

Online 'personal brands' are key to job success for Gen Z, says study

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New research reveals how members of Generation Z perceive online "personal brands" as a crucial tool to gain more advantage in job markets.

The study, led by the University of East Anglia in collaboration with the

University of Greenwich, demonstrates the importance of authentically building online personal branding strategies and tactics to bridge the gap between Gen Z's desired and perceived images on [social media](#) when job seeking. The study results are published in *Information Technology & People*.

Members of Gen Z—the generation of people born between the late 1990s and early 2010s—are also in favor of a more dynamic, interactive, work-in-progress style of authentic personal brands, which may not necessarily show them as "perfect," but instead willing to share imperfections and weaknesses.

The findings, published in the journal *Information Technology & People*, suggest that those of Gen Z are using this combination as a strategy to establish more significant levels of trust and engagement with employers.

Lead researcher, former UEA Masters student and Gen Z student job seeker Nguyen Trang, said, "As Gen Z start graduating from university and entering the competitive job market, understanding how they enter the workforce is important. Less is known about the Gen Z student perspective, and their [brand](#)-building strategies, brand goals and motivation, and how they manage risks associated with their images when promoting on social media."

Study co-author Dr. Brad McKenna, Associate Professor in Information Systems at UEA, said, "The differentiating factor between Millennials and Gen Z is the use of technology from an early age and how this has impacted their online behavior. Gen Z are always connected to digital environments through interactions with their networks, gaming, consuming videos, and creating their own content to share on social media.

"Social media has emerged as a tool for shaping the personal brands of job seekers, and how Gen Z attempt to represent themselves authentically online has implications for their job seeking activities and affects hiring decisions. As a result, personal branding has emerged as a means of achieving career success."

Co-author Dr. Wenjie Cai, from the University of Greenwich, added, "Image consistency is becoming a critical concern for Gen Z to highlight their skillsets to potential employers. We found that authenticity was perceived to play a central role in personal branding, as well as being the most crucial characteristic of Gen Z online personal brands that employers expected to find.

"Personal branding has shifted from celebrities and top-tier managers to employees and job seekers, making the ways in which people market themselves more of a conscious effort. Job seekers today need to effectively communicate their talents to prospective employers."

The study involved Gen Z students in their final year at a UK university who were interviewed about personal branding, as well as recruiters and career advisors to gain insights into the [recruitment process](#) and expectations of online personal brands.

Before interviewing, the Gen Z students' profiles on professional social media platform LinkedIn were examined, and then fed into the interview process.

All Gen Z participants perceived digital personal brands as an essential tool to portray themselves and project strong impressions to employers. The effort in building and managing personal brands creates win-win results for Gen Z students and employers in the recruitment process.

Strategies such as effective self-reflection, authentic communication,

self-promotion processes, awareness of risks, and constantly controlling digital footprints were suggested to build stronger and more coherent personal brands.

"Previous research has argued that professionals tend to maintain a perfect image online, but we find that for Gen Z job seekers, an imperfect online image works better," said study co-author Prof. Alastair Morrison at the University of Greenwich.

The more Gen Z students focus on portraying their brands on platforms such as LinkedIn, the higher the probability that employers will find their profiles and be better able to evaluate candidate talents, skills, traits, and the fit with company culture. Employers highly recommend LinkedIn to Gen Z students and expect them to build LinkedIn profiles.

The researchers recommend that universities seek personal brand information from Gen Z students to understand them better and to mentor them in the varied ways needed to achieve personal goals and objectives based on skills, knowledge, and opportunities for training and growth.

Companies should utilize all possible opportunities to engage with student job seekers, share their organizational cultures, and be open about what they are expecting for specific positions.

It is also suggested that creating authentic personal brands brings considerable benefits for organizations. For example, the recruiter can immediately see unique points and examine whether candidates fit with organizational cultures, and this saves time, money and resources while allowing acquisition of the most suitable employees.

More information: 'I Do Not Want To Be Perfect: Investigating Generation Z Students' Personal Brands on Social Media For Job

Seeking', *Information Technology and People* (2023).

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