SILESIAN UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY PUBLISHING HOUSE

SCIENTIFIC PAPERS OF SILESIAN UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY 2026
ORGANIZATION AND MANAGEMENT SERIES NO. 255

THE WORK CULTURE OF GENERATION Z AND THE ISSUE OF WORK ETHICS

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Purpose: To discuss the changes currently taking place in the culture of work, which are linked to Generation Z's different values regarding work. These issues are of particular interest primarily because the choices they make seem to differ significantly from the preferences attributed to previous generations. This raises the question of whether and how this new generation will bring about a change in the way work is valued.
Design/methodology/approach: Critical analysis of literature and secondary research, which was theoretically confronted with Zygmunt Bauman's concept of liquid modernity.
Findings: An analysis of the characteristics and beliefs that define Generation Z, based on the theoretical assumptions of Zygmunt Bauman's concepts of liquid modernity and the postmodern work ethic, has shown that they are consistent. Theoretical considerations on the anticipated directions of change in thinking and attitudes in times of liquid modernity may provide a basis for interpreting the characteristics of Generation Z.
Originality/value: The issue of Generation Z's functioning in the labor market has been interpreted with reference to their own worldview, which allows us to demonstrate the consistency of their views on the value of work and their vision of a good life. In turn, reference to Zygmunt Bauman's concept allows us to understand the context of the generational change that has taken place in recent years.
Keywords: Generation Z, value of work, generational change, work ethic.
Category of the paper: Research paper.

1. Introduction

Discussions regarding the characteristics of Generation Z have intensified in recent years, a trend I attribute to the arrival of the first cohorts of this generation in the labor market (see Benitez-Marquez, Sanchez-Teba, Bermudez-Gonzalez, Nunez-Rydman, 2022). Research on the competencies, attitudes, preferences, and perceptions of the so-called "good life" among Generation Z is conducted primarily to develop effective human resource management methods within organizations. The findings of these studies are applied in planning changes to HR practices, which seems important given the need to account for the coexistence in the labor

market of three or even four generations with distinct characteristics (employee profiles) (cf. Bencsik, Horváth-Csikós, Juhász, 2016).

The discussion presented in this text addresses a broader issue—it is not so much about work-related values, but rather the value of work itself: how Generation Z ranks work within its hierarchy of existential values and how it perceives its own life in relation to its worldview. Rather than asking, therefore: what is Generation Z like and how can we effectively manage their work, we will focus on the following question: what is Generation Z like and how can it contribute to changing our thinking regarding the concept of the "good life," values, and the work ethic. Going further, we can consider the possibility of developing an approach—different from the current one—to the issue of humanity's responsibility toward the environment, one's own life, attitudes toward material goods, professional careers, and social advancement. What values will define the concept of the "good life"? Will we abandon existing indicators such as: the level of material prosperity achieved, professional success, and social advancement?

2. The work culture of Generation Z

According to the standard established by the Pew Research Center, Generation Z is defined as those born between 1997 and 2012. It is projected that by 2030, Generation Z will account for 30% of the global workforce (A-Gen-Z report, 2023). Currently, the workforce includes representatives of four generations: baby boomers, Generation X, millennials (Generation Y), and Generation Z. An important characteristic of the youngest generation in the labor market is the significant homogeneity of this social group, as noted by researchers: despite the significance of demographic, political, and cultural factors in shaping the diversity of today's youth, their impact is less pronounced compared to previous generations (Yanitskyij, Seryy, Braun, 2020; Lazar, Zbuchea, Pinzaru, 2023). This is confirmed by the results of a study conducted by Forbes Magazine on a group of 49,000 young people from various regions of the world. These findings suggest that Generation Z is the first truly global generation (Bencsik, Horváth-Csikós, Juhász, 2016).

The youngest generation is viewed in relation to earlier generations, and especially the one immediately preceding it. Comparisons of Gen Z with millennials reveal certain similarities—particularly regarding technological competence—but even in this area, those born after 1996 stand out significantly: this is the first generation for whom the digital world is a natural environment and where they spend the most time (Hysa, 2016; Bielen, Kubiczek, 2020), which may, however, negatively affect their participation in real-life social interactions (cf. Bencsik, Horváth-Csikós, Juhász, 2016). Their attitude is practical; they are more intelligent than wise, they are bold and like to take the initiative, they are more impatient than their

predecessors, but in turn they are more flexible, they are not afraid of new challenges, and they constantly need new inspiration and impetus to act (Csiszárik-Kocsír, Garia-Fodor, 2018). They are credited with entrepreneurial skills that surpass even those observed in Generation Y. At the same time, they seem to assess their prospects in the labor market more realistically (less optimistically), particularly when it comes to the possibility of long-term, secure employment with a single company. An alternative for them is the concept of a non-linear career with a flexible approach to offers of job changes and shifts in the nature of work (Maloni, Hiatt, 2019). Generation Z is driven by its own goals and chooses a career path that aligns with their interests. They are ready for frequent changes; moreover, they tend to quit a job immediately if something does not suit them. It is important to them to do meaningful work in a well-functioning team (Benitez-Marquez, Sanchez-Teba, Bermudez-Gonzalez, Nunez-Rydman, 2022; Maloni, Hiatt, 2019). They are strongly internally motivated, but they are not focused on meeting the expectations placed on them; at the same time, they accept what is offered and adapt to real-world conditions (Messyasz, 2021). Their creativity and ambition are emphasized, but so is their impatience (Graczyk-Kucharska, Erickson, 2020). Maintaining a balance between their professional and private lives is extremely important to them (cf. Lazar, Zbuchea, Pinzaru, 2023; Bencsik, Horváth-Csikós, Juhász, 2016), and at the same time, they care about maintaining consistency between the two through the ability to uphold the same values—Generation Z members seek employment where they will not experience a conflict of their held beliefs (Żarczyńska-Dobiesz, Chomątkowska, 2014).

Older workers perceive their younger colleagues as overly confident, uncommitted, and undisciplined (see Bencsik, Horváth-Csikós, Juhász, 2016). There are also doubts regarding their communication skills and ability to form social relationships (Benitez-Marquez, Sanchez-Teba, Bermudez-Gonzalez, Nunez-Rydman, 2022; Bencsik, Horváth-Csikós, Juhász, 2016). They are attributed with a desire to achieve success without effort and an inability to persevere in building a professional career step by step, as well as a lack of interest in stability, fleeing from routine in search of variety (Hysa, 2016; Graczyk-Kucharska, Erickson, 2020). When asked about the distinguishing characteristics of their own generation, members of Generation Z themselves expressed rather critical views: they described themselves as cunning, pretentious, entitled, lazy, reluctant to become independent, and lacking motivation (cf. Żarczyńska-Dobiesz, Chomątkowska, 2014; Kukla, Nowacka, 2019a). Generation Z is described as rather externally driven and reactive: it requires feedback and exhibits difficulties in making independent decisions and taking the initiative (Kwiecińska, Teneta D, 2024).

Note that the description of Generation Z presented above is interpreted through the lens of beliefs attributed to earlier generations, which, on the one hand, highlights generational differences and, on the other, gives it a negative connotation. Let’s try to neutralize this critical judgment. By setting aside our traditional beliefs about work, we can see in the description of Generation Z a common-sense approach, stemming from the realization that following traditional models of professional work is no longer possible due to profound changes in the

labor market, primarily linked to the acceleration of technological progress. For it would be irrational to value job stability in the age of "liquid modernity", when change is its defining feature. Planning and consistently pursuing a career path, building the foundations of a lasting identity, identifying with a single, clearly defined specialization—shaping one's thinking according to traditional models no longer guarantees success. It therefore seems that what is viewed critically in the context of the established practices of previous generations may, in light of contemporary circumstances, be regarded as a strategy for adaptation. Members of Generation Z are children of their time—as Messyasz (2021) writes—their micro-worlds have been shaped by the macro-structures of late-capitalist society and the economy. The anxiety of older generations regarding Generation Z's questioning of the wisdom of choosing so-called future-proof professions that guarantee job and income stability, as well as their aversion to long-term planning, is rooted in beliefs about the stability of the present and the predictability of the future. Meanwhile, the younger generation is entering adulthood amid a serious crisis of values and of social and political order that has severely shaken the foundations of the Western world. In light of the fluid nature of modernity[1], the volatility of political, economic, and social conditions, and the prevailing uncertainty, the choice of a "drifting strategy" is not a sign of immaturity or irresponsibility, but of prudence. We are witnessing an ongoing postmodern transformation of values (Yanitskyij, Seryy, Braun, 2020) or the emerging metamodernism—a cultural phenomenon resulting from rapid social changes leading to the transformation of institutions and organizations (Tirochi, 2024). It is therefore important that we be able to look at Generation Z through their own eyes—setting aside our attachment to the values recognized by previous generations, let us reflect on what constitutes the worldview-based source of their beliefs: what constitutes the source of a good life, and what is important in our lives? In other words, what remains under consideration is what we might call a philosophy of life and the positioning of work within a hierarchy of values.

3. Values at work versus the value of work. How does Generation Z rank work in its hierarchy of values?

Research on life preferences indicates that work is not as important to Generation Z as it was to their predecessors (Kukla, Nowacka, 2019a, 2019b; A-Gen-Z report, 2023). More specifically, they are less inclined to see value in work for its own sake: the importance of work in an individual's life is linked to the necessity of securing a livelihood and is therefore

[1] This concept was introduced by Zygmunt Bauman (2000) and refers to the characteristics of contemporary social reality identified by the researcher: changeability, the absence of stable social structures, and strong individualism. The result is a breakdown of continuity and the impermanence of relationships, identities, and institutions.

viewed instrumentally. They are significantly less likely to view work as an opportunity for self-fulfillment or to attribute value to it in connection with achieving social goals or building social relationships through work. In other words, work is merely work and serves to obtain financial benefits, and the relatively high importance of work is not linked to the appreciation of values such as career and professional success or social respect and recognition (Kukla, Nowacka, 2019a, 2019b). Other studies, however, show that Generation Z has high expectations regarding work: they seek meaningful work that allows them to pursue important goals and grow professionally, and they expect a flat management structure and an inclusive approach that is open to diversity (Graczyk-Kucharska, Erickson, 2020; Lazar, Zbuchea, Pinzaru, 2023). It can therefore be concluded that although work is not highly ranked in the hierarchy of values, the conditions it offers are not without significance. What may encourage Generation Z members to stay with a company is, above all, compensation and opportunities for growth (Bencsik, Horváth-Csikós, Juhász, 2016). Analyzing the above research findings, we can conclude that a consistent picture emerges of a generation that views work primarily as a means of earning an income, and considers a professional career valuable only to the extent that it facilitates personal growth. Money and material status are valued much less highly than peace of mind and harmony. They consider the social commitment of the companies they work for to be important and tend to make ethical consumer choices (Benitez-Marquez, Sanchez-Teba, Bermudez-Gonzalez, Nunez-Rydman, 2022; Bieleń, Kubiczek, Żarczyńska-Dobiesz, Chomątowska, 2014). The fact that they take jobs primarily for financial reasons does not mean that the material aspects of life are their top priority. Rather, it is about securing financial independence (self-sufficiency) and obtaining the means to pursue their own authentic goals unrelated to material possessions. This is evidenced by the fact that they have moderate salary expectations: in a study by Żarczyńska-Dobiesz and Chomątowska (2014), 75% of respondents indicated a fair wage, while 32% of respondents expected a high salary. Many academic and journalistic texts point to Generation Z's tendency to quit their jobs without hesitation (even if it is financially risky) when they perceive negative working conditions or the nature of the work, or when they feel that the company does not embrace values that are important to them (see Graczyk-Kucharska, Erickson, 2020; Csiszárik-Kocsír, Garia-Fodor, 2018).

It is essential to note an important characteristic of the worldview held by this generation: they view their lives as an integral whole that is guided by specific values—what is important in their personal lives is also important in their professional lives. Hence, such great emphasis is placed on maintaining harmony—the coherence of respected values (Bieleń, Kubiczek, 2020; Domagalska-Grędys, 2017; Żarczyńska-Dobies, Chomątkowska, 2014). The search for consistency in values and the strong integration of both areas—work and private life—reflects the need to be authentic across the entire spectrum of life: who I am, what I believe in, and what is important to me—all of this translates into the choices I make. Perhaps, then, instead of attributing negatively perceived traits to Generation Z—such as inconsistency, carefreeness, a lack of stability and loyalty, and an inability to perform routine and repetitive tasks—

we should instead recognize that they are characterized by a need to be true to themselves, to live life on their own terms, and to take actions that are purposeful and meaningful. This is the first generation whose members are strongly self-oriented, which in turn translates into reluctance to conform to the goals and methods imposed by organizations, institutions, and society. Prioritizing opportunities for growth, a better work-life balance, transparency, personalized attention, the democratization of information, and equal treatment—these are important for their own sake (A-Gen-Z report, 2023).

The answer to the question of what Generation Z is like and how they prioritize work in their hierarchy of values can be found in a report based on a survey of 10,000 young people in the United Kingdom and the United States (A-Gen-Z report, 2023). In the opening section, we find a significant statement that the report demonstrates just how much Generation Z will transform many important aspects of our lives: "Gen Z will profoundly change how we live, work, shop, invest, interact, react, stay healthy, and stay informed" (A-Gen-Z report, 2023, p. 5). It is also telling how the chapters addressing issues related to the value of work and worldview choices are titled: "Work matters, but the world matters more" and "Working to live". The titles alone indicate the significance of work for Generation Z and how vastly different this is from the beliefs of previous generations.

Above all, work is not a central focus around which their lives revolve; they reject the choices of their parents, who placed work at the center of their lives and viewed a professional career as a form of self-fulfillment. Life—according to Generation Z—should not be subordinated to work: to climbing the corporate ladder or pursuing higher-paying jobs. Work is viewed instrumentally—as a necessary means of securing one's livelihood. In this regard, members of Generation Z are pragmatic and realistic—work is meant to cover daily expenses and allow them to pursue life passions that hold greater meaning than work itself. Generation Z approaches work transactionally: they are not interested in (or at least it is not the most important thing) achieving success; for them, professional achievement metrics are not a measure of satisfaction. They do not identify with the company or their coworkers; they do not expect team-building events, joint celebrations, or perks such as relaxation areas at work: "They want to clock in and clock out, and aren't interested in small talk or fraternizing with co-workers over beers" (ibid., p. 75). They do not want to work under corporate conditions, but on their own terms; they do not want to be modern-day slaves driven by personal ambitions to achieve the highest possible material status. When accused of not being willing to work as hard as their predecessors, they respond that they are acting in accordance with their salary (ibid., p. 75).

The report also contains a very telling statement: "Boomers and Gen Xers shouldn't view Gen Zers as the enemy but rather as the enablers, since their demands for better benefits and workplace standards will be acted on broadly" (ibid., p. 81). This statement refers to the issue of developing more favorable working conditions for employees, but it is worth considering it more broadly: for it seems that Generation Z, through its uncompromising life choices,

is reviving the pre-modern view that private life and work are two spheres, of which the former is more important. A strong conviction regarding the primacy of home and family life makes them true pioneers of a genuine work-life balance, which in turn strengthens mental well-being by freeing up time for regeneration and living life in harmony with oneself.

4. Generation Z and the postmodern work ethic

Observations regarding Generation Z's work culture lead to the obvious conclusion that a shift in values is underway—a reversal of the hierarchical order regarding the importance of work in our lives. Generation Z is entering the labor market with a different vision—rejecting the traditional approach rooted in the era of industrial modernity, it is becoming an advocate for a postmodern value system.

Let us refer here to the works of Zygmunt Bauman (1994, 2006, 2018), which are so helpful in understanding this transformation. In his book "Work, Consumerism, and the New Poor", Bauman explains the scope and function of work ethic in its traditional form, as respected by the Baby Boomer and Generation X generations: the grandparents and parents of Generation Z. During the industrial era, work ethic valued work as a path to a better life, measured by increased consumption. Thus, the work ethic became linked to the belief that placed material prosperity at the top of the hierarchy of values. The desire to secure a higher material status reinforced the belief in the value of work as a path to prosperity. At the same time, especially during the period of primitive accumulation of capital, the work ethic served a controlling function—it was a tool for disciplining wage laborers into working hard and responsibly. Compliance with its moral imperatives was linked to the belief that social advancement could be achieved through one's professional career. Work was viewed as a path to higher social status and a marker of social identity and self-esteem.

The controlling functions of work ethics were concealed behind a narrative proclaiming that work is a value in itself and that working ennobles a person. The ennoblement of work also lies in the recognition that work is a contribution to the common good; it is creative in the sense that it contributes to social development (identified with increased prosperity). The nobility of work is linked to fulfilling obligations toward others—it is an expression of solidarity with others—together we work for the benefit of us all; those who do not work live at the expense of others, refuse to participate in the collective endeavor, and think only of themselves.

In the era of late/liquid modernity, the beliefs upon which the concept of work ethic was built are being undermined: above all, the focus has shifted—from the individual as a producer to the individual as a consumer. Social status is now determined by one's level of consumption, rather than by the type of work performed or one's position. It is also questionable to build identity based on professional work—long-term, systematic, and consistent career development

is not possible today, and maintaining such a belief is irrational[2]. If the present is characterized by uncertainty, fluidity, the blurring of values, instability, transience, and changeability, then the message of traditional work ethics regarding the ethos (values) of work loses its power of influence.

When reading Bauman (1994, p. 16) describing the postmodern personality, it is hard to resist the impression that he is characterizing Generation Z: "…different traits than in the past now contribute to success in life: not consistency in behavior, stubborn adherence to a predetermined goal, persistent specialization, or the accumulation of qualifications with a distinct profile—but flexibility of interests and the speed with which they change, adaptability, a willingness to learn, and the ability to forget what has already fallen out of use. […] Those who fare best are individuals whose freedom of movement is not constrained by precise specialization, who are not in the habit of focusing their attention on a single subject for too long, who do not become overly attached to the matters that need to be addressed at any given moment, and who maintain emotional distance and restraint toward whatever they are engaged in at any given moment. A truly postmodern personality is distinguished by a lack of identity". Bauman's predictions have become a reality, epitomized by Generation Z.

5. Summary

The perceived characteristics of Generation Z evoke strong emotions because we relate them to socially entrenched beliefs shared by members of previous generations. However, by shifting the interpretive framework to their own axiological perspective, we can see that Generation Z's vision of life and work constitutes a coherent set of beliefs that forms the foundation of the choices they make. Here, the youngest generation refuses to submit to the dictates of the late-capitalist market, which demands ever-greater effort to build individual and social material prosperity. Generation Z does not want to replicate the pattern of their predecessors, who, by focusing on work, put their lives on hold. They do not share their predecessors' belief in the possibility of achieving a better future through intense commitment to work. They debunk the neoliberal vision of social order and dispel the myth of self-determination through work and the importance of social status. Young people born after the world was reshaped perceive its changeability and, above all, its transience and unpredictability. The "fluid generation" in the age of "fluid modernity" proposes a reversal of the hierarchy of values: work subordinated to life, rather than life subordinated to work. Work is no longer the

[2] Bauman (1994, p. 15) writes about this as follows: "Few can count on a profession they have acquired once serving them for the rest of their lives—professions appear and disappear, and skills acquired yesterday become useless today. The practical meaning of the 'experience' accumulated in the course of one's career is also changing: competencies cannot be accumulated, and with the change in technical equipment, the disappearance of old functions and the emergence of new ones, habits already acquired become a burden rather than a ticket to further professional advancement. Jobs are not for life and are rarely long-term".

primary source of identity and meaning in life. If work is a tool for achieving life goals, then that is exactly how it should be treated. Given this, shouldn't we be grateful to Generation Z for making us realize that we have lost sight of what is most important in life?

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