



THE SOFT SKILLS GAP AND GENERATION Z

Teaching the Missing Basics to Today's Young Talent

By Bruce Tulgan

If you are like most managers with employees in their late teens and twenties, then you no doubt have first-hand experience with a very serious management challenge that has been growing especially fast in recent years: an ever-widening “soft skills gap” in the workforce, especially among the newest young workforce.

I use the term “soft skills” because most people understand the term is used to encompass a wide range of non-technical skills ranging from self-awareness to people skills to problem solving to teamwork—in contrast to “hard skills,” which are technical.

These skills may be less tangible and harder to define and measure than many of the hard skills, but they are absolutely critical to the success or failure of any individual in the workplace. The problem is that these old-fashioned basics—professionalism, critical thinking, and followership—are out of fashion, so they are too rarely spoken of nowadays. Today’s young talent is not being indoctrinated in these old-fashioned basics either at home or in school. Usually, by the time they get to the workplace, employers figure it is too late to focus on them. Certainly most managers figure it is neither their place, nor do they have the time or resources or knowhow to deal with the soft skills gap in their newest youngest employees.

So the soft skills gap continues to grow, hiding in plain sight, despite the fact that it costs organizations a fortune every day.

I’ve asked tens of thousands of managers, “How much do these so-called ‘soft skills’ matter?” The answer is nearly universal: soft skills matter a lot. The cliché is that people get hired because of their hard skills but fired because of their soft skills.

When employees have significant gaps in their soft skills, there are significant negative consequences. Potentially good hires are overlooked. Good hires go bad. Bad hires go worse. Misunderstandings



abound. People get distracted. Productivity goes down. Mistakes are made. Customer service suffers. Workplace conflicts occur more frequently. Good people leave when they might have otherwise stayed longer.

It robs so many young employees of greater success and causes so many managers so much aggravation and so many unnecessary costs. The soft skills gap is not a household term like the technical skill gap, but it should be because its impact is monumental.

Like the technical skill gap, the soft skills gap in the workforce has been developing slowly for decades. But the soft skills gap runs across the entire workforce—among workers with technical skills that are in great demand every bit as much as workers without technical skills. What is more, the soft skills gap has gotten much worse in recent years.

Are today’s young employees really so much worse when it comes to soft skills than those of previous generations?

The Soft Skills Gap: Growing Steadily from Gen X to Gen Y to Gen Z

Since 1993, I’ve been tracking generational change in the workplace and its impact on organizations, especially the impact on supervisory relationships. I started out as a frustrated young lawyer seeking to understand why the older, more experienced lawyers were so annoyed by those of my generation, Generation X (born 1965–77). I quickly realized that it wasn’t just the older, more experienced people at my firm who were annoyed with Gen Xers. It was nearly *everybody* older and more experienced in workplaces of all shapes and sizes.

That's when I started conducting in-depth interviews with young people and their managers, the original research that led to my first book *Managing Generation X*. I formed a company to continue that research, and we've been conducting that interview research for decades now, ever tracking the ever-emerging ever-“newer” new young workforce. By the late 1990s, we started tracking the first wave of the great Millennial cohort, what we refer to as Generation Y (born 1978–89). At this point, we've been tracking the second-wave Millennials, whom we call Generation Z (born 1990–99), for nearly a decade now, since they first entered the workforce as teenagers in part-time jobs. Gen Zers are the newest “new dogs” arriving in your workplace, part of the global youth tide rising now and for the foreseeable future.

Since the mid-1990s, I've had a front-row seat, on the front lines, and behind the scenes in organizations of all shapes and sizes. I've interviewed tens of thousands of young workers, and they're

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in just about every industry—health care, professional services, restaurants, retail, research, finance, aerospace, software, manufacturing, the public sector, and even nonprofits. You name it. Based on two decades of research, I can report that the overwhelming data points to a steady

diminution in the soft skills of young people in the workplace from Gen X to Gen Y to Gen Z. Today's young workers are increasingly likely to have significant notable weaknesses in one or several key soft skills.

Why is that?

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Something Much Larger Is Going on Here: The Post-Boomer Generational Shift

Of course, the older, more experienced people are always more or less annoyed by the attitudes and behavior of each successive new young generation. New young employees are, by definition, always younger and less experienced and, therefore, lacking in the corresponding maturity and patience. As they step into the adult world with youthful energy and enthusiasm, young workers often clash with their older colleagues. That's always part of the story. But there is something much bigger going on here.

On a macro level, Generation Z represents a tipping point in the post-Boomer generational shift transforming the workforce. With older (first-wave) Boomers now retiring in droves, they are taking with them the last vestiges of the old-fashioned work ethic. By 2020, more than 80 percent of the workforce will be post-Boomer dominated in numbers, norms, and values by Generations X, Y, and Z. Generation Z will be greater than 20 percent of the North American and European workforce (and a much greater percentage in younger parts of the world, especially South Asia, Sub Saharan Africa, and South America).

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Globalization. Generation Z will be the first truly global generation—connecting and traveling to work across borders in every direction and combination. Unlike any other generation in history, Gen Z can look forward to a lifetime of interdependency and competition with a rising global youth-tide from every corner of this ever-flattening world.

Technology. The pace of technological advance today is unprecedented. Information. Computing. Communication. Transportation. Commerce.

Entertainment. Food. Medicine. War. In every aspect of life, anything can become obsolete any time—possibilities appear and disappear swiftly, radically, and often without warning.

Institutional Insecurity. Gen Zers were small children on 9/11 and young teenagers when the economy collapsed in 2008. Theirs is a world threatened by terrorism and environmental cataclysm in which the economy fluctuates wildly from boom to bust, governments sometimes shut down or run out of money, and great companies conquer or fail or merge or continually downsize, restructure, and reengineer. Institutions in every domain

have been forced into a constant state of flux just in order to survive and succeed in this constantly changing world. Gen Zers know enough to know that they can't rely on institutions to be the anchors of their success and security.

The Information Environment. Gen Zers are the first true “digital natives.” They learned how to think, learn, and communicate in a never-ending ocean of information. Theirs is an information environment defined by wireless Internet ubiquity, wholesale technology integration, infinite content, and immediacy. From a dangerously young age, their infinite access to information and ideas and



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perspectives—unlimited words, images, and sounds—is completely without precedent.

Human Diversity. In every dimension, the world is becoming more diverse and more integrated. Generation Z will be the most diverse workforce in history, by far. That's true in terms of geographical point of origin, ethnic heritage, ability/disability, age, language, lifestyle preference, sexual orientation, color, size, and every other way of categorizing people. For one thing, the Generation Z workforce will include a global mix like never before. Equally important, Gen Zers look at every single individual—with his/her own combination of background, traits, and characteristics—in his or her own unique diversity story. They value difference, uniqueness, and customization, most of all their own.

At the same time, Generation Z has been also been shaped by two very important micro trends.

Helicopter Parenting on Steroids. By the late 1990s, the Boomer-esque self-esteem based “everyone gets a trophy” style parenting was morphing anew. The parents of these second-wave Millennials are mostly Gen Xers who have had fewer children and typically have children at a later age than Boomers did. Xer parents have taken helicopter parenting to a whole new level. As one Gen Xer parent told me, “I don't want to make my kid just feel like a winner no matter what happens; I want to do everything I can to set him up with every possible advantage to make sure he has a big head start in the real world, so he can win for real.” Parents (and contingent authority figures) are so engaged in supervising and supporting the child's every move, validating their differences, excusing (or medicating) their weaknesses, and setting them up with every material advantage possible. In China, where there are so many only-children due to the longstanding “single child policy,” a similar trend in child-rearing has yielded a phenomenon referred to by many as “Little Emperor Syndrome.”

Gen Zers grew up spending most of their time ensconced in their own highly customized safety zones—the private comfort of protection and resources provided by responsible adults who are always supposed to be looking out for them. Gen Zers have been insulated and scheduled and supervised and supported to a degree that no children or young adults have ever been before. It's been decades since children were told to “go outside and play.” Even school no longer functions (as it used to) as a robust quasi-public sphere for children to “scrimmage” real-life social interaction. More Gen Zers per capita, by far, have been home-schooled than any generation since the rise of public schooling. Meanwhile, parental involvement in the classroom is more pervasive than ever before.

Gen Zers have grown accustomed to being treated almost as customers or users of services and products provided by authority figures in institutions, both in schools and in extracurricular activities, not to mention in their not-infrequent experiences as actual customers.

As a result of all of this, relationship boundaries with authority figures are rather blurry for Gen Zers. They expect

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authority figures to be always in their corner, to set them up for success, and to be of service. They are often startled when authority figures see it otherwise.

Virtual Reality. It's not just that they are always looking down at their hand-held devices. Gen Zers are

equally valid" and try to "fit in" with each other, in a never-ending digital dance, by projecting their uniquely diverse persona(s) in their own highly customized virtual peer ecosystems.

Trying to make the adjustment to "fitting in" in the very real, truly high stakes, mostly adult world of the

attitudes and behaviors accepted by the group in order to "fit in." Of course, in any era there are conformists and outliers, regardless of the zeitgeist. But the pendulum does swing one way or the other. Think of the relative conformism of the 1950s when so many were trying to assimilate and come together after the global upheaval of World War II and its aftermath. The revolutionary non-conformity of the 1960s yanked the pendulum in the other direction, and it's been swinging that way ever since. There have been ebbs in the swing, notably in the middle 1980s and the years immediately following 9/11. Still, the pendulum has kept swinging away from conformism and toward a broad cultural relativism for many good reasons.

It is unfortunate that cultural relativism has been widely misunderstood and is often misappropriated (in a classic case of *reductio ad absurdum*) by those who wish to argue that no expectations of conformity to any norms of conduct are legitimate. This is the kind of thinking that leads to the wishful notion that "all styles are equally valid."

It is easy to see why cultural relativism is so important to understand: it provides much of the intellectual underpinning behind some very important long-term cultural and social trends away from oppressively hierarchical systems and one-size-fits-all rules. Strict hierarchy and one-size-fits-all rules are extremely limiting: by design, they prescribe and proscribe the behavior of those who wish to belong. They constrain individual expression, creativity, and innovation. They exclude those outside the norm or unwilling to conform. Sometimes they exclude people for very bad reasons, sometimes even with malice, as in "no Irish need apply," a sign common in US workplaces in the middle- to late-nineteenth century. Cultural relativism teaches us that differences in norms and values are not an indication of moral failure. There may be many different ways to think

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Some standards of conduct are more burdensome than others. Some are arbitrary, exclusionary, constraining, and worth resisting. Others are necessary, efficacious, and worth some inconvenience. How does one tell the difference? This question holds the key to bridging the soft skills gap with today's young talent.

always totally plugged in to an endless stream of content and in continuous dialogue—through social-media based chatting and sharing and gaming—with peers (and practical strangers) however far away (or near) they might be. They are forever mixing and matching and manipulating from an infinite array of sources to create and then project back out into the world their own ever-changing personal montage of information, knowledge, meaning, and selfhood.

They try on personas, virtually. Social media makes it easy to experiment with extreme versions of one persona or another more or less (or much more) crass means of expression.

Gen Zers are perfectly accustomed to feeling worldly and ambitious and successful by engaging virtually in an incredibly malleable reality where the stakes can seem all-important one moment, until the game is lost and reset with the push of a button.

In a nutshell, Generation Z might be seen as a rising global youth-tide of "Little Emperors" who have been told their whole lives "all styles are

workplace is a whole new game for them. And it's not really their kind of game. They are less inclined to try to "fit in" at work and more inclined to try to make this "whole work thing" fit in with them.

Gen Zers: The Ultimate Non-conformists in an Age of Non-conformism

If you think about it, soft skills are mostly about "fitting in"—making an effort to conform one's attitude and behavior to established standards of conduct—in order to engage and work together effectively with others in a shared enterprise. Here's the thing: Gen Zers are the ultimate non-conformists in an age of non-conformism.

For some time now, the pendulum of the zeitgeist has been swinging (more or less) away from conformism. Non-conformism is the belief that it is better for individuals to be unique and emphasize their individual differences from the group; conformism is the belief that it is better for individuals to subordinate their individual differences and adopt the normative/dominant

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about or do things that are equally legitimate, on some fundamental level, even if they might be more or less appropriate in one culture versus another. Plus, being open to people with differing norms and values can open valuable new opportunities and possibilities. Still, none of this means that “all styles are equally valid.”

What it really means is that a style that may be appropriate in one time and place may not be appropriate in another. Any cultural anthropologist will tell you that the way to get along in a different culture is to adjust your attitude and behavior to what is appropriate in that place and time. That doesn't mean you have to compromise your values or integrity or abandon your “true self.” It just means, if you want to develop good relationships with others and be effective, you need to be adaptable.

Dress codes offer a simple example: I often say, “If you don't want to wear a uniform, you shouldn't become a police officer, a firefighter, or a soldier.” Uniforms function to help police, firefighters, and soldiers identify each other in a crowd; signal to outsiders the special role of those in uniform; provide important information such as name and rank; and have built-in equipment for doing the job. Uniforms can make a lot of sense in some jobs. So where do you draw the line? What about suits and ties for men? Skirts and jackets for women? When I was a young associate at a Wall Street law firm in the early 1990s, there was a serious brouhaha among the young associates over women lawyers being required to wear skirts instead of pants. In the 1990s! The Gen X lawyers had a mini-revolt in favor of women being able to wear pantsuits. What rebels!

Some standards of conduct are more burdensome than others. Some are arbitrary, exclusionary, constraining, and worth resisting. Others are necessary, efficacious, and worth some inconvenience. How does one tell the difference? This question holds the key to bridging the soft skills gap with today's young talent.

The Bottom Line: Managing Gen Zers

The bottom line is this: you simply cannot have a functional workplace where everybody makes his own rules of conduct. Imagine an organization where some employees support the mission, but others support the opposite mission. Where nobody agrees about who is in charge. Where people come and go whenever they feel like it. Where some people wear pantsuits, and others wear bathing suits. Where people only work on the tasks and responsibilities they enjoy, insist on doing everything their own way, and only work with the people they like. Where meetings are held with no particular agenda, and people are encouraged to blurt out whatever pops into their heads. Where people may or may not return each other's calls and emails. And so on.

Sometimes conforming makes a lot of sense. Consider the essential soft skills such as the elements of professionalism, critical thinking, and followership. These are old-fashioned basics for a reason: they are time-tested best practices. They work.

Nobody needs Gen Zers to give up their uniqueness as individuals, their overall non-conformism, or adopt too many arbitrary, exclusionary, or overly constraining standards. But most managers would very much like Gen Zers to make some reasonable adaptations—to adjust at least some of their attitudes and behaviors to the realities of the adult workplace.

The problem is that Gen Zers are neither accustomed nor inclined to conform their attitudes and behavior for an institution or an authority figure (especially a non-parental authority figure).

Yes, they apply for the job. They accept the job. They might be excited about the job. They might want your approval. They usually are very keen to succeed. They definitely want the paycheck. Nonetheless, they usually do not realize just how much “just doing their own thing” makes their attitudes and behavior maladaptive in the real world of the workplace. Most of them have no concept of the incredible power of the old-fashioned soft skills.

If you want your employees to really focus on high-priority soft skill behaviors, then you need to:

- Set clear goals for specific behaviors.
- Monitor and measure each employee's actual performance on those specific behaviors in relation to those goals.
- Provide candid feedback, direction, and guidance on those behaviors.
- Problem solve and troubleshoot when course correction is necessary.
- Identify opportunities to improve on those specific behaviors.
- Recognize and reward success on those specific behaviors.
- Identify high performers for key assignments, opportunities, and promotions based on success in those specific behaviors.

Your young employees need to know exactly what is expected and required of them every step of the way when it comes to high-priority soft skill behaviors. They also need to know that their performance will be measured and that the score will have real consequences for failure and real rewards for success. ■



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