Gen Z: Power + Possibility with Jean Twenge Transcript

Chris Congdon: Gen Z is on the cusp of being nearly 30% of the workforce. Today we're talking about the power and possibility of the youngest generation at work. This is not a conversation about what's right and what's wrong with Gen Z. It's about understanding – so we can all work better together. Welcome to Work Better, a Steelcase podcast where we think about work and ways to make it better. I'm your host Chris Congdon alongside our producer, Rebecca Charbauski.

Rebecca Charbauski: If you know anyone who needs to have a better day at work, we would appreciate it if you would share this podcast with them.
Today we get to learn from Dr. Jean Twenge. Jean has spent her entire academic career – 30 years – studying generational differences. She is professor of psychology at San Diego State University and has authored more than 180 scientific publications and books. Her most recent book which just came out is called "generations."

CC: After we hear from Jean, we'll be joined by Keith Bujak who is a researcher at Steelcase and recently led work on Gen Z in the workplace. So stay with us for that.

CC: Jean, thanks for joining us today.

Jean Twenge: Thanks for having me!

CC: Some people might know you from your previous books 'Generation Me' and 'iGen' but I'd love to hear a little bit about your new book 'Generations.' Can you talk about the research that went into this book? It feels like it's kind of your Magnum Opus.

JT: It really is. My previous books were about one generation each and this one is about six. All six living American generations. I just drew from as much data as I could get my hands on. The previous books were looking at young people. I mostly was drawing from about four data sets now it's up to about 3, so it's very broad in looking at all the generations and as many topics as I thought would be interesting to people, so everything from politics to mental Health to birth rates and then of course the workplace.

CC: It feels like people never grow tired of talking about generations. We're always fascinated in either self-discovery or trying to understand our kids or our colleagues. So let's talk about Gen Z for a little bit because I think people are really interested in this group of people who are in this now 11 to 28 ish years old cohort and pretty soon the next couple years they're going to be about 30% of the workforce, and that's huge and you've done so much work with understanding this generation before and it and it feels like they were interesting to begin with and then it feels like the pandemic came along and I'm just curious if they were on a trajectory and this is just part of that or did did the pandemic really create a strong shift in terms of generational behavior and patterns?

JT: The pandemic certainly had an impact. However, most of the differences between millennials right before and Gen Z were already on a certain trajectory before the pandemic hit. It's almost like Gen Z was in dress rehearsal for the pandemic with a lot of the trends. So the trend toward more electronic communication, the trend toward less face-to-face social interaction, trends toward uncompromising mental health … a lot of these things were already heading in that direction and then the pandemic amplified the trends rather than changing them.

CC: That's interesting can we maybe zero in on a couple of the trends that you mentioned because it does feel like Gen Z is a bit of a conundrum that it almost like there's different types of behaviors, like the more electronic kind of communication, but yet we're we're seeing at least in the workplace that they're more likely to show up at work. So I'm just curious, can you tease out a couple of what you think are the big defining characteristics of this generation?

JT: The one of the big things is, they're very very different from the Millennials just before them so millennials grew up in a very optimistic time with a lot of emphasis on the self and positive self views and then when you transition to Gen Z being, say, the high school seniors or the college students, it just falls off a cliff. There's this very very clear change around the mid 1990s birth years. The definitions vary but I define Millennials as being born between 1980 and 1994 and Gen Z starting with those born in 1995 and it's very stark because I've been looking at generations for a long time. The other differences between Millennials and Gen X – it wasn't such a sudden transition but from Millennials to Gen Z it's this very sudden transition from optimism to pessimism from happiness to unhappiness. There's some positives from a huge emphasis on work-life balance to a little bit more realism about having to put in more time at work on the part of Gen Z at least until 2021, and then that kind of went away. Quiet quitting and all of that, so we still have to see how the pandemic is going to change things, but a lot of these things were there before that.

CC: It's so interesting because I've given birth to both millennials and Gen Z and I wish I really would have known you when everybody was more in the teenage years because it would have helped me a lot because I know exactly what you're saying. I experienced, just within a 5 year gap of time, how different the experiences were. I felt like my Gen Z son – I've spent a lot more time talking to him about literally survival issues. You know surviving the pandemic and gun violence – all kinds of behaviors going on in society I never felt like I had to have those discussions at least not as early in life with my Millennial kids so that's kind of super interesting. One of the things that you've talked about I want to kind of circle back to is this topic of technology – generational change can be influenced a lot by technology. So I'm curious if you could talk more about that in terms of Gen Z – and again as I'd mentioned you know it seems like Gen Z is super comfortable with technology and being on screen, being on whatever platform they're using but at the same time craving a kind of physical presence as well. At least in terms of coming into the workplace. So I'm just curious if you could talk a little bit about the technology and what that dichotomy is all about.

JT: A lot of books and theories about generations focus on major events. So if you experience World War II or the Vietnam War or the pandemic at a certain age that's why we have generational differences but in writing this new book and thinking about the changes that have happened since the birth of the silent generation, our oldest living generation born starting in 1925. What's really different about living now compared to living in 1925? The very obvious answer is technology. That's what's had the biggest difference in our day-to-day lives and it's not just a technology piece. It also has these downstream effects that technology is why we have more focus on the self and less on social rules because technology lets us do that. It's also why people take longer to grow up and take longer to grow old than they used to. This is the observation many people make. Millennials are taking longer to get married and have kids and settle into careers and Gen Z is doing the same. Also, Gen Z as teenagers are less likely to have a driver's license, less likely to drink alcohol, less likely to go out on dates. And all that was all true even before the pandemic – it is taking them longer to grow to adulthood. It's also the explanation for 60 is the new 50 that we have more years and, Yeah, well technology has led to a slower pace of life at every stage of the lifecycle and so you think about all of all of these effects. That's what really makes generational differences happen. And for Gen Z we see all of these effects. We still see it's a different flavor of individualism than for Millennials. It's a little less positive but it's still very much about identity and self-expression and diversity and inclusion and then with the slower pace of life, we still see that and then we see the direct effects of technology. Millennials were the first digital natives and then Gen Z are really the first social media natives especially for current platforms – that they were the first to spend their adolescence in the age of the smartphone. You know they got a smartphone when they were in middle school or in high school and for most Millennials that wasn't true. They use the internet, granted, so it's really changed their viewpoint of so many things in particular – how to communicate….

CC: And what kind of communication differences do you see?

JT: Well, the old joke is that the Boomer wants to see you in person and the Gen X wants to send you an email. The Millennial wants to text you and Gen Z wants to submit the resume as a Tiktok video. That takes it a little bit far but there's some truth to that too that it really has shifted that way over time – less in ,much more online communication. For Gen Z in particular, it's been social media and texting. I give a lot of talks on college campuses and I hear all the time they don't read emails. I'm like well that's because your emails are boring. So I sort of get it. But you do have to recognize that there is this generational shift that you're going to be much more likely to reach people via text. Tiktok is hard because even though it's very popular the videos you see are curated. They're done through the algorithm, so I don't think Tiktok communication is necessarily a solution here, but just to recognize that there are these pretty substantial generational differences in how people are used to communicating.

CC: That's super interesting. I want to dig into that a little bit in terms of some of the data that we're seeing that I've scratched my head a little bit about. So when we look at the likelihood to go into the office, for example, everybody assumes that the Gen Z group is less likely to come into the office and that the baby boomers are the people who are there but we saw just the opposite. We saw Gen Z coming into the office, and then a really significant drop off with boomers who – as you said – you would think they're more inclined to want in-person communication. I'm curious what you think is going on there because that feels like that's a little bit of that dichotomy where Gen Z is more likely to be on technology and Tiktok is the main form of communication and yet this other behavior is going on. So what do you make of that Jean?

JT: My guess is that's age instead of generation. If you're a young person who is living with a bunch of roommates or in your own apartment coming into work can be a social occasion. If you're with a bunch of kids at home then being at home seems a lot easier and more practical and you don't need to work as much for your social interaction. So it's life stage and age, maybe even more than the generation that's influencing that.

CC: That's an interesting perspective on that one. I mean I think one of the things I worry about honestly is if we do have Gen Z coming into the office – yes, looking for social interaction with peer groups – but also looking to be mentored, looking to learn and to develop, then what happens if the older generations don't show up?

JT: This is the challenge that so many organizations are struggling with – how to find that balance with remote work versus coming into the office. Now that we're coming out of the Pandemic and we've realized just how much work can be done efficiently from home, but then how much we also miss. I think it's going to be a real process of finding that hybrid model of how can we try to keep the things that are great about being there like mentoring and socialization while still keeping a lot of the efficiencies of working from home and I think you're absolutely right – we can't make a generational assumption about that right off the bat. It's going to vary depending on a lot of other circumstances – what people are going to favor. But yeah, you do lose a lot with people not being in the office but then you sure gain a lot of time when you're working from home. Potentially.

CC: Potentially, if you don't end up spending all of that time at home on Zoom meetings or just doing even more work. Since we've started talking about this Hybrid model of working, there's flexibility that is inherent within that we're allowing people to make decisions about where they do their work. I grew up in a time, or professionally grew up in a time, where it just wasn't a question. It's like you went to work. That was synonymous with the office and going to work. The two things were synonymous and now they're not. With that level of flexibility, I'm curious about from your perspective if you have that kind of level of flexibility and you've also got a generation of people who maybe feel less confident making decisions or who are less independent, what do leaders and organizations need to be aware of when they think about this issue of flexibility and people who might be making decisions differently?

JT: That is an important thing to understand about the generational transition. So for younger Gen Z in particular they just didn't get as much experience with independence and decision making. When they were younger and that was true before the pandemic and it's even more true now because when you're a teen or a young adult a lot of the ways you develop that ability to kind of be independent to make decisions is by being out of the house and getting a flat tire and figuring out what to do or you know just being in certain situations where you know you have to figure things out on your own. That's partially because of having smartphones but mostly just not being out of the house. This generation hasn't figured that out as much. They may know how to navigate things on Instagram and know the right emoji for every situation but they haven't had as much experience in the so-called real world. The world of in-person actual experiences where you have to learn how to make those decisions and people do grow up more slowly now and there's a lot of advantages to that. But the downside is a 22 year old or a 23 year old has not had the same amount of independent life experience as they had twenty years ago. It's just the reality. They just don't and so you have to realize that and there's also been changes in education like no child left behind – things are much more structured. I have noticed this as well as a college faculty member that we're asked to give a lot more structure and a lot more instruction about exactly what students are supposed to do at every step. I teach jumper division students. So I'm seeing them probably six months before they might, you know, take an entry level career position and that's what I see a lot. You have to tell me exactly what I need to do. Well, in the workplace you're not always told exactly what you need to do step by step by step. So that's the challenge I think. It's good for managers to have that understanding. It's not criticism to understand generational differences. It's understanding. It's empathy knowing that that's where they're coming from and then it's probably different from when you were that age –
and knowing that they may expect that structure so at first maybe give them some of that structure but you gotta have them work up to you because eventually yeah, they do need to make those independent decisions. That's just the way it is but they may not be able to do that at first and that shouldn't be a complete surprise, just given the way they grew up.

CC: I'm also following that line we've also seen in your work and the work of others. This idea that Gen Z is maybe less likely to be going above and beyond – that they're going to do what they're asked to do but they may not be of the mindset of putting in extra hours or completing an extra project – that they're going to try and define more work life boundaries. And they have a greater likelihood to change jobs – to say that I'm going to leave the company I'm working for in the next six months and so similarly you just gave us a good piece of advice about thinking about Gen Z members of our teams. What would you say to leaders about that? How do you build that sense of loyalty within this generation? Maybe in ways that we didn't need to in the past.

JT: We have to acknowledge that this emphasis on work life balance has been around for a while. It really started with Gen Xer, it built with Millennials and then for a little bit there, at least as 18 year olds, Gen Z was actually more likely to say I'm willing to work overtime.. Because their thought is work is going to be a central part of my life compared to Millennials at the same age. I think that that fundamental recognition that hard work is necessary is there and I think that can be brought out. Gen Z is a very practical generation. Their expectations are lower which has some advantages and disadvantages, but they have been told their whole lives, "in this economy you gotta make it. Either you make it or you don't so you better make it" and they have that perspective. They know things are competitive. They've been told that for ages and I think they are willing to work hard. They just have to see that there's a reward and not a reward two years from now. But maybe one few months away. That's one piece of advice that I think is really useful. If you have a structure where promotions come after two years on the job, you should have smaller promotions every six months.

CC: You see more incremental recognition or something that signals that you're getting that positive feedback through those forms of recognition. Another area I want to explore a little bit with you, Jean, is how Gen Z is expressing their unique identities. Particularly their values around diversity, equity and inclusion, sustainability, Social Justice, et cetera, and really wanting to make sure that their values are represented in their employers values. I'm just curious if you've seen examples of companies who are doing this right? Or again, what advice would you offer to leaders and organizations who are trying to attract this generation?

JT: I think this is one of the biggest challenges for organizations right now is Gen Z and often younger Millennials as well are sometimes demanding political statements from companies. It's companies in a really difficult position. I think a lot of successful companies have realized, "Well what we'll do is harness that and take the things that are not as controversial and run with those and that that can work." Sometimes that's not enough, and the younger employees are demanding more and that's when it gets really really dicey. I mean the classic example was Disney where the CEO said nope I'm not going to take a position on this bill in Florida. The young employees demanded he do so and he did. Then the governor of Florida took their special tax status. So you know nobody won. I mean you could argue nobody won. This is hard. This is where, when you get some of these controversial issues, it gets very fraught because things are so polarized right now. I think it really does put company leaders in a tough position. But there are things that can be done. There are things that – continuing to use Disney as an example – Disney relaxed their rules around employees having tattoos. That's an example of something where you can meet the generation where they are and is it really going to do any harm? Probably not. The same thing with embracing policies around diversity and inclusion if they are done in a way that is truly inclusive and not something that ends up making some groups feel left out. If it can be done in that way, that is a winning strategy right? And it's that balance that can be difficult to find. I think it's the hardest when it comes to taking political positions.

CC: Yeah, not just pandering. That is a tricky one to try and navigate. I was surprised, pleased but surprised actually when we're interviewing some job candidates who were all Gen Z and when I was asking them questions like, why would you want to work for Steelcase, I was expecting something that was more about their career and what path they wanted to take or something like that and yet everybody wanted to talk about our sustainability initiatives and how they felt really strongly about those. Which was great – I was glad to hear that but it was also really interesting to me because I hadn't heard that from other job candidates. It was very clear that this was important to Gen Z in ways that I hadn't anticipated. Is there anything else that we've missed in our conversation or things that we should really know if you want to try and create a workplace and a culture that's attractive to this very large group of people?

JT: I think there is a real desire among Gen Z for those in-person relationships. They don't always get those and when they do get them, they can kind of get over their anxiety around those interactions. They do find them very fulfilling because that's a human universal to be able to connect with others and in a more authentic way. There is a real desire for mentoring, for wanting that guidance that young people have always wanted. But I think this generation really really needs it because they have not had as much experience with independence. And because they do have a close relationship with their parents they're very comfortable with the idea of being guided much more so than say Gen X was at the same age. They were much more independent and not as easily led and I think that can be a very useful dynamic where they want that guidance. Often everybody wins from that situation – they get the guidance that they want and then you develop that strong relationship and they do excellent work.

CC: I think that's a great point for us to wrap on – for us to to think about. Jean, I really feel like we could keep talking for a long time but I've really appreciated you taking time to join us and I know everybody is going to look forward to reading your book 'Generations' as soon as they can get their hands on a copy. So thanks again for joining us.

JT: Thank you.

CC: After talking to Dr. Twenge, I reached out to Keith Bujak, who is not only a principal researcher with the Workspace Futures team here at Steelcase, but he's led a significant body of work understanding Gen Z and the workplace. Thanks for joining us Keith.

Keith Bujak: Thanks for having me Chris, glad to be here.

CC: She had so many interesting things to say, but I wanted to zero in on something she mentioned about the idea that Gen Z didn't get as much experience with acting independently and making independent decisions when they were younger, and then the pandemic really had an impact on that – I hadn't thought about that before. In the work you've been doing, it seems like Gen Z is looking for more opportunities for mentorship and growth opportunities so those two things jive with each other. I'm curious, when she talked about this need for Gen Z to have more structure and guidance, what are you seeing and how do you think the workplace could help with that?

KB: I really appreciate how Dr. Twenge is thinking about that. There are many factors that have influenced Gen Z to make decisions, work independently. Gen Z values the workplace as being a way to connect with leaders and the organization. We ought to consider the way in which community building is supported by the workplace to create a sense of connection among all employees, so it's not just with each other but across the org. In a recent global survey, only 28 percent of Gen Z believes their workplace completely fosters a sense of community.

CC: That's interesting. That's an opportunity right?

KB: That's a huge opportunity to design better spaces to build that community. To illustrate this point, during a recent customer visit we talked with a facility manager. Every day he observed his junior, younger employees getting together, leaving the office, and walking across the street to get coffee. When he brought this to his leadership team, they said "How can we support some of that relationship building within our own spaces?" It was an opportunity to bring better coffee into the space, to have community spaces, and neighborhood cafes where they could gather and connect. We really love that opportunity to think about new ways, new spaces. We also really liked the fact that the facility manager and leaders were observing their own employees and thinking about new things they needed. They were reflecting and iderating as they went.

CC: I think it's a really interesting point you're making that it's both the physical space and amenities we take for granted like good food and great coffee – bringing those two things together – that feels like that needs to be an ongoing way we need to think about the workplace.

KB: And the way this particular customer did it was really purposeful and thoughtful. It wasn't just to build a space – but to bring in all of these additional things that would help encourage – these employees wanted to connect over coffee. That was important to them.

CC: Yeah. And then when to come in the office too. That was something that some of your colleagues in Workspace Futures found – is that Gen Z is the generation most likely to want to come in and work out of the office, which I think surprised a lot of people. There's this notion that Gen Z are the ones that want to be fully remote, so it was interesting they're the ones that want to come into the office. One thing Jean said that kind of relates to that – the idea that Gen Z wants to feel like their personal values are reflected in the organization they work for. I'm curious what you think, how does an organization go about signaling some of those values to employees?

KB: Speaking to the research we mentioned earlier, we found that 75 percent of Gen Z has a sense of purpose within the organization. We thought that was incredible. They are starting their career, they have this sense of purpose, and they want their company to reflect that sense of purpose – they want to see it reflected back at them. So, Gen Z is looking for organizations that are committed to the values and purpose they reflect in the design or the space. It might be as simple as selecting CarbonNeutral products, using products that have upcycled plastic material, biophilic patterns, it might be as simple as that. But we're also seeing some organizations, in order to solve some of these big challenges that Gen Z cares about – sustainability, diversity, equity and inclusion – to make those improvements you need to connect with partners outside of your organization. It's not just within your company, but thinking about those community partners that can support you. We're finding that some of our customers are creating community spaces, and then opening them up to those community partners. They invite people from the community into their offices for social and networking events, allowing Gen Z and other employees to make connections with those community members and partners. And they're using space to host those connections. We're seeing them bring in art from the community – that space is really meant to reflect the community that it's in to help build those relationships.

CC: That's interesting because it's not only building the community literally within the organization, but within the surrounding community that people live in.

KB: Exactly. And some of these challenges are so complex, there's no way one organization can do it by themselves. They see they have a community partner that can support them in other ways, and we see Gen Z bringing their passion and purpose to work. They want to be empowered and supported and they want to build some of the networks to solve these complex problems.

CC: Keith, thanks for joining me today. I know we could talk a long time about this – everyone is fascinated with Gen Z. Thanks for taking a few minutes to talk to us about what we can do to support this generation. Because they're about to be one of the largest generations in the workforce.

KB: We're looking to be inspired by them and make sure we're empowering them, and all of us really, to do our best work.

CC: Thank you for being here with us. If you enjoyed this conversation – share this podcast with a friend or colleague and visit us at steelcase.com/research to sign up for weekly updates on workplace research, insights and design ideas delivered to your inbox. Rebecca, what's up for next week?

RC: JWe had the chance to talk to Laszlo Bock. Laszlo used to lead Google's People Operations. He's the author of Work Rules! And he co-founded Humu – a company designed to help managers create better routines and habits at scale. He's going to give us the inside track on Humu's research into hybrid work and help us with tips on how to go from insight to action.

CC: We hope you join us.
Thanks again for being here – and we hope your day at work tomorrow is just a little bit better.

CREDITS

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