

Bridging the Generation Gap

Who are your
Leaders for
What's Next?



Amrop

Leaders For What's Next



They have not yet been humbled by life, nor experienced the force of circumstances... They think they know everything."

Aristotle | Rhetoric.

Since the dawn of time, mature adults have been scratching their heads about the next generation.

Family business owners questioning their desire and drive to keep the shop open. Educators mystified by minds that seemed to function differently. Governments worried about the survival of the social and economic fabric.

In the 21st century, the Gen Z and Millennial cohorts* have sparked megabytes of academic and business studies - and a host of assumptions.

We now examine the relationship between the new gen and business leadership. Beyond the hype, which new gen characteristics deserve special attention?



A 3-part series based on in-depth interviews with senior Amrop Partners from Northern and Central Europe, Asia, North and South America.

*Ages: Gen Z: 20-26 | Young millennials: 27-34 | Old millennials: 35-42 | Gen X: 43-60



Tomorrow's leaders have evolved in a context few could have imagined.

THE DIGITAL NEW NORMAL

Social media has affected communication modes - even if its relationship with mental health isn't clear cut.¹

A CHALLENGING WORLD

Financial crises, terrorism, political uncertainty, climate change. Education and early careers disrupted by the global pandemic. A third of Gen Z in the UK believes Covid-19 affected them more than older generations.²

NEW WORKPLACE DYNAMICS

Only 23% of remote-capable Gen Z employees would prefer fully remote work, vs. 35% among older generations. They're almost 2x as likely as Gen X, and nearly 3x as likely as baby boomers, to report experiencing loneliness much of the previous day.³



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They want to be treated as humans, not just part of a big machine."

İrem Yüksel | Managing Partner, Amrop Türkiye and CIS

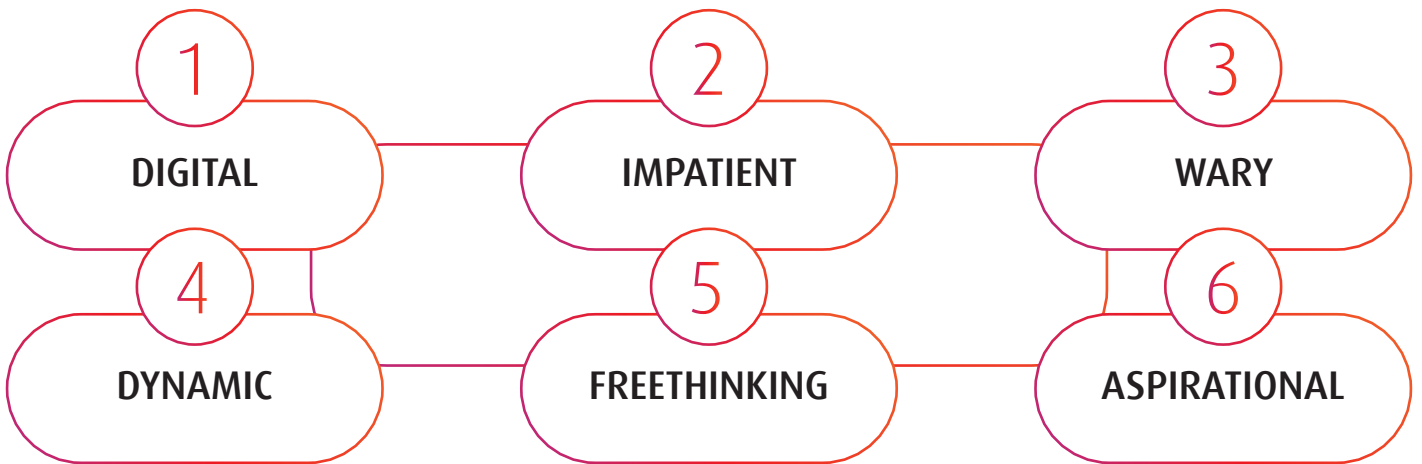


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New gen characteristics & needs

Researchers observe several distinct indicators, some more obvious than others.*

Every generation has known uncertainties and change. But whereas Gen X and Boomers grew up in relatively stable economic times, doomscrolling new gen members have been particularly exposed to shocks beyond their control. "These trigger specific responses and behaviors that affect their working relationships and how they build their careers," says Mansour Abdulghaffar, Managing Partner of Amrop in Saudi Arabia.



*See References

1

Context

Securing the next generation of leaders is an existential matter for hiring firms. But there are mixed attitudes regarding their fitness to govern. “The picture is divided,” says Anna Bonde, Managing Partner of Amrop in Sweden. “We see people my age who view Zoomers as equally ambitious, engaged, and driven. Others see them as the TikTok generation - lazy, unwilling to go the extra mile.”

Views also vary by C-suite function. Clarisa Vittone is Managing Partner of Amrop in Buenos Aires, Argentina. All CHROs (and most CEOs) are highly aware of succession questions, she says. Other CXOs are working blind: “They need a lot of help.” When interviewing leadership candidates, she asks them what younger employees would say about them. “People imagine what might be said, but usually they’ve never asked.”

Still, some organizations are waking up. “My clients are continuously developing their leaders. So there is strong hope,” says Anna Bonde. Meanwhile, “Most organizations and larger conglomerates have done a lot of work over five years,” agrees Tarunesh Madan, Co-Managing Partner of Amrop India. “Some have created an environment that is conducive to this generation of future leaders.”



People imagine what younger employees might say about them, but usually they’ve never asked.”

Loss of live

From the executive hiring, board and leadership perspective, the digital takeover of live interaction is one of the biggest game changers. “Workplace dynamics have had the greatest impact,” says Clarisa Vittone. “We are still deeply human. We learn through modeling, mirroring, interpersonal relationships, and real-world bonds. Screens allow excellent conversations, but learning how to be a leader requires more.”

Tarunesh Madan agrees: “Most leaders learned by observing how other leaders operate in real time, how decisions get made, conflict handled, a difficult conversation steered through. You only acquire those skillsets by being in the room.”

Irem Yüksel is Managing Partner of Amrop Türkiye and the CIS. She laments the loss of “micro learning moments” sparked by workplace togetherness: “grabbing tea in the kitchen, laughing, or hearing a director handle a tough client call. The office offered learning and inspiration you could absorb naturally.”

The new ecosystem is a harsher place: “Less joy, less social glue, more isolated routines. Fewer memories, more tasks.” For Marko Mlakar, Managing Partner of Amrop Adria, the reduction in “small interactions” risks a vicious circle: “Less live communication means more reliance on technology.”



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Characteristics

Covid-19, a digital world, global turbulence, hybrid working. The next generation of leaders have evolved in a unique environment and developed some distinctive characteristics. Which ones will help – or hinder – their propensity to lead tomorrow’s organization?



If employees lack resilience and can't sustain their energy for a long career, we won't have anyone to manage in the future."



Virtual valleys

The conversation has to continue in the online environment. For it is this, with its light and shadow sides, that has most impacted the mindset, skillset and toolset of the next cohort of leaders.

Consider a global management team meeting. Gathered around the table are senior executives with different cultures, expertise and personalities. If the firm’s diversity agenda is still in play, the spectrum will be even broader.

In these physical spaces, conflicts, nuances and insights are surfaced, and biases called out. Insights are explored, information scrutinized and synthesized. Water cooler encounters open up new and unexpected territories: risks and creative opportunities.

The ebb and flow of the live strategic meeting can feel exciting, boring or downright frustrating. Few could deny feeling the occasional urge to check out; leave the room or take refuge in their phones. An online meeting allows exactly these circuit-breakers. And when it comes to board hiring and functionality, this is a clear concern. “Being brought up in a digital environment has made it easy for the next gen to hide behind a screen,” warns Anna Bonde. “Many of their conversations since childhood have taken place online. They don’t have to face another person in real life.”

İrem Yüksel agrees. “They are lonelier, less equipped for interpersonal conflict. They have missed the personal touch, playground rehearsals, reading body language, negotiating face-to-face.” Even phone conversation is being abandoned in favor of an email or SMS. “Don’t say “I talked” when you only checked,” urges Clarisa Vittone. “That’s proactivity in the old way.” “A phone call gives you immediate non-verbal signals - tone of voice, something wrong,” confirms Marko Mlakar. “Their minds aren’t structured around speaking with people.”





The next gen is not necessarily thinking about a linear, MBA type of career path. It's about larger skill development."



Right here, right now

Online algorithms serve up information snippets and factoids. They create echo chambers by adapting seamlessly to our search history. Moreover, conventional news channels are imitating seductive social media models. Consuming info snacks, rather than meals, is affecting the new gen's cognitive processing. A recent empirical study found significant international declines in academic performance linked to electronic devices.⁴

Online channels help people monitor events as never before. And more detail is certainly available for curious minds. But overwhelmed with choice, new gen members generally don't invest the time to investigate, says Marko Mlakar. "They operate in nutshells. They look at ChatGPT and think they've formed an opinion, even if it's not clarified or verified." The snappy online environment is re-wiring brains for instant gratification. But in today's ambiguous, complex and risky world, executives and boards need more. Accurate, verifiable and robust information is vital. Depth and discernment are prerequisites to form a judgment.

Furthermore, as AI steadily hijacks critical thinking, its limits are emerging. As we have previously explored,⁵ machines miss data and nuance. They may suffer from bias, hallucinations and narrow-mindedness. Trained on AI-generated data, they risk becoming increasingly self-referential and inaccurate. Trapped within their own gene pool, a disturbing phenomenon of 'model collapse' is looming.⁶ AI is never the full answer – it is a starting point. Leaders cannot rely on ChatGPT to perform their roles.

Different degrees of excellence

Deloitte recently reported ⁷ that a third of Gen Zs and millennials will not pursue higher education. Reasons include financial constraints, family or personal circumstances, or the quest for career paths that don't demand degrees.

Just as important is their access to a vast ocean of constantly updated knowledge, glowing portraits of successful young entrepreneurs, and enticing sources of capital. Time-consuming and costly higher education is losing its cachet.

So, too, is the classic life continuum that leads from the halls of universities to the walls of corporate life. Hiring organizations, executive and board search professionals have traditionally viewed academic achievement as a badge of cognitive excellence. Such identifiers are also easily caught in an online search, pulling graduates to the top of the pile.

A dual exodus could be at hand: not only from academic qualifications, but from corporate employment. How do Amrop Partners react?

Jeff Rosin is a Managing Partner of Amrop Rosin in Canada and a global Amrop Board Member. "Many people think, what is this going to do for me? Versus getting into the workforce now, doing something more entrepreneurial." Tarunesh Madan also understands the hunger to build "a more entrepreneurial business, a divergent career, with a greater risk appetite. The next gen is not necessarily thinking about a linear, MBA type of career path. It's about larger skill development."





They don't have those preconceived notions, template thinking. It's the passion for an opportunity, figuring out how to get there."



Bids for freedom

"There are so many interesting career options," Tarunesh Madan continues. "The previous generation focused on creating conventional assets, (financial, real estate), building a base, giving a solid education to the next generation." The next gen is more in search of enrichment - doing something they genuinely believe in. "Many have come through working class families, but with conviction and risk taking appetite, they've gone to build billion dollar businesses."

Mansour Abdulghaffar can also see the attraction of freewheeling: "Many unicorn founders are college dropouts - Microsoft, Scale AI, OYO. They become billionaires young, without degrees. That's further evidence that it's not about the degree; it's about what you do afterward. Sometimes the degree even teaches you the wrong things." Scrolling through Instagram, the new gen is watching closely, says Marko Mlakar. "They think, 'If someone can build a global platform with three people, why can't I?'" They don't have mental barriers such as needing Harvard or elite credentials. They think, "Give me a computer, I can program, and off I go. If I fail, I don't care."

The message for higher education providers is stark. "It feels old-school and doesn't fully meet people's needs in corporate life," says İrem Yüksel. Nor can the once-prized elite institutions relax. "People from top and mid-tier schools can be equally successful," warns Mansour Abdulghaffar.

Tarunesh Madan welcomes the digital democratization of learning. "Technology has largely done away with the class divide. Access to education used to be very difficult for the mass population." Marko Mlakar concurs: "In the US, if you don't get a scholarship, you graduate with massive debt. But now knowledge is freely available globally." Anna Bonde goes further still: "We have many unemployed, university-educated young people - which is new."

Jeff Rosin concludes: "There's a point where your accomplishments outweigh your education." But he worries about what will happen when a lack of education becomes the norm, rather than the exception. "They'll miss the experience, the cohort, the relationships."

So, new gens are losing their appetite for the slow food of higher education. And many don't want to be absorbed into a corporate machine. Even if a modern matrix organization aspires to agility, it still needs the checks and balances that may clip aspirational wings. The siren call of self-determination, autonomy, limitless horizons and creativity makes the entrepreneurial alternative a compelling one.

Nowhere is the 'self-starter' attitude more vibrant than in India, busily breeding unicorns. "There's a lot of optimism. Many structural reforms are playing out," says Tarunesh Madan. "Risk appetite has probably gone up." So, too, has access to capital. An emboldening environment, for sure. But, how realistic are these would-be business-builders? Anna Bonde has doubts: many children of successful entrepreneurs only saw the golden years. "Not the struggle, bankruptcy, restarting, failing again. And TikTok makes entrepreneurship look easy." Creating a company takes deep knowledge, she argues - acquired through reading, listening, learning, and analysis.

But impatience has a plus: it can liberate the new gen from analysis paralysis and vitalize a lagging, legacy organization. An *entrepreneurial* mindset can be channeled into *intrapreneurship*. "Their ability to take a leap of faith without overthinking comes through naturally," says Tarunesh Madan. "And they don't have those preconceived notions, template thinking. It's the passion for an opportunity, figuring out how to get there."

Get real

In a related development, blind trust in authority has left the corporate building. "They trust people they shouldn't - without checking their sources - yet don't trust their own leaders," remarks Anna Bonde. İrem Yüksel believes the erosion of physical bonding is one reason. "They mostly know each other online, rather than through personal connection." Trust and authenticity go hand-in-hand. Here, the new gen have an advantage. "They talk straight," says Tarunesh Madan. "They are skeptical about dishonest conversations. If there is a disagreement, they'll voice it." Mansour Abdulghaffar agrees: "They'll speak up in meetings, challenge rules, and either follow them if they make sense, or push for improvement if they don't."

Today's leaders must take these factors into account. Whether their new gen successors can exercise the kind of leadership that they are demanding for themselves remains to be seen. How hiring organizations - and the hiring process - should flex to this new reality is something we'll investigate later in the series.





These are leadership characteristics we've been trying to train into previous generations for decades, For the new gen, it's genuine."



Me, us and the planet

Mistrust. Entitlement. Impatience. Aversion to detail. Entrepreneurial yearnings. It would be easy to stereotype and amalgamate these characteristics into a ball labeled 'selfish.' This would be an error. İrem Yüksel acknowledges a shift from a collective 'we' to the survivalist 'me' - a rupture of the loyalty contract. She nonetheless insists that the new gen "are naturally more well-being-focused - caring for the team, the environment, and their own well-being," Anna Bonde sees a similar interplay of selflessness and self-focus: "They like working in teams and sharing success, but there's still ego underneath."

"The new gen ensures we stay open to all kinds of people and perspectives," she observes. "They also expect us to take better care of nature and the people around us." Marko Mlakar also sees this borderless mindset: "They seem more like citizens of the world. They're not obsessed with their own country, the way we were."

"These are leadership characteristics we've been trying to train into previous generations for decades, says İrem Yüksel. "For the new gen, it's genuine. They're looking for meaning, for the planet and for humanity. They want to be treated as humans, not just part of a big machine." Purpose is a primary attraction and retention factor, she notes. Tarunesh Madan also thinks that sustainability is safe in the new gen's hands. "Even given recent developments, we have been quite steadfast. Structurally we are headed in the right direction. My clients are very optimistic."

Look, don't look

Comparing ourselves with others is a core aspect of human behavior, say a research team exploring the evolutionary roots of social comparisons. These comparisons impact how we see ourselves, our decisions and behavior.⁸ But the new gen is exposed to a constant stream of flawlessly filtered social media content - and more frequent and spontaneous social comparisons than ever before.⁹ "You show your happy face online. LinkedIn sometimes feels like a private platform for self-promotion," observes Anna Bonde. Jeff Rosin recalls a recent interaction with a board containing some relatively junior board directors. Self-comparison risked harming their judgment. "The board felt threatened by the caliber of people we were presenting, because they would be seen to be inferior to them."

We could imagine that this pressure for perfection might mean that new gen members avoid feedback - a crucial lever for leadership self-knowledge, self-development and decision-making. Instead, they ask for it. Could this actually be a proxy for recognition and reassurance, though? An Amrop Partner was called to a meeting by a new gen colleague, who said: "I'd like to know what's working, what's not, as we figure out the path forward." He replied: "Great. I'm going to be constructive, I'll tell you what is working well, and where the concerns lie. And then he started getting extraordinarily defensive." Anne Bonde: "Their emotional sensitivity can be intimidating for more senior leaders. Crying at work, for example, is something my generation didn't do. This makes leaders hesitant to give feedback. Younger people say they want feedback, but can they handle it? I'm not sure. Then the person giving feedback becomes less direct, less authentic."

İrem Yüksel has hope: "They don't take it personally if you're transparent. When you give feedback clearly, they say 'thank you' and do their best to fix it." Clarisa Vittone agrees. "The new gen will easily accept feedback if they feel respected and understood as a generation. You must ensure, like a coach, that you say: "I understand X, Y, Z. Do you understand A, B, C? Please correct me if I'm wrong." And pay close attention to things that get lost in translation."



Feeling the burn

Only around of half of Gen Z's or millennials rate their mental health as good or extremely good. About a third put much of their stress down to their jobs and work/life balance, with around half citing a lack of recognition, long working hours, and insufficient time to complete their work.¹⁰ Meanwhile in the UK, absenteeism due to stress was over twice as high in workers aged 18-24 than in the over-55s.¹¹

Resilience is a core leadership attribute. And, as we reported in 'The CEO Struggle', life at the top has never been tougher. In the first half of 2025, 1,028 CEOs left their posts in the US alone; a 19% increase from the same period the previous year.¹² Economic downturns shorten a CEO's tenure by an average of 1,5 years.¹³

"In leadership assessments, we look at how people react to negative feedback," says Anna Bonde. "Nobody likes it, but resilience is about how you bounce back, how you act on it, whether you see it as development or push it away. If you can't take feedback, you're less likely to get it. That's why emotional resilience matters."

"I have never seen as much anxiety as right now," says Jeff Rosin. "It's a generalization, but people seem unable to put things in context. They've lost sight of balance. I think stress has become their norm." A materially comfortable upbringing may hinder the development of grit – "the ability to deal with a crisis, resilience, patience if things are not coming together, tenacity. I would associate these traits with the previous generation," muses Tarunesh Madan.

As ever, virtuality has some explaining to do. Anna Bonde: "What matters is the willingness to step out of the digital world, using AI for answers. Ditch that. Get out of your comfort zone and learn from real human beings." For Jeff Rosin, Covid-19 pushed digital reliance beyond the tolerance of even the new gen. The long-term damage cannot be understated, he says. However, people also risk misdiagnosing themselves: "Drs. Google and ChatGPT are answering their questions, with peer groups going through similar things."

Irem Yüksel urges caution: "Burnout is not a personal failure - it's structural. With an always-online culture, there's no true disconnection, no ability to unplug. That's why collapse happens."

She is also concerned about quiet quitting. 75% of people aged 18-24 will tell their boss that they're feeling under par, more than older peers will.¹⁴ But when the stakes soar too high, just like walking out of the virtual room when a video game is not running right, "Gen Z often doesn't raise a red flag by saying they will resign. They quietly walk away instead of fighting for better conditions."

Back to basics

Dispiriting as all this may sound, classic management solutions still hold water. Setting parameters has never been more vital, says Tarunesh Madan: "Stress is less about environment or workload than not knowing what matters, and having no say in how work gets done. With clear priority-setting and communication, the next gen can absorb stress well. They just need direction and an open environment where they can have a candid conversation without fear of judgement. That's a fundamental difference with the previous generation. It can be channeled as a strength – as long as it is tempered."

Irem Yüksel also advises structural solutions. "If it's mathematically impossible to finish work, you can't say, 'here's a yoga subscription.'" You need efficiency solutions first. Energy management is a strategic asset today - even more important than revenue generation. Because, if employees lack resilience and can't sustain their energy for a long career, we won't have anyone to manage in the future.

"It's about well-being, work-life balance, being treated as human, caring for the planet and others. Sleepless nights and working 24/7 aren't sustainable. Their mindset is fair, and we have a lot to learn from them."

However, structural solutions are only one side of the coin. "We have technologies to track motivation, like AI tools and advanced psychometrics during selection. But leaders need operational empathy: feeling the stress, understanding it, and taking action to fix the root cause."

In our next articles in this series, we look at the career expectations of the new gen, and unpack specific hiring and talent strategies that will bring out the best in the Leaders for What's Next.



About the contributors

This series is based on in-person interviews with the following Amrop Partners.



Mansour Abdulghaffar
Managing Partner, Saudi Arabia



Anna Bonde
Managing Partner, Sweden



Tarunesh Madan
Co-Managing Partner, India



Marko Mlakar
Managing Partner, Adria



Jeff Rosin
Managing Partner, Canada,
Amrop Global Board Member



Clarisa Vittone
Managing Partner, Argentina



İrem Yüksel
Managing Partner, Türkiye & CIS

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About Amrop

The Amrop Partnership is a premium leadership and executive search consultancy with 72 offices in 59 countries and a global team of more than 550 professionals.

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