Exploring the Needs of Generation Z Adult Learners in College and in the Workplace

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Abstract: This article presents the insights collected from an engaged interactive round table session, where participants came together to collaboratively brainstorm and deliberate upon best practices for effectively educating and mentoring Generation Z adult learners in both classroom and workplace settings. Drawing upon the extensive body of literature on Generation Z characteristics, the session served as a solid foundation for the discussion. At the heart of this roundtable was the central theme: the pivotal role of educators and mentors in guiding and supporting Generation Z individuals. By exploring strategies, challenges, and innovative approaches, this article offers a comprehensive overview of the multifaceted landscape of Generation Z education and mentoring, shedding light on key insights and actionable recommendations for educators and mentors.

Keywords: Generation Z, coaching, mentoring, workplace, classroom, adult learners

Generation Z, often referred to as Gen Z, represents the cohort of individuals born between the mid-1990s and the early 2010s, and this generation falls after the millennial generation (Seemiller & Clayton, 2019; Seemiller & Grace, 2016; Stillman & Stillman, 2017). Generation Z is characterized by its unique set of experiences and traits. Generation Z individuals are often considered the first true digital natives, having been immersed in technology from a very early age. This upbringing has shaped them into a highly tech-savvy and connected generation (Seemiller & Grace, 2016; Shaikh et al., 2023) with a strong affinity for smartphones, social media, and online communication (Dong, 2021; Seemiller & Grace, 2016; Shaikh et al., 2023; Stillman & Stillman, 2017). Generation Z is known for its diversity and global perspectives, valuing inclusivity and social justice issues (Seemiller & Grace, 2016; Smith & Cawthon, 2017; Weber & Keim, 2021). They tend to be pragmatic and entrepreneurial (Seemiller & Clayton, 2019; Smith & Cawthon, 2017; Stillman & Stillman, 2017), seeking innovative solutions to societal changes. While they share some commonalities with previous generations, their distinct experiences and worldviews make them a generation with their own unique identity and characteristics. The purpose of this paper is to help educators and employers understand Generation Z's significant characteristics as they navigate a rapidly evolving world influenced by values, ideas, beliefs, and preferences. The significant characteristics are pulled from the current literature.

Background

In the educational setting, Generation Z students present challenges and opportunities for educators. They are accustomed to instant learning and information (Smith & Cawthon, 2017). They also often prefer active (Becker, 2022) and experiential learning approaches (Seemiller & Grace, 2016; Smith & Cawthon, 2017; Weber & Keim, 2021). Educators are discovering successful teaching methods, such as incorporating technology, gamification, and other

interactive concepts in their teaching strategies (Seemiller & Grace, 2016; Smith & Cawthon, 2017). Generation Z is known for its social awareness and desire to make a positive impact on the world (Seemiller & Grace, 2016; Shaikh et al., 2023). Educators can employ this concept by integrating real-world problem-solving and social justice topics into their curricula, such as case studies or inviting guest speakers into the classroom (Seemiller & Grace, 2016; Smith & Cawthon, 2017). In contrast, Generation Z's attention span may be shorter due to consistent digital stimulation, so educators need to be mindful of the lesson construction and possibly keep lessons concise, engaging, and relevant (Kutlák, 2021; Seemiller & Grace, 2016; Smith & Cawthon, 2017).

This generation is marked by its entrepreneurial spirit and remarkable understanding of technology (Iorgulescu, 2016; Smith & Cawthon, 2017). Many seek out tech-oriented job opportunities (Iorgulescu, 2016; Seemiller & Grace, 2016). Their social and environmental mindset leads them to gravitate towards organizations aligned with their values, including those committed to social responsibility and sustainability (Iorgulescu, 2016; Seemiller & Clayton, 2019; Stillman & Stillman, 2017). The COVID-19 pandemic helped foster their familiarity with remote work, making them likely proponents of flexible work arrangements (Aggarwal et al., 2022; Becker, 2022). Generation Z's preference for diverse and inclusive workspace, financial planning, and job hopping in search of better opportunities further pinpoints this dynamics generation's approach to employment (Barhate & Dieani, 2022; Becker, 2022; Iorgulescu, 2016; Seemiller & Clayton, 2019).

Generation Z is more likely to favor online shopping and is influenced by online reviews and social media advertisements, in addition to prioritizing sustainability and ethical consumption (Becker, 2022). Their decision-making rationalization typically correlates with their desire for authenticity and a sense of purpose (Kutlák, 2021; Stillman & Stillman, 2017). Generation Z faces unique challenges encompassing mental health and addiction to digital technology (Stillman & Stillman, 2017). Their dependence on technology, at times, results in shorter attention spans, necessitating a constant need for stimulation (Stillman & Stillman, 2017). They are incredibly capable navigating smartphones, social media, and the Internet, which significantly influences their communication styles, information consumption, and social interactions (Dong, 2021; Seemiller & Clayton, 2019). This generation is characterized by its comfort with instant digital connectivity.

Discussion

Recognizing Generation Z characteristics in the workplace and the classroom is critical for various reasons. First, Generation Z individuals possess distinct preferences, expectations, and communication styles shaped by their status as digital natives. They grew up in a world embedded with technology and are incredibly familiar with information consumption. By understanding these characteristics, educators and employers can tailor learning and work environments to better suit the needs of this generation, enhancing engagement and productivity. In the workplace, Generation Z brings a set of interesting characteristics and expectations that employers should understand and adapt to. Generation Z individuals are tech-savvy; they grew up with smartphones and consistent connectivity, making them highly adaptable to digital tools and remote work environments. In addition, they also value face-to-face interpersonal communication connectedness and collaboration, seeking a balance between technological and in-person interactions. Generation Z tends to be entrepreneurial and eager to take on challenges, making them significant in innovative and dynamic work environments. Employers who can provide opportunities for skilled development, feedback, and a sense of purpose are more likely to attract

and retain Generation Z capabilities.

Effective communication is a significant core of successful education and workplace relationships. Generation Z places importance on clear, concise, and instant communication. Acknowledging this significance allows educators and managers to adopt their communication strategies, ensuring that instructions, feedback, and information are conveyed effectively. This can reduce the likelihood of misunderstandings and emphasize a more efficient learning and workplace experience. Generation Z's recognition of the importance of interpersonal communication skills should not be underestimated. While this generation is tech-savvy, they value strong communication, teamwork, and adaptability. Educators and employers can emphasize the development of these soft skills to prepare Generation Z individuals for success in collaborative work environments, where effective communication and collaboration are key.

It is recommended that educators and employers need to be aware of Generation Z's high expectations regarding career development and growth. This generation aspires to meaningful career and personal growth. To meet these expectations, educators and managers must provide the necessary guidance, mentorship, and opportunities for Generation Z individuals to thrive and achieve their goals. As they become a significant part of the workforce and student population, understanding and recognizing their characteristics is beneficial and essential. Employment organizations and educational institutions that understand and adopt to Generation Z's traits will be better equipped to remain competitive and relevant in an evolving society.

The interactive roundtable discussion encompassed recommendations on various subjects. Currently, a majority of research concentrated on Generation Z is focused on individuals living and maturing within European countries, India, and the United States, where the definitions of Generation Z differ by several years. An avenue of exploration would involve examining whether generations of individuals worldwide resonate with the characteristics associated with the United States. Additionally, there is a need for more research on Generation Z and their engagement with educational preparation programs. This can encompass educational students aspiring to become P-12 teachers or other professionals, such as the health care field. Such research endeavors not only facilitate a deeper comprehension of this generational cohort for employment professionals but can also help employers and enhance onboarding development and program design. Lastly, research centered on additional developmental training in the workplace or a required course in education to assist Generation Z individuals with human communication approaches.

Conclusion

This proceeding provided a synthesis of the insights gathered during the interactive roundtable session dedicated to enhancing the education and mentoring of Generation Z individuals. By captivating a collective wisdom of diverse participants and leveraging the extensive body of literature on Generation Z characteristics, we have gained a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities presented by this unique generation. The central theme that emerged from the discussions—the pivotal role of educators and mentors—reminds us of the profound influence that guidance and support can have on the growth and development of Generation Z learners in both classroom and workplace environments. It is our hope that the insights and recommendations presented in this research will empower educators and mentors to navigate these perspectives effectively, ensuring the success and well-being of Generation Z individuals as they embark on their educational and professional journeys.

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