Sarah Schumacher (schumacher.minigolf@gmail.com)

YOUNG TALENT AWARD 2025

How can print companies effectively attract and engage younger generations to pursue careers in the print industry?

My name is Sarah Schumacher. I am a four-time world champion in minigolf who found her way into the world of printing by studying Print Media Technologies (PMT) at the Hochschule der Medien in Stuttgart, Germany.

Over the last weeks, I have been thinking about how I should answer the question of how print companies can effectively attract and engage younger generations to pursue careers in the print industry. I was reflecting on what value I can share with you, as any generative AI tool could give you a detailed answer in seconds. When talking about attracting and engaging new talents, and I am focusing mainly on human talent here, the social connections among each other play one, if not the most important role.

Personal contact, however, seems to have become a rarity in our digital age. With constantly rising new technology, our world has changed so rapidly that adapting takes a lot of flexibility. Younger generations are used to this flexibility early on, whereas older generations have more difficulties with the fast change. This causes conflicts between generations to be understood and can often be a barrier in companies with teams of different age groups.

It is undoubtedly true that print companies cannot survive without attracting younger generations. Time never stands still. Older generations retire, and who is going to replace them? The younger generations. Listening to eachothers' opinions and viewpoints is essential for solving these generation conflicts, but with fewer personal interactions, this skill has slowly started to be forgotten.

Strong employer branding is one of the key success factors for companies to drive in our digital age. Therefore, last year, I started a business offering team-building activities for companies to strengthen their employer branding. Hereby, I relate to my 18 years of competitive sports experience in minigolf, which I translated to be applicable in the business world.
That's when I realized the most valuable information I can share with you, the leaders and decision-makers in the industry, is sharing my experience as a young printing student and providing insight from my business perspective as a team-building coach.

In this paper, I address different challenges the print industry faces in appealing to younger generations and explore possible solutions from a Gen Z perspective. Hereby, I have structured my thoughts into four main categories: (1) Image of the print industry, (2) Work structure and conditions, (3) Education, and (4) Relationships.

(1) Image of the print industry

As typical in my generation, after graduating from school, I felt lost and overwhelmed by the seemingly endless career possibilities I could choose from. Printing was not on my radar at that time. Like many others, I thought that digital technology had long defeated printing and that no future career possibilities were left in that industry. I wasn't aware of the variety of print applications existing. Furthermore, printed products are often referred to as waste production, which leads to the belief that printing is not sustainable. This demonstrates one of the biggest challenges of the print industry: misperception and underestimation.

To my understanding, there are two main factors for this image problem. Firstly, it's true the print industry is outdated and resistant to change in some ways. This will be further elaborated in the next chapter. Secondly, the positive developments and growth in the print industry get too little attention. This is where the question arises: How do we get young people's attention to the positive sides of print? The answer is clear: We, the people already in the industry, need to bring the excitement about printing to them.

Creating awareness of the innovation possibilities and growth of the print industry can be used as one pulling factor to attract young talent. My story of how I decided to enter the print industry is a good example of positively changing the image perception of print. To find guidance in my career decision-making process, I anticipated the information day of Hochschule der Medien. That day, my perception of print was turned 180 degrees with a simple but effective presentation of the PMT study program. For the first time, I understood print's impact on our world and its development possibilities, such as label and packaging printing, variable data printing, printed electronics, advanced printing substrates, more eco-friendly inks, print automation, smart prints, AR-enhanced printing and more (StartUs Insights, 2024). I was shown the development potential within the industry that I could work with, which spoke to me and eventually led to my application and acceptance into the programme. What fascinated me the most about the PMT program was the excitement the Professors, staff members and international students shared throughout the program presentation and above. I felt like I would join a winning team.

This example also shows that print companies must be available to students seeking career opportunities. Don't wait until young talents come to you. Take initiative in joining career fairs, invite school classes to your company site, and offer them internships and summer job positions. That will also benefit you by helping you better understand the viewpoints of the younger generation. On the other hand, the students will thank you for providing them guidance in their decision-making progress and maybe even start working with you afterwards.

Additionally, social media platforms can be used to provide more insights into the world of printing. So imagine a school class is visiting you. In the end, you give them some printed goodies that can be scanned with their smartphones and connect them with your company on social media. There, they can continue reading about you and possible career opportunities. Plus, you generate more awareness about print.

In terms of campaigns, I came across the idea of how a world would look without print. Or even thinking about a theoretical print strike. So much food would be wasted because of lacking packages that make our food last longer and thus more sustainable. Production delays would occur for flexible displays or for sensors in automotive products. Textiles would look bland without the printed patterns and images

on top. All these examples and more create awareness of the relevance of print in our digital world. With the help of AI, social media campaigns like this can be created with minimal effort. Of course, creating marketing about the innovation aspects of print should reflect the reality. The reality, however, shows that besides the glance of innovation and development, there is still a lack of digital integration throughout the print industry.

(2) Work structure and conditions

As I gained more insights into the print industry, I soon realized that a big part of it is rooted in traditional values and is opposed to change. To some extent, this resistance towards change can be comprehended by traditional printing itself, as the investment costs for printing machines like flexography, gravure, and offset are comparatively high and should be used in production over multiple years. On the other hand, the older generations are generally more resistant to change.
Still, the world evolves and brings new technologies and ideas with it. The financial numbers show that the businesses that lead the change dominate the market. Many print houses, often family-owned, have gone out of business over the last years. E-commerce has long been evolving into the print industry and has taken the lead in B2B marketing and print solutions.

Understandably, innovation requires investment, which many smaller print companies struggle to afford. On the other hand, younger generations are a great asset in flexibility and developing new ideas. As the Stanford report of 2022 states: "Gen Z are typically self-driven, collaborative, and diverse-minded. They value flexibility, authenticity, and a pragmatic approach to addressing problems. [...] They will drive the change you need in your company if you let them" (De Witte, 2022). Handing responsibility to younger employees, however, requires trust from the leaders and decision-makers in the companies, and this needs to be built.

The responsibility of company leaders also tends to emphasize the well-being of the employees. The employer market has become more competitive, which is reflected in the many career options young people can choose from nowadays. Younger generations also tend to value options like flexible working hours, locations, development potentials, etc., more than a high salary.
Print production has limitations in flexibility, as it is locally bound and defined by production times. Nevertheless, it is beneficial to understand the young people's needs and wishes in order to negotiate deals to meet their expectations. Higher employee satisfaction results in fewer job resignations, saving hiring costs. To better understand the young people, you need to interact with them through education, for example.

(3) Education

From my perspective as a print student, I see big potential for cooperation between universities and the industry. The connections I made in the industry throughout my studies and the insights I gained from them were the most valuable to me. I was invited to give a speech about *"the future of print"* from a Gen Z perspective at the Graphic Consultant Leadership Symposium in Munich in May 2023, where I got to talk to many leaders within the German-speaking market. At the moment, I am writing my Bachelor's Thesis in cooperation with Tetra Pak in Lund, Sweden. Especially when given a challenge to students with guidance and support from Professors and industry partners, there are many development possibilities for new ideas, which can even result in new print startups eager to drive for change. A challenge could be to develop a sustainable proto-type packaging solution for a specific product or,

given a business case, to generate ideas for new business operations. It could be set up as a competition where global teams compete and present their results in a networking event with a mix of students and industry partners.

The startup frontline.io, for example, developed a technology offering virtual 3D training possibilities. On a Cross-Reality XR platform, machinery can be displayed by digital twin technology, enabling interactive training purposes and support services by combining AR and VR (frontline.io, 2023). This technology applied in the industry can save production costs and attract young people who are enthusiastic about tech.

In general, however, there is an existing skill gap in training possibilities because many print companies have closed over the last few years. Talking to other students from more common study programs like Information Technology or Mechanical Engineering, I often feel like a unicorn. Print study courses are comparatively rare and have experienced a decrease over the years. This could also be seen in the PMT study course, which only viewed applicants left for the study semesters some years ago. The potential was seen in the internationalization of the program, which led to a change of the course being taught in English instead of German. The number of applicants has increased since then. Furthermore, the internationalization of the study course benefits the students who work in multicultural teams and become well-prepared for global work environments. International students learn German throughout the study course to increase job qualifications in regional areas.

(4) Relationships

At the Leadership Symposium in Munich, I was asked by a group of print industry leaders: "Isn't the young generation just lazy and don't want to work?". I was astonished by this question because many of my student colleagues and I are highly ambitious regarding university and outer study activities. Even studies reflect that *"Gen Z are misunderstood. Contrary to stereotypes of being 'lazy' or 'coddled,' Gen Z is entrepreneurial and adaptive"* (DeWitte, 2022).

This conflict of misunderstanding, however, harms collaborative working, and with that, the business progresses. It even leads to young generations not feeling welcome in traditional operating companies. Instead, we should all acknowledge that depending on the generation we are born in, we have experienced things the other generations will never fully understand. Open work culture in companies will make it possible for all generations to feel welcome and create more space for collaboration, development and business success.

If you, as a leader or decision-maker in your company, would like to strengthen your employer branding, working with team-building coaches like me is possible. I have created a fun minigolf team event that turns every team into a winning team. The focus hereby is on strengthening the team dynamics and, with that, becoming more efficient. Small interactions where people get together in person and talk can also make a positive impact. Emphasizing that "in person" is the preferred communication path among the young generation (De Witte, 2022).

The main reason for this change in perspective can be explained by Maslow's hierarchy of needs (McLeod, 2024). The basic human needs are listed at the bottom of the pyramid, incl. physiological needs. The following steps in the pyramid (safety, love & belonging, esteem, self actualization) can only be reached if the ones below are provided. Even though different parts of the world are unequally

developed, the overall life standards have improved. Hence, the needs of the younger generations are listed further up in the pyramid. This is what can be seen in the young generations' demands on their workplace, including a sense of connection, respect, freedom, etc., as discussed in the previous chapters.

However, with the rise of AI and further developing technology, companies should also think about managing work relations that are not only between humans. The first artificial employees have already entered the market. How can the print industry use these artificial workforces, and how will they change the industry? These remain questions to be answered.

CONCLUSION

Hearing my perspective gave you more insight into the mind of the Gen Z generation. In some areas, a mismatch can be seen between the needs of young people and what the print industry has to offer. Innovation and digital integration are major pulling factors and seemingly the biggest gaps in the print industry. Interestingly, attracting young employees and driving your business development go hand in hand, as they attract each other.

The best innovations, however, are worth nothing if not getting attention for it. Therefore, print companies have to take action and become visible by collaborating with schools, universities, etc., and presenting themselves on the world's screens. Do so by letting young people in your companies take responsibility and drive the change with your experience as guidance.

Gen Z might want to have more flexibility in working hours and develop technology, but what are the next generations asking for? Creating an open work culture, where all generations are heard and work together, will make the success of future companies. More change will come than we have ever dreamed of, but with a strong mentality and a winning team, you will lead the change in the world, and that is where people will want to be - on the winning team.

References:

- *Frontline.io (2023) About Us, https://frontline.io/about/ last viewed: 27.02.2025*
- *De Witte, M. (2023) Gen Z are not 'coddled.' They are highly collaborative, self-reliant and pragmatic, according to new Stanford-affiliated research, Stanford Report, https://news.stanford.edu/stories/2022/01/know-gen-z#:~:text=Gen%20Z%20are%20typically%20self,pragmatic%20approach%20to%20addressing%20problems. last viewed: 27.02.2025*
- *StartUs Insights (2024) Top 10 printing industry trends 2024 https://www.startus-insights.com/innovators-guide/printing-industry-trends/ last viewed: 27.02.2025*
- *McLeod, S. (2024) Maslow's Hierarchy Of Needs, https://www.simplypsychology.org/maslow.html last viewed: 27.02.2025*