

RECRUITMENT & RETENTION

Gen Z Lacks Job-Readiness Skills, Survey Shows



By [Elizabeth Heubeck](#) — December 20, 2023 ⌚ 5 min read



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Are recruiters more likely to hire older or younger job applicants?

This may seem like a trick question to K-12 human resources professionals, as staffing shortages continue to plague the overwhelming majority of public school districts, leaving recruiters hoping for any qualified candidate regardless of their age.

But a job candidate who appears qualified, such as a recent college graduate with a teaching certificate, isn't necessarily "job ready."

So say the findings of a newly released [survey of 800 employers by intelligent.com](#), a resource that curates research on college and workplace issues. Survey respondents (managers, directors, and executives) reported that Gen Z college graduates, those born between 1997 and 2012, have yet to master several key foundational aspects of professionalism, like making eye contact during an interview. Among the survey respondents, nearly 60 percent agreed that recent college graduates are unprepared for the workforce, and close to 40 percent admitted to intentionally avoiding hiring Gen Z college graduates and instead hiring employees who are 27 and older.

The survey, while not aimed at any particular industry, has implications for all hiring managers, including those in K-12 education. Most teachers [start](#) their careers between the ages of 20 and 25, placing a large number of current and soon-to-be job-seeking teachers (as well as other would-be hires in the education sector) within the Gen Z age range. In contrast, the average age of a [school administrator](#) is 47, part of the demographic referred to as Gen X (those born between 1965 and 1980).

It's not uncommon to hear about generational differences creating friction in the workplace. But the findings of this study suggest personnel challenges that go well beyond those typically attributed to misunderstandings between employees in different life stages. Here's a look at what's behind these findings and tactics for administrators to employ that can improve the outlook for working relationships across generations.

Interpreting the survey results

Diane Gayeski, a researcher, college professor, and business consultant who was not directly involved in the survey, shared her insights about its findings, which paint a vivid picture of Gen Z'ers ill-preparedness for the workforce. For instance, 47 percent of survey respondents reported job candidates dressing inappropriately for interviews, 21 percent had a job candidate refuse to turn on their camera for a virtual interview, and 19 percent reported having a college graduate bring a parent to a job interview.

Before interpreting the survey results, Gayeski advised caution. "When you prompt people to think about workplace issues, it's a chance for them to vent," said Gayeski, a professor at the Roy H. Park school of communications at Ithaca College. "The people who decide to respond to surveys usually are motivated to have their opinion known."

She did, however, acknowledge that certain factors legitimately contributed to Gen Z job seekers' interview etiquette, or lack thereof. The impact of the pandemic is a big one.

“Students who are graduating from college now were freshmen during the COVID lockdown,” Gayeski said. “They might have been living at home, taking Zoom classes in their bedroom.”

Pandemic restrictions severely limited college students’ ability to gain valuable real-world professional experience in multiple ways, observed Gayeski. Online classes precluded students from gaining in-person teamwork experience. Many internship opportunities either failed to materialize or switched to remote access, leaving holes in students’ exposure to professional etiquette—from seeing what professional attire looks like to observing the importance of making eye contact with colleagues and supervisors.

Even before the pandemic began, awareness and diagnoses of mental health problems among young people had increased significantly. McKinsey’s 2022 [American Opportunity Survey](#) included 1,763 Gen Z respondents, 55 percent of whom reported having either been diagnosed with or receiving treatment for mental illness, compared with only 31 percent of people aged 55 to 64.

Gayeski said that, in her experience, an increase in students’ health-related diagnoses and associated accommodations isn’t limited to mental health problems. “For more than 10 years, I’ve seen an increase in the number of college students who have accommodation plans for things ranging from mental health issues to learning challenges to chronic health conditions,” said Gayeski. “Even in the most elite and selective colleges, about 20 percent of students have some sort of accommodation plan and have had this since high school.”

Such accommodations might include, for instance, flexible class attendance or deadline extensions for students with a diagnosis of anxiety or ADHD. “There are all sorts of accommodations that we in academia see as normal, but the workplace may have not caught up to,” Gayeski said.

Embracing Gen Z employees in the workplace

Awareness of job seekers’ backgrounds is critical to understanding how they present in a job interview. This means knowing that, compared with past job applicants, this current cohort of job seekers may have far less exposure to the professional workplace and a much greater likelihood of having been diagnosed with a mental health or related issue for which they’ve received accommodations at school. Awareness is a first positive step toward reaching across the generational divide. Training on how to do this is, perhaps, the next logical move.

“Training is necessary. Progressive organizations are allowing more flexibility for employees. They understand that diversity includes more than one’s racial/ethnic background,” Gayeski said.

This training cuts both ways, with less experienced, emerging professionals needing additional guidance. “Students, especially the ones coming out of college now, do need more mentoring,” Gayeski said. “They haven’t been in a workplace; they don’t know what the expectations are.”



Elizabeth Heubeck

Staff Writer

Elizabeth Heubeck is a staff writer for Education Week.

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