

# MOTIVATION AND PERFORMANCE OF EMPLOYEES FROM GENERATIONS Y AND Z: CHALLENGES, STRATEGIES, AND MODERN SOLUTIONS

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## Abstract

Employee motivation and performance are undergoing significant transformation under the combined influence of generational shifts, geopolitical instability, and rapid technological advancement. This article examines the motivational drivers and performance patterns of Generations Y and Z within a contemporary context marked by global conflicts, economic uncertainty, and the accelerated adoption of artificial intelligence (AI) in the workplace. Grounded in Self-Determination Theory and Generational Cohort Theory, the study provides a management-oriented analysis of how intrinsic and extrinsic motivation mechanisms evolve under specific conditions of unregulated technological disruption and uncertainty. The employees from Generations Y and Z have different motivational profiles that are highly sensitive to external environmental factors. Economic volatility, mainly driven by ongoing global conflicts, intensifies the demand for job security, psychological safety, and organizational trust, while the adoption of AI technologies redefines competence requirements and performance expectations. From a managerial perspective, the paper identifies the main implications for human resource management and organizational leadership. It highlights the need to move away from standardized management approaches towards adaptive, employee-centered strategies, including personalized motivation frameworks and leadership models based on flexibility, trust and continuous learning. By integrating generational theory, motivational frameworks and the impact of environmental disruptions, this study offers actionable insights aimed at enhancing employee performance and strengthening organizational resilience in an increasingly volatile and digitalized business environment.

**Keywords:** Employee motivation, Generations Y and Z, Workplace performance.

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.24818/beman/2026.S.I.6-09>

**Article history:** Received: 02 March 2026, Revised: 30 May 2026, Accepted: 12 June 2026, Published online: 18 June 2026

**How to cite this article:** Bombariu, A. (2026). Motivation and performance of employees from generations Y and Z: Challenges, strategies, and modern solutions. *Business Excellence and Management*, 16(S.I.6), 170–193.  
<https://doi.org/10.24818/beman/2026.S.I.6-09>

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The contemporary organizational environment is increasingly shaped by the effects of geopolitical instability, economic uncertainty and rapid technological transformation. The current global disruptions

together with the inflationary pressures, labour market volatility and ongoing structural changes in the global economy have significantly altered both organizational priorities and employee expectations (World Economic Forum, 2023). At the same time, the adoption of artificial intelligence (AI) is redefining job structures, skill requirements, and performance systems, simultaneously generating both efficiency gains and new forms of uncertainty in the workplace (Frey & Osborne, 2017; Jaiswal et al., 2022).

Understanding employee motivation and performance has never been more critical than in the present context, as it becomes increasingly complex, particularly with the growing presence of Generation Y (Millennials) and Generation Z in the workforce. These two generational cohorts have developed in highly digitalized and dynamic environments, which have shaped their work-related values, behavioural patterns, and expectations (Schroth, 2019; Rudolph et al., 2021). Compared to previous generations, they tend to prioritize meaningful work, flexibility, autonomy and continuous development, while also being more sensitive to external environmental factors such as economic instability and job insecurity (Costanza et al., 2012; Shoss, 2017).

Employee motivation has been extensively examined from a theoretical perspective, particularly through Self-Determination Theory, which differentiates intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and recognizes the important role of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in shaping human behaviour (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2020). From a complementary perspective, Generational Cohort Theory suggests that individuals belonging to the same generational group share similar values and attitudes, shaped by common socio-economic and historical experiences (Mannheim, 1952; Rudolph et al., 2021). Although these frameworks provide valuable insights, they are largely grounded in relatively stable organizational contexts and are less well equipped to explain employee behaviour in environments characterized by continuous disruption and uncertainty.

Despite the extensive research on employee motivation, generational differences, and workplace transformation, these topics have largely been studied in isolation. While some recent studies have explored the implications of AI for job design and skill requirements (Frey & Osborne, 2017; Jaiswal et al., 2022), others have focused on generational work values or the psychological effects of job insecurity (Rudolph et al., 2021; Shoss, 2017). Moreover, there is limited integrative research that examines how these factors interact simultaneously to influence employee motivation and performance.

This paper adopts an integrative conceptual perspective, examining employee motivation and performance through the interaction of three key dimensions: generational values, global uncertainty, and AI-driven workplace transformation. Grounded in Self-Determination Theory and Generational Cohort Theory, the study proposes a conceptual framework in which motivation emerges from a dynamic tension between the need for meaning, the actual need for security, and the demand for continuous adaptation.

In a world of macroeconomic instability and technological disruption, this study examines the reshaping of motivational mechanisms and performance outcomes among the Generations Y and Z employees. More specifically, the study aims to explore how economic uncertainty influences perceptions of job security and organizational trust, how the increasing adoption of AI affects competence and intrinsic motivation, and how these factors interact in shaping employee engagement and performance.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

Understanding the drivers of employee motivation and performance in today's organizations has become really challenging. Continuous change, uncertainty, and new expectations are no longer predictable, highlighting the need for more than a single theoretical lens. Accordingly, this study adopts a multidimensional approach that brings together psychological factors, generational influences, social dynamics, and the broader organizational context in order to better understand the key factors shaping employee motivation and performance.

### **2.1 Self-determination theory**

Starting with the Self-Determination Theory (SDT), this framework explains motivation through three fundamental psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2020). In this paper, particular emphasis is placed on employees' sense of control over their work, confidence in their abilities, interpersonal connectedness, and their relationship with engagement and performance. Furthermore, the analysis also the underlying psychological and neurobiological processes associated with curiosity and learning, which further highlight the importance of SDT in shaping human behaviour.

It is also important to note that SDT was largely developed in the context of relatively stable work conditions. Today's organizational operating systems are fundamentally different from those of the past. The rapid advancement of technologies and artificial intelligence is redefining job roles and expectations. Employees are increasingly required to adapt, reskill, and respond to continuous disruptive changes, which can influence their experiences of autonomy and competence in daily work (Frey & Osborne, 2017; Jaiswal et al., 2022). In this sense, motivation is no longer a fixed state, but a dynamic process that shifts in response to environmental conditions.

## 2.2 Generational cohort theory

A useful perspective is offered by Generational Cohort Theory, which focuses on how shared experiences influence individuals' attitudes toward work (Mannheim, 1952; Rudolph et al., 2021). Generations Y and Z have grown up in a fast-paced, digitalized world, which has shaped their professional values and expectations. They tend to place greater emphasis on flexibility, purpose, and continuous development compared to previous generations (Costanza et al., 2012).

However, more recent research indicates that these generational differences should not be neglected. In many cases, external factors such as economic conditions or organizational environments may play a more significant role in shaping work-related attitudes and behaviours than generational identity alone (Rudolph et al., 2021). This suggests that understanding employee behaviour requires looking beyond generational labels and considering the broader context in which individuals operate.

## 2.3 Social identity approach

In addition, the social identity approach suggests that motivation is shaped not only by personal goals, but also by individuals' sense of belonging to a group or organization (Tajfel, 1978; van Knippenberg, 2000).

Taking this into consideration, identification does not automatically lead to higher performance. Instead, it influences how employees interpret their roles and whether they perceive their contributions as meaningful to the company/organization. When employees perceive a clear connection between their efforts and organizational success, motivation tends to increase. However, if this connection is unclear, even strong identification may not translate into improved performance (van Knippenberg, 2000). This highlights the importance of perception and context in shaping motivation and performance outcomes.

## 2.4 Economic uncertainty

Global uncertainty and economic instability are strongly correlated with employee behaviour, especially in the context of rising global uncertainty, geopolitical tensions, and ongoing changes in labour markets. These changes have affected job security, making it less certain than in the past. As a response, employees may place greater emphasis on stability and security, which can lead to a shift away from their intrinsic motivation (Shoss, 2017). In uncertain environments, motivation becomes closely linked to individuals' perceived security regarding their roles and future within the organization.

## 2.5 Technological transformation

The nature of work is shifting due to the increasing use of artificial intelligence and digital technologies. While these tools improve efficiency, they also create new challenges and pressures. Employees may feel

the need to continuously update their skills or may worry about the long-term relevance of their roles. This is particularly relevant for younger generations who are still shaping their career paths (Frey & Osborne, 2017). In this way, technology acts both as a source of opportunity and as a source of uncertainty.

## 2.6 Integrative perspective

When these perspectives are considered together, it becomes clear that motivation and performance cannot be fully explained through a single theory. Instead, they emerge from the interaction between individual needs, generational influences, social identity, and external conditions such as technological change and economic uncertainty. While each of these factors has been studied separately, limited research has examined how they work together. This highlights the need for a more integrated approach, which this study aims to address.

## 3. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study proposes an integrative framework combining SDT, Generational Cohort Theory, and contextual uncertainty (Figure 1). Employees motivation is conceptualized as emerging from the interaction between: psychological needs (autonomy, competence, relatedness), generational values (Y and Z differences), external uncertainty (economic and geopolitical instability), and technological disruption (AI transformation).

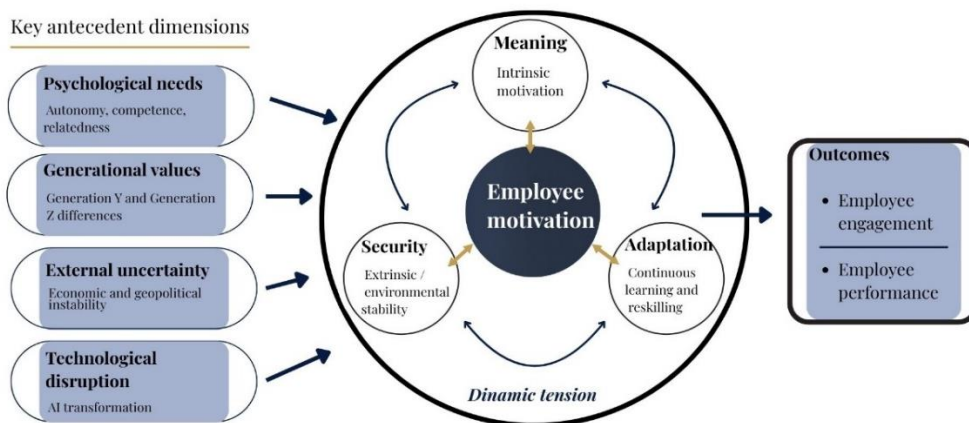


FIGURE 1. INTEGRATIVE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF EMPLOYEE MOTIVATION AND PERFORMANCE

Source: Author's research

Within this framework, motivation is understood as a dynamic process shaped by tension between: meaning (intrinsic motivation), security (extrinsic/environmental stability), and adaptation (continuous learning and reskilling). This model suggests that employee engagement and performance are the outcomes of how individuals balance these competing forces.

#### 4. CHALLENGES IN CONTEMPORARY WORKPLACES

Contemporary workplaces are shaped by uncertainty, technological disruption, and changing employee expectations. The main challenge is no longer limited to organizations seeking productive employees; employees themselves are expected to remain motivated and adaptable in environments that are, in reality, less predictable than ever before. Economic instability, AI-driven transformation, and generational differences do not operate in isolation. Instead, they overlap and create a workplace reality in which employees must manage the tension between security, competence, and meaning.

This section focuses on three major challenges: job insecurity and economic instability, AI-driven transformation, and generational differences. These challenges are especially relevant for understanding the Generation Y and Z because younger employees are developing their careers in a context where financial stability meets uncertainty, technological change is rapid, and traditional career paths are more or less seen as not interesting. As a result, motivation and performance cannot be explained only through internal ambition or organizational rewards. They are also shaped by how employees interact with risk, how capable they feel in the face of change, and whether they believe the organization offers a credible future.

##### 4.1 Job insecurity and economic instability

One of the most important psychological challenges in the contemporary workplace is job insecurity. The possibility of losing one's job is only one aspect of this issue. Job insecurity also includes the perception that one's position, career path, or professional future may become unstable. This distinction is important because employees may experience insecurity even when there is no immediate threat of job loss. In modern organizations, uncertainty itself can become a significant source of stress.

A deeper understanding of job insecurity requires distinguishing between its cognitive and affective dimensions. Cognitive job insecurity refers to an employee's perception that the job or important job features may be threatened. Affective job insecurity refers to the emotional reaction to that perceived threat, such as fear, anxiety, concern or worry (Jiang & Lavaysse, 2018). This distinction is very useful for the present paper because employees do not react only to objective labour market conditions. Rather, they react to how those conditions are perceived and interpreted emotionally.

This suggests that economic instability affects employees through more than salary concerns alone. Employees may perceive the future as less controllable in the context of inflation, organizational restructuring, layoffs, market uncertainty, and geopolitical instability. Even in the absence of a visible or formally announced downsizing process, employees may still perceive signals of instability, such as hiring freezes, budget cuts, reduced promotion opportunities, increased performance pressure, or growing

automation. These signals can lead employees to question whether the organization will continue to provide a sense of security and stability.

The affective side of job insecurity is especially important because it is more closely related to employee outcomes than the cognitive perception of insecurity alone (Jiang & Lavaysse, 2018). In other words, the damaging part is not only thinking that one's job may be at risk, but emotionally living with that possibility. Once insecurity becomes emotional, it can influence motivation, commitment, health, and performance. Employees may still complete their tasks, but their psychological relationship with work shifts.

This creates a defensive form of motivation. Instead of being driven by growth, purpose or curiosity, employees may become driven by protection. They may work hard not because they feel engaged, but for the need of not being perceived as replaceable. This is important taking into consideration why job insecurity can sometimes appear to increase short term effort while damaging long term motivation. Employees under pressure may become more productive temporarily, but this sort of productivity is fragile because is built on fear rather than commitment.

Job insecurity also changes the way how employees relate to the organization. When stable employment is perceived as part of the psychological contract between employee and employer, insecurity can be interpreted as a breach of that contract. Empirical evidence further shows that job insecurity is associated with psychological contract breach, lower organizational commitment, weaker engagement, turnover intentions, burnout, anxiety, and work-life conflict, with affective job insecurity being more strongly related to employee outcomes than cognitive job insecurity (Shoss, 2017; Jiang & Lavaysse, 2018).

The consequences are not limited to attitudes. Job insecurity has been linked to burnout, emotional exhaustion, turnover intentions, lower work engagement, weaker job satisfaction, anxiety, depression, and work-life conflict (Jiang & Lavaysse, 2018). These outcomes show that insecurity is not only an economic issue. It is also a psychological and an organizational issue. When employees feel insecure, the effects can extend into their personal lives, because employment is connected to financial stability, identity, social status, and future planning.

For Generation Y and Generation Z, this challenge is particularly relevant. These generations are often described as seeking meaning, flexibility, autonomy, and development, but these expectations do not remove the need for security. In fact, economic instability can make security even more important. Younger employees may want meaningful work, but they also need financial independence, career progression, and employability. When these conditions are perceived as uncertain, motivation becomes more complex.

This creates a central beacon of tension. Younger employees may want to grow, learn, and contribute meaningfully, but economic instability may push them to prioritize safety and stability. In this context,



organizations cannot rely only on purpose-driven messaging. Purpose is elementary, but it is not enough if employees feel financially or professionally exposed. A workplace that asks employees to be passionate while failing to provide stability risks creating frustration rather than engagement.

Therefore, job insecurity should be understood as a structural challenge of contemporary workplaces. It affects how employees evaluate their future, how much they trust the organization, and whether they are willing to invest effort beyond minimum expectations. The challenge for organizations is not only to reduce the objective risk of job loss, but also to manage the emotional experience of uncertainty.

#### 4.2 AI-driven transformation

AI-driven transformation has rapidly become one of the most significant challenges facing the contemporary workplace. It changes not only the way tasks are performed but also the way employees perceive their professional value. Artificial intelligence is often presented as very efficient and innovative. For employees, however, the experience can be more ambiguous. AI may simplify certain tasks, but it can also make people question the stability of their role and the future value of their skills.

The fear is not always that a certain job is going to disappear overnight. More often, the concern is slower and less visible: some parts of the job begin to change, familiar tasks are automated, and employees start to wonder whether their experience is still enough. This is why AI transformation affects motivation so deeply. It does not only change the tools people use, it changes how secure they feel in their own competence.

This concern becomes stronger because automation is no longer limited to simple or repetitive activities. Technological development has made it possible for machines and intelligent systems to enter areas that were once considered more protected from automation. Tasks involving analysis, prediction, document processing, customer interaction, and decision support can now be partially supported or transformed by AI. This does not mean that human work becomes irrelevant, but it does mean that employees can no longer rely only on past experience as a guarantee of future value.

A more careful interpretation of automation risk switch the question from whether a job will be replaced, but which parts of a job can be computerized. Some tasks are more exposed because they are easier to structure or measure. Other tasks remain more difficult to automate, especially when they involve creativity, social intelligence, contextual judgment, or complex human interaction (Frey & Osborne, 2017). This distinction is important because it moves the discussion away from panic and toward adaptation. The real challenge is not only whether AI replaces work, but how it changes what kind of work remains valuable.

Within that shift, competence itself becomes a moving target. Employees may remain qualified, experienced, and genuinely capable and still feel that the ground beneath their expertise is slowly



changing. A skill that once anchored someone's professional confidence may begin to feel insufficient the moment an organization deploys an AI system that handles part of that same activity faster and at lower cost. A quiet pressure builds as a result: employees are no longer expected only to perform, but to continuously renegotiate the foundations of that performance.

Upskilling in this context is therefore often presented as the solution. In practice, however, it is not always perceived as something positive. From a managerial point of view, reskilling sounds like an opportunity for development. From the employee's perspective, it can sometimes feel like a warning. The message can be interpreted as: learn fast, or risk becoming less relevant. This is why AI-related upskilling should not be treated only as a technical process. It also has an emotional and motivational dimension.

As the changes in work processes due to AI, employees are increasingly expected to rebuild parts of their skill set, especially on digital literacy, data interpretation, continuous learning and decision making (Jaiswal et al., 2022). These skills become important because AI changes the way human work is organized. Employees must learn how to use AI outputs, how to interpret them, when to trust them and when to intervene with a rational human judgment. This requires more than learning how to operate a tool. It requires a new form of professional confidence.

The difficult aspect is that employees experience this transition in different ways. Some may see AI as a chance to reduce repetitive work and focus more on meaningful activities. Others may feel exposed or uncertain, especially if they do not understand how AI will affect their responsibilities. The same technology can therefore be perceived as support by one employee and as threat by another. The difference often depends on the level of communication, training, role and clarity inside the organization.

Recent research on AI in working life shows this dual perception clearly. Employees may associate AI with efficiency, productivity, and better decision support, but also with anxiety, uncertainty about role change, and concerns about job security (Savolainen et al., 2026). This is important because it shows that resistance to AI is not always resistance to technology itself. Often, it is a reaction to uncertainty. Employees may not reject AI because they dislike innovation, but because they do not know what AI means for their future.

A deeper problem occurs when AI-related insecurity begins to affect how employees behave toward one another. In knowledge based organizations, expertise represents one of the main sources of employee value. When AI threatens that value, employees may start to become more protective with what they know. Knowledge can start to feel more like a personal resource that should be guarded and not freely shared. This is especially problematic because contemporary organizations depend on collaboration within knowledge exchange in order to innovate.

AI-induced job insecurity can therefore produce defensive behaviours. Employees who feel that AI may play a role in reducing their value may become less willing to share information, explain processes, or help others develop similar expertise. This is known as knowledge-hiding behaviour, meaning the intentional withholding or concealment of information requested by others. It is not simply a lack of communication. It is a protective response in a context where employees feel that sharing knowledge might reduce their uniqueness or make them easier to replace (Kim & Kim, 2024).

This is where a paradox appears. AI is often introduced to make smarter, faster and innovative decisions in organizations. Yet, if AI makes employees feel insecure, it may reduce the openness and collaboration that innovation actually requires. A company may invest in advanced technology and in the same time weakening the human relationships that allow knowledge to circulate. In this sense, AI transformation can improve technical capacities while damaging the social conditions needed for effective performance.

Psychological safety becomes central here. When employees feel psychologically safe, they are more willing to ask questions, admit mistakes, express concerns, and share knowledge. When psychological safety is low, employees are more likely to protect themselves. In an AI-driven context, this can mean staying silent about uncertainty, avoiding difficult conversation, or hiding knowledge that could help others. AI-induced job insecurity can reduce psychological safety because employees may feel that openness makes them vulnerable (Kim & Kim, 2024).

This mechanism is mandatory for understanding that AI implementation cannot be managed only through technology. If employees are afraid that this implementation is going to make them less valuable, they may not fully participate in the transformation. They may use the tools formally, but without trust or real engagement. They may comply with change while internally becoming more cautious and defensive, in this way weakening the organization ability to learn from AI adoption.

The role of self-efficacy in AI learning is also important. Employees who believe they can understand and use AI technologies are more likely to remain confident during technological change. This might be challenging, but it is not necessarily threatening. In contrast, employees with low confidence in their ability to learn these technologies may experience the same transformation as a direct risk to their future. This can reduce psychological safety and increase defensive behaviour (Kim & Kim, 2024).

This point connects directly with motivation. Employees are more likely to stay engaged when they believe they can develop alongside new technologies rather than be overtaken by them. If digital transformation feels faster than their ability to learn, motivation can easily turn into anxiety. The problem is not only the presence of intelligent systems, but the feeling of being left behind. For this reason, organizations need to build confidence, not only technical knowledge. Training should give employees practical experience, but it should also reduce fear and create a stronger sense of control.

The way technological change is communicated inside the organization matters as much as the tools themselves. If automation is presented mainly as a way to cut costs, reduce headcount, or increase surveillance, employees may interpret it as a threat. If it is presented as a way to support human work and create opportunities for development, employees are more likely to engage with it. The difference is not only about wording. It influences whether employees see the transformation as something done with them or something done to them.

For employees who are still building their careers, the issue is not simply whether they can use new technologies. The important question is how these technologies reshape the early and middle stages of their careers. Many younger employees are trying to create their professional identity, so the rapid spread of AI can influence their understanding expertise, progression and long-term relevance. If entry level analytical tasks become automated, for example, younger employees may lose some of the traditional learning opportunities through which competence was previously developed. Therefore, AI not only changes future jobs; it may also change the path through which employees learn how to become professionals.

If intelligent systems take over repetitive tasks, organizations should ensure that employees still gain the experience required to build judgment, creativity, and contextual understanding. Otherwise, the workplace may become faster but less developmental. This is especially important for Generations Y and Z, whose motivation is often connected to growth and employability. When AI supports learning, it can strengthen engagement. When it removes learning opportunities or makes career progression unclear, it can create frustration and uncertainty.

### **4.3 Generational differences**

Generational differences are among the most discussed, but at the same time, among the most misunderstood, challenges in contemporary workplaces. In organizational practice, generations are often used as a simple explanation for why employees think, communicate, or behave differently. Younger employees are frequently characterized as more flexible, more digital or less loyal, while older employees are often associated with stability, discipline or resistance to change. These descriptions may sound useful for managers because they create clear categories. However, they can also oversimplify employee behaviour and lead organizations to manage people based on assumptions rather than evidence.

The difficulty is that generational differences are attractive as an explanation precisely because they make complex workplace problems appear easier to understand. If younger employees leave more quickly, the explanation becomes “they are Millennials” or “they are Gen Z.” If they want feedback, flexibility, or development, the same explanation is used again. Yet this logic can hide other factors that may be more

important, such as career stage, economic insecurity, leadership style, organizational culture, job design, or the availability of development opportunities. In contemporary workplaces, this is particularly important because employees are not only influenced by age or birth cohort, but also by technological disruption, economic instability, and changing expectations around work.

A more cautious interpretation is necessary because empirical evidence does not fully support the idea that generational membership strongly explains workplace attitudes. A meta-analysis of 20 studies, covering 18 generational comparisons and 19,961 participants, found that differences between generations in job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and intent to turnover were generally small or close to zero in many cases (Costanza et al., 2012). The implication is not that age diversity does not matter, but that generational labels alone are weak explanations for complex workplace behaviour. In practice, organizations should be careful before designing interventions based only on the assumption that one generation is fundamentally different from another.

This matters because management strategies based on generational stereotypes can become ineffective. If an organization assumes that all young employees want the same things, it may ignore differences in individual needs, career stage, and personal circumstances. Similarly, if older employees are assumed to be less adaptable or less interested in technology, organizations may limit their development opportunities unfairly. This is where generational thinking can become problematic and perhaps turn into a rigid managerial shortcut.

The methodological problem is also relevant. Generational differences are difficult to separate from age effects and period effects. What appears to be a generational difference may actually reflect the fact that employees are at different life stages, have different levels of tenure or are responding to the same historical context from different positions. For example, younger workers may show higher turnover intentions not because of a unique generational identity, but because they are earlier in their careers, have fewer organizational ties, or are still searching for better opportunities. The challenge is therefore to avoid treating generational membership as the main cause when other explanations may prove to be stronger.

This critical view is reinforced by research arguing that generational categories are often used despite weak empirical support. The idea of generations remains powerful because it helps people make sense of age-related differences at work, even when those differences may not be truly generational. The problem is that such categories can become socially accepted stereotypes. In this sense, organizations should not ignore age diversity, but they should avoid managing employees as if generational labels automatically explain their needs and behaviour (Rudolph et al., 2021).

This does not mean that all the research on generational differences should be dismissed. Some studies do identify differences in how employees from different age cohorts value sources of motivation. For example, evidence from a Canadian service sector sample shows that sources of overall work motivation

differ across Generation X, Y, and Z. The study used the Multidimensional Work Motivation Scale and found that the six motivational dimensions did not contribute to overall motivation in exactly the same way across the three groups (Mahmoud et al., 2021). This is useful for the present analysis because it allows a more nuanced position: generational labels should not be treated as deterministic, but motivational patterns may still vary across groups.

One of the most relevant findings is that Generation Z appeared more sensitive to motivation than Generation X and Generation Y. This suggests that when work feels meaningless, unclear, or disconnected from personal purpose, younger employees may be more vulnerable to disengagement. The same study also found that intrinsic motivation contributed more strongly to Generation Z employees' overall motivation than it did for Generation X and Generation Y (Mahmoud et al., 2021). This does not mean that all Gen Z employees are motivated only by passion or enjoyment. Rather, it suggests that the quality of the work experience may matter strongly for their engagement.

At the same time, the study complicates the common idea that younger employees are motivated only by purpose. Material extrinsic regulation was found to be a valid source of overall work motivation for Generation Z only, while identified regulation was valued by Generation X and Generation Y but not by Generation Z (Mahmoud et al., 2021). This is important because it supports a more realistic view of younger workers. They may value meaningful work and intrinsic satisfaction, but they are also sensitive to financial and material conditions. In a workplace shaped by economic uncertainty, this combination makes sense. Purpose matters, but security still matters.

These insights make the connection directly with the previous challenges discussed in this section of the paper. Job insecurity and economic instability may make material rewards and financial stability more relevant for younger employees. At the same time, AI driven transformation may increase the importance of learning and the future power of employability. As a result, generational differences cannot be analysed separately from contemporary workplace conditions. They occur within a broader environment where employees are trying to balance meaning, security, and adaptation.

The managerial implication is therefore not to create separate motivational systems for each generation, but to understand that standardized management may fail when it ignores different motivational sensitivities. A multigenerational workforce requires managers to be more attentive to how employees interpret work, rewards, recognition and development. For some employees, motivation may come from task meaning and autonomy. For others, it may be strongly influenced by material stability, recognition, or career clarity. The challenge is not to manage stereotypes, but to manage diversity in motivational needs. This is why the tension between Costanza et al. (2012) and Mahmoud et al. (2021) is useful rather than contradictory. The meta-analysis warns that broad claims about generational differences are often

overstated and may not justify targeted organizational interventions based only on generation (Costanza et al., 2012). The motivation study, however, suggests that differences may appear when the analysis focuses on specific motivational mechanisms rather than broad attitudes such as job satisfaction or commitment (Mahmoud et al., 2021). Together, these studies support a balanced conclusion: generations should not be used as rigid categories, but organizations should still pay attention to how employees at different career stages and social contexts respond to different motivational conditions.

Another important issue is communication. Younger employees are often described as more digitally oriented, but this should not be reduced to a stereotype. In practice, digital familiarity changes how employees search for information about employers, evaluate employer branding, and compare workplace opportunities. Organizations are more visible than before, and younger employees can more easily assess whether a company's promises about development, flexibility, inclusion, or well-being are credible. This increases pressure on employers to align external branding with actual internal practices.

This point is relevant for retention. If employees join an organization expecting development, feedback, meaningful work, or flexibility, but then encounter unclear expectations, weak support, or limited progression, disengagement may appear quickly. The issue is not simply that younger employees are disloyal. A more accurate interpretation is that the employment relationship has become more conditional. Employees are more likely to remain committed when the organization offers a credible path for growth and when the psychological contract feels balanced.

The management challenge is therefore subtle. Organizations should not treat Generation Y and Generation Z as homogeneous groups, but they also cannot ignore that younger employees may enter work with expectations shaped by digitalization, uncertainty, and changing career norms. A useful approach is to focus less on "what Gen Z wants" as a fixed list and more on what contemporary employees need in order to remain engaged: clarity, development, fairness, recognition, flexibility with boundaries, and a believable future inside the organization.

Generational differences also create potential conflict in multigenerational teams. Employees may prefer different forms of communication, recognition, or autonomy. One employee may interpret frequent feedback as support, while another may see it as micromanagement. One may value public recognition, while another may prefer private respect or material rewards. These differences are not always purely generational, but they can be interpreted that way by employees and managers. Once interpreted through generational stereotypes, ordinary workplace differences can become sources of tension.

This is where the critical perspective becomes especially useful. The problem is not only whether generational differences objectively exist. The problem is also that people believe they exist and may act on those beliefs. If managers expect younger employees to be impatient or older employees to resist change, these expectations can shape interactions and decisions. The focus should therefore shift from



managing generations to managing the perceptions, assumptions, and stereotypes that surround generations (Rudolph et al., 2021).

Overall, generational differences in contemporary workplaces require a nuanced interpretation. When they are exaggerated, they can turn into stereotypes and lead to poorly designed management practices. When they are dismissed entirely, organizations may fail to notice important variations in employee expectations, communication preferences, and sources of motivation. A more appropriate approach is to move away from deterministic views while still acknowledging that employees may relate to work differently depending on their career stage, social environment, and the broader disruptions shaping the labour market. Therefore, the managerial challenge is not to treat Generation Y and Generation Z as fixed categories, but to build workplaces in which employees can experience purpose, stability, and growth without being defined only by their generational label.

#### **4.4 Synthesis: security, adaptation and meaning**

The analysis developed in this section shows that contemporary work is shaped by a difficult balance between stability, change and personal relevance. Employees are no longer asked only to perform their assigned tasks. They are also expected to remain employable in uncertain markets, adjust to technological transformation and find meaning in work environments that often change faster than their expectations.

This creates a more fragile basis for motivation. When security is weak, employees may become cautious and protective. When adaptation is demanded too quickly, learning can start to feel like pressure. When meaning is promised but not supported by fair practices, clear communication or real development opportunities, it can lose credibility. In this context, motivation depends less on isolated incentives and more on the quality of the work environment as a whole.

A useful way to understand this situation is through three connected conditions: security, adaptation and meaning. Security gives employees the confidence to invest effort without feeling constantly exposed. Adaptation allows them to develop the skills needed to remain relevant. Meaning helps them connect their work to personal values, professional identity and future growth.

For younger cohorts, this balance is especially important because their careers are developing in a period of economic instability and rapid technological change. Their motivation cannot be explained only through generational labels, but it is influenced by whether the workplace offers a credible future. Development without stability may create anxiety. Stability without learning may limit engagement. Purpose without concrete organizational support may feel superficial.

The main implication is that organizations need to move beyond fragmented responses. Addressing job insecurity, technological change or generational expectations separately is not enough. Sustainable



motivation requires a work environment where employees feel protected enough to commit, capable enough to adapt and valued enough to contribute. This is the point where contemporary workplace challenges become not only a human resource issue, but a broader management responsibility.

## 5. MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS: STRATEGIES AND MODERN SOLUTIONS

### 5.1 Adaptive leadership in modern organizations

Modern organization nowadays can rarely operate in conditions where decisions can be made just once and then simply repeated. Everything changes so quickly from strategies, technologies, employee expectations and market fluctuation for leadership to remain attached to a single managerial formula. In this context, adaptive leadership becomes more relevant because it allows managers to respond to change without turning every disruption into disorder.

The adaptive leader is not defined by flexibility in a vague sense. What matters is the capacity to read the situation, understand what kind of response is required and adjust managerial behaviour without losing coherence. Sometimes this means giving employees more autonomy. In other situations, it means offering clearer direction, reducing ambiguity or slowing the pace of change so that people can actually absorb it. Adaptiveness, therefore, is not about changing constantly; rather it is about changing appropriately.

A useful way to approach adaptive leadership is to see it as the link between organizational instability and managerial judgement. Modern managers are often expected to make decisions without having all the related information available. At the same time, they need to remain open to correction once new evidence appears. This requires a different type of authority: one that depends less on control and more on credibility, communication and the ability to mobilize people around changing priorities.

There is also a need for a careful balance between action and reflection. In unstable environments, hesitation can become costly, but speed alone is not enough. A fast decision can create value when it has a good base, when organizations have the capacity to have a complete overview about feedback and situational awareness.

Feedback becomes important because it prevents leadership from turning into stubbornness. When managers see feedback as criticism, they may continue defending decisions that no longer fit the situation. When they treat it as information, they can adjust without appearing inconsistent. In fact, the ability to revise a decision can strengthen authority, because it shows that the leader is attentive to reality rather than attached to control. Adaptive responses are therefore shaped by how quickly leaders notice weak signals, how honestly they interpret them, and whether they have enough confidence to act before the situation becomes harder to manage (London, 2023).

Employees rarely judge leadership only by strategic decisions. They judge it through everyday moments: how a decision is explained, how priorities are made clear, and how managers behave when organization is under pressure. A new direction may be formally correct, but from employees point of view they can be distant if they don't understand its purpose or its consequences for their work. Leadership has to translate managerial decisions into something employees can actually work with. Otherwise, change stays at the level of announcement, not practice.

This is especially visible in organizations undergoing digital transformation. Although these processes are often discussed in terms of tools, platforms or automation, their real impact depends on what happens after implementation. A technology can be introduced formally and still remain weakly embedded in everyday work. It begins to create value only when employees understand why it is there, how it changes their tasks, and where human judgment remains necessary. From this perspective, digital transformation is not a technological upgrade alone, but a managerial process through which leaders help people make sense of new digital knowledge and turn it into practical organizational capability (Schiuma et al., 2024).

The pragmatic side of leadership is especially important. Modern organizations are often tempted to adopt new tools or practices because they appear innovative. But adaptation should not become trend-following. A leader has to ask whether a new initiative solves a real organizational problem, whether employees are prepared to work with it, and whether the organization has the resources to support it beyond the initial launch. Change that is disconnected from daily work can easily become symbolic rather than useful.

The managerial relevance of adaptive leadership becomes visible at the level of implementation. A strategic decision is not enough if employees do not understand what changes in their work, what is expected from them, and what resources are available. Without this translation, transformation remains a managerial slogan rather than a functioning organizational process.

Adaptive leaders therefore focus on making change executable. They clarify responsibilities, organize learning opportunities, create feedback loops, and adjust the pace of implementation when necessary. This is important because modern organizations often introduce several changes at the same time, and even well-designed initiatives can fail if employees experience them as fragmented or impractical.

In this sense, adaptive leadership is not only about responding quickly to change, but about sequencing and prioritizing it. Leaders need to decide what should be implemented first, which routines must be redesigned, and where employees need support before performance expectations are increased. Poorly sequenced transformation can create overload, while a more adaptive approach can make change easier to absorb.

This is particularly relevant in digital transformation, where technological knowledge must be connected with operational knowledge. A digital tool may be technically advanced, but it creates value only when it fits

the reality of daily work. Adaptive leaders help connect these two sides by involving employees, testing new processes, and correcting the implementation when difficulties appear. This reflects the idea that transformative leaders need to be pragmatic, facilitative, communicative, catalytic, informed, and oriented toward sustainable value creation (Schiuma et al., 2024).

## 5.2 Motivation systems based on autonomy, competence and identification

Motivation systems in modern organizations need to move beyond the assumption that employee effort can be sustained mainly through rewards, targets, or formal performance evaluations. These instruments still remain relevant, but they are insufficient when work becomes more unstable, technologically mediated, and psychologically demanding. In this scenario, motivation depends not only on what employees receive in exchange for their work, but also on their interpretation of the work itself, how capable they feel in relation to changing expectations, and whether their contribution is experienced as meaningful within a larger organizational context.

Self Determination Theory is useful for this discussion because it shifts attention from motivation as external stimulation to motivation as internalization. In organizational life, many tasks are not intrinsically enjoyable. Employees do not always perform because the activity itself is interesting, but because they realize its value, accept its relevance, and connect it with their professional identity. This distinction is important for managerial practice. A motivation system should not aim only to obtain compliance, instead it should create the conditions under which employees can transform organizational goals into personally meaningful goals. (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2020).

This changes the perspective of how autonomy should be understood. In management practice, autonomy is often confused either with full independence or with flexible working arrangements. A more useful interpretation is that autonomy refers to the employee's experience of agency within a structured work environment. Employees can accept demanding objectives when they understand their rationale and when they have some influence over how those objectives are pursued. Therefore, autonomy does not weaken managerial control; rather, it changes the form of control from direct supervision to purposeful coordination. Because too much control may only result in weak motivation, this point is crucial. Employees may continue to put out effort, but the level of involvement is lower when they perform only to protect their reputation, prevent unfavourable outcomes, or meet external expectations. On the other hand, motivation is less reliant on ongoing administrative pressure when workers see the importance of what they are doing. The management consequence is that companies should create incentive programs that highlight the goal of work rather than just the desired outcome.

For Generations Y and Z, competence is closely linked to employability. These employees are building careers in a context where long-term stability is less certain and where professional relevance depends

increasingly on continuous development. As a result, learning opportunities are not perceived only as organizational benefits, but as part of career security. A motivation system that ignores development may still generate short-term output, but it risks weakening long-term commitment. Employees are more likely to remain engaged when they believe that the organization contributes to their future value, not only to their present productivity.

The social dimension of motivation is equally important. Employees do not relate to work only as isolated individuals pursuing personal goals. Their motivation is also shaped by the groups to which they belong and by the degree to which they identify with the organization. This is where van Knippenberg's social identity perspective becomes relevant. From this perspective, work motivation and performance are influenced by the extent to which employees define themselves as members of a group and perceive their effort as contributing to collective outcomes (van Knippenberg, 2000).

This adds an important nuance to SDT. Relatedness should not be reduced to positive interpersonal relations or a pleasant team atmosphere. In organizational settings, relatedness can also mean identification: the feeling that one's work has significance because it contributes to a collective project. When employees see a connection between their individual effort and the success of the team or organization, performance becomes more than a personal obligation. It becomes part of maintaining and expressing a shared identity.

However, social identification does not automatically lead to higher performance. The effect depends on how employees interpret and act towards the relationship between their own effort and the group's interests. If high performance is perceived as meaningful for the group, identification can strengthen motivation. If organizational goals are unclear, inconsistent, or disconnected from the group's values, identification may not translate into productive behaviour. This is a crucial managerial point: organizations cannot simply ask employees to identify with them; they must make the collective purpose credible.

For this reason, motivation systems should connect individual contribution with collective meaning. If employees are evaluated only through individual indicators, their behaviour may become too narrow. They may focus on starting to protect their own results instead of supporting team learning, cooperation, or innovation. A more balanced system should recognize both individual performance and the way each employee contributes to the organization's broader capacity to perform.

Avoiding focusing motivation just on discrete rewards is a managerial difficulty. Bonuses don't always establish ownership, but they can reward output. Although a target might make expectations clear, it doesn't always increase competence. Although a mission statement might articulate purpose, it does not inevitably foster identification. Only when everyday managerial practices make work comprehensible, growth-oriented, and socially relevant can these components take on significance.

In this sense, motivation systems are part of organizational design. They influence how employees interpret effort, learning, collaboration, and performance. If the system rewards only short-term results, employees will prioritize immediate output. If it also recognizes development and collective contribution, employees are more likely to support long-term organizational resilience. The key question is not only how employees are motivated, but what kind of motivation the organization is producing.

### 5.3 AI and continuous learning systems

AI implementation shouldn't be treated as a race to introduce new tools as quickly as possible. The real managerial issue is not the adoption itself but whether the organization can transform adoption and turn it into learning. If AI is implemented only as a productivity instrument, it may increase speed without necessarily developing employees. Implemented as a learning system, it can improve performance while in the same time preparing employees for future work.

The practical value of AI becomes visible when it helps employees learn faster, not only work faster. Evidence from a large workplace study shows that access to generative AI increased productivity by around 15%, with the strongest benefits for less experienced and lower-skilled workers. More importantly, the tool did not only improve immediate task execution. It helped newer employees move faster along the experience curve, suggesting that AI can transfer elements of expert practice to employees who are still developing their professional routines (Brynjolfsson et al., 2025).

This point is important for management because it changes the logic of training. AI should not be seen only as a software that employees have to learn to operate. It can become a mechanism where employees are exposed to better work patterns, better communication, and more effective problem solving. In this sense, AI can support the formation of professional judgement, but only if employees are given enough time to understand, test and critically use its recommendations.

The process therefore should not be rushed. Fast implementation could seem like a false appearance of modernization, but in reality will not produce a real capability. Employees may adopt the tool formally while still lacking the ability to evaluate its outputs. This is risky because AI-supported work requires more than simply accepting suggestions. Employees need to know when to follow the system, when to modify the output and when to rely on human judgement. Without this learning process, AI adoption can become mechanical rather than developmental.

A continuous learning system should be built in stages. First, employees need to understand why the technology is being introduced and what problem it is supposed to solve. Then they need practical exposure in real or simulated work situations. Only after this stage should organizations increase performance expectations linked to AI use. This sequencing matters. Evaluation before learning creates pressure. Learning before evaluation creates capability.

The same logic applies at organizational level. AI adoption changes the type of skills firms' need, which means that training strategies must also change. Recent evidence from German firms shows that sustained AI adoption is associated with an increase in new apprenticeships among firms that already provide training, together with a modest rise in continuing training. Over time, training resources also shift more toward high-skilled tasks, especially two to three years after adoption. This suggests that AI does not eliminate the need for human capital investment; it makes skill development more strategic (Muehlemann, 2025).

As a result, businesses should avoid seeing AI training as a brief technical course. A few sessions on how to utilize a platform are insufficient. Employees must have digital judgment, task-specific expertise, and the ability to work with automated recommendations without becoming reliant upon them. The goal is not to produce individuals who only utilize AI, but employees who can stay professionally relevant in a fast-paced work environment.

Additionally, multiple learning pathways are needed for various staff groups. AI, as a guide, may support new hires by introducing them to skills they have not yet acquired through experience. A distinct strategy centred on the critical usage, validation, and enhancement of AI-supported procedures could be required for more seasoned staff members. Because it presumes that every employee need the same kind of assistance, a uniform deployment strategy runs the danger of squandering the technology's potential.

Managers must also safeguard the developmental function of work. If AI replaces mundane activities, businesses must ensure that individuals continue to have opportunity to develop judgment. Some repeated activities are useful not just for producing output, but also for helping people comprehend the job's rationale. If these jobs are eliminated too rapidly, younger employees may lose a portion of the learning route via which competence is typically developed. As a result, AI adoption must be accompanied by improved learning opportunities, rather than just routines.

The primary management approach is to link AI deployment with ongoing competence development. This includes setting aside time for learning, doing pilot projects before full deployment, including staff in testing tools, and upgrading training as responsibilities change. It also entails measuring success differently. The debate should not be limited to whether AI makes work faster. It should also consider if employees become more capable after utilizing it.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

In light of economic volatility and AI-driven change, this study looked at employee motivation and performance among Generations Y and Z. Because modern workplace behaviour results from the

interplay of psychological requirements, generational influences, social identity, and external disturbance, the investigation demonstrated that motivation cannot be adequately described by standalone theoretical viewpoints.

The suggested conceptual framework emphasizes how the conflict between meaning, security, and adaptability shapes motivation as a dynamic process. Meaning is linked to the perceived worth of work, professional identity, and intrinsic drive. The demand for stability, trust, and a reliable future for the company is reflected in security. The ability to consistently learn, regain proficiency, and maintain professional relevance in technologically evolving work situations is referred to as adaptation.

By combining Self-Determination Theory, Generational Cohort Theory, and the social identity perspective into a cohesive management-oriented framework, the study contributes to the existing body of literature. This integrative perspective is crucial because Generations Y and Z are not motivated solely by personal preferences or generational traits. Instead, their motivation is shaped by economic volatility, AI-driven skill shifts, and the extent to which organizations foster growth, a sense of community, and long-term employability.

From a managerial standpoint, the results indicate that companies must go beyond uniform approaches to performance management and incentives. Adaptive leadership, autonomy, competence- and identification-based motivational systems, and continuous learning systems are examples of effective responses to today's workplace challenges. These solutions are particularly relevant because they view employees as individuals whose engagement depends on the quality of the work environment, rather than merely as resources to be controlled.

This study stresses that AI adoption should not be seen just as a technology or productivity problem. Its effect on motivation is determined by whether employees are assisted in obtaining the skills and confidence necessary to work with new technology. Organizations that combine AI deployment with continuous learning are more likely to develop employees who are not only more productive but also better prepared to adapt to future developments.

Overall, the paper contends that sustained employee performance among Generations Y and Z requires a combination of purpose, stability, and development. Meaningful work can enhance engagement, but it is not sufficient without security. Stability can foster commitment, but it is insufficient without opportunities for learning. Adaptation can enhance employability, but it must be encouraged rather than imposed. As a result, contemporary organizations require incentive systems that integrate individual needs, collective identity, and continuous skill development.

Future research could empirically test this framework across industries and generational groups to validate and refine the proposed relationships.



#### DECLARATION OF COMPETING INTEREST

The author declares that he has no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

#### DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI AND AI-ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WRITING PROCESS

During the preparation of this work the author used ChatGPT in order to correct grammar, reformulate repetitive passages, and brainstorm ideas. After using this tool, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the content of the published article.

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