

Fostering Future Agribusiness Professionals: Developing the Skills of Generation Z

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The agribusiness industry faces a global challenge in attracting and retaining qualified workers, making it crucial for higher education institutions to understand the skills employers value most in recent graduates. This study aimed to identify the perceptions of the agribusiness industry on the necessary skills needed in agribusiness graduates. The results showed that soft skills such as critical thinking, communication, and time management are highly sought-after by agribusiness employers. This research highlights the importance of preparing future employees with the necessary skillsets before hiring to aid agribusinesses in overcoming their challenges and ensure a capable workforce for society. The findings of this study provide valuable insights for educational institutions to better prepare Generation Z for the contemporary challenges they will face in the agribusiness workforce.

Keywords: agribusiness, generation z, skillset, employers, higher education

INTRODUCTION

The global pandemic's recent societal and economic disruptions have significantly impacted the business environment. The disruptions created by the pandemic are evident through organizations' ability to attract and retain qualified employees (Kavaliunas, 2020). According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) (2023), the unemployment rate is abnormally low or erratic due to the disruption of the pandemic. The BLS identified the approximate unemployment rate for the United States (US) as follows:

- 2018: 4%
- 2019: 4%
- 2020: 3.5%
- 2021: 6.3%
- 2022: 4%
- 2023: 3.5%.

The BLS (2023) stated these low unemployment levels, especially in 2023, have not occurred since 1951-1953. The low and abnormal unemployment rates have created a heightened demand for new employees (Bolton 2018; Barhate and Dirani, 2021). This demand and the retirements of the Baby Boomer generation, has caused severe organizational challenges (Stinson, 2020; Thoele, 2018). Organizations are facing similar challenges with attracting and retaining qualified candidates. According to Bolton (2018) and Dick (2019), organizations are seeking help from Generation Z. However, Bolton and Dick argued that organizations are incurring challenges in attracting candidates with adequate skill sets to add value. This study aims to identify the most valued skills by agricultural businesses when hiring recent graduates. Covid-19 has profoundly impacted the business world, leading to a significant shift in the work environment (Bailey & Breslin, 2021; Rasul et al., 2021). As a result of widespread lockdowns and economic disruption, many organizations have been forced to reorganize and restructure their operations, leading to an increased demand for new employees.

Additionally, the pandemic has resulted in job losses, increasing demand for job openings. At the same time, the pandemic has also accelerated the adoption of remote work and digital transformation, which has created new job opportunities in areas such as information technology, digital marketing, and e-commerce. As a result of the recent global pandemic, a unique and challenging hiring landscape has been created, with an increased demand for employees in certain industries and organizations needing to adapt their recruitment strategies to meet these new demands.

The pandemic has challenged the global business environment, particularly in the food and agriculture industry (Bailey & Breslin, 2021; Rasul et al., 2021). With changes in consumer behavior, supply chain disruptions, and increased safety concerns, the demand for new employees in the industry has skyrocketed. Companies are now looking for individuals who can help navigate this new and complex landscape to provide solutions to the many challenges resulting from the pandemic. In addition, the industry is facing a significant shortage of skilled workers, making it crucial for organizations to find and hire employees who can quickly and effectively adapt to the changing needs of the industry. This has resulted in employees needing the technical skills necessary to perform their jobs and soft skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, communication, and teamwork to navigate the challenges the pandemic poses effectively.

BUSINESS PROBLEM

Organizations are enduring extreme pressures from the decreased employee selection pool and increased retirements and turnover (Santillo, 2019; Shukus, 2020).

As the mass exit of baby boomers from the workforce creates room for the next generation of workers, organizations are facing new challenges in understanding and effectively communicating with Generation Z. Generation Z, born between 1995 and 2012, is known for their comfort with technology and their focus on financial security and employment. However, stereotypes are also associated with this generation, such as a lack of ability to communicate in person, which may not be entirely accurate.

Organizations strive to find effective and efficient methods to ensure Generation Z employees are ready for the workforce. This includes understanding their skills, values, and preferences to align them with the organization's needs. However, organizations continue to uncover workplace challenges with the millennial generation. They now see differences and challenges with understanding and aligning with Generation Z. These challenges include understanding their communication preferences, work-life balance, and willingness to adapt to changes.

To ensure success in the workplace, organizations must work to understand and effectively communicate with Generation Z. This includes recognizing and addressing the stereotypes associated with this generation, as well as understanding their unique skills, values, and preferences. Additionally, organizations must create an environment that allows for flexibility and autonomy and encourages personal growth and development for Generation Z. By doing so, organizations can increase their chances of success by creating a well-prepared, motivated workforce aligned with the organization's needs. Organizations recognize the need to adapt and prepare for the influx of Generation Z employees, as they understand that understanding and aligning with this generation can lead to increased success. Studies have shown that

Generation Z may have different values, skills, and communication styles than previous generations (Maloni et al., 2019).

One of the key traits of Generation Z is their comfort and familiarity with technology (Chillakuri, 2021). Growing up in a digital age, technology has always been a part of their lives, and removing it may cause confusion and dissatisfaction. This generation has also been shaped by financially turbulent times, leading to a higher emphasis on financial security and stability.

Research has also highlighted some stereotypes associated with Generation Z, such as a lack of ability to communicate in person and an increased focus on societal initiatives. However, these stereotypes should be approached with caution as they may not fully capture the complexity and diversity of this generation. Studies have shown that while they may prefer technological communication, they are still capable of and comfortable with in-person communication. Organizations must strive to understand and adapt to Generation Z's unique characteristics and need to integrate them into the workforce and drive organizational success effectively.

The Human Resource Management International Digest (2021) has identified a common stereotype of Generation Z: they are not good at communicating verbally and are overly invested in social causes (Chillakuri, 2021). However, this stereotype is only partially accurate, as evidence suggests that while this may hold some truth, it is not entirely accurate (Chillakuri, 2021). Studies by Malonia, Hiatt, and Campbell (2019) have found that one of the central stereotypes about Generation Z is that they cannot communicate effectively in person. Janssen and Carradani (2021) have found that Generation Z is highly social, comfortable, and proficient in communicating through technology. However, many members of this generation prefer technological communication to face-to-face interactions (Janssen & Carradani, 2021).

THE AGRIBUSINESS SECTOR

J.H. Davis first coined the term “agribusiness” at a conference in Boston in October 1955 and a year later published a paper titled “From Agriculture to Agribusiness” (Davis, 1956). In 1957, he further defined agribusiness in “A Concept of Agribusiness,” emphasizing the complex relationships between agriculture and other industries (Coclanis, 2019; Hamilton, 2016). To accurately measure these relationships, the authors utilized the input-output model and worked with its creator, Wassily Leontief, to analyze input and output tables for the US economy (Leontief, 1967). This method continues to be the most effective way to assess the significance of agribusiness in the national economy, as it allows for tracing complex flows between sectors. According to Davis and Goldberg, agribusiness encompasses all aspects of farm supplies production and distribution, farming operations, and storage, processing, and distribution of farm commodities and derived items (Trelogan et al., 1957).

Agribusiness incorporates all activities in producing, processing, marketing, and distributing food and fiber products. This includes farming, ranching, forestry, and fishing, as well as the processing and distribution of food and fiber products, such as dairy products, meat, fruits, and vegetables. The agribusiness industry also includes businesses that support agricultural production, such as suppliers of seeds, fertilizer, and equipment, and businesses that provide financial and other services to farmers and ranchers.

The agribusiness sector is a vital component of any modern economy, and its importance extends far beyond just food production (Mrówczyńska-Kamińska & Bajan, 2019). For millions of people worldwide, the sector is their primary source of livelihood and income, providing jobs, resources, and support to rural communities. In many countries, agriculture is the backbone of the economy, and the success of the agribusiness sector is essential to national stability and growth. One of the key benefits of a strong agribusiness sector is its role in ensuring food security. As the global population continues to grow, so does the demand for food. A strong and productive agribusiness sector is essential to meet this growing demand and ensure everyone has access to nutritious food. This is particularly important in developing countries, where hunger and malnutrition are significant challenges that impact health, education, and productivity.

In addition to food security, the agribusiness sector is also essential for economic stability. It provides employment and income opportunities for rural populations, helping to reduce poverty and promote economic growth. The sector also provides raw materials for other industries, such as textiles and

biotechnology, which can drive economic growth and diversification. This creates a ripple effect, stimulating economic activity and helping to boost the nation's overall prosperity. The agribusiness sector is also crucial for environmental sustainability. Agricultural practices and innovations can significantly impact the environment, and promoting environmentally friendly approaches to agriculture is essential to preserve the planet's resources. This includes promoting practices that reduce waste and pollution, conserve water, and protect biodiversity.

Current challenges facing the agribusiness industry include climate change, import competition, and increasing productivity while reducing environmental impact (Maienfisch & Stevenson, 2015). A growing demand for sustainably produced food and fiber products drives innovation and investment in the sector. The industry must also respond to changing consumer preferences and attitudes, including food safety, animal welfare, and environmental sustainability concerns.

THE ROLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN AGRIBUSINESS

Higher education in agriculture and food production is essential for the growth and development of the agriculture and food industry (Kómíves et al., 2019). This education provides individuals with advanced knowledge and skills in agricultural production techniques, food science and technology, sustainability, and business management.

One of the primary benefits of higher education in agriculture and food production is the development of a highly skilled workforce. Graduates of these programs are equipped with the knowledge and skills needed to develop and implement efficient and sustainable agricultural practices, improve food quality, and increase productivity. This leads to increased competitiveness and profitability in the agriculture and food industry. According to Alexio et al. (2018), organizations are partnering with higher education institutions to assist in students' sustainable development and education. One of the solutions educational institutions and the agribusiness sector are exploring is to create a direct link between the students and the organizations (Alexio et al., 2018). Alexio et al. ascertain this link can allow students to be better prepared for careers in the agribusiness industry while adding immediate value to the employer.

Muruillo-Zamorano, Lopez Sanchez, and Godoy-Caballero (2019) argued that higher education institutions need to find a way to better prepare students for careers. Muruillo-Zamorano, Lopez Sanchez, and Godoy-Caballero further postulated that providing students with skillsets and information that is current and relevant is a method that higher education can better prepare the students.

Another essential aspect of higher education in agriculture and food production is its focus on sustainability. This education gives individuals the understanding and skills to develop and implement environmentally friendly and economically viable agricultural practices. This helps preserve the environment for future generations and supports the long-term viability of the agriculture and food industry. In addition, higher education in agriculture and food production equips individuals with the knowledge and skills needed to manage and grow a thriving agriculture or food business. This includes business management, marketing, and financial management courses and hands-on experience through internships or research projects.

GENERATION Z

Generation Z, also known as iGen or Centennials (Rue, 2018), is characterized as tech-savvy, diverse, and independent. They have grown up with technology and are used to having instant access to information and communication. However, Generation Z is also characterized as being socially inept, and displaying poor soft skills (Human Resource Management International Digest, 2021). Research by Janssen and Carradani (2021) and Malonia, Hiatt, and Campbell (2019) argues this is not entirely true. Generation Z is a very social cohort but they prefer to utilize technology for their main forms of communication because of their familiarity with using technology. Chillakuri (2021) postulates that iGen has inappropriately been associated with laziness. Chillakuri further argues that iGen is not lazy. They effectively and efficiently utilize technology and have different values than some previous generations. Generation Z values work-life

balance, flexibility, efficiency, career growth and purpose, and social responsibilities (Chillakuri, 2021; Janssen & Carradani, 2021; Maloni, Hiatt, & Campbell, 2019). They are also known for being adaptable and open to change.

Compared to previous generations, such as Millennials (1981-1996) and Generation X (1965-1980), Generation Z tends to be more independent and less focused on individual achievement (Schroth, 2019). They also place more importance on work-life balance and are more socially and politically conscious. Millennials tend to value career growth and are more individualistic, while Generation X values stability and work-life balance but also places a high value on personal achievement.

The agribusiness industry faces widespread difficulties in attracting and retaining employees due to its high production and growth levels. As the industry expands, it requires a larger workforce to meet the market's demands and maintain production levels. However, this growth has created a highly competitive environment for hiring, making it increasingly difficult for agribusinesses to find and retain qualified employees. The challenges the industry faces in hiring workers are not limited to a specific region or location but are universal and impact the entire sector. These challenges can range from a shortage of skilled workers to competition with other industries for top talent to difficulty attracting workers to rural areas. To overcome these challenges, agribusinesses must find innovative and effective ways to recruit, train, and retain employees who can support the continued growth and success of the industry.

The scarcity of qualified workers is a global issue, and it is becoming increasingly important for the agribusiness industry to understand the skills most employers value when hiring recent graduates. As one of the key stakeholders in agricultural education, the industry plays a crucial role in shaping the skillsets of the next generation of workers. By understanding the employers' needs and the industry's requirements, educational institutions can tailor their programs to better prepare students for careers in agribusiness. This will ensure that students possess high-demand skills and that agribusiness can attract and retain the talent they need to continue growing and thriving. Furthermore, by collaborating with educational institutions, the agribusiness industry can help create a pipeline of well-prepared workers equipped to meet the industry's challenges and contribute to its success.

This study focuses on identifying the agribusiness industry's perceptions regarding the essential skills required of agribusiness graduates. The goal is to gain a deeper understanding of the skills that industry employees value and to use this information to better prepare the emerging generation, or Generation Z, for the contemporary challenges they will face in the workforce. By surveying human resource professionals and analyzing their perspectives, the study aims to provide insights into what the agribusiness industry needs from its future employees. Higher education institutions can then use this information to update their curricula and ensure students have the skills and knowledge necessary to succeed in the industry. Ultimately, the study aims to bridge the gap between education and industry and to ensure that future generations of workers are prepared to meet the demands of the agribusiness sector. Doerfert (2006) emphasized the importance of a capable workforce for any society (Doerfert & Miller, 2006). In today's global economy, where knowledge and information play a crucial role in determining competitiveness, the objective is to develop and maintain the ability of citizens to perform skilled and knowledge-intensive tasks (Doerfert & Miller, 2006). The agribusiness industry needs help attracting employees with the necessary skill sets. In light of the challenges faced by the agribusiness industry in attracting and retaining qualified workers, the industry is seeking assistance from educational institutions to prepare the emerging generation of workers, Generation Z, to meet the demands of the modern business environment. By equipping students with the necessary skills and knowledge before they enter the workforce, educational institutes can help to mitigate some of the challenges faced by agribusinesses in attracting and retaining top talent. This could involve incorporating relevant coursework and practical experience into their programs, such as courses in agribusiness management, agronomy, and marketing, as well as internships and co-op opportunities. By partnering with agribusinesses, educational institutions can help bridge the gap between students' skills and what the industry requires. This will benefit the students and the industry, creating a pipeline of well-prepared and motivated workers ready to contribute to the success of the agribusiness sector.

AGRIBUSINESS AND GENERATION Z

The agribusiness industry is constantly evolving and adapting to modern technologies and sustainable practices (Olander et al., n.d.). Generation Z, known for their digital literacy, innovation, and interest in sustainability, could bring fresh perspectives and ideas to the industry (Chillakuri, 2021). Alexio et al. (2018) argued iGen could also bring new skills and knowledge in data analysis, digital marketing, and precision agriculture.

Furthermore, the agribusiness industry is not limited to traditional farming and includes various sectors such as food processing, packaging, distribution, and sales. This diversity in the industry can provide a wide range of career opportunities for Generation Z, from hands-on work in the field to management positions in the office (King, 2017).

Janssen and Carradani (2021) argued organizations in the agribusiness industry must provide clear career paths, opportunities for growth and development, and a sense of purpose and social responsibility if they want to attract and retain Generation Z. Agribusiness organizations should also consider implementing flexible working arrangements and utilizing technology to cater to the preferences and needs of Generation Z.

To prepare Generation Z for the workforce and to help them add value to agribusiness organizations, industry leaders can focus on providing education and training that aligns with the skills needed in the industry (Murillo-Zamorano, Lopez Sanchez & Godoy-Caballero, 2019). This includes technical skills such as agronomy, animal science, and food science and soft skills such as communication, leadership, and problem-solving (King, 2017). (Murillo-Zamorano, Lopez Sanchez and Godoy-Caballero, 2019; Olander et al., n.d). Alexio et al. (2018) and Murillo-Zamorano, Lopez Sanchez, and Godoy-Caballero (2019) determined that organizations can provide opportunities for internships and apprenticeships, which would give Generation Z hands-on experience and the ability to apply their knowledge in real-world situations.

Furthermore, agribusiness organizations can also consider ways to adapt their management and leadership styles to better align with the values and goals of Generation Z (Bolton, 2018). This includes providing flexible work schedules, creating a positive and inclusive work culture, and promoting a sense of purpose and meaning in their work (Chillakuri, 2019). By understanding and addressing the unique needs and characteristics of Generation Z, agribusiness organizations can better attract and retain young talent, which will ultimately help drive the industry forward (Murillo-Zamorano, Lopez Sanchez and Godoy-Caballero, 2019; Olander et al., n.d). Overall, the agribusiness industry presents a valuable opportunity for Generation Z to secure meaningful and stable employment and positively impact the world's food supply and sustainability (Alexio et al., 2018; Murillo-Zamorano, Lopez Sanchez & Godoy-Caballero, 2019; Olander et al., n.d).

RESEARCH METHOD

The authors of this study aimed to investigate the desired employability skills in agribusiness companies in the upper Midwest region during the COVID-19 pandemic. To gather the necessary data, one of the authors designed a short online survey using Qualtrics and reviewed it by three human resource professionals to ensure its validity and reliability.

The survey design was based on previous research on employability skills, which was categorized by Peterson and Peterson (2004), Patacsil and Tablatin (2017), and Andrews and Higson (2010) (Andrews & Higson, 2010; Patacsil & Tablatin, 2017; Peterson & Peterson, 2004). Given the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the need to attract employees was high. This prompted the researchers to examine the skills that agribusinesses were seeking to fill the employment gap.

It is worth noting that the survey designer was from a business school and not agriculture, which explains the focus of the survey questions on business rather than agriculture. Only one question out of the nine addressed more traditional agriculture career paths, while three were demographic. The survey was distributed between December 2020 and January 2021 to human resource professionals at 150 agribusinesses in the upper Midwest region. The sample included companies of various sizes and functions

within the agribusiness sector that had previously recruited undergraduate students from the authors' regional, comprehensive, state university.

In this study, 51 human resource professionals from the agribusiness industry responded to the survey; however, only 84% fully completed the survey successfully. The final number used for the analysis was 43 respondents 29% of the distributed surveys. These results suggest that while the survey response rate was moderate, most participants completed the survey thoroughly, providing valuable insights into the perceptions of human resource professionals in the agribusiness industry.

DATA

The analysis of the data gathered from the survey of human resource professionals yielded some noteworthy findings, which will be further explored. The highlights of the data include:

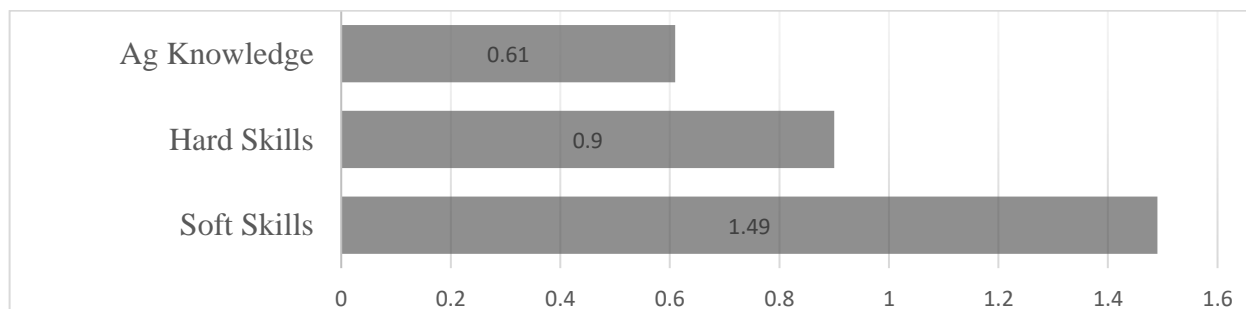
The study's results showed that an overwhelming majority, 95%, of the human resource professionals surveyed believe that soft skills are essential or of utmost importance when hiring employees in the agribusiness industry. This highlights the significance of emotional intelligence, interpersonal skills, and communication abilities in determining a candidate's suitability for a role in the sector. The emphasis on soft skills indicates that agribusiness organizations value employees with technical knowledge and the ability to work well with others, manage conflicts, and communicate effectively. This preference for soft skills reflects the increasing recognition of their crucial role in the workplace's overall success.

Additionally, the results showed that a solid understanding of agriculture is necessary for operations/management and sales positions in the agribusiness industry. This means that for these roles, it is essential for the candidate to have a good grasp of the industry, its processes, and its workings. The knowledge of agriculture could help these employees make informed decisions, improve operations, and effectively sell agricultural products and services. This highlights the significance of having agriculture-specific knowledge in these critical positions, as it could directly impact the success and growth of the organization. The results emphasize the need for job applicants to have the required technical and soft skills and a good understanding of the agriculture industry.

Furthermore, the study revealed that in-depth agriculture knowledge is not required for roles in information technology, legal, and human resources within the agribusiness industry. This suggests that a comprehensive understanding of agriculture may not be as crucial as other skills and qualifications for these positions. While understanding the industry could be helpful, it may not be seen as a defining factor in the hiring process. Instead, the focus for these roles may be on the relevant technical and soft skills and the candidate's overall fit with the organization. This highlights the diversity of skills and qualifications valued in the agribusiness sector and the importance of considering the unique requirements of each role in the hiring process.

Regarding ranking the skills difference for business positions at agriculture companies, most respondents indicated that soft skills outweigh hard skills and agriculture knowledge. This is shown in Figure 1, which highlights the difference in the skills ranking.

FIGURE 1
MEAN OF SKILL IMPORTANCE (RANKED ON A 3-POINT SCALE)



CONCLUSIONS

The decline of the traditional rural agriculture population has created a need for agribusiness organizations to find efficient methods to integrate the newest generation of workers, Generation Z, into their workplace. With the aging of the existing agricultural workforce and the need for recruits, companies in the industry face a talent shortage. They are looking for ways to attract and retain younger workers. To address this challenge, companies seek ways to make the agribusiness sector more appealing to Generation Z and develop an inclusive and supportive workplace that meets their needs and expectations. This includes offering flexible work arrangements, promoting work-life balance, and providing professional growth and development opportunities. By doing so, agribusiness organizations hope to attract and retain young talent, maintain a competitive edge, and secure their future success.

To gain a more comprehensive understanding of the recruitment and hiring process in the agribusiness industry, a study was conducted to survey human resource professionals. The aim was to gather their insights on the importance of different skills and qualifications when hiring for various positions in the sector. The survey focused on the significance of soft skills, technical skills, and agriculture-specific knowledge when evaluating job applicants. By gaining the perspectives of human resource professionals, the study aimed to provide valuable information for organizations looking to attract and retain Generation Z employees in the agribusiness industry. The study results could be used to inform recruitment strategies, hiring processes, and employee development initiatives, with the ultimate goal of promoting success and sustainability in the sector.

Agribusiness organizations could utilize the results of the study conducted among human resource professionals to develop and implement more effective recruitment strategies to attract and retain Generation Z employees. By understanding the specific skills and qualifications valued in the industry, organizations could tailor their recruitment and hiring processes to better attract and retain young talent. This could include creating more appealing job descriptions and compensation packages, promoting the benefits of working in the agribusiness sector, and highlighting opportunities for growth and development. Additionally, organizations could use the results to identify areas for improvement, such as investing in soft skill development programs for Generation Z employees. By using the insights gathered from the study, agribusiness organizations could create a more attractive and supportive workplace for Generation Z employees, ultimately increasing their chances of success and longevity in the sector.

While attracting young talent to the agribusiness sector is essential, simply bringing them on board may not be sufficient. The study revealed a need for more soft skills among Generation Z individuals, which could impact their success and effectiveness in the workplace. This highlights the importance of attracting Generation Z employees and developing their skills and abilities to ensure their success in the industry. Organizations could use the study results to identify the specific soft skills lacking among Generation Z workers and implement training and development programs to address these weaknesses. This could include workshops and training sessions on teamwork, communication, and leadership. By providing opportunities for professional growth and development, organizations could enhance the soft skills of their Generation Z employees and improve their chances of success and long-term viability in the agribusiness sector. Further research and investigation are necessary to fully support the success of Generation Z employees in the agribusiness sector. The study conducted among human resource professionals has highlighted the importance of soft skills, but further exploration is needed to determine the most effective methods for developing and nurturing these skills among Generation Z workers. This could involve researching best practices for training and development programs, identifying innovative skills-building approaches, and seeking feedback from current and former Generation Z employees in the agribusiness sector. The results of this research could inform the development of targeted and effective programs and initiatives to promote the success of Generation Z workers in the industry. By investing in their development and growth, organizations could ensure the long-term viability and success of the agribusiness sector and create a supportive and inclusive workplace for all employees.

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