

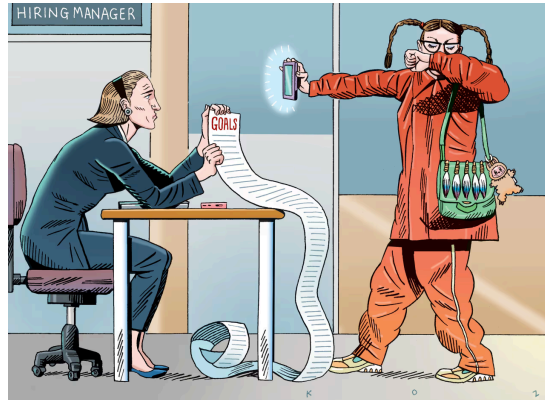
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Is Gen Z Unemployable?

Hiring managers prize achievement, learning and work. Today's youth value pleasure and individuality.

By Suzy Welch

Sept. 24, 2025 12:56 pm ET



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I came late to a career as a business-school professor—I'm now in my fourth year. When I first stepped into the classroom, I didn't expect that my research would soon agitate nearly everyone.

It started innocently enough, with a class I created about how to find your purpose—which, I posited, lies at the intersection of your values, aptitudes and economically viable interests. Intrigued by what I was learning about Generation Z by teaching, I decided to conduct a study about generational values, and, because it seemed relevant in an M.B.A. environment, I thought it would be interesting to see how Gen Z's values compared with the values most prized by hiring managers in today's economy.

The [analysis](#) produced a number that startled my co-researchers and me. A mere 2% of Generation Z members hold the values that companies want most in new hires, namely achievement, learning and an unbridled desire to work.

There's much to unpack in that finding, but let me first explain how we arrived at it. My course helps students discover their purpose through collecting three data sets. Aptitudes and economically viable interests are relatively easy to identify by having students take widely available tests, but values are harder to pin down. One reason is that most students confuse values with virtues. Values are choices about how we want to live and work, while virtues are qualities that everyone generally agrees are good, like kindness and integrity.

Another reason it was hard to assess values was that most available tests relied heavily on self-reporting, which often led students to "discover" that their values were family and financial security in equal measure. You don't need a Ph.D. to know that people are more complex than that. Scholars have identified more than a dozen values, each existing on a continuum of intensity, of which family and financial security are only two. The [Welch-Bristol Values Inventory](#), which I developed as part of my Ph.D., proposes that there are 16.

In 2022 I assembled a team of data scientists, engineers, researchers and psychometricians to help me formulate a scientifically validated, behaviorally based assessment tool called the [Values Bridge](#). It was released this May, and 45,000 people have taken it to date. We drew our analysis from this data, which is demographically representative of the U.S. in age, sex and income.

Our first step was to analyze Generation Z's values in order. In first place is *eudemonia*, a Greek term my inventory uses to encompass the desire for self-care and personal pleasure. Next comes voice, the value that reflects the priority a person places on expressing authentic individuality. Third, *non sibi*, the Latin term meaning "not for oneself," the desire to help people. Fourth is affluence, exactly as it sounds, and fifth, "beholderism," a desire for things—including yourself—to be beautiful.

We then surveyed 2,100 experienced hiring managers in knowledge-industry roles—those that rely heavily on human capital. We asked employers to identify the No. 1 value they desired in their new employees.

Achievement came in first; it's the value of wanting accomplishments and success other people can see. That value comes in 11th for Generation Z; 61% wish they had less of it in their lives.

Next for the hiring managers was scope, which reflects the desire for learning, action and stimulation. That ranks 10th for Gen Z.

Third for hiring managers was "workcentrism," the desire to work for work's sake. That's ninth for Gen Z.

We then calculated how many Generation Z respondents—7,563 of the 45,000 total people who took our test—identified achievement, scope and workcentrism in their top five values. Only 154, or 2.04%, did so.

I've shared our findings with human-resources leaders on the external board at the New York University Stern [Initiative on Purpose and Flourishing](#). Most weren't surprised, but they were dismayed. As one put it, "It's like the line, 'Water, water everywhere, and not a drop to drink.' " One chief human-resources officer said, "The bodies are out there. The attitudes are not."

This same executive noted that her company and others, if armed with data, could become more targeted in hiring efforts, racing to find the 2% before competitors do.

I've also shared the data with my students. Statistically speaking, Stern M.B.A. students have a higher incidence of achievement than the general population, but the reception is still one of unease. Given the tenuous job market, the last thing they want to hear is a professor saying, "And virtually none of you have the values companies want anyway." Still, I say it—not to provoke, but because this is data my students should know. Values, after all, are choices. Like all choices, they have consequences.

This message is often met with the pushback that business needs to change. What has a focus on achievement gotten us, young people ask, but anxiety? And who wants a life of scope, with action and stimulation, when the world is already unstable?

Maybe they're right. And maybe business will change someday—when Generation Z is in charge. But right now, the marketplace faces a values disconnect between generations that could reshape the future of work.

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Appeared in the September 25, 2025, print edition as 'Is Generation Z Unemployable?'.

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