PROMOTING EMPLOYABILITY OF GENERATION Z – THE CONTRIBUTION OF A MENTOR’S PROGRAM

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Abstract

Generation Z (referred to as GEN Z or iGen) regards individuals that were born between the 1990 and early 2000s. This generation, even more than the previous generations, have grown up surrounded by advanced technologies. Most GEN Zs are either recent graduates and/or are at the beginning of their academic studies or are about to enter the labour market. At both stages, there are new challenges as they enter the labour market. The European funded iGen Project developed tools to help to build bridges between these youngsters and companies and to facilitate their integration in the job market. Within this project, we studied the characteristics, expectations and needs of both actors: GEN Z and companies thoroughly. Based on these results, we developed a training session to prepare mentors to welcome youngsters in companies. In these paper, we present the results of the first training session for the future mentors of companies in order to discover the importance, and therefore, in all likelihood, be highly supportive of mentor programs within the enterprise.

Keywords: Mentor program, Employability, Generation Z.

1 INTRODUCTION

Labour markets undergo dynamic transformation driven by digitisation, long value chains and increased complexity in work organisation. The net result is that ready-made human capital will no longer be available to employers. One of the critical trends affecting the future of European labour markets is population ageing. The economic crisis prevented the EU from reaching targets set in 2010. Today's European labour market deals with challenges regarding changes in the demographic composition of the labour force, as well as the increase in work complexities and processes [1].

Eurostat's population projection shows that, in the coming decades, Europe will face a decline in the working-age population and an increase in the old age dependency ratio. Recent studies - such as European Commission or Cedefop country forecasts, - show that the decline of working age population will, in some countries, reduce the labour force to the extent that potential economic growth will be at risk [2].

With the increasing retirement age and new generations entering the workplace increasing levels of age diversity are becoming more and more a reality in the corporate world. The impact of age diversity spreads across several issues in the employment relationship and is a topic of interest in the literature [3], [4].

The concept Generation Z (GEN Z or iGen) refers to the population born between the late 1990s and the beginning of the 21st century. At this moment, GEN Z will be between 16 and 24 years old; therefore, either recent graduates and/or are at the beginning of their academic studies or are about to enter the labour market. GEN Z both face and pose new challenges as they enter the labour market.

GEN Z is likely to be profoundly affected by globalisation, information and communication technology, the green economy, and encouraged by parents to be socially and culturally aware. It is likely to have different, often more comprehensive, perspectives on the global labour market, supervisor-subordinate relationships, cultural diversity, job performance, and how information and communication technologies can leverage organisational performance and maximise productivity.

Like other generations that preceded it, the first obstacle that GEN Z faces is the socialisation with the other members of the organisation. Newcomers get to know the tasks and expectations of social norms through this process and learn how to adapt and negotiate the role they play and how to gain acceptance of others as active members in the workplace.

This paper is an output of the current findings of the iGen Project – Interwork between Generation Z and Employers, a European funded project with general aims to help GEN Z to incorporate in the job market.
This project included the study of both perspectives GEN Z and firms regarding their mutual expectations and needs and perception of GEN Z characteristics.

Data collected during the iGen Project show that GEN Z has specific characteristics, such as a high level of interaction with its parents, teachers, among others. People of this generation also have a lesser tendency to resist authority relations than previous generations (i.e. the previous generation Generation Y born between the late 1970s and early 1990s [5]). They also tend to perform better when engaged in intensive labour relations. Generation Z, more than any other, suffers from the growing cleavage between the highly skilled and the unskilled. If the cleavage of technical skills is significant, the cleavage of non-technical skills is even more widespread in areas such as public speaking, problem-solving, language, and decision making. Managing people of this generation requires training in cross-cutting skills such as work habits, interpersonal communication and critical thinking, as well as high investment in technical improvement training.

In the work environment, they value trust and respect and mutual appreciation between colleagues, their employer and others. They value flexibility, creativity, transparency and they like to be able to ask for and receive help from managers and colleagues. They also like to be able to express their ideas, use their creativity and to organise themselves and their work.

To access labour market opportunities, they usually use the internet and their network. Job search services are usually disregarded and considered to be an ineffective job search method. This data should provide an insight into the needs of this generation.

They do not see themselves as entrepreneurs, at least not in the immediate future, as they recognise that they still have many things to learn and want to apart from work [6].

The skills required by employers are changing, with interpersonal skills (soft skills) replacing technical skills. These new necessary skills could polarise the workforce [7]. Young people highly qualified in advanced technologies have some advantages since interpersonal skills give an additional dimension to their work insofar as they are an alternative to technical skills. Employers are highly aware of the impact that digital communication has on the presence of the general population during in-person interactions.

About the perspective of companies, there were few dominating trends. In general, the companies in the Project considered they were reasonably well prepared to meet the needs of GEN Z. However, while they had some established processes, they often did not have sufficient processes in place – this was especially the case with smaller companies.

Companies reported that they expect GEN Z employees to bring innovative ideas, an innovative attitude and technological knowledge into the company. They also expect GEN Z employees to be able to learn quickly, to be proactive and independent in their work. Employers also expect GEN Z employees to possess specific basic skills (e.g. writing an e-mail, creating simple documents and able to undertake simple calculations as well as a set of soft skills and qualities (e.g. hard-working, the ability to listen, high adaptability skills, critical thinking, teamworking): employers and managers do not have the time to train and develop these skills.

Employers also believe that keeping GEN Z interested in their work as one of the main challenges. They reported that GEN Z often refuses or are reluctant to undertake simple tasks if they find it too easy about their qualifications. Employers reported that GEN Z needs regular feedback and do not readily accept formality and hierarchical structures at work. They respect their managers and leaders if they believe and are seen to be competent in their work. They do not like repetitive, monotonous tasks and they have difficulties focusing on one thing at a time. They also believe that GEN Z likes and are used to instant gratifications and give up easily if they need to face problems or experience frustration or stress.

Generation Z's dependence on technologies and social media will impact its ability to use interpersonal communication skills to establish relationships with future supervisors and employers [8]. The relationship between employees and their supervisors is essential to ensure that the organisation fulfills its mission and achieves its strategic objectives.

The critical issue for smooth workforce diversity, and employees from previous generations - especially those in formal and informal power positions in organisations - will be to interact with Generation Z willing to understand and value their talent, not to criticise how different Generation Z is. Trust and support between Generation Z and employees will encourage them to engage and perform better in their organisations.
Mentoring can be of great help in dealing with this career entering issue. Mentoring is a one-to-one relationship with a developmental focus of the mentee, is temporary and, and performed by someone usually older, with more experience and seniority in the context that the mentee is entering [9]. Literature indicates that there are positive developmental results of mentoring programmes with young people and that it is a strategy that has proliferated at the beginning of this century [10], [11].

As known based on years of dealing with other generations, problems in the workplace can arise when labour values and expectations about the role of colleagues already in the organisation clash with GEN Z: this can lead to conflict, mistrust, and low productivity.

It is then, essential to train the supervisors on induction techniques that will help them to introduce the young newcomers to a new work setting, and at the same time keep them motivated and engage into taking the best out of their talent.

Within the iGen Project, we found that a Mentoring training session for older workers, usually with supervising roles on organisations, would be of great use.

In the next section, we present the methodology conceiving and implementing the Mentoring Training in the Portuguese context.

2 METHODOLOGY

The training session structured and materials were developed and validated by all partners. The materials were translated into Portuguese.

The trainer was an experienced human resources professional and academic that did not participate initially in the materials development. The selection of an unrelated to the project trainer was decided to enable the evaluation of the resources provided by the project.

Materials include a slide set, a competency book, and exercises

The session included the following topics:

- What is GEN Z
- Characteristics of GEN Z
- What is Mentoring
- Characteristics of Mentoring
- Key-roles of the Mentor
- Benefits of the process
- Activities within the process
- Barriers to the process
- Competencies required to be a Mentor
- Planning tools
- Programme phases
- Developing a draft programme for a specific position in hiring

Twenty-six participants from 18 different firms and institutions volunteered to participate in a free training session with a duration of 4 hours.

Participants answered a questionnaire at the end of the session, and the trainer provided a written report with her impressions on the materials, and the course of the session.

3 RESULTS

In this section, we present the results of the training session in the perspective of the participants, the trainer, and the iGen Project.
3.1 Participants perspective on the session

The session was a bit longer than the four hours initially previewed, and from the 26 participants, only ten remained until the end.

The majority of the respondents agreed that the target of the training is correct (Fig.1).

![Figure 1. Agreement regarding the target group of the training session.](image)

Regarding the topics covered during the session, the participants considered them relevant and very relevant (Fig.2).

![Figure 2. Relevance of topics (1: Not relevant at all - 5: Very relevant).](image)

All participants considered that there were enough practical activities to apply the theory, making the theoretical ground easy to follow.

They also found the materials are easy to understand, and the layout is visually attractive (Fig.3).

![Figure 3. Visual attractiveness/easiness to understand of the materials (1: Not attractive/easy to understand at all – 5: Very attractive/easy to understand).](image)

Participants considered that the materials distributed are helpful for their organisation to implement a mentoring programme with an adequate mentor (Fig.4).
Participants also consider that the materials they accessed will facilitate the integration of generation Z in the organisations (Fig. 5).

As for the time dedicated to the training, although some participants feel it was enough some of them wanted more time, since did not “completely agree” with the duration of the session (Fig. 6).

Participants made some additional comments on the strengths of the training session. They highlighted:

- “the presentation and the workgroup” as enjoyable,
- the “relevance” and “usability of the topic”,
- the opportunity to “reflect about the problems lived in the companies with the integration of youth and their relationship and coordination with the other staff already working in the company”,
- and the opportunity to “understand the characteristics of Generation Z and the development of competencies to act as a mentor”.

### 3.2 Trainer perspective

The trainer referred to the materials provided as “interesting and very useful”, but also mentioned the need for each trainer to adapt. Even if there is a pedagogical course defined, it is challenging to follow
it exactly, because “one always feels that wants to add something, or that some other thin does not make sense, for some reason”.

As this was a very interested group, and that picked up the topic very quickly, it would be very attention-grabbing to have, as a backup, in case of groups like these “at least one completed example of a program (processes, procedures, instruments) for the trainees to have as a model”.

To add some more tools to the materials would also be of interest.

The training session ended 20 minutes after the scheduled time: “It was very hard to keep the schedule, and I ended up not keeping it! They were very interested and kept intervening. At the same time, other people had already appointments and had to leave earlier”. To deal with this kind of situations, either make two types of sessions: the first introductory, and the second, to enrol only who is interested, with the skills development; or to have, from the begging, more sessions.

4 CONCLUSIONS

The youngest generation entering the labour market is GEN Z. They have specific characteristics which the labour market has to deal with. These characteristics make them different in several ways from previous generations: more technological prone and competent, and have different motivations and therefore, have different ways and competences regarding human interaction. Entering the labour market may be hazardous for young people, and on the labour market side, it may be difficult to integrate people with new characteristics.

The iGen Project is a European funded project that aims to support GEN Z to incorporate in the job market. The project does that in two different ways, by supporting the firms, and the youngsters. The project developed several tools, but in this paper, we refer to the labour market side, organising a training section to develop Mentoring competences on supervisors.

The session was performed by an outsider to the project trainer, which proved very useful because this is the type of professional that will replicate the training session after the end of the project.

On the participants perspective, the session seemed motivating, the materials adequate and useful, as well as the topic. The final aim is to motivate to develop Mentoring programmes for young employees, rather than criticising the differences, taking the best out the youngster's talent.

The trainer also found the session useful and the distributed materials good enough. Even if the materials were considered suitable, she found it necessary to adapt it, which was predictable and also desirable, to make the session “her own”.

The trainer's suggestion of completing the materials and the participant's inputs regarding the visual attractiveness will be taken into consideration when revising the tools before the project's end.

On the trainer standpoint, there were a bit more ambitious intentions wanting to go further in depth on the competences training. The suggestion of extending the duration of the session or increasing its number, although useful, may, at this moment, not be attractive enough to the firms in the labour market. Corporate Mentoring programmes are associated with larger firms, and smaller companies, at the beginning are not aware of its benefits for young talent attraction and retention.

The project found this pilot successful, both in the strategy of doing it with an outsider trainer, and we the tools and materials developed to the moment. The most rewarding part of this pilot test was the fact that participants found a relatively unknown topic to them useful, and found that they could use this new knowledge and pass it into practice in their firms.

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