



## HARNESS THE POWER OF GEN Z TALENT

Gen Z talent has the potential to be game changers in the workforce. Find out what drives them and how you can utilize their unique set of talents.



UNIVERSITY OF  
**WATERLOO**

Co-operative and  
Experiential Education



# AS THEY CONTINUE TO ENTER THE WORKFORCE, GEN Z TALENT IS KEY TO YOUR ORGANIZATION BOTH NOW AND FOR THE FORESEEABLE FUTURE.

At the University of Waterloo, our Work-Learn Institute (WxL) surveyed more than 2,000 co-op students to gain deep insights into this intriguing next generation of talent. These students have gained real-world experience during their co-op work terms, giving them unique perspectives to help us predict expectations for Gen Z talent in the workplace.

Generation Z talent is educated, tech-savvy, innovative and ready to work hard for you. They simply have an expectation that the impact of their time and effort aligns with their values. That's where we come in!

**This research-based guide will answer questions to help your organization effectively harness the power of Gen Z talent.**

Questions like:



What does Gen Z value in an employer?



Do they prefer remote, in-person or hybrid work?



What support do they want from you as an employer?

WxL's survey gave us insights into the values and preferences of this next generation of talent when it comes to their professional experiences. Insights from this research will help you, as employers and educators, to effectively engage and leverage Gen Z talent in your workplace.

**THE UNIVERSITY OF WATERLOO:**

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**NORTH AMERICA'S LARGEST**

work-integrated learning program

**8,000+**

active employers in

**60+ COUNTRIES**

**25,000+**

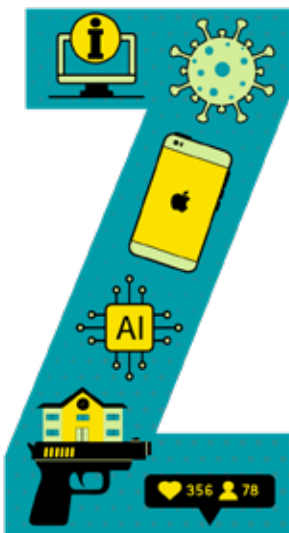
co-op students enrolled in

**120+ PROGRAMS**



## TALKING ABOUT MY GENERATION

Generations are cohorts of people who have grown up in a specific social, economic and political context which can shape their view of the world. Year of birth determines one's generation. These generations influence the economy and society because of their distinct values and attitudes.



### Gen Z

**Born between 1997 – 2012**

**Lived during increasing global conflicts, school violence and global pandemic.**

- Immersed in technology since birth.
- Grew up in an economic downturn.
- Comfortable in an interconnected world with fast access to information.
- Fully aware the world isn't perfect.
- Understand the volatility of finances and jobs.
- Expect technology will continue to take over human jobs.



### Millennials

**Born between 1981-1996**

**Lived during 2008 recession, 9/11, Iraq wars.**

- Huge technological advances in their lifetime.
- Raised by parents who provided more time and attention.
- Many experienced economic wealth, followed by an economic downturn.
- May have seen their parents work one job for their entire career, then lose their jobs along with retirement savings.
- Challenges getting jobs themselves.



## Gen X

**Born between 1965-1980**

**Lived during the introduction of personal computers, cable television, MTV, AIDS epidemic, the end of the Cold War and economic instability.**

- Often overlooked as compared to larger baby boomer and millennial generations with higher birth rates.
- Tech savvy.
- Many have dual caregiving responsibilities
- Their work must matter to them, willing to change employers.



## Baby Boomer

**Born between 1946-1964**

**Born directly after the return of soldiers following World War II. One of the largest generational cohorts in history.**

- Despite entering the retirement age, many want to continue working.
- Less likely to embrace remote work options because they value visibility.
- Strong work ethic, disciplined and focused.
- Often very self-sufficient and believe in individual problem solving.

## AVOIDING GENERALIZATION

Using generational labels in the workplace can lead to making the mistake of boxing employees into categories and generational stereotypes. Instead, we want to focus on understanding true values, motivations and expectations. It is important to take the time to understand individuals and their unique experiences and needs. However, learning about generational influences can help us to understand why a generation values what they do. At all ages, employees want meaningful work, real connections with co-workers and managers, broader purpose and fair compensation.



## ● WHO IS GEN Z?

**Gen Z is becoming, if not already, a critical component of your workforce.** Young people in this generation were born in a digital age and have experienced a lot. Their experiences with people, societies and activities from around the world exceed their age.

### GEN Z ATTRIBUTES:



Open-minded



Entrepreneurial



Good at multitasking, they can also have short attention spans



Ethical



Quick to learn

### HOW IS THE WORKFORCE CHANGING?

**By 2030, Gen Z will be 30 per cent of the workforce, holding almost all entry-level jobs.** According to Statistics Canada, the last generation of baby boomers will reach the age of 65 in 2031 and are aging out of the labour market. Millennials, the generation before Gen Z, and Gen X will outnumber Gen Z in the workforce until the early 2040s. As Gen Z continues to age out of school and into the workforce, their influence and numbers in the workforce will only increase.



# ● WHAT DOES GEN Z VALUE IN THE WORKPLACE?

Values can change over time. We asked our co-op students about their workplace values in 2018 and again in 2022 as we returned to a changing workplace after the global pandemic.

The top things Gen Z talent value when it comes to work are:



Meaningful work that changes the world



Strong work-life balance



Organizations that support growth and equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI)



Job security

Our findings continue to show benevolence, the desire to help others, as the top value for Gen Z. Co-op students want to make a difference in the workplace.

Gen Z continues to value self-direction and hedonism. They look to enjoy life and explore things they are curious about.

Universalism, which fits with the theme of justice and equity is continuing to grow in importance.

Since the original results, Gen Z has valued enjoying life more while placing less importance in self-direction in the workplace.

## THERE ARE A FEW SHIFTS IN VALUES WE FOUND OVER THREE YEARS AND A GLOBAL PANDEMIC.

Value	Definition	2022 rank	Change since 2018 rank
Benevolence	Helping others	1	-
Hedonism	Enjoying life	2	↑ 3
Self-direction	Explore curiosities	3	↓ 2
Universalism	Justice and equity	4	↑ 5
Security	Safe communities	5	↓ 4
Achievement	Stand out from others	6	-
Stimulation	Looking for adventure/ risk	7	-
Conformity	Follow the rules	8	-
Tradition	Following customs	9	-
Power	Being in charge	10	-



**“ WHAT’S REALLY NEAT IS THESE THREE VALUES (BENEVOLENCE, HEDONISM AND SELF-DIRECTION) ARE TIED INTO A BROADER THEME OF TRANSCENDENCE AND OPENNESS TO CHANGE**

- David Drewery (PhD '22), associate director, WxL

For generations, organizational prestige has been a key component of resource allocation for companies when it comes to attracting people. For the next generation of talent, prestige is no longer a priority. “Gen Z is pretty clearly telling us, we don’t really care (about prestige),” says Drewery.



Dea Nair, a graduate of the Psychology program, spent two work terms in 2020 and 2021 at United Way Waterloo Region Communities thanks to the Co-op for Community program. Nair enjoyed her experiences so much that she is now a full-time employee at United Way.



**WHAT I REALIZED FROM THIS DONOR FUNDED EXPERIENCE IS THAT POVERTY IN CANADA IS MUCH MORE INVISIBLE, BUT EQUALLY PRESSING. MY PERSPECTIVES HAVE CHANGED, AND I FEEL LIKE I’M ABLE TO DO SOME GOOD.**

- Dea Nair (BA '23), donor relations specialist, United Way Waterloo Region Communities



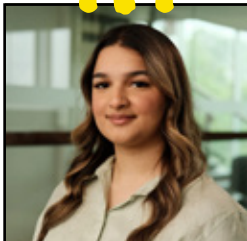
# WHAT CAN EMPLOYERS DO TO ALIGN WITH GEN Z WORKPLACE VALUES?



Now that we know about Gen Z workplace values, how do those values align with your workplace? Organizations that have similar values, and project those values in the workplace, can better attract and retain Gen Z talent. Here are actions your organization can take that reflect Gen Z values:

## 1 HELP FACILITATE CHANGE

The next generation of talent wants the work they do to be meaningful. That could mean being part of a movement that enacts change in the world for the better. Help facilitate change by encouraging staff to work on passion projects.



Unzila Shahzad is a Health Studies student who wanted to make a difference during her work term at SickKids Hospital in Toronto. So, she wrote and published a children's book about a congenital condition.

[Read Shahzad's story](#)

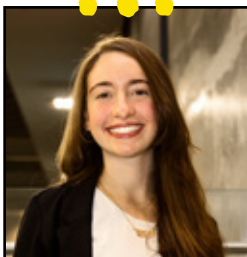


**I WANT TO BE A DOCTOR, BUT MORE IMPORTANTLY THAN THAT I WANT TO BE A GOOD PERSON. I WANT TO BE A BETTER PERSON. WHEN I LEAVE THIS WORLD, I WANT PEOPLE TO ADVOCATE FOR THE PERSON I WAS. THAT'S THE TYPE OF CLINICIAN I WANT TO BE AND THE TYPE OF PERSON I WANT TO BE.**

- Unzila Shahzad, Health Studies, co-op student at SickKids Hospital in Toronto

## 2 FACILITATE OPPORTUNITIES FOR INDEPENDENCE

The next generation of talent wants to do their own thing. Give them the independence to self-direct and take their own approach to work tasks. If they have an idea, they will work hard to drive it forward. Or, once motivated, they will go above and beyond to succeed.



Salma Marzouk, a Science and Business student, believes her co-op experience helped to build resiliency and skills that she can apply to any industry. She had the opportunity to work with top-level executives in a position that is typically reserved for MBA students.

[Read Marzouk's story](#)



**I'M SO GLAD I STEPPED OUTSIDE MY COMFORT ZONE AND TOOK ON THE CHALLENGE, BECAUSE MY TEAM CREATED AN ENVIRONMENT WHERE I COULD LEARN AND GROW TO MY FULLEST POTENTIAL.**

- Salma Marzouk, Science and Business, co-op student at Trillium Health Partners



# 3

## PROVIDE A COMPETITIVE SALARY AND SUPPORT FOR CAREER PLANNING

Who doesn't want to get paid well? As in every generation, security and salary remains an important component of job attributes. In this current economy, Gen Z recognizes they must be properly compensated to pay for increasing cost of living expenses. Providing a salary range in a job description has become a norm and expectation for Gen Z talent as they consider their options.

Gen Z also value promotion criteria. They want to understand how they can advance in their careers internally within an organization. However, opportunities to rotate between different jobs/roles are not high on their list when it comes to career advancement. Instead, students indicate they want to understand the specific steps and paths that people at the top of the company took to get to their role.

### HERE'S HOW STUDENTS RATED SUPPORTS FOR CAREER ADVANCEMENT

Employer support for career advancement	% of very important and essential
Clear communication of promotion criteria	81.6
Discuss career goals	67.8
Leadership development	68.5
Informal socialization	64
Personalized career plan	62.2
Job shadowing	59
Job rotation	50.8



Consider offering unique ways to help employees understand possible pathways of growth.



Ingrid Kaffka appreciated her co-op work terms supervisors who provided her with mentorship and the opportunity to build new skills. Her experiences inspired her to get out of her comfort zone and consider a variety of possible career paths.

[Read Kaffka's story](#)



**WE DEDICATE 40-PLUS HOURS A WEEK TO THE COMPANIES THAT WE WORK FOR. WE WANT TO KNOW...WE'LL RECEIVE EQUAL AMOUNTS OF DEDICATION AND CARE. THINKING OF THE VALUES, SELF-DIRECTION IS A LOT LIKE TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT AND LESS IMPORTANT THINGS LIKE POWER ARE STILL ABOUT GROWTH AND OPPORTUNITIES.**

- Ingrid Kaffka (MA '23), 2021 Arts Co-op Student of the Year, co-op student at Red Canari

# WHAT ARE GEN Z STUDENTS LOOKING FOR FROM EMPLOYERS?



The Work-Learn Institute surveyed students to understand what Gen Z talent are looking for from employers. The following pages outline these employer attributes and ways to prioritize them for Gen Z talent.

## HERE'S HOW STUDENTS RATED THE IMPORTANCE OF ATTRIBUTES OF THEIR EMPLOYERS

Employer attributes	Mean rating
Professional training and development	4.12
Culture that values EDI*	3.86
Culture that respects individuality	3.74
Good reference for future job	3.62
Mentorship/coaching	3.58
Commitment to sustainability	2.95
Organizational prestige	2.67

Calculated on a scale of 1 to 5.  
 1 = not at all important  
 2 = moderately important  
 3 = important  
 4 = very important  
 5 = essential  
 \*EDI= Equity, Diversity and Inclusion

## PROFESSIONAL TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

The top thing that students told us they are looking for from employers is professional training and development opportunities. Eight out of 10 students said training and development is “very important” or “essential” when it comes to picking an employer. The next generation of talent wants a workplace that changes and improves. And they want to improve alongside their workplace.

Employers who want to attract and retain Gen Z talent can prioritize training and development opportunities for staff. These opportunities can include on-the-job training, access to online training materials, mentorship or other opportunities to develop their career.

### Constructive feedback

When it comes to personal learning, the next generation of talent also values constructive feedback. It’s how they learn. As their supervisor, you can provide feedback that helps them to learn and grow.

## HERE'S HOW STUDENTS RATED THE IMPORTANCE OF OPPORTUNITIES FOR PERSONAL LEARNING

Employer support for personal learning	% of very important and essential
Constructive feedback	87.4
Mentorship from seniors	74.6
Work time for upskilling and training	69.8
Work with new tools	71.4
Assign unfamiliar and challenging tasks	64.1



Challenge students to identify and solve existing business solutions in innovative ways to ultimately present to leadership. This gives students agency and provides you with new and fresh ideas.

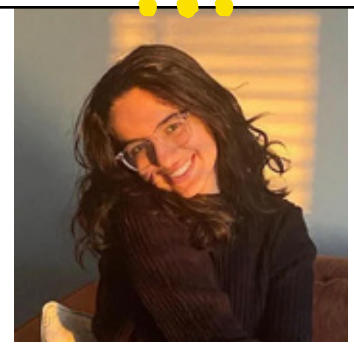
## CULTURE THAT VALUES EQUITY, DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION (EDI) AS WELL AS INDIVIDUALITY

Workplace cultures that value EDI and individuality go hand-in-hand. Done well, EDI results in employees feeling safe, comfortable and supported to be their authentic selves in the workplace. Fitting with the theme of benevolence, Gen Z wants to help people by supporting avenues to be themselves. Providing lip service isn't enough, Gen Z talent want to see your commitment to EDI in your hiring practices, supports and work environment.



**THE POLICE ARE MAKING AN ACTIVE EFFORT TO CHANGE THEIR EDI APPROACH AND I WAS CURIOUS TO SEE HOW MUCH WORK WAS BEING DONE BEHIND THE SCENES. CONTINUOUS GROWTH IS IMPORTANT, AND I AM GLAD I HAD A SMALL PART TO PLAY TOWARDS POSITIVE CHANGE.**

- Ina Gera, Honours Arts and Psychology and Social Development Studies student, co-op student in the EDI bureau at Peel Regional Police



Ina Gera, an Honours Arts student, has been interested in EDI initiatives since middle school and was thrilled to be part of enacting change through her co-op work term with the EDI bureau at Peel Regional Police.

[\*Read Gera's story\*](#)





## ● WHAT ARE GEN Z STUDENTS LOOKING FOR IN A JOB?

The WxL survey also asked students to identify key attributes Gen Z is seeking in potential jobs. Work-life balance, job security and competitive salary came out on top. Consider how you can strategize and prioritize these attributes to attract and retain Gen Z talent.

### JOB ATTRIBUTES



Calculated on a scale of 1 to 5.

1 = not at all important

2 = moderately important

3 = important

4 = very important

5 = essential



## WORK-LIFE BALANCE

### HERE'S HOW STUDENTS RATE THE IMPORTANCE OF FACTORS RELATED TO WORK-LIFE BALANCE

Employer support for work life balance	% of very important and essential
Allow personal appointments during work hours	77
Distinguish work life and home life	78.3
Access to unpaid leave	66.2
Guidelines for communication off-work hours	45.7

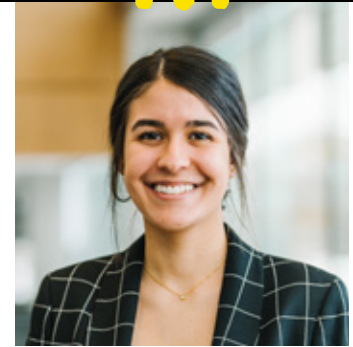
In team settings, emerging talent looks for support, honesty and understanding. More than 80 per cent of students say it's very important or essential to work in an organization that offers work-life balance. It may be that working the traditional 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. workday isn't the best option for many of them. Let prospective talent know your expectations and what you will do to support their work-life balance early in the recruitment process.

### “ I WANT MORE OF A WORK-LIFE BALANCE THAN MY PARENTS OR GRANDPARENTS HAD.

- Breanna DeFreitas (BE '23), 2022 Co-op Student of the Year, co-op student at Evolugen



Consider letting employees book personal appointments during work hours.

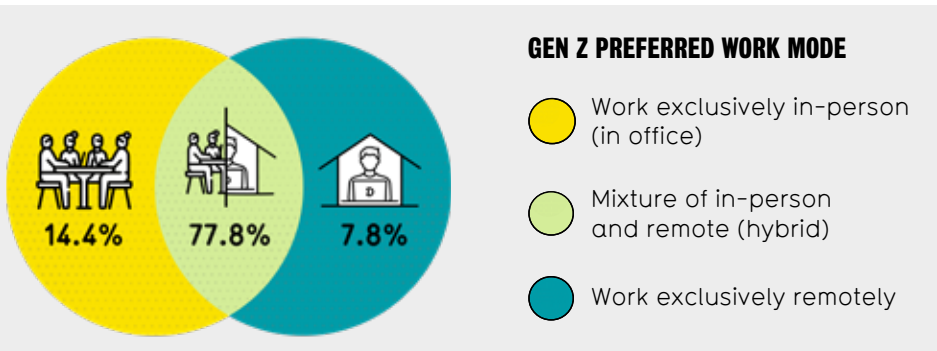


Breanna DeFreitas believes that prioritizing your own well-being and mental health allows for better production and output at work.

[Read DeFreitas' story](#)

### Does Gen Z prefer in-person, remote or hybrid work?

The world of work has changed. Gen Z experienced the first major shift to remote work during the pandemic. Now, their reality involves either completely remote, in-person or hybrid (mix of both). So, what work mode does Gen Z prefer?



Try creating specific reasons for coming into the office like in-person meetings or socials.

Gen Z mirrors what most full-time employees of companies suggest: the need for flexibility. Specifically, employees prefer two remote days and three days of in-person work. About 66 per cent of respondents prefer two or three remote days. This next generation of talent does want to work in person with co-workers, but only sometimes.

In cohesion with our earlier results, Gen Z craves work-life balance and looks to seek flexible work arrangements in their career. Seventy-three per cent of respondents intentionally seek out a career with a flexible work arrangement.



## ● GEN Z HAVE SPOKEN. NOW WHAT?

To recap, we've shared feedback and survey results directly from the next generation of talent. This includes valuable Gen Z talent who are currently working at your organization or will be soon! Here are 6 key takeaways to help your organization to attract and retain Gen Z talent.

The key is to be transparent with values. Gen Z wants to work for organizations whose values align with theirs. **Be clear about your values when attracting and recruiting emerging talent and display a concrete plan on how you are showcasing values.** You can do this by being very intentional in your job postings and interview questions.

### 1 LET IT BE KNOWN. ADVERTISE WORK-LIFE BALANCE.

Advertise the wellness programs you have in place. Students and other Gen Z talent will likely ask about wellness programs and support in the recruitment phase. Make it clear work-life balance is a priority at your organization.

“ **WITHIN THE TEAMS, THERE ARE A LOT OF INTERACTIONS THAT ARE OUTSIDE OF A PURELY WORK BASIS. EVEN THOUGH WE DO WORK IN A HYBRID ENVIRONMENT. I FEEL THAT TEAMS AT GEOTAB ARE ABLE TO STILL STAY CONNECTED, EVEN AT A DISTANCE.**

- Jacob Pirrsalu (BAsc '23), software developer, Geotab

## GEOTAB®

Co-op employer Geotab, a fleet management organization, prioritizes student experience by holding panel discussions that focus on mental health and stress.

They also host office lunches and social events to ensure team cohesion. Geotab's efforts help keep employees connected both online and offline. Jacob Pirrsalu is a Mechatronics Engineering grad who had three co-op work terms at Geotab and is now a permanent member of the organization.

[Learn more about Geotab's initiatives](#)

## 2 OFFER FLEXIBLE TIME AND SPACE.

Help Gen Z talent find a pathway to success by providing strong work-life balance. Gen Z values the ability to have personal appointments during work hours and a distinction between work and home life. Although Gen Z prefers a hybrid work environment, they also appreciate clear guidelines for communication off work hours.



“ IT WAS ACTUALLY MY FIRST FULL HYBRID TERM; I WAS ABLE TO, RIGHT FROM THE GET-GO, SORT OF MANAGE MY OWN TIME AND CHOOSE WHETHER OR NOT I WENT TO THE OFFICE OR WORKED FROM HOME, AND IT PROVIDED ME GREAT FLEXIBILITY.

- Alex Zhu, Computing and Financial Management student

## 3 SET A PLAN FOR GROWTH.

As an employer, you have a responsibility to help your talent prepare for the future — whether their future is with your organization or another. Prioritize training and development programs and offer constructive feedback to employees.



“ EMPHASIZING THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SOFT SKILLS ALONGSIDE TECHNICAL EXPERTISE IS PARAMOUNT, AS WE AIM TO SUPPORT OUR TEAM MEMBERS IN FEELING PREPARED FOR THEIR ROLES. OUR COMMITMENT EXTENDS BEYOND VIDYARD; WE BELIEVE THESE SKILLS ARE ESSENTIAL FOR SUCCESS WITHIN OUR BROADER COMMUNITY.

- Laura Galbraith (BES '08), director of community impact, Vidyard

## 4 SUPERVISE, SUPERVISE, SUPERVISE.

Supervisors are essential to career development. WxL has created a research-based model for supervision we call the 4C model. It outlines the importance of **creating meaningful work, communicating regularly and effectively, connecting students to the organization and caring about student experiences.**



Supportive supervisors provide time for the next generation of talent to develop their skills and foster belonging. When a supervisor takes time to learn about an employee's interests and to help them with career plans, it demonstrates care for the student's experience during their work term. Discuss career paths, both in and beyond your company, with students. Show how their individual work adds value to the organization.

*Learn more about how supervisors can effectively manage student talent*

### LAUNCH

At LAUNCH Waterloo, a league for youth, Waterloo co-op students positively impact young people by being mentors in the fields of science, technology, engineering, arts and math.

By creating a collaborative creative environment, LAUNCH Waterloo facilitates Gen Z talent as a part of a community and exhibits hedonism in the process.

*Read more about how students lead K-8 students at LAUNCH*

“ THE BIGGEST THING THAT THEY GET TO BE IS ROLE MODELS FOR THESE KIDS. THAT'S A REALLY INTERESTING PIECE FOR THE CO-OP STUDENTS, TO BE ABLE TO CONNECT WITH THE KIDS AND BE THAT ROLE MODEL.

- Tobi Day-Hamilton (BA '99), co-founder & executive director, LAUNCH Waterloo

## 5 FOSTER EDI TALENT IN THE WORKPLACE.

Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) continues to be an important priority for many workplaces. And Gen Z have made it clear - they want organizations that value it. Waterloo co-op employers have displayed a strong willingness to develop EDI programs.



Lumentum, an Ottawa-based photonics company, has prioritized EDI and made co-op students' perspectives integral in how they shape their initiatives. Lumentum received the 2021 Co-operative and Experiential Education Employer Impact Award for EDI. The company's initiatives include gender equity pay reviews, gender neutral job postings, cultural communication emails and unconscious bias training for hiring managers and employees. Lumentum also offers scholarships for co-op students from underrepresented backgrounds.

*Learn more about Lumentum's EDI initiatives*



**THE INITIATIVES AT LUMENTUM REALLY HELP ME WORK, KNOWING THAT THERE ARE PEOPLE AROUND ME THAT ARE TRYING TO CREATE A MORE DIVERSE AREA. I AM FROM IRAQ, AND I RARELY SEE A MIDDLE EASTERN PEOPLE WORKING IN HIGH-END ENGINEERING POSITIONS. SOMETHING WITH LUMENTUM IS THAT THEY TRY TO BRING IN PEOPLE FROM DIVERSE BACKGROUNDS.**

- Sarah Bahnam, Nanotechnology Engineering student

## 6 BUILD A SUPPORTIVE TEAM.

Gen Z talent is looking for employers who will provide extra support. This includes considering work-life balance, training and development. Your interest in Gen Z talent doesn't end with an interview and hire. Instead, show your interest in their continued success.

**A LOT OF EMPLOYERS FOCUS ON GETTING PEOPLE THROUGH THE DOOR BUT MAY STRUGGLE TO SUPPORT THEM ONCE THEY GET INTO THE ORGANIZATION. IT'S IMPORTANT THAT EMPLOYERS CONTINUE TO SHOW A GENUINE INTEREST IN THEIR EMPLOYEE'S SUCCESS, PROVIDING THEM WITH RESOURCES, OPPORTUNITIES FOR GROWTH AND MENTORSHIP AND CONSISTENT SUPPORT THROUGHOUT THEIR JOURNEY.**

- Manjot Sidhu, talent acquisition coordinator, OpenText







**WHAT'S NEXT?**

**UTILIZE THE POTENTIAL OF GEN Z TALENT**

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