A hybrid workplace for a hybrid workforce

Is your business ready to support Generation Novel?
Contents

• Executive Summary
• Chapter 1
  New behaviours of an emerging workforce
• Chapter 2
  What risks does Generation Novel pose?
• Chapter 3
  How to address the new needs of Generation Novel
• Conclusion
• Research Methodology
• Expert Bio
Executive Summary

A Novel generation for unprecedented times

Although the impact of the pandemic has varied hugely at an individual level, certain aspects of the experience have been almost universal: lockdowns, isolation and much less time spent in close contact with others, for instance. These sudden, significant and widespread lifestyle changes have led to the emergence of Generation Novel – a new group of people who share very specific character traits as a result of these shared experiences.

The concept of Generation Novel (Gen-N) extends beyond the traditional definition of a generation; grouping people by birth dates. Rather than being bonded through age-related events, Gen-N has been forged as a cross-generational cohort of people who thrive on digital-first experiences. They value personalization, customization, trust and transparency from the brands they buy from, work for, and support. And above all else, they understand, use and demand more from technology than ever before – both at home and work.

According to our latest research, 85% of hybrid workers identify with the traits of Gen-N. Which means that, for technology leaders, the attitudes and behaviours of this new generation bring changing technology needs across organizations of all sizes and sectors. But because Gen-N emerged during the pandemic, businesses have not yet had a chance to properly explore the impact of their arrival on the workplace or adapt technology provision to support them optimally.

This report aims to change that. Aruba commissioned Sapio Research to investigate the Gen-N related tech habits and attitudes of hybrid workers, with a particular focus on their relationship with technology and how it has changed in the last 12-18 months. The insights gained from this survey (of 5,018 hybrid workers across five countries), combined with expert commentary from generations expert Dr Eliza Filby, should help forward-thinking technology leaders to change their offerings in order to get the best from the hybrid workers of today and tomorrow.
CHAPTER 1

New behaviours of an emerging workforce

As coined by digital analyst Brian Solis, those who belong to Generation Novel are more than just digitally native, they’re driven by emotional factors that affect the relationship they have with their technology. From the way they purchase products to how they work with colleagues, their preferences are informed by their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our research identified three main areas where these evolving preferences are becoming visible in the workplace.

“Generation Novel has come out of the pandemic with a new set of expectations and a new identity as workers. People’s expectations have changed because they’ve been using technology so much more during the pandemic – particularly in terms of ecommerce and social media platforms.

The amount of customization and personalization available in the consumer space has shifted attitudes to workplace technology. Tech skills have increased, but there has been a corresponding increase in impatience when these tools don’t work as expected.”

Dr Eliza Filby
New behaviours of an emerging workforce

1. USERS GET SMART WITH TECH SOLUTIONS
During a period of enforced isolation, even those who may have previously been averse to technology adoption had little choice but to embrace new methods of interaction, particularly as mobile and tech became the main gateways to services for sectors such as hospitality and retail.

As a result, Gen-N is more comfortable with technology than ever before. Over three quarters (78%) of hybrid workers say they now use technology more than they did before COVID-19, and because of this increased usage, there has been a corresponding increase in feelings of competence. 71% indicate that they are now more confident in their ability to use technology, and 75% consider themselves to be ‘digitally savvy’.

Rising confidence levels amongst workers should be music to the ears of technology leaders keen to increase participation and collaboration through tech solutions – but this change in attitude comes with a few caveats that they should also be aware of.

For instance, as a direct consequence of this increased tech usage and understanding, 69% of survey respondents agree they now have more of an opinion regarding the technology they’re using at work – which leads us on to the second Gen-N related trait that emerged from the research...
CHAPTER 1

New behaviours of an emerging workforce

2. A GENERATION THAT DEFIES GENERALIZATION

Personalization is key for Gen-N – and so too for today’s hybrid workforce. In fact, 71% of survey respondents advised that they felt it important to be able to customize their workplace tech set-up to suit their individual preferences. But although hybrid workers now feel more confident expressing opinions about the technology they use, the influence they actually have is still very limited. Only 38% say they have significant choice in their workplace technology. Respondents also list having fewer flexible ways to work (32%) as one of their biggest frustrations about working from the office.

Dr Eliza Filby suggests that this could be attributed to newfound feelings of ownership over working environments that have surfaced during COVID-19.

“There’s a feeling of ownership over technology when it’s in your home that’s very different to when it’s in an office. Working remotely or from home is a hyper-individualized state of working. If you’re working in a personalized space, why wouldn’t you expect the tech to also be personalized?”

This strong desire for custom workflows and set-ups also indicates that generalized, company-wide policies around hybrid working could be outdated in a post-COVID world, she adds: “There is a culture of defensiveness amongst employees. Some are desperate to get back into the office, while others are eager to stay at home and are concerned that their newfound flexibility is going to be taken away from them. People don’t want blanket policies from the top that tell them how/when/where to work. They want hybrid working to be customized at a management, project, or even individual level, to what works best for them. Technology has an important role to play in order to enable this.”
New behaviours of an emerging workforce

3. TECH HELPS WITH HYBRID HUMAN CONNECTIONS

Another of the emerging characteristics of this new generation is how it feels about mental health as it relates to technology. Despite a drastic increase in the use of technology both at work and personally, Gen-N is mindful of not letting devices interfere with healthy habits. And it believes employers have a responsibility to be so too – 80% of our respondents say their company must maintain policies that encourage healthy technology use.

However it seems that organizations are currently falling some way short of hybrid workers’ ideals. Nearly half (48%) of all respondents say their company’s current policies do not support good mental health. Similarly, while 73% believe technology has a role to play in fostering an inclusive environment in the new hybrid workplace, 44% believe it is not currently doing so.

Dr Eliza Filby draws direct comparisons with how the safeguarding of employees’ physical health could help organizations to view this: “Companies have always been aware that they have a legal responsibility to employees’ physical health – whether that’s providing the right keyboard or an ergonomic chair. Because of the pandemic, and the intensity at which people were working (and because few companies were good at setting boundaries to regulate this) there should now be a responsibility for mental health-boosting regulatory features to be incorporated into workplace tech.”

Filby also highlights the crucial role of technology in ensuring safeguarding equality for hybrid workers: “People’s home tech setups vary massively. Organizations need to be conscious of maintaining a level playing field, and not leaving certain employees at a disadvantage because of where they live or the technology they have at home.”
1. RISK TO EMPLOYEES
The very first action Gen-N workers are likely to take when left without the technology that fits their needs is to demand it from their managers and supervisors. This group knows what they want, and they're vocal about it. And team leaders should be encouraged to view these clear requests as important opportunities to protect both individuals and the wider organization, because leaving them unanswered could have a number of knock-on effects.

Example consequences of not offering the right technology include decreased productivity (35%) and workers using their personal devices for work-related matters (27%). By contrast, if provided with the right technology set-up workers believed they would be more productive (45%), happier at work (37%) and have a more positive perception of their company (36%).

According to Dr Eliza Filby, there are many individual risks to employees posed by inadequate tech set-ups: “There are all sorts of potential pitfalls. High staff turnover, lower loyalty, over-surveillance and impact on working mothers to name a few. Generation Novel needs technology solutions that will help them to negotiate these issues and more.”

What risks does Generation Novel pose?
As technology leaders plan for the hybrid workplace, it’s critical to think through the risks this new generation will bring if these emerging expectations and behaviours continue to go unmet. Our research indicates two primary areas where these risks are most prominent: risk to employees and risk to the business.
What risks does Generation Novel pose?

2. RISK TO THE BUSINESS

With such a tech savvy group, the expectations of IT have never been higher – and patience never lower, which is a dangerous mix for IT leaders who are trying to keep their business secure.

When encountering a tech issue at work, nearly three quarters (74%) of hybrid workers say they expect it to be resolved in 20 minutes or less – and over two fifths (42%) in under 10 minutes. But as technology leaders worryingly know, managing IT challenges across an organization and resolving challenges correctly can be far more time consuming than this allowance.

And their concerns are only likely to be exacerbated by the 50% of respondents who claim they are more likely to try to resolve a tech issue themselves now than they would have been before the pandemic. Often these ‘fixes’ involve workarounds that include circumventing approved solutions in favour of personal devices or networks. And this kind of ‘shadow IT’ usage can leave companies wide open to a myriad of cyber security risks.

50% are more likely to try to resolve a tech issue themselves now than they would have been before the pandemic.
What risks does Generation Novel pose?

Gen-N’s desire for increased flexibility also opens businesses up to a number of security risks relating to where, when, and how employees choose to log on to their work devices. Despite unpredictable travel restrictions across Europe, the pandemic has shown that the viability of anywhere, anytime working. As a result, 43% expect to work from a different country at least once within the next 12 months, and 64% are more likely to work while travelling than before the pandemic.

It would also appear that despite the many habits that have changed during the pandemic, we’re still seeing workers participating in the same risky behaviours that technology leaders have been trying to mitigate for years. For example, over half (55%) of our survey respondents admit to connecting to a non-password protected public network at least once a week, but only a third (33%) consistently think of the security risks in doing so. Meanwhile, as many as 82% are still using their personal mobile device to access work information.
How to address the new needs of Generation Novel

So what does all of this mean for technology leaders? And how should they respond?

Despite the risks we’ve highlighted, 61% of respondents feel more secure working in a hybrid workplace than they did working remotely during the pandemic. This is the key to Gen-N’s great technology divide: the gap between the risks they bring to the workplace and the sense of security they have in their workflows.

Looking ahead, technology leaders need to carefully consider these risks in building their hybrid workplace technology policies. This means balancing choice and flexibility with security and ensuring better visibility than ever to keep an eye on how trends will continue to evolve over time.

Here are three initial ways they can go about doing this:

STRENGTHEN YOUR SECURITY

As the need for flexibility grows around where, when and how workers log on to their devices, and bad habits continue, it’s vital that businesses address the ever-growing threat landscape that Gen-N brings.

Automation and Zero Trust Security models are the only way to effectively streamline security operations and respond to the increased risks these new behaviours and attitudes bring. With real-time monitoring, IT teams will be able to detect, prevent, isolate and stop network breaches, ideally before they happen.

Solutions like automatic device categorization based on network fingerprint and dynamic segmentation will also provide the reliable, effortless control required to allow for more relaxed, choice-driven policies around device usage and anywhere, anytime working.
How to address the new needs of Generation Novel

**IMPROVE YOUR VISIBILITY WITH A UNIFIED INFRASTRUCTURE**

Of course good security relies on visibility. And Gen-N’s tendency to disperse across campuses, home offices and cafes, often while using their personal devices for business, has presented new complexities in this regard. Put simply, IT visibility continues to shrink as more infrastructure and users move to work remotely or on-the-go.

Unfortunately, the information that IT teams can collect through third-party network monitoring and reporting tools is often not actionable. This is usually because data granularity is poor, or because operators are pushed to manually collate data from various disjointed tools.

Going forward, businesses must look towards technologies that can address fragmented network operations and simplify the network management lifecycle. Deploying a unified infrastructure, one that can be centrally managed via a single point of control, can give businesses stronger supervision over their networks.
How to address the new needs of Generation Novel

AUTOMATE FOR SMOOTHER USER EXPERIENCES

Today’s Gen-N employees have heightened expectations around their experiences with IT, and want any tech issues to be solved almost immediately – before they take matters into their own hands. This leaves time-pressed IT teams with challenges around responsiveness. Throw into the mix the growing number of devices being added to the network almost daily and the increasingly sophisticated technology that now has to be managed, and IT support have become pressed like never before.

Here, automated troubleshooting can boost network performance and overall IT efficiency. With self-healing AIOps in place, IT teams can deliver on the promise of closed-loop remediation, so problems are automatically surfaced and fixed before end users or business performance are impacted, without requiring any manual effort on the behalf of IT operators. With employees now watching the clock when it comes to IT support, automated troubleshooting can resolve issues immediately.
Conclusion

Over the next few years, a new generation of employees, with its list of digital demands and evolving behaviours, looks to set the pace when it comes to workplace technology.

In order to both support their workers and nourish an efficient workforce, businesses must meet these new expectations. Striking the balance between an open but secure network will afford employees the flexibility, freedom and personalization they now seek, without compromising on security.
Research Methodology

The survey was conducted among 5018 hybrid workers from the UK, France, Germany, Spain and Italy.

The interviews were conducted online by Sapio Research in August and September 2021 using an email invitation and an online survey.

Results of any sample are subject to sampling variation. The magnitude of the variation is measurable and is affected by the number of interviews and the level of the percentages expressing the results. In this particular study, the chances are 95 in 100 that a survey result does not vary, plus or minus, by more than 1.4 percentage points from the result that would be obtained if interviews had been conducted with all persons in the universe represented by the sample.

Sample was selected from Online partner panels.
Expert Bio

Dr Eliza Filby is a writer, speaker and consultant who specialises in ‘Generational Intelligence’ helping companies and services understand generational shifts within politics, society and the workplace. Eliza has worked with a variety of organizations from VICE media to Warner Brothers, from the UK’s Ministry of Defence to the Royal Household, with banks such as HSBC, Barclays, BYMellon in Canada and Macquarie in Australia. She has spoken at the EU’s Human Rights Forum on teenagers and technology; the Financial Times CEO forum on the future of work and to the UK’s House of Lord’s Select Committee on intergenerational unfairness.

She is the author of Fuelling Gender Diversity: Unlocking the Next Generation Workplace and Mind the Gap: Managing a Multi-Generational Workforce in the Post Pandemic Age and recently launched her own podcast, It’s All Relative, in which she interviews famous families on the generation gap. It is available on Spotify and Apple. Eliza received her PhD from the University of Warwick and subsequently taught at King’s College, London and the University of Renmin in China. Her writing has been published in The Times, Guardian and the Financial Times.

Her writing can be found on her website www.elizafilby.com and you find out more @drelizafilby on Instagram, LinkedIn and Twitter.