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Open to Collaboration

Why Gen Yers expect
collaborative workplaces

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Summary and highlights

As the generation that pioneered the social media persona, Gen Y isn't known for fading into the background. But despite their desire to stand out, today's young people are equally apt at working together – and the workplace is no exception.

With 38% of Gen Y noting that outdated modes of collaboration obstruct a company's ability to innovate, they're taking it upon themselves to create collaborative atmospheres and push for opportunities to have their voices heard.

Mastering the art of effective collaboration isn't easy though, but Workplace is building the tools to help simplify the process. We've partnered with behavioural insights agency Canvas8 to explore how Gen Y approach working together – both online and offline – in the professional sphere.

In this report, we piece together the puzzle of a generation's attitudes towards collaboration: what holds them together, what drives them apart and how understanding these tensions is central to any business's success.

Gen Y

Having grown up with social media, they are natural networkers. Gen Y are looking to create collaborative environments within the workplace and share their innovative thoughts and ideas

Gen Yers

Feel that companies are not giving them the tools they need to work effectively and are holding them back due to outdated modes of collaboration

38%

of Gen Y and Gen Z say their best work happens in environments that enable them to both focus and collaborate with others

Randstad, 2016

71%

of Gen Yers say they face challenges using their companies' collaboration tools

Dimensional Research, 2015

“In any successful workplace, people expect to work together.”

Maurice Schweitzer

Co-author of *Friend & Foe: When to Cooperate, When to Compete, and How to Succeed at Both*

Introduction

“In any successful workplace, people expect to work together,” explains Maurice Schweitzer, co-author of ‘Friend & Foe: When to Cooperate, When to Compete, and How to Succeed at Both’. “This is even more important for millennials, who are learning that they have to be adaptable, flexible and open to new ways of working.”^[1]

As the generation that pioneered the social media persona, Gen Y aren’t known for fading into the background – the average Gen Yer juggles four different social media accounts, crafting individual personalities on each.^[2] But despite their desire to stand out, today’s young people are especially keen to work together; so much so that 40% would even pay out of their own pocket for social collaboration tools at work.^[3]

Despite this, workplaces aren’t always giving them the tools they need to work effectively with one another. While 38% of Gen Y feel that outdated modes of collaboration obstruct a company’s ability to innovate, 71% say they face challenges using their company’s collaboration tools.^[4] As a result, they’re taking it upon themselves to create collaborative working environments, share innovative ideas and embrace the diversity of thought that comes along with it.

But how has growing up with social media shaped their view of professional networking? Why are they so committed to diversity of thought? How is a collaborative approach to work making Gen Yers feel more motivated? And is co-opetition the new way of working?

Natural networkers

As the first generation to have grown up with social media, Gen Y are natural networkers. While this cultural emphasis on socialising means they have the skills to manage virtual relationships alongside physical ones, it also feeds into their expectations of what they want from a job.

More than any other generation, Gen Yers' workplace satisfaction depends on meaningful relationships with coworkers – 57% of employees aged 18-24 say that workplace friendships made them happy, while others also say these relationships make them more motivated (50%) and more productive (39%).^[5] With research finding that 38% of Gen Y and Gen Z say their best work happens in environments that enable them to both focus and collaborate with others, workplaces that can meet these demands look to retain – and attract – top talent.^[6]

Whether it's open-plan offices or hot-desking, workplaces are – on the surface – evolving to become more collaborative. But with globalisation making consistent physical closeness an impossibility for many businesses, virtual collaboration is becoming increasingly important. Yet workplaces are lagging behind in their offerings, and it's Gen Yers that have the biggest expectations – 71% say they face challenges with their collaboration tools at work, compared to 62% of Gen Xers and 45% of baby boomers.^[7]

Such tools – from group chats to document sharing – are integral to facilitating collaboration among a generation who want to work whenever and wherever they choose, with a full 70% of Gen Yers wanting more flexible working options. ^[8] “I’d never have thought of bringing these types of tools into the business,” explains Dan Kieran, CEO and co-founder of Unbound, a London-based crowdfunding literary platform. “But it’s something our younger employees created and the tech has actually helped foster team spirit and conversational communication when people are working from home.” ^[9]

Take video calling as another example of transformational tech. By blending the benefits of face-to-face communication with the ease of virtual collaboration, it’s transforming the way employees and businesses work together when physical interaction isn’t possible. When Campbell employed Workplace across its 16,500-strong global team, the platform’s live video feature enabled the business to broadcast events in real time. And if people missed the event, they were able to catch up whenever or wherever they were able. By supporting these richer connections, such tools have enabled the business to reimagine its culture – and it has seen a 243% increase in overall connectivity. It’s a popular tool too, with 64% of employees across the globe saying that video conferencing tech makes it easier to build relationships with people working remotely. ^[10]



2112

Launched in 2015, 2112 is Chicago’s first incubator hub for entrepreneurs in music, film and creative technology. As well as helping foster meaningful connections, 2112 equips its members with educational programming and mentorship schemes that further help facilitate the sharing of knowledge. By creating a space where people are encouraged to intermingle, 2112 is helping Chicago’s creatives grow and innovate at the speed of business.

Crucial building blocks

As well as helping to build better employee relationships, collaboration also creates opportunities for employees to embrace new ideas, which is a move that's being championed by Gen Yers in a bid to create better work. Research from Deloitte finds that, compared to other generations, Gen Yers see diversity of thought as more of a positive asset to a business, as opposed to a moral or legal obligation. This acceptance gap is evidenced in the finding that a staggering 86% of Gen Y say that diverse teamwork allows teams to excel, yet just 59% feel their leaders share this same view. ^[11]

People's affinity for a hive-mind mentality – the idea that many brains are better than one – is something Alex Restrepo, member engagement coordinator at 2112, a Chicago-based incubator for startups in the creative industry, has witnessed being crucial to business growth. "Whether it's young or old, different demographics, ethnicities or socioeconomic backgrounds, when people from different backgrounds are all working together, you get a more considered, more authentic and more successful result," she explains. ^[12]

As people become more accustomed to broadcasting and sharing ideas, workplace technologies that expose Gen Yers to different people are making them receptive to ideas different to their own. It's this 'marketplace of ideas' that's creating more competent, able and experienced teams – less diverse companies are 29% more likely to underperform in terms of profitability. ^[13] Even the UK economy is losing out on £127 billion a year due to a lack of diversity in the workforce, making diversity a key building block to successful collaboration. ^[14]



Unbound

Launched in 2011, Unbound is a London-based literary crowdfunding and publishing platform. It works by authors pitching a book idea to the community of more than 150,000 people across the world and if enough people pledge their support, the book is published. By putting the power of partnerships at the heart of the business, Unbound is hoping to revolutionise the publishing industry.

United under a common cause

“Millennials want to get more out of their work,” explains Schweitzer. ^[1] And that’s certainly true. A survey by MetLife found that American Gen Yers say they’d work for 34% less of their current salary if a company shared their views – more than double the amount Baby Boomers (15%) would give up. ^[15] Schweitzer adds: “They want a job that enriches them, develops their skills, gives them some meaning and a sense of purpose.” ^[1]

As part of this pursuit of purpose, Gen Y are actively creating workplace communities they want to be a part of, and collaboration is a huge driver of that. Organise – a UK-based startup – is helping them do just that. It’s an online community of more than 20,000 people who work together with other employees in their company in a bid to make a positive change to their workplace.

“People don’t discuss or share what they want to change in the break room anymore, because there aren’t many break rooms left,” explains Usman Mohammed, lead campaigner at Organise. “We’re giving people the space and facilities to spot shared problems and fix them in a space where most people are – online.” ^[16] Be it a petition to River Island’s head office asking for the ability to freely swap shifts or a mini documentary shedding light on the realities of zero-hour contracts, the platform is giving employees a powerful voice to create a positive change within their world of work.

With research from ADEC finding that 45% of Gen Y feel the most important cultural factor of a workplace is that everyone is listened to and their opinion respected, tools that help create a more unified community look to benefit business culture. ^[17] A sense of connectedness also boosts a



Organise

Established in 2017, Organise is a UK-based startup aimed at helping Gen Yers make a difference in the workplace. It’s a community of people who “team up” with other employees in their company and run workplace specific campaigns, via online petitions, open letters and surveys.

businesses bottom line – two-thirds of today's high-performing companies are making values the core of their corporate focus, compared with one in three of the lowest-performing companies.^[18]

“We like people to share their knowledge, yet the private knowledge one has is a social competitive advantage.”

Maurice Schweitzer

Co-author of *Friend & Foe: When to Cooperate, When to Compete, and How to Succeed at Both*

The era of co-opetition

Despite its selling points, this taste for collaboration doesn't come without some tension. Teamwork acts as a protective strategy to mitigate the risks of 'going it alone' in the workplace. "Most Gen Yers grew up in over-crowded classrooms, so they're used to working in teams, spreading both the reward and the blame when something goes wrong," explains Karen Myers, professor of organisational communication at the University of California. "They've always had people to lean on throughout their lives, so becoming independent takes longer for this group than it did for Gen X and Baby Boomers." [19]

This affinity for group work, however, comes alongside a contradictory need to stand out from the crowd. "Knowledge-sharing is a prime example of this tension," says Schweitzer. "We like people to share their knowledge, yet the private knowledge one has is a social competitive advantage." [1] And with 40% of millennials expecting a promotion within one or two years at a job – faster than any generation – finding a way to balance their personal ambitions with their desire to collaborate is key to Gen Yers' careers: an attitude dubbed 'co-opetition'. [20]

Digital platforms are helping them do that. The transparency of knowledge-sharing on online platforms is allowing people to slot in as a node among a network of teams, while still getting credit where it's due. As workplaces evolve to become increasingly nimble – 94% of businesses say that 'agility and collaboration' are central to their growth – technologies that encourage the right mix of efficient teamwork, community spirit and independent responsibility will become the backbone of business. [21]



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Credits

Created in partnership with Canvas8, a leading authority on behavioural insights, as well as global experts: Maurice Schweitzer, co-author of 'Friend & Foe: When to Cooperate, When to Compete, and How to Succeed at Both' and professor at Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania; Dan Kieran, CEO and co-founder of Unbound, a London-based crowdfunding literary platform; Alex Restrepo, member engagement coordinator at 2112, a Chicago-based incubator for startups in the creative industry; Usman Mohammed, lead campaigner at Organise, a UK-based startup helping Gen Yers work together to effect change in the workplace; and Karen Myers, associate professor at the University of California department of communication.

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