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Motivating Generation Z: An intergenerational and gender-based evaluation using the 9M model

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The article aims to identify and organise the key factors that motivate Generation Z (Gen Z) workers. Generation Z enters the labour market with new expectations and preferences. A key issue for companies is to understand and explore what motivates them, as the impact of motivation on performance also affects the company's overall effectiveness.

Research Design & Methods: The article looks at the situation after COVID-19. To provide a theoretical foundation and formulate the hypotheses, we conducted a systematic literature review based on the literature on Generation Z workers' motivation post-2022, published in WoS and Scopus. Moreover, the article also presents the results of a primary study (n=747) based on the analysis of data collected from a questionnaire survey using the 9M motivation model. We identified the most important factors influencing the motivations of Generation Z workers in the workplace, while also presenting these factors in an intergenerational comparison. In addition to descriptive statistics, we analysed the data using inferential methods in the statistical software SPSS and AMOS.

Findings: According to the results of the primary survey, Gen Z workers are most motivated by appreciation and incentives, followed by working conditions (including remuneration, security, support systems) and thirdly by work-life balance (WLB). Among the motivational factors of the 9M, GEN Z exhibit a positive difference compared to previous generations only in terms of WLB, with all other factors being less motivating for them. Kruskal-Wallis H test showed significant differences between generations in the perception of motivational factors, WLB measures p=0, working conditions p=0.024, and quality of work and development p=0.032. The survey also confirmed that the motivation of men and women in Gen Z differs. Women are more motivated by all 9M factors than men, except for organisational culture, which is the least relevant element for Gen Z workers overall.

Implications & Recommendations: Properly motivating Generation Z workers is essential for improving their performance and retention. The study provides an overview of the current situation, and its findings highlight a significant issue.

Contribution & Value Added: Synthesising the literature review and comparing it with the findings of the primary survey helps clarify the motivational factors of Generation Z. The results of the systematic literature review show that there is a limited amount of relevant empirical research on the topic. The study contributes to the existing body of literature on Generation Z motivation.

Article type: research article

Keywords: GEN Z; Generation Z; motivation; work-life balance; workforce

JEL codes: M51, M54, M55

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INTRODUCTION

The best companies invest in human capital (Achmad *et al.,* 2023; Salvadorinho *et al.,* 2024), recognising that attracting, motivating, and retaining a talented, creative workforce is a key management priority for business success (Over, 2016). There is a well-established relationship between motivation and performance (Taryana *et al.,* 2023), with increased motivation leading to higher performance levels (Ryan &

Deci, 2000). Motivation, whether intrinsic or extrinsic, is a driving force rooted in human behavioural theory that sustains an individual's energy to achieve goals; with engagement mediating the relationship between motivation and performance (Nusraningrum *et al.,* 2024). Consequently, work motivation is essential to company success, as it directly influences employee performance and efficiency (Vo *et al.,* 2022). However, motivational drivers differ across generations (Mahmoud *et al.,* 2021; Naim, 2022).

The post-COVID-19 'new normal' environment forces employers to adopt new motivational strategies to retain the younger generation. Hybrid and remote working, as well as the transformation of employee expectations, significantly influence how organisations respond to emerging situations (Zoellner & Sulikova, 2022). The younger generation has developed a greater demand for flexibility and autonomy, which have become important motivational factors, as personal preferences have taken precedence over organisational commitment (Surugiu *et al.,* 2025). However, men and women may interpret the advantages of working from home differently due to varying life circumstances (*e.g.*, childcare, career). Mothers working from home may face more interruptions than men, and stress levels may increase due to the perception and conflict of roles (Hartner-Tiefenthaler *et al.,* 2022). Therefore, the transformation of working arrangements may heighten gender differences and may also give rise to new patterns. Therefore, examining intergenerational and gender differences constitutes an important and relevant topic because, amid the fundamental transformation of workplaces, these differences may either promote or hinder organisational success.

Gen Z members, who have recently entered the labour market, exhibit job preferences that differ significantly from those of previous generations. As such, effectively motivating Generation Z will become increasingly important for enhancing employer attractiveness and improving employee retention (Klages *et al.,* 2023). However, several studies emphasise the lack of surveys in the academic literature on Generation Z's work motivation and expectations (Gribanova, 2024) as well as the need for further research to better understand what drives this cohort in the workplace (Ortiz *et al.,* 2020; Salvadorinho *et al.,* 2024). Moreover, much of the existing data was drawn from student populations with limited or no significant work experience (Barhate & Dirani, 2022).

The article aims to explore and systematise the factors that promote the motivation of Generation Z employees. To achieve this, we first conducted a systematic literature review, summarising the findings of previous studies published after 2022 on Generation Z's motivation in the workplace, using the Web of Science (WoS) and Scopus databases. This was followed by a quantitative questionnaire survey – based on the 9M motivational theory and covering all four generations currently present in the labour market – to allow for intergenerational comparison. A prerequisite for completing the questionnaire was that respondents had to be in active employment and have been working at their current workplace for at least three months.

We also sought to address the following research questions: Are financial incentives and remuneration indeed the most important motivational factors for Generation Z? Are work-life balance (WLB) initiatives more motivating for Generation Z than for previous generations? Are there differences in work motivation between men and women?

The study refines the understanding of extrinsic and intrinsic motivational factors related to Generation Z by examining intergenerational and gender differences. This is of both theoretical and practical interest in the current labour market, as it may support the development of HR policies and inform management decisions.

We interpret the concept of motivation at two levels. On the one hand, in a psychological sense, we treat it as a latent construct, i.e., an individual's internal driving force underlying work behaviour (Deci & Ryan, 2000). On the other hand, in the primary survey of our study, we understand it as a directly observable variable, namely as a motivational factor (an observable proxy indicator, *e.g.*, working conditions, work-life balance), measured using the 9M questionnaire, which captures the needs to live, grow, and relate as empirically measurable dimensions. The latter refers to the measurable dimensions of the motivational structure as 'motivational factors,' while the former addresses its psychological foundations as 'individual motivation.'

Following an introduction to the 9M model, the next chapter of the study conceptualises the notion of generation, presents the main characteristics of Generation Z, and provides a systematic

review of the literature on their work motivation. After outlining the methodology and the research sample, the study discusses the results of the quantitative survey based on the 9M model, presents and discusses the results of the qualitative survey based on the 9M model, and offers practical recommendations. Finally, the article concludes by summarising the key findings, suggesting future research directions, and identifying the study limitations.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

The 9M Model

The 9M model, which forms the theoretical background of the preliminary survey, is one of the modern content theories of motivation. Content theories of motivation focus on the underlying reasons for behaviour; they examine what employees need and by what means they can be motivated. Content theories include Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943), Herzberg's two-factor model (1987), McClelland's (1961) theory of affiliation-achievement-power, and Ryan and Deci's (2000) self-determination theory (SDT). Maslow's theory centres on an individual's psychological needs, arguing that human behaviour is driven by a hierarchy of needs (physiological, safety, social, esteem and self-actualisation). According to Herzberg (1987), motivators (intrinsic motivation, *i.e.*, achievement, recognition, the work itself, opportunities for advancement, personal growth and development) and hygiene factors (extrinsic motivation, *i.e.*, relations with colleagues, company policies, physical work environment, working conditions, pay and status) have different effects on motivation: motivators increase satisfaction, while hygiene factors reduce dissatisfaction. However, the absence of dissatisfaction does not lead to motivation (Thant & Chang, 2021). McClelland (1961) argues that three dominant learned motives drive behaviour: the need for achievement, the need for power and the need for affiliation. Ryan and Deci (2000) distinguish between intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, and amotivation (the absence of motivation). Intrinsic motivation is driven by personal interest and enjoyment, whereas extrinsic motivation is oriented towards achieving outcomes or external rewards. According to the theory, the quality of human motivation depends on the extent to which the basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness are satisfied.

The 9M model places trust between the employer and the employee at its core. Developed by Mathe *et al.* (2011) (see Figure 1), the 9M model (Motivation Spectrum) is structured around three fundamental needs: to live, to grow, and to connect, each of which is associated with three organisational core factors that influence motivation.

- The LIVE dimension encompasses measures aimed at promoting work-life balance (WLB), along with working conditions such as salary, benefits, and job security. It also includes the working environment, which refers to the physical workplace, access to technological and communication tools, cleanliness, safety, ergonomics, and catering facilities.
- The GROW dimension refers to meaningful work and development opportunities, including career advancement, training, and professional growth within the organisation. It also includes recognition and incentives for behaviour that supports organisational goals, such as performance-based rewards; and the setting of clear goals and feedback, *i.e.*, specific, challenging yet achievable targets, deadlines, actions, and performance evaluations provided during and after task completion.
- The CONNECT dimension covers all workplace relationships, including those with supervisors, colleagues, and clients. It also encompasses identification with the organisation's vision and mission, as well as the culture (*i.e.*, the shared mindset and beliefs) that unite and inspire employees.

Some concepts may require further clarification. *Quality work*, *i.e.,* high-standard, well-executed work can itself be a reward for the employee, increasing feelings of self-efficacy and satisfaction (Deci & Ryan, 2000). *Incentives* can be regarded as external motivators linked to tangible or financial rewards (*e.g.*, salary increases, bonuses, benefits). By contrast, *recognition* is a socio-psychological construct that strengthens motivation through appreciation or verbal feedback. Although both originate from external sources, recognition primarily influences the employee's need for competence and relatedness, and therefore enhances intrinsic motivation when provided in a supportive manner (Deci & Ryan, 2000), whereas incentives target the instrumental aspect of motivation.

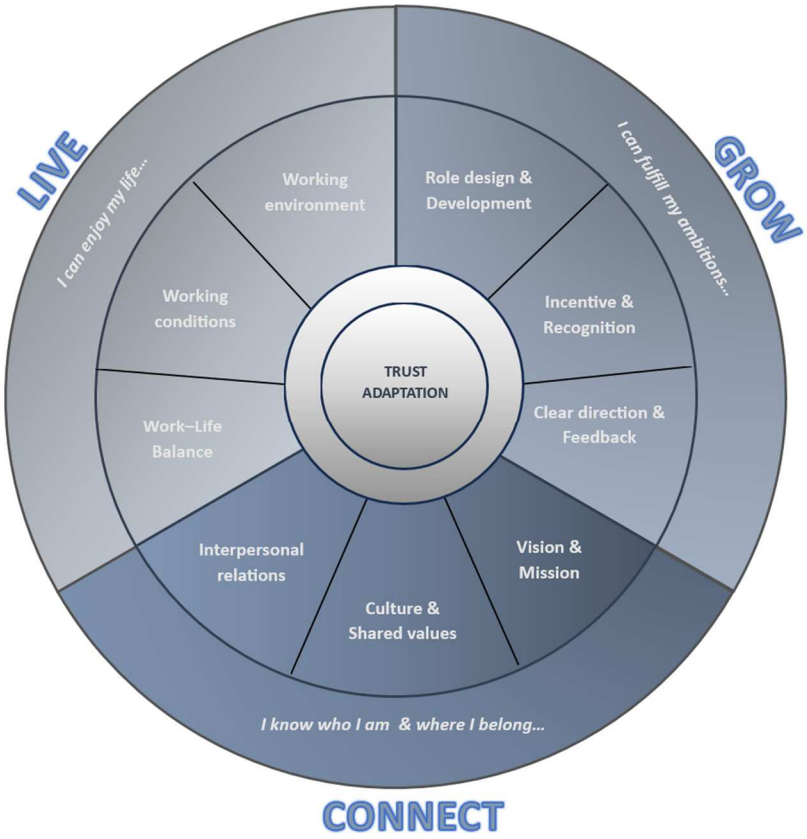

Figure 1. 9M Motivational model
Source: own elaboration based on Mathe *et al.* (2011)

The 9M motivational model is novel in that it synthesises the insights of earlier theorists and facilitates simpler organisational adaptation. It functions as a motivational mix that helps organisations design more effective and efficient motivational systems (Balogh & Nagy, 2023). In the 9M model, unlike Maslow's theory, motivation appears as a multidimensional organisational system, where motivating factors operate not hierarchically but in parallel. The model also incorporates Maslow's levels of needs, but interprets them at a systemic level (*e.g.*, Maslow's social need corresponds to the *personal relationships* dimension in the 9M model). Likewise, the 9M model includes Herzberg's motivators and hygiene factors, but it deconstructs Herzberg's duality: according to the concept, management must place strong emphasis on all nine motivational factors to achieve high motivation. McClelland's learned needs also appear within the 9M model, as the nine motivational factors are structured around three needs: *to grow*, *to connect*, and *to live*. The need *to grow* corresponds to the achievement motive, the need *to connect* to the affiliation motive, while the need *to live* – extended to include the need for safety and control – parallels the power motive. However, while McClelland treats these needs as individual motives, the 9M model positions them within the organisational framework of work conditions.

Likewise, Ryan and Deci's self-determination theory appears in the 9M model. While SDT describes from a psychological perspective how intrinsic motivation arises from the satisfaction of three basic needs (autonomy, competence and relatedness), the 9M model maps these needs to organisational dimensions. In this way, one may interpret the 9M model as a management-implementation model of SDT.

Generations

We attribute the contemporary interpretation of the generational concept to Karl Mannheim. According to the Hungarian-born sociologist, individuals born within a particular period tend to share similar characteristics, ways of thinking, attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviours, which distinguish them

from other cohorts (Mannheim, 1952). While there are variations among researchers regarding the delineation of generational boundaries, this study adopts the classification proposed by McCrindle and Wolfinger (2010). At present, the human capital present in the labour market comprises four generations: the Baby Boomers (1946-1964), Generation X (1965-1979), Generation Y (1980-1994), and the youngest, Generation Z (1995-2009). Notably, we should not see generational boundaries as rigid distinctions but rather as indicative guidelines (PRC, 2015); useful for categorising cohorts and conducting behavioural and attitudinal analyses (Mahmoud, 2021).

In what follows, the study focuses specifically on Generation Z, both in the presentation of the theoretical framework and throughout the analyses.

Key Labour Market Characteristics of Generation Z

Members of Generation Z were born into the digital age (Rachmatdianto *et al.,* 2023), so they bring advanced technological expertise with them as they enter the labour market (Bhore & Tapas, 2023). They utilise digital technologies and social networks (Magano *et al.,* 2020) for both information gathering and communication. Social media platforms influence not only employer attractiveness but also the Generation Z candidates' application intentions (El-Menawy & Saleh, 2023). When seeking information about an organisation's culture and the employment conditions, Generation Z tend to rely on independent sources (Ling & Lew, 2024).

The online world connects and globalises this generation. They are capable of performing a wide range of tasks (Rosdiana, 2020), which can be an advantage in the workplace.

Their attitude towards work differs significantly from that of previous cohorts (Grigore & Elbers, 2023), and they exhibit unique work values and behaviours (Chillakuri, 2020). Their expectations are high, and they are often difficult to motivate (Kozák & Pózner, 2024). Generation Z tends to be more impatient, not only in their private lives but also in the workplace (Smolka, 2019), and they often struggle to accept criticism, which can lead to increased conflict (Bencsik *et al.,* 2016).

Higher rates of turnover are characteristic of this cohort; they frequently change jobs without strong loyalty or emotional attachment (Nieżurawska & Galaś, 2021). They generally do not plan to remain long-term with a single employer, but instead seek organisations that align with their preferences (Bucovetchi *et al.,* 2019). To retain Generation Z employees, it is essential to focus on their motivation (Barhate & Dirani, 2022); without sufficient attention to this, turnover rates are likely to rise (Shah & Asad, 2018).

In the case of intrinsic motivation, employees are significantly more likely to be motivated and perform well compared to when they are extrinsically motivated. In fact, internally motivated individuals are generally less influenced by financial incentives (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Extrinsic motivators, beyond financial rewards, include working conditions, recognition, work-life balance (WLB), and career opportunities, although some studies suggest that career development can foster intrinsic motivation (Springer, 2023).

Research findings indicate that members of Generation Z are generally more sensitive to motivational factors, and external rewards can be effective tools for encouraging them (Lašáková *et al.,* 2023). However, their intrinsic motivation contributes to their work engagement to a greater extent than is the case for the previous two generations (Mahmoud *et al.,* 2021).

Ichsan *et al.* (2021) further emphasise the importance of intrinsic motivation. They state that passion is of greater importance to Generation Z, and that they work not solely for material compensation. According to Autin *et al.* (2022), a sense of meaningful work is a decisive factor in their work motivation. While salary and professional development are also important to them, Generation Z places a higher value on work-life balance compared to earlier cohorts (Vieira *et al.,* 2024). They prefer jobs that offer flexibility in terms of both working hours and location (Minahan, 2021). Work-life balance is particularly critical, as its absence can lead to higher turnover rates (Pulevska-Ivanovska *et al.,* 2017). Generation Z prioritises their private life (Bińczycki *et al.,* 2023) and typically resists working overtime. They do not want to make additional efforts for the sake of their managers or for their job (Baša *et al.,* 2023).

The motivation of Generation Z: A Systematic Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

The existing literature has already identified factors that can effectively motivate Generation Z. However, a systematic synthesis and thematic summary of these findings offers a more objective understanding of their motivational drivers. To this end, we conducted a systematic review of 19 relevant studies, drawing from the WoS and Scopus databases. We present the findings thematically: the first subsection explores studies related to the 9M motivation model, including generational and gender differences, while the second subsection highlights insights into flow experiences, autonomy, and development.

Motivational Factors and Preferences: Generational Differences

Table 1 lists the studies included in the analysis in connection with the 9M motivational model, grouped by motivational factor.

Table 1. The most important motivational factors mentioned

9M factors	Motivating factors	Bibliography
Work-Life Balance	Free time	Machova *et al.,* 2022; Jackel & Garai-Fodor; 2024; Gribanova, 2024
	WLB, flexible working hours	Baša *et al.,* 2023; Revuru & Bandaru, 2024; Ling & Lew 2024; Gribanova, 2024; Surugiu *et al.,* 2025
Working conditions	Salary	Machova *et al.,* 2022; Baša *et al.,* 2023; Jackel & Garai-Fodor, 2024; Revuru & Bandaru, 2024; Ling & Lew 2024; Gribanova, 2024; *Surugiu et al.,* 2025
Working environment	Well-being	Surugiu *et al.,* 2025
Role design & Development	Realising own vision, career	Jackel & Garai-Fodor, 2024; Ling & Lew 2024
	Sensible work	Revuru & Bandaru, 2024
	Skills development	Surugiu *et al.,* 2025,
Incentive & Recognition	Bonus	Machova *et al.,* 2022; Surugiu *et al.,* 2025
	Praise, recognition, appreciation	Machova *et al.,* 2022; Baša *et al.,* 2023; Surugiu *et al.,* 2025
Clear direction & Feedback	Feedback	Plakhotnik, 2024
Vision & Mission	–	–
Culture & Shared values	–	–
Interpersonal Relations	Good working atmosphere	Baša *et al.,* 2023

Source: own study based on systematic literature review.

In terms of preferences, among the motivational factors encouraging better performance, Jäckel and Garai-Fodor's (2024) study found that for Generation Z, the top priority is a higher salary, followed by more free time, and then the opportunity to realise their own ideas. Career advancement ranks only sixth behind a modern working environment and teamwork. These findings are supported by the results of a survey involving 2 153 Generation Z IT professionals living in EU countries, which showed that work motivation among these young specialists is primarily driven by fair remuneration and the freedom to organise their own working hours; they place greater value on freedom, fairness and tolerance than on convenience or career advancement (Gribanova, 2024).

The most recent study in the systematic literature review also confirms that salary remains the primary motivator for Generation Z, followed by other financial benefits and, in third place, flexible working arrangements (Surugiu *et al.,* 2025). Surugiu *et al.* (2025) have identified four key factors as central elements of motivational strategies: high levels of recognition, support for skill development, management recognition that increases productivity, and employee well-being.

Dwivedula (2025) emphasizes intrinsic motivation; according to his research, the nature of the work, the task, support, future opportunities, references, opportunities to gain experience, and career development are the primary factors explaining Generation Z's motivation to work. Similarly, a survey of Indian Generation Z members found that meaningful work is the top motivator, followed

by work-life balance, managerial credibility, and efforts to fine-tune gender balance – these being the most important motivational tools (Revuru & Bandaru, 2024).

However, motivators evolve (Ling & Lew, 2024). Intergenerational research indicates that financial incentives (such as salary increases and bonuses) motivate all generations, but Generation Z is particularly driven by bonuses, praise, and increased free time. Moreover, the research also revealed that they are less satisfied with job security and do not feel their knowledge and skills are being fully utilised (Machova *et al.,* 2022). Other studies indicate that, alongside higher salaries, a positive workplace atmosphere and recognition are the most motivating factors for Generation Z, who prefer to work with flexible hours in a private or medium-sized company, and they are also particularly inclined to consider employment opportunities abroad (Baša *et al.,* 2023).

Ling and Lew's (2024) intergenerational study also shows that hygiene factors (*e.g.*, salary, career opportunities) matter more to Generation Z than to previous generations. Nevertheless, workplace flexibility emerges as the most important motivational factor for this generation. Ludviga and Sluga's (2023) study identified seven value dimensions: performance, supervision, comfort, altruism, independence, excitement, and technology with the latter two being more significant for Generation Z. We could explain this by the fast-paced, technology-oriented nature of Generation Z. Plakhotnik *et al.* (2024) highlighted that, compared to previous generations, Generation Z prefers regular feedback from the workplace, while working conditions are less motivating for them.

Several studies suggest that Generation Z considers higher salaries and fair compensation as the most important financial incentives (Baša *et al.,* 2023; Jäckel & Garai-Fodor, 2024; Gribanova, 2024; Surugiu *et al.,* 2025), while also highlighting flexible working hours (Surugiu *et al.,* 2025), and the freedom to plan work schedules (Gribanova, 2024), more freetime (Jäckel & Garai-Fodor, 2024), both of which support work-life balance. Some studies even identify work-life balance as the most important motivational factor (Ling & Lew, 2024), while career progression is ranked lower in two studies (Gribanova, 2024; Jäckel & Garai-Fodor, 2024). However, it remains unclear to what extent the differences between Generation Z and previous generations manifest, or which factors employers should prioritise to effectively motivate them.

These prior empirical results support the formulation of the following research hypotheses:

H1: Generation Z is most motivated by financial incentives and fair pay, i.e., working conditions, according to the 9M model.

H2: WLB measures are more motivating for Generation Z than for previous generations.

There are also differences in motivational factors between genders: for Generation Z women, personal relationships, successful work, external recognition, and low levels of stress are the key motivators. In contrast, for men, a happy private life, stress-free living, and leisure time are the driving forces (Lašáková *et al.,* 2023). Ganguli and Padhy's (2023) study highlights the significance of gender differences: they argue that work motivation significantly impacts retaining Generation Z employees, a factor that gender can moderate.

Gender-based fine-tuning is one of the most important motivational tools (Revuru & Bandaru, 2024), yet it remains unclear what differences exist between men and women's motivation. Generation Z shows stronger intrinsic motivation compared with previous generations (Machmoud *et al.,* 2021). Therefore, it would be important to examine which motivational factors are preferred by men and women to provide insights for one of the key HR challenges: retaining Generation Z members.

This led us to the following research hypothesis:

H3: Generation Z men and women differ in their motivational drivers.

Flow Experience, Development, and Autonomy

Salvadorinho *et* al*.* (2024) identified six motivational factors related to Generation Z: autonomy, competence, affiliation, purpose, flow state, and performance. 'Flow is the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 4). 'Autonomy refers to being the perceived origin or source of one's own behaviour.' (Deci & Ryan, 2000, p. 231).

According to Berke and Balázs (2023), the flow experience is more prevalent among new entrants, individuals in lower positions, and those working remotely. However, women's experience of flow is disrupted by unexpected, new tasks, while men's flow is hindered by the stress associated with multitasking. These findings suggest that Generation Z more consciously seeks flow in the workplace, making it essential for them to have clear expectations regarding their specific tasks.

Motivation influences happiness. In turn, happiness significantly impacts performance and improves job satisfaction. Astuty *et al.* (2025) explored the mediating role of satisfaction between motivation and performance. Based on the concept of workplace happiness known as Hygge, Nieżurawska *et al.* (2023) recommend the establishment of the Chief Happiness Officer (CHO) position and the development of a 'self-managed motivation structured, multi-dimensional model.'

Examining the relationship between gamification and productivity, Tayal and Rajagopal (2024) found that gamification enhances both motivation and productivity, with autonomy acting as a key mediating factor. Autonomy is strongly linked to the intrinsic motivation of Gen Z employees, and there is also a significant relationship between intrinsic motivation and retention (Lee *et al.,* 2022). Yang *et al.* (2024) have demonstrated the positive impact of mentoring on the proactivity of new employees.

Flow experiences make individuals happier (Berke & Balázs, 2023), and happiness in turn enhances performance (Astuty *et al.,* 2025). An autonomous environment can facilitate an individual's entry into a flow state and strengthen intrinsic motivation, as external control or coercion reduces the likelihood of experiencing flow (Nakamura & Csíkszentmihályi, 2009). The nature of the work itself is also crucial for the development of flow: individuals need to be able to work autonomously and make their own decisions.

Autonomy is directly linked to the intrinsic motivation of Generation Z, which is significantly associated with retention (Lee et *al.,* 2022). Based on the reviewed studies, we may state that the experience of flow can be considered a motivational factor (Salvadorinho *et al.,* 2024) and that Generation Z actively seeks opportunities to experience flow (Berke & Balázs, 2023). The question remains how important these factors are for them, and to what extent they may enhance their performance.

These empirical findings indicated the following research hypothesis:

H4: The most crucial factors for Gen Z are those that provide a flow experience and autonomy, such as quality work and professional development.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Purpose and Background

This research aimed to identify the motivational factors of Generation Z using the 9M model. By employing an abductive research methodology — which integrates both inductive and deductive approaches — it bridges theoretical concepts with empirical data, thereby providing stronger evidence for addressing the research question (Hurley *et al.,* 2021).

As part of the deductive approach, we conducted a systematic literature review (SLR) focusing on academic sources related to the work motivation of Generation Z. These secondary data informed the development of the theoretical framework concerning Generation Z's motivation. From an inductive perspective, we conducted a primary online survey in Hungary using LimeSurvey. The survey sample included respondents from all four generational cohorts currently active in the labour market: Baby Boomers, Generation X, Generation Y, and Generation Z.

The national context may significantly influence the results interpretation and their transferability to other countries. Social norms, national values and economic conditions can affect motivational factors. Post-socialist countries, including Hungary, display high uncertainty avoidance scores according to Hofstede's cultural dimensions (Hofstede Insights, 2024). Although the economic and social changes following the political transition increased individual autonomy, distrust and risk aversion have remained more pronounced in both employer and employee behaviour than in Western European contexts, which may influence perceptions of work-life balance and other motivational factors (Bakacsi *et al.,* 2002; Hofstede Insights, 2024). Therefore, we may generalise findings primarily to the Hungarian

employee population; further validation studies would be required to confirm their applicability in other cultural environments.

Systematic Literature Review

We based the literature review on the motivation of Generation Z employees on publications found in the Web of Science (n = 48) and Scopus (n = 70) databases, covering the period from 2022 to 20 February 2025. We conducted the search using the following keywords and settings, without restrictions on document type or language:

Abstract: 'Z GEN' OR 'GEN Z' OR 'Z Generation' OR 'Generation Z'
AND Abstract: 'workforce*' OR 'workplace*' OR 'employee*'
AND Topic/Article Title, Abstract, Keywords: „motivation' OR „motivat*'

In the Web of Science database, the 'Topic' field included searches within publication titles, abstracts, and keywords. The screening and selection process followed a modified version of the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) framework, adapted for dual-database screening, as shown in Figure 2. After removing 35 duplicate records, we reviewed the abstracts of the remaining 83 sources. Of these, we deemed 20 publications relevant. However, we excluded one article due to a lack of full-text access, resulting in a final sample of 19 studies for in-depth analysis.

Identification	Documents identified via database searching in WoS (n=48)	&	Documents identified via database searching in Scopus (n=70)
	↓		↓
Screening	WoS documents after language screening (n=48)	&	Scopus documents after language screening (n=70)
		Documents after discarding duplications (n=35)	
		↓	
Eligibility	**Abstracts screened opposite to criteria (n=83)**	–	**Documents discarded as not adequately suitable (n=63)**
		↓	
Screening	**Full document source, availability screening (n=20)**	–	**Documents deemed inappropriate or unavailable (n=1)**
		↓	
Eligibility	**Main content determinded for acceptability (n=19)**	–	**Documents removed as not compatible on full reading (n=0)**
		↓	
Included		**Studies included in qualitative synthesis (n=19)**	

Figure 2. Flowchart of the screening process for the systematic literature review
Source: own elaboration based on the PRISMA framework (Page *et al*., 2021), adapted and extended to two databases.

Primary Survey Based on the 9M Model

We conducted the primary survey in 2024 using an online questionnaire created with LimeSurvey, applying the snowball sampling method. We used the snowball sampling method because an initial sample with a relatively broad and nationwide network distributed the questionnaire specifically to individuals with labour market experience. This method allowed us to reach a relatively large sample with wide geographical coverage and was aligned with our aim of exploring motivational patterns among employees working in organisations and coming from diverse backgrounds. The sample is not repre-

sentative, but the respondents came from varied groups in terms of gender, age, educational attainment, organisational size, sector and other socio-demographic characteristics (Appendix 1). The questionnaire began with an introduction outlining the study purpose, instructions for completion, and details about anonymity and the voluntary nature of participation. A prerequisite for participation was that respondents had prior work experience. To enable generational comparisons, the questionnaire included sociodemographic questions that allowed for the identification of generational cohorts. The survey also incorporated validated items based on the 9M motivation model, each accompanied by detailed explanatory notes to ensure clarity and consistency in interpretation. In total, we collected and analysed 747 valid responses (see Table 2).

Table 2. Sample characteristics

Generation				Gender*		Highest level of education**		
BB	X	Y	Z	Male	Female	Basic / Secondary	Higher (BA/BSC)	Master's / PhD
33	185	353	176	359	386	239	320	178

Note: *2 respondent did not specify their gender or chose not to answer (Gen Z is not affected), **10 respondents chose not to answer, or only had a primary school education.
Source: own study based on the research results (n = 747).

Participants responded to the 9M motivation model items using a 7-point Likert scale (polytomous), where: 1: Not motivating at all, 2: Not motivating, 3: Rather not motivating, 4: Neutral, 5: Rather motivating, 6: Motivating, 7: Fully motivating.

We analysed data using SPSS 29.0 and IBM SPSS Amos 26.0 statistical software. We tested the normality of the distribution of values using the one-sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov test. According to the null hypothesis, the sample followed a normal distribution. However, for all factors examined, the significance value was $p < 0.001$, indicating that the sample was not normally distributed. Therefore, we conducted Kruskal-Wallis H tests and Mann-Whitney U rank-sum tests to examine the relationships between the grouping variables and the questionnaire items (Field, 2018).

Due to the self-reported nature of the questionnaire data collection, we examined the potential presence of common method bias (CMB). The validity of the 9M model in a Hungarian sample was previously assessed by Balogh and Nagy (2023). We conducted a principal component analysis (PCA) on the nine elements of the model; the results showed that the structure fully reflected the original nine components, although the PCA grouped the elements differently based on the responses of the present sample. This was likely because, although most participants in Balogh and Nagy's (2023) sample (n = 121) had work experience, they were students at the time of completing the questionnaire. For this reason, in the present study, we applied a factor-analytic procedure to the items measuring the nine dimensions of the 9M model to assess its structural validity.

We verified the data suitability for factor analysis using the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure and Bartlett's test of sphericity. The KMO value exceeded 0.8 (0.887), which is considered excellent (Kaiser, 1974), and Bartlett's test produced a significant result ($p < 0.001$), confirming that the data were appropriate for factor analysis (Bartlett, 1954).

To uncover the underlying dimensions of the variables, we performed an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) using the principal component analysis (PCA) method. In Harman's single-factor test (Podsakoff *et al.,* 2003), we entered all variables into a single unrotated factor analysis. A potential CMB issue is indicated if the first factor accounts for more than 50% of the total variance.

According to the results of Harman's single-factor test, the first factor explained 52.8% of the total variance, which is close to the threshold but does not indicate substantial bias. The rotated factor structure confirmed this result, as two clearly distinct components emerged. After rotation, the first component explained only 38.9% of the variance, allowing us to conclude that no serious common method bias was present (Podsakoff *et al.,* 2003).

Based on the Varimax rotation (Kaiser, 1958) shown in the Rotated Component Matrix, seven variables associated with work-related aspects loaded on the first component, while two variables (culture and mission), reflecting organisational values and identification, loaded on the second component

(Appendix 2). Thus, we could describe the construct along two clearly distinguishable dimensions. The results suggest that the items of the 9M model did not cluster along the original three needs (to live, to grow, to relate), but rather form two more dominant factors. The motivational patterns of the examined population, therefore, exhibited a more aggregated and generic structure.

For the evaluation of model fit indices in the confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), we used the threshold values recommended by Hu and Bentler (1999), Kline (2016), Byrne (2016), and Hair *et al.* (2019). According to these guidelines, CFI, TLI and GFI values above 0.90, RMSEA below 0.08, and χ^2/df values below 5 were considered acceptable. The CFA results indicated an acceptable model fit: χ^2/df = 7.18, GFI = 0.946, AGFI = 0.906, CFI = 0.951, TLI = 0.932, NFI = 0.943, IFI = 0.951, RMSEA = 0.091 (90% CI = 0.079-0.104). Although the χ^2/df and RMSEA values deviated slightly from the ideal range, the overall fit indices indicated that the model was structurally valid and the fit could be considered adequate (CFI, TLI, GFI > 0.90). The analysis supported the empirical credibility of the study. Minor modifications (*e.g.*, correlating certain item error terms) could further improve model fit. The Hoelter index (N = 156) and AIC value (224.67) also fell within the acceptable range, indicating that the sample size was sufficient.

We employed both descriptive and inferential statistical methods to examine the relationships between variables. To determine whether statistically significant differences existed among generational cohorts, we used the Kruskal-Wallis H test, applying a significance level of 0.05.

To explore gender-based motivational differences within Generation Z, we employed the Mann-Whitney U test, along with an approximation of the Z normal distribution, also using a 0.05 significance threshold.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Intergenerational Analysis

We conducted the Kruskal-Wallis H test to assess potential differences between generational groups at the 0.05 significance level (Asymptotic Significance) regarding the evaluation of the 9M motivational factors. The test indicated statistically significant generational differences in the importance of work-life balance (p = 0.000), working conditions (p = 0.024), and the motivational factor of quality work and development (p = 0.032) (see Table 3). (df refers to degrees of freedom, calculated as the number of groups minus one).

Table 3. Intergenerational differences in 9M motivation factors

Spectrum	9M Motivation Factor	Kruskal-Wallis H	df	Asymp. Sig.
LIVE	Work-Life Balance	25.097	3	**0.000 ***
	Working conditions	9.455	3	**0.024 ***
	Working environment	7.679	3	0.053
GROW	Role design & Development	8.835	3	**0.032 ***
	Incentive & Recognition	4.248	3	0.236
	Clear direction & Feedback	1.022	3	0.796
CONNECT	Vision & Mission	3.309	3	0.346
	Culture & Shared values	4.792	3	0.188
	Interpersonal relations	5.715	3	0.126

Note: * Statistically significant at the 0.05 level.
Source: own study in SPSS (n = 747).

We measured the dependent variables using a Likert scale and treated them as interval-level variables (based on a Likert scale), enabling the calculation of mean values. As the primary objective of the study was to map and analyse the motivational preferences of Generation Z, Figure 3 presents the elements of the 9M model in the order of ratings assigned by the Generation Z sample. The columns in the figure, arranged from left to right, display the average response values for each of the four generation cohorts (Baby Boomers, Generation X, Generation Y, and Generation Z).

For Generation Z, the most motivating factor was *Incentive & Recognition* (5.95), which involves acknowledging behaviours that support organisational goals and performance-based rewards. *Work-*

ing conditions ranked second (5.90), covering remuneration, job security, and support systems. However, in comparison to Generations X and Y, *Working conditions* were relatively less motivating for Generation Z. In third place was *Work-Life Balance* (5.88), which was notably more motivating for Generation Z than for the three preceding generations.

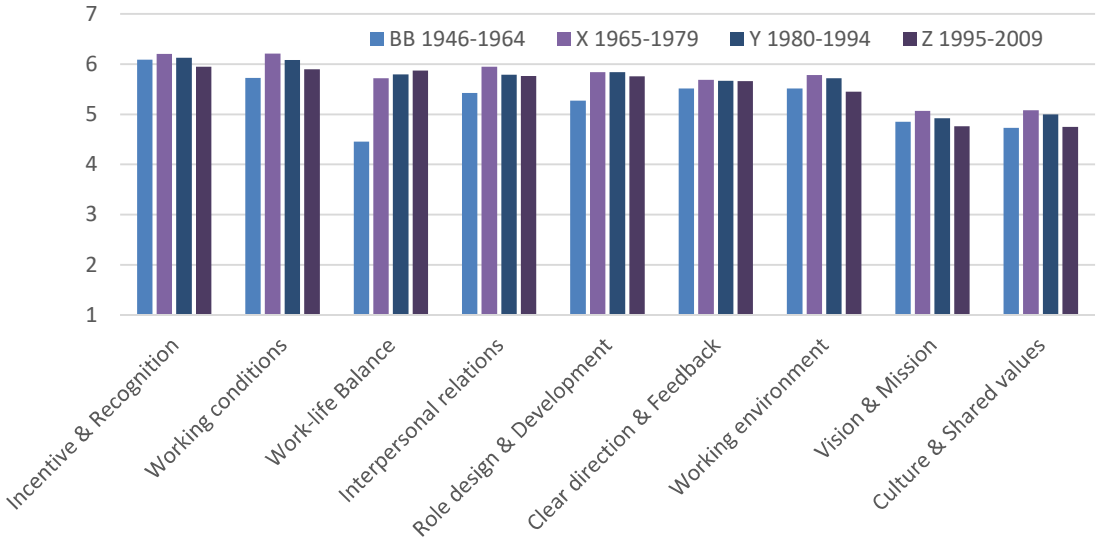

Figure 3. Intergenerational variation in 9M factors
Source: own elaboration (n = 747).

These results align with the findings of Surugiu *et al.* (2025), who identified salary, additional financial benefits, and flexible working arrangements as the three most motivational factors for Generation Z. The current study also reinforces the conclusions of Gribanova (2024), Jäckel and Garai-Fodor (2024), and Baša *et al*. (2023). Gribanova (2024) emphasised fair compensation and autonomy in work schedule planning as the key motivating factors among Generation Z. Similarly, in the 2024 survey by Jäckel and Garai-Fodor, salary ranked as the most important motivator, followed by increased free time. Baša *et al.* (2023) identified higher pay and flexible working hours as the most significant motivational factors for Generation Z. Thus, we only partially confirmed the first (H1) hypothesis stating that *Generation Z is most motivated by financial incentives and fair pay, i.e., working conditions, according to the 9M model*. It is significant, but it does not motivate them more than previous age groups.

Following *Incentive & Recognition* – the most motivating factor for Generation Z –, *Working conditions,* which include aspects such as pay, rank second. At the same time, both factors are less significant motivators for Generation Z compared with the two preceding generations, although we observed a statistically significant difference only for *Working conditions*. *WLB* ranks third.

This result contradicts several previous studies. For instance, Vieira *et al.* (2024) found that WLB is more important than salary, while Ling and Lew (2024) identified WLB as the single most important factor for Generation Z. However, the findings are consistent with those of Gribanova (2024) and Surugiu *et al.* (2025), who emphasised salary, financial benefits, and flexible work arrangements, including the autonomy to plan one's working hours, as key motivators for this generation. This suggests that although material factors remain important for Generation Z, the drivers of their motivation are shifting towards non-material needs.

Nevertheless, when examining the elements of the 9M model, it becomes evident that only *Work-life Balance* (*WLB*) is the only factor rated more highly by Generation Z than by previous generations. Therefore, we accepted the second (H2) hypothesis.

WLB refers to working practices that help individuals maintain equilibrium between their professional and personal lives. These include flexible working arrangements, adaptable schedules, autonomy in planning working hours, and extended holiday entitlement. Within the reviewed literature, WLB is explicitly addressed only in the study by Revuru and Bandaru (2024), where it is identified as a core work value highly appreciated by Generation Z.

Importantly, both financial incentives and *WLB* are considered external motivational factors (Springer, 2023). This partially supports the findings of Link and Lew (2024), who argued that Generation Z places greater importance on hygiene factors than previous generations, as a positive difference is observed only in relation to *WLB*.

Interestingly, Generation Z rated eight out of the nine motivational factors as less motivating, except *WLB*. This suggests that Generation Z may be more intrinsically motivated than prior cohorts, though this assumption requires further empirical investigation.

Among Generation Z respondents, *Interpersonal relations* (5.77) ranked fourth, while *Role design & Development* (5.76) placed fifth. Both were perceived as less motivating compared to the two preceding cohorts; however, we found a statistically significant difference only for *Role design & Development*. Based on these findings, we rejected the fourth (H4) hypothesis.

Conditions that support flow experiences and autonomy, such as quality work and development opportunities, are not the most important for Generation Z. These results contradict the conclusions of Berke and Balázs (2023), who suggested that Generation Z consciously seeks flow experiences in the workplace. In contrast, quality work and development opportunities appear to be more significant for Generations Y and X than Generation Z.

We found *Clear direction & Feedback* (5.66) to be equally motivating for Generation Z as for previous generations. By contrast, *Working environment* (5.45) and *Vision & Mission* (4.76) were among the least motivating factors for Generation Z. Notably, *Culture & Shared values* (4.75) was the least motivating factor, both in comparison to Generations X and Y and within Generation Z's own motivational profile.

Interpreting the generational and gender differences observed in the results requires careful consideration of the socio-economic context in Hungary. Generation Z entered the labour market at a time characterised by economic uncertainty, accelerated digitalisation and inflationary pressure (OECD, 2024).

Regarding hypotheses H1, H2 and H4, the results partially contradict earlier theoretical expectations. For Generation Z, external motivational factors (*e.g.*, *Incentive & Recognition*) may still play a more significant role in employee motivation than conditions supporting intrinsic motivation. This suggests that although autonomy and flow are psychologically advantageous, experiencing these states does not yet necessarily become a central source of motivation for younger employees. The emphasis on autonomy and self-realisation reported in Western European and Asian studies may be attributable to different cultural patterns.

Notably, Plakhotnik (2024) noted that Generation Z prefers regular feedback more than previous generations. Although *Incentive & Recognition* (recognition of behaviours that support organisational goals and performance-based rewards) proved to be the strongest motivational factors for the surveyed Generation Z group, based on the present findings, their motivational effect is weaker than among older generations. This may be rooted in economic, cultural and generational specificities.

Many young people face financial insecurity at the start of their careers. Therefore, external motivators such as feedback and rewards gain greater significance (Deci & Ryan, 2000). In addition, the post-COVID socio-economic context may also have reshaped young employees' priorities. Wages have not kept pace with inflation (Pózner & Kozák, 2024), and the combination of rising living costs and economic uncertainty may have elevated the importance of financial factors. This could explain why *Incentive & Recognition* and the stability and security provided by *Working conditions* (including remuneration, safety and support systems) emerged as key motivators for Generation Z.

The expectation for continuous reinforcement and immediate feedback may be a natural consequence of growing up in a digital culture characterised by instant reactions (*e.g.*, likes and emojis). In workplace environments that offer limited autonomy, appreciation and incentives may remain the primary motivation source. This aligns with self-determination theory (SDT), which states that recognition, when informational rather than controlling, can support the need for competence and thereby strengthen intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Generation Z's intrinsic motivation is stronger than that of the preceding two generations (Mahmoud *et al.,* 2021).

The importance of these factors may also be reinforced by Hungary's cultural context, which is characterised by high uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede Insights, 2024), as security is a crucial element of individual motivation (Hofstede, 2001).

Young people seek stability not through long-term loyalty but through moral and financial recognition of their performance and the security provided by *WLB*. The higher value placed on *WLB* reflects Generation Z's preference for flexible, autonomy-supportive work environments, which aligns with the importance of intrinsic motivational needs (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

For Generation Z, flexibility, adaptability to change, and readiness to start anew are common experiences, shaped not only by digitalisation but also by the economic fluctuations characteristic of recent decades. Similarly, Twenge *et al.* (2012) observed that young generations' motivational patterns adapt flexibly to economic and social conditions. Generation Z enters a labour market in which security and financial recognition have once again become central values.

In the context examined here, Generation Z employees appear to be characterised by a dual orientation towards external recognition and self-assertive security-seeking. While relying on both financial and social feedback, they also expect working conditions that ensure a balanced work-life interface and support personal development. When these needs are not met, they do not hesitate to leave the organisation. This behaviour may be reinforced by the tight Hungarian labour market, which reduces the risks of job change, and the high uncertainty avoidance may be compensated by the pursuit of roles that better meet their expectations.

Among the 9M model's motivational factors, *WLB* is the only factor rated more highly by Generation Z than by previous generations. In a previous Hungarian survey, HR professionals and executives observed positive differences in seven out of the nine factors (Kozák & Pózner, 2024), meaning they perceived them to be more motivating for Generation Z than for prior cohorts. This indicates a discrepancy between professional perceptions and the actual motivational patterns, highlighting the need for HR specialists to address this perception gap.

The analysis of generational differences shows that motivational factors carry different weights across generations. While *Incentive & Recognition* and *Working conditions* rank highest in all groups, what follows varies: for Generation Z, *WLB* is particularly salient; for Generation Y, high-quality work and development opportunities stand out; and for Generation X, personal relationships play a stronger motivational role. Except *WLB*, all factors exhibit a declining trend across generations. This suggests that younger generations' motivational structures increasingly emphasise individual well-being, autonomy and quality of life, whereas for older generations, factors linked to traditional expectations (development, personal relationships) remain more motivating. Overall, the generational motivational patterns indicate a gradual value shift in the world of work: although the need for external recognition and security remains important, younger generations are increasingly driven by intrinsic well-being, autonomy and the preservation of life quality as core sources of workplace motivation.

Gender-based Analysis

We conducted a non-parametric Mann-Whitney U test (Table 4) to examine potential gender differences within Generation Z regarding the 9M motivational factors. In this analysis, gender served as the dichotomous independent variable, while the 9M motivational factors functioned as the dependent variables. For a large number of elements, it is also recommended to look at the approximation to the normal distribution. The absolute value of a Z-score, denoted by $|Z|$ indicates the result of the approximation to the normal distribution.

We found a statistically significant difference between genders in the *Clear direction & Feedback* factor. The second largest difference appeared in *Work-life Balance* factor, although this difference was not statistically significant. Figure 4 illustrates the extent of these gender differences using average values, with a horizontal line indicating the overall mean score for the Generation Z sample.

Men and women ranked motivational factors differently. Among male respondents, *Working conditions* ranked first, followed by *Incentive & Recognition* in second place, and *Role design & Development* (which includes career opportunities) in third. In contrast, female respondents ranked *Incentive & Recognition* as the most important factor, followed by *Work-Life Balance* initiatives in second place and *Working conditions* in third. Notably, *Role design & Development* ranked only sixth among women.

Table 4. Gender difference in 9M motivation factors

Spectrum	9M Motivation Factor	Mann-Whitney U	Z	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)
LIVE	Work-Life Balance	3237.5	-1.860	0.063
	Working conditions	3830.0	-0.005	0.996
	Working environment	3277.5	-1.698	0.090
GROW	Role design & Development	3791.0	-0.126	0.900
	Incentive & Recognition	3298.0	-1.685	0.092
	Clear direction & Feedback	3102.5	**-2.254****	**0.024***
CONNECT	Vision & Mission	3676.0	-0.471	0.637
	Culture & Shared values	3621.0	-0.638	0.523
	Interpersonal relations	3538.0	-0.912	0.362

Note: * Statistically significant at the 0.05 level; **The absolute value of Z exceeds the critical value of 1.96 at the 0.05 significance level, so the difference between the two samples is considered statistically significant.
Source: own study in SPSS (n = 176).

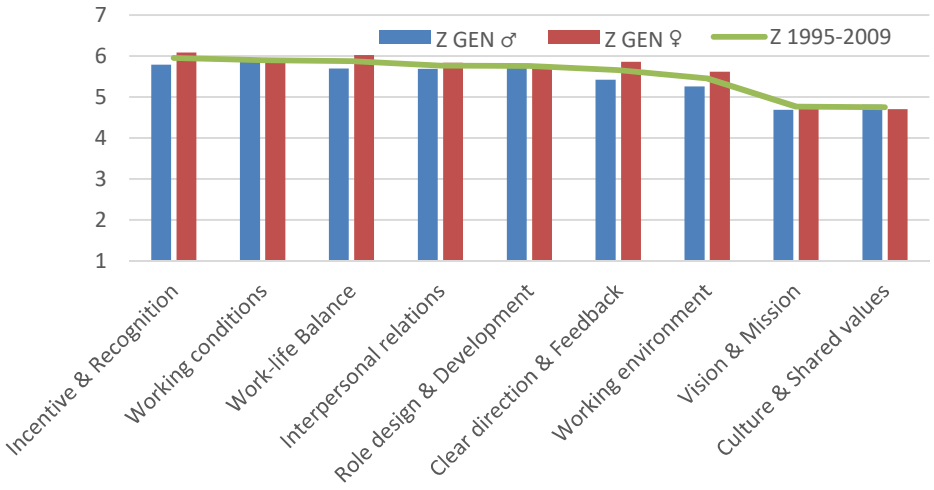

Figure 4. 9M gap between GEN Z males and females
Source: own elaboration (n=176).

This divergence is particularly noteworthy, as the results suggest that female respondents tend to be more strongly motivated across nearly all factors, except *Culture & Shared values*, which both genders ranked lowest. Therefore, we accepted the third (H3) hypothesis.

Nevertheless, it is important to highlight that *Incentive & Recognition* and *Working conditions* appeared among the top three most motivating factors for both genders, indicating some degree of commonality.

During the systematic literature review, only one study – conducted by Lašáková *et al.* (2023) – included a gender-based comparison. Their findings revealed that Generation Z men are primarily motivated by a happy personal life, a stress-free work environment, and leisure time, whereas women are more driven by interpersonal relationships, intrinsic aspects of work, variety, and recognition. In contrast, the current study found that women place greater importance on *Work-life Balance* measures, while men are more strongly motivated by *Role design & Development*.

Ganguli and Padhy (2023) emphasise the importance of gender, which can moderate the effect of work motivation on retention among Generation Z. Regarding hypothesis H3, the results of the present study confirm the existence of gender differences and highlight the importance of examining them. They also support the view of Revuru and Bandaru (2024) regarding the need to fine-tune motivational factors according to gender. However, the findings contradict the results of Lašáková *et al*. (2023), based on a Czech sample, concerning WLB and high-quality work.

Gender differences in the ranking of motivational factors reflect variations in work values and career preferences. For men, the prioritisation of *Working conditions, Incentive & Recognition*, and opportunities for development within the motivational hierarchy indicates a stronger focus on performance goals and career orientation. Meanwhile, for women, the most salient aspect is the primacy of *Incentive & Recognition* and *WLB*, reflecting a need for connection and harmony. This is consistent with the findings of Konrad *et al.* (2000), who found that women are more sensitive to positive workplace relationships.

We may partly explain the greater importance of *WLB* for women by societal expectations associated with caregiving roles and the persistence of labour market inequalities (ILO, 2024), as well as the mobility of young people, who often move away from family support networks, increasing vulnerability. Women's overall higher motivational levels may reflect stronger emotional engagement and the presence of intrinsic motivational resources (Gagné & Deci, 2005). In the case of Generation Z, organisational values and norms are primarily perceived as external conditions rather than internalised drivers of motivation.

CONCLUSIONS

Theoretical Contribution

An organisation's most valuable asset is a competent, motivated, and loyal workforce (Varga, 2021). In this context, the retention of Generation Z employees, the newest entrants to the labour market, has become crucial for long-term organisational success. As motivation plays a key role in shaping both performance and retention, understanding its underlying factors is essential for minimising turnover costs and enhancing overall organisational effectiveness.

A systematic review of international literature on Generation Z's work motivation, conducted using the WoS and Scopus databases, yielded 83 relevant studies. However, only five studies addressed employee motivation through generational comparisons (Machova *et al.,* 2022; Lee *et al.,* 2022; Baša *et al.,* 2023; Ludviga & Sluka, 2023; Plakhotnik *et al.,* 2024). This study not only contributes to the expansion of empirical literature on this topic but also helps to update the current state of research regarding motivational factors across generations. Of the four hypotheses formulated based on the literature, one was partially confirmed, two were confirmed, and one was rejected.

Our primary research, which investigated four generations, *i.e.*, Baby Boomers, Generation X, Generation Y, and Generation Z, with a focus on Generation Z, revealed the following key insights from the 9M model: The top three motivational factors for Generation Z are: (1) *Incentive & Recognition*; (2) *Working conditions*; (3) *Work-Life Balance* (WLB). These results suggest that external motivational tools are particularly influential for Generation Z. While *WLB* is not the foremost motivating factor, it is notably more important to Generation Z than to earlier generations, and features among the top three motivational drivers for women within the cohort. The study also confirmed significant gender differences in motivation among Generation Z. Women reported higher motivational ratings across eight of the nine 9M factors compared to men. This higher receptiveness to motivation could imply greater performance potential and enhanced retention among female employees. Still, consistent with the findings of Kozák and Pózner (2024), Generation Z is overall challenging to motivate, underlining the importance of targeted strategies.

As Williams (2015) emphasised, understanding generational differences is critical to managing work motivation effectively. Our study further highlights the importance of recognising gender-based differences, which remain underexplored. The differences may stem from the distinct functioning of intrinsic and extrinsic motivational mechanisms, and they also justify the development of differentiated, group-specific organisational motivation systems. At the HRM level, this means that it is advisable to design flexible and differentiated incentive and retention strategies that consider variations in the cultural and economic context as well as generational value differences.

Practical Implication

The findings of this study draw attention to a real and pressing issue regarding the motivation of Generation Z employees. While there is a notable alignment with previous research, especially in regard

to the relevance of external motivational factors, further exploration is warranted, particularly concerning the hierarchical ranking of motivational preferences. Future research should incorporate contemporary content theories of motivation, which could contribute to a more unified and theoretically grounded scientific consensus on generational differences in workplace motivation.

Drawing from both the systematic literature review and the primary survey results, it is evident that human resource management strategies must be adapted to meet the needs and preferences of Generation Z. Doing so will be essential for enhancing long-term commitment, reducing turnover costs, and leveraging the unique capabilities of this emerging workforce to strengthen organisational competitiveness.

From a practical perspective, the discrepancy between HR professionals' perceptions and the actual motivational patterns suggests that motivation systems and value propositions should be redesigned based on empirical data. It is recommended that HR conduct regular generation-focused employee focus group interviews to accurately identify and understand the real needs and expectations of younger employees. This is particularly important because, as the empirical results indicate, national cultural context also influences motivational factors.

Although fair pay remains a relevant factor, it does not occupy the top position in Generation Z's motivational hierarchy. We may attribute its heightened salience in recent years to the decline in real wages due to high inflation. In contrast, recognition and performance-based financial incentives currently play a more prominent motivational role.

Among the 9M motivational factors, *Work-life Balance* emerges as the most distinctive preference of Generation Z compared to earlier generations. Beyond contributing to a state of flow, *WLB* plays a crucial role in preventing burnout and supporting employee retention. Therefore, organisations should tailor their workplace policies accordingly, introducing measures such as:

- Flexible working hours and locations.
- A shortened workweek.
- Remote work and telecommuting options.
- Expanded paid leave entitlements.
- The reduction or elimination of mandatory overtime.

Importantly, Generation Z's efficient work style offers potential productivity gains for organisations but only if companies respect the cohort's aversion to overtime. Perceptions of excessive work demands, especially if discovered via platforms like social media, may discourage potential applicants from considering a role.

The study also reveals gender-based motivational differences. Women within Generation Z appear to be more easily motivated than men, rating eight of nine motivational factors higher. For male employees, *Working conditions* are the top motivator, followed by *Incentive & Recognition and opportunities for development*. In contrast, female employees place the highest value on *Incentive & Recognition*, followed by *Work-Life Balance*. These findings suggest that men may prioritise career advancement, whereas women place greater emphasis on personal life and holistic well-being. Consequently, motivational strategies should consider both generational and gender differences.

Given that Generation Z attributes greater importance to *WLB* than previous cohorts, it is crucial to focus on enhancing their intrinsic motivation. Approaches such as mentorship programmes can promote independence and competence, which are key to intrinsic drive. Furthermore, the introduction of a CHO, inspired by the Hygge concept, can help foster well-being, positive workplace culture, and flow experiences. This role could play a pivotal part in amplifying motivation, enhancing employee satisfaction, and boosting performance and retention among Generation Z.

From the perspective of Hungarian HR practice, the results indicate that retaining and engaging younger generations cannot rely solely on financial incentives. For Generation Z, flexible working arrangements, regular feedback, and personal recognition are at least as important as remuneration. Figure 5 summarises the key factors identified around the three needs of the 9M model that support Gen Z motivation.

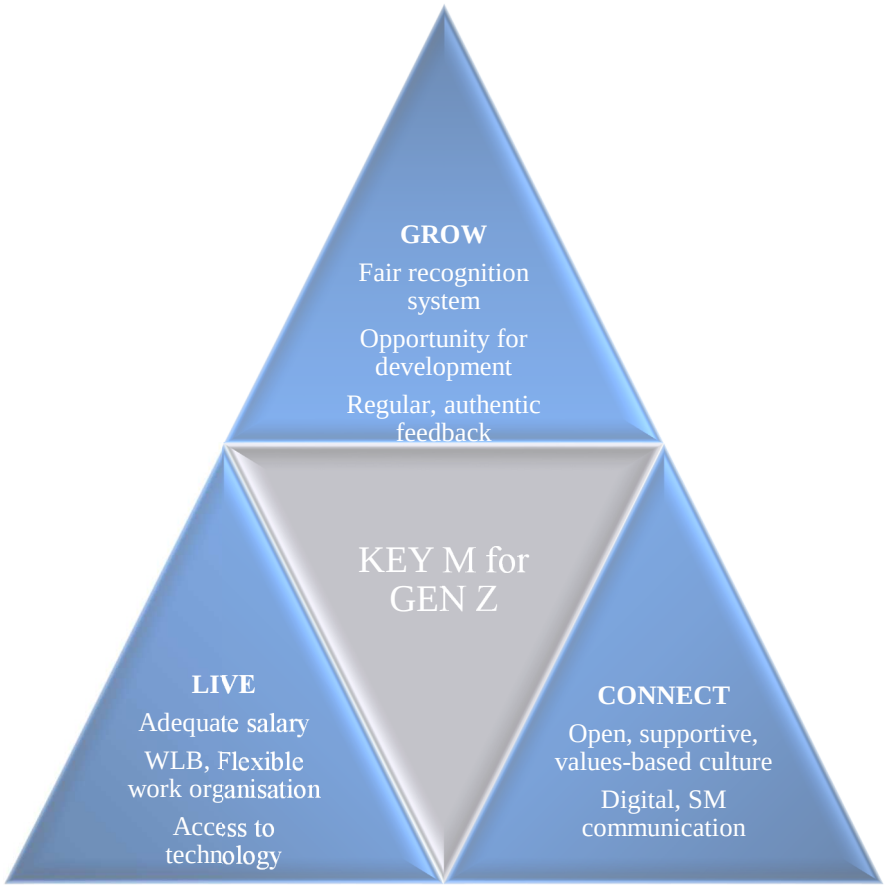

Figure 5. Key factors supporting the motivation of Generation Z employees
Source: own elaboration.

Based on the results, we may formulate several guidelines for designing HR incentive systems to sustain the motivation of younger employees:

- Performance-based, fair recognition system: Rewards acknowledging individual performance and value creation can enhance the sense of competence (Moller & Deci, 2014) and increase intrinsic motivation (Cameron *et al*., 2005).
- Flexible work arrangements: Remote work, hybrid models, and flexible schedules can support the fulfilment of autonomy and work-life balance needs (Krajčík *et al*., 2023; Surugiu *et al*., 2025).
- Provision of regular, authentic feedback: For Generation Z, prompt and constructive feedback can increase self-efficacy and a sense of competence (Bandura, 1977; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Surugiu *et al*., 2025).
- Development of organisational culture: A values-driven, open, and supportive environment can satisfy the need for relatedness (Deci *et al*., 2017), which should be aligned with the technologies used for interaction (Greiner *et al*., 2024).
- Use of digital and social communication channels: Reaching and engaging young employees requires modern, interactive tools (Schroth, 2019; Zhong *et al*., 2023).
- Integration of development and learning opportunities: Career planning, internal training, and mentoring programmes can contribute to long-term commitment (Pandita, 2022; Vieira *et al*., 2024).

Amid high turnover and labour shortages, organisations should redesign or design motivation systems that account for generational differences and, over the long term, are built on trust, recognition, and work-life balance.

Limitations and Future Research

This study is subject to several limitations that readers should acknowledge when interpreting the findings.

The study limitations include the self-reported nature of the data, the cross-sectional research design, the sample being restricted to Hungary, and the absence of control variables.

There is an inconsistency in the classification of Generation Z across the studies included in the systematic literature review. The generational boundaries used by different researchers vary, which may impact the comparability and the generalisability of conclusions regarding Generation Z's motivational preferences.

Second, the systematic literature review was limited to publications indexed in the WoS and Scopus databases. While these are highly reputable academic sources, it is possible that relevant studies published in other databases or grey literature were excluded. This limitation may have led to a partial view of the existing research landscape.

Among the 19 studies included in the final analysis, 15 were peer-reviewed journal articles classified within the Q1-Q4 quartiles. Although these contribute to a credible academic foundation, the relatively small sample size and limited number of generationally comparative studies restrict the ability to draw broad generalisations. Nonetheless, the findings offer a tentative but valuable picture of the motivational factors influencing Generation Z, which future research can further validate or refine.

As generational values and expectations are dynamic and shaped by ongoing social, political, economic, and technological developments, it is critical to continuously update our understanding of the workforce, especially as new cohorts enter the labour market.

In the current literature, several motivation models, including the 9M model, exhibit conceptual overlaps and contradictions in how we interpret motivation, motivational factors, and work-related attitudes. Therefore, future research may benefit from examining motivation within a more integrated theoretical framework.

In its present form, the 9M model essentially treats motivational factors as a universal framework, yet the findings indicate that their meaning and relative weight may vary across generations and national cultures. Thus, refining the model is warranted in order to better reflect the distinctive characteristics of different generational profiles and cultural contexts. Further development of the model could contribute to a more flexible interpretative framework, capable of responding to the continuously changing conditions of the world of work, including digitalisation, flexible forms of work, and the transformation of employee value orientations.

Future studies could refine the 9M model by subdividing its nine dimensions, allowing a deeper understanding of individual motivational factors and a more accurate exploration of generational specificities. Theoretical guidance could be strengthened if subsequent research were to apply structural modelling methods to distinguish between different levels of motivation (factors, attitudes and behaviours) and to uncover causal relationships. Such developments may contribute to the conceptual fine-tuning and international comparability of the 9M model, and support its more precise interpretation across diverse cultural and generational contexts.

Future research may also focus on cross-cultural studies to reinforce and validate the results, as well as longitudinal research that enables the exploration of causal links. Another direction could involve comparing different motivation models, which may support the development of a unified measurement tool and thereby enhance the comparability of motivational findings across countries and generations.

Future studies could examine the discrepancy between professional perceptions and employee attitudes using both quantitative and qualitative methods, for example, paired HR-employee surveys, as well as longitudinal research to explore how Generation Z's motivational preferences evolve across different stages of their careers. Furthermore, international comparisons of post-pandemic and inflationary environments could contribute to a deeper understanding of cultural specificities.

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Appendix A: Socio-demographic characteristics

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)
Gender	Male	359
	Female	386
	Prefer not to say	2
Generation	Baby Boomers (1946-1964)	33
	Generation X (1965-1979)	185
	Generation Y / Millennials (1980-1994)	353
	Generation Z (1995-2009)	176
Education	Prefer not to say	6
	Primary	4
	Secondary (A-levels / equivalent)	239
	Tertiary (Bachelor's degree)	320
	Postgraduate (Master's + PhD)	178
Total Work Experience	<1 year	16
	1-3 years	55
	3-6 years	101
	6-15 years	252
	>15 years	323

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)
Employment History	Prefer not to say	3
	First employer	116
	Second employer	162
	Third employer	161
	Fourth or subsequent employer	277
	Self-employed business owner	22
	Freelancer	6
Tenure in Current Position	Prefer not to say	4
	<1 year	122
	1-3 years	193
	3-6 years	188
	6-15 years	165
	>15 years	75
Type of Employment	Prefer not to say	5
	Full-time	674
	Part-time (<20 hrs/week)	12
	Part-time (20-39 hrs/week)	41
	Contractor / assignment-based	15
Home Office Ratio	Prefer not to say	3
	Home office <20%	140
	Hybrid 20-80%	189
	On-site >80% (incl. 100% on-site & none)	415
Position Level	Prefer not to say	8
	Blue-collar employee	80
	White-collar employee (non-manager)	408
	First-line manager	79
	Middle/senior manager	106
	Executive/top management	45
	Owner	21
Company Size	Prefer not to say	23
	Micro (1-10 employees)	72
	Small (11-49 employees)	97
	Medium (50-249 employees)	184
	Large (250+)	371
Ownership Structure	Prefer not to say	19
	Cannot assess	36
	100% Hungarian-owned	387
	100% foreign-owned	226
	Mixed ownership	79
Industry Sector	Prefer not to say	28
	Industry	355
	Services	345
	Agriculture	19
Employment Sector	Prefer not to say	38
	Public sector	141
	Non-profit sector	31
	Private/for-profit sector	537

Source: own elaboration based on the research results (n = 747).

Appendix B: Rotated Component Matrix

Rotated Component Matrix*		
	Component	
	1	2
Working conditions	0.852	
Incentive & Recognition	0.764	
Working environment	0.698	
Work-life Balance	0.692	
Role design & Development	0.663	
Interpersonal Relations	0.627	
Clear direction & Feedback	0.572	0.518
Vision & Mission		0.905
Culture & Shared values		0.894

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The contribution share of authors is equal and amounts to 50% for each of them.

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The authors used AI-assisted tools (ChatGPT) solely for language polishing and proofreading. All scientific content, interpretations, and conclusions were developed exclusively by the authors, who take full responsibility for the accuracy and integrity of the manuscript.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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