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Strategies for Retaining Generation Z Student Employees



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ABSTRACT

The workplace function of Generation Z is a research focus as young people born from 1999-2006 move into postsecondary life. Gen Z characteristics seem to impact interactions in the workplace. In the past, student employees in the Library Informatics Department at Olivet Nazarene University stayed until they either graduated or needed to devote time to internships. Informatics supervisors observed a decrease both in job interest and persistence among Gen Z students. They wondered if these factors were related to personal communication reduction with the internet, social media, and Covid pandemic. The department staff studied Gen Z characteristics and adapted departmental procedures to adjust to their preferences. Even though Gen Z employees cope somewhat differently than other age groups, they respond to the same motivations that other generations have desired: mentorship, relationship with supervisors, communication, and acknowledgment of the value of their work.

According to Dimock, the Generation Z or Gen Z designation applies to anyone born after 1997.¹ This generation is distinguished by their access to the internet and communication technology from birth. The Baby Boomers had television, Generation X had computers, and the Millennials had the internet explosion. Dimock notes that “[b]y the time [Generation Z] were in their teens, the primary means by which young Americans connected with the web was through mobile devices, Wi-Fi, and high-bandwidth cellular service.”² Ubiquitous technology access reduced face-to-face communication generally, and Gen Z experienced further isolation due to COVID pandemic restrictions.

As the new normal developed after COVID limitations, supervisors realized the need for a new strategy to retain these skilled young people. In the fiscal year 2021-2022, the Library Informatics Department at Olivet Nazarene University

¹ Michael Dimock, “Defining Generations: Where Millennials End and Generation Z Begins,” *Pew Research Center*, January 17, 2019. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/01/17/where-millennials-end-and-generation-z-begins/>.

² Dimock, para. 12.

(hereafter, the Department) employed thirty-three students born between 1999 and 2006. Only four of eighteen students who left the department by the end of the year did so due to graduation (see Figure 1 in the Appendix). While some students do leave their positions before graduation due to internships or other academically related activities, this high attrition rate was alarming, indicating a need to try to influence both perseverance with the job and possibly persistence to graduation.

The leadership philosophy for student workers includes three primary elements: train them to help with the Department workload; mentor them as they adapt to college life and independence; and encourage their persistence to graduation. Supervisors in the Department realized that the personal isolation and technology priorities of Gen Z could impact their function in the department and their job persistence. The leadership team decided to re-evaluate the management of student staff in order to align interactions and procedures with the unique characteristics of this generation. There also seemed to be some correlation between job persistence and graduation rate, which added a sense of urgency to the project as retention is an important focus across campus. Therefore, the project included behaviors or processes that might also impact persistence to graduation, as well as departmental retention through the college years and strategies to convey the value of student positions.

During the summer of 2022, the team began to research Gen Z characteristics and values to inform strategies that might restore the work retention rate. Reverting to elementary school days, the staff initiated DEAR (Drop Everything And Read). They designated thirty-minute sessions to read materials about Gen Z and additional sessions to share information and discuss ways to apply the ideas to departmental workflows. They discovered that Gen Z employees value mentorship; they desire a relationship with their supervisor(s); they expect deference to their preferred communication technology; and they want to know that the employer values their work.

Mentorship

Many of the readings emphasized the importance of mentorship. Gen Z students are not looking for how to do things; they can Google that. They are looking for relevance, ownership, and genuine care from their supervisors. They are looking for mentors who are not simply using them or giving them busy work. Deluliis and Saylor state “...they seek out an environment and organizational culture to guide, inspire, and mentor them...”³ They need clear directives and meaningful tasks, or they feel disengaged and undervalued.

³ Elizabeth D. Deluliis and Emily Saylor, “Bridging the Gap: Three Strategies to Optimize Professional Relationships with Generation Y and Z,” *The Open Journal of Occupational Therapy* 9, no. 1 (Winter 2021): 4, <https://doi.org/10.15453/2168-6408.1748>.

One of the first goals implemented in the Department was to encourage the students to see their value in God's eyes. All Informatics applications (apps) open to a joke of the day every time someone logs in. The jokes were replaced with Bible verses, inspirational thoughts, hymn lyrics, and encouraging phrases. The leadership team thought the daily inspirations might provide a sense of security or belonging for the students.

Harrigan, et al. share that Generation Z members have a fear of missing out (FoMO).⁴ FoMO causes problems with personal relationships. Psychologists noted negative consequences of FoMO including fatigue, increased stress, some physical reactions, and sleep loss. The authors state, "positive communication activities such as listening, trying to understand, and creating a positive and supportive atmosphere for discussions can reduce FoMO."⁵ Supervisors focus on what the students are trying to communicate on a personal level. McDowell and Warner encourage leaders to be willing to share some of their frustrations and life experiences.⁶ The authors also talk about praying together as evidence of genuine concern and caring. It is not unusual for the Department staff to pray with a student at Olivet Nazarene University. Gen Z values this kind of personal interaction, and it elevates mentorship to a sharing relationship.⁷

Relationship with Supervisor(s)

Building relationships is another aspect of mentorship. Relationships require investing time to build trust; "You've got to give loyalty down, if you want loyalty up."⁸ If leaders intentionally model loyalty, members of the organization will normally reciprocate, even after they have left the position. The supervisors in the Department regard any employee, even short-term employees, as a part of the Informatics family, and students respond to this attitude. A student who worked for only two weeks returned nearly a year later to say "hi" and ask how others were doing. Supervisors are intentional about real interactions with the students even outside the workplace, which reinforces the student's sense of value to the organization. Love and support often develop lasting connections.

4 Meredith Marko Harrigan, et al., "The Dialectical Experience of the Fear of Missing out for U.S. American iGen Emerging Adult College Students," *Journal of Applied Communication Research* 49, no. 4 (September 2021): 424–40, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00909882.2021.1898656>.

5 Harrigan, 425.

6 Sean McDowell and J. Warner Wallace, *So the Next Generation Will Know: Preparing Young Christians for a Challenging World* (David C Cook, 2019).

7 Bhagyashree Barhate and Khalil M. Dirani, "Career Aspirations of Generation Z: A Systematic Literature Review," *European Journal of Training and Development* 46, no. 1/2 (2022): 139–57, <https://doi.org/10.1108/EJTD-07-2020-0124>.

8 Donald T. Regan cited in Jeffrey Gast, "Loyalty Up and Down the Chain," Little Rock Air Force Base News, United States Airforce, May 29, 2009, <https://www.littlerock.af.mil/News/Commentaries/Display/Article/358161/loyalty-up-and-down-the-chain/>.

To continually engage with student employees on a personal level and demonstrate care for their well-being, supervisors meet regularly with individuals to discuss the progress of their tasks or projects. This practice is modeled by rounding in the field of nursing. Bethel defines rounding as “proactively engaging, listening to, communicating with, building relationships with, and supporting your employees. The number one purpose of rounding is to establish that personal connection with the employee, which creates trust.”⁹ The Department revised an app to track interactions with student employees and document their progress. Personal interaction is time-consuming, but consistent and specific individual feedback has proven to be valuable.

Preferred Communication Technology

Generation Z students consider email to be outdated and irrelevant, and they are annoyed by job-related emails when they are not on the clock.¹⁰ Nevertheless, email is emphasized in the Department because it is the standard means of communication in the business world. Student employees are required to read their email messages from supervisors in a timely manner. In deference to Gen Z preferences, the Department began sending internal email to the Message Center app to reduce the number of personal emails from supervisors. The message is pinned to the wall in the app but does not clutter student inboxes, and students deal with the message when they are at work. A Comm Log is another effective tool used for short team messages.

A downside exists to the reduction of email when using the above solutions. The students must be trusted to carefully review the messages. Leaders monitor app use and remind the students how to use the systems to stay organized. A supervisor may meet with a student to reinforce training and may observe other issues that should be addressed individually or even in additional group training. The process creates a positive environment of mentoring rather than negative lecturing.

The Value of Their Work

Auditing student work also affirms the value of their production. About 40% of Gen Z employees want frequent interactions with their boss. If they do not get it, they often think they have done something wrong.¹¹ The Department’s supervisors pull data from report logs each week and award points. Students receive prizes for reaching specific goals (number of points). This system addresses the Gen Z demand for regular affirmation.

⁹ Bethel cited in Cynthia Sarver, “The Three R’s of Staff Engagement: Relationships, Rounding, and Recognition,” *OR Manager* 31, no. 1 (2015): 11.

¹⁰ McDowell and Wallace, *So the Next Generation Will Know*, 52.

¹¹ “State of Gen Z Research Report for 2018,” The Center for Generational Kinetics, 2018, <https://genhq.com/generation-z-research-2018/>.

Elmore challenges employers to take the time to help young people from this generation understand how their work contributes to the company's goals.¹² Gen Z employees do not just want to be complimented for their work. They want to know that their work is not superficial and that their projects are important. In addition to supervisor affirmation, other library staff were engaged to provide positive feedback when they interact with these students.

One challenge to the system was validating tasks that seem unimportant to the students. For example, the processes for closing and opening the building seem unnecessarily exhaustive to student employees; they often need to be reminded to pay attention to details. While Gen Z employees want to be involved in developing and giving feedback on processes, students are not always able to see the big picture.¹³ There are times that policies must be firm.

Conclusion

According to Ecclesiastes 1:9 (NASB), there is nothing new under the sun. As a result of the Gen Z character exploration described in this article, the leadership team realized many Gen Z expectations are not distinct from those of other generations. They also realized how much personal interaction was lost, particularly during the COVID period. Mentorship, relationships, and validation are concerns of every generation. Gen Z has more in common with prior generations than might be superficially evident, and the need for genuine relationships and for affirmation as individuals and as employees is common to all. Data collected over the most recent school year indicates a positive trend. Of twenty-two student workers, five persisted to graduation; only three lower classmen left their positions for other reasons, a reduced attrition rate of 36% (see Figure 1 in the Appendix). Data over the next few years may demonstrate a correlation between the implemented changes, job persistence, and perseverance to graduation.

Pressure and adversity are common to all humans. However, coping strategies differ among generations. Earlier generations might be more likely to suppress their feelings and just push through the daily grind. Gen Z is more likely to express their feelings or remove themselves from the pressure. They may cope differently, but they still need mentorship, relationships with their supervisors, communication, and acknowledgment of the value of their work.

¹² Tim Elmore, *Generation iY: Secrets to Connecting with Today's Teens & Young Adults in the Digital Age* (Poet Gardener Publishing, 2015).

¹³ Tim Elmore and Andrew McPeak, *Generation Z Unfiltered: Facing Nine Hidden Challenges of the Most Anxious Population* (Poet Gardner, 2019).

APPENDIX

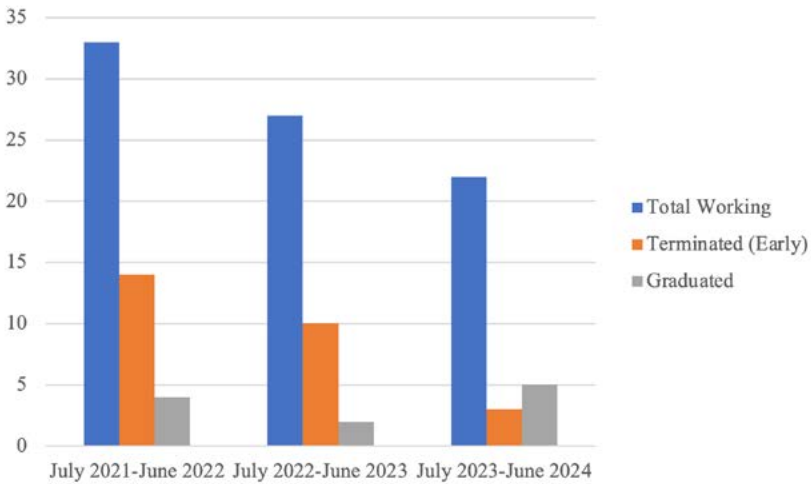


Figure 1. *Student Employee Persistence to Graduation.* The graph indicates the recorded attrition rates and lower graduation rates in the year 2021-2022 and 2022-2023. It compares them with a reversal in the trend in 2023-2024 which may be correlated with the intervention.

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