



Research Article

The Motivation of Generations: What Drives Generation X, Y, Z?

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Abstract

Generations X, Y, and Z are shaped by different groups which, at the stage of developing their personality, prepared for work and entered the labor market under various socio-economic conditions. This resulted in differences not only in behavior but also in preferences in terms of motivation. Knowing the motivations of each group allows you to improve human resource management. The aim of the study is to determine to what extent generational differences have an impact on the perception of the tools used in the motivational process. This study presents the results of an expert opinion poll and a survey conducted among 227 employees of project teams, in which the participants were asked to assess the importance of financial and non-financial factors in motivating employees from Generations X, Y, and Z. The gathered responses allowed us to identify differences between the cohorts in terms of their perception of these tools. The respondents regarded financial factors (particularly, a salary increase) as the most important motivational tools. On the other hand, the most frequently mentioned non-financial incentives were working in a well-coordinated team and opportunities to improve skills and qualifications through participation in training and language courses.

Keywords: motivation, diversity management, Generation X, Generation Y, and Generation Z, human resources management

Introduction

Numerous theories of motivation analysed in several studies (Sitopu, Sitingjak and Marpaung, 2021)(Asalamah and As'ad, 2021)(Pak *et al.*, 2019)(Lengnick-Hall *et al.*,

2009) indicate that an increased motivation for work brings positive effects both for employers and employees (Amorós, Cristi and Naudé, 2021)(Suhada *et al.*, 2021)(Sitopu, Sitingjak and Marpaung, 2021)(Sohail *et al.*, 2014)(Block and

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Wagner, 2010) in terms of lower employee turnover and greater work efficiency. Meanwhile, a number of other studies (Gabrielova and Buchko, 2021)(Sakdiyakorn, Golubovskaya and Solnet, 2021)(Bento, Martinez and Martinez, 2018)(Shirish, Boughzala and Srivastava, 2016)(Greenwood, Gibson and Edward F. Murphy, 2008) highlight the existence of both characteristics and differences between Generations X, Y, and Z. More detailed analyses providing a more in-depth understanding of this problem remain limited (Kian and Yusoff, 2012)(Bencsik, Horváth-Csikós and Juhász, 2016).

The current situation on the labour market poses many challenges for enterprises. As a result, companies are being forced to revise their ways of operating and react quickly to changes. In addition, increasing pressure from employees and competition between employers for their services mean that strategies of human resource management often have to be adapted to the prevailing business environment. Nowadays, a company's personnel policy requires constantly monitoring trends on the labour market, tracking changes and planning based on manageable human resources (Marzoch, 2019). This marks a departure from the psychological perspective of universalism, which assumes that people have a similar structure of needs that motivates them to behave in a certain way, which in turn justified the need for standardised strategies, processes and human resource management tools. It also takes into account the systemic and situational approach, assuming that contextual factors are important in defining strategies, processes and methods of human resource management as well as incentive systems (Pocztowski, 2019).

Hitherto research suggests that despite the similarities they share, significant differences exist between generations and the diversity of a company's employee structure is a key factor that should be taken into account when formulating human resource management strategies. Due to the fact that employee expectations vary, identifying these expectations is

essential. Once this condition is fulfilled, it becomes possible to model incentive systems that can increase the likelihood of achieving planned results (Staško, 2014).

In the present paper, an attempt was made to identify the particular characteristics of generations and to examine employees' preferences regarding motivating tools. The aim of the study is to determine to what extent generational differences have an impact on the perception of the tools used in the motivational process.

Implementation of the research goal was based on the hypothesis that motivating tools should be selected on a case-by-case basis and take into account the characteristics of Generation X, Y, and Z employees.

In light of the above, the following research questions were adopted:

1. What different impact do motivators have on employees from Generations X, Y, and Z?
2. How do employees' perceptions of motivators vary depending on their membership of Generations X, Y, or Z?

To answer the goal and research questions, the following methodological stages were adopted: 1. a classic analysis and evaluation of the literature on the subject, including the issues of motivation, motivation tools, and characteristics of Generations X, Y, and Z; 2. The development of a research tool together with an assessment of the methodological correctness of the research; 3. the preparation of a standardized questionnaire; 4. the conducting of the survey among 227 employees of project teams; 5 an analysis of the results and the drawing of conclusions.

Review of the Literature

Over the years, the role of people in enterprises and the ways in which human resources are managed have changed considerably (Pocztowski, 2019). By incorporating the findings of research in the field of psychology into the management sciences, a platform was

obtained for developing and putting into practice the ideas of the behavioural school, important from the point of view of human resource management and motivating employees.

The very concepts of motivation and motivating tools have been defined in various ways (Stasško, 2014). Researchers interpret motivation as a process that governs choices, and this process may be internal or external to the individual. It inspires enthusiasm and persistence in achieving the set goal. Without providing a detailed interpretation here, we will assume that motivation refers to a person's intensity, direction and persistence in their efforts to achieve a specific objective (Fuller, Valacich and George, 2008), while motivating tools are a conscious and deliberate process of influencing the motives behind people's behaviour by creating the means and opportunities for implementing their value systems and expectations (goals of activities) to achieve motivating goals (Borkowska, 1985). Motivation systems are deliberately selected sets of motivating tools, applied in accordance with the principle of cooperation and operating in line with a company's adopted strategy (Koprowicz, 2005). These sets should be diverse in character and their final shape should be determined by the following variables: organization strategy, resources, characteristics of the organization, employee, environmental, and cultural conditions (Koprowicz, 2005)(Sikorski, 2004)(Karaś, 2003)(Borkowska, 1985). Depending on the specific situation, the type and importance assigned to such tools can be shaped accordingly.

The authors of the research are of the opinion that incentive systems should be tailor-made according to the needs, preferences and characteristics of employees based on their membership of Generation X, Y, or Z. Regardless of the final choice of tools, several principles of such a system should be indicated:

- the reward should be appropriate to the effort made;

- employees should be treated as people with their own individual needs and preferences;
- motivating actions should reward above-average performance;
- the frequency with which employees are rewarded should be timed appropriately;
- motivating staff should be based on a situational and systemic approach;
- the time between completing a task and receiving a reward should be relatively short;
- employees should be rewarded for their actual impact on the results of tasks;
- employees should be given a choice of possible rewards.

As a consequence, a properly developed incentive system should not only take into account the above principles, but also encompass certain motivators, which can be divided into three groups:

- a. coercive tools (prohibitions, orders, recommendations, instructions, regulations);
- b. incentive-based tools:
 - a. material:
 - financial: fixed (basic salary, functional allowance, internship allowance), movable (bonus, cash award, jubilee award), deferred (savings account, share in profit, shares, bonds, pension plan, insurance policy)
 - non-salary benefits (company car, service coupons, mobile phone, housing assistance, loans, season tickets)
 - b. non-material benefits - promotion, modification of work content, flexible working hours, good work relations, company's reputation
 - c. tools of persuasion - appealing, negotiating, understanding, advising, informing, making suggestions (Koprowicz, 2005).

In recent years, there has been growing interest in research that focuses on intergenerational differences in values and attitudes. A generation is a cohort of individuals grouped by age and shares the historical and social experiences, behaviours and beliefs common to that

time (Cole, Smith and Lucas, 2002). Within the scope of studies, the generation which was born between 1925-1945 was named as 'Traditionalists' silent generation and it was not subject of studies too much since it is regarded as a generation which does not have major effect. The generation which was born after World War II and therefore has the name of 'Baby Boomers' includes people born between 1946-1964 and representatives of this generation are regarded as those who are retired or about to retire today. The greatest aim of the generation which was born between 1965-1979 and named as 'X Generation'. The generation which was born between 1980-2000 was named as 'Millennials' or as 'Y generation'. The generation which was born between 2001-2010 was named as 'Z Generation', colloquially also known as zoomers. The last generation, which was born between 2010-2020, is the technology generation and named as 'Alpha Generation' (Berkup, 2014).

The Big Crew Change refers to the departure of the oldest generation of employees in industry and the influx of the next, younger generation. The term is commonly used in the US to describe the

retirement of the Baby Boomers and the entry of Generation Y (Gen Y) into the workforce (Lim, 2012). Therefore, we can assume that a generation constitutes the totality of individuals born and living at the same time. Belonging to a particular generation is determined not only by the year of an individual's birth but also by the community of experiences shaped by a specific society (Giddens, 2012). In addition to a person's year of birth, this definition draws attention to an important aspect, namely the dependency of experiences occurring in society at a specific time. The literature on the subject indicates a number of differences between generations with regard to particular characteristics. However, there have been only limited attempts to provide a general overview of these characteristics. This is due to the considerable influence exerted by the context of life, work, and socio-economic and cultural conditions. Therefore, it is imperative that local research takes into account such implications. For example, the intergenerational characteristics in Poland are closely related to the political aspect and the economic situation. The main features of Generations X, Y, Z in Poland are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Main characteristics of Generations X, Y and Z

Generation X	Generation Y	Generation Z
Diligence	Creativity	Entrepreneurship
Communicativeness	Impatience	Need for feedback
Loyalty	Average loyalty	The "here and now" generation
Skepticism	Indecisiveness	Pragmatism
Monotasking	Multi-tasking	Multitasking
Independence	Tech-savvy	The ability to connect the virtual and real worlds

Source: Author's own table based on (Wiktorowicz et al. 2016).

The Generation X cohort comprises people who experienced the effects of the economic crisis in the 1970s, and in Poland, their outlook was also shaped by the political system prevailing at that time. It is interesting to note that the age range of this generation includes both people who experienced the communist regime and those who only reached preschool or early school age during this period. This generation had the opportunity to reach maturity in the 1990s, i.e. age of economic

and technical progress (Wiktorowicz et al. 2016). As was noted by L. Weroniczak (Weroniczak, 2010), Poland's Generation X is not typical of its counterparts elsewhere and has few features in common with the prototype from the United States.

Based on the research (Szkudlarek, 2011), the following typical features of Poland's Generation X can be identified: work style, salary expectations, attitude to authorities and hierarchy, separation of working time

and private life, ways of communicating with others, loyalty to one's company, IT competences, an ability to adapt to change, determination, efficiency, loyalty to one's employer, diligence and even workaholism and the ability to work in a team. Education and skills are extremely important. As a consequence, members of this generation show a willingness to continue their education, adopt a task-oriented approach to work, seek opportunities for self-development, and exhibit the qualities of reliability and independence (Armstrong and Kotler, 2016)(Wiktorowicz *et al.* 2016). A very important issue is the value of community and the opportunity to cooperate in a team. The need of members of this generation to hold down a job in which they have a sense of security means they have low trust in their superiors and a rather pessimistic approach to the work environment (Walków, 2020). Members of this generation tend to place professional duties over personal life, resulting from their desire to ensure a decent standard of living for their families (Szymczyk, 2018).

The main factors shaping the outlook of Generation Y are the newly emerging capitalist system and the development of technology. As a result of the collapse of communism, which marked the beginning of the economic transformation, and access to the Internet, Generation Y in Poland acquired new experiences somewhat later than its Western counterparts (Olbrychowski, Arak and Lipiec, 2018). The predominant characteristics of Generation Y employees are flexibility, creativity, an openness to change, advanced digital skills, an ability to learn quickly, an ability to work in a multitasking mode, overconfidence, a reluctance to conform to rigid rules as well as impatience, limited decision-making abilities and being easily fatigued (Hysa,

2016)(Rapacka - Wojdat, 2016)(Zych, 2017). This generation greatly appreciates the opportunity to manage their free time and develop their passions, as well as engage in socially responsible and voluntary activities during their work. Maintaining a work-life balance is very important for this group.

Generation Z, on the other hand, grew up in a period when capitalism was more fully developed and with universal access to technology. Increasing digitization and automation have changed their image of the world and have blurred the boundary between the virtual and the real worlds. This requires multitasking and flexibility. The defining characteristics of this generation are pragmatism, the rapid acquisition of knowledge and essential competences, effective and quick decision-making skills, the absence of formal authority, the need for mentoring, impatience and a strong appetite for risk (Koprowska, 2019)(Zdrojewska - Madura, 2017)(Wiktorowicz *et al.* 2016).

The above-mentioned features are not a closed set. However, due to limited publication possibilities, the focus was on those features that are most representative. To fully illustrate the issue, it is worth viewing the above issues from the perspective of the structure of the population. Poland has a population of just under 38 million, with the median age of men and women in 2018 being 39.3 and 42.6, respectively ('Rocznik demograficzny 2019', 2019). The generational quantitative and percentage distribution presented in Figures 1 and 2 shows the current situation on the labour market, which should be determined, *inter alia*, by taking into account the factor of age in formulating motivation systems.

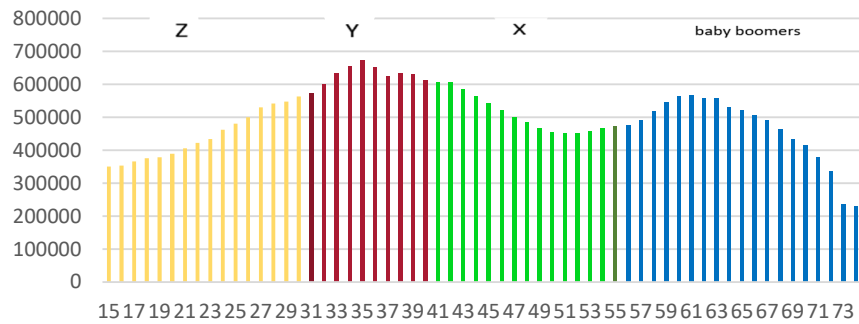


Fig 1. Breakdown of generations in Poland 2018

Source: Authors' own figure based on ('Rocznik demograficzny 2019', 2019).

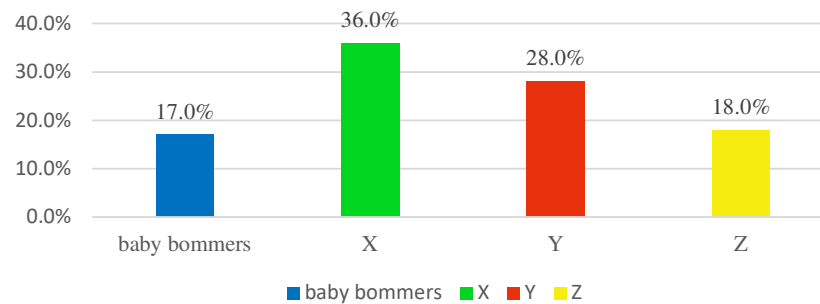


Fig 2. Intergenerational economic activity rate between cohorts in Poland in 2019

Source: Authors' own figure based on (Rocznik Statystyczny Pracy 2019, 2019).

The percentage of economically active Poles is highest among Generation X, followed by Generation Y and then Generation Z, whose members are the youngest and are only just entering the market. This structure is relatively positive in terms of economic activity. However, there is a clear need to understand what motivates the above-mentioned groups in the work environment. Such an approach will make the recruitment process more efficient and ensure appropriate working conditions.

Methodology

The empirical research presented in this article is regional in its scope. It covered 227 people working in project teams in companies located in Poland. In the first

stage of the research, based on an analysis of the subject literature, the authors selected the motivators featured in motivation systems and used this as a basis for establishing a list of leading motivators. In the present study, this list was prepared by researchers from the Cracow University of Economics and project team leaders. The task of the experts was to choose the most important factors motivating employees to work and invest more effort in their work. In the next step, those factors mentioned the most by the respondents were then selected and the final list of 14 motivators was drawn up. It included: a salary increase, a discretionary bonus, an annual bonus, purchase vouchers, social benefits (e.g., subsidised private holidays in the countryside), trust at work, recognition from one's superiors, working in a

harmonious team, additional health insurance, benefit programs, access to private health care, additional pension schemes, social gatherings for staff members (St. Nicholas' Day, integration meetings) as well as industry and language training. All the above-mentioned motivators were included in the questionnaire. The empirical study was conducted in January and February 2020 using a diagnostic survey for the needs of

which a CAWI (Computer Assisted Web Interview) questionnaire was prepared. It was posted on an Internet platform and was addressed to an economically active group working in project teams. The questionnaire consisted of 18 questions with open and closed answers and included normative, quantitative, single and multiple-choice question forms. The characteristics of the participants are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Characteristics of the participants

Factor	Subgroups	Number of Participants	Percentage
Gender	Female	142	63%
	Male	85	37%
Age	< 20	89	39%
	21-41	100	44%
	42-56	34	15%
	>57	5	2%
Seniority	> 5	38	16,74%
	5-10	74	32,6%
	10-15	68	29,96%
	<15	47	20,7%
Position	Team leader	43	19 %
	Manager (without a team)	33	15 %
	Specialist	119	52 %
	Technical	14	6 %
	Administrative	14	6 %
	Other	4	2%

Source: Authors' own research.

The first part of the study was aimed at identifying the important role played by motivation in the professional lives of the respondents and their current levels of motivation. Next, we focused on the task of examining the respondents' preferences regarding the types of motivational tools.

Research Results

The importance of motivation for the three different groups is as follows: X - 99%, Y - 95% and Z - 92%. At the same time, 7% of the Generation Z respondents considered motivation as having no impact on their professional work, but only 1% regarded it as completely irrelevant. Some 3% of the Generation X respondents believe that motivation has no or very little influence on

their work. A downward trend can be observed between groups, although it is difficult to state categorically whether age is a determinant shaping perception of motivation as an important factor increasing the attractiveness of the workplace and improving motivation.

The next step was to determine the level of the respondents' satisfaction with current incentive systems. For this purpose, the NPS (net promoter score) indicator was used, whereby the respondents determine on a scale of 0 to 10 to what extent he/she is satisfied / would recommend to other people the motivation system in operation in his/her place of employment.

Based on the results thus obtained, the respondents were divided into three groups: "Promoters" – people with scores in the range of 9-10, "Critics" – people with scores in the range of 0-6 who reject particular solutions, and "Neutrals", i.e., people with scores in the range of 8-7. The NPS ratio is calculated by subtracting the percentage of responses from "Critics" from the percentage of responses from "Promoters" according to the following formula:

$$\text{NPS} = \% \text{ Promoters} - \% \text{ Critics}$$

The NPS ratio ranges from -100 to 100, with higher values indicating a higher level of satisfaction with the system (Hall, 2009). Based on the above formula, NPS levels were calculated for each group participating in the study. The results are as follows:

The NPS ratio for generation X was 3%, while for both Generations Y and Z it was 5%.

According to the literature, a very good result should be in the region of 50%. On the other hand, the average percentage for companies in the US oscillates between 5% and 10%. Research carried out in Polish enterprises shows similar values (Hall, 2009).

The results of the present study show that the respondents' level of satisfaction with their current incentive systems is high only in the case of Generations Z and Y. It can therefore be concluded that the incentive systems implemented in the surveyed companies fulfil their functions. Interestingly, the satisfaction of members of Generation X with the incentive systems of their companies was below average. It is important to note here that determining the reasons why the oldest employees in the survey were not satisfied with their current incentive system does not fall within the scope of the study.

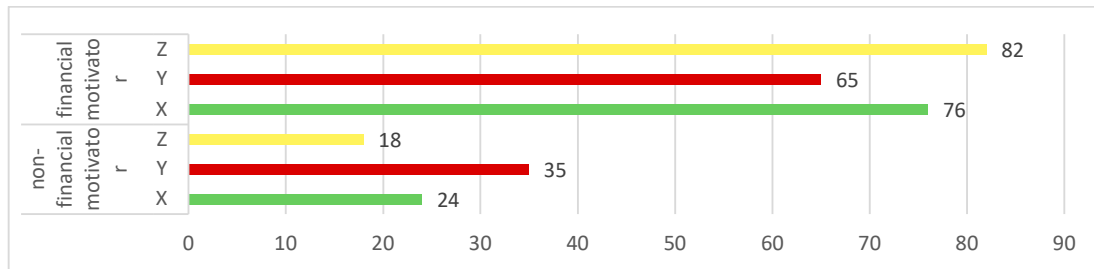


Fig 3. The preferences of employees from Generations X, Y and Z regarding financial and non-financial motivators

Source: Authors' own figure based on the research.

Our study also included an assessment of the impact of the motivational factors identified by experts on the effectiveness of project tasks. A five-point rating scale was

adopted, where 1 denotes the least impact and 5 the greatest. Figure 4 shows the results obtained for the financial factors.

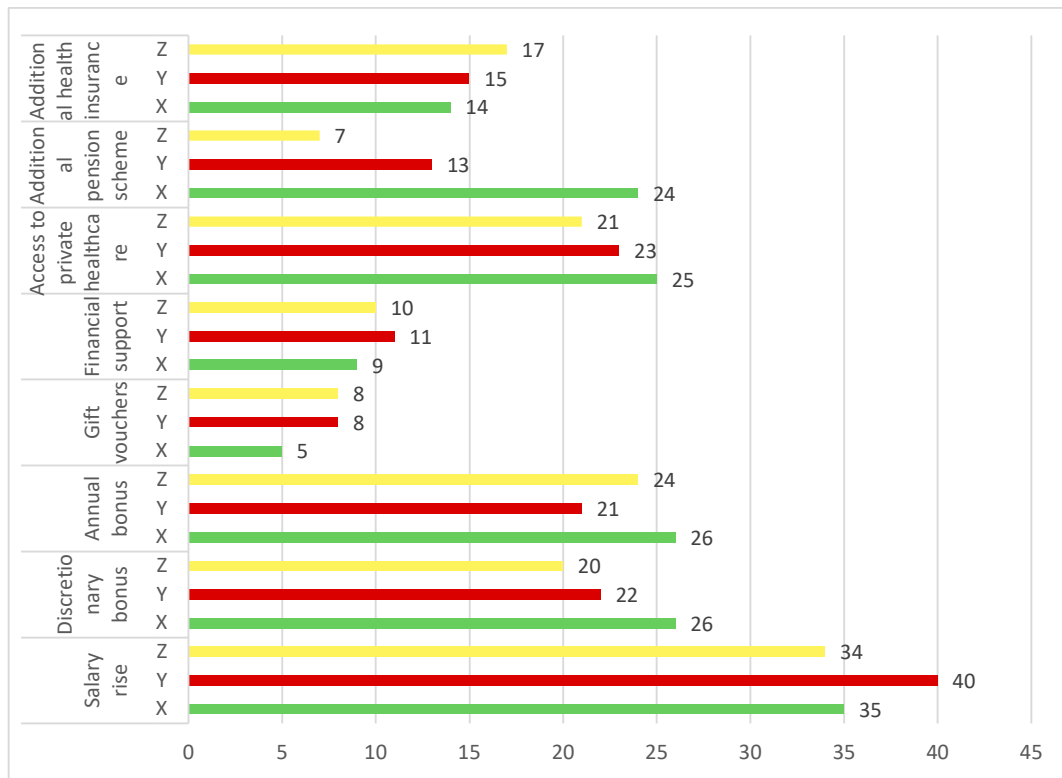


Fig 4. The preferences of employees from Generations X, Y and Z regarding financial motivators

Source: Authors' own figure based on the research.

The results clearly indicate that all three groups of employees prefer financial gratification in the form of a salary increase. This option was most preferred by Generation Y respondents (40%). The corresponding percentages for members of Generations X and Z were above 30% in both cases. In turn, motivators in the form of discretionary rewards, access to additional private healthcare, and annual bonuses received a similar number of responses. The least popular motivators are various types of social benefits and vouchers. The other motivating tools mentioned were, in order of importance: additional health insurance, and pension scheme.

If we take into account the fact that the importance of material motivators in shaping the feelings of employees depends primarily on the general economic situation of the country (region) and has a

direct impact on the level of wages, it seems that our results confirm this rule. A negative correlation was observed between salary levels and the importance of salary factors (when salaries are low, material factors are relatively more important). It is worth noting that material motivation is directly or indirectly related to remuneration. However, an effective employee motivation system should not be based solely on salaries. Hence, when constructing such a system, it is important to take into account non-salary material factors. Their role is primarily to instil in employees a sense of importance and belonging to the organization and to ensure that effective work is a guarantee of success for both parties.

As was rightly noted by W. Tokarska-Ołownia (Tokarska – Ołownia, 2019), over the last dozen or so years, there has been increasing interest in non-material forms of

motivation in Poland, among employers, managers and employees. However, the question of which motivators are more effective is unclear because it is a very individual matter.

The respondents were also asked to assess the attractiveness of non-salary motivators indicated by independent experts on the initial stage (Figure 5).

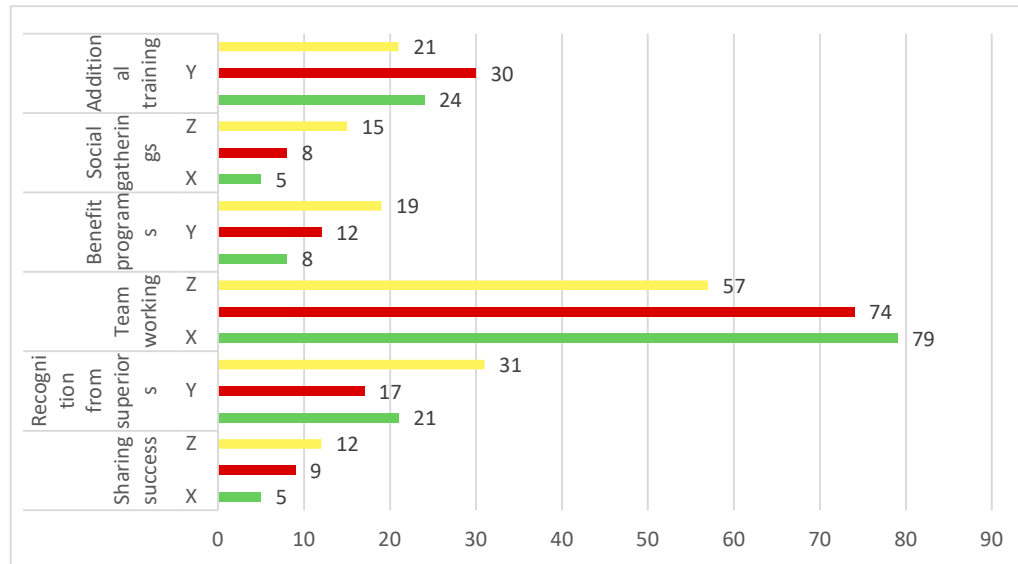


Fig 5. The preferences of Generations X, Y and Z employees regarding non-financial motivators

Source: Authors' own figure based on the research.

Our research highlights the wide-ranging preferences of the different groups. Among the non-financial factors, Generation X's preferences were fairly even. The most important motivators are: work in a well-coordinated team, industry and language training, and recognition from superior, representing 79%, 24% and 21% of the respondents' answers respectively. These in turn were followed by the following incentives: benefit programs (8%), sharing success, and employee integration meetings, which were highly rated by only 5% of the respondents.

On the other hand, the most sought-after incentives among the younger generation were: work in a close-knit team (74%), additional training (30%). The other motivating tools mentioned were, in order of importance: recognition from superior (17%), benefit programs (12%) and integration meetings (8%).

In turn, the preferences of Generation Z were very evenly distributed. The most highly valued motivator was teamwork (57%), followed by access to additional training (21%) and other benefit programs (19%). The least valued motivator, mentioned by just 12% of the respondents, was the possibility of sharing success with team members.

The most desirable motivator of all was working in a well-coordinated team. Interestingly, however, its importance decreased with the age of the respondents. The ability to share success with other team members is considered the least important motivator. On the other hand, earning the recognition of one's superiors and being motivated by one's immediate superior are more important factors for younger people. Another curious observation is the importance of language training among Generation Y employees compared with Generation X, although the

latter group should consider it a more important factor due to the education system and age.

Conclusion

The research indicates differences between the respondents' preferences when it came to the attractiveness of different motivational tools depending on their membership of Generation X, Y or Z. Importantly, motivation understood as a general concept designed to regulate behaviour so as to satisfy needs and achieve a set goal had the same significance for all the respondents. Neither education, type of position held, nor the role played by a given person in a project played a significant role. In our study, the vast majority of representatives of all three generations consider motivation to be vital, and they appreciated the role of external motivation as well as the role of their immediate supervisors in the entire process.

Only the respondents from Generations Z and Y were satisfied with their current incentive systems. The respondents belonging to Generation X rated their satisfaction as below average. It is important to point out here that determining the reasons why the oldest employees are not satisfied with their current systems does not fall within the scope of the study.

The results of the research provide a basis for identifying differences in the degree of employee engagement in tasks performed in projects after working hours. All the respondents accepted a one-off situation where they would be required to stay at work in order to continue project implementation. On the other hand, only members of the oldest group, which was most willing to make sacrifices, would tolerate such a situation being repeated.

When it comes to choosing between financial and non-financial incentives, we can see that financial factors were much more important. In turn, working in a well-coordinated team is by far the most motivating non-financial factor. The

distribution of preferences in relation to financial tools observed in our study did not differ from other studies of this type. Financial gratification was the motivational tool preferred by all respondents, regardless of their membership of Generation X, Y, or Z. This appears to be related not only to the characteristics of a given group, but also to economic and social conditions in Poland. Most of the respondents, regardless of their group affiliation, mentioned the possibility of improving their skills and qualifications through training as well as access to healthcare.

Our research shows that despite many common features shared by all three generations, it is worth highlighting the differences between them that may become key to building individualized incentive systems that can shape effective and efficient human resource management strategies. These conclusions also open the way for further research. Firstly, although our study featured a large sample of 227 people and is not representative of all employees working in project teams, its results are largely consistent with other studies. However, it will be interesting to see these results in the context of countries with different income levels, environmental factors and cultural backgrounds. In the modern, culturally diverse world, it would be advisable to use such a set of tools that would take into account the heterogeneity of the recognized values and needs of people employed by an organization (Zielak, 2012).

Although we found many common features, it is worth carrying out in-depth research that takes into consideration such factors as project type, employment form, an employee's gender, situation or professional status, and expanding the results by means of e.g., structural equation modelling. Such an approach would provide a platform for creating a model that takes into account hidden (unobservable) and formative variables, indirect effects and intergroup comparisons. Another possibly interesting subject for further research would be a detailed analysis of

employee satisfaction with current incentive systems performed within particular generations.

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