Episode 17 – Supporting and retaining Gen Z talent (Part 2): Work-life balance, communication and wellbeing, with Rose Sellman-Leava and Laura Verrecchia

Ellie: Hi and welcome to the Work Couch podcast, your fortnightly deep dive into all things employment. Brought to you by the award-winning employment team at law firm RPC, we discuss the whole spectrum of employment law with the emphasis firmly on people. My name is Ellie Gelder. I'm a senior editor in the employment engagement and equality team here at RPC and I will be your host as we explore the constantly evolving and consistently challenging world of employment law and all the curveballs it brings to businesses today. We hope by the end of the podcast you will feel better prepared to respond to these people challenges in a practical, commercial and inclusive way. And to make sure you don't miss any of our fortnightly episodes, please do hit the like and follow button and share with a colleague.

To follow on from an episode we released in July last year which focused on supporting and retaining senior talent, we wanted to bring a perspective from the opposite end of the spectrum. So today we're going to discuss how organisations can best support and retain Gen Z talent. Last time in part one we looked at some of the myths and misconceptions surrounding Gen Z employees, their preferences when it comes to workplace culture, and the opportunities for employers to support, include and empower the next generation of the workforce. And today in part two, we're going to explore work-life balance, communication and wellbeing in relation to Gen Z talent. And I'm thrilled to be joined once again by two experts on all things Gen Z, Rose Sellman-Leava , Director and Co-Founder of Inclusive Futures, a not-for-profit organisation which empowers students from underrepresented groups and disadvantaged backgrounds to enter careers which are right for them, and Laura Verrecchia, a trainee solicitor here at RPC and resident Gen Z member of the Employment Engagement and Equality team. Thank you both for joining me again to share your thoughts on what is a really topical subject for employers.

Rose: Thanks so much Ellie it's lovely to be here and I hope by expert you mean a Millennial who's desperately trying to be a bit Gen Z by embracing socks higher than my ankles at the moment.

Ellie: Well that's exactly what I meant Rose.

Laura: Very on trend I can promise you and thank you so much for having us back, Ellie.

Rose: Great, thanks I'm really, really trying!

Ellie: So in our last episode, Rose, Laura mentioned having never worked in an office setting before Covid. Please, can you expand on how the pandemic has affected Gen Z talent, and how employers can best support them to overcome those challenges?

Rose: Yeah, it's interesting because I think the pandemic and the ripples that we're gonna see for goodness knows how long on our young people is gonna go on for a really long time. But yeah, if we're looking specifically at Gen Z, one of the key things that the pandemic meant was that young people, so those people who are between maybe the ages of 16 and 18 when we were all locked down, they weren't able to, to access work experience opportunities in the same way that Millennials and above did. So we can't just assume that new talent, Gen Z talent, will come to us with everything that we expect them to. Like it's little things, things like how to word an email to somebody, how to communicate with clients best, or at what times you communicate with your manager and how you do that. We can't assume that any of this prior knowledge has been gained because it might not have been. And so really clearly stating all expectations when somebody starts and building a sort of two-way contract that goes deeper than a job description when someone starts is a great way to manage this because it can be revisited if things drift away and it can be covering things like, okay, how we expect you to communicate with outside clients, how we expect you to

communicate with people within the organisation, when you should contact me, like when you need to raise an issue. A sort of a two-way contract between a manager and their new employee can have so much information that actually we all assume most people know when they enter the workplace, but we can't make those assumptions anymore because of those lack of work experience opportunities. Gen Z also weren't able to network or build their communication skills in quite the same way. So again, those key kind of formative years, if you turned between 16 and 18 or 16 and 20 when COVID hit, let's say you started university and you were locked down, you weren't able to build your social skills, go out and make the new friends that you expected to meet, or build that kind of social or cultural capital if you're from a less represented or lower socio economic background. So these, you know, going out to parties, meeting new people, maybe taking risks and things like that. And that kind of reduction in in-person socialising has all meant that communication skills are an area where some young people really know they're lacking, and some employers have really talked to us about where they need extra support. And yeah, that reduction in in-person socialising and the rise in tech use have meant that chances to risk take, chances to develop those awkward conflict negotiation skills or have difficult conversations, they have really been reduced. So we've worked with students who have not felt comfortable just walking into a pub to ask if there's a job going, for example, or we know one student who got a job and she didn't turn up on her first day because she was too scared to ring them up and ask what she had to wear because that was a conversation that was too, like it was not prescribed enough, she was not able to think about it, it was too on the spot, it was too scary and so we have to consider what lockdown did in terms of affecting people in how they were able to type up measured responses to things but also how they weren't able to build up some key on the spot communication and networking skills. And similarly, the rise in tech does mean that particularly in social and cultural capital and building those skills, young people maybe need some extra support and some extra guidance in terms of what employers are expecting.

Ellie:	Yeah. And Laura, how do you think Gen Z employees prioritise their work-life balance and what sort of strategies can employers implement to accommodate those preferences? So you've mentioned flexible working.
Laura:	Yeah, absolutely. So as I mentioned, Gen Z definitely place a really high priority on that work-life balance, you know, valuing their time outside of work, whatever that may entail, as much as their professional responsibilities. For me, I absolutely love all aspects of theatre, both performing and spectating. And this for me is such a good way to unwind and do something I love. And I think it's so important for people to do the same, whether it's a sport or just watching your favourite TV show or just relaxing really. I also appreciate that I don't currently have any caring responsibilities, but I know how important that is for employees to be allowed time to fulfil these responsibilities as well. So from an employer's perspective, I think this really all just boils down to being understanding and really prioritising and thinking about that work-life balance for every single employee. And I think this can be addressed from many different perspectives really, but I've come up with a couple of strategies which I think employers can implement to accommodate these preferences. So as you mentioned Ellie, and I mentioned earlier, flexible working is really important for Gen Z and offering that possibility to work flexibly and remotely, and these can massively help employees to balance their professional and personal lives more effectively, which as I said is really important to Gen Zs. And something that Rose touched on earlier was mental health support. So providing effective resources and support for mental health, such as access to counselling services and wellness programmes is really crucial for Gen Zs, especially because Gen Zs are particularly aware of and affected by mental health issues. And we definitely value employers who support and prioritise our wellbeing. Another one for me is workload management, so ensuring that manageable workloads and promoting a culture where taking breaks is encouraged and this can definitely prevent burnout and enhance overall productivity. I think having someone like a resource manager, which we have in some of our teams here at RPC, is a really great way to monitor how everyone's doing and be alerted to when people are working those super long hours, which is sometimes expected in the legal industry and just to really check in with their employees and just make sure everyone's doing okay and that they've still got time to prioritise their mental health and their work-life balance. And then the last one I would say is feedback and communication. So regular feedback and recognition are really important to Gen Z. I certainly thrive on knowing how I'm performing, and I always appreciate constructive feedback that helps me to improve. But then on the flip side of that, I think it's really important for employees to feedback and communicate back to those above them. And this is definitely something that I find quite difficult, like if I ever have any problems, you know, RPC is super supportive, but it is something that can sometimes feel a little bit scary, you know, going to someone above you and saying, look, like, I'd really like a little bit more time to focus on myself. So that's definitely something I'd like to kind of maybe hear more from Rose on about how this can be actively implemented, both from the employee to the employer and vice versa. So yeah, those are my four things I would say are really important for employers to implement to accommodate the preferences of Gen Zs to sort of prioritise that work-life balance.

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Ellie: Thanks Laura. And yes, on that note Rose, about feedback, it can be hard to seek as a Gen Z employee. So what are some effective methods then for Gen Z when it comes to getting feedback from other employees? And then on the flip side, how can feedback from Gen Zs be gained in order to incorporate their input into decision making processes?

Rose: So I love this question. Thanks for asking it. Thanks for bringing up feedback. The topic of feedback is something that we've actually been approached by a lot of organizations to help them with at the moment. Before I kind of give any tips or before I give any thoughts on it, feedback is really interesting because when we're in the education system and that might also look like a traineeship, so like going through a training contract, essentially, we expect feedback. It goes hand in hand with a learning environment. But once we enter the workplace, and I think I do think this does apply even as a trainee on a learning journey, suddenly feedback can feel very serious, and it can feel a little bit scary. And it's basically because our jobs and careers are so intrinsically tied to our values, whatever those values might be. So it might be things around security or safety, which is around kind of money and where we live. It might be values to do with status and our identity. I think, you know, we all know what's the first thing that somebody asks you when they meet you, what do you do? And so... When our jobs are so tied up with our values and who we are, we can often go into fight or flight mode when somebody gives us constructive feedback because it can genuinely feel like those values, those things that are so important to us are at risk. And when we're in this state, it's really, really hard to listen and to learn. So actually framing feedback in the right way is incredibly important, especially with new talent.

And yeah, and actually one of the best ways to avoid going into this state is to be the one to ask first. So it is to be the employee that is asking somebody for feedback. Because if you're seeking it out, then you're sort of immediately telling your brain that this is something that you want to hear. So immediately, that's a great start. But an effective way to do this with line managers or with anybody who's more senior than you, it kind of goes back to what I was saying about contracting. So it goes back to knowing how your manager likes to give feedback, when they like to give it, because we all have different needs when it comes to feedback. So if a new employee is able to think about what they need in terms of feedback, they can raise that with their manager in the first instance and then they might also learn what their manager likes to give. So some people like to give loads and loads of feedback and it can be too much for someone else. Equally, somebody like Laura said, really values feedback but maybe their manager just doesn't think to give it all the time. So if you've had that conversation at the start of your relationship, you can state whether you like lots of informal updates or whether you need to know you're doing a good job or actually if you just prefer to receive feedback when it's relevant. So kind of have a bit of a contracting conversation with your line manager. And also figuring out someone's preferred communication style can also help here. So some colleagues are going to be really happy to have an ad hoc conversation for 20 minutes. Others want to send you something in a bullet pointed email. We can all adapt to others communication preferences in order to get the best from them, which is probably another podcast in itself! And then being proactive is great. So we can just wait for somebody to share something with us if they think the work, we've done is brilliant or not so brilliant. But in many cases, we don't get the good feedback that boosts our confidence because our managers are just happy that they don't have to make any changes to the work we're doing. So genuinely challenging yourself to be a little bit brave and to seek feedback out on a regular basis is a really good thing to do as you don't know when you might have excelled. And if you're asking for feedback, try and embrace it with curiosity, like how can you learn the most from it so that you can use it to your advantage in the future. And you can be curious by asking some lovely open questions. So the ones that start with what, where, why, how, that's a great way of keeping yourself curious and again, opening your brain up to learning a bit more. And then if you're somebody who's seeking feedback or giving feedback, timing is key. Like we know that lawyers and people managers are extra busy all the time. So setting up a 15-minute conversation, providing someone with some context ahead of it, whether they are the person you're giving feedback to or the person you're seeking feedback from might really help them to plan how to give you that helpful feedback. And equally, maybe having like a regular fortnightly or monthly feedback meeting can help both sides plan better for the conversation as well. And then lastly, it might sound like a tiny bit silly. I think most of us are starting to open up to this idea, but basically psyching your body up in a positive way can help you feel calmer when hearing that feedback. So if you know you have a planned meeting where you're going to receive some feedback, you can do some really simple like box breathing or the superhero pose or longer exhales that tell your body and your brain that you're feeling calm and therefore you're receptive to feedback.

And then on the flip side, one of the key ways to retain Gen Z is to embrace their ability to think in those new and innovative ways and to offer their views on how things are done. Because surely, we need to retain that talent and surely, we do not know everything. And like Laura has been saying this whole time, Gen Z are so familiar with tech and process and innovation. And actually, if we're open to hearing it and if we can be curious and really listen to our Gen Z employees, we are going to get some absolutely invaluable information that will improve our company for the better, it'll improve what we're doing for the better. And it will also mean that we're future proofing for younger people to come in and change the pace of what we're doing.

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Ellie:	Thank you, Rose. Absolutely, it's that diversity of thought, isn't it, that is good for the wider workforce. And Laura, how do you think employers can best navigate those generational differences in communication styles and preferences to effectively engage with Gen Z employees?
Laura:	I think there's three things which I think are really important for this one. So as we've mentioned many times already, and as Rose just mentioned, technology is of huge importance to Gen Z. So when it comes to communication, I think embracing and utilising this is really important. So you've got your instant messaging apps such as Teams and video calls. And I know most people already do use these things, but they are really important to Gen Z. And they also obviously link in with that flexible and remote working aspect as well. My second one is, as Rose has already mentioned very well, feedback I think establishing that culture of continuous feedback and prioritizing frequent check-ins and providing constructive feedback sessions can also really help Gen Z feel valued and understood to echo what Rose has just said. And lastly, this is again something that Rose mentioned earlier, that training and coaching. So where needed, providing that training to help all employees understand and respect everyone's different communication styles, I think can really also be of value. I think this can really foster a more inclusive workplace where everybody's communication preferences are acknowledged. And it's also really important to recognise that one size definitely does not fit all. So tailoring communication methods to suit the preferences of different generations.
Ellie:	And another topic that we've touched on is mental health. Rose, how do you think employers can best support the mental health and wellbeing of Gen Z employees, especially when we're talking about high stress work environments such as the legal industry?
Rose:	I actually think the three, the three that Laura just discussed there are really pertinent.. . because if you're improving communication and if you're improving a feeling of trust between an employer and their employees, then naturally people's mental health will be feeling a little bit better. But in terms of what we help promote and what we discuss at Inclusive Futures as well, I've said it before in this podcast, I'll say it again, have a little time to pause and reflect for a moment. So I think that as well as the ripple effects from COVID, which we obviously chatted about earlier, Gen Z are entering the workplace when a career doesn't necessarily guarantee you what it did 20 years ago. So, you know, young people don't know if they're going to have a pension to claim. They don't know how long they'll have to work for. They don't know how our leaders are going to support them throughout their lives. And when I say leaders, you know, I mean, in a sort of political context, they don't know whether they'll ever be able to afford houses , maybe even food at times, and you know, if you're thinking of the rise in food banks and things like that. So I think we need to just pause and reflect and consider that this next generation are being faced with so much uncertainty. And that's actually quite a good place to start when you're thinking about how to support employees' mental health from quite an empathetic point of view. Laura's also touched on this, but I think true flexibility being offered for work is really important. And I've chatted about this with some other law firms. It's that idea around hours, the idea around, you know, you do go into law, and you might expect to have to work some long hours and some long days. But what if your employee has a regular yoga class that really helps their mental health and that's at 6pm of an evening? Would it be the end of the world if they exited for that yoga class and then maybe came back to finish off the work later. Because you know, there is this kind of understanding in the law world and also in the finance sector as well, that you just keep going and you keep plugging through. But what actually, you know, if an employee just needs an hour of yoga or to go and sit down and properly have a lunch and then they'll come back and they'll be able to feel more able to do something, surely that's worth embracing, isn't it?
Rose:	And not being, not being judgy and not being bitter and that kind of that bitterness can come from a place of, well," I was never able to clock off when I needed to" but actually let's just re-evaluate and just try and view things from everybody's perspective.
Laura:	And I think sometimes as a Gen Z, it feels a bit embarrassing or a bit awkward to be like, "I've got a hockey match" or "I've got a choir rehearsal to go to". But I think putting it in your diary, letting everyone know that that's where you're going and that it's really important to you, I think you've just got to let people know. And I think as the workplace evolves, that is something that will become more normal.

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Rose:	Yeah, I really hope it becomes more normal because if it just means that everybody is a bit happier and a bit more productive, then that's really lovely. And again, in terms of mental health and supporting people in high stress work environments, I think check-ins, check-ins in person if they can be done, are really, really useful because you can receive so much more from an in-person meeting in terms of somebody's body language, noticing maybe what's not being said as well. And so, things like walking meetings, like where your gaze maybe isn't directly in front of somebody, they can be a great opportunity for checking conversations that are more open and more relaxed, where somebody doesn't feel kind of put on the spot. And like I said, you just pick up on nuances when you're with somebody in person that you can't when you're online. So it's not always the easiest but doing something in person. And then, yeah, whatever initiatives your workplace has, being really clear in signposting your employees to the right support is very, very helpful because actually, again, you don't know what you don't know and so being really explicit about what is provided and what isn't is very important. And again, kind of back to that contracting that I've mentioned a couple of times before, ask your employee what works well and what helps to support their mental health. We just can't assume that everyone with a mental health issue needs the same support. And so being direct in how we ask is a great step to more authentic conversations. And as we know, this next generation are more comfortable talking about things like mental health. So we may as well open up the conversation and then maybe others will join in as well.
Ellie:	Absolutely, yeah, it just goes back to that point of benefiting the wider workforce as well, doesn't it, with better mental health support. I'm going to wrap up then with a final question for both of you. So in our previous Age Inclusion podcast, I asked our guests what would be on your wish list for supporting and retaining senior talent going forward. So I'd like to ask you both the same question. So Rose, first of all, what would be on your wish list for retaining Gen Z talent?
Rose:	So my wish is, it sounds simple but it's probably really, really hard, is just openness, like more openness from everybody to new opinions or to new ways of doing things. And so that might be openness from Millennials and above to what Gen Z employees are bringing. It might also be openness from Gen Z employees as to the experiences and the ways in which more senior employees are doing things. I think we know that like tried and tested isn't always the best. And we hire talent for a reason, they are talented, so we should be open to hearing their opinions and knowing that they can help change things for the better.
Ellie:	And Laura, what would you say, especially in relation to the legal industry?
Laura:	Yeah, I think fostering a real environment of openness is really, really important and you know, while I have lots of hopes for the future of the legal industry specifically when it comes to Gen Z, I think the number one thing for me, which is quite specific, but it's definitely something that I'm really passionate about, would be having a 50-50 % split between women and men in the average partnerships in law firms by the time that I am hopefully a partner in a law firm. Currently in the City the average female representation within partnerships is only 33 % and you know while there are so many different reasons for this.
	I would love for Gen Z women to be the generation who change this and bring that up to 50-50. So while I'm not exactly sure how the legal industry is going to get there, I really hope that as the industry itself becomes more diverse across all aspects, this is something that will happen. So Gen Z, let's do this.
Ellie:	Fantastic. I think that is an excellent note to finish on and some wonderful wish list items there. So thank you so much Rose and Laura for joining me today, for providing those really interesting insights into the role that work-life balance, communication and well-being all play in achieving Gen Z inclusion at work and you've both provided some brilliant practical takeaways for employers to successfully attract and retain Gen Z talent and future proof their business. So thank you.
Rose:	Thank you so much for having us, Ellie, and hosting this.
Laura:	Yeah, absolutely thank you so much for having us.

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Ellie: If you would like to revisit anything we discussed today, you can access transcripts of every episode of The Work Couch podcast by going to our website: www.rpc.co.uk/theworkcouch. Or, if you have questions for me or any of our speakers, or perhaps suggestions of topics you would like us to cover on a future episode of The Work Couch, please get in touch by emailing us at theworkcouch@rpc.co.uk – we would love to hear from you.

Thank you all for listening and we hope you'll join us again next week which will be a special episode to close Season 2, in a Work Couch exclusive recorded before a live audience, I will be speaking to a panel of three inspirational guests about their own lived experiences of employment barriers and how employers can advance untapped talent. It is a truly moving and thought-provoking discussion and definitely one not to miss!

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