

In praise of Gen Z.



I surveyed my multi-generational team on what they wanted from work. Here's what I learned.

Last Autumn a penny really dropped for me in the middle of an interview I was doing with a global marketing CEO. I was working for a client who wanted to **build the future customer base** and was looking for non-executives with experience of tuning into rising generations of prospective subscribers.

Over many months prior to that moment, countless leaders eating their lunch opposite me had bemoaned the general lack of work ethic in today's first and second jobbers, told me they just couldn't get the talent anymore, and that it was impossible to get anyone to go into an office these days. I nodded. We ourselves had tried everything to get a big enough group of colleagues into our offices at least twice a week. We even balloted our teams and, even then, something was just not quite right. I longed for a day when I could deliver the quarterly company briefing without tumbleweed blowing across my support team.

“The thing is” the marketing CEO said “you have to be prepared to suspend disbelief. New generations work in ways you would just never imagine.”

The conversation with the marketing CEO was profound. The next day I decided to survey my team of 40 to find out how they see work and jobs, how they like to learn, what they make of office life, and how relevant they think our benefits really are. At the time I decided to do it, it was little more than fun. But what I discovered has been game-changing in our cohesion and sense of community as a business. Essentially, it has been more than just a survey and a way of cutting the cake differently, not just looking at perspectives in terms of seniority or role type, but at the intersection between seniority, role type and generational characteristics.

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Suddenly people's potential and sense of ownership stops being defined by what they do, and becomes more about who they are and how they see the world. From there, a real sense of agency can emerge.”

There are exceptions to every rule. I wouldn't suggest for a moment, for example, that every single Zoomer or Millennial conforms to the characteristics of their generation. But there are definitely patterns that influence our business and the survey results prove that point. Our clients, for example, are still largely Boomers, born 1946-1964 or they are Generation X, born mid-60s to mid-70s. These generations are at time of writing still setting the pace and expectations for large swathes of our practice at Starfish, defined by powerful Boomer work ethic and stolid Gen X independence and self-reliance.

Within the company, our entire Executive Leadership Team are Gen X with all the initiative and occasional cynicism that comes with it. Our middle managers are largely Millennials, born 1981-1996. **They are my drivers, shapers and challengers.** My Gen Zs, born 1997-2012 are quiet, diplomatic and literally always sit together. Both the character and potential of this last community – the generation that I have heard bemoaned the most, and the most unfairly – have been completely unlocked by this piece of work.

Here's what I learned about my Starfish team.

What drives and preoccupies us

Despite being a commercial organisation, as much as one third of my overall workforce, and my Gen Z community specifically, does not consider financial reward to be a significant personal driver. **They consider Culture, Values, Opportunity** to learn new skills, and Freedom and flexibility to be higher priorities, reflecting a broader range of ideals within this group.

Our Gen X and Millennial community is more concerned with how they are going to serve clients or the business when they start their working day: whether they've got the right kit, can log on efficiently and get started. Gen Z and some younger Millennials are more concerned about what their experience will be that day, especially whether there will be enough people in the office. If they are working from home, this group will think about how else they can fulfil that need for interaction, and also **complete their tasks with enough breaks.**

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My Gen Zs work quietly and they work well when there is purpose to their activities and when they are part of something bigger. **They are at their best when they're together and on a mission.** For this group in my business, work is an important social experience and having time together as a team, Practice or London or Leeds office is essential, not a nice to have.

On the question of benefits, **my Gen X colleagues still value a blend of long-term financial incentives and work/life balance.** My Millennial community, however, appreciates wellbeing days, performance and promotion incentives and is also

attracted to a well-appointed work space. They don't like messy cables or scuffed walls: how the space feels is important to them. Our Zoomer population has adopted the new gym membership quickly; they value wellbeing and early finish days and social experiences. By and large this community is less interested in money and status.

How we like to learn

Our overriding preferred methods of learning at Starfish are learning from others (especially gaining practical experience by being physically together) and reading. There was no major generational or age correlation I could see when it came to how we like to learn. Some of my Gen Zs, however, say they have to concentrate and be in a private space when they read, to be away from noise or the overwhelming speed and amount of information that characterises their daily digital worlds.

Life in the office

Our barrier to getting enough colleagues into the office was never about how many days they had to be there, or how the days were decided (even by ballot), but about *which* days. **My socially focused Gen Zs like to be in on a Friday so they can go out together after work.** For years we didn't allow it because of an outdated idea that they would somehow not work well without more experienced team members around them, and those members wanted to be at home on Fridays. We recently opened the office up on Fridays and that mainly Gen Z group are now more productive and feel more empowered through the trust that they are motivated to play their part and don't need supervision.

There is overwhelming evidence that we all enjoy being together at Starfish. When we are in the office, the team values time with co-workers more than anything else. This is followed by an appreciation of a range of quiet and more social spaces. In the end, although two days is a guide, we decided to encourage being in the office rather than mandating it, for the simple reason that life is busy and priorities change quickly in our line of work. We now encourage colleagues to check who will be in before they commit to travel costs etc, so they can make arrangements within their team to be together.



Gen X colleagues most like to feel connection

Gen X colleagues most like to feel connection to share experience and have a break away from the home environment when they go into London or Leeds. My Millennials like being in the office because of cross-pollination of ideas. My Gen Zs value social time together in the office and they enjoy instigating group lunches and social events. **My Gen Z population also tends to prioritise experiences** that recognise the importance of wellbeing and good mental health – hence their preferences when it comes to benefits.

They are, by the way, also by far the best source of ideas and innovation on emerging Tech and are motivated by opportunities to feed into and support digital enablement of almost any kind in the business.

Communicating

Few people are still using phones, especially outside work. **Telephone is alien to my Gen Z community** who feel so uncomfortable using them they will often leave the open office to make a call. We used to be horrified, now it's just the way it is. For them, having a smartphone is about using WhatsApp when they are working. (And the rest of us agree that our smartphones are brilliant for most things, but often useless for ringing people.)

As much as this was a groundbreaking piece of work for me personally in running the business, sharing the outcomes with the team has galvanised engagement and it has been like a light suddenly coming on. People just 'get' each other and can recognise themselves or their colleagues in the descriptions of each respective generation. This has led to greater empathy, understanding, tolerance and maturity – and better than anything, it has also reframed what were previously viewed as "management issues".

Barriers have been lifted by removing old assumptions and unhelpful, outdated stereotypes. My old tumbleweed moments in the quarterly briefings are becoming a thing of the past. And, if you do this, I promise you cannot fail to emerge with a greater sense of yourself as a leader, as well as what your team is capable of delivering. It is all there, this exercise is about finding the face of the prism where you can see it.

My team told me just now that they appreciate the tangible outcome in benefits they will use. They appreciate the fact we did something that has never been tried before, to understand and make sense of our differences, and that we listened and made change happen – and we made it happen fast. Our Gen X Executive now has children who are Gen Z, by the way, and this piece of work has been illuminating on that front too.

For 2026, we have set up Task and Finish Groups to deliver aspects of business change. We are all in it together. My Zoomers are at the vanguard of this, as our 'changemakers', particularly in their native digital space. I can count on my Millennials to ask the curious and awkward questions that ensure our plans are grounded in reality. This means that our Gen X leaders can be confident enough to take the first step. Because of this piece of work, our capability will not only grow and evolve as a search business, but more importantly we are creating the culture where it is safe to try something new. And in these fast-moving times, who could ask for more?

More leaders should try this and see what insight it produces. To find out what I asked my team contact me at Juliet.Taylor@Starfishsearch.com