

How will in-person networking events be impacted by the rise of Gen Z professionals?

Recent research from Handshake has revealed that 67% of Gen Z professionals no longer believe they must have in-person interactions with professional connections to form meaningful relationships.

These figures may come as a shock to many, but this data follows a general trend that Gen Z professionals have a resistance to in-person networking events.

We cannot deny that young professionals utilise online platforms more than their elders, with average mobile phone screen time being upwards of three hours a day. This, of course, means that the interactions people have online are forever becoming easier to cultivate into a relationship.

However, the assumption that Gen Zs cannot find value from in-person networking is quite frankly false. This isn't an issue of Gen Z's not wanting to network, but networking no longer catering for a wider demographic. This must change. And, the truth is, it's not just Gen Zs that are finding less value in traditional networking events.

The COVID Shift

COVID has brought about many changes for the working professional. It pushed us all online, with little choice but to continue business from behind our screens. Whilst it was difficult in the beginning, with little choice, we made it work – and successfully so.

This issue is many of us, Gen Zs included, now know we can quite happily conduct business on all levels from behind the screen. But yes, whilst it's certainly possible – is it the most beneficial to business and career development? Of course not!

COVID has increased the trend towards a new idea of what professionalism means. Many of us no longer see the need to attend meetings suited and booted, and in fact, our regular attire better represents who we are.

The interesting thing to remember about all of this is that the vast majority of the Gen Z working population began their careers during the pandemic. This means that the broadening term of professionalism is all they know first-hand.

These changes – and of course the growing number of Gen Z's in the workplace – means that traditional attributes of a networking event are no longer widely desired. For example, sitting in a cold hotel conference room, beside a cold bacon sarnie, listening to people regurgitate their business' messaging in the two-minute time slot is no longer of interest. We know that time is more valuable than ever – and people are finding it harder and harder to justify blocking out large parts of their day to commute to and sit in a networking event that brings little value.

So, how are Gen Zs perpetuating this trend? Well, research is constantly stating that Gen Zs are simply saying “no” to the things that do not serve them at work – their focus has shifted towards value and wellbeing. With that information in mind, you can begin to understand why Gen Zs are paving the way for networking to change.

What changes can we expect?

Hybridity is everything right now. By hybrid, I don't just mean having the option of online or in-person, though I can see the value in that choice being front and centre going forward this winter.

In this sense, I am referring to the hybridity of activities within one event. This, I believe, is the answer to the lack of engagement in more traditional networking events. For example, the rise of coworking networking events has

proved incredibly successful in attracting a wide range of demographics – Gen Zs included.

This is because people now value time productivity and being able to spend the day working whilst meeting new people throughout the day proves to be a great way to network. It also provides the opportunity for people to make connections in a much more organic and natural way, as opposed to forced talking points that can feel rehearsed. Furthermore, with many people working from home, it provides the perfect chance for a change of scenery for the day, providing a bit of excitement in what could for some, be a repetitive working week.

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Make networking... Fun?

Another way in which the *networking events industry* can bring in a wider, more diverse demographic to networking sessions is by developing events based around fun activities. Though these are novelty events, being able to let loose on activities such as walking, baking and perhaps workshop style events, allows for people to forget that they are networking altogether.

You might wonder how this could be useful, but associating connections with fun rather than rigid business enables higher levels of creativity and spontaneity, which in my opinion can lead to more valuable collaborations and continued connections.

Again, with working from home still taking precedence, events like these prove themselves as a well-needed change for some – because let's face it- business doesn't have to be so dull.

Gen Z and beyond

The idea that Gen Zs are resistant to in-person networking is by no means a reflection of Gen Zs, but a reflection of how they believe networking events have become stagnant and of the past.

It doesn't have to be that way. There's no denying sometimes we must put our serious business hats on, but with a more natural and light-hearted approach to networking, we can involve everyone, and as such expand our connections and horizons.

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