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Research shows that over half of Gen Z have no interest in pursuing middle management roles, meaning they are missing out on valuable opportunities. (Shutterstock)

Why Gen Z is saying ‘no’ to middle management — and why you might want to reconsider

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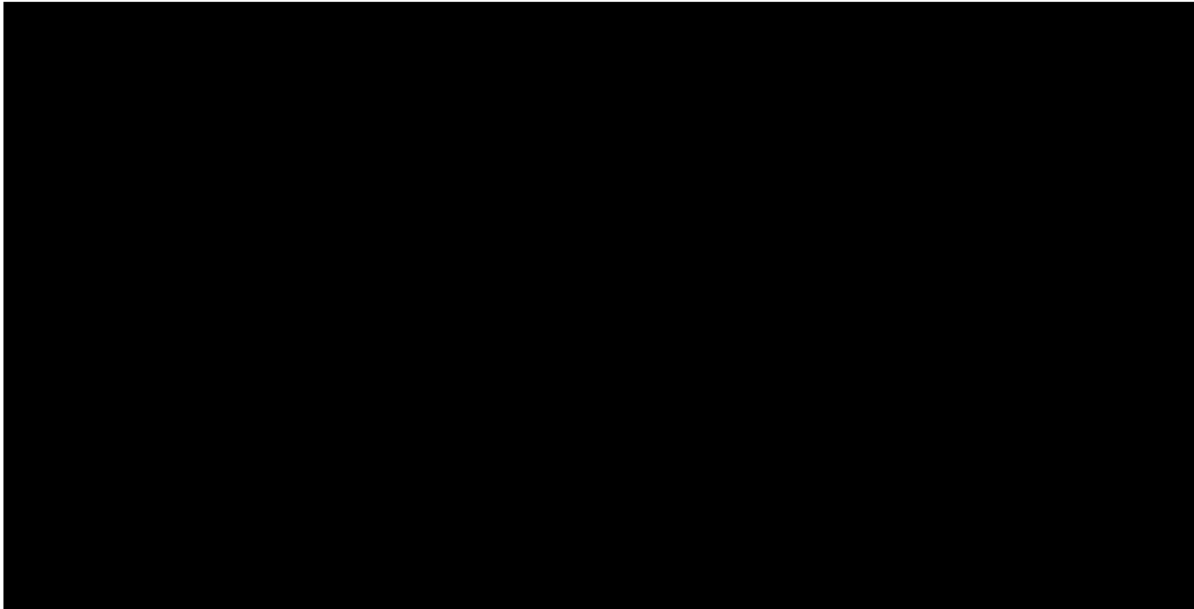
Gen Z is poised to become the most populous generation on the planet, and their influence is already shaping the future of work. As one of the most educated and racially and ethnically diverse generations, they bring fresh perspectives and new expectations for how we work and lead.

Known as the first truly “digital native” generation, Gen Z grew up immersed in a world of technology and social media, giving them a natural edge in navigating the modern world. But there is more to Gen Z than their digital fluency.

What truly sets them apart is their ambition, entrepreneurial spirit, financial savviness, commitment to ethical consumption and strong sense of social responsibility. For Gen Z, work is more than just a paycheck — it’s about committing to a higher purpose. They do best in people-centred organizations that value their contributions, prioritize well-being and align with their sense of mission.

Gen Z is redefining leadership by choosing to lead through expertise rather than relying on formal positions of authority. One of the most striking trends is their growing reluctance to step into middle management roles — a phenomenon being called “conscious unbossing.”

This powerful shift is catching many in the business world by surprise.



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Where strategy meets execution

Middle managers play a vital role in organizations, acting as the crucial link between a company's big-picture strategy and its day-to-day operations.

Unlike supervisors, who primarily focus on overseeing day-to-day tasks, middle managers are responsible for both their team's performance and the implementation of broader organizational strategies. It's a dynamic role where strategic vision meets practical execution.



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Middle managers are often the bridge between a company's big-picture strategy and its day-to-day operations. (Shutterstock)

However, research shows that over half of Gen Z have no interest in pursuing middle management roles. There is an understandable reason for this: these roles are known for their high levels of burnout and may initially seem at odds with Gen Z's values of autonomy, flexibility and personal well-being.

It is true that middle managers face real challenges. Over the past decade, their responsibilities have grown significantly. They manage competing priorities while contending with a polarized and rapidly shifting workplace. However, with the right approach, these roles can be deeply fulfilling and transformative, as my doctoral thesis research found.

Why middle management matters

Despite being highly ambitious, self-confident and driven by personal growth, Gen Z may be overlooking the valuable learning opportunities and influence that come with middle management.

Middle management roles serve as a crucial stepping stone for those seeking to make a real, systemic and lasting impact, offering a platform to advocate for the values Gen Z cares deeply about, such as social responsibility, sustainability and equity.

Additionally, middle management provides important opportunities to develop essential technical and human skills, including emotional intelligence, strategic thinking and complex decision-making. Embracing these roles can unlock the potential to lead change and inspire transformation.

How to find joy in middle management roles

If you are part of Gen Z and are unsure about middle management, reframing these roles to align with your values and aspirations can help you see it as a rewarding opportunity rather than a burden. This three-step framework can help you make the most of these roles while staying true to your values:

1. Use it as a vehicle to increase self-awareness

Middle management offers a unique environment to enhance self-awareness. By reflecting on how you respond to challenges, interact with others and make decisions under pressure, you can gain valuable insight into your strengths, areas for growth and leadership style.

For example, self-awareness can help you delegate more effectively — empowering your team, preventing burnout, and freeing up time to focus on what matters most to you.



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Instead of viewing middle management as a burden or a step backward, consider how these roles can be an opportunity for growth, leadership and greater impact. (Shutterstock)

2. Think of the role as a leadership incubator

Viewing middle management as a leadership incubator can help you shift the focus toward its long-term value. These roles offer a training ground where you learn to negotiate priorities at multiple levels of the organization and give you access to important networks and development opportunities.

The skills you develop — strategic thinking, negotiation and stakeholder management — not only prepare you for higher positions, but also equip you to effectively advocate for social change or succeed as an entrepreneur.

3. Leverage the role to scale your impact

Middle management is about expanding your influence and creating larger ripple effects. The role offers a unique vantage point to shape organizational culture and advocate for meaningful change. You can demonstrate to older generations in the workplace that ambitious goals can be achieved without compromising personal well-being or ethical standards.

The path forward

The world is counting on you and other members of Gen Z to lead the way forward. Middle management roles offer a powerful platform to exercise meaningful influence while developing the essential skills that will prepare you for success in any path you choose.

Rather than viewing the roles as a burden, see them as opportunities to grow, inspire others and leave your legacy. Middle management allows you to connect strategy with execution, shape organizational culture and advocate for the values that matter most to you.

By embracing the challenge of middle management rather than shying away, you'll have a chance to shape the future of your organizations and become a leader who drives positive, systemic change for a better, more sustainable world.