

This is how Gen Z is 'AI-proofing' their careers

'This isn't an isolated trend—it's becoming a generational pattern.'



[Illustration: [Freepik](#)]

BY [JEFF LEBLANC](#)

The conversation around [AI](#) is deafening. Headlines shout disruption, executives debate [productivity](#), and experts argue endlessly about timelines. But in the middle of all that noise, Gen Z's response has been surprisingly quiet and that silence is telling.

AI replacing entry-level jobs isn't a distant headline, it's the elephant in the room. My students know it's possible, and they don't treat it as science fiction. What I've seen isn't fear or denial. It's movement. Instead of getting stuck in "what if" debates, Gen Z is choosing clarity over panic, quietly steering their careers toward stability in a way that's easy to miss if you only listen for loud signals.

Over the past year, I've spoken with at least a dozen Gen Zers who have completely redirected their career paths. Some have changed college majors midstream; others have

opted for what they describe as “AI-proof” careers—fields that feel more stable than what they originally planned. This isn’t an isolated trend—it’s becoming a generational pattern.

Glassdoor’s new data makes that shift visible: 70% of Gen Zers say AI at work has made them question their job security. And the conversations I’ve had echo that unease, but in a distinctly practical way. One recently graduated high school student told me, *“I want a job a robot can’t take from me. I’m leaning toward trades—construction especially.”* Another, more open to AI’s role, said: *“I’m thinking healthcare. It’s hard to imagine a world where healthcare doesn’t need humanity.”*

What struck me most wasn’t the content of their answers—it was the absence of drama. No grand declarations about the future of work. No panic. Just choices. In their quiet pivots, you can see the outline of a generation that would rather act than speculate. They are sketching the blueprint of the future not with slogans or hashtags, but with deliberate, decisive moves.

The data backs this up. A national survey shows [65% of Gen Z](#) believe a college degree alone won’t protect them from AI disruption, and 53% are seriously considering blue-collar or skilled trade work, while [47% are eyeing people-centered fields like healthcare or education](#). Even local headlines echo it: in California, young adults are turning to trades, with some making over [\\$100,000 before age 21](#), citing AI’s threat to office jobs as a key reason.

This matters for more than career planning. It’s a generational lesson in adaptability. Millennials rerouted during the 2008 recession when jobs disappeared. Gen Z is doing the same now, but with a different twist: AI is the disruptor, and they are responding not with conversation, but with action. And that adaptability—pivoting early, diversifying career paths, and building resilience without waiting for clarity—may be the model that older generations should learn from as work keeps shifting.

The Side Hustle Signal

The same survey found 57% of Gen Z already have a side hustle, compared to 48% of millennials, 31% of Gen X, and 21% of boomers. When I asked about it, neither Gen Zer I spoke with used the phrase “side hustle.” One simply said, *“I thrift and sell on Etsy—that’s basically the same thing.”* The other added, *“I restore furniture on the side. Picked it up on [TikTok](#).”*

That’s the telling part. For Gen Z, these pursuits aren’t dressed up as passion projects with clever [branding](#)—they’re just part of life. Millennials may have turned side projects into brand accounts or hustling personas, but Gen Z just does them quietly. That often leads

others to mistake the low-key approach for disengagement, when in fact they're quietly building, experimenting, and buffering.

What's more, Gen Z's approach is not just practical, it's second nature, born from economic volatility. These ventures are about resilience and peace of mind, not validation or status.

If Gen Z's quiet hustle is telling, Gen Alpha's coming of age may be even sharper. As the first generation born entirely in the 21st century, Gen Alpha is hyper-immersed in tech, digital fluency, and entrepreneurial thinking from day one. Studies show that [76% of them aspire to be their own boss or have side ventures](#), signaling an innate entrepreneurial mindset.

Gen Alpha is growing up with AI, screens, and social media as baseline reality—not novelty. Many will enter a workforce [where two-thirds of jobs don't yet exist](#) demanding agility and perhaps, a blurring of main job and side project from the start.

If millennials branded their hustle, and Gen Z normalized it, Gen Alpha may simply live it with no label needed and the expectation that multiple streams of work are the status quo.

Why It Matters

We've seen this playbook before. Millennials graduated into the 2008 recession and quickly realized the jobs they'd been promised—entry-level corporate ladders, clear promotion tracks—had either vanished or shrunk. Many quietly rerouted into fields that felt more durable: tech, healthcare, education. They didn't always frame it as a grand statement, but the pivot reshaped entire sectors.

Gen Z is doing something similar in response to AI. They aren't waiting for institutions to tell them where things are headed—they're reading the signals and moving. In some cases, that means choosing stability over prestige. In others, it means doubling down on side projects that create agency and identity beyond a single employer. And again, they're doing it without much fanfare. The anxiety is real, but the response is practical.

That's the deeper lesson here. Older generations often expect disruption to announce itself with noise: strikes, protests, loud declarations. But Gen Z's pivot shows a quieter kind of adaptability—one where people act before they talk. They may not spend hours debating AI's impact, but they are already adjusting their choices in ways that will ripple across the economy.

For older workers, there's value in paying attention. In a world where disruption is accelerating, the instinct to pivot quickly, experiment on the side, and build multiple paths forward may be the model we all need. Gen Z is showing that resilience isn't just about grit—it's about agility, foresight, and the humility to change course before it's too late.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jeff LeBlanc, DBA, is a lecturer at Bentley University and creator of the Engaged Empathy Leadership Model (EELM), focusing on leadership strategies that resonate with Gen Z and beyond. As a strategist, he helps organizations adapt by emphasizing kindness, fairness, and structure to retain top talent. [More](#)
