

Tech-Voc Among Gen Z: Aspirations, Stigma, and Opportunity

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Generation Z currently stands at a critical intersection of educational choice. As digital natives, they thrive in environments that emphasize practicality, collaboration, and minimal hierarchy (Tagare & Villaluz, 2021). Yet, despite the promise of technical-vocational education (Tech-Voc) as a practical and affordable pathway to employment, its perception among Gen Z remains conflicted, often caught between pragmatic appeal and lingering social stigma.

Generation Z's educational preferences align naturally with the structure of Tech-Voc programs. Studies highlight their aversion to traditional lectures and preference for hands-on, group-based activities (Tagare & Villaluz, 2021). Institutions like TESDA have capitalized on this by offering competency-based programs tailored to industry needs, equipping Filipino youth with globally competitive certifications (Lazaro et al., 2024). However, while such programs prepare students for immediate employment, Gen Z in many communities still view Tech-Voc pathways as inferior to four-year degrees. This is rooted in societal norms that equate success with board courses and academic prestige, factors that influence not just employment aspirations but even perceptions of social status and marriageability. Nonetheless, real-world hiring trends suggest a divergence from these ideals: many employers prioritize marketable skills and certifications over diplomas, particularly in part-time and technical roles.

Critics of Tech-Voc education argue that, despite its structured certifications and relevance to global industries, it leads to low-paying, unstable employment. This concern is not unfounded. While TESDA programs are well-integrated with education systems, graduates often face a saturated labor market with limited opportunities (Lazaro et al., 2024). Many find themselves in underemployed roles that do not match their skillset, reinforcing negative perceptions of vocational tracks. Still, the rebuttal lies in distinguishing the problem of employment infrastructure from the value of vocational education itself. The skills taught, ranging from automotive to computer servicing, are vital to economic development and remain in demand, particularly when linked to evolving technologies.

Indeed, as digital natives, Gen Z is uniquely equipped to enhance Tech-Voc learning through technology. AI tools can supplement training by offering diagnostic support, simulations, and up-to-date information on newer systems (Trifu, 2024). However, there is concern that such tools may lead to overreliance, risking the erosion of manual competencies foundational to vocational work (Mundo et al., 2024). The challenge, then, is to strike a balance between digital fluency and procedural mastery, a tension that Tech-Voc programs must navigate carefully.

In conclusion, Tech-Voc education offers a timely and practical response to the needs of Generation Z, but its broader success is impeded by social stigma, uneven employment prospects, and systemic undervaluation. Reframing vocational work as skilled labor with upward mobility, not merely a fallback option, requires both institutional reform and cultural change. As Gen Z continues to reshape the workforce, perhaps the greater question is not whether Tech-Voc suits them, but whether society is ready to value it on equal terms.

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