

We Don't Want You, Uncle Sam

Examining the military recruiting crisis with Generation Z

by 2ndLt Matthew Weiss

I was born in 1998. As the very first members of our new generation took their initial breaths of life, the world was about to undergo a seismic economic shift. The babies born with me became Generation Z, or Gen Z, and together we are answering the question, *what do you do for a living?* very differently than in the past.

This statement is borne out by Gen Z's reaction to the time period we have developed in. We are too young to remember 9/11, and instead, we had our childhoods bookended with the Great Financial Crises and the COVID-19 pandemic. These large-scale, global events impacted nearly everyone in the world and shaped our fear today. McKinsey's American Opportunity Survey shows Gen Z's financial trepidation with nearly 23 percent of the ~25,000 respondents queried saying they do not expect ever to retire and only 41 percent ever hope to own a home.¹

Recognizing that Gen Z views the world as being in an era of instability is of great importance to the uniformed Services because it greatly impacts how we should craft our recruiting. The delivered messaging must focus on putting control back into the hands of Gen Z'ers. Explaining that the military itself can be a way to make sense of this rapidly changing world is a start. The traditional barriers of the globe are now eviscerated with a generation that has been used to getting Wi-Fi and an iPhone at nearly the same time they grew out of diapers. These global moments combined with global technology make Gen Z desire for their work to be globally reaching. The Zoomer generation is one of *influencers* who

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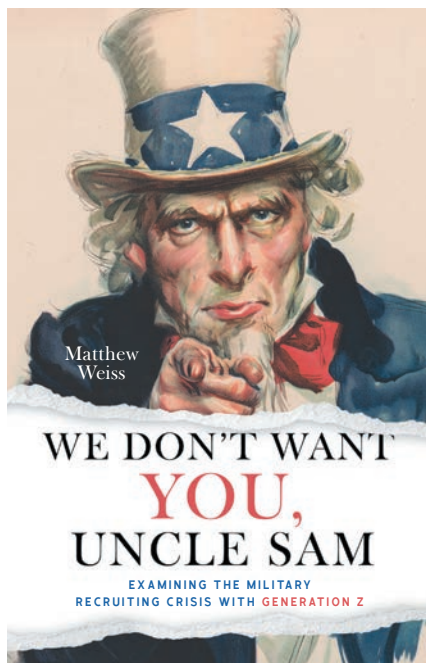
can legitimately reach an audience of millions in seconds. They expect their work to do much the same. They care less about how their work better themselves or helps them grow on the small or local level and much more about how

their work is larger than any one individual.

This is significant for the Marine Corps because helping Gen Z'ers feel good about their answer to *what do you do for a living?* will have a dramatic effect on accessions. The way Americans respond to that question is very revealing of how they view their work. One seminal organizational behavior study on work categorizes people into three groups. Those that view what they do as a job, a career, or a calling.² Those who consider what they do to be a calling believe that their work is a crucial part of their identity.

With the onset of the COVID lockdowns and remote tasking, scores of employees quit their jobs and began questioning their relationship with work. Under the surface emerged a new trend that Harvard Professor Ranjay Gulati calls "the great rethink." Meaning trumps most other factors in determining how a Gen Z'er chooses a job. This generation feels it needs to have a calling that must be unique, more significant than the individual, and impactful.

Stanford Researcher Roberta Katz analyzed millions of snippets of Gen Z



***We Don't Want You, Uncle Sam* is a book written about the Generation Z recruiting crisis. (Photo provided by author.)**

online speech in a project called iGen Corpus. One of her main discoveries is that Gen Z emphasizes finding unique identities.³ Verbiage is a crucial consideration here in defining a unique meaning. If someone is a doctor, while that is admirable and respectable in society, they are just one of the roughly million doctors in the United States.⁴ One level above that is the neurosurgeon, an extremely rare and niche doctor, but still one of thousands. A calling, however, is usually a sentence, a string of words put together in a fundamentally differentiated way. Just like a mission statement in a military order, a calling usually has a why attached to it. An example would be, “I want to go into healthcare to protect the elderly from disease because my grandmother suffered tremendously from COVID.” The generation cares less about the rigid doctor title and more about the destination, “I want to go into healthcare.” Notably, they want to be able to say or post something to the larger society that scores them social standing.

To Gen Z, impactful work yields results that can be immediately observed. If someone wants to order a taxi, Uber has one within ten minutes. If someone wants to buy an item, Amazon will deliver it within two days. This “instant” economy makes the world seem like it is spinning faster. Interestingly, a study done during COVID captured this phenomenon.⁵ Time expansion is that strange feeling many experienced but couldn’t describe in lockdown where time either sped up or slowed down at abnormal rates. The study showed that younger participants were the most impacted by this perceived slowing down of time. Relating this to Gen Z’s need for impactful work, they are not inclined to wait around to see results that may take ten years to mature. Gen Z wants their callings to produce immediate changes.

The challenge for the modern military is how to capitalize on Gen Z’s desire to have a calling, not just a job. Unfortunately, an increasing gap is opening between military service and the perception of a calling. Recruiters are struggling to tap into innovative mental marketing to reunite what used

to be obvious. Service used to be one of the highest-extolled virtues; arguably, nothing was more meaningful. Today, it is increasingly difficult to convince Zoomers that giving up rights and privileges to take on duties and responsibilities in uniform is the right path. Are Gen Z’s new callings so out of touch with the traditional military? No, but the only people to enlighten future Gen Z recruits on how the military can help achieve their callings are those Gen Z’ers currently in the military. Only fellow Gen Z’ers actually understand this generation’s deep quest for a calling.

Notes

1. McKinsey, “American Opportunity Survey,” *McKinsey*, 2022, <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/sustainable-inclusive-growth/future-of-america/american-opportunity-survey>.

2. Amy Wrzesniewski, Clark McCauley, Paul Rozin, and Barry Schwartz, “Jobs, Careers, and Callings: People’s Relations to Their Work,” *Journal of Research in Personality* 31, No. 1 (1997).

3. Melissa De Witte, “What to Know about Gen Z,” *Stanford News*, January 3, 2022, <https://news.stanford.edu/2022/01/03/know-gen-z>.

4. Frederic Michas, “Total Active Physicians in the U.S. 2022, by State,” *Statista*, 2022, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/186269/total-active-physicians-in-the-us>.

5. André Mascioli Cravo, Gustavo Brito de Azevedo, Cristiano Moraes Bilacchi Azarias, Louise Catheryne Barne, Fernanda Dantas Bueno, Raphael Y. de Camargo, Vanessa Carneiro Morita, et al., “Time Experience during Social Distancing: A Longitudinal Study during the First Months of Covid-19 Pandemic in Brazil,” *Science Advances* 8, No. 15 (2022).

>Author’s Note: The above was taken as an excerpt from the author’s upcoming book this fall titled *We Don’t Want You, Uncle Sam: Examining The Military Recruiting Crisis With Generation Z*.



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