

# Gen Up

How the recession has changed attitudes to work



## Executive summary

In the economic downturn, attitudes have changed towards employers. This research report shows how these attitude changes differ between the generations in the workforce which partly reflect their experience of previous economic downturns. The key implications for HR and management practice relate to attracting and engaging employees, supporting those employees to perform, and managing employees through change.

The impact of the downturn on workforce attitudes has been to increase engagement levels<sup>1</sup>. In 2008, engagement levels were around 24% in the UK private sector, whereas they are now 33% three years later. The highest increases in engagement were found in the energy, engineering and technology sectors.

This increase in engagement reflects two changes: more discretionary effort and intention to stay with the current employer. Employees are more willing to offer discretionary effort and work outside their core job requirements to support their employer through the economic downturn. Workers, perhaps unsurprisingly, are choosing employers that can offer greater job security and stability. At this stage of the economic downturn in 2011, we did not find a stressed response of presenteeism to be prevalent, which had been indicated in earlier employee engagement literature.

Overall, our research found that emphasis placed on each of three key engagement factors varies by generation<sup>2</sup> and this emphasis is more significant during the economic downturn:

- Boomers and Gen X workers seek autonomy to make their own decisions
- Gen Y have purpose gained through their performance objectives and from feeling clear about the organisation's direction
- Gen Z are focused on opportunities to boost their mastery and employability

Amongst the youngest workers, we have found a group of people motivated to find ways to improve organisational performance and feel their organisation is making appropriate changes for the future. However, they are sceptical that senior managers are doing what they say they will and relatively few feel that their individual contribution is recognised by their employer. Conversely, the optimism and engagement of those who joined the workforce during the long economic growth (Gen Y) remains surprisingly unabated.

So, are employers right to take comfort that retention is improved during an economic downturn? Well, it depends on the generational profile of your workforce. Those most likely to leave are the youngest workers (Gen Z) who lack a significant connection to their current employer and have quickly learned the importance of boosting their employable skillset.

In the report, we identify other risks to employee engagement associated with each generation. The risk with Boomers is that their employability will drop as they pay less attention to their own personal development. With Gen X, the risk relates to a possible divergence between their views and efforts and the direction of their employer – this group need to be convinced about and aligned with the organisation's future direction. For Gen Y, employers still need to manage their career expectations and support opportunities within the organisation.

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<sup>1</sup> Researchers and consultants use a variety of methods to assess engagement. We assess engagement based on intention to stay, employer advocacy, willingness to display discretionary effort and an emotional connection to the work.

<sup>2</sup> Generation Z refers to c18-24 year olds  
Generation Y refers to c25-34 year olds  
Generation X refers to c35-49 year olds  
Baby Boomer refers to 50+ year olds

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## About Penna

Penna is a global HR Services Group. We help organisations improve their performance through their people. Our expertise spans the entire employment lifecycle – from attraction and communications, managed recruitment and assessment, executive search, executive interim and assessment to board & executive coaching, learning and development, consulting solutions, welfare to work and outplacement. Over a period of time, we have been observing diversity in requirements and views between generations whilst providing our consulting services and through coaching individuals. We noted the potential for unintended conflict in the workplace by not truly understanding the needs and motivations of the four different generations. Penna has therefore invested in understanding generational differences to inform our range of services.

## About the author

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## Introduction

What impact has the economic downturn had on workplace engagement over the last three years? In a buoyant employment market in 2008, less than one in four people were engaged with their employer. Many workers were unwilling to offer discretionary effort outside their core job requirements and were considering moving employers to get a better deal. With a rapid and prolonged swing of power to employers and a deflated job market, what has been the impact on workforce attitudes? And how do these views differ between those who have experienced significant economic downturns before compared with younger workers? Are employers right to take comfort that people have become more focused on keeping their jobs, or should they fear the exodus of their most valued people?

In summer 2008, we reported on a generational diversity study conducted in partnership with the CIPD<sup>3</sup>. This research was conducted just before Lehman Brothers collapsed and a recession ensued. Suddenly, workers were faced with reorganisation, redundancies and needing to rethink their contribution to their employer.

This has been the first significant economic downturn experienced by Generation Y<sup>4</sup> (Gen Y). This group had only previously been exposed to a long period of positive growth before the recession hit. In 2008, we found this group had a positive attitude to their organisation and its leaders but were continuously assessing their career progression opportunities elsewhere. What impact has the recession had on their attitudes to the workplace?

Generation X (Gen X) faced a recession when they first joined the workplace which, at the time, was the worst recession since the 1930s. By 2008, this group had developed a more independent attitude towards their employer: seeking greater autonomy, technical excellence and seeming less socially connected to their workplace than younger workers. Such a profile might suggest that this generation could cope well with the changing employment tides of a new downturn. So, how has this generation responded?

The oldest group in the workforce is the Baby Boomer (Boomer) generation. In 2008, we found a group frustrated by changing attitudes to job performance and customer service. With the most experience of recessions, they might be expected to excel in an environment where their experience would be prized. However, this group have the most to lose in this economic downturn in terms of job security, pension and status within their organisation. How have their attitudes to the workplace changed at this stage in their career?

### What research have we done?

In this report, we cover new research that explores the extent to which the recession and economic crisis has affected workforce engagement in the UK private sector. We have surveyed over 1,200 workers from industries across the private sector. We report on the differences in attitudes in this sector with those in these industries in 2008 and any variance between the generations between these times.

Our research has also started to explore the experience and attitudes of a new generation into the workplace – Generation Z (Gen Z). What differentiates this group from Gen Y is that they have joined the workforce around the time of the most significant downturn in working memory. Do their attitudes differ from those of their older colleagues?

<sup>3</sup> Drewery, K, Riley, A and Staff, H. (2008). *Gen Up: How the four generations work*. Penna/CIPD.

<sup>4</sup> Generation Z refers to c18-24 year olds  
Generation Y refers to c25-34 year olds  
Generation X refers to c35-49 year olds  
Baby Boomer refers to 50+ year olds

## Recruiting the generations

Through the economic downturn, the key factors that attract people to an employer continue to be the same for the majority of workers: competitive pay, job security and working for a 'good' employer. Ambiguity and uncertainty has affected each generation and there has been an increased emphasis on job security as a desirable part of any opportunity. However, there are other factors that make some organisations stand out as 'employers of choice' during this uncertain time.

Focus has shifted from pushing for the best pay deal for many workers to focus more on job security, especially for Boomers. In some cases, workers have been agreeing to reduced pay and shorter working hours in order to support the employer. However, many are still quietly concerned about whether their pay is fair relative to those in other organisations

For some, the recession has given them an opportunity to create a renewed focus on gaining more satisfaction from any job they have. Boomers in particular are increasingly seeking to work with an organisation that offers a better work-life balance and opportunities to give customer service.

Those in Gen X continue to maintain a self-directed approach to the workplace. They are the least inclined of any generation to seek a job where they can manage and coach other people, preferring instead to seek out roles with greater autonomy.

Those in Gen Y are less concerned about autonomy than the older generations. Instead, Gen Y workers are more focused on gaining more development and experience to help them stay employable. These factors differ from their expectations at the start of the recession where they were much keener to choose an employer with a competitive deal (pay and progression).

New into the workplace, Gen Z employees are also keen to develop their skills and seek out employers where they can have a sociable element in their workplace. They are less concerned than other generations about job security and only three in ten are concerned about gaining competitive pay in the immediate time.

I have total freedom in all I do in my job without any interference.

Boomer

Flexible hours allow me to balance life outside of work, e.g. education and home life, making it more motivating to work with a reasonable wage and friendly environment.

Gen Z



They are a fair company that makes me feel as if I've done the right thing by coming to work for them. Although I sometimes get frustrated with things at work I know I can go to my manager with my concerns as they arise. I get paid a fair wage for the work I do which makes me want to do my best.

Gen Y

What I like about my current employer, is that the job is paid well for its field compared to similar jobs in other companies. It's close to my home and they do recognise sometimes what I do for the company.

Gen X





## Spotlight on Generation Y

This generation is around 25 to 34 years old. Key social influencers on this generation are:

- **Social:** Facing higher costs for education, housing and general living expenses than previous generations. Social unrest emerging from 9/11 and 7/7 have impacted a generation that has grown up in a relative time of peace and prosperity.
- **Economic:** They saw the economic boom and growing welfare state during New Labour years. Although this downturn is the first directly experienced by this generation, they are familiar with the effects of corporate restructures and are no strangers to change.
- **Management thinking:** The key areas of thinking as they joined the workforce related to organisational performance such as Kaplan's Balanced scorecard and Collins & Posner's Good to Great; personal effectiveness such as Covey's Seven Habits of Highly Effective People and Goleman's Emotional intelligence; and tailored products and services such as Pine et al's Mass customisation and Kidd's Agile manufacturing.
- **Preferred Employer Value Proposition:** They look for employers that offer job security, skills development, competitive pay and worklife balance. They want to develop expertise and employability. They do not see their career in the form of a ladder – more of a 'scramble net' – where they might move laterally and vertically to build on their experience and employability.

In 2008, Gen Y had a positive attitude to their organisation and trusted its leaders but they were continuously assessing their career progression opportunities - possibly elsewhere. So, what impact has the downturn had on their optimistic attitudes to the workplace?

In 2011, Gen Y workers are the most engaged members of the workforce. They are still the most likely to recommend their employer to others and feel it provides high quality products and services. The recession has changed what they look for from an employer and they are more focused on developing their skills and experience. As a group, they are less concerned with autonomy or customer service than the older generations. They are more positive about the relationship with their manager than before the downturn and still believe in the senior managers. They also feel more job security and that people listen to their opinions more than other generations. They tend to feel experience gained in their current job is good for their future employability and that there are promotion opportunities available to them. The engagement risk with this group is their career expectations which the organisation may need to actively support with opportunities to ensure retention.

I have the opportunity to use my skills to the full and develop new ones. The work load is always a good amount, such that my personal life is unaffected by my work life.

Gen Y

I am given opportunity to take on work outside of my job description in order to prove myself.

Gen Y

My work is challenging and provides the opportunity to learn things every day. The environment in the office is supportive and very team spirited.

Gen Y

Offers job security and an enjoyable challenging and busy role. They make me feel valued in supporting my role and career development with study assistance

Gen Y

## Engaging the generations

The downturn has seen a shift in the general employment proposition. Engagement levels have actually risen nearly 50% (see Figure 1) on those reported in 2008 as people have become more willing to work outside the parameters of their job to help their employer respond to the economic challenges they face. Gen Y are now the most engaged of any generation with four in ten engaged with their employer.

The general drivers of employee engagement during the downturn that emerged from our research thematically concur with research by Daniel Pink<sup>5</sup>: autonomy, purpose and mastery. We found that the emphasis placed on each factor varies by generation and this emphasis is more significant during the economic downturn.

The first factor is having autonomy to make one's own decisions. This factor has become significantly more important for older workers during this economic downturn. Many older workers commented on feeling trusted by their managers as the main reason that they liked their current employer. The younger generations place less emphasis on this factor for their engagement.

The second factor is purpose and clarity around one's role. Gen Y are more confident than other generations that people listen to their opinions, that they understand the organisation's direction, and that they are getting feedback on performance. They are more engaged than other generations and more willing to recommend their employer to others. Conversely, older workers felt less clear about what is happening across the organisation and less involved in performance improvement.

The third factor is mastery and employability. With a tough job market, seven in ten Gen Z workers feel their work experiences are contributing to their future employability. Although new into the workplace, Gen Z are the least engaged group as only four in ten want to stay with their current employer for the next two years. We look at other generations' views of employability and development in more detail in the next section.

My manager trusts me to oversee other staff when she is busy elsewhere

Boomer

My employer communicates with me personally and is always available should I have a problem. I feel rewarded for working hard and the management recognise this.

Gen Z



I like how relaxed my work situation is... My new boss is professional and when I had a problem with my previous boss the company listened to my complaint.

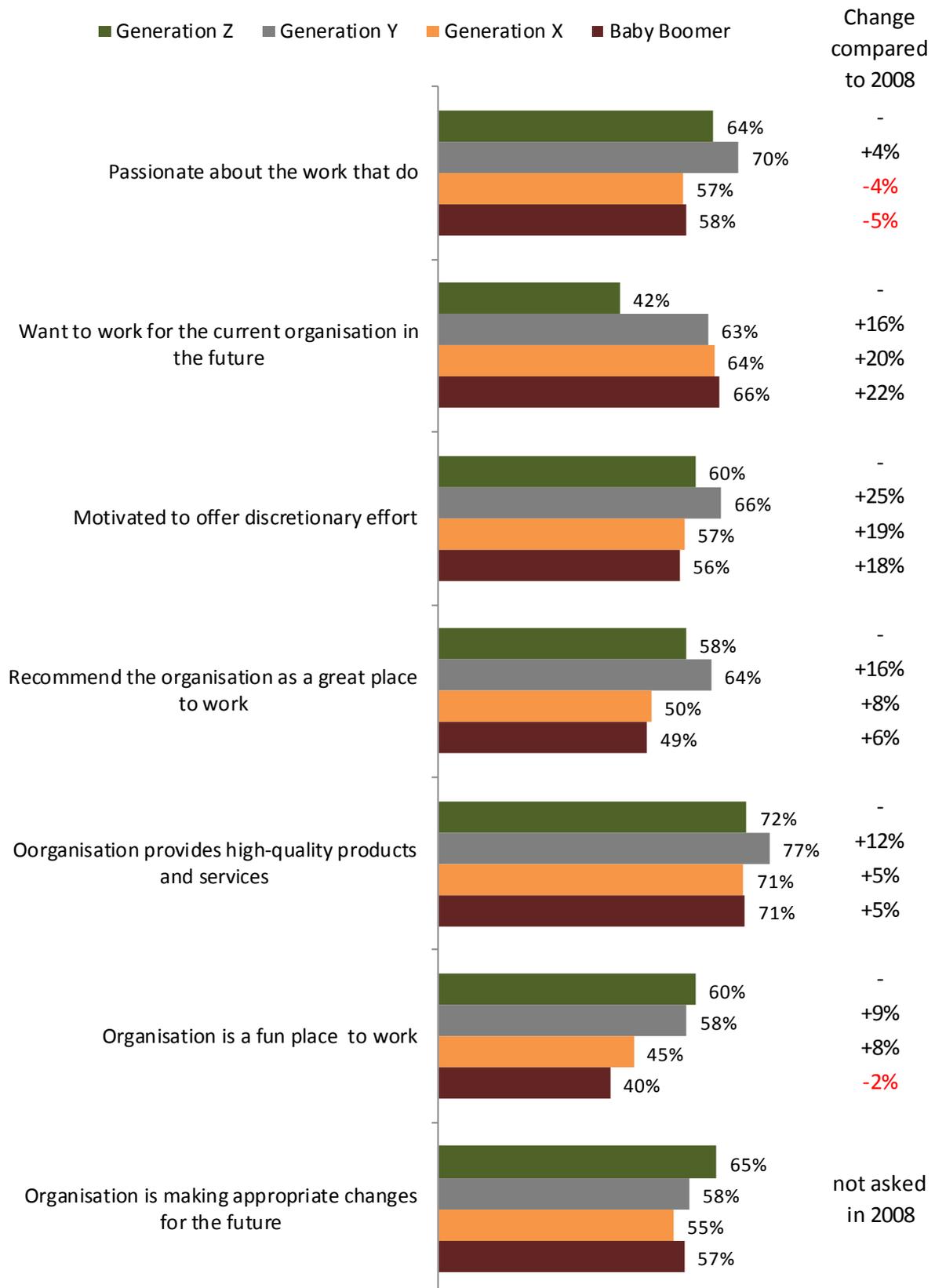
Gen Y

I am left to my own devices about how to and when to do a particular work task. Management have enough confidence in me, so that they are not always checking up on me.

Gen X

<sup>5</sup> See *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us* at <http://comment.rsablogs.org.uk/2010/04/08/rsa-animate-drive/>

Figure 1: Engagement indicators by generation in 2011 (compared with 2008)



Base: UK private sector 2011: 1203 respondents and 2008: 1749 respondents





## Spotlight on Generation X

This generation is around 35 to 49 years old. Key social influencers on this generation are:

- **Social:** These 'Thatcher's children' were exposed to news about corporate scandals. They had, both their parents working full time and there was a growing demand for Gen X around educational achievement and performance.
- **Economic:** Exposed to economic turmoil as many graduated into the worst job market since the 1930's Depression, they have also experienced large scale redundancies and cuts of long term benefits such as final salary pensions. Therefore they are used to uncertainty.
- **Management thinking:** The key areas of thinking as they joined the workforce related to resource based strategy such as Hamel and Prahalad's Organisational core competence and Kotter's Organisational culture, as well as leaner production methods such as Piore & Sabel's Flexible specialisation and, Womack's Lean production.
- **Preferred Employer Value Proposition:** They look for employers that offer job security, competitive pay, worklife balance and skills development. They want to develop their expertise and general employability. They focus more on their 'professional ladder' of specialist skills rather than the 'corporate ladder'.

In 2008, Gen X sought greater autonomy, technical excellence and seemed less socially connected to their workplace than younger workers. Such a profile might suggest that this generation could cope well with the changing employment tides of a recession. So, how has this generation responded?

In 2011, Gen X workers still seek a self-directed relationship with their employer. They are the least inclined of any generation to seek a job where they can manage and coach other people, preferring instead to have a role with greater autonomy. Through the recession, Gen X workers have become more positive about the skills that they are developing on the job, the pay deal, and their work-life balance. However, less than half feel their ideas about improving performance are listened to, and only four in ten trust their senior managers to make the right decisions. The engagement risk with this generation is that there is a divergence between their views and efforts and the direction of their employer. The employer will need to ensure effective communication and involvement with this group to maintain their engagement.

I like the fact that as I have been with them for many years. I know the ins and outs of the company and its beliefs and aims. I can cover other positions within my company as over the years I have moved around the different departments.

Gen X

I'm not realising my potential there but in these hard times the wage pays the bills and I have to stay there.

Gen X

My employer is a good organisation to work for and I hope I will be able to continue working for them for many years. The service we do can change or improve many people's lives.

Gen X

Been with them for 29 years - lots of change but still quite secure and salary is good. Management on the ground are good, I just don't trust senior management.

Gen X

## Developing the generations

The changing employer proposition and general drop of job security is, in turn, prompting many workers to review their skills and employability in order to boost their future job prospects should their fears become a reality. On the whole, many workers seem to be treating the changing environment as an opportunity to gain new experience and work outside their core job requirements.

In particular, the youngest workers are the most keen to develop their skills, see Figure 2. The primary motivator for Gen Z is to find formal opportunities for personal development to boost their employability. They look to develop specialist skills and improve their softer 'people' skills (people management, customer service and leadership development).

Likewise, Gen Y employees are interested in boosting their employability, something many feel they are gaining through on-the-job experience. More than other generations, they feel there are promotion opportunities available to them. Gen Y workers are interested in developing project management and leadership skills.

Many Gen X workers are looking to boost their employability through technology training, learning a new trade or enhancing their specialist skills on-the-job.

This differs to Boomers, who have a reduced interest in developing technology or specialist skills since the start of the recession. In terms of development, some Baby Boomers admit they're not really looking for development currently. Of concern, Boomers are the least likely generation to feel they have the opportunity to grow within their role and only four in ten feel their current experience is good for their future employability.

It's a large company with opportunity to move between sites. I have the opportunity to learn different aspects of the financial industry.

Boomer

It is transparent in that all employees are aware of the targets, aims and outcomes. The company runs on simple but strict rules.

Gen Z



As a very large global organization my company is very well set up and organised - there are clear systems for each administrative function, more than I worked for previously. I feel valued by my colleagues and managers.

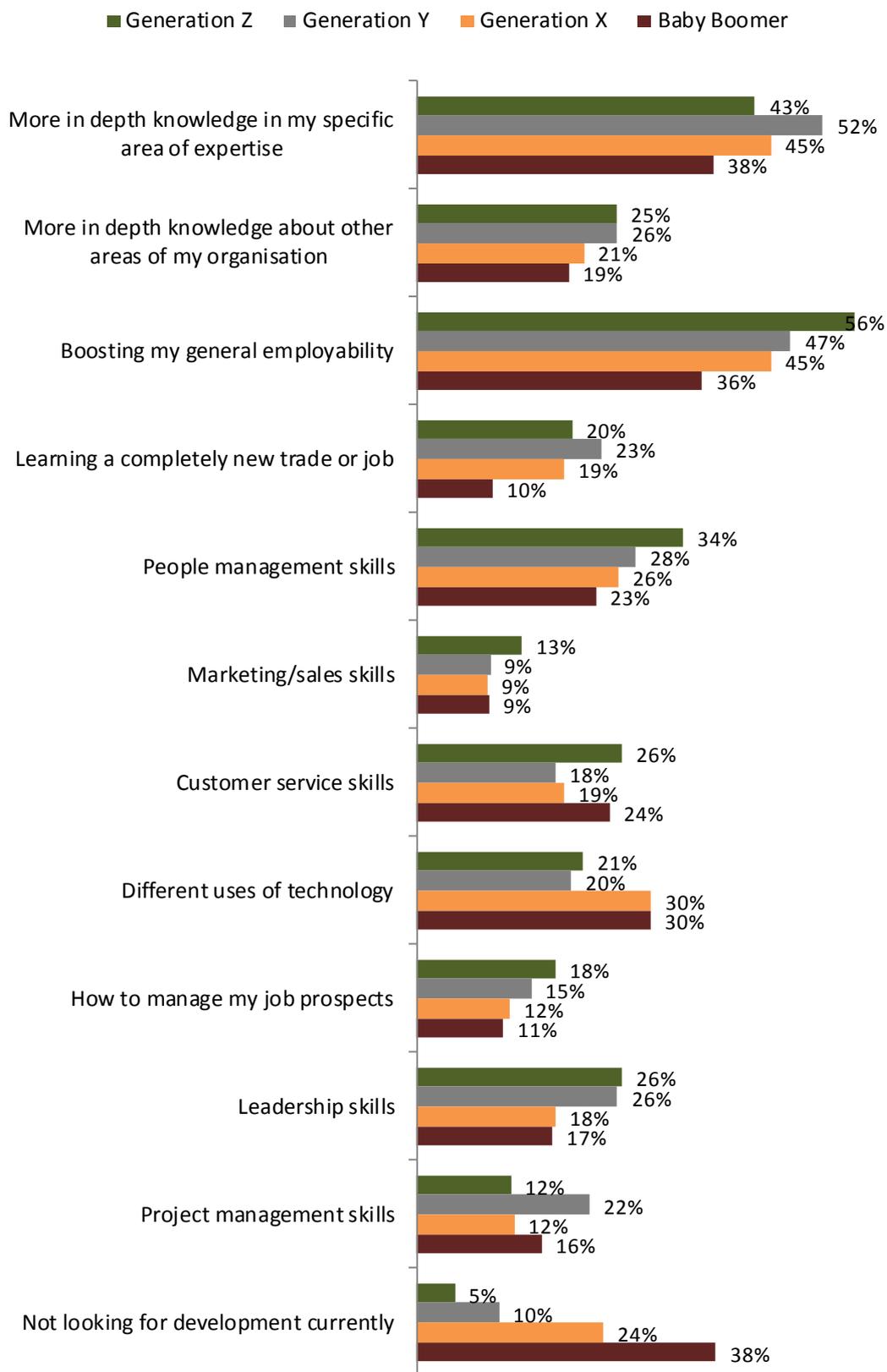
Gen Y

The goals are open for to see and we know what is expected from us. If you make errors they are noted, but, on the other hand good performances are commented on as well. All in all fair and balanced.

Gen X



**Figure 2: The forms of development that each generation is seeking**



Base: UK private sector 2011: 1203 respondents and 2008: 1749 respondents





## Spotlight on Baby Boomers

This generation is around 50 to 65 years old. Key social influencers on this generation are:

- **Social:** They experienced a push for civil rights, the women's movement, and union power; in some senses, Baby Boomers are idealists. They have affected enormous liberalisation in their lifetime and believe change is possible to an extent that none of the other generations do.
- **Economic:** They experienced soaring inflation in their early careers. Success has often resulted from long working hours and tackling high competition for jobs.
- **Management thinking:** The key areas of thinking as they joined the workforce related to the concept of Transformational leadership, Peter's Search for excellence, Senge's Learning organisation, and the use of occupational competencies.
- **Preferred Employer Value Proposition:** They look for employers that offer job security, competitive pay, worklife balance and the opportunity to give good customer service. Some are not interested in development; others seek to develop their expertise and employability. Career progression has traditionally been through moving up the 'corporate ladder' and 'beating the competition'.

In 2008, Boomers were frustrated by poor recognition of the importance of good customer service. With the most experience of recessions, they might be expected to excel in the organisation knowing how to respond to change. However, this group have the most to lose in this recession in terms of job security, pension, and status within their organisation. How have their attitudes to the workplace changed at this stage in their career?

In 2011, the recession has had an effect on how Boomers view the proposition from their employer. They are more positive about their actual job design and feel they can develop skills more than before the recession. More are willing to work outside the core requirements of their role; however, they are currently the least positive group about what their employer actually offers in terms of job security and pay deal. Perhaps consequently, only half feel they work for a 'good employer'. The engagement risk with this generation is that their employability will drop as they pay less attention to personal development. The employer will need to ensure that they are actively engaging in appropriate development.

They are a fair company to work for; they look after the staff well and are very fair in their promotions.

Boomer

It's a stable company and I have worked there a long time. The pension is better than other companies.

Boomer

They are a unionised company which means they communicate with the workers.

Boomer

It is a fair employer and it is fairly secure in these uncertain times.

Boomer



## Managing the generations

Engaging people through a period of ambiguity, uncertainty and change for many managers can be tricky. Far from relationships with managers being damaged by the recession, on the whole, workers are more positive about their relationship with their manager than they were three years ago. However, views around senior managers have diverged more between the generations.

Over the space of the last three years, more Gen Y workers have become positive about their relationship with their manager. They feel more involved with their senior managers and also continue to view senior managers as providing a clear business direction for them to work towards.

We have a friendly, easy going atmosphere. Senior managers 'muck in' alongside other workers.

Boomer

However, this should not be mistaken for youthful positivity as Gen Z employees are more sceptical than Gen Y on these issues. Gen Z are less inclined to think that their contribution is recognised by their manager or that people who perform well are paid fairly. Positive recognition aside, the majority are confident that their manager would certainly deal with poor performance. They are less inclined than Gen Y to feel that senior managers do what they say they will.

It is transparent in that all employees are aware of the targets, aims and outcomes. The company runs on simple but strict rules.

Gen Z

Gen X workers are also much less positive about their senior managers than Gen Y. Fewer feel they trust the senior managers as much as they did before the recession. Less than half feel their ideas about improving performance are listened to and less than four in ten feel senior managers listen to employee input.



Boomers are also less positive about their senior managers with only four in ten trusting their senior managers to make the right decisions – indicating a slight drop in trust since before the recession. Neither generation feels that senior managers act with passion for what their business does – a view that differs from the younger workers. However, at a local level, the older generations do feel their manager recognises their contribution, that they are treated fairly and that they have appropriate levels of responsibility.

They are a great company to work for. I work within a small team of around 10 people. It's great fun and I have learnt a lot of skills while I have been there.

Gen Y

There is a certain level of security for the future and you can develop your skills for better employment in the future

Gen X

# Z

## Spotlight on Generation Z

This generation is under 25 years old. Key social influencers on this generation are:

- **Social:** These digital natives will be the most socially networked generation in history. They have seen the start of the Mobile Digital age, mobile telephony, Web 2.0 where ordinary users have more power to create content, Digital TV, iPod and open source technology.
- **Economic:** They have grown up with a booming welfare state under New Labour, the EU encouraging population migration, the unpredictable effects of 9/11 and the more recent credit crunch on global economy and politics, Brand Globalisation, as well as age legislation and a rise of the retirement age.
- **Management thinking:** They have joined the workforce when key areas of thinking include emphasise on knowledge sharing such as Tapscott's Macrowikinomics, there is an increased focus on national and business cultures such as Porter's Shared Value, Ghemawat's World 3.0 and Trompenaar's Cultural Waves, and changing business strategy such as Kim & Mauborgne's Blue Oceans.
- **Preferred Employer Value Proposition:** They look for employers that offer skills development, a social team environment, job security and competitive pay. We are yet to see how their careers will progress but expect it will follow the scramble net format of Gen Y.

What differentiates this group from Generation Y is that they have joined the workforce during a recession. Do their attitudes differ from those of their older colleagues? In 2011, new into the workplace, the primary drivers for Gen Z are to gain experience, employability and ideally have a sociable element in their workplace. They are more concerned than any other generation to seek ways to improve performance in their organisation. They are currently less concerned than other generations about job security and competitive pay. Few expect to stay with their current employer for at least the next two years even though seven in ten feel their work experiences are contributing to their future employability. Notable about this generation is that they are more sceptical of their employer than Gen Y. For example, they are less inclined than Gen Y to think that senior managers do what they say they will, that their contribution is recognised by their manager, or that people who perform well are paid fairly. The engagement risk with this generation is that, so far, they lack a significant connection to their current employer and instead focus on boosting employability with any employer.

It is a very welcoming and enjoyable company to work for. My hard work and determination is recognised by my senior management.

Gen Z

I'm lucky to be surrounded by colleagues who love their jobs as much as I do. The warm atmosphere is noticed by our customers.

Gen Z

They have supported me and given me opportunities to develop my skills, and support me when I have ideas

Gen Z

They have enabled me to develop skills that I was lacking prior to this job.

Gen Z



## Implications for HR and management practice

In our previous research in 2008, we explored some key implications of generational diversity for HR strategy and practice. In this report, we have outlined how HR may need to adapt its practices during an economic or industry downturn. Our ten recommendations for reviewing your practices include:

- 1** Actively review your employer value proposition (or employer brand) – what are you offering workers outside of the job? If your proposition needs tweaking or changing, ensure you communicate and embed the value proposition consistently across HR practices.
- 2** Review your current workforce demographic profile by generational group and how it has changed in recent years. Are there groups that are hard to retain or motivate? Review your employer value proposition and HR practices with them.
- 3** Review your work-life balance policy. This may include flexible working hours, better use of digital technology to allow people to be more mobile, or promoting healthy living within the workplace.
- 4** Take the time to review autonomy in people's job design. Do people genuinely have authority to make their own decision over how they achieve the outcomes expected of them? Encourage managers to act as coaches to their teams by giving people space to choose how to achieve their objectives.
- 5** How can teams be better engaged with the organisation and each other? Especially important where there has been any restructuring or redundancies, review the flow of work and resources with and between teams. Review the social aspects of team dynamics and encourage social and fun activities during the working day.
- 6** Encourage and develop managers to hold more effective career conversations with their teams. These conversations should focus on maintaining employability, future skills needs, as well as career management.
- 7** From an organisational perspective, review your learning and development strategy. Should your organisation's policy be to invest in developing employability? These skills include problem solving, communication, technology etc. If so, how can you promote this to attract new workers? If not, are there any risks of skills gaps in the future?
- 8** Analyse the differences in training needs for the generational groups and not just requests for training. The development needs and motivation for each generation has changed during the downturn.
- 9** Are your formal and informal ways of recognising people's contributions fairly covering your entire workforce? Many recognition schemes can reward specific groups such as support staff or the head of a team. Where people are performing during a period of change, find ways to reward their discretionary effort.
- 10** Finally, the trickiest one. Review how the business direction may have changed over the last few years and whether this has any implications for your performance management practices. Do people still have 'line of sight' of how they contribute to the organisation?

Please note: We would not recommend that an organisation takes the evidence from our research to then 'label' people and make assumptions about their attitudes. Diversity within each generation is as significant as across generations. Instead, we recommend using the findings from this report to appreciate the variety of views in the workforce.



