

Corporate Social Responsibility Practices Most Valued by Generation Z

Alexa N. Scudillo

Department of Communication, The University of Tampa

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Kristen Foltz, Esq.

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Abstract

As Generation Z emerges into the workplace today, employers are looking to meet the unique expectations of this cohort. Using convenience sampling, 45 college students born in or after the year 1997 were asked to respond to a survey containing three open-ended questions and two-forced choice questions that pertain to corporate social responsibility. The results found that the most important aspects of CSR to Generation Z are the degree of diversity and inclusivity throughout an organization, a healthy company culture, and the maintenance of a sustainable and environmentally-friendly standard of operation. In order to reach the objective of this research, a thematic analysis was used to examine the data. Implications of this research are asserted in-depth within the discussion, but are mainly aimed towards offering employers a reference for meeting the expectations of Generation Z in terms of CSR. The discussion includes recommendations to help organizations become more Generation Z friendly. Future research may use these findings to produce recommended best-practices for CSR implications, to provide data for recruitment, or expand on these findings to find further causation of these themes.

Keywords: corporate social responsibility, Generation Z, generations in the workplace, generational studies

Corporate Social Responsibility Practices Most Valued by the Newest Cohort in the Workplace Today: Generation Z

The workplace today consists of multiple generations, all with distinct and unique characteristics (Ritter, 2014). Generation Z enters the workplace with a new set of expectations that are deeply rooted in their desire to participate in work that has some sort of greater meaning (Brown, 2020). The implementation of initiatives by organizations with the goal of fulfilling some sort of greater social good may be a way to entertain Generation Z's yearning to do work that has greater purpose. These "do-good" initiatives fall into the framework of corporate social responsibility (Matten & Moon, 2008). This research aims to identify the general components of corporate social responsibility that are most important to Generation Z as they enter the workplace.

Literature Review

Generational Studies

The analyzation of different values of a particular generation require a contextual understanding of the elements that contribute to the distinctions of different generations. Studying generations can be challenging due to the absence of a set of universal guidelines that precisely define what separates one generation from the next (Lyons & Kuron, 2014). Researchers argue that generations can either be defined by their birth year or from a historical/socio-cultural context (Pilcher, 1994). Bengston and Laufer (1974) name and define the cohort perspective and the social forces perspective as the two ways to define a generation. The cohort perspective argues that generations are defined by time of birth, which allows researchers to studying generations more objectively and precisely (Bengston and Laufer, 1974).

Opposing the cohort perspective, is the social forces perspective, which asserts that generations are defined by historical events and similar formative experiences (Bengston and Laufer, 1974). The social forces perspective offers a contextual lens for researchers to analyze generations through, however, this perspective lacks precision of due to the subjectivity of historical and socio-cultural contexts (Bengston and Laufer, 1974). It is important to question whether or not a generation can even be defined. Lyons and Kuron (2014) question generational differences and if they are simply due to age and maturity of a cohort rather than socio-historical context or the time period of birth. The work of sociologist and father of generation theory, Karl Mannheim, counters this skepticism by offering specific elements that mold a generation's exclusivity (Pilcher, 1994).

While studying generations, it is important to keep in mind the different elements that contribute to characteristics of a generation. Karl Mannheim highlights the relationships between nature and nurture, time period of birth, historical context, mechanisms of social change, and socio-psychological connections of language and knowledge (1952). For the purposes of this research, there will be an emphasis on his assertion that upcoming generations are the catalysts for social change and progression in society, as well as, the importance of historical context in the development of generational attitudes. A generation's location in time, in terms of historical events, serves as a foundation for the development of that generation's unique attitudes and behaviors (Schuman & Scott, 1989). For example, Millennials grew up in a time period where the advancement of technology sky rocketed, characterizing them as generation that is consistently seeking new information (Pathak, 2019). As a generation is in development, individuals within that cohort are pressured to follow the norms that existed before their time. If individuals born within the same time frame collectively reject the norms taught to them by their

families and/or society, they are separating themselves, characteristically, from previous generations (Joshi et al., 2010). Knowledge of a generation's unique distinctions from other is important for more than just research, it is vital for employers to have a clue into the unique factors of each cohort present in the workplace today.

As of 2014, there were four generations in the workplace for the first time, including Traditionalists, roughly born within 1925-1945, Boomers, roughly born within 1946-1964, Generation X, roughly born within 1965-1980, and Millennials roughly born within 1981-2000 (Ritter, 2014). Traditionalists are characterized in the work place as conformers, hard workers, loyal and respectful of authority (Ritter, 2014). Boomers witnessed the emergence of television which allowed them to witness historical events such as civil rights and women's movements, protests, the Vietnam War, and presidential assassinations, first hand (Schullery, 2013). Boomers in the workplace are noted as determined workers that are committed to harmony among those they work with (Ritter, 2014). Gen Xer's and Millennials have similar workplace values including flexible work hours and a high degree of comfort with technology (Ritter, 2014). Millennials are notably tech savvy, value diversity in all aspects of their life, and are comfortable having more than one career (making them hard to retain) (Ritter, 2014). In her research regarding workplace engagement and generational values, Schullery asserts "both universities and organizations have invested substantial resources to recruit, retain, and engage the Millennials, yet overall workplace engagement continues at dismal levels." (2013, p. 253). Employers must be aware of the value and motivational differences of each generation in the workplace (Schullery, 2013).

With every new generation entering the workplace, employers are challenged to learn a new set of workplace expectations, beliefs, and values. Collins (2001) reported that leaders who are conscious of who makes up their organization take that organization from good to great. Not discussed about are the characteristics of the job market's newest generation: Generation Z. By 2025, one-third of the world's workplace will be made up of Generation Z, therefore it is vital for employers to have a genuine understanding of that characteristics that define this cohort (Koop, 2021).

Defining Generation Z

Current literature suggests that Generation Z begins somewhere within the years 1994 (Shawbel, 2014) and the year 2000 (Ritter, 2014). For the purposes of this research, Generation Z will refer to individuals born in/after the year 1997 as it falls between these two theorists. In their formative years, Generation Zer's watched their parents fight through a major recession, grew up with iPhones in hand, and always had access to the world instantaneously with the advancements of other technology (Collison et al., 2021). In terms of communication, this is a generation values face-to-face dialogue (Arora et al., 2019) (Shawbel, 2014). While they are the most technologically sophisticated and ethnically diverse generation (Arora et al., 2019), the Institute for Emerging Issues (2013) notes that they are challenged to translate their digital communication skills into business communication skills, as most work environments are traditionally structured. In 2012, an earlier report from the Institute for Emerging Issues noted that Gen Z takes a more casual approach to communication making them very personable and reachable through the uses of phones and social media. Generation Zer's are said to be more entrepreneurial and value work that is done in a collaborative fashion (Aurora et al., 2019).

While they do not want to work in isolation at home (Institute for Emerging Issues, 2013), Gen Z does expect that they will have a flexible work schedule in and outside of the office (Schroth, 2019). As they enter the workplace, they will need mentors and career coaches who have a clear cut awareness of their expectations and motivations.

Mentors and career coaches must note that Generation Zer's are collaborative to the core and expect immediate feedback on their work (Aurora et al., 2019). According to the Institute for Emerging Issues (2013), they value the interaction that comes with sharing space and ideas with those that are like-minded. They expect that their managers will want to hear and implement their ideas (Aurora et al., 2019) and that their work will fulfill their achievement-oriented personalities (Schroth, 2019). Mentors and career coaches are faced with coaching a fairly inexperienced group of individuals, as only 19% of 15-17-years-olds have job experience (Schroth, 2019). Current research reveals that Generation Zer's are motivated by work that provides them with purpose over work that is simply for a paycheck (Aurora et al., 2019).

Conceptual Framework of Corporate Social Responsibility

In order to analyze the trends of corporate social responsibility (CSR) that are most important to Generation Z as it enters the workplace today, the concept of CSR must be defined. CSR is a valued and internally complex concept composed of clearly articulated and communicated policies and practices within organizations that reflect the business's responsibility for doing some wider good (Matten & Moon, 2008). Fitch (1976) defines CSR, in simpler terms, as "the serious attempt to solve social problems caused wholly or in part by the corporation" (p. 38). It can be hard to measure and precisely define what corporate social

responsibility is composed of because these practices are not regulated by the government and are largely up to the organization in terms of application (Matten & Moon, 2008).

Although CSR is difficult to define, the most practical way to categorize elements of CSR is in dimensions. After analyzing thirty-seven definitions of CSR, Dahlsrud (2006) reported five dimensions of CSR and phrases that fall into these dimensions. The first is the environmental dimension which refers to an organization's effort to help create a cleaner environment or contribute to environmental causes more often (Dahlsrud, 2006). The social dimension refers to the relationship that an organization has with society and pertains to the way the organization contributes to bettering society. The economic dimension of corporate social responsibility involves the way a business operates and whether or not those operations are conducted in a proper manner. The next dimension is the stakeholder dimension and it refers to how organizations interact with their employees, customers, the surrounding community, and resources. Lastly, the voluntariness dimension refers to an organization behaving properly beyond the demands of the law (Dahlsrud, 2006).

Fitch (1976) argued that companies and organizations are the key component to solving social issues within our capitalist society. While the U.S. government requires that corporations are responsible for the health care, pension, and other aspects of their employees' well-being, there is little regulation beyond those commodities (Matten & Moon, 2008). However, the government provides some incentive to employers who provide social benefits through the use of tax cuts (Matten & Moon, 2008). While corporate social responsibility is differentiated from a business's core profit fulfillment, it is tied to the financial performance (Matten & Moon, 2008). Hedblom, Hickman, and List (2021) looked further into the financial implications of being a

socially responsible organization. The company altered between a normal business and a business with the goal of contributing to some social good. They found that when the company advertised itself as a “do-good” organization the number of applicants increased by 25% and the demand for higher pay decreased (Hedblom et al., 2021). These findings support the notion that this cohort wants to do work that adds value to society (Hedblom et al., 2021).

Tones of corporate social responsibility run through Generation Z due to the composition of this cohort. Members of Generation Z are well engrained in the progression of society (Bonilla-Silva, 2015) and are highly concerned with the environmental issues of today (Mihelich, 2013). Essentially, the composition of Generation Z primes them to be more drawn to working for organizations that participate in the doing of some greater good for society (Brown, 2020). This comes to no surprise, as they are the most racially and religiously diverse generation to date (Bonilla-Silva, 2015). Generation Z is motivated by work that has a larger purpose, meaning that organizations who engage in practices that contribute to the bettering of society may increase the job satisfaction of Generation Z professionals within their organization (Brown, 2020). Overlooking the notable aspects of Generation Z as workplace professionals may lead to a decrease in engagement, lower morale, and ultimately, difficulty retaining these young professionals (Arora et al., 2019). Implementing socially responsible practices in the workplace gives members of Gen Z the opportunity to engage in work that is fulfilling to them.

Method

This study analyzed open-ended and forced-choice answers to survey questions about the values of CSR most important to Generation Z as they enter the workforce. Using convenience sampling, participants were recruited via a link sent to two group chats using the application

GROUPME that contain mostly members of Generation Z. Eligible participants were Gen Z members, defined as people born in or after the year 1997. Those who chose to volunteer filled out a survey with three open-ended questions and two forced choice questions, as well as demographics. After indicating their age and time spent searching for a job, they described and defined corporate social responsibility, and identify the top characteristics of CSR most valuable to them. Lastly, they selected where they expect to learn about an organization's CSR practices and finally, rate the importance of the subject. The researcher collected data in May 2021. All participants completed an informed consent before they filled out the survey.

Participants

Participants included 45 members of Generation Z that were involved at a midsized university located in the southeastern region of the United States. Participants consisted of men ($n=12$), and women ($n=33$). They consisted of members of Gen Z born in 1997 ($n=16$), and members born after 1997 ($n=29$). The majority of the participants have bachelor degrees ($n=32$), while others reported to have some college education ($n=7$), a Master's degree ($n=3$) or a high school diploma ($n=3$). Participants report actively seeking employment ($n=16$), looking for a job for about a year ($n=13$), on the job search for less than a year ($n=15$), and looking for a job for more than a year ($n=1$).

Measures

Participants responded to three open-ended questions and two forced-choice questions. The first open-ended questions asked participants to define corporate social responsibility in their own terms. The purpose of this question was to evaluate how this generation understands corporate social responsibility. To assess how this generation believes society interprets CSR, the

second open-ended question asked participants to report what they consider to be society's main trends in social responsibility. The last open-ended question asked participants to report the concepts of corporate social responsibility that they expected to see companies engaging in. Following the open-ended questions are two forced-choice questions. The first forced-choice question asked participants to select where they expect to hear about or see a company's socially responsible practices. The second forced-choice question asked participants to rate how relevant CSR is to them.

Data Analysis

This research aims to identify the major themes within CSR that are most important to Generation Z. One of the best ways to analyze the data and properly respond to the research question, a thematic analysis was conducted based on the steps developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). To get familiar with the data, every response to a question was re-written under the corresponding question. This allowed all the data for one question to be in one place for coding. Continuing with Braun and Clarke's (2006) process of thematic analysis, the answers were coded to identify initial commonalities among the different responses and listed on another paper. Following this, codes with commonalities were identified as potential themes. Each potential theme was assessed to ensure that there was no overlap between any two potential themes. By going over the original data once more, the themes were further assessed to assure that all the data was accounted for within the themes. Finally, the themes were named, refined, and defined for reporting and specific responses were selected to be included in the report as prime examples of the theme that reoccurred within the data. Outliers did exist and were noted for reporting.

Results

Diversity and Inclusion

When asked to define CSR, report society's most valued components of CSR, and to report their own most valued components of CSR, the most common theme was diversity and inclusion. In response to defining CSR, examples of this theme included "equality among people, rights for all," "commenting on social issues," or simply "diversity and inclusion." Some responses included statements such as "diversity and inclusion practices and equitable standards of work" and "non-discriminatory hiring practices". When reporting what they believed are society's most valued practices as well as their own, participants responded with diversity and inclusion practices overwhelmingly more than other responses.

Company Culture

Company culture was another theme that consistently reappeared in responses. This theme is an umbrella term that represents not only internal initiatives such as taking good care of employees, but also outward-facing initiatives including contributions to the surrounding community and engagement in philanthropy. Responses falling into this theme include defining CSR as "taking care of the community and employees with as much detail and emphasis while keeping the bottom line in mind" and "team outings to build the inner relationships within the company, providing feedback and feeling comfortable giving feedback to someone higher than you in the organization." Another response stated "everyone should be able to do what makes them happy, freely." Participants included philanthropic tones in regards to their most valued practices within CSR in responses such as "philanthropy and volunteer work," "businesses implementing policies to better the world," and defining CSR as "the way a business contributes

to society.” Responses such as these indicate that Generation Z expects the company culture of an organization to include healthy social practices, philanthropy, and community concern.

Sustainability and Environmental Initiatives

Examples of responses that fall into this theme include “environmental care,” “giving back to the environment,” “energy-based initiatives,” and “environmental sustainability.” Other variations of these responses often appeared in participants responses. This theme obtained theoretical saturation with the repetition of the presence of words in responses such as “environmental issues,” “sustainability,” and “caring for the world we live in environmentally and socially.” These findings reflect the belief of Generation Z that within the framework of CSR, society values environmental issues and sustainability efforts.

Discussion

The purpose of this research is to present the practices within corporate social responsibility that are the most important to Generation Z. Diversity and inclusion practices were the most commonly occurring theme within responses from participants. Within the workplace, diversity can be defined as “the many ways people may differ, including gender, race, nationality, education, sexual orientation, style, function expertise and a wide array of other characteristics and backgrounds that make a person unique.” (Roberson, 2006, p. 220). Inclusion can be defined as “recognizing, understanding, and respecting all the ways we differ, and leveraging those differences for competitive business benefit.” (Roberson, 2006, p. 220). As noted earlier, Generation Z is the most racially and diverse cohort to date, therefore, this is a very plausible finding (Bonilla-Silva, 2015). Based on this theme, suggestions to get organizations started are listed below:

- Create a diversity and inclusion committee or board to develop and oversee diversity and inclusion initiatives
- Educate employees, upper management, and organization leaders (boards, c-suite executives, etc.) through seminars or workshops
- Communicate your diversity and inclusion initiatives, goals, and progress throughout the organization
- Reach out to diversity and inclusion professionals to come assess and offer recommendations to your organization

Company culture is another theme that presented as a valued aspect of an organization by Generation Z according to the results. This theme encompasses codes that pertain to the ways in which organizations support employees, engagement in philanthropy/how the organization contributes to its surrounding community, the social atmosphere of an organization, and providing work that has meaningful implications. Previous research regarding Generation Z's expectations of an organization's culture support this finding, stating that they favor in-person communication over digital communication and value their ideas being heard (Schawbel, 2014). Responses within this theme also indicate that Generation Z expects and wants to be a part of organizations to set the standard for society in terms of giving back. Some responses pertained to Generation Z's expectations regarding mentorship programs within organizations. These responses align with previous research reported by the Institute for Emerging Issues (2013), which stated that Generation Z wants professional mentorship as they enter the workforce that supplies them with consistent feedback. Recommendations for organizations to begin expand their company culture to meet the expectations of Gen Z include:

- Send company-wide surveys regarding work satisfaction and how well an organization is meeting the needs of employees
- Develop mentorship programs that support and groom new employees as well as help them understand a possible path of progression for their career
- In job descriptions, include and communicate how the specific tasks within that job contribute to the productivity and success of the organizations to ensure employees and future employees understand the meaning of their work
- Ensure that there is a consistent and strong HR presence in offices or remotely for those who work from home
- Regular check-ins to make sure employees feel supported and cared for
- Communicate the organization's CSR progress and goals on different initiatives
- Encourage collaboration among different niches within the organization
- Organize social meetings such as happy hours, team meals, and other activities that are within the means of the organization
- Reward those who represent the company culture well
- Offer employee mental and physical health and wellness seminars to ensure employees feel that their well-being is priority of the organization

According to the results, Generation Z values working for an organization that operates in a sustainable and environmentally-friendly fashion. Mihelich (2013), reported that environmental issues are at the forefront of Generation Z's concern, supporting these findings. While there are easy ways to make an organization more environmentally friendly, it largely depends on what industry regulations pertain to that organization. Other responses in this theme suggest that

Generation Z wants to be sure that the product the organization is producing is sustainable. Sustainability refers to an organization's ability to use its resources responsibly so that future generations are able to access those resources to meet their needs (Brundtland, 1987). Although organizations must take time to seek out their industry's environmental/sustainable "best-practices," there are some generalizable starting points recommended below:

- Start small— run an environmental audit within offices to see if the little things such as lighting, plumbing, recycling, and paper use are all environmentally friendly; based on this audit, develop a policy that governs the actions that pertain to environmental affects and effects of the organization's operations
- Talk to the organization's legal team about government regulations to ensure the organization is following all environmental regulations
- Investigate environmental pacts and pledges your organization can begins pledging to ad advertise those pledges on your media
- Check sources—make sure that all of the resources the organization uses to create its product are also sustainable and environmentally friendly
- Donate to organizations who clean oceans, land, and preserve wildlife around the world
- Offer employees rewards for engaging in environmentally friendly initiatives
- Hire a consultant who offers services such as environmental auditing and sustainability checks to help your organization gain traction in this area and point leaders in the right direction
- Communicate any and all initiatives to employees often

Conclusion

Limitations of this study include, but are not limited to the researcher's own bias, a lack of reporting the ethnicity of participants, and the type of sampling methodology. The first limitation of this research is the researcher's bias. As a member of Generation Z studying Generation Z, the data is analyzed through the perspective of an individual within that cohort. This may have affected the way the data was interpreted because of the perspective of the researcher. The purpose of this research is to identify themes rather than explore the cause of these themes. The researcher did not collect the ethnicity or race of participants. Therefore, if the sample of participants that participants lacked diversity, this may have influenced the findings. The sample was recruited via convenience sampling of college students, therefore, there is a chance that the data is skewed according to their commonalities. Convenience sampling may also impact the generalizability of the findings because the group of participants were drawn based on availability.

The purpose of this research is to report the general themes within CSR that are most important to Generation Z. Future research may look further into how different demographics within Generation Z might view CSR differently and why. The make-up of this generation is overwhelmingly diverse, meaning that various demographics influence their thoughts and behaviors. To gain a better understanding of how these demographics play a role in their preferences in the workplace, future researchers may utilize a research design that dissects the causes of certain workplaces preferences within different demographics of Generation Z. Additionally, future research may explore the disparities between each generations' CSR

preferences. This information is resourceful for organizations making a conscious effort to be sensitive to the values of each of its employees.

Organizations and their leaders are challenged to provide a work environment that matches the needs of each of their employees. As time passes, employee expectations may be altered as new and younger generations enter the workplace. The goal of this research is to provide employers and organizational leaders with the current expectations of Generation Z in the workplace as they pertain to corporate social responsibility. Findings suggest that within CSR, Generation Z values diversity and inclusion, a healthy company culture, and environmental friendly/sustainably practices. It is vital that organizations are aware of the values of Generation Z so that they may provide them with a work environment that attracts and retains these young professionals.

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