Crafting an Emerging Talent Strategy

By Sophie Soar

The importance of Gen-Z consumers to drive market performance has made access to emerging talent increasingly critical to success. In the latest BoF Careers white paper, 6 experts share insights on how to access and leverage the best Gen-Z talent.
Executive Summary

“The youth of each generation represents progress. We need them to be part of our businesses, our platforms and organisations in order to help us future-proof,” says Rani Patel Williams, who connects brands including Nike, Depop, Netflix and Google with the next generation of creatives, activists, entrepreneurs and thought leaders as a business partner at London-based agency Livity.

Critically, Generation Z, born approximately between 1997 and 2012, account for around 20 percent of the global population and more than 40 percent of fashion’s customer base. Their values and beliefs are shaping modern consumer behaviour, resulting in greater demand for: more sustainable products and transparency around operations; growing expectations that brands reflect the values of their customers and take stances on social movements; and an increasing expectation that brands deliver experiences as successfully online as they do offline.

As a result, understanding and authentically representing the expectations of younger consumers is crucial in driving business performance — prompting fashion companies to focus on hiring emerging talent.

However, attracting and leveraging young talent has become more challenging due to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, which prompted global hiring freezes and disrupted education systems. In the US, Pew Research Centre found those aged between 18 and 29 were the most affected age group for job losses (32 percent) and pay cuts (45 percent). The UK revealed similar unemployment trends, with young people most likely to have lost work or seen their income drop. More than one in three 18 to 24-year-olds are earning less than they were before the outbreak, according to British think tank, Resolution Foundation.

In this BoF Careers white paper, we examine the value emerging talent can offer to fashion and beauty businesses and how companies should leverage their youngest employees — from internal mobility schemes and establishing shadow boards to externships and reverse mentoring guidance.
01. How to Attract Emerging Talent

“Companies have to recognise that [this] generation of emerging talent isn’t going to wait around forever for their opportunity.”

— Lance LaVergne

Develop Your Employer Brand

Today, prospective employees want to know about the companies and executives for whom they are applying to work — to not only understand what benefits, pay or possible career progression they can expect, but also — and crucially for Gen-Z — to see whether their values align with those of the organisation.

The core values of Gen-Z are “reflected in their prioritising social activism more than previous generations and in the importance they place on working at organisations whose values align with their own,” with 77 percent stating it’s important, according to Deloitte’s Welcome to Gen-Z report.

Companies need to prepare for talents’ concerns and questions on what the organisation is doing to make a difference. This necessitates tangible evidence and examples to convince candidates that your organisation’s values, as stipulated in employer branding, are not superficial.

During a BoF LIVE event, Natalie Matulon, Farfetch’s senior director of talent acquisition, recommended that talent “ask for specific examples of company values and ask probing questions like, ‘How does a company’s diversity and inclusion agenda feed into the way that employees are treated, recognised and developed?’ and ‘Does the organisation have communities that have a voice, and how is that voice used?’”

As a result, organisations need to focus time and resources into developing and effectively distributing their employer branding, and ensure that it authentically speaks to the company’s output, services and current workforce.

“It doesn’t take a whole lot of research for us to look up these brands and see what they’re really about,” Kimberly Jenkins, assistant professor of fashion studies at Ryerson University, previously told BoF.

“You can tell a lot by looking up leaders on their Instagram accounts and social media [to] see their lifestyles. What kind of political messages do they tend to circulate? Are they doing this work 365 days [of the] year?”

Provide Sufficient Remuneration

In the US, 35 percent of entry-level fashion employees report supplementing their income, with 14 percent receiving financial support from their parents, according to the CFDA x PVH State of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in Fashion 2021 report.

In the UK, graduate careers site Prospects reports starting salaries for fashion design assistants at around £16,000 to £18,000 — approximately £4,000 and £2,000 under the recommended Living Wage for those living inside and outside of London respectively.

The ‘Pay Your Dues’ Paradigm Isn’t Working

LaVergne joined Tommy Hilfiger and Calvin Klein-owner PVH as chief diversity officer last year from financial services firm Wells Fargo. Previously, LaVergne worked in recruitment and diversity at McKinsey & Co. and Goldman Sachs.

“As entry-level talent has gotten more sophisticated and discerning about opportunities and career paths, that old paradigm of ‘pay your dues’ isn’t working as well. Companies have to recognise that [this] generation of emerging talent isn’t going to wait around forever for their opportunity.

At PVH, we have a variety of mechanisms through which we collect feedback. We do a big, broad engagement survey across the whole organisation. It’s big and structural. We also do pulse surveys so that, on a more frequent basis, we can push out a survey to a subset or segment of our population to get a representative feel for how things are going.

It gives us real-time feedback on how our associates are feeling. Like most organisations, we also have our regular performance and development process.”
“As entry-level talent has gotten more sophisticated and discerning about opportunities and career paths, that old paradigm of ‘pay your dues’ isn’t working as well,” says Lance LaVergne, chief diversity officer and SVP of global talent acquisition and associate experience at Tommy Hilfiger and Calvin Klein-owner PVH, which supports a 40,000-strong workforce in over 40 countries. “Companies have to recognise that [this] generation of emerging talent isn’t going to wait around forever for their opportunity.”

“It is incumbent upon companies to make sure they are paying a liveable wage, so that people can afford to be in this business, which is particularly true for underrepresented or underserved communities,” adds LaVergne. “We have to think more broadly about the types of emerging talent we are attracting to our industry, for whom we are creating opportunity, and do all that we can to eliminate barriers.”

Reassess Job Specifications and Candidate Assessment Criteria

To further widen talent pools, businesses need to reconsider where they recruit. “We’re used to recruiting just at design schools, but that’s not the talent we necessarily need,” says Alfred Chang, president of Californian retailer and Gen-Z-focused brand, PacSun, which counts 80 percent of its corporate workforce as under the age of 30. A survey of 10,000 Gen-Z consumers by Piper Jaffray in 2021 saw PacSun rank third most popular clothing brand and shopping website in the US.

Outside of fashion schools, companies should consider those without formal higher education. Forbes reported last year that 75 percent of Gen-Z say there are other ways of getting a good education than going to college — especially prevalent with applicants unconvinced about spending exorbitant student fees on a digital college experience without the social benefits of campus life.

Indeed, for those in education, the parameters for learning have shifted exponentially with UNESCO reporting more than 1.5 billion students globally are affected by school and university closures due to Covid-19. As a result, there will be holes in formal education — with employers needing to adjust to transferable skills beneficial to the workplace.

“Since last year, I can see that [students] have had to be even more organised and stricter than before to be able to lead a project while they are not together at school,” says Thomas Delattre, a professor in consumer behaviour and director of entrepreneurship programmes at the Institut Français de la Mode.

Employers must also reconsider their expectations on work experience, with the pandemic disrupting talents’ ability to acquire placements. In the UK, market research and data analytics firm YouGov found 61 percent of employers had to cancel some or all of their work experience placements in 2020. Despite this, 42 percent of surveyed employers thought it unlikely businesses would take this disruption around work placements into consideration in hiring decisions post-pandemic.

“I think the industry needs to be more open-minded about [relevant experience],” says Tuhina Mitra, Future Graduates consultant at London College of Fashion. “Certain brands are restrictive in their selection process — and they’ve got their own reasons for it.

Reflect Skill Sets in Job Titles

With a background in fashion recruitment, Mitra conducts market and industry research, and manages industry relations across fashion, media and creative industry, for London College of Fashion, The University of the Arts London.

“For businesses, they need to be open-minded about what they’re looking for in their recruitment processes. It’s more to do with transferable skill sets. The pandemic has shown how resilient we have all become with working in a digital way. This has also opened a wealth of new talent, like those with disabilities [who have to work from home].

What’s more, the whole concept of having ‘graduate’ in [a junior’s] job title is absolutely irrelevant. You might have a [student] buyer’s admin assistant who has worked for a brand for six months as part of their course curriculum, yet [they don’t qualify] when they are applying for a buyer’s admin assistant position and need a year’s industry experience — plus, such roles should no longer only apply to newly graduated talent, otherwise the talent pool is further confined and depleted.”
However, it’s a limitation by not tapping into several niche talents or opening to new demographics. “You have to be willing to think differently about what is required to actually do a job — how much of what you need in your talent as intrinsic skills versus what can be taught on the job,” says LaVergne. “Does someone need four years’ experience, or do they need to be bright, creative, good thinkers, and we can teach the other stuff?”

Consider More Flexible Employment
Younger generations are predisposed to more flexible working options. In 2019, Statista reported 53 percent of Gen-Zs in the US were participating in freelance work, compared to 40 percent of Millennials, 31 percent of Gen-X and 29 percent of Boomers.

“For young people, freelancing makes them feel like they have more control — they can choose when they work to a certain extent,” says Patel Williams, whose agency Livity connects brands with young freelance and contract workers. “For brands, it’s beneficial to bring in freelancers to work almost in a satellite way. [If they are] orbiting your business, you can pull [them] in and out as you need, based on their experience.”

“When we think about Gen-Z, they are a lot more fluid than the generations before them. They’ll have all of these different hats that they wear because they want choice. This naturally develops a multi-hyphenated and hybrid individual,” adds Patel Williams.

Outside of using freelance or short-term contract work, employers need to consider greater flexibility for their full-time team members too. “The industry has to adapt its working methods and understand that the new generation are multidisciplinary. We need to let emerging talents have the option to work on different projects in parallel to their activity for brands,” says Delattre. “We should not force them to choose, but encourage both at the same time.” Companies need to carefully consider what parameters they should impose to ensure they are leveraging their talent effectively, while also helping them satisfy their need for creative freedom.

“When people don’t have boundaries, they tend to lose track of what they are trying to do. What are those boundaries within an organisation or in a role? Might they be financial or time boundaries? Now, it’s about this more protean career where you shape your [work] based on your own goals,” says Jennifer Jordan, Ph.D., a social psychologist and professor of leadership and organisational behaviour at IMD.

Citing Google’s 20 percent rule — a system that parent company Alphabet introduced 20 years ago, encouraging individuals or teams to use 20 percent of their time working on bigger picture projects without immediate results — Jordan believes it provides recognition and opportunities for employees to work on personal goals.

Exhibit 1: In the US, freelance work is most popular among Gen-Z compared with older generations.
Proportion of workers in the US that participate in freelance work, by generational cohort, as of 2019 (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Generation</th>
<th>Participate in freelance work</th>
<th>Do not participate in freelance work</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gen-Z</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Millennial</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gen-X</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baby Boomer</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Gen-Z is defined as 18-22 years old by Statista at time of survey.
Source: Statista
02. How to Leverage Emerging Talent

Hire Them Throughout Your Organisation

Today, the vast majority of emerging talent come from Gen-Z. They understand their generation’s expectations around topics like sustainability, mental health, diversity and inclusion.

“If you want to access that segment of a consumer population, you’ve got to understand it,” says LaVergne. “The best way to understand it is to have them represented in your organisation, and then be willing to listen to that segment when they are telling you what they want.”

Indeed, not only can this assist a company’s interface with Gen-Z consumers but also provide constructive feedback for older leaders with new perspectives relevant beyond marketing to younger generations.

“Naturally, for seasoned people in the industry, when something’s right up against your nose, it’s hard to see clearly. Young people come in, not so close to the brand or organisation, and they bring in perspective, which is vital to keep evolving as a business,” says Patel Williams.

Exhibit 2: Adults aged 18–29 boast the highest level of social media usage across all age groups.

Proportion of US adults that claim to ever use YouTube, Instagram and TikTok (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Media</th>
<th>18–29</th>
<th>30–49</th>
<th>50–64</th>
<th>65+</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>YouTube</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instagram</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TikTok</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Pew Research Center, 2021

Foster the Multi-Hyphenate, Hybrid Worker

Patel Williams is a business partner at London-based agency Livity, which connects brands including Nike, Depop, Netflix and Google with the next generation of creatives, activists, entrepreneurs and thought leaders. She also co-founded Brand Share the Mic and is the founder and creative director for non-gendered accessories brand FanGirl, inspired by Black and LGBTQ+ club culture.

“Younger generations are creating new careers for themselves and a lot of that doesn’t require the validation of a certain type of education or having worked at [a company] for so long. Gen-Z are generally a lot more fluid than the generations before them. This is more than just sexual orientation or identity — this is about a way of life. They’ll have all of these different hats that they wear because they want choice. This naturally develops a multi-hyphenated and hybrid individual.

That’s where you get these really interesting textures around their experience and I think, for brands, it’s beneficial to bring in freelancers to work almost in a satellite way. [If they are] orbiting your business, you can pull [them] in and out as you need, based on their experience. The natural way of them living more fluid lives, their life experience, massively informs your work and how you [approach your] work, your ideas and the way you solve problems.”

Rani Patel Williams
Business Partner, Livity
Co-Founder, Brand Share the Mic

Image source: Courtesy
“If you are going to bring in this younger generation of talent, [you] have to put them in places where you’re listening to them — hearing them.”

— Alfred Chang

For Gen-Z’s input to be an effective growth lever in a business, junior employees need to be dispersed across the business, its decision-making processes, and made to feel like they belong.

“If you are going to bring in this younger generation of talent, you’re not bringing it in just to sprinkle it into your organisation. You have to put them in places where you’re listening to them — hearing them,” says Chang.

Create Consultative Groups or Shadow Boards

To enable effective feedback from your junior workforce — to truly listen to them — companies can formulate cross-functional groups of younger employees representing different facets of the business. These groups can offer feedback or sense check any aspect of business or strategy, from diversity and inclusion initiatives to social media strategies, even design concepts.

Shadow boards are “a group of non-executive employees that work with senior executives on strategic initiatives [...] to leverage the younger groups’ insights and to diversify the perspectives that executives are exposed to,” Jordan wrote in the Harvard Business Review in 2019.

Gucci, an early adopter of the shadow board, formulated a committee of under-30s in 2015. Since then, the move has contributed towards its commercial success and popularity among young consumers despite being a 100-year-old brand.

Jordan has since evolved the initial best practices set out in her Harvard Business Review article — from keeping the criteria for joining broad to CEO buy-in — to three new factors that need to be present.
“First is exec sponsorship. If [not], they fade out. There also needs to be a form for exchange of ideas. [Some companies] don’t create any formal structure for the shadow board to communicate those ideas to the executive team and therefore, they have little influence on what happens strategically.”

For example, PacSun has leveraged a consultative group in response to the #StopAsianHate movement. Its “Be The Change Committee” is designed to address company initiatives around workforce diversification, “how we show up and project ourselves as a brand,” says Chang. “It’s an example of how we want to work with emerging talent to make sure we listen to them as the conscience of the company.”

Companies need to consider what process of feedback structure best suits their junior talent and executives. This might be a “floating representative,” with a different shadow board member presenting each month to the executive team. You could have an executive sit in on a shadow board meeting and report back to the wider senior team. Alternatively, executive team meetings are attended by the entire shadow board, or leaders could share briefs on research for the board to work on.

“Consider what briefs you put them on and manage your own internal stakeholders on that,” advises Patel Williams. “Your expectations need to be managed because they are still young talent. They’re still learning [and need] a level of nurturing.”

Finally, juniors should be trained on how to structure and share their ideas so they resonate with executives. Communication training will enable more effective communication between the two bodies and give younger employees the courage to speak up.

Utilise Reverse Mentorship
While a shadow board enables select groups to input into wider strategies, executives and managers might also consider accessing individual feedback from junior talent with whom they develop a direct relationship.

“More than ever, a brand or fashion company needs to be able to translate the values of an individual,” says Delattre. “To translate it correctly, surrounding yourself with young talent in a company is a sure way to do that.”

Mentoring can empower juniors with an opportunity for personal development in appropriately private forums, while senior employees can access an informal feedback loop — the equivalent of a one-person test group.

Harvard Business Review reported this year that 76 percent of people say mentors are important. Yet, the CFDA x PVH 2021 report found only 36 percent of employees of colour reported having a senior person to go to for advice during a challenging time. This only increased to 47 percent for white employees.

Formalising a reverse mentorship programme normalises the practice, making it easier for junior employees to access or request a mentor.

“With any mentor relationship, it’s two ways. It’s not like coaching. The older member imparts some organisational
leadership knowledge, while the younger person will share different perspectives and experiences with the older person,” says Jordan.

Indeed, coach style management — in which managers offer support and guidance rather than instructions, control and scrutiny — is a leadership approach that nurtures employees, allowing them to make their own mistakes and generate their own learnings. What’s more, many organisations have found that coach style leadership approach became necessary during the pandemic without direct contact with employees and asynchronous communications while working from home.

Reverse mentorship builds on that supportive style of management — but it takes the role of nurturing a step further in demonstrating that the senior employee is listening to and valuing the input of the junior, and wanting to learn from them.

“For the more senior person who is being reverse-mentored, it just widens their aperture on a host of things, whether it’s around diversity and inclusion, along racial lines, LGBTQIA+ issues or generational differences,” adds LaVergne.

“Your expectations need to be managed because they are still young talent. They’re still learning [and need] a level of nurturing.”

— Rani Patel Williams

Develop a Mentor-Oriented Leadership Style

Chang joined LA-based PacSun in 2006 in the men’s merchandising team, working his way up to chief brand officer in 2017 before becoming president of the retail company a year later. PacSun counts 80 percent of its corporate workforce as under the age of 30. A survey of 10,000 Gen-Z consumers by Piper Jaffray in 2021 saw PacSun rank third most popular clothing brand and shopping website in the US.

“We want to ensure our overall culture embraces and supports leaders that understand how to get the most out of the younger talent and the younger generation. It’s a very different style. It’s not about just purely managing them, it’s about how you mentor them. How do you continue to create a relationship that really allows them to feel their voice is being heard, and they are involved in creating an impact?

For example, [our] leaders take time out of their day-to-day to teach and mentor [juniors] around communication styles — things that go beyond the technical part of [the job]. Teaching them about empathy, how to properly listen and how to grow beyond just the specifics of the business. Investing that time into our people is important.”

Alfred Chang
President, PacSun

Image source: Courtesy

businessoffashion.com
03. How to Retain Emerging Talent

Provide Mental Health Support
Gen-Z are increasingly concerned with mental health support — and its relevance in the workplace holds significant weight on their retention. Mind Share Partners’ Mental Health at Work 2019 Report found 75 percent of Gen-Z left roles in the past for mental health reasons, both voluntarily and involuntarily, compared with 34 percent of respondents overall. What’s more, 86 percent of the survey’s respondents said a company’s culture should support mental health.

Mental health support is increasingly a non-negotiable for businesses, especially with the pandemic’s impact on mental health illnesses, which saw 56 percent of adults aged 18 to 24 report symptoms of anxiety and/or depressive disorder. Poor mental health was exacerbated by job losses or lower incomes, with affected adults reporting higher rates of mental illness symptoms than those without job or income loss (53 percent vs. 32 percent), according to US non-profit health organisation KFF.

As a result, when considering health benefits and training for employees, mental health support must be included and treated with the same respect as physical health concerns.

Practice What You Preach
BoF’s Employee Survey in 2019 found 73 percent of Millennial and Gen-Z respondents said that creating positive impact is critical to their long-term commitment to an employer and 92 percent agreed that businesses have a responsibility to address environmental and societal issues.

Greenwashing and virtue signalling activism can be hard to decipher for consumers, but behind the scenes, companies will struggle to convince or silence younger employees if a company is perceived to only pay lip service on critical issues.

“This is a generation that feels they can really contribute to the world,” says Chang. “They expect to join a workforce today and create an impact. They care about the brand that they are associated with and how they are helping to make the world a better place.”

Creating an inclusive, nurturing company culture is also essential to appeal to a younger employee base. US-based market
research firm Quantilope found 76 percent of Gen-Z surveyed in December 2020 said they feel diversity and inclusion is an important topic for brands to address, compared to 72 percent of Millennials, 63 percent of Gen-X and 46 percent of Baby Boomers.

What’s more, the rise in call-out culture on social media, plus the ability to review employers on unverified sites like Glassdoor, means companies must consider the potential impact of public scrutiny. Pertinently, 66 percent of consumers said they would stop or significantly reduce shopping at a brand if they found it was not treating its employees fairly, according to BoF and McKinsey’s State of Fashion Report 2021.

Offer Alternatives for Learning and Development

With their drive for learning and development opportunities, businesses need to get creative with their retention methods to keep junior talent engaged and constantly learning. This is all the more true due to the delayed promotion opportunities pandemic-impacted performance may have created.

“If [you] have a cohort of talent interested in new experiences and new opportunities, you have to create a mechanism within your organisation that helps meet that need so they don’t look elsewhere,” says LaVergne, who believes an emphasis on internal mobility can help satisfy junior talent’s drive for newness and education, while also creating a pipeline of talent that will keep costs down on onboarding and training entirely new recruits.

“By creating opportunity for advancement, growth and development, you strengthen the culture and fabric of your organisation,” he adds. “Instead of having a possessive mindset around the talent on a particular team, think about talent as an organisational asset, so you reward people who are good developers and exporters of talent within the organisation.”

Jordan takes the approach a step further by advocating “externships,” which see employees send their staff to educational institutions or work elsewhere for a short while — perhaps at a non-profit or in a different country. These employees can then bring the learnings back to their workplace.

These opportunities can only work with buy-in and empowerment from those at the top. “Give them the resources that need to go along with those opportunities, like a budget, maybe even a team to help them accomplish some of these goals or projects,” says Jordan.

Exhibit 5: As a generation, Gen-Z value diversity and inclusion the most as a topic for brands to address.

Proportion of individuals in the US that believe diversity and inclusion is an important topic for brands to address, by generational cohort (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Generation</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gen-Z</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Millennial</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gen-X</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baby Boomer</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Gen-Z is defined as 18-22 years old by Quantilope at time of survey.

Source: Quantilope survey, 2020
Additional Reading and Helpful Resources

- Social Media Fact Sheet, Pew Research Center, April 2021
- The Implications of COVID-19 for Mental Health and Substance Use, KFF, by Nirmita Panchal, Rabah Kamal, Cynthia Cox and Rachel Garfield, February 2021
- What do Consumers Expect From Brands in 2021 Around Diversity & Inclusion? Quantilope, February 2021
- Google Says It Still Uses the ‘20-Percent Rule,’ and You Should Totally Copy It, Inc, by Bill Murphy Jr, November 2020
- Majority of UK employers have had to cancel work experience due to Covid-19, The Guardian, by Sally Weale, July 2020
- Covid-19 Impacts: Access To The Workplace, Sutton Trust, July 2020
- When Outraged Commenters Are Your Employees, The Business of Fashion, by M.C. Nanda and Tamison O’Connor, June 2020
- What Your Youngest Employees Need Most Right Now, Harvard Business Review, by by Lauren Stiller Rikleen, June 2020
- The Leader as Coach, Harvard Business Review, by Herminia Ibarra and Anne Scoular, November–December 2019
- Why Millennial and Gen-Z Employees Are Really Leaving You, Forbes, John Hall, May 2019
- Mental Health at Work 2019 Report, Mind Share Partners, 2019
- Gen Z In The Workforce: How To Recruit And Retain Youth Generations, Forbes, by Jeff Fromm, July 2018
- Professional Mentee–Mentor Relationship in 2019, Olivet Nazarene University
- Welcome to Generation Z report, Deloitte, by Karianne Gomez, Tiffany Mawhinney and Kimberly Betts
- UNESCO Global Education Coalition COVID-19 Education Response
- Fashion Designer Job Profile, Prospects
- Living Wage Foundation
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