



**Q1 2026 THOUGHT LEADERSHIP PIECE**

# **EMPLOYING THE NEXT GENERATION: UNDERSTANDING AND SUPPORTING TODAY'S YOUNG TALENT**

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Dr. Brooklyn Raney, Ed.D., Founder, BRSF Group

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A generational inflection point is reshaping the modern workplace. As Gen Z steps into adulthood, they are entering a labor market defined by rapid technological transformation, geopolitical volatility, and the cognitive impact of lifelong digital immersion.

At the same time, organizations are struggling to understand how to support, motivate, and retain a generation navigating unprecedented levels of uncertainty.

Recently, I sat down to discuss the implications with educator, author, and researcher Dr. Brooklyn Raney, whose work centers on human development, school and workplace relationships, trust and boundaries, and leadership development, along with her BASICS framework — developed through years of research, observation and experience — that reveals every person (young or older) shares the same six core needs.

So while Brooklyn brought the vantage point of someone who understands the needs of today's emerging adults, I brought the perspective of a technology leader building teams in an AI-driven economy. The result of our conversation revealed a powerful truth:

**Employing the next generation isn't an HR challenge.  
It's a strategic imperative for any organization that  
wants to compete in the age of AI.**

Below are the key insights from our discussion—and what they mean for organizations preparing for the future of work.

# 1

## GEN Z ISN'T APATHETIC. THEY'RE OVERWHELMED—AND IT LOOKS THE SAME ON THE SURFACE.

When it comes to young adults, the news headlines share a consistent pattern: skyrocketing anxiety, identity exploration, and a tendency to self-diagnose through social media. Platforms like TikTok have democratized language around mental health—but not necessarily accuracy. The result is a generation with more awareness yet more confusion, often interpreting uncertainty as failure.

One story illustrates the larger trend: a student turned in an exam completely blank, writing, "What's the point? The economy might crash tomorrow."

This wasn't laziness—it was existential overwhelm.

Today's young adults watched older generations follow the "traditional path" only to face layoffs, inflation, and instability. Their skepticism isn't rebellion; it's realism shaped by experience. And layered on top of this is the "comfort paradox"—a culture of convenience that has unintentionally stripped away opportunities for young people to build resilience. When everything is frictionless, discomfort feels foreign. Yet discomfort is where growth begins.

**For employers, this signals a clear mandate: clarity, consistency, and a renewed commitment to building confidence through challenge—not protecting employees from it.**

# 2

## TECHNOLOGY HAS REWIRED HOW GEN Z COMMUNICATES, LEARNS, AND WORKS

**From my vantage point in the tech sector, one thing is undeniable: For young adults, the smartphone isn't a tool—it's an extension of identity.**

Everything they do, from communicating to task management to self-expression, routes through that device. Understanding that isn't optional; it's foundational to designing roles, workflows, and expectations that fit how this generation operates.

Yet even younger workers are beginning to acknowledge the consequences. Tech-free retreats and social-media sabbaticals are emerging, especially among older members of the cohort. As Brooklyn notes, "They recognize the phone is an extension of their body—but they're not sure they want it to be."

This internal tension is paired with the neurological impact of swipe-based media—shortened attention spans, fragmented focus, and increased reliance on external stimulation.

**Workplaces must adapt communication, training, and engagement strategies to compete in an attention economy that this generation did not choose—but must navigate daily.**

## 3 THE PANDEMIC ACCELERATED A BREAKDOWN OF NORMS—AND EMPLOYERS ARE SEEING THE EFFECTS

COVID-19 didn't just disrupt education; it dissolved many of the norms that typically prepare young people for the workforce. During remote learning, deadlines softened, accountability eased, and attendance became negotiable. The intention was compassionate—but the long-term effects are real.

Young adults are now entering workplaces unsure of where the lines are. As Brooklyn shared, one young employee fired for chronic tardiness was genuinely surprised. His manager had repeatedly said, "I'm flexible," intending to be supportive. But flexibility without clarity becomes chaos.

**Gen Z needs structure—not micromanagement. They need boundaries—not ambiguity. For leaders, this means re-establishing norms that earlier generations absorbed implicitly.**

## 4 THE EXPERIENCE GAP: WHY INTERNSHIPS MATTER MORE THAN EVER

One of the biggest challenges I see in recruiting young talent is a widening "experience gap." Many young adults are entering the workforce with minimal real-world exposure simply because they never pursued internships—or their institutions didn't make experiential learning a priority.

In today's AI-transformed economy, experience isn't just helpful. It's differentiating.

Internships, co-ops, apprenticeships, and project-based learning are no longer "nice to have"—they are critical pathways to employability. Without them, young workers risk being forced into jobs that don't match their skills, interests, or long-term potential.

**Organizations that build pipelines for early talent development will win the future talent race.**

## 5

## AI FLUENCY: GEN Z'S UNTAPPED COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

As Perplexity CEO Aravind Srinivas recently said of young adults busy on social media watching reels:

***“Stop wasting time scrolling through Instagram and start mastering AI tools.”***

His direct message for the next generation of workers was that AI is reshaping the job markets at a pace humans are struggling to match. With updates arriving every few months, adaptability is now essential. Technology is moving too fast for passive learning.

The next decade will divide workers into two groups — those who understand how to use AI to build, analyze, and accelerate work, and those who are sidelined by automation.

**Young people must learn to:**

- **Use AI as a thought partner**
- **Streamline repetitive tasks**
- **Prototype ideas quickly**
- **Build products or solutions that didn't exist yesterday**

Employers must encourage this fluency. The opportunity is massive — but so is the risk of being outpaced.

The current generation has a natural technological instinct that older generations often lack. If they cultivate AI proficiency—prompting, automation, data analysis, AI-assisted creativity—they will be positioned to lead one of the greatest workforce transformations in modern history.

But there's a catch: Without coaching, mentorship, and guardrails, their potential remains dormant.

**The organizations that invest in teaching young employees how to harness AI will build the most adaptive, future-ready teams.**

## 6

## THE BASICS CHECKLIST: CREATING AN ENVIRONMENT THAT BUILDS TRUST

As Brooklyn explained, if trust is the foundation for positive and productive experiences and growth, our first step must be creating the best possible conditions for that trust to build. That starts with designing environments that meet the needs of young people—spaces they want to be in, and ones they want to return to.

Through her years of research, observation, and experience, she has come to believe that everyone shares the same six core *predictable* needs – even if the ways young people pursue them can be wildly *unpredictable*.

She calls this checklist the **BASICS**

- B** | **Belonging and Membership**  
A feeling that you are known and valued by others in your daily life, by your group, team, and wider community.
- A** | **Ability to Contribute**  
A feeling that your strengths, talents, and efforts are needed and that you have opportunities to offer them to your community.
- S** | **Safety and Structure**  
A sense that you are safe in the world and that daily events are somewhat routine and predictable.
- I** | **Independence and Control**  
A perception that you have some control over daily events and are accountable for your own actions and their consequences.
- C** | **Competence and Mastery**  
A feeling that you are building skills that will benefit your future self and your community.
- S** | **Self-awareness and Connection**  
A sense of your own uniqueness and an understanding that you are an integral part of your family, school, cultural groups, and the wider world.

What's critical to understand about this **BASICS** list is that youth will pursue these needs—with or without adult guidance—sometimes consciously and sometimes unconsciously. When these needs aren't met in healthy ways, young people may seek to meet them through less healthy or even risky behaviors.

Brooklyn made it clear that the less healthy or risky behavior is not a moral failing; it's human nature.

Our role as leaders is to build environments where the healthy path is not only available but clear, supported, and appealing. Ideally, this is a preventative approach, but it can also be used when working to help a young person get back on track – so young people can ultimately flourish—and organizations can thrive.

## 7

## PURPOSE AND STORYTELLING: REDISCOVERING THE MEANING OF WORK

Today's generation wants to understand why their work matters. This isn't entitlement—it's engagement.

**Purpose is a productivity multiplier.**

As I often tell leaders, we must re-sell young people on the value of work: not as a grind, but as a source of contribution, growth, identity, and stability. The basics of life—food, shelter, security—are inextricably linked to employment. That message isn't self-evident to a generation raised in economic volatility.

Brooklyn frames it poignantly: "We're losing the feeling of a dollar earned and a day's work completed." Leaders must help rebuild that connection through storytelling, transparency, and meaning.

## CONCLUSION: DESIGNING ENVIRONMENTS THAT MEET THE NEEDS OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN AN AGE OF AI

As AI accelerates the pace of change, the fundamentals of human development matter more—not less.

Belonging & Membership.  
Ability to Contribute.  
Safety & Structure.

Independence & Control.  
Competence & Mastery.  
Self-awareness & Connection.

These aren't nice-to-haves, they are have-to-haves—for individuals and organizations.

Today's younger adults are not just another generation entering the workforce. They are the first truly AI-native workforce in history. If we mentor them, stretch them, challenge them, and invest in them, they will shape the next era of innovation.

At Maverick Technology Partners, we believe the future belongs to organizations that can do two things exceptionally well:

**EMBRACE TECHNOLOGICAL DISRUPTION—AND ELEVATE HUMAN POTENTIAL.**

When we combine meaningful work experience and AI fluency, with a foundation of trust, we won't just prepare today's generation for the future.

**WE WILL EMPOWER THEM TO HELP BUILD IT.**