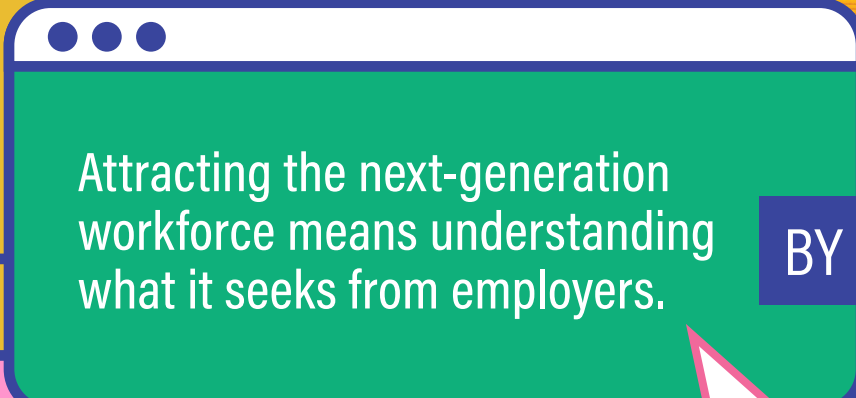




ARE YOU

READY FOR A GEN Z WORK



Attracting the next-generation workforce means understanding what it seeks from employers.

BY RENEE PAS



FORCE?

You would be hard-pressed to find a convenience store not hiring today. Even the biggest c-store chains are struggling to fill every open spot. Wage increases, extra pay during the summer travel season and hiring bonuses have been widely reported as the industry remains in the struggle-to-hire-and-retain camp, along with restaurants and other sectors.

Even as U.S. unemployment claims jump, hiring simply has not gotten easier. As the pandemic showed signs of subsiding, many assumed it would become an employer’s market given the number of displaced workers around the country. “That has not been the case, however,” said Eleesha Martin, recruiting manager at G&A Partners, a human resources firm based in Houston. “Candidates found new things to do, and even if their unemployment benefits might be coming to an end, it’s still not an employer’s market.”

Understanding how to attract the younger generation of employees, specifically Generation Z, can yield new perspectives in hiring and retention. In 2021, Gen Z lands right in the sweet spot for potential c-store new hires as they are now teenagers and in their early 20s. The Pew Research center defines Generation Z as anyone born after 1996. This group comes with their own views on life and work; understanding how they approach both can benefit any industry looking to draw employees from this demographic. Two notable workplace “wants” from Gen Z, according to a Yello Recruiting Study, are the desire for greater flexibility with the key to that being work-life balance and a desire to move up the career path. Knowing how to connect with Gen Z can at minimum offer some guidance in today’s difficult labor landscape.

iStock.com/khosrorik

IN PRACTICE: HOW TXB INTERVIEWS TODAY

The interview process has changed drastically at TXB, or Texas Born, formerly known as Kwik Chek. The standard approach the 47-store chain used to follow was a sit-down interview with the store manager, who then essentially provided a yes or no stamp of approval. “We threw that process out the window,” said Nathan Graham, human resources director for TXB.

Now, the first person a potential employee comes into contact with at the store has the tools to start things moving. They start by welcoming the person to the store, Graham said, and tell the applicant that if they become part of the store team, they get a free drink on every shift. “Then they get them a free drink and walk them around the store and introduce them to everyone—it’s a quick store tour,” he said. That employee has a baseline of roughly 10 questions to ask, who then (assuming the potential employee seems like a fit at that time) hands the candidate off to a cashier for what TXB dubs a Realistic Job Preview, or RJP.

The RJP essentially allows a potential employee to shadow the cashier and watch the interaction that happens with customers. “It gives them an idea of what they would be doing,” Graham explained. Then, if things still seem like a fit, the person speaks with the store manager.

The new approach provides a better hiring gauge for whether or not someone is a fit, Graham said, while at the same time giving everyone on-site a way to be connected and engaged with the process. Another advantage: The new person would have already met several other co-workers before even starting work. “It helps eliminate some of the ‘new person’ feelings of the first day,” he said.



There is a lot of frustration going on right now as employers navigate the new hiring and retention landscape, Martin said. “It’s difficult to keep candidates engaged right now throughout the hiring process.”


A tough hiring landscape is not something new for c-stores, said Nathan Graham, human resources director at 47-store chain TXB, or Texas Born, formerly known as Kwik Chek. “It’s never been easy to hire and retain employees at the store level,” he noted. “It’s just a little harder to bring people into this industry. There’s just a bit of a stigma about convenience stores. Yet once [new hires] experience it, it’s generally different than what they thought.”

Graham has been approaching hiring with a fresh set of eyes as he worked to staff up for the opening of the first ground-up TXB in August in Georgetown, Texas. The new store comes with an elevated approach to its c-store offering and also ups the ante from employees’ perspectives, he added. “The younger generation definitely views it as the cool new place to work,” he said. It’s definitely the bright new shiny thing, he added, with a clean, modern design that creates an elevated work environment compared to how potential employees might view a legacy-style gas station.

The goal when staffing discussions were first happening for the new store was to aim for “40% over,” Graham said, meaning to hire 40% more staff than what they would actually need to run the store. As of late July, there were 26 people on staff for



the store, with Graham still looking for a few more. “The goal was to staff heavy,” he said, in anticipation of turnover. Standard hiring elements applied, including the chain’s referral bonus program, which pays an employee \$250 the first day someone they referred starts the job, and an additional \$250 if that person remains with the company 90 days later. One Gen Z employee hired for the new store subsequently referred five of her friends.



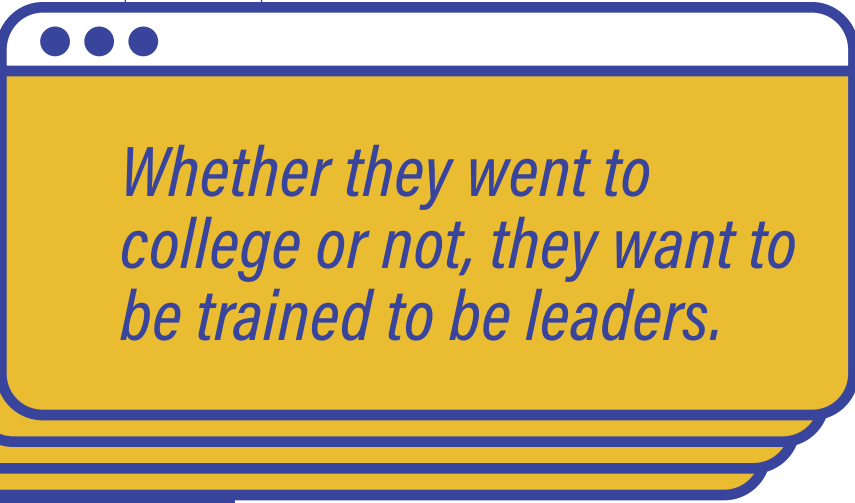
great conversations along the way,” Graham said. They’d talk about what the expectations were for the day, for example, or review learnings from the day on the ride home. “There was also a lot of learning about the individuals,” he added, for example, sports that some of the younger hires play. The time together allowed for team bonding.

Once hired, expect that Gen Z employees will want to be able to continue to grow, Martin pointed out. “Whether they went to college or not, they want to be trained to be leaders.” Another “want” from Gen Z employees today: flexibility. “Don’t blow that off,” she advised. “Keep it in consideration.”

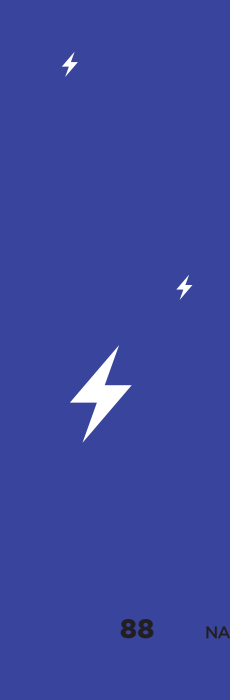
The new normal is still being shaped right now, said Martin. “Employers are still figuring out flexibility. They are negotiating it out with employees.” She noted even internally at G&A Partners, the company expected everyone to come back to the office in September but decided to postpone the return until February 2022, following some employee pushback. “Figure out what’s important to each person,” she advised. “What can you make concessions on?”

Babir Sultan, owner of FavTrip, a 12-store chain based in Independence, Missouri, strives to work with employees wherever he can. For example, he switched to a two-month-in-advance employee schedule based on feedback. “People want to have a personal life and schedule stuff out,” he said. It was a relatively simple change to rethink shift schedules, and it made a difference to employees. He noted that while traits such as having a more flexible work schedule might be attributed to Gen Z most frequently in research reports, he finds the desire for more control over their schedule applies to all his employees.

The idea of schedule flexibility was supported by research at the Workforce Institute at UKG, which provides research and education on workplace issues. When talking about the research in an online post, Dan Schawbel, a board member at Workforce Institute who worked on a global study of Gen Z, found Gen Z will work “harder and longer if they are in a culture that supports a flexible schedule.”



Whether they went to college or not, they want to be trained to be leaders.



Hiring for that location did yield a few learnings about employee expectations today. One unexpected challenge was the lack of interest among new hires—many of whom are Gen Zers—in traveling to train for their new jobs. It’s too early to tell if that reluctance is unique to Gen Z or caused by some other factor, but it is something TXB will continue to monitor and adjust as needed. “There are a handful of existing stores within an hour of the Georgetown site,” Graham said, “but the new hires absolutely didn’t want to drive that far, even though we pay them for the travel.” The TXB team got creative and resolved the issue by renting a van to bus people back and forth for training sessions.

One of the side benefits of escorting employees was the discussion en route. “There were some



Employers are still figuring out flexibility. They are negotiating it out with employees.

Sultan noted, “It’s not always about pay. We ask [employees] what they are looking for. We want them to feel appreciated and want to try and meet their needs.” Many FavTrip employees have remained store-level employees for five years or more, he said. “We want to be invested for the long term with them.”

“Communicate, communicate, communicate” is a mantra Sultan adheres to with employees.

That’s a refrain echoed by Todd Jenney, a consultant with Phoenix-based Business Accelerator Team (BATeam) and former CEO for Martin & Bayley, dba Huck’s Convenience Stores. He recalls the value of listening to store-level employees during his time with Huck’s and believes the significance of those conversations has only accelerated today.

“It was important for employees to know that senior leaders wanted to hear what they were feeling,” Jenney said. “We always felt like we were getting to the grassroots when we did what we called the ‘great store tours’ and listened to how we could make the company better for [store associates].” During those visits, each staff member was allotted five minutes to talk and have their voice heard. While the first few times around the conversations were a bit intense, he admitted, over time it became clear employees wanted their voice to be heard.

SURVEY SAYS ...

Young millennials and Gen Z (born between 1989 and 2001) want to work for an organization that cares about employees’ well-being, according to a 2018 Gallup survey. Two other priorities for

those groups: ethical leadership and a diverse, inclusive organization.

“These themes have only been amplified over the past year,” said Ed O’Boyle, global practice leader for Gallup’s workplace and marketplace consulting, in a March 2021 Gallup article following up on the 2018 survey results.

In fact, the first two of those themes—employee well-being and ethical leadership—also extended to reach what Gallup classifies as older millennials (born between 1980 and 1988), as well as Gen X (born between 1965 and 1979) and baby boomers (born between 1946 and 1964). The varying element among age groups was in the No. 3 spot: Young millennials and Gen Z noted diversity and inclusion; older millennials cited open and transparent leadership; and Gen X and baby boomers both said financial stability.

In essence, the big priorities for all employees today—employee well-being and ethical leadership—translate to every age sector.

Caring about well-being can connect to things such as career, social, financial, community and physical, according to Gallup. The thinking is that each influences the other.

Here’s how an idea in practice demonstrates this: Amarillo, Texas-based Pak-A-Sak convenience stores participated in a #meetourmanagers social media campaign that spotlighted one store manager each week on Facebook, then moved on to district managers. Each person’s story ultimately touched on multiple connections.

TOP 3 EMPLOYEE PRIORITIES

Here's what employees expect from an organization today:

1. Care about employee well-being
2. Ethical leadership
3. Diversity and inclusivity

The first two expectations extend to employees of any age group. The priority shifted in the third slot, where older millennials (born 1980–88) cited open and transparent leadership instead of diversity and inclusivity, and Gen X and baby boomers cited financial stability.

Source: Gallup

For example, the post of store manager Ken Chrostowski talked about how he strives to help his staff grow within the parameters of their jobs. He has touched not only the employees' lives but also their families. He has received letters from family members of former clerks thanking him for the time he spent teaching and motivating those former staffers. That story serves double duty to both recognize Chrostowski and demonstrate to potential employees that Pak-A-Sak offers a unique work environment and will take the time to guide personal career growth.

There are ample studies regarding Gen Z and what they want from a workplace, most of which have common themes such as noting they grew up with technology in a way no other generation has. All the studies offer good insights on this new generation entering the workforce, but one comment that Workforce Institute at UKG referenced earlier now seems more relevant: mental health.

Simone Biles and her plight at the Olympics drew fresh attention to emotional well-being. It is something that Gen Z connects with intensely, with the Workforce Institute blog noting that “anxiety is the biggest thing holding [Gen Z] back from achieving success at work and life.” The media reports surrounding Biles and how she handled her own bout of anxiety may open the flood gates for future mental health conversations. While mental health remains a stigma in the workplace, noted Schawbel, more companies are bringing therapists in-house to help employees. (See “Mental Health in the Workplace” on page 96.) “Smart companies will help Gen Z solve their basic human needs in order for them to realize their full potential at work.”



Renee Pas has spent more than 20 years writing about various retail channels. Her formative c-store years were spent in communications at White Hen Pantry, a family-owned c-store chain acquired by 7-Eleven in 2006. She can be reached at reneepas4@gmail.com.

