

Chapter 1

The Soft Skills Gap

You are very careful in your recruiting, selection, and hiring process and, yet, it is getting harder and harder to figure out which young job candidates to hire. Should you hire the promising new graduate with impressive, freshly minted credentials indicating valuable technical skills, even though he seems like he might be yet another new graduate lacking in some of those elusive, yet critical "soft skills"?

It seems like more and more of your young new hires are not working out. They make very little effort to "fit in." Does every single one of them expect to be treated like a "special case"? They often don't seem to appreciate that they are entering a pre-existing scene; joining an organization with its own mission, history, structure, rules, and culture; integrating with a group that has its own established dynamic; and engaging with individuals, each of whom has his or her own story and many of whom have been part of this scene in this organization for years on end or longer.

Too often they say the wrong things at the wrong times and they fail to ask a lot of the questions they should be asking. Heck, they often can't even get to work on time. Anyway, they spend half the workday on their devices, instead of focusing on the work. That really comes through in customer service scores, along with other complaints about young front-line service personnel. Sometimes, their lack of interpersonal skills leads to misunderstandings and even conflicts on the team.

Most of them seem to have one foot out the door from the day they arrive, all the while asking for more of something—or more of everything. Even the young superstars nowadays don't seem to come in early, stay late, work

through meals and weekends and holidays, bend over backward, and jump through hoops like the young superstars of yesteryear did.

If you are like most managers with employees in their late teens and twenties, then you no doubt have first-hand experience with a very serious management challenge that has been growing especially fast in recent years. There is an ever-widening “Soft Skills Gap” in the workforce, especially among the newest new young workforce.

I use the term “soft skills” because most people understand the term is used, in contrast to “hard skills” which are technical, to encompass a wide range of non-technical skills ranging from “self-awareness” to “people skills” to “problem solving” to “teamwork.”

These skills may be less tangible and harder to define and measure than many of the “hard skills,” but they are absolutely critical to the success or failure of any individual in the workplace. The problem is that these old-fashioned basics—professionalism, critical thinking, and followership—are out of fashion and are too rarely spoken of nowadays. Today’s young talent is not being indoctrinated in these old-fashioned basics either at home or in school. Usually, by the time they get to the workplace, employers figure it is too late to focus on them. Certainly, most managers think it is neither their place, nor do they have the time or resources or know-how to deal with the soft skills gap in their newest, youngest employees. So the soft skills gap continues to grow, hiding in plain sight, despite the fact that it costs organizations a fortune every day.

I’ve asked tens of thousands of managers: “How much do these so-called ‘soft skills’ matter?” The answer is nearly universal: Soft skills matter a lot. The cliché is that people are hired because of their hard skills but people are fired because of their soft skills.

When employees have significant gaps in their soft skills, there are significant negative consequences: Potentially good hires are overlooked. Good hires go bad. Bad hires go worse. Misunderstandings abound. People become distracted. Productivity goes down. Mistakes are made. Customer service suffers. Workplace conflicts occur more frequently. Good people leave when they might have otherwise stayed longer.

It robs so many young employees of greater success and causes so many managers so much aggravation and so many unnecessary costs. The soft skills gap is not a household term like the technical skill gap, but it should be, because its impact is monumental.

Like the technical skill gap, the soft skills gap in the workforce has been developing slowly for decades. But the soft skills gap runs across the entire workforce—among workers with technical skills that are in great demand, every bit as much as workers without technical skills. What is more, the soft skills gap has grown much worse in recent years.

Are today's young employees really so much worse when it comes to soft skills than those of previous generations?

At the corporate headquarters of a very old and very large consumer products conglomerate, summer interns are sometimes permitted to attend certain high-level meetings, mostly as a learning experience, but also to run errands and assist with clerical tasks during the meetings. One such intern was visibly annoyed when she was asked by her manager to dress in “business casual attire, at least” on days when she would be attending such meetings. After, “ignoring that suggestion entirely,” the intern came to one such meeting “very casually dressed” and then spent most of the meeting texting on her hand-held device. When her manager whispered quietly to ask her to please stop texting during the meeting, the intern responded in an exasperated tone, “Actually, no.” The manager whispered back with incredulity: “No?” At which point, the intern explained, “I’m texting with my dad . . . about this meeting. So, it’s fine. My dad works here!” As it turned out, she was giving a blow-by-blow account of the meeting in progress to her father, who was himself a longtime executive in the company, and had arranged the internship with the company for his daughter.

The Soft Skills Gap: Growing Steadily from Gen X to Gen Y to Gen Z

Since 1993, I've been tracking generational change in the workplace and its impact on organizations, especially the impact on supervisory relationships. I started out as a frustrated young lawyer seeking to understand why the older, more experienced lawyers were so annoyed by those of my generation, Generation X (born 1965 to 1977). I quickly realized that it wasn't just the older, more experienced people at my firm who were annoyed with Gen Xers. It was nearly everybody older and more experienced in workplaces of all shapes and sizes.

That's when I started conducting in-depth interviews with young people and their managers, the original research that led to my first book, *Managing Generation X*. I formed a company to continue that research, and we've been conducting that interview research for decades now, tracking the ever-emerging, ever-"newer" new young workforce. By the late 1990s, we started tracking the first wave of the great Millennial cohort, what we refer to as "Generation Y" (born 1978 to 1989). At this point, we've been tracking the second wave Millennials, whom we call "Generation Z" (born 1990 to 1999), for nearly a decade now, since they first entered the workforce as teenagers in part-time jobs. Gen Zers are the newest "New Dogs" arriving in your workplace, part of the global youth tide rising now and for the foreseeable future.

I've interviewed tens of thousands of young workers (hundreds of thousands of interviewees in total) in just about every industry—health care, professional services, restaurants, retail, research, finance, aerospace, software, manufacturing, the public sector, even nonprofits—you name it. Based on two decades of research, I can report that the overwhelming data points to a steady diminution in the soft skills of young people in the workplace from Gen X to Gen Y to Gen Z. Today's young workers are increasingly likely to have significant notable weaknesses in one or several key soft skills.

Why is that?

Some partners at a forensic accounting firm told me of their latest young associate “case study.” This first-year associate, a recent top graduate of a top school, was cutting-edge in his knowledge of a new set of tools and techniques for mining and analyzing data buried within evidentiary documents obtained during pre-litigation discovery. One of the partners said, “This kid had done some projects in school using this new approach and his technical knowledge in this area far surpassed anyone else in the firm. But he kept running into roadblocks because his communication made him seem so immature. At first, he couldn’t get anybody to listen to him. Once we got him going on introducing the new process, I know it sounds petty, but he kept saying ‘like, like, like’ every other word, and he could barely look people in the eye or string three words together without saying ‘like.’” In short, “His inability speak in a way that seemed even remotely professional was just rubbing people the wrong way, especially in meetings, though it wasn’t very much better when he was working with people individually.” One of the other partners explained, “We had to send him to a class.” One of the other partners added, “It took a lot more than one class.”

Something Much Larger Is Going on Here: The Post-Boomer Generational Shift

Of course, the older, more experienced people are always more or less annoyed by the attitudes and behavior of each successive new young generation. New young employees are, by definition, always younger and less experienced and, therefore, lacking in the corresponding maturity and patience. As they step into the adult world with youthful energy and enthusiasm, young workers often clash with their older colleagues. That’s always part of the story. But there is something much bigger going on here.

On a macro level, Generation Z represents a tipping point in the post-Boomer generational shift transforming the workforce. With older (first-wave) Boomers now retiring in droves, they are taking with them the last vestiges of the old-fashioned work ethic. By 2020, more than 80 percent of the workforce will be post-Boomer—dominated in numbers, norms, and values by Generations X, Y, and Z. Generation Z will be greater than 20 percent of the North American and European workforce (and a much greater percentage in younger parts of the world, especially South Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and South America).

Much of why Generation Z seems like a new species from another planet is really just an accident of history. They just happen to be the generation to come of age in the 2010s, during an era of profound change and uncertainty driven by a confluence of epic historical forces.

GLOBALIZATION

Generation Z will be the first truly global generation—connecting and traveling to work across borders in every direction and combination. Unlike any other generation in history, Gen Z can look forward to a lifetime of interdependency and competition with a rising global youth tide from every corner of this ever-flattening world.

TECHNOLOGY

The pace of technological advance today is unprecedented. Information. Computing. Communication. Transportation. Commerce. Entertainment. Food. Medicine. War. In every aspect of life, anything can become obsolete any time—possibilities appear and disappear swiftly, radically, and often without warning.

A very savvy and experienced restaurant general manager, who employs more than a dozen teens and early twenty-somethings, shared this with me: “Schedule adherence is always an issue among new young employees, but it’s getting much worse. More and more, we are having a terrible time with young waiters, kitchen support, and cleaners disappearing for ‘breaks’ in the middle of their shifts, not to mention calling out ‘sick’ too often, coming in late, and leaving before shifts are over.” To make matters worse, it seems that whenever

confronted about their timeliness by a manager, the young employees responded by pushing back. The general manager said, “They would always have an excuse and they’d be almost indignant about it. Every one of them is a ‘special case.’” She reports: When his manager told him he was taking too many breaks, one young waiter told his manager, “You have to understand. I have ADD so I am going to need some help staying focused.” Reprimanded about coming in late and leaving early, a young prep chef pushed back, “I’m home schooled, so I’m not really used to following a set schedule.” When confronted about regular last-minute absences, a young cleaner explained, “Sometimes, I just don’t feel up to working.”

INSTITUTIONAL INSECURITY

Gen Zers were small children on 9/11/01 and young teenagers when the economy collapsed in 2008. Theirs is a world threatened by terrorism and environmental cataclysm; in which the economy fluctuates wildly from boom to bust; governments sometimes shut down or run out of money; great companies conquer or fail or merge or continually downsize, restructure, and reengineer. Institutions in every domain have been forced into a constant state of flux just in order to survive and succeed in this constantly changing world. Gen Zers know enough to know that they can’t rely on institutions to be the anchors of their success and security.

THE INFORMATION ENVIRONMENT

Gen Zers are the first true “digital natives.” They learned how to think, learn, and communicate in a never-ending ocean of information. Theirs is an information environment defined by wireless Internet ubiquity, wholesale technology integration, infinite content, and immediacy. From a dangerously young age, their infinite access to information and ideas and perspectives—unlimited words, images, and sounds—is completely without precedent.

HUMAN DIVERSITY

In every dimension, the world is becoming more diverse and more integrated. Generation Z will be the most diverse workforce in

history, by far. That's true in terms of geographical point of origin, ethnic heritage, ability/disability, age, language, lifestyle preference, sexual orientation, color, size, and every other way of categorizing people. For one thing, the Generation Z workforce will include a global mix like never before. Equally important, Gen Zers see every single individual, with his or her own combination of background, traits, and characteristics, as his or her own unique diversity story. They value difference, uniqueness, and customization, most of all their own.

At the same time, Generation Z has been also been shaped by two very important micro-trends.

Helicopter-Parenting on Steroids. By the late 1990s, the Boomer-esque self-esteem-based “everyone gets a trophy” style parenting was morphing anew. The parents of these second-wave Millennials are mostly Gen Xers, who have had fewer children and typically have children at a later age than Boomers did. Xer parents have taken helicopter parenting to a whole new level. As one Gen Xer parent told me, “I don’t want to make my kid just feel like a winner no matter what happens. I want to do everything I can to set him up with every possible advantage to make sure he has a big head start in the real world so he can win for real.” Parents (and contingent authority figures) are so engaged in supervising and supporting children’s every move, validating differences, excusing (or medicating) their weaknesses, and setting them up with every material advantage possible. In China, where there are so many only children due to the longstanding “single child policy,” a similar trend in child rearing has yielded a phenomenon referred to by many as “Little Emperor Syndrome.”

Gen Zers grew up spending most of their time ensconced in their own highly customized safety zones—the private comfort of protection and resources provided by responsible adults who are always supposed to be looking out for them. Gen Zers have been insulated and scheduled and supervised and supported to a degree that no children or young adults have ever have been before. It’s been decades since children were told to “go outside and play.” Even school no longer functions—as it used to—as a robust quasi-public sphere for children to “scrimmage” real-life social

interaction. More Gen Zers per capita, by far, have been home-schooled than any generation since the rise of public schooling. Meanwhile, parental involvement in the classroom is more pervasive than ever before.

Gen Zers have grown accustomed to being treated almost as customers/users of services and products provided by authority figures in institutions, both in schools and in extracurricular activities, not to mention in their not infrequent experiences as actual customers.

As a result of all of this, relationship boundaries with authority figures are rather blurry for Gen Zers. They expect authority figures to be always in their corner, to set them up for success, and to be of service. They are often startled when authority figures see it otherwise.

In an aerospace company that hires hundreds of new young engineers every year, engineering group managers have been reporting that entry-level engineers quickly become frustrated and bored with repetitive tasks and narrow recurring responsibilities—so bored, in fact, that they are playing video games on their hand-held devices while working. The problem, of course, is that the work of entry-level engineers—like so much entry-level work—involves a lot of repetitive tasks and narrow recurring responsibilities. One of the engineering group managers said, “If we don’t actively keep them engaged in the work, they get distracted, and then they slow down and they also start making more mistakes.” Another group manager responded, “What are we supposed to do? I found it frustrating and boring when I had to do it, too. The work is the work. Should we have the older, more experienced engineers do all the grunt work so these first- and second-year engineers can do all the interesting work just so they will stay engaged? They are simply not qualified yet to do the more interesting work.”

Virtual Reality. It’s not just that they are always looking down at their hand-held devices. Gen Zers are always totally plugged in to an

endless stream of content and in continuous dialogue—through social media–based chatting and sharing and gaming—with peers (and practical strangers), however far away (or near) they might be. They are forever mixing and matching and manipulating from an infinite array of sources to create and then project back out into the world their own ever-changing personal montage of information, knowledge, meaning, and selfhood.

They try on personas virtually. Social media makes it easy to experiment with extreme versions of one persona or another and more or less (or much more) crass means of expression.

Gen Zers are perfectly accustomed to feeling worldly and ambitious and successful by engaging virtually in an incredibly malleable reality, where the stakes can seem all important one moment, until the game is lost and reset with the push of a button.

In a nutshell, Generation Z—East, West, North, and South—might be seen as a rising global youth-tide of “Little Emperors” who have been told their whole lives that “all styles are equally valid” and try to “fit in” with each other, in a never-ending digital dance, by projecting their uniquely diverse persona(s) in their own highly customized virtual peer ecosystem.

Trying to make the adjustment to “fitting in” in the very real, truly high-stakes, mostly adult world of the workplace is a whole new game for them. And it’s not really their kind of game. They are less inclined to try to “fit in” at work, and more inclined to try to make this “whole work thing” fit in with them.

Gen Zers Are the Ultimate Non-Conformists in an Age of Non-Conformism

If you think about it, soft skills are mostly about “fitting in”—making an effort to conform one’s attitude and behavior to established standards of conduct—in order to engage and work together effectively with others in a shared enterprise. Here’s the thing: Gen Zers are the ultimate non-conformists in an age of non-conformism.

For some time now, the pendulum of the zeitgeist has been swinging—more or less—away from conformism. Non-conformism is the belief that it is better for individuals to be unique and emphasize their individual differences from the group; conformism is the

belief that it is better for individuals to subordinate their individual differences and adopt the normative/dominant attitudes and behaviors accepted by the group in order to “fit in.” Of course, in any era, there are conformists and outliers, regardless of the zeitgeist. But the pendulum does swing one way or the other. Think of the relative conformism of the 1950s—when so many were trying to assimilate and come together after the global upheaval of World War II and its aftermath. The revolutionary non-conformity of the 1960s yanked the pendulum in the other direction, and it’s been swinging that way ever since. There have been ebbs in the swing—notably in the middle 1980s and the years immediately following 9/11. Still, the pendulum has kept swinging away from conformism and toward a broad cultural relativism—for many good reasons.

It is unfortunate that cultural relativism has been widely misunderstood and is often misappropriated—in a classic case of “*reductio ad absurdum*”—by those who wish to argue that no expectations of conformity to any norms of conduct are legitimate. This is the kind of thinking that leads to the wishful notion that “all styles are equally valid.”

The problem with that notion should be obvious: If everybody has his own style and some styles are mutually exclusive, then how are we all supposed to get along and work together in a shared enterprise? Try to imagine a communication system whereby everybody speaks his own language. Or picture a style of greeting strangers by punching them in the nose. These suggestions are ridiculous.

Yet, there are, in fact, many different ways to greet a stranger appropriately, depending on the community—or the time period—in which you live: Some people would bow. Others would shake hands. Some would hug. Others kiss on both cheeks. More and more people are bumping fists these days, partly due to the rise in awareness of especially pernicious contagious germs. Social norms are indeed highly variable depending on context: manners and etiquette, appropriate attire, hair styles, good grammar, even the very meaning of words in the same language. When I was working in Ireland in the 1980s, I asked a woman for a “ride” home. It turns out I should have asked for a “lift.” “Ride” meant something very different in Ireland from its most common meaning in the United States. Perhaps nowadays asking someone for a “ride” in Ireland would be less shocking,

with so much more shared global media. To wit, social norms also change over time.

It is easy to see why cultural relativism is so important to understand. It provides much of the intellectual underpinning behind some very important long-term cultural/social trends away from oppressively hierarchical systems and one-size-fits-all rules. Strict hierarchy and one-size-fits-all rules are extremely limiting. By design, they prescribe and proscribe the behavior of those who wish to belong. They constrain individual expression, creativity, and innovation. They exclude those outside the norm or unwilling to conform. Sometimes, they exclude people for very bad reasons, sometimes even with malice, as in, “No Irish Need Apply,” a sign common in U.S. workplaces in the middle to late 19th Century. Cultural relativism teaches us that differences in norms and values are not an indication of moral failure. There may be many different ways to think about or do things that are equally legitimate, on some fundamental level, even if they might be more or less appropriate in one culture versus another. Plus, being open to people with differing norms and values can open valuable new opportunities and possibilities. Still, none of this means that “all styles are equally valid.”

What it really means is that a style that may be appropriate in one time and place may not be appropriate in another. Any cultural anthropologist will tell you, the way to get along in a different culture is to adjust your attitude and behavior to what is appropriate in that place and time. That doesn’t mean you have to compromise your values or integrity or abandon your “true self.” It just means, if you want to develop good relationships with others and be effective, you have to be adaptable.

Dress codes offer a simple example. I often say, “If you don’t want to wear a uniform, you shouldn’t become a police officer, a firefighter, or a soldier.” Uniforms function to help police, firefighters, and soldiers to identify each other in a crowd; signal to outsiders the special role of those in uniform; provide important information such as name and rank; and have built-in equipment for doing the job. Uniforms can make a lot of sense in some jobs. So where do you draw the line? What about suits and ties for men? Skirts and jackets for women? When I was a young associate at a Wall Street law firm

in early 1990s, there was a serious broo-ha-ha among the young associates over women lawyers being required to wear skirts instead of pants. In the 1990s! The Gen X lawyers had a mini-revolt in favor of women being able to wear pantsuits. What rebels!

Some standards of conduct are more burdensome than others. Some are arbitrary, exclusionary, constraining, and worth resisting. Others are necessary, efficacious, and worth some inconvenience. How does one tell the difference? This question holds the key to bridging the soft skills gap with today's young talent.

The bottom line is this: You simply cannot have a functional workplace where everybody makes his or her own rules of conduct. Imagine an organization in which some employees support the mission, but others support the opposite mission. Where nobody agrees about who is in charge. Where people come and go whenever they feel like it. Where some people wear pantsuits and others wear bathing suits. Where people only work on the tasks and responsibilities they enjoy, insist on doing everything their own way, and only work with the people they like. Where meetings are held with no particular agenda and people are encouraged to blurt out whatever pops into their heads. Where people may or may not return each other's calls and emails. And so on.

Sometimes, conforming makes a lot of sense. Consider the essential soft skills such as the elements of professionalism, critical thinking, and followership. These are old-fashioned basics for a reason: They are time-tested best practices. They work.

Nobody needs Gen Zers to give up their uniqueness as individuals, their overall non-conformism, or adopt too many arbitrary, exclusionary, or overly constraining standards. But most managers would very much like Gen Zers to make some reasonable adaptations—to adjust at least some of their attitudes and behaviors to the realities of the adult workplace.

The Soft Skills Gap: The Missing Basics in Today's Young Talent

The problem is that Gen Zers are neither accustomed nor inclined to conform their attitudes and behavior for an institution or an authority figure (especially a non-parental authority figure).

Yes: They apply for the job. They accept the job. They might be excited about the job. They might want your approval. They usually are very keen to succeed. They definitely want the paycheck. Nonetheless, they usually do not realize just how much “just doing their own thing” makes their attitudes and behavior maladaptive in the real world of the workplace.

Most of them have no concept of the incredible power of the old-fashioned basics. They simply cannot fathom how much mastering the soft skills could increase their value as employees—not just right now, but for the remainder of their careers. Even if they do understand the value, most Gen Zers have no idea where to begin. They are usually just not that familiar with the old-fashioned basics—certainly they have very little experience. And like any skill, if one does not practice, one simply cannot master the essential soft skills.

Let’s go back to the “ur” conundrum of the soft skills gap: The promising new graduate with impressive freshly minted credentials—especially in-demand technical skills—who is nonetheless lacking in soft skills. If you interviewed a new young worker like this one privately, as I do all the time in my research, she would probably start looking down at her hand-held device and say something like this: “I have, like, the hard skills they need? So they, like, shouldn’t care so much about the soft skills. So I come in a little late or leave a little early or blow off the occasional meeting?? So what?! They should just, like, tell me what they need me to do?? Give me, like, the resources I need?? And I’ll, like, get the job done?? Why do they keep, like, insisting I do everything their way?? Their way, like, makes no sense?? My way is, like, so much easier?? And I’m, like, not afraid to say so!”

This young person is in a real quandary. It is a quandary shared by so many young workers, not to mention their co-workers and managers, everywhere I go. Today’s newest young people in the workplace have so much to offer. Yet too many of them are adding less value and undermining their own credibility because of their weakness in a whole bunch of old-fashioned basics.

What are the soft skills that young people are missing nowadays that the grown-ups really miss the most? There are so many of them. I’ve boiled them down to some key behaviors in three old-fashioned categories:

1. Professionalism,
2. Critical Thinking, and
3. Followership.

Let's take a closer look.

1. OLD-FASHIONED "PROFESSIONALISM"

Why don't young people today hold themselves to a higher standard when it comes to their attitude, work habits, and people skills?

Just like those of previous generations, Gen Zers' first real job usually coincides with their first real taste of adult freedom and autonomy. They embrace the freedom and autonomy of young adulthood, but often resist the attendant responsibility, discipline, and consistency. Why do they not, like those of previous generations, quickly realize that young adults need to make the adjustment to the grown-up world?

There are five reasons:

First, most Gen Zers are coming to you straight from school. If they have the most in-demand technical skills, then they are probably coming from college or university; maybe graduate school. That means they've probably become quite accustomed to a very luxurious form of pretend adulthood. I'm not blaming the institutions, but think for a moment about the college/university lifestyle from which your young employees come to you: Room and board are not only covered, but also arranged conveniently in close proximity to campus. College students are surrounded by their peers all the time, and often with intimate friends. College students have access to the resources of a major institution, but their only responsibilities are those of a valued customer. They have the support and services of staff, administration, and faculty, but their social status is determined by where they fit in with their peer group. Their "job" is a privilege for which someone else is paying (even if it is paid for by student loans, the tremendous cost of all this is deferred).

In exchange for all of this, one could make a strong argument that very little is required or expected of most young college/university students. Of course, there is substantial coursework. Still, they have very little supervision and a great deal of latitude in all manner of their personal habits and conduct. How many college students

come to work for you who have been in the habit of staying up too late hanging out with their friends? Skipping too many classes? Doing their work at the last minute . . . or not at all? Then expecting to receive an inflated grade? Or else their parents might call an administrator to insist on why the student's individual learning need requires a special accommodation, maybe an A-.

That takes me to the second reason: Being raised by those helicopter parents on steroids. Even after they arrive in the workplace, Gen Zers are still only a phone call (or text) away from their parents. It is unlikely that their parents are still enforcing a bedtime (perhaps that one is unfortunate), but I would bet some of your less than tardy Gen Zers may still be receiving an actual wake-up call from a parent in the morning. Even worse, maybe they are on their own now, for the first time, after being reared by parents (and their parenting poses) who did all the work for them of closely scheduling, managing, and supporting their every move. With their parents doing so much of the work, many Gen Zers never mastered the basics of taking care of themselves.

Third, the customization of everything has entrenched in Gen Zers a fundamental expectation that individual accommodation is the norm. Even if they, themselves, did not home-school, never had an ILP (an "individual learning plan," very common in schools nowadays), and never took meds for their special "diagnosis," they surely grew up among kids who did. And surely too many people told them each and all, way too often, "You are a special case." Meanwhile, there has long been a growing current of personal customization in every sphere where consumers dwell—especially media. Of course, all of this dovetails with the long-term zeitgeist swing toward relativism, that is, "all styles are equally valid."

Gen Zers' basic assumption is that they should be able to just "be themselves" and "express" their true identity at work, even if that might include stuff like failing to follow through on a day when they are "just not feeling it."

Fourth, when it comes to Gen Zers' people skills, it is easy to blame the fact that they have become so accustomed to electronic communication that they are losing the ability to communicate well in-person. That's surely a big part of the story. Communication practices are habits, and most Gen Zers are in the habit of remote informal

staccato and relatively low-stakes interpersonal communication because of their constant use of hand-held devices and social media and instant messaging. But there is much more going on here than Gen Zers staring at their devices too much, sending too many texts, and becoming increasingly less articulate because they have so little practice having real conversations. As a partner in a large accounting/consulting firm put it so well, “It’s not just how they communicate that is the problem. It’s what they have to say that really pisses me off!”

Fifth, much of what older, more experienced people might see as matters of professionalism—attitude, self-presentation, schedule, and interpersonal communication—Gen Zers are more likely to consider highly personal matters of individual style or preference and really none of their employer’s business.

An experienced nurse-manager on a busy hospital floor told me about her campaign to stop the new young nurses from using their hand-held devices at the same time they are administering care to patients. The manager and her nursing supervisors had been surprised and impressed to discover how often the young nurses on their devices were instant messaging with each other about the patient care. They were asking each other for—and giving to each other—regular advice and support throughout the day. Sometimes, they were searching the Internet for clinical information, often reaching out on social media to other nurses who were not even co-workers. One supervisor was startled to discover a young nurse having a real-time video conference on her hand-held device with her friend, a nurse in India. “She was standing outside this patient’s room, discussing the case with her friend in India. When I asked her about it later, she said this friend had been a mentor to her in school and she felt like she didn’t have anyone here yet she could confide in.” By the way, the nurse-manager hastened to add that the young nurse in question was NOT herself of Indian descent. She went on, “They spent a lot of time on Facetime together. She was more comfortable getting answers from her friend in India than turning to any of us for help.”

2. OLD-FASHIONED "CRITICAL THINKING"

Why are today's young people not better at "thinking on their feet"—learning, problem solving, and decision making in their own heads without a device?

What managers tell us regularly in our interviews is summed up well by one senior-level nurse-manager with more than three decades of experience managing young nurses: "They just don't think on their feet the way they used to. They know a lot. But if they are not sure of something, they go right to their device. If there is not an obvious online resource to answer their question immediately, then they turn right to another person—whoever is available—another nurse, a doctor, or anyone they run into next. What they never seem to do is just stop and think. They can often find the 'right' answer, but often they don't fully understand the answer they've found. It's not just a lack of experience. It's a different way of thinking—shallow and wide, instead of digging deep. They don't puzzle through the problem, and they don't stop and reflect on why the right solution is the right solution."

As they become adult players in the real world of work, why don't they stop and think on their feet, puzzle through problems, and reflect more on the best solutions?

Of course, there is one big reason: They have never had the need. Today's information environment offers infinite answers to every question under the sun, and they've always had powerful, easy-to-use information technology at their fingertips all the time.

On this subject, I often remind older, more experienced people: "Do you remember when we used to have conversations with very smart people about meaningful things that sometimes ended with a giant chorus of 'I don't know,' 'I don't know,' 'I don't know,' and 'Neither do I'? Or maybe you remember having those 'I wonder if ____' conversations with yourself." Are you old enough to remember those conversations? Well, Gen Zers are not! They have never had that conversation—with themselves or with anyone else. As long as they can remember, when they reach that point in a conversation—"I wonder if ____"—they (or someone else) would go immediately to a hand-held device to find answers or a short related video or a giant detour that distracts them from the original inquiry altogether. Or they would ask the ultimate authority on everything—their parents.

With computers, content providers, and grown-ups to do so much of their thinking for them, Gen Zers have hardly any experience digging

deep, puzzling, and reflecting. They have a built-in expectation that learning curves are instant. They think of learning in small increments, filling skill and knowledge gaps as they run across them. The long learning curve is a rarity and a bit of a mystery to Gen Z.

When it comes to the learning habits of Gen Zers, many experts blame changes in the emphasis of the education system at all levels: Teaching to the test has become too common. It is all too rare that schools are teaching students to assemble and evaluate evidence, construct multiple competing arguments and understand multiple sides in a debate, untangle seeming inconsistencies, and wrestle with complexity. In college, university, and graduate school, those learning technical skills are likely to continue throughout their education on that “learning for the test” pedagogical trajectory. Those being schooled in the liberal arts often err all the way on the other end of the spectrum. Young liberal arts graduates may become so convinced that “all styles are equally valid” they have difficulty vetting information for legitimacy, use value, and broader implications in the real world.

This takes me to another disturbing factor in today’s information environment: the proliferation of half-baked experts spewing content on just about everything. Nowadays, you can find an expert to support nearly any proposition: “My expert says that two plus two equals five.” What is one supposed to do with information like that? Yet information like that is everywhere. The impact of this factor goes way beyond the common Internet search misfire in which Gen Zers find the answer, but the answer is “two plus two equals five.” Far more damaging, the organic pluralism of the Internet has led to a false sense of intellectual pluralism, a world in which people think, “Maybe two plus two does equal five.” This has led to profound distortions in the public discourse—in all media—in which pure fiction, gut feelings, and opinions are given the same weight as well-researched facts, rigorous analysis, and strongly constructed arguments. This phenomenon dovetails with the swing of the zeitgeist pendulum toward cultural relativism more generally and the weakening of institutional credibility. After all, what authority figure in what institution has the staying power to say, definitively, that “two plus two must equal four”?

Maybe we shouldn’t be so shocked when Gen Zers sometimes tell us, “It appears that two plus two may actually equal five.” After all, in virtual reality, this equation probably has very few negative consequences. It’s only now that they are entering the real world of

the workplace where, suddenly, their lack of skill and experience in the basics of critical thinking can have very real consequences.

3. OLD-FASHIONED "FOLLOWERSHIP"

Why don't young people today "respect authority"? By the time they were growing up, "Question Authority!" was not a slogan anymore but a hackneyed cliché. So maybe it is too easy to explain away Gen Zers' seeming disregard for joining something larger and making personal sacrifices for the greater good.

Why don't Gen Zers value citizenship, service, and teamwork? Four reasons:

First, they think like customers. Yes, they know that their employers are the ones paying them. But still, they look at their relationship with any established institution, no matter how small or how large, and they think: "What do you have for me? And what currency do I need to use to get what I want/need from you?"

It's not that most Gen Zers are not feeling very fortunate just to be employed. They are. However, that gratitude is not bottomless nor is it without conditions. They are grateful to have a source of income and perhaps some benefits. They are grateful to be accepted, validated, wanted. They are grateful to have access to a hub of resources from which to acquire experience, training, networking; a place to be, with computers and phones and bathrooms; maybe a kitchen or a gym; maybe some office supplies. They are grateful for the future doors that might be opened by this current job. But let's not get carried away. It's not like they are likely to be here for a long time anyway.

Gen Zers may seem clueless about a lot of things, but they know very well that they are much less likely than those of prior generations to make long-term uninterrupted careers with one organization. They are also less likely to be exclusively employed by one organization at any given time. And they are less likely to work full-time and on-site. They are less likely to trust the "system" or the organization to take care of them and, thus, less likely to show what looks like loyalty—a desire to belong, deference to authority, a willingness to make short-term sacrifices for the good of the whole, and an eagerness to contribute regardless of credit or rewards.

Second is the way they think about their relationships with co-workers not in positions of authority: Gen Zers are simply not accustomed to sustained interactions with a group of "peers" who are

- ◆ Not all roughly their own age, and
- ◆ Not relationships of their own choosing, and
- ◆ Not refereed constantly, and
- ◆ Not also engaging with them in a parallel conversation through social media.

These relationships are real-world, involve a high degree of inter-dependency in pursuit of concrete goals every step of the way, and the stakes are high. Adults are in the workplace to earn their livelihoods. So there are lots of opportunities to disappoint and/or be disappointed.

Third is how they look at individuals in positions of authority—especially authority figures in institutions in which they are constituents. Once again, they think like customers. In this case, specifically, your customer!

Remember, Gen Zers love grown-ups! They have been and remain closer to their parents—and their parenting “posses”—than any other generation has ever been! The problem is that their parents, teachers, and counselors have always treated them like “little emperors.” It’s even worse if they are coming to you straight from a college or university, where Gen Zers were, in fact, actually the customers of the staff and faculty who were their proximate authority figures. Gen Zers look at older, more experienced people and presume on a very deep level that you are there to take care of them. Surely you wouldn’t be interacting with them if you did not want to help them meet their basic needs and wants. They expect you to greet them warmly, make them feel comfortable, set them up for success, provide them with the resources they need, help them avoid pitfalls, and give them lots of encouragement. Isn’t that what grown-ups do?

Gen Zers don’t typically look at other people in the workplace trying to figure out “their proper place” in the context—how to adapt in order to “fit in” with others who clearly have longstanding relationships and a well-established course of dealing. Instead, they look at you—and everyone else in the room—and think: “I wonder what role you might play in this chapter of my life story?”

Fourth, Gen Zers are not planning to follow the old-fashioned career path, so they figure they are probably just passing through your organization anyway. Why go to a whole lot of trouble adapting to your approach to how they should manage themselves when they

won't even be here that long? They are thinking: "Seriously, what am I supposed to do? Adapt my schedule and work habits and style and attitude for every new job?" Even if they could be convinced to adapt for an employer eventually, they are very unlikely to be ready to do it from the get-go, certainly not early in their first or second real jobs.

One large retail chain I know has a longstanding tradition of involving retail sales personnel in all aspects of the business, ranging from creative work, such as providing input on marketing, to janitorial work, such as cleaning the bathrooms in the store; and everything in between, including buying, inventory management, accounting, legal, HR, safety, loss prevention, and you name it. An executive in the company explained to me: "Of course, we have all those roles in the company: We have a professional marketing team, buyers, inventory managers, accountants, lawyers, and so on. We do use a janitorial service; they are not on their own cleaning the store. But we have a deep commitment to involving the store personnel in everything we do. We talk a lot about cross-training and teamwork. We do it because they are the face of the company to our customers and we want them to own everything in the organization." The executive added: "That's also one of the ways we recruit internally for corporate positions—not only store managers or district or regional, but also for other jobs throughout the organization." What's the problem? According to this executive, "The new young people only want to do what they want to do. They want to sit on the marketing panels, but they don't want to clean the store or change over inventory because those things happen after hours and seem less glamorous. They beg for the high-profile, fun, or interesting projects, but they complain bitterly when they are asked to help clean the store or change over inventory. Quite a few of them outright refuse to do it. Quite a few have been fired or have quit over it." As a result, the executive concluded, "We are currently rethinking our whole approach to these cross-training/teamwork projects."

Face the Hard Realities of the Soft Skills Gap

Maybe you are thinking: “Wait a minute. I know some young people who are great at professionalism, critical thinking, and followership!” Of course you do! And I do, too! It seems like now is a good time for me to make it clear that, even nowadays, there are many young people with excellent soft skills. It’s just that there are not enough of them—it’s a supply and demand thing. That’s especially true among young people with in-demand technical skills, among whom there is a shortage to begin with. Over and over again, we hear from leaders and managers at all levels that the soft skills gap is not going away. If anything, it is getting worse. And it’s not just about the youngest people in the workplace. Overall, this gap has been developing for decades. The costs are great, the opportunity costs are even greater, and yet the problem stands right there in plain sight, not even hiding. Why does this problem evade solutions?

There are three reasons:

First, you cannot hire your way around the soft skills gap, at least not entirely. If you are hiring for a low-supply high-demand technical-skill job, you probably won’t be able to select out all those with weak soft skills. If you are hiring for non-technical jobs, then soft skills are among the only criteria, making the demand for those with strong soft skills very high, despite the low supply.

Second, soft skills cannot be spoon fed to young people or forced upon them. Soft skills are all about the regulation of the self. They must be fully embraced in order to be learned. You have to help Gen Zers to care enough about soft skills that their self-building drive is turned on and focused on mastering the missing soft skills.

Third, you probably don’t have a lot of extra time or resources to pull your Gen Zers out of work and send them for soft skills training, or to create your own Boot Camp (like the Marines) to break down new workers and systematically rebuild them. If you are like most managers, then you deal with soft skill gap issues when they arise: when an employee is late, or inappropriate, or makes an error in judgment, or there are conflicts on the team, or there is a bad customer service interaction. You deal with the problem. Maybe you note the issue. Maybe if it is a recurring ongoing issue with an employee, you really drill down and try to deal with the problem. In any

case, unless you are the rare exception, your approach to dealing with the soft skills gap is probably ad hoc, hit or miss.

Senior leaders in U.S. intelligence agencies have been grappling with the impact of steadily rising zero- to five-year employee turnover rates among new young intelligence professionals. This is a particularly pressing issue because intelligence agencies make an unusually large investment in new hires due to the elaborate selection criteria, the need to gain security clearance, the extensive requisite training, and the sensitive nature of the work and information to which employees are often privy. So it is a big problem when that investment walks out the door before the new young professionals have a chance to contribute to the mission. One intelligence official told me: “No matter how hard we try to develop a profile to help us select for retention—to predict who will be longer-term employees—it just doesn’t work. We used to be able to do it. But it doesn’t work anymore. Maybe there is no ‘type’ anymore who stays or a ‘type’ who goes. I’m afraid that the young people joining now who serve long-term will end up that way, not by deciding that today, but instead by deciding every few months or years to not leave just yet. We are making a lot of adjustments. But how are we supposed to identify the right high potentials to start developing for new leadership roles? It makes succession planning very difficult. Too often, those identified for promotion end up deciding to leave, taking with them the huge investment we’ve made in them.”

In our training seminars, when I start talking about these difficult realities, managers start nodding their heads and listening carefully. I often say, “I don’t have any easy answers because easy answers work only in fantasyland. What I do have is a lot of difficult partial solutions.” That’s when managers in the real world know that I really have something to offer them. All I do in my seminars is teach managers how to imitate the best practices that the most effective

managers are doing successfully every single day. How are the most effective managers bridging the soft skills gap every day?

Here's the number one thing they have in common: They recognize the incredible power of soft skills—in themselves and in others and in organizations and teams. They understand what can go wrong when individuals or teams or organizations have big gaps in their soft skills. Even more important, they understand how much can go so incredibly right—the extraordinary potential for added value—as a result of unlocking the power of soft skills.

