

# WHAT WORK ATTITUDES AND ETHICS MOTIVATES GENERATION Z TO WORK?

*Bharati J. Krishnan, Medha Arora, Vedika V. Sakhardande*

*Miranda House, University of Delhi*

## Abstract

*With the oldest members of the newest generation entering the workforce, there is a need to understand their attitudes, expectations and inclinations towards money, leisure, ethics and other preferences, especially as their formative years were grappled with uncertainty. In an attempt to do so, we surveyed students and young professionals in the age group of 17-24 years. Consistent with existing research, we found that Gen Z places high importance on extrinsic rewards such as money and prestige but also observed discontent with the respondents' relationship to work, possibly owing to the era of 'hustle culture' and 'workism', which doesn't provide a flexible and healthy work-life balance, also crucial to the generation's expectations from work.*

*Keywords: Generation Z, work ethics, work values, hustle culture*

## Introduction

Generation Z, born between 1995 and 2008, or the digitally native generation is now entering the workforce, with the oldest of the cohort being about 24 years old. Typically characterized by their constant use of technology and social media, 8-second attention spans, concern about issues such as racial discrimination and climate change (or 'wokeness'), they're the most educated generation yet. Older generations tend to describe them as 'slackers', but they're more hardworking and ambitious than they appear. (Gelber, n.d.) Understanding their attitudes and expectations towards work is increasingly important as they are expected to make up about 27% of the workforce by 2025 (Chart: How Gen Z Employment Levels Compare in OECD Countries, 2021), are significantly different from previous generations and have witnessed both The Great Recession of 2008 as well as the Coronavirus-induced lockdown and financial crisis now, with normalized rampant uncertainty and high rates of unemployment.

The economic, social and political environment that a generation grows up in is said to define their outlooks, beliefs, values, inclinations, expectations and attitudes, distinguishing their characteristics from other generations who may have grown up under different circumstances. This can be ascribed to the 'Generational Cohort Theory', which explains the changes in traits across generations owing to important historical events and social changes in society which could include traumatic episodes like wars, sizable shifts in the distribution of resources, or significant ideological changes. Events that unfold during the formative years (till about age 25) rather than later years of individuals are especially consequential. As a result, individuals born during a particular time, and thus corresponding to the same cohort, will often share specific inclinations and cognitive styles. These effects are also assumed to persist over time. (Moss, 2016). These differences in attitudes and expectations also apply to the workplace and larger work culture, as each generational cohort brings its own set of values and inclinations, with the

potential of transforming the workplace, and also initiates new challenges for employers as they need to attract and retain these new employees.

Understanding Gen Z's motivations, attitudes and ethics at work involves looking at their cohort through the lens of the environment they grew up in and how it affects their notions of money, security, hard work, meaning etc. For instance, the uncertainty and instability-riddled environment of the last two decades is presumed to have made Gen Z more risk-averse and crave increased security and stability at work. Similarly, transparency and flexibility are also extremely important factors to them. They're also an entrepreneurial generation that likes to work independently and have absorbed the competitiveness of their times.

### **Literature Review**

Generation Z work values: A cross-national analysis (Boer et al., 2021) compared work values of undergraduate students across four countries and found intrinsic motivation factors followed by the work value for stability to be the most important in a future job for Gen Z while the least importance was attached to the work value for leisure. The study suggests that a uniform corporate approach to managing global HR and work design is ill-advised.

The paper "Generation Z and its Perception of Work through Habits, Motivations, Expectations Preferences, and Work Ethics" (Bulut & Maraba, 2021) found that, "Generation Z have individualistic, entrepreneurial, and money-conscious characteristics at work, and they look for large scale companies that offer good salary and self-enhancement". Moreover, they were comfortable with and preferred diversity (of sexual orientation, gender) at work and looked for a sense of sensitivity about social struggles from their work environment. The ethical values of companies were important to them. Creativity, collaborative working, and work-life balance were also important factors.

The Workforce Institute at Kronos Incorporated published a three-part series of reports that surveyed 3,400 members of Gen Z across Australia, China, India and other countries to understand how their education has prepared them for the working world, their perceptions about the gig economy, and their views on how to be an employer of choice for the next generation. Almost two-fifths (36%) of Gen Zers believe they "had it the hardest" when entering the working world compared to all other generations before it, tied with the Silent Generation (ages 75-94), which generally began entering the workforce during or just after World War II. It was found that more than half of Gen Zers worldwide (54%) say pay is the most important consideration when applying for their first full-time job. Employee perks like free snacks and gym reimbursements are enticing, but traditional benefits like health care coverage, retirement plan, life insurance are preferred by a 2-1 ratio by Gen Z.

To get their best work, Gen Zers say they need direct and constructive performance feedback (50%), hands-on training (44%), managers who listen and value their opinions (44%), and freedom to work independently (39%). 1 in 4 (26%) Gen Zers worldwide would work harder and stay longer at a company that supports flexible schedules. Gen Z's appeal for flexibility comes

with a few actions they would never tolerate from their employer, including being forced to work when they don't want to (35%); inability to use vacation days when they want to (34%); and working back-to-back shifts (30%).

Despite record-high enrollment, less than half of Gen Z credits their high school (39%) or college (42%) education for preparing them to enter the working world. 1 in 4 Gen Zers say they are least prepared to handle negotiating (26%); networking (24%); speaking confidently in front of crowds (24%); and resolving work conflict (23%).

Generational Differences in Work Values: Leisure and Extrinsic Values Increasing, Social and Intrinsic Values Decreasing (Twenge et al., 2010, 1117-1142) found a decline in work centrality and work ethic consistent with a rise in leisure values over generations. At the same time, emphasis on extrinsic rewards such as money and status in younger generations was found to have increased. They also found a declining emphasis on intrinsic work values and social rewards indicating that younger generations are not necessarily searching for more meaningful work than the previous generations.

Multigenerational Differences in career preferences, Reward Preferences and Work Engagement among Indian Employees (Chawla et al., 2017, 181-197) found that the senior generations were more focused on movement in the hierarchy rather than on career aspirations as a result of being groomed in a period of negative job growth. Subsequent generations prefer the assignment of meaningful work that matches their career aspirations. The study found no intergenerational differences in reward preferences, all the generations consider a high pay package as a top motivator to work. They recommend that it is pertinent that MNCs gain a deeper understanding of the cultural nuances of the Indian workforce and the impact of these nuances on work attributes such as career preferences, reward preference and work engagement for better work environments.

The Monster Multi-Generational Survey, conducted by TNS found that Gen Z is motivated by the same top three job attributes as Boomers – health insurance, competitive salary and a “boss I respect”, having grown up during the Great Recession of the late 2000s.

Consistent with other studies, it was also found that Gen Z is the most entrepreneurial yet practical generation, with 76% believing that they are responsible for driving their own careers. Additionally, their Top Work Motivators were salary (70%), ability to pursue their passion (46%) and job security (32%).

According to a study ‘Welcome to Generation Z’ by Deloitte, authored by Karianne Gomez, Tiffany Mawhinney and Kimberly Betts, consistent with other findings, money and salary matter the most to Gen Z along with work-life balance, flexible working hours, and other perks and benefits. Unsurprisingly, the study also found that Gen Z does not form opinions of a company solely based on the quality of their products/services but also on their ethics, practices and social impact. Gen Z's preferred career development is to have diverse and entrepreneurial opportunities with the safety of stable employment, and they may offer more loyalty to

companies that can offer this. Gen Z is quickly becoming the most educated and debt-laden generation in history, so organizations that focus on investment in learning and skill development become more attractive to this education-oriented cohort.

The paper "Understanding the work values of Gen Z business students" (Maloni et al., 2019) found that a better understanding of student expectations by the faculty increased the chances of them being able to arouse interest and productivity in the students. Academic programs and career services can use these results to better serve their goals.

The paper "Leadership and Gen Z: Motivating Gen Z Workers and Their Impact to the Future" (Baldonado, 2018, 56-60) found that managers can use "increased responsibilities" as rewards for Gen Z workers because for them being trusted with responsibility was a good motivator. Gen Z was also sensitive to other rewards at the workplace such as "employee of the month" certificates or gift certificates, vacations etc. The paper further suggested the use of social media to engage with Gen Z workers as they spend a major portion of their time on social media apps.

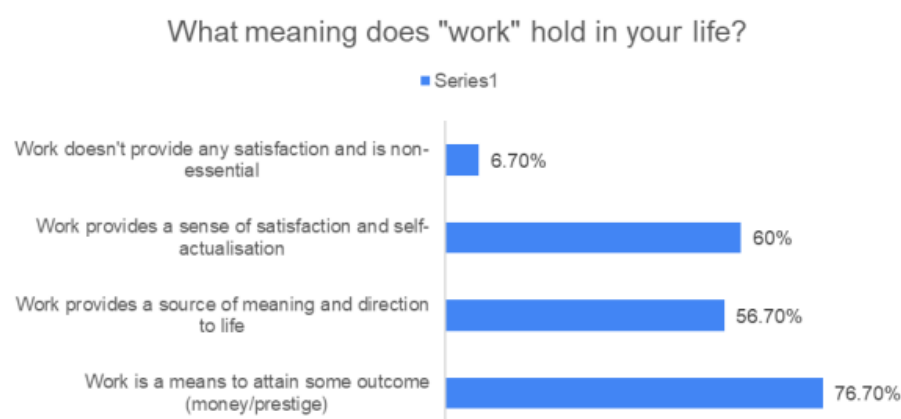
## Methodology

The paper relied on both secondary and primary sources in order to get a holistic understanding of the research question. The secondary data was collected from the online database of Google Scholar. The primary data was collected by creating an online questionnaire through Google Forms. The questionnaire was then distributed to recent high school graduates, college-going students and newer job-market entrants (age group of 17 to 24 years). There were no restrictions placed on the cities or income backgrounds of the respondents. The answers to the questions were organised into either bar graphs or pie charts depending on the question type. The final sample size used for analysis was 60 respondents. The primary data results were analysed on the basis of the secondary data available and conclusions were drawn.

## Results

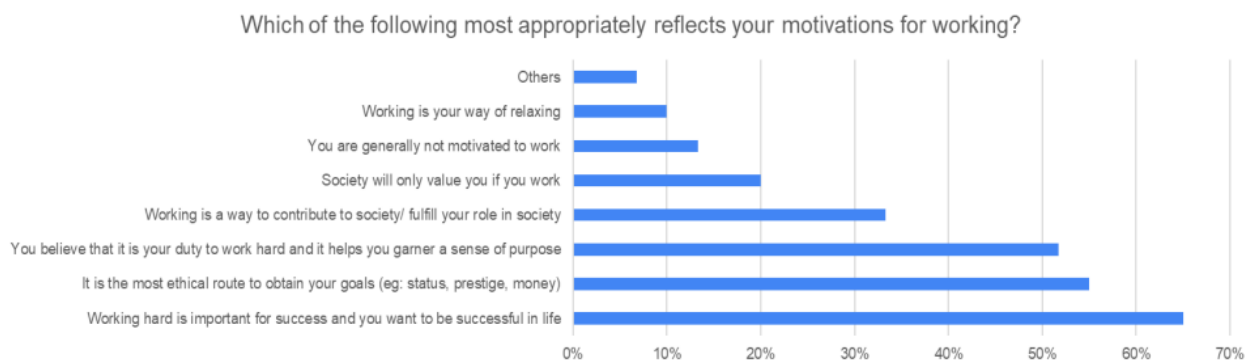
### Work Values

Q1: What meaning does "work" hold in your life?



For a majority of the respondents (76.7%), work was "a means to attain some outcome (eg: money, good grades, prestige etc.)"; followed by "a sense of satisfaction and self-actualisation" (60%) and "Work provides a source of meaning and direction to life" (56.7%). Only 6.7% of the sample chose the option that "work did not provide any satisfaction and was non-essential". Hence, we can understand that for the large majority of the sample, work held some value.

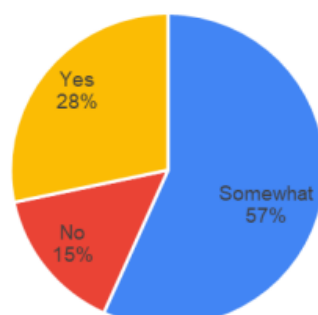
Q2: Which of the following most appropriately reflects your motivations for working?



"Success" was an important reason for a large section of the sample (65%), whereas for 55% it was the "most ethical route to obtain their goals (eg. Status, prestige, money, grades)". Other added responses included "just a feeling of listlessness comes in when there's no work, sort of related to the first option", "work is a way of making an impact in the world, also keeps my mind engaged, without which I would have no brain exercise", "wage cucking", "allows me to achieve my potential and learn as much as possible".

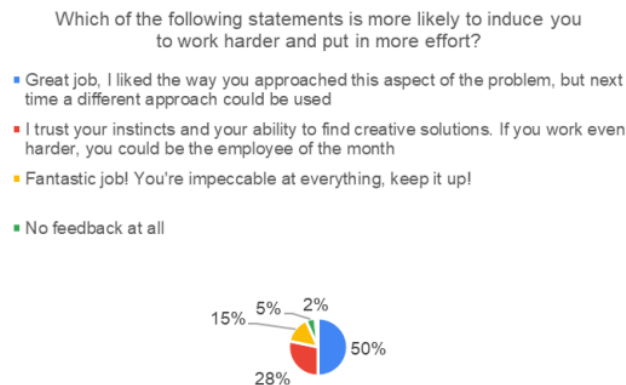
Q3: Would you say that your identity and self-respect are contingent on the quantity of work that you do?

Would you say that your identity and self respect are contingent on the quantity of work that you do?



For 28% of the sample, their "identity and self-respect were contingent on the quality of work" they did. 57% of the respondents chose "somewhat" and only 15% chose "no". This might indicate that the large majority of the sample relied on their work to give them some sense of purpose and dignity.

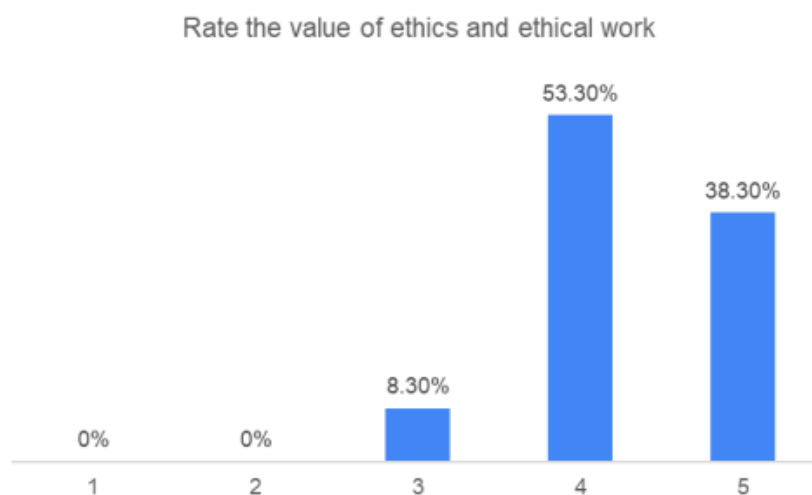
Q4: Which of the following statements would induce you to work harder and put in more effort?



Half the population (50%) chose the option "Great job, I liked the way you approached this aspect of the problem, but next time a different approach could be applied and the method could be improved upon" which shows that suggestions to improve their work (when it was combined with either positive feedback or was put forth in a polite manner) was the most efficient way to increase motivation. Only 15% felt motivated by a pure compliment ("Fantastic job! You're impeccable at everything, keep it up!"). Whereas 28.3% of the respondents felt motivated by incentives such as an opportunity to become "employee of the month".

## Work Ethics

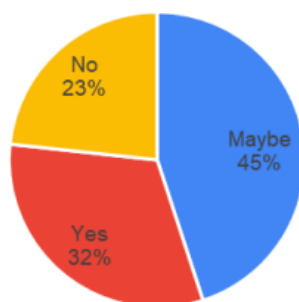
Q5: Rate the value of ethics and ethical work



On a scale of 1 to 5 (from "no value" to "very valuable"), options 1-2 were not chosen by any of the participants. The majority of the sample (91.6%), valued ethical work, whereas 3.3% were indifferent to it. Hence, it would be fair to conclude that ethical work is important to the sample.

Q6: If there is no harm/ punishment for pursuing an unethical activity that guarantees a reward would you still take the ethical course?

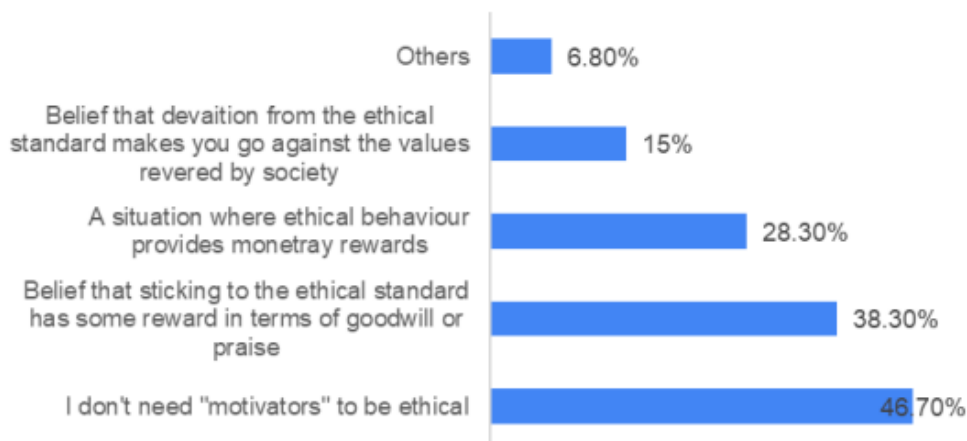
If there is no harm/ punishment for pursuing an unethical activity that guarantees a reward, would you still take the ethical course?



When faced with a choice to do ethical work, without any harm/punishment for unethical work, 32% chose a strict "yes", 23% chose a strict "no" and 45% chose "maybe". Hence, it may be concluded that for 32%, being "ethical" was more important than gaining benefits by taking an unethical course of action. Ethics are seen as a good in itself by this portion of the population. 45% were unsure as to what they would do.

Q7: Which of the following would be the most effective motivators for you to be ethical in your work?

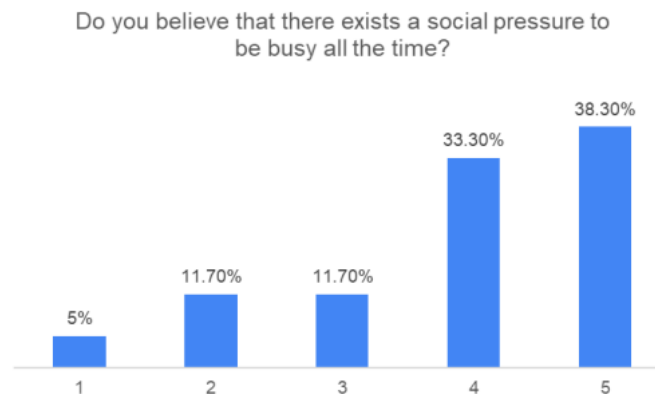
Which of the following would be the most effective motivators for you to be ethical in your work?



The majority of the participants (46.7%) chose “I don't need "motivators" to be ethical”, whereas 38.3% chose “Belief that sticking to the ethical standard has some reward in terms of goodwill or praise”. Other answers that were given by the respondents include: “I don't think being ethical is a concern for me at all”, “if being unethical causes someone harm, mentally, physically or socio-economically, or if it goes against my personal values which might be different from what is revered by "society" and “belief that being ethical is better than facing the repercussions”.

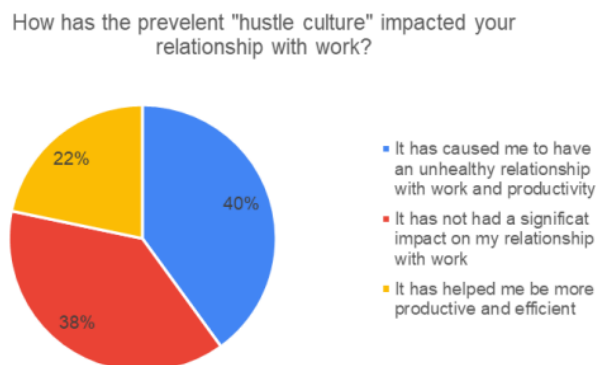
### **Cultural determinants of Work Values and Ethics**

Q8: Do you believe that there exists a social pressure to be busy all the time?



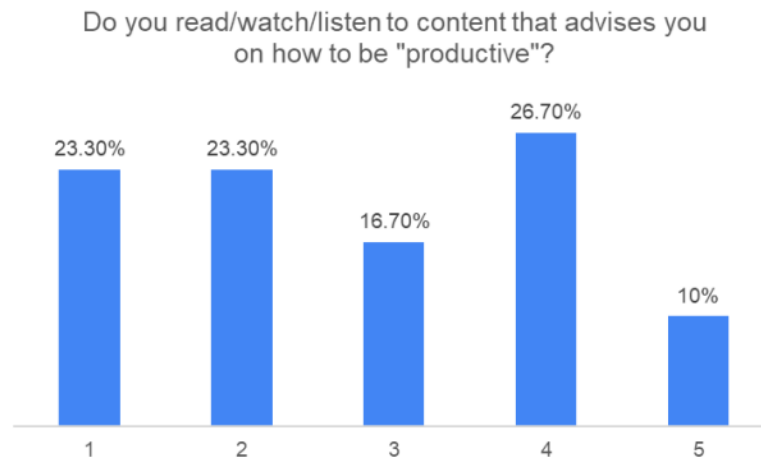
On a scale of 1 to 5 (from “not really” to “yes! all the time”) The majority (71.6%) of the population agreed with the statement that “there exists a social pressure to be busy all the time” to some degree (they picked 4 or 5 on the scale). Whereas 11.7% chose a neutral take (3) and 16.7% didn't really think such a pressure existed (they picked 1 or 2).

Q9: How has the prevalent “hustle culture” impacted your relationship with work?



40% of the respondents had a negative relationship with "hustle culture" as they chose “it has caused me to have an unhealthy relationship with work and productivity”. On 21.7% of the sample, it had a better impact, as it made them more “productive and efficient”. Whereas 38.3% of the sample was indifferent to it. (Hustle culture is understood to be a form of outlook on life that prioritizes work and success in work above any other pursuits).

Q10: Do you read/ watch/listen to content that advises you on how to be “productive”?



On a scale of 1 to 5 (from "not really" to "yes, very regularly"), the majority 46.6% chose 1 to 2, whereas 36.7% chose 4 to 5. Hence, productivity-based content was popular, but only amongst a certain part of the sample.

Q11: Which of the following serves as sources of motivation or inspiration for you?



For the majority (61.7%) of the sample, "intrinsic motivation" was their primary driver. 56.7% chose their "peers" as motivators, whereas 36.7% chose "billionaires, popular entrepreneurs and innovators". Other answers that were given included "deadlines", the American singer "Billie Joe Armstrong" and "family, competitors". Hence, the sample majorly drew motivation from their immediate surroundings, such as family and friends or relied on intrinsic motivation.

## Discussion

### Work values

Our findings in Q1 and Q2 are consistent with that of Twenge et al., who found an increasing emphasis on extrinsic work values (money/prestige) and decreasing emphasis on intrinsic work values (work as a source of meaning, satisfaction and actualisation) over generations. It is evident from Q2 that extrinsic reward is the primary driver of the respondents followed by intrinsic values such as fulfilling your duty and finding a sense of purpose. Altruistic and social values have minimal emphasis.

Work is considered essential and leisure values are given low emphasis which is consistent with the findings of Boer et al. Increased emphasis on extrinsic work values can be explained by the higher emphasis placed by Gen Z on security and stability following from the experiences of the financial crisis of 2008 and the recent pandemic. Increased economic instability and unemployment, increased cost of higher education and higher debt load may have caused work to be viewed as a means of securing a livelihood rather than a good in itself.

From the responses in Q3, we observe a moderate link between identity and work (i.e work centrality). This moderate position could be a result of two opposing forces acting on the sample. According to Gould and Werbel (1983) people in the middle of their lives have stronger work centrality as work is a crucial component of their identity.

Responsibilities and desire for financial stability in middle age increase the importance of working. As most of our respondents are university-level students, work is not yet a crucial component of their lives. However, according to the findings of Goldman (1973) those who are upwardly anchored are more likely to be committed to their work. University students seeking career and academic advancement hence form strong bonds with work.

From Q4 we see that feedback and suggestions are important for a majority of the respondents followed by an intimation of success or reward. We see that little emphasis is placed on non-constructive feedback, lack of feedback or a threat to the job. These results are consistent with the findings of Maloni et al. (2019).

### **Work Ethics**

From Q5 we observe a high degree of emphasis on ethical work. From Q6 we can observe that emphasis on ethical work is intrinsic and not externally motivated for a majority of the population which implies that the respondents are willing to trade off rewards for maintaining an ethical standard. This appears in contrast to the high degree of emphasis placed on extrinsic rewards by the sample. Q7 supports the results of Q6 by showing that for a majority, ethical choices don't require motivation but are intrinsically motivated. However, we also notice a moderate preference for incentive to choose an ethical course. This reward is observed to be largely related to money, praise and goodwill (extrinsic reward) which agrees with our findings on work values. We can hence reach the rough conclusion that the sample considers ethical work to be more important than extrinsic reward.

### **Cultural determinants of Work Values and Ethics**

From Q8 we can observe that a majority of the sample faces social pressure to be busy all the time. This 'social pressure' which is perpetuated by the hustle culture present in society has caused a negative relationship with work for a majority of the population, however, a large section of the sample remains indifferent to it. From Q10 we can see that "productivity content" is not popular across the sample and from Q11 we observe that the motivation to work for people is largely internalised or imposed by their peers. Hustle culture or 'workism' may therefore be a manifestation of economic insecurities brought on by financial crises which necessitate a prioritisation of work to survive.

## Conclusion

We can infer that Gen Z places a high degree of emphasis on working and is eager to obtain extrinsic rewards such as money or prestige. To a large extent, work is not valued as a good in itself but rather as a method of attaining a desired living standard. Despite the high degree of emphasis on reward, there is a considerable degree of ethical consciousness among the respondents where ethics is perceived as an unconditional ideal for the respondents. While Gen Z's competitiveness and desire for growth can be seen as conducive for the future of the industry, at an individual level we note a discontent with the respondents' relationship with work. With hustle culture giving way to an era of 'workism' the lines between work and life are getting blurred. A workplace grounded in ethical values that provides opportunities for individual growth while also allowing for flexibility and autonomy is ideal for Gen Z.

## References

Baldonado, A. M. (2018). Leadership and Gen Z: Motivating Gen Z Workers and Their Impact to the Future. *International Journal of Managerial Studies and Research (IJMSR)*, 6(1), 56-60.  
<http://45.113.122.54/pdfs/ijmsr/v6-i1/8.pdf>

Boer, P. d., Bordoloi, P., Dallmann, J., & Hengshen, L. (2021). Generation Z work values: A cross-national analysis.

<https://www.scienceguide.nl/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Microsoft-Word fhooeccbc2021-Full-Paper-10April2021.docx.pdf>

Bulut, S., & Maraba, D. (2021). Generation Z and its Perception of Work through Habits, Motivations, Expectations Preferences, and Work Ethics. *Psychology and Psychotherapy: Research Study*, 4(4).

Chart: How Gen Z Employment Levels Compare in OECD Countries. (2021, March 26).

The World Economic Forum. Retrieved January 14, 2022, from <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2021/03/gen-z-unemployment-chart-global-comparisons/> chawla, D., Dokadia, A., & Rai, S. (2017). Multigenerational Differences in career preferences, Reward Preferences and Work Engagement among Indian Employees. *Sage*, 18(1), 181–197.

Gelber, M. (n.d.). Gen Z In The Workplace | Monster.com. Monster Jobs. Retrieved January 14, 2022, from <https://www.monster.com/career-advice/article/gen-z-boss-0816> Gig In or Get Out: Will Gen Z Endanger or Embrace the Gig Economy's Future? (2019, September 18). *Kronos*. Retrieved January 14, 2022, from <https://www.kronos.com/about-us/newsroom/gig-or-get-out-will-gen-z-endanger-or-embrace-gig-economys-future>

Maloni, M., Hiatt, M. S., & Campbell, S. (2019). Understanding the work values of Gen Z business students. *The International Journal of Management Education*, 17(3). Science Direct. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S1472811719300126>

Meet Gen Z: The Self-proclaimed Hardest-working, Anxiously Optimistic Workforce of the Future. (2019, June 3). Kronos. Retrieved January 14, 2022, from <https://www.kronos.com/about-us/newsroom/meet-gen-z-self-proclaimed-hardest-working-anxiously-optimistic-workforce-future>

MONSTER MULTI-GENERATIONAL SURVEY. (n.d.). WordPress.com. Retrieved January 16, 2022, from [https://kerryleebroderick.files.wordpress.com/2017/06/monster-multi-generational-workforce-report\\_16\\_4nov2016\\_late.pdf](https://kerryleebroderick.files.wordpress.com/2017/06/monster-multi-generational-workforce-report_16_4nov2016_late.pdf)

Moss, S. (2016, July 11). Generational cohort theory / Dr Simon Moss /. Sicotests. Retrieved January 14, 2022, from <https://www.sicotests.com/psyarticle.asp?id=374>

Twenge, J. M., Campbell, S. M., Hoffman, B. J., & Lance, C. E. (2010). Generational Differences in Work Values: Leisure and Extrinsic Values Increasing, Social and Intrinsic Values Decreasing. *Sage*, 36(5), 1117-1142.

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0149206309352246>

Understanding Generation Z in the Workplace. (n.d.). Deloitte. Retrieved January 16,