

Generation Z work values: A cross-national analysis

Peter de Boer¹, Prantik Bordoloi¹, Jens Dallmann², Luo Hengshen³

1: NHL Stenden University of Applied Sciences, The Netherlands

2: Stenden Thailand, Thailand

3: Dongguan University of Technology, People's Republic of China

ABSTRACT

Generation Z, those born between 1995 and 2010, enters the workplace in increasing numbers at a time of great societal and technological transformation, and is expected to account for nearly a quarter of the total global workforce in the next few years. Having been shaped by different events and experiences than previous generations, Generation Z possesses unique perspectives, preferences and expectations about work. This poses challenges for business in attracting and retaining them in the *Global War for Talent*. Generation Z studies have recently become a burgeoning field of research, however, empirical studies into this emerging generation's work values remains limited and comprehensive cross-national research scarce. This exploratory study sought to assess the reliability of the instrument used to measure work values in an internationally comparative context and, secondly, to examine the prioritization and desirability of Generation Z work values according to respondents' nationality. The respondents to the study consisted of 1188 undergraduate students enrolled at a tertiary level in China, Thailand, Germany and the Netherlands. The results suggest the measurement tool for work value preferences, both at construct and individual value levels, was reliable. At a construct level, the *Intrinsic* work value was found to be most important across the whole study sample, and least importance was attached to the work value of *Leisure*. For individual work values, the top three values were *Learning*, *Promotion* and *Visible Results*. The three least important work values were *Respect*, *Status* and *Pace*. Significant differences were found in how nationality influenced overall ranking of work values as well as the importance attached to specific values. The results question the extent to which Generation Z can be considered a global phenomenon and have implications for management of multinational corporations.

1 INTRODUCTION

Globalization and the accompanying Information Revolution have created a more connected business world. Although the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has caused a slowdown in terms of global trade and affected certain international sectors disproportionately, Altman and Bastian (2020, p. 8) argue in their DHL Global Connected Index study that globalization in all its guises is resilient and "far from dead". The labor market has particularly been impacted by of globalization and technological advances. As a result, the nature of work has changed requiring new knowledge and different skill sets. At the same time, globalization has enabled companies, whether they are multinationals or more locally focused, to source personnel with the right knowledge and skills. However, it also means they must compete for talent as part of the global "War for Talent" (Keller and Meaney 2017). Gen Z enters the workforce at this time of great societal and technological transformation and is expected to account for more than a quarter of the global workforce in the next few years (O'Boyle, Atack, and Monahan 2017). Gen Z is often considered the first truly global generation. Formative experiences and events, such as

social justice movements, have contributed to Gen Z's unique perspectives, preferences, and expectations regarding work. Companies in need of talent need to thoroughly understand Gen Z work values in an effort to attract and retain Gen Z employees long-term. This will provide them with the necessary human capital to reach organizational objectives and save costs.

1.1 Gen Z

Gen Z is generally comprised of those born in 1995 and after. Twenge and Campbell (2008) note that individuals belonging to the same generation hold similar values and that these differ in meaningful ways from those of previous generations. Each generation is shaped by formative events and these greatly influence that generation's perceptions, preferences and expectations. For Gen Z specifically, these events were among others social justice movements, the financial crisis of 2008, the smart phone and social media revolution, and growing up in a culture of safety which fostered parental overprotectiveness (Schroth 2019). Gaidhani, Arora and Sharma (2019) note that Gen Z is more digital-centric and technology is a big part of their identity. Some studies (i.e. Keller and Meaney 2018) go as far as classifying Gen Z as digital natives. Randstad's Future Workforce study (2016) identified collaboration and communication as key drivers contributing to job satisfaction for Gen Z. Moreover, the study found that financial rewards, motivation, flexibility and a good work-life balance are highly correlated to retaining Gen Z (Randstad 2016). Dolot (2018) confirms many of the Randstad findings and notes that feedback is of critical importance to Gen Z. They provide feedback, but also expect to receive feedback from their manager. Dolot goes on to argue that work needs to be attractive to Gen Z for them to stay engaged and loyal long-term.

1.2 Work Values

According to Schwartz (1994), a value is defined as a desirable trans-situational goal varying in importance, which serves as a guiding principle in the life of a person on other social entity. In other words, values serve as a moral compass. Schwartz (1994) identified three universal requirements related to human existence, namely desired level of social interaction, desired level of in-group harmony and individual needs. Based on these three universal requirements, he further explored human values and distinguished ten certain value types: achievement, power, security, conformity, tradition, benevolence, universalism, self-direction, stimulation, and hedonism. Hofstede (1980) argued that values are culturally specific and the result of the collective programming of the mind. As they are often firmly engrained, values are hard to change.

Schwartz (1994, p. 41) defined work values as "goals or rewards people seek through their work, and they are expressions of more general human values in the context of the work setting." Work values play an essential role in shaping individuals' preferences and expectations pertaining to work and how they would respond in work situations (Lyons, Higgins, and Duxbury 2009). Understanding current and potential employees' work values is considered vital in attracting and retaining qualified personnel as well as creating synergy in terms of intergenerational collaboration (Schroth 2019). This allows organizations to better address employee needs and expectations and enables them to address these by way of a work design that is both efficient and effective.

1.3 Nationality

For several decades the work of Geert Hofstede has been highly influential in informing cross-national and intercultural research. The multi-dimensional model Hofstede first proposed in “Culture’s Consequences: International Differences in Work-Related Values” remains a much-used model to study the ways in which nationality contributes to a predisposition in thinking within groups of individuals (Hofstede 1980). Common criticism of Hofstede’s work has been that it is prone to generalization and assumes a certain level of culture homogeneity within nations. Moreover, it is said it does not sufficiently acknowledge the dynamic nature of cultural change and lacks predictiveness (Kirkman, Lowe, and Gibson 2017; Minkov 2018). Despite the criticism and the development of more comprehensive approaches in cross-organisational studies, values remain valuable in explaining differences (Beugelsdijk, Kostova, and Roth 2017). Beugelsdijk and Welzel (2018) also note that the nation as a construct continues to be among “the most powerful” ones in the categorization of people.

In recent years examinations of Gen Z, and their work values in particular, have become more widespread. However, comprehensive cross-national research remains scarce. This exploratory study aims, on the one hand, to determine the reliability of the instrument used to measure work values in an internationally comparative context. Additionally, it seeks to establish the influence of Gen Z respondents’ nationality on their work value prioritization and desirability.

This study addresses two specific questions, namely:

RQ1: Which work values do Gen Z students consider most important in a future job?

RQ2: To what extent does nationality impact Gen Z work values?

2 METHODOLOGY

2.1 Participants and Procedure

Data for this study was collected using an online survey from a convenience sample of 1188 students from 4 universities in the countries of China, Germany, The Netherlands and Thailand respectively. Table 1 presents the characteristics of the study participants.

Table 1. Respondent characteristics

Item	Percentage (%)	Item	Percentage (%)
<i>Sex</i>		<i>Study Program</i>	
Female	31.0	Business/Economics	82.4
Male	67.9	STEM	4.0
Prefer not to say	1.1	Others	13.6
<i>Nationality</i>		<i>Stage or Year of Study</i>	
China	50.6	Year 1	16.4
Thailand	22.9	Year 2	14.6
Germany	13.0	Year 3	42.4
Netherlands	13.5	Year 4	24.0
<i>Level of Study Program</i>		Other	2.0
Bachelor	95.5		
Master	2.5		
Other	2.0		

The study participants primarily consisted of Generation Z business students (82.4%), born in 1995 and after, enrolled in an undergraduate programme (95.5%) in China, Germany, Thailand or the Netherlands. Students in their third and fourth year formed the majority of the sample (66.4%), whereas 31% was enrolled as first- or second-year students. It is important to note that Asian students were overrepresented in the sample with Chinese students making up just more than half of the respondents (50.6%) and Thai students (22.9%) having completed the online survey.

2.2 Measures

The measures of work values used in this study were based on the measurement approach employed by Maloni, Hiatt and Campbell (2019) in their exploration of Gen Z work values in the United States. Study participants were asked to rate how important an item was for them in an *ideal* job upon graduation from their current studies on a scale of 1 to 5 (1=not important to 5=absolutely essential). These items represented the 22 individual work values which were the focus of this study. The supplemental material at the end of this article presents the wording used in the survey for the items that represented the work values. These 22 individual work values represent seven work value constructs, namely extrinsic motivation, intrinsic motivation, stability, altruistic, supervisory facilitation, social engagement, and leisure. For this study, the seven work value constructs were created as a composite variable using the simple average of the individual work values that constitute the construct (Song et al. 2013). Table 2 presents the composite work values and their constituent individual work values. For analysis, the ranking of work values, both composite and individual, were ranked based on their mean values.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 2. Work Value Ranking and Cronbach's alpha

Composite Work Value	Individual Work Value	Rank	Mean	Standard Deviation	Cronbach's alpha
Intrinsic Motivation (IN)	Learning (IN1)	1	4.11	0.576	0.73
	Sustainable Skills (IN2)				
	Visible Results (IN3)				
	Creativity (IN4)				
Stability (ST)	Retirement (ST1)	2	4.05	0.694	0.83
	Benefits (ST2)				
	Future (ST3)				
Extrinsic Motivation (EX)	Money (EX1)	4	3.85	0.658	0.80
	Promotion (EX2)				
	Status (EX3)				
	Respect (EX4)				
Altruistic (AL)	Worthwhile (AL1)	5	3.84	0.780	0.75
	Helpful (AL2)				
Supervisory Facilitation (SU)	Feedback (SU1)	6	3.78	0.630	0.63
	Instruction (SU2)				
	Support (SU3)				
Social Engagement (SO)	Friends (SO1)	7	3.73	0.723	0.75
	Contact (SO2)				

	Common Interests (SO3)				
Leisure (LE)	Vacation (LE1)	8	3.67	0.741	0.71
	Time (LE2)				
	Pace (LE3)				

3.1 Reliability of composite work values

The internal reliability and consistency of the composite work values were assessed using Cronbach's alpha. As can be seen from table 2, the internal consistency of all the construct work values was found to be acceptable (Taber 2018). All work values had Cronbach's alpha values between 0.71 and 0.83, except for the work value of 'Supervisory Facilitation', which was slightly weak at 0.63.

3.2 Work values ranking

The overall ranking of work value constructs, as presented in table 3, shows that *intrinsic motivational factors (IN)* were deemed most important in a future job. *Stability work values (ST)* were ranked second. Both constructs were also consistently ranked first and second for all nationality groups suggesting they have universal appeal. Despite the apparent agreement on these value constructs, notable differences can be observed in the importance attached to *extrinsic motivational work values (EX)*. For instance, although extrinsic motivation was ranked third overall, Chinese respondents rated them considerably more important than the other nationalities in this study. Thai respondents even rated these values to be least important at a construct level.

Altruistic values (AL) varied less in terms of the importance attached, however, Thai Gen Z students ranked these higher than their Chinese and European counterparts. For German students, *supervisory facilitation values (SU)* appear more important especially in comparison with the Asian respondents, while the results suggest that Dutch students value social engagement more in a future job than other nationality groups. *Leisure work values (LE)* were ranked lowest overall with little variation among the different nationalities.

When examining the overall individual work value ranking, shown in table 4, it is apparent that *learning (IN1)* is considered the most important value Gen Z seeks in a job with *promotion (EX2)* being rated second most desirable. Irrespective of respondents' nationality these two values were deemed important by all respondent groups as they consistently appeared in each nationality's top five. The third most preferred value is *visible results (IN4)*, which refers to being able to see the results of work carried out. Chinese Gen Z students were the only nationality group for whom visible results did not appear in its top 5. Two work values completing the top five overall ranking are *future (ST3)* and *money (EX1)*. A reasonably predictable and safe future was especially important to the Asian respondents, whereas the results suggest money had particular appeal for Chinese and Dutch students.

The least important work values according to the overall ranking are *pace (LE3)* and *status (EX3)*. The pace at which work is done was consistently rated least important across the different nationality groups, while status also appeared in the bottom five ranking. Additionally, respect was overall rated unimportant by three of the four respondent groups, with Chinese Gen Z students being a notable exception. They ranked status considerably higher than their Thai and European counterparts. *Contact with other people (SO2)* and *frequent feedback (SU1)* complete the overall ranking of work values Gen Z student consider least vital in a future job. However, it is worth noting that Dutch students considered contact with others, and Thai

student to a lesser extent, much more important than Gen Z students from Germany and China. Moreover, feedback was particularly important to German students while completely unimportant to Chinese respondents.

Table 3. Work Value Ranking Overall and by Country

Composite Work Values	Overall Ranking	China Ranking	Thailand Ranking	Germany Ranking	Netherlands Ranking
Intrinsic Motivation (IN)	1	1	1	1	1
Stability (ST)	2	2	2	2	2
Extrinsic Motivation (EX)	3	3	7	5	6
Altruistic (AL)	4	4	3	4	5
Supervisory Facilitation (SU)	5	5	5	3	4
Social Engagement (SO)	6	7	4	6	3
Leisure (LE)	7	6	6	7	7

Table 4. Individual Work Value Ranking Overall and by Country

Individual Work Value	Overall Ranking	China Ranking	Thailand Ranking	German Ranking	Netherlands Ranking
Learning (IN1)	1	3	2	3	1
Promotion (EX2)	2	1	5	1	3
Visible Results (IN3)	3	6	3	2	2
Future (ST3)	4	4	1	7	9
Money (EX1)	5	2	10	8	4
Benefits (ST2)	6	5	4	6	7
Creativity (IN4)	7	7	6	15	5
Sustainable Skills (IN2)	8	8	7	12	10
Time (LE2)	9	10	9	11	15
Support (SU3)	10	11	16	4	8
Retirement (ST1)	11	13	12	10	14
Vacation (LE1)	12	15	18	5	12
Worthwhile (AL1)	13	9	19	14	18
Helpful (AL2)	14	17	8	13	16
Common Interests (SO3)	15	12	17	18	17
Friends (SO1)	16	19	14	17	11
Instruction (SU2)	17	14	13	20	19
Feedback (SU1)	18	20	15	9	13
Contact (SO2)	19	21	11	16	6
Respect (EX4)	20	16	21	19	20
Status (EX3)	21	18	22	21	21
Pace (LE3)	22	22	20	22	22

A comparison between the construct and individual work value rankings reveals that, while some constructs are ranked relatively high, considerable variation is found in the rating of the values constituting those constructs. This is particularly the case for *extrinsic motivational values (EX)*, which are ranked third at a construct level. While *promotion (EX2)* and *money (EX1)* are considered highly important by Gen Z students, the other two extrinsic values, *respect (EX4)* and *status (EX3)*, are shown to be deemed some of the least important in this study. *Stability values (ST)* are ranked second in the construct ranking, but the findings indicate retirement is considered less important than *future (ST3)* and *benefits (ST2)*. Although *leisure values (LE)* are found to be least important to Gen Z students as a construct, the underlying values of *time (LE2)* and *vacation (LE1)* are ranked much higher than *pace (LE3)*, which is the lowest rated individual work value.

The results of this study's multinational sample partly confirm the mononational work value ranking of Maloni, Hiatt and Campbell (2019). For instance, *promotion (EX2)* and *future (ST3)* were ranked second and fourth respectively in both studies. However, notable differences are found as well in the importance Gen Z students attached to particular work values. The most important value in this study, *learning (IN1)*, was ranked sixth in the Maloni research, whereas *visible results (IN4)*, the top-rated value among American students, ranks third in the present study. *Support (SU3)* and *retirement (ST1)* are deemed considerably less important by the multinational sample, while *time (LE2)* was ranked in the top 10 of measured work values but placed lower in the Maloni study.

The main findings of this study in terms of the importance Gen Z business students attach to continuous learning and growth as well as the need for career advancement are corroborated by Fraticova and Kirchmayer (2018) and Deloitte's Millennial Survey (2018). They found these work values to positively contribute to work motivation. As staff turnover is high among Gen Z, retaining them is essential in the increasingly competitive competition for human capital.

4 CONCLUSION AND FURTHER RESEARCH

One of the primary objectives of this study was to determine the suitability of the measurement approach of work values in an internationally comparative context. As can be seen from the results, the internal consistency of the measures was found to be acceptable, and, as such, it can be concluded the measurement approach is appropriate in an internationally comparative context.

Further, the results of this exploratory study show that nationality serves as a key differentiator in terms of Gen Z work value preferences and desirability. Learning and visible results appear to have near universal appeal, however, for all other work values measured considerable variation was found in how these were rated across the four nationality groups.

These findings underscore the importance of managing diversity in multinational organizations and of having a thorough understanding of value differences among the multinational workforce. This suggests that a uniform corporate approach to managing global HR and work design is ill-advised. Attention should be paid to accommodating differences on the work floor in order to ensure long-term Gen Z employee engagement and retention.

The present study did not examine variation in terms of work value preferences within nationality groups. Over the past decade cross-national research has increasingly concentrated on exploring levels of cultural tightness within countries, inspired by Gelfand et al. (2011), in order to better understand the normative structure of nations and their acceptance towards deviant

behavior. Future research should examine cultural tightness as this will allow for a better understanding of dynamic local contexts.

Another aspect meriting further exploration is the influence of other control variables, e.g. gender, work experience, experience abroad, on Gen Z work value preferences. This will enable a more comprehensive examination of factors impacting Gen Z perceptions and expectations of the world of work. Furthermore, this will allow globally active organizations to better understand their current and prospective employees and create workplace conditions that enable them to thrive.

This study's sample was comprised of different sizes for the different nationality groups, which can be considered an important limitation. Therefore, future research should ensure a more balanced sample to safeguard the representativeness of results.

REFERENCES

- Altman, Steven A and Phillip Bastian (2020), "DHL Global Connectedness Index 2020 – The State of Globalization in a Distancing World."
- Beugelsdijk, Sjoerd, Tatiana Kostova, and Kendall Roth (2017), "An overview of Hofstede-inspired country-level culture research in international business since 2006," *Journal of International Business Studies*, Palgrave Macmillan Ltd.
- Beugelsdijk, Sjoerd and Chris Welzel (2018), "Dimensions and Dynamics of National Culture: Synthesizing Hofstede With Inglehart," *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 49 (10), 1469–1505.
- Deloitte (2018), "2018 Deloitte Millennial Survey: Millennials disappointed in business, unprepared for Industry 4.0."
- Dolot, Anna (2018), "The characteristics of Generation Z," *e-mentor*, (74), 44–50.
- Fratrličová, Jana and Zuzana Kirchmayer (2018), "Barriers to work motivation of Generation Z Strategic Human Resource Management View project Barriers to work motivation of generation Z," *Journal of Human Resource Management*, XXI (2), 28–39.
- Gaidhani, Shilpa, Lokesh Arora, and Bhuvanesh Kumar Sharma (2019), "UNDERSTANDING THE ATTITUDE OF GENERATION Z TOWARDS WORKPLACE," *International Journal of Management, Technology and Engineering*, IX (1), 2804–12.
- Gelfand, Michele J., Jana L. Raver, Lisa Nishii, Lisa M. Leslie, Janetta Lun, Beng Chong Lim, Lili Duan, Assaf Almaliach, Soon Ang, Jakobina Arnadottir, Zeynep Aycan, Klaus Boehnke, Pawel Boski, Rosa Cabecinhas, Darius Chan, Jagdeep Chhokar, Alessia D'Amato, Montse Ferrer, Iris C. Fischlmayr, Ronald Fischer, Marta Fülöp, James Georgas, Emiko S. Kashima, Yoshishima Kashima, Kibum Kim, Alain Lempereur, Patricia Marquez, Rozhan Othman, Bert Overlaet, Penny Panagiotopoulou, Karl Peltzer, Lorena R. Perez-Florizno, Larisa Ponomarenko, Anu Realo, Vidar Schei, Manfred Schmitt, Peter B. Smith, Nazar Soomro, Erna Szabo, Nalinee Taveesin, Midori Toyama, Evert van de Vliert, Naharika Vohra, Colleen Ward, and Susumu Yamaguchi (2011), "Differences between tight and loose cultures: A 33-nation study," *Science*, 332 (6033), 1100–1104.
- Hofstede, Geert (1980), *Culture's Consequences: International Differences in Work-Related Values*, Sage.
- Keller, Scott and Mary Meaney (2017), "Attracting and retaining the right talent," (accessed February 25, 2021), [available at <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/organization/our-insights/attracting-and-retaining-the-right-talent>].

- Kirkman, Bradley L., Kevin B. Lowe, and Cristina B. Gibson (2017), "A retrospective on Culture's Consequences: The 35-year journey," *Journal of International Business Studies*, Palgrave Macmillan Ltd.
- Lyons, Sean, Chris Higgins, and Linda Duxbury (2009), "Work Values: Development of a New Three-Dimensional Structure Based on Confirmatory Smallest Space Analysis," *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 31, 969–1002.
- Maloni, Michael, Mark S. Hiatt, and Stacy Campbell (2019), "Understanding the work values of Gen Z business students," *International Journal of Management Education*, 17 (3).
- Minkov, Michael (2018), "A revision of Hofstede's model of national culture: old evidence and new data from 56 countries," *Cross Cultural and Strategic Management*, 25 (2), 231–56.
- O'Boyle C, Atack J, and Monahan K (2017), "Generation Z enters the workforce Generational and technological challenges in entry-level jobs A Deloitte series on Future of Work."
- Randstad (2016), "Gen Z and Millennials Collide at Work."
- Schroth, Holly (2019), "Are you ready for gen Z in the workplace?," *California Management Review*, 61 (3), 5–18.
- Schwartz, S H (1994), "Are There Universal Aspects in the Structure and Contents of Human Values?," *Journal of Social Issues*, 50 (4), 19–45.
- Song, Mi Kyung, Feng Chang Lin, Sandra E. Ward, and Jason P. Fine (2013), "Composite variables: When and how," *Nursing Research*, 62 (1), 45–49.
- Taber, Keith S. (2018), "The Use of Cronbach's Alpha When Developing and Reporting Research Instruments in Science Education," *Research in Science Education*, 48 (6), 1273–96.
- Twenge, Jean and Stacy Campbell (2008), "Generational Differences in Psychological Traits and Their Impact on the Workplace," *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, 23, 862–77.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

Composite Work Value	Individual Work Value	Wording in survey
Intrinsic Motivation (IN)	Learning (IN1)	A job where you can learn new things, learn new skills
	Sustainable Skills (IN2)	A job where the skills you learn will not go out of date
	Visible Results (IN3)	A job where you can see the results of what you/they do
Stability (ST)	Creativity (IN4)	A job where you have the chance to be creative
	Retirement (ST1)	A job with a good retirement plan
	Benefits (ST2)	A job with a good health care and benefits plan
	Future (ST3)	A job that offers a reasonably predictable, secure future
Extrinsic Motivation (EX)	Money (EX1)	A job which provides you with a chance to earn a good deal of money
	Promotion (EX2)	A job where the chances for advancement and promotion are good
	Status (EX3)	A job that has high status and prestige
Altruistic (AL)	Respect (EX4)	A job that most people look up to and respect
	Worthwhile (AL1)	A job that is worthwhile to society
Supervisory Facilitation (SU)	Helpful (AL2)	A job that gives you the opportunity to be directly helpful to others
	Feedback (SU1)	A job where you receive frequent feedback on your work
	Instruction (SU2)	A job where you receive detailed instructions for your/their work
Social Engagement (SO)	Support (SU3)	A job where your supervisor supports your personal commitments
	Friends (SO1)	A job that gives you a chance to make friends
	Contact (SO2)	A job that permits contact with a lot of people
Leisure (LE)	Common Interests (SO3)	A job where you have common interests with co-workers.
	Vacation (LE1)	A job where you have more than two weeks' vacation
	Time (LE2)	A job which leaves a lot of time for other things in your life
	Pace (LE3)	A job with an easy pace that lets you work slowly

Scale: 1–not important, 2–somewhat important, 3–important, 4–very important, 5–essential