

Foresight: The CPA Podcast

Season 5 Episode 4: The impact of Gen Z on the accounting profession

Neil Morrison: Welcome to Foresight: The CPA Podcast. I'm Neil Morrison.

In our second episode this season, Jan Taylor said, "This is not your parents' accounting profession anymore." Jan was talking about the central role technology now plays in accounting, but it's also true in another way. The future of accounting no longer belongs to the Baby Boomers and Gen-Xers. Millennials are in leadership roles now, and there's a new generation entering the workforce. They have a very different perspective on the profession.

Generation Z is the cohort born after 1996. These are the digital natives. They have never lived in a time without the internet. They were still in elementary school when the first smartphones emerged, and they are entering the workforce at a moment when remote work is the norm. Generation Z represents a fundamental shift in our society that will drive change in the accounting profession over the next 10 years. So, let's get to know this next generation of CPAs a little bit better.

This is something two international accounting organizations attempted to do. The Association of Chartered Certified Accountants and the International Federation of Accountants produced a massive study called *Groundbreakers: Gen Z and the Future of Accountancy*. It's a fascinating report, and we will link to it in the show notes, but here's some of the highlights. Gen Z expects to progress quickly and have a range of experiences. They prioritize work-life balance, and they are particularly concerned about wellbeing and mental health.

Now, there's a lot of nuance in the report and it's definitely worth the read, but even better than reading a report is going straight to the source. On today's episode, we are going to speak with three people. Charlotte Hamilton is a senior consultant at EY Canada. She is a Gen-Zer. Murjanat Dambatta, or MJ, is assistant controller at Oliver & Bonacini Hospitality Incorporated, and she is in the unique position of being just on the cusp of Gen Z. And Safia Rahemtulla is an associate partner at EY Canada. She is a millennial who now manages Gen-Zers.

Ok, Charlotte, do you feel your generation is entering its career as a CPA with a different mindset than previous generations?

Charlotte Hamilton: Yeah, I do. I think there's a number of different ways that we tend to see things differently than generations before us. So I think partly it's because we've grown up with technology. We're used to experiencing the world at such a rapid pace with so much information at our fingertips that we're not always willing to be as patient for that feedback as other generations. I think coming of age in a world where we've had such significant events over the last few years, such as COVID, housing market fluctuations, severe recessions, we're watching our parents, our cousins go through that as we're preparing to enter the world ourselves. I think these things, we're watching them happen, and they're manifestations of a world where our conventional career paths and life paths have been disrupted. So what I've noticed, myself and my peers, we tend to approach with a very unique mindset that we have to

carve our own path through this world, and we have to fight for what we believe in and fight for a life that aligns with our values and unique aspirations.

Neil Morrison: Safia, how about you? You are involved in recruiting newly minted CPAs into the firm. Are you noticing anything in your pitch that seems to particularly resonate with this generation?

Safia Rahemtulla: Yeah. I think for me, what I'm noticing with this generation and recruiting them is that they do want to be the CEO of their own career. That's what I call it. So they do want to be able to control and input and influence their path and the ability to do many things, experience many things, go many places, try different clients. So I think that we see that more with this generation. I think from a firm perspective, one of the attractive pieces is that the firm does many things and has many different solutions and service offerings and was always trying to adapt and bring new solutions to market rapidly. So I think that dynamic-ness is exciting to them.

Neil Morrison: I like the term "CEO of their own career." One of the ways that this came out, I think in the Groundbreaker study was that Gen Z, or Gen Zed, I guess expects to progress quickly in their career as a CPA and have many job portfolios.

MJ, as a young CPA, how does that resonate with you?

Murjanat Dambatta: Absolutely. It definitely a hundred percent resonates with me in that I started my career about seven years ago. I've worked at four different places. So when I gain my experience and I feel like it's time for me to move on, I do. I don't feel restricted or locked down to any specific place. If I find an opportunity that sounds good and that works well with the vision I have for myself, I'm going to go for it. I don't necessarily believe being tied down to one specific path. I believe we're young and we should venture out to feel things out and decide what works for us and what doesn't, what serves us and what doesn't, and just follow through with that. If you venture down toward a path and you see it doesn't serve you, it's never too late to change your mind.

Neil Morrison: How have your employers reacted to that? Do you think they're starting to notice that and expect it, or were they surprised when you made these moves?

Murjanat Dambatta: I feel like some of them were surprised. I feel like a lot of employers, especially in the older generation, being at a specific place, working at a company or at a firm for their entirety of their lifetime, would expect that it would be the same. But it's just not that way anymore. People are making moves. People are venturing out and not being tied down to one particular place. So I feel like a lot of, I guess, my bosses were not necessarily surprised, per se, but they would've preferred if employees had more longevity, but it can't always be that way.

Neil Morrison: Yeah. Safia, I'm wondering, as a manager of this new generation of CPAs, how do you accommodate this expectation? It almost seems like a restlessness, but it's not really a restlessness. I guess, MJ, what you're saying is you have little patience if you don't feel that there's growth.

Murjanat Dambatta: Absolutely, yeah.

Neil Morrison: So Safia, how as a manager do you accommodate this expectation?

Safia Rahemtulla: Yeah, so I think it's curiosity is what it is. I think there's a different hunger and thirst for curiosity maybe than other generations. So I think that you need to be able to provide different experiences, different opportunities for growth, just different formats for people to learn and grow and excel. I think the other piece about it is listening. So I think that this generation is more vocal with what they want, what they're looking for, what they're needing in their career. So I think hearing them when they say, "I want to try this client," or "I want to try this type of work," or "I want to go work overseas," or whatever the permutation is, that we're listening and looking to provide that to them. So I think it's about continuous growth. Then I think it's about flexibility. I think if you can do that, then you can create a pretty rewarding career for someone, irrelevant of how long they may stay at the firm, or if they come back or go, that's not uncommon as well. To me, it's the growth and I think it's curiosity.

Neil Morrison: MJ is nodding her head.

Charlotte, how about you? Does this resonate with you?

Charlotte Hamilton: Yeah, absolutely. I think Safia is right in that we are curious and we, growing up with so much at our fingertips, we want to see it come to life. We want to experience those things that, especially in a post-pandemic world, we've felt a little locked out of. And I think what's one of the defining things about how we work and the way we work is that creativity and that curiosity comes with our other expectations around flexibility and work-life balance and our ability to be vocal and express our needs and our curiosities. So those boundaries between personal and professional sometimes blur a little bit, but it's all in the name of finding out that path that works for you and having that come to life in a way that's unique to each and every person.

Neil Morrison: I'm glad you brought up the idea of work-life balance, because that was another important area in this survey.

MJ, how important is work-life balance to your career as a CPA?

Murjanat Dambatta: Very important, and I feel that it should be for everyone, for anyone from any generation. You don't want your work and your personal to be so intermingled. You need to create boundaries and adhere to those boundaries. There's some workplaces that listen and provide you with that, but then there's other places that don't necessarily have that. Like me, for one, it's very important to me, and it's one of the reasons why I've also moved around so much. I've worked at places where I worked until 2:00 AM everyday type of thing, and that just didn't really sit right with me, or it impacted my mental health as well, not in a positive way. And thinking about my life and not wanting to live out my entire life in this specific way, I'm like, "Okay, I got to make this change. I've got to move on. I've got to find a place that will allow me to actually have a life outside of work, hang out with my friends, hang out with my family." I think it's very important for anyone's mental health really.

Neil Morrison: Yeah. I'm glad you mentioned mental health because another important area that came out of this study was the focus on mental health and mental wellbeing.

Charlotte, MJ linked that with work-life balance. Can you tease it apart? Are they different things or are we talking about the same thing here?

Charlotte Hamilton: I think there's a lot of nuance to it, actually, and everyone would define it a little bit differently. But overall, I think what really we're looking for is compassion. We want to be seen as people and we want to be understood that not every day is going to be a good day. Some days you might be able to get eight hours of work done in eight hours. Some days it might be four hours of work done in eight hours. Some days it might be 12 in eight hours. So I think it's just a shift from understanding people as ways to be productive versus people as a holistic human being that maybe has a bad day and wants that compassion and to be seen and understood. I think that's really the driving factor behind that push for mental health, is that compassion.

If you call out sick, you say, "I broke my arm," you can point to that and you can say, "Hey, this is my arm. Look, it's broken. I can't type today." But when you have a really bad mental health day, if you're suffering from depression or anxiety or anything else in that realm, you can't really point to that and say, "Look, this is my depression broken arm. This is why I can't come into work today." So I think it's just that compassion and understanding, that maybe we can't point to it, but it's still real and it's still part of our holistic ability to function as people and as workers.

Neil Morrison: MJ, another thing that I found interesting in this study was that, as we expected, Gen Z CPAs are very comfortable with digital technology, but the study also showed that there's some nervousness around the rise of new technologies. Does this nervousness make sense to you?

Murjanat Dambatta: For me personally, I don't really have any nervousness surrounding new technology. I embrace it, if anything. New technology's great, makes my work easier. I do know that even speaking with generations before me, they may feel a little bit nervous, a little bit intimidating because things are changing so quickly. If you look at the advancement of technology, we've advanced quicker in the last five to 10 years than we have in the last 50 years. So things are changing pretty quickly. I'm very comfortable with that change. I think change is good. It can come with a lot of positives, it can come with some negatives, but it's a matter of being adaptable, being adaptable to change, and being open-minded to that change as well.

Neil Morrison: Charlotte, you seem to be agreeing with that.

Charlotte Hamilton: Yeah, I think that's a really important message. It's not always just about the change itself, but it's about how we perceive it and how we approach it. We've grown up with change. We've grown up with that dynamicism, whether it's been forced on us by the world that we live in or whether we've become that way because it serves us well and it's something that we've found helpful. I think that's really one of the things that underpins our generation, we have a better appetite for change, and it comes more naturally to us because we're used to it. We've almost trained our brains and trained those neural pathways to adapt quicker and be more productive with that. So it's less scary and more exciting. Now, so long as the change makes sense. If the change doesn't make sense, then I tend to think we're a little quick to raise a flag there and say, "Hey, change is good but this isn't quite what we think we should be doing."

Neil Morrison: So neither of you are nervous about AI or the rise of new technologies like that?

Murjanat Dambatta: No, bring it on.

Neil Morrison: Safia, how do you think leadership in organizations need to adjust to not only recruit Gen Z CPAs, we touched on that, but to retain them and try to get them to stay for more than two years or three years?

Safia Rahemtulla: I think it comes back to a couple things. I think one, it's flexibility. So giving them the opportunity to drive the boundaries that they need to drive for their growth acceleration objectives, whatever those may be. So I think that's one, is flexibility. I think the second is a workplace that allows for growth, and the path for growth may not be linear.

Neil Morrison: What does that mean, "The path may not be linear?"

Safia Rahemtulla: So I think that in previous generations, it was very much climbing the corporate ladder. Stepwise, you'd stay in a role and advance in that role. Whereas I think today, the ability to jump laterally, to jump into different types of work, different types of departments, explore different types of work is important. So you can still advance your learning, your growth, your professionalism, but it may not be being a staff and then a senior and then a manager in that same area or department or field of study.

So to me, it's growth opportunities, it's flexibility. Then I think it's empowering them to be able to make decisions for their wellbeing, for their profession, for their personal life. So I think that we have to allow them to know that it is okay to take that mental health day, or it is okay to clock out at a certain time because you've got something special in the evening, or whatever the case may be, or you're starting work late that day because you've got something going on.

So I think that we've got to empower them to know that's okay, and that when I boil it all down, it comes down to a construct that is less rigid and a construct that is more malleable. I think that if you can provide that in terms of team dynamic, client dynamic, work experience, then I think you can keep people engaged with an appetite where they're excited and they want to be there.

Neil Morrison: Isn't the key phrase there, "If you can provide that?" How challenging, how much of a shift is this going to be for firms or organizations that employ CPAs to be able to do this, to be able to provide this environment? It sounds amazing.

Safia Rahemtulla: So I think it depends on how big the employer is, the resources they have available to them, and how big the gap is. So certain organizations, whether they are in the industry or they're firms, are actually pretty proactive with this. There are huge teams dedicated to talent focus and to how we recruit and how we create that experience and force the organization to adapt. So if you look at, I think some of the largest companies in Canada and in the world, they're not waiting. They understand generations are changing, technology is changing. Those talent teams are not waiting to figure it out and wait for a Gen Z to show up and say, "Hey, I want this," and then they say, "Oh, yeah, that's a good idea. We should probably do that." They're trying to be proactive.

Now, are they all always on the forefront of change? No. Sometimes you do need a Gen Z to walk in and say, “It’d be great if...” right? Then it’s about that receptiveness, to again listen and apply that. I think the challenge is remember your entire workforce is not all Gen Z. So whatever company you work at, there are probably few that are all Gen Z, unless they’re maybe perhaps an entrepreneurial startup or something like that, but any of your large multinationals are going to have Baby Boomers potentially kicking around and then everything in between up to Gen Z. So the challenge becomes how do you make everyone happy? To me, it’s flexibility. So it’s having a malleable construct that says that what Charlotte needs or what MJ needs or what Safia needs may be different, but we create a workplace that accommodates all of that. So it comes down to inclusivity, right?

Neil Morrison: MJ, you are in a smaller organization right now. I don’t want to put you on the spot too much here, but what would it need to do to retain you, to make you look at it, be like, “Oh no, I’ve got five, maybe 10 years here as a CPA?”

Murjanat Dambatta: I think they’re already doing that right now. I’ve been here for about two years now and I’m loving it. It really does tick all of the boxes in terms of work-life balance, in terms of listening to my needs, having that compassion. My mental health is great. In terms of salary expectations, in terms of having phenomenal coworkers, having a great boss, it literally ticks all my boxes. For the time being, I do see myself remaining here for a little bit. It’s the first time I’ve really felt like that about any place I’ve worked. So I do see myself being here at least for another few years.

It’s also allowed me to even explore and move within departments, starting out in financial reporting, moving on to budgeting and forecasting team, the FP&A team, and now I’m moving into corporate accounting. It’s just allowed me to really try a lot of different things, explore my curiosity. Because again, key word is listening. They listen to me, listen to my concerns, listen to my voice. So I love it, and I wish that a lot more other companies were receptive of this. I think that’s the key to keeping your employees happy and keeping your employees present.

Neil Morrison: Charlotte, looking ahead, you’re still at the early stages of your career, so what is most exciting to you about building a career as a CPA long-term?

Charlotte Hamilton: So what’s most important and exciting to me is just the ability to learn. As a CPA, the skills that you learn when you go through the program are so transferable. That’s what’s so amazing to me about having gone through it and getting my CPA last year, is that most of what I learned in the program, the technical knowledge, isn’t actually applicable to what I do on a day-to-day basis. So some of it is, a lot of it really isn’t, but it’s those skills. It’s that critical thinking, that analysis, that ability to work and perform well under pressure, all of those skills that it teaches you, I think that gives you such a broad horizon.

I’m very happy at EY. I definitely want to stay and grow my career. I love what I do here. I love the team I work for. I love the clients I work with. But I think what’s really exciting is that as I continue to grow my own skills, I’m seeing how those transferable skills I got through my CPA are helping me to be better in my professional life and in my personal life.

Neil Morrison: I want to thank all of you for speaking with me. I think this has been a really great discussion and has given a really good flavor for the change that is coming.

It does actually feel to me, Safia, that there is a big change coming to the workplace for CPAs.

Safia Rahemtulla: I think so, and I think it's exciting. I think that when MJ and Charlotte are perhaps where I am or in a similar role, right, or rank, 10 years from now or 20 years from now, they're going to be facing different challenges as leaders. They're both already leaders today, but even more so with whatever that generation looks like, which we don't know what they're going to look like. But I think it's really exciting, and I think that the interplay with technology is going to make the next couple years very dynamic. It doesn't matter how old you are or where you are in the workplace, I think it's going to be pretty cool.

Neil Morrison: Yeah. Safia, Charlotte, MJ, thanks so much for talking to me. I really appreciate it. It's been great.

Charlotte Hamilton: Thank you for having us.

Murjanat Dambatta: Thank you. It's been a pleasure.

Neil Morrison: Charlotte Hamilton is a senior consultant at EY Canada. Murjanat Dambatta is assistant controller at Oliver & Bonacini Hospitality Incorporated, and Safia Rahemtulla is an associate partner at EY Canada.

On our next episode we will look at the rise of generative AI and what it means for CPAs. Annie Veillet leads the National Intelligent Automation practice at PwC. She says, CPAs need to embrace the potential of generative AI to transform their practices.

Annie Veillet: If you are not evolving and learning how to work with these tools, you will be left behind, right? It's as simple as that. There is no way a human can be as efficient for some of the activities that the current CPA roles include than these machines. So if we know that humans cannot beat the machines for certain parts of their current activities, we need to think through, okay, how do I collaborate now with the machine that they've taken care of the data prep, the sampling, the data analysis, a number of activities handled by these new colleagues of ours, if we call it that. These machines. Now, that leaves room for me to do a certain amount of analysis that didn't necessarily have time to do before.

Neil Morrison: That is Annie Veillet, the National Intelligent Automation practice leader at PwC speaking on our next episode coming up in two weeks.

And that's it for this episode of Foresight: The CPA Podcast. If you like what you heard, please give us a five-star rating or review wherever you get your podcasts and share it through your networks. Foresight is produced for CPA Canada by PodCraft Productions, and please note the views expressed by our guests are theirs alone and do not necessarily reflect the views of CPA Canada. Thanks so much for listening. I'm Neil Morrison.

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