

GENERATION Z ATTITUDES ABOUT THE WORKPLACE DURING COVID-19:  
AN EXPLORATORY SURVEY

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

Generation Z—those born between 1995 and 2012—have begun to enter into the workforce at a rapid pace. Although they will make up a significant portion of the workforce within the next few years, little research has been done regarding their work preferences and attitudes, especially whether and how they have been influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic. In order to analyze the workplace experiences, expectations, and preferences of Generation Z, an exploratory survey was distributed to undergraduate students at Texas State University. We found that while most participants were very comfortable with personal technology use, many were uncomfortable with technology use in a professional setting. In terms of work benefits preferences, students preferred healthcare over retirement benefits. We also found a relation between success with online courses and work setting preferences, such that students who were doing better on online courses preferred jobs where they could work from home. Finally, we discovered that although COVID-19 greatly impacted students' academic experiences, the pandemic did not significantly impact their optimism about their futures. Our study was limited by the fact that we had no pre-COVID data and that our demographic breakdown did not fully capture Generation Z. Future directions could include expanding the survey nationwide and following participants over multiple years to see if their preferences and experiences stayed consistent.

## I. INTRODUCTION

### **Generation Z in the Workforce**

Since Generation Z has just barely entered the workplace, little information has been collected about their workplace habits and preferences. Researchers have had ten-plus years to characterize Millennials, but it is still unclear if the members of Generation Z are simply younger versions of the preceding Millennial workforce or a unique set of workers entirely (Iorgulescu, 2016). Although there is debate around where exactly the Millennial Generation ends and Generation Z begins, the most common age range used to define Generation Z are those born between the mid-1990s to the early 2010s (Giunta, 2020). The oldest of Generation Z are either relatively new to the workforce or are still completing their education, but Generation Z is set to make up at least a quarter of the workforce within the next few years (Merriman, 2018). Thus, it is important to understand the attitudes and preferences of this generation toward work.

In a recent manuscript, Schroth (2019) discussed that many factors influence how Generation Z behaves, both in and out of the workplace. These factors include their lack of work experience, the prevalence of smartphones and social media, social justice movements, and growing up in a culture of safety (Schroth, 2019). They have grown up through multiple recessions, great economic inequality, and rising tuition costs (Hughes, 2020). They are the most racially and ethnically diverse generation, as well as the most educated (Schroth, 2019). Now, they are the first generation to enter the workforce during the COVID-19 pandemic, a factor that past generations haven't had to experience. Understanding Generation Z attitudes toward work in the context of the pandemic will offer important insight into the future of workplaces.

Past research on Generation Z in the workplace has confirmed that although they share many similarities with Millennials, they still have unique work preferences and habits of their own (Maloni et al., 2019). In one survey by Maloni et al. (2019), researchers had Generation Z business students rank their top work values, such as job security, promotions, and benefits. This study found the top value for Generation Z was being able to see the results of their work, with opportunity for advancement and financial security ranking highly as well (Maloni et al., 2019). Additionally, a recent survey of U.S. teenagers ages 13 to 18 found that Generation Z is very achievement-oriented, with almost half viewing personal achievements in work and school as a central part of their identity (Barna Group, 2018). Other studies have shown that this generation prefers regular feedback about their work, interactive learning environments, and workplace autonomy (Schenarts, 2020).

In terms of the physical workplace, members of Generation Z have preferred open, well-lit work environments, where both individual and group work opportunities are provided (Schenarts, 2020). Ozkan and Solmaz (2015) found that over a quarter of Generation Z preferred a traditional corporate office as a work environment, another quarter preferred a co-working space separate from their employer, and a fifth of participants preferred a fully-independent home office. Past researchers, however, have found conflicting information about Generation Z's social interaction preferences in their workplace. Some research has found that instead of desiring constant group work, Generation Z prefers to complete their work individually and then contribute to their group once their work is complete (Schenarts, 2020; Adecco, 2015). However, other studies have claimed that Generation Z values high levels of social interaction and team

camaraderie (Hampton & Welsh, 2019).

Though they are just entering the workforce, research indicates that Generation Z already has expectations for their leaders and their career potential. Valuing autonomy both in and out of the workplace, Generation Z prefers management who allows them to openly share their ideas, values their opinions, and allows them to work independently (Ozkan & Solmaz, 2015). They expect positivity and inclusivity both from their organization and from their supervisors (McGaha, 2018). Generation Z expects to move up the ladder quickly in their work and will likely leave a position if unable to visualize their career path (Goh & Okumus, 2020). They are willing to be flexible in terms of work-related travel, so long as this flexibility is tied to increased career advancement potential (Cohen et al., 2013).

### **Impacts of COVID-19 on the Workforce**

Although this existing research provides a good foundational understanding of Generation Z, there are still gaps in research created by the COVID-19 pandemic. Generation Z is unique in that most of its members will only know the workplace in a pandemic or post-pandemic setting, making it important to understand how COVID-19 has impacted the workforce.

One of the largest changes is that the pandemic has created a shift from bustling offices to working from home. A survey of HR departments last spring found that over one half of the companies surveyed had more than 80 percent of their employees working from home due to the pandemic (Gartner, 2020). The abrupt change from in-person to at-home left many employees anxious and unprepared for many reasons (Kniffin et al., 2021). First, working from home has been linked to difficulty separating work life from

home life (Ramarajan & Reid, 2013). Second, prior research has found that virtual teamwork lacks the same communication richness as in-person teamwork, causing communication problems to arise (Martins et al., 2004). Finally, the use of videoconferencing has increased feelings of stress in employees, as many feel uncomfortable with the lack of privacy video conferences may create (Kniffin et al., 2021).

Unfortunately, the pandemic has also worsened the mental health of many employees. Giorgi et al. (2020) claims that factors associated with COVID-19, such as social distancing, fear of illness, loss of income, and mandatory isolation, have had a negative impact on the mental health of workers. Job insecurity, lengthy isolation, and uncertainty of the future negatively impact the mental health of young, educated people in particular, such as those of Generation Z (Giorgi et al., 2020). Thankfully, companies can play a role in alleviating this stress if the correct measures are implemented. Research has found that the more intensive implementation of COVID-19 safety policies in a workplace can reduce psychological distress and protect work performance (Sasaki et al., 2020). Overall, however, little research studying the impact of COVID-19 on the workplace has examined Generation Z in particular.

### **Goal of the Current Study**

Given that COVID-19 may have impacted the attitudes of Generation Z about work, the goal of the current study is, in an exploratory survey of college students, to assess the relationship between participants' school preferences, work preferences, and COVID-19. This predominately descriptive research will provide important knowledge about the next group of individuals to enter the workforce. Ultimately, this knowledge

could be used by workplaces to ensure employee success and positive well-being.

## II. METHOD

### Participants

Our sample consisted of undergraduate students enrolled in Introduction to Psychology at Texas State University. Students participated in exchange for course credit. The only eligibility criterion was that participants had to be 25 or younger. In total, N=189 students completed the survey. Of the full sample, 32 failed the attention check embedded in the questionnaire, 1 failed the attention check and was older than 25, and 6 answered fewer than 50% of the survey questions (including the attention check). Thus, we excluded 39 participants.

Our final sample consisted of 150 participants aged 18-25 (average age=18.94y, SD=1.24). 83.4% of participants were women, 14.7% were men, 1.3% were nonbinary, and 0.7% of participants did not identify their gender. Out of our participants, 47.3% (n = 71) of participants were 18 years old, 32% (n = 48) were 19 years old, 9.3% (n = 14) were 20 years old, 5.3% (n = 8) were 21 years old, 4.7% (n = 7) were 22 years old, 0.7% (n = 1) were 23 years old, and 0.7% (n = 1) were 25 years old.

Overall the sample was diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, and parental education. Participants were 7.3% Asian, 20.6% Black/African American, 39.4% Caucasian, 30% Hispanic/Latinx, 1.3% Native American, and 1.3% Pacific Islander. 13.3% of participants identified as mixed race. In terms of parental income, 9.3% of participants reported their parents made less than 25 thousand dollars a year, 19.3% reported 25 to 50 thousand dollars a year, 30.7% reported 50 to 100 thousand dollars a year, 20.7% reported 100 to 200 thousand dollars a year, 7.3% reported over 200 thousand dollars a year, and 12% of

participants preferred not to answer.

In terms of educational variables, 60.7% of participants were freshmen, 22.7% were sophomores, 11.3% were juniors, 4% were seniors, and 1.3% did not identify their class year. The most common majors were nursing (13.3% of the sample), psychology (12.0%), criminal justice (10%), and biology (7.3%). In total, 72% of participants reported having at least one minor.

### **Materials & Procedure**

Participants completed a survey on Qualtrics. The survey took approximately 20 minutes to complete. Participants were free to skip any question. The specific sections included on the survey are detailed below and the full survey is available in Appendix A.

### ***Technology Experiences***

Participants answered 17 questions that questions pertained to technology use and comfortability. Three questions asked about technology use in hours per day. The next block of questions pertained to comfortability with phone apps, Microsoft Office, and Google products. The following eight questions asked about virtual, hybrid, and in-person learning. The final two questions in this section asked about videoconferencing skills and social media use in a professional setting.

### ***Impact of COVID-19***

Eight questions pertained to the impact of the pandemic on students' educations. These questions asked students about the difficulty of their classes, their preferences for online or in-person classes, and how the pandemic has impacted their degree progress. The remaining three questions in this section asked students about how quickly they think they will find a job after graduation, how long they plan on staying at this job, and how the

pandemic has impacted their previous answers.

### ***The Workplace***

The first three questions in this section asked about students' preferences for group work/individual work, as well as in-person/at-home/hybrid work. Students were asked if the pandemic has impacted their previous answers. The next five questions pertained to the future workplace size preferences, work benefits preferences, management style preferences, and the pandemic's impact on the answers. The next eight questions asked about views on job hopping, having multiple sources of income, optimism for future careers, and COVID-19's impact on given answers. The final questions in this section pertained to commuting, expected age at career start/end, and other career-related preferences.

### ***Demographics***

Participants indicated their age, gender, ethnicity, and estimated parental income. They were asked how COVID-19 has impacted their family's financial situation. Students needed to indicate their class year, their major/minor, and their plans to pursue an advanced degree after graduation. The remaining five questions pertained to volunteer and job experience, leadership roles, and one COVID-19-related question.

### **Hypotheses**

The large set of questions in the survey allowed for a wide array of analyses. For this exploratory first study, I focused on four main questions/areas. The first area was the potential relationship between students' work setting preferences and the success of their online courses. The second area examined if phone app comfort is connected to professional social media use. The third area pertained to class year and pessimism, with

upperclassmen hypothesized to be more pessimistic than underclassmen. The final area examined students' opinions on workplace benefits.

In order to determine the relationship between work setting preferences and online academic success, I hypothesized that students who are doing better in their online courses will prefer at-home work, while students doing worse in their online courses will prefer in-person work.

In terms of technological use, although Generation Z is often characterized as tech-savvy, I hypothesized that a majority of participants will be uncomfortable with professional software, such as Microsoft Office. However, I expected that they would be very comfortable with a wide variety of phone apps. I predicted students will have little experience using social media in professional positions, even though they may be comfortable with them on a day to day basis.

In investigating attitudes towards future career paths, I hypothesized that the majority of students will be pessimistic about their career prospects. I also hypothesized that upperclassmen will be more pessimistic than underclassmen.

Finally, since the pandemic has placed personal health in the spotlight, I predicted that our participants would prefer health insurance over retirement benefits.

### **III. RESULTS**

#### **Workforce Preparedness and Preferences**

##### *Hypothesis 1: Online Course Success and Work Setting Preferences*

Using an ANOVA, we examined whether levels of satisfaction with online courses (rated on a 1 = poor to 5 = excellent scale) differed between students with different work setting preferences (in-person, hybrid, at home, or no preference). We

found a significant effect ( $F(3,146) = 2.94, p = .035$ ) such that work preference was related to satisfaction with online courses. Follow-up analyses indicated that this effect was driven by differences between the in-person and at home preference groups. Bonferroni-corrected post-hoc t-tests found that the in-person preference group was significantly more dissatisfied with their online classes than the at home preference group ( $M_{\text{in-person}} = 2.97, M_{\text{home}} = 3.72, t(148) = -2.948, p = .022$ ). This confirms our hypothesis that students who are doing better in online classes will prefer working from home and students who are doing poorly in online classes will prefer an in-person work environment.

#### *Hypothesis 2: Casual Technology Use and Professional Technology Use*

Though Generation Z is often characterized as the most tech-savvy generation, our data indicates that the stereotype may not be entirely accurate when it comes to professional software. For example, our participants were asked about the number of hours they spent videoconferencing each week, with 72.6% of participants reporting approximately 3-8 hours each week. However, when asked about their personal experience with videoconferencing software, 62% had never hosted a videoconference, 34.7% had never screenshared during a videoconference, 92% had never hosted a poll in a videoconference, and 74% had never screen recorded during a videoconference.

Respondents also showed a low level of familiarity with the Microsoft Office Suite. When asked about skill level with Microsoft Excel, 62% of participants considered themselves beginners or had no experience. When asked about Microsoft Teams, over three-quarters of participants considered themselves beginners or had no experience. When asked about Microsoft PowerPoint, nearly a quarter of participants either had no

experience or considered themselves beginners. Participants did report higher levels of comfort with Google products, such that experience with Google Docs was significantly higher than experience with Microsoft Word ( $t(147) = 3.89, p < .001$ ).

Though participants showed discomfort with using professional software, they indicated high comfort with a variety of phone apps. 78.7% of participants reported spending between 3-8 hours on their phone every day and 86% of participants considered themselves to be extremely to somewhat comfortable with a variety of phone apps. Though many participants listed social media apps as their most used app, approximately two-thirds of participants had never used social media in a professional setting.

### **Effects of COVID-19**

#### *Hypothesis 3: Optimism and Class Year*

We used an ANOVA to examine whether level of optimism about the workforce was significantly different between different class years (freshman, sophomore, junior, senior, and other). We found no significant effect ( $F(4,145) = 1.20, p = .31$ ). Results, however, did show fairly high levels of optimism among all participants. 87% of participants claimed to be very or somewhat optimistic about their future career path. In terms of COVID-19's impact, 26.6% of participants reported that the pandemic had increased their optimism, 55.3% of participants reported no change, and only 18% reported they were somewhat more pessimistic.

#### *Hypothesis 4: COVID-19 and Job Benefits*

Participants ranked job benefits on a 1 (most important) to 5 (least important scale). Using a paired samples t-tests, we found that participants ranked healthcare ( $M = 2.90, SD = 1.68$ ) higher than all other categories of benefits (retirement, mobility, paid

leave, and work perks;  $ps < .05$ ). Additionally, paid leave was rated significantly above work perks ( $t(138) = -2.317, p = .022$ ). All other categories were equivalent.

#### **IV. DISCUSSION**

The current study used a survey to explore Generation Z workplace attitudes, experiences, and preferences, in addition to measuring the impact of COVID-19. Three of our hypotheses were supported. First, we found that those who were doing better at online school preferred jobs where they could work from home. Second, we found that students had limited experience with professional technologies. Finally, we found that students prioritized health insurance as a workplace benefit. We did not support one hypothesis, however, because optimism about the job market was unrelated to class year. Across years, students were very optimistic. These results contribute to our understanding of Generation Z as they begin to make up more of the workforce.

Our first hypothesis found a connection between school and workplace preferences, including wide variability in how students felt their online classes were going. As many universities are pushing for a return to in-person classes, students may not be able to share their experiences and preferences for hybrid or online courses. In free response items, students were able to share reasons for preferring hybrid or online school. Many students reported that this new schedule allowed them to take on a job or work more hours. Many students also liked that they could move at their own pace for certain classes. These results may have implications for universities' decisions about class modality in the future. They may also help identify ways to make college more accessible to lower-income students, disabled students, or other students who may be disadvantaged by traditional formats.

The results supporting our second hypothesis challenge some of the assumptions

and stereotypes surrounding Generation Z. For example, past research has characterized members of Generation Z as digital natives eager to use technology in both school and work (Hernandez-de-Menendez et al., 2020). Our results showed that this tech-savvy stereotype was partially true, as a majority of participants reported multiple hours of phone use a day and many listed a form of social media as their most used app. However, there appears to be a disconnect between personal use and professional use. Although personal technology experience may be transferable to professional tools, the assumption that Generation Z is naturally equipped to handle all forms of technology may be hurting their professional readiness. Additionally, our results indicate that while participants may spend much of their academic time using a particular software (e.g., videoconferencing), this does not guarantee that they will know how to use it independently. Based on our results, more training may be necessary for Generation Z as they enter the workforce.

We did not find that optimism was related to class year, but we still encountered some surprising responses. First, we found high levels of optimism about careers regardless of grade level. Second, our results hinted that COVID-19 hasn't impacted student optimism as much as we predicted. A majority of our participants reported no change in optimism as a result of the pandemic, with some students even reporting an increase in optimism. These results challenge past research on Generation Z and their overall mental well-being. Generation Z has often been characterized as having worse mental health than previous generations, with high levels of anxiety, depression, and suicide (Lane, 2020; Cartwright-Stroupe & Shinnars, 2021). Though our study didn't look at mental health specifically, our participants did show high levels of optimism in the face of adversity. These surprising results have implications for the way we study COVID-19's overall impact on mental well-

being and the way we view Generation Z's emotional resiliency. Future research should continue to explore these topics.

Finally, we found that this generation places emphasis on health care in employment, demonstrated by the importance placed on health insurance and paid leave, which includes sick leave. I hypothesized that healthcare access would be the most desired benefit for multiple reasons. First, members of Generation Z have witnessed nationwide disputes over health care coverage plans, i.e., the Affordable Care Act and Medicare for All. Second, many members of Generation Z have either witnessed parental job loss, personal job loss, or both due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Since health care is often tied to employment, many members of Generation Z may have lost their health care coverage once furloughed or fired at the beginning of the pandemic (Ramgobin et al., 2021). Finally, the current pandemic may increase the salience of health care benefits. The results of our current study cannot show that job benefit preferences are due to COVID-19, but this is a target for future research.

### **Limitations & Future Directions**

This was a single-site study with a sample size of 150 Texas State University undergraduate students enrolled in an introductory psychology course. The generalizability of our findings could be improved by including students at other universities, Generation Z members not currently enrolled in college, and Generation Z students already in the full-time workforce. Additionally, the participants in our survey were mainly between the ages of 18-19 and were freshmen or sophomores, indicating that only a few of the oldest members of Generation Z participated in the study.

An additional limitation of the study is the lack of pre/post data, rendering it

impossible to claim that COVID-19 specifically changed anything about our participants' answers. Another limitation is that based on question phrasing, our participants may have been answering based on future job expectations, not their current job situation. A future direction of the study could be to include participants in a longitudinal study to see if their job expectations as undergraduates match up with their answers once fully in the workforce. Participants in our sample could also be compared to a sample who have pre-pandemic data.

Future studies should include questions asking participants about their use of university career resources. One hypothesis is that more prepared students may feel more secure in their future career and show higher levels of optimism. Additionally, studies could ask about how COVID-19 has impacted social media use, in order to determine whether use has increased and whether social media has become a more positive or negative environment.

In terms of expanding upon our hypotheses, it would be important to track if student preferences change over time and to get more detailed insight into students' ideal hybrid formats for work and school. Another interesting direction would be to compare class setting preferences with academic performance outcomes. For example, researchers could analyze whether students' preferred formats correspond with better grades or increased learning. Future research could also follow our participants to see how their grades, experiences, and preferences change when either returning to campus or experiencing it for the first time in the fall semester. In terms of technology, a future direction could be asking students themselves how they think they should be taught professional skills. Finally, future research could compare the values of Generation Z on these job benefits

questions to other generations. Such research could also examine workplace preferences in countries with nationalized healthcare and/or significant mandated paid leave.

## **V. CONCLUSION**

Overall, this study offers important insight into Generation Z, an understudied group on the cusp on making up a quarter of the workforce. Quantitative investigations into Generation Z's workplace attitudes, preferences, and behaviors are necessary in order to move beyond media stereotypes and determine how this generation is similar to, and different from, generations that have come previously. Findings from such investigations can inform education and workplace preparation efforts, such as the way students learn about technology. Finally, the results call on us to be more intentional in the way we prepare students of any generation for the workplace. This study is an important first step to what should be large-scale, longitudinal examinations of Generation Z in the workforce. Though facing a global pandemic during a key developmental time, they remain unique, optimistic, and ready to face the future.

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