

# Can the Spatial Industry Attract (and Keep) Gen Z Employees?

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## ABSTRACT

*If like me you were born between 1955 and 1964 (or thereabouts), you are a 'Baby Boomer', sometimes referred to as a 'Post-World War II Baby Boomer'. As professionals we are generally regarded as having strong work ethics, being self-assured, competitive, goal-centric, resourceful, mentally focussed, team oriented and disciplined. Following hot on our heels was 'Gen X'. Hard-working and independent, they had much the same traits as us but preferred flexibility in their work over stability. 'Gen Y' (also known as the Millennials) was born between 1980 and 2000. Typified by a strong 'look at me, look at me' focus, they seem more interested in smartphones, Facebook, texting, sexting and other technology rather than actual work (or am I just an old cynic?). And now we have 'Gen Z', the most global, social, visual and technological generation ever. Will they be attracted (and stay with) the spatial industry? What can we as an industry, employers or educators do to understand and attract Gen Z employees or has that horse already bolted? This paper discusses this issue and aims to provide answers to these questions.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Gen Y, Gen Z, future, surveying profession, employees, attractors.*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The future of our industry in part relates to the employees we attract (and keep). In that respect, an understanding of Gen Z (and in fact all of the generations) will be beneficial to us and the industry. Understanding what appeals to Gen Z and what they are looking for will inform the strategies we adopt to get the best out of them and help them grow.

### 1.1 Who is Gen Z?

Baby Boomers, Gen X, Gen Y, Gen Z... There is no clear-cut definition for the birth years that separate these definitions, but most researchers typically use the mid-1990s to mid-2000s as starting birth years for Gen Z. That means that the school leaver you employed for a gap year or the TAFE / university graduate you just employed is a Gen Z. So, other than how old they are, what defines a Gen Z? Probably the best starting point would be to see who came before them and what were their characteristics and traits.

### 1.2 The Generations by Name

Figure 1 gives us an idea about the different generations and some of their characteristics. While this is a starting point, the characteristics of Gen Z are more complex than this simplistic figure. In fact, a lot of what we perceive about Gen Z is misconception based on the press and hearsay... and the fact that we do not know what they are saying sometimes!



Figure 1: Generation names and their characteristics (WordPress and Maxwell, 2017).

One of the ‘facts’ often quoted about Gen Z is that they have an 8-second attention span (Hope, 2016). How do you employ someone with such a short retention span? This is a prime example of how we misunderstand, or are led to misunderstand, Gen Z. Finch (2015) states “Gen Z actually have what we’re calling highly evolved ‘eight-second filters.’” In fact, this filter allows them to decide if an event, article or activity is attention-worthy and, if so, then Gen Z can become intensely committed and focussed.

## 2 WHAT REALLY TYPIFIES GEN Z?

Let us wipe away the myths, the YouTube videos, the misconceptions and the downright bullshit and discover what is left.

### 2.1 Statistics

Firstly, here are some bare-bones statistics about Gen Z (Abramovich, 2015; Mediakix, 2017):

- 96% of Gen Z owns a smartphone.
- 85% of Gen Z uses social media to learn about new products.
- Almost half of Gen Z is connected online for 10 or more hours a day.
- One-third of Gen Z watches one hour of online video a day.
- More than 25% of Gen Z is ‘constantly’ checking Facebook.
- Gen Z shares the entrepreneurial spirit of millennial innovators: About 72% of current high-schoolers want to own their own businesses, and 76% hope they can turn their hobbies into full-time jobs.
- Gen Z are adept researchers. They know how to self-educate and find information. 33% watch lessons online, 20% read textbooks on tablets, and 32% work with classmates online.
- 58% of Gen Z is either somewhat or very worried about the future.

## 2.2 What Typifies Gen Z as an Employee?

Statistics aside, what typifies a Gen Z as an employee? Before we consider how to attract and retain Gen Z employees, we need to know what they are like in general as employees. From the statistics, we already have an idea what Gen Z is like in general but let us look further into what Gen Z is like as an employee.

Gen Z grew up in a post 9/11 era with all the associated fear, market crashes and recessions. Hence it is no surprise that they place job security as a high priority in their lives. Like the Millennials (Gen Y) before them, Gen Z have high expectations of good jobs and good salaries, but unlike the much maligned Millennials, Gen Z is prepared to work hard to get what they want (Figure 2).

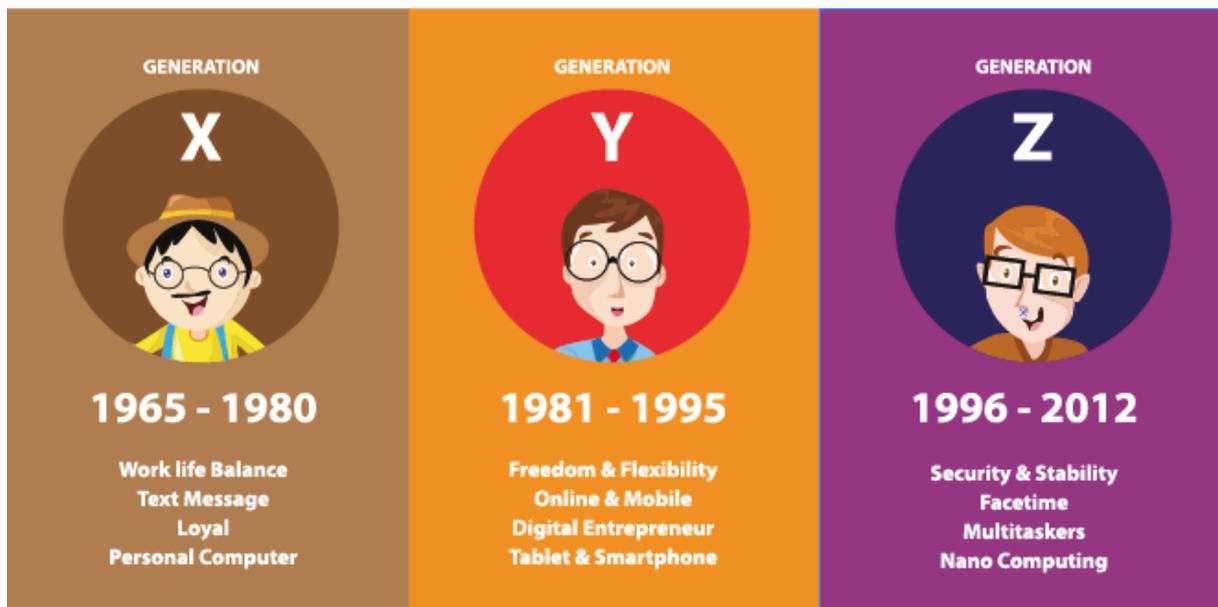


Figure 2: Characteristics of Gen X, Gen Y and Gen Z.

Boitnott (2016) states “Generation Z has a great amount of drive, talent, and ambition to bring to the table. They are loyal, and are able to innovate your company to match the changing times. They are willing to grow and progress quickly and intend on making an impact on the company they work for from the beginning.”

This is quite a challenge. How do we engage Gen Z and make use of their traits and skills? The following sections look at Gen Z from an employer’s point of view but also from the an educator’s point of view. Why educators? Because we need to consider Gen Z as current employees as well as the Gen Z who will be entering the workforce in the future. We need to consider Gen Z employees from the perspective of employers and educators.

## 3 WHAT CAN WE DO AS EMPLOYERS?

Companies must be willing to work hard for their attentions and offer adequate salaries and benefits in order to attract talented Gen Z employees. Employers have to be prepared to think differently to work with Gen Z. This section provides some thoughts and observations in this regard.

### **3.1 Offer Career Growth**

Unlike Gen X and Gen Y and their desire for change and mobility, Gen Z has lived through recent difficult times and they are looking for stability within careers. “Gen Z have experienced perhaps the most rapid, dramatic shifts of societal standards than any other generation” (Insight.FYA, 2017). With that stability must come direction and purpose. They are looking for a career with purpose and direction and not just a ‘job’.

### **3.2 Learn to Speak ‘Z’**

Actually *don’t*. Nothing sounds stranger than a Baby Boomer speaking ‘Z’. If you think the following makes perfect sense to you, think again: “tbh, rn you want to be lit but not salty – all g?” Gen Z is the most technologically literate generation to date. Instead of trying to speak ‘Z’, you should use a common language, i.e. technology. While we struggle to use a mobile phone while typing, Gen Z can (and do) use multiple devices simultaneously.

### **3.3 Create Ideas and Solutions with Gen Z**

Independence, creativity and innovation are words often used to describe Gen Z. Their independence, creativity and innovation are perhaps their greatest strengths and simultaneously weaknesses. Build solutions with them and do not try and impose answers upon them.

### **3.4 Listen, Listen, Listen**

Other than the language issue already mentioned, Gen Z wants to be heard. They are smart, technologically literate and know where to find answers. They may not always be right but they do have a strong and positive voice.

### **3.5 Change Your View of Gen Z**

Although this paper has talked about statistics and characteristics of Gen Z, there is really not one single ‘view’ of Gen Z. Nonetheless, of all the generations, Gen Z seems to be the most flexible, tolerant and accepting (Boitnott, 2016).

### **3.6 Embrace Technology**

We work in a paradoxical industry. While old reference trees, RM bottles and lockspits still form part of our psyche, we are also in one of the most technologically changing times (Figure 3). As Fosburgh (2012) states: “New technologies and changing demands are driving a paradigm shift in modern surveying. Rapid technological development extends beyond measurement to include computing, communications and geospatial data mapping.” Who better to involve in this new world than Gen Z?



Figure 3: Changing technology (Dilbert, 2011).

## 4 WHAT CAN WE DO AS EDUCATORS?

As mentioned earlier, Gen Z uses an 8-second filter. How do educators deal with this when traditional subjects ran for months and courses for years? The challenges facing educators are similar (but not the same) as the challenges facing employers. For this reason, the subsections that follow parallel the subheadings in section 3.

### 4.1 Offer Career Educational Growth

There has been a strong tradition of progressing from school to university for the ‘brighter’ kids and to TAFE for those who did not make it to university. This archaic (and inaccurate) approach needs revisiting in light of Gen Z. It would take a whole paper in its own right to explore this further, but here is an option worth considering.

As already mentioned, Gen Z are “adept researchers. They know how to self-educate and find information. 33% watch lessons online, 20% read textbooks on tablets, and 32% work with classmates online” Mediakix (2017). Educators should be harnessing this. Students should be encouraged from early high-school years to undertake learning that informs a career in the spatial industry. They should progress through a learning path that takes them into a career, enhances their learning and supports their career. What they learn, how they learn and how they adapt the learning should be the focus. Qualifications from university or TAFE should be the by-product of learning, not the other way around.

### 4.2 Learn to Speak ‘Z’

If 30 years in adult education has taught me anything, it is that communication is key. Unfortunately, my knowledge of the language of Gen Z is about as good as my knowledge of German: “Nicht so gut” (not too good).

The historic approach has been for educators to teach and students to learn. However, with Gen Z so much learning is done from Gen Z to Gen Z or their interaction with technology. Educators need to harness these skills and be education facilitators and not the ‘teachers’ of the past. Educational facilitators “who understand the connection between digital engagement and student experience will cause dynamic changes within their organisations. Student-focused efforts, led via savvy social media practitioners, will win the day” (Povah and Vaukins, 2017).

### 4.3 Create Ideas and Solutions with Gen Z

Here is an example: What if you could use an app to find the latest information about a topic, link yourself to the software developer/supplier/technologist, communicate with your trainer or facilitator, and then capture the learning for a submission as part of your course/learning journey? I have no idea where to begin with this, but I bet a Gen Z does.

### 4.4 Listen, Listen, Listen

As an educator, communication is important. It is *how* we communicate with Gen Z that counts. There is a reason Instagram is so popular. Gen Z are highly visual communicators, and educators need to consider this in the development of learning activities for Gen Z. “They say a picture’s worth a 1,000 words and Gen Z takes that to a whole new level. They speak fluently in images, from emojis to photo and video based social media. Let’s just say Gen Z isn’t typing out their status updates” (Inflexion, 2016). As educators we cannot limit our thinking, techniques and communication skills to the past. We must embrace the future.

### 4.5 Change Your View of Gen Z

In the past, educators viewed students as ‘sponges’ to ‘absorb’ learning. Ask a teacher of even 10 years ago what they thought of students and these are *not* the words that would come to mind (McKenzie, 2016):

- Social learners.
- Mobile.
- Global.
- Digital.
- Visual.

Educators, like employers, need to change their view of Gen Z in order to realise, promote and use this generation’s potential.

### 4.6 Embrace Technology

The journey from chalk boards to smartboards technology and beyond has always been part of education (Figure 4). With Gen Z, it is even more relevant that we use technology to engage, teach, interact and share. But it is important to also remember that “technology no longer has the buzz that it used to have. Several years ago, if you sat a student in front of a computer, you would get instant engagement. This is no longer the case. Technology is just [a] tool not [the] tool. If your use of technology is not underpinned by sound educational techniques, then it will fall short” (Using Technology Better, 2017).

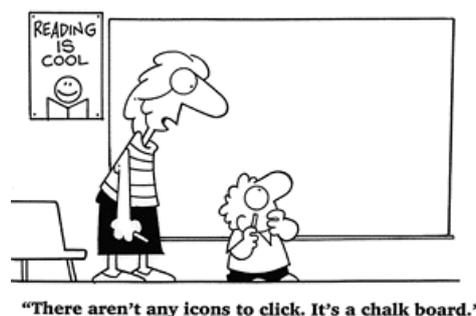


Figure 4: The mysteries of the chalk board (Using Technology Better, 2017).

## 5 HAS THAT HORSE ALREADY BOLTED?

I would like to say a definitive “no” but that would be untrue. I cannot say a definitive “yes” either. I strongly believe that Gen Z employees have a great role to play in the spatial industry. Their strengths will contribute positively to the industry, and the industry will be better for their presence. Equally, education will play an important part in helping Gen Z be ready to find and create their place in the future. “Education is the passport to the future, for tomorrow belongs to those who prepare for it today” (Malcolm X).

Has the horse already bolted? I do not think so. But I do know we are in for one hell of a ride.

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