

The Zillennial Generation and the Modern Workplace: Enabling the Right Culture Fit

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The Zillennial generation of today (a combined term for the Millennials and Gen Zers) is an incredibly critical demographic. Born between the early 1980s and late 1990s (Millennials), and between 1996 and early mid-2000s (GenZ), this generation has grown up in a time of rapid change. And by filling up the roles of most organizations today, or about to step into it, they figure at the front and centre of the employee profile of all organizations of the modern era.

What are the key learning and skilling areas to cultivate this generation across different sectors? The corporate world offers among the best opportunities for the young generation who are set to step into the workplace; hence, it is apt that we keep the discussion limited to the corporate sector alone. However, the takeaways would apply across varied industries – private or public, and startups or established companies.

We can discuss this issue from two angles:

- Steps that modern academic institutions and students should take to be ready for the new-age workplace
- Steps that corporates should take to enable the right culture fitment for Zillennials at the workplace

Creating the Skill Ecosystem at the Educational Level

Identifying the most impactful methods through which Zillennials learn their skills will help academic institutions to create effective training programs for a knowledgeable and productive workforce. It is important to understand this issue across certain important dimensions: What are the key learning traits of Zillennials? What are the preferred skill programs that can be designed for them?

And how will these programs help them in their future workplace?

In the era of digital transformation, there is a need to build high levels of tech skills among our workforce. Even as educational institutes put in efforts to get their students – the next generation of our workforce- job ready, technology continues to outpace an institute's ability to impart the best in student training.

Traditionally, the focus has been on academic performance and less on practical knowledge. Sometimes, the lack of knowledge updates among faculty, the absence of in-demand courses in institutes, and the lack of academic and industry linkages are some other factors. To enable our future workforce to expand their skillsets for a competitive advantage, institutes should introduce examination reforms, alignment of engineering courses with global trends, and induction programs for early orientation of students to these subjects.

Developing the Right Learning Culture at the Workplace

The Zillennial generation is characterized by its ability to multitask. It's a tech-savvy generation, that enjoys teamwork, prefers to learn on its own terms, and prefers activities that sanction creativity. Their workplace training preferences are focused on collaboration, with a likeness to L&D styles that include an externship, role play, and empirical modules. L&D frameworks should involve them to create their own learning methods and modules, similar to a form of self-tailoring of course curriculum or activities.

Organizations should develop technology-based L&D activities that include computer-based activities,

presentations, course websites, Web exchanges, games, etc. These align well with their mindset of multi-tasking and teamwork. Being a generation who haven't known a world without digital devices, they just can't look beyond technology. Digital devices are most helpful to trainers and instructors who assign technology-related tasks or those who are comfortable with them themselves.

Zillennials value teamwork and collaboration for effective results. Similarly, on-the-job training allows them to learn from experienced employees and fits in with their active learning style for effective knowledge transfer. Activity-based learning with a technical orientation is important to them. Training should also include variety and flexibility, such as special projects or responsibilities that address Zillennial needs for multi-tasking and teamwork, creating a sense of autonomy and empowerment.

Industry-Academia Collaboration – a Good Start

A 2019 Nasscom survey says India produces 15 lakh engineering graduates every year, but only 2.5 lakhs succeed in getting jobs in the core engineering industry – meaning we are producing a mere 16 per cent of graduates with employable skills. The strong academia-industry collaboration will help to address this gap. While industry experts can guide on business scenarios and technical solutions, institutes and faculty can assist with prerequisites such as software, infrastructure, and technical upskilling.

The corporate sector should build an extensive framework to collaborate with institutes in key Industry 4.0 skills, especially new-age technologies like AI, ML, IoT, Robotics, Cloud Computing, 5G and Edge, Data Analytics, AR, VR, Cybersecurity, Digital, Cloud, Data Management, etc. Any framework of collaboration should be based by focusing on four aspects:

Institute Selection: Evaluate an institute's NIRF/NAAC rankings, autonomous status, intake student quality, management focus and infrastructure.

Skills Program: Finalize skills based on demand and supply in a particular stream, engagement model, and investment plans.

Technology Labs: Set up tech labs and orient the faculty and students on new-age technology, and redesign the curriculum by introducing subjects following university guidelines.

Execution Model: Train faculty on new-age skills, provide industry best practices, conduct hackathons, offer internships, provide guest lectures, and do continuous improvement.

Creating the Right Programs for the Modern Workplace

Any L&D strategy – both at the institute and workplace levels – should aim to develop the capabilities and skills of the Zillennial generation to create a sustainable and successful process. While it is important for institutes to churn out the rightly equipped talent, it is important for a company's overall business strategy too. Organizations spend billions of dollars on employee learning and training. They must derive the best cost-to-dollar returns from their investments.

Successful L&D programs are those that train and develop Zillennials not only in course curriculum but also effectively letting them know that their contributions, and what they do at the workplace, really matter. Framing an L&D program should also be a learning for course formulators. It will keep them engaged, and focused, and establish the best organic relationship with the organization.