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COMMUNICATION AS AN ELEMENT OF THE 4C COMPETENCIES – SELF-ASSESSMENT AMONG STUDENTS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ECONOMICS IN WROCŁAW

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Purpose: To identify the specific skills that constitute effective communication and to assess their level among a group of working students at the University of Economics who represent Generation Z.
Methodology: A questionnaire was prepared in the MS Forms application. It included demographic questions (gender, job title). Using a Likert scale, respondents were asked to self-assess their competencies. Respondents were asked to respond to the following statements: (1) I can express my thoughts clearly and precisely; (2) I adapt my communication style to the listener; (3) I listen carefully to the speaker, trying to understand them well; (4) I feel at ease presenting my ideas in a group; (5) I am able to communicate effectively in stressful or difficult situations.
Findings: An analysis of the research data has shown that students' communication skills are inadequate. The respondents rate their adaptability and listening skills most highly, whereas they find situations requiring them to speak in public and communicate under stressful conditions more challenging.
Research limitations/implications: The study was limited by a small sample size and inclusion of students from only one university. Future research should involve participants from multiple universities and compare students' self-assessments with evaluations made by their supervisors. Further studies should also examine the role of trust-building by academic staff and students' attitudes toward active learning methods in reducing fear of public speaking and improving communication styles.
Practical implications: Universities should improve lecturers' communication competencies and implement teaching methods based on realistic communication scenarios. Regular opportunities for speaking in front of groups may help students overcome psychological barriers and strengthen communication skills.
Originality/value: The originality of this study stems from a two-stage research procedure (desk research and surveys), which enabled the creation of a communication profile for working members of Generation Z. The findings are of significant value to academic teaching and human resource management, highlighting specific areas requiring support in the process of young employees' professional adaptation.
Keywords: interpersonal communication, future-ready skills, Generation Z, soft skills.
Category of the paper: Research paper.

1. Introduction

There is much talk these days about so-called ‘skills of the future’. Their importance in the changing VUCA world (volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous) is frequently highlighted, as they enable people to function effectively and adapt to new conditions, and possessing them makes it possible to pursue the jobs of the future (Pudło, 2024, p. 394). This takes on particular significance in the context of the younger generation entering the labour market, who in particular should develop and strengthen the potential of the competences perceived today as key. We assume that the competences of the future are a set of skills that will be particularly valued and needed in a rapidly changing world, especially in the context of technological development, automation, artificial intelligence, and social and climate change.

The literature presents various models of competence, the role of which is primarily to define a core set of skills that are essential for creating value and developing in a highly digitalised world. J. Lamri, (2021, p. 128) points out that among the skills comprising various competency models, four are consistently mentioned: creativity, critical thinking, communication and cooperation – the 4Cs – which, as he notes, appear to be the least computerised. They are considered crucial for achieving academic and professional success, yet they still require extensive research and empirical evidence. K. Burieva (2025, p. 34) points out that the development of 21st-century skills, and in particular the 4Cs, is now becoming a key area of focus for modern education systems worldwide.

The Generation Z cohort analysed in this publication realises that technical skills can quickly become obsolete, whilst interpersonal skills remain universally applicable. This is confirmed by research conducted by ARC Rynek i Opinia, (2024), which states that in the age of digitalisation, Gen Zers recognise that technology is not everything; as many as 49% of respondents in the youngest age group highlight the importance of soft skills, such as empathy, communication skills and the ability to work effectively in a team.

In this study, we focus on one of the components of the 4K model – communication, which should be understood as a ‘multidimensional process of sending, transmitting and receiving signals that vary in form and content’, aimed at ‘the exchange of thoughts, and the sharing of knowledge, information and ideas’. It is purposeful, complex and multi-layered (Sulyma, 2022, p. 15).

It is said that Generation Z has completely redefined the meaning of communication and interacting with others. This is a generation that never puts down its smartphone, sends countless text messages, and treats its phone like a portable computer that it uses for tweeting. Gen Zers use abbreviations in their writing, such as LOL, XD. In their actions and communication, Generation Z avoids conflict, risk, disappointment and failure. Perhaps they will retreat even further into the virtual world, fearing confrontation with real-life situations

that need to be resolved or worked through (Rogulska, 2018, p. 134), which seems to determine the need to develop communication skills within this group.

The aim is to identify the specific skills that contribute to effective communication and to assess their level among a group of working students at the University of Economics who represent Generation Z.

The specific objectives are to identify the level of:

1. The ability to express thoughts clearly and precisely.
2. The ability to adapt one's communication style to the audience and context.
3. The ability to listen actively and understand the speaker.
4. Respondents' comfort in presenting their own ideas within a group.
5. Effectiveness in communicating in stressful or difficult situations.

2. Communication skills

Effective communication is the cornerstone of building relationships within a team. Skilfully managed communication determines a team's success and satisfaction with the work carried out; it influences the development of interpersonal relationships, but also affects the effectiveness of the changes implemented. The exchange of information between employees is a key component of the process of knowledge development, both individual and collective. However, people often fail to realise that a large proportion of problems stem from a lack of communication skills (Szczęsna, 2021, p. 28).

According to J. Lamri (2021, p. 133), communication skills are becoming particularly important in the era of remote teams. The researcher identifies three fundamental communication activities: effectively conveying messages whilst being sensitive to the recipient, attentively receiving messages by eliminating distractions, and providing feedback which – as communication metadata – helps both parties avoid misunderstandings. Furthermore, the author identifies seven skills essential for effective communication: openness, empathy, creating a safe environment, a positive attitude, social adaptability, inspiring others, and motivating others. A.V. Pesha & N.V. Shramko (2020, p. 888) point out that communication skills foster learning, discovery and the sharing of ideas. Well-developed communication skills ensure the ability to act effectively in a variety of communication situations, encompassing the selection of appropriate linguistic behaviours, the ability to persuade and influence, active listening, the conscious use of non-verbal cues, and the use of foreign languages. They also encompass cross-sectoral communication, understanding of meaning, multilingualism and multiculturalism, negotiation and persuasion, and media literacy as an area combining digital and communication competences.

3. Communication within the Z generation

It is noted that communication within an organisation is often seen as a challenge or a problem, particularly when Generation Z is involved in the communication process (Drzewiecki et al., 2015, p. 123). A characteristic feature of Generation Z is their proficiency in using technology and a clear preference for digital communication tools. Growing up in a hyper-connected world, where instant messaging, social media and collaboration platforms are an integral part of everyday life, means that in group work this generation often achieves the best results when technology is seamlessly integrated into the process (Dass et al., 2021, pp. 75-76). Nowadays, widely used platforms such as Microsoft Teams enable Gen Z to communicate effectively, share documents and manage tasks. These factors, combined with a strong desire to achieve goals and maintain authenticity, influence young employees' approach to communication. This generation also has the ability to seek feedback and use it constructively to improve performance. However, they may struggle with an over-reliance on asynchronous communication, which can lead to potential delays or misunderstandings if expectations are not clearly defined (Katz et al., 2021, cited in Chuah, p. 426). In this context, A. Chomicka and co-authors (2022, p. 95) point out that feedback should be specific and substantive – this may be linked to the frequent 'liking', rating and commenting on posts on social media.

Generation Z is the first generation to grow up and socialise in an environment of constant access to the internet and social media. It is noted that members of Generation Z spend more time online than offline. Young people prefer to use technology as a medium for communication and for maintaining relationships with others. They tend to replace telephone calls with visual or text-based communication. Generation Z in Poland grew up in an era of prosperity, a capitalist economy and technological boom. They are often described as a privileged generation who had an easier entry into the world and greater opportunities. It is suggested that this has directly influenced the development of their communication skills and preferences (Sulyma, 2022, p. 21).

4. Methods

The survey was conducted amongst students at the University of Economics. A prerequisite for participation in the survey was being in employment (including those undertaking an internship or work placement). As this was a pilot study, a convenience sample was used. The questionnaire was sent to 162 individuals (seven seminar groups) with whom the authors have direct contact during teaching sessions. Not all questionnaires were completed correctly

and comprehensively; ultimately, the analysis presented here covers 99 people. Women accounted for 62%, men for 28%. The respondents were representatives of Generation Z, born after 1997. The research was conducted in January 2025.

A survey was created using the MS Forms app, ensuring the anonymity of respondents. It included demographic questions (gender, job title). Using a Likert scale, respondents were asked to self-assess their competencies. The aim is to evaluate the specific skills that contribute to effective communication.

The specific competences assessed are described in the following statements:

- Potrafię jasno i precyzyjnie wyrażać swoje myśli (K1).
- I adapt my communication style to the listener (e.g. formal/informal) (K2).
- I listen carefully to the speaker, trying to understand them fully (K3).
- I feel at ease presenting my ideas to a group (K4).
- I am able to communicate effectively in stressful or difficult situations (K5).

Basic descriptive statistical methods were used to analyse the results, including the calculation of mean values, standard deviations and the distribution of responses.

5. Results

The respondents who took part in the survey were characterised by a high degree of optimism regarding their assessment of their communication skills. Statistical analysis indicates that the respondents (N = 99) generally rate their communication skills highly. They most frequently selected the responses ‘definitely yes’ and ‘somewhat yes’. The mean values for all variables studied range from 3.75 to 4.49 on a five-point Likert scale (see Figs. 1 and 2). It was assumed that a person choosing the ‘somewhat yes’ response expresses a positive opinion but is not entirely convinced; they are characterised by some hesitation and a lack of full confidence regarding their possession of the assessed skills.

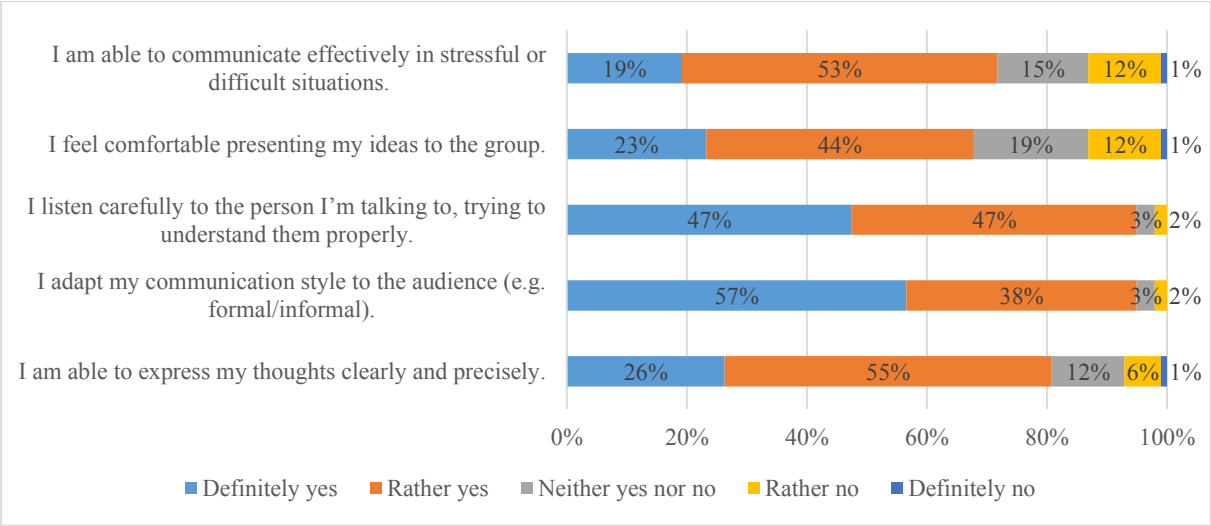


Figure 1. Assessment of individual components of communication.

Source: Compiled by the author.

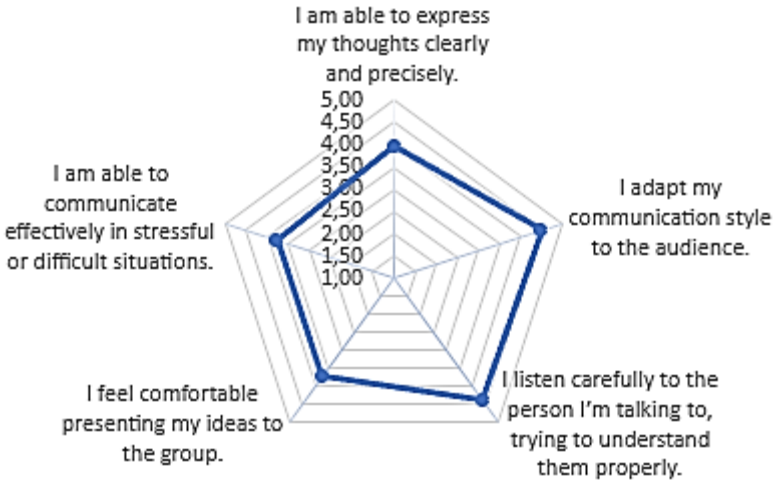


Figure 2. Competency profile of the study group in the area of communication (average for N = 99).

Source: Compiled by the author.

As can be seen in Figures 1 and 2, the highest-rated competencies include those related to:

- Adapting one's communication style to the listener (K2) (57% answered 'definitely yes'; 38% answered 'somewhat yes').
- Listening attentively and striving to understand the other person (K3) (47% answered 'definitely yes' and the same percentage answered 'somewhat yes').

It would appear that these skills can be regarded as strengths of the group under study, particularly in the context of the emphasis currently placed on teamwork, building interpersonal relationships within teams of mixed ages, and functioning effectively in a professional environment.

Slightly lower, though still high, scores were recorded for variable K1 – 'I can express my thoughts clearly and precisely' (26% answered 'definitely yes'; 55% answered 'somewhat yes').

The lowest ratings were given to skills relating to:

- The freedom to present one's own ideas within a group (K4) (23% answered 'definitely yes'; 44% answered 'somewhat yes').
- Effective communication in stressful or difficult situations (K5) (19% answered 'definitely yes'; 53% answered 'somewhat yes').

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics.

Table 1.
Communication skills – descriptive statistics

Descriptive statistics					
	K1 I can express my thoughts clearly and precisely.	K2 I adapt my communication style to the listener.	K3 I listen carefully to the speaker, trying to understand them fully.	K4 I feel at ease presenting my ideas to a group.	K5 I can communicate effectively in stressful or difficult situations.
N	99	99	99	99	99
Mean	3.99	4.49	4.40	3.75	3.77
Median	4	5	4	4	4
Standard deviation	0.851	0.660	0.653	0.962	0.935
Minimum	1	2	2	1	1
Maximum	5	5	5	5	5

Source: Compiled by the author.

As can be seen, adapting one's communication style to the audience (K2) has a median score of 5, which means that at least half of the respondents selected the highest possible response, i.e. they were fully convinced that they possessed this skill. The high mean (4.49) indicates that the vast majority of responses fell within the range of 4 'somewhat yes' and 5 'definitely yes', whilst the low standard deviation (0.660) demonstrates a high degree of consistency in the assessments within the study group. This means that this is the respondents' strongest communication competence.

The ability to listen attentively to the speaker (K3) was also rated highly. A median score of 4 indicates that the typical response from respondents was 'somewhat agree', whilst the high mean (4.40) shows that a significant proportion of respondents also selected the 'strongly agree' option. The low variation in responses (SD = 0.653) suggests that most respondents perceive this skill in a similar way, which allows it to be considered common and well-developed within the study group.

The ability to express one's thoughts clearly and precisely (K1) was rated slightly lower. An average close to 4 (3.99) indicates that respondents rate this competence fairly highly, though not as highly as the ability to listen or to adapt a message to the audience. This may suggest that some respondents do not always feel entirely confident about the clarity of their own statements, despite their generally positive self-assessment.

The lowest average scores were recorded for freely presenting one's own ideas within a group (K4) and communicating effectively in stressful or difficult situations (K5). The averages of 3.75–3.77 respectively indicate that not all respondents feel confident in these situations. Higher standard deviations mean that the responses were more varied, suggesting the existence of individual differences in coping with group presentations and communication under pressure.

6. Discussion

Our respondents indicated that they are able to express their thoughts clearly and precisely. In this regard, it is worth referring to the publication by A. Wawrzonek (2023, pp. 80-81), in which the author highlights the communication preferences of young employees. We read that members of Generation Z are far more likely to use low-context communication, which is characterised by precision, simplicity and clarity; messages are expressed and understood directly, and repetition and clarification are highly valued. In this type of communication, there is no room for 'reading between the lines', making assumptions or paying attention to nuances. At the same time, the literature on the subject also indicates that Generation Z is characterised by distinctive vocabulary, linked, amongst other things, to new technologies and the virtual world. This vocabulary is rich in neologisms (e.g. alternatywka, chajzerować, eluwina, memiczny) (Praszek, Wojtkowiak, 2020, pp. 69-70), slang (e.g. masny, normik, mamedżer) (Ramusiewicz-Osypowicz, 2021), jargon, abbreviations, loanwords, etc., which make it difficult to communicate with members of older generations (Bencsik et al., 2016, p. 101).

We also noted a high proportion of respondents agreeing with the statement "I adapt my communication style to the recipient". It is worth referring to O. Filip and N. Kaźmierczak (2025, pp. 55-57), who, in their research, highlight the importance of context, which they understand as the relationship between the sender and the recipient of a message. They point out that context is crucial for understanding messages. Respondents from Generation Z stated that taking into account the relationship between themselves and the sender, as well as knowing the sender's identity, facilitates the correct interpretation of messages. The reception of the same message sent by a peer versus an adult can differ drastically. The relationship between the sender and the recipient is also important. Generation Z is characterised by the use of abbreviations and emojis in messages, and a preference for concise communications, which, depending on the context, may be misinterpreted by members of older generations. This is illustrated by the example of the smiley face emoticon, which Generation Z perceived as cold and ironic, whilst Generations X and Y saw it as neutral or an expression of kindness. It is noted that younger generations often do not pay attention to whether their writing style is

understandable to older interlocutors, which can lead to disruptions in the communication process. The same authors studied the communication styles of different generations (including Generation Z, which is of interest to us). This research indicates that Generation Z exhibits a certain flexibility regarding the level of formality in their communication style. Young employees see no obstacles to using less formal forms, which, as the authors' research suggests, may lead to potential tensions, particularly in intergenerational teams. Furthermore, the researchers point out that Generation Z may perceive formality in the workplace as unnecessary rigidity that does not foster effective collaboration. Respondents from this group emphasised the importance of flexibility in communication. K. Chuah and colleagues (2025, pp. 427-429) also investigated preferred communication styles within Generation Z. With regard to the assertive communication style, participants demonstrated consistency in expressing their ideas, whilst respecting others and actively listening to group members. It is worth noting that the findings regarding active listening correlate with ours. Our respondents indicated that they are able to listen attentively to the speaker, striving to understand them well. K. Chuah obtained slightly lower average scores in terms of providing constructive feedback and expressing needs whilst compromising. The aggressive style proved to be used less frequently. However, participants showed a moderate degree of support for behaviours such as steering the discussion towards their own preferences or strongly emphasising their views; they also demonstrated a minimal tendency to ignore group consensus or openly criticise the ideas of their group colleagues. In the case of passive-aggressive behaviour, behaviours such as expressing dissatisfaction through sarcasm or undermining group decisions were rarely observed. The passive style revealed a clear reluctance to actively resolve conflicts. High scores on behaviours such as remaining silent during group conflicts and allowing others to make decisions revealed that Generation Z individuals prefer to avoid conflicts rather than engage in them.

Our respondents also stated that they are able to listen attentively to the person they are speaking to, striving to understand them well. H. Raslie & S. Ting, (2021, p. 10) studied the communication styles of Generation Y and Generation Z. The researchers point out that there are certain differences between the two groups regarding whether their members talk more or listen more. It turns out that both groups listened more than they spoke, but the average values indicated that Generation Z participants spoke more than they listened.

In our survey, respondents also indicated that they feel comfortable presenting their ideas in a group. Many researchers suggest that trust forms the basis of effective communication for Generation Z. A high level of trust encourages Gen Zers to build good relationships, maintain strong bonds, strive for teamwork and increase engagement in the workplace. The atmosphere and interpersonal relationships are also key values for young employees (Sulyma, 2022, p. 17), which we believe can increase the freedom to share ideas and knowledge within the team.

In his publication, J. Kutlák (2019, p. 67) points out that Generation Z prefers face-to-face communication, followed by text messages, phone calls, emails and social media. He points out that, unlike older generations, Gen Zers prefer to communicate only when necessary, and that such communication should be quick and easy. It can therefore be assumed that young people are keen to share ideas, but the effectiveness of this process depends on their expectations being met, for example, regarding the shift of communication to the online world. In this context, A. Całek (2021, pp. 105-108) points out that members of Generation Z state that they feel more comfortable when they can interact with others online. Their ability to communicate without the use of the internet is declining.

In our research, the Zetki group claimed that they were able to communicate effectively in stressful or difficult situations. Meanwhile, I. Dronia (2025, p. 116) points out that months of remote learning have had very negative consequences. We observe significantly higher levels of anxiety and alienation, as well as depressive behaviours; students find it harder to return to normal peer interactions. The problem lies in interpersonal communication and speaking freely in front of a group. Research by M. Lin and colleagues (2025, p. 2) also indicates that approximately 63% of the general population report experiencing some level of public speaking anxiety (PSA), and around 61% of college students report it as their most common fear. PSA is consistently recognised as one of the most feared situations among both students and the general public.

7. Summary

The development of 21st-century skills, and in particular the 4Cs – critical thinking, communication, collaboration and creativity – has, as Burieva (2025, p. 33) points out, now become a key focus for modern education systems worldwide.

Empirical research has revealed deficits in communication skills among the group of students analysed. The findings point to the need for a systematic strengthening of the teaching skills of academic staff, particularly in terms of adapting teaching methods to the cognitive characteristics of today's students (the requirement for concise and specific communication). It is crucial to build relationships based on trust and to select teaching methods that allow for the identification of individual communication styles. The educational process should be enriched with workshop-based activities that create realistic conditions for practising interpersonal skills and overcoming barriers associated with public speaking in front of a group.

Building communication resilience in challenging situations, e.g. using the ‘small steps’ method (practising short, ungraded statements that help participants become comfortable with public speaking without fear of the outcome); high-pressure simulations (using time-limited case studies, which allow for practising composure and logical speech under pressure); learning self-control (practising simple breathing and cognitive techniques as a standard part of preparation for a presentation).

Instead of lectures on communication, participatory and workshop-based methods should be implemented. It is essential to shift from the role of ‘evaluating expert’ to that of ‘facilitator of communication processes’, who creates a space for peer training and normalises stress as a natural part of developing 4C skills.

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