

EVENT SUMMARY

HOW TO RECRUIT AND RETAIN GENERATION-Z IN THE POST-PANDEMIC WORKPLACE

6 JULY



Eliza Filby is a writer, speaker and consultant who specialises in “generational intelligence”, helping companies and services to understand generational shifts and how they affect politics, society and the workplace.

At this FT Board Director event, Filby joined Janina Conboye, the Financial Times work and careers writer and editor, to discuss how to recruit and retain generation-Z in the post-pandemic workplace.

Here are the highlights of the discussion.

THE FUTURE OF WORK

Three disclaimers should be given when discussing the future of work, Filby said. These are:

- **Knowledge workers vs blue-collar workers.** A broader division will exist between these two groups. Knowledge workers can be more flexible but the future for blue-collar workers will be a different story. Filby’s presentation concerned knowledge workers.
- **The threat of recession.** Senior leaders expect that the talent war will end as a recession causes workers to seek greater stability. Filby was sceptical. She said the pandemic had made us more conscious of every aspect of our lives. “Those consequences, that time, is having a profound impact on the workplace. This will still be felt even in a recession,” she said.
- **The new era of work.** “We’re seeing a shift of values and this is most pronounced in gen-Z. [This is] the generation whose predominant experience of work happened during the pandemic,” Filby said. Companies that are transparent and show care, humility, flexibility and stability will be best equipped to serve a multigenerational workforce.

PROFILE OF GENERATION-Z

Gen-Z covers people born between 1997 and 2010. To understand their attitudes and expectations, it is important to recognise their world. None will remember the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center; they were at most 11 years old when the 2008 financial crisis happened, and they have grown up in a time of political disruption.

Filby identified the attributes of gen-Z that distinguish it from other generations:

They are more serious. Members of gen-Z have experienced political disruption, whether it be Brexit, the rise of populism, climate change or Covid-19. These have been “very significant era-defining events that have shaped them into quite a serious generation”, Filby said. They are much more active politically and this activism filters into the workplace.

They are more fluid. “They’ve had a smartphone since their early teens. They are the social media generation not the smartphone generation”, Filby said. They have been building their brand since an early age and are conscious of their digital footprint in case it affects their careers.

They are more sceptical. Disruptive times breed scepticism and this colours gen-Z attitudes towards politics, brands, technology and data privacy.

They are close to their parents. This is the generation of helicopter parenting. Gen-Z takes a lot of advice and seeks approval from mum and dad. Very often they live at home for longer. They are serious and sober. They do not rebel in the same way as previous generations.

They were young when Covid struck. They sacrificed two years of their youth to protect older people and those most vulnerable to Covid. It is important to empathise with them.

GEN-Z'S IDENTITY IN THE WORKPLACE

This generation speaks truth to power and this is evident in the workplace. "You have a generation that wants to be heard. It is a reflection of the end of deference", Filby said. This is very difficult if a company has a hierarchical structure.

Most members of gen-Z will see learning as a long process that does not stop at the age of 21. They are likely to have five different careers and more than 17 employers during their working lives. "There's no way that the initial phase of learning will see them through that diverse career," Filby said.

This generation has grown up with a more holistic sense of physical and mental health, which is partly the result of engaging with too much technology and growing up with cyberbullying.

THE 21ST CENTURY WORK-LIFE CYCLE

The structure that emerged in the 20th century is known as the three-stage life – the idea that you obtain qualifications before the age of 21, enter full-time work and then move into full-time retirement. This was devised and sustained by the baby boomers (born 1946-64).

But millennials (born 1981-96) and gen-Z experience a multi-stage work lifecycle. "The problem with a lot of companies is that they are still stuck in a three-stage lifecycle, and not the new reality which is the multi-stage life," Filby said.

She listed the characteristics of the multi-stage life cycle:

- delayed adulthood
- education
- managing two careers
- retraining
- looking after children
- career change
- carer for parents
- social care
- building assets, and
- retiring

ARE WORKPLACES FLEXIBLE ENOUGH FOR WORKING FAMILIES?

Filby said the workplace was a kinder place for women since the pandemic, but there is a long way to go. One sign of progress is that many women no longer have to make awkward requests to work flexibly.

The multi-stage work lifecycle means that two careers are being managed in a household. "Millennial couples in particular will be spearheading across all sectors, a movement towards financial support," Filby said. She cited fertility, menopausal support and mandatory paternity leave as ways to help millennial couples in the workplace

FIVE THINGS TO CONSIDER WHEN RECRUITING AND RETAINING GEN-Z EMPLOYEES

- **Communication.** "This is the generation that has lived their adolescence on social media and had the capacity to speak truth to power. They are going to expect that in their workplaces", Filby said. She advised companies to create a communication culture that incorporates their desire to be heard but also facilitates a listening culture in which all voices are valued.
- **Personalisation.** Whether you are talking about the recruitment process, the onboarding process or management, gen-Z really values face to face communication, more than any other generation.
- **Autonomy.** The pandemic gave all of us time to reflect on the role that work plays in our lives. Members of gen-Z want autonomy, not only over flexible working but also how they are learning and how they are managed. They expect to have a greater say in how, why and what they do.

However, companies have seen tension between the generations and the different expectations of what hybrid work policies should be. Filby said the most productive way to smooth over generational attitudes was to determine policies at a team level. A manager should work out the different experiences and responsibilities of the team.

- **The desire for constant learning.** Companies' learning and development departments are key to retaining gen-Z talent. "They have to feel that constant movement and upgrading and upskilling in order for them to be the agile workers they need to be in the 21st century", Filby said. Companies have to invest in their employees as it is unlikely that funding will come from the government. As a result employees are likely to be more loyal to employers.
- **Care.** This is the generation that prioritises mental health. Employers should think about this issue in two ways. Can you create a working culture that supports and maintains mental health? And can you create resources and benefits and perks if they are needed by those who have poor mental health? "Work is a major contributor to mental health issues. To be seen to be acting on that, I think it's something that gen-Z in particular would really value," Filby said.