

AGILE ADAPTERS IN A SHIFTING WORLD

INTERVIEW WITH

Dr. Claire Madden

Dr. Claire Madden is a renowned Australian social researcher, author and keynote speaker and a leading voice internationally on Gen Z. She is a member of EFG's Future Leaders Network, sharing insights on social trends, demographics and generational change and explaining how these forces could shape the next decade. In a conversation with *InTalks*, she explores the attitudes and aspirations of Gen Z and what motivates them as clients and consumers.



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What sparked your interest in Gen Z and inspired you to research and build a career around them?

I think it was a combination of working with young people in my local community over a number of years and a career in social research. I have always had an interest in generational differences – in what we can learn from each other and which factors shape the values and world view of emerging generations. Over the past 15 years or so, it has been fascinating to watch Gen Z grow up and navigate the complexities of adolescence in a globally connected, technologically saturated environment. More recently, as they have entered the workforce, I have been particularly interested in understanding how we can shape workplace cultures in a way that activates the intrinsic motivation of Gen Z.

Which overarching attitudes and behaviours define Gen Z and set them apart from other generations? And to what extent have these characteristics been driven by the emergence of digital technologies?

Gen Z have grown up in a world of increased convenience: Everything can be done almost immediately on apps. Products can be delivered to their doorstep within a couple of days – or even on the same day – from different parts of the world. As consumers, they therefore expect hyper-personalised, instantaneous and exceptional experiences from any service provider or any brand at any time. Their expectations have been radically inflated compared to those of other generations.

Can you elaborate on that?

Gen Z will compare the brand experience you offer to the best experience they have ever received from a brand. Their expectations seem to be higher across all dimensions. At the same time, what they care about at the end of the day is that the brand is authentic. They want to know that advertising is not just hype, so they follow influencers and everyday people who are using that brand to check its authenticity. They also want to know that the brand is relatable and cares about them. In other words, they are looking for brands that build long-term relationships.

You have described Gen Z as the most formally educated, technologically literate and globally networked generation in history. How does this influence their attitude to jobs in more “traditional” industries?

Gen Z have grown up in a digitally immersed environment where they are used to embracing new technologies. They are agile adapters, often effortlessly switching to newer, faster ways of achieving tasks or improving lifestyle experiences for themselves or for customers. When engaging Gen Z as talent in the workplace, it is helpful to recognise that they have an insatiable appetite for learning and development, largely due to the

rapidly changing environment they have grown up in. They fear becoming irrelevant and they want to work in organisations that are open to innovation and new ways of doing things – organisations with more of a focus on output and outcomes than on physical hours spent working in an office.

What does your research reveal about Gen Z attitudes to wealth?

Having a purpose in life is extremely important to Gen Z. However, they also have high aspirations when it comes to financial security. This can create a dilemma for Gen Z, though, as many have grown up with the rhetoric of rising house prices and the cost of living crisis, which can weaken their focus on achieving financial security. Instead, they subscribe to the YOLO (You Only Live Once) mindset, prioritising spending on enjoying life instead of saving for later. They also have new categories of spend, from mobile phones to streaming services and app purchases. They expect to routinely enjoy certain products or experiences that Baby Boomers would have seen as absolute luxuries. For example, Gen Z see global travel as a rite of passage.

What do you think is more important to them – having a clear purpose in life or achieving financial security?

I call Gen Zs “conflicted crusaders” because they are vocal about wanting to change the world and are motivated by causes like environmental sustainability. And yet in their daily choices you often see a conflict – for example, their wardrobes might contain recycled clothing (good for the environment) but also fast fashion (good for looking the part on social media). This means that many Gen Zs are torn between aspiration and reality. We see this in the context of building wealth too – they want financial security on the one hand but don’t want to sacrifice being able to spend money on lifestyle and luxuries on the other.

What advice would you offer to companies to help ensure that they remain relevant for Next Gen clients?

Authentic relationships are extremely important to Gen Z. Perhaps weary from deciphering the barrage of constant stimulation and messages vying for their attention online, Gen Z place a high value on people and organisations that genuinely show an interest in them and care about them, rather than just delivering a product or service.

And what does this mean for private banks as they prepare for the Great Wealth Transfer?

For them too, there is a clear opportunity to build relationships with future inheritors now and to help educate them about wealth management. Private banks need to invest in the relationship early, recognise that Gen Z may want to be more involved or invest in different ways, and then help to mentor them on the path to good financial stewardship and values. However, these banks need to be mindful of the fact that Gen Z have a different attitude to finances than older generations. For

example, they are likely to have learned about finance through social media and they value fast, frictionless digital finance, investing apps, crypto wallets and instant payments. They are also likely to be more comfortable with speculative assets such as crypto.

Which other factors are key for Gen Z when engaging with a financial institution?

For Gen Z, trust is everything. They want to be able to trust the brand, the offering and ultimately the people behind a product or service. Trust is multilayered, with transparency being one aspect that can strengthen it. Technology can be an enabler to facilitate transparency, and Gen Z will expect organisations to

Book published

by Claire Madden



2018

About



Dr. Claire Madden is a social researcher and leading expert on Gen Z. She completed a PhD on the qualities of organisational culture that motivate Gen Z in the workplace and she shares her insights on topics such as social trends, demographics and generational change in her role as an author, keynote speaker and media commentator. She is also the Founder and Director of the research-based strategy and communications agency Hello Clarity. Her book “Hello Gen Z: Engaging the Generation of Post-Millennials” was published in 2018.



Watch the video interview with Dr. Claire Madden.

connect in with the humour and priorities of the younger generations. Often the best way to know how to do this is to build relationships with them, have Gen Zs on your team, listen to what they want from your brand or organisation, and adapt where possible to create brand partnerships with them.

Another widely discussed topic today is the “workplace of the future”: Which skills, organisational practices and mindsets or values will be most decisive when it comes to retaining talent in the coming years?

It is interesting when you look at Gen Z and see what activates their intrinsic motivation in the workplace. My research has consistently found that connectedness is a high priority – connectedness with one another, friends in the workplace and access to relatable leaders. They want to feel valued and to know that their whole self is seen – not just as an employee but also as a person with a life outside work. Gen Z are used to contributing from a very young age on all sorts of platforms and in all sorts of ways, so when they enter the workplace, they want to make a meaningful contribution from day one. Gen Z are also lifelong learners and place a high priority on development and learning opportunities, as they don’t want to be left behind in a fast-moving world. In fact, they consider this aspect to be even more important than their salary. Companies that focus on these areas of workplace culture are more likely to create an environment that attracts, motivates and retains Gen Z talent.

When multiple generations work side by side, often with differing values and expectations, this can pose significant challenges for companies seeking to create a unifying corporate culture across generations. How best can they address this?

There certainly can be intergenerational tensions and differences when the workforce spans Baby Boomers through to Gen X, Millennials and Gen Z – not to mention Gen Alpha*, who will soon be beginning their careers. People across different generations have different work ethics. Research suggests, for example, that Gen X like to “just get in and get the work done, no matter what it takes”, whereas a Gen Z might say “just get the work done in the smartest and fastest way possible, and when it suits me”. Taking time to understand the different perspectives and engaging in cross-generational mentoring in workplaces can help bridge the gaps and build a cohesive multigenerational workplace.

How do you expect the accelerated adoption of AI to affect the professional and private lives of Gen Z over the next 10–15 years?

AI will become seamlessly integrated into the personal and professional lives of Gen Z. They are digital natives, they are used to quickly adapting to new technologies and integrating them into their lives when they see a practical, relational or emotional benefit in doing so. AI will double as personal

assistants, be an external processor and, in some cases, even become like a companion to workers in the future – with Gen Z likely to be early adopters and comfortable at experimenting with how AI can be used effectively.

Your homeland of Australia attracted global attention in late 2025 when it imposed a ban on the use of social media among under-16s. Do you expect other countries to follow suit?

Yes I do. Gen Z have been the first generation to navigate their formative years of adolescence and identity formation, while simultaneously managing their “personal brand” online. This has created a highly emotionally and relationally complex environment for young people to navigate. Further, given the boundary-less technologies, young people have become accustomed to being “always on” – with many addicted to checking their social media accounts constantly – and then trying to process the likes, the comments and other interactions, and at

times the bullying, from other online users. For some, this has become an unsafe environment – and for all young users, it is surely adding layers of complexity to their early years of adolescence. It makes sense to put an age restriction on social media to ensure that users have the emotional maturity to navigate the array of content and interactions that they can be exposed to on those platforms.

What do you consider to have been the single most important insight or piece of advice that you were offered as a young person?

Character is what endures. As a young person, my mentors and my faith were formative in inspiring me to try to live a life that serves and helps others, to be generous with sharing time and resources, to be teachable, and to persevere through the array of challenges that life brings.

*Baby Boomers born 1946–1964; Gen X born 1965–1980; Millennials born 1981–1996; Gen Z born 1997–2012; Gen Alpha born 2013–2025

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utilise effective technologies. In the case of a wealth manager, I see two different levels of trust: Confidence in the institution as a whole but also the bond of trust with their adviser. This personal connection is fundamentally important in building a very significant relationship for Gen Z – rather than a simply a transactional relationship.

What does that mean in concrete terms?

Their adviser’s interest in them as a person and in their life, but also in the way they want to experiment with investing, may also strengthen this relationship. For example, Next Gen clients might be more interested in sustainable investing or different kinds of portfolios or digital currencies. We are seeing more of these clients wanting to be active co-pilots of their investing journey.

Considering the main traits of Gen Z as clients and consumers, how can brands best adapt to their specific needs and expectations?

The best opportunities for brands are to create contexts for collaboration with Gen Z, whether it be idea generation, product development, personalisation options or in-person events. Companies do well when they are authentic and honest, when they learn to speak the “language” of Gen Z and know how to

Established in 2018 by EFG’s Global Chief Investment Officer (CIO), Moz Afzal, and Full Professor of Strategy at INSEAD, Nathan Furr, the EFG Future Leaders Network is an innovation hub comprised of industry professionals, academic leaders and visionary entrepreneurs focused on generating ideas that help guide decision-making and inspire progress.

FUTURE LEADERS NETWORK 

Mission: Empowering progress through insight and innovation

The EFG Future Leaders Network’s mission is to ensure we remain ahead of the curve in a rapidly changing world, identifying megatrends and those who will shape the future for us all.

Connecting academia and industry expertise

A key tenet of EFG Future Leaders is a commitment to bridging the gap between academic research and practical application. By connecting academic thought leadership with industry expertise, we create an environment where theoretical knowledge meets hands-on expertise, resulting in actionable insights.

Dr. Claire Madden translates rigorous social research on Gen Z and Millennials into practical, values-aligned actions for clients and families. At the EFG Investment Summit 2026, she guided audiences through multi-generational mindsets and discussed ways of finding the “sweet spot” – i.e. the balance between digital input and human guidance in wealth decisions. In particular, she underlined the importance of communication across generations, emphasising the need for early engagement, transparent dialogue and clarity on purpose and the transfer of values alongside assets.



Find out more about the EFG Future Leaders Network.