

U T O
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Under 35s in the workplace

“There are so many factors contributing to the need for Under 35s feeling pressure to over-achieve which go beyond inexperience. For example, the prevalence of social media, the rise of hustle culture, the existential threat of new technology - these factors all account for a lot of pressure that these individuals are feeling to ‘prove’ themselves in the workplace. However, there is definitely a large proportion of pressure that comes directly from these workplaces. A lot of working environments reward ‘high output’ at an unspoken high cost. This is especially heightened when you belong to marginalised/minority communities, where it feels like you need to overcompensate to fit these norms.

Bejay Mulenga, founder and MD of Supa Network



Foreword

Nora Bank, Utopia

The workplace is at a crossroads: the rise in remote and flexible ways of working is undeniable while the global pandemic may have speeded their arrival for many. Younger workers, especially, want to be trusted to work where and when they want; for the focus to be on their output rather than their ability to guard a seat all day. They are meanwhile increasingly mindful of their mental health but the pressure to succeed in the workplace seems to make it harder for them to ask for help. So while businesses place a heavy focus on attracting Under 35 talent, what they often crucially overlook is how to retain that talent.

It seems outdated masculine norms - including a long-hours culture, suppressing vulnerability and a reluctance to ask for emotional support - are still disturbingly prevalent in the workplace. These stereotypes are harmful to everyone, whether in the physical office or working from home, as being yourself in the workplace is fundamental to our mental health and, not incidentally, to the business's bottom line.

Businesses need to understand how they can make their workplaces more inclusive of everyone to truly unlock their potential. I know when I was starting out in my career the pressure to prove I was good enough - professional enough, fast enough - was intense. Leaders need to demonstrate an empathetic and vulnerable approach to guiding and motivating these younger employees if they want their businesses not just to exist but to thrive in the future.

I hope this report helps you to understand both the issues younger employees face and the ways you can create impactful change to solve them.

Executive Summary

Original research we conducted shows that Millennials and Gen Z (Under 35s) are struggling to be themselves at work and are more afraid to ask for help than their perennial colleagues, putting themselves at increased risk of burnout.

This report offers insight into the ways younger employees are clashing with certain norms, feeling tremendous pressure to succeed but also susceptible to poor mental health as they are afraid to ask for emotional support at work.

We explore research findings that reveal:

- **half of Under 35s feel unable to reach out for emotional support when they need it at work**
- **younger men, although feeling on a more equal footing to female colleagues at work and at home, subscribe to many hyper-masculine stereotypes of success**
- **younger women workers feel their gender is a barrier to career progression**

While our research suggests in some respects masculine work cultures are gradually in retreat, younger workers are clearly ill at ease in workplaces where stereotypes still persist. But, in the absence of alternative role models and leaders, nonetheless Under 35s feel compelled to conform to many aspects of these damaging cultures.

Studies show that Millennials and Gen Z are coming into the workplace with different demands and refuse to accept certain practices any longer (1) but our survey revealed the workplace is lagging far behind their needs.

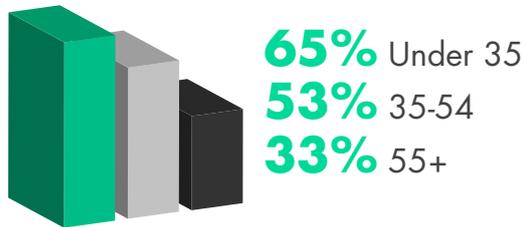
In the meantime by “shrinking themselves to fit” outmoded work cultures and not feeling able to ask for support they could be setting themselves up for mental health problems.

Employers must step up to change the workplace culture and demonstrate empathetic leadership to provide the support they need.

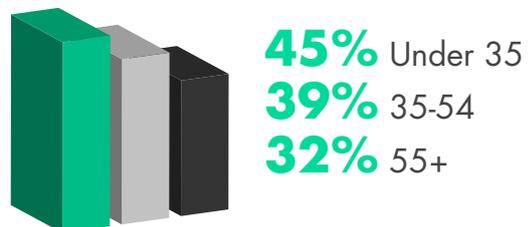
To that end, we offer some solutions - with the three hacks you can bring into your business today to accelerate change for your younger workforce.

■ = Under 35 ■ = 35 - 54 ■ = 55+

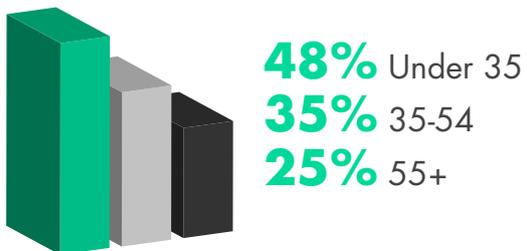
Pressure to over-achieve



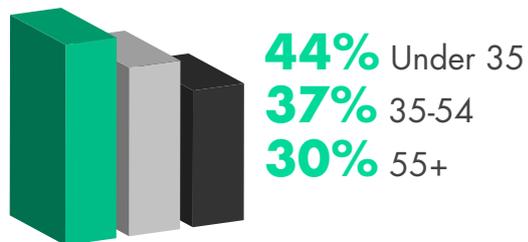
Working long hours has a positive impact on career prospects



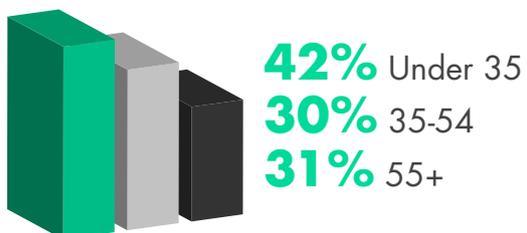
I feel afraid to ask for emotional support at work when I need it



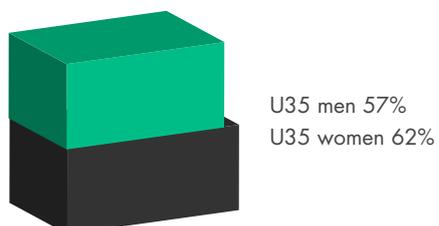
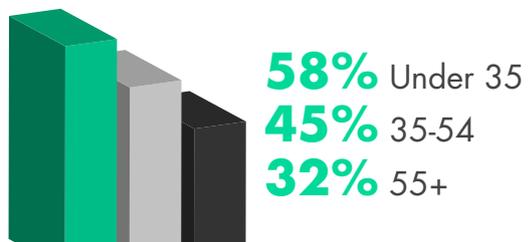
A focus on winning all the time is important for career success



Ensuring family and social life doesn't interfere with work has a positive impact on career prospects



I mask parts of myself at work to fit in



Methodology

A survey carried out for us by insight agency Opinium in late 2019 asked a representative sample of more than 2000 workers across a range of industries around the UK for their opinions about their workplaces.

Employees were asked questions ranging across how they were feeling in their jobs, aspects of masculinity in the workplace and how inclusive they felt their workplace cultures to be.

Workers were categorised by age as under 35s, 35-54 and 55+.



We can't be ourselves

Our survey found Under 35s feeling uncomfortable with many aspects of the workplace, struggling with certain norms and generally having more difficulty than their older colleagues being themselves at work.

The fear of failure was paramount: significantly 63% of Under 35 women and 54% of men were afraid to fail at work compared with their 35+ counterparts who felt less and less pressure the older they were. Whether the pressure to succeed subsides simply with age and experience or whether there is something more hostile in the current workplace culture for younger employees is something to be further explored.

However this was compounded by a perceived need to "cover" aspects of their identity at work in order to fit in. 58% of Under 35s overall said they felt the need to mask parts of themselves at work - this figure spiking for young women at 62%. Additionally just under half of Under 35 men and women (44% and 45% respectively) felt they sometimes didn't belong at work which suggests something in the culture does not allow them to be who they are.

Imposter syndrome is also particularly prevalent for younger workers, with 59% of women and 49% of men in this age group believing they were "not enough" at work (not smart enough, vocal enough, strong enough).

Just over half of Under 35s (54%) believed their workplace has a culture which is inclusive of everyone, including parents, people with poor mental health and ethnic minorities - in contrast to 61% of 35-54-year-olds and 71% of over 55s.

But Under 35s women felt their workplaces to be the least inclusive and, to compound this, 33% had felt excluded or marginalised at work compared with just 22% overall.

Nearly 40% of Under 35s agreed the most respected people at work don't show emotions (peaking for young men at 43%) and felt uncomfortable themselves sharing their emotions at work (42% men, 33% women) - higher numbers of younger men and women felt uncomfortable compared to their older counterparts. That so many Under 35s perceive emotions as a weakness in the workplace is problematic when we know how vital showing up as your full self and belonging are to business success and personal wellbeing.

While more than half of Under 35 employees were afraid to be judged for being vulnerable at work (53%), they were also more afraid to be judged for being vulnerable at home than their older counterparts overall and younger men in particular believed not showing vulnerability was positive for success.

Younger women felt their gender stood against them in terms of career progression - with 41% feeling that their gender was a barrier. But what is striking, especially in the aftermath of the #MeToo movement, is that 29% of Under 35 men also felt this way - something which is also echoed in their tendency to believe that "pale, male and stale" was becoming a more prevalent term to describe white men in the workplace.

“Younger women can sometimes feel they are fighting assumptions about their age and their gender in the workplace - they may fear they won't be perceived as professional enough, or taken as seriously as their older counterparts, especially in more straightjacketed environments.

Bonnie Linieres, Facilitator, Project Manager and Creator, Curve

While Under 35s unease at being their authentic selves at work may point initially to insecurity and a need to prove themselves earlier in their careers, this figure is so high compared with men and women overall that it perhaps highlights a deeper crisis of confidence and will hamper productivity, as research has shown. (2)

Over-achieve but don't ask for help - self-imposed pressure takes its toll

Some Under 35s beliefs about pressures in their workplace are at odds with each other. On the one hand they feel under massive pressure to over-achieve, with 65% overall feeling the need to go "above and beyond" at work in comparison to 44% of their older colleagues. On the other hand 48% of Under 35 men and 46% of women felt unable to ask for emotional support when they needed it at work.

As we know that mental health is no longer a taboo subject for this self-aware age group, this begs the question: what is it in the workplace culture forcing them to ignore their own needs?

This pressure to go above and beyond also leads them to believe a focus on winning all the time, working long hours and ensuring family and social life don't interfere with work all have positive implications for success in the workplace.

Our research revealed almost half (45%) feel that working long hours will have a positive impact on their career prospects, whilst 42% feel that a separation between their work selves and their family/social life will make them more successful.

“There are so many factors contributing to the need for Under 35s feeling pressure to over-achieve which go beyond inexperience. For example, the prevalence of social media, the rise of hustle culture, the existential threat of new technology - these factors all account for a lot of pressure that these individuals are feeling to 'prove' themselves in the workplace. However, there is definitely a large proportion of pressure that comes directly from these workplaces. A lot of working environments reward 'high output' at an unspoken high cost. This is especially heightened when you belong to marginalised/minority communities, where it feels like you need to overcompensate to fit these norms.
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The toll for this drive for success without support is poor mental health - the cost of poor mental health to UK employers is estimated to be £45bn a year. (3) The fact that the Under 35s feel unable to reach to their colleagues for emotional support will undoubtedly leave them vulnerable to loneliness and isolation at work.

Gen Z are at the sharp end of the loneliness trap — the Office for National Statistics states that people aged 16-24 are three times more likely to feel lonely than older people. Meanwhile loneliness and its associated outcomes — absence from work, reduced productivity, and costs associated with increased turnover of staff — costs UK employers an estimated £2.5bn a year. (4)

While it is not altogether surprising that employees nearer the start of their careers may be ambitious and feel the need to prove themselves more keenly than their older co-workers, it seems Under 35s are putting undue pressure on themselves to over-achieve and are at subsequent risk of isolation and burnout.

“A lot of young people I know won't take a lunch break because they feel that working through shows they are focused and driven. It's so critical for a person's wellbeing to take time to regain energy by going outside for a walk, eating something tasty, talking to different people. Often your best work comes after changing your environment and mentality.

[Bonnie Linieres](#)

Additional research Utopia carried out in 2019 showed Millennials and Gen Z have internalised the idea they need to be constantly working, achieving and that being average is no longer enough. Excelling in your job is accompanied by the added pressure of having a job that is purposeful and fulfilling alongside a successful "side hustle".

While talking about mental health and wellbeing is no longer taboo for this generation, against a backdrop of longer times spent in higher education, socio-economic uncertainty and the always-on nature of social media, rates of anxiety, depression and suicide are higher for this cohort than previous generations.

It is problematic that younger employees feel unable to ask for help in particular. But rather than leaving them to shoulder this responsibility alone as individuals, their employers must be accountable for the culture and clearly signpost the ways they can find support in the workplace.

Next gen masculinity - the workplace update needed for all genders to thrive

“Men are limiting themselves to a narrow view of masculinity, but so is everyone else around them. It's a cage we are all trapped in.

[Liz Plank, author For The Love Of Men](#)

While just under half of younger employees (44%) felt their workplace did not have a masculine culture, 45% did, perhaps suggesting a lack of true consensus over what masculine culture represents to them.

Nonetheless many younger men in particular subscribed to some surprisingly traditional masculine tropes in the workplace.

Survey respondents said they felt under pressure to behave in certain ways such as being more assertive or talking over others to get their point across - with only 29% of Under 35 men saying they had not been told to behave in a certain way at work.

Meanwhile, it is striking that 67% of Under 35 men felt it was their responsibility to provide for their family financially - matched only by their over-55 colleagues. This suggests a traditional masculine stereotype which is still very much at play

in the workplace despite more than half Under 35 women - 54% - also feeling this responsibility.

Furthermore, half of Under 35s overall (50% of men and 48% of women) feel it is their responsibility to be the primary carer for the family. So, while young men feel on a more equal footing with their female colleagues in some respects and find balancing the demands of family and work life equally difficult (47% men and 43% women), they nonetheless seem to feel the pressure to be the breadwinner more than ever.

So what is going on here? It may be that younger workers lack the role models for an alternative kind of masculinity so revert to the traditional stereotype.

Author Liz Plank believes that, although young men were raised by fathers whose defining identity was as "the provider", with fewer men of their generation becoming the primary breadwinner they are crying out for role models which simply don't exist yet.

“Men’s identities are still wrapped up in financial contributions, and their male currency in how much they bring back home. This jostles the masculine ideal their fathers modelled and taught them to emulate. What makes them men if the main organizing principle of the provider is not available to them?
Liz Plank (5)

On the other hand, there are positive signs that this cohort does acknowledge empathy is a critical work skill. This is important since the World Economic Forum identified emotional intelligence - in essence empathy - as a critical skill for workers of the future. (6)

However, the masculine stereotypes persist. Research shows that men are penalised for straying from masculine norms in the workplace - whether that is men who display less traditionally masculine behaviour being perceived as a poorer prospect at recruitment stage, being less likely to be promoted while in post or receiving less credit for showing empathy than their female colleagues. (7)

Furthermore, we know that social power or status is awarded for conformity to masculine norms but the cost of this male privilege may be that having to adhere to these tropes can also restrict men's ability to function adaptively. (8)

But just because men get penalised for straying from masculine norms doesn't mean they shouldn't stray. It is their environment - the workplace - which is in need of an update to align more closely with modern values in which everyone feels like they can be themselves and belong.

If workplace norms are still stuck in the "male provider, female caretaker" dynamic of the past and there is no alternative model of masculinity for men to embrace, is it any wonder younger employees revert to traditional masculine stereotypes?

What next?

Our research was carried out before the advent of a global pandemic and we have yet to see what the long-term impacts of this will be on Under 35 employees.

Indeed, recent ONS data on UK unemployment figures shows that, while 695,000 UK workers have disappeared from the payrolls since March 2020, Gen Z specifically have been hit disproportionately hard, with 16-24-year-olds suffering the biggest drop in employment compared with other age groups (9). This fall can be partly explained by many in this group being more likely to work in sectors such as retail and hospitality and in low-paid and insecure jobs.

In the short term it's clear they have been hugely impacted by the change in working practices - whether that is precarious employment or enforced working from home.

Additional research carried out by Utopia last year revealed Millennials and Gen Z want to be trusted to work flexibly but are simultaneously all too aware of the pitfalls of working from home including loneliness and an "always on" culture. Likewise, they were cognisant that the pressure they put on themselves to over-achieve could lead to burnout if they were unsupported at work.

Deloitte's Millennial Survey 2020 (10), including a "pulse survey" of this cohort carried out in the midst of the pandemic earlier this year, showed many Millennials and Gen Z were conversely slightly less stressed during this period.

According to their survey, this generation's sympathy towards others had increased (particularly for small, local businesses), they wanted to do good in their communities, their commitment to purpose was renewed and those who were employed at the time of the survey showed a greater loyalty to their employers, although mental health remained a key concern.

While some may have been able to take the opportunity of lockdown to "reset", this won't be the case for many younger workers who will have seen their mental health decline or may have experienced poorer access to mental health services than pre-pandemic. (11)

We have yet to see how Under 35s will weather the storm of global disruption to health and the economy but one thing is certain - they will be creating new ways of working in the new normal and their need for change may benefit the entire workforce.

3 things to do now

- 1** Signpost help before burn-out - show younger workers that it is encouraged within the culture to ask for emotional support when needed and signpost where to find it right from the beginning, when they are on-boarded. Wellbeing and support strategies must be in place.
- 2** Find ways to ensure your younger workers have the confidence to speak up and can feel heard. This can come in many forms but examples include the creation of millennial Advisory boards, reverse mentoring for your senior leadership team (we prefer to call it co-mentoring) and dedicated forums to allow the younger generation to express their opinions
- 3** Role model modern leadership behaviours. When leaders show that vulnerability and empathy are strengths that are valued and rewarded in the business, this sets a precedent for others to be themselves and show empathy without feeling the need to cover. Here are some examples of how to promote these kinds of behaviours:
 - Share stories of how this open behaviour has helped not hindered you in business
 - Champion male employees who display a more modern and mindful version of masculinity in the workplace

For more information about how to embed these strategies within your business, and the programmes to enable you to do so, contact Nora Bank at Utopia (nora@weareutopia.co).

References

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Thanks

This report would not have been possible without the following amazing organisations who helped fund the research and ensure that we delivered an incredible Masculinity in the Workplace event.

All our MIW 2019 partners:



Thanks for your incredible support and we look forward to working together again in 2020.

Also a massive thanks to Roxanne Hobbs and The Hobbs Consultancy who are our wonderful partners on the Masculinity in the Workplace event.

U T O P I A

Utopia is a culture change business. In a business landscape where creative thinking is the primary driver of growth, our changemakers help organisations build more inclusive, more entrepreneurial and healthier cultures.

We do this by disrupting, inspiring and rewiring - from the intern to the CEO, through workshops and hacks - to create happier, inclusive, more productive workforces that deliver competitive advantage. And we've done it for businesses across the board, including Coca-Cola European Partners, D&AD, Google, KP snacks, Nestlé, Schneider Electric, Spotify and Universal Music.