

Hiring Managers vs. Gen Z Priorities

The Values Gap in Today's Workforce

Suzy Welch, PhD
Becoming You Labs

Daniel B. Davis, PhD
Sociologist, San Diego State University

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Executive Summary

Workplaces run on values. They shape how employees define success, approach challenges, and engage with work. When values align, research shows higher engagement, performance, and retention. When they diverge, the result is stress, disengagement, and costly turnover.

This white paper presents new findings from The Values Bridge, a behavioral assessment of over 45,000+ respondents, focusing on the 7,500+ Gen Z users, alongside survey data from 2,100 U.S. hiring managers in knowledge industries. The results reveal a sharp gap between what organizations seek and what Gen Z prioritizes.

What Hiring Managers Want

Managers overwhelmingly favor values tied to productivity and visible performance:

- 1. Achievement (30%)** – professional success.
- 2. Scope (23%)** – learning and action.
- 3. Workcentrism (22%)** – comfort with hard work.

Together, these account for 75% of hiring managers' top priorities.

What Gen Z Values

Gen Z most often prioritizes:

- **Eudemonia** – well-being and self-care.
- **Non-sibi** – helping others.
- **Voice** – authenticity and expression.

Only **2% of Gen Z** rank all three hiring-preferred values in their top five. Even where overlap exists, Gen Z often tries to dial these values down: 61% report Achievement is higher in their real life than they want in their ideal life.

The Implications for Organizations

The values gap between Gen Z and hiring managers creates two starkly different realities for employers.

For top-tier companies with resources: The focus will not be on changing their values but on outcompeting rivals for the scarce 2% of Gen Z who naturally align. Recruiting will become more targeted, pipelines more competitive, and early identification of value-aligned candidates

a strategic priority.

For everyone else: Companies without the brand power or budget to compete head-to-head will need to be pragmatic. That may mean staffing critical roles with candidates who show two of the three hiring-preferred values, while designing complementary teams where other values help stabilize culture, client empathy, or retention. For these firms, making the “value contract” explicit in job descriptions and interviews is essential. Transparency reduces churn.

Generational differences also risk being misread. More senior managers may see Gen Z’s emphasis on balance as slack, while younger employees may view traditional norms as rigid. Training managers to set expectations clearly, and to recognize which values are non-negotiable versus where flexibility exists, can reduce this cycle of mistrust.

The values gap between hiring managers and Gen Z is structural, not incidental. Employers continue to prize Achievement, Scope, and Workcentrism because they correlate with visible performance and productivity. Gen Z, in contrast, emphasizes balance, service, and authenticity. Where overlaps exist, they are fragile, and often shaped more by external pressure than intrinsic drive.

For leading firms, this gap translates into an arms race to identify and secure the few candidates who align. For others, it requires more strategic adaptation, designing teams and roles that maximize partial fits while minimizing mismatch risk. Either way, the implications are clear: ignoring the divide will fuel turnover and disengagement, while recognizing it early provides a competitive edge in the future of work.

1. Introduction: Why Values Matter at Work

Workplaces run on values—whether or not those values are openly acknowledged. Values shape how employees define success, approach challenges, and evaluate the meaning of their work. When individual and organizational values align, employees are more engaged, satisfied, and productive, and they are less likely to leave. Decades of organizational research consistently show that strong person-organization (PO) fit predicts higher performance, lower turnover, and stronger commitment (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005). More recent research highlights that value congruence fosters trust, cooperation, and motivation at both individual and team levels (Edwards & Cable, 2009), and that PO fit remains one of the most powerful predictors of workplace outcomes—even as scholars now recognize it as a dynamic process that shifts over time (Kristof-Brown, Schneider, & Su, 2023). Importantly, this recent work underscores that fit is not always straightforward or uniformly beneficial: while alignment typically supports engagement and retention, certain kinds of “misfit” can encourage diversity of thought and innovation. For organizations and their leaders, the challenge is not simply whether fit exists, but how it is understood, measured, and managed in a changing workforce.

Values are also deeply tied to well-being. Research shows that when people pursue goals consistent with their central values, they report greater life satisfaction and vitality, whereas persistent conflicts with their values often predict stress, dissatisfaction, or depressive affect (Sortheix & Schwartz, 2017). Importantly, Sortheix and Schwartz (2017) further found that the impact of particular values on well-being is not fixed but depends on cultural and socioeconomic context: for example, values of self-direction and stimulation are more strongly linked to well-being in egalitarian societies, while in more hierarchical contexts the same values may generate frustration. In the workplace, these dynamics are especially visible. As person-environment fit research shows, motivation, satisfaction, and performance are highest when employees’ values align with the broader goals and culture of their organizations (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005; Edwards & Cable, 2009). Conversely, when people feel their own priorities collide with organizational expectations—such as when career achievement undermines family or altruistic commitments—they often experience stress, disengagement, or burnout (Michel et al., 2011).

At the same time, values are not static. They shift across life stages and are shaped by cultural, social, and economic forces. Generational research consistently shows that younger workers seek something different from work than their older counterparts. Recent surveys (Deloitte, 2025) highlight that Gen Z places greater emphasis on well-being, authenticity, inclusivity, and purpose, while many older managers continue to prize achievement, work intensity, and traditional career progression. Alignment clearly matters: 52% of Gen Z respondents whose values matched their organization reported being happy, compared with only 31% whose values

did not. This gap translates into real behavior: 41% of Gen Zs reported rejecting a potential employer over ethics or beliefs, and 44% said they left a job because it lacked purpose.

For organizations, the stakes are high. Misalignment between what hiring managers want and what younger workers value can translate into higher turnover, weaker talent pipelines, and disengagement that undermines performance. Gallup's State of the Global Workplace report estimates that disengaged employees cost the global economy \$9.6 trillion annually in lost productivity—about 9% of global GD (Gallup, 2025). This is due to several factors including: lost productivity and sales, increased absenteeism, higher turnover costs, reduced customer satisfaction, and more. Put in easier to digest numbers, a disengaged employee can cost an organization the equivalent of 18% of their salary (Herway, 2020). Conversely, when organizations understand generational shifts and design roles, cultures, and policies that align with younger employees' values they can significantly bolster attraction, retention, and performance.

This white paper explores the emerging mismatch between the values most desired by hiring managers and the values most commonly held by Gen Z. Drawing on new data from the Values Bridge assessment and surveys of 2,100 hiring managers, it examines where alignment is strong, where gaps are largest, and what this means for leaders in talent strategy, HR, and organizational development. While the focus here is U.S. data, the patterns connect to broader global shifts in the meaning of work, purpose, and organizational culture.

2. What Hiring Managers Want

To better understand what organizations are looking for in new talent, we surveyed 2,100 U.S.-based hiring managers using Prolific. Respondents were screened to ensure they were age 40 or older, had direct management and hiring experience, and currently held a mid- to senior-level role (Manager, Senior Manager, Director, Vice President, President, CEO/C-suite, Owner, or Partner). Participants represented a wide range of knowledge-based industries, including technology, finance, consulting, education, healthcare, government, and professional services. Entry-level managers and industries outside of knowledge work (e.g., farming, trades) were excluded to focus on sectors where competition for Gen Z talent is particularly high.

Each hiring manager was asked a single forced-choice question:

“When you're hiring, what personal value or quality do you look for most in a candidate?”

They were presented with ten workplace-relevant descriptions adapted from the Values Bridge framework, without the formal value labels. For example, instead of “Achievement,” managers saw “desire for professional success.” The full list of response options was¹:

- Achievement of personal wealth
- Comfort with hard work
- Desire for authenticity and self-expression
- Desire for community
- Desire for professional success
- Focus on family considerations
- Focus on helpfulness
- Interest in being in charge
- Interest in learning new things
- Priority on personal well-being and fun

By design, only one option could be chosen. This forced-choice structure distributes responses across values to approximately 100%, with each percentage reflecting the single most important hiring criterion for that respondent.

¹Note: Six Values Bridge dimensions—Beholderism (aesthetics), Belovedness (romantic relationships), Cosmos (faith tradition), Luminance (fame), Place (a specific location), and Radius (societal change)—were excluded from the survey on the grounds that they are less directly relevant to workplace hiring decisions.

The findings reveal a striking hierarchy of preferences, three stood out in particular:

- **Achievement** — *Desire for professional success (30%)*
- **Scope** — *Interest in learning new things (23%)*
- **Workcenterism** — *Comfort with hard work (22%)*

Note: Six Values Bridge dimensions—Beholderism (aesthetics), Belovedness (romantic relationships), Cosmos (faith tradition), Luminance (fame), Place (a specific location), and Radius (societal change)—were excluded from the survey on the grounds that they are less directly relevant to workplace hiring decisions.

Together, these three values account for three-fourths (75%) of all selections, signaling a managerial emphasis on performance, growth, and sustained effort.

Two other values had modest selection among hiring managers: Non-sibi (a focus on helpfulness) at 10% and Voice (desire for authenticity and self-expression) at 10%. The results dropped off precipitously after that. With the remaining values garnering between less than one to two percent. See Table 1 for a breakdown of responses.

Table 1: Hiring Managers’ Top Value in New Hires

Value	Description	Count	%
Achievement	Desire for professional success	635	30.2%
Scope	Interest in learning new things	479	22.8%
Workcenterism	Comfort with hard work	470	22.4%
Non-sibi	Focus on helpfulness	212	10.1%
Voice	Desire for authenticity and self-expression	200	9.5%
Belonging	Desire for community	49	2.3%
Affluence	Achievement of personal wealth	23	1.1%
Eudemonia	Priority on personal well-being and fun	16	0.7%
Familycenterism	Focus on family considerations	15	0.7%
Agency	Interest in being in charge	1	0.0%
Totals		2,100	100%

**Note: Numbers do not total exactly to 100 due to rounding.*

These results underscore a clear tilt toward values that align with productivity and organizational success over those that prioritize personal fulfillment, family, or broader social

contribution. This profile of hiring priorities offers a critical point of comparison with the values of emerging workers. In the next section, we examine the top values of Gen Z, and reveal how sharply they diverge from what managers say they want.

3. The Values Gap: Gen Z and Employers

The Values Bridge data makes one reality unmistakable: Gen Z is entering the workforce with motivational priorities that diverge sharply from what employers say they most want in new hires.

Gen Z’s Core Priorities

Across more than 7,500 Gen Z respondents, the values most frequently appearing in their core, or top five values, are Eudemonia (66%), Voice (61%), and Non-sibi (53%). These reflect strong commitments to personal well-being and leisure, authentic self-expression, and helping others. Values associated with recognition, work intensity, or professional achievement appear much less often.

By contrast, only about one in four Gen Z respondents rank Achievement (24%), Workcentrism (27%), or Scope (27%)—the three values most preferred by hiring managers—in their top five. See Table 2 for a list of how often each value shows up in Gen Z’s top 5 (core) values.

Table 2. Ranked List of Frequency Gen Z Lists Each Value as Top 5 (Core)

Value	Description	% in Core (N = 7,653)
Eudemonia	Self-care, recreation, leisure, and other forms of personal pleasure.	65.6%
Voice	Creative self-expression and authenticity.	61.4%
Non-sibi	Altruism on a local or personal scale.	52.75%
Affluence	Wealth and/or financial security.	42.1%
Beholderism	Aesthetics regarding one’s home, belongings, and/or personal appearance.	41.8%
Familycenterism	Family considerations around health, well-being, and presence.	38.1%
Radius	Systemic change on a societal, cultural, global, or national scale.	38.1%
Cosmos	A faith tradition.	31.2%
Workcenterism	Work-related activities and responsibilities.	26.8%
Scope	Stimulation, excitement, learning, activity.	26.5%
Achievement	Visible success in professional or personal spheres.	24.1%

(Table continues on following page)

Table 2. Ranked List of Frequency Gen Z Lists Each Value as Top 5 (Core)

Value	Description	% in Core (N = 7,653)
Agency	Self-determination over life's decisions and outcomes.	16.0%
Belonging	Community and/or connectivity with friends or affinity groups.	12.8%
Place	One particular location or type of location.	11.3%
Luminance	Fame, recognition, wide public renown.	5.1%

Limited Overlap with Employer Priorities

Hiring managers surveyed for this study (N =2,100, all over age 40, with managerial or higher titles in knowledge industries) overwhelmingly selected Achievement (30%), Scope (23%), and Workcentrism (22%) as the most desirable values in new hires. Together, these three accounted for more than three-quarters of employer preferences.

How much overlap exists with Gen Z? Not much. While 58% of Gen Z have at least one of these values in their top five, only 2% hold all three.

Table 3. Share of Gen Z Holding Employers' In-Demand Values Among Their Core (Top 5)

Gen Z Values in Core (Top 5) N = 7,563	Count	%
Has Any of the 3 In-Demand Hiring Values in Core	4,390	58.0%
Has Workcentrism in Core	2,029	26.8%
Has Scope in Core	2,007	26.5%
Has Achievement in Core	1,823	24.1%
Has Achievement + Workcentrism in Core	743	9.8%
Has Workcentrism + Scope in Core	460	6.1%
Has Achievement + Scope in Core	420	5.6%
Has All 3 In-Demand Hiring Values in Core	154	2.0%

This means the vast majority of Gen Z applicants will show up in interviews and workplaces emphasizing very different motivations than hiring managers expect. Employers are looking for signals of visible success, constant learning, and comfort with hard work, but most Gen Z

candidates are guided more by balance, authenticity, and altruism.

The Depth of the Gap: Values “Negative Variance”

The values gap is not only about how often Gen Z holds employer-preferred values but also about how strongly they want them. The Values Bridge measures both “ideal life” values (the priorities people most want to guide their lives) and “real life” values (the ones they feel they are currently living).

For Gen Z, the hiring-preferred values show unusually high negative variance—meaning many report living these values more in their real life than they actually want in their ideal life:

- **Achievement:** 61% show negative variance, suggesting Gen Z often feels pressured into achievement rather than intrinsically motivated by it.
- **Workcentrism:** 37% show negative variance, indicating that many already feel over-immersed in work compared to their desired balance.
- **Scope:** 27% show negative variance, implying that constant stimulation and learning may feel less like opportunity and more like overload.

See **Table 4** for a breakdown of negative variance and average variance across all values.

Definitions:

- *Negative Variance:* The percentage of respondents whose “ideal life” would require less of a value than their “real life” currently demands.
- *Average Variance:* The mean gap between ideal and real life for each value, combining both positive variance (wanting more of it) and negative variance (wanting less).

Table 4. Gen Z Negative Variance and Average Variance of Each Value

Value (N = 7,563)	Negative Variance	Average Variance
Achievement	61.4%	-7.6%
Belonging	49.1%	0.1%
Workcenterism	36.9%	7.1%
Affluence	35.4%	5.0%
Agency	34.5%	6.7%
Place	33.4%	4.5%

(Table continues on following page)

Table 4. Gen Z Negative Variance and Average Variance of Each Value

Value (N = 7,563)	Negative Variance	Average Variance
Scope	27.0%	11.6%
Eudemonia	25.6%	12.8%
Familycenterism	23.8%	12.3%
Beholderism	22.2%	13.0%
Non-Sibi	21.8%	11.0%
Cosmos	19.4%	5.1%
Voice	17.4%	20.9%
Luminance	16.50%	20.3%
Radius	6.20%	31.2%

It is notable that nearly every value shows a positive average variance: most people want more of a given value in their ideal life than they currently experience. The lone exception is Achievement. Here, 61% of Gen Z indicate they want less of it, producing the only negative average variance (-7.6). This creates a double misalignment: not only do few Gen Z place Achievement among their core values, but even when they do, many are trying to dial it down rather than amplify it. Yet Achievement is the single most desired value among hiring managers, with 31% naming it their top priority in new hires.

Put differently: even when some members of Gen Z do show the very values employers say they want, they are often trying to *dial them down* rather than lean into them. That inversion makes the generational gap harder to bridge—it is not just a matter of different priorities, but of opposing directions.

Interpreting the Divide

Taken together, these findings suggest that the employer-employee values gap is structural, not incidental. Employers recruit for Achievement, Scope, and Workcentrism because they link them with productivity and visible performance. Gen Z, in contrast, is drawn more toward balance (Eudemonia), authenticity (Voice), and meaning (Non-sibi). Where overlaps do exist, they are often fragile—driven more by external pressure than by genuine motivation.

This divide helps explain today’s workplace dynamics: rising disengagement among younger employees, resistance to “grind culture,” and demands for roles that respect boundaries and

individuality. Left unaddressed, the mismatch risks fueling turnover, burnout, and costly cycles of unmet expectations on both sides.

4. Implications and Future Applications

The data show a structural mismatch: Gen Z values balance, authenticity, and service, while hiring managers overwhelmingly prize achievement, scope, and workcentrism. That mismatch is not one most companies will resolve by changing their expectations. The market reality is that most top employers will not recalibrate their core values to match Gen Z. They will invest more heavily to find the small cohort (2%) whose values already align with Achievement, Scope, and Workcentrism. As this “match” pool shrinks, competition intensifies: earlier sourcing, richer offers, and more selective screening. Organizations that cannot or choose not to compete at that level will need a different playbook, one that is transparent about expectations and precise in role design, so they hire for fit and avoid costly mis-hires.

Competing for the 2%

Top organizations are unlikely to change their expectations, they will compete aggressively to identify, recruit, and retain this small group. Winning that contest requires sharper, earlier, and more disciplined talent strategies.

- **Sharpen the Employee Value Proposition (EVP).** Be explicit about high standards, visible outcomes, fast learning cycles, and meaningful time-on-task. Offer clear advancement gates and high-impact assignments early.
- **Pipeline early and often.** Target programs, competitions, and internships that reward visible achievement and sustained effort. Build talent communities and pre-offer relationships around real work samples.
- **Select for sustained performance.** Use work tests, case sprints, and behavioral evidence of finishing hard things. Validate with structured references focused on persistence, learning velocity, and output quality.

A Practical Path for Everyone Else

Not every organization can, or should, pour resources into an intense competition for 2% of Gen Z candidates whose values perfectly align with hiring managers’ top priorities. For many companies, the smarter strategy is to be realistic about alignment and design roles, teams, and management practices to make the most of partial fits. Four practical approaches stand out.

- **Segment roles and teams.** Staff core execution roles with candidates who display two of the three hiring-preferred values (Achievement, Scope, Workcentrism). Then balance teams by pairing them with colleagues who bring different strengths—such as Voice, Non-sibi, or Eudemonia—to strengthen culture, empathy, and retention.

- **Tell the truth in job descriptions and interviews.** Make the “value contract” explicit: the pace, the performance bar, and what “great” looks like. Realistic job previews reduce mismatches that drive costly churn. Replacing an employee can cost 50-60% of annual salary directly, and 90-200% when indirect costs are included (Cascio, 2015).
- **Design within guardrails.** Where possible, use job crafting and scheduling levers without lowering the bar. Clarify non-negotiables, such as response times or core deliverables, and where flexibility is possible. This approach sets clear expectations while still respecting work-life balance.
- **Upgrade manager capability.** Equip leaders to talk openly about values, set expectations early, and run short “alignment check-ins” during onboarding and role transitions. Managers who can recognize and manage values gaps reduce frustration and build trust.

Risk Management and Analytics

The values gap is not just a hiring challenge; it is an ongoing management risk. Organizations need to move beyond demographic shortcuts and measure fit directly. Value congruence, not age, should be the focus, using behaviorally anchored assessments tied to actual job demands.

One practical tool is tracking *negative variance*: when employees report wanting less of a value than their role requires (e.g., Achievement or Workcentrism). Combined with pulse surveys and early performance data, negative variance can serve as an early-warning signal for disengagement or flight risk. Analytics that integrate these measures allow leaders to intervene before turnover or burnout takes hold, reducing both human and financial costs.

Strategic Takeaways and Future Directions

Adapting does not mean abandoning performance values. It means competing deliberately for the small segment of candidates who fit, being transparent about expectations, and designing roles and teams that make the most of partial fits. The alternative—hiring into a values mismatch—creates predictable churn and hidden costs that compound over time (Cascio, 2015)

Looking ahead, the Values Bridge dataset offers opportunities to deepen this analysis—such as distinguishing between candidates who match all three hiring-preferred values versus those who match two of the three, or comparing patterns across industries and job types. The next iteration will also incorporate *Belovedness*, supporting exploration of how close personal relationships interact with work intensity in sustaining engagement. This gap also raises broader questions for future research:

- To what extent can workplace culture and training shift values over time?

- Will Gen Z candidates mask values mismatches in interviews, and what happens once inside the organization?
- What are the long-term consequences for firms unable to compete for the 2%, will they adapt, or face chronic turnover?
- As Gen Z advances into management, will organizational values slowly evolve, or will institutional norms remain dominant?

Ultimately, the implications are clear: as the pool of value-aligned candidates remains small, companies that identify, attract, and retain them first will gain a decisive advantage. Those who ignore the gap risk higher turnover, weaker pipelines, and mounting costs. The competition for values fit is already underway, and it will only intensify.

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