

PROSPECTS FOR THE COMPETITIVENESS OF THE VX VOIVODESHIP IN LIGHT OF GENERATION Z YOUTH RESEARCH

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Objective: The aim of this article is to present the main conclusions of a study conducted in 2025 on the situation of Generation Z in the labour market in one of the voivodeship of the eastern region of Poland (VX). The study focused on identifying the factors motivating and hindering the professional activity of Generation Z in the region and proposing measures to increase talent retention.

Project/methodology/approach: the research was conducted using Individual In-depth Interviews (IDI) with 20 representatives of Generation Z and 35 employers hiring Generation Z employees. These interviews were conducted in person without the use of remote communication. In addition, a Focus Group Interview (FGI) was conducted with 7 career counsellors from the region.

Findings: The main conclusions from the research concern the difference in values and attitudes towards work presented by Generation Z compared to previous generations (Millennials, Generation X, Baby Boomers). Several paradoxes were identified regarding declared vs. actual attitudes towards:

- the role of work in human life and work-life balance,
- the use of digital technology,
- Generation Z's entrepreneurship,
- cooperation in multigenerational (intergenerational) teams.

The identified paradoxes are significant for shaping the work environment in many organisations and require further in-depth research. The key research findings are the identification of realistic assessments of the same phenomena by young people and by employer representatives from earlier generations. The shift in perspective on these phenomena (described in the paradoxes above) also changes the approach and assessment of these phenomena by these same respondents.

Practical implications: The article provides a deeper understanding of the identified contradictions in the opinions and thinking of different generations. It debunks misleading stereotypes and beliefs about the degeneration of successive generations. It also points to the reasons for the erosion of trust in systemic solutions and Generation Z's lack of faith in social advancement. Based on this research, the approach to recruitment and shaping career paths for young people from Generation Z can be significantly changed.

Originality/value: The research findings reveal hidden internal contradictions in the attitudes and behaviours of young people from Generation Z in the workplace. They also challenge widespread stereotypes about the entitlement and laziness of Generation Z youth.

Keywords: Generation Z, work-life balance, paradox.

Category of the paper: Research article – presenting research results.

1. Introduction

At the request of one of the authorities in VX, research was conducted on activating the potential of young people in the region's labour market.

The main objective of the research was to identify the motivating factors and barriers to the professional activity of Generation Z in the region and to propose measures to increase talent retention.

The scope of the research conducted as part of this project was very broad. It ranged from determining the demographic conditions of young people in the regional labour market, through diagnosing the problems and challenges for young people in the face of digitalisation, the pandemic, and the VUCA/BANI world, to identifying the most effective processes for young people to acquire knowledge and skills. This article focuses on the factors supporting and barriers to the educational and professional activity of Generation Z, and in particular on the paradoxes identified in this area. Among them, the following are discussed:

- 1) The paradox of the role that work and the hierarchy of values related to the work ethic play in the lives of young people. On the one hand, there is a prevailing belief among Generation Z that work serves the pursuit of life passions, manifested in high flexibility of working hours, freedom of decision-making, and opportunities to change jobs and lifestyles. On the other hand, Generation Z values stability and job security or a good atmosphere in the work environment (Nichols, Smith, 2025).
- 2) Related to the previous issue is the work-life balance paradox. The assessment of the importance of this factor depends on the role represented by the respondent. The assessments of employers and employees in this area initially differed significantly. Interestingly, however, these assessments were flexibly modified in situations where there was a change of perspective, e.g. in a retrospective analysis of one's own behaviour (especially among employers).
- 3) The paradox of Generation Z's proficiency in using digital tools. On the one hand, Generation Z's natural ability to use these tools is noted, and they are referred to as digital natives for whom the virtual world is a natural environment that has existed since the beginning of their lives. On the other hand, it turns out that digital tools requiring in-depth knowledge, more effort and time to master their functionality pose a great challenge for Generation Z.

- 4) The Generation Z entrepreneurship paradox. On the one hand, decision-making independence, courage and assertiveness are important to Generation Z, but on the other hand, research has identified a low level of entrepreneurship, especially in terms of running a business on their own.
- 5) The paradox of cooperation in age-diverse (multigenerational) teams. It consists in the declarative appreciation of the benefits of knowledge diffusion between generations, e.g. digital skills from Generation Z to older generations and the diffusion of substantive knowledge and experience in the other direction. At the same time, Generation Z points to difficulties in communication and issues of dignity, such as respect and appreciation from older colleagues. Older generations, on the other hand, emphasise the soft skills deficits among Generation Z representatives, such as communication, empathy, loyalty, etc., which have been exacerbated by the pandemic.

There are definitely more paradoxes concerning Generation Z. Seyfi, Hall, and Strzelecka identify the Generation Z sustainable tourism paradox (2025), P. No formulates the paradox of connectivity, or the relationship between social media use and perceived loneliness among Generation Z (No, 2026), and Kang J.H. and Badal C identify the fashion consumption paradox among Generation Z students between sustainable and fast food fashion (2025). A significant number of scientific articles presenting Generation Z paradoxes can be found in the literature. Google Scholar alone has published 6070 publications after searching for the keywords "paradox and Generation Z" since 20025. Based on these observations, it can be argued that Z is a generation of paradoxes. The paradoxes described above can be interpreted as a manifestation of cognitive dissonance – a tension that arises when an individual holds contradictory beliefs or when their behaviour is inconsistent with their declared values (Festinger, 1957, pp. 1-3). In such situations, people seek to reduce dissonance by changing their attitudes, reinterpreting their behaviour or selectively perceiving information, which may explain the discrepancies observed in the study between the declarations and practices of Generation Z and employers, e.g. in the area of work-life balance or wage incentives (Festinger, 1957, pp. 17-22).

These issues will be described and analysed in more detail in the article.

Nationwide and global studies (Deloitte, 2024; Hausner, 2023; Hays, 2024; Maleszczyk, 2021, 2021; ManpowerGroup Polska, 2024; PwC, Well.HR & Absolvent Consulting, 2020; PwC, Well.HR & Absolvent Consulting, 2022; Richmond, 2024; Wyższa Szkoła Humanitas, 2023, etc.) indicate that Generation Z values flexibility, skills development and an organisational culture consistent with ESG values. A review of the literature shows that regional analyses of young people in the labour market are limited, hence the undeniable role of this article – to fill the gap in this area and integrate the perspective of young people from Generation Z and their employers.

2. Description of the sample and research methods

The research methodology involved conducting a minimum of 40 individual in-depth interviews (IDI), i.e. 20 with representatives of Generation Z and 20 with entrepreneurs employing Generation Z workers. In addition, a Focus Group Interview (FGI) was conducted with a minimum of 6 career counsellors from the region. In the course of the research, the following were conducted:

- 35 in-depth interviews with employers (IDIs) from 11 industries, from all districts of VX, in the following company size structure: 31% micro, 34% small, 23% medium and 11% large.
- 20 individual interviews with representatives of Generation Z, with 10 IDIs conducted with young people aged up to 25 who are in employment (3 women, 7 men) and another 10 IDIs with unemployed people who are completing their education (8 women, 2 men).
- One FGI with career counsellors for people aged up to 30 (7 counsellors).

All interviews were conducted between January and June 2025.

Questions on related issues concerning working conditions were placed in different parts of the interview. This "cross-referenced" arrangement of questions made it possible to verify the consistency of the respondents' views and narratives.

3. Research results

The presentation of the research results was subordinated to a discussion of the five main paradoxes identified.

3.1. The paradox of the role of work in the lives of young people and the hierarchy of values related to the work ethic

The research results confirmed the common opinion that Generation Z sees work as a separate sphere of life and does not associate it with their passions and private interests. This does not mean that work is less important to them than their private life, but it cannot absolutely dominate their lives. The research identified one of the fundamental problems in the motivation of the younger generation and its educational and development strategies. It is the paradox identified above, which consists in the difference in the perception of work and employees by employers and the young Generation Z. On the one hand, this concerns the belief among Generation Z that employers do not appreciate them, want to exploit them and take over their lives through work. On the other hand (employers), Generation Z employees are perceived as lazy, demanding, uncommitted, inflexible, etc.

Based on extensive research material, it is possible to create a schematic profile of a Generation Z person in the labour market – from the perspective of young people, employers and career counsellors. Below are two images of the same group – how they see themselves and how they are perceived.

Generation Z about themselves – how young people from V X see themselves.

1. What motivates them?

- Salary – they want to earn a decent wage and expect salaries of PLN 5,000-10,000 net, even if they do not have much experience. This is the most important motivating factor.
- Work atmosphere and respect – they want to be treated as partners and with dignity, they cannot stand hierarchical management and mobbing.
- Development and learning – they expect opportunities to learn from their superiors, participate in training courses and have clear career paths.
- Work-life balance – work should be one element of life, not its centre. They value flexible hours, no overtime and the possibility of remote working.
- Appreciation – they care about recognition: verbal, financial (bonuses), team-based (shared success).

2. What do they not tolerate and why do they resign from their jobs?

- Too low wages.
- Discrepancies between expectations and reality.
- Lack of opportunities for development.
- Difficult relationships with superiors.
- Overwork, poor atmosphere and unpaid overtime.
- Lack of appreciation and flexibility.
- Work that is not satisfying or does not fit their lifestyle.

3. How they would like to motivate others (as leaders – the question was: Put yourself in the shoes of a team manager – how would you encourage your peers and colleagues to engage in their work?)

- Focus on open communication, partnership, community and integration.
- Ensure flexibility, reward commitment and have a real impact on the organisation of work.
- Emphasise cooperation and respect rather than hierarchy.
- They see value in analysing the team's potential and setting goals together.

The structure of the identified motivators corresponds well with self-determination theory. Deci and Ryan distinguish three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence and relatedness, the satisfaction of which promotes intrinsic motivation and well-being (Deci, Ryan, 2000, pp. 231-233). High salary expectations and the need for "decent wages" are combined here with the need for competence (development, learning), relatedness (atmosphere, respect, appreciation) and autonomy (work-life balance, flexible working hours). When these needs are

chronically unmet, the likelihood of withdrawal, decreased engagement and employee turnover increases (Deci, Ryan, 2000, pp. 236-239).

Generation Z through the eyes of employers and career counsellors – how they are perceived

1. Their strengths:

- Technological proficiency and knowledge of social media.
- Creativity, fresh perspective, innovation.
- Flexibility and adaptability, especially to new digital tools.
- Assertiveness and ability to set boundaries – they can say "no" and fight for their rights.
- Work-life balance – they respect their time and strive to live in harmony.
- Openness to teamwork, especially with peers, but also across generations.

2. Their weaknesses and deficits:

- Lack of professional experience.
- Deficit in soft skills, especially in communication and customer relations.
- Lack of independence and initiative, passivity, expectation of clear instructions.
- Entitlement – high financial expectations not matched by skills.
- Low sense of responsibility, short-term planning perspective.
- Problems adapting to the "offline" world, outside of digital comfort.
- Frequent "ghosting" – disappearing without a word, lack of feedback.

3. What are their requirements?

- High salaries, stability, clear employment rules.
- No overtime, task-based work, flexible hours.
- A friendly working environment with benefits (coffee, meals, multisport).
- Lack of development often leads to resignation. They look for new challenges if they do not have them.

The responses of career counsellors in the FGI coincide with the distribution of responses from employers. This confirms the opinion about the high demands of young people of Generation Z in terms of, on the one hand, financial security and, on the other hand, work flexibility, prioritising private life, and professional satisfaction (more in the sense of a sense of security and stability than climbing the career ladder).

Table 1.

Summary of the profile of Generation Z on the labour market

Aspect	How Generation Z sees itself	How employers/advisors see Generation Z
Priorities	Money, development, atmosphere, work-life balance	Money, flexibility, quick gratification
Motivators	Respect, appreciation, flexibility, influence	Transparency of conditions, benefits, remote work
Deficits	They tend not to see them – focused on needs	Lack of experience, soft skills, responsibility
Working style	Partnership-based, community-oriented, relationship-focused	They expect comfort and quick rewards

Cont. table 1.

Requirements	High, often inadequate for the region's capabilities	Difficult to meet at the outset
Perception of work	Work is part of life, not its meaning	Aversion to hierarchy, short planning horizon
Communication style	Openness, honesty, empathy	Sometimes difficulty in relationships with superiors and customers

Source: own study based on our own research results.

The clash between Generation Z's self-portrait and the stereotype formulated by employers can be interpreted in the spirit of social identity theory – the tendency to favour one's own group and use simplified "us-them" categories in assessing others (Tajfel, Turner, 1979, pp. 33-37). Such categorisations reinforce labels such as "entitled" and "lazy" in relation to young people and "exploitative" in relation to employers, even when detailed data show a much more nuanced picture of attitudes and motivations. At the same time, Generation Z's expectations regarding job stability, respect, development and participation in decisions can be interpreted as a form of psychological contract, i.e. unspoken mutual commitments between the employee and the employer (Rousseau, 1995, pp. 9-15). Violation of this contract – for example, through a lack of appreciation or unpredictable employment conditions – often leads to disappointment and the decision to leave.

This contradiction may be more understandable after analysing the other identified paradoxes. Especially where respondents were asked to take a different point of view. That is, employers were asked to assess the role of Work Life Balance in their lives (described in section 3.2). Generation Z, on the other hand, was asked to take on the role of a team manager. In the latter case, there was a significant shift in preferences from monetary to non-monetary motivational factors. When asked about the most satisfying working conditions and the main reasons for leaving their jobs, Generation Z respondents primarily pointed to decent wages and financial aspects (12 responses out of 20 respondents). However, when asked how they would encourage their peers and colleagues to engage in their work in a managerial role, they most often pointed to non-wage factors such as:

- interpersonal relationships and good communication skills,
- dignity and integration aspects,
- creating community-based partnerships based on trust, honest conversation, and appreciation of employees' ideas as team members.

First and foremost, these were bonuses (7 responses) and benefits (2 responses) for completed projects. Only one respondent indicated the use of pay rises.

3.2. The paradox of work-life balance perception

Work-life balance (WLB) is a concept that is both fashionable and well regarded by all respondents. Declaratively, all entrepreneurs strive to apply work-life balance as widely as possible in their companies. Unfortunately, practice shows that in various situations, employees struggle to achieve a balance between their private and professional lives.

The difficulties described fit well into the classic concept of work–family role conflict. Greenhaus and Beutell distinguish three main sources of conflict: time, workload and conflicting behavioural demands (Greenhaus, Beutell, 1985, pp. 77-80). Respondents' statements about "being constantly on call" or having to work overtime illustrate the overlap between time and workload demands. In turn, the work/family border theory emphasises the importance of setting boundaries between work and private life – people who strive for clear segmentation are particularly sensitive to violations of these boundaries (Clark, 2000, pp. 756-760), which corresponds with Generation Z's declarations about not wanting to "take work home with them." This can be seen as an expression of the desire for a clear segmentation of these spheres, while many employers – also for cultural reasons – tend to operate in a model where they overlap.

Interestingly, even for employers, achieving this balance proves very difficult. This refers to the paradox of the difference in the perception of work and employees by employers and the young Generation Z, already characterised in the first paradox.

Responses to the question about the direct attitude towards the increasingly popular concept of Work Life Balance among Generation Z respondents showed a positive attitude towards WLB. Above all, they point to cherishing the time devoted to their rest, relaxation, hobbies and pleasures. They understand this balance as separating the sphere of work from the private sphere. They would prefer to work from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., Monday to Friday. If overtime is necessary, it must be paid. This applies equally to both employed and unemployed people.

"Everyone should have this rule: as soon as I leave work, I'm not interested in it until the next day".

"It's popular and okay to separate work from private matters. I don't stay after hours, I put my laptop away".

Employers also rated the concept of work-life balance very positively. All respondents consider it to be right – both in relation to their employees and to themselves. It can be said that, at the level of declarations, all respondents agree. However, in practice, this principle is not widely applied. Several employers openly admitted to upsetting this balance in their lives, where work predominates.

"I've been striving for this for 20 years and so far I haven't succeeded".

"I mean, as a boss, I look at it with great hope that I will achieve it one day. Because, unfortunately, for me, work comes before life and this balance is somewhat disturbed".

This also applied to 5 out of 20 Generation Z respondents, mainly working people:

"Okay, but not everyone can afford it. I sometimes have to be available outside of working hours, so I don't follow this rule. Young employees should also understand the need for flexibility sometimes".

"It's important, but because of my job, I have to be available by phone all the time".

"It's important, but work is my whole life, I work after work".

"Important, 50/50, I follow this rule".

"Impossible to fulfil, it is only possible in certain industries".

Interestingly, employers also declare that they admire people who maintain a work-life balance and will, of course, support such behaviour in their own companies. However, practice does not entirely match these declarations.

Examples of quotes from interviews with employers:

"It's very important, but difficult to implement – it's easy to say".

"Young people have a problem with this because it's not a job that we measure in terms of time, but in terms of tasks [...] and sometimes simple tasks stretch to the limit".

"It all depends on whether the person is able to organise their own working time and whether they are disciplined".

Clearly, life verifies certain ideas (even if they are absolutely correct).

Entrepreneurs' opinions change in a similar way in response to questions about Generation Z's deficits and then about their strengths. The table below summarises Generation Z's deficits and strengths.

Table 2.

Strengths and weaknesses of Generation Z in the eyes of employers

Weakness	Quote	Strength	Quote
Lack of experience	"They lack experience. They didn't have a chance to gain experience, so that's the biggest problem".	Innovation and fresh perspective	"In my opinion, definitely the innovativeness of solutions, because they certainly come up with ideas that an older employee or someone who is not familiar with technological developments, for example, would not think of".
Poor communication skills	"Well, lack of professional experience, first and foremost, in my opinion. Poor communication. These are the two most important reasons, the deficits that young people have". "Mostly human contact [...] communicating not only with their peers, but also with people who are 50, 60, 70 years old".	Assertiveness and the ability to set boundaries	"What I can learn from young people is to be a little more relaxed and worry less"; "They have a more laid-back attitude than my generation".
Entitlement and unrealistic expectations	"I think young people definitely have this problem that they think they are entitled to everything from the start. They approach work with a little humility, especially at the beginning".	Care for work-life balance	"The advantage is undoubtedly that they know how to maintain a balance between work and private life. So they don't take their work home with them, which is something the older generation often fails to do".

Cont. table 2.

Lack of independence and proactivity	"I think that a big disadvantage is their lack of proactivity [...] and a lack of independence in solving problems".	Openness, flexibility and the ability to adapt to change – especially in the technological sphere	"Creativity in social media is something that can be learned from the younger generation"; "They are proficient in modern technologies".
Lack of responsibility	"Young people have no sense of responsibility for themselves or their job position".	Courage and self-confidence Generation Z	"I think courage is definitely an important trait in a group of people who make all kinds of bold decisions".

Source: own study based on our own research results.

A comparison of entrepreneurs' answers to these two questions can lead to some rather surprising conclusions. The deficits identified turn out to be advantages of Generation Z.

Lack of experience, which is viewed negatively, promotes innovation and a fresh perspective, and these qualities are considered advantages of Generation Z.

The low rating of communication skills may be linked to assertive boundary setting (i.e. Generation Z fighting for their interests).

Similarly, Generation Z's assessment of entitlement and unrealistic expectations may be the result of their fundamental attitude of caring about work-life balance.

On the one hand, entrepreneurs criticise Generation Z for their lack of independence and creativity, while on the other hand, they praise them for their openness, flexibility and adaptability. These opinions may relate to different areas/aspects of Generation Z's behaviour, but one cannot help but feel that these judgements are contradictory. Similarly, characteristics such as lack of responsibility on the one hand and courage and self-confidence on the other can lead to cognitive dissonance.

It seems that when it comes to opinions about the strengths of Generation Z, employers have changed/adopted the perspective of young people and recognised that their attitude has positive qualities that they themselves envy in Generation Z employees. If work is not the most important area of life for Generation Z, then, according to the respondents, the quality of that life must have sources outside of work. They themselves notice their sometimes excessive dedication in a professional context.

Respecting their time and resistance to working overtime (especially without additional remuneration for those hours) is also seen as an assertive attitude that should be appreciated in Generation Z. This opinion may stem from the previous professional experiences of the employers surveyed, in the form of excessive, underappreciated dedication to work, which has remained in their memory as not very positive memories.

3.3. The paradox of Generation Z's proficiency in using digital tools

In light of interviews with employers and young people from Generation Z, as well as FGI with career counsellors, it should be noted that:

- 1) The development of technologies and IT tools facilitating remote communication, which is a positive phenomenon in itself, but their impact on establishing and maintaining social contacts is assessed differently.
- 2) The wide range of expansion of digital solutions in many aspects of life – here, the research shows some inconsistency. Employers' opinions on the impact of digitalisation on the social skills and work engagement of the younger generation are rather pessimistic. However, this is not confirmed by interviews with members of Generation Z, who are quite sceptical about digital tools and themselves note the dangers they pose to them by destroying social relationships, for example with their peers.
- 3) Similar conclusions can be drawn from the statements of career counsellors. On the one hand, they emphasise the importance of technology at work (especially remote working tools), while on the other hand, they point to threats such as the superficial digital skills of Generation Z and digital fatigue among young people.

Remote work has its advantages and disadvantages. Typically, respondents pointed to savings in time and money on commuting, clothing, etc. Among the disadvantages mentioned in the responses, the most common were issues related to social isolation, depression and alienation within the team.

As can be seen, statements emphasising the negative aspects of remote work/study prevailed.

Interestingly, few respondents (5 responses in the Generation Z group) mentioned the low quality of remote meetings, especially training sessions, and the possibility of participating in several parallel meetings at the same time or developing the habit of performing several different activities simultaneously.

Examples of responses regarding the low quality of remote classes:

"learning is not learning",

"learning has gone downhill",

"you can do several things at once while at work",

"online classes were terrible in my opinion",

"remote learning wasn't exactly thrilling at first either".

Employers recognise that young employees are highly adept at navigating the digital world, which translates into rapid adaptation to changes and technological innovations.

"I think they are definitely much more ready for change and decision-making. It seems that they are able to access information quickly".

"What could we learn from them? Certainly how to use the whole digital world and navigate this virtual world".

On the other hand, respondents pointed out many negative aspects of remote working.

"The digital world is time-consuming. On the one hand, it helps, but on the other, it hurts".

The development of communication technology is a natural phenomenon, and no one is opposed to the introduction of new tools and working methods. The main concern of the respondents-employers is whether these tools will dominate the way we work and even eliminate Generation Z's ability to collaborate in the real world. They also point to the distraction and "overstimulation" of young people by an excess of information, events and topics. In their opinion, this makes it difficult to focus on specialised issues and so-called deep work.

The most frequently mentioned shortcomings are:

1) Difficulties with concentration.

"Young people are very susceptible to all kinds of misinformation that appears on social media".

"In every free moment, I see that employees, for example, are eating lunch and scrolling through something on their phones all the time".

2) Distraction and overconfidence are the most frequently mentioned negative consequences of digitalisation.

"The digital world adds a bit of nonchalance and confidence that I can do anything because I have AI and I can write something, so it kind of replaces thinking".

3) Communication problems are another important aspect of the impact of technology.

"I think that people of this generation, who have been raised mostly in the digital world, have problems communicating in the real world".

4) Career counsellors noticed another feature in the form of digital fatigue among young people [3 indications]. The increasing amount of time spent in front of a computer is simply tiring. Especially since remote communication has not yet reached a level where it could completely replace personal contact in the real world.

The counsellors surveyed recognise the positive aspects of digitalisation (e.g. access to knowledge, the possibility of remote working), but also point to the risk of superficial knowledge (6 responses among 7 FGI participants) and growing dependence on AI (4 responses).

"They have access to tools, but often do not understand their depth – these are superficial competences".

On the one hand, Generation Z are so-called "digital natives", especially where the use of IT tools is intuitive and easy to use. In literature, people born after the spread of information technology are referred to as "digital natives" for whom the digital environment is a natural context for socialisation (Prensky, 2001, p. 1). However, more recent analyses challenge the assumption that simply growing up in the digital world guarantees deep technological competence. Kirschner and De Bruyckere show that the myth of the "digital native" leads to overestimating the skills of young people and tolerating superficial use of technology and alleged multitasking, which in fact reduces efficiency and concentration (Kirschner, De Bruyckere, 2017, pp. 136-139). The "overstimulation" and difficulty concentrating

described in the study can also be interpreted in the light of cognitive load theory, according to which information overload exceeds the capacity of working memory and leads to shallower processing (Sweller, 1988, pp. 257-260).

However, tools that require a significant amount of time to master pose a natural cognitive barrier for Generation Z.

The most common competency gaps among Generation Z identified by advisors are:

Soft skills and communication skills [6 responses].

MS Office skills [5 responses].

Knowledge of foreign languages [3 responses].

However, the question arises as to whether, in the era of dynamic development of artificial intelligence, it will be necessary to master the existing complex IT tools. Will the ability to use, for example, Excel (formulas, macros, visual basic, etc.) become a thing of the past, just like website programming, which nowadays no longer requires programming skills? This question remains open today – perhaps Generation Z is right to give up on mastering the functions of "outdated tools" such as MS Office?

3.4. The Generation Z entrepreneurship paradox

Analysing the answers to the question about Generation Z's strengths (see Table 2), one might think that this is a creative, well-educated, assertive generation, i.e. one with the qualities necessary for entrepreneurs. However, considering employers' responses to the question about Generation Z's weaknesses (also included in Table 2), one may get the contradictory impression that Generation Z lacks entrepreneurial traits.

In this situation, it is worth broadening the analysis to include the distribution of Generation Z representatives' responses to questions about:

- 1) Knowledge of start-ups established in the region by young people.
- 2) Knowledge of people running their own businesses.
- 3) Willingness to start their own business.
- 4) Intentions to change their place of work and life.
- 5) Main sources of innovation in the region.

Ad 1. Only four respondents declared that they were familiar with start-ups. However, references to:

- a) clothing boutiques,
- b) nail and eyelash salons,
- c) car repair shops, carpentry companies, shops,
- d) entertainment at events and for children as start-ups rather indicates a lack of knowledge about the nature of such companies.

This observation indicates a low level of interest among the younger generation in starting businesses or following developing industries in the area. This may further translate into the level of entrepreneurship among young people of Generation Z in the region. Of course,

20 interviews cannot be used as a basis for such a sweeping conclusion, but it is symptomatic, especially since the responses of entrepreneurs to the same question also reveal few examples of knowledge of start-ups in the province. Employers are unable to cite specific examples, and most of them openly admit that they do not know of any start-ups.

"I've encountered the most in the e-commerce and IT industries. Others are just attempts, but these are not really initiatives of young people, but rather people who have tried other things somewhere else".

"Hmm... When it comes to start-ups, I don't know any".

Ad 2. Among the Generation Z respondents, only half say they know people who run a business. Some of them cannot specify exactly what they do or what industry they work in ("they run a business, but I don't know what it is", "I think so, probably construction").

Ad 3. Only 4 out of 20 respondents representing Generation Z seriously declared their intention to start their own business. Their plans concerned standard businesses such as a confectionery, a dietitian's office, a psychological counselling centre or gardening. The rest do not plan such activity – 8 responses, a further 5 responses are unspecified dreams of owning a business, or 3 declarations of willingness, but with the proviso that they are not suited to it.

Examples of respondents' answers:

"I am more of an employee than a manager and administrator of everything, managing everything with my brain during operations. All the paperwork and stress associated with it terrifies me".

"Yes, but maybe not now, I don't even know what kind of company it would be".

"Yes, but I'm afraid to take out a loan".

"I used to, but I came to the conclusion that it's not for me".

Ad 4. In the opinion of almost half of the respondents, the capital city of VX is a city with prospects because it is developing rapidly – 9 out of 20 Generation Z respondents indicated this.

However, when asked about the possibility of moving to another city or country, they do not rule out such options. They see more promising places for themselves in the country, such as Warsaw or other urban agglomerations – 11 responses. Among those who declared that they would stay in the capital city of VX or their home town in the region, there were 7 people.

However, it is worth noting a certain syndrome, especially among those who do not want to move to other cities. They recognise the greater prospects offered by cities in other parts of the country or even abroad, but the fear of changing their lives prevails.

Examples of respondents' answers:

"I considered leaving because the beauty industry is valued abroad, but my friends and family would probably not be able to cope".

"I am a local patriot and I don't know if I would feel comfortable somewhere else, besides, there are secure job prospects here".

"Travelling broadens the mind, but I myself have not considered leaving my city".

Ad 5. The question about the main sources of innovation in the region was addressed to employers. The responses of employer respondents indicate a high degree of uncertainty, with respondents unable to provide specific examples. Their statements reveal doubts as to whether VX can be considered innovative. General associations with digitalisation, EU programmes and broadly understood access to technology prevail. Only a few respondents indicated specific examples of companies or sectors in which young people undertake innovative activities.

Examples of statements by employers:

"I can see a few industries, I mean companies from the technology sector, I mean IT, I think that's the most intuitive thing that comes to mind".

"To be honest, I don't know, I haven't thought about it. Somehow, I wasn't really interested in it".

In terms of sources of talent for the regional labour market, the study did not identify any sources. The respondents' answers regarding their lack of knowledge of any specific examples of start-ups from VX are pessimistic. They find it difficult to identify specific sources of innovation. It was also not possible to determine, based on the respondents' answers, the direction in which the region's innovation policy should go.

A noticeable phenomenon is the fact that respondents are unable to indicate in which industries, areas and directions the prospects for this development in the region are being built. Most of them do not plan to start their own businesses. This may indicate a low propensity for entrepreneurial behaviour, especially among respondents who declare their willingness to remain in the region.

Based on these statements, it can be assessed that the level of entrepreneurship among young people of Generation Z is low. Various factors may influence this, but the most common theme in the respondents' statements is a conservative/comfortable attitude towards work.

The low level of entrepreneurial intentions among Generation Z described above can be interpreted using the theory of planned behaviour. Ajzen assumes that the intention to act depends on attitudes towards behaviour, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control (Ajzen, 1991, pp. 188-191). The respondents' statements reveal rather cautious attitudes ("it's not for me" [], "I'm scared of paperwork"), weak pro-entrepreneurial norms (little knowledge of start-ups in the region) and low perceived control ("I'm afraid to take out a loan", feeling of incompetence). According to entrepreneurial intention models, this configuration favours choosing secure employment over starting one's own business (Krueger, Reilly, Carsrud, 2000, pp. 415-419).

3.5. The paradox of cooperation in multigenerational teams

Respondents' ambivalent attitude towards working in intergenerational teams is noticeable. Both the advantages and disadvantages of such a solution are recognised. Declaratively, working in such teams is necessary. However, practice shows that difficulties prevail and

dominate in the work of such teams. The anticipated accelerating pace of technological development may widen the cultural gap between Generation Z and the next Alpha generation, and the older Generation X, Generation Y and Millennial generations.

The ambivalent attitude towards working in multigenerational teams is consistent with the results of reviews of research on generational differences at work. They point to different values, career expectations and communication styles among different age groups, which can lead to both conflicts and complementarity of resources in mixed teams (Lyons, Kuron, 2014, pp. 141-145). In terms of social capital, working in such teams can build so-called bridging social capital – bonds connecting groups that differ in age, experience and perspective (Putnam, 2000, pp. 22-24). However, this requires trust and norms of reciprocity; a lack of these tends to reinforce stereotypes (“young people are demanding”, “older people are arrogant”), which are strongly reflected in the empirical material collected.

The question about the most important advantages and disadvantages of working in intergenerational teams yielded many seemingly contradictory answers, which, however, may confirm the opinion of the authors cited above.

Work does not play a dominant role in the lives of Generation Z. This may be one of the sources of conflict with older generations, who have a different attitude towards work and life values. Generation Z do not understand this and feel uncomfortable in their relationships with older colleagues or managers. On the other hand, they also feel that their older colleagues do not understand their world and their needs. This arouses their fears and frustration and reinforces their defence mechanisms in the form of rigidly invoking the provisions of the Labour Code (e.g. "overtime is okay, but only if it is paid extra, as stipulated in the Labour Code").

Among the positive aspects of working in multigenerational teams, respondents, both Generation Z representatives and employers, pointed to:

Stimulation of innovative ideas.

The diffusion of substantive knowledge from older employees to younger ones.

At the same time, the flow of knowledge, especially technological knowledge, in the other direction, i.e. from Generation Z to employees representing older generations.

Examples of respondents' statements:

"Older people can certainly teach young people a lot. However, I believe that young people also teach older people a lot" (Generation Z).

"Older people know more, younger people bring a fresh perspective, but stereotypes that young people are demanding, etc. can be a problem" (Generation Z).

"In my opinion, definitely innovative solutions, because they definitely come up with certain ideas that an older employee or someone who is not familiar with technological developments, for example, would not come up with" (employer).

“Such people have a fresh perspective on various problems, they are creative, they are also open to change, they adapt quickly to technology, these new technologies, and I have the impression that they are more flexible than older people” (employer).

"Well, the spontaneity of young people is definitely an advantage, their ability to adapt to new things" (employer).

Among the negative aspects of working in multigenerational teams, Generation Z respondents mentioned the arrogance of older generations, a different culture due to different upbringings, and they also pointed to lower physical fitness and poorer skills in modern technology.

Many voices (almost half of the respondents – 9 out of 20) representing the younger generation point to the problem of communication between these age groups.

Examples of statements from Generation Z respondents:

"A different way of thinking, these are different generations raised differently, sometimes older people are resistant to knowledge, different perspectives can be a plus".

"Older employees do not understand that younger people are fighting for their rights [...] older employees have loans and redundancy for them would be the end of the world".

"They put themselves above others, which isn't very nice".

"If it's possible not to mix these teams [...], then I'm all for it, because it usually leads to conflicts and nothing good".

"The language is changing, so it's harder to communicate. There are people who are ashamed to talk to older people as colleagues at work".

On the other hand, employers expressed opinions regarding:

- lack of resistance to criticism,
- different work pace and different lifestyles,
- misunderstandings resulting from generational differences (e.g. in communication, dress code, hierarchy),
- difficulty in understanding each other's expectations and ways of expressing emotions.

Examples of comments:

"If someone criticises you once or twice, instead of adapting or thinking that maybe it's wrong, they just prefer to give up".

"The pace of work of the two generations may diverge".

"Older people do not understand social media, young people are annoyed that older people do not understand new technologies".

"The problem with written communication – we perceive the same text differently with and without an emoji".

Employers' statements reveal a desire for such teams to function as well as possible, as they see the advantages of positive factors outweighing the limitations. On the other hand, the statements of young people from Generation Z reveal a much stronger sense of reluctance and fear about working in such teams than appreciation of the positive aspects.

Career counsellors note that intergenerational cooperation can be difficult and burdened with stereotypes on both sides. They point to:

- differences in attitudes towards work and responsibilities,
- a lack of mutual understanding and respect for different experiences,
- entitlement and inflexibility on the part of some young employees,
- the young generation's sense of technological superiority and depreciation of the experience of older people,
- but also the need to learn from each other and the necessity to keep up with changes, including by older people.

Examples of statements by career counsellors:

"It is often the case that: 'because in your day it was different, and now it is different', so it is a kind of excuse that today everything can be done more easily, and let's assume you have some old methods".

"The difference was noticeable on many different levels [...] between peers, adults and minors, between me as a coach – a person from Generation X".

As you can see, generational differences cause a lot of problems in multigenerational teams. Respondents recognise the challenges, but do not deny the possibility of good cooperation – however, it requires effort on both sides. It is essential to build bridges of understanding – through openness, education and awareness of cultural differences between generations.

4. Conclusion

The research conducted yielded quite interesting results. They are not one-sided, as most reports on Generation Z tend to be. The clash of opinions between young people and employers and career counsellors brought a new quality to the analysis of the situation – it identified several contradictions in judgements about Generation Z. Interestingly, these contradictions did not concern differences in the opinions of individual generations, but appeared in the statements of entrepreneurs and young people from Generation Z themselves. This was particularly evident when they were asked questions that required a change in perspective. That is, when Generation Z was asked to take on the role of a team manager, and employers were asked to assess the role of work-life balance in their lives.

The paradoxes identified and described above obviously require further in-depth research into their causes and origins, as well as their further implications.

They clearly show that we cannot remain shackled by stereotypical thinking about the degeneration of successive generations. Plato was the first to express the opinion that "all authority is falling in our times — today's youth respect neither gods, nor people, nor the state, nor blood, nor the customs of their ancestors" (Plato's Defence of Socrates).

Aristotle complained that "when he sees young people, he doubts the future of civilisation" and he was not alone in his opinion.

The power of empathy, or the ability to understand other people's situations and emotions, allows for broader insight and deeper understanding of a problem. In the case of Generation Z, it is worth looking at the world from their point of view, and most of the traits criticised by previous generations such as baby boomers, Generation X and millennials will prove to be justified.

Generation Z has lost faith in classic social advancement. There is also a noticeable erosion of trust in systemic solutions, e.g.:

- all prestigious positions are occupied by representatives of older generations,
- a vague vision of starvation pensions,
- declining influence on the political situation – longer life expectancy in an ageing society and a demographic catastrophe are reducing the number of Generation Z voters,
- the deconstruction of social roles, work ethic and professional prestige caused by the rapid development of technology (robotics and AI) taking over/automating work processes in an increasingly wide range of professions.

This erosion of trust in systemic solutions is part of a broader diagnosis of declining social capital and weakening trust in institutions in late modern societies (Putnam, 2000, pp. 27-31). At the same time, research on the i Generation / Generation Z generation points to an increase in the frequency of depressive and anxiety symptoms and a growing sense of lack of control over one's own future, linked, among other things, to the rapid digitisation of life, the pressure of social comparisons and economic uncertainty (Twenge, 2017, pp. 101-110). In this context, the metaphor of "Generation Z depression" reflects the real psychosocial burdens that may be behind this cohort's strong focus on the private sphere at the expense of the traditionally understood work ethic.

The cause of Generation Z's "depression" is also quite accurately identified by A. Grant (Grant, <https://www.youtube.com...>; Rusak, Generation Z...), who explains that Generation Z grew up watching financial and political institutions fail to deliver on their promises of stability and wealth. This has translated into a deep mistrust between employees and employers.

These factors trigger defence mechanisms in Generation Z in the form of a focus on their private lives, not necessarily related to gainful employment.

It can also be argued that as Generation Z grows up, their priorities and life opportunities will also evolve, which will translate into further progress in the development of our civilisation. However, experiences in non-human communities (Calhoun, 1973) may raise fears about whether this thesis is valid.

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