

# SAFETY IS THE NEW COOL

## Attracting the Next Generation to the Safety Profession

By Kevin Ledversis

**Today's warehouses and fulfillment centers are a collision of worlds. On one end, the latest software, automatic picking systems, wearable technologies, and artificial-intelligence-optimized workflows drive incredible gains in speed and efficiency.**

**On the other end,** young workers, many in their early 20s, hustle through long shifts on concrete floors, navigating outdated equipment and inefficient layouts that have remained unchanged for decades. For younger generations—mainly Gen Z, who grew up with ergonomic furniture in classrooms and mindfulness apps on their phones—the gap between technological progress and workplace reality feels jarring. According to a report by McKinsey and Company (Freeman et al., 2024), the share of Gen Z in the manufacturing workforce has declined since 2019, despite more than 20 million members of Gen Z reaching adulthood in the intervening years.

### The Importance of Safety

According to Chapman (2024), 25% of Gen Z adults believe working conditions are unsafe in industrial jobs and 14% feel benefits are inadequate, reinforcing the ingrained assumption that the job is not safe, appropriate benefits are lacking, and employers do not value their employees. In addition, statistics show that Gen Z injury rates in blue-collar positions are noticeably higher compared to other generations, a factor that confirms their bias and drives the youngest working generation away from these positions (Ring, 2025).

Injuries are also becoming more serious. More than 90% of injuries in 2023 required missed days of work or job transfers, compared to only 60% of injuries in this “most serious” category in 2017 (Tung, 2024). The total cost of work injuries in 2023 was \$176.5 billion, which includes wage and productivity losses of \$53.1 billion, medical expenses of \$36.8 billion, and administrative expenses of \$59.5 billion (NSC, n.d.).

Safety is not just about avoiding injury, but about designing environments that respect people's time, bodies and expectations. And in a labor market increasingly shaped by Gen Z's preferences, companies that ignore this shift risk more than resignations; they risk irrelevance.

### The Generational Shift

Workplace evolution in response to the generational shift is not just a matter of comfort, but a redefinition of what work should feel like. By the late 2020s and early 2030s, all baby boomers will be retired or nearing retirement (Alliance for Lifetime Income, 2024). For Gen Z, who now make up more than 20% of the global workforce (McCrandle, 2023), wellness is a baseline expectation. Safety, in their view, is not just the absence of harm, but a proactive environment that nurtures productivity without sacrificing well-being.

This shift is particularly evident in labor-intensive sectors such as manufacturing, warehousing and logistics, where outdated safety infrastructure often is still in place. Gen Z does not accept the explanation that “this is how we have always done it” as a reason to tolerate poor design. Raised in a digital-first and health-conscious culture, they expect their workplaces to reflect the same level of ergonomic intelligence and accessibility they have experienced in their everyday lives.

If employers want to attract and retain young talent, they must understand that Gen Z is looking for not just a job, but respect.

### Hybrid Work Culture

Warehouses are competing for talent not only with one another, but with laptops and living rooms. The rise of hybrid and remote work has reset expectations for flexibility and autonomy across all industries. Even roles that cannot be performed remotely are now measured against the standards set by those that can.

Furthermore, according to research by the World Economic Forum (Bloomgarden, 2022), 73% of Gen Z employees want permanent flexible work arrangements. A flexible work schedule differs from the standard 40-hour, 9-to-5 work schedule. This can include a combination of at-home remote and on-site work or even a 4-day workweek.

For Gen Z workers, the appeal of hybrid jobs is more than just convenience. They want to feel trusted, respected and in control of their time. A warehouse job, by contrast, often comes with rigid schedules, high physical demands, limited upward mobility and environments that have remained largely unchanged for decades. That contrast can make these roles feel especially outdated or disposable to younger workers who see peers enjoying more modern and adaptable setups in other fields.

This does not mean physical workplaces need to replicate remote culture, but they can compete by creating experiences that offer their own kind of flexibility: better shift structures, ergonomic improvements, access to wellness resources and genuine support from leadership. Even small steps toward modernization—such as digital signage for streamlined communication, improved lighting for enhanced visibility, climate-controlled break areas or modular workstations that adapt to various tasks—can make a significant difference in how employees experience the space. These updates signal that a company values both efficiency and employee comfort, creating an environment where workers feel energized and motivated to return each

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### Rethinking What Safety Means

For decades, workplace safety has been driven by compliance laws, regulations and inspections designed to prevent the worst. But the younger workforce wants more than the minimum standards. This means shifting safety from a checklist to a cultural cornerstone. Gen Z expects safety to be baked into the design of their tools, schedules and spaces, not tacked on with a training video or a laminated poster. According to a Deskbird report, 28% of Gen Z workers identified mental health as their top concern at work (Sombret, 2025). Their definition of safety is holistic, encompassing physical ergonomics, psychological well-being, emotional support and workload management.

The best workplaces are already responding to this. Some logistics companies are redesigning shift structures to reduce burnout. Others are improving lighting, providing better airflow, or designating quiet zones for mental decompression. The likelihood of Gen Z and young millennials being “not engaged” at work is somewhat higher than that of their more senior counterparts, with distractions having lasting consequences on workflow and attention spans (Donelan, 2024). The previous cornerstones of an environment conducive to work no longer ring true for younger generations, who require more.

And as Gen Z’s influence grows, companies must evolve from a mindset of “safe enough” to “built for people.” The result is fewer injuries, better engagement, stronger loyalty, reduced turnover and a brand reputation that authentically speaks to the values of the future.

### Ergonomics as Competitive Infrastructure

Central to this cultural transformation is the physical layout of the workspace, especially in

warehouses and industrial settings, where ergonomic design is more critical than ever.

Many warehouse injuries stem from repetitive strain, excessive walking, poor equipment layout and a lack of adaptable workstations. In environments where speed is a main priority, workers are often left to navigate inefficient systems that compromise both their safety and their sanity.

Well-designed ergonomics prevent harm and enhance productivity and morale. OSHA (n.d.) estimates that U.S. employers spend nearly \$1 billion per week on direct workers’ compensation costs, which could be avoided through better design. Design initiatives aimed at bridging this dissonance have led to the creation of wearable technologies, such as posture-correcting devices, which have been shown to reduce worker strain and sprain injuries (Elhawary, 2022). These injuries declined by nearly 50% in the manufacturing industry and by almost 60% in the warehouse industry. This also sends the message that employers value their employees’ time and physical well-being.

Changes such as mobile-powered workstations that reduce unnecessary walking, adjustable-height carts and smarter storage systems can dramatically improve daily workflow. These tools consolidate key equipment—including computers, scanners and printers—into a single unit, reducing wasted motion and physical strain and allowing companies to work smarter, not harder. The innovation may not be flashy, but it is effective and most importantly, it is human centered.

In a landscape where warehouse work is often treated as disposable, ergonomic improvements transform these spaces into safe, inclusive, career-sustaining environments that inspire loyalty and commitment.

### Technology, Autonomy & the Human Touch

Despite the rise of automation, the future of work remains fundamentally human. Gen Z and future generations are not afraid of technology. They have grown up immersed in it, and they want it to work for them, not against them.

The primary concern in some automation initiatives is the loss of agency. When technology replaces rather than supports the worker, employees are left feeling devalued and expendable. With job security on the line, the implementation of such technologies carries the potential to severely sway company culture. But when technology enhances autonomy through ergonomic devices, intelligent workflow tools or mobile systems that eliminate unnecessary movement, workers feel empowered.

Today’s workforce is asking for tools that adapt to them, not the other way around. Customizable workstations, self-paced task systems and ergonomic innovations such as spring-loaded lifts or mobile battery units are already changing the way people experience physically demanding jobs.

Companies embracing these ideas are beginning to see tangible results. Workers can accomplish more

and feel more invested in their roles. Tools that reduce friction also reduce turnover. According to Deloitte (2025), 44% of Gen Z and 43% of millennials say that many people have recently left their organizations due to the pressure of their workloads, and millennial and Gen Z workers who have changed organizations in the past 2 years cited burnout as one of the top three reasons for leaving their previous employer.

This is where safety and culture intersect. Gen Z does not just want a workplace that prevents injuries. They want a workplace that reflects the world they live in—mobile, intuitive, flexible and designed for human beings.

### What Gen Z Really Values

For Gen Z, safety is not just about what surrounds them physically; it is about how supported they feel emotionally. Managerial behavior plays a central role in that equation. When younger employees discuss safety, they often refer to psychological safety: the confidence that they can speak up, ask questions, make mistakes, and still feel respected. The traits Gen Z workers value most in leaders and managers are empathy and honesty, indicating that Gen Z seeks a safe and open relationship with their management and team that fosters transparent communication (TalentLMS, 2024).

According to research (Deloitte, 2025; Freeman et al., 2024), Gen Z workers rank strong, empathetic leadership as one of the most important factors in choosing and staying in a job. They value managers who check in regularly, ask about workloads and are transparent about decisions. When these qualities are absent, burnout rises quickly and morale plummets.

In physically demanding jobs like warehousing, that kind of support can be as vital as a steel-toe boot. A manager who notices signs of fatigue and adjusts schedules or workflows accordingly can prevent injury and turnover. Leaders who take ergonomic concerns seriously, even the smallest ones, build trust and accountability.

Support also means inclusion in conversations about change. When workers are invited to suggest improvements, whether it is a better cart design or a more efficient station layout, they feel valued. When they are told “we’ll look into it” and then see no action, they disengage.

The bottom line: Gen Z is not afraid to work hard. However, they want to do it for leaders who see them as people, not just labor. This kind of support, especially in high-risk environments, is one of the most overlooked forms of safety a company can offer.

### Building for the Future Starts With Listening

Gen Z is looking to work in environments that support their minds, bodies and ambitions. In an era of rapid automation and high turnover, companies that thrive are those that invest not just in speed but also in their people. Traditional emblems of safety no longer appeal to younger generations, and more importantly, they do not reinforce the

message that workers are truly safe. This generation seeks safety and comfort outside of the home, with their workplaces being a chief priority. Companies must create cultures that support not only physical but mental and emotional well-being. Younger generations often thrive in environments where their own moral interests align with those of management, who create workspaces where employees feel more engaged with their job and with the world around them.

Safety is not just about avoiding injury anymore. It is about design. It is about culture. And for a generation that is redefining the workplace from the ground up, it is a signal of whether they should stay or walk away. **PSJ**

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