Technology & the Future of Work: Next-Gen Perspectives
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As a consultant on generational diversity, I spend much of my time busting the various myths about millennials and Gen Zs: Yes, young people do actually like to talk face to face. Yes, many early-career professionals do want to remain with an employer for many years. No, not all entry-level employees want to work remotely full-time.

Some of the most consistent myths and misunderstandings about young professionals arise around technology. Namely, that young people love it, unconditionally and unequivocally, and that everyone under 40 dreams of developing the next popular app or cryptocurrency.

The truth is more nuanced, especially when one considers attitudes about technology in the context of not just age but also race, gender, sexual orientation, ability, and socioeconomic class — DEI principles that may not immediately come to mind.

General Assembly’s new study, “Generational Attitudes on Technology,” digs beneath common stereotypes and assumptions and incorporates a DEI lens to provide deep insight into young Americans’ attitudes about technology and, in particular, working in the rapidly growing tech industry.

With job growth in the tech sector (15% by 2028) projected to outpace overall U.S. employment job growth (10.5%) in the same period, employers must cast a wide net to attract and retain the very best talent now and into the future.
The first place to start is with the study’s finding that Gen Z college students and recent grads are less interested than the previous generation, millennials, in pursuing skills or careers that are solely related to technology. This includes a lower interest than other generations in many of the in-demand technical fields such as cloud computing, blockchain, and data science — that are often touted as some of the hottest “jobs of the future.”

Employers recruiting for such jobs will likely wonder, why wouldn’t young people want to work in some of the most promising, lucrative areas of tech?

The reason for this lower level of interest is likely found in another survey finding related to why people work. While salary is the top reason individuals of all ages chose a career field, younger workers were the only cohort to cite “passion” or “sense of purpose” as their second most important reason for taking a job.

Perhaps this is why tech areas with a more human element, such as digital marketing and UX design, ranked higher in interest among Gen Zs than cloud computing, blockchain, and data science. This was particularly true for women and nonbinary respondents, who were more interested in tech roles that employ EQ skills.

Here we risk falling into dangerous stereotypes again — that older workers care less about purpose or that females aren’t cut out for “hard” skills tech jobs. Quite the contrary. I believe the key interpretation is that we can no longer consider technology to be separate from the humans (of all generations and identities) who use it.

The way for the tech industry to attract the best young talent is to continually relate technology to humanity: how cloud computing creates jobs; how blockchain protects people’s security; how data science helps to solve health, environmental, and business challenges. We can create deeper, wider pipelines of talent by positioning tech knowledge and tech jobs in the context of how they relate to human beings and human concerns.

As you read through the survey results, ask yourself what findings most surprise you and consider what assumptions you were making. Where can you abolish stereotypes about what members of the younger generations want and what tech talent “should” look like?

Your answers may just change the future of the technology industry.
Introduction

One year ago, employers were grappling with the tightest labor market in fifty years; today, due to the pandemic, tens of millions of people find themselves out of work. The workplace’s demographic dynamics are also changing, as baby boomers retire in record numbers and younger generations with different priorities begin to reshape the workplace amidst a long-overdue reckoning on race and social justice. Once-urgent corporate pressures have diminished, and new pressures are mounting.

We all know that COVID-19 triggered an upheaval in the labor market that accelerated existing trends. Although the pandemic will not last forever, its effects may certainly rewrite the narrative around the future of work. The resulting shifts are indisputable: workers are navigating new safety and health protocols and struggling to balance an always-on culture in remote settings. Expectations of leadership are evolving in response to
world shifts — employers are renewing their efforts to create equitable workplaces that promote an authentic and sustainable sense of belonging.

Like the Great Recession before it, which disrupted the career trajectories of an entire generation, the experiences of the last eighteen months will leave an indelible, historical mark — and those marks (workers’ views, perspectives, and goals) remain to be fully understood.

Despite unprecedented change and volatility, demand for highly skilled tech workers has not abated. Prior to the pandemic, U.S. companies had nearly one million unfilled tech jobs. Today, those trends have only intensified. The Bureau of Labor Statistics predicts that growth in software jobs will continue to outpace the average, and MIT’s David Autor has referred to the pandemic as an “automation forcing event” that will reshape the labor market and further drive demand for tech talent.

Many of these emerging jobs are not in the technology sector. They represent roles like business analysts, HR managers, and marketing — what we once dubbed “hybrid jobs” but may now be better described as, well, jobs.

Today’s circumstances lead into questions for business leaders as the next generation enters and grows in the job market in the wake of the pandemic:

- How does corporate demand align with the career aspirations of workers?
- How can employers ensure that hiring and recruiting approaches reflect the priorities and objectives of the groups that are quickly becoming the largest sectors of the U.S. workforce?
- What role can education and training play in an era where the pace of change is accelerating and the shelf-life of skills continues to shrink?

In response, we surveyed workers of all ages to understand their perspectives on technology and the world of work, including how millennial and Gen Z attitudes are shifting in the wake of COVID-19. We unpacked these opinions to understand how they differ from those of older generations to inform corporate decision-making — and the future of work.

We hope our findings provide an initial blueprint for employers seeking to build talent pathways that are responsive — not just to their near-term needs — but to future generations of employees.

The universal truth is that people will always come first — this resonates more now than ever.
Key Findings, Key Solutions

Understanding different generational perspectives can enable business leaders to tailor their recruiting, hiring, training, and professional development practices to better meet those generations’ needs. What are the findings, and what do they suggest for employers preparing for an increasingly dynamic and multigenerational workforce?

We have some answers.
1. Find Purpose in Tech

It’s a new era in tech, and as far as Gen Z is concerned, tech for tech’s sake is over. With this new era comes an inevitable shift in attitude. As a result, we are revisiting ways to retain talent and approach the workforce. Our research showed that purpose is at the forefront of career decision-making for Gen Z.

Younger people are far less interested than millennials in pursuing skills or careers solely related to technology. While younger workers are interested in technology, it’s in the context of fields that prioritize the “human element,” e.g., UX design, digital marketing.

“Colleges and employers alike are still in the process of figuring out how to help Gen Z students navigate the transition to the workforce. The pandemic has, of course, only made that process more complicated. In many cases, this new generation of up-and-coming professionals wants the same thing from their future employers that employers want from them: a commitment to communication, integrity, and resilience.”

— CHRISTINE CRUZVERGARA
VP of Higher Education & Student Success at Handshake and former career services leader at Wellesley College and George Mason University
Older workers are more interested than Gen Z workers in specific tech skills, based on a list adapted from LinkedIn’s most in-demand hard skills.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Field</th>
<th>Ages 18–24</th>
<th>Ages 35–44</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cloud Computing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very Interested</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Interested</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blockchain</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very Interested</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Interested</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Science</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very Interested</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Interested</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These gaps shrink slightly for fields that are more focused on the “human element” (jobs that require technical skills but are ultimately focused on human interaction).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Field</th>
<th>Ages 18–24</th>
<th>Ages 35–44</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Digital Marketing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very Interested</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Interested</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UX Design</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very Interested</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Interested</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although purpose is at the forefront, unsurprisingly, when asked what drove career decisions, salary remains the top reason individuals of all ages chose a career. That said, compared with their early- to mid-career peers (age 35–44), younger workers are significantly less interested in many of the in-demand technical fields that their predecessors are keyed into. For older workers (45+), the type of work was the second-most-important characteristic; for younger workers, their passion or a sense of purpose was their second choice.

“What we’re talking about here is a generation that is very tuned-in to the big picture. They find fulfillment and purpose in the greater good that comes from their contributions, not just their individual tasks.”

— ROB KINGYENS
CEO of YellowBrick
Lead with purpose.

While demand for technical jobs and skills will continue to increase, employers and managers alike should couch those occupations in a broader context and purpose, catering to younger workers’ more human-driven interests.

How, for instance, will a data science role contribute to the overall mission and impact of the organization? How can an intentional approach to user experience design make a given product or service more equitable? How should ethics and privacy considerations be integrated into AI jobs? A clear explanation of how a given skill set contributes to the mission of the business — and its impact on society — will help younger employees draw connections between their day-to-day work and the broader organizational purpose.
When looking at the millennial generation, the group that is segueing into top leadership, we are finding that this group expects — and needs — education and training support from their employers. The majority of workers of all ages believe that their employer has an obligation to support their ongoing training financially; however, millennials (age 25–44) were most strongly in-favor of training support from their employers. As for the type of support, workers were just as interested in nondegree certificate programs as in traditional graduate programs (e.g., MBA).

Across all age groups, role-growth support is a core retention value. Workers of all ages ranked “commitment to supporting my professional development to improve in a current role” as the most important factor in determining whether to stay at a company. Other forms of development (e.g., training for other roles or different careers) were less important.
Do you believe your employer has an obligation to finance your education?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ages 18–24</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ages 25–34</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ages 35–44</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ages 45–54</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SUPPORT ONGOING SKILLS TRAINING

Key Solution

Provide middle-managers with outcomes-focused training.

Millennials are increasingly likely to serve in middle management or early leadership positions and are likely to expect their employers to provide financial support for education. This suggests that the pivotal inflection point between junior and senior roles may be the most important time to ensure that millennial employees have access to training. Targeted outcomes-focused training can accelerate and amplify the success achieved at this integral pivot point.
Case Study: How Booz Allen Hamilton Improved Employee Retention

Overview
Booz Allen Hamilton rolled out a program, the Data Science 5K, to upskill their workforce in data analytics and data science while giving consultants an opportunity for professional development.

Impact
Retention rates for graduates of the DS5K were an impressive 93% compared to 84% for nongraduates. The course was also featured in job postings, resulting in an 11% increase in applications for data science positions at Booz Allen.
3. **Refine “Fox & Hedgehog” Skill Sets**

To showcase — and simplify — generational attitude differences, we resort to the philosopher Isaiah Berlin’s famous essay, which differentiates foxes, who “know many things,” from hedgehogs, who “know one big thing.” Millennial and Gen Z workers are significantly more likely than their older peers to report that they would rather develop a smaller number of skills and become highly specialized with in-depth, outcomes-focused training that is truly sustainable — a departure from generations past.

**Fox**
A worker who has a breadth of knowledge across topics.

**Hedgehog**
A worker who has a depth of knowledge in a specific discipline.
Highly specialized in a small number of skills

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Fox Skills</th>
<th>Hedgehog Skills</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ages 18–24</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ages 25–34</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ages 35–44</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ages 45–54</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ages 55–64</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ages 65+</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Less specialized with a broader array of skills

REFINE “FOX & HEDGEHOG” SKILL SETS TRAINING

Key Solution

Cultivate “foxy hedgehogs.”

We referenced Berlin’s Fox/Hedgehog analogy above, and recent research from Emsi makes the case that the workers best-equipped to navigate the shifting world of work will be “both fox and hedgehog: they know a little about many things, and they know a lot about one or two subject matters.” Most younger workers report that they want to be hedgehogs. This presents an opportunity for employers to support their upcoming workforce with deep upskilling and reskilling solutions that employees can apply directly in their day-to-day jobs.
The diaspora of generational differences lends valuable insight to workforce attitude shifts, employer support tactics, and technology as a whole. Helping employees build in-demand skills specific to their generational needs will play a critical role in companies’ responses to the pandemic. Ultimately, workers will need to re-invest and retool themselves to stay relevant in their current roles or transition to entirely new jobs.

Workers of all ages rank professional development support as a main career priority. As the world has shifted, internal upskilling and reskilling have proven to be among the most crucial pivots that many global companies have had to make. There is a growing interest within the up-and-coming generation to find and connect purpose-driven work within the tech sector, while millennials require and expect role-growth support through additional education and training. Gen Z and millennial groups prefer deep training, in contrast to older workers who prefer to learn a breadth of knowledge — employers must distinctly address each generation’s needs to effectively motivate their teams.

With these findings in mind, today’s leaders need to sync human-centric purpose within tech roles and ultimately help retain sustainable talent throughout the org chart with outcomes-focused training at pivotal career points.
Putting It All Together

WORKFORCE NEEDS

Gen Z is most-interested in human-centric tech roles, and traditional, “in-demand” tech roles are of low interest for Gen Z.

SOLUTIONS FOR LEADERS

The quest for talent in high-demand tech roles is full-on. To engage the next generation of talent, company leaders must lead and define with human-centric purpose.

Across all age groups, role-growth support is a core retention driver, especially with millennial workers, who are most likely to expect education and training support from their employers.

Employer-sponsored development opportunities are critical to keeping workforces engaged. Companies must provide specialized, outcomes-focused upskilling/reskilling internal training.

Older workers want to be foxes (requesting knowledge breadth); younger workers want to be hedgehogs (requesting specialized, in-depth knowledge).

Leaders must address the distinct motivations of employees across a multi-generational workforce to retain talent that will drive business impact. Companies can cultivate “foxy hedgehogs” through targeted training to foster diverse skill sets and business needs.

Being at the forefront of digital transformation happens by attracting and retaining high-quality talent within your workforce. It starts with a choice to facilitate change. To learn more about how General Assembly can upskill and reskill your workforce, reach out at cheers@ga.co.
About the Survey

Between December 2020 and January 2021, General Assembly surveyed 2,000 U.S. adults, all of whom are either currently employed or in school or were employed or in school during the past 12 months. Our survey sample included 1,000 individuals of all ages over 18, as well as 500 respondents age 18–24 and 500 respondents age 25–40, to ensure that the perspectives of Gen Z and millennial workers were explicitly captured.

About General Assembly

General Assembly is part of the Adecco Group, the world’s leading workforce solutions provider and a Global Fortune 500 company.

Through innovative training and hiring programs, GA has helped over 300 companies, including more than 68 of the Fortune 500 and 40 in the Fortune 100, source talent, train teams, and assess skills to identify growth opportunities.

As individuals and companies struggle to compete in an increasingly technological economy, General Assembly provides award-winning, dynamic programs to close the global skills gap. With more than 50,000+ enterprise employees trained and over 78,000+ alumni from our full- and part-time courses, we help organizations upskill promising team members, reskill valuable employees, and onboard new talent.