



Journalist Fellowship Paper

What Gen Z wants: attracting and retaining young employees in South African newsrooms

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Preface

This report was prepared for News24, South Africa's leading digital news outlet, by managing editor Mpho Raborife. The report is the product of a three-month industry-sponsored fellowship at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.

News24 was founded in 1998 as a news aggregator, but has grown its journalism offering over the past 23 years to become the most-trusted news brand in South Africa, according to survey data from the [2023 Reuters Institute Digital News Report](#).¹ The site boasts over a million daily visitors.

More than half of News24's readership are aged between 20 and 39, making them Gen Zs (born 1996-2010) and Millennials (born 1981-1995). The largest group (33%) is aged between 20 and 29, while 23% are aged between 30 and 39, 17% between 40 and 49, and 14% between 50 and 59.

Readers are predominantly in the urban regions of South Africa, namely Gauteng and the Western Cape. They consume News24 content on their mobile phones, via web or the publication's app.

Like many other media outlets, the organisation is largely dependent on audiences to stay in business. That means it must constantly monitor South Africa's social, political, and economic landscape to remain relevant and build richer relationships with consumers through journalism.

¹ News24. 2023. News24 is SA's most trusted news brand for fifth year in a row - Oxford's Reuters Institute. [online]. Available at < https://www.news24.com/news24/Opinions/Reader_Hub/news24-is-sas-most-trusted-news-source-for-5th-year-in-a-row-reuters-institute-study-finds-20230614 >

Introduction

South Africa is a country whose challenges are surpassed only by the resilience of its people. More than half of its population of 62 million are under the age of 40. While it is the [most industrialized](#) country in Africa, it is also one of the [most unequal](#) in the world, and has [third highest unemployment](#) rate.^{2,3,4}

A 2018 [British Council survey](#) of South Africans aged between 15 and 34 found a generation on the move (from rural to urban areas), intent on reducing poverty levels at home, and making choices about where to live and what to study in order to do so.⁵ The report found more than half were interested in politics and believed their vote could change things. They were optimistic about the future and had confidence in their ability to transform their own lives.

They also told researchers they wanted to play a role in strengthening their communities. Despite poor access to many resources, most young South Africans reported high levels of access to the internet and use it as a primary source of news information.

In the face of these aspirations and obstacles, it becomes all the more critical for newsrooms to provide the best available information so the public can make the best possible choices for their lives – and do so in a way that is relatable and relevant.

At News24, the nation’s leading digital news outlet, both readership and staff reflect South Africa’s age demographic, with more than half being aged 39 and younger. It is within this context that I embarked on an exploration of how News24 can attract and retain Gen Z journalists, born between 1997 and 2012, to ensure we are well equipped to produce news that speaks to the nation’s challenges and hopeful spirit.

To do so, I began by reviewing literature from leading researchers in the field. I then interviewed five Gen Zs and a young millennial journalist to better understanding their expectations and realities when entering our newsroom.

² African Development Bank Group. 2022. New report by African Development Bank, partners finds that 37 African countries have industrialized in last decade. [online] Available at < <https://www.afdb.org/en/news-and-events/press-releases/new-report-african-development-bank-partners-finds-37-african-countries-have-industrialized-last-decade-56799>>

³ Statistics South Africa. 2020. Inequality Trends in South Africa A multidimensional diagnostic of inequality. [online] Available at < <https://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/Report-03-10-19/Report-03-10-192017.pdf>>

⁴ Bloomberg. 2022. South Africa Jobless Rate Drops To Third Highest in the World. [online] < <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-11-29/south-africa-jobless-rate-drops-to-third-highest-in-the-world?leadSource=verify%20wall>>

⁵ British Council. 2018. Next Generation – Listening to the voices of young people. [online] Available at < <https://www.britishcouncil.org.za/next-generation-south-africa> >

I asked them about factors that make the workplace attractive and unattractive, their news consumption and habits, and how they rate their future in South Africa as the next generation. These young interviewees included a student journalist, intern journalists, a permanent journalist and former journalists who have left the newsroom and journalism. They are all South African.

I also interviewed four senior newsroom leaders who manage younger journalists in South Africa, Kenya, Nigeria, and the United States to ask about their experience of leading this generation of employees and their advice to fellow leaders. Finally, I spoke to three journalism lecturers in South Africa, the United Kingdom, and the United States to ask how they are preparing the next generation of journalists.

Here, I summarise expert findings, share key themes and quotes from interviews, and offer seven recommendations for how to make our newsroom a more attractive place for Gen Z to work and thrive.

What experts say Gen Z want and need

Several consulting firms, including McKinsey and Deloitte, have undertaken comprehensive research on Gen Z. However, their main focus has revolved around gaining insights into their habits as consumers. The gathered data also tends to centre perspectives from Europe and the United States. Nevertheless, possibly owing to the interconnected nature of this generation, certain themes show similarities with South Africans surveyed in the British Council report, as well as the insights obtained from my interviews.

For example, a [report](#) from consulting firm McKinsey found that Gen Z's identity has been shaped by the digital age, climate anxiety, a shifting financial landscape, as well as the COVID-19 pandemic.⁶ It also found that, as consumers, they defy certain stereotypes and place greater value than other generations on setting themselves apart as unique individuals.

Deloitte's [annual survey of Gen Z and Millennials](#) found that both groups were deeply worried about the state of the world and were “fighting to reconcile their desire for change with the demands and constraints of everyday life”.⁷ It also found that both Gen Z and Millennials were struggling with financial anxiety while trying to invest in environmentally sustainable choices. The report also found that:

“They feel burned out, but many are taking on second jobs, while pushing for more purposeful – and more flexible – work. They press their employers to tackle climate change, particularly when it comes to efforts they can get directly involved in, but businesses may still be missing opportunities to drive deeper and broader climate action. [...] They have inspired organisations to take action to address workplace mental health, but they are not always comfortable talking about these issues or taking advantage of the resources available. [...] The unprecedented circumstances of the past few years have prompted many people around the world to rethink their priorities, leading to the Great Resignation. This time of historic voluntary turnover presents significant opportunities for millennials and Gen Zs.”

⁶ McKinsey & Company. 2023. What is Gen Z. [online] < <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/mckinsey-explainers/what-is-gen-z> >

⁷ Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu Limited. 2022. Striving for balance, advocating for change – The Deloitte Global 2022 Gen Z & Millennial Survey. [online] Available at < <file:///C:/Users/Mpho.Raborife/Downloads/deloitte-2022-genz-millennial-survey-en-220601.pdf> >

The report also indicated that “the sustained workplace changes they’ve been asking for – including higher compensation, more flexibility, better work/life balance, increased learning and development opportunities, better mental health and wellness support, and a greater commitment from businesses to make a positive societal impact – are strategies that will help employers attract and retain talent.”

A report in the *McKinsey Quarterly* noted that Gen Z will account for a quarter of the global workforce by 2025.⁸ While there is a fair amount of overlap between what different generations want in the workplace, employers need to understand what Gen Z prioritises. Namely:

- **Career development** Good prospects for development was their number one reason for taking a job.
- **Workplace flexibility** This was Gen Z’s top cited reason for staying in a job.
- **Purpose** Meaningful work was the third highest ranked factor for staying.
- **Workplace culture** Gen Z ranked mental health factors higher than other generations.
- **Compensation** This was the lowest ranked consideration compared to Gen X and Boomers

What happens if we keep the status quo?

In 2021, Deloitte released a special report on global human capital trends titled, *The Worker-Employer relationship disrupted*.⁹ It defined four potential worker-employee relationship patterns that might emerge in the workplace of the future. Namely:

1. **Work as Fashion** In this future, employers are in constant motion as they chase worker sentiments, competitor actions, and marketplace dynamics. This worker-employer relationship is reactive. Employers feel compelled to respond in the moment to workers’ expressed preferences, and to competitor moves, without connecting those actions to a sustainable workforce strategy.
2. **War between talent** In this future, workers compete for limited jobs due to an oversupply of talent. The worker-employer relationship is impersonal. Employers view workers as interchangeable and easily replaceable, and workers are more

⁸ McKinsey & Company. Five Fifty – Your five minute debrief or a deep dive in fifty. The Gen Z equation. [online] Available at < <https://www.mckinsey.com/quarterly/the-five-fifty/five-fifty-the-gen-z-equation?stcr=09BCB7A430D140589A5C8323B6D8A82D&cid=other-eml-dre-mip-mck&hlkid=2eaf737cbdf247f4aefe3065c42fc4c2&hctky=14379558&hdpid=8350ced7-552f-4db5-88ca-df6757a21f83> >

⁹ Deloitte Development LLC. 2021. Global Human Capital Trends Special Report titled The Worker-Employer relationship disrupted – If we’re not a family, what are we? [online] < file:///C:/Users/Mpho.Raborife/Downloads/DI_Human-Capital-Trends-Scenarios-special-report.pdf >

concerned with competing with each other for jobs than with the quality of their relationship with their employer. This future takes a supply-chain view of talent.

3. Work is work In this future, workers and employers view organisational responsibility and personal and social fulfilment as largely separate domains. The worker-employer relationship is professional. Each depends on the other to fulfil work-related needs, but both expect that workers will find meaning and purpose largely outside of work. To be clear, workers still care about work in this future; they conscientiously do their jobs and expect fair compensation, paths to advancement and learning and growth opportunities.

4. Purpose Unleashed In this future, purpose is the dominant force driving the relationship between workers and employers. Both workers and employers see shared purpose as the foundation of their relationship, viewing it as the most important tie that binds them together. An organisation's commitment to purpose becomes critical to its employment brand: it shapes everything from its ability to attract and retain workers to the extent to which workers experience meaning and fulfilment in their employment.

The report did not favour one future scenario over the other, but advised employers to adopt a relationship that best complements their long-term strategy. It also offered ways organisations could foster each relationship style. (See diagram below.)

	Work as fashion 	War between talent 	Work is work 	Purpose unleashed 
Purpose	Anchor the relationship in values that do not change	Build a foundation of respect and dignity for all workers, all work, and the human needs they all have	Make work meaningful so workers can see how their contributions tie to the larger whole	Give workers a meaningful voice in defining and executing the organisation's purpose
Potential	Design careers for choice and opportunity	Invest in worker skills for the good of the organisation	Use work as a means to develop human capabilities that would otherwise remain untapped	Foster a culture and work environment where workers can grow and bring their ideas and passions to further business and social goals
Perspective	Define the worker experience around the areas that can drive true competitive differentiation	Create a worker experience designed for future talent needs	Centre the worker experience around work itself	Make purpose the core tenet of the worker experience and talent brand

Source: Deloitte analysis

Diagram from 2021 Deloitte Insights' special report on Global Human Capital Trends

“There’s more to nurturing a productive relationship with workers than the immediate question of how much flexibility to offer,” the report noted. “And figuring how to bring people back to the workplace is not the same as creating a sustainable workforce strategy. Building a worker-employer relationship that empowers an organisation to thrive depends first and foremost on a clear, compelling vision for differentiating and sustaining that relationship.”

News consumption habits of Gen Z

Research has been conducted into news consumption habits of younger audiences. According to [Dr Kirsten Eddy](#), a postdoctoral research fellow in digital news at the Reuters Institute, people aged between 18 and 24 have a more casual and less loyal approach to news.¹⁰ They rely more strongly on social media and have weaker connections with brands, making it hard for media organisations to build relationships with them.

A [2022 report](#) prepared by strategic insight agency Craft surveyed young people aged 18 to 30 and found:¹¹

- For young people, news carries two broad definitions: it can be “narrow” (politics and current affairs) or “broad” (sports, entertainment, celebrity gossip, culture, science, and more).
- Some young people selectively avoid “narrow” news – at least some of the time.
- Many factors – both contextual and personal – influence a young person’s news consumption preferences and behaviours.
- Young people are highly sceptical of most information and often question the “agenda” of news purveyors.
- There is little consistency in what young people want in terms of format – it is usually a matter of personal taste.

From consumers to co-workers: how to get alongside Gen Z in the newsroom

The very consumers mentioned in the studies highlighted above exist today in our newsrooms. They represent an audience we are working so hard to try to reach. Are newsroom leaders doing enough to create an environment where these unique,

¹⁰ Eddy, K. 2022. The changing news habits and attitudes of younger audiences. [online] Available at < https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2022/young-audiences-news-media#_ftn3 >

¹¹ Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. 2022. The kaleidoscope: tracking young people’s relationships with news. [online] Available at < <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/news/kaleidoscope-tracking-young-peoples-relationships-news> >

digital- and social-media-savvy individuals can raise ideas or give constructive feedback on the news we cover, the angles we pursue, and the way we package and distribute our content?

Is room being created internally for us to hear suggestions on what we could experiment with to improve our performance among younger audiences?

During the Wan-Infra World News Media Congress in Zaragoza last year, Kathy English moderated a panel titled [*The changes needed to win over young and disserved audiences*](#).¹² It included the *Washington Post*'s Next Generation Director Phoebe Connelly and Shirish Kulkarni, an award-winning journalist, researcher and community organiser.

Connelly's department comprises members from subscriptions, marketing, brand and partnerships, data and analytics, as well as product teams. This diverse set of skills enables them to expedite the development of strategies and solutions that span across various departments in their newsroom. "The mandate my team has is to help the *Post*, as a whole, figure out how we are reaching younger and diverse audiences," she said.

Connelly said she advocates for looking inside the newsroom for solutions and ideas to explore from colleagues. "Trust me, there is someone who is already using [that new technology] as a journalist, as a consumer of information, who has thoughts about your strategy," she said.

Senior colleagues can be allies to young talent by creating support for their ideas, she said. By way of example she mentioned finding ways to ensure young people with ideas had a place at the table, that they were being taken seriously, and were brought into conversations about news judgement, assignments and investigative work, as well as how the publication approached more serious stories.

Kulkarni, whose work is centred around delivering more effective, engaging, and inclusive journalism, challenged leaders in the audience to take a bold approach. "Big problems require big solutions, and it's not going to happen overnight," he said. "We need to initiate that process. Diversifying the pipeline or rebuilding trust won't occur suddenly."

He also warned that the key was not in finding the right platform itself. Many mistakenly think, "How do we get on TikTok?" but Kulkarni said, "It's not about the platform; it's about the storytelling."

¹² Wan-Infra World News Media Congress. 2022. The changes needed to win over young and disserved audiences. [online] Available at < <https://wan-ifra.org/2023/02/want-to-reach-younger-audiences-help-is-likely-already-working-in-your-newsroom/> >

At the *Financial Times*, a Next Generation Board (NGB) was created four years ago and Hannah Sarney, the *FT*'s new Editorial Product Director, was one of its first members. It is a one-on-one, cross departmental collaboration between members of the group management board and emerging leaders in the newsroom.

She told WAN-IFRA's [Newsroom Summit 2023](#): "It's a source of rapid, diverse and trusted feedback and ideas to run the business. [...] It also acts sometimes as a shadow board on certain key strategic themes for our FTGroup Management Board, and a lot about silo breaking, and networking."¹³

The board is able to consult NGB on matters of strategy, and the NGB is empowered to present new ideas to the board. As result of consultation, the NGB has contributed to significant changes, including:

- a global diversity, equity and inclusive (DEI) task force,
- improved paid leave policies for women and parents,
- an environmental sustainability strategy,
- the introduction of employee network leave allowance (giving employees time to work on new initiatives away from their core deliverables).

Employees in who are early- to mid-career serve on the NGB for 12 months to ensure the opportunity is made available to a wide range of up-and-coming talent.

Next Generation Board

The NGB is...

- A forward-looking, solutions-focused group
- A source of rapid, diverse and trusted feedback and ideas from the business
- A shadow board on certain key strategic themes
- Silo-breaker and networking tool
- Opportunity to broaden experience and general career development

The NGB is not...

- Outputs focused
 - Its value lies in being a real-time channel for perspectives & ideas
- A space to air unconstructive grievances
- An automatic route to promotion

FT

A slide presented by Hannah Sarney at WAN-IFRA Newsroom Summit 2023

¹³ <https://wan-ifra.org/2023/11/lessons-and-wins-from-three-cohorts-of-the-fts-next-gen-board/>

What South African Gen Z journalists think

None of the journalists I spoke to – some current and former News24 employees – will be named here. As you'll see from my interviews, job security is a top concern for Gen Z. That is why interviews were conducted off-the-record to ensure they could speak candidly and without repercussions.

All of my interviewees were raised in homes with a culture of news consumption, and only one was raised in a home where both parents were professional journalists. Most said their interest in journalism was sparked in high school, either by a newsroom visit or by being part of a school publishing initiative. One came to journalism after a temporary translation gig at university.

Six key themes emerged during my interviews, which I relay here via their quotes.

Gen Z South Africans feel anxious and overwhelmed about the future

The young journalists I spoke to echo the findings of the British Council survey: Gen Z is acutely aware of needing to have their own agency if they want to change their circumstances. They conveyed a sense of hopelessness in the state of South Africa economically, politically, and socially. Many spoke about weighing their options to emigrate or work for international employers in order to advance their lives and personal goals.

“We are confused, we are scared, and we overthink things a lot. The conversation is that ‘I will graduate, go find a job elsewhere in a different country and save, save, save. Maybe come back [to South Africa] when I feel like I’ve saved enough because prospects of the future in South Africa are just not looking good.’

“The unemployment rate is very high, so just having a job is another way to say, ‘I am going to lead a successful life’. [...] But getting a job in this economy does come with [responsibilities]. Maybe one comes from a home where they are the first person to work, or their parent [isn’t earning much]. It’s the Black Tax: everyone looking at you now because you all of a sudden have a job. I think what our families don’t realise [...] is that you are actually just starting out. [...] I think that’s where our mental health issues – anxiety, and depression – come from. [You’re] taking the pressures of work, the pressures at home and [working on] self-development – just wanting to do better and be present in all spheres of your life – [and then] you find yourself overdoing it.

“We really don’t know what tomorrow holds for us. I look at this inflation rate now: its prices going up, yet your salary is still the same. It’s not like your employer is going to up your salary just because rates are going up. So it’s a constant deliberation [...] where you have to ask yourself: am I gonna be in this country all my life? Is this what I signed up for? We just want to be comfortable in the lives that we lead. But if we are all gonna flee to other countries then who’s gonna be left here? Someone does have to stay behind. But at what cost?” – **MT, 22**

“[We are] defeated, very conflicted, and angry, but also feeling like we can’t do anything. [...] It’s like what are we even going to do about it? We are just indifferent. Everything’s depressing, life is pricey, and jobs are non-existent. They exist but then [its] tenders, nepotism, favours. All of that is what buys people their way. Corruption has [taken over]; we’re not safe. Loadshedding, crime... nothing is looking good.” – **DM, 23**

“We have entered an era where new graduates have a lot more options than they did previously – such as working online remotely for international firms, such as emigrating. I also think a lot [more] of the newly graduated cohort have university-educated parents, and a lot of them thus also have a safety net. There’s almost like a shift of graduates in terms of socioeconomic class, where a lot of graduates know that they do have something to fall back on.” – **SM, 22**

News, as its currently served, is not appealing

Just as the findings of the Craft Survey mentioned, the journalists I spoke to said that their generation find narrow news (politics and current affairs) unappealing, and our formats unengaging.

A journalism lecturer in the UK told me their students reported similar sentiments: “They feel that (news) is not aimed at them; that it’s speaking to someone else. They don’t care about politics. They find it very dry and boring and say it feels very far removed from their actual day-to-day lives.”

While a South African journalism lecturer said: “They want to be informed by people with strong opinions. They want to know which side you’re on. If you don’t have a side, they are not interested.”

“They think traditional media is too rigid,” they added. “Watching packages is like watching paint dry. They enjoy personalised news coverage, someone who looks like them and speaking in a way they understand. They don’t like being spoken to; they like to be spoken with.”

“I think, to escape our reality, we’ve all turned to everything but the news. We’ve turned to going out, we’ve turned to creating content that shifts away from that – to dance challenges. We’ve changed to talking about silly things, fighting with each other [online], just to escape the reality of it all.

“National news is not really our [thing]. [...] I wouldn’t go [to a news site] for just the sake of going. Unless it’s on the radio and we want more detail about it, then that’s when we go out of our way and actually go read the content.” – **DM, 23**

“They’ll probably start (caring) when they start working. In terms of young people checking the news every day, I don’t really think that happens.

“I do think there are stories that capture young people’s imagination. I think people get their news style from curated Netflix documentaries, which is where something like having [in-house documentaries] is great.” – **BW, 23**

“There’s general news that everybody needs to know and then there’s another side to it, to say: why would I come to [this publication] when I don’t see people who look like me, and you don’t come to cover areas that look like the one that I live in, you only speaking to certain regions.

“If it’s entertainment, soft, leisure, lifestyle... that’s more their thing. I think journalism that the youth is mostly attracted to, has to be the one that’s related to lifestyle because you want to know how to lead better lives, how to better our dating lives, what kind of wine to drink, what kind of restaurant to try out? Things that are aesthetically pleasing.” – **MT, 22**

“The visual aspect: I think that South African media would do very well with infographics, explainers, or videos which I know takes a lot of production capacity. But I do think the return on investment is worth it because people are more likely to listen to short audio clips or watch videos on an issue than they are to read an 800-word feature piece. That’s just the reality of it.” – **SM, 22**

Gen Z are hungry for learning – particularly in person

Young journalists I spoke to have a strong desire to learn that extends beyond the classroom. It was rated among the most valuable benefits of being in the newsroom.

“I can remember walking into class on the very first lesson I had back after a year completely online. I remember walking in and thinking, ‘There’s going to be a very intelligent person at the front of this room. And I’m a fool if I don’t make use of them, if I don’t ask questions, if [...] I’m not intentional about using this resource at the front of my class’. I don’t think I would have realised that as clearly if I wasn’t denied that for a year. [It] was a huge turning point in my education, because it changed me from a passive receiver of information in the class to an active participant. I’ve taken that mindset with me as I come into a space like the newsroom: I think I’m more intentional about maximizing what I can learn from some of the best journalists in the country who I work with.

“I’ve learned to be much more deliberate about in-person interaction with authorities who I respect and authorities I think I can learn from. That, to me, is at the top of the things I value: the interaction with people who I think I would want to be like someday who are doing the types of things I want to be doing. I recognise, as a very junior journalist, my lack of ability. I try very hard and I’m competent, but you’ve got these

brilliant journalists who've been doing it for years. What a fool I'd be to not try and learn what they do." – **BW, 23**

The pace of a national newsroom can come as a surprise

A number of the junior journalists spoke of the drastic change in pace required of them when entering a newsroom professionally. They said the output expectations and speed of news was something they needed to mentally adjust to. Although they were told to prepare for a faster pace, they were still trying to adjust to it.

"I've been finding it difficult to settle in because it's so fast. There is a lot happening all at the same time. [...] Also I'm easily paranoid as a person so if I don't get to do something and finish it in the five minutes I'm given, I actually feel like I'm not [...] doing my best; I'm not putting my best foot forward. But then again, I remember that I'm still building my contact list, I'm still trying. I am doing the work.

"It's a very intense work environment. I like it when things feel a little bit out of control and busy. Those are actually my favourite days: where stuff is happening, and you're sort of keeping track of it but it's difficult and it's wild? I like that.

"Sometimes you're like, 'Oh my gosh, I'm so exhausted. I don't know if I can do this again tomorrow'. Because it's very busy – it's so, so busy. I never expected it to be like this but also the thrill of it all. It's so nice to break that story [and say] 'Oh my gosh, I was able to help someone'. Things like that genuinely make me want to stay here for longer because there's an impact. As much as you're not saving the world one day at a time, you are slowly getting there... or you're just maybe also reaching people who relate to your stories and have similar stories." – **MT, 22**

"There [are moments] where I feel out of my depth. To me, that's an attractive point. I wouldn't want to start a job as a 22-year-old and feel like I know it all. I feel like that would be concerning. And, so, it's going to be important for me – to be retained – to constantly feel a little bit challenged." – **BW, 23**

They appreciate having approachable editors

I asked all of the journalists I spoke to whether they felt confident to speak up and voice their thoughts and opinion. Most said the environment they worked in was not hostile and they found most seniors approachable.

"I usually box myself [in] because I'm like 'I'm here to learn so I need to soak up all that's in this place and [...] not say much'. I don't think there's been a moment where I've wanted to say [something, but] if I did, I've kept it to myself because, again, I still feel like I'm new, so I'm just trying to learn. But the environment, it's not hostile.

"You are able to speak to your editor about how to approach a story. I went to court the other day for the first time, and I had no idea what to do. So before I left, I had to find out exactly what I do when I get there. When I came back, they were like, 'Actually you

did very well'. So it's good I asked questions before I left because, had I kept quiet, I wouldn't have known what to do when I got there." – **MT, 22**

"In as much as they're my seniors, there's no sense of 'Yeah, you're younger than me, therefore, I'm going to step all over you'. And also their willingness to help: I really enjoy that about the workspace. I also just like the warm environment [and] our editors, having a good relationship with them." – **DM, 23**

The dealbreakers: low pay, a lack of flexibility, and no path for progress

Once again echoing the findings of research experts, both young journalists and their lecturers confirmed workplace flexibility, fair pay, and a newsroom grounded in ethical values were important. They also mentioned the importance of an inclusive and collaborative work environment, where people were spoken to with respect and where one could see a path for growth and development.

"[I want] a strong sense of journalism ethics [...] If [my newsroom] doesn't have that, it would probably push me away. [As would] getting paid like next to nothing.

"My generation values flexibility. Since we were in that environment where you sort of got to dictate your own schedule and your life marched to the beat of your own drum for that year (during the pandemic). You were very much (aware of) the fact that we were (not in) of control of our macroenvironment but we could be intimately in control of our microenvironment." – **BW, 23**

"I value my time a lot and sometimes this job takes a lot of one's time. [...] You're constantly on the lookout for what is happening, which is something we are all struggling with. I'm not saying it's a bad thing but it's very crippling when I'm meant to be resting but I am constantly on my toes. You feel guilty when you're not working." – **DM, 23**

"I don't think there's work-life balance, there's just work-life integration. At the end of the day, there will always be stressful times at work and in your personal life. But leading a successful life, a successful career is really just integrating your personal life with work, because you're employed now. You need to be present in all those spaces in your life and there will never be a balance." – **MT, 22**

Seven ways to create a newsroom

South African Gen Zs will stay in

1. A little handholding at the start goes a long way

In interviews with young journalists, the consensus was clear – in the beginning, they value the opportunity to sit with an editor and receive a detailed guide to expectations for a story. Equally important is a chance to review their work post-publication with a senior figure. A post-mortem allows them to understand their strengths, identify areas for improvement, and understand the rationale behind why certain angles were pursued in the final product.

Pair junior reporters with a senior for one or two assignments before letting them fly solo. It provides a chance to walk the journey in a less pressured situation, so that they can take notes on practical aspects before going out alone.

“They are, on paper, ready to do the work,” said a journalism lecturer in the UK. “But there’s a whole other side of the job, a huge part of journalism that you can only learn on the job. It scares them.”

“I think sometimes because they think you have that experience, there’s not always someone to hold our hand. I’m not saying baby us, but I think show us the ropes – an idea of what’s expected of us. That would also make it easier to adjust to the newsroom.” – **DM, 23**

2. Make space for collegial bonding away from deadline pressures

Coming into a new workplace can be daunting for any new team member – even more so when you are fresh out of school. Gen Z journalists told me they valued opportunities to get to know colleagues outside of outcomes-based conversations.

Offering [a quota of time](#), as the *FT* has done, to spend working with colleagues on non-editorial tasks (for example, a reader outreach programme like [reading news to the elderly](#)) can go a long way to creating bonds that make it easier for younger journalists to build contacts with senior newsroom staff, making it easier to ask questions or start conversations about new ideas.

“If you have an idea of how this person is, who they are, it makes it even easier to come and ask for help because it would be like, OK, I feel safe, I feel comfortable to come and talk to you about A, B and C.” – **DM, 23**

3. Prioritise mental health and advocate for wellbeing

Mental health and wellness were a top priority for Gen Zs I spoke to. This is an area where they refuse to compromise. The workplace they choose must be attentive to these expectations. Superficial initiatives won't suffice – Gen Z expects employers to invest in resources that promote mental health (such as access to professional counselling services to debrief on difficult stories) and foster a newsroom culture that is free from toxicity.

“Get rid of this culture of ‘This is how we used to work: they used to traumatise us every day at work and look how brilliant we are now.’ It doesn't work anymore, and it was always problematic. You didn't have the language then, but we have the language now to talk about toxic workspaces, we have the language to talk about abusive coworkers.”
– **BL, 26 (left the newsroom at 25)**

4. Establish a healthy culture of mentorship (both standard and reverse)

Assigning younger employees a mentor will help them to establish internal networks and possible allies to help champion new ideas and suggestions.

This is important because younger journalists may not be confident enough to raise certain views or ideas with their line managers yet, and would value having step-level access to another senior colleague who they can use as a sounding board or to seek advice.

“A level of personal attention and mentorship for me was instrumental in my happiness at work because at each level [...] there was a champion that was championing me. And it was allowing me to kind of play and try things.” – **VJ, 28 (left the newsroom at 27)**

Reverse mentorship programmes, like the FT's NGB (see p.10), can empower younger members in a newsroom by letting them know they have value to contribute to the publication's vision and mission, and provide space for management to hear from the audience they're trying to reach.

Editors I spoke to suggested exercises like inviting younger individuals to attend meetings with seniors and soliciting their thoughts, opinions, and ideas on projects, strategies, or stories. This is as much for the benefit of editors as it is for Gen Z.

Another editor recommended informal lunches or coffee with young journalists reporting directly to them, aiming to establish a bond outside of task-based conversations – and an opportunity to learn first-hand what makes Gen Z tick. The informality and lack of structure in these interactions relieve younger team members from feeling the need to prepare ahead of time and have something relevant to discuss.

“The reason why someone might not find [your publication] appealing as a Gen Z is because the people producing the product know nothing about Gen Zs. They know as much as they’re willing to read [but do not] speak to the people in front of them and it [therefore] lacks a lot of nuance. If you go to the internet and you ask what a Gen Z is, you’ll get all the information you need, but you don’t get the information you need in order to mass distribute it to other people and understand the nuance from the different groups within that Gen Z group. We miss the intersectionality of different Gen Zs just in this one group.” – **BL, 26 (left the newsroom at 25)**

5. Acknowledge, affirm, recognise... repeat

Affirmations go a long way in making colleagues feel seen and acknowledged. Editors spoke of the importance for anyone managing a team to make this a habitual practice for their direct reports. One editor suggested that affirmations be public and frequent, perhaps on a weekly basis. They suggested making notes throughout the week of what deserved a shout-out. Make public recognition part of the culture in the newsroom, and an intentional habit practiced by leaders. It is a small act, but it has impact if done in a genuine and deliberate manner.

“I like a gold star. I like a carrot. And we don’t give enough gold stars – even in the form of going ‘Oh, so-and-so, I read your article, it was lovely and read very nicely. Thank you for putting in the extra work’. A lot of people often end up feeling like they’re not being seen as people outside of [their work]. Every once in a while, we all need a ‘Well done, champ, you’re doing great’. No one will admit it, but we do.” – **BL, 26 (left the newsroom at 25)**

6. Visit more classrooms, be more visible to children

Young journalists and journalism educators both said newsrooms should build closer and stronger relationships with learning institutions. Whether talking to high school pupils about journalism as a career option, or to university students about the story behind the story, or even just soliciting opinions about a project the newsroom needs a younger audience’s insights on. These are all ways to put your brand in front of the young people – not only to gain direct feedback, but also to inspire the next generation of potential young journalists or future readers.

“If you want to overhaul your TikTok strategy, wouldn’t it be great to have a journalism class to come up with one?”

“Sometimes you only hear from certain news [organisations] when they have a vacancy rather than saying, ‘Hey, we did this thing, and we think this is really great and we’d like to talk to your students about it.’ Give us case studies, come and talk to us about the story behind the story, and be proactive about that relationship rather than waiting for

us to come to you. Our classrooms are free focus groups. Ask them what they'd do to make it better. Students will feel like their opinions are valued.

“Don't just come in and talk about yourself. What questions do you have for them? At the moment it's a very extractive dynamic. It's about the classroom taking your knowledge and then you're gone until the next time we need something from you. But it should be a two-way process that would benefit you as well.” – **RD, journalism lecturer in the US**

7. Performance reviews must include clear career development plans

Gen Z journalists who left the newsroom told me that by the time they made the decision to resign, they had tried to see what opportunities for growth or change looked like inside the newsroom and were disheartened when they saw none. They found no clear plan or vision mapped out, nor attainable goals attached that could motivate them to stick around.

Newsroom leaders recognise that the traditional idea of a journalist's growth is to go from junior to mid to senior, then venture into either specialising in a subject or becoming some form of manager. But interviewees said this was too linear and that newsrooms should look into creating a culture of possible floor-crossing – news, to audience engagement, to innovation teams, for example – where one could move internally for a change of scenery without having to leave the newsroom.

“I felt a nagging sense of ‘OK, I need a change’. I just realised that within the current operational structure and within the current budgetary constraints, there wasn't really space to create that next step. I didn't [necessarily] see the next step as a promotion, I just saw it as a new challenge.” – **VJ, 28 (left the newsroom at 27)**

While these seven pointers may not be groundbreaking for newsroom supervisors, my hope is that they will act as a vital reminder. If newsroom leaders take action to recruit and retain Gen Z in an informed and mindful way, we can foster an environment where ideas are freely contributed, and collaborative strategies are developed. Ultimately, an engaged young newsroom contributes to the business reaching its mission and vision more effectively.

Conclusion

We have an opportunity to practice an empathetic style of leadership that will allow young, talented, and ambitious Gen Z journalists to find a sense of belonging and purpose in our newsrooms.

In *Resonant Leadership*, authors Richard Boyatzis and Annie McKee provide pointers on leading others through mindfulness, hope and compassion.

In order to resonate, they say a leader must be willing to look at themselves and analyse how they are showing up in the world – both as human beings and in their roles as leaders.

“Great leaders are awake, aware, and attuned to themselves, to others, and to the world around them. They commit to their beliefs, stand strong in their values, and live full, passionate lives. Great leaders are emotionally intelligent, and they are mindful: they seek to live in full consciousness of self, others, nature, and society. Great leaders face sacrifice, difficulties, and challenges, as well as opportunities, with empathy and compassion for the people they lead and those they serve.”

Today, despite the growing number of graduates who are eager to enter the labour market, young and mostly Black South Africans are struggling to find employment. They are disillusioned by the country’s government and they don’t see great prospects for their futures locally. But they have a desire to be self-sufficient and to help improve conditions in their households.

Whether as consumers, colleagues or future customers, there are multiple industries trying to better understand this generation. As a result, there is no shortage of research to refer to. But an even more helpful resource exists within our own walls: Gen Z employees.

Start by creating an environment that gives all colleagues – especially the youngest and most eager – a sense of identity, purpose and value.