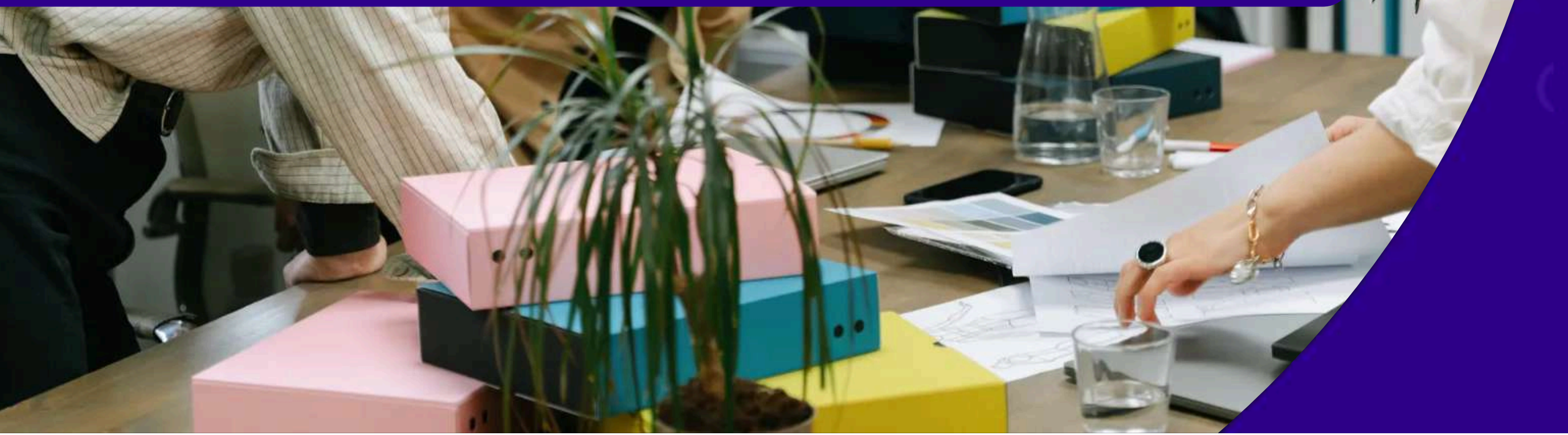




The Gen Z Workplace Guide



What employers must do to support balance, flexibility and mental health

Gen Z isn't quietly adapting to the workplace - they're actively reshaping it. Long-standing assumptions about how, when, and why we work are being challenged all at once, and far faster than many organisations anticipated.

For the youngest generation entering the workforce, work-life balance, flexibility, and mental health support are no longer optional benefits - **they are core factors influencing where people choose to work and whether they stay.**

The Generational Shift

Organisations are operating in a period of unprecedented workplace stress. Recent data from the Burnout Report 2026 reveals that 39% of young adults (aged 18-24) have taken time off in the past year due to poor mental health caused by stress.

Unlike previous generations, Gen Z is far less willing to accept burnout as a normal part of career progression. They are entering workplaces that are already under pressure, and they are vocal about the need for systemic change.

The Bottom Line

The evidence suggests that mental health support is now business-critical. With 35% of Gen Z ranking work-life balance as their top priority (second only to pay), the link between well-being and retention is undeniable. For employers, understanding these expectations is no longer simply a cultural conversation - it's a strategic workforce priority.

Organisations that fail to offer genuine flexibility or that neglect mental health support risk losing talent to competitors; in a 2026 survey, 27% of UK Gen Z professionals reported they are likely or very likely to change jobs within the next 12 months, frequently citing a lack of balance as the primary driver.



Three workplace expectations defining Gen Z

While generational discussions often focus on attitudes, the priorities of Gen Z employees are remarkably consistent.

Across studies and surveys, three expectations repeatedly emerge:

1. Sustainable work-life balance

Gen Z rejects "always-on" culture. For them, balance is a health requirement, not a perk. They expect clear boundaries between professional output and personal time, viewing downtime as essential for long-term performance.

2. Genuine flexibility

Flexibility is a non-negotiable expectation for autonomy over when and where work happens. They see this as an enabler of productivity, not an excuse for absenteeism, and are increasingly willing to leave roles that enforce rigid 9-to-5 mandates.

3. Proactive mental health support

Mental health is a baseline requirement. Gen Z seeks environments that prevent stress rather than simply responding to it. This includes transparent leadership, open dialogue, and a culture that treats wellbeing as a critical component of professional success.



Organisations that build workplace experiences around these three pillars are far more likely to attract and retain younger talent.

Expectation 1: **Work-life balance is non-negotiable**

Work-life balance has become one of the defining priorities for the Gen Z workforce.

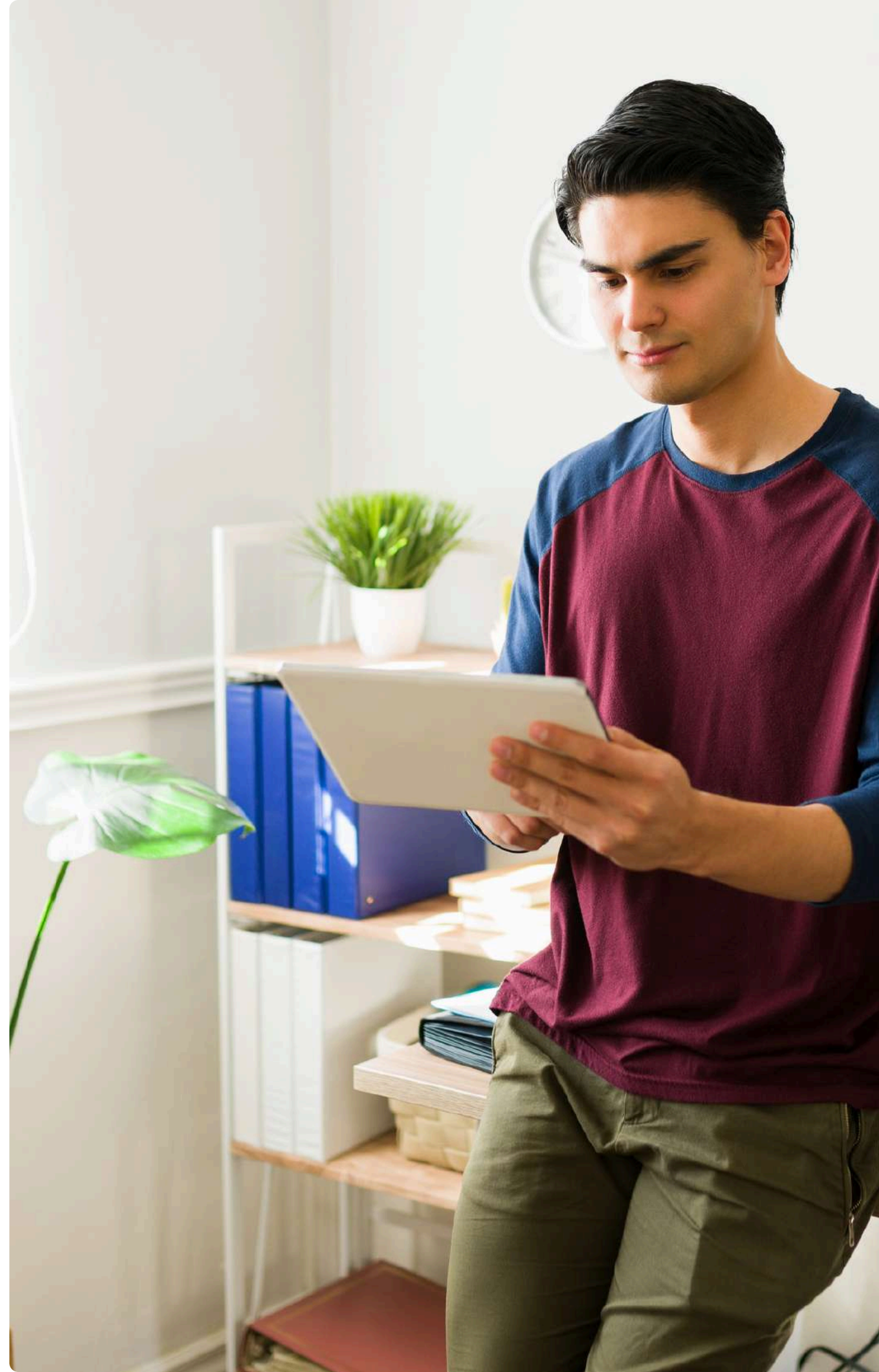
For many young professionals, balance is not a lifestyle preference but a practical response to rising levels of burnout and workplace stress.

Research from Oxford Brookes University found that Gen Z employees report significantly higher burnout and lower job satisfaction compared with Millennials, Gen X, and Baby Boomers.

Several factors contribute to this shift in expectations.

Gen Z grew up watching previous generations sacrifice evenings, weekends, and personal wellbeing for employers who often provided limited long-term security.

As a result, younger workers are questioning whether that trade-off is worthwhile. They still value career development and professional growth, but they are increasingly unwilling to pursue those goals at the expense of their wellbeing.



What real balance means to Gen Z

Work-life balance is often misunderstood as simply working fewer hours. In reality, Gen Z employees are looking for a shift in how work integrates with their lives. When these conditions are absent, the risk of "quiet quitting" or active resignation increases significantly.

The Cost of Inaction

With 32% of workers under 34 planning to change employers soon, addressing these expectations is no longer a peripheral concern; it is a critical retention strategy.

Leaders must move beyond reactive management and instead focus on proactive cultural design that respects the following pillars:

- **Clear Boundaries:** Explicitly defining when professional output ends and personal recovery begins.
- **Sustainable Workloads:** Ensuring expectations are realistic and do not rely on constant "crunch" periods.
- **Life Management Support:** Providing the flexibility and tools needed to manage responsibilities outside of the office.

Organisations that treat wellbeing as a strategic workforce priority - rather than a checkbox exercise - see a direct impact on their bottom line through reduced recruitment costs and a more engaged, loyal talent pool.



32%
of workers
under 34

are actively job hunting or planning to change employers soon.

Source: Ciph
Snapshot UK employees 2026



Expectation 2: Flexibility as the new standard

The Shift to Outcome-Based Work

Younger employees increasingly expect organisations to evaluate performance based on outcomes rather than physical presence.

This shift requires a move away from "presenteeism" - the idea that being seen at a desk equals productivity - and toward a culture of trust and results.

The Talent Magnet

With 75% of Gen Z ranking flexibility as their most important benefit, often placing it above salary, organisations must treat flexible working as a core part of their value proposition.

Those who enforce rigid 9-to-5 mandates risk alienating a generation that views autonomy as an enabler of productivity rather than an excuse for absenteeism.

While previous generations often favoured either fully remote or fully office-based work, Gen Z typically prefers hybrid models that combine the autonomy of home working with the social collaboration of the office.



75%
of Gen Z
employees

rank workplace flexibility as their
most important benefit

Source: Randstad GenZ workplace
blueprint 2025



What Gen Z expects from flexible work

Flexibility means more than remote working options. For many employees, it includes:

- Hybrid work arrangements
- Flexible working hours
- Results-based performance evaluation
- Autonomy over daily work patterns

However, flexibility alone does not guarantee a positive employee experience. Without strong support systems, hybrid working can create challenges including isolation, weaker team connections, and blurred work-life boundaries.

Organisations therefore need to design workplace experiences that work across multiple environments. Taking into account different working patterns and structures when looking at your people and culture strategy has never been more important for organisations.

Supporting the Hybrid Workforce

Flexibility only works when employees have the right support systems in place. See how we helped AstraZeneca provide consistent wellbeing services to their teams, whether at home or on-site.

[\[Read the AstraZeneca Story.\]](#)



Expectation 3: Mental Health Support That Actually Works

Mental health has become one of the most important workplace issues for younger employees.

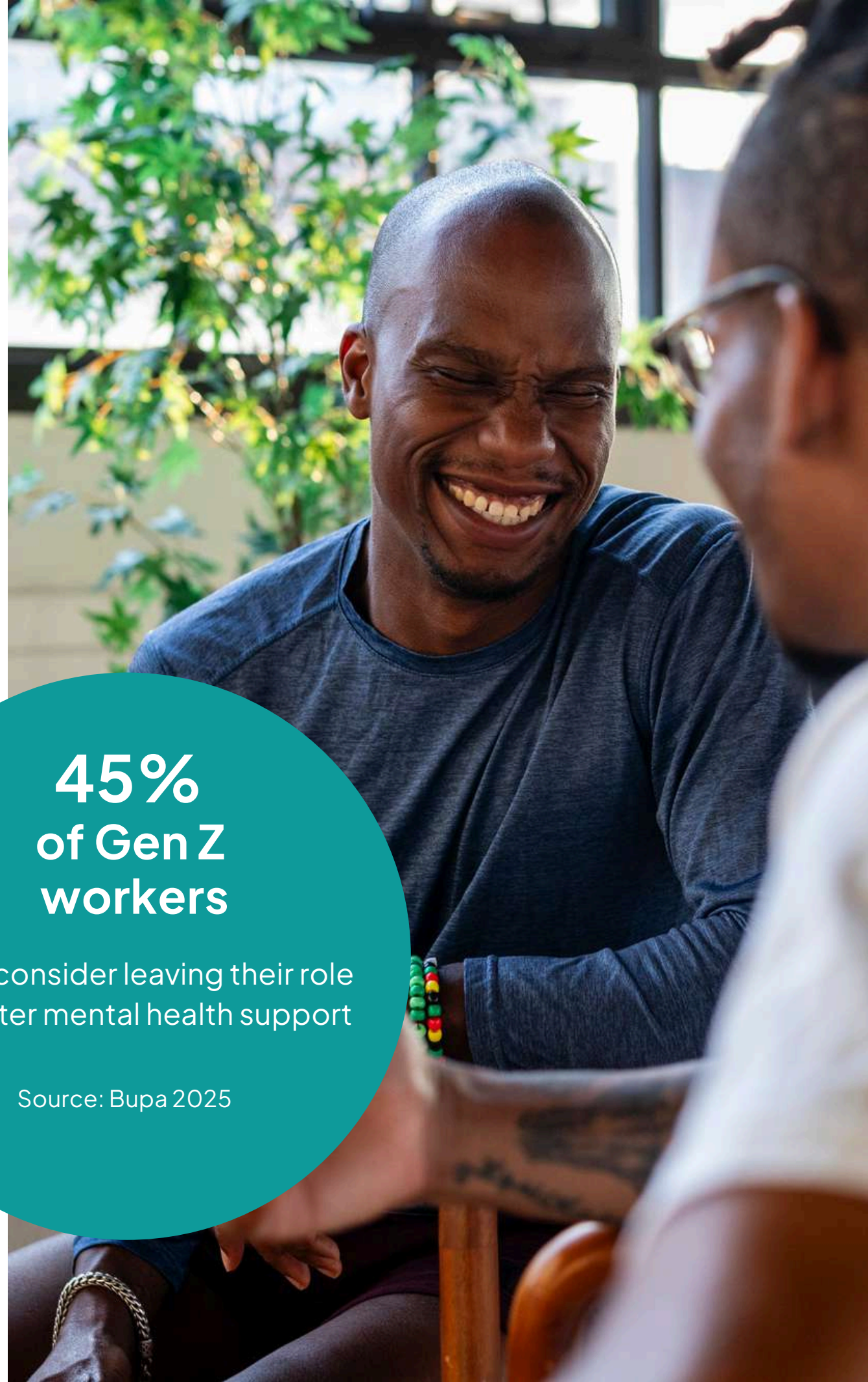
According to 2025 research from Bupa, 45% of Gen Z workers would consider leaving their role for better mental health support, while 38% report experiencing work-related loneliness.

These figures reflect broader societal trends. Across the UK, mental health challenges among young people have increased significantly over the past two decades.

Several pressures are contributing to this rise:

- Economic uncertainty and rising living costs
- Student debt and housing affordability challenges
- Social media and digital comparison culture
- Global crises and political instability
- Pandemic disruption during early career years

These factors mean many Gen Z employees enter the workforce already experiencing elevated stress levels.



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for better mental health support

Source: Bupa 2025

Why Traditional Workplace Benefits **Fall Short**

Many workplace wellbeing initiatives were designed for a different workforce.

Employee Assistance Programmes, annual health screenings, and crisis helplines remain common. While valuable, these services are often reactive - providing support only once employees are already struggling.

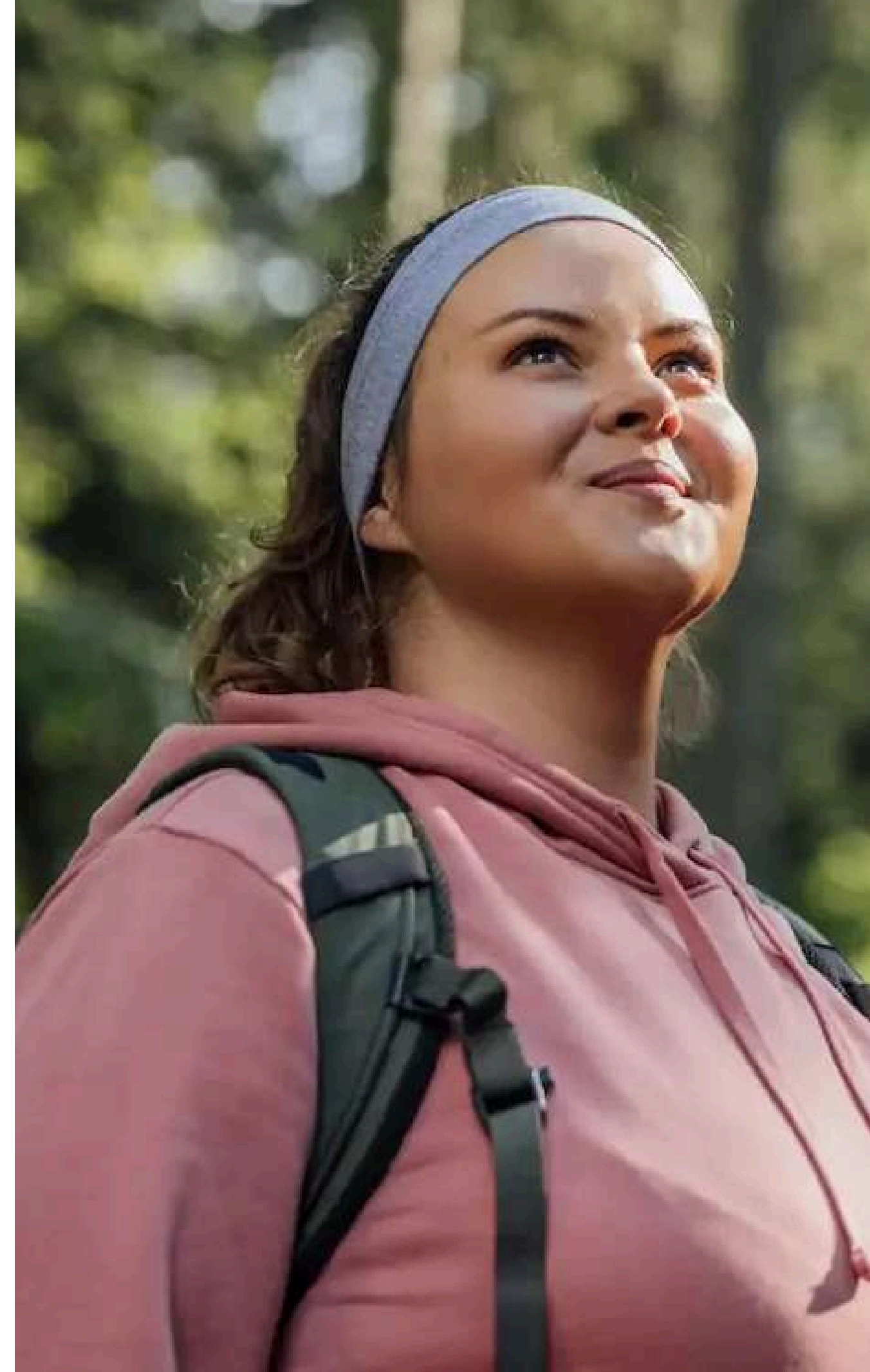
Gen Z increasingly expects preventative approaches that address everyday sources of stress.

Common gaps in traditional benefits:

Research suggests many employees experience challenges such as:

- Difficulty accessing available support
- Lack of awareness about existing benefits
- Concerns about stigma when seeking help
- Workplace cultures that contradict wellbeing messaging

For wellbeing programmes to be effective, organisations must ensure that support is not only available but also visible, accessible, and culturally supported by leadership behaviour.



The Hidden Source of **Workplace Stress**

Many organisations focus on major stressors such as workload or deadlines. However, a significant portion of everyday stress comes from smaller practical pressures.

Administrative tasks, personal logistics, travel planning, and life management responsibilities can quickly accumulate. Over time, these demands reduce the capacity employees have for rest, focus, and recovery.

Addressing these everyday pressures is becoming an increasingly important part of workplace wellbeing strategies.

Some organisations are now adopting workplace hospitality models that support employees with services designed to reduce daily friction. For example, concierge-style support can help employees manage time-consuming personal tasks such as appointment scheduling, travel planning, or coordinating home services.

Real-World Impact: Reducing the Mental Load

When the 'life admin' of daily chores and errands builds up, burnout follows. Discover how we provided a 24/7 lifeline for frontline staff, allowing them to focus on what matters most.

[Read the NHS success story.](#)

By removing practical burdens from employees' lives, these services free up time and mental energy that can be redirected towards meaningful work and personal wellbeing.

According to Circles' internal data, 92% of employees who use concierge services report feeling more valued by their employer, highlighting the impact that practical support can have on employee experience.

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Source: Circles' internal data



Why This Matters for Employers

The business case for supporting Gen Z is increasingly clear.

When employees feel overwhelmed or unsupported, the consequences appear quickly through disengagement, absenteeism, and voluntary turnover.

High turnover among early-career employees carries significant costs, including recruitment expenses, onboarding time, and lost institutional knowledge. It can also weaken an organisation's future leadership pipeline.

On the other hand, organisations that prioritise wellbeing and flexibility often see measurable benefits.

Research consistently links strong wellbeing support to:

- Higher employee engagement
- Improved retention rates
- Stronger workplace culture
- Greater productivity and innovation

For employers, the question is no longer whether employee wellbeing matters. It is how effectively organisations are adapting their workplace strategies to support it.

The Strategic Advantage

Wellbeing isn't just a perk - it's a retention strategy. Learn how a global financial leader used Circles to reclaim thousands of hours for their talent and strengthen their competitive edge.

[\[See the Bank of America Case Study.\]](#)



Preparing for the Future Workforce

Generation Z currently represents a growing share of the global workforce and will continue to shape workplace expectations in the years ahead.

As their influence increases, priorities around balance, flexibility, and mental health will increasingly define what employees expect from employers.

Organisations that adapt early will be better positioned to attract and retain the next generation of talent. Those that fail to evolve may find themselves facing higher turnover, disengagement, and widening gaps between employee expectations and workplace realities. The workplace is changing — and Gen Z is accelerating that transformation.

Forward-thinking organisations are recognising that supporting employee wellbeing is not simply a cultural initiative. It is a strategic investment in the future of their workforce.

Gen Z Workplace Readiness Checklist

Organisations looking to support Gen Z employees can begin by asking a few key questions:

- Work-life balance
- Do employees have clear boundaries between work and personal time?
- Are workloads sustainable across teams?
- Flexible working
- Do employees have genuine autonomy over where and when they work?
- Are performance evaluations focused on outcomes rather than presence?
- Mental health support
- Are wellbeing resources easy to access and widely understood?
- Are managers trained to recognise early signs of stress?
- Workplace culture
- Do leadership behaviours reinforce wellbeing commitments?
- Do employees feel supported using the benefits available to them?

Small changes across these areas can significantly improve employee experience and retention.



Learn more about Circles

Visit circles.com for more information and resources on planning for a changing workforce and cultivating a culture and experience that your teams will love.

