

Executive Summary

Ever since the first millennial employees stepped foot in the office of their very first job, the idea was hatched that there's a relationship between "purpose" and "work." Today, it's one of the key business themes of our age.

At the same time, purpose is also one of the most overused and more loosely defined terms around. In the context of work, purpose encompasses all the values that drive people's choices, actions and attitudes — from wider social and environmental goals, to professional and personal objectives such as a healthy work-life balance.

Helping employees fulfill their purpose at work, while more important than ever before, remains a highly elusive endeavor. The global events of the past year-plus — from the pandemic, to unprecedented natural disasters, to outcries against social injustice — have pushed people worldwide to question their life and work choices. And amid the "great resignation," where record numbers of employees have quit their jobs, often without a destination in mind, employers are scrambling to fill gaping talent gaps. Moreover, as older millennials reach their early 40s and Gen Z joins the job market, the career moves of these "purpose-led" generations are increasingly central to businesses' ongoing viability.

However, our recent study reveals a widening gap between what workers expect from employers when it comes to purpose and what they believe their employers are actually delivering. Gen Z tends to be even more skeptical than their millennial peers in some key areas, such as business ethics and sustainability.

In September 2021, we conducted a study to explore the purposes that motivate younger generations of workers, and the extent to which employers are delivering purposeful experiences. The picture that emerges should spur business leaders to reexamine their playbooks. While most workers give their companies some credit for their ethical, social and environmental positions, few believe these to be very genuine.



Crucially for businesses, young workers distinguish between the purpose they want their employers to embrace as good corporate citizens — ethical operating principles, environmental protections and furtherance of societal goals — and their own purpose at work, which they largely define in terms of personal job satisfaction.

In our study, we surveyed 499 millennial and Gen Z workers (i.e., between the ages of 20 and 40) from five European regions (see our methodology on page 22 for more detailed information). Despite our precision geographic focus, the dynamics we've identified reflect behaviors taking place across much of the globe. Therefore, the lessons drawn from our observations are also applicable worldwide.

Our key findings include:

- Young workers seek purpose at work, but not in the way you might expect. The vast majority of millennial (aged 27-40) and Gen Z (aged 20-26) workers expect employers to be highly committed to having a positive impact on the environment and on the wider society. However, most center their own purposes at work on far more personal objectives. More than half define purposeful work as being passionate about what they do and achieving a healthy work-life balance.
- Skepticism is high about employers' commitment to their stated positions in key purpose areas. For example, only 24% of respondents believe their employer's position on the environment and climate change to be "very genuine," while 46% see it as halfhearted, or "slightly" genuine.
- I The gap is widening between what young workers expect from their employers in terms of purpose and what they believe employers are actually doing. Eight in 10 millennials say that responsible and ethical business practices are extremely or very important to them when choosing an employer, and 75% are happy with the commitment displayed by their companies — a five-point gap. Among Gen Z, 84% consider this area extremely or highly important, and 72% approve of their employer's efforts, accounting for a far larger 12-point gap.

- Young people are struggling to live their purpose at work. Fewer than one in five (18%) of our respondents strongly believe they are living their day-to-day purpose in their work life. This is as serious a problem for companies as the widening gap between expectations and perceptions about corporate purpose. Nearly half of respondents identified unfair treatment from their supervisor and excessive workload as potential burnout risks. Such perceptions undermine the company's ability to cultivate the loyalty of younger workers and can lead to meager talent pipelines.
- Poor intra-company communication undermines the purpose message. Many young workers simply aren't aware of their company's stance on ethical, social and environmental issues. For example, almost one-third of our respondents had no idea whether their employer had a long-term plan to become carbon neutral. Insufficient organizational knowledge — beyond one's individual job — not only undermines understanding of corporate values and purpose, but can also result in a lack of employee engagement that creates a disconnect between business opportunities and challenges and the ability to meet them.
- Leadership needs a makeover. Executive leadership style must evolve to meet today's imperative of winning the war for talent while accommodating a cornucopia of postpandemic workplace attitudes. After almost two years working entirely or mostly from home, often juggling video meetings and childcare or other home-related obligations, 43% of our respondents see flexibility as a key defining trait of a good leader.

Our study demonstrates that companies need to step up their efforts to convince the current generation of young, educated workers that they are serious about positively impacting not just shareholders but also employees, local communities and the world at large. Failure to do so, together with an inability to allow young talent to live their own work purpose, poses a serious risk to nurturing tomorrow's leaders and building a prosperous future for all constituents.



Few businesses today seriously question that we live in the age of purpose. From pledges to increase minority representation on leadership teams, to partnerships with local community organizations and sustainability investments, companies all over the world have spent the last few years tripping over themselves to show consumers, shareholders and their own staff how engaged they are in promoting outcomes beyond turning a profit.

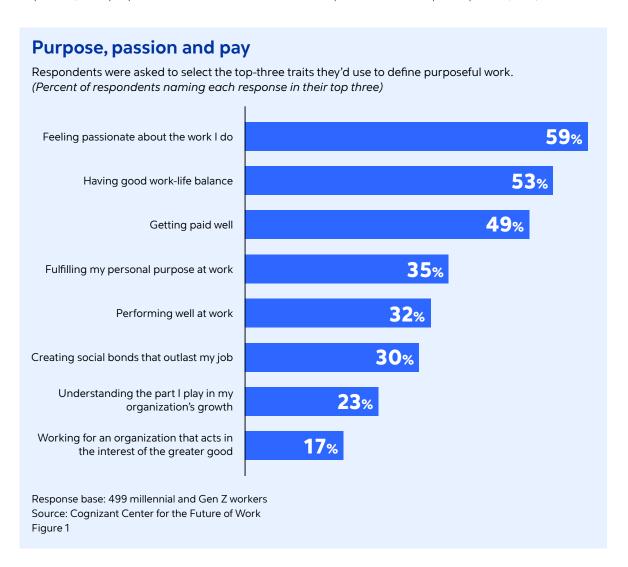
These efforts stem in part from a genuine concern with social, racial, environmental and other issues. However, they also owe much to the widespread perception that talented young people no longer work just to pay the bills. Young workers, the argument goes, need to feel they're contributing to the greater good, as well. The corollary is clear: In order to attract the talent you need, you need to show people they can help the world through their work in your company.

Our study reveals a somewhat different reality. What younger workers mean by purpose is actually twofold: Yes, the majority (65%) say it's extremely or very important for their employer to positively impact society in a way that reflects their own values; however, they also want a workplace that fuels their own personal sense of purpose.

And when it comes to defining what purpose means for them personally, millennials and Gen Z workers focus less on the external world and more on concerns and issues that have an immediate, direct impact on their work and personal life (see Figure 1, next page). In the words of a 31-year-old woman in our study who works in Germany's computer software industry, "It can be as simple as a project or role in a company. If I'm able to conduct it, that in itself gives me a lot of meaning and drive."

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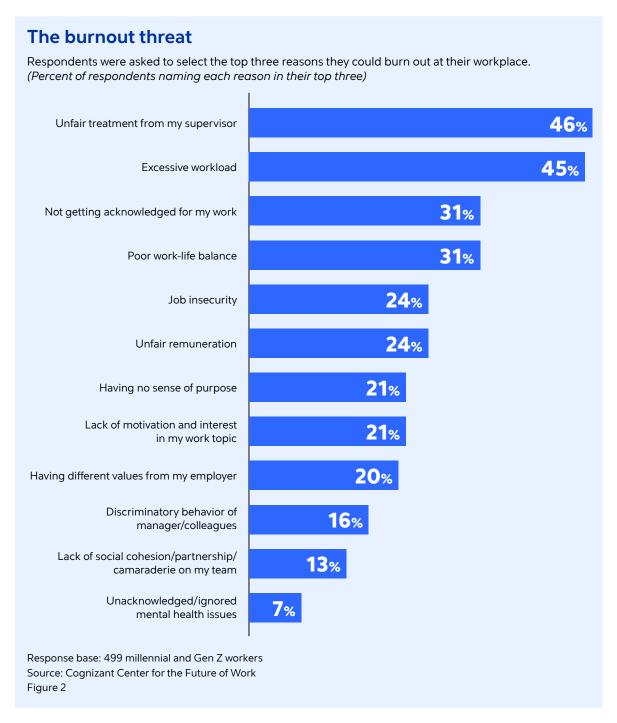
In addition to defining purposeful work in terms of personal objectives, respondents overwhelmingly favor traditional metrics for gauging business performance (which 62% consider to be the most or very important) over purpose-focused metrics such as diversity and inclusion or poverty relief (24%).



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Struggling to live their purpose

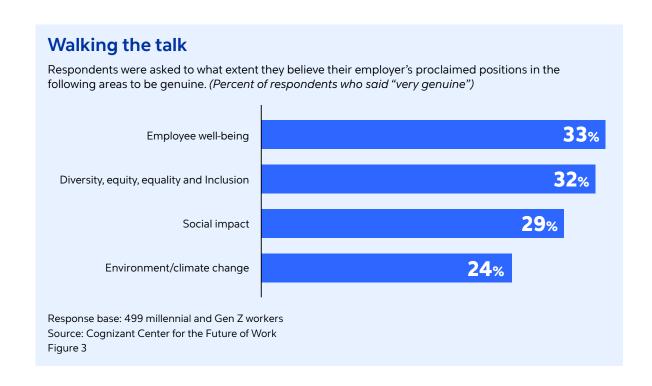
It's alarming, then, that fewer than one in five (18%) respondents strongly agree they are living their purpose at work, and 47% unenthusiastically, or "slightly," agree. In this environment, the risk of burnout is high. The main burnout factors identified by respondents are unfair treatment from a supervisor (including unrealistic expectations, harassment and bullying), and an excessive workload (see Figure 2).

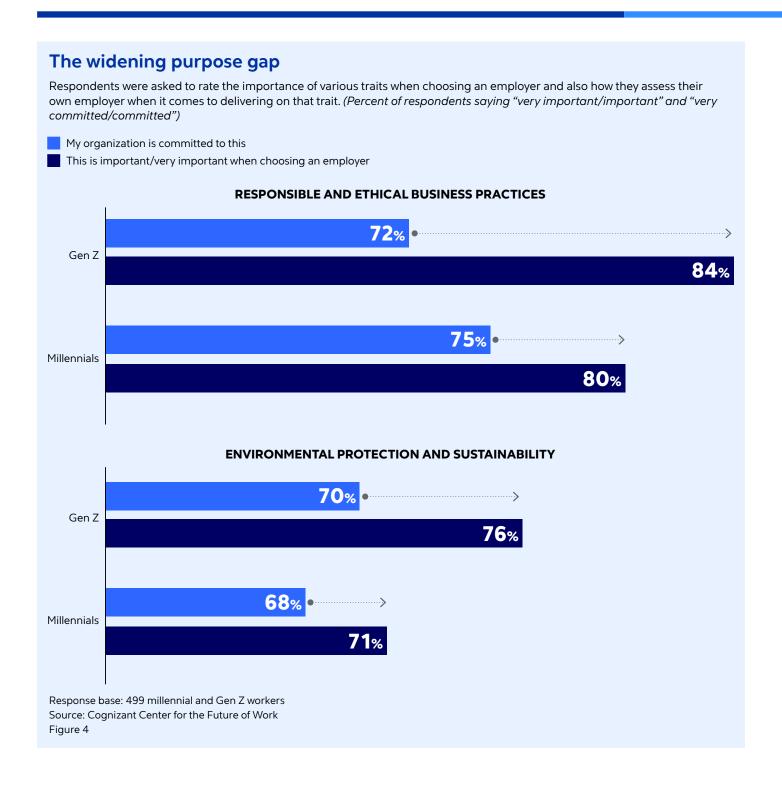


A second red flag for businesses is the reported skepticism among respondents regarding their employer's commitment to their proclaimed positions on key environmental, social and governance areas (see Figure 3). At the minimum, this suggests internal communications aren't working as they should. Whatever the reason, there is a clear lesson for companies: It's not enough to pay lip service to social and environmental concerns; employees will only be convinced when they see real action.

More than youthful enthusiasm

Not only are younger generations of skilled workers demanding a lot; their expectations are growing. When we compared millennials with their younger Gen Z peers, we saw a greater gap between what the youngest generation of workers expects from their companies in key purpose-related areas, such as ethical business practices and sustainability, and how they believe their employers are performing in those areas (see Figure 4, next page).





It may be tempting for companies to dismiss Gen Z's attitude as reflecting the idealism of the young and to expect their enthusiasm to fade as they spend more time in the job market and accumulate more personal and financial responsibilities.

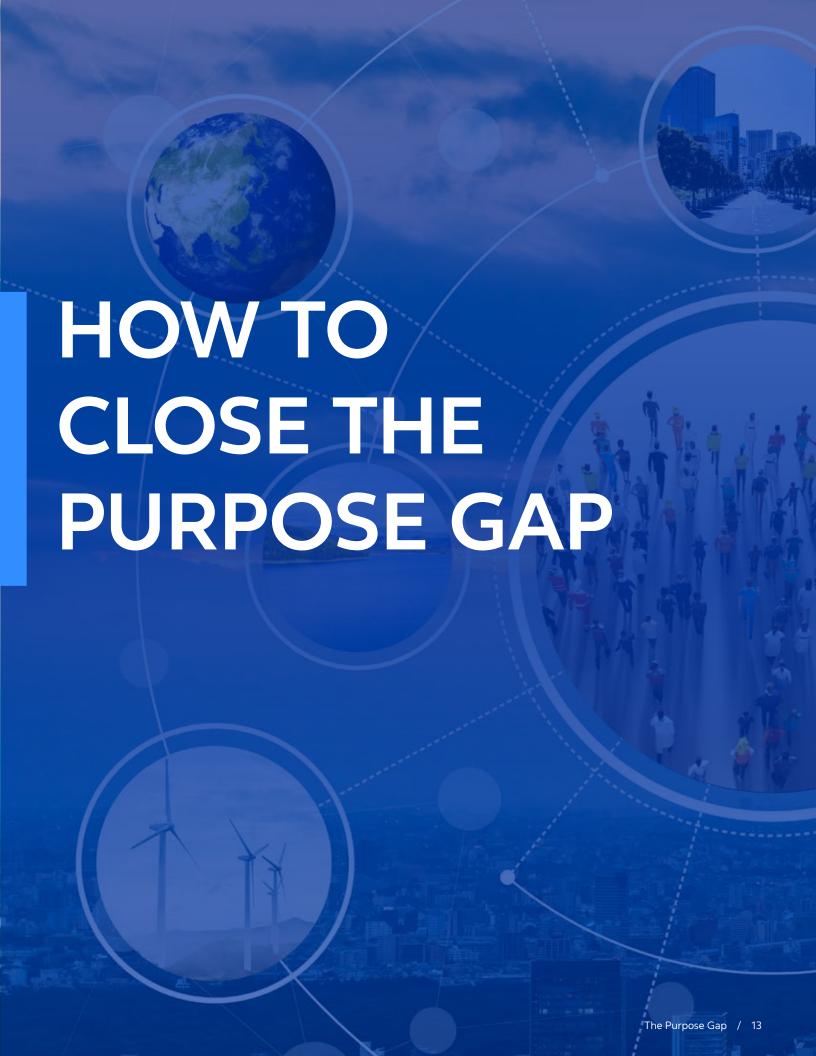
That would be shortsighted, for at least two reasons. The first has to do with the timeframe in which these different young cohorts started working. Studies show that the economic environment in which an individual joins the job market is a key factor in determining both their overall attitude toward work and their longer-term financial prospects.¹

Many millennials graduated around the time of the Great Recession in 2008–09 and still bear the scars of that crisis's prolonged impact on job markets, which has contributed to making them more conservative in their attitude to work. Gen Z workers, meanwhile, are riding the rollercoaster of the "pandemic job market": a deep plunge (or one just averted by quick government intervention) followed by a meteoric recovery that has increased the leverage of workers — all the while making it clear that it is, after all, perfectly possible for many people to be productive working remotely and with flexible hours.²

The second has to do with the evolution of social and environmental awareness that has been one of the hallmarks of society since the early 2010s. Gen Z lived their adolescence and early adulthood in a world characterized by #metoo, Occupy Wall Street, Black Lives Matter and climate change protests — all reflective of long-simmering problems that have increasingly made headlines and, crucially, colonized social media feeds.

In short: Don't count on the sense of social and environmental purpose and the demands of the younger cohort fading as the years pass.

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With no end in sight to growing expectations for purpose at work, our research has revealed steps businesses can take to close the existing gap in this area.



1. Get your internal communications right

Our study makes it clear that employees are often unaware of their employer's efforts in many areas of purpose. For example, more than one in five respondents couldn't say whether their organization's performance metrics were aligned with its vision and values; a similar number said they didn't understand their company's mission, while more than one in four weren't sure whether a realistic long-term plan was in place to achieve carbon neutrality.

It's hard to overstate the negative effects of such a lack of employee knowledge. Employees who don't have a holistic picture of the business they work for will ultimately feel disengaged and struggle to think strategically about the opportunities and challenges the business faces. Further, they'll fail to see the company's wider purpose beyond the bottom line and even how their job can help them fulfill their personal purposes.

At the same time, businesses often struggle to understand their young workers. For example, after years of companies seeking to lure young talent and equip their offices with free snacks and beverages and even ping-pong tables, recent research reveals that, nice as these "fun" perks are, young workers actually see them as less important than respectful communication.³

Companies developing a communication strategy to close the purpose gap must start by asking themselves, "What don't our young workers understand about our corporate purpose?" and "What don't we understand about their personal purpose?"

There is a growing need for a leadership position that sits between marketing and HR to ensure fluid communication across the company about its values and what it seeks to achieve beyond the bottom line. (For more on this and other relevant HR roles of the future, see our report "21 HR Jobs of the Future."⁴)

In addition, companies need to do the following:

I Involve managers in internal communications. In most circumstances, one-size-fits-all communication is ineffective and can even be counterproductive. Yes, key information needs to be widely known and understood, but people have different working styles, and effective communication depends on the right message reaching the right person at the right time.

The age of micromanagement is dead. Or, at least, it should be. Young people will not achieve the purposeful work they crave — including their highest personal priorities of finding passion for what they do and having a healthy work-life balance — if they are constantly monitored on what to do and how to do it.

Managers are the ideal people to do this because no one knows people on their team so well (from their strengths and weaknesses to their personal values and their occasional personal and family difficulties). Never has this been more important than in an age of hybrid work, when face-to-face meetings are less frequent. Moreover, managers are by nature the link between the companies' foot soldiers and its leaders, and hence ideally placed to maintain a constant flow of two-way communication.

Companies must train managers to identify and apply the best-suited communication methods for each circumstance. Our survey showed that 58% of young workers see frequent communication on the consequences of decisions and actions as one of the most important approaches to communication; a similar amount favors adept listening and personalized attention.

I Use tech wisely. Technology, it goes without saying, is crucial to good communication, especially when some (or most) people on a team are working remotely. But companies must use tech with care if they want it to fulfill its role of ensuring young workers understand where corporations stand, when it comes to purpose and other areas.

Sixty-three percent of our respondents agree that excessive connectivity makes their attention become too divided. So it's vital not to over-index on digital communications to convey messaging on corporate purpose.

Moreover, as anyone at the receiving end of an overwhelming volume of emails and other kind of messages can attest, sometimes the best way to ensure an idea is not known is to hide it in plain sight. Attention spans are limited, and not every message will be read, let alone absorbed.

To use tech wisely, companies can draw inspiration from the approach taken by Healx, a startup based in Cambridge, UK, that develops Al-powered treatments for rare diseases. The company combines a monthly newsletter that provides a high-level view of the company's strategic priorities with an online platform that Healx's director of strategic alignment and communication defines as "a one-stop shop for any information you need or question you have" about the business.5



2. Empower young workers to fulfill their personal purposes

The age of micromanagement is dead. Or, at least, it should be. Young people will not achieve the purposeful work they crave — including their highest personal priorities of finding passion for what they do and having a healthy work-life balance — if they are constantly monitored on what they do and how they do it. That requires vision and encouragement.

In a hybrid workplace, micromanagement can take an even greater toll on workers, including the feeling they are not trusted. Conversely, empowering team members with more autonomy to achieve business goals and contribute their ideas on a range of business-related areas will increase worker satisfaction, creativity and productivity. This means they will also be less likely to quit.⁶

Other guidelines for businesses to follow include:

- **Empowerment and guidance go hand-in-hand.** Empowering employees means it makes more sense to make them accountable for their performance at work. Our conversations with young workers indicate they don't want to avoid responsibility for the outcome of their work; they just reject the notion of being told what to do every step of the way.
 - What empowerment doesn't mean, however, is leaving employees unsupported, especially when they are just starting their work lives, are new to a company or are facing a novel or tricky situation. As a 33-year-old man in our study from a UK management consultancy explained: "A lot of what I do is quite self-driven. I have some flexibility in what is being done, but I do need some instructions."
- I Help people understand how they can build a career in the company. Guidance is necessary not only in individual projects and tasks; it is equally important when it comes to young people's careers. In our study, a 26-year-old man in the UK biotech industry explained he had left a job where he had acquired "very solid experience" due to the lack of a clear growth path ahead.
 - His frustration highlights how skilled young people struggle to envision a long-term career in many organizations today. This can deprive companies of a strong pipeline of future leaders and put them in a position of constantly waiting for new senior hires to get up-to-speed in their new environment.
 - If companies want to retain their best talent saving money and increasing broader job satisfaction in the process — they need to make sure their young workers understand how they can fulfill their personal purposes.
 - Relevant learning and development opportunities are important, but often insufficient. Businesses can take a page out of Aer Lingus' playbook. The Irish airline assigns each of its young workers a talent manager to help them develop in their first couple of years with the company. This helps them to not only get to know the company better, but also understand how they can build a career there.
 - "Businesses must realize they need to be attractive for workers, and not just from a financial point of view. Especially in high-value jobs, if people are bored or feel they aren't benefiting from their job, they simply walk away," said Kevin Tuohy, head of software engineering at the airline, in a recent conversation with us.



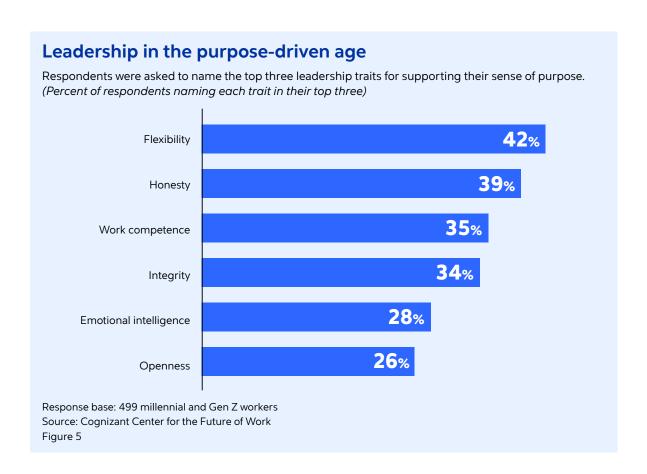
3. Modernize your current leadership

At first sight, corporate leaders might believe it's up to someone else (perhaps HR or the communications department) to ensure younger employees understand the corporate purpose and the extent to which they're able to live their personal purpose at work. But leadership must be at the heart of this effort, for two reasons.

First, as we have seen, young workers are skeptical of the authenticity of their employer's commitment to stated social and environmental goals. It is incumbent upon leadership to make sure the company walks the talk.

Second, it's ultimately up to leaders to make decisions in areas such as remote-work and promotion policies that will ultimately allow young workers to fulfill their individual purposes at work. When creating these policies, leaders must have a profound understanding of the changing dynamics that affect the work and personal lives of their younger colleagues.

When we asked our respondents to identify the leadership traits that mattered most to them, flexibility came out on top, even above traditional (and still essential) characteristics, such as honesty and work competence (see Figure 5).





While it's natural for employees to value flexibility after almost two years of responding to pandemicimposed needs, this trait may still not come as naturally to leaders themselves. When that is the case, leadership training may be necessary.

In addition, leaders need to:

I Be the change employees want to see in the world. Workers will have little reason to doubt the authenticity of the company's commitment to positive outcomes beyond the bottom line if they see leaders rolling up their sleeves to directly take part in promoting positive social and environmental outcomes.

Kate Isaacs, an MIT lecturer who has spent years researching business-led ventures with social impact, has identified the ability to tell a clear and purposeful story and to combine institutional goals with community priorities as some of the common elements of effective leaders. She points to the case of Bob Rivers, the CEO of Eastern Bank, a lender based in Boston. Not only did he open the first bank branch in two decades in a formerly prosperous textile mill town, but he also helped launch initiatives to improve the region's outlook through, for example, bilingual work training and investment in local businesses.

Learn to be a follower. The definition of a leader from a 30-year-old woman in our study from Sweden's automotive industry goes straight to the point: "You can't be a good leader unless you can also be a good follower." Leading doesn't mean having all the answers. Young talent knows no one has them and struggles to takes seriously leaders who pretend they do.

Knowing how and when to learn from others, notably from younger workers, is an essential part of being a good leader. It will not only help build a better company by inviting more diverse views on how and where to steer the business, but it will also assure young workers they're being heard. It is hard to understate the importance of this when nearly four in 10 of our respondents admitted a reason for quitting was the feeling they were unvalued.

Reverse mentoring is a key way of accomplishing this. The current rate of social change has made it even more important for leaders — especially those with long tenures at the same company — to listen to those who are less embedded in the organization's culture and retain the strongest connections with the outside world. That normally means younger workers.

Reverse mentoring can also be valuable when it encourages relationships between people at different career levels This will facilitate inter-generational dialog in the company and help both sides — young mentors will understand better what the company does to pursue its purpose and how they can operate more effectively in the corporate environment.

Leading companies are taking steps to ensure the benefits of reverse mentoring or similar programs reach the entire organization. For example, US beauty product company Estée Lauder distributes bi-monthly alerts to all employees, including leadership, about topics discussed in a sharing portal created by reverse mentors to exchange ideas.8 At Italian luxury goods maker Gucci, a "shadow board" of millennials has been meeting regularly with the senior team since the mid-2010s.9



Making sure young people both understand what the company is doing to pursue its wider purposes and that they're able to achieve their own personal purpose at work is not just an ongoing process; it is also a multifaceted journey.

Three very different areas of corporate activity need to be calibrated to support it:

- I Plan for skill development in the hybrid age. Our study leaves no doubt about the preference for hybrid work policies: 87% of our study respondents reject a return to a fully in-office model. However, most admit that the office remains the best place to develop key skills, such as conflict management and networking.
 - The lesson: To make staff feel they are developing their skills at work in the hybrid age, companies will need to both prioritize learning and development during the scarce office time available and make the best use of tech-based solutions, including extended reality options in the emerging "metaverse." (For more on this topic, see our report "Infusing XR into Remote Collaboration." 10)
- **I** Define purpose-related metrics and report on them. Only one in five of our respondents strongly agreed that their organization's performance metrics align with its vision and values. Companies must make sure they not only take steps to pursue their wider purposes, but also define specific goals and periodically report on them.
 - Clearly established objectives and key results (OKR) for corporate purposes beyond the bottom line could work wonders for improving young workers' perspective of their employers.
- I Make conscientious choices about your company's hierarchy levels. While young workers reject ways of working characterized by strong hierarchical relationships, less than one in five wants to work for an extremely flat company. Too much hierarchy can alienate less senior people, but with too little, young workers may struggle to understand where to turn for guidance.
 - Companies must weigh the pros and cons of different levels of hierarchy, including on younger workers' ability to pursue their purpose at work, and make a conscientious decision about the balance they want to strike.

In the end, organizations are embedded in the societies of which they are part. As social values and needs evolve, so will workers' purposes. Being by their side in this journey is key to remaining relevant today and tomorrow.

Methodology

We joined forces with Finnish organization The NextGen Project to survey 499 young workers from five European regions, 16 industry groups and three age cohorts:

Respondents by geography

21% UKI (United Kingdom and Ireland)

20% The Nordics (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden)

20% France

19% DACH (Germany, Austria, Switzerland)

19% Benelux (Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxemburg)

Respondents by age cohort

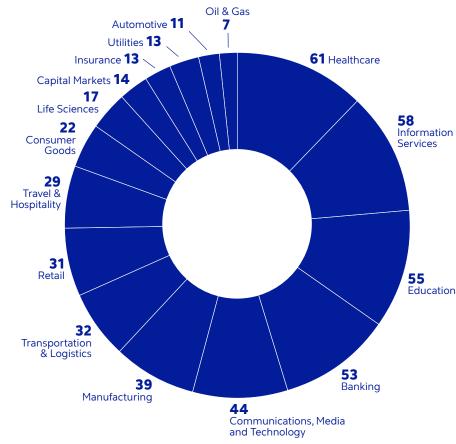
35% Younger millennials (27 to 33 years old)

35% Older millennials (34 to 40 years old)

30% Gen Z (20 to 26 years old)

(Percentages may not total to 100% due to rounding)

Respondents by industry



In addition, we conducted in-depth interview with young workers with the following age, industry and country profiles:

- Accounting software, 36, Finland
- Automotive, 30, Sweden
- Biotechnology, 26, UK
- Computer software, 31, Germany
- Financial services, 28, Germany
- International relations & affairs student, 21, Switzerland
- Management consulting, 33, UK
- Oil & energy, 28, France
- Sporting goods, 23, the Netherlands

Endnotes

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Eduardo Plastino is a Director at the Cognizant Center for the Future of Work. His research focuses on the impact of digital transformation on work, societies, organizations and economies throughout the world.

Before joining Cognizant, Eduardo spent several years at Accenture Research, where he focused on a range of topics, including skill-building in the digital age, the learning experience of the future, responsible leadership, innovation ecosystems and different aspects related to the development and adoption of artificial intelligence.

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About the Center for the Future of Work

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