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Blogs

It's Time To Prepare Young People For Life, Not Just Exams

Responding to Alex Mahon's recent insights on rethinking the workplace for Gen Z, Lou Robey and Claire Preston describe the radical overhaul that is needed to prepare young people for life.



Alex Mahon's recent analysis in *People Management* (late August 2024) offered valuable insights into Gen Z's unique characteristics as digital natives who 'def[y] easy pigeonholing' and the challenges they face entering today's workplace.

However, while Mahon (who is former CEO of Channel 4 and was recently appointed CEO of Superstruct entertainment, while continuing to be a leading

voice in education) correctly identifies that Gen Z workers struggle with essential workplace diplomacy and 'haven't got the skills to debate things', we must move beyond simply acknowledging these gaps to fundamentally rethinking how we prepare young people for professional life.

The statistics paint a sobering picture: nearly 60% of employers believe recent college graduates are unprepared for the workforce, with close to 40% intentionally avoiding hiring Gen Z graduates. More telling still, 40% of Gen Z workers themselves admit there's a huge gap between the [soft skills](#) they need for entry-level jobs and what they actually possess.

The Real Challenge: A System That Stops at the Classroom Door

When are we going to accept that learning doesn't stop at the classroom door and that we are all responsible for preparing young people for the world of work? The current education-to-employment pipeline is fundamentally broken, treating workplace readiness as someone else's responsibility rather than a collective obligation.

While seven in 10 Gen Z students and recent graduates feel they are prepared for work, networking remains their biggest perceived skills gap. This disconnect reveals a critical truth: we're measuring preparation by academic achievement rather than real-world readiness. Many Gen Z individuals acknowledge their lack of interpersonal communication skills needed in the workplace, with 65% saying they struggle to make conversation with colleagues.

The pandemic has undoubtedly exacerbated these challenges. Research shows that nine in 10 Gen Z workers experience social discomfort at work, with more than half feeling it at least half the time. But we cannot simply blame external circumstances when the underlying issue runs much deeper.

Beyond Technical Skills: The Human Elements That Matter

This isn't just about technical competencies or even traditional soft skills. It's about independent thinking, behavioural insight, personal responsibility, self-

awareness, financial awareness and understanding how to operate within a professional environment. More than eight in 10 Gen Z workers (86%) believe soft skills like communication, leadership, empathy and networking are somewhat or highly required – they know what they need, but our systems aren't delivering it.

The evidence is clear: communication appears in 110 million job listings, while technical skills like data analysis appear in only 9 million. Yet our educational institutions continue to prioritise academic achievement over workplace readiness, creating what researchers describe as a result of 'STEM-focused curricula that came at the expense of learning rooted in liberal arts'.

A Collective Responsibility

What if we reimagined how we prepare young people to take on responsibility, to step into new roles, and to grow into their working lives with confidence and purpose? What if they were equipped not just with



Networking and social skills are just as important as academic success.

qualifications, but with the skills and mindset to make the most of the opportunities ahead of them?

Deloitte's 2025 research shows that 86% of Gen Z workers emphasise the need for mentorship and guidance, while 88% highlight the importance of on-the-job learning and practical experience. They're telling us exactly what they need: meaningful support during the critical transition from education to employment.

We all have a role to play – educators, employers, families, mentors. Preparing the next generation isn't someone else's job. It's all of ours.

Educators must recognise that their responsibility extends beyond curriculum delivery to developing young people's professional capabilities and workplace confidence.

Employers need to move beyond criticism to active partnership, creating apprenticeships, mentoring programmes, and genuine development opportunities rather than expecting work-ready graduates to materialise without investment.

Families and communities must support young people in developing independence, resilience and real-world experience before they enter professional environments.

Mentors and professionals across all sectors should actively engage in sharing knowledge, providing guidance and offering the kind of authentic workplace exposure that builds genuine competence.

The Work Ready Collective: A New Approach

At the Work Ready Collective, we're challenging the status quo and working to help young people not just understand what the world of work demands but also prepare in a meaningful way for what lies ahead. Our approach recognises that workplace readiness isn't a box to tick at graduation – it's an ongoing development process that requires intentional support, practical experience and genuine investment from all stakeholders (website coming soon).

Research shows that companies prioritising soft skills development can increase employee engagement from 64% to 79% within six months. When we invest properly in young people's development, everyone benefits.

Time for Change

The evidence is overwhelming: nearly one in four executives say they wouldn't hire today's entry-level employees, while 48% of Gen Z workers don't feel financially secure and struggle to find meaningful work that meets their expectations.

As one survey respondent noted: 'I think people are attributing lack of experience to a generational issue. When I was the younger generation in the workplace, I also lacked these skills. No one comes with all of them ready; it takes some time, and it takes patience from older generations to teach.'

It's time to stop preparing young people just for exams – and start preparing them for life. The workplace isn't just changing for Gen Z; it's changing because of them. As Mahon notes, Gen Z are 'brilliant and vibrant, bubbling with ideas and optimism' but require 'purpose and stability during an unsettled economic landscape'.

The question isn't whether Gen Z is ready for the workplace – it's whether we're ready to meet them where they are and provide the comprehensive support they need to thrive. The future of work depends on it.



Ready to join the movement to prepare young people for life, not just exams? For more information about the Work Ready Collective and how you can get involved, email: lou@loubey.com or clairepreston45@gmail.com.

Lou Robey and Claire Preston are co-founders of the Work Ready Collective, an initiative dedicated to bridging the gap between education and employment through practical workplace preparation and stakeholder collaboration. They are both award-winning leaders, changemakers and passionate advocates for unlocking human potential. With over 70 years' experience collectively across education, business, media and the

charitable sector between them, they are united by a mission to help people find their voice, build confidence and lead with purpose.

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