

# **Adapting to Another “New Normal”: The Pandemic’s Impact on Generation Z’s Team Dynamics**

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*The role of teamwork in modern organizations is more crucial than ever. This research investigates whether the COVID-19 pandemic has permanently altered Generation Z’s perceptions and behavior on team projects. A study of graduating seniors at a Southeastern university found decreased team conflicts during and after the pandemic compared to pre-pandemic levels. Task attractiveness and interpersonal cohesiveness declined during COVID-19 but rebounded post-pandemic, though not to pre-pandemic levels. These findings have implications for educational programs, workforce development, and organizational practices aimed at supporting Generation Z’s success and well-being as they transition into their careers.*

*Keywords: teamwork, post-pandemic, conflict management, Generation Z*

## **INTRODUCTION**

The COVID-19 pandemic had a profound impact on people worldwide, disrupting routines, causing extended periods of isolation, and creating high levels of physical, economic, and emotional uncertainty and stress. Generation Z, who were born from the mid-1990s to the early 2010s, were enmeshed in this crisis during their formative years. Generational research asserts that pivotal events during formative years not only shape a generation’s immediate responses but also permanently alter mindsets and behaviors (Alwin & McCammon, 2007; Connolly, 2019).

Prior to the pandemic, studies were already being conducted regarding the unique characteristics of Generation Z in school and in the workforce (O’Boyle et al., 2017; Seemiller & Grace, 2015; Stillman & Stillman, 2017; Twenge, 2017). Generation Z has been referred to as digital natives, iGen, and Zoomers because they have grown up in a world with access to the internet and digital technologies (Katz et al., 2022). Their media consumption is primarily through digital platforms like YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, and streaming services, with a preference for short-form content. Using mobile devices and accessing website applications for personal purposes is second nature to them. Generation Z also is described as practical, cautious, and realistic in their expectations and approach to life, an outcome of being raised in the

shadow of 9/11 and the 2008 Great Recession. Gen Zers seek internships and jobs that provide a sense of purpose while offering financial stability and developing practical skills that prepare them for the future (Hayek, 2021).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Generation Z learners experienced the disruption of the learning environment as most schools and universities moved course delivery to an online format. With their tech-savvy backgrounds, Generation Z was expected to be prepared for this sudden shift; and much of the research on teaching and learning focused on the use of technology and digital learning (Guppy et al., 2022; Singh et al., 2021). However, the abrupt transition to virtual classrooms, asynchronous learning, and online collaboration posed challenges beyond technology. Generation Z learners needed to quickly adapt to a new set of norms and expectations (Harari et al., 2023) as they profoundly changed the ways they not only tackled the course material but also connected with their classmates and instructors. Understanding the lasting effects of the pandemic on Generation Z's task and interpersonal attitudes and actions is critical due to the collaborative nature of contemporary work environments and the vital role of effective teamwork in achieving organizational success.

Thus far, extensive research shows mixed findings on the relationship between the pandemic disruption of the learning environment and learners' teamwork effectiveness. Some studies show that learners had a positive perception of virtual teams' flexibility in continuing teamwork during the pandemic (Awuor et al., 2022), whereas other studies show that team members were disengaged, easily ignoring virtual team meetings (Weit et al., 2023). In this research, we explore the underlying teamwork process to evaluate the effect of pandemic learning on Generation Z's teamwork competencies. Specifically, we investigate whether post-pandemic college seniors are more adept or less adept at managing conflict and fostering cohesive, high-performance teams than their pre-pandemic counterparts. The findings of this research provide insights into both educational and workplace practices that are designed to support the successful transition of Generation Z into professional careers and society.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Teamwork Dynamics**

Prior to the pandemic, renowned consulting firms like Deloitte emphasized the importance of teams in publications such as "Organizational Performance: It's a Team Sport" (Volini et al., 2019). This revelation was not new, and business school educators for years have been creating classroom activities and group assignments to foster students' teamwork competence (Juban et al., 2021). The increasingly diverse workforce and the need for innovative solutions required that students learn to manage conflict (Islam et al., 2021). For students to be engaged in their learning, faculty knew these activities and assignments needed to be viewed as fruitful because students railed against busy work or heavy workloads with limited benefits. If successful, students produced high-quality work and responded to the question "I would work with my teammates again" with a resounding "strongly agree." The desired end goal was for graduates to be able to participate in and lead highly productive, task-focused work teams (Islam et al., 2021). In the post-pandemic "new normal," the importance of teamwork has not changed; and the concepts of conflict management, task attractiveness, and interpersonal cohesiveness remain three key components that drive effective teamwork and team performance. Successful teams deal with conflicts constructively, find meaning and engagement in their tasks, and foster strong interpersonal bonds among team members.

First, effective conflict management entails acknowledging, managing, and resolving disagreements. Through respect and empathy, constructive conflict management promotes diverse viewpoints, innovation, and stronger relationships (Tjosvold, 2008). For example, in an educational setting, openly discussing disagreements and engaging in civil conversations about the direction and content of a team project can lead to a more comprehensive and creative final product (Borrego et al., 2013). Similarly, in a professional setting, constructive conflict management can lead to a willingness to consider and incorporate different perspectives, thereby yielding robust solutions and superior team performance (Leonard-Barton & Swap, 2005).

Conversely, mishandled conflict can be highly deleterious. Escalating affective conflicts, which stem from personal problems and relationships, can cause dissatisfaction and a decrease in cohesiveness and productivity within teams (Jehn & Mannix, 2001). Conflict avoidance, which is often driven by a reluctance to face uncomfortable situations and undesirable consequences, also can damage work performance and morale. Davey (2019) coined the phrase “conflict debt” to illustrate the long-term effects of unresolved conflicts. The idea is that conflicts do not fade away over time if they are not addressed. Instead, like financial debts, they remain and grow, making them increasingly challenging to resolve. In educational settings, unaddressed conflicts can result in disengagement and negative learning experiences (Borrego et al., 2013). In organizations, they can foster a toxic work environment characterized by hostility, passive-aggressive behavior, dwindling trust and collaboration, and project setbacks (Behfar et al., 2008).

Second, task attraction relates to the degree to which a task is perceived as interesting, relevant, and valuable. Individuals are more inclined to participate when tasks align with personal interests and/or professional goals (Vallerand et al., 2019). The impact of high task attraction extends to effective problem-solving and innovation because it motivates individuals to think creatively (Amabile and Pratt, 2016). Moreover, when there is task interdependence among individuals, moderate to high task attraction fosters collaboration and leads to high-quality outcomes (Gagné et al., 2018).

Conversely, unappealing tasks can demotivate team members, leading to disengagement and discontent. Tasks that are monotonous, lack significance, and/or do not align with an individual’s interests or goals can lower motivation, cause stress, and result in burnout (Moss, 2020).

Third, interpersonal cohesiveness is the extent to which individuals feel supported, connected, and dedicated to one another. It is viewed as an important antecedent for team performance (Beal et al., 2003; Franz et al., 2017; Grossman et al., 2021). When coupled with high-performance norms, cohesive teams enjoy frequent collaborative interactions that promote positive work environments and cultivate their members’ strengths. This, in turn, enables teams to overcome obstacles and accomplish their goals more proficiently and with greater agility.

Conversely, teams with low levels of cohesiveness experience poor communication, mistrust, and misaligned values and goals. The lack of mutual support makes tedious or highly challenging tasks even more unappealing (Fried & Ferris, 1987). In educational settings, low interpersonal cohesiveness can cause uneven work efforts (including social loafing) and resentment, undermining performance quality and student learning outcomes (Lam, 2015). In professional settings, the resultant communication breakdowns and unresolved conflicts can lead to lower productivity, job satisfaction, and morale (Mathieu et al., 2008).

## **COVID-19 Disruptions**

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, most students were already utilizing digital tools at their colleges and universities, although the degree to which they were used differed across schools, fields of study, and courses. Students utilized Learning Management Systems, such as Blackboard and Canvas, to access course documents and readings, communicate with their classmates and instructor, join group discussions, submit assignments, receive feedback, and keep track of due dates and grades. For team assignments, they utilized applications, such as Google Docs, Microsoft Word Online, and Dropbox Paper, to write and edit documents, share files, and collaborate with their classmates in real time.

Nonetheless, at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, college students faced unprecedented challenges when universities worldwide swiftly transitioned to synchronous and asynchronous online learning. They needed access to dependable internet connections and computers equipped with adequate hardware and software capabilities to effectively engage in virtual lectures, complete assignments, participate in group discussions, and collaborate remotely with peers. Learning management systems and online methods of communication, which were previously supplementary to their education, became the central vehicle for learning. Digital platforms that students used for social interactions were now being used for educational tasks and team collaboration. This transition, while necessary, introduced a new set of dynamics into how teams and team projects were perceived and how team projects were executed.

Generation Z learners were less inclined to interact with their classmates on virtual team projects, resulting in noticeable declines in their team skills and team performance compared to pre-pandemic levels

(Wei et al., 2023). Students suffered from digital fatigue as they spent countless hours in front of computer screens performing activities ranging from researching to writing to attending classes remotely (Gregersen et al., 2023). Moreover, the blurring between personal and educational environments made disconnecting from schoolwork increasingly difficult, affecting students' capacity to take breaks and recharge (Wardak et al., 2022).

Firsthand activities that were engaging in a physical classroom setting were hard to replicate in virtual environments (Morrison et al., 2021). Students were demotivated by the elimination of the idea exchanges that took place in face-to-face discussions (Eden et al., 2022). Physical separation from friends, classmates, and instructors was accompanied by psychological feelings of isolation, loneliness, anxiety, and detachment (Leal Filho et al., 2021).

The lack of meaningful interactions may be the reason that individuals completing team projects virtually reported a low level of conflict (Wei et al., 2023). On the other hand, Generation Z's remote and hybrid learning experiences during the pandemic may have equipped them with communication and collaboration tools that reduce team conflicts (Pueschel et al., 2020; Sumolang, 2023). Either way, this finding is intriguing because virtual team research before the pandemic indicated higher levels of conflicts due to fewer face-to-face opportunities to resolve team members' differences and misunderstandings (Gilson et al., 2015; Zaccaro & Bader, 2003).

## **HYPOTHESES**

### **Pre- and During the Pandemic**

The first set of hypotheses explores changes in team dynamics from pre-pandemic norms to those observed during the pandemic. We expect that the abrupt move to virtual learning and the forced dependency on electronic communication significantly modified traditional conflict resolution processes, leading to a decrease in overt conflicts. The decrease could either be the result of fewer conflicts or due to conflict avoidance. Moreover, we expect that the isolation and repetitive nature of remote learning might have diminished task appeal and the strength of interpersonal ties within teams, as the physical separation and digital medium made it challenging for students to find value in assignments and foster robust relationships.

*H1: Compared with pre-pandemic in-person learning, during the pandemic, students have decreased levels of teamwork conflicts (H1a), task attractiveness (H1b), and interpersonal cohesiveness (H1c)*

### **Pre- and Post-Pandemic**

In the second set of hypotheses, we assessed the enduring impacts of pandemic-induced adaptations on team dynamics, even as face-to-face instruction resumed. Generational research suggests that when a generation undergoes an unusual, life-changing, or traumatic event during their formative years, it leaves a profound and lasting impact on their shared identity, values, and worldview. These experiences often lead to changes that become integrated into their daily lives long after the event. We therefore predicted that lower conflict levels would continue with the ongoing integration of digital tools (e.g., Zoom and learning management systems). Moreover, we expected that the previous isolation and the appealing flexibility of online learning and collaboration (including fewer direct interactions) would affect students' views on task attractiveness negatively and hinder interpersonal cohesiveness in the long run.

*H2: Compared with pre-pandemic in-person learning, post-pandemic, students have decreased levels of teamwork conflicts (H2a), task attractiveness (H2b), and interpersonal cohesiveness (H2c).*

### **During and Post-Pandemic**

In the third set of hypotheses, we investigated the extent to which pandemic-induced changes in team dynamics remained post-pandemic. We anticipated that the effects of remote collaboration methods and the collective experience of the pandemic on Generation Z would endure. However, we wondered if there

would be some rebound to pre-pandemic levels once in-person classroom conditions were restored or if the changes that were set in motion during the pandemic would deepen.

**H3:** After the pandemic ended and the mode of instruction returned to in-person, the levels of teamwork conflicts (H3a), task attractiveness (H3b), and interpersonal cohesiveness (H3c) remained at a similar level as during the pandemic.

## RESEARCH METHOD

### Participants and Data Collection Procedure

The data for this research were collected during the strategic management course, a mandatory capstone course for business majors at a private university in the Southeastern United States. The course is built around a team project with a local business that spans the entire semester. The project historically entailed a series of in-person fact-finding and feedback meetings with the local business and with the instructor. At the end of each semester, students were required to evaluate their team experience, and grades were adjusted based on team members' assessments of each other's contributions to the project. Data collection began in Fall 2018 and continued through Fall 2022, resulting in a total of 366 completed surveys. We excluded surveys from Spring 2020 because the method of instruction abruptly changed from in-person to remote mid-semester. For more information, refer to Table 1.

**TABLE 1  
SAMPLING DETAILS**

Number of Collected CATME Evaluations	Pre-Pandemic			COVID-19 Emergency – Excluded semester	During the Pandemic		Post Pandemic		
	Fall 2018	Spring 2019	Fall 2019	Spring 2020	Fall 2020	Spring 2021	Fall 2021	Spring 2022	Fall 2022
Conflict	48	25	33		74	46	46	47	47
Task Attractiveness	0	25	33		74	46	46	47	47
Interpersonal Cohesiveness	0	25	33		74	46	46	47	47
Total	n(conflict) = 106 n(task) = 58 n(cohesiveness) = 58				n = 120		n = 140		

### Measurements and Instruments

CATME (Comprehensive Assessment of Team Member Effectiveness) is a widely adopted tool in higher education designed to enhance students' teamwork skills and boost team effectiveness (Loughry et al., 2014). It provides a quantitative method for students to assess the performance of their team members and offers interpretative scores to instructors. These scores can be used to monitor team dynamics and determine when intervention is appropriate. Although CATME peer evaluations were primarily used to evaluate teamwork, during the process of administration we selected additional instruments to be integrated into the survey, which is an option provided by the CATME interface (Wei et al., 2023). Specifically, CATME measures Conflict using the (Jehn and Mannix, 2001) instrument, and this instrument was administered with all CATME evaluations, starting in Fall 2018. Additionally, starting in Spring 2019, we added CATME's measure of *Task Attractiveness* and *Interpersonal Cohesiveness* using the Carles and De Paola (2000) instruments, albeit with some minor modifications.

## Data Analysis

To examine the lasting effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, we first grouped the data into three samples. As shown in Table 1, the pre-pandemic sample consisted of 106 surveys, the during-pandemic sample consisted of 120 surveys, and the post-pandemic sample consisted of 140 surveys. We conducted the two-sample t-test, which is commonly used in research to compare means in different samples of populations (Lu & Guo, 2019). Because the resulting samples were different sizes and variances, we utilized Welch's approximation method, which is appropriate when the samples are unpaired or unrelated (Seats, Lawrence, & Prieto, 2012).

## RESULTS

T-tests were conducted separately for each set of hypotheses, and the results are presented in Table 2.

**TABLE 2**  
**T-TEST STATISTICS**

Measured Items	Mean Pre-Pandemic (M1)	Mean During Pandemic (M2)	Mean Post-Pandemic (M3)	Hypotheses 1a,b,c Test Results M1>M2	Hypotheses 2a,b,c Test Results M1>M3	Hypotheses 3a,b,c Test Results M2≠M3
Conflict	1.65 (n=106)	1.41 (n=120)	1.42 (n=140)	$t(224)=-2.33$ $p=.01$	$t(244)=-2.23$ $p=.01$	$t(258)=-0.14$ $p=.89$
Task Attractiveness	3.83 (n=58)	3.56 (n=120)	3.64 (n=140)	$t(176)=-1.37$ $p=.09$	$t(196)=-0.99$ $p=.16$	$t(258)=-0.51$ $p=.61$
Interpersonal Cohesiveness	4.10 (n=58)	3.80 (n=120)	3.94 (n=140)	$t(176)=-1.62$ $p=.05$	$t(196)=-0.87$ $p=.19$	$t(258)=-0.95$ $p=.34$

Note: Results comparing M1 and M2 and M1 and M3 are for one-tailed tests; results comparing M2 and M3 are for two-tailed tests.

### Pre- and During Pandemic

*Hypothesis 1a* suggested that the reported level of conflict pre-pandemic will be higher than during the pandemic. The reported levels of conflict in the pre-pandemic sample ( $M=1.65$ ,  $SD=0.88$ ) were significantly higher ( $t(224)=-2.33$ ,  $p=.01$ ) than the conflict levels reported during the pandemic ( $M=1.41$ ,  $SD=0.60$ ), thus supporting the hypothesis. Additionally, when we assessed the different types of conflicts, we obtained similar results: relationship conflict ( $p=0.001$ ), process conflict ( $p=0.046$ ), and task conflict ( $p=0.060$ ). *Hypothesis 1b* suggested that students will report lower levels of task attractiveness during the pandemic than pre-pandemic. Indeed, reported levels in the pre-pandemic sample ( $M=3.83$ ,  $SD=1.21$ ) were significantly higher ( $t(176)=-1.37$ ,  $p=.09$ ) than those reported in the during-the-pandemic sample ( $M=3.56$ ,  $SD=1.19$ ), thus providing support for the hypothesis. Similarly, the reported levels of interpersonal cohesiveness in the pre-pandemic sample ( $M=4.01$ ,  $SD=1.13$ ) were significantly higher ( $t(176)=-1.62$ ,  $p=.05$ ) than those reported during the pandemic ( $M=3.80$ ,  $SD=1.17$ ), thus providing support for *Hypothesis 1c*.

### Pre- and Post-Pandemic Teamwork

*Hypothesis 2a* suggested that the reported levels of conflict pre-pandemic will be higher than those reported post-pandemic. These levels were significantly higher ( $t(244)=-2.23$ ,  $p=.01$ ) in the pre-pandemic sample ( $M=1.65$ ,  $SD=0.88$ ) than in the post-pandemic evaluations ( $M=1.42$ ,  $SD=0.65$ ), thus supporting the

hypothesis. When comparing the reported levels of task attractiveness in the pre-pandemic sample ( $M=3.83$ ,  $SD=1.16$ ), with those reported in the post-pandemic sample ( $M=3.64$ ,  $SD=1.21$ ), the test results were in the right direction but the level of significance did not meet the required threshold ( $t(196)=-0.99$ ,  $p=.16$ ). Thus, *Hypothesis 2b* was not supported. Similarly, when comparing the levels of interpersonal cohesiveness in the pre-pandemic sample ( $M=4.10$ ,  $SD=1.13$ ) and post-pandemic sample ( $M=3.94$ ,  $SD=1.20$ ), the test results were in the right direction but the level of significance did not meet the required threshold ( $t(196)=-0.87$ ,  $p=.19$ ). Thus, *Hypothesis 2c* was not supported.

### **During and Post-Pandemic**

*Hypothesis 3a* argued that the reported levels of conflict in the post-pandemic sample will remain at similar levels as those reported during the pandemic. Comparison of the reported levels of conflict in the sample during the pandemic ( $M=1.41$ ,  $SD=0.60$ ) with those reported in the post-pandemic sample ( $M=1.42$ ,  $SD=0.65$ ) did not show a significant difference, thus supporting the hypothesis ( $t(258)=-0.14$ ,  $p=.89$ ). Similarly, the reported levels of task attraction during the pandemic ( $M=3.56$ ,  $SD=1.19$ ) were not found to be significantly different ( $t(258)=-0.51$ ,  $p=.61$ ) than those reported after the pandemic ended ( $M=3.64$ ,  $SD=1.21$ ), thus providing support for *Hypothesis 3b*. Finally, the reported levels of interpersonal cohesiveness during the pandemic sample ( $M=3.80$ ,  $SD=1.17$ ) were not significantly different ( $t(258)=-0.95$ ,  $p=.34$ ) than those in the post-pandemic sample ( $M=3.94$ ,  $SD=1.20$ ), supporting *Hypothesis 3c*.

## **DISCUSSION**

Our findings indicate changes in reported conflict, task attractiveness, and interpersonal cohesiveness among college students before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The reported levels of conflict were higher before the pandemic compared to during the pandemic. This included relationship, process, and task conflicts, all of which were higher before the pandemic. Task attractiveness and interpersonal cohesiveness were also higher before the pandemic than during the pandemic. Moreover, there was no significant difference in the reported levels of conflict, task attractiveness, and interpersonal cohesiveness between the during and after the pandemic periods. Together, the two sets of hypotheses (H1 and H3) suggest that the pandemic created a new baseline of behavior. Furthermore, our findings on conflict management (H2a) show that the reported level of conflict pre-pandemic was statistically higher than the post-pandemic level, suggesting that Generation Z college students have either learned to resolve conflicts or developed a conflict-avoidance strategy when working in teams post-pandemic.

While the results were in the predicted direction, there was no statistically significant difference in the reported levels of task attractiveness (H2b) and interpersonal cohesiveness (H3c) between the pre-pandemic and post-pandemic periods. The findings regarding the second and third sets of hypotheses suggest the need for a more nuanced interpretation. Students reported lower levels of task attractiveness and interpersonal cohesiveness during the pandemic, but these levels partially rebounded after the pandemic.

### **Implications for Teaching Generation Z Students in Higher Education Settings**

According to Tuckman's model of group development, conflict and conflict resolution are critical in fostering high performance teams (Bonebright, 2010; Katzenbach & Smith, 2015). Therefore, the reported decrease in team conflict during and after the pandemic merits educators' attention regardless of whether the learning environment is in-person, virtual, or a combination of both. Educators could offer instruction on evidence-based information sharing and decision-making before the start of a team project. Conflict resolution modules could be integrated into the curriculum to equip students with tools and techniques for constructively managing disagreements. These modules could include simulations, role-playing, and case studies to help students assess conflict dynamics and practice different resolution strategies. By establishing a classroom environment that welcomes open dialogue and diverse viewpoints, educators could reduce the likelihood that conflicts in team projects would escalate into negative confrontations or be suppressed through avoidance or accommodation behaviors.

The reported decrease in task attractiveness during the pandemic indicates that students have difficulty finding team projects engaging or appealing in remote and hybrid learning environments. To tackle this challenge, educators should create team assignments that are not only academically rigorous but also personally meaningful to students. Offering Generation Z students options, such as selecting topics that align with their interests or future career plans, could enhance task attractiveness. In addition, project-based learning (PBL) can be highly effective because it enables student teams to address real-world issues in collaboration with external stakeholders, thereby experiencing the practicality of their academic studies. Educators should also consider incorporating gamification, which is defined as “the application of game design elements in non-game activities [to] address the issue of learner distraction and stimulate students’ involvement” (Khaldi et al., 2023, p.1), into their lesson plans. Design elements in an educational setting include storytelling and themes, quests and challenges, and badges that recognize achievements.

The decrease in reported interpersonal cohesiveness during the pandemic suggests the need to build social connectedness among students, especially in online learning environments. Therefore, educators should create structured opportunities for interactions where students can engage in meaningful discussions and group problem-solving. Icebreaker and networking activities could help students build relationships with their peers. Allocating time during class for small group discussions or breakout sessions could help students feel more connected and engaged. By incorporating online whiteboards, discussion boards, and group chat apps like Microsoft Teams, Google Meet, Slack, and Discord, into lesson plans, educators could enhance collaboration and increase trust among their “digital native” students. Additionally, the use of learning analytics could help educators track student participation and performance, enabling them to provide timely support and intervene when necessary.

### **Implications for Managers of Generation Z Employees**

Teams are a vital component for organizations to achieve their objectives. As such, it is imperative for organizations to proactively understand and address the mindset and behaviors of Generation Z employees toward teamwork. As an initial step, managers should closely monitor the level and type of engagement exhibited by Generation Z employees in team projects. For instance, they may be more risk and conflict averse because of the pandemic. In such cases, managers could facilitate open dialogue and encourage diverse perspectives to counter this tendency. Effective strategies include conducting team meetings with structured approaches, such as round-robin and brainstorming, as well as implementing anonymous feedback tools, such as suggestion boxes and online surveys. By utilizing these tools, managers can cultivate an atmosphere where Generation Z employees feel secure sharing their opinions and ideas. Regular team-building activities, both in-person and virtual, could also contribute to building trust and improving communication among team members.

Leading by example is equally important. Managers should actively solicit feedback and demonstrate how to handle disagreements effectively. They could also recognize and reward those who constructively challenge the status quo or bring forward innovative ideas. Moreover, providing mentorship and coaching could help younger employees develop their confidence and professional voice. Mentorship programs could pair Generation Z employees with older coworkers who can provide guidance, support, and feedback on their performance. These programs could also offer opportunities for reverse mentoring, where younger employees share their knowledge of digital tools and technologies with their older coworkers.

To make team tasks more attractive for Generation Z employees who telecommute part-time or full-time, managers should utilize similar strategies as those previously recommended to educators. Offering diverse and challenging projects that align with employees’ interests and career goals can increase task attractiveness. Frequent feedback and recognition could help employees improve their skills and feel appreciated, thereby boosting their desire to participate in team projects. Additionally, managers could incorporate gamification design elements into team tasks, such as setting up friendly intergroup competitions or rewarding employees for achieving milestones, to enhance their appeal.

To foster interpersonal cohesiveness among Generation Z employees in today’s digitalized workplace, managers need to support social connections in both virtual and in-person work environments. It is essential to create a diverse and inclusive work culture where every employee feels respected and valued. Team-



building activities, such as e-sports games and escape rooms, could help Generation Z employees build relationships and develop a sense of team camaraderie in non-traditional settings. Regular check-ins and virtual coffee breaks could provide informal online opportunities for Generation Z employees to connect and share their experiences within and across generations. Organizing in-person social events, team outings, and workshops could further strengthen bonds in their intergenerational workforce. Managers should also consider implementing DEIB (diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging) training and practices to foster a supportive and cohesive work environment.

### **Research Limitations and Future Directions**

Our study has several limitations. First, our sample was limited to undergraduate business students in the Southeastern US, and Generation Z college students may behave differently in classroom settings than Generation Z employees behave in the workforce. As such, future research may examine how the hypothesized effects manifest in the workforce and well as in different geographic locations. Second, our sample was limited to one year prior to COVID-19-, and one-year post-COVID-19. As such, while we were able to capture these effects, it is not clear whether the effects are temporary or permanent. As such, studies that have a sample that expands over a longer time would be able to further understand the nature of the observed differences in conflict, task attractiveness, and interpersonal cohesiveness. Third, while we were able to capture the student's responses pre-, during, and post-COVID-19, we were also capturing changes in the mode of instruction. Future studies that can isolate the effects of COVID-19 by capturing student responses using the same method of instruction (e.g., all remote, all online, all in-person) would further advance our understanding of the effects of COVID-19, mode of instruction, and Gen Z teamwork attitudes.

### **CONCLUSION**

The findings of this study suggest a varied response in the ways that Generation Z approached team projects and teamwork during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Some changes may persist. Others may return to pre-pandemic norms or improve as both institutions and individuals adjust to the post-pandemic "new normal" with their newfound knowledge and enhanced technical capabilities. In this study, the permanent decline in reported team conflicts was coupled with a decline and subsequent small rebound in the levels of task attractiveness and interpersonal cohesiveness. These findings underscore the resilience and adaptability of Generation Z learners and employees. They also highlight the need for periodic reassessments of teaching methods and business practices to foster teamwork and team accomplishments as society moves out of the pandemic's shadow.

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