

# GENERATION Z AND THE FUTURE OF WORK OUTSIDE C6 IN FINLAND:

A STRATEGIC WHITE PAPER

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Non-metropolitan Finland faces a critical demographic challenge: an aging workforce compounded by youth outmigration. In regions like Päijät-Häme, the working-age population will shrink by over 10,000 people by 2030, while the 65+ population grows to represent nearly one-third of all residents (30.6%) - a demographic imbalance significantly more severe than the national average (24.8%). This structural shift significantly limits regional capacity for innovation and growth. To secure the future of organizations in the region, a paradigm shift in talent attraction and retention is required, that aligns with the values of the emerging workforce: Generation Z.

Drawing insights from *De GenZclopedia*, we identify three core demands from Gen Z: Colleagues, Career Planning, and Compliments (the '3 C's'). Organisations in rural areas are uniquely positioned to meet the "Colleagues" demand through their close-knit structures. However, they must pro-actively invest in the other two.

This paper proposes that a dedicated talent platform is essential for bridging the gap between Gen Z's expectations and the realities of regional employment. By providing structured personal leadership development and clear career pathways, companies like Spark Traineeships Oy serve as a crucial strategic partner. Furthermore, the integration of foreign Gen Z graduates is identified as a strategic necessity, not just to fill roles, but to stimulate local entrepreneurship, address critical SME succession challenges, and foster long-term regional vitality.

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# 1

## THE DEMOGRAPHIC IMPERATIVE IN NON-METROPOLITAN FINLAND

The economic engine of non-metropolitan Finland is under threat. Data from Statistics Finland consistently highlight two critical trends: a rapidly aging population and the continued outmigration of young, highly educated talent to metropolitan centers or abroad.

### The accelerating challenge

The median age in rural and peripheral regions is significantly higher than in the Uusimaa region, creating a growing gap in labor replacement. The data from Päijät-Häme illustrates this crisis: by 2030, the working-age population (15-64) will comprise only 57.7% of residents, compared to 62.3% nationally—a gap of 4.6 percentage points. Meanwhile, those aged 65+ will reach 30.6%, compared to 24.8% nationally.

In absolute terms, Päijät-Häme will lose over 10,000 working-age individuals between 2020 and 2030 (declining from 120,376 to 116,984), even as the retirement-age population grows by nearly 6,000 people. Yet there are insufficient numbers of local youth to fill these roles—the under-15 population will drop from 14.2% to just 11.6% by 2030.



## THE 2030 REALITY: PÄIJÄT-HÄME DEMOGRAPHIC SNAPSHOT

	Change from 2020 to 2030
Youth (under 15):	14.2% → 11.6%
Working Age (15-64)	58.5% → 57.7%
Retirees (65+)	27.3% → 30.6%

This means nearly 1 in 3 residents will be retirement age, while barely 1 in 9 will be under 15.

**Source:** Statistics Finland, Population Projections

Youth outmigration is often driven by the perception that career progression, diversity, and dynamic opportunities are concentrated in larger cities. This perception creates a vicious cycle: talent leaves, reducing the employer pool, which in turn discourages others from staying or moving to the region.

The result, as noted by the OECD, is a widening regional divide in productivity and innovation capacity. For HR management, this is not merely a recruitment problem; it is a structural challenge that requires fundamental changes in how organizations present themselves, lead people, and grow talent. The solution lies in adapting the workplace to the expectations of the future workforce, Generation Z.

# 2

## DECODING GENERATION Z: A NEW WORKPLACE CONTRACT

Generation Z (born 1997–2012) is a digital-native, hyper-aware generation entering the workforce with distinct expectations. Research by Laura Bas in \*De GenZclopedia\* shows that many stereotypes (e.g., “snowflakes”) arise from generational communication gaps, not a lack of commitment.

Gen Z’s expectations align with what agile, forward-looking organisations already pursue: authenticity, adaptability, and purpose. For them, work funds life - not defines it - prompting organisations to reshape their employee value proposition around the 3Cs.

### The 3 C's: Gen Z's Non-Negotiables

Pillar	Gen Z Expectation (The Demand)	HR Action Point (The Delivery)
Colleagues	Genuine social connection, live interaction and a sense of belonging within a diverse, respectful community.	Prioritize a positive, supportive, inclusive work culture. Ensure leaders model empathy and openness. Work should feel like a place where people connect, not just perform.
Career Planning	Personalized, long-term development plans with visible growth milestones and clear expectations.	Implement structured, personalized career roadmaps (beyond annual reviews). Combine technical training with soft-skills development.
Compliments	Continuous, honest, and specific appreciation (both verbal and financial) for effort and contribution.	Shift from infrequent bonuses to ongoing, concrete feedback and recognition. Reinforce meaning by explaining why the work matters and how it creates impact.

### Leadership and expectations

Gen Z expects equality, clarity, and involvement, even at junior levels. They question outdated processes and want to know what's expected, the desired result, and who's responsible. Leaders who lack openness risk seeming evasive. In rural areas, this is an opportunity: smaller organizations can offer real ownership, visible impact, and faster decision-making, turning these expectations into a competitive edge for attracting and retaining young talent.



### 3

## BRIDGING THE DIVIDE: ADAPTING FOR GEN Z IN RURAL CONTEXTS

Non-metropolitan regions hold unique strengths that, with targeted structural changes, can meet Gen Z's core expectations. Finnish organizations in the regions naturally excel at the “Colleagues” C — tight-knit communities replace the anonymity of city offices, creating real belonging and genuine human connection.

Smaller structures also mean less bureaucracy, faster learning, and direct access to leaders, that offer hands-on experience and ownership Gen Z craves. When used intentionally, these qualities become a decisive advantage over larger, slower metropolitan employers.

The urgency is undeniable. With Päijät-Häme's working-age population projected to decline by another 1,500 people between 2030 and 2035, and the youth cohort stabilizing at historically low levels (11.0-11.1%), regional organizations have less than a decade to fundamentally transform their talent strategy. The window for action is closing.



## *Overcoming Perceived Deficits*

The key challenge for rural organisations is overcoming the perception of limited career progression and lack of dynamism. To counter this, employers must:

- 1 Define Impact:** Clearly articulate the local and regional purpose of the work. Gen Z seeks purpose; showing how their work directly contributes to community resilience and growth is a powerful recruitment and retention lever.
- 2 Formalize Structure:** While being small is an advantage, the career structure must be formalized. Rural employers should offer structured development pathways (the “Career Planning” C) that ensure skill growth, even within compact teams.
- 3 Invest in Leadership:** Equip senior staff to provide the clarity, openness, and continuous feedback Gen Z expects. This generational mentoring is essential for engagement and long-term retention.

# 4

## A STRATEGIC SOLUTION: THE SPARK TRAINEESHIPS MODEL

Attracting young talent to rural areas requires more than job ads—it needs a clear pathway for growth and integration. For smaller organizations lacking in-house programs, **Spark Traineeships** provides that bridge.

Spark Traineeships is designed specifically to address regional labor market imbalances outside metropolitan areas. Its model directly mitigates the two main risks for Gen Z employment in rural contexts: unclear career progression and poor integration.

Spark Component	Gen Z Need Addressed	Employer Benefit in Rural Finland
<b>Targeted Sourcing</b>	Access to post-graduate opportunities beyond the capital region.	Direct connection to skilled, university- and polytechnic-trained graduates committed to regional work.
<b>Personal Leadership program</b>	Development of soft skills, self-awareness, resilience, and critical thinking (the "Career" C).	Immediate improvement in emotional intelligence and communication skills, reducing the "snowflake" misconception.
<b>Tailored Traineeships</b>	Clear 6-18 month path with a focus on project-based work, resembling a junior employee role.	Infusion of new ideas and expertise (the 'Updates' Gen Z brings) into the organisation with a clear, low-risk, long-term employment objective.

By offering **Personal Leadership** coaching, Spark enhances the attractiveness of rural employment, ensuring that the young professional's growth extends beyond technical competences. This commitment to holistic growth demonstrates an investment in the employee's future- directly fulfilling the "Career Planning" C.

# THE GLOBAL EDGE: INTEGRATING FOREIGN GEN Z GRADUATES

## *Stopping the brain drain*

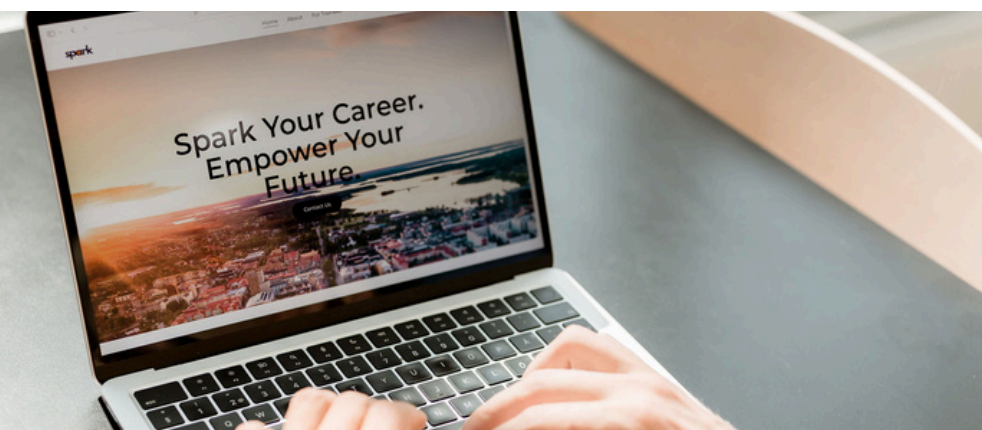
Finnish educational institutions graduate thousands of international students annually. Despite their high education level and language proficiency (often in English and increasingly Finnish), a significant percentage leaves Finland shortly after graduation. This represents a major lost investment in talent that could directly help address Finland's labour shortage and regional outmigration trends. Given that, regions like Päijät-Häme will lose over 8,700 working-age residents between 2020 and 2035, retaining even a fraction of international graduates could significantly offset demographic decline and preserve economic capacity.

Foreign Gen Z graduates often possess the "work as a means, not the goal" entrepreneurial spirit identified by De GenZclopedia. They tend to be motivated, adaptable, and comfortable with diversity - qualities that align perfectly with the needs of a modern, resilient workforce.

## *The succession crisis: An opportunity for new founders*

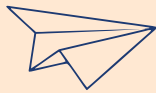
Beyond filling immediate labor gaps, foreign Gen Z graduates offer a solution to another critical challenge: SME succession. In non-metropolitan Finland, many business owners are approaching retirement without local successors. Surveys by Suomen Yrittäjät indicate that numerous companies will change hands—or close—within the coming decade.

Foreign graduates bring the adaptability, fresh perspective, and entrepreneurial motivation needed to acquire and grow these businesses or launch new ventures. They represent a ready-made generation of founders capable of driving long-term regional renewal.



## Spark's role in integration and retention

The challenge for regional employers in hiring foreign graduates is often cultural and structural integration, compounded by perceived language barriers. Spark Traineeships serves as a vital intermediary by:



### PROVIDING A SOFT LANDING

The structured traineeship offers a formalized introduction to Finnish work life and culture, bridging the gap in soft-skill and social integration



### FOSTERING BELONGING

The emphasis on the "Colleagues" C and the Personal Leadership program naturally supports the feeling of belonging, a critical factor in retention for those new to Finland and its regions.



### REGIONAL RETENTION STRATEGY

By placing talent beyond metropolitan areas, Spark helps regional employers and policymakers turn international graduates from temporary students into long-term, committed residents.



### STIMULATING LOCAL FUNDING

Spark is developing entrepreneurship modules for Gen Z graduates on business acquisition, funding, and the Finnish start-up ecosystem—establishing Spark as a launchpad for the next generation of rural employers.

**This strategy is not merely humanitarian; it is an economic necessity.**

Integrating Gen Z talent is the fastest path to injecting youth, diversity, and much-needed skills into regions battling an aging workforce.

# CONCLUSION & CALL TO ACTION

The future competitiveness of non-metropolitan Finland depends on its ability to attract and retain Generation Z. This requires senior HR management and regional leadership to replace outdated talent acquisition strategies with one based on authenticity, clarity, and development.

The structural strengths of regional organisations, such as close-knit teams and high individual impact, already satisfy Gen Z's demand for community. The remaining challenge is one of commitment: formalizing personalised career planning (the Career C) and continuous appreciation (the Compliments C).

Spark Traineeships is uniquely positioned to deliver on this commitment through its structured traineeship and Personal Leadership program, making it the strategic partner for organisations ready to invest in the next generation. Furthermore, this partnership offers an immediate, scalable way to integrate international graduates, transforming talent drain into regional gain by preparing the next generation of rural entrepreneurs.



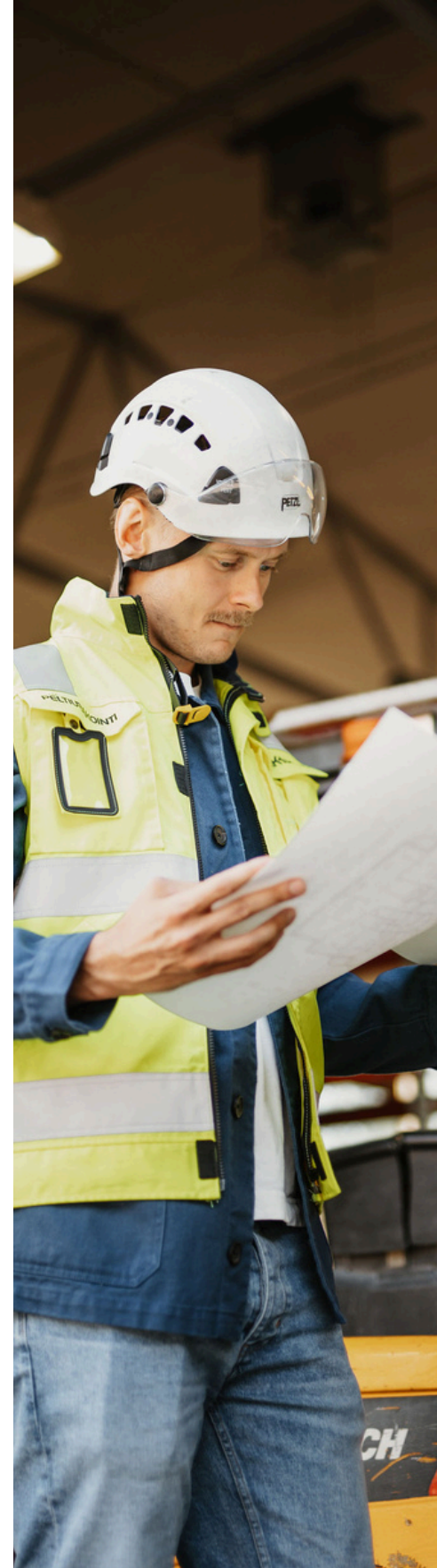
## Key Takeaways for Senior Leadership

- **Audit your culture:** Assess leadership training for Gen Z-relevant skills: vulnerability, clear communication, and continuous feedback.
- **Formalize career growth:** Ensure every entry-level position has a visible, personalized 12-month development roadmap.
- **Partner strategically:** Leverage dedicated services like Spark Traineeships to outsource recruitment and deliver the soft-skills and integration training that Gen Z values.
- **Cultivate entrepreneurship:** Recognize foreign graduates as potential successors and founders. Partner with Spark to pilot entrepreneurship training modules that convert highly motivated graduates into regional job creators.
- **Look globally, hire locally:** Actively target and integrate foreign graduates from local educational institutions as a primary solution to demographic stagnation.

The time for incremental change is over.

Securing the workforce of tomorrow in regional Finland requires strategic partnership and a full commitment to the Gen Z value proposition today.

Let's discuss how **Spark Traineeships** can customize a regional talent solution that meets your organisation's unique growth challenges.



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# APPENDIX

## DEMOGRAPHIC TRAJECTORY: PÄIJÄT-HÄME VS FINLAND

■ Päijät-Häme ■ Finland

### WORKING-AGE POPULATION (15-64 YEARS)



**⚠ The gap widens:** Päijät-Häme consistently lags 4-5 percentage points below the national average.

### RETIREMENT-AGE POPULATION (65+ YEARS)



Source: Statistics Finland