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## **Expectations of Generation Z When Entering the Job Market in Croatia**

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**RIT**

**Expectations of Generation Z when entering the job  
market in Croatia**

by

Goran Pekica

A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of Master of Science in Service  
Leadership and Innovation

Department of Hospitality and Service Innovation  
Saunders College of Business

Rochester Institute of Technology-Croatia  
Zagreb, Croatia  
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### Abstract

A new generation called Generation Z is about to enter the labor market in Croatia where employers are already facing challenges with recruitment and retention processes. With a new cohort at their doorstep, more different than similar to its predecessors, employers are presented with additional challenges. The focus of this qualitative study is on exploring early career work experiences of ten Generation Z members who study in either International Business or Information Technologies programs in Zagreb, Croatia and who are about to become part of Croatian labor force. By exploring their initial work experiences, their expectations about the work environment and expectations from potential employers are revealed. The objective of this study is to reveal latent, undisclosed needs that this generation might have. Five main elements found to be most important for Generation Z in Zagreb, when discussing work related topics, are expectations of a learning environment, meaningful work, flexibility in the workplace, being independent and receiving practical rewards. Potential impact on the work environment and suggestions for employers are also discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

This year in Croatia, as reported by Croatian Agency for Science and Higher Education (2019), 165.000 students will graduate and enter the labor market looking for entry level positions. These students represent a new generation – Generation Z. According to Bencsik, Horvath-Csikos, & Jubasz (2016), “#generation Z are individuals born between 1995 and 2010”. Most of them are now finishing up their studies from a variety of institutions in Croatia and are looking for full-time positions in a rather vibrant job market in Croatia. With having only recently adapted to recruiting and retaining Generation Y, new challenges for employers lie ahead when welcoming this new generation. Lanier (2017) forecasted a need to change recruitment and retention processes with any new generation. Thus, engaging Generation Z will present unique challenges and opportunities that may change the work environment in the upcoming period.

### 1.1. Problem Statement

An emerging trend can be observed with new generations entering the labor market. These young professionals are at the beginning of their career expressing high demands when it comes to financial packages, financial and other benefits, and various perks in the workplace. These entrants are now members of Generation Z, who according to Cseh-Papp, Varga, Szabó, Szira, and Hajós (2017) have unrealistic expectation of the workplace regarding time they spend searching for jobs, desired remuneration packages or positions in the company hierarchy. Most such demands would traditionally be fulfilled only after first demonstrating loyalty or a good track record during employee performance reviews, but with this new generation entering the workforce, employers and decision-makers in the area of human resources are becoming more and more uncomfortable when attracting and retaining this group of employees.

According to Allegis Group (2018), it is reported that 49 % of HR community worries that their organizations will not be able to attract and retain this new generation and 62 % feel that the lack of these capabilities will influence their businesses negatively. If this emerging issue is not dealt with quickly and decisively, organization's growth, efficiency and goals could be slowed down or not achieved at all. Attraction and retention have always been pivotal in HR's domain of bringing success to organizations and now new challenges arise as companies are not able to keep younger generations for more than one-to-three years (Kloss, 2018).

Thus, with a clear mismatch in Generation Z's expectations about the work environment on one side, and what companies are used to offering for entry level positions on the other, there are two main issues that arise for employers:

- 1) There is a shift in the powerplay between employers and employees.
- 2) Companies are having a hard time attracting employees for entry level roles and when successful they fail to retain them for a longer period.

## **1.2. Significance of this study**

Until now, no research has been undertaken in Croatia around this topic because members of Generation Z are only now coming of age to enter the workforce. Conducting such a study in Croatia should bring new insights about what drives this generation and what they look for in employers of choice and could be a starting point for making recruitment processes more effective in the upcoming period.

## **1.3. Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative research study is to explore undisclosed expectations about the work environment of college educated representatives of Generation Z in Zagreb, Croatia, who have recently entered or will soon be entering the labor market. The location of this research is Rochester Institute of Technology's Zagreb campus. Moreover, in looking for

meaning behind this generation's beliefs, needs and wants, when taking part in recruitment processes, objective is to uncover factors that might influence this generation when looking for a preferred work environment.

#### **1.4. Research Questions**

The main research question of this study is: What are Generation Z's expectations of the work environment in Croatia?

Additional questions that are explored are:

- a) What does Generation Z in Croatia expect from organizations that will hire them?
- b) What are the underlying reasons behind Croatian Generation Z's expectations?

In the short term, it is practical to identify most common demands expressed by Generation Z when they find themselves in front of HR professionals and hiring managers and fulfill their demands when looking to fill various entry level positions. In the long term, real solutions for employers can be found when looking deeper for what drives Generation Z. It would behoove organizations to begin by looking at these underlying values based on trust, respect and appreciation and not just throw various perks and benefits at this generation's feet when recruiting (Kloss, 2018).

## **2. Literature Review**

This literature review explains Generation Z's general characteristics which influence their work motivation and how they are currently perceived by employers compared to other generations. It is found that there is a similarity of values, drivers and communication styles which make members of Generation Z similar to one another (Niemczyk, Seweryn & Smalec, 2019). Additionally, comparisons can be drawn between Generation Z and previous cohorts regarding expectations about the work environment in several Central and South-East European countries. In this part of Europe, when observed through a historic and cultural lens, certain traits are comparable to Croatian Generation Z.

## 2.1. Characteristics of Generation Z

There are some common traits that members of Generation Z share among each other. Generation Z is often characterized as one of the most demanding, materialistic, and entitled generation so far. In the recruitment context this translates into being hard to please when offered a job – they want more of everything and they want it instantly (Singh & Dangmei, 2016). Generation Z is highly confident and ambitious, money and success driven, but needs assistance while in search of its true identity. This signals an opportunity to take a different approach when reaching out to this generation and it would be beneficial to do so by enabling their growth and investing in their professional development. (Töröcsik, Szűcs & Kehl, 2015).

Additionally, one can find many reasons behind this generation's observable feeling of entitlement. Generation Z is considered to be driven solely by money and ambition, but also looks to shake up the status quo, reinvent norms, and thus needs purpose and pragmatism when starting careers (PR newswire, 2016). This provides another opportunity for employers to elevate their branding efforts and demonstrate there is much more to the organization than offering a product line or a core service, emphasizing organization's positive impact on the society and thereby possibly attracting more of Generation Z to their cause.

Generation Z's tech-savviness is another established trait. Generation Z is not only used to having easy access to information and technology (as Generation Y already did), but they are often referred to as "digital natives", as reported by PR newswire (2016), which characterizes Generation Z as fully connected with their friends, family and colleagues at all times. This leads to many misconceptions about Generation Z. Supposedly, they are feeling too secure in the workplace, lack respect for the authority or are prone to slacking off. Still, they care about their work and, if empowered, they can be molded to the employer's image

and consequently prove as valuable and hardworking team members as any other generation before them (Desai & Lele, 2017).

## **2.2. Generation Z compared to Generation Y**

There is a certain dynamic between Generation Z and their predecessors - the distinct Generation Y. Understanding differences between these two generations is beneficial when adjusting recruitment tactics. When looking at how Generation Y fared when entering the workplace, it is observed that they relied heavily on getting feedback. They needed to know if and in what area they are doing well which suggests a need for supervision when they look for clear instructions on what is expected from them (Ellison, 2015). This does not apply to Generation Z who are bursting with confidence and are more self-reliant (Adecco, 2015).

When it comes to Generation Z's strong feeling of entitlement, which is often a thorn in the employer's eye when offers are being prepared, it seems that both Generation Y and Z have plenty of these feelings. Members of Generation Y feel that they can do anything as all things in life revolve around them (Alexander & Sysko, 2013). It is ascertained that Generation Z looks primarily for a way to get ahead because they deserve it by default. In this area not many differences exist between these two cohorts (Adecco, 2015).

Two generations can be compared by looking at how organizations attempt to retain them. Generation Y will usually look for stability and comfort zones in the workplace. They look for a comfortable environment where their contribution to the organization's success comes independently without being criticized by their leaders (Brack, 2012). With Generation Z, other approaches would be necessary to reach same retention rates, as they are more entrepreneurial (Adecco, 2015). Thus, two completely different approaches might be necessary when wanting to retain employees.

With Generation Z now entering the workforce, for the first time there will be a collaboration and clash of five different generations – Traditionalists, Baby Boomers,

Generation X, Generation Y and Generation Z. It is expected that the intergenerational differences will have an impact on the work environment in this constellation and the work environment might be disrupted when Generation Z starts presenting itself to other generations. Generation Z, as opposed to other generations, is not good at listening because it lacks important interpersonal skills (Bejtkovsky, 2016). In this regard, Generation Z is unwilling to share their knowledge and ignore other generations when being advised, mentored, or managed, which in turn decreases work moral, erodes relationships among colleagues and disrupts hierarchy. This also might have a negative impact on the corporate culture.

### **2.3. Work expectations of Generation Z in Croatia and other countries**

In Croatia, one research study has been conducted on Generation Z's expectations from their college education and how it will tie in with their career development (Novak & Žnidaršič, 2018). It served as a foundation for extrapolating how their careers might develop after graduation. This research involved students without any significant prior work experience but from insights of these younger members of Generation Z, a valid attempt of extrapolation ensued on what this generation might look for in employers in the years to come. It was established that they look for practical paths when choosing education programs and that two main criteria they consider when making this decision are interest in the field of study and a good chance of being easily employed in a specific profession (for which they were confident they will be). In Croatia, students are also inclined to value stimulating tasks and work conditions while having a job which influences and potentially benefits the society (Wüst & Šimić, 2017).

Still, most relevant research on the topic has been conducted in Central and South-East Europe's region – a region that Croatia is part of and region where there are many cultural similarities. In this region, Generation Z values trust, fairness, loyalty, and respect

from their employers, which are surprisingly traits of Baby Boomer generation. Thus, employers can be assured that they will hire members of a generation which is forward-looking, which demonstrates long-term thinking, who are hard workers, happy and capable to learn on their own (Schwieger & Ladwig, 2018).

Another important factor to observe is Generation Z's capability to collaborate with previous cohorts. When comparing Generation Z and Generation Y in the workplace in Hungary, taken from the perspective of management and HR personnel, these two generations which are closest to each other have a hard time working together (Bencsik, Horváth-Csikós & Juhász, 2016). Although entering the workforce one after another and both being tech-savvy and focused on personal growth, there is an incompatibility in collaboration efforts which brings into question how mentorship programs will have to be redesigned when onboarding Generation Z in the workplace.

Differences between Generation Z and other cohorts can have another potentially negative effect on the workplace. When new generations join the work environment members of Generation Z do not regard their workmates as to have strong social relations with them. They consider their colleagues to be acquaintances and they trust them a little bit more than they would trust complete strangers (Lazányi & Bilan, 2017). By being more isolated with their technology in hand, information at their grasp and being connected to their friends and family, Generation Z will not ask for advice and will let their entrepreneurial spirit and overall need for independence get in the way of achieving healthy work relationships. This could fence the efforts to teach them to work as a part of a team. The task for HR experts then could be to create an atmosphere of trust and emphasize the need for collaboration in creative ways.

A trap that many employers today fall into, when attracting this new generation, is often caused by not fully understanding what really motivates Generation Z. Drivers that

prevail in Generation Z's thinking about their first jobs are a high salary, promotion opportunities and a positive working atmosphere in a strong team (Csiszárík-Kocsír & Garia-Fodor, 2018). The first two drivers are rather straightforward in explaining the obvious gaps in what employers are offering and what is expected by Generation Z, but being part of a great team testifies to the fact there are differences among Generation Z members in this culturally similar region. For example, Generation Z in Hungary still considers being part of a team as to having backup and sees taking part in mentorship programs as a positive thing, neither of which can be said for Generation Z in Poland.

With having more entrepreneurial spirit than previous generations, Generation Z's need for independence should be incorporated in already established work practices and employers should consider being more flexible. With technology now allowing for virtual teams to perform just as well as any other co-located team, another approach to satisfying Generation Z will be to nurture this sense of independence as much as possible. When looking at Generation Z's attitudes towards the workplace, a significant part of Generation Z expresses a need for autonomy as they want to become competent as soon as possible. Generation Z appreciates working independently and not in traditional jobs in co-working spaces as this is the best way to achieve autonomy and higher level of competence (Kubátová, 2016).

As for the mismatch in financial expectations of Generation Z when joining a new company, there are motives that take priority over high remuneration expectations. Generation Z looks for stability and personal fulfillment which outweighs monetary rewards (Grow & Yang, 2018). This is one important revelation about Generation Z for final stages of recruitment processes, when negotiations take place, as employers can pursue other means to fulfill this Generation Z's deeper need.

In trying to align the expectations of Generation Z with what employers can offer to this new cohort, one approach could be to dig deeper into Generation Z's motivators and demotivators in regard to their work. Most significant reasons for a lack of motivation for Generation Z are deficiency of meaningful content, negative atmosphere in the team, work overload and a lack of overall purpose (Fratričová & Kirchmayer, 2018).

Another perspective on resolving the gap between what employers offer and Generation Z expects is to observe Generation Z's need for security. It is reflected in their desire for simultaneously wanting a secure job and a competitive salary. This comes almost as a surprise that this confident, independent, and perceived to be mentally strong generation is looking for safety cushions when requesting high remuneration and various additional benefits (Iorgulescu, 2016).

#### **2.4. Summary**

The scarcity of literature illustrates that there is a strong need for inquiry about college-educated Generation Z's expectations of the work environment in Croatia. The reason for the lack of literature is twofold. On one hand, this generation born as early as in 1995 could at present be part of the job market for only one year, assuming they attained college degrees after three or four years, depending on the study program.

On the other hand, not enough attention is given to the fact that 'millennials' and 'post millennials' differ in many regards, so separate studies about Generation Z have not yet fully drawn the attention of the scientific and business circles in Croatia. It is high time for these communities to address these issues so they can point the HR community to the right direction when attracting new employees. In Croatia, different generations have different work preferences and should also have different job characteristics (Hernaus & Vokić, 2014). Additionally, existing studies conducted in other countries do not necessarily mean their findings could easily be applied to the Croatian work environment. Thus, there is a void to be

filled with knowledge about relevant differences among members of Generation Z, even in culturally similar markets. Additional country-specific research would be valuable in revealing motivations and expectations of college-educated Generation Z in Croatia as they are becoming more and more significant part of the workforce.

### **3. Methodology**

This research is qualitative in nature. By taking on the role of a qualitative researcher the intention is to understand how research participants interpret their experiences, construct worlds and what meaning they attribute to their experiences (Merriam & Russell, 2016). This research has certain characteristics that are in common to all types of qualitative research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018):

- 1) Research is conducted in a natural setting where researcher talks face-to-face to participants who share their ideas freely which brings their responses into context
- 2) Research design is planned for but not tightly prescribed as it emerges in the process
- 3) Researcher is pivotal in gathering the information not using instruments of other researchers, yet researcher's background will influence the interpreted data
- 4) Researcher is inductive and deductive in analyzing open-ended form of data which is reviewed and organized into codes and themes by the researcher himself

#### **3.1. Research Design**

This research is designed as a phenomenology. Phenomenology is rooted in philosophy and psychology and describes lived experiences of individuals about a phenomenon, with the condition that it has been experienced by all individuals participating in the research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). As the purpose of this study is to understand Generation Z's expectations of the work environment in Croatia, the researched phenomenon revolves around the underlying needs and wants of Generation Z in Croatia. The focus of this research is on what Generation Z looks for in the work environment, how it feels about the

current situation in the Croatian labor market, what it already experienced and what it might seek from employers which has not been sought by generations before. This study reveals Generation Z's expectations and answer the question of what this newest generation in the labor market needs. Phenomenology design provides necessary structure for data collection and information analysis. It is suited for small-scale research that does not call for technologically sophisticated or expensive equipment for the purposes of data collection and analysis. Additional advantages for the purpose of this research involve possibilities to scratch beneath the superficial aspects of social reality, removal from any abstract theorizing and can tell an interesting story to a broader audience (Denscombe, 2014).

### **3.2. Participants**

Target population for this study consists of students or college graduates who are attending or have recently attended RIT Croatia and are or were enrolled in either International Business or Information Technology program at RIT's Croatian campus. Main reason for choosing this particular population of students to participate in this research is that these students should have already gained relevant work experience through internships (as mandated by RIT's policies). In some cases, these students are working part-time in parallel to their studies or are currently interviewing for entry level positions in various organizations and some have been able to find their first full-time jobs already. In either case, all research participants are members of Generation Z, i.e. born between 1995 and 2000, sophomore, junior or senior students at RIT Croatia or graduates with bachelor's degrees in aforementioned programs from within last two years. Sample includes ten members of Generation Z who are currently studying at RIT's Zagreb campus, are at least in their second year of study (sophomores) and can prove they attained a fair amount of relevant work experience already. Participants are interviewed in groups of two or four, depending on their availability to participate in sixty to ninety-minute interview sessions. Invitations for

participating in this research were sent through formal RIT Croatia's internal communication channels (via email), which resulted with six participants to apply. Four participants additionally were recommended by RIT Croatia's faculty and researcher's colleagues (RIT alumni) and who agreed to participate in this research.

### **3.3. Researcher's role and reflexivity**

With much subjectivity that is present in phenomenological and small-scale research like this one, researcher's biases could interfere with the research results. Researcher has an investment in this topic because of working in the recruitment field for five years at the moment this research was beginning, having close contact with Generation Z during recruitment processes for various organizations he is working for and, when starting the research, exclusively working for one large pharmaceutical company. Researcher is a member of Generation Y that precedes Generation Z and his own experience differs from what Generation Z currently expresses and experiences during recruitment and onboarding processes in organizations. Companies not being able to retain this generation for too long and Generation Z's diverse demands during offer stages in the scope of recruitment processes are significant reasons for the researcher to want to understand this phenomenon better.

Researcher has graduated from RIT Croatia in 2015 and is familiar with RIT Croatia's mandatory internship policy and proclivity of RIT students to gain work experience during their studies.

Data is gathered by interviewing ten members of Generation Z in Croatia who are inquired about their recent work experiences and views on their soon to be initiated careers. Inquiries are also made about their motivation when it comes to work, preferred relationships with peers and superiors, desired workplace conditions, compensations and rewards that

might interest them and specifics around which type of work they expect to be involved with or which type they would prefer.

### **3.4. Measurement Instruments**

As this is a descriptive phenomenological research study, a specific sequential approach in measuring data is taken. First transcripts and notes from the interviews are typed up and resulting raw data is initially screened for general ideas. As a next step data is coded using HyperRESEARCH software to add to validity of data analysis and then clustered in categories. Emerging themes are then described. Special focus is put on finding a common denominator for all themes and answers – what they have in common and in how many aspects they differ and to what degree. What then follows is the interpretation of findings and comparison with secondary research provided in the literature review that relates to Generation Z characteristics and attitudes toward work in culturally similar countries.

### **3.5. Procedure**

Interviews are chosen as the most appropriate data collection type. They are most useful as it is not possible to observe participants directly in recruitment processes, they can provide historical data and a degree of control for the researcher while questioning participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Interviews are conducted in the time period of October and November of 2019, in a classroom environment at RIT's Zagreb campus in Croatia. This location is chosen for two reasons. First, this is a familiar environment for all participants and the researcher, who all attend or have attended educational programs at this institution. This is meant to provide a laid-back atmosphere when interviews take place so that both the researcher and the participants can converse freely in a setting that resembles a professional surrounding. Second, access to the facilities can be rather easily granted by RIT Croatia's leadership as RIT Croatia's staff and faculty are willing to assist the researcher by providing necessary space and by encouraging students to participate in this research.

Interview protocol is as follows. Interviews are scheduled at least one week in advance and last for sixty to ninety minutes, depending on the number of participants. In case a participant who applies for participation (and assessed to be eligible to take part in the study) is for some reason unable to attend one session, another appointment is attempted to be organized at a different time. If a participant is unable to join the scheduled interviews or cannot find another time to participate, a student from the top of the backup list of candidates is invited to take place of the student not being able to attend. Participants' identities are known to the researcher so that their eligibility to participate can be verified. During interviews participants' names are not mentioned to provide anonymity. In the data analysis and interpretation phase of the research participants' initials are listed so that the researcher is able to track the source of each relevant wording, code, or theme. During the interview ten main subtopics are inquired about and are listed in Appendix A.

Interviews are recorded with an audio device through a mobile phone application "Voice Recorder" and additional notes on participants' non-verbal communication are taken by the researcher. Additionally, one researcher's peer from RIT's Master of Science program is assisting the researcher by taking more detailed notes and who discusses the participants' responses with the researcher after the interviews are over.

Transcriptions of the recorded interviews are initially done with assistance of transcription software "Happy Scribe", where audio files are uploaded to the software's dashboard and then initial draft is edited manually. Volume and participant's accents tend to interfere with this software's effectiveness, so researcher has to manually transcribe and edit each audio file several times over.

Data analysis consists of sequential steps and starts with an overview of the text comprised of participants' responses. After an initial read-through, data is first segmented, then taken apart and again put back together. Due to time constraints and overall research

project timeline, data analysis and qualitative write-up happens consecutively, although most qualitative researchers will usually conduct these activities simultaneously. The process of winnowing the data ensues where only certain data will evolve into themes and the rest of the data gets disregarded. During data analysis a computer software called HyperRESEARCH assists the researcher to decrease time spent for hand coding. It enables storing and easily finding relevant qualitative data that emerges during this stage of research. In the process of coding, where data is grouped and replaced by a single word that will represent later a category, in participants' language a term is assigned which provides a basis for describing common patterns in creating themes. Codes are grouped as 'expected', 'surprising' and 'unusual' as is common in qualitative research design (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). These are then described in a narrative paragraph explaining participants' experiences about the researched topic or phenomenon. No predetermined codes are used, rather codes are allowed to emerge on its own during data analysis. In the last stage of data analysis, when layers of data are added again, researcher narrows his focus again on participants' statements about the working environment followed by discussions of possible meanings behind them.

For the interpretation of results, researcher compares the results with existing literature in a narrative format, and not as a scientific report, offering subjective perspective, and pointing out to possible limitations for further research on the topic. Through a descriptive writing format, the audience is meant to understand the participants' views of the working environment. There are two main strategies for data verification. First, all participants can easily be contacted at any moment after the interviews are over so that the researcher can check about different responses that might have left the researcher with dilemma on what the participants meant when discussing a subtopic. The contact numbers of all participants are left with the researcher and participants give permission to be contacted for potential follow up session. Second, researcher's mentor and Associate Professor in the

Department of International Hospitality and Service Innovation at Saunders College of Business in Rochester is providing mentorship during all steps of the research process which replaces peer examination that is recommended for similar research projects.

### **3.6. Limitations**

One limitation of this research is a relatively short time span regarding data collection that will last for approximately two months in the fall of 2019, during which a limited number of participants can be interviewed. Another limitation is the interest of students at RIT Croatia who, at the time of being invited for interviews, have mandatory classes and exams as part of their bachelor's programs. Additionally, certain biases might be present when choosing participants, especially participants recommended by RIT Croatia's faculty or researcher's colleagues. Another limitation is generalization of findings after interviewing participants who have little work experience. There is a possibility that these participants do not necessarily have the capability to fully understand certain concepts related to work environment. Their responses to certain subtopics inquired about might be based on a theoretical and hypothetical level.

## **4. Findings**

After reviewing interview transcripts and analyzing participants' responses five themes emerged which answer the research question – what does Generation Z expect from the work environment in Croatia? During their interviews, as part of organized focus groups, ten students discussed their future career plans and what motivates them in their work.

Generation Z expects to be taught and mentored while still having enough autonomy in their work as they prepare for new challenges that lie ahead. Their work needs to be meaningful so they can have an impact on their surroundings. They need their work environment to be flexible so they can have enough time to pursue their interests outside of

the workplace. They are pragmatic when thinking about rewards. They expect an environment which will enable them to pursue their life and career goals.

#### **4.1. Expectation of a learning environment**

Students expect to be immersed into a learning environment where they can swiftly be taught through trainings and mentorship, where knowledge must be shared freely and can be used to get ahead in their careers.

##### **4.1.1. Learn quickly through trainings and mentorship**

Being trained in the workplace is crucial for students. This is how they perceive they can acquire substantial knowledge fast. Their bosses and senior colleagues are the ones who should deliver initial trainings and have the role of mentors. Students think that a perfect boss is always there to answer any questions and gives hands on training. This also applies to the process of onboarding, as students surmise that a perfect employer would train them from the beginning. They are aware they do not have all the necessary skills and knowledge upon graduation, so they require someone to rely on, someone who has answers to all of their questions. Student #5 confirms this by sharing her point of view on mentorship programs:

I like the idea of mentoring and training programs in companies. It would be beneficial also for me because I do not think I would be well equipped only with my knowledge from college. So, I see many benefits with this - it will be quicker for anyone to become independent in their roles.

When it comes to short-term career plans students emphasize the importance of learning as part of gaining first real work experience. They expect access to knowledge right away, they value it immensely and want to absorb it quickly. It is a priority for students to learn - as much as they can within a short period of time. It does not matter if it is a smaller or larger organization where they can learn. Both environments are perceived as rich in opportunities to learn. There see benefits of working in a smaller organization where they can try different fields of work and they see larger organizations as strong, structured supporters

of their learning process. What also helps in acquiring knowledge faster is project work because this is how they experience many things at a faster pace.

#### **4.1.2. Knowledge must be shared**

Knowledge once acquired needs to be shared freely in the workplace and keeping information for oneself is not appreciated. This relates also to relationships that are expected to be based on open communication with colleagues and bosses. Student #3 maintains that learning happens only if there is a clear communication channel and he can only respect colleagues who are willing to share their knowledge, not keeping it for themselves. Still, key person for enabling open communication and knowledge sharing is the authority figure in the place of work. Student #4 believes that one of the things that a boss should do is encourage employees to share knowledge. From students' responses it is evident that the whole work environment needs to be a safe place to ask questions and the work atmosphere should enable learning. Student #2 confirms this as she appreciates a workplace where she can ask as many questions she wants to, but also does not want to feel stupid in the process.

#### **4.1.3. Knowledge is an asset**

Students want to gain knowledge quickly because it will set them apart from their peers and help them get ahead in their careers. Alternatively, they will use it to develop their own businesses. Students believe that attaining key information and knowledge will enable them to make a step up in their organization and be more competitive in the market. Student #1 underlines that the only way to get ahead is by knowing something before other people. This is firmly rooted in their minds when they plan their careers. They express ambition to grow already in the first few years of their careers. Getting ahead is a goal by itself when it comes to career planning. Student #6 elaborates on the importance of knowledge for career progress and introduced side projects as a key differentiator:

As time goes on, my work experience is not enough. In example, if you have somebody with eight years of experience in the industry and a person with four years

and multiple side projects behind them, the second person will be preferred by the company over another person. And this is because his knowledge is broader, and it also shows that the person is working on multiple things and not just working for somebody.

Besides students' short-term interests when acquiring knowledge, students expressed where they specifically plan to apply their knowledge. Having plans in the mid-term to start their own businesses, knowledge acquired while working for other organizations will be useful to them with this higher purpose in mind. Their goal is to first improve an organization with which they are aligned with or have a stake in. Student #1 shares her plan to work on acquiring knowledge first and then build upon that knowledge to go back to her company, develop key departments and eventually branch the business out to other European countries. Students also plan on implementing newly acquired knowledge into their own businesses.

Student #3 explains:

I think the 20s are for me the time when I want to get experience, trying to learn as much as possible about how business functions in general. So different departments, different fields, and then implement that once I open my own thing.

Students value diverse knowledge that will be helpful later in their careers and are pragmatic in their views - at the end of the day it will look good on their CVs.

## **4.2. Expectation of meaningful work**

Students expect to see meaning in their work. Their work must impact the community, challenge them personally, and keep them motivated.

### **4.2.1. Impact on the community**

Students look at the broader picture when assessing what type of work interests them. They want to positively influence their environment. Student #1 wants to nurture whatever change she can in her community. Student #2 confirms this with a story from the time she was applying for her first job in two different companies:

I had two offers when I was applying in the US for my second co-op and one company was Ford Motors. I thought wow, it would be great to have working for Ford on my CV. And then I didn't get accepted at Ford and I said OK, I'll work for the other

company - SunPower, a green, environmentally-friendly company, and as they are producing solar panels I found I liked the idea of saving the world. I believe in the same things that they do.

She landed the job at SunPower and is sure this was a perfectly aligned experience with who she is and what she wants. Student #7 also expresses her preference for organizations which impact the environment. In her case, companies she applies for have an indirect impact on the community. She sees consulting companies as perfect employers because they are trying to solve problems for other companies.

#### **4.2.2. Challenging work**

The work students expect to be involved with needs to be meaningful on the operative level as well. They appreciate knowing reasons behind tasks they are assigned. They need to know the ‘why’ and are curious about the broader picture an organization is trying to paint. To students meaningful also means the opposite of having repetitive tasks. They do not appreciate repetitive and administrative tasks and they run away from such roles already now when they are applying for internships or entry level positions. They assume that repetitive tasks will be assigned to newly employed young professionals and they are unhappy because of this. They do not appreciate repetitiveness but look for challenges as they do not want to do the same exact thing over and over. They see repetitiveness as the first big red flag when looking for a job. Student #4 was explicit in explaining his attitude toward such type of work:

I would quit within a week if I had to consistently work on operative tasks. I do work around 40 hours a week without any issue. The second someone told me to fill out an excel sheet with meeting minutes, I would hand in my resignation.

Previous work experience which students acquired during freshmen and sophomore years in college gave them a taste of what some entry level positions involve, and they are fended off by repetitive tasks that could become part of their responsibilities. Their dislike of repetitiveness is so strong that they are willing to completely change direction in their careers if their work is not challenging enough.

### **4.2.3. Meaningful work as motivation**

After seeing the impact of their work on their surroundings students become motivated to stay in their jobs and with the same organization for a longer period of time. For student #9 it would be enough to see that her customers are happy and if she sees them smile, she feels a surge of motivation. For students, side projects are also meant to have an impact on the society or at least the broader organization they work for. They enjoy inventing something new, a new software algorithm or a new process – the only criterium is that it must be related to their work.

### **4.3. Expectation of a flexible work environment**

Students expect a flexible work environment with elements of informality, having physical and mental breaks, and achieving balance. They disdain micromanagement and monotony.

#### **4.3.1. An informal work environment**

Having already experienced diverse work environments during their internships, students acquired enough information to conclude that they do not appreciate formal structure in the workplace. The less rules and strict policies, the better. Student #2 notes on her experience working for one US-based company:

They do not have hierarchy like we do. And I liked that they are a pet friendly company. Although I can work in a hierarchical environment, I just felt uncomfortable. I feel more comfortable working with colleagues as with friends.

Students prefer to see their bosses as peers. They enjoy an easy-going environment and need to feel they fit in. They want to work in a surrounding where they feel comfortable being themselves and preferably not have strict deadlines. Students emphasize the importance of spontaneous socialization in the workplace when discussing what a perfect employer might be like. They are in consensus that employers should allow employees to talk to each other,

not just about work, and that there should be a lenient work atmosphere. If they do not feel comfortable with how lenient it is, they believe they will not be productive.

#### **4.3.2. Importance of having a break**

Another aspect of flexibility that students expect comes in the form of daily organization of work. Students expect to have control over their workdays - when and how many breaks they can take and to be allowed to take a day off whenever they need one.

Technology and being active on social networks enhance this need for flexibility. Student #2 explains that by saying:

I can spend one hour being active and then I need five minutes for a Facebook break. I would love to have a space where I work and a place where I do not work. And when I want to have a break then I can just stand up, take my phone if I want to go to Facebook and go out for a walk. I think I need these breaks because I cannot be concentrated for seven hours straight. If I do not open my social media messages my mind already goes away, and I am distracted.

Students unanimously expect to be able to switch on and off at work. They prefer flexible work hours and being able to adjust their schedule, e.g. work one day for four hours and then work for twelve the next. And by taking occasional breaks they believe they would be more productive overall, especially if engaging in some non-work activities such as watching a movie or going for a run in the middle of the workday.

#### **4.3.3. A healthy work-life balance**

Students value their lives outside of work immensely and they do not want to feel stressed out about their work. When discussing previous work experiences students mentioned they are content if they do not feel bad or stressed every day and they seek to find the perfect balance. Students strongly emphasize the importance of work-life balance and they emphasize how important it is to plan their lives in advance, making plans for several days ahead. For them, it is about time management, the time they want to have for themselves but also about removing the stress. It is employers' responsibility to care about employees' work-life balance and the solution could be in having a good HR strategy. Student #7 needs to

be able to enjoy her private life, work from home and to use vacation days when she wants to during the year. For student #10 this would mean that she is treated like a person, not just an employee.

#### **4.3.4. Dislike of micromanagement**

In the context of flexibility and when it comes to the boss - employee relationship, micromanagement is entirely undesirable. Students expect they will not be controlled by their supervisors and that they will not be forced to participate in mandatory activities by their line managers. They want to be inducted into the work through mentorship but only initially, after they join an organization. Students see value in coaching, and they need to be free to make mistakes to be able to learn from them. They expect to work without too much oversight and have freedom to choose their own approach to solving problems. They reason that if they were already hired, there should be enough trust that they will know what to do; thus, continuously telling them how to do their job is redundant. Furthermore, management does not need to be involved with operational details on how the work gets done - if the work gets done. Additionally, they would appreciate not coming to the office for a day or two if they perform well. They also do not appreciate being told when exactly to work on some tasks.

#### **4.3.5. Diverse tasks to break the routine**

One more expectation of flexibility pertains to the tasks and work itself. Imposing certain tasks on students is not always appreciated as they look for flexibility in the type of work they are involved with on a daily basis, how they are treated when they fail and how their time at work is distributed between busier and slower periods. Being flexible when assigning the work is important to students who expressed preference for a balance in tasks they receive.

Letting them work on their own is important to students, but they expect then that the organization will be tolerant of failure and that there will be many chances to correct mistakes

that happen. Student #7 would like her employer to consider her time while she works, and be flexible with it, but also be part of a well-organized environment where efficiency, in the sense of perfectly utilized time, is the norm. Students do not want to sit idly as they see it as punishment for doing their jobs better or faster. On the topic of side projects flexibility came up as students want to work on side projects whenever there is no core work to be done. It is important for them that they can decide when and on which projects they will be working on.

#### **4.4. Expectation of autonomy**

Students are unified around an expectation to have autonomy in their work and they search for it as soon as they feel comfortable in a new work environment. This theme emerged after students emphasized on numerous occasions how ‘being their own boss’, freelancing and empowerment are quite important to them.

##### **4.4.1. Working for themselves**

The goal of eventually starting and owning a business is evident as this is how students see their careers developing. This is the ultimate stage of being independent which students seek. They are keen on planning for a future where they would be working for themselves. They plan for the long-term, have a clear vision of what they will be doing in the next few years and they have laid out their plans on how to eventually become completely independent. Students want to start something on their own after gaining some international experience. Some are not specific regarding the timelines but are explicit in sharing their goals to own a business.

##### **4.4.2. Work outside of work**

Even if in the short term owning a business is not easily achievable, there are still ways for students to be and feel independent. Their solution is to engage in project-based work. Student #8 explains her strategy this way:

I want to do my own thing. I started considering starting my own company and the five-year plan would be to open a consulting company for the hospitality industry,

covering everything from restaurants, bars, hotels and so on. But at this point I have managed to find smaller projects to work on and make some money but also get some experience from them.

Freelance work is appealing to students because they can gain experience, work autonomously, and earn money on the side. They are finding ways on how to incorporate this into their early careers. Students expressed their satisfaction on how many opportunities lie in freelancing. Students do not appreciate mandatory side projects though. These are the projects companies force upon employees, but freelancing is mentioned as a great way to do ‘their own thing’, independently of their current employers. They prefer to work on side projects outside of their day jobs, either for fun or for extra income on the side. It appears that the key word for students is ‘free’ in freelancing and to get this feeling of freedom, working on side projects makes sense to them. These side projects still need to be closely related to their skills and interests.

#### **4.4.3. Empowering bosses**

Students see the role of a boss as to facilitate their path to independence. Bosses are supposed to be explicit in communication about what tasks need to be accomplished, allow freedom to choose an approach on how the goals should be reached, then step aside until the job is done and finally discuss the results with employees. These situations are rare for students, based on their previous experience, but highly desired. Student # 6 described one such experience with his boss:

There was one boss who was confident in our abilities. If we had to do an assignment, he would tell us what generally needs to be done and we would go over that in a meeting. And then we would just do it in our own way and at the end of the day, in meetings, we would get feedback on that.

Students see mentorship as necessary for any organization to welcome and make new joiners independent in their roles. Mentorship is welcome only at the beginning and it should not last for too long. New joiners must become independent quickly in their work, so it is a short-term solution. Students see it as a necessary evil because it limits their independence.

Student #1 expressed her doubts on this topic because she firmly believes everyone is supposed to become independent rather quickly and this induces mixed feelings in her about mentorship programs.

#### **4.5. Expectation of practical rewards**

While salary and bonuses are important to students, they see financial rewards only as a means to an end. They assign more value to practical perks and additional non-financial benefits. They welcome such rewards more as they enrich their lives or make their lives easier. This is how they see that employers care about their individual needs.

##### **4.5.1. Salary as a means to an end**

Students still expect and need a decent base salary. It must be high enough to fulfill a young professional's cost of living and cover their basic needs. Student #4 explained that student life can be difficult and paying tuition is no small feat. Thus, because of necessity, he slightly values a higher paycheck over a satisfactory work environment, but it is not something that he necessarily agrees with. Students are driven by basic needs only at this point in their life, at the beginning of their careers. But in the long term, they would rather be happy where they work than have a big paycheck.

Students recognize certain benefits that can be offered that would enable them to do their job well. Sometimes work can involve long working hours, and this can be exhausting. Therefore, students expect from employers to give them discounts for e.g. food. When work causes stress or fatigue (or both) it does not matter to students if bosses are friendly or if the work atmosphere is relaxed. Sometimes students simply need to be energized to be able to do their jobs in the first place.

##### **4.5.2. Importance of practical rewards**

Various practical rewards or perks make students content when they get compensated for their work. Student #1 feels that salary plays a big part, but benefits and company culture

is more appreciated. A company that offers perks appreciated by employees will be an employer of choice. What might seem as small tokens of appreciation, sometimes of modest monetary value, still goes a long way in increasing satisfaction of new joiners in one organization. Student #6 shared a good example during the interview:

I appreciated certain benefits when I worked at the bank. I got a coupon for 60% off for a gym subscription. That is amazing because I really use this a lot. It was very practical. Also, I was really surprised that I got this gym membership benefit being an intern only.

Student #5 contends she would value a parking spot for convenience. Student #7 follows this same line of thought mentioning discounts in various stores. If the monetary value of such perks is significant, employees will be even more grateful. Students explain their appreciation for such perks by putting a price to each benefit and compare it with a lower entry level salary that is expected to be received at the beginning of their careers. They acknowledge that some companies offer e.g. free babysitting options in the workplace or a company car. They know such expenses can be substantial so those kind of perks can easily make up for a relevant portion of the lower entry level salary and they get the feeling that the company is helping them and truly understands their needs.

#### **4.5.3. Intangible practical rewards**

Desired practical rewards are not necessarily tangible. Such is the case when students seek recognition for their work. Importance of being recognized for the work students will be involved with relates to building a reputation in a pertinent field of work and students want to capitalize on being recognized to advance in their careers. It is one significant motivator. Student #4 wants to earn enough reputation in the industry to get recognized and respected for doing what he does. Recognition is an important element in reward systems students expect, it is reward in and out of itself. It is enough for them to be recognized for doing a good job or commended for their efforts - either by their bosses or their peers. They see acknowledgement of their successes as a support system, not just a shortcut to promotion.

Ideally, recognition as a reward should come as quickly as possible. On this topic students believe that a perfect employer is an employer who recognizes individual success immediately after it occurs. They will not put in extra effort into their work if nobody will recognize it. They are still realistic in this expectation in that immediate recognition will not happen each time, but in an ideal work environment this is what would make them content.

## **5. Discussion**

The objective of this study was threefold: to explore what Generation Z in Croatia expects from the work environment, to ascertain what this young generation requires from employers and to determine if there are some undisclosed, latent drivers in this new generation's minds regarding their attitudes toward work. Research findings revealed that what students expect from the work environment is only partially in line with what existing studies suggest, as some ideas about this generation, previously considered to be true, have been refuted. Additionally, some new insights were revealed about this cohort's underlying motivators.

Ten students who were interviewed for this study fit the definition of Generation Z as they were all born between 1995 and 1998, falling into Generation Z birth year range which is between 1995 and 2000 according to Bencsik et al. (2016). They already gained relevant work experience which they accumulated during internships or while freelancing. Several of them have already, at the time of this research, started working in part-time or full-time roles in various organizations.

Already in the initial stages of the interviews one important element was revealed. Students are fully aware of what lies ahead now that they are in the process of joining the labor market in Croatia. They are well informed and their initial work experiences, in

combination with their exploratory nature, provides them with relevant details on what to expect from their early careers. This differs from what Cseh-Papp et al. (2017) reported, as they posited that Generation Z has little knowledge on various aspects of the job market. On the contrary, students spend a significant amount of time job hunting, have adequate knowledge about reward systems in different companies and know which positions in an organization would be suitable for their level of experience. They have strong opinions about work-related topics and leave the impression they are now prepared to be judged by their CVs and work motivation. They are eager to start working for small and large organizations in public or private sector (it does not matter to them which) and want to spend a significant amount of time within one company, and in one department, willing to demonstrate their loyalty to their future employers.

What contradicts existing literature's findings on Generation Z, as reported by Singh and Danghmei (2016), is that they are overly demanding, materialistic and that they tend to feel entitled to certain benefits and higher salaries. This research showed the opposite in that students are already at the start of their careers dedicated to their work and they expect to be working longer hours having to prove themselves to their superiors. In fact, they prioritize job security as they worry about external factors which are out of their control and they concede they are concerned about their future when it comes to finding a good place to work in the current climate. This corroborates what Iorgulescu (2016) ascertained to be true of Generation Z in that they look for a shelter in their early careers.

On the topic of rewards, extrinsic factors such as salaries mean a great deal to students, yet they are not driven by money as much as they are interested in feeling fulfilled by their work and recognized for their accomplishments. Their pragmatism leads them into a different direction when thinking about desired rewards. They worry more about getting

ahead and want to prove themselves to get a pay raise quickly. They appreciate most of the trendy perks which companies currently include in their job offers, as it is established that for students a parking space or a gym membership card outshines monetary benefits or bonuses. The latter are nice to have but could be easily forgone. Students get a sense of fulfillment when they see they are making a difference in their specific line of work. There is a positive correlation between being interested in the work they are involved with and their feeling of happiness. If they are good at their jobs, they will be happy which makes them even more interested in their work.

Students demonstrate moderation in their expectations about remuneration, benefits and what might interest them in a job offer in general. Still, a need for instant gratification is evident in students' answers and their need to be recognized as soon as they reach a milestone, have a breakthrough, or accomplish even a small victory is strong. This revelation partially refutes the idea that they are driven by money, as reported by PR Newswire (2016), although they do not pretend that it is not important to them. Additionally, it is confirmed they do not lack ambition which was already previously established by Grow and Yang (2018).

Students consider feeling appreciated as a reward by itself. This is a strong motivator for students. If they experience gratitude for their efforts, coming from either their colleagues, bosses or even from their customers, they get intrinsically motivated to continue working in such an environment and are keen on giving more than what is required in their work. An example of how this intrinsic motivator can be enough for students is shared by students who have the experience of working in service-oriented businesses, who accentuate having feelings of accomplishment when they make customers happy. This is a clear sign for them that they are performing well and thus do not need additional feedback. This confirms

Adecco's research findings (2015) in which Generation Z was depicted as self-reliant and not needing constant feedback.

It is also important for students to be heard and acknowledged. Then they get a sense of belonging to the work environment they are part of. They expect that their voice in the work environment will be heard, that they will be recognized for the good results they bring in and this instills a sense of fulfillment in them which motivates them to continue performing well. Student #2 suggests that if you feel like you are not ignored, and someone is paying attention to you and appreciates you, you know you are part of the group, accepted and involved. It is about the idea sharing and being listened to. By listening to what Generation Z has to say organizations can quickly keep track of changes in the work environment which are sometimes hard to keep up with.

Several previously observed Generation Z's traits and behaviors, found in the existing literature, are reinforced with this research. As already hinted in the research done by Adecco (2015), students are unanimous in expressing a strong need for independence and will rely on their own capabilities in becoming successful in their careers. They frown upon any prolonged mentorship that might be imposed on them as they see it as an unnecessary handholding (especially if a formal mentorship program is meant to take longer than a few weeks). Just as their peers in the Czech Republic, students put a high value on being autonomous in their work as it mirrors a deep need for independence and displays of their proven individual competences (Kubátová, 2016).

This ties in well with another expectation students reveal which is a need for a flexible work environment. The more independence they are given, the less employers will need to impose rules in a workplace (and later monitor employees for being compliant to these rules). This is made clear as students explain how much they value their free time and how they want

to have a saying when it comes to their daily and weekly work schedules. The number of breaks that can be taken and amount of time allowed to use technology and social media are such examples which steer away students from organizations that are strict and impose limitations in this area. This will not be part of the equation anymore if they are given the autonomy to organize their time how they see fit.

Another fact that is corroborated about Generation Z with this research pertains to their main work motivators. All four drivers identified by Fratričová and Kirchmayer (2018) are backed up by students' responses. Students need to feel content with their work; they need to work on diverse, meaningful tasks; team climate needs to be positive; and the right amount of workload would be highly appreciated to keep their work-life balance in an equilibrium. Having a purpose while working in their jobs, which ideally should be aligned with organization's goals and overall vision, is an additional motivator based on the need to positively influence the society. This in turn is aligned with the research of Wüst and Šimić (2017), one of the rare existing studies about Generation Z in Croatia, who found that benefits to society are rooted deeply in the minds of Generation Z in Croatia.

According to students, team climate will depend mostly on the people and their personalities in one organization. There are inconsistencies with previous research about Generation Z on the topic of socialization in the workplace. According to Lazanyi and Bilan (2017), Generation Z has trouble trusting other people which is heightened in a work environment. On the contrary, students are explicit on how important it is for them to form strong interpersonal connections with their colleagues. This is not a priority for Generation Z in Poland (Lazanyi & Bilan, 2017). When talking about relationships with superiors, it is clear that an expectation exists that bosses will listen to and appreciate employees.

An important revelation in this research is finding out that students expect and hope for a learning environment which could easily be a significant factor when choosing which employers are desirable and which are not. When choosing employers to apply for, students will always seek out opportunities in environments where they can gain significant knowledge. In fact, students see knowledge and growth as a reward. It is a much-appreciated reward on top of other benefits and remuneration. With this expectation that their work will provide personal and professional growth they become motivated to make significantly more effort in their work. They are open to all types of knowledge and they want it to be shared freely as opposed to what Bejtkovsky (2018) reported. In fact, Generation Z does not want to monopolize knowledge, and this should not be an obstacle in this generation's ability to cooperate with their peers.

### **5.1. Suggestions for future research**

This research sheds some new light on what this new generation, soon to play a significant part in the work environment in Croatia, expects. Its findings can be useful to employers in helping them better understand this new cohort and assist to initiate changes in the recruitment processes as workplaces will surely be going through a transformation in the upcoming period. Results of this research can also assist employers in making them better prepared and steered in the right direction on how to attract and retain this new generation.

It is suggested that employers adapt their hiring practices and devise appropriate employment branding campaigns to emphasize the broader impact their organizations have on the society. It is recommended to give Generation Z a chance to speak their minds freely, listen to their opinions and allow the maximum amount of flexibility in the workplace to be able to retain them longer. It is also proposed to focus more on ad hoc education and trainings than on standardized mentorship inductions. Carefully building up a pleasant work climate

and thinking about the cultural fit with the organization will also be important to consider during hiring process.

Further steps to be taken should involve more research around this topic. For the purpose of this research ten students were interviewed and it might be worth having a larger sample of interviewees to see if more latent drivers in Generation Z's minds exist. This would also be a good way to check if this research findings can be validated and affirmed. One suggested step would be to conduct a similar study of Generation Z in Croatia who attend or have attended different schools or programs or, more broadly, conduct a study of non-college educated young professionals to compare them with the sample of students interviewed for this research. Having a quantitative study around the topics of preferred rewards and an in-depth qualitative study of Generation Z's motivation and preferred work organization would also be complimentary to this research and would be beneficial for understanding Generation Z better.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Interview Questions**

- 1) What is your current work experience?
- 2) How do you see your career progress?
- 3) How often do you plan to change jobs?
- 4) What motivates you in your work?
- 5) What makes a perfect employer?
- 6) How would you describe a great colleague and a great boss?
- 7) What do you think about mentorship programs?
- 8) What do you expect to get in return for your work?
- 9) What type of work and what amount of workload do you expect?
- 10) Is working on side projects important to you?