359 (45.21%)	318 (40.05%)	1.25
Attend Online workshops hosted by companies	126 (15.87%)	344 (43.32%)	324 (40.81%)	1.25
Attend IN-PERSON workshop on CV writing or Interview skills	112 (14.00%)	302 (37.75%)	386 (48.25%)	1.34
Attend ONLINE workshops on CV writing or Interview skills	115 (14.38%)	323 (40.38%)	362 (45.25%)	1.31
Practice with mock interviews on your computer	124 (15.48%)	315 (39.33%)	362 (45.19%)	1.3
Job shadowing	39 (4.88%)	178 (22.25%)	583 (72.88%)	1.68
Courses on Udemy or Skillshare	115 (14.47%)	379 (47.67%)	301 (37.86%)	1.23
Linkedin Learning	125 (15.64%)	349 (43.68%)	325 (40.68%)	1.25

Both these last two questions highlighted the need of students to have industry exposure as the highest rated resource and opportunity was job shadowing and internship opportunities. This has a direct implication on the resources that institutions avail to students or purchase at expensive prices which are not deemed as helpful by the students themselves. Or the effort to invite a guest speaker to a lecture versus getting 2 – 3 students to rather job shadow that same guest speaker or apply for an internship at the company.

The survey then moved on to ask students whether they felt work-ready and the students answered from their perspectives as first years through until postgraduate students. It was evident that any student with prior work experience, regardless of the year of study, felt more confident in their employability than those who were never exposed to the work environment before.

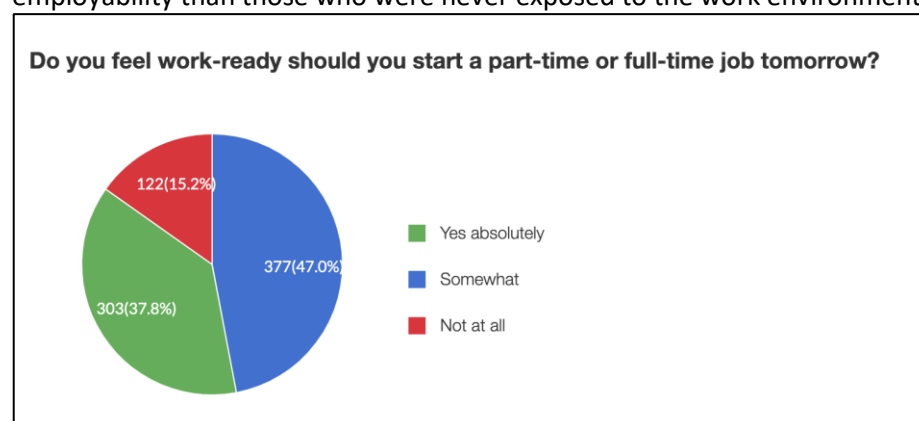


Figure 9: Students perception of their work-readiness



Following this question, students were then asked **why they chose** the answer to the previous question and here are some quotes in Table 6:

Table 6: Survey quotes: Why students did or did not feel work ready

Quotes from the survey
<i>"I have already worked in a challenging environment, but only in the service industry, however jobs of a more technical nature will require a better understanding of what I need to do before I would feel confident."</i>
<i>"because i have worked as a general worker at Distell and as a merchandiser before so I'm quite familiar how things are done at a work place."</i>
<i>"I wouldn't be confident in transferring what I've learnt in class into the office."</i>
<i>"I feel like we should start gaining experience as soon as we can, because organisations chooses experienced workers over people with qualifications."</i>
<i>"I do not really see how my field of study - the humanities - have direct applicability in a work environment. The skills I acquire is more general skills that can be indirectly applied in a wide variety of contexts. So I think for any work situation I will need additional training to make me feel work-ready."</i>
<i>"I feel confident as I have been prepared ever since I came to campus, my studies have only reinforced this feeling."</i>
<i>"I have never had a job but i feel like if I'm given the opportunity I'd do my best to make the company better."</i>
<i>"I don't feel like I could be absolutely prepared, however I will always try to make the best of the challenge at hand."</i>
<i>"Because the knowledge I have gained feels like a backdrop to an irrelevant scene in history. The industry works at a much quicker pace than university can teach and change."</i>
<i>"I feel I have the necessary baseline theory and knowledge to perform tasks given to me in the work place, but still lack the real world work experience about best practices and acceptable work standard that would be expected from an professional."</i>
<i>"Because I have working experience"</i>
<i>"Due to my course being so broad and having many different duties depending on where you work, I feel that I will mostly learn when I start working. But having practical blocks I could start developing skills that I would need for my career one day."</i>
<i>"I am ready to learn and start making mistakes."</i>
<i>"My confidence level for the industry exposure is slightly below my expectation"</i>

Students were then asked in an open-ended question to indicate the skills they felt they needed to be work-ready and a word cloud was generated from their responses and shown in Figure 10. Read "time" and "management" as one concept for "time management" and not two different concepts. The next two standout concepts were problem-solving and experience.



<p><i>"Since many employers or companies generally look for potential employees who have some form of experience, those companies or employers who do hire graduates (who have minimal to no experience) should be mindful of the fact that these people are not familiar with a work environment and that they need to be clued in on how things work. That is, they needn't be spoon fed and guided directly for the course of their employment, but rather experience a form of onboarding or training before being expected to perform at a certain level. It should also be made plain that questions are welcome because how are we to know things if we don't ask."</i></p>
<p><i>"Offering mentorship and training, support new graduates with onboarding, training programs, and mentorship to help them develop their skills. Assessing for potential by look beyond just academic qualifications and assess candidates' potential, adaptability, and soft skills."</i></p>
<p><i>"They should understand that graduates took many years in Varsity preparing for that certain job so they should be treated with respect and kindness, no extra work where there wont be extra payment for graduates, And the salary should match the job field."</i></p>
<p><i>"Better job descriptions and not overworking them."</i></p>
<p><i>"Be clearer with their expectations and requirements. If I am expected to have no tattoos or piercings, this needs to be specified so that I can adequately prepare for the interview. If I am expected to work on weekends or after hours, this needs to be made clear. Even when it comes down to the application process or expectations in the workplace - tell me what you most want to see on my CV, and tell me if you expect me to respond to every email within 10 minutes or be 5 minutes early for every meeting. These incredibly specific expectations often result in people getting hired that aren't necessarily the best person for the job, but know all the secrets for landing the job because of their contacts."</i></p>
<p><i>"Have a clear graduate and lack of experience category to publish opportunities for graduates so we can find it easily. Have an good induction program to ensure learning and decrease error rates. Have extensive mentorship for graduates in the company and be in contact from day 1."</i></p>
<p><i>"Having an onboarding program."</i></p>
<p><i>"Not judge graduates based on their gender, cultural/personal backgrounds, race or religion."</i></p>
<p><i>"Specify exactly what qualifications they want of a potential employee, and should one not get picked for a position, provide a detailed yet concise explanation as to what the individual lacked, that way the individual can improve their chances of getting employed by another company."</i></p>
<p><i>"They should invest in creating open days, like the university does to invite student to see the company and experience what it is like to be there."</i></p>
<p><i>"They should should say why there job is interesting."</i></p>
<p><i>"Do not base their decision on the type of institution attended by the graduate but focus on the ability to make use of cognitive skills , performance when practicing skill."</i></p>
<p><i>"Allow for mock-ups in the workplace so that a student knows what they would potentially be stepping in."</i></p>
<p><i>"Just ensure that opportunities are more accessible and that the application process is clear and straightforward."</i></p>
<p><i>"Offer better remuneration based on their profit margins."</i></p>
<p><i>"Positive and negative feedback on what you lacking."</i></p>
<p><i>"Pay them better. No micromanagement either. That's why people leave!"</i></p>
<p><i>"Offer flexibility - allow for self regulation and management"</i></p>



<i>"Clear job description Mentorship and guidance Feedback on performance review Open communication Flexibility Health and well-being."</i>
<i>"Advertise on platform students use."</i>
<i>Check in with the graduates from time to time. It's a big change for graduates making the transition. Making graduates feel part of the team, I would think, would be something that I would want a company to focus on."</i>
<i>"Give everyone a chance, we are different and learnt different but we have potential. Don't only focus to A students. Some have studied under difficult circumstances."</i>
<i>"Not place all pressure on an interview. Some people do not interview very well and get anxious. It is not a true reflection of the candidate at all."</i>
<i>"Give them more job security."</i>

As with most hires, the process starts with a job description and at Gradlinc we are seeing applications following certain trends which prompted the following question to determine why certain job postings receive less attraction than others. Figure 11 was a multi-choice question where students indicated the factors that deterred them from applying for a job.

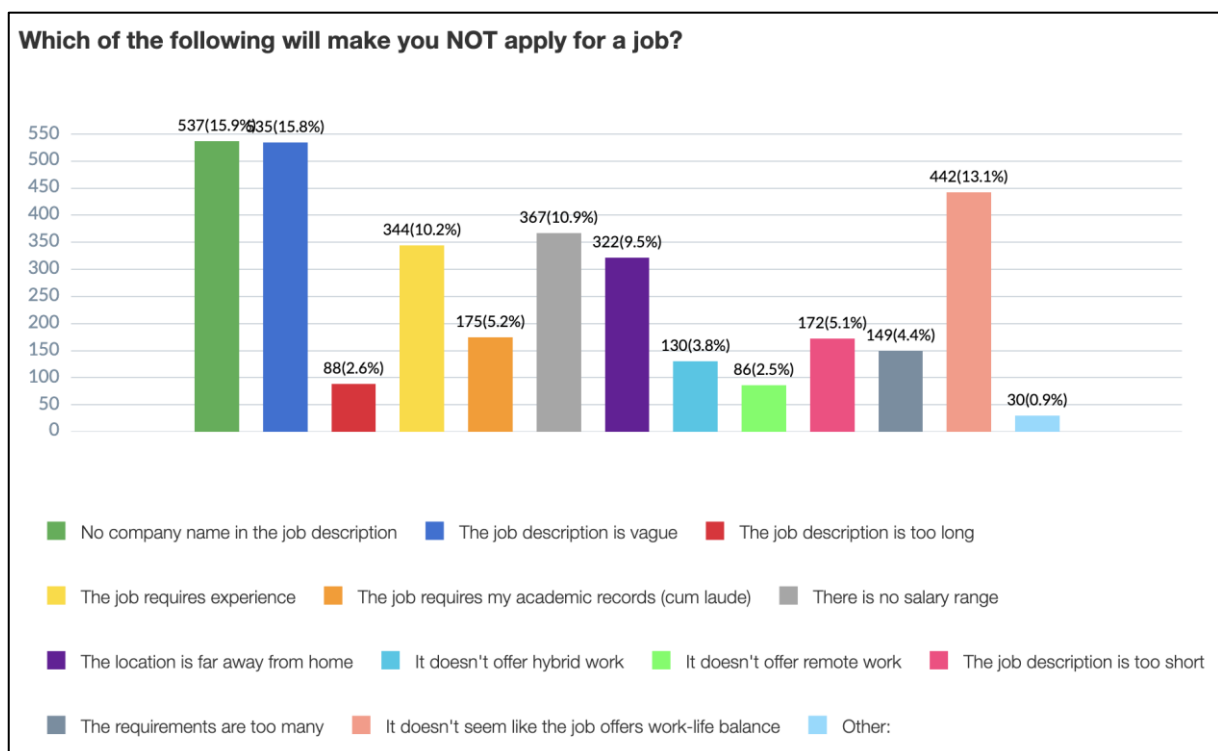


Figure 11: Factors that will deter graduates from applying to a position



In addition to this, students were given the opportunity to explain why they made their selection in Table 8.

Elaborate on any of the above why you would NOT apply for a job

Table 8: Survey Quotes why certain aspects deter graduates from applying for a job

Quotes from the survey
<i>"If the job description is missing elements such as the company name or other details, it is not a sign of good organisation and administration. If the job description seems to indicate unreasonable expectations (both with qualifications and workload/hours) this often carries over into the actual job."</i>
<i>"Work-life balance would result in a healthy working and personal environment. You would be dedicating equal amount of work related issues and personal life without experiencing stress or being overwhelmed. For me a company has to have a work-life balance."</i>
<i>"The company name is crucial if you are applying for a job. I am saying this because you must also make a research about it just before you put your personal details in that posted form. You must get to know how many years since it exist and get if anybody knows about it or maybe they are scamming people."</i>
<i>"I am a person that likes to be prepared in most situations therefore a vague description would deter me. I would fear that even if I had the correct experience, I would not be good enough and I'd therefore prefer for them to not require experience, but for me to have it anyways. I do not own transportation, therefore if it was far away I would have no way to reach it unless I use public transport which is dangerous and untrustworthy. A company should have a good working environment and should value employees enough to allow for a good work-life balance. I wouldn't want to work with people who would rather I sacrifice myself or themselves."</i>
<i>"If the company is dodgy and does not have a lot of information about it."</i>
<i>"Work-life balance is something that is very important to me. I've seen many people become to absorbed in trying to meet deadlines or overtime requirements and it is not a way I would like to live my life."</i>
<i>"Too many requirements and too much experience needed makes you feel like the company does not want to put effort into your development and training as an employee and just want someone to "plug and play"</i>
<i>"As previously stated some companies are abusive and inflexible and have managers that micro manage and abuse graduates. Some companies have incredibly toxic work culture they want cum laude students but forget that there is more to students than cum laudes. Some companies don't understand that living far from home is a challenge they under pay us and we can't pay for flights to go home."</i>
<i>"I would want to job that would be able to let me maintain my personal life in a stress free environment."</i>
<i>"A vague job description leads me to be sceptic of it as it is not being clear if my skill set will be of use or not."</i>
<i>"Location is important since I have a family who I would not like to stay apart from."</i>
<i>"Basically none of those things will stop me from applying for a job. I would ask clarity on any of those things. Contacts are always provided."</i>
<i>"As I don't have a car, I take into account possible options on getting to and from work."</i>
<i>"I have experienced the lack of a work-life balance and realised its importance in living a happy life."</i>



"I want a clear and concise idea of what the job is, what is expected of me and what i would need to do if i get the job. i don't want to go through the full process only to find out i was misled and am now doing something i wasnt expecting and am not happy with/not able to do that."

"Requiring cum laude is a terrible hiring practice. Students who receive distinctions are not necessarily able to apply their knowledge, they may be better equipped at memorization and not necessarily understanding. Although I am a cum laude student, seeing that that is what a job asks for deters me as it feels elitist. It provides students with better backgrounds access to companies better as we all know there exists a correlation between financially and socially stable backgrounds and academic performance."

"When the job description is too short and vague, it doesn't give enough information to make the job attractive."

"Jobs with vague and too little description seem untrustworthy to me."

"Flexibility is also an important aspect for me, but is more of a question to ask in an interview. No flexibility in working hours to sort out admin is a no-go for me. Any hierarchical structure that sounds like I would be micro-managed is also a no-go. These points are common key areas people look for in my field of software engineering."
If there is a sense that there is not respect for the employee, then there is little hope for a functioning and effective business or team. This could be like little pay for the amount of responsibility. Few benefits. No team building or efforts for team cohesion, communication or familiarization. Few prospects for promotion or additional responsibilities with more pay. The biggest indicator of a bad job to go for is a contract stating additional responsibilities can be given without pay or proper compensation."

"Stop asking for work experience, and take a chance on smart, hardworking kids."



6. Adaptation Strategies for Employers

6.1. Accommodating a diverse workforce

The graduates of today were born and raised in a digital world but employed by those who were born with either limited technology, or those who transitioned between the two worlds.

Gen Z expects close relationships with leaders and coworkers, productive teamwork, and a strong work-life balance. They plan to start families earlier and seek integration of work and personal life. Consequently, managers should focus on mentoring and building strong interpersonal relationships to effectively support Gen Z employees ²⁰.

Almost two decades ago the internet was buzzing with videos and interviews of Simon Sinek (*click on images to watch videos*) speaking up about how the Millennials were misunderstood and how companies needed to better understand the changes needed to adjust for new generations. People were sceptical but Sinek was not the only one. Research also found that companies needed to adapt their culture as new generations enter the workplace and still mentioned the term Gen Z with caution (and still in quotation marks) as a new or foreign concept. Yet years later we are still grappling with this culture shift and not understanding why graduates are having a hard time adjusting in the workplace.



One such study explored the challenges and strategies related to maintaining a productive and engaged workforce that included both younger and older employees (think Gen Z and Baby Boomers or Millennials). It highlighted the increasing number of older workers staying in the workforce due to financial necessity and the diverse benefits they bring, such as experience and knowledge. However, this trend can lead to concerns about career progression among younger employees and necessitates a balanced approach to employee engagement ²⁹.

To retain both older and younger employees, companies must focus on financial well-being programs and tailored benefits. For younger employees, this includes addressing student debt, housing concerns, and providing opportunities for professional development ²⁹.



For older workers, financial planning support and reduced workload options are crucial. Creating a workplace culture that values diversity and fosters strong interpersonal relationships across age groups is essential for maintaining a dynamic and innovative



business environment. By understanding and addressing the unique needs of different age groups, employers can create a supportive and engaging workplace for all employees ²⁹.

“Team work, commitment, loyalty, honesty, punctuality, professionalism, patience, the ability to work well and stay calm in a stressful environment and good communication..” – Gradlinc Survey

An important factor to mention is that traditional gender assumptions are still shaping work value orientations among Gen Z, with women valuing social aspects, development, and work-life balance more, while men prioritise economic value. Therefore, companies can structure their employer branding accordingly for example to highlight social value and flexibility to attract female Gen Z talents and create an inclusive, flexible work culture to appeal to a diverse Gen Z workforce ^{30,31}.

6.2. Practical steps for adapting company culture to meet graduate needs

Having said all of the above, it is not an easy task to adjust a company culture that attracts a diverse workforce and retain them at the same time. It is really up to the decision-makers of the company to decide how much they are willing (or not) to adjust. But these are some practical approaches that the research has highlighted to create an employer branding strategy that will assist in attracting Gen Z graduates. These strategies, when effectively implemented, can help employers attract and retain Gen Z by aligning their organisation’s practices with the values and expectations of this new workforce ³².

In order to attract Gen Z, employers must emphasise diversity and inclusion within their company culture. Gen Z values diversity across multiple dimensions, including race, gender, identity, and orientation. Employers should craft their branding messages to reflect a commitment to these values, ensuring that their workplace environment is seen as inclusive and supportive. This strategy not only aligns with the core values of Gen Z but also helps in creating a sense of belonging and acceptance among potential employees. Companies can implement programs and policies that promote diversity and inclusivity, which in turn can make them more attractive to this generation’s graduates.

Another significant strategy is to cultivate a culture of innovation and continuous learning. Generation Z has grown up in an era of rapid technological advancements and is inherently tech-savvy. They are attracted to workplaces that offer opportunities for creative expression and innovation. Employers should focus on creating flexible work environments that encourage experimentation and the adoption of new technologies. Providing platforms for continuous learning and professional development, such as access to online courses and opportunities for skill enhancement, can also be very appealing to Gen Z. This approach not only attracts but also retains young talent by keeping them engaged and motivated.

Additionally, fostering a sense of community and purpose is crucial for attracting Gen Z. This generation is highly conscious of social and environmental issues and prefers to work for companies



that have a positive impact on society. Employers can leverage this by involving Gen Z in corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives and community service projects. Highlighting the company's commitment to societal well-being and providing opportunities for employees to contribute to meaningful causes can significantly enhance the employer brand. By aligning company values with the personal values of Gen Z, organisations can attract individuals who are passionate about making a difference, thereby enhancing both employee satisfaction and organisational reputation.

"I think that employers should have more grace with graduates before writing them off as young and naive. It is a huge change going from a structured university plan to the workplace, where one doesn't have a 5-year plan set in place, nor a safety net in case of failure. Grace and patience are necessary for at least the first few months of employing a recent graduate." – Gradlinc Survey

From a local point of view, the research on attracting Gen Z graduates is rather limited as we are still grappling with a large unemployment crisis amongst graduates in South Africa. That doesn't mean that employers do not have certain expectations, it just means that we are still in the early days to understand contextually how our graduates perceive the workforce entrance. However, a lot of the previously mentioned research has shown transferable assumptions across different contexts and light of that, these adaptation strategies can be localised as well.

Additional resources for employer perspectives on Gen Z graduate recruitment in South Africa:

- [The art of attracting and retaining GenZ workers - CHRO](#)
- [Preparing for the next generation of employees: Generation Z – Standard Bank](#)
- [Overcoming Recruitment Challenges: Hiring Gen Z in South Africa by Kgaugelo Mmalegodi](#)

It is important to remember that the workplace cannot only adapt to the needs and expectations of Gen Z as multiple generations might be employed by the same company. In that instance, a positive company culture needs to be established across all the generational preferences. Radu ³³ explored the significant impact of a positive workplace culture on organisational performance and agility and highlighted the key dimensions that define and support such a culture from a diverse workforce perspective, not just Gen Z:

- **Well-Being Initiatives:** Prioritise employee health with wellness programs and work-life balance.
- **Psychological Safety:** Encourage open communication and trust, allowing employees to voice ideas without fear.
- **Employee Engagement:** Foster emotional commitment to work by aligning tasks with strengths and creating meaningful experiences.
- **Inclusivity and Diversity:** Value diverse thoughts and backgrounds to enhance job satisfaction and performance.
- **Employee Empowerment:** Enable decision-making and ownership of work, increasing commitment and reducing turnover.
- **Collaboration:** Promote teamwork to boost productivity and innovation.



- **Resilience and Adaptability:** Equip employees to handle change and challenges, enhancing organizational agility.
- **Recognition:** Regularly acknowledge contributions to motivate and maintain morale.
- **Growth Mindset:** Invest in continuous learning and development to support career growth and adaptability.

Onboarding and Training

Gen Z, the newest demographic cohort entering the workforce, brings distinct characteristics and expectations that HR professionals must understand to effectively engage and retain them. These are insights from a recruitment perspective ³⁴:

1. **Digital Natives:** Generation Z is the first true digital native generation, having grown up with the internet and mobile technology from birth. This constant connectivity has led to an extreme tech-savviness and shorter attention spans. HR needs to leverage their digital fluency by creating collaborative environments that integrate technology and value input from tech-savvy employees across all levels.
2. **Diversity Expectations:** Gen Z expects a high level of diversity in the workplace. Social media has connected them with diverse cultures and backgrounds, fostering a strong ethos of social justice. Companies must ensure cultural, racial, and gender diversity to meet these expectations and create an inclusive work environment.
3. **Pragmatism and Security:** Unlike the perception of being lackadaisical, Gen Z values sensible and stable career paths due to their experiences growing up during a global recession. They prioritise security, privacy, and traditional opportunities for advancement and development over perks and flexibility (to an extent). HR should focus on providing clear career development pathways and improved economic security.
4. **Entrepreneurial Spirit:** Generation Z shows a stronger inclination towards entrepreneurship compared to Millennials. They seek autonomy, innovation, and project ownership at work. HR can nurture this entrepreneurial spirit by fostering a culture of innovation and giving Gen Z employees a sense of agency and ownership in their projects.
5. **Preference for In-Person Communication:** Despite their digital nature, Gen Z values in-person communication, especially when it comes to feedback from leaders. While digital tools are still important, meaningful, face-to-face interactions are crucial for effective communication and feedback. HR should balance digital engagement with regular, personal interactions to meet this preference.

To retain Gen Z employees, organisations must manage their expectations right from the recruitment phase, offering a realistic job preview to avoid future dissatisfaction. Providing meaningful work and reducing monotonous tasks can help keep these employees engaged. Furthermore, fostering a supportive work environment through regular coaching and personalised feedback is crucial. Managers should be trained to act as mentors and coaches, helping employees align their career aspirations with the company goals. By addressing these needs, companies can create a culture that supports both new graduates and long-term employees, improving retention and overall job satisfaction ²¹.



7. Enhancing Employability: Graduate Perspectives

Gen Z graduates are not silent about the challenges they face to transition into the workplace and the respondents from the Gradlinc survey also shared their perspectives of which a few comments were extracted and shown in Table 9 below.

Table 9: What do you think is the biggest challenge for you in finding employment?

Quotes from Survey
<i>"Finding a job I can balance with my mental health challenges."</i>
<i>"Employment rate and the fact that I'm an international student"</i>
<i>"Access to information or job opportunities"</i>
<i>"Skills mismatch may be concerned that my skills and qualifications don't align perfectly with the job requirements."</i>
<i>"I don't know where to start. The unemployment rate is very high and that demotivates me to even try and search for a job."</i>
<i>"Finding a company that is willing to take on an employee with little to no experience."</i>
<i>"The lack of easily available entry level opportunities."</i>
<i>"The competitive environment and lack of available jobs in academia. Also nepotism - the people who get the jobs are usually the people who already know the other workers in the relevant department quite well, making it really difficult for a newcomer to get in."</i>
<i>"Finding the a job that is compatible. Its easy to find work if you have the necessary skill set. But how much of those jobs are you actually compatible with. (eg. getting along with colleagues and agreeing with a company's values etc)."</i>
<i>"The amount of experience companies expect from people, even if you have the best qualifications in terms of studies behind your name, you still don't get the job if you don't meet the experience expectations."</i>
<i>"I'm part of a demographic which is very restrictive under BBBEE requirements making me undesirable to hire for companies in South Africa so I do intend to move away which is sad but I do understand the original purpose for the system and don't blame companies."</i>
<i>"Getting an interview / I am not confident in interviews"</i>
<i>"For me there are no big obstacles. I know that I come across well in interviews and my CV is well written. I also know where to find job listings and that there is more than enough work for myself and the students I am graduating with now."</i>
<i>"Not knowing where to look! / I struggle to find the correct search engines and websites to find work"</i>
<i>"Finding a permanent position in academia with a stable income source."</i>



7.1. Graduates' Adaptation Challenges

Despite their technological adeptness and innovative mindset, Generation Z faces several adaptation challenges when transitioning into the workforce. One significant challenge is the lack of social and cultural capital, which can hinder their ability to navigate workplace dynamics and build professional networks. Additionally, their high expectations for rapid career advancement and meaningful work can lead to frustration if not met. Employers should provide comprehensive onboarding programs, mentorship opportunities, and continuous training to help Gen Z graduates acclimate to the corporate environment. Addressing these challenges with empathy and support can foster a more inclusive and supportive workplace, ultimately benefiting both the employees and the organisation

^{2,11}.

While Generation Z brings a fresh perspective to the workplace, they are still inexperienced and often lack work- and life experiences. Therefore, they expect to have close relationships with their leaders and coworkers, and they seek work-life balance to focus on their personal lives. Direct supervisors play a crucial role in their career satisfaction, and companies need to ensure that managers are equipped to mentor and support these young professionals effectively. Additionally, Gen Z's preference for teamwork and social contact must be balanced with their desire for independence and personal achievement ²⁰

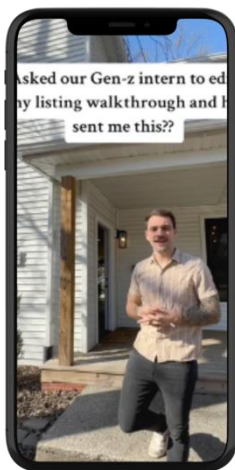
Going a bit broader, international graduates face significant challenges in adapting to the local job market due to a lack of social and cultural capital. These graduates often struggle to understand and navigate professional norms and build networks essential for career success. Employers tend to favour candidates with strong social and cultural skills, which disadvantages international graduates looking for opportunities outside of their local context. To address these challenges, universities and employers must provide support for international students to build their social and cultural capital through networking opportunities, internships, and targeted training. By fostering an inclusive environment and providing necessary resources, companies can tap into a diverse talent pool and create a more dynamic workplace ⁷.



8. Leveraging Multimedia for Insights

8.1. Social Media Insights

Technology is ingrained in their lives, having grown up in a complex and uncertain environment. This shapes their unique expectations for work, study, and the world. They are a career-driven, ambitious generation with advanced technical and language skills, making them excellent employees.³⁵



Video 1

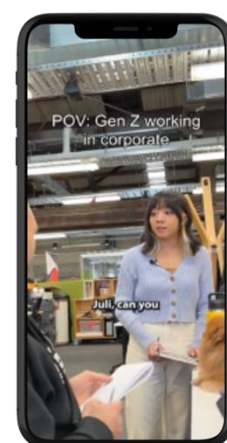


Video 2



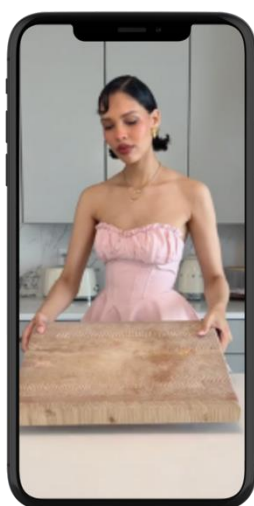
Video 3

Due to this digital presence, it is somewhat easier to understand their world as there is a lot of information available on social media, either from their perspective (**videos 2, 7, 8 & 10**) or those who work with them (**videos 1, 3 – 6, 9**). Do yourself a favour and read the comment sections in these videos – click on each image to view the video.

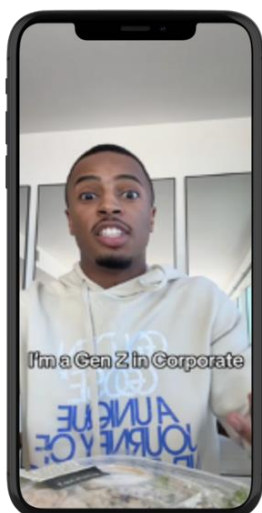




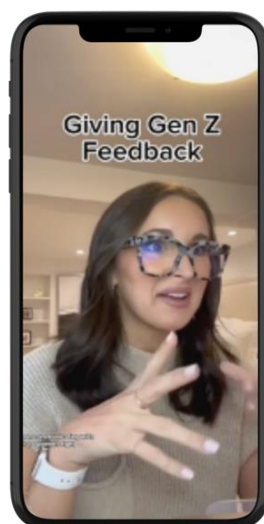
While these videos might have an entertainment component to them, there are multiple insights to be gained from engaging with Gen Z content. Another interesting influencer account that has taken over the internet is that of Nara Smith, a Gen Z mom and wife making cooking videos (video 7). You might wonder what is so special about that but have a look at her content. Even if it does not appeal to everybody, she received a lot of media attention as a Gen Z idol and portraying the life that many strive for which is, in its basic form, back to traditional roles of men and women and a rather interesting perspective on the Gen Z mindset.



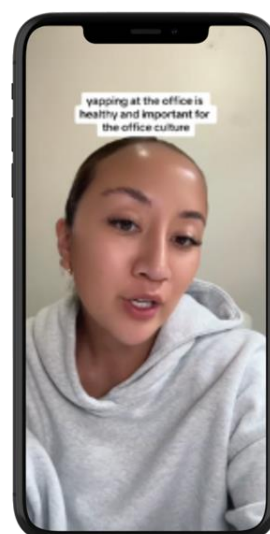
Video 7



Video 8



Video 9



Video 10

8.2. Digital Engagement

Employers can leverage digital platforms to engage with potential graduate employees by utilising social media, online job portals, and professional networking sites to reach a wider audience and attract top talent. By creating engaging content that represents the company culture, values, and career opportunities, employers can build a strong online presence that appeals to Gen Z graduates. Virtual career fairs and webinars provide interactive forums for graduates to learn about the organisation and engage directly with recruiters and current employees. Additionally, using platforms like LinkedIn for targeted recruitment campaigns allows employers to connect with graduates who possess the desired skills and qualifications. Implementing digital assessments and video interviews can streamline the hiring process, making it more efficient and accessible for graduates. Overall, the strategic use of digital platforms enables employers to connect with a tech-savvy generation, enhance their employer brand, and attract a diverse pool of qualified candidates.



9. Strategic Recommendations for Employers

9.1. Creating a Dynamic Company Culture that attracts and retains top graduate talent

Creating a company culture that attracts and retains top graduate talent is crucial. Research highlights the importance of inclusivity, flexibility, and growth opportunities. Companies should focus on building a positive work environment that fosters collaboration and innovation. The available research (**highlighted in bold**) shows this from various sources:

- This generation prioritises **flexibility**, **technological** integration, and **transparency**. They seek **meaningful** work, clear **career paths**, and opportunities for professional **growth**. This includes fostering an environment of **inclusivity**, transparency, and continuous **learning**. They value **authenticity** and expect their employers to be transparent in their communications and ethical in their practices ^{2,36}.
- To attract and retain Generation Z, companies must develop a dynamic company culture that resonates with **their values** and **expectations**. Gen Z employees prefer workplaces that offer opportunities for professional **growth** and clear career paths. Companies should focus on building a culture that **promotes dialogue**, recognises **individual contributions**, and supports personal and professional **development**. Initiatives like **mentorship** programs, regular **feedback** sessions, and employee engagement activities can help in creating a vibrant and dynamic workplace ^{2,11}
- To effectively attract and retain Generation Z employees, companies need to establish a dynamic and engaging company culture. Research indicates that Gen Z values **ethical standards**, **social responsibility**, and a **positive work** environment that fosters **collaboration** and mutual **respect**. Creating a **fun** and **supportive** atmosphere, with positive relations between colleagues and supervisors, is essential. Organisations should focus on transformational leadership qualities and emphasise **team cohesion** and support ²⁰

9.2. Leadership considerations to get the most of out of Gen Z

Different leadership styles impact the performance of Gen Z employees in the workplace. Leaders who are adaptable, empathetic, and supportive are more likely to inspire and motivate their teams. Leaders need to understand the unique needs and preferences of Gen Z workers³⁷. **Transformational** leadership, characterised by inspiring and motivating employees through a shared vision, was found to have a statistically significant positive impact on Gen Z performance. This leadership style aligns with Gen Z's desire for purpose and meaningful work, enhancing their commitment and engagement within the company culture.



This research also shed light on the unexpected positive impact of **laissez-faire** leadership on Gen Z performance. Unlike traditional views that often criticise laissez-faire leadership for its hands-off approach, Ogunsola et al.³⁷ found that Gen-Z employees thrive when given autonomy and the freedom to innovate. This leadership style resonated with Gen Z's preference for flexibility and independence, allowing them to take ownership of their tasks and contribute creatively to the organisation.

However, the interesting finding was that **transactional** leadership, which relies on rewards and punishments to motivate employees, did not have a significant impact on Gen Z performance. This suggested that a culture driven by extrinsic rewards as is the case in many organisations, may not resonate well with Gen Z employees, who value intrinsic motivations and personal growth opportunities more. Organisations aiming to enhance their company culture and effectively engage Gen Z employees should focus on leadership styles that promote collaboration, innovation, and a sense of purpose, rather than solely relying on transactional methods. By aligning leadership practices with the values and expectations of Gen-Z, companies can develop a more dynamic and supportive work environment³⁷.

"Companies are going to hire what they believe to be individuals that are fit for the job. Their responsibilities are determined by what they require and not by what they are provided. One thing that they can do is to provide opportunities for sponsorship of courses or workshops that can generate employable individuals. They can ensure that the courses taking place are constructive to what is actually needed by the industry they operate in and they can also provide more feedback about what they require instead of letting academics decide on their behalf." – Gradlinc Survey

From the moment an employer start hiring Gen Z's, the company culture matters as it will be evident in the interview and onboarding processes. A lack of communication prior to or following an interview, unclear instructions or any indication of a lack of inclusivity in the workforce will influence a Gen Z graduate's decision to work for that specific company.

Keep these factors in mind when the interview process is structured and the onboarding programme designed, and this is included in the leadership section to highlight the importance of not just delegating this part of graduate recruitment but to actively be involved to design a process that will in fact, attract graduate talent¹:

- **Provide realistic job previews:** Clearly communicate the positive and negative aspects of the job during the hiring process to set realistic expectations.
- **Develop comprehensive onboarding programs:** Implement structured onboarding processes that include checklists, orientation sessions, and regular feedback to help new hires adjust.
- **Promote diversity and inclusion:** Create and enforce policies that support a diverse and inclusive workplace, addressing issues of equity and fairness.
- **Support mental health:** Offer wellness programs and resources to help employees manage stress and mental health challenges.
- **Enhance communication training:** Train employees on effective communication skills, including face-to-face interactions and appropriate use of digital communication tools.



- **Foster autonomy and growth mindset:** Encourage employees to take ownership of their work and view challenges as opportunities for growth. Provide coaching and support to help them develop resilience and problem-solving skills.

To retain Gen Z employees, leaders should carefully consider retention strategies such as meaningful perks, financial wellness, and personal/professional growth opportunities. These strategies will help reduce turnover and satisfy Gen Z's unique career aspirations. Key steps factors to consider include ⁹:

- **Culture audit:** Evaluate and enhance company culture using data on retention and engagement – see **Annex A: Company Culture Audit Document**
- **Celebrations and fun:** Incorporate creative perks and foster a welcoming environment.
- **Community engagement:** Promote group and individual community service initiatives.
- **Financial support:** Offer benefits like student loan repayment and financial planning.
- **Growth opportunities:** Provide training, development programs, and global experiences.
- **Effective communication:** Use modern communication methods to engage and inform employees.

9.3. Embracing Flexibility and Innovation

Generation Z values flexibility not just in terms of working hours but also in terms of work arrangements and career progression. They expect employers to offer flexible work schedules, remote working options, and the ability to balance work with personal life. Additionally, they are drawn to innovative work environments that leverage the latest technologies and encourage creative problem-solving. Employers should consider implementing flexible policies that cater to individual needs, such as flexitime, staggered shifts, and remote working options. Embracing technological innovations like AI, machine learning, and digital collaboration tools can also enhance productivity and appeal to tech-savvy Gen Z employees ^{2,11,20,36}.

9.4. Designing a Gen Z-inclusive company culture

This is a practical guide from the information above to crafting a Gen Z inclusive workplace culture and adapted in table format for ease of reference:

Table 10: A practical guide to a Gen Z inclusive workplace

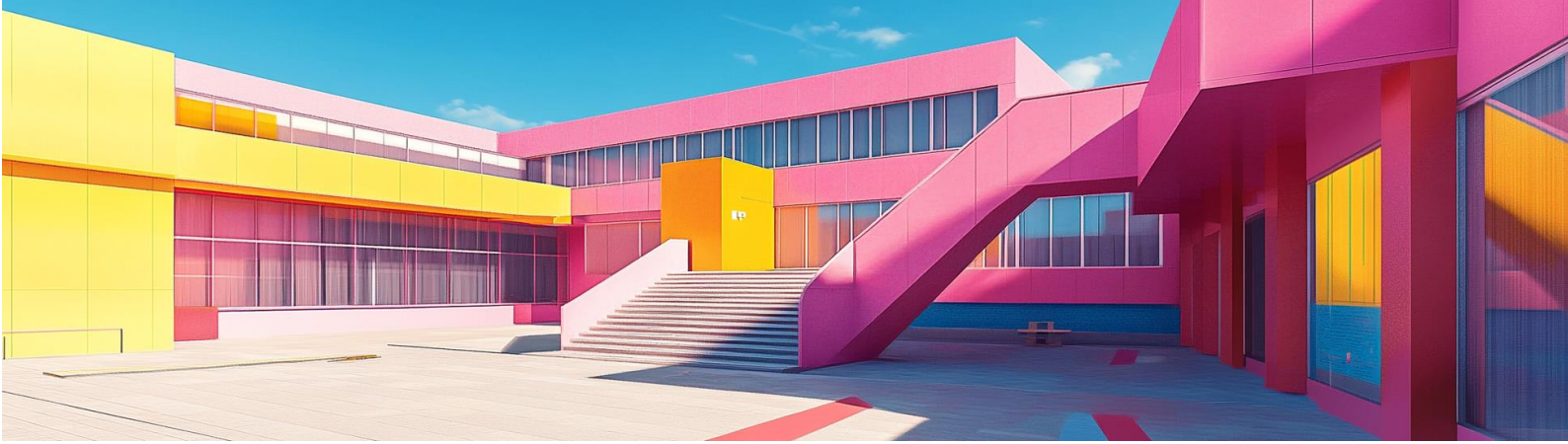
What needs to be done	Why do we do it?
Adaptation to Technological Integration	Gen Z, being digital natives, has a profound impact on company culture, pushing organisations to integrate advanced technology and digital tools in everyday operations. This generation's comfort with technology drives companies to adopt new technological solutions to stay relevant.
Emphasis on Diversity and Inclusion	Gen Z values diversity and inclusion significantly more than previous generations. Companies must foster a culture that embraces various



	backgrounds, perspectives, and ideas. This includes promoting diversity management practices that integrate diverse viewpoints and reduce biases.
Need for Transparency and Open Communication	Transparency is a critical element for Gen Z. They prefer open and honest communication from their employers. This necessitates a cultural shift towards more transparent practices, where feedback is frequent, and communication is clear and straightforward.
Flexibility in Work Arrangements	Gen Z employees highly value flexibility in their work schedules and locations. Companies are adapting by offering flexible working hours and remote work options, contributing to a more dynamic and accommodating company culture.
Focus on Continuous Learning and Development	Gen Z shows a strong preference for continuous development and training opportunities. Organisations are cultivating a culture of lifelong learning by providing regular training programs, workshops, and opportunities for professional growth.
Innovative and Creative Environment	Creativity and innovation are hallmarks of Gen Z. Companies are encouraged to create an environment that supports and fosters creativity. This includes encouraging new ideas, innovative solutions, and providing platforms for employees to express their creativity.
Emphasis on Social Responsibility	Gen Z is known for its commitment to social responsibility and ethical practices. Companies are integrating corporate social responsibility (CSR) into their culture, engaging in activities that contribute to societal well-being and environmental sustainability.
Feedback-Oriented Culture	Regular and constructive feedback is crucial for Gen Z. Organisations are developing a culture where continuous feedback is normalized, ensuring employees feel supported and guided in their roles.
Customization and Personalisation	Gen Z employees expect personalized career paths and development plans. Companies are moving towards a more customized approach in managing employee careers, focusing on individual strengths and career aspirations.

The entry of Generation Z into the workforce necessitates significant changes in company culture. Organisations must adapt by embracing technology, promoting diversity, ensuring transparency, and providing flexibility. By doing so, companies can create a positive and inclusive culture that attracts, motivates, and retains Generation Z employees, ultimately leading to higher productivity and innovation. Managerial actions and cultural adaptations that can be put in place are ³⁸:

- **Development of training programs:** Establishing specialised training programs that cater to the interests and needs of Generation Z, such as digital skills, language training, and soft skills enhancement.
- **Creating inclusive policies:** Implementing policies that promote diversity and inclusion, ensuring all employees feel valued and respected regardless of their background.
- **Flexible working conditions:** Introducing flexible work arrangements, including telecommuting options and flexible hours, to accommodate the work-life balance preferences of Generation Z.
- **Enhancing communication channels:** Improving communication channels within the organisation to ensure transparency and open dialogue between management and employees.
- **Recognising and rewarding innovation:** Recognizing and rewarding innovative ideas and solutions proposed by employees, fostering a culture of creativity and continuous improvement.



10. Strategic Recommendations for Higher Education Institutions

10.1. Recommendations for Higher Education Institutions

From the South African study by Sotshangane & Obioha ²² their findings highlighted the need for a stronger interaction between academic institutions and industry to address the skill gaps. Policies should encourage and facilitate such partnerships to enhance the employability of graduates. Higher education institutions must stay updated with current industry requirements and continuously adapt their programs to equip students with relevant skills.

Employers should provide feedback to graduates who fail to secure employment, identifying skill deficits and areas for improvement. By implementing these recommendations, higher education institutions in South Africa can better prepare graduates for the labour market, thereby reducing unemployment rates and ensuring that graduates possess the skills needed by employers ²².

10.2. Building a more employable future workforce

Based on the literature review and survey results, the following recommendations are proposed for higher education institutions to develop student competencies that align with labor market needs, ensuring the employability and workability of graduates ³⁹:

- **Emphasise cross-disciplinary education:** Encourage collaboration across academic departments to provide a holistic understanding of various fields and their intersections, preparing students for the interconnectedness of the modern workplace.
- **Promote digital literacy and proficiency:** Integrate digital skills development into all academic programs, ensuring students are adept at using digital tools, analysing data, and navigating the digital landscape effectively.
- **Nurture soft skills and competencies:** Include soft skills training in the curriculum, focusing on communication, interpersonal relationships, teamwork, problem-solving, adaptability, and cultural sensitivity.
- **Foster entrepreneurship and innovation:** Encourage an entrepreneurial mindset and support students in developing innovative solutions, preparing them for the dynamic nature of work that demands creativity and problem-solving.
- **Enhance practical skills and experiential learning:** Incorporate practical training and internships into the curriculum to provide hands-on experience, allowing students to apply theoretical knowledge in real-world settings.
- **Strengthen industry collaborations:** Build strong partnerships with industry leaders to gain insights into industry needs, integrate industry-relevant content into courses, and offer opportunities for students to connect with potential employers.



- **Invest in Career Counseling and Guidance:** Offer comprehensive career counseling services to help students identify career interests, develop personalised career plans, and navigate job search strategies.
- **Embrace lifelong learning and adaptability:** Promote a mindset of lifelong learning and adaptability, preparing students to continuously upgrade their skills and adapt to evolving workplace demands.
- **Foster global citizenship and intercultural understanding:** Instill values of global citizenship and intercultural sensitivity, preparing students to thrive in diverse workplaces and contribute to a globalized society.
- **Emphasise personal and professional development:** Encourage personal growth, self-awareness, and the ability to manage emotions and build resilience, as these qualities are highly valued by employers.

For higher education institutions, this broad understanding of employability has significant curricular implications. Developing employability involves integrating experiential learning opportunities, such as internships and work placements, within academic programs. These experiences help students apply theoretical knowledge in practical settings, enhancing their readiness for the job market.

Employability should be seen as a lifelong attribute. This means higher education should not only focus on preparing students for their first job but also equip them with the skills and attitudes necessary for continuous learning and adaptability in an ever-changing work environment. This lifelong perspective on employability aligns with the concept of lifelong learning and the need for graduates to remain agile and resilient in their careers. ³

10.3. Opportunities for Graduates

Several industries are experiencing rapid growth and offer numerous opportunities for graduates. These include technology, healthcare, renewable energy, and finance. Graduates with relevant skills and qualifications in these fields are in high demand. The rise of remote work has opened new opportunities for graduates. Many companies now offer remote positions, allowing graduates to work from anywhere.

A well-crafted resume is crucial for standing out in the competitive job market. Graduates should highlight their skills, experiences, and achievements. Networking is essential in the job search process. Graduates should leverage their professional and personal connections to learn about job opportunities and get referrals. Attending industry events, joining professional organisations, and using social media platforms like LinkedIn can also help build a professional network.

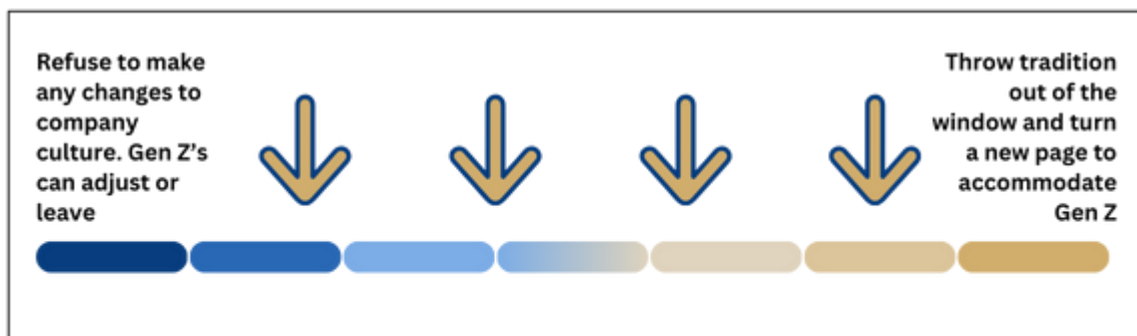


11. Should Company Culture Adapt to Graduates, or Should Graduates Adapt to Company Culture?

That is something only you can answer for yourself and your organization.

From the graduate's perspective it is evident that they are aware that they need to adapt in the workplace and they are more than willing to adjust and to learn, but they have certain conditions they would like to be met in the process. Aside from the validity of their expectations for a work-life balance or mental health day, they are asking for help and mentorship.

So it is not a black or white answer. It's on a continuum. You have the context and the understanding from this report, it is up to each organisation to decide how where they will fit in but at the very least, it is evident that change is inevitable. It's coming for your organisation and you can either adjust this yourself or you will be forced into a position.



12. Conclusion

Gen Z employees expect a workplace culture that is **inclusive**, **transparent**, and **supportive**. They value **authentic** relationships with their supervisors and colleagues and seek environments where they can **collaborate** effectively and receive regular **feedback**. The study also emphasises that Gen Z employees are motivated by opportunities for personal and professional **growth**, preferring workplaces that offer clear **career progression** and continuous **learning** opportunities. Furthermore, Gen Z's digital nativeness means they expect seamless **technological integration** in their work processes ^{30,31}.



Annex A: Company Culture Audit Document

Introduction

As we strive to create a workplace that not only retains our valued employees but also attracts new talent, particularly from Generation Z, it is imperative to understand and enhance our company culture. This document outlines the steps and areas of focus for conducting a thorough culture audit.

Objectives

- Assess the current state of company culture.
- Identify areas of improvement to enhance employee satisfaction and retention.
- Align company culture with the values and expectations of both long-term employees and new graduates.

Survey Structure

Section 1: Demographics

1. **Age:**
 - Under 25
 - 25-34
 - 35-44
 - 45-54
 - 55+
2. **Department:**
 - [List of departments]
3. **Tenure with the Company:**
 - Less than 1 year
 - 1-3 years
 - 4-6 years
 - 7-10 years
 - 10+ years

Section 2: Job Satisfaction

1. How satisfied are you with your current role?
 - Very satisfied
 - Satisfied
 - Neutral
 - Dissatisfied
 - Very dissatisfied
2. Do you feel valued and recognized for your work?



- Always
 - Often
 - Sometimes
 - Rarely
 - Never
- 3. How likely are you to recommend our company as a great place to work?
 - Very likely
 - Likely
 - Neutral
 - Unlikely
 - Very unlikely

Section 3: Company Values and Culture

1. How well do the company's values align with your personal values?
 - Very well
 - Well
 - Neutral
 - Poorly
 - Very poorly
2. How inclusive do you find the company culture?
 - Very inclusive
 - Inclusive
 - Neutral
 - Not very inclusive
 - Not inclusive at all
3. How effectively does the company promote diversity and inclusion?
 - Very effectively
 - Effectively
 - Neutral
 - Ineffectively
 - Very ineffectively

Section 4: Communication and Engagement

1. How satisfied are you with the communication from leadership?
 - Very satisfied
 - Satisfied
 - Neutral
 - Dissatisfied
 - Very dissatisfied
2. How often do you receive feedback on your performance?
 - Regularly
 - Occasionally



- Rarely
 - Never
- 3. How engaged do you feel with your work and the company?
 - Very engaged
 - Engaged
 - Neutral
 - Disengaged
 - Very disengaged

Section 5: Professional Development

1. Are there sufficient opportunities for professional growth and development?
 - Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Neutral
 - Disagree
 - Strongly disagree
2. Do you have access to the necessary resources and training to perform your job effectively?
 - Always
 - Often
 - Sometimes
 - Rarely
 - Never
3. How satisfied are you with the mentoring and support available to you?
 - Very satisfied
 - Satisfied
 - Neutral
 - Dissatisfied
 - Very dissatisfied

Section 6: Work-Life Balance

1. How satisfied are you with your work-life balance?
 - Very satisfied
 - Satisfied
 - Neutral
 - Dissatisfied
 - Very dissatisfied
2. Does the company provide adequate flexibility to manage your work and personal life?
 - Always
 - Often
 - Sometimes
 - Rarely
 - Never



Section 7: Future Outlook

1. Do you see yourself working here in the next 2 years?
 - Definitely
 - Probably
 - Not sure
 - Probably not
 - Definitely not
2. What would make you more likely to stay with the company long-term?

Action Plan

- **Data Collection:** Distribute the survey to all employees and ensure anonymity.
- **Data Analysis:** Compile and analyse the responses to identify key trends and areas for improvement.
- **Implementation:** Develop and implement strategies based on survey findings to enhance company culture.
- **Follow-Up:** Regularly review and update cultural initiatives to ensure ongoing alignment with employee needs and expectations.



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