

Rethinking Human Capital Management in the Age of Generation Z

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Rethinking Human Capital Management in the Age of Generation Z

A CROSS-CULTURAL
PERSPECTIVE
FROM POLAND
CROATIA
AND PORTUGAL

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Preface

SEA-EU is an alliance of nine coastal universities from across Europe that creates a shared space for advancing education, research, skills, and cross-border relationships. Partners from Algarve, Bodø, Brest, Cádiz, Gdańsk, Kiel, Malta, Naples, and Split work to fulfil the vision of a truly European University – open, international, sustainable, and driven by innovation.

SEA-EU is one of the pioneers in the European Universities Initiative, which started in 2019. The community – 150,000 students and 18,000 staff members – is working towards ambitious objectives such as the European Degree Label for joint bachelor and master programmes, a legal status for the Alliance and increasing overall mobility across the Alliance by 50%.

The Alliance is committed to creating a new model of education and academic exchange that will enhance the competitiveness of European higher education, support student and staff mobility, and ensure the highest quality of teaching and scientific research. Additionally, each of the nine SEA-EU partner universities works closely with businesses, local authorities, academic staff, and research institutions to find solutions to contemporary social challenges.

This monograph is the outcome of a sustained process of scholarly collaboration that emerged not from a single, predefined research project, but from a sequence of academic encounters, exchanges, and jointly undertaken activities facilitated by the **European University of the Seas alliance (SEA-EU)**. Within this institutional framework – designed to foster academic mobility, interdisciplinary dialogue, and long-term research cooperation – the foundations were laid for a shared analytical reflection on contemporary challenges in human capital management.

The contributing authors, affiliated with the **University of Gdańsk**, the **University of Algarve**, and the **University of Split**, established their collaboration through SEA-EU initiatives that enabled systematic comparison of labour market dynamics and organizational practices across national contexts.

Introduction

In the face of accelerating technological disruption, demographic transformation, and globalisation-driven volatility, organisations worldwide are rethinking the foundations of human capital management (HCM). The rise of Generation Z, a digitally native, socially conscious, and psychologically attuned cohort, marks a profound shift not only in the composition of the workforce but in the strategic imperatives shaping leadership, culture, and value creation in contemporary organisations.

This monograph explores how Generation Z's entry into the labour market is prompting a redefinition of HCM priorities and practices. More than any previous generation, Gen Z challenges legacy models of human resource management (HRM) by demanding flexible work structures, meaningful engagement, value alignment, and wellbeing-centric environments (Zain et al., 2025). These generational expectations intersect with broader shifts – from hierarchical to agile organisational cultures, from control to trust-based leadership, and from transactional human resources (HR) to strategic, inclusive human capital development (Brown, 2025).

Crucially, this transformation is not uniform across geographies. National culture, institutional heritage, labour market conditions, and organisational traditions shape how different societies respond to the generational shift. To understand these dynamics, this monograph adopts a cross-cultural comparative lens, focusing on three European countries – Poland, Croatia, and Portugal – that share commonalities in generational transformation but diverge in cultural, economic, and organisational trajectories. The dynamic evolution of labour markets, accelerated by technological innovation, globalisation, and profound demographic transformations, has fundamentally redefined the foundations of HCM (Schuler et al. 2011; Sparrow et al. 2016). Organisations around the world are increasingly challenged to navigate the complexities of managing multigenerational workforces, where each generation – from Baby Boomers to Generation Z – brings distinct expectations, experiences,

and values that shape the culture and functioning of contemporary organisations (Ng & Parry, 2016). Notably, the emergence of Generation Z as a significant labour market cohort is reshaping traditional HCM paradigms. As digital natives, Gen Z employees place exceptional value on flexibility, inclusion, mental wellbeing, technological fluency, and authenticity in leadership (Twenge, 2017; Deloitte Report, 2024).

Generation Z differs markedly from previous cohorts in several ways. As digital natives, they expect seamless technological integration within their professional environments (Microsoft Report, 2023; Gallup Report, 2024). Furthermore, this cohort places a higher priority on authenticity, social impact, diversity, and mental health far more than previous generations (Kuron et al., 2023; Deloitte Report, 2024). According to PwC (2023), over 70% of Gen Z employees actively seek employers whose values align with their own, and more than 60% consider mental health support to be a critical factor when choosing an employer. Moreover, Schroth (2019) argues that Gen Z values flexibility in work arrangements to a much greater extent, viewing hybrid and remote work as baseline expectations rather than perks. Their expectations toward employers, perceptions of career success, and attitudes toward the working environment differ significantly from those of previous generations. Effectively understanding and addressing these differences is essential for organisations seeking to build resilient, innovative, and future-ready human capital strategies (Lyons & Kuron, 2014; Meister & Mulcahy, 2016).

In this context, the interplay between national culture, organisational culture, and generational diversity becomes critically important (Hofstede, 2001; House et al., 2004). With their distinct socio-economic trajectories, demographic profiles, and organisational traditions, countries such as Poland, Croatia, and Portugal offer valuable insights into how human capital strategies must adapt to evolving workforce expectations (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005).

Recognising the need for empirical grounding, this monograph includes a pilot empirical study designed to explore the expectations of future labour market participants regarding HCM practices. The research focuses on graduates of management and economics faculties from three universities: the University of Gdańsk (UG, Poland), the University of Algarve (UAlg, Portugal), and the University of Split (UNIST, Croatia).

The study has been conducted through a survey-based qualitative-quantitative approach with an aim to provide an initial diagnosis of:

- Attitudes and behaviours in workplace environments (Cennamo & Gardner, 2008);

- Expectations toward employers and employment conditions;
- Perceptions and definitions of career success among emerging professionals (Sullivan & Baruch, 2009).

By analysing the perspectives of young graduates at the outset of their professional careers, the research seeks to capture early signals of how Generation Z's aspirations may influence future HCM models in different national contexts. Although exploratory in nature, the findings are expected to offer valuable insights into designing more adaptive, inclusive, and generation-sensitive HCM strategies (Rudolph et al. 2021). Through the comparative lens of Poland, Croatia, and Portugal, this monograph aims to identify both universal determinants and culturally conditioned factors shaping HCM in the era of generational diversity. The analysis draws on current empirical research, strategic HRM frameworks, and industry best practices, offering guidance for scholars, HR professionals, organisational leaders, and policymakers navigating the challenges of an increasingly multigenerational workforce.

The principal aim of the empirical component of this monograph is to conduct a pilot diagnosis of the expectations, attitudes, and behavioural patterns of emerging labour market participants – specifically, recent graduates of management and economics faculties – regarding HCM practices.

Focusing on the Generation Z cohort, the research seeks to:

- Identify key expectations toward employers, including desired employment conditions and organisational attributes;
- Understand perceptions of career success and work-related values among future employees;
- Explore preferred models of workplace behaviour and intergenerational interaction (Gursoy et al., 2013);
- Analyse initial differences and similarities in these areas across three national contexts: Poland, Portugal, and Croatia.

The study aims to provide early empirical insights into how Generation Z may shape the evolution of HCM strategies in different cultural and organisational environments, serving as a foundation for further, broader research on intergenerational management and diversity-driven HRM practices.

Structured in fourteen chapters, the monograph builds a multi-dimensional perspective on HCM in the age of Generation Z. Chapters 1–3 provide the theoretical and contextual groundwork by tracing the evolution of the HR function, delineating generational cohorts, and identifying key determinants of HCM for Gen Z. Chapters 4–6 explore how typologies of organisational culture and Hofstede's Competing Values Framework and Cameron and Quinn's

cultural dimensions influence generational expectations and HRM practices. The core of the monograph, Chapters 7–11, presents national case studies for Poland, Croatia, and Portugal, analysing labour market dynamics, cultural shifts, and the emergence of Gen Z within distinct organisational ecosystems.

The comparative synthesis in Chapter 12 identifies common trends and contextual divergences, offering a panoramic view of how Generation Z reshapes the employment landscape across cultures. This is followed by a detailed empirical study (Chapter 13) based on survey data from graduates of management and economics faculties in the three countries. Finally, Chapter 14 consolidates the findings into forward-looking recommendations for building adaptive, inclusive, and sustainable HCM models capable of engaging a generationally diverse workforce, especially dedicated to Gen Z.

In reframing HCM through the lens of Generation Z and cultural diversity, this monograph contributes to both academic discourse and practical strategy. It offers insight for scholars, HR professionals, policy-makers, and institutional leaders who seek to navigate the complexities of multigenerational, culturally diverse work environments – and to do so in a way that positions human capital not merely as a resource, but as a strategic driver of resilience, innovation, and organisational renewal.

In researching and analysing topics related to HCM, the labour market, and the characteristics of different generations, two key dimensions are certainly present: the global that identifies and studies common, universal traits and principles, and the local that examines local specific features (either at the level of individual countries, different segments of the labour market, individual generations, or different combinations thereof). The selection of countries included in this research certainly enables both a rich comparative study of local specificities and a synthetic exploration of global values and principles.

Given that the results presented in this work constitute the first stage of a joint research project by the authors, which is planned to be continued and expanded, and given the limitation of the scope and time available for this work, the authors have deliberately chosen to give priority to the global dimension and global approach.

Poland, Portugal, and Croatia constitute an excellent combination of countries with rich and diverse specificities in terms of both the local spectrum of thought on HCM (in both theoretical and practical terms), historical and cultural differences and characteristics, as well as recent directions and results of development in the economic, social, political and scientific fields.

Therefore, research conducted in these countries offers broad opportunities for comparative research from the perspective of local specificities. The authors of this paper are keenly aware of this, and exploring this aspect is the planned next step in their long-term research collaboration project.

To conclude the introductory part, it is worth noting that this monograph is not only the result of joint research efforts undertaken by academic institutions from Poland, Croatia, and Portugal within the SEA-EU Alliance of European coastal universities but also a tangible testament to the idea – firmly rooted in numerous theories of HCM – that building interpersonal relationships and fostering a friendly, inclusive work environment form the synergistic foundation of any effective teamwork.

In this spirit, I, Tomasz Kawka, as the initiator and originator of our joint research and publishing endeavour, would like to express my deepest gratitude to those without whom this work would not have been possible: to Professor Srećko Goić from Split, to Professor Joaquim Contreiras from Faro, and to the talented young doctoral researcher Diogo Bento – for your invaluable contributions, your commitment, your intellectual inspiration, and, above all, your outstanding collaboration.

Most importantly, throughout our work on this book, as well as through joint educational projects and meetings organised under Erasmus programmes, you have become my trusted friends – individuals I can always rely on. I truly believe that this rarely visible, yet profoundly meaningful, added value has shaped the very essence of this publication: that the synergy of a collaboration rooted in genuine friendship has helped us unlock the full potential of our competencies, and has allowed us to address the complexity of the research questions with the depth and coherence that now lie before the reader in the pages of this volume.

This collaborative endeavour thus exemplifies the very principles we investigate: that meaningful professional relationships and supportive environments are fundamental to achieving excellence in HCM, particularly in our rapidly evolving organisational landscape shaped by generational transitions.

The preparation and the format of this work was limited by the available space and time, which made it impossible to provide deeper and more detailed analyses in some areas. The opportunity given to the authors by the University of Gdańsk to publish this monograph imposed clear limitations both in its scope (i.e., the length of the book acceptable to the publisher) as well as time (the monograph had to be ready for publication within only three months after the end of the empirical pilot research phase). These were

the reasons that determined that in some matters it was not possible to go into deeper and more detailed analyses. Nevertheless, as mentioned before, the authors are fully aware of the breadth of the observed issues and the richness and specificity of the experiences of individual countries involved in the research, and are committed to the idea of continuing the research and publishing more detailed research results.

In the end, the authors would like to thank the Reviewer for his strong support and very valuable developmental suggestions, which not only significantly improved the final design of this monograph but also provided strong and clear guidelines that will serve as our roadmap for future work.