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Neha Mehrotra

Just five years ago, Elon Musk was tweeting how "nobody ever changed the world on 40 hours a week", suggesting a work week of 80-100 hours. "Pain level increases exponentially above 80," he warned. The young workforce responded with cheer and admiration – after all, they were part of a millennials-fuelled hustle culture punctuated by #ThankGodIt'sMonday hashtags.

Things are different in the post-pandemic world. Today's youth, the infamous Gen Z, don't react kindly to 77-year-old billionaires or anyone else telling them to work 70-hour weeks. Their priorities are different, to say the least: they don't want to be 9 to 5 "corporate mazzdoors"; they'll avoid working overtime unless "the world is falling apart"; they'll talk to the director of the company as casually as they do a co-worker; they all seem to have side-hustles, or at least side-dreams that they nurture in anticipation of future fruition. All in all, there's a sense of limitless possibilities. As one Gen Zer put it, there are so many choices that it's paralyzing because "we could be so many things right now".

The flip side, however, is that the retention rate for Gen Z employees tends to be quite poor. Most stay on at companies anywhere between one and five years – the number often being closer to one. This generation is also the most susceptible to 'corporate despair' (videos of youngsters screaming in panic rooms, for instance, are doing the rounds on social media). According to data from LinkedIn, 94% of Gen Z professionals are considering a job switch in 2024. Their top priority, the platform found, is work-life balance, with 20% listing it as their main career goal and 36% leaving their current jobs for it.

It's important to acknowledge, as many of these Gen Z professionals do, that they are part of a relatively privileged minority. Even as unemployment among the rest of India's youth is rampant, almost touching 46%, with every new day bringing news of job cuts and digital disruptions – like Reliance Industries reportedly cutting 42,000 jobs in FY 2024 – this select group of highly educated youngsters float above it all. Their parents, beneficiaries of India's steadily growing GDP over the last 20 years, have acquired sufficient wealth and security that their children can now afford to demand better, raise the bar higher, and if not met, quit jobs that don't suit them.

Employers, for their part, are having a hard time dealing with this new, "high-maintenance" generation. Very few are equipped for these fresh-from-college graduates talking about mental health, toxic work culture, and choice of pronouns.

Clash of the generations

Part of the "COVID-batch", Nadia Khatib's college years were spent online. Amid Zoom classes and Google Meet study sessions, the 24-year-old started creating food videos and offering restaurant reviews and recommendations on Instagram. Before she knew it, she had become a social media influencer for all things Goa. Her job as a social media marketing associate at MindShift Interactive, a digital marketing and branding agency, was an extension of this – and it was great. The job was remote, the company was filled with Gen Z employees, and Khatib's boss was open to creative ideas, even when it involved luxury clientele such as Taj who usually have strict, staid brand guidelines. The company also had no problem with Khatib being a "creator" on the side. "There were so many days that I worked from an event with my laptop," she recalls.

Eighteen months later, she moved to a different marketing company (the workload not aligning with her health), but this time around, her experience was very different. She was the only Gen Zer there, the rest being millennials. There was a lot of micro-managing and doing things the long way. "Gen Z, we like to close our work as efficiently as possible. But I find that millennials will have doubts, will rethink things, and end up doubling the work," she says. (On the contrary, Khatib's former boss, Marilyn Pinto, 31, believes Gen Zers tend to overthink, especially since, for many, it is their first job.)

She also felt like she was judged for drawing boundaries: not working late,

This 'high-maintenance' generation speaks up for self-reliance, isn't okay with inflexible work environments, and wants to retire by 35. There's a lot that corporates can learn from them too: from transparency to pay equality

GEN Z: BREAKING THE 9 TO 5

not working on weekends. But why should she? "They only pay us for work hours and I have a life beyond work." For now, she's managed to squeeze her content creation and freelancing projects into the weekend, but she's looking for a switch, preferably to a Gen Z-heavy company.

Others are more jaded. In Bengaluru, Bani S.* has worked at three different start-ups in the last few years spanning a variety of sectors, all of which have had a "crazy pace" of work – "My output was what two people would have produced anywhere else". But one of them was the worst. "It was the most toxic job that I've ever had, and I didn't last more than six months," says the 24-year-old, describing it as a "daffar" from the 90s, where to prove your loyalty to the company, you had to sit in front of the boss from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m., apart from working Saturdays, sometimes Sundays, and always being available. "It felt like such a fundamental difference. The things they considered important, that level of micromanagement, I just didn't get it," she says. She soon moved to a new company, and her expectations this time were more modest. "All I'm looking for is flexibility. If you give me more control over my time and the same deliverables, I'm okay with it."

Focus on money and growth

Bosses, sitting on the opposite end of the spectrum, come with their own perspective. Nayla Pandit, 37, has worked at an American multinational technology company for eight years, and has encountered her fair share of Gen Zers. From her experience, they want two things: money and accelerated growth. "There are freshers from IIT, BITS, and NIT who join with insanely high packages, like ₹18-₹19 lakh per annum – it's almost as much as I'm getting paid after all these years. And within three months, they're talking about appraisals and asking for promotions," she says.



If you look at Gen Z as compared to Gen Y or X, they expect a lot of communication, recognition, and respect for how they've done their work. They're also big on authenticity.

SHVETA RAJNA
Founder and CEO, Talarang

The company does its best to retain them, but often can't keep up with their expectations. Pandit divulged that they hired 40 freshers in 2019; of them, 38 have left. Some leave for better packages elsewhere, but she's also seen a few quitting the corporate grind altogether to do "whacky" things: start restaurants, and, in one case, join the Padukone Academy to become a professional badminton player.

Even the ones who end up staying are clear that they're doing it just for the money. "They all want to retire by 35,"

she says. This requires avid financial planning, and Gen Zers seem on board. According to a recent *Financial Times* article, the last few years have seen a frenzied enthusiasm for trading among the country's Gen Z cohort, courtesy cheap brokerage, and a band of 'influencers'. The benchmark Nifty 50 index of large Indian companies has doubled over the last five years, beating Japan's resurgent Nikkei 225 and even America's S&P 500. Looking at today's employed youngsters, Pandit can see why. "Even before they've walked into their first job, they have their financial planner on board with them. SIPs, mutual funds, everything is in place," she jokes, a stark difference from her own generation (millennials) who never had that level of financial literacy.

Her company has recently taken to discouraging employees from hiring freshers, in favour of someone with two to three years of experience. They want someone well-versed with the ins and outs of corporate culture. Most significantly, one often has to pay a fresher as much as someone with two to three years of experience. It's no wonder that job listings have now started specifying requirements for "freshers with 2-3 years of experience". How someone with three years of experience qualifies as a 'fresher', or what real freshers with zero experience are to do, remains to be seen. Even the BITS graduate Pandit hired this year has a year's experience, and in spite of it, has been hired on a contractual basis.

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NAYLA PANDIT
A millennial boss working at a multinational

ILLUSTRATION: SATHISH VELLINEZH

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Can Gen Z and corporates play well?

This gap, between Gen Zers and the corporates they work for, is real. A few organisations are trying to bridge it, working with young professionals to get them job-ready while simultaneously training corporates on how to deal with, and retain, their Gen Z workforce. Shweta Raina's Telangar is one of them.

A Harvard Business School graduate and former McKinsey employee, Raina has experienced first-hand how university doesn't prepare you for the corporate grind. At Telangar, they start students off with an assessment to gauge how job-ready they are. Depending on the results, they are provided training in a set of hard and soft skills followed by mentorship. "If you look at Gen Z as compared to Gen Y or X, they expect a lot of communication, recognition, and respect for how they've done their work. They're also big on authenticity. Whereas corporates are used to keeping things very black and white," says Raina. So, on the one hand, Telangar works with young graduates to temper their expectations, and on the other, they work with corporates on how to get Gen Z adjusted into their organisation.

The most effective way of doing this, Raina has found, is through internships. "All initial teaching issues get brought up at this stage, and we can work through them." After every internship, Telangar gives students feedback on what the company said about them. "This ensures that when they get placed, they're not learning on the job." They're prepared. Interestingly, the latest Union Budget has adopted a similar approach with its new internship scheme. Under this, 500 top companies in India have been encouraged to hire 2+

GLAZ: BREAKING THE 9 TO 5

24-year-olds as interns, where the government will offer a monthly allowance of ₹5,000 for 12 months. This is expected to make the corporates' vast youth work-ready, paving the way for easier employment.

An employee-first ethos
In spite of all that's said of Gen Z, there are instances of them setting into organisations seamlessly. Much of this has to do with workplace culture, proving that good organisations with an employee-first ethos are more than capable of flattening generational divides. Caari Bansal, 27, spent the first three years of her professional life working for Twitter as a product manager, and by her own admission, it "spilled her in terms of culture, access, exposure". Organisations like these don't have a stereotypical 'Indian-company mentality', she

Inter-generational dialogue

A recent Stanford-affiliated study, spearheaded by researcher Roberta Katz, states that Gen Z employees are collaborative, self-reliant, and value diversity and inclusion. Katz recently told the *Stanford Report*: "Gen Z may be more likely to question authority because they are so used to finding what they need on their own." But that's not to say they are always right. "Often they don't know what they need, especially in a new setting," she says, "and this is where inter-generational dialogue can be helpful. The older colleague can learn new ways of getting a job done, while the younger colleague may learn good reasons for why things have been done in a certain way."



Saurabh Misal

How to motivate a young workforce

According to Gen Zers themselves, it's the little things that count. For instance, it might be breakfast for people who start shifts early or electric foot massages for those on their feet for long periods of time. Nadia recalled appreciating the weekly CEO (Chaitan Charcha) sessions at MindShift Interactive, where the entire team got on Zoom calls to bond over games, debates and gossip; Bani enjoyed the evening cricket sessions with teammates; and still others have said they appreciated things like subsidised housing, team lunches, and employee awards. These things might seem negligible, but for Gen Zers, it's a sign that their companies care.

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Why work for ₹14,000 a month?

Service sectors, especially hospitality, have left Gen Zers disenchanted. According to hotel management graduate Saurabh Misal, young recruits have to work 14-hour shifts at hotels for a measly salary of ₹14,000 a month. Promotions are slow on the operational side, taking three years each to move up the ladder—from steward to captain to supervisor to executive to assistant manager. "It usually stops there. People rarely become full-fledged managers."

Misal, 26, became disenchanted during campus placements: he had applied for a management training programme at a five-star luxury hotel chain. He didn't make it beyond the fourth round of selection (of six), which comprised a one-on-one interview. As he was leaving, one of the recruiters—a fellow Maharashtrian—shared that hotel chains like theirs rarely hired "dusky-skinned" candidates like him. Come graduation, though, he got three offers, one of them from another five-star chain, where after a year as a trainee he'd be promoted to manager with a salary of ₹35,000, a discouraged Misal decided to leave the industry for good.

On average, attrition rates for Gen Zers in hospitality have been high, most leaving within 8-12 months for jobs in the airline and retail sectors, says Misal's friend, who wished to remain anonymous. Post-pandemic, when the rates jumped to a whopping 45%, the industry took note, with some hotels announcing a complete overhaul in workplace policies including an emphasis on shifts, including shorter shifts, quarterly incentives and a 10% hike for juniors.

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Sunil Ralambal

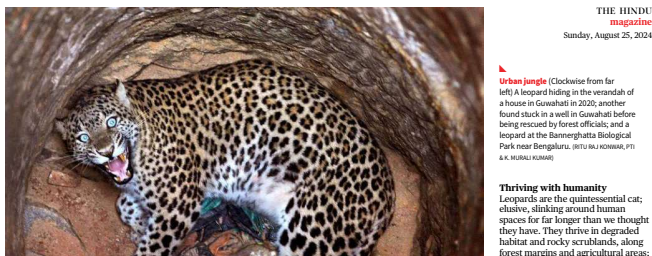
LEOPARD AT MY DOORSTEP

Once thought to be elusive, the big cat is far more visible now with 65% of the population existing outside protected areas

We are watching bats. Short-nosed fruit bats diving boldly in through the arc of faint white lamps onto a bunch of ripening *Jatropha* plantains. Louise, who had been barking her head off at them, is suddenly quiet, covering with her cool nose at the back of my knee. All I can hear are leaves. Green leaves dancing and dry leaves skating through dark silences on the street. It is hard to believe that 100 feet downhill is a bustling thoroughfare with street lights and supermarkets. Across the road, houses stealthily twinkle up another hillside to a lonely wood perched on the crown. This is not unusual in Guwahati. The city's surging population overruns accessible plain areas near the Brahmaputra before spreading into the forested hills and wetlands. Non-forest areas have exploded by 1,176% from 1976 to 2018. Assam has lost 2,600 sq km, and the Northeast, a massive 17,650 sq km, of free cover.

What does Louise know that I don't? She is eight and has one good eye, but hers is a world of scent. When her family goes out, she knows when they are half a mile away. Dogs probably have a different concept of time to ours. One of all three trees can exist at the same time. Perhaps the leopard is downwind, and his odour has wafted up to her. Perhaps he padded by our back, but his distinctive musk is lingering. Or perhaps there is a leopard right there in the shadows. "Does she know if he is hungry or has fed?" A leopard is the one creature that loves dogs more than humans do.

The unseen presence
How do I know if a leopard? I can feel Louise's feet. She is a Naga hill



Urban jungle (Clockwise from left) A leopard hiding in the verandah of a house in Guwahati in 2020; a leopard found stuck in a well in Guwahati before being rescued by forest officials; and a leopard at the Bhanupratap Biological Park near Bengaluru. (ST/RAJ KANWAR, PTI & A. HUSAINI KAMAL)

WILD IN THE CITY

dog, proficient at hunting things smaller than herself. A fishing cat would be out of place here. A stray sambar deer would probably excrete outside the supermarket. Two nights back, there was a soft thud near the sunshade, like a pillow falling. Our daughter, who calls anything furry a 'bow bow', has been walking in the early hours to peek out of the window to beckon to an unseen 'bow bow'.

We call ourselves *Homo sapiens*, the wise human, making up for physical weakness with reasoning. And a lack of common sense. I reason that the cat is after the dog and wary of me. It is too early for a leopard to be out and about, so near habitation. And so, I step out for a walk leaving Louise safely at home. Fifty feet later, I am frozen to the spot with the hair on the back of my neck bristling. Someone is watching me. I cannot see much in the overgrown tangle beneath the shade of *Jatropha* and her. Just to be sure, I take a shot on my mobile phone with night mode on. Nothing is obvious, so I pinch the screen. And there he is, a short leap away. A grumpy spotted head buried in the grass. Nearly invisible. Nearly glowing at me—anything but fear in those eyes.

Then the reasoning makes its appearance again. Standing two feet from a grumpy leopard in the dark, taking photos with a mobile phone isn't the brightest thing to do. My heart is nearly bouncing out of my chest in the time it takes for my feet to get home. Louise is relieved to see me, grawwwing away to make sure I am not a ghost.

The author is a bird and writer based in Chennai.

The fourth in a series that looks at urban spaces as havens for overlooked species.

GREEN HUMOUR

Rohan Chakravarty



WE'RE CALLED PARASITIC SKINKS, SCAVENAGERS OF THE COLD SEAS AND THE LATEST VICTIMS OF BIRD FLU.



NOW DECLARED 'PANZOOTIC', HENI HAS EVEN BREACHED BOHÍ POLES, KILLING SEA BIRDS AND MAMMALS EN MASSE!



EXPERTS TRACE THIS BACK TO THE DESTRUCTION OF WETLANDS WORLDWIDE, AND PLACING INDUSTRIAL POULTRY & LIVESTOCK FARMS ON BIRD MIGRATION PATHWAYS.



I MEAN, THE SHEER GALL OF YOUR SPECIES TO CALL ANOTHER SPECIES 'PARASITIC! GOTTA LOVE YOUR SICK SENSE OF HUMOUR!



SICK-ENING, I MEANT.

Guardians of the people (Clockwise from below) Offerings of suruttu at Muniappan, Madurai Veeran with his wife; a woman on a tree; a ritual for Mariamm; people offer votive to Muthupattan; and devotees cutting coins to offer Vettuvazhi Kalliamman. (SARASWATHI S.R., MOORTHY P.)



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I happened almost 35 years ago. The elders in my village had assembled to discuss a curious incident caused by the *ambundi* (oracle) of the local Sudalaimann temple, the presiding deity of graveyards. He insisted that the village should organise a *kodai* (festival) as the deity was very particular about it. "He is not letting me sleep. If you organise the *kodai*, I will continue to perform the pujas," he said, and placed the keys of the sprawling graveyard, with his hansom and neem trees, before the elders.

There was an air of scepticism. These families with the Vaishnavite tradition, however, accept such interactions between a god and his devotees. Legend has it that Thiruvachi Namhi, one of the gurus of philosopher Ramanuja and founder of Vaishishadavita, used to converse with Varadharaja Perumal, the presiding deity of Kancheepuram.

Offerings of elongated ears
Guardian deities are colourful characters and they share a strong bond with their devotees. In Tamil Nadu, there are folk deities with pan-regional appeal, those worshipped in a specific area, and deities of particular communities and castes. Ballads narrate their stories. They are fearsome, ferocious, and capable of punishing wrongdoers. They drink liquor, smoke cigars, and eat meat. During *kodai*, goats, roosters and pigs are sacrificed to



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propitiate them. (On the southern part of the State, *padappu* is an important offering to folk deities. Sacrificed animals are cooked and offered with rice, vegetable curry, a slice of *Evans* (mango leaves), *puppad*, boiled eggs and lashings of ghee.)

In Srirangam, a neighbourhood of Tiruchirappalli, Muniappan is the guardian deity of the first Vaishnavite temple (near the 108 in the area). He occupies the entrance of the *rigapuram* temple. Just outside the temple is a small bowl on a makeshift stand where devotees deposit their offerings. They pray that their problems would vanish like smoke. While in Tiruvuru, a town on the banks of the Cauvery, and a holy place for Saivites as it houses the biggest temple of Lord Shiva, the Azhilar (chariot festival) begins only after a *kodai* for Pidari, a folk goddess.

I've always been fascinated by folk deities, and my childhood passion was strengthened by watching folk art forms such as Nairandi Melam, Kanyasulkam, Villupattu and Thrippu. Recently, I got to revisit it again while curating *Folk Deities of Tamil*



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People's faith, I discovered, is still strong. At S. Kovilpatti, a village in Sivaganga district, men carve out a portion of their car for a deity. It is an atonement for the wound one of their ancestors accidentally caused Ayyanar, a deity of prosperity who is worshipped by farmers of the wetland and rains-fed areas. They also follow the custom of elongating their earlobes by wearing weighty rings right from their childhood.

Thanjavur, devotees observe a morbid ritual. On the day of Padakkatti (cotton festival) of the local Mariamm temple, the entire village resembles a graveyard. In Thanjavur, devotees observe a morbid ritual. On the day of Padakkatti (cotton festival) of the local Mariamm temple, the entire village resembles a graveyard. In Thanjavur, devotees observe a morbid ritual. On the day of Padakkatti (cotton festival) of the local Mariamm temple, the entire village resembles a graveyard.

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ALLEGEDLY

Go straight to the gut

Bemoaning the degeneration of the nation? Consider a gut reset programme instead



GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK

2. Know your CFUs (not to be confused with STFU)
Each probiotic capsule has billions of CFUs (Colony-Forming Units). The good guys who start setting up homes, offices and enzyme-making factories as soon as they land in your gut. Are the CFUs in your pill alive or are half of them dead? Do any of them have free-livers (germs) lurking around? You don't want to pay good money to eat dead bacteria, or worse, bad bacteria. So make sure you get the right CFUs.

3. Don't eat Junk
Live for the animals in your belly every time you pick something up at the supermarket, or read a restaurant menu. Ask yourself: would Mr. *Lactobacillus rhamnosus* approve?

4. Consume fermented stuff
My favourite. Gut microbomes love it when the regular inflow of fermented foods because they create a billion-strong community of happy, healthy gut microbes. It's like a bacteria visiting a foreign country and being welcomed by thousands of local bacteria. It builds a fantastic atmosphere of microbial bonhomie, which is why beer, the world's oldest fermented drink, is so important. Me and my current best friend *Lactobacillus acidophilus* bond over every night, and so should you.

5. Join a gut health cult
Every time you see the necessary motivation to start talking about gut health with everyone you meet, or an advertisement for want to spread the good bacteria around. One major challenge people face is that you can't see your gut bacteria, or make reels out of them. But you can't see God, and people do have begun to stick around in our bodies with the tasty antibiotics they know are sure to cure their way. But no more of this. We live in a polarised society where everyone must pick a side—'pro' or 'anti'. You are a pro-from now on.

G. Sampath, the author of this satire, is Social Affairs Editor, The Hindu.