

Far more socially responsible, and yet with a tech-driven impatience, this generation may usher in a new work ethic

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China's Generation Z is enormous and increasingly influential.

This generation, which includes those born in 1995 onwards, is now entering the workforce in large numbers. That is some 250 million people — more than six times as many people as there are in Canada.

At the same time, China's rapid move up the value chain is transforming the country in many ways. The focus of the initiative is to shift and upgrade Chinese industries to make the country an innovation powerhouse.

"When striving for prosperity and rejuvenation, China should dedicate itself to promoting science and technology, and building a major world center for science and innovation," said President Xi Jinping, in May, at the opening of the 19th Meeting of the Academicians of the Chinese Academy of Sciences and the 14th Meeting of the Academicians of the Chinese Academy of Engineering.

"Innovation is the leading driving force and high-quality innovations are needed to support a modern economic system," he said.

That move has undoubtedly changed the job landscape in the country. With a new wave of workers arriving, employers now need to consider how to deal with them.

Generation Z, termed iGen by US psychologist Jean Marie Twenge after the ubiquitous smartphones this generation grew up with, was born between 1995 and 2002. Luckily, managers may find this new batch easier to handle than the Gen Y-ers before them.

"iGen workers are more practical and work-focused than the 'millennials' just before them. For example, iGen is more willing to work overtime and more likely to say that work will be a central part of their lives," said Twenge, who is also author of the book *iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy — and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood — and What That Means for the Rest of Us*.

She added that iGen workers are "eager to prove themselves and may not need as many enticements as millennials did. They are focused on getting a good job and do not have the sky-high expectations that millennials did."

A work-focused and comparatively easy-to-please lineup of employees may sound like a dream come true for employers and managers, but employers should exercise greater



University graduates attend a job fair in Xi'an, Northwest China's Shaanxi province, on Jan 10. As China's post-millennial generation starts working, companies require new strategies to attract and retain talent. IMAGINECHINA

Gen Z looks to the future

sensitivity in dealing with Gen Z.

This is a generation that grew up with greater awareness of social movements through social media, and even helped drive them along. A survey from the Ministry of Education in China that interviewed more than 7,000 young people born after 1995 showed that this is a far more socially responsible group than any generation before.

Twenge tells future employers of iGen-ers to expect to start hearing about topics such as "safe spaces, microaggressions, and trigger warnings, soon if you haven't already."

"iGen is also very interested in safety, so will be eager to hear about how your organization promotes the health and safety of workers — including emotional safety," she said.

Dealing with Generation Z has its own challenges.

"The iGen are accustomed to doing everything digitally, so are likely to be impatient with systems that are not fully digital," said Twenge.

That iGen impatience extends further. In a recent survey by consulting firm Accenture, over one-third of the Generation Z consumers said they wanted same-day delivery of orders, while 27 percent said they expected delivery within half a day. And they expect the same when it comes to communicating.

"They expect to be able to communicate instantly. As teens, their friends usually texted them back within seconds," said Twenge.

The instantaneous nature of tech-

facilitated communication may be great for speedy replies, but to some extent it has also deprived iGen of the ability to develop stronger social skills.

Based on her interviews with managers, Twenge noted that many observed this new batch of workers seems to lack social skills. For instance, they tend not to look into the eyes of those they are speaking to.

She urges parents to allow and encourage their Gen Z offspring to make time for face-to-face social interaction, as this will help them build the social skills necessary at work.

"Actual social gathering rates have plummeted. Parents need to realize time spent with friends in a real world setting is not a waste of time," said Twenge.

Gen Z seems to be adept at managing without the security of traditional employment.

"As Gen Z enters the workforce, they're increasingly choosing non-traditional ways of working that are better suited to their desired lifestyle than a traditional 9-to-5 job is," said Stephane Kasriel, the CEO of Upwork, a global freelancing website.

"More than any other generation, members of Gen Z are seeking work they're passionate about that also affords them freedom and flexibility."

According to data commissioned by Upwork and US organization Freelancers Union, almost half (46

percent) of their Gen Z sample had freelanced in the 12 months prior to the survey. More than any other generation before them, 73 percent of the Gen Z respondents said that they started freelancing by choice rather than out of necessity.

In China, the gig economy is already strong.

The China Internet Network Information Center, or CNNIC, identified 21.3 percent of Chinese internet users as being in the "self-employed workers/freelancers" category as of December 2017. It is the second-biggest category in the employment structure of netizens, just behind 'students' (25.4 percent) and ahead of 'common corporate staff' (12.2 percent).

And the freelance model may fit employers just fine as well.

According to a report by Kelly Outsourcing & Consulting Group, the gig economy is thriving. Talent managers cited lower labor costs, improvements in solutions offerings and extending of reach as motivations to turn to gig talent.

And in certain labor markets, there are additional push factors at play.

In a recent report, real estate consultant company JLL estimated that space-starved Hong Kong may only have enough land supply to provide office space for 10 years.

At the same time, most Gen Z workers expect many tedious processes to be automated. Employers have to ensure their work processes

are up to date with the latest technology that Gen Z cut their teeth on. But that should already be a natural progression for many companies.

Tom Wujec, an author and founder of The Wujec Group, points to "autonomation" as the next step in the evolution of work processes.

"Autonomation is about being able to automate and augment simultaneously. The future of work will be about bringing together the toolset and the mind-set," said Wujec.

He believes no matter how computable industries become, many things still require a human mind.

"Workers need to pay attention to changes inside and out of their industry. Then, they can identify places to create and capture fresh value," said Wujec.

"Identify your super power. They are not just skills."

Employers can protect and augment key areas in their business by adjusting to the workflows best suited to capturing value from Gen Z workers. And that should be done on a large scale soon, as the 1.9 billion-strong group makes up one-fourth of the worldwide population, according to data from Barclays.

"It's important that companies adjust their hiring strategies in order to work with the best young talent, which accounts for more people than Gen X and Baby Boomers and will be the majority of the workforce in the next five years," said Kasriel of Upwork.