

Dr. Roberta Katz:

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Ellen Kelsay:

That's Dr. Roberta Katz, co-author of *Gen Z, Explained: The Art of Living in a Digital Age*. With a PhD in anthropology, Dr. Katz has been studying Generation Z since 2017, seeking to understand who these young people are...and why. She has spent the last 18 years of her career at Stanford University, serving under two university presidents as the associate vice president for strategic planning and has been involved in the facilitation of numerous research activities, including her work on Generation Z. She currently serves as a consultant to the university on interdisciplinary initiatives.

I'm Ellen Kelsay and this is the Business Group on Health Podcast, conversations with experts on the most relevant health and well-being issues facing employers. My guest today is Dr. Roberta Katz and we discuss the youngest generation in the workforce: Generation Z. We chat about the defining attributes of Gen Zers and how these impact the workplace, as well as ways older and younger employees can bridge their divide through better understanding.

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Dr. Katz, welcome. We're thrilled to have you with us today.

Dr. Roberta Katz:

Thank you so much. I'm delighted to be here.

Ellen Kelsay:

Well, I am very excited to have this conversation with you about Gen Z and have you explain them to us. They are the youngest generation in the workforce, and your book about them was just so fascinating, so excited to bring it to our audience today. If we could get started, I would love for you to just tell us who is Gen Z? What generation and how old are they?

Dr. Roberta Katz:

They tend to be the people who were born around the year 1995. This generational research is not an exact science, and so start dates and end dates may vary a little bit. For our purposes in the book, we chose 1995 as the year we were going to focus on because that was when the commercial internet, as we know it today, was really introduced into the world. And then that generation is thought to end around 2010, and the newest generation is called Generation Alpha.

Ellen Kelsay:

Wow. All right. So we've got another one coming soon behind them. As we think about Gen Z, and I would love for you to maybe take us back in time, where did the genesis for this book come from, the research that you and your colleagues embarked upon, what was it that spurred you all to want to explore this generation a little bit more extensively?

Dr. Roberta Katz:

Yes, all of us work within universities. There were four of us and we were friends. Two of the co-authors were also at Stanford, and the third co-author was visiting at Stanford. She was teaching in England, but she had come for a visit and we were having dinner together, and as often happens with academics, we started sharing

experiences of the students we were teaching. As we were talking about things that we had noticed in the then current generation of students, we realized that there was something that was qualitatively different. They were the same age as prior generations of students that we had been teaching and advising and dealing with, but some of their behaviors were noticeably different. As we were sharing these anecdotes, we realized that we had come from four academic disciplines. I had come from anthropology, one had come from linguistics, one had come from sociology, and the fourth had come from the discipline of history. And we realized that there was knowledge to be learned that if we could apply our different disciplinary methods and expertises to really looking at who these young people were, it might be of interest. Fortunately for us, we found funding agencies that thought this would be worthwhile.

Ellen Kelsay:

I want to dive in a few more minutes to what some of those behaviors were that you said were noticeably different. Before we go there, in terms of the conversation, tell us a little bit about your methodology. You've got these four different researchers all from different academic disciplines, who come together to explore this generation more extensively. How did you go about doing this research? Where were you pulling your research study students from? I understand this was a global approach, so it wasn't just on your campus, there were other places that you went to. So explain a little bit about how you went about this from a methodology perspective.

Dr. Roberta Katz:

We took advantage, as I said, of the four different disciplines. Anthropologists are good at what we call ethnographic research and that involves asking people how they live, what their values are, what their days are like, to hear in their own words who they are. We started with the ethnographic research. We brought in some research assistants, young college students who were peers of those people that we wanted to learn more about. We developed a questionnaire. It took about an hour for each of the interviews, sometimes a little bit more than that. We developed a set of questions aimed at very open-ended answers from the students about what their days were like, what their values were, what they thought the values of their generation were, their peers, what they worried about, what they were excited about. These interviews were really trying to get these young people to speak in their own words about their lives.

We interviewed over 100, about 120 young people. Some were at Stanford, about a third. About a third were at Lancaster University in the northern part of England. Another third were from a community college in Silicon Valley. These were all students in higher ed. We focused on students that were older than 18 so that we didn't need to worry about parental consent. These were the older members of the generation. Then we brought all these interviews together. We tried to analyze where we found similarities, where we found differences. From that, we developed a survey. We used a very reputable random sample survey company that then gave a questionnaire to a thousand young people in the U.S., some of whom were college educated, but many of whom were not, and a thousand young people in Britain. We had the information from the surveys, we had the information from the interviews, and then the third piece of information we brought into this was what they call a linguistic corpus. There's a whole new way of doing analysis of language now that takes advantage of machine learning algorithms. What our linguist was able to do with the help of a lot of research assistants was what they call scrape words from the internet, from the interviews, from focus groups. They look at linguistic usage from a group of people, again, these 18- to 25-year-olds, and then they compare patterns of language use, whether it's words or grammar, with that age group's language use is compared with the sort of general population usage. We were able to compare the Generation Z language use, again based on these 70 million words, with the broader U.S. population, and then again with the broader English or British population. Then the last piece of this is as we were bringing all of this data together, our historian was able to give us some historical perspectives on certain values that appeared in the generation, and our historian was able to say, oh, you can look back 20 years, 30 years and see the origin of those values in American society or in British society. We had this really rewarding collaboration among the four of us.

Ellen Kelsay:

It's just so impressive and so extensive, the body of work that went into this. Of all the things you mentioned, many of them each in their own right are equally remarkable and compelling, but I thought this linguistic corpus that you just referenced was so unbelievable and you pulled on that many times throughout the book. The language really gives you such a deeper insight into this generation. I know we'll touch on many of those words and many of the traits and values that you were able to glean from that study, but that corpus was fascinating to me, certainly. I did want to dive in more specifically, often when generations are talking about another generation, whether it's boomers talking about Gen X or millennials talking about boomers, you name it, there's a little bit of perhaps sarcasm or eye rolling. Sometimes it happens when people are talking about another generation. That is not at all the tone of your book. It's not at all the findings that you share. You and your co-authors speak quite optimistically about this generation. Let's talk about what were some of those behaviors and characteristics that you thought were noticeably different that compelled you to do this research.

Dr. Roberta Katz:

I have to say, we started out with that same skepticism because some of what we had observed in these students seemed so unusual, surprising, just so different from what we had expected and from what we'd seen in the past. We actually surprised ourselves. The more we got to know these young people and heard them, the more we grew in our understanding and frankly in our empathy for what they have had to contend with, and in our awareness that they are at the vanguard of a highly-networked society. All these changes that we've seen since 1995, they've grown up in the midst of that. I'll just list a bunch of attributes that we concluded were characteristic of these young people. Let me say it before I get into those attributes that we clearly are generalizing, but we're not saying this is true of every single member of the generation. It never is true of everyone. We are all unique.

The point of generational research is to recognize that the experiences people have when they're growing up are very foundational. They are very fundamental to a person's understanding of basic things like time and space and roles, and roles within the family, roles with friends. It doesn't mean we don't change from that over time, but there are certain shared experiences that generations have. For Gen Z, we can talk a lot about those early experiences because they are important when you think about these attributes. Among the attributes that we concluded were characteristic of many, many people in the generation is they are self-drivers who care very much about each other. They are invested in their communities of identity. They strive for diverse community. Authenticity is very important to them. They are highly collaborative and social. They are exploring consensual models of leadership. They are oriented to modular and fluid structures. They are disillusioned by the past and have a very no nonsense attitude about the future. They use memes and edgy humor to lift their spirits and reinforce their communities. And the last thing we say in the book that came through very surprisingly and very clearly is that they are fighting for our humanity in this highly technological age. So that's a lot there. I'll let you decide what you want to pursue.

Ellen Kelsay:

Oh my gosh, I want to pursue all of them, but we won't have enough time. But that is not a short list and those are all really heady, important attributes, characteristics that you just mentioned. Maybe before we peel back the layers on many of these, I would love to know, you said that these characteristics are really born from their experiences and shared experiences as a generation. If you could name maybe just a few of those shared experiences that have really led to this generation exhibiting these characteristics that you just mentioned, what are some of those really sentinel experiential moments that this generation has experienced?

Dr. Roberta Katz:

Sure. Some people say, well, Gen Z are the digital natives. They're not the digital natives because digital technology was up and running. We were using computers well before they were born, but what they are is the internet generation. I like to remind people that this internet didn't really come into full force until 1995 when there were just a handful of websites. 1995 was the year that the first commercial browser really started to be sold. It's the year that Amazon sold its first book online. When you stop to think about how much change

has happened since 1995, it is extraordinary. People couldn't even have imagined the notion of all that we do online now and how much time we spend online in networked interaction. This is very much about the power of the internet and all the other networks that have been built off the internet.

What these kids have gotten is early exposure and access to a big, diverse, often frightening world. If you think about, for those of us who are older, what we knew of the world as we were growing up in those very formative years, it was much less than what these young people have been exposed to. In addition, as I was just saying, all this change has happened in such a short time and it's been constant. One of my friends has called it a white water world that we've been living in. It's a world of constant change at a very rapid speed. So we've had to learn to be adept at everything coming at us at such a fast pace. The next thing is that what's been brought to us is millions and billions of bits and bytes of information. Three things, scope, speed, and then scale of what these young people have had to learn to process, is unprecedented.

This internet has been not only hyperconnectivity, it connects all of us. It has the potential to connect a world of 7 billion people, and so it's a giant megaphone for communications. If you think about the human experience, communications is at the heart of it. This very powerful tool, that for those of us who are older kind of came on top of everything we knew and experienced before, if you're just growing up with that, you don't know anything other than that and you learn to deal with that. Part of what these young people also experienced was, in a sense, parent child reversals, because parents were trying to deal with all of this change themselves. We had many jokes about the kids who know how to use the technology and the parents are kind of helpless and need their kids to translate for them, need their kids, not only to help them understand the technology, but everything else that's going on in the world, all the online stuff. So you get a little bit of a reversal, parents who don't necessarily know what to tell their kids about the future, let alone the present, and at the same time, you've got the kids who are connected, so they're going through this together. They really learn to rely on each other and they learn to rely on themselves. If they needed to get some information, they knew how to go online and find it. It might not always be good information and we can get into that.

These kids grew up in the midst of a lot of instability in institutions. The gig economy, divorce, scandals of you name your institution, scandals have happened and information about has been accessible. There was the great recession of 2008. This not only constant change, but a lot of instability. Then the background of climate change, which they are very aware of as young people and the importance of the background of school shootings. There's a quote in the book that I like to point to, one young person said, "I don't understand why adults are so worried about social media. I'm much more likely to get killed at school than I am on Instagram."

Ellen Kelsay:

Roberta, that was so helpful to have you walk us through the experience of this generation and certainly understandable now and I use the word empathy as you and your co-authors were discovering more about this generation. One thing that I thought was equally interesting is how not only is this generation so used to and accustomed to the internet and social media, but they also equally value what you call their offline lives. And they're balancing their online and offline lives in a very fluid way. That then leads to a lot of what you talk about and kind of the relationships they have with each other, the sense of community, the way they like to collaborate. I would love for you to maybe talk a bit more specifically about two things: one, collaboration and second, authenticity.

Dr. Roberta Katz:

The collaboration point is partly related to the technology that they've been using, and not just the technology, but the in-person experiences. I'm a boomer. I remember when my Gen Y child came home and said in her class they were getting group grades. That just sounded so bizarre to me. But group grades and group learning is now the norm in the schools, as best I can tell. From the earliest time, especially with experiential learning, young people are working together, bringing their individual contributions, but ending up with a group grade. But if you look at what's happened online, think about all the group experiences, Wikipedia, GoFundMe, those are two that most people know about, but a lot of the social media communities are built through

collaborative work. If you think about the workplace, the notion of teams, that started even before this generation was born, having teams in the corporate workplace.

For those of us who grew up at a time when things were much more individualized and our rewards were individualized, that was an overlay. We learned to do that. But for these young people, that's the norm that they grew up with. So combine that with what I talked about before, that they were having to figure some things out without the guidance from older people that has been truer in past generations. That's why they are very bonded as a generation.

Authenticity, we see it in the context of identity, but it is also a consequence of these young people being exposed to so much online from their earliest times. Again, this scope, scale, and speed issue. What happens, they've seen fake news, they've seen advertising, they've seen hype, they've seen misinformation. It's been much harder for them to know who to trust. Again, this is happening while they are young and forming their sense of how the world works. So authenticity, and this surprised us, we just hadn't understood this till we heard from the young people, authenticity for them means that you do what you say, I can trust what you say if I see that you do it.

Ellen Kelsay:

That's great. That's helpful. One area of identity that I wanted to ask you about specifically was around sexual and gender identity. Could you elaborate a bit more there?

Dr. Roberta Katz:

The whole area of identity, and we do go into that in quite a lot of detail in the book, is a very interesting part of Generation Z. It didn't come sort of full blown out of this generation. It actually has been in the culture for decades, this notion of identity and who an individual is. For those of us who are older, I remember the free to be you and me kind of recordings, and there were books and so on that we had in the seventies and eighties. But along with this notion of scope, scale, and speed has been the ability of young people as they are trying to figure out who they are individually, to get access through their online exploration, to a lot of different ways of being. In contrast to those of us who are older, who had more limited exposure to ways of being, in our classrooms and in our families and in our neighborhoods, these young people today can see lots of ways of being. So they try on different identities and they have respect for that process of trying on different identities, for changing who they might want to be, while they're growing up. I want to insert one point here, which is that they are the most diverse generation just looking at all kinds of diversity, partly through what they have been exposed to in their classrooms and as well as online. So they have a lot of respect for individuals trying on different identities and for difference because they have developed more compassion, I guess you could say, for diverse ways of living because they have seen more of it. That applies to every aspect of diversity, but where it has really become apparent is in gender identity and sexual identity. It's such a complicated area. As I say, the book goes way into it, but it is not totally unique to this generation. It does come from seeing that there are lots of different ways to be a person and make a life.

Ellen Kelsay:

This is a Business Group on Health podcast. I'm talking with Dr. Roberta Katz, co-author of *Gen Z, Explained: The Art of Living in a Digital Age*. We'll be right back.

Onduo by Verily

Chronic conditions are a public health crisis, impacting the health and quality of life of millions of Americans, while burdening employers with lost productivity and health care costs. At Onduo by Verily we know limited access to affordable and equitable health care are major contributors. That's why Onduo was born - to help people get the care needed to lead healthier lives with chronic conditions. Onduo delivers personalized, precision care through a user-friendly solution where advanced health tech that provides access to a real care team offering personalized support through daily insights, dedicated coaching, specialist access and tailored interventions in the moments that matter most. By partnering with Onduo, employers put quality, inclusive care that can foster a happier, healthier workforce within reach, which may help lower costs.

Ellen Kelsay:

Let's maybe segue this conversation into very specifically this generation within the workforce. They are now currently the youngest generation in the workforce. A lot of what you just talked about, their experiences, their characteristics, are being manifested in terms of what they're looking for in a work environment, how they're engaging within that environment. Let's talk about that. You had mentioned earlier as well that there's a lot of skepticism for institutions, whether that be for corporations, for leaders, for adults. How should those of us in other generations in the workforce be thinking about this generation, engaging with them in perhaps different but just very productive and healthy ways, that maybe meet them where they need to be met versus expecting them to come to where we are within our framework of the work environment?

Dr. Roberta Katz:

I think it's both. They are young and they are inexperienced about how the work world works. They don't necessarily know better about all things. Having said that though, they are at the forefront of the future and they do know some better ways to get things done. One of the reasons we wrote the book, as we began to understand more about them and where they are relative to the future, we realized it was imperative to have more cross-generational understanding, not only for their sake, but for our collective future sake. One of the things that has been interesting to us is when young people read this book, when Gen Z people read this book, they are surprised at how different their own upbringing was from that of prior generations. They just hadn't realized how differently their early years of experience had been. What I have been, I guess advocating is the right word, is that there is openness, there is enough respect for these young people who seem like they are questioning so much of what we've done for years, that we listen to them. It doesn't mean we necessarily do what they say, we need to explain why we've done things the way we've done, but there may be room for change. In fact, in many cases, change is going to have to happen. We have a whole new set of tools for how to get work done, and these young people are very experienced in that set of tools. On the other hand, we have a lot of experience with human interactions and the kinds of things that businesses have been contending with for a long time. It's moving toward less of a do it because I say so and more of a, let's talk about why we do it this way and do you have thoughts on how we might do it differently? And they need to learn from those of us who are older about some things that they don't know or understand, but we can learn from them.

Ellen Kelsay:

I think so much of what you said earlier in the conversation too about, I believe you called it consensual models of leadership and these group projects, and they are not looking for a hierarchy, or as you said a top down do it because I said so, but they want a voice, they want to collaborate, they're willing to learn if others are willing to listen. So really having, as you said, that openness to that interaction is going to be vitally important for all of us.

Dr. Roberta Katz:

I guess I'm going to mention one other thing here, this whole point about them fighting for humanity, one of the things that shocked us, really shocked us, we asked one of the questions in the interviews was what is your favorite way to communicate with others? We thought some people would say email, some people would say texting, some people would say DMing, some people would say by cell, but these interviewees said in person face-to-face, and we were shocked. When the interviewees were asked why, the answers varied, but they really came down to, I can actually see someone in the conversation. I can see that we are looking at each other, that we're responding to each other. They have been so immersed in technology that they want to be seen as human beings and they want to see each other as human beings. It seems kind of paradoxical, but it is what we discovered.

Ellen Kelsay:

Well, that was great and I'm so glad you pulled that forward. I did pick up on that in your book, and I was stunned by that. I would never have assumed that. I love that you just illuminated it. I also want to balance that with something you said when you were rattling off the list of characteristics, you mentioned memes. So talk about memes and how this generation is using memes.

Dr. Roberta Katz:

When we were doing this work at the beginning, I would talk to my friends, older people and they would say, what are you talking about when I would use the word meme. Yet for young people, it was absolutely the glue that was holding them together. The okay boomer thing that a lot of people knew about where members of Gen Z would roll their eyes when someone from an older generation would say, well, you just don't understand. Rather than take the person on and say, no, I understand, here's what you don't understand. A Gen Z would just say, okay, Boomer, in other words, I hear you, but you really don't get it. Well, memes, they are humorous. They tend to be kind of on the skeptical side of humor or the cynical side, but they are basically saying, we're in this together. Yes, we have a lot to contend with. Yes, all the institutions around us look like they're broken or breaking. Yes, we've got climate change. Yes, we've got the justice issues that they care so much about because they are such a diverse generation. They look at those of us who are older and go, look, these things were going on for a long time, why were you so dismissive of them? They feel bonded in that they're young. Their futures depend on solving some of these or at least addressing some of these problems, big problems, so they use this cynical humor to kind of bond. It's like, okay, we're in this together.

Ellen Kelsay:

As you just described, memes, you referenced it mainly in a mode of communication that they are using within themselves as a generation. Could memes be used to cross a generational divide? For example, could they become a mode of corporate communication, organizational communication, that would resonate with them?

Dr. Roberta Katz:

I hadn't thought about that. That's a very interesting idea. I think they might. It would have to be just the right kind of meme. If a company has some inside jokes that could get turned into memes, yes. These memes serve as reinforcing communities, so it depends on the community that you want to reinforce.

Ellen Kelsay:

And it would have to be authentic.

Dr. Roberta Katz:

It would have to be authentic.

Ellen Kelsay:

It would feel contrived if not done well and appropriately.

Dr. Roberta Katz:

Yes, it's kind of like once the young people figured out that the older people were on one form of social media, they moved to another one.

Ellen Kelsay:

Exactly. I would love to also talk about, you mentioned a couple terms earlier self-care, self-reliance and how this generation views mental health, their own well-being. Our audience are many corporate employers who are doing an awful lot to support their workforce around physical health and emotional and mental health. I would love to maybe drill down more specifically on this generation as it relates to self-care and the mental health challenges that they and others have faced.

Dr. Roberta Katz:

This question has many strands to it, or the answer has many strands. Let me start with the pre pandemic strand. When I talked about that they care about their humanity, part of the way they have expressed their humanity, they're looking to bond with each other over their humanness. Some of that comes in the form of sharing health issues. In contrast to older generations where, especially mental health, you didn't talk about mental health. You certainly didn't talk about if you needed to see a therapist or a psychiatrist or any of that because it was viewed as shameful or some weakness. For these young people it became another form of

bonding and sharing. It's like, I have this problem and I'm putting it out there, and by the way, I'm finding help. I'm finding compassion. I'm finding other people who say, oh yeah, I've been there, I understand. I'm with you. I care. It was a whole new attitude about the ability to express mental health concerns. Then that became reinforced by influencers who talked a lot about their own mental health issues. If you come forward during the pandemic, I think post pandemic or not even post, but the pandemic has been harmful for all the reasons that we all know in so many ways, the isolation and so on. For young people who are being socialized, they missed out on a whole set of socialization experiences that would happen at school and so on. For these older members of the generation, they haven't been in the workplace, everything has been done online for a long time. They are going through a set of issues now that reflect what happened to them at their stage of life. Just like all the rest of us are going through things that the isolation and so on did for us during the pandemic at our stages of life. I don't want to focus so hard on young people because I think it's become a meme that we read about - oh, young people, young people, when in fact, this is a much bigger problem for all of us right now.

Ellen Kelsay:

Oh my goodness, absolutely. We certainly know there's nobody who's been immune from having some challenges when it comes to mental health and emotional well-being. Certainly in recent years, and as you mentioned, we live in a white water world. I think that was a phrase you used earlier, and that's probably not going to subside anytime soon. I think what is remarkable and encouraging about this generation is that they do have the wherewithal and they are outspoken and they are not embarrassed about talking about it and they are seeking help. That gives us hope for potentially stigma being eroded over time too, where this is just something that we all talk about and it's not something where we suffer in silence or don't ask for help. We're seeing this generation do that quite readily.

Dr. Roberta Katz:

And the self-care piece, I didn't mention that because it's not exactly the same as the mental health. It's related, but the self-care piece comes again from this notion of trying to hang onto their humanity, their humanness, in the face of everything getting turned into bits and bites. I like to call it the messy stuff in between the ones and zeros that which makes us very human. They have grown up so much affected by the technology that self-care becomes one of those ways that they can say, look, as an individual, I'm taking care of my physical and emotional health right now. One of the things that was so stunning to us as academics was when we had that initial dinner, when we were comparing notes about these behaviors, someone said for the first time, I had a young person turn in a paper late knowing that they would get a lower grade and when I asked the student about it, the student said, it is more important to me that I take care of myself than that I get an A.

Ellen Kelsay:

Dr. Katz, I would love to close with one last question for you and that is what gives you hope about this generation?

Dr. Roberta Katz:

They are hardworking. They have been compared to the great generation of World War II that as little kids went through the depression and then went through World War II and that generation has been described as pragmatic and hardworking, and this generation is pragmatic and hardworking. It's just in a different context. It's in the context of this massive change in the tools we use to do everything. Because they are communication tools, we are changing how we get all of our work done, and they are pragmatic and hardworking with the sort of more expertise about how to use these tools. There's a quote that's in the book, and it was from a woman who wrote a book about helicopter parenting and who started out as we did very critical of the generation, but the more she looked into it, the more she realized that there was something here. I'd like to read this quote. It's from Julie Lythcott-Haims. She says, "maybe being born on a planet, facing potentially cataclysmic climate change, instills a voice that will not be silenced. Maybe being thrust ill-equipped into the real world with all its challenges forces a human to sink or swim. Maybe Charles Darwin is smiling. Maybe precisely because of their environment, they're not wimps but warriors who will be capable of



saving themselves. Maybe then we should be interested in how they've adapted to this changed world and in how to join them." I just feel like that quote says it all.

Ellen Kelsay:

It really does. That is so compelling and I like that they're not wimps, they're warriors, and that does give us all hope for the future. Wonderful.

Roberta, thank you so much. It was a pleasure. I really appreciate you speaking with us today.

Dr. Roberta Katz:

Well, thank you for inviting me to speak with you. I really enjoyed it.

Ellen Kelsay:

I've been speaking with Dr. Roberta Katz, co-author of *Gen Z, Explained: The Art of Living in a Digital Age* about the youngest generation in the workforce and how we can understand them better.

I'm Ellen Kelsay. This podcast is produced by Business Group on Health, with Connected Social Media. If you enjoyed today's conversation and know someone who would too, please consider sharing.