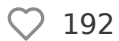


GenZ software engineers, according to older colleagues

Responses to a survey about GenZ suggest this new generation possesses standout differences. We explore what makes GenZ distinctive, and check out ideas for ways to work fruitfully together.



GERGELY OROSZ AND ELIN NILSSON
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192



12

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👋 Hi, this is Gergely with a subscriber-only issue of the *Pragmatic Engineer Newsletter*. In every issue, I cover challenges at Big Tech and startups through the lens of engineering managers and senior engineers. To get articles like this in your inbox, every week, subscribe:

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Before we start: I've published details on [how indicate interest in writing a guest article](#) *The Pragmatic Engineer*. My goal is to work with hands-on engineering professionals to occasionally bring details, learnings and approaches from "working in the weeds." A good example was last week's article on [Thriving as a founding engineer](#). If you're interested in potentially writing a guest post, [see the details](#).

A few months ago, I met up with my former engineering manager colleagues for dinner. As we caught up on each other's news, one topic of chat was the new generation of tech workers. A common thing mentioned was that GenZ feels notably *different* to work with. Positive in many ways – and a bit confusing in others!

So, what is the new generation like at work, according to their colleagues? In a survey, we asked this of readers who identify as Millennial, GenX, or

Boomer, and have dug into the replies.

Today, we cover:

1. **Who are GenZ?** A recap.
2. **Survey respondents.** Mostly managers and seniors who are Millennial or GenX, based in the US and Europe.
3. **Values.** Higher salary and benefits expectations, challenging to retain, more distrustful of senior leadership.
4. **Knowledge.** GenZ are on the “bleeding edge” of frameworks, higher up on the tech stack, and use different learning resources.
5. **Mentoring GenZ: what works?** Display purpose, focus on the individual, and connect!
6. **Working with GenZ: successful approaches.** Give feedback, consider extra onboarding and training, and accept they’ll probably leave.
7. **Pandemic impact?** Enforced remote work began just as many people started their first jobs. It was a hard time for graduates and young professionals, for whom staying indoors – and on endless Zoom calls – was likely the last thing they wanted to do.
8. **More observations and advice for GenZ.** A generation of “mages,” and a possible bimodal distribution for ambition. Also, sharing the unfiltered [survey responses](#).

This is part 1 of a two-part high-level overview on the new generation of talent in tech workplaces. This article is based on a small survey of people’s personal opinions, beginning with the views of more “seasoned” folks. But it won’t be a one-sided series! In part 2 to come soon, we hand the mic to tech professionals from GenZ, to learn what it’s like being young and in tech today – and what older colleagues are like to work with.

GenZ devs, according to older colleagues

Values

Higher expectations

Harder to retain

Distrust in senior leadership

Outspoken comms

Knowledge

Higher up the stack

Loves "bleeding edge"

Gets stuck more easily

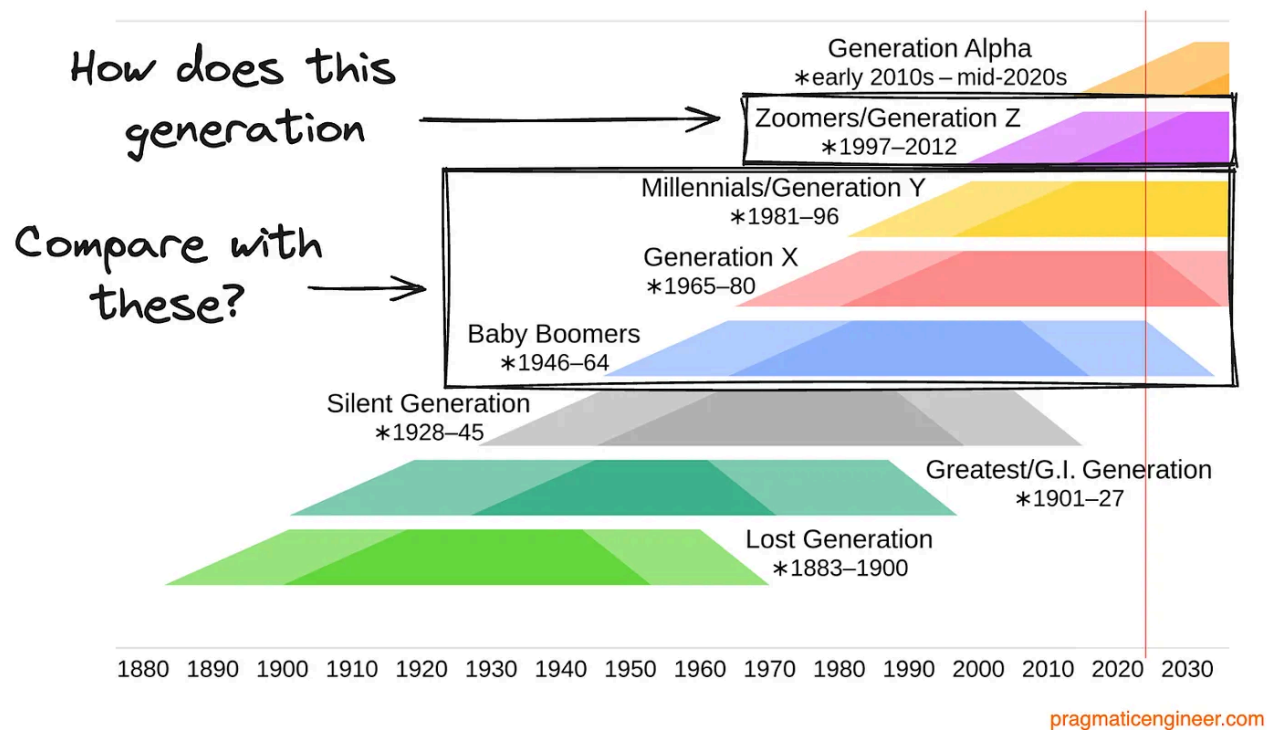
Learns differently

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Some of the findings we'll explore in this article

1. Who are GenZ? A recap.

Generation Z (GenZ) is the group name for people born between 1997 and 2012, and it's commonly used in media and popular culture. In workplaces, the most senior members of this new generation have joined colleagues from the cohorts "Millennial," "GenX," and "Baby Boomer." Each of these names refers to a span of time, and birth date determines which one you fit into:



An overview of demographic cohorts. Image source: [Wikipedia](#)

The oldest members of GenZ are 27 years old, and the youngest are 12, meaning that graduate developers hired over the past few years are almost all GenZ'ers.

They're the first generation to grow up "mobile native," with consumer tech like smartphones, often from a very young age. The oldest members of this generation were aged 10 when the Apple iPhone launched in 2007 and kicked off the smartphone revolution.

There are [countless studies](#) claiming GenZ is different from earlier ones. A summary [from Wikipedia](#):

"Compared to previous generations, members of Generation Z tend to live more slowly than their predecessors when they were their age; have lower rates of teenage pregnancies; and consume alcohol (but not necessarily other psychoactive drugs) less often. Generation Z teenagers are more concerned than older generations with academic performance and job prospects, and are better at delaying gratification than their counterparts

from the 1960s, despite concerns to the contrary. (...) Nostalgia is a major theme of youth culture in the 2010s and 2020s.”

For reference, here is how Millennials are described, also [by Wikipedia](#):

“As the first generation to grow up with the Internet, Millennials have also been described as the first global generation. The generation is generally marked by elevated usage of and familiarity with the Internet, mobile devices, and social media. The term "digital natives", which is now also applied to successive generations, was originally coined to describe this generation.

Millennials have also been called the ‘Unluckiest Generation’ because the average Millennial has experienced slower economic growth since entering the workforce than any other generation in U.S. history. The generation has also been weighed down by student debt and child-care costs.

Millennials across the world have suffered significant economic disruption since starting their working lives; many faced high levels of youth unemployment during their early years in the job market in the wake of the Great Recession, and suffered another recession in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.”

And let’s not forget GenX:

“As adolescents and young adults in the 1980s and 1990s, Xers were dubbed the ‘MTV Generation’ (a reference to the music video channel), sometimes being characterized as slackers, cynical, and disaffected. Some of the many cultural influences on Gen X youth included a proliferation of musical genres with strong social-tribal identity such as alternative rock, hip hop, punk, post-punk, rave, and heavy metal. (...) Video games, both in amusement parlors and in devices in Western homes, were also a major part of juvenile entertainment for the first time. Politically, in many Eastern Bloc countries, Generation X experienced the last days of communism and the transition to capitalism as part of its youth. In much

of the Western world, a similar time period was defined by a dominance of conservatism and free market economics.

In their midlife during the early 21st century, research describes Gen Xers as active, happy, and achieving a work-life balance. The cohort has also been more broadly credited as entrepreneurial, and productive in the workplace.”

2. Survey Respondents

Sixty three readers took part in the survey. Here’s a breakdown of their current job titles:

Most are in management roles (manager, director-level, VP or C-level) or software engineers (senior-and-above.) "Other" covers product and data roles

Most respondents are based in the US and Europe:

Respondents by location

Most respondents belong to the Millennial or GenX generations.

Respondents, by generation. The lack of Boomers is unsurprising,
since most are near retirement

What I don't know is the extent to which participants in the survey reflect the newsletter's readership. But there's a way to find out. My newsletter platform (Substack) launched surveys that let you vote with a click. So, I have a request; would you please tap below on the generation you belong to, based on your birth date? *Voting is anonymous, and your vote isn't linked to your email.*



LOADING...

Many thanks to all who share this detail! With that, let's dive into the survey's findings.

3. Values

A note of caution: of course, it's impossible to sum up a whole generation based on a mix of opinions from a few workplaces! The details in this article are anecdotal, based on individuals' experiences.

We know labels like "GenZ" are loose and fail to account for the inherent diversity of millions of people, which simply *cannot* be summed up in a collection of observations, no matter how detailed. There are GenZ folks to whom none of the respondents' views apply, as well as people with traits which no respondent captured.

Our goal with this survey is just to try and identify any distinctive characteristics which could be worth paying attention to. How can we work together with this younger generation and build great products and a thriving business? It's undeniable that differences exist between successive generations, and it's worth attempting to verbalize these. The new generation of software engineers is no different!

Higher expectations for salary, promotions and benefits

Common themes from the responses:

- GenZ expects bigger raises and faster promotions
- Benefits like flexible or remote working are expected

Some respondents say younger colleagues don't appear to offer as much in return, such as shouldering higher expectations, or taking on extra responsibilities. *To be fair, this sounds like fairly typical "early-stage career" behavior; I remember Millennials being described like this 10-15 years ago!*

Hard to retain, high expectations, & little "loyalty"

It's clear that survey respondents think GenZ expects promotions faster, and aren't shy to jump ship for better pay. Respondents say there is little to no "corporate loyalty" either. *This is understandable; can we entirely blame people for putting their own career first, especially after waves of ruthless job cuts in software engineering by companies following their own interests? Also, switching jobs for better pay occurs across the generations.*

A lack of corporate "loyalty" among young colleagues is noted positively by some respondents:

"Retaining them is hard, there is no loyalty to the company. But this is a good thing, as we have seen that companies, even great ones like Google, aren't loyal to their people! So, you need to be creative, move GenZ colleagues around a lot within the team (keep the work fresh), use retention strategies (options, bonuses, etc.,) and find empathetic managers."

- Director of Engineering at a startup acquired by Big Tech (GenX, US)

"From my old-school perspective, they are somewhat entitled, expecting flexibility, yearly raises and promotions - even when the company has no need for more managers, for example. They also expect significant benefits on top of our higher-than-market pay.

As many before me have said, they have cast off outdated expectations of 'loyalty' to jobs that aren't loyal to them, in return. It's admirable for the most part, though I do not think everyone should get raises/promotions every year in a small company."

- Head of Product at a startup (Millennial, US)

Retaining GenZ workers is harder, according to some responses:

“Motivating and retaining seems to be increasingly difficult, as they have all been advised to job hop around the two-year mark in order to have a chance at earning more. Which I don’t blame them for – it’s just that it is tough for managers who have little say/influence on their reports’ pay packages.”

- Senior Software Engineer at a Fintech (GenX, US)

“I see a challenge around motivation and retention. There is somehow a baked-in assumption that just turning up to work means you should get a pay rise. Until very recently (due to the downturn in tech jobs,) it was extremely difficult to retain without using a lever, such as compensation.”

- VP of SRE at startup (GenX, US)

“I find retaining them hard when it comes to money: sometimes they get crazy offers for positions! They will apply to positions that they are only *starting* to be ready for. Older peers tend to take a different approach: they sometimes need to feel more confident about their capabilities in the target role before changing jobs.”

- Platform Director at a Fintech (Millennial, France)

Could social media influencers be fuelling career impatience among young professionals? One respondent reckons so:

“Almost impossible to retain; expected salaries and titles more often than not surpass their actual ability about 6-12 months into tenure. From conversations with fellow managers and university lecturers, it seems YouTube and LinkedIn influencers are fuelling unrealistic expectations.

Specifically: over-stating market-rate salaries; while understating levels of responsibility that accompany a given salary range”

- Head of Engineering at a Series A startup (Millennial, UK)

It’s tempting to blame social media, but I reckon what we’re seeing is that GenZ have far *more* (good and bad) career advice from peers than previous generations did. Sure, this advice isn’t always perfect, even when it’s well-meant.

Senior leadership distrusted, demand for transparency

Survey respondents think GenZ colleagues have less trust in management, and are skeptical of business decisions:

“I find GenZ to be strong believers in radical transparency. They want to know the ‘why’ behind many decisions. The speed with which they want to consume this information is also much higher than other generations.

I have observed that GenZ have a stronger distrust of senior leadership than other generations. My hypothesis is that with the tech retraction in 2022-2023, this generation was going through its first downturn and thus questioned why there were no visible consequences for company leadership.

Looking back to the sub-prime crisis of 2008 – my first downturn after graduating college – I was also concerned. However, I saw that this was more than just a specific company issue, and was a much larger economic problem. One could correctly say that the tech retraction of 2022 and the sub-prime crisis of 2008 are not apples-to-apples, but I think there are some similarities.”

- Engineering Manager at a startup (Millennial, Boston, US)

“They are very aware and cynical of the impact of capitalism on business decisions.”

- Frontend Engineer at Amazon (GenX, Canada)

Workplaces with low transparency may have a hard time retaining GenZ workers, some respondents believe:

“My hunch would be that GenZ won’t stay long in cultures where transparency is *not* the norm, and where it’s not okay to question upwards, and in a direct way.”

- Senior DevOps Engineer in the public sector (Millennial, Singapore)

A fitting summary comes from an engineering manager:

“The don’t take management bullsh*t.”

- Group Engineering Manager at a scaleup (GenX, Australia)

Outspoken, open communication style

Blunt communication is something older colleagues notice:

“They have no trouble interacting with their peers, older folks. There weren’t any occasions where communication was a problem, I’ve not received or heard of any negative feedback.

This being said, they were more likely to speak out against and voice their concerns directly. Whether it was work related (disagreeing with an analysis, decision, etc.) or non-work related (good movies and tv shows.)

This happens at varying levels

between individuals, but it is common among the GenZ’ers I’ve interacted with.

Some of my colleagues were disarmed by their frankness. Some found that the GenZ were too open, insensitive, and should be more sensitive of their environment, and of people hearing what they said. Others embraced the directness and it built strong relationships that

lasted beyond the internship. “

- Senior DevOps Engineer in the public sector (Millennial, Singapore)

A few other respondents mention that the communication style ruffles the feathers of some senior colleagues:

“It can be hard for older peers, as younger new joiners often feel free to share strong opinions about how things are done, that could be harmful for others.”

- Platform Director at a scaleup (Millennial, Spain)

The reasons for such directness and bluntness are well-intended, says one respondent:

“They are clearly intent on improving the status quo.”

- VP of SRE at a scaleup (GenX, UK)

An important trait pointed out by a VP:

“They are usually willing to speak truth to power.”

- VP of Engineering (Boomer, US)

Does the age-old age gap explain older professionals’ reactions to young colleagues, or is there more to it? Certainly, many survey responses mention GenZ’s “in your face” communication style. Cultural factors may be at play, and perhaps GenZ is a generation that speaks its mind, regardless of whether to a peer, or the business’s Boomer CEO!

Personally, I think this fits into existing workplace trends; better teams already spend time ensuring graduate colleagues feel unafraid to speak up when senior peers are in the room. Indeed, companies like Meta [got rid of](#)

[titles of seniority](#) in order to encourage precisely this behavior. But it's always good to bear in mind the thin line between directness and rudeness.

Modern values?

Survey respondents say GenZ colleagues are more vocal about work-life balance, flexibility of work, mental health, and diversity. They are more protective of free time, but friendlier and more personal in the office than older colleagues. *Survey responses from GenZ tech workers confirm these observations.*

Protecting free time:

“They are much less willing to do the work to grow *on their own time*. They are also much more willing to take a break and protect their own time.”

- Head of Design at a scaleup (GenX, US)

“They have a dim view of working outside the 9-5.”

- Staff Engineer at a startup (Boomer, US)

Informality and openness:

“GenZ is much more open about sharing personal situations: mental health, life events, etc. As a manager, I like this as it lets me know what is going on and how to help them.

- Director of Software development, large tech company (GenX, US)

“Much more informal in the workplace; they tend to have friendlier, closer relationships with colleagues. They also excel at workplace culture and work-life balance.”

- Frontend engineer at Amazon (Millennial, US)

Diversity and inclusivity:

“They are very much pushing for a great, healthy culture and a lot of diversity – this is good! Mental health is something front and center for them, which is great to see in the workplace.”

- Staff Software Engineer at a scaleup (GenX, New York, US)

“I’ve found that GenZ engineers are more inclusive of different backgrounds and people at the company/on teams.”

- Senior Software Engineer, scaleup (Millennial, US)

“They are more aware of diversity issues.”

- CTO at a mid-sized company (Boomer, Europe)

The importance of flexibility:

“Flexible hours are very important for them, as is independence, and working in a ‘flat’ hierarchy.”

- CTO at a mid-sized company (Boomer, Europe)

Workplace politics:

“The mere existence of people who don't agree with them politically seems deeply upsetting oftentimes, but maybe that's a symptom of a larger issue of polarization in the U.S. When I entered the workforce, I thought it was understood that religion and politics were completely off the table AT WORK because it should go without saying that not everybody is in complete lockstep with the same ideology, and yet we must still work together and see one another every day.”

- Senior Software Engineer at a startup (Millennial, US)

Caring about things earlier generations do not:

“From my point of view as a member of GenX, GenZ can be critical of things that I don't even notice. For example, they might use Firefox over Chrome because Firefox is part of the truly open internet.”

- Head of Design at a dev tools company (GenX, US)

Purpose and meaning

GenZ seems more inspired by a strong sense of purpose and meaning, according to their older colleagues. Maybe this is why they're seen as questioning everything: they want to know the *why* of tasks and decisions, and to do things for the right reasons!

“I see the GenZ people need a strong purpose. When the company can provide it to them, it's easier to keep them motivated.”

- Team Lead at a startup (Millennial, Brazil)

“GenZ engineers can be extremely motivated to do right by the user, particularly if the problem they are solving has a deep impact on something meaningful.”

- Head of Design at a dev tools company (GenX, US)

4. Knowledge

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A guest post by

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