

MANAGING “GENERATION Z” BASED ON DIFFERENCES IN EMPLOYEE VALUE PROPOSITIONS - ROMANIA VERSUS THE EU

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Abstract

Gen Z will soon be the predominant generation in the workplace. It is such a different generation versus the previous ones that new guidelines of managing young talent were written. All the advice in managing the new generation is based on several psiho-social characteristics that were the effect of the early years of living that have formed the values of this generation. Yet, despite many of the factors that have affected the early years of living are similar, there are differences between countries and even regions.

Thus the question arises: should managers lead Gen Z representatives based on the global guidelines or should they rather adapt the management style to the country. In order to find an answer to this question, we're comparing the results of a large cross country study on the value propositions that motivate the young generation, to understand how similar Romanian GenZ is to European GenZ.

Key words: Gen Z; millennial; talent management; workforce retention; motivation; strategy; statistical inference

1. Introduction

Looking back at the evolution of human society, at the evolution of the concept of “work” throughout it and at the very different motivators and the drivers that governed each era, it is quite clear that the purpose of work has shifted significantly to something quite different from that simple, initial purpose of human survival¹.

Looking at the WWII Gen, Post War Gen, the Boomers, Gen X, Millennials, Yuppies and Gen Z it's obvious that the drivers of each generation are distinct and that each has it's own set of triggers that can generate success or failure. Clearly, Gen Z is not working to survive in a period of abundance, as much as they are not struggling to find a job, like their parents, in a world where labour is perceived to be scarce for the desired amount of consumption.

A generation is represented as a demographic cohort, an observable group of people who “experience the same event within the same time interval”². Generations succeed each other and coexist in the labour market. Yet, generations are shaped by a plenitude of factors - behavioural and cultural - which ultimately affect their values, their drive, and their desires. In this context, there is little wonder that the workplace quickly became a complex and heteroge-

neous environment. An environment where leaders are faced with a wide array of challenges and dilemmas regarding how to manage each team to success.

What might work for one generation may not work for another and even within the spectrum of a particular group, there will be multiple motivating factors and nuances.

2. The importance of Gen Z

We now see a new generation coming into the market, a generation significantly different than the previous ones: Gen Z. Gen Z is a part of the Millennials generation, regularly considered as those born after the year 1995.

Gen Z has already started populating workplaces, their numbers are increasing and they are already representing a high proportion of the employable and employed population (over 7% in the US). Naturally as more time progresses, they are expected to become the largest generation of the workforce during the next decade. In consequence, Gen Z employees are becoming more and more important for the labour market.

Thus, GenZ is affecting the economy through their participation in lucrative activities and also through their impact in demand and expenditures.

3. Essential Characteristics of Gen Z

Based on global research³, GenZ is characterised by individuals considered to be incredibly smart as they benefit from having had the knowledge of the world at their fingertips, access to computers, tablets, mobile phones and other hi-tech gadgets from a very young age.

Digital natives, they have grown up in a world of information overload, in which, in contrast to their parents who needed to travel to the library to study, they could find most, if not all, the information online - not kilometres but clicks away.

Being raised in a period of economic growth, coupled with global heating, Gen Z became overly aware of climate change and very interested in renewable sources of energy and lowering the carbon footprint⁴.

Furthermore, the information, considered as being the source of success in the past, became a regularly free commodity, subsidized with advertising models. Thus, the value of knowing information started being perceived as low, when everything is so easy to find, easy to get, accessible for the masses.

The Education system was also caught in the whirlwind, highly off-guard, as students started using collaborative tools like Wikipedia and the knowledge of thousands of people to help with their homework and writing their essays. Thus, Gen Z got used to having it easier than previous generations, and, in the context of a smaller attention span due to too much information, this has led to a need for quick, if not instant, gratification.

Additionally, their Gen X parents invested more in the education of their offspring, all the while allocating more time to their careers, thus Gen Z became the recipients of a lot of "helicopter parenting": the parents which were interested in their children getting the right level of education, providing enough money to ensure they have a good, healthy life but, at the same time, also the parents which didn't provide one of the most important things - enough of the scarce time and attention they had.

Besides being the "beneficiary" of a distant parenting style, Gen Z individuals are also, by far, part of the most digitally connected generation ever experienced. It's a sort of irony that

we are speaking about former children, now young professionals, who have grown up with the internet and with social media within their grasp, who are used to be connected 24/7, but at the same time who are suffering from a pandemic of disconnect with their offline environment, who find it so much more difficult to establish meaningful links and relations when not online.

They have been helped to become more knowledgeable of different cultures with various student and staff mobility programs, such as Erasmus, and by supporting the mutual recognition of diplomas and periods of study, and last but not least, promoting co-operation between higher education institutions and the development of distance learning so that each person has the opportunity to study regardless of the context⁵.

Gen Z grew up in a world where they could easily reinvent themselves each day with another social media or gaming profile - this kind of addictive flexibility as well as the constant possibility of clicking "reset" and starting over on a moment's whim has led, however, to an ever-decreasing sense of belonging and loyalty towards colleagues, managers, and companies⁶. This behaviour can be sometimes misinterpreted as shallowness or a lack of commitment but in reality it is much closer to a coping mechanism to the offline world surrounding them. This has also led to a higher level of fragility in front of hardship, compared to their more resilient counterparts in the previous generations.

Those born between 1980 and 1995, called Gen Y or Yuppies are also Millennials, however we can consider them as a different cluster from the same ecosystem. They are the ones who grew up in a period of prosperity, when their parents could sustain them easier, all the while Gen Z were subjected to seeing their parents struggle through the 2008 economic recession and the various crises associated with that time. This exposure is what makes Gen Z individuals less idealistic than Gen Y, less confident and, often times, much more modest in their expectations.

Even so, the prosperity of the 21st century provided both generations with the fulfilment of all their basic Maslow needs, driving both groups towards the goals of meaningful lives, successful careers and the desire bring significant change and leave their mark⁷.

The Gen Z characteristics have led to challenges for managers in leading them in the workplace. Since many of the current leaders are Gen X representatives, they've found themselves trying to apply what worked for them on a totally different type of individual. Since the motivating factors are different, the results were sometimes sub-optimal. Thus, new talent management theories of motivating young individuals emerged. These new theories are based on the general GenZ characteristics.

The question now is: would this framework apply in Romania as well?

4. Data and methodology

In order to understand this, we've looked at the similarities and the differences between Romanians and Europeans, inside one of the most comprehensive and recent surveys regarding the workplace, the "LinkedIn Employer Value Propositions Survey between July 2020 - June 2021"⁸. The data we'll analyse represents the agreement in importance for a set of 15 value propositions that affect the motivation of workers, expressed in percentage.

The 15 value propositions are: Good work-life balance, Excellent compensation and benefits, Challenging work, Colleagues and culture that inspire employees to do their best, Flexible work arrangements, Open and effective management, Job security, Investment in comprehensive and ongoing employee training, Employees have influence over their tasks and

priorities, Role that meaningfully impacts the company's success, A company with a purposeful mission, Convenient commute to work, Opportunity for rapid advancement within the company, An industry-leading company with high calibre talent and Inclusive workplace for people of diverse backgrounds. For each of these we'll be looking at the percent of individuals who have considered the specific value proposition as important from the total.

We will be focusing this study on the BS / BA graduates as LinkedIn is a tool globally used mainly by this cohort. Since the belonging to Gen Z is not a characteristic recorded in the study, we'll use another variable as a proxy. From the variable "Experience", we'll chose the 0-5 years of experience threshold to include Gen Z only. Based on this segmentation, we'll have 2 samples, one for Europe with 2,582 survey respondents and one for Romania with 146 survey respondents. Taking into consideration the data, we will not be able to exclude Romania from Europe, as 5.5% of the European records will actually be Romanian, with impact on the differences.

For each of the value props recorded, we've compared the proportions on the two samples with a Z test. The results in Table 1. show that there are value props for which we can reject the alternative hypothesis and accept that there is no significant difference in the proportions measured on the two samples while there are also multiple characteristics where we'll need to reject the null and consider there is enough information to prove that the perception is significantly different. We've used a bilateral test for a confidence level of 95%.

Table 1. Calculation of the Z statistic for the difference between proportions on two samples and conclusions

	Europe 0-5 Years	Romania 0-5 Years	Z Stat	Conclusion
Good work-life balance	64%	65%	-0.24	Reject H1
Excellent compensation and benefits	58%	67%	-2.15	Accept H1
Challenging work	45%	11%	8.07	Accept H1
Colleagues and culture that inspire employees to do their best	47%	32%	3.54	Accept H1
Flexible work arrangements	40%	40%	-	Reject H1
Open and effective management	25%	50%	-6.67	Accept H1
Job security	30%	50%	-5.08	Accept H1
Investment in comprehensive and ongoing employee training	33%	42%	-2.24	Accept H1
Employees have influence over their tasks and priorities	23%	18%	1.40	Reject H1
Role that meaningfully impacts the company's success	15%	13%	0.66	Reject H1
A company with a purposeful mission	18%	11%	2.16	Accept H1
Convenient commute to work	24%	18%	1.66	Accept H1
Opportunity for rapid advancement within the company	26%	34%	-2.13	Accept H1
An industry-leading company with high caliber talent	15%	11%	1.32	Reject H1
Inclusive workplace for people of diverse backgrounds	16%	8%	2.59	Accept H1

Source: Personal calculation based on data from the "LinkedIn Employer Value Propositions Survey between July 2020 - June 2021"

As we can see, despite the perception is similar when it comes to work-life balance, flexibility, when it comes to influence over the tasks, impact to company's success and working with great colleagues, the differences are statistically significant when it comes to the im-

portance of compensation, the acceptance of challenging work, the desires regarding the culture of the organization, the need for effective management, job security and training, the desire for a purposeful mission, the need for convenient commute, the desire for rapid growth and the desire of an inclusive workplace.

Yet, despite the differences are significant for one third of the value propositions, we reckon that they may be due to the cultural biases and perception or measurement scale difference. Thus, in order to make sure that we're interpreting the results correctly and we don't have a scale issue, we'll also be looking at the ranks that Europeans and Romanians have given to their preferences in terms of the perceived importance of 15 value propositions.

For this, we've ranked each value prop in terms of its relative importance versus the others, for each of the two samples. The Spearman ranks coefficient of correlation computed on the data of 0.703, shows us that there is a borderline strong correlation between the Romanians and the Europeans on the prioritization of the value propositions that motivate workers. Despite the strong correlation, this also means that it's not a very strong one or a perfect match, with Romanians sharing some of the European Gen Z values, but not all.

Table 2. Heatmap of the average difference between Romania and The European Union in ranking the importance of main value propositions, per experience cohorts

	All respondents	0-5 Years of experience
Good work-life balance	1	1
Excellent compensation and benefits	- 1	- 1
Challenging work	7	8
Colleagues and culture that inspire employees to do their best	3	5
Flexible work arrangements	-	1
Open and effective management	- 3	- 6
Job security	- 3	- 3
Investment in comprehensive and ongoing employee training	- 2	- 1
Employees have influence over their tasks and priorities	-	- 1
Role that meaningfully impacts the company's success	1	- 4
A company with a purposeful mission	3	2
Convenient commute to work	-	- 1
Opportunity for rapid advancement within the company	- 5	- 1
An industry-leading company with high caliber talent	- 1	- 1
Inclusive workplace for people of diverse backgrounds	-	2

Source: Personal calculation based on data from the "LinkedIn Employer Value Propositions Survey between July 2020 - June 2021"

We've deep dived in Table 2, in order to understand what the main differences are in ranking the value propositions. For better visibility, we've created a heatmap of the differences in ranks and compared it to all the respondents, not just Gen Z (0-5 years of experience), to understand both the cultural differences and the generation differences between Romanians and Europeans. A positive difference (in blue) means that the element is ranked lower by Romanian Gen Z while a negative difference (in red) means that Romanians rank that value proposition higher. White cells represent a perfect match between the ranking on the two samples. We only have perfect matches in the all respondents group, not in the Gen Z one.

Based on the difference of ranks above, we can see that the highest difference is on the 3rd priority of Europeans, the "Challenging work" value proposition that is considered the 10th as importance in Romania and the 12th for the 0-5 years of experience cohort, considered to be mainly Gen Z. Regularly, employees are getting a sense of meaning from succeeding to

solve challenging business and societal problems, but according to the data, it seems that the Romanian young generation would rather have it easy.

The second largest difference is in the case of “Open and Effective Management”. Although it is considered as the 9th motivator for the youth of the European Union, it’s perceived as the 3rd motivator for Romanian GenZ, thus placing more emphasis on the skills of the manager. Yet, since the average experience is quite scarce (1-5 years for GenZ), the open management may be more of an idealistic expectation than a real talent management framework.

Another surprise is on the colleagues and culture side that is extremely important for the Europeans (4th position overall, and 3rd position for Gen Z). This manages to get only on the 8th position for Romanian GenZ, a 5 ranks difference versus European youth. Again, organizational culture represents one of the main drivers considered for GenZ globally, especially when comparing to other generations, that seems to be much less important in Romania, according to the data from this survey.

The role that meaningfully impacts the company’s success is bringing the next big difference between the two cohorts. This value proposition is considered on the eleventh ranking for Romanian youth while it’s the last motivator for European GenZ.

Another strong motivator for Gen Z representatives in Romania is Job security, on the 3rd place in importance despite it being in the middle of the list in Europe, on the 7th position. Again, this is a bit surprising for Romanians since GenZ is generally considered to be less loyal to the company than their parents were.

Romanian GenZ prefer compensation versus work-life balance for all age groups, including the Millennials. Yet, although this changes the top elements, the preference is quite close, making both Europeans and Romanians have the same principal motivating factors. We’ll not discuss the other value proposition due to their smaller difference or due to the small percent of agreeing in importance.

Based on all the data above, we can argue that there is not a one size fits all solution for Gen Z all over the world and that we need to adapt the management best practices and frameworks for Romanian specificities. To understand what is working and what’s not, we’ll comment on the main 4 global management advice for leading GenZ in relation to the results above.

5. Adapting the global management directions to Romanian GenZ specificities

If we wish to successfully manage the new generation towards success, then it is mandatory we understand some of their most important triggers and motivators. In this sense, employers, Human Resources Departments and leaders everywhere need to consider some of the main characteristics that have developed and shaped the youngest part of the current workforce so that their strategies are addressing the needs of the new generation.

Looking back at the formative years of this generation, we can surmise some of their most important features as follows: masters of social media with a high sense and high focus on relationships, in a constant race to stand out, been seen as different, unique and individual, with a strong global mindset and an equally strong disconnect to the local reality.

Therefore, it is important, in the creation of any management strategy aimed at addressing the interests of GenZ globally to take into account the following recommendations and filter them when it comes to their importance in managing Romanian GenZ:

1. Build relationships

This is one of the key advices that the global research is proposing in managing GenZ. GenZ individuals worldwide are considered to have a high focus on relationship building, this combined with their innate lowered loyalty level towards company and employer can, in the wrong blend, lead to disastrous results. Yet, the ranking of Romanians regarding colleagues that inspire employees to do their best is much lower than the European one. Thus, relationship building may be less important in Romania and thus prioritized lower.

2. Manage expectations

Another global advice is that the expectations with GenZ should be correctly fostered from the beginning, starting as early as the recruitment process. In this sense, it is essential that the employer provides a clear Job Description with well-defined responsibilities⁹ and expectations, ensures a transparent interview, highlighting both challenging aspects of the role as well as opportunities of learning and development and presents the company, the organizational culture and the work environment in an as realistic and as objective way as possible.

Providing a realistic image regarding the future employment and correctly managing expectations of GenZ is mandatory. Employers that don't abide by this rule are often times quickly penalized by the individuals of this group through attrition, as they usually have a very clear set of expectations, generally quite idealistic, about what their future employment should look like.¹⁰

Considering the very high focus on Romanians on Open and effective management, this factor may be furthermore important. Since Romanians tend to be over pessimistic on multiple topics in the workplace, creating a management system in which young employees know what to expect and what is expected of them is key.

3. Have a strong Onboarding Process

The first few days spent in onboarding by new employees tend to frequently become the foundation of what that future relationship with their employer will be like, for both GenZ and other generations globally. Employees, especially GenZ, will look at the onboarding process as an initial window within the organization and well judge it as such¹¹. Considering this, especially in the case of GenZ, having an well-structured program, organized around facilitating the newcomer's adjustment, providing clarity of roles, responsibilities, goals and expectations from the very beginning, will greatly help alleviate anxiety, uncertainty and fear, it will promote better performance and lower retention risks.¹²

Although different in the percent of agreeing in importance, Romanians are quite close to the European average on this, with the investment in comprehensive and ongoing training being the 5th value proposition. Thus, a strong onboarding and enabling process is key to obtaining success with GenZ.

4. Promote diversity, equity and inclusion

Globally, it is considered that Diversity and inclusion is one of the keys to gaining the support of this generation. Different than other generations that needed to work to fulfil the basic needs, GenZ is working to push for the higher needs of the Maslow's pyramid.

Gen Z could travel more than the previous generations and could freely interact online and on social media with citizens from all over the world. The information they had access is unprecedented, as all the wisdom of the world stood a touch of a button away from them. On

the account of their unprecedented exposure to various cultures, differences in perspectives, preferences, ways of being, GenZ is by far the generation with the most intense global focus - they are also the ones for which these fundamentals acquire the most intense focus.¹³

Some of the proposals that employers can take into account, when building and fostering a workforce based on diversity, equity and inclusion include workshops which emphasize both the personal as well as the organizational value of diversity and having a diverse workforce, trainings on positive communication, negotiation and conflict resolution.¹⁴

Yet, despite the importance globally, diversity and inclusion is ranked the last of the fifteen value propositions in Romania. Probably diversity and inclusion may be considered such a low motivator in Romania as it is one of the countries with the lowest gender pay gap in the European Union and one of the most welcoming countries with foreigners. The author considers that in the case of inclusion issues, Romanians may have been the victim rather than the offender but would act upon injustice if it would be perceived in the workplace, thus, despite being perceived as the last motivator, it may be considered a prerequisite.

6. Conclusions

Gen Z is considered to be a storm coming into the marketplace, bringing with them fantastic skills and knowledge but also the need for a large transformation in the management style. Yet, it would be a big mistake to treat GenZ as a whole instead of understanding that it is a diverse group with similarities and differences.

Gen Z in Romania is significantly different in perceptions versus the GenZ in Europe as the statistical tests have shown. The perception regarding challenging work, colleagues and culture and effective management have proven to be the biggest differences both from testing the proportion of agreeing in importance and from looking at the difference between the ranks.

Therefore the managers in each country, and especially the ones in Romania, should adapt their style to the new generation, based on the global guidelines but also taking into account the local flavours, values, mindset and biases. Many of the general management advice for managing GenZ are working but there are also some where the differences are large enough to ensure dissatisfactions in the work environment.

Humans are diverse and diversity is something to foster, rather than dismiss under the use of hard to apply general guidelines.

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