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INTERGENERATIONAL COOPERATION UNDER DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGES – AN EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS OF SMES IN THE POZNAŃ COUNTY

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Purpose: The paper analyses intergenerational cooperation in enterprises in the context of demographic changes, particularly population ageing and declining fertility rates. It also examines whether younger and older employees differ in their assessment of intergenerational cooperation and willingness to engage in it.
Design/methodology/approach: The study is based on quantitative research conducted in 2022-2023 among 50 small and medium-sized enterprises in Poznań County. The sample included 100 respondents representing two age groups: employees under 50 and employees aged 50 and above. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire and analysed with the Mann-Whitney U test and the chi-square test. The study draws on the literature on demographic change and age diversity management.
Findings: Intergenerational cooperation was common, with over 70% of respondents reporting experience in age-diverse teams. No statistically significant differences were found between the two groups in their assessment of cooperation quality. However, significant differences were identified in willingness to cooperate and the perceived importance of intergenerational cooperation. Older employees showed greater openness to cooperation and attached higher importance to it than younger employees.
Research limitations/implications: The study is limited by its regional scope and relatively small sample, which may reduce the generalisability of the findings. Future research should include larger samples, different regions and sectors, and qualitative methods.
Practical implications: The findings support the implementation of age management practices, including mentoring, reverse mentoring, and initiatives promoting intergenerational collaboration to enhance knowledge transfer and organisational effectiveness.
Social implications: Strengthening intergenerational cooperation may reduce age stereotypes, foster social cohesion, and support policies extending working lives.
Originality/value: The study provides empirical evidence on intergenerational cooperation in SMEs under demographic change and compares perceptions across generational groups, highlighting the importance of age diversity for organisational functioning.
Keywords: intergenerational cooperation; demographic changes; SMEs; age diversity; labour market.
Category of the paper: Research paper.

1. Introduction

Terms such as demographic crisis, demographic bomb, or generational tsunami describe ongoing adverse changes in the age structure of the population from the perspective of the labour market. Population ageing, accompanied by a simultaneous decline in fertility rates, including in developing countries, has become a global trend. This is confirmed by numerous statistical data. According to the World Bank, the share of people aged 60+ in the world population was 5% in 1960, rising to 10% in 2024. In contrast, the share of people aged 0-14 was 37% in the same period, whereas it has currently decreased to 25% (WB, 2025). According to projections of the same institution, this trend will continue to intensify: the share of older people is expected to reach 16% in 2050 and even 22% in 2100. Conversely, the share of children aged 0-14 is projected to amount to 21% and 17%, respectively (UN, 2022).

A similar unfavourable transformation of the demographic structure has also been observed in Poland over recent decades. In 1960, the share of people aged 60+ was 6%, increasing to 20% in 2024. At the same time, the share of the population aged 0-14 more than halved, falling from 33% in 1960 to 15% in 2024 (WB, 2025). Thus, a clear reversal of the population age structure has taken place—from a progressive to a regressive model. In the second half of the twentieth century, the population pyramid had a broad base due to high fertility rates and relatively lower life expectancy (UN, 2022). Currently, a systematic narrowing of the base and widening of the upper age groups can be observed, resulting from declining fertility rates, postponement of reproductive decisions, and increasing life expectancy (Eurostat, 2025). This process leads to population ageing and an increasing share of people in post-working age, which in turn raises the demographic burden on the working-age population (GUS, 2023a). Polish demographic projections do not indicate a reversal of this trend in the future. In 2050, the share of the population aged 65+ is expected to reach 32%, and in 2100 it may rise to 38%. In contrast, the younger population (0–14) is projected to account for 13% both in 2050 and 2100 (GUS, 2023b; Eurostat, 2023a), which results from projected low fertility rates (1.45 in 2050 and 1.5 in 2100) (Notes…, 2025). This means that in both the medium- and long-term perspective, the country will not reach the replacement-level fertility rate of 2.1.

The described transformations have a significant impact on the functioning of the labour market and, consequently, on national economies. In the face of a growing number of older people, there is a real risk of labour shortages. As a result, many countries are either implementing or discussing the extension of the retirement age. However, this raises concerns regarding cooperation between different generations in the workplace. Each generation is characterised by different values, attitudes, and priorities in both professional and private life. Nevertheless, in the context of the above-mentioned demographic changes, intergenerational cooperation ceases to be merely a desirable element of organisational culture and becomes a necessity determining the stability of enterprises and entire economies.

In the context of shrinking labour resources and the growing share of older people, the effective use of the potential of all age groups becomes crucial. The integration of competencies and experiences from different generations may provide a response to challenges related to labour shortages, knowledge transfer, and the continuity of organisational processes (OECD, 2020; Eurostat, 2025). Properly managed age diversity can lead to increased innovation, improved team effectiveness, and higher employee satisfaction (OECD, 2020; Kunze, Boehm, Bruch, 2013). However, there is still a lack of conclusive empirical evidence providing a comprehensive picture of intergenerational relations in organisations and their perception by employees of different generations. Therefore, it is justified to conduct empirical research aimed at identifying the scale, frequency, and quality of intergenerational cooperation, as well as the willingness to cooperate and the perceived importance of such cooperation within two age groups. This allows not only for the verification of theoretical assumptions but also for the formulation of practical recommendations for human resource management (North, Fiske, 2015).

Taking the above into account, this article presents the results of a research project conducted among SMEs in Poznań County, aimed at verifying key aspects of intergenerational cooperation. For this purpose, the following research questions were formulated: 1) Did respondents work in age-diverse teams within the last six months? 2) If so, how do they evaluate this cooperation? 3) Is there a relationship between age/generational group and willingness to engage in intergenerational cooperation? 4) How important is intergenerational cooperation for the respondents? Subsequently, in accordance with quantitative research principles, these questions were transformed into research hypotheses subject to empirical verification. The transformation of research questions into hypotheses enabled the operationalisation of the analysed phenomena and the application of statistical methods to assess relationships between variables. The formulated hypotheses formed the basis for assessing whether intergenerational cooperation can be considered an effective tool for mitigating the negative effects of demographic changes on the labour market.

2. Literature review

Intergenerational cooperation is one of the key aspects of the functioning of contemporary organisations and societies, particularly in the context of dynamic demographic changes such as population ageing and the extension of working life. According to Eurostat data, the median age in the European Union increased from 38.4 years in 2001 to over 44 years in 2023, clearly indicating an ongoing process of population ageing (Eurostat, 2023b). Consequently, the labour market is increasingly characterised by the coexistence of representatives of as many as four or five generations, which necessitates effective age diversity management (EPALE, 2025).

It should be noted that the essence of intergenerational cooperation lies in the synergistic use of the potential of representatives of different generations, who differ in professional experience, competencies, values, and working styles. Older generations, such as Baby Boomers and Generation X, primarily contribute expert knowledge, experience, and well-developed interpersonal skills to organisations. In turn, younger generations, including Generation Y and Z, are characterised by greater proficiency in digital technologies, flexibility, and openness to change (Hays Poland, 2024). This complementarity of resources constitutes the foundation of effective intergenerational cooperation and may lead to increased innovation and organisational competitiveness.

Researches show that age diversity in teams has a significant impact on their effectiveness. As many as 65% of managers indicate that generational diversity fosters innovation and improves problem-solving (EY, 2024). Moreover, organisations that actively manage diversity achieve higher financial performance and demonstrate greater adaptability to market changes (OECD, 2020). Intergenerational cooperation also supports knowledge transfer, which may take the form of both traditional mentoring (where older employees pass knowledge to younger ones) and reverse mentoring, in which younger generations share digital competencies and modern work tools (Harvard Business Review, 2019).

Furthermore, key benefits of intergenerational cooperation include improved quality of decision-making resulting from the inclusion of diverse perspectives and experiences. Diverse teams are also more creative and better at solving complex problems (OECD, 2020). In addition, such cooperation contributes to building an organisational culture based on inclusiveness, mutual respect, and lifelong learning. It is also worth emphasising that employees working in intergenerational teams more often report higher levels of job satisfaction and engagement (EY, 2024).

From the perspective of younger generations, cooperation with older colleagues is often perceived positively. Research indicates that as many as 71% of Generation Z representatives consider such cooperation valuable and development-oriented (Pro Progressio, 2024). At the same time, only 57% of older employees share this opinion, which indicates a certain asymmetry in the perception of intergenerational relations (Pro Progressio, 2024). These differences may stem from varying work expectations, communication styles, and levels of openness to change.

Intergenerational cooperation also creates a number of important development opportunities. First and foremost, it enables the creation of learning organisations in which knowledge is continuously exchanged and developed. This is particularly important in the era of digital transformation and rapid technological progress, where continuous skills updating becomes essential (World Economic Forum, 2023). Moreover, effective use of older employees' potential helps mitigate labour shortages and counteract the professional exclusion of pre-retirement-age workers (OECD, 2020). From a social perspective, intergenerational cooperation also fosters social cohesion and helps reduce stereotypes and age-related prejudice, including ageism.

However, despite numerous benefits, intergenerational cooperation also involves certain challenges and threats. One of the most frequently identified problems is differences in communication styles. Older generations typically prefer direct and formal communication, whereas younger generations more often use digital tools and informal communication (Hays Poland, 2024). This may lead to misunderstandings and reduced efficiency of cooperation.

Another important challenge is intergenerational stereotypes, which may influence perceptions of colleagues. Older employees are sometimes perceived as less flexible and less open to change, while younger employees are seen as less loyal and less committed (Posthuma, Campion, 2009). Such simplifications may lead to conflicts and hinder the development of effective team relationships, potentially negatively affecting organisational performance and financial results.

Differences in digital competencies represent another risk factor. In the context of ongoing digitalisation, insufficient skills may limit cooperation and cause frustration among both older and younger employees (World Economic Forum, 2023). Additionally, differing approaches to work- including work-life balance, hierarchy, and management styles - may lead to tensions within intergenerational teams (EY, 2024).

In conclusion, intergenerational cooperation is a complex, multidimensional phenomenon that brings both significant benefits and challenges. Its effectiveness largely depends on the skillful management of diversity, the promotion of an open organisational culture, and the implementation of solutions supporting integration between generations, such as mentoring programmes, communication training, and initiatives aimed at reducing stereotypes. In the context of demographic change and rapid technological development, intergenerational cooperation will play an increasingly important role in shaping organisational competitiveness and social cohesion.

3. Methods

3.1. Study design

This study employed a quantitative research design to investigate intergenerational cooperation in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) operating in Poznań County, Poland. The research was conducted between 2022 and 2023 as part of the project *Methods of shaping employees' intellectual capital with consideration of age diversity*. The main objective of the study was to examine whether employees representing different generations differed in their perceptions of intergenerational cooperation, willingness to cooperate, and the importance they attached to such cooperation.

3.2. Sample

A purposive sampling strategy was applied. The study involved 50 SMEs located in Poznań County. The selection criteria included: (1) location in Poznań County, (2) classification as a small or medium-sized enterprise, (3) operation within Section C of the Polish Classification of Activities (PKD 2007), and (4) employment of at least four employees aged under 50 and four employees aged 50 years or older.

Initially, 362 enterprises met the selection criteria. Fifty-two organisations agreed to participate, and complete questionnaires were obtained from 50 enterprises. Two respondents from each enterprise participated in the survey - one employee under the age of 50 and one employee aged 50 or above - resulting in a final sample of 100 respondents.

Among the participating enterprises, 64% were small enterprises. The average age of respondents was 33 years in the younger group and 56 years in the older group. Men constituted the majority in both groups. The average job tenure was 9.7 years among younger employees and 30.2 years among older employees.

3.3. Research instrument

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire consisting of 24 questions. Prior to the main study, a pilot survey was conducted to verify the clarity and reliability of the research instrument. The questionnaire included questions concerning respondents' experience of working in age-diverse teams, assessment of the quality of intergenerational cooperation, willingness to cooperate with employees from another age group, and the perceived importance of intergenerational cooperation.

For the purposes of statistical analysis, age was transformed into a categorical variable representing two generational groups: employees under 50 years of age and employees aged 50 years and above.

3.4. Statistical analysis

Descriptive statistics were calculated for all analysed variables. To verify the research hypotheses, both descriptive and inferential statistical methods were applied.

Hypothesis H1 was verified using descriptive statistics presenting the proportion of respondents working in age-diverse teams.

Differences between younger and older employees in the assessment of intergenerational cooperation (H2) and the perceived importance of such cooperation (H4) were analysed using the Mann-Whitney U test for independent samples, as the analysed variables were measured on a five-point Likert scale. The relationship between age group and willingness to engage in intergenerational cooperation (H3) was examined using Pearson's chi-square test of independence.

All statistical analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics software. The level of statistical significance was set at $\alpha = 0.05$.

4. Results

The main premise of the study was the assumption that age diversity in teams may constitute a significant source of organisational advantage, provided that it is properly managed and fosters cooperation among employees representing different generations. Accordingly, during the implementation of the project, efforts were made to address the following research questions:

1. Did the respondents work in age-diverse teams during the last six months?
2. If so, how did they assess this cooperation?
3. Is there a relationship between age groups and the willingness to engage in intergenerational cooperation?
4. Do respondents consider intergenerational cooperation to be important?

At the stage of preparing the empirical study, the following research hypotheses were formulated:

H1) In the analysed enterprises, more than half of the respondents worked in age-diverse teams during the last six months.

H2) The evaluation of established cooperation is the same across both generations.

H3) There is no statistically significant difference between the younger and older generations in terms of willingness to engage in intergenerational cooperation.

H4) The possibility of engaging in intergenerational cooperation in the workplace is equally important for both younger and older generations.

It should be noted that, for the purposes of inference, the quantitative variable "age" was transformed into a qualitative variable by grouping numerical values into "generation", where 1 denotes the younger generation (individuals under 50 years of age) and 2 denotes the older generation (individuals aged 50 and above).

In order to verify the first research hypothesis, respondents were asked to indicate whether, during the last six months, they had the opportunity to work in age-diverse teams. The collected data show that as many as 70% of respondents declared such cooperation. Therefore, there are no grounds to reject hypothesis H1. Moreover, respondents were also asked to indicate the frequency of such cooperation. It was found that 42 respondents (17 younger and 25 older) reported occasional cooperation, while 28 (including 11 younger and 17 older) indicated its regular occurrence.

The author also sought to determine whether respondents from both generations who had answered positively to the first research question assessed this cooperation in a similar manner. This issue formed the basis for hypothesis H2. Its verification using a statistical test required the formulation of the null hypothesis (H0) and the alternative hypothesis (H1), as follows:

H0: The distribution of cooperation evaluations is the same in both groups of respondents.

H1: The distributions of cooperation evaluations differ between the two groups.

Respondents were asked to assess the quality of the "cooperation" resource using a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 indicates very poor and 5 indicates very good. The distribution of responses provided by 70 respondents, including 28 from the younger generation and 42 from the older generation, is presented below in the Figure 1.

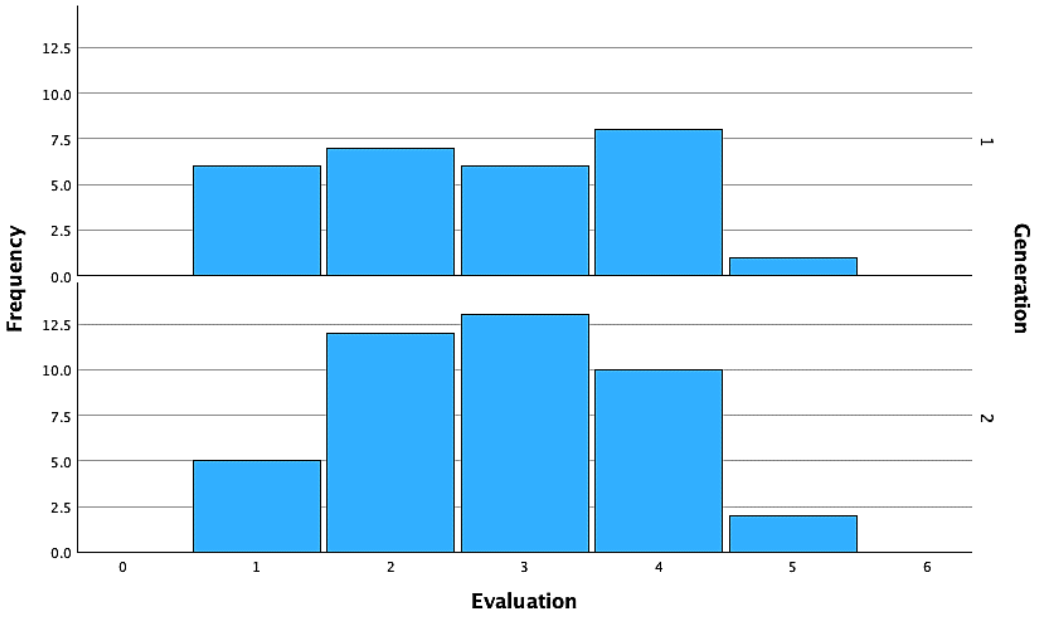

Figure 1. Evaluation of cooperation between generations.

Source: Authors' own study based on IBM SPSS output.

It should be noted that the distribution of ratings in both respondent groups is similar - the median is 3, and the middle 50% of values fall within the range of 2 to 4. In both cases, the full range of the response scale (from 1 to 5) is observed, with no outliers, which indicates the comparable nature of the distributions. In order to empirically verify hypothesis H2, further statistical procedures were conducted. The collected data were analysed using the Mann-Whitney U test for independent samples, at a significance level of $\alpha = 0.05$. The detailed results are presented below.

Table 1.
Mann-Whitney U test results for hypothesis H2

Statistic	Value
Mann-Whitney U	554.000
Wilcoxon W	960.000
Z	-.421
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.674

Source: Authors' own study based on IBM SPSS output.

The obtained p-value of 0.674, which is higher than the adopted significance level α, indicates that there are no grounds to reject the null hypothesis. This means that there are no statistically significant differences in the evaluation of intergenerational cooperation between the younger and older generations.

A review of the literature and empirical studies provides evidence of widely held stereotypes concerning both younger and older generations. With regard to cooperation, it is often assumed that the younger generation is characterised by individualism, self-centredness, and a lower level of respect towards older employees (Błaszczak, 2025). In contrast, the older generation is perceived as reluctant to share knowledge and as hindering the development of younger employees (Posthuma, Campion, 2009). Against this background, it was considered important, in the author's view, to examine whether the willingness to engage in intergenerational cooperation is related to respondents' age group. To realize this aim, hypothesis H3 was formulated and tested using the Pearson chi-square test of independence, assuming a Type I error risk of 5% (α = 0.05). The analysis used the nominal variable "Willingness", operationalised as a dichotomous response (YES coded as "1" / NO coded as "0") provided by respondents, and the categorical variable "generation", where "1" denotes the younger generation (individuals under 50 years of age) and "2" denotes the older generation (individuals aged 50 and above). The results of the statistical test is presented below in Table 2 and the cross-tabulation of age group and willingness in Table 3.

Table 2.
Pearson chi-square test results for age group and willingness to engage in intergenerational cooperation

Value		df	Symptotoc signicicance (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	4.857	1	.028		
Continuity Correction	4.014	1	.045		
Likelihood Ratio	4.898	1	.027		
Fisher's Exact Test				.045	.022
Linear-by-Libear Association	4.809	1	.028		
N of Valid Cases	100				

Source: Authors' own study based on IBM SPSS output.

Table 3.
Cross-tabulation of age group and willingness to engage in intergenerational cooperation

			Younger Generation	Older Generation	Total
Willingness	**No**	**Count**	32	21	53
		Expected Count	26.5	26.5	53.0
		% within Willingness	60.4%	39.6%	100.0%
		% within Generation	64.0%	42.0%	53.0%
		% of Total	32.0%	21.0%	53.0%
Willingness	**Yes**	**Count**	18	29	47
		Expected Count	23.5	23.5	47.0
		% within Willingness	38.3%	61.7%	100.0%
		% within Generation	36.0%	58.0%	47.0%
		% of Total	18.0%	29.0%	47.0%

Cont. table 3.

Total	**Count**	50	50	100
	Expected Count	50.0	50.0	100.0
	% within Willingness	50.0%	50.%	100.0%
	% within Generation	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
	% of Total	50.0%	50.0%	100.0%

Source: Authors' own study based on IBM SPSS output.

The p-value of 0.028, which is lower than the adopted significance level α, leads to the rejection of the null hypothesis. This indicates a statistically significant difference between age groups in terms of willingness to cooperate with the opposite age group. Based on the cross-tabulation data from Table 4, it can be concluded that such willingness was reported more frequently by the older generation. These findings, obtained from a sample selected according to the criteria specified in the article, therefore do not confirm the commonly held stereotype concerning older individuals.

The findings prompted the researcher to examine whether intergenerational cooperation in the workplace is perceived as equally important by employees representing different age groups, namely those under and over 50 years of age. This question formed the basis for research hypothesis H4. Its verification using a statistical test required the formulation of a null hypothesis (H0) and an alternative hypothesis (H1), as follows:

H0: There is no statistically significant difference in the assessment of the importance of intergenerational cooperation between the younger and older generations.

H1: There is a statistically significant difference in the assessment of the importance of intergenerational cooperation between the younger and older generations.

Respondents were asked to assess the importance of the “intergenerational cooperation” resource using a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 indicates “not important at all”, 2 - “not important”, 3 - “moderately important”, 4 - “important”, and 5 - “very important”. The frequency of responses, broken down by the two generations, is presented below on the Figure 2.

The responses provided by the respondents constituted the input data for conducting the Mann-Whitney U test for independent samples, at a significance level of $\alpha = 0.05$. The detailed results are presented in table 4.

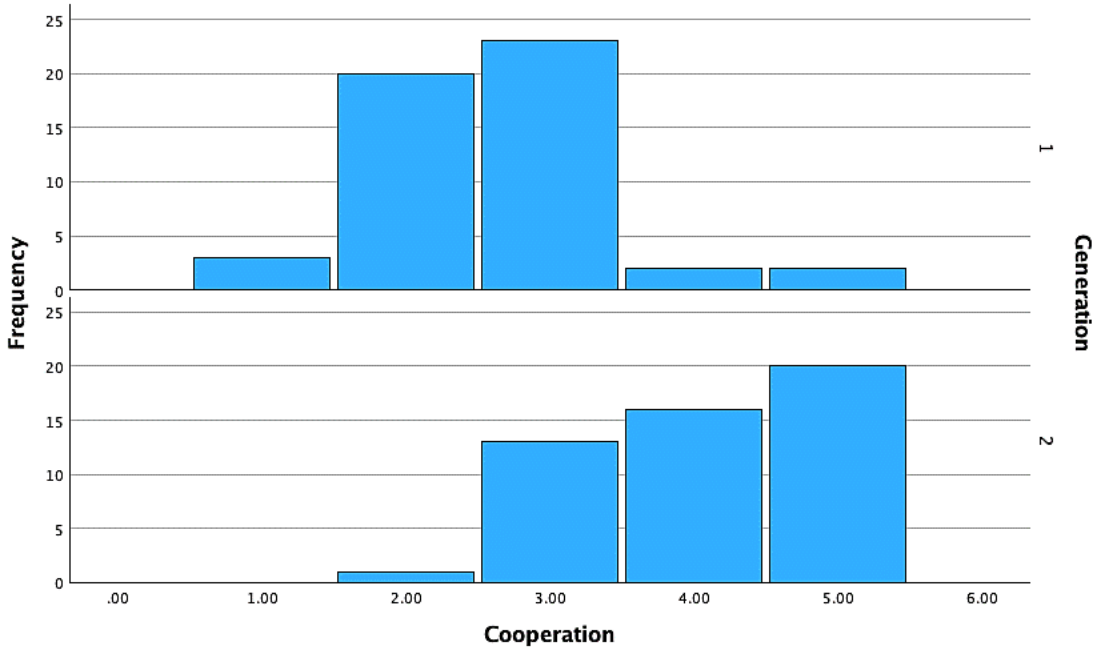

Figure 2. Assessment of the "intergenerational cooperation" resource.

Source: Authors' own study based on IBM SPSS output.

Table 4.
Mann-Whitney U test results for hypothesis H4

Statistic	Value
Mann-Whitney U	306.500
Wilcoxon W	1581.500
Z	-6.753
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001

Source: Authors' own study based on IBM SPSS output.

The obtained p-value of less than 0.001 (i.e., lower than the adopted significance level α) leads to the rejection of the null hypothesis. This indicates that there are statistically significant differences in the assessment of the importance of the "intergenerational cooperation" resource in professional work between the younger and older generations. Moreover, considering the higher mean rank in the group of older respondents (mean rank = 69.37), it can be concluded that individuals aged 50+ attribute greater importance to this resource. The box plot below presents the distribution of responses provided by the younger and older generations to the fourth research question.

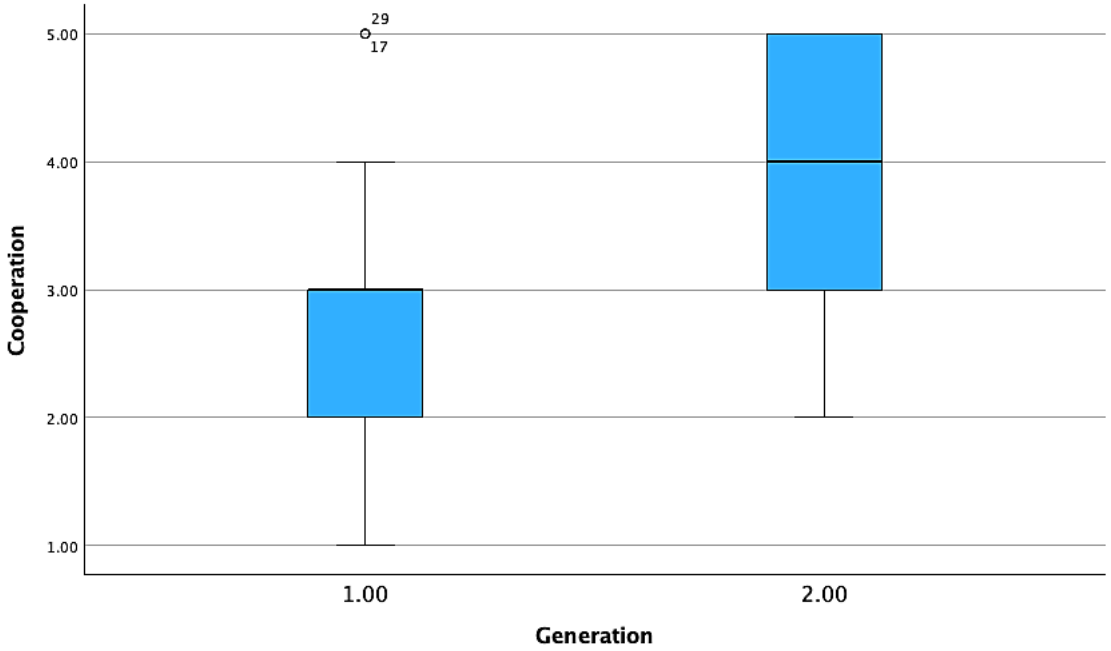

Figure 3. Distribution of responses regarding the assessment of the "intergenerational cooperation" resource.

Source: Authors' own study based on IBM SPSS output.

As can be seen from the above chart, the lowest non-outlier value is "1" in the younger generation and "2" in the older generation. No respondent from the older generation assessed "intergenerational cooperation" as the least important resource in professional work (score of "1"). Furthermore, in the younger age group, 25% of the ratings are below or equal to the first quartile, corresponding to a value of "2", while 75% of responses are above or equal to "2". In the older generation, this threshold is at the level of "3". The median in the younger group is 3, whereas in the older group it is 4. In the younger age group, the upper edge of the box (corresponding to the third quartile) is at the value of "3", which means that 75% of responses in this group are below the level of "3", interpreted as "moderately important". In contrast, in the older group, the upper whisker reaches the value of "5", which is also the highest non-outlier score. This indicates that 75% of responses in this group are less than or equal to "5", corresponding to "very important." Additionally, in the younger generation, two outliers can be observed (upper outliers), both corresponding to a score of "5".

5. Discussion

The present study provides empirical evidence on intergenerational cooperation in small and medium-sized enterprises operating under conditions of demographic change. The obtained results should be interpreted in the broader context of population ageing, declining fertility rates

and the increasing age diversity of the labour market discussed in the literature (OECD, 2020; Eurostat, 2025).

The findings indicate that intergenerational cooperation has already become a common organisational practice. More than 70% of respondents declared having worked in age-diverse teams during the previous six months. This result is optimistic, as it confirms that enterprises are increasingly adapting to demographic changes by employing representatives of different generations. As emphasised by Jurek (2012), intergenerational cooperation facilitates effective knowledge transfer, reduces competency gaps and strengthens team integration. Consequently, the present findings support the view that age-diverse teams may become an important organisational resource rather than merely a consequence of demographic processes.

An important finding of the study is that younger and older employees evaluated the quality of intergenerational cooperation in a similar manner. No statistically significant differences were identified between the analysed groups. This finding suggests that age diversity itself does not negatively affect cooperation quality. It also confirms previous observations that properly managed age diversity may improve organisational effectiveness and innovation (OECD, 2020; Kunze, Boehm, Bruch, 2013). The absence of statistically significant differences may indicate that age-diverse teams are capable of functioning effectively despite differences in experience and work styles. Therefore, the obtained results do not support stereotypes suggesting that generational diversity inevitably leads to poorer workplace relationships or conflicts (Posthuma, Campion, 2009).

However, statistically significant differences were found with regard to employees' willingness to cooperate and the perceived importance of intergenerational cooperation. Older employees demonstrated greater willingness to cooperate with younger colleagues and attached greater importance to intergenerational cooperation than younger respondents. The present findings indicate that experienced employees may constitute an important driving force behind knowledge sharing and organisational continuity. Their greater willingness to cooperate may reflect their broader professional experience and awareness of the benefits resulting from effective knowledge transfer within organisations.

The high importance attached to intergenerational cooperation among older employees may result from their own professional experience and observations of organisational functioning. Employees with longer careers are more likely to recognise the importance of knowledge transfer, mentoring and succession planning. Their attitudes may also reflect an awareness of the approaching end of their professional activity and the need to transfer accumulated experience to younger employees. In contrast, the lower evaluation observed among younger respondents may stem from their more limited professional experience, different expectations towards work, and persisting stereotypes concerning older workers (Posthuma, Campion, 2009). At the early stages of their careers, younger employees may be less aware of the long-term organisational benefits resulting from intergenerational cooperation. Moreover, previous

studies indicate that age-related attitudes and stereotypes may influence mutual perceptions and cooperation between different generations (North, Fiske, 2015; Posthuma, Campion, 2009).

The observed differences between younger and older employees regarding the importance attached to intergenerational cooperation may also reflect differences in work expectations, communication styles and career priorities characteristic of successive generations. According to Hays Poland (2024), younger employees tend to value flexibility, digital communication and rapid professional development, whereas older employees more frequently emphasise organisational loyalty, direct interpersonal communication and the exchange of professional experience. These differences do not necessarily reduce the quality of cooperation, as confirmed by the present study, but they may influence employees' attitudes towards intergenerational collaboration and explain why older respondents attached greater importance to this form of cooperation.

The obtained findings broaden existing knowledge concerning age diversity management. While previous studies have mainly focused on the consequences of demographic ageing, age diversity and age management (OECD, 2020; Kunze et al., 2013), relatively little attention has been paid to differences in the perceptions of intergenerational cooperation between younger and older employees within Polish SMEs. The present study fills this gap by demonstrating that although both age groups evaluate the quality of cooperation similarly, they differ significantly in their willingness to cooperate and in the importance they attach to intergenerational cooperation. These findings complement previous research highlighting both the opportunities and challenges associated with demographic ageing and multigenerational workplaces (OECD, 2020; EY, 2024; World Economic Forum, 2023).

From a practical perspective, the findings indicate that organisations should consciously develop age management strategies supporting cooperation between generations. Mentoring and reverse mentoring programmes, mixed-age project teams, communication training and initiatives aimed at reducing age-related stereotypes may improve knowledge transfer, employee engagement and organisational effectiveness (OECD, 2020; EY, 2024).

Overall, the empirical findings confirmed all four research hypotheses. The study demonstrated that intergenerational cooperation is a common organisational practice, that younger and older employees evaluate the quality of cooperation similarly, and that significant differences exist between the two groups regarding their willingness to cooperate and the importance they attach to intergenerational cooperation.

The study is subject to several limitations. It was conducted exclusively among SMEs located in Poznań County and included a relatively small research sample. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted with caution and cannot be generalised to all enterprises. Future studies should include organisations representing different regions and sectors, involve larger samples and combine quantitative and qualitative research methods to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of intergenerational cooperation.

6. Summary

The study aimed to analyse intergenerational cooperation in SMEs in the context of demographic change and to identify differences between younger and older employees regarding their perception of such cooperation.

The findings confirmed that intergenerational cooperation is already a common phenomenon in the analysed organisations. More than 70% of respondents declared experience in working within age-diverse teams. Although no statistically significant differences were identified in the assessment of cooperation quality, significant differences were found regarding willingness to cooperate and the perceived importance of intergenerational cooperation. Older employees demonstrated greater openness to cooperation and attached greater importance to this form of collaboration than younger respondents.

The study contributes to the existing literature by providing empirical evidence from Polish SMEs and extending current knowledge on age diversity management. Unlike many previous studies focusing primarily on the consequences of demographic ageing, the present research demonstrates that intergenerational cooperation should be perceived not only as a challenge resulting from generational differences but also as a strategic organisational resource supporting knowledge transfer, organisational continuity and sustainable labour market development.

The practical implications of the study indicate that organisations should increasingly implement age management strategies, including mentoring and reverse mentoring programmes, mixed-age project teams and initiatives aimed at reducing age-related stereotypes. Such solutions may contribute to strengthening organisational performance, improving employee engagement and mitigating labour shortages resulting from ongoing demographic changes.

The study has certain limitations related to its regional scope and relatively small sample size. Consequently, future research should include larger and more diverse samples, organisations representing different sectors and regions, and qualitative approaches that would provide a deeper understanding of the mechanisms underlying intergenerational cooperation.

Overall, the obtained findings demonstrate that effective management of age diversity may become one of the key factors supporting organisational competitiveness and labour market stability in ageing societies.

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