

# How to manage Gen Z workers when you don't always see them



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We must rethink how to ensure the professional growth of young workers who want work-life balance and hybrid arrangements.

## Sarah Cheah

They are more technologically savvy than previous generations, having grown up with the smartphone and social media. The older ones among them launched their careers in remote or hybrid settings during or after the Covid-19 pandemic. This has fundamentally altered their relationship with work.

Those already working are clear about their position on work-life balance and those who will join the workforce in the years to come are likely of the same mould.

The question before managers

across the world is: How to ensure the professional growth of Generation Z, or Gen Z – those born between 1997 and 2012 – when they won't regularly show up at the workplace like the cohorts before them did?

The data is clear. In Singapore, 88 per cent of Gen Z workers prefer hybrid arrangements and more than 70 per cent say the availability of flexible work directly influences their career decisions, according to a 2024 International Workplace Group survey of over 1,000 young professionals. Globally, Deloitte's 2025 Global Gen Z and Millennial Survey of more than 23,000 respondents across 44 countries found that only 6 per cent of Gen

Zs say their primary career goal is to reach a leadership position. Yet they do not lack ambition because learning and development consistently ranks among their top three reasons for choosing an employer.

The management challenge, then, is how to help this generation grow professionally if they won't compromise on work-life balance (and are less willing to put in long hours) and also won't show up regularly at the workplace merely to be more "visible"?

This demands a deliberate response across three fronts: addressing the bias in assessment, compensating for the breakdown of informal mentorship, and motivating a generation that has consciously redrawn the terms of engagement.

### PRESENCE IS NOT PERFORMANCE

The first challenge is one that managers often do not see.

Proximity bias, or the subconscious tendency to view employees who are physically present as more capable and worthy of promotion, is well documented and consequential.

In a study of a large multinational company in China, US economist Nicholas Bloom found that remote employees had a 50 per cent lower chance of promotion after 21 months compared with their onsite colleagues.

McKinsey's 2025 research on return-to-office strategies reinforces the point: Leaders who remain fixated on where their people work, rather than how they are developed and supported, are solving for the wrong variable.

Performance assessments must therefore be anchored to outcomes and clearly defined goals, not presence and effort signals, and career advancement opportunities must be made transparent and equally

accessible regardless of work location.

In Singapore, EY's 2024 Future Workplace Index found that only 2 per cent of employers expect fully onsite arrangements for knowledge workers, yet hybrid work policies have outpaced the management frameworks needed to support them. Some 76 per cent of Singapore employers now allow employees to work remotely two to four days a week, up sharply from 54 per cent in 2023. The policies for flexible work are firmly in place, but management habits haven't kept pace. They need to change.

### RETHINKING MENTORSHIP

Second, there is a striking gap between what Gen Zs expect of their managers and what they get. Surveys have shown that Gen Z employees regard having a workplace mentor as crucial to their career development, yet fewer than half report receiving active mentorship from their managers. They want guidance, inspiration, and genuine investment in their growth, not managers who default to task oversight.

The deeper problem is that most managers are simply not equipped for this role. Gallup's 2026 State of the Global Workplace report found that global manager engagement fell five points to just 22 per cent in 2025, the steepest single-year decline on record, erasing what was once a meaningful engagement premium that managers enjoyed over the employees they lead.

"Managers are now caught between heightened executive expectations and employee demands for autonomy, inclusion, and balance," Gallup observes. "They are doing more with less while trying to meet the needs of everyone around them." Institutions have to find ways to plug the gap between what Gen Zs need and what most managers have been equipped to deliver.

The traditional mentorship model, where a junior employee could lean over and ask a senior colleague a quick question in the physical office, is largely lost in the virtual workspace, and what replaces it cannot be left to chance. Managers must carve out structured, regular one-on-ones explicitly dedicated to development conversations, separate from task check-ins.

More consequentially, they must shift from reactive guidance to active sponsorship. Senior colleagues have an equally important part to play here: making an introduction across teams, sharing institutional knowledge that would never surface in a formal meeting, or simply remembering to copy a junior Gen Z colleague into a conversation they would benefit from. These are small acts that once happened naturally in physical offices and now require conscious intent.

For remote and hybrid Gen Z employees, having a manager who flags them for stretch

assignments, nominates them for cross-functional projects, and raises their visibility in discussions they cannot physically attend fills a function that proximity once delivered almost automatically.

Gallup's research is unambiguous on the stakes: The manager is a key factor, accounting for 70 per cent of the difference in how engaged or disengaged teams are compared with one another, and that influence is even more pronounced in hybrid settings.

### REGULAR FEEDBACK, NOT YEARLY

Third, and perhaps the most consequential shift that managers can put into action almost immediately, is the discipline of providing regular feedback. Unlike older cohorts who were accustomed to annual appraisal cycles and informal corridor corrections, Gen Zs expect something closer to a continuous dialogue. Three in four Gen Z employees expect feedback on a weekly basis, not as a formal review that feels more like judgment than development, but as ongoing, actionable course correction.

Gen Zs see the absence of feedback as indifference. For managers, this has become harder to provide in a hybrid setting where the informal check-in or the casual encouragement after a meeting has quietly disappeared. What Gen Zs actually seek is not constant validation but connection, open communication, and genuine acknowledgment of progress. Weekly check-ins that distinguish coaching from evaluation remind Gen Z employees that their managers are genuinely invested in their growth.

None of this asks Gen Zs to abandon the boundaries they have reasonably drawn, nor does it ask managers to simply work harder – just differently. Physical proximity lent itself naturally to an employee's development. Now it has to be replaced with something more intentional. As the Deloitte 2025 survey captures well, Gen Zs are not lacking in ambition, but they expect support in the form of deliberate mentorship, honest feedback, and active advocacy.

The generation that has been the most vocal about what it needs from the workplace may, in the end, drive changes in how managers everywhere think about their role.

The burden of professional development was never meant to rest entirely on the ambition of the junior employee. In a world where Gen Zs have drawn a clear line, it is time for their managers to draw one too, around the time, attention, and deliberate effort they commit to growing the people in their charge.

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