

1 Meet Your New Workforce

Fifty years ago, television depicted the working family in simplistic form. Each morning, a straight white male kissed his dutiful wife as she handed him his briefcase and sent him off to work at an office job, surrounded by other white men, occasionally interrupted by the single Gal Friday. Meanwhile, Mom stayed home to care for the house and raise the couple's precocious children, helped from time to time by a housekeeper or handy man, often the only characters of color seen on television.

That classic television script persisted well beyond the years when women joined the workforce. Over time, the media slowly integrated racial and cultural diversity into its prime time programming, but the male business boss remained the go-to script. Media reflected the stereotypes, world view, and likenesses of the people who held power and sway. The workforce the media depicted in that era put the "white" in white-collar jobs. Women in the workforce were an anomaly. The roles depicting blue-collar service and domestic workers tended to go to people of color. Even as we watched, laughed, and took some familiar comfort in these depictions, we had more than a hunch that television didn't reflect our reality.

In fact, reality was quite drastically different. Women were 34% of the workforce in 1950, a number that rose to 38% in 1960, 43% in 1970, and sits at 47% today where it is expected to remain.¹ Unfortunately, the Bureau of Labor Statistics didn't document data on nonwhite workers until the 1980s.² Still, many assumed – and

built social structures around – a factory default setting of a straight white male worker supported by a caregiving wife. There's nothing quite like a pandemic to finally blow up that assumption once and for all.

The diverse workforce is not coming; it is here. That, no doubt, becomes more and more obvious every time you hold a team meeting. The faces around the table – or in the Zoom video windows – probably don't look much like you or each other. That demographic diversity can be challenging when it contradicts your comfortable norms and usual assumptions. If there's no factory default setting for the workforce, then there's certainly not one for leadership, either.

It was never safe to assume that workers who looked like you shared your motivations and experiences. Now, those assumptions are an occupational liability. Our workforce is a *mélange* of life experiences and rich perspectives that can make our work more enriching and more valuable. Our workforce, and now its leadership, is starting to look like the markets we serve. To tap that value, you're going to have to see – *really see* – the new workforce. Let's take a closer look at today's workforce.

A Workforce Without a Majority

At first blush, the workforce, in the United States, still looks pretty white, but trend lines make it clear that we are on the cusp of change. The US population is more racially and ethnically diverse than at any time in our country's history, data from the 2020 US Census shows,³ yet 78% of the workforce is white, according to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics. That white majority will ebb come 2045 when whites will make up less than 50% of the workforce, Hispanics nearly 25%, Blacks 13%, nearly 8% Asian, and almost 4% will be multiracial.⁴

So, what's driving the big change, you might ask? There is no racial majority in the 18 and younger cohort,⁵ the very people who are filling jobs today and will continue to fill jobs in the future. Within 10 years, in fact, Gen Z workers (those born in or after 1997) will fill 30% of the workforce. This racial reordering has given rise to the "People of the Global Majority,"⁶ a reference to the global market that now comprises more Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) than whites.

Meet the Pan-Generational Workforce

The influx of young workers came as some Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964) were staying in the workforce longer. After a pandemic-driven uptick in retirements in 2020,⁷ some Boomers came back to the workforce. Some, spurred by the existential crisis of the pandemic, retired early. Others pushed off retirement for the economic stability that comes with work. And many of these older workers simply want to remain productive longer. And why not? Lifespans have doubled in the hundred years from 1920 to 2020.⁸

Curiously, these bookends of the pan-generational workforce have rather similar demands of their workplaces. Among Gen Z workers, 40% say “flexibility and adaptability” are critical to their organization.⁹ At the other end of the age spectrum, Boomers are also seeking a flexible work schedule (79%) or reduced hours (57%).¹⁰ Providing that flexibility to older employees is critical to maintaining and passing down institutional knowledge. Employers are inviting retired employees back to work as knowledge experts (21%), mentors to younger employees (16%), or to handle critical client relationships (14%).¹¹

These are just a few of the benefits of a blended workforce. In the world of work that requires continuous learning and adaptation, an age-diverse workforce has a distinct advantage over a singularly young or singularly older workforce because our brains develop different capacities at different ages. A 2015 research study by Dr. Laura T. Germine of Massachusetts General Hospital and Dr. Joshua K. Hartshorne at MIT found a range of cognitive peaks across the lifespan.¹² Fluid intelligence – the ability to respond quickly – peaks earlier in life and crystallized intelligence – the accumulation of facts and knowledge – peaks later. Things like vocabulary and ability to read emotions peak in the 40s and 50s. A pan-generational – or age-diverse – workforce, then, enables all employees to benefit from these developmental peaks. (See “Managing the Multigenerational Workforce.”)

To be clear, however, the pan-generational workforce isn't exactly pan-global. In some parts of the world, aging societies are facing labor shortages as birth rates plummet. Elsewhere, youth booms are leading to labor surpluses. This uneven distribution of talent begs for a location-independent workforce to meet labor needs around the world.

Managing the Multigenerational Workforce

We are shaped, undoubtedly, by the historical and cultural context of our upbringing, a thought that ought to stay top of mind when the urge strikes to whisper under our breath, “Okay, Boomer,” “kids today,” or simply “Gen Z!” With four generations actively participating in today’s workforce, mindfulness of generational context is essential for empathetic leadership.

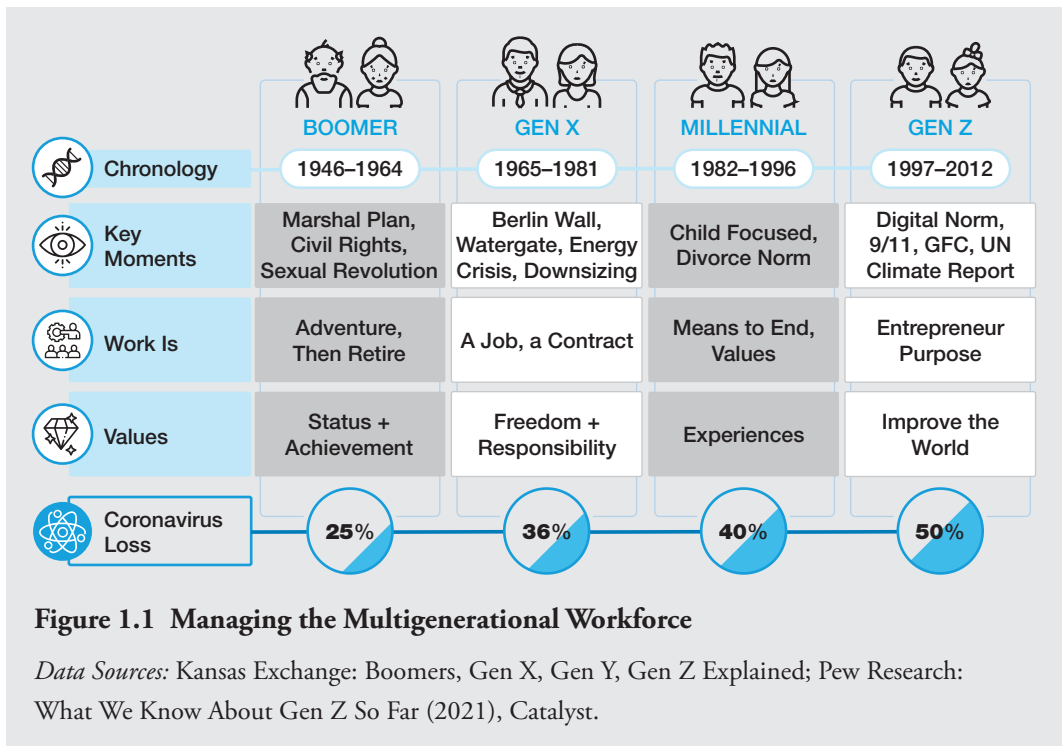
Born into a period of high public investment, Boomers pushed against their parents’ WW2-born conformity to experiment with a sexual revolution and to march for civil rights. For many, if not most, work was an escalator to status and reward; the ultimate achievement was a comfortable retirement.

Generation X was born into global chaos. In the years between 1965 and 1981, the Berlin Wall came down, a global energy crisis and rampant inflation reframed consumerism, and corporate profiteering shut factories and sent jobs offshore. Watching waves of layoffs, Gen X learned to never fully trust the stability of their jobs, yet remained constantly connected to work via email and mobile phones.

The social contract most at risk for Millennials, those born between 1982 and 1996, was the marriage license. Divorce was the norm and parents held their fractured families together by focusing on their children. Accustomed to being the center of attention, Millennials are more likely to expect the job to bend toward them and use their work as an expression of their values.

Born into a post-9/11 world (between 1997 and 2012), Generation Z does not know a time without global conflict or a time without smartphones. They are entrepreneurial, purpose driven, and firm in their desire to improve the world. They have also been disproportionately impacted, economically and emotionally, by the coronavirus pandemic.

Quickly, then, it becomes clear that a one-size-fits-all approach to leadership is not effective among so many differing experiences. On the flip side, however, these different perspectives make for a dynamic, learning-centric workforce.



Women Hold Up Half the Workforce

Cutting across race, ethnicity, and age is gender, and it is here that we see some of the most profound changes in the composition of the workforce.

Faced with labor shortages in 1950s China, Mao Zedong famously noted that “women hold up half the sky,” spurring women to enter the workforce on equal footing with men. Since the 1970s, nearly all the gains to the US middle class have come from women entering the workforce.¹³ And by the first quarter of 2019, women became the larger share of the university-educated workforce for the first time in history.¹⁴ “In the next few years, two women will earn a college degree for every man, if the trend continues,” Douglas Shapiro, executive director of the research center at the National Student Clearinghouse, told the *Wall Street Journal*.¹⁵ In fact, more women than men have earned bachelor’s degrees since 1982, master’s degrees

since 1986, and doctoral degrees since 2006.¹⁶ That is a robust talent pipeline of 13 million more university-educated women than university-educated men over the last few decades.

Adding well-educated women to the workforce has significant and universal benefits, especially now as we tackle thorny challenges from climate change to income inequality to navigating the Covid-19 pandemic. This challenging future requires a different style of working, one that is less about individuals executing tasks in isolation and more about collaborative exploration. The collective intelligence needed to tackle complex challenges especially requires the input of women. In the cross-disciplinary paper titled “Quantifying Collective Intelligence in Human Groups,” coauthor Anita Williams Woolley spoke to the advantages of women’s participation in workgroups: “Having more women in the group raises collective intelligence, and in the supplement, we specifically compare face-to-face and online collaborators and find few differences in the elements that lead to collective intelligence.”¹⁷

Yet despite the dramatic increase in the population of university-educated women and the clear benefit they bring to much-needed collective intelligence, women continue to be underrepresented in the higher echelons of corporate America. At the largest (by market capitalization) and arguably most influential companies in the United States – technology companies including Apple, Amazon, Facebook, Alphabet (Google), and Microsoft – employee gender in 2020 skewed more than 72% male.¹⁸ Across the S&P 500, women account for only 7.8% of CEO roles.

Yet even as women prove valuable in the workforce, we are losing their contribution, largely due to the burden of caregiving and the lack of childcare infrastructure in the United States. We lost nearly three million women from the workforce at the height of the pandemic¹⁹ and 1.5 million women have yet to return to work.²⁰ Many of those women are moms or otherwise have caregiving responsibilities for their families. Prior to the pandemic, 70% of working moms participated in the labor force, according to data from the US Department of Labor. In fact, the Massachusetts Taxpayers Foundation, a nonpartisan public policy organization, found that due to inadequate childcare infrastructure the state loses \$2.7 billion dollars a year, a hefty combination of \$812 million in lost productivity from higher turnover costs, \$1.7 billion in lost wages from employees who miss work and reduce their hours, and \$188 million in lost employment tax income.²¹

And make no mistake, those working caregivers have their hands full. The folks at grape juice giant Welch Foods commissioned a study that found that moms (usually) spend 98 hours a week in caregiving. That's the equivalent of *more than two jobs* before she even clocks in for work.²² Women (and sometimes men) have been juggling these dual responsibilities with varying degrees of success. The pandemic gave employers a clearer view of that balancing act when Zoom opened a window into workers' homes. Now able to see that caregiving responsibilities are the norm and not the exception for women at work, smart businesses can follow the lead of the really great companies that have made caregiving support – from on-site daycare to flexible work hours for caregiving employees – a part of their organizations.

Clearly, addressing the lack of childcare infrastructure in the United States is a valuable and, ultimately, profitable problem to solve. In a *Washington Post* article titled "Putting Parents First Could be the Secret to a Successful Return-To-Office," parenting columnist Alyssa Rosenberg argues that offering on-site childcare may be the one perk that could motivate parents to return to the office. She cites as examples Goldman Sachs and Patagonia, which both offer on-site childcare and report lower rates of employee turnover amidst the Great Resignation, turnover that can cost twice the annual worker salary.²³

Our ability to address this challenge will determine our ability to meet what many predict will be an ongoing labor shortage. The rise of women in the workforce has been met with a decline in male labor force participation, and not just as a matter of averages. Men are dropping out of the labor market and more than half of unemployed men in their 30s have criminal records.²⁴ Most likely, these men aren't hardened criminals. The blot on many a young man's record is conviction for possession of even a small amount of marijuana. Recognizing the albatross that is a federal marijuana conviction, President Joe Biden pardoned all federal offenses of simple possession of marijuana, then took the further step of urging state governors to do the same for state marijuana possession crimes.²⁵ Even as more than half of the United States have eased marijuana laws, only a small handful of states enable those previously convicted of cannabis-related crimes to petition to have their records cleared.

Overall, participation by men in the labor force has declined by 10% over the last 50 years, due in large part to our failure to provide pathways for men from manual to cognitive labor as our economy shifted from a manufacturing to a knowledge base. Looking forward, the picture is even more bleak. Women now

outnumber men in university populations, earning more degrees than men in every category. We need both women and men, albeit barred by different obstacles, to participate more fully and more flexibly in the workforce to address the growing worker shortages.

Simply put, given the labor force shortages that show no signs of abating, we need to find ways to engage everyone in the workforce. In the United States, we need to figure out how to construct a caregiving infrastructure – a concept that has eluded us even though it has been bridged by nearly all our peers in the developed world. We need to expunge the records for minor offenses that are barring some men from engaging in the workforce. We need more pathways to skills training beyond two- and four-year programs that are inaccessible to some men and women while finding ways to engage more men into and through higher education to help them transition to the workforce we need.

The LGBTQ+ Workforce

Perhaps the most rapidly transforming demographic marker in the workforce is gender and sexual identity. Once firmly defined as fixed and binary, gender and sexual orientation are increasingly understood to be fluid and to exist on a continuum. For example, 17% of Generation Z in the United States report being part of the LGBTQ+ community²⁶ and of that group, 25% report that they expect to change their gender identity in their lifetime.²⁷ The number of those who identify as something other than cisgender – where one’s personal identity and gender correspond with their sex as assigned at birth – and heterosexual is nearly doubling every generation. (See “Navigating Gender: From Fixed to Fluid.”)

There is no doubt that changing attitudes about gender have sparked culture wars in pockets of the United States and around the world, making it dangerous, still, to be gay, nonbinary, or transgender. But increasingly, acceptance is being codified in law. The US Department of State now allows passport applicants to select “X” as a nonbinary gender distinction²⁸ and currently 21 US states and the District of Columbia legally recognize nonbinary gender designations, up from 11 states in 2019, as do more than 20 countries around the world.²⁹

Navigating Gender: From Fixed to Fluid

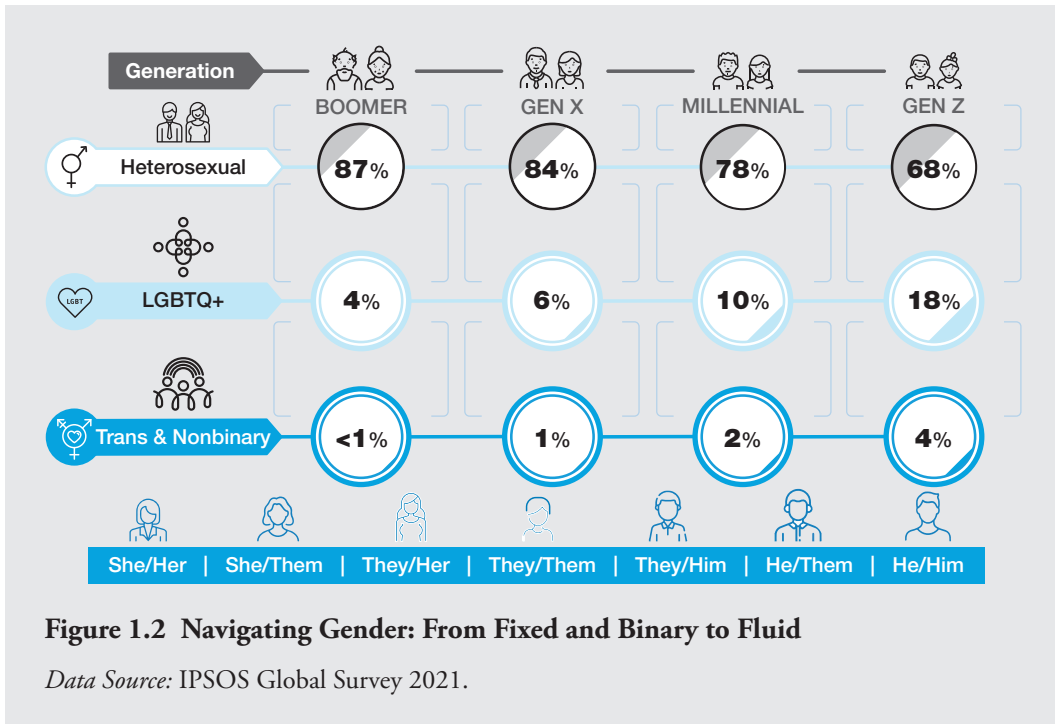
On January 11, 2003, Alex MacFarlane, an Australian from Perth, got the passport they had been pursuing. Biologically intersex, MacFarlane believed that neither M nor F was an accurate representation of their sex. The sex designation in MacFarlane's passport now reads X. Twenty years on, and with our understanding of gender as far more fluid than binary, 21 US states and the District of Columbia allow a third designation. As of April 2022, the third option was made available on all United States passports, and 15 other countries from Argentina to Australia to India offer the third distinction.

In short order, gender went from fixed and binary to fluid. Globally, the rates of people identifying as either nonbinary gender or as members of the LGBTQ+ community are doubling with every passing generation.

In a June 2020 6–3 ruling, the US Supreme Court found that federal law bans employment discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act, which made it illegal for employers to discriminate in employment because of a person's sex.³³

Even with legal protections, nonbinary, gay, and transgender workers need the empathetic support of their employers, even as they themselves adjust to a New Now. Fixed gender markers are a thing of the past. It's time to end the so-called "pink tax" that puts higher prices on products and services such as razors and dry cleaning when they are marketed and sold to women. All-gender bathrooms have supplemented or even replaced men's and women's restrooms. Using preferred pronouns is a sign of acceptance and inclusion. (Pro tip: use "they" as the default in your communications and you'll have everyone covered.)

(Continued)



Despite dramatic shifts in social acceptance, including full marriage equality in the United States in 2015, still 46% of LGBTQ+ people say that they are closeted at work, according to the Human Rights Campaign, a number only marginally better than the 50% of people who in 2008 said they were closeted at work.³⁰ This lack of disclosure – and the further complexity of intersectionality – makes it challenging to collect meaningful statistics on LGBTQ+ workers.

Still, the speed at which gender norms have changed in the United States and around the world has been unmatched by virtually any other shifting societal norm. About 1.6% of all adults identify with a gender other than the one they were assigned at birth, according to Pew Research Center, and 5% of Americans ages 18 to 29 – your current and future workforce – identify with a gender other than the one that was assigned at birth.³¹ The decision to be open about one’s changing gender identity, for example, is fraught with risk.

You might be wondering, then, how shifting norms (with or without legal protections) will affect the workplace and allow your LGBTQ+ colleagues to contribute most fully to a collaborative team. Now is the time to lean into your

empathy to support your people in their full experience and struggles. Awareness, openness, transparency, and acceptance go a long way to create a workplace and team dynamic that engages workers of every background. That, and younger workers, more than half of whom are in the Gen Z and Millennial cohorts, believe that fixed and binary gender markers – from pronouns to bathrooms – are irrelevant in work.³²

The Case for a Multidimensional and Diverse Workforce

It's a simple, identifying trait: about 1–2% of all people have red hair. Hair color, gender identity, sexual identity, right- and left-hand dominance, neurodiversity, and other factors are simply part of the rich fabric that makes your workforce and our society so interesting and capable. As we drive deeper into the digital economy, humans will continue to be the greatest source of value creation. Little optimizes the investment in humans more than diversity in the workforce. Multidimensional, diverse workforces make organizations stronger and better equipped to meet the demands of their markets and communities by every measure: innovation,³⁴ financial returns,³⁵ and employee engagement.³⁶

As leaders seek to build value of all kinds (not just financial), we need to do a better job of tapping into a diverse workforce and creating the conditions for people to thrive. Diversity doesn't mean simply adding more women, more people of color, more LGBTQ+ people to our employment rolls. We need more than a checkbox diversity. We need to fundamentally shift organizational structures and cultures to fully embrace and capture the benefits of the diverse perspectives. As Liz Fosslien, Head of Content and Communications at human resource company Humu, posted on LinkedIn, "Diversity is having a seat at the table, inclusion is having a voice, and belonging is having that voice be heard. A sense of belonging is not the same as feeling similar to everyone else. Instead, it's when you feel safe and valued for embracing what makes you different."³⁷ Belonging, then, is critical to unlocking the power of diversity. We must create work environments, structures, processes, recruitment strategies, retention plans, and talent mobility that shatter old stereotypes to build workforce structures that maximize *all* human potential. Smart leaders embrace these shifts and adapt their leadership style not just to accommodate them, but to celebrate the perspectives and experiences they bring to every workday.

Generational Empathy

We must embrace our diverse workforce in the context of each of our workers' experiences. The Gen Z worker entering the workforce today, for example, comes with a dramatically different set of life experiences than a Gen Xer. For all practical purposes, Gen Z workers have never known a world without conflict, coming of age in a post-9/11 fight against global terrorism. They've also never known a world without readily available mobile internet, where any question or curiosity is quickly met with a flood of information, media, and social commentary.

The result of this continuous, high-impact change is a Gen Z worker who appreciates the fragility of life because they have grown up in near-continuous trauma. (See "Meet Generation Z.") This generation struggles with stress and depression at higher rates than previous generations.³⁸ The effect is a young workforce that wants more purpose and less workplace politics, a young workforce that has agency and little patience for command-and-control leadership. They have seen existential challenges, from climate change to educational debt to gun safety, merely kicked down the road by other generations and left for them to solve.

Contrast that with the Boomer generation that came of age in the Age of Aquarius and the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. These people came into the workforce in the era of 1980s Wall Street "Greed is Good" and "Me Generation" thinking. Work, as much as any other factor, was intrinsic to personal identity and value.

Generation X, a cohort of latchkey kids who were more likely than those in prior generations to witness their parents' divorce and watch them lose jobs amid a wave of offshoring, lost trust in institutions, something that has only grown with each subsequent generation. Gen Xers entered the workforce when mobile phones, email, and internet were standard workplace tools; they are the first "always on" generation.

One generational experience is not *better* than another; it's just different. And that difference suggests that in order to lead well, we must adapt to and embrace those differences. We are not moving fast enough to leverage this diversity. Researchers at McKinsey have been tracking the impact of diversity in the workforce since 2014, gathering data from more than 1,000 large companies across 15 countries. Without question, the research shows that "the most diverse companies are now more likely than ever to outperform less diverse peers on profitability."³⁹

Meet Generation Z

By 2030, Generation Z – those born between 1997 and 2012 – will fill more than 30% of all jobs, and the experiences of their still young lives will make an indelible mark on the workplace.

At every stage of their lives, Gen Z has met with trauma and uncertainty. They learned to walk in the shadow of 9/11, headed to middle school amid a global financial meltdown, came of age as the United Nations declared a climate crisis, and graduated to virtual *Pomp and Circumstance* as the Covid-19 pandemic cast a cloud over their early careers. Active shooter drills were as much a part of their curriculum as reading, writing, and arithmetic, and they have *never* known a world that was not, somewhere, at war. Likely it is because of these experiences that Gen Z also exhibits higher instances of mental illness, especially anxiety and depression, than any prior generation.

Nevertheless, they are perhaps the most resilient, racially diverse, and well-educated generation we have known. Living in an eddy of change, Generation Z survives – and even thrives – with an agency not often seen in young workers. They are unwilling to compromise their values for a paycheck, and they have a burning desire to improve the world that was handed to them.

Given these life experiences, Gen Z isn't one to coddle, or even harness. Rather, channel your empathy, provide direction, channel their passion, and get out of the way.



Figure 1.3 Meet Generation Z

Nonetheless, the report also bemoans the “slow progress” of companies toward building diverse and inclusive workforces. This, though, is changing rapidly, too. Indicators including the Fortune 500 Measure Up⁴⁰ and the Edelman Trust Barometer⁴¹ point to changing sentiment among investors who now demand diversity not as an HR strategy, but as an essential business driver.

Your experiences, identity, beliefs, and perspectives may or may not be shared with your workforce. To be sure, there is opportunity in honing your ability to empathize and learn from those who are different from you and from your wildly diverse customer base. The more you can make the inside of your company look like the markets you serve, the better positioned you will be.

The New Now of work is reshaping every aspect of the global workforce, and it requires organizations and employees alike to rethink every aspect of work from the demographic composition of the labor force to how we measure the meaning and outcomes of jobs. What’s changing? Simply everything.

Let’s keep going, then.

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