



# GEN Z IN THE SKILLED WORKFORCE

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Attracting a New Generation of Front-Line Workers

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# INTRODUCTION

A major transformation in skilled work is about to unfold. Despite record investment levels in workforce development in 2024, the number of job openings is outpacing available workers across high-growth sectors like manufacturing, healthcare, and skilled trades.<sup>(1, 2, 3, 4)</sup> Rapid technological advancements, aging workers, and rising income inequality have contributed to a growing mismatch between the skills employers need and the skills jobseekers have. With 4.2 million workers in the U.S. planning to retire next year, organizations face critical pressure to attract the next generation of talent: Generation Z<sup>5</sup>.

This talent gap is already creating a cascade of economic challenges: companies struggle with rising costs, high turnover, and overwhelmed staff, while jobseekers miss opportunities for stable and prosperous careers. Specialized roles in manufacturing and healthcare take time for employees to master, and often require that students self-pay for certification programs that typically cost up to \$5,000. Companies that are able to successfully attract – and retain – entry-level Gen Z employees will develop an edge over the competition.

To help employers meet this challenge, Ready to Hire surveyed a broad sample of 525 members of Gen Z who are currently working in or considering entry-level roles in manufacturing, skilled trades, and healthcare. Our research focused on understanding how Generation Z discovers and evaluates career pathways, with particular attention to their professional interests and values.

**4.2M** U.S. workers  
are planning to retire next year.  
**Organizations must address  
the talent gap by attracting  
the next generation of skilled  
workers: Gen Z.**



1. Global Healthcare Private Equity Report 2025. (2025). Bain.com.
2. United States Joint Economic Committee. (2024, April 24). Fact sheet: The Manufacturing Renaissance That Will Drive the Economy of the Future.
3. Melhorn, S. F., & Hoover, M. (2024, December 13). Understanding America's Labor Shortage: The Most Impacted Industries.
4. What are the recent trends in health sector employment? (2024, March 27). Peterson-KFF Health System Tracker.
5. Fichtner, J. J. (2024). The Peak 65® Zone Is Here—Creating a New Framework For America's Retirement Security.

# WHO IS GEN Z?

## RETHINKING STEREOTYPES

Born between 1997 and 2013, members of Generation Z bring a fresh perspective to the workforce. As true digital natives, technology shapes how they live, work, and build relationships – in many parts of the country, Gen Zers spend six or more hours per day on their phones<sup>6</sup>. Despite their digital fluency, Gen Z prefers in-person conversations when it comes to meaningful discussions, valuing face-to-face interaction for deeper engagement<sup>7</sup>.

## PRAGMATIC IDEALISTS

From navigating COVID-19 lockdowns to witnessing AI advancements and extreme weather events, Gen Z has developed a nuanced outlook on the future. A more resilient and practical attitude towards many facets of life, including education, has emerged from these disruptions. While Gen Z is on track to become the most educated generation yet<sup>8</sup>, they've also seen college costs double in twenty years<sup>9</sup>. As a result, they're questioning traditional pathways more than ever. This skepticism isn't unique, however: according to Gallup, only 36% of Americans have confidence in higher education, a steep drop from 57% in 2015.

**Leading the charge in seeking alternative routes to success, more than half of Gen Z believes it's possible to secure well-paying jobs without traditional four-year degrees<sup>10</sup>.**



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6. Federica Laricchia, O. (2024, October 16). U.S.: Daily Phone Screen Time by Generation 2023.
  7. De Witte, M. (2022, January 3). What to know about gen Z.
  8. Parker, K. (2020, May 14). On the Cusp of Adulthood and Facing an Uncertain Future: What we Know About Gen Z so Far.
  9. Wood, S. (2024, September 24). A Look at 20 Years of Tuition Costs at National Universities.
  10. Brenan, M. (2023, July 11). Americans' Confidence in Higher Education Down Sharply.



# KEY FINDINGS

## ★ HIGHLIGHTS

The data suggests that employers should focus on two key areas:



creating accessible hands-on training programs for attracting and developing new talent

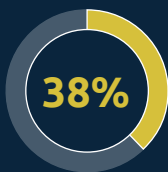


offering career advancement and upskilling pathways to support retention

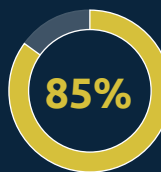
The results from our survey reveal both challenges and opportunities for employers. **Gen Z workers currently employed in skilled, entry-level roles report high job satisfaction**, particularly valuing the hands-on, results-oriented nature of their work. However, they express concerns about wage growth and technological disruption. While jobseekers considering skilled trades express intent to stay long-term, retention depends on the presence of career development opportunities.

## 1 COST OF TRAINING

Financial barriers prevent Gen Z from pursuing entry-level roles in manufacturing, healthcare, and skilled trades.



of respondents cite the high cost of training and education as the biggest barrier to their generation pursuing careers in this field



of respondents would "definitely" pursue these careers if financial support for training was guaranteed



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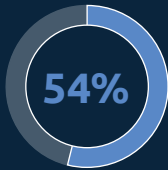
**“Training without pay can be degrading and discouraging**, watching bills pile up while you’re trying to learn to get a job. Having the training and education taken care of and paid for really encourages people to want to get involved, myself included.”

**—ASPIRING ELECTRICIAN**  
from Albuquerque, New Mexico

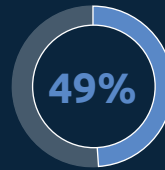
# KEY FINDINGS CONTINUED

## 2 ATTRACTING TALENT

Career path decisions happen in high school or directly after—and are heavily influenced by friends, family, and social platforms.

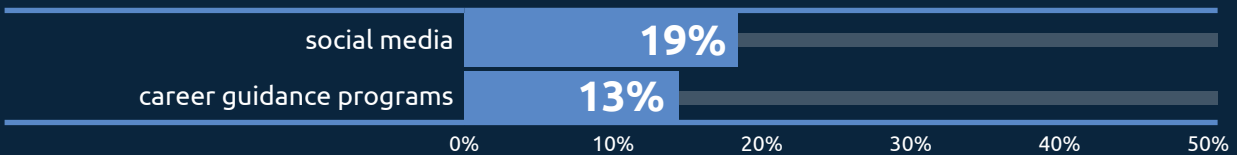


of aspiring workers started considering career paths during high school or immediately after graduation



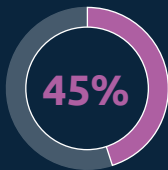
of respondents working in the skilled trades first learned about their current field through family or friends

### Influential Channels for Gen Z Jobseekers

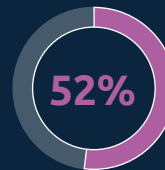


## 3 ROLE PREPAREDNESS

Traditional training programs aren't fully preparing early-career workers for their jobs in the skilled workforce.



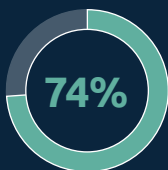
of respondents feel that their training fully prepared them for their roles



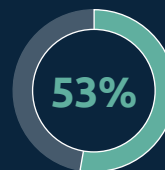
of respondents wanted more preparation for their roles, citing gaps in hands-on experience and tech-focused training

## 4 JOB SATISFACTION

Gen Z workers report high job satisfaction and plans to remain in manufacturing, trades, and healthcare long-term.



of respondents are satisfied or very satisfied with their current jobs (54% satisfied, 20% very satisfied)



of respondents work full time and 28% plan to stay in their field for more than 10 years

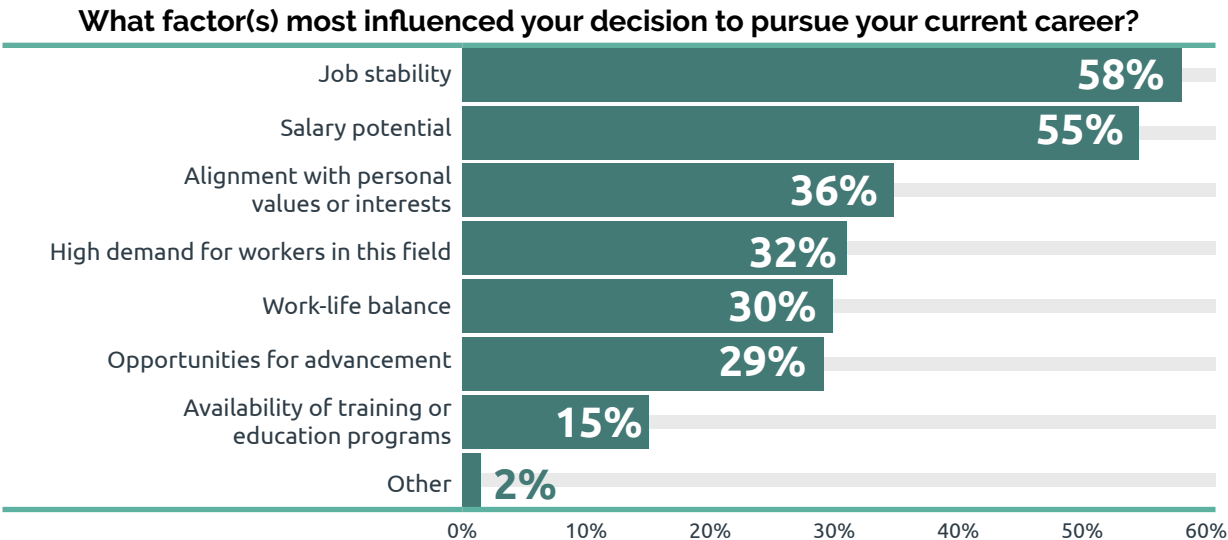
# GEN Z'S PATH TO THE SKILLED WORKFORCE

## THE IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL CONNECTIONS

NPR has dubbed Gen Z workers entering the skilled trades the “toolbelt generation”<sup>11</sup>. These young workers are making a deliberate choice to sidestep college pressure, instead pursuing careers in healthcare, manufacturing, and other trades where salary potential and employer demand remain high. Our survey reveals a pattern in how Gen Z finds their way into these fields: most discover opportunities through family and friends (49%) and develop their expertise through hands-on apprenticeships (49%). As Gen Zers approach high school graduation and begin considering their career choices, the impact and influence of social connections and hands-on learning opportunities cannot be understated.

**49%**  
of Gen Zers in the skilled roles discover opportunities through family and friends

**49%**  
develop their expertise through hands-on apprenticeships



## MOTIVATION & VALUES

Practical factors like job stability (58%) and salary (55%) drive Gen Z’s initial career choices, yet this generation also shows strong interest in development opportunities - with 74% “extremely likely” to pursue programs offering paid training in skilled trades that leads directly to employment. What’s more, this generation takes a long view – the majority of respondents envision staying in their field for more than 10 years. While employed Gen Zers report high job satisfaction in their fields, they’re also expressing an expectation that employers will invest in their career advancement pathways to retain them long-term. They want clear communication about how to progress from entry-level positions to management roles, along with hands-on training and access to the certifications they need to help them achieve those goals.

11. Johnston, W. (2024, April 22). Many in Gen Z ditch colleges for trade schools. Meet the “toolbelt generation.” NPR.

# VOICES

“

*“I had an opportunity to tour a manufacturing plant, and seeing how raw materials were transformed into finished products fascinated me. This experience fueled my desire to contribute to an industry that plays such a vital role in everyday life.”*

**–INDUSTRIAL ENGINEER** from Dallas, Texas



“

*“It was the only job I knew I could get immediately without a college degree.”*

**–CONSTRUCTION LABORER**  
from Greenville, North Carolina

“

*“I’m very satisfied with my current position because I get to work on meaningful projects that challenge me, and allow me to see real results. The team I work with is supportive and collaborative [...]. Plus, I have a good balance between my work and my personal life, which keeps me feeling energized and motivated.”*

**–COMPUTER NUMERICAL CONTROL MACHINIST** from Santa Clarita, California



“

*“I was inspired to pursue healthcare because I enjoy helping people and making a difference in their lives. Watching loved ones receive care and seeing the impact it made pushed me toward this path.”*

**–PHARMACY TECHNICIAN**  
from Los Angeles, California



# BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS FOR ASPIRING WORKERS

## ELIMINATING THE COST OF ENTRY

Gen Z jobseekers show a strong level of interest in joining critical front-line fields, but there's a catch – the cost of entry. Our survey reveals that 85% of respondents would pursue careers in the skilled trades if training was funded, with 23% specifically citing financial barriers as their primary obstacle. This suggests that the traditional model of self-funded training may be deterring potential talent from entering these fields. For employers looking to attract Gen Z talent, addressing these financial barriers through innovative training programs could be key to unlocking a new pipeline of skilled workers.

85%

of Gen Z jobseekers would pursue entry-level careers in the skilled workforce if training was funded

23%

cite financial barriers as their primary obstacle to entering skilled trades

20%

say a lack of qualifications prevents them from applying for skilled trade jobs

## FACILITATING SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

Beyond financial barriers, Gen Z faces other obstacles in pursuing these fields. Twenty percent of respondents reported a lack of qualifications to move forward with applications, while 15% are still in the exploration phase of their careers. When it comes to training, Gen Z jobseekers have clear preferences for how they want to enter the workforce: they strongly favor paid apprenticeships and job placement programs. Job stability and security also rank high on their list. This presents an opportunity for employers to develop targeted talent acquisition strategies that drive awareness about high-demand, entry-level opportunities, and offer access to the training and certifications needed to become a qualified applicant.



*"My biggest barrier to a position in healthcare is financial cost, so removing that barrier would allow me to effectively pursue the opportunity and train without worry or concern about money."*

**—ASPIRING RADIOLOGY TECHNICIAN**  
from Jefferson, Georgia

# ATTRACTING A NEW GENERATION OF WORKERS

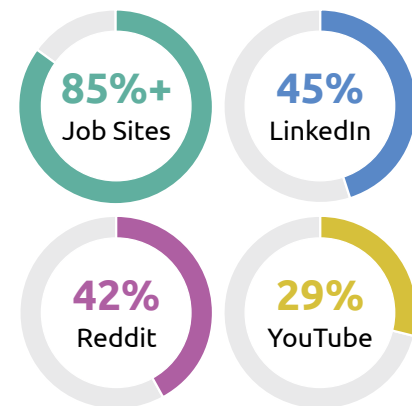
## EARLY CAREER EXPOSURE

Career awareness typically begins in high school: an environment where skilled entry-level work is increasingly unrepresented. According to a report by Thumbtack, over one third of high schools don't offer shop classes that can help students develop and practice hands-on skills<sup>12</sup>. This gap is particularly significant given the role that social influence plays in Gen Z's career choices. Without direct exposure through social platforms and hands-on training opportunities, many potential workers may never consider these fields.

## DIGITAL RECRUITMENT STRATEGIES

These digital natives conduct extensive online research when job hunting—over 85% of respondents checked job boards, scrolled LinkedIn (45%), dove into Reddit (42%), and searched YouTube (29%) for professional opportunities and employer research. Respondents want the full story from employers when evaluating roles. Clear salary figures, detailed role breakdowns, and authentic glimpses into workplace culture were cited as influencing factors for applicants. Organizations that offer values-driven online content, designed specifically for these platforms, have proven to be effective at attracting Gen Z talent.

### Gen Z's Online Career Research Habits



## RETENTION DRIVERS

Gen Z shows a remarkable sense of loyalty when employers invest in their growth. Workers want tenured careers in their fields, but keeping them engaged requires competitive pay, clear paths to advancement, and work-life balance. Savvy employers are taking note, rolling out benefits that include upskilling programs, flexible work options, and wellness initiatives. The key is to communicate long-term career potential to Gen Z: over 78% want to see growth paths and skill development plans before committing to a role. By investing to help Gen Z acquire career-advancing skills, organizations can create a loyal and motivated workforce while also addressing skills gaps.

**78% of Gen Z jobseekers** want to see growth paths and skill development plans before committing.

12. Steckel, D. (2023, August 24). Young People Want Skilled Trades Careers — So What's Stopping Them?

# THE READY TO HIRE MODEL

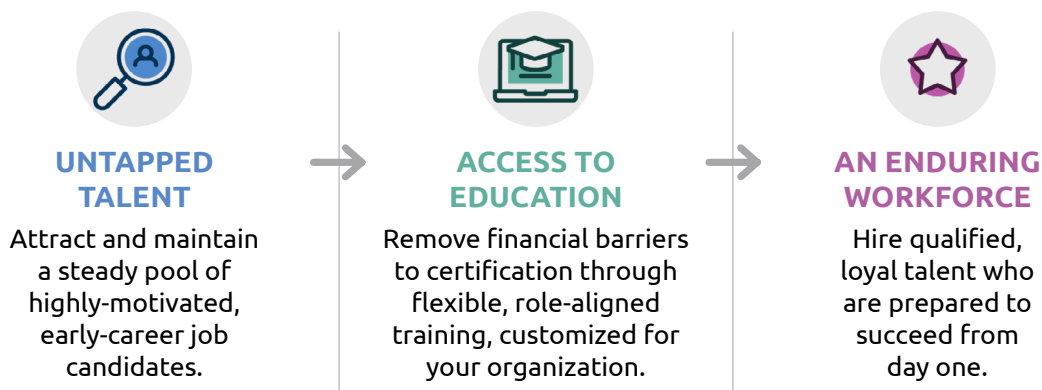
Financial hurdles and training costs shouldn't block emerging talent from pursuing meaningful careers. Ready to Hire's full-service train-to-hire and upskilling programs help organizations attract, train, hire, and retain a loyal, skilled workforce. With access to a national pool of motivated learners, Ready to Hire recruits early-career jobseekers by speaking to their values, on platforms where they're actively engaged.

Our train-to-hire model creates sustainable pipelines of new talent by funding the training and certification costs that job seekers cite as their main obstacle to entering the workforce. By offering employer-sponsored, certification programs that combine flexible online coursework with paid, hands-on training, organizations can develop committed talent that is prepared to make an impact from their first day on the job.

This approach goes beyond filling immediate openings. Ready to Hire helps organizations build a lasting pipeline and loyal workforce by addressing what Gen Z workers want most: accessible skills development and advancement paths.

**85%+**  
of Gen Z  
jobseekers  
would  
consider roles  
in the skilled  
workforce if  
training was  
funded

## Ready to Hire: Empowering Gen Z For the Skilled Workforce



By partnering with Ready to Hire, companies get more than just trained candidates: they get a comprehensive talent solution that includes customizable training programs and retention strategies aligned with the priorities of the up-and-coming "toolbelt generation". This targeted approach means organizations can stop struggling with talent shortages and turnover, and instead focus on growing the businesses to better serve their customers and communities.



**Ready to build your next-generation workforce?**

Let's connect on attracting, training, and retaining top talent. [Contact us](#)

# CONCLUSION

As millions of workers approach retirement, attracting and retaining Gen Z talent has become mission-critical for organizations. Our research reveals a clear path forward: by removing financial barriers to education and structuring robust career pathways for jobseekers, employers can build a sustainable pipeline of skilled workers.

Gen Z has demonstrated strong interest in the skilled trades and a willingness to commit long-term when provided with the right opportunities. Organizations that invest in accessible training programs will not only fill immediate openings but cultivate a loyal, engaged workforce ready to drive their industries forward. The future of skilled trades lies in meeting Gen Z where they are – and giving them the tools to build careers that match their ambitions.

**Organizations that invest in accessible training and upskilling programs can build a sustainable pipeline of skilled workers while fostering a loyal, engaged workforce.**





# APPENDIX

Data presented in this report comes from a survey conducted between October 18 and October 29, 2024, of 525 individuals aged 18-29 from the United States who did not hold a bachelor's degree. The service CloudResearch<sup>13</sup> (Connect) was used to recruit, and participants were either employed in or interested in entry-level positions within health care, manufacturing, or other skilled trades. Responses were confidential and met rigorous standards to ensure a broad representation of this population and protection of personal data and information.

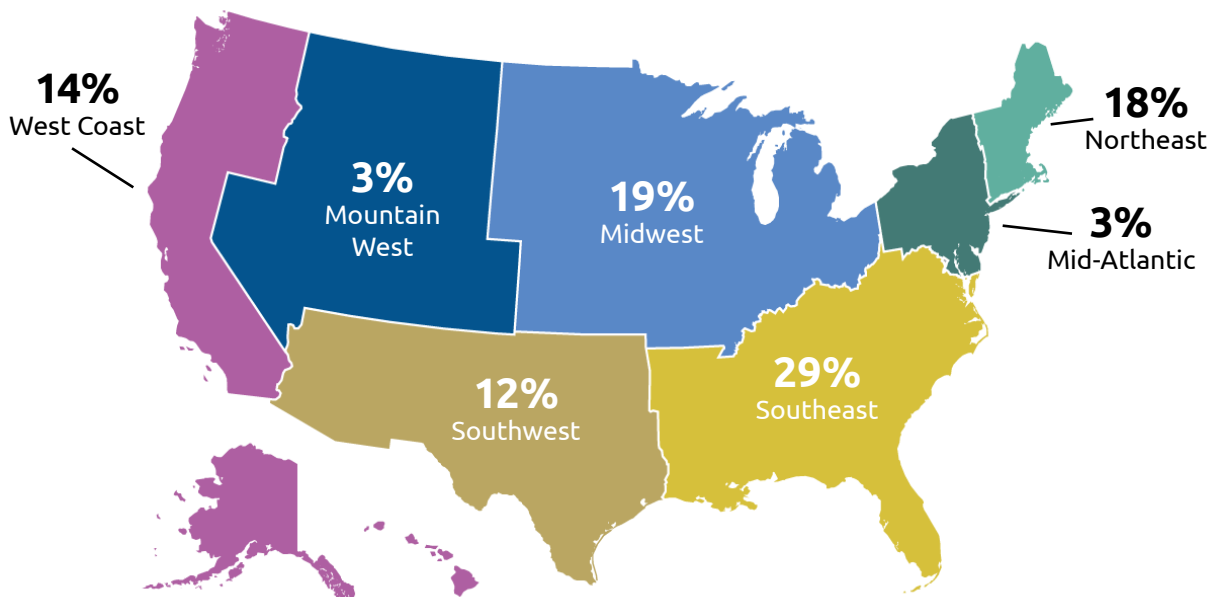
Survey respondents represent individuals both currently employed in and interested in healthcare, manufacturing, and skilled trades positions. Data was collected through a comprehensive questionnaire administered in two segments: current workers (Segment A) and potential entrants (Segment B). Survey responses were collected through standard online questionnaire methods, and all responses were anonymized to protect participant privacy.

Segment A encompasses responses from individuals currently employed in healthcare (51%), manufacturing (25%), and skilled trades (25%) positions. Only respondents with active employment status were included in the analysis, with 53% working full-time (40+ hours/week), 31% part-time with consistent hours, 12% part-time with variable hours, and 3% in temporary/seasonal positions.

Segment B comprises responses from individuals expressing interest in entering these fields, with 73% indicating they were "interested" and 26% "very interested" in pursuing careers in healthcare (56%), skilled trades (37%), or manufacturing (8%).

Demographically, survey participants were between 18-29, with distribution across 18-20 (19%), 21-23 (25%), 24-26 (24%), and 27-29 (32%).

Geographic representation spans all major U.S. regions:



Southeast (29%), Midwest (19%), Northeast (18%), West Coast (14%), Southwest (12%), Mid-Atlantic (3%), and Mountain West (3%).

13. Hartman, R., Moss, A. J., Jaffe, S. N., Rosenzweig, C., Litman, L., & Robinson, J. (2023). Introducing Connect by CloudResearch.



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# ABOUT READY TO HIRE

Ready to Hire, powered by Cengage Group, helps companies create and develop skilled talent pipelines for high demand roles through role-aligned training and upskilling products and services. Working directly with employers and a network of academic partners and workforce organizations, Ready to Hire helps employers build untapped candidate pipelines using scalable, technology-enabled services that identify and train new talent through train-to-hire programs, upskill current talent to earn certifications and professional skills with an on-site structured experience, and access local talent. For more information, visit [readytohire.com](https://readytohire.com).

For more information about the report, contact: [cwinsights@cengage.com](mailto:cwinsights@cengage.com).

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