

# Understanding Gen-Z Work Ethic and Leadership Management in the Digital Age

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## ABSTRACT

This research examines serious challenges faced by the modern professional environment. The phenomena discussed include a lack of work ethics, limited appreciation for work, and insufficient professional experience among Gen Z workers, as well as leadership management challenges among Gen Y leaders. This study employs an ethnographic approach, involving direct observation and participation at PT X and NGO Y to analyze these phenomena. The findings indicate that Gen Z workers exhibit minimal work ethics and professionalism, low appreciation for their jobs, and reduced motivation and commitment. To address these challenges, this research recommends strengthening soft skills education programs, developing detailed professionalism guidelines, enhancing administrative systems, and fostering an inclusive work culture. Implementing these recommendations is expected to increase organizational productivity and create a harmonious multi-generational workplace. This research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of multi-generational dynamics and offer practical strategies for effectively managing Gen Z talent.

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## 1. Introduction

The development and innovation of digital technology have significantly transformed various aspects of life, including the workplace. The emergence of digital generations, such as Generation Y (Gen Y) and Generation Z (Gen Z), has introduced new dynamics into organizational environments. The presence of generations born and raised in the digital age has brought new behavioral patterns and perspectives to the workplace, distinct from previous generations. This research focuses on the interaction dynamics between Gen Y and Gen Z and their impact on organizational productivity.

Gen Z has grown up in a technological bubble and experienced unique cultural events, shaping their perceptions of work, motivation, and satisfaction. Meanwhile, the earlier digital generation, Gen Y, has long been the subject of research and industry focus, often carrying negative stereotypes, such as being entitled, self-centered, and disloyal (Darby & Morrell, 2019). This study aims to reveal how the interplay between these generations, both products of the digital civilization, shapes communication patterns and dynamics in the professional world.

It is predicted that Gen Z will constitute 27% of the global workforce by 2025, with an average of 17 different jobs, five career shifts, and 15 residential moves throughout their lives (McCrinkle, 2018). Today's job market is more diverse than ever, bringing together representatives of four or five different generations (Accounting Principals, 2017). Soon, Millennials and Gen Z will naturally

dominate the workforce. In Indonesia, the Central Statistics Agency (BPS) notes that nearly 10 million people aged 15–24, commonly referred to as Gen Z, are unemployed.

Digital generations possess characteristics and behaviors distinct from their predecessors. Gen Y and Gen Z, characterized by advanced digital technology, abundant information access, and fast-paced lifestyles, demonstrate unique working, communication, and interaction styles in professional environments. These generational differences present challenges in human resource management and organizational productivity.

Previous studies show that Gen Y and Gen Z possess different work ethics, values, and expectations (Bristow et al., 2021; Darby & Morrell, 2019). Both generations generally prefer flexibility, autonomy, and collaborative work environments. They reject traditional hierarchies and demand egalitarian relationships at work.

This research utilizes an ethnographic approach to explore the behaviors of Gen Y and Gen Z workers at PT X and NGO Y and how leaders manage the interactions between these generations. Understanding these dynamics can help organizations develop more effective strategies to enhance productivity and create conducive working environments for all generations.

## Literature Review

The term “generation” is used to describe factual social phenomena originating from a group of people within a specific time frame who experience significant social activities and historical movements during that period. A “generation” can also be defined as a group of people preceding a particular cohort (Kesterson, 2013).

The Baby Boomer generation (1946–1964), or Boomers, refers to those born during the early stages of domestic and international prosperity. They grew up during an era of protests, the invention of television, and the hippie movement promoting "make love, not war" (Lancaster & Stillman, 2003). This workforce is highly competitive, placing great value on job titles and corner offices. Traditionally labeled as "workaholics," Boomers exhibit unwavering loyalty to their employers and a strong correlation between work and personal identity (Alsop, 2008). Although Gen Y has surpassed this age group as the largest generation, there are notable similarities between the two, such as the national climate upon entering the workplace and their respective attitudes.

Generation X (1965–1979), shares some characteristics with their Millennial children, although they are often incorrectly associated. Members of this generation, known as "latchkey kids," were often left alone at home while their Baby Boomer parents worked long hours. As a result, this generation is known for being authoritative, independent, and even skeptical or demanding in the workplace. Gen X prioritizes family over work, with 30% struggling to balance both (Bell & Narz, 2007). They are known for entering the workforce with a strong work ethic and are unafraid to work hard for their employers, even if trust in them is not absolute.

The generation that followed Gen X is Gen Y (1980–2001), or Millennials. Born between the early 1980s and the late 1990s, they are often referred to as "digital natives." Gen Y comprises children of Baby Boomers or Gen X parents. This generation grew up during the rise of internet technology, globalization, the expansion of digital media, and widespread technological evolution, which shaped their expectations for change and broader acceptance of differences (Benckendorff & Moscardo, 2014).

Millennials have been labeled as a generation lacking experience, sweat equity, and the desire for long-term career pursuits. They are often seen as inexperienced individuals with unrealistic expectations of immediate rewards for their degrees and unearned privileges (De Hauw & De Vos, 2010). According to Ismail and Lu (2014), Millennials perceive their careers as "boundaryless, variable, and independent" rather than linear. Their high level of confidence can be interpreted as entitlement, though their upbringing instilled positive attitudes and beliefs about self-worth. Managers must understand that Millennials did not grow up in the same society as their ancestors, who believed in sentiments like "be grateful to have a job."

Generally, Gen Y strives for values such as work-life balance, enthusiasm, learning, security, and a willingness to work (Dries et al., 2008; Gayeski, 2015). Raised during a period of economic growth and technological advancement, they are the most tech-savvy, educated, affluent, and ethnically diverse generation. They are also more procedural than result-oriented (Dayan, 2005).

Furthermore, salary is less important to them than contributing to society, raising children well, and achieving a balanced life (Bisner, 2005). Gen Y needs to be challenged and motivated, is opinionated, and desires flexible work arrangements. They view companies as places of work or careers where they are customers, requiring less direction and earning money to spend rather than save (Sowa, 2006).

Generation Z or Gen Z (2001–2011) differs significantly from the aforementioned Gen Y. This generation is comfortable with diversity, technology, and online communication to stay connected with friends (Triyono, 2020). Generally, they are accustomed to living in a highly technological environment (Dolot, 2018). Gen Z is also active on social media, leveraging numerous contacts and networks to communicate daily through these channels. While in-person meetings are still important, online communication holds equal significance (Csobanka, 2016).

Gen Z seems to reevaluate the role of the workplace within the context of their personal lives rather than focusing solely on their roles within companies. Consequently, it is unsurprising that, unlike their parents or grandparents, they expect to work for four different companies throughout their careers. Moreover, Gen Z is open to constant feedback and communication (Seemiller & Grace, 2015). Their entry into the workforce is slower compared to previous generations (Twenge & Park, 2017).

In the professional world, Gen Z is indifferent to workplace stability. They frequently change jobs, seeking flexibility and avoiding routine work. They are more educated and technologically adept than previous generations (Gen X) (Hysa, 2016). A study by Adecco (2015) revealed that Gen Z prefers independent work and is reluctant to engage in teamwork or collaboration. This phenomenon may stem from Gen Z's tendency to communicate in virtual environments, using brief language that affects their listening, interpersonal, and social skills (Addor, 2011; Tulgan, 2013).

Furthermore, according to Bascha (2011), Gen Z values transparency, independence, flexibility, and personal freedom in their work ethic. These preferences are non-negotiable, and neglecting them can lead to frustration among colleagues, reduced productivity, low morale, and disengagement. Gen Z expects to be informed continually, allowed to respond, and have their responses acknowledged and appreciated.

According to Twenge (2010), there are at least five categories of values that emerge in careers or jobs across generations. These five categories are work ethic, work centrality, and leisure time; altruistic values; extrinsic versus intrinsic values; affiliation or social values; and job satisfaction and intention to leave.

**Table 1.** Categories of Values and Their Descriptions

Category	Value	Description
1	Work ethic	Work ethic refers to a set of values, attitudes, and beliefs regarding work and its meaning in life. High work ethic reflects dedication, commitment, and enthusiasm to work hard to achieve goals.
	Work centrality	Work centrality indicates the extent to which work is considered a primary or central part of a person's life. High work centrality means work is viewed as a top priority and defines identity and life purpose.
	Leisure time	Leisure time refers to time outside of formal working hours that can be used for non-work activities such as hobbies, social engagements, or family time. Balancing work and leisure is crucial for mental health and well-being.
2	Altruistic values	Altruistic values in work reflect the desire to help or benefit others or society through one's work. Examples include professions in healthcare, education, or social work.
3	Extrinsic values	Extrinsic values refer to external factors or rewards derived from work, such as salary, benefits, status, or promotion. These values are associated with the outcomes of work rather than the work itself.
	Intrinsic values	Intrinsic values refer to the satisfaction derived from the work itself, such as a sense of achievement, challenge, autonomy, or personal growth. Jobs with high intrinsic values are considered meaningful and provide inner satisfaction.
4	Affiliation or social values	Affiliation or social values reflect the importance of interpersonal relationships at work, such as having supportive colleagues, a friendly work environment, and a sense of belonging in a group.
5	Job satisfaction	Job satisfaction refers to the positive or negative attitude a person has toward their job. Factors influencing job satisfaction include salary, working conditions, relationships with

	colleagues, and opportunities for growth.
Intention to leave	Intention to leave reflects a person's desire to quit their current job and seek other opportunities. This intention can be influenced by factors such as job dissatisfaction, lack of career opportunities, or conflicts with supervisors or colleagues.

<sup>a</sup> Source: Twenge (2010),

To better understand the categories above, the following table provides real-life examples regardless of age group or generation:

**Table 2.** Examples of Values

Value	Example
<b>Work ethic</b>	A construction worker arrives early and leaves late to ensure a project is completed on time.
<b>Work centrality</b>	A startup manager spends most of their time and energy on work, even bringing work during vacations.
<b>Leisure time</b>	An international soccer player uses their leisure time to train and maintain physical fitness.
<b>Altruistic values</b>	A nurse working in a regional government hospital aims to provide care and psychological support to patients.
<b>Extrinsic values</b>	An employee at a renowned automotive company is motivated to work hard for a significant annual bonus or salary raise.
<b>Intrinsic values</b>	A government nuclear scientist is driven by curiosity and passion to discover new knowledge about nuclear technology.
<b>Affiliation or social values</b>	A creative industry employee enjoys a friendly and collaborative work environment with supportive colleagues.
<b>Job satisfaction</b>	A lawyer at a prestigious law firm feels satisfied with the challenges and growth opportunities their job provides.
<b>Intention to leave</b>	A marketing staff member at an electric car company feels dissatisfied with their salary and career prospects, prompting them to seek new employment at another company.

<sup>b</sup> Source: Twenge (2010), Bascha (2011)

## 2. Methodology

The research qualitative research using ethnographic approach. It also was conducted over three years, from 2021 to 2024, at PT X and NGO Y. The relatively long duration was chosen to enable in-depth observation of the behavior and interaction dynamics between the digital generations, Gen Y and Gen Z, in the workplace of both organizations. This timeframe allowed the researchers to witness developments and changes longitudinally.

An ethnographic approach was chosen as the appropriate methodology to explore this phenomenon. Ethnography is a qualitative method that involves participatory observation and intensive engagement within the socio-cultural environment being studied (Blomberg & Burrell, 2009; Dutta, 2016). By using ethnography, the researchers could obtain rich and holistic insights into the behaviors, values, and norms embraced by digital generations within the organizational context (Adams, 2012; Tedlock, 1991; Schensul, Schensul, & Lecompte, 1999).

The subjects of this research were PT X, operating in the communications industry, and NGO Y, which focuses on educational campaign programs. The communications industry was chosen because it is a sector that heavily employs digital generations and experiences rapid dynamics alongside technological advancements. NGO Y, on the other hand, focuses on annual programs representing flexible and challenging work environments for Gen Z.

The observed respondents included three Gen Z individuals at PT X and NGO Y, as well as one organizational leader from Gen Y or Millennials at both organizations. The Gen Z respondents were aged between 22 and 25 years, while the two leaders from the organizations were over 40 years old.

To facilitate the understanding of observational results, this research utilized the following coding system:

**Table 3.** Coding for Generations and Work Values

Value	Code
<b>Work ethic</b>	EK
<b>Work Centrality</b>	SK
<b>Leisure Time</b>	WL
<b>Altruistic Values</b>	NA

<b>Extrinsic Values</b>	NE
<b>Intrinsic Values</b>	NI
<b>Social or Affiliation Values</b>	NS
<b>Job Satisfaction</b>	KP
<b>Intention to Leave Work</b>	MN

To illustrate the coding context for the analysis below, the researchers provide the following example:

A leader chooses to leave work later than their subordinates.

EK: Gen Y > Gen X

In this study, it can be understood that the Work Ethic of Gen Y is higher, as evidenced by the example of a company leader staying later than their Gen X subordinates.

### 3. Results and Discussion

#### 3.1. Employee Behavior (Gen Z)

##### 1) *Work Ethic and Morality*

Gen Z employees at PT X and NGO Y exhibit unique work ethics and morals in a professional environment. They tend to view that there are no hierarchies or formal boundaries between leaders, colleagues, and clients. This perspective is reflected in their communication and behavior, where they treat everyone equally regardless of status or position. For example, Gen Z employees at PT X demanded the same bonuses and facilities as their leaders, without considering responsibilities or achievements. At NGO Y, they had greater freedom to set their work phases and often engaged in other jobs outside of the projects they were working on.

Such work ethic and morality reflect the digital generation's lack of understanding regarding professional norms and ethics in the workplace. They tend to underestimate hierarchies and formal boundaries that should be maintained in professional interactions. In other words, professional ethics and hierarchy are often disregarded. (EK: - Gen Z).

##### 2) *Work Productivity*

In addition to unique work ethics and morals, Gen Z employees at PT X displayed low productivity. They often missed deadlines and showed low discipline in completing their tasks and responsibilities. Their initiative to perform additional or "extra works" was minimal, often perceived as burdensome or exploitative. Similar behavior was also observed at NGO Y.

Furthermore, time management regarding office attendance, departure times, and absences was carried out at their discretion. They felt they were working hard, although their output did not necessarily reflect optimal productivity. Such behavior could hinder overall organizational efficiency and performance.

Low work productivity among Gen Z employees at PT X and NGO Y could be attributed to factors such as lack of experience, limited understanding of professional ethics, and cultural values from outside the workplace. (SK: - Gen Z)

##### 3) *Financial Management*

Another identified issue among Gen Z employees at PT X and NGO Y was poor financial management. Despite earning income, they often expressed dissatisfaction with their earnings. Consequently, they frequently purchased items that did not align with their financial conditions, such as braces, the latest phones, skincare products, and fashion items. Moreover, they were often involved in online loans, both legal and illegal, and gambling to support their consumerist lifestyles. Poor financial management behavior could lead to larger financial problems in the long term, such as debt entanglement or bankruptcy. (NE: - Gen Z)

##### 4) *Personal, Social, and Humanitarian Values*

Employees at PT X and NGO Y exhibited double standards in applying personal, social, and humanitarian values. On the one hand, they demanded their rights as employees, such as leave and fair wages. On the other hand, they often failed to fulfill their obligations, such as performing their duties and responsibilities properly.

They also displayed contradictory behavior, such as boycotting certain restaurants for specific reasons while willingly accepting invitations to dine at the same places. In their daily lives, they did not always adhere to religious or moral practices that should guide their behavior.

These double standards highlighted a gap between the normative values they held and the real behavior they displayed in the workplace and daily life. (NI: - Gen Z)

#### 5) *Non-Productive Behavior*

Gen Z employees at PT X and NGO Y also demonstrated unhealthy workplace behaviors. They often exhibited excessive self-confidence, believing they were superior even to their leaders. Despite minimal work achievements, they continuously sought recognition and praise.

Additionally, they focused more on building their reputation outside PT X and NGO Y by exaggerating their accomplishments, such as claiming to have numerous subordinates, rather than improving actual productivity. They frequently shared workplace matters on social media, including gossiping about their office, leaders, and clients.

Furthermore, they often failed to understand appropriate workplace behavior, such as dressing or grooming in ways unsuited to professional environments. Such unhealthy workplace behavior disrupted the work environment and overall organizational productivity. (MN: - Gen Z)

### 3.2. Leadership Behavior (Gen Y)

#### 1) *Egalitarian Principles*

Leaders at PT X and NGO Y managing Gen Z employees tended to adopt an egalitarian approach, emphasizing equality. They viewed their team as part of the same digital generation, fostering a relaxed and open workplace environment without strict hierarchies or formalities. By treating employees as equals, these leaders hoped to build closer relationships and create a collaborative work environment. They believed this leadership style would better understand and motivate Gen Z to deliver optimal work results. (NI: + Gen Y)

#### 2) *Work Rules*

Despite adopting an egalitarian leadership style, leaders at PT X and NGO Y often failed to establish detailed professionalism rules or regularly socialize them to employees. They tended to rely on Gen Z employees, especially recent graduates with limited experience, to naturally understand organizational rules without explicit explanations. This approach led to misunderstandings and inconsistencies in applying professionalism standards among Gen Z employees. (EK: - Gen Y)

#### 3) *Tolerance Values*

Leaders at PT X and NGO Y managing Gen Z exhibited high tolerance for rule violations and lack of discipline among employees. They avoided strict disciplinary measures, fearing they would demotivate employees. This approach reflected the leaders' belief that they understood Gen Z's characteristics best and sought to implement a leadership style tailored to this generation. (NI: + Gen Y)

#### 4) *Administrative Weaknesses*

Leaders also showed weak administrative practices in managing Gen Z employees. Work contracts were often not created at the start, only drafted after issues or demands arose. Salary slips were not provided regularly, leading to uncertainties regarding compensation.

Poor record-keeping on company finances and commitments with employees often caused misunderstandings, distrust, and conflicts between leaders and Gen Z employees. (SK: - Gen Y)

#### 5) *Recruitment and Recommendations*

Leaders at PT X and NGO Y tended to prioritize recommendations from friends or connections over professional recruitment processes. This approach risked creating exclusive and less diverse workplaces. (NS: - Gen Y)

### 3.3. Analysis

#### 1) *Limited Understanding of Soft Skills and Financial Management*

One of the factors contributing to the low productivity and suboptimal behavior of digital generations in the workplace is the lack of education in soft skills and financial management at PT X

and NGO Y. Gen Z employees often lack adequate preparation in interpersonal skills, professional ethics, time management, and personal financial management.

A lack of understanding of soft skills can make it difficult for Gen Z employees to communicate, interact, and adapt to the norms of the workplace. Meanwhile, insufficient education on financial management encourages reckless spending habits, such as engaging in online loans and gambling. This deficiency hinders their ability to adapt and establish productive behavior patterns in the workplace. (EK: Gen Y = Gen Z, NE: Gen Y < Gen Z)

#### 2) *Non-Adaptive Verbal Communication Culture*

The verbal communication culture of Gen Z employees also affects their workplace behavior. Gen Z tends to favor informal and spontaneous verbal communication, feeling more comfortable with this style rather than structured written communication.

This verbal communication culture can lead digital generations to overlook formality and politeness in professional settings. As a result, their casual communication style may disregard hierarchies or the status of their counterparts, whether it's supervisors or clients. (NS: Gen Y > Gen Z)

#### 3) *Feudal Elements in Workplace Behavior*

Although Gen Z tends to reject hierarchies and advocate for equality in the workplace at PT X and NGO Y, elements of feudalism persist in their behavior. This is reflected in their reliance on connections or recommendations from friends during recruitment, rather than professional competence and qualifications.

Similarly, Gen Y leaders demonstrate excessive tolerance, reluctance to enforce discipline, and a tendency to trust promises and commitments made by employees. Such behavior can be perceived as nepotism or favoritism based on personal connections. (NA: Gen Y = Gen Z)

#### 4) *Digital Media as a Key Influence*

One defining characteristic shaping Gen Z behavior in the workplace is their borderless digital culture. Both Gen Y and Gen Z have grown up in the digital age, enabling unrestricted access to information and global interactions. This mindset fosters a rejection of hierarchies, structures, and formal boundaries in various aspects of life, including the workplace.

The borderless nature of digital media also encourages Gen Z to express themselves freely on social media. Without considering ethical and professional boundaries, they often vent their frustrations or share workplace-related matters online, which may lead to unresolved work issues and public complaints. (WL: Gen Y > Gen Z)

#### 5) *Low Work Experience*

Another contributing factor to Gen Z's workplace behavior and productivity is their lack of experience. Most Gen Z employees at PT X and NGO Y are fresh graduates entering the professional world for the first time. Their limited exposure and involvement in previous workplace environments have resulted in insufficient understanding of workplace norms, ethics, and culture.

This lack of experience also inhibits the development of essential skills and habits needed in a professional environment, such as time management, discipline, initiative, and the ability to work under pressure. Consequently, their productivity and performance in the workplace are often suboptimal. (NE: Gen Y > Gen Z)

**Table 4.** Summary Analysis Findings

Employees (Gen Z)	Leaders (Gen Y)	Analysis
<b>Work Ethic and Morality</b>	Egalitarian Principles	Limited understanding of soft skills and financial management (EK: Gen Y = Gen Z)
<b>Work Productivity</b>	Work Rules	Non-adaptive verbal communication culture (SK: - Gen Z, EK: - Gen Y, NS: Gen Y > Gen Z)
<b>Financial Management</b>	Tolerance Values	Feudal elements in workplace behavior (NE: - Gen Z, NI: + Gen Y, NA: Gen Y = Gen Z)
<b>Personal, Social, and Humanitarian Values</b>	Administrative Weaknesses	Digital media as a key influence (NI: - Gen Z, SK: - Gen Y, WL: Gen Y > Gen Z)
<b>Non-Productive Behavior</b>	Recruitment and Recommendations	Low work experience (MN: - Gen Z, NS: - Gen Y, NE: Gen Y > Gen Z)

#### 4. Conclusion

The findings highlight the challenges posed by minimal work ethics, limited appreciation for professionalism, and lack of work experience among Gen Z employees, coupled with leadership shortcomings in Gen Y. These issues significantly impact productivity, work quality, and organizational goals.

To address the challenges faced by PT X and NGO Y in bridging generational gaps between Gen Z employees and Gen Y leaders, several strategic recommendations are proposed. First, it is crucial to strengthen soft skills education programs for Gen Z employees. These programs should focus on developing effective communication, professional ethics, time management, and financial literacy. By equipping Gen Z with these essential skills, they can adapt better to workplace demands and contribute more effectively to organizational goals.

Furthermore, Gen Y leaders are encouraged to establish detailed professionalism guidelines and ensure these are communicated regularly to their Gen Z counterparts. Clear and consistent guidelines will help eliminate misunderstandings and set expectations for workplace behavior and standards.

In addition, enhancing administrative systems is vital. This includes improving contract management, ensuring regular issuance of salary documentation, maintaining accurate financial records, and formalizing employee agreements. Such measures will not only increase transparency but also build trust between employees and management.

Creating an inclusive work culture is equally important. Organizations should foster an environment that values generational diversity, allowing collaboration and mutual understanding to flourish. Embracing multigenerational diversity has been shown to stimulate creativity, encourage knowledge sharing, and improve overall productivity (Clausing et al., 2003).

By implementing these strategies, organizations like PT X and NGO Y can bridge the generational divide, fostering a harmonious and productive work environment. Additionally, aligning Gen Z's pragmatic mindset with job security and financial stability can prepare them for future leadership roles, avoiding hasty transitions and ensuring long-term organizational success (Mărginean, 2021).

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