

UNMANAGEABLE OR MISUNDERSTOOD?

The Real Reason Gen Z Are Being Fired

Employers say Gen Z hires are difficult to manage. New graduates say they're being set up to fail. This lesson explores the real story behind the dismissal statistics — and what it means for leaders.

C1
BUSINESS
English
Reading



READ

authentic business article



VOCABULARY

12 key C1 business phrases



PRACTISE

comprehension & gap-fill



DISCUSS

real business insights



ABOUT THIS LESSON

Nearly six in ten employers who hired a recent graduate say they let them go within a year. This article examines the workplace friction between Gen Z employees and their managers — and asks who is really responsible.



BY THE END OF THIS LESSON, YOU WILL BE ABLE TO:

- ✓ Use 12 new business idioms and collocations confidently
- ✓ Discuss generational differences in the modern workplace
- ✓ Summarise an argument and evaluate counter-arguments

A) WARM UP — DISCUSS BEFORE YOU READ

In your view, are the values young employees bring to work today fundamentally different from those of previous generations, or simply expressed differently?

Should companies adapt their management style to a new generation of workers, or should employees adapt to existing workplace norms?

Have you ever received feedback at work that felt more like a personal attack than constructive criticism?

What makes a new employee feel that a job is not what they were promised during recruitment?

Unmanageable or Misunderstood? The Real Reason Gen Z Are Being Fired

A paradox has emerged at the heart of modern talent management. Organisations that invested heavily in employer branding campaigns to attract digitally native, values-driven graduates are now **terminating** those same employees at a rate that has alarmed HR professionals. According to a 2024 survey by the consulting firm Intelligent, nearly six in ten employers who hired a recent graduate acknowledged letting them go within a year — a statistic that has sparked fierce debate about whether the problem lies with the employees, the employers, or the expectations each brings to the relationship.

The generation in question — broadly those born between 1997 and 2012 — entered the labour market having internalised a set of workplace values that **diverge sharply** from those of their predecessors. Raised in an era of radical transparency, they are accustomed to questioning decisions, **advocating for** their own wellbeing, and declining work they consider unethical or misaligned with their personal values. These behaviours, celebrated in the classroom and lionised on social media, frequently collide with the **hierarchical structures** and unspoken protocols that still govern most professional environments.

The specific complaints from employers are telling. Managers report that Gen Z employees resist constructive criticism, interpreting it as a personal attack rather than a professional development opportunity. Others are described as reluctant to engage in tasks they perceive as beneath their qualifications, a phenomenon sometimes labelled **role resentment**. Perhaps most counterproductive is the tendency — documented across multiple studies — for young workers to **air grievances** publicly, whether to colleagues, on internal platforms, or even on social media, rather than escalating concerns through established channels.

KEY PHRASES

terminate

diverge sharply

advocate for

hierarchical structures

role resentment

air grievances

KEY NUMBERS

6 in 10

Employers who hired a recent graduate say they let them go within a year

1997–2012

Birth years defining the Gen Z workforce cohort

5 years

Time in which reluctant employers may badly need the very talent they're cutting off

What these critiques obscure, however, is the degree to which Gen Z's frustrations are well-founded. Many graduates arrive in organisations where **onboarding** is perfunctory, feedback is infrequent, and progression pathways are opaque. Rather than **escalating** concerns through channels that rarely seem to exist, they have little choice but to voice them elsewhere. They have been promised meaningful work and a collaborative culture; they often find bureaucracy, micromanagement, and work that bears little resemblance to the role they were sold during recruitment. The resulting disillusionment is predictable, if unfortunate.

A growing body of research suggests that organisations that bridge this gap successfully do so through structural rather than cultural change. Clarity of role expectations from day one, structured feedback cycles, and genuine **psychological safety** — the assurance that speaking up will not jeopardise one's position — correlate strongly with improved retention. Companies that treat **generational friction** as a management failure rather than an employee deficiency consistently outperform their peers on engagement metrics.

The broader question, of course, is whether the workplace is simply lagging behind a generation that has already moved on. Gen Z did not invent the concept of work-life integration, nor were they the first cohort to challenge authority. But they are doing so at scale, with unprecedented visibility, and with a level of collective **self-advocacy** that organisations are, for the most part, ill-equipped to absorb. Those that continue to frame the problem as a question of attitude — and reach for the dismissal letter — may find that the **talent pipeline** they are so aggressively cutting off is the same one they will desperately need in five years' time.

"Nearly six in ten employers who hired a recent graduate acknowledge letting them go within a year."

— Intelligent, 2024 hiring survey

MORE KEY PHRASES

escalate

onboarding

psychological safety

generational friction

self-advocacy

talent pipeline

 KEY WORDS & PHRASES

to terminate

to diverge sharply

to advocate for

hierarchical structures

role resentment

to air grievances

to escalate

onboarding

psychological safety

generational friction

self-advocacy

talent pipeline

1 MATCH EACH PHRASE TO ITS DEFINITION, THEN COMPLETE THE EXAMPLE WITH THE CORRECT FORM OF THE WORD.

1. to formally end someone's employment: _____
| The company decided to _____ her contract after just four months.
2. to be very different from something else: _____
| Her expectations of the role _____ from what was advertised.
3. to publicly support or speak up in favour of something: _____
| She has always _____ greater flexibility in working hours.
4. formal systems of authority with different levels of seniority: _____
| Younger staff often struggle to navigate rigid _____ in traditional firms.
5. frustration at being asked to do tasks seen as beneath one's abilities: _____
| His _____ grew every time he was asked to file paperwork.
6. to openly express complaints or dissatisfaction: _____
| Employees began to _____ on the company's internal forum.
7. to pass a problem to someone with more authority to resolve it: _____
| If the issue isn't resolved, please _____ it to your manager.
8. the process of integrating a new employee into an organisation: _____
| Poor _____ is often to blame for early staff turnover.
9. a shared belief that it is safe to speak up without fear of punishment: _____
| Leaders must build _____ before employees will admit to mistakes.
10. tension between different age groups in the workplace: _____
| The report blamed high turnover on unresolved _____.
11. the ability to speak up for one's own needs and interests: _____
| Her _____ impressed the panel during the salary negotiation.
12. the ongoing supply of skilled candidates available to fill future roles: _____
| Cutting graduate schemes could seriously damage the firm's _____.

2 ANSWER THE QUESTIONS IN FULL SENTENCES, USING YOUR OWN WORDS WHERE POSSIBLE.

1. What statistic does the article cite to demonstrate the scale of early Gen Z dismissals, and what does it suggest?

2. What is meant by 'role resentment', and why might it lead to conflict in the workplace?

3. According to the article, why might Gen Z's frustrations with their employers be considered 'well-founded'?

4. What does the author imply will happen to companies that continue to frame this issue purely as a question of attitude?

3 GAP FILL — COMPLETE THE TEXT BELOW USING THE CORRECT FORM OF THE KEY WORDS AND PHRASES.

terminate

diverge sharply

advocate for

hierarchical structures

role resentment

air grievances

escalate

onboarding

psychological safety

generational friction

self-advocacy

talent pipeline

A Manager Reflects on Losing a New Hire

"Thank you all for meeting today. I want to talk honestly about why we (1) _____ Priya's contract after only three months. Her feedback in the exit interview really (2) _____ from what I expected. She said she had tried to (3) _____ more support early on, but felt our (4) _____ made it difficult to be heard. She also described a growing (5) _____ after being asked to do basic admin work for weeks. Rather than raising this directly with me, she chose to (6) _____ to her colleagues instead of coming to HR — and by the time concerns began to (7) _____, it was already too late. Looking back, I think our (8) _____ process let her down: nobody explained her responsibilities clearly in the first month. We also failed to build real (9) _____, so she never felt she could speak up without consequences. I don't want this to become a pattern of (10) _____ between the younger team and management. Going forward, I want to encourage more (11) _____ among new starters, and make sure we're not damaging our (12) _____ by losing good people this early."

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Do you agree that the workplace is 'lagging behind' a generation that has already moved on? Why or why not?

Should companies treat generational friction as a management failure rather than an employee deficiency? Do you agree with this view?

What structural changes, rather than cultural ones, could most improve the retention of younger employees at your organisation?