

Gen Z: Life Beyond the Glass Ceiling?

The technology generation was born to Skype, Facebook, Yahoo and all things Internet. Will this Generation Z free us from the margins that have traditionally split the workplace?

– By Gina Miller



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On 30 November, the Chamber's Women in Business Committee held its annual panel at the ICBC Building on Garden Road, Central. The topic of the 2016 panel was titled "Gen Z: Life Beyond the Glass Ceiling?" and was mediated by Stephen Callender, the Chief Financial Officer for Hong Kong at Barclays.

"Will gender barriers be a reality, and if not, what barriers might they face?" the event invitation asked its attendees. "Will Gen Z be the generation that finally experiences life beyond the glass ceiling?"

Roughly 80 guests attended, mingling and enjoying canapés and drinks before the panel was introduced, and speculating on the meaning of the terms in the word-cloud projected on the screens of the front wall. What did "gullible", "yolo" and "snowflake" have to do with "tech", "digital" and "innovative", they wondered. Were these the words that defined Generation Z? They didn't have long to wait to find out.

Clarence Yang, the Chief of Staff to BlackRock's Asia-Pacific Chairman; Karen Farzam Co-Founder of WHub.io; Yanjun Chen, Account Manager at Thomson Reuters Hong Kong and Editor of the Thomson Reuters women's network global newsletter; and Karen Li, Executive Director and Deputy Chief Executive Officer

of Vinda, were the event panellists and offered engaging examples of their own experiences, and their opinions on the future that Generation Z would shape.

Stephen Callender introduced the panel and the subject at hand. Generation Z is currently entering the workforce, and they are drawn to careers that combine an ability to make a personal, meaningful impact with good financial reward and a flexible work-life balance. What we would discover was what matters to Generation Z, and would they be the generation that finally experiences life beyond the glass ceiling?

Most important, what makes Generation Z different from their predecessors?

Defining Generation Z

Who are Generation Z, after all? What actually defines one generation from the next, apart from birth year, and what makes a new generation so significant to the workforce, particularly before they have even actually started to work?

According to the all-knowing sage Wikipedia, Generation Z titles are legion, including "post-

millennial”, “iGeneration”, “founders”, “plurals”, and “homeland generation”. The New York advertising agency Sparks & Honey also suggested names “Gen Tech”, “Gen Wii”, “Net Gen”, and “Digital Natives”. There are doubtless many more.

Generation Z birth dates are not precise, but generally agree on a range between the mid-1990s and the early 2000s: placing them at roughly 12-22 years of age today.

What is most important to those trying to understand Generation Z is the fact that this generation has grown up with the Internet as a de facto presence throughout their lives. Generation Z is widely perceived as being entirely comfortable with technology and as having fostered and nurtured most of their social interactions through social media. These are largely perceptions, of course, but most are buttressed by demographic studies and consumer research.

By the numbers

According to research by Ranstad (a recruitment agency) and the US Department of Labor, Generation Z is projected make up 36% of the global workforce by 2020. Today, Generation Z makes up about one quarter of the US population alone, and 20 million of them are already in the workforce in internships and entry-level positions, according to Arcadis (a global design and consultancy firm) research.

The corporate world is already suffering from a shortage of skilled IT workers, and with the rate of change with digital disruption, increasing advancements in IoT (the Internet of Things) and AI (artificial intelligence), most employers are painfully aware of known unknowns: they don’t know what specific tech skills are needed next, but Generation Z will clearly be the best equipped workforce to manage those changes. Subsequently, hiring and retaining these future skilled employees is critical to corporate survival.

Panellist Clarence Yang was succinct in his summary of the challenges of hiring new tech talent: “It’s a knife fight”. Generation Z is going to take over, he said, “If you can’t get them, you won’t survive.”

Yang noted that today’s corporates realise that tech is pervasive, and that they need to rethink how to hire talent. The hiring environment is changing, and Generation Z – in his view – assumes that the workplace will be de facto inclusive, and will offer an improved, more appealing, collaborative and attractive office lifestyle. Generation Z’s drive toward inclusivity is what will lead markets.

A diverse, inclusive, global village

Each of the event panellists had a somewhat different approach on how to reach increased diversity in business – for instance, Yang supports affirmative action measures; Karen Li does not – but all panellists agreed that diversity and inclusion is what Generation Z expects from the workplace. The notion of a glass ceiling is almost dismissed – enshrined in a yesterday where women couldn’t vote, hold public office, or take on corporate positions of authority.

According to the website girlspeakout.org (founded by Andrea Johnston and Gloria Steinem in 1994) Generation Z girls are less likely to identify with the roles and traditions of women from previous generations, are more likely to have strong feminist

attitudes, and expect gender equality to be the norm, not a notable exception.

Dr Tracey Wilen, a scholar and leader on the impact of technology on society, work, women’s leadership and careers, notes that in her own research, “the younger Generations X and Y men and women were less inclined to view leadership in terms of gender but as a set of qualified characteristics and attributes that the ideal individual possesses,” and that issues of gender and race are less important to Generation Z, purely because their perspective is that they should not be issues at all.

Panellist Karen Farzam certainly has not been held back by her gender. Originally from France, Farzam’s education was in STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) subjects. Following her education, she worked in Tokyo for six years as a JP Morgan exotic equity derivatives trader. When she moved to Hong Kong, she transferred her attention to the digital world and worked for an IoT start-up before co-founding WHub – an online platform where start-

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ups make meaningful connections to develop their business. Karen is also the Co-founder of Women Who Code Hong Kong, a non-profit organisation which inspires women to excel in careers in technology.

Although she was one of very few women in engineering during her education, and one of few women who were in the advance battalion of software engineering, she didn't feel out of place or beleaguered by her mostly-male colleagues. Like for her fellow woman panellists, Yanjun Chen and Karen Li, glass ceilings are not a concern. All three women have enjoyed great success; all three are young, energetic and vibrant.

Farzam did express disdain over being praised as a Great Woman Coder, rather than a Great Coder; her fatigue for the gender division was clear, though she was light-handed in her desire to be admired for her work, rather than for her work as a woman.

Currently though, women continue to lag men in entering advanced STEM fields. The (US) National Girls Collaborative Project notes, "women earned 57.3% of bachelor's degrees in all fields in 2013 and 50.3% of science and engineering bachelor's degrees. However, women's participation in science and engineering at the undergraduate level significantly differs by specific field of study. While women receive over half of bachelor's degrees awarded in the biological sciences, they receive far fewer in the computer sciences (17.9%), engineering (19.3%), physical sciences (39%) and mathematics (43.1%)".

The UK Women's Engineering Society notes that only 9% of the current engineering workforce and only 6% of registered engineers and technicians are women. In Hong Kong, women made up 33% of the local

first-year undergraduate intake for STEM degrees in 2014, down from 34% in 2013, according to Education Bureau statistics.

Whether or not Generation Z believes there will, or should, be divisions in the workplace, statistics indicate that some divisions are still present. And STEM jobs are currently the fastest growing market. According to the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE), engaging girls in STEM subjects at an early age is essential to closing the gender divide. All of which presupposes that there remains a gender divide in critical employment areas.

So is there a ceiling?

Perhaps expectations of a glass ceiling are gone because Generation Z has faith that it will achieve what it desires. Perhaps the ceiling is actually a cloak of invisibility (to borrow a *Harry Potter*, age-appropriate metaphor) disguising the benefits of STEM subjects from young women, for instance.

Models such as Farzam, Chen and Li offer positive signals that girls may see more examples of women succeeding and enjoying STEM careers; the technological intelligence that is a native aspect of Generation Z's identification will presumably get them there faster.

The connected, collaborative generation

Chatting with a few Generation Z-ers after the panel, it became clear how swiftly they grasp information. Answers are at literally their fingertips.

Obviously smart phones are ubiquitous, but to have one's full digital profile (education, career, hobbies and photos) pulled up within seconds of meeting someone; to have been issued an invitation to "follow/befriend" that person online, only seconds later, and have this seamlessly integrate into the conversation, erasing barriers of age, gender and ethnicity through the absolute egalitarianism of binary, was somehow startling.

Whatever Generation Z represents or will come to represent, it is a future that – by design – intends to be knowable and worth knowing. **B**

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