

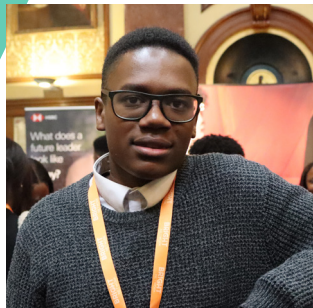


# Fix the disconnect

Enabling Gen Z success through your recruitment strategy



**BRIGHT**  
NETWORK



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## Introduction

# The disconnect

**Gen Z and employers aren't on the same page. There's a disconnect – and we are at the centre of supporting leading early careers teams and bright emerging talent in order to get that disconnect fixed.**

The 2023/24 recruitment season saw application numbers skyrocket, a noticeable lack of quality, challenges with generative AI (GenAI) usage and a dip in overall student confidence. All against the backdrop of a messy political landscape, economic upheaval and an uncertain future.

Now is a pivotal moment, as we navigate new landscapes together, weaving intersectionality into our diversity strategies, starting to embrace GenAI usage and understanding the expectations of the workplace in 2024 and beyond.

We must push on our journey to building a more diverse and

inclusive workforce of tomorrow and enabling Gen Z success through increased understanding whilst also setting clear expectations about what you need in your organisations.

**With our deep knowledge of Gen Z sentiments and employer challenges gathered from our 1,000,000+ members and 300+ employer partners, we're here to bridge the gap.**

In the following pages, we highlight the biggest disconnects and why addressing them is essential for building better, more inclusive and more efficient recruitment strategies.



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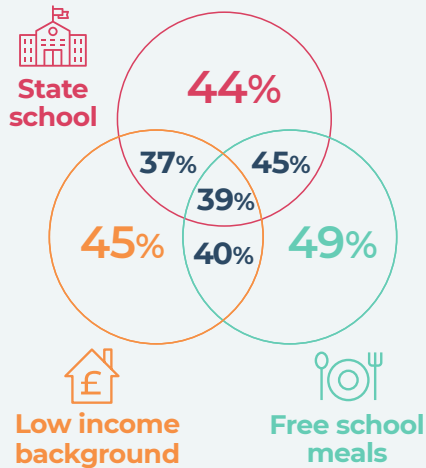
# The intersectional generation

Over the past decade, early careers hiring has increasingly prioritised diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging (DEIB). What began as a foundational approach, focusing on gender gaps and ethnic diversity, has evolved into comprehensive strategies.

For employers to build on this positive progress in creating truly inclusive and attractive propositions, intersectionality – the intersection of different demographics that make up an individual and the layered barriers they face – must be considered.

## Q. Are you confident about securing a graduate role?

Yes responses



Continued progress here is crucial. Our latest research found that Bright Network members who identify with underrepresented demographics saw decreased confidence in securing a graduate role.\*

We know that Gen Z expects more personalisation than ever before. Miles away from the basic unsubscribe button for tailoring preferences of the past, today a completely personalised experience – considering all aspects of their identity – is expected in every experience. They're digital natives looking for authenticity, relevance and convenience, so the best way to connect with Gen Z is to prioritise the personal.

We're also seeing a potential danger to DEIB and intersectionality efforts. With recent macroeconomic challenges, hiring freezes, budget cuts and high application volumes, some employers may risk taking an inadvertent step back.

For organisations where progress has been made on individual demographics, there's a risk investment could now be cut. For others facing tough budget decisions, DEIB might start to feel like a less urgent investment area. But, failing to evolve your approach will harm your business, as diverse teams drive success. They foster a positive culture with happier staff and lower turnover, while diverse perspectives lead to better, more inclusive outcomes.

It's essential that we keep focus on diversity and innovate the way we approach it, so that employers can attract and retain the best, most diverse talent and create inclusive workplaces.

# An employer brand for the AI-enabled generation

**GenAI is here to stay. The last year has seen strong and rapid growth in the day-to-day use of GenAI to improve efficiencies amongst students and within hiring teams, as well as dominating conversations across the early careers space.**

Outside of the realm of applications, screening and selection, another conversation emerges: With GenAI becoming part and parcel of Gen Z's experiences, employers must consider the impact their attitude towards it can have on their employer brand.

Research shows that **80%** of Gen Z who already use AI frequently in their jobs believe it improves the way they work. More than a third of Gen Z (**38%**) plan to participate in GenAI training within the next 12 months.\* As well as this, **59%** of students and recent graduates expect to be using GenAI day-to-day in their first job.\*\*



For Gen Z, there's an expectation already in place surrounding GenAI. Their appetite for innovation and native abilities with technology today mean that embracing GenAI in your organisation is no longer just important for your recruitment processes, but for shaping an attractive employer brand that gets the attention of top talent.

Organisations are all at different stages with this but, to stay ahead of the curve, now's the time to build a clear strategy around the use of GenAI in your workplace.

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**59%** of Gen Z expect to be using GenAI day-to-day in their first graduate job.

\* Deloitte 2024 Gen Z and Millennial survey

\*\* Bright Network What do graduates want? 2024

# Expectations of Gen Z

**As our intern and graduate cohorts get further away from the millennial generation, a rapidly widening gap between Gen Z's outlook and the generations before them has revealed itself.**

Gen Z seeks greater purpose in their day-to-day, often one that aligns with their core values. And, importantly, they're not compromising on this when it comes to their work. **50%** of Gen Z have rejected an assignment or project based on their personal ethics or beliefs. And nearly as many (**44%**) have turned down an employer for these same reasons. Not only that, but work ranked second after family and friends for what's most important to their identity.\*

Attractive salaries, benefits or impressive clients are no longer the biggest draw. Gen Z cares deeply about environmental impact,

equality, mental health support and flexibility. Their holistic outlook means they view work as part of life, not separate from it, so they expect hybrid working, space to flex their hours and an environment that fits their existing identity, rather than one where they need to adopt a separate persona.

This holistic approach has caused friction with employers, as some struggle with Gen Z's aspiration to pair a job with purpose alongside a healthier work-life balance than we've typically associated with these high impact, high commitment jobs in years gone by.



There is a way to meet Gen Z in the middle. What was good for business 10 years ago isn't today – employers must reflect on expectations, align with Gen Z on the non-negotiables and evolve.

**There is a balance to be achieved when it comes to enabling Gen Z success and supporting a healthy work-life balance. In fact, this term today seems outdated – to Gen Z, there is only life.**

# The Gen Z skillset

**There's a disconnect between Gen Z and employers when it comes to skills valued in the workplace.**

Gen Z is using AI every day. They're digital natives. They're clued up on DEIB. They're more resilient than you think. There's an exciting opportunity for employers to tap into these skills to support business whilst also nurturing development and enabling success.

## Insights from students

**Q.** What do you think employers value most in graduates joining their scheme(s)?\*

Existing industry experience	1
A 2:1 or above	6
Resilience	8
Digital skills	11

## Insights from employers

**Q.** What do you value most in graduates joining your scheme(s)?\*

Resilience	2
Digital skills	6
A 2:1 or above	10
Existing industry experience	12

Excerpt from table in Bright Network What do graduates want? 2024

Our data exposes a large disconnect. Not only are employers potentially missing out on untapped skills, like AI expertise and resilience, but they're not aligned with Gen Z on which skills are currently considered valuable in their hiring processes.

It's worth considering if the skills you're looking for are truly delivering value. Where they are essential, you play an important part in communicating and supporting Gen Z to upskill.

As we watch automation begin to support teams with technical skills so that they become increasingly commoditised and as the job landscape itself changes more rapidly than ever before, transferable soft skills become even more critical to career success.

Gen Z and employers need to get aligned on which skills truly matter, why they matter and how to develop these skills – before they join your teams and once they're in role.

**Discover more about fixing the disconnect**



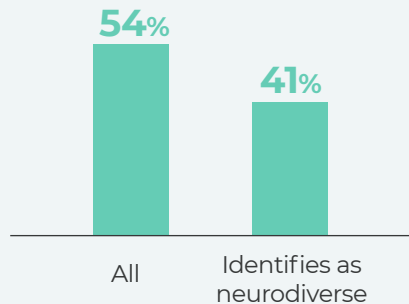
# Neuroinclusion in your organisation

Recent years have seen progress in the ability to diagnose neurological conditions and growth in awareness for these conditions, including ADHD, Autism, Dyslexia and Dyspraxia. At the same time, there's been an increase in openness in identifying as neurodivergent, and acceptance of those who do, amongst Gen Z.

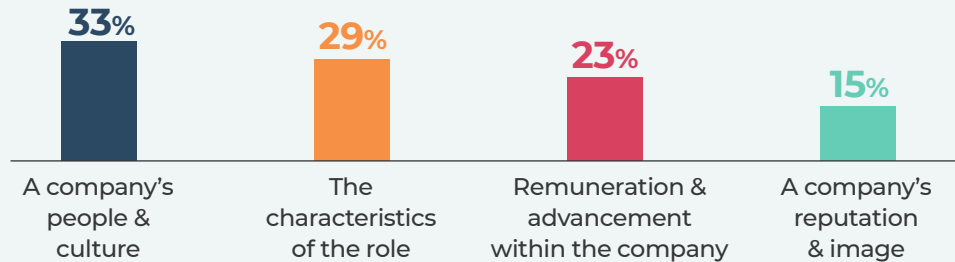
The workforce of tomorrow is demanding an inclusive, considerate environment that matches this openness and offers those who are neurodiverse the support they need to thrive. Unfortunately, our research revealed that neurodivergent respondents have the lowest confidence in securing a graduate role.\*

## Q. Are you confident about securing a graduate role?

Yes responses



## Q. What's most important when choosing a graduate role?



For employers to become truly aligned with Gen Z and enable their success, creating open and supportive environments for neurodiversity really matters.

Not only does it enable success, but it supports employer brand. Gen Z is critical of inclusivity within organisations and consider this when selecting their employer of choice, ranking an employer's people and culture as most important in our latest research.\*

Past the attraction stage, the value of creating inclusive, diverse workplaces is obvious and organisations that combine neurodiverse and neurotypical thinking styles will see better performance.

Regardless of what stage you're at, getting involved in the conversation and starting to take action is essential.

Discover more about fixing the disconnect





# The STEM talent gap

**We have a supply and demand issue in the STEM space. Starting from early education, science and maths often seem like less appealing choices and are mistakenly viewed as reserved for the ‘smartest’ in class, leading many capable students to self-exclude. Those with confidence, often from more privileged backgrounds, tend to dominate the subjects.**

Once off the STEM track, students seldom return to the subjects for university study. For those who do pursue a STEM subject, the demand from employers is overwhelming. Their skills are highly sought after, with numerous employers vying for their attention. The talent pool is too small.

In addition to this, our research highlighted the continued gender gap in tech interest – only **10%** of female students are interested in tech careers, compared to **22%** of males.\* We also uncovered a perception from females that coding is inaccessible, with only **38%** of female students thinking coding is quite or very accessible, compared to **48%** of males.\*

This perceived inaccessibility is contributing to serious diversity issues in the tech sector, which creates a self-fulfilling cycle of lack of representation, exclusive cultures, hiring bias and lack of progression for diverse groups in tech.

**9%** of tech workers come from low socio-economic backgrounds\*\*

**83%** of women in tech are looking for a new job\*\*

**77%** of tech director roles are filled by men\*\*

The STEM industry is innovative, ever-changing and impactful – career characteristics that Gen Z is looking for. But, that message isn't landing. So, there's work for employers to do to increase understanding and accessibility in STEM careers.



\* Bright Network What do graduates want? 2024

\*\* Tech Talent Charter – Diversity in Tech, 2024 and Attrition in Tech, 2023

# The mental health crisis in 2024

**1 in 3 university students have poor mental wellbeing and 30% say their mental health has gotten worse since starting university.\***

In addition, Gen Zs from underrepresented groups such as females, those identifying as LGBTQIA+, those with a disability or from an ethnic minority background are reporting elevated levels of stress, as well as being less likely to rate their mental wellbeing as good or extremely good.\*\* This truly is a social crisis.

We're several years deep into prolonged 'unprecedented times', as economic uncertainty, increasing global threats and political upheaval has led to crime, social unrest and rioting.

This, of course, impacts both students and employers alike. The stigma surrounding poor mental health has positively improved in

recent history, which has helped shed light on the extent of people affected and brought about more proactive efforts in many workplaces to support mental wellbeing. But there's still a mental health crisis affecting young people in 2024.

There's evidence to show that work – which we know Gen Z value as important to their identity – contributes to the stress levels of those who feel regularly stressed or anxious.\*\*

**Good mental health matters, and it can cost your hiring efforts if not taken seriously.**

Gen Z aren't impressed by lack of support, toxic work culture or lack of flexibility around health issues. Members in our most recent survey told us support for mental health and wellbeing is one of the key things they look for when assessing a company's culture.\*\*\* All of this must be considered when building an employer brand for top talent.



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fixing the disconnect



\* Student Minds, Feb 2023

\*\* Deloitte – Mental health today: A deep dive on the 2024 Gen Z and Millennial survey

\*\*\* Bright Network What do graduates want? 2024

## Conclusion

# A new age for building a diverse and inclusive workforce

**Throughout this booklet, we've highlighted the disconnects between Gen Z and graduate employers and where they have the potential to stifle success for organisations and the graduates joining them.**

Positively, there is appetite from both Gen Z and employers to fix the disconnects that exist to ensure the workplace is fair, inclusive and set up for success.

Here at Bright Network, we're excited by the role we have to play in supporting employers and Gen Z in aligning. Whether that's through providing actionable advice to build into your strategy, gaining deeper insight into student sentiment through our research and member interactions or acting as a bridge that can facilitate eye-opening conversations that drive understanding and innovation.

This is just the start – we'll be continuing the conversation by sharing further insights and giving our recommendations for fixing the disconnect. Keep up with the discussion by following us on LinkedIn and exploring our website. We're also here to talk to you about specific topics in detail – just reach out to your Bright Network contact.



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