

Young Adults in the Polish Labour Market: Challenges, Expectations and Development Prospects*

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Abstract

The contemporary labor market is undergoing intensive transformations resulting from technological progress, globalization processes, demographic changes, and socio-cultural transformations. Young adults constitute a particularly significant group of labor market participants, whose attitudes, expectations, and professional behaviors differ significantly from the patterns represented by previous generations of employees. The aim of this study is to analyze the situation of young people in the Polish labor market, with a particular focus on the representatives of Generation Z, and to identify the key challenges and prospects associated with their professional activity. The paper utilizes the method of literature review and the desk research method, which consists of analyzing secondary data derived from industry reports, institutional documents, and scientific publications. Special attention was dedicated to the results of the report titled "Gen Boost. Youth Redefine Work", which enabled an in-depth analysis of young employees' expectations toward contemporary organizations. The conducted analysis indicates that for representatives of Generation Z, flexible forms of work organization, opportunities for continuous professional development, maintaining a work-life balance, as well as functioning in a work environment based on partnership, transparency, and mutual respect are of paramount importance. Simultaneously, young workers face numerous challenges stemming from economic uncertainty, rising competition in the labor market, the dynamic advancement of technology, and the necessity of constantly upgrading professional qualifications.

Keywords: young people, labor market, Generation Z

Introduction

The issue of young people's functioning in the labor market constitutes one of the most vital areas of contemporary socio-economic research. This arises from the fact that the process of young individuals entering the labor market determines not only their individual professional and economic situation, but also influences the pace of the state's economic development, the level of enterprise innovation, and the stability of social systems. In conditions of progressive digitization, automation of work processes, and dynamic organizational changes, significant transformations are observed regarding the methods of performing work, employee expectations, and human resource management models. Generation Z holds particular significance in this context, as it is gradually becoming one of the most numerous groups participating in the labor market. Representatives of this generation were raised in conditions of universal access to the Internet, mobile technologies, and social media, which has influenced their perception of social and professional reality. Consequently, their expectations toward employers, methods of work organization, and career development paths differ from the expectations of previous generations. The primary objective of this study is to identify the determinants of young people's functioning in the Polish labor market and to analyze the key challenges and developmental prospects associated with the professional activity of Generation Z representatives. The realization of the research objective was subordinated to the following research questions:

- What are the most important characteristics of the contemporary labor market affecting the situation of young adults?
- What expectations toward work and employers do representatives of Generation Z present?
- What barriers and challenges hinder young people from functioning in the labor market?
- In what ways can organizations effectively leverage the potential of young employees?

To implement the research assumptions, the method of scientific literature analysis and the desk research method were applied, encompassing the analysis of institutional reports, statistical data, and expert studies regarding the labor market and the situation of young people in Poland. The applied desk research method enabled the inclusion of a broad socio-economic context and the comparison of results from various empirical studies, which increased the credibility and multidimensionality of the reasoning. At the same time, it should be emphasized that the adopted methodology involves limitations resulting from the lack of direct contact with respondents and the inability to verify primary data. Consequently, the conclusions are of an interpretative and synthetic nature, rather than statistically generalizable. Despite these limitations, the applied research approach allows for a reliable analysis of contemporary trends in the labor market and the identification of key challenges related to the functioning of young people in the professional environment. The choice of the desk research methodology is particularly justified in the context of dynamically changing socio-economic conditions, in which access to up-to-date secondary data constitutes an essential source of knowledge about the investigated phenomenon.

The Labor Market and Its Contemporary Developmental Determinants

The labor market constitutes an integral element of the economic system and is a specific type of market within which processes related to hiring and dismissing employees occur. As Męcina (2018) indicates, the labor market should be understood as “an economic, social, and political area in which all processes regarding broadly defined employment and unemployment are realized”. The key factors conditioning the functioning of the labor market are the relationships between labor supply and demand, as well as the level of remuneration and employment conditions. Labor supply refers to the labor force asset, encompassing individuals who are working or ready to undertake employment at a specific wage level. On the other hand, labor demand signifies the requirement declared by employers, i.e., the number of employees they are willing to hire at a given wage rate (Kryńska, Kwiatkowski, 2013). The essence of the labor market's functioning is the interaction between labor supply and demand within a specific timeframe (Lichniak, 1995), which implies that this market constitutes a space where their balancing occurs (Kabaj, 1997).

The labor market possesses a specific character because its object is work, whereas the subject offering it is a human being. This means that decisions regarding professional activity are closely linked to individual choices of the unit, encompassing, among others, the educational path or career development strategy (Lichniak, 1995). The result of the interaction between labor demand and supply is of fundamental importance for the level of wages and the offered conditions of employment (Jarmołowicz, Szarzec, 2008). The inability to fully separate work from the person of the employee ensures that individual factors, such as personality traits or predispositions, influence work outcomes. Consequently, the possibility of full substitution of labor resources and their predictability is limited. In this context, the role of the state in the labor market extends beyond a regulatory function and includes also actions related to providing social security, improving market functioning, and striving to maximize the level of employment (Szyłko-Skoczny, 2018).

The contemporary labor market is undergoing intensive transformations resulting from dynamic technological, economic, and social changes that affect both the forms of work organization and employee expectations. The key tendencies observed in recent years include the growing importance of remote and hybrid work, the popularization of flexible forms of employment, an increase in the role of digital competences, and the necessity of continuous improvement of professional qualifications. In response to growing competition, organizations implement innovative management solutions, including structures with a lower degree of hierarchization and transformational leadership (Warwas, Rogozińska-Pawelczyk, 2016). Progressive digitization and the development of artificial intelligence constitute some of the most important factors shaping the contemporary labor market (PARP, 2024). These technologies affect not only production processes, but also the business models of enterprises and the methods of cooperation between employees. Simultaneously, they contribute to an increase in requirements for employees, who must constantly update their competences and adapt to the changing work environment (PwC, 2021).

A significant manifestation of these changes is the dynamic development of remote and hybrid work models, the intensification of which occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic. These forms provide greater flexibility for both employees and employers, enabling a better alignment of work organization with individual needs. PwC

research from 2021 indicates that in Poland, the hybrid model, combining remote and on-site work, is most frequently preferred. It allows for reconciling the benefits of office work, such as effective team cooperation, with organizational flexibility that meets employee needs. At the same time, new forms of work entail specific challenges, among which the risk of social isolation, difficulties in maintaining a work-life balance, and limited access to direct support from co-workers are mentioned. Consequently, organizations increasingly undertake actions aimed at supporting the psychological well-being of employees and building a work environment conducive to their engagement (Hays, 2026).

According to the Hays report (2026), contemporary trends in the labor market are largely determined by the development of new technologies. Among the most important directions of change, the following are indicated:

- the growing importance of occupations related to the use of artificial intelligence,
- process automation, which may limit the entry opportunities of young individuals into the labor market,
- an increase in the importance of cybersecurity in organizational management,
- a deterioration of employee morale resulting from phenomena such as technostress or FOMO.

From the perspective of enterprises, this implies the necessity of intensifying actions towards employee qualification enhancement (reskilling and upskilling), as well as modifying recruitment strategies by searching for flexible individuals capable of rapid learning. Concurrently, a decline in the availability of job offers for individuals starting their professional careers is observed, which constitutes a significant challenge for young labor market participants. The development of new technologies also causes an increase in pressure felt by employees, associated with the fear of non-adaptation to the changing market requirements. Under such conditions, adaptive capacity, understood as the ability to rapidly adjust to new tools, procedures, and work models, acquires particular importance. Employees characterized by high flexibility and stress resilience are perceived as especially valuable to the organization (Hays, 2026). Consequently, the development of soft skills, encompassing, among others, communication, cooperation, and creative problem-solving, plays an increasingly vital role. Organizations investing in the development of these skills achieve a higher level of employee engagement and better economic results. Simultaneously, it becomes essential to promote the idea of lifelong learning, which enables the adaptation of qualifications to the changing needs of the labor market. The importance of education as a factor supporting innovation and competitiveness of the economy is widely emphasized in the literature (PARP, 2021). Particular attention is drawn to the necessity of adapting educational systems to labor market requirements and developing digital and technological competences, which constitute the foundation of functioning in the modern economy.

Generational Diversity in the Labor Market and the Situation of Young Adults in Poland

Generational theory constitutes an important analytical tool utilized in research on social behaviors and the functioning of individuals in the labor market. In management sciences, it finds the application in the analysis of differences in values, attitudes, and work styles among generations of employees. According to the classical approach of Karl Mannheim, a generation is defined as a group of people born in a similar historical period who experience similar socio-cultural events, which influences their way of perceiving reality (Mannheim, 1952). The commonality of historical, technological, and economic experiences fosters the formation of specific generational traits, which are also reflected in the work environment. In Polish literature, the importance of this perspective in the analysis of human resource management is emphasized (Jabłońska, 2016).

The concept of young people is not unambiguous and can be considered from several perspectives (Mazurkiewicz, 2021):

- demographic - encompassing individuals aged 15-24,
- educational - referring to pupils and students, and economic - defining youth as professionally active individuals aged 18-24.

In a broader sense, young people are individuals in the period of transition from childhood to adulthood, the boundaries of which are determined by, among others, the completion of formal education or obtaining citizenship rights (Skórska, 2016). Labor market analysis most frequently takes into account a division into four basic generations: the baby boomers generation, Generation X, Generation Y, and Generation Z. The differences between them stem from distinct socio-economic experiences that determine their way of thinking, values, and approach to work (Czerwińska-Lubszczyk, Jankowiak, 2024). The following approximate birth ranges are assumed (Czerwińska-Lubszczyk, Jankowiak, 2024):

- baby boomers (1946-1964),
- Generation X (1965-1980),
- Generation Y (1981-1996), and
- Generation Z (1997-2012).

However, it should be emphasized that these boundaries are conventional and may differ depending on the adopted criteria and the socio-economic context (Maziarz, Wojtowicz-Żygadło, 2023).

The baby boomers generation is characterized by a high level of loyalty toward the employer, attachment to employment stability, and relatively low professional mobility. Their approach to work often has a traditional character, and their engagement in professional duties is very high (Przytuła, 2019). Generation X, on the other hand, places emphasis on hard work and commitment as the basis for professional success, while simultaneously recognizing the importance of superior authority and organizational stability (Przytuła, 2019). Representatives of

Generation Y, referred to as millennials, raised in conditions of globalization and the development of information technologies, display greater openness to changes and a stronger orientation toward competency development. They are characterized by striving for work-life balance and a lower propensity to commit long-term to a single employer (Chester, 2007; Paszkiewicz, Wasiluk, 2022; Konkel, 2023).

The youngest generation in the labor market, Generation Z, was raised in an environment heavily saturated with digital technology, which significantly influences its social and professional functioning (Przytuła, 2019). This generation is also referred to as generation “C” (connect, communicate, change), which highlights its continuous presence in the digital space and openness to changes (Nowicka, 2025). At the same time, an excess of informational stimuli may negatively affect the capacity for concentration (Konkel, 2023). The core characteristics of Generation Z include, among others, technological proficiency, strong individualization, realism orientation, and a high need for achievement, as well as functioning in the conditions of the digital economy and a high propensity for independent action (Stillman, Stillman, 2017). Representatives of this generation are creative and flexible, yet simultaneously they may experience difficulties in long-term focus of attention and feel uncertainty regarding the future (Nowicka, 2025). In the work environment, young employees attach great importance to the possibilities of professional development, acquiring new competences, and employment flexibility. Work-life balance and concern for mental health are also of vital importance to them (Zieleniewska, Samul, 2025; Konkel, 2023). They expect transparency, clear rules of cooperation, and open communication within the organization (Bartczak, Szymankowska, 2021). Simultaneously, they demonstrate greater sensitivity to evaluation and stress, alongside a need for recognition of individuality (Konkel, 2023). The situation of young adults in the Polish labor market is diversified and depends on many socio-demographic factors. Statistics Poland (GUS, 2025) data indicate that in 2024, the economic activity rate in the 15–34 age group was 63.0%, and the employment rate was 59.8%. Despite a relatively low unemployment rate (5.1%), it was higher than for the overall population. A significant portion of young individuals remains economically inactive, primarily due to continuing education (77.4%) (GUS, 2025). An important phenomenon is also the NEET category, encompassing individuals who are Not in Education, Employment, or Training. In contrast to classical unemployment, these individuals often do not undertake active measures to find a job (Liszka, 2016). Studies indicate that belonging to this group may be associated with negative social and psychological consequences, such as lowered self-esteem or social exclusion (Gunnes et al., 2025).

Adaptive and Competency Challenges of Young Employees in the Work Environment

The previously presented characteristics of Generation Z implies that its entry into the labor market constitutes a significant challenge both for employers and management staff. This stems from the fact that certain traits of this generation may hinder the smooth functioning of an organization. Among the most frequently indicated problems are an insufficient level of consistency, self-discipline, patience, and perseverance, as well as a limited inclination to subordinate to formal organizational rules. Attention is also drawn to relatively higher expectations toward employers and a lower level of loyalty toward the workplace. Representatives of this generation may exhibit difficulties in accepting criticism, while simultaneously displaying an elevated sense of self-worth. In some cases, they also prefer their own comfort over professional demands, which can lead to formulating unrealistic expectations. Furthermore, the literature indicates a propensity for risk-taking, difficulties in independent decision-making, problems in direct interpersonal relationships, and a limited capacity to resolve daily conflicts (Kawka, 2021). An important challenge also remains the changing competency requirements in the labor market, among which soft skills, such as assertiveness, creativity, analytical and logical thinking abilities, and the capacity

to function under conditions of stress and time pressure, are gaining increasing significance. Simultaneously, intensive online communication and excessive use of technology can lead to information overload. Consequently, a decline in productivity, difficulties with concentration on executed tasks, limited effectiveness of team cooperation, as well as problems in conducting face-to-face interactions are observed (Nowak, 2025).

In recent years, communication difficulties in relationships with representatives of Generation Z have also been increasingly emphasized. Management staff and individuals responsible for organizational communication signal the escalation of communication barriers in contacts with young employees. These problems negatively affect the functioning of enterprises, contributing to a reduction in work efficiency, the level of engagement, and team creativity. Therefore, it becomes necessary to introduce changes both in the scope of applied forms of communication and the quality of communication processes in organizations, especially those that strive for effective cooperation with representatives of Generation Z (Sulyma, 2022).

With the emergence of the new generation of employees, organizations were forced to verify their previous human resource management practices and methods of building relationship between the employer and the employee. The results of the Hays report "Gen Boost. Młodzi na rynku pracy" ("Gen Boost. Youth in the Labor Market") (2025) indicate that despite the growing presence of young people in the labor market, numerous discrepancies still occur between the expectations of Generation Z representatives and the beliefs of employers regarding their needs, motivations, and method of professional functioning. One of the most significant problems identified in the report is the occurrence of a perceptual gap between young employees and employers. Analysis of the research results indicates that many organizations still base their HR activities on stereotypical perceptions regarding Generation Z. Young workers tend to be perceived as excessively demanding, impatient, focused on immediate benefits, and reluctant to commit long-term to the life of the organization. Meanwhile, research results show that the significant part of Generation Z representatives expect, first and foremost, transparency, fair treatment, development opportunities, and clear rules of cooperation. These discrepancies can lead to the emergence of organizational misunderstandings, a decline in the level of job satisfaction, and increased employee turnover. The lack of proper recognition of the young generation's needs hinders the design of effective motivational strategies and the building of sustainable organizational commitment. Consequently, enterprises may experience difficulties related to attracting and retaining talent, which in conditions of labor shortages becomes a critical strategic issue.

The report indicates that one of the most important expectations of young employees is the opportunity to utilize flexible forms of work organization. For representatives of Generation Z, flexibility constitutes not so much an additional benefit, but rather one of the fundamental conditions for attractive employment. This expectation arises from a distinct approach to professional and private life. Young people do not treat work as a dominant element of their social identity, but rather as one of the areas of functioning that should remain in balance with other spheres of life. In practice, this implies the necessity of redesigning many organizational processes and departing from the traditional management model based on strict control of working time toward management by objectives and results.

The possibility of professional development constitutes one of the key factors influencing the career decisions of Generation Z representatives. Young employees demonstrate high awareness of the dynamic changes occurring in the labor market and realize the necessity of continuously updating their competences. The results of the report show that a lack of development prospects is one of the main factors prompting young employees to search for a new place of employment. This means that organizations should treat investments in employee competency development not as a cost, but as a strategic element of building a competitive advantage. An important area analyzed in the report is the issue of professional promotion. Research results indicate that usually young employees attach great importance to career development opportunities and regularly receiving information regarding their professional prospects, and a significant portion of young individuals interprets the lack of promotion as a signal of limited development opportunities within a given enterprise.

One of the most important challenges of the contemporary labor market is becoming the concern for the psychological well-being of employees. Generation Z is the first generation entering the labor market that openly communicates the importance of mental health, counteracting professional burnout, and the necessity of maintaining a balance between professional and private life. Young employees more frequently than previous generations pay attention to the work atmosphere, the level of support from superiors, and the organizational culture of the enterprise. As a result, organizations are forced to implement new management tools encompassing psychological support programs, activities related to employee well-being and building a work environment conducive to a sense of security and belonging.

Final Conclusions and Implications for Economic Practice

The conducted analysis allows to state that the contemporary labor market is in a phase of intensive changes resulting from technological progress, globalization processes, demographic changes, and the evolution of employee expectations. A particular role in these processes is played by young people entering the labor market, who are gradually becoming one of the most important groups shaping the future of employment. Their attitudes, values, and expectations influence not only the functioning of enterprises, but also the directions of development of contemporary human resource management models. Verification of the adopted research questions allows to state that the situation of young people in the labor market is determined by many interrelated factors. The most important include technological changes, educational level, access to professional development opportunities, employment conditions, and the organizational culture of enterprises. At the same time, it was confirmed that representatives of Generation Z attach particular importance to the possibilities of acquiring new competences, flexibility of work organization, and maintaining a work-life balance. This means that contemporary organizations should depart from traditional management models based on hierarchy and control toward an approach that incorporates employee autonomy, cooperation, and competency development.

It is worth emphasizing that young people do not exclusively constitute a group requiring support in the process of entering the labor market, but are also an important source of innovation, creativity, and new ways of thinking about work organization. Thanks to their high technological proficiency, openness to change, and ability to quickly acquire information, they can effectively support enterprises in digital transformation processes and building a competitive advantage. The condition for utilizing this potential, however, is the creation of a work environment enabling development, co-determination, and the realization of individual professional aspirations. In conclusion, it can be stated that the future of the labor market will be significantly shaped by representatives of Generation Z and subsequent generations of employees raised in a digital environment. Organizations that can identify the ongoing changes early enough and adapt their human resource management strategies to the new expectations of employees will possess greater capabilities to attract and retain talent.

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