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Chapter 7

Adapting HRM Practices for Generation Z with a Human-centric Management Approach to Mental Health and Employee Development



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7.1. Introduction

In Chapter 2, we explored employee loyalty and performance within human-centric organizations, highlighting how workplace environments and psychological underpinnings influence these dynamics. Building on the exploration of psychological impacts in organizational contexts as seen in Chapter 5, which examines the resilience and psychological commitment of soldiers during the pandemic and the war in Ukraine, and continuing through the discussion in Chapter 6 on managing knowledge worker turnover in SMEs, this chapter shifts the focus towards the specific needs and expectations of Generation Z employees. These sequential insights into the psychological aspects of employee management across different contexts underscore the importance of addressing psychological needs to enhance commitment and performance in varied employment scenarios.

In the modern business environment, a significant shift towards human-centric management practices is redefining the landscape of organizational behavior and human resources. This shift represents a move away from traditional, transactional management styles toward a more holistic approach that places the well-being and individual needs of employees at the

forefront (Contreras-Cruz et al., 2023). Such practices are not just about enhancing productivity – they are about creating a more fulfilling and empathetic workplace where employees feel genuinely valued and understood.

This transformation is critical in addressing the needs of the newest entrants to the workforce, Generation Z. As digital natives, these young workers bring new expectations into the workplace, including a demand for a balance between personal and professional life, a need for meaningful and ethically aligned work, and a preference for environments that prioritize their mental and emotional well-being. These expectations challenge organizations to rethink how they engage with their employees, emphasizing the necessity for human-centric HR practices that not only attract but also retain young talent.

We are entering a time when the humanistic aspects of human resources management (HRM) are becoming particularly important (Cooke et al., 2022). The youngest workers in the job market exhibit specific personal needs related to the workplace. The risk of excessive individualism, job turnover, lack of engagement in duties, or lack of recognition of leadership authority poses a serious threat to achieving organizational goals. Effective implementation of HR policies involves focusing attention not only on behavioral motivational aspects but primarily on humanistic aspects related to personal development and self-realization. It should also be sensitive to the psychological needs of the younger generation, especially those at risk of mental health issues.

Given these shifts towards a more empathetic, individual-focused approach and considering the unique needs and values of Generation Z, it becomes imperative to explore how HR practices must transform. Thus, **the main goal of the chapter** is to make preliminary findings on how HRM practices need to evolve to effectively address the unique characteristics and needs of Generation Z in the era of human-centric management.

7.2. The Theoretical Framework for the Study

In establishing the theoretical framework for understanding Generation Z within HRM, this section considers several critical issues. We explore the redefinition of mental health in a digital era, emphasizing the necessity of navigating online interactions and real-world connections for Generation Z's well-being. Additionally, the adaptation of HRM practices, such as training and development programs, must align with Generation Z's technological adeptness and communication preferences. The integration of their values—such as sustainability, social justice, and work-life balance—into HRM activities and strategies is essential for effectively engaging this young workforce in the human-centric management era.

Addressing mental health from the perspective of human-centric management is crucial because it directly influences the productivity, creativity, and overall satisfaction of employees, particularly those from Generation Z who are entering the workforce with new expectations and experiences. By prioritizing mental well-being within the framework of HRM, organizations not only enhance the personal and professional lives of their employees but also position

themselves to thrive in a competitive and rapidly changing business environment. This approach is essential as it aligns organizational goals with the well-being of individuals, thereby fostering a resilient and adaptive workforce capable of navigating the complexities of the modern world.

However, mental health is not simply the absence of illness but rather a continuous effort towards maintaining psychological well-being. While traditionally mental health has often been defined negatively as the absence of mental disorders, it is now increasingly understood as a positive state, encompassing the ability to cope with daily challenges, build positive relationships, make effective decisions, and achieve life goals (American Psychological Association, 2018).

The definition of mental health may evolve in the context of new generations, as the demands and challenges individuals face change (Rogozińska-Pawełczyk et al., 2019). For Generation Z, growing up in a digital environment, it may be important to consider the impact of social media and technology on their mental health. Therefore, the definition of mental health may expand to include the ability to cope with the negative influences of social media, manage screen time, and develop skills for building satisfying relationships in the virtual world (Mohite and Kulkarni, 2019). Furthermore, as society becomes increasingly aware of the importance of mental health, this definition may also encompass aspects related to self-acceptance, developing coping skills for stress, and building resilience (Molek-Winiarska, 2014). As a result, the definition of mental health is likely to evolve to better reflect the needs and challenges of new generations and changing social and cultural contexts.

In the context of Generation Z, who may rely heavily on digital communication, developing these face-to-face communication skills could be particularly relevant for their mental health and overall well-being (Ono et al., 2011). Thus, the definition of mental health may emphasize the importance of fostering authentic, in-person connections alongside digital interactions (Wentzel et al., 2016). This generation faces unique challenges in the digital age, including increased exposure to social media, cyberbullying, and academic pressures. Therefore, mental health initiatives tailored to Generation Z should focus on promoting resilience, coping skills, and healthy digital habits. Additionally, fostering open communication and reducing the stigma surrounding mental health issues are crucial for supporting the mental well-being of Generation Z (Borg et al., 2020).

Characterizing Generation Z from a psychological perspective, it's important to note that they commonly face identity crisis, difficulties with direct communication, habituation to strong perceptual stimulation, and on the other hand, issues with overstimulation and depressive tendencies (Całek, 2021). Furthermore, they hold specific values related to caring for nature, the climate, and the environment; show sensitivity to social injustice; treat work-life balance as a foundation, and exhibit individualism, creativity, and a strong ability to use technology. Work for them must be attractive and interesting. The younger generation perceives the opportunity to receive feedback on their duties as a key aspect of their work (Dolot, 2018). Guidelines for preparing a job position for the new demanding generation can be found by employers in extensive scientific publications regarding the ways and methods through which the younger generation learns (Shatto and Erwin, 2016).

During the learning process, the young generation requested feedback from their teachers (Dudek, 2017). Gen Z students are digital natives who prefer an independent learning style with less passive but more visual and kinesthetic learning. They also desire convenience and are open to honest feedback (Issacs et al., 2020). Gen Z students often lack developed in-person social skills, as they may struggle with the nuances and art of conversation. This deficiency in face-to-face communication skills has the potential to hinder their ability to connect socially (Chicca and Shellenbarger, 2018; Seemiller and Grace, 2016; Turner, 2015).

An important aspect is the cultural diversity of Generation Z individuals entering the Polish job market. The conflict on the eastern border, stemming from Russia's invasion of Ukraine, has led to Poland opening its borders to refugees. Additionally, borders have been opened to immigrants from African countries. Another group of potential employees consists of individuals who have chosen Poland as a location for studying and pursuing a career for reasons other than economic ones. Experiences of war trauma are significant and have serious consequences (Tehrani, 2004). Many Generation Z workers in Poland have faced the loss of loved ones or extreme circumstances (Hysa, 2016, p. 390; Steinerowska-Streb and Wziątek-Staśko, 2016, pp. 81-82).

Integrating mental health within human-centric management for Generation Z is crucial. This approach emphasizes authentic, face-to-face interactions to complement digital communications, enhancing emotional intelligence and resilience in the workplace. By fostering a supportive culture that addresses both digital and real-world challenges, organizations can align HRM practices with the unique needs of this generation, boosting engagement, innovation, and overall job satisfaction. This alignment helps businesses thrive by embedding human-centric organizational practices that adapt to a competitive, rapidly evolving market.

In the context of the characteristics of Generation Z that have been described above, a question arises about what all this means for HRM. To answer this question, we must first establish what HRM is. Until recently, it was most commonly understood that HRM refers to the policies, practices, and systems that influence employees' behavior, attitudes, and performance (Milkovich and Boudreau, 2019), and this was about such effective HRM practices that support business goals and objectives (Dessler, 2019; Noe et al., 2019). However, there is now an increasing emphasis on a capital-oriented approach to employees in an organization (Juchnowicz, 2014), and moreover, on viewing them as people, not just as organizational resources to be exploited. Additionally, there is a focus on considering a wider range of stakeholders (Ferrary, 2005) who are interested not only in the financial results of the organization but also in its impact on the management sphere and the social realm (Ferrary, 2009), even extending to the external environment (Stahl et al., 2020). Therefore, HRM is now defined, for example, as a set of configurationally tied activities that compose certain subfunctions of HRM, are oriented toward people in the organization, and are performed with the intention of transforming human resources into such human capital that when it's used in the organizational practice, it enables people to create value added in economic, managerial, and social spheres. And as for this added value, it contributes to the company's competitive advantage in the long term through the realization of its goals and strategies in a skillful,

effective, and efficient way (Stor, 2023a, p. 4). Such an understanding of HRM has been adopted in this chapter of the monograph. Adopting this definition of HRM is crucial for aligning with the unique attributes of Generation Z within a human-centric management framework. This approach recognizes employees as whole individuals, not merely as resources, addressing their complex needs and emphasizing their well-being and personal development. Such alignment not only boosts individual productivity and satisfaction but also enhances organizational adaptability and resilience, making it essential for engaging and retaining a generation that values meaningful and supportive work environments.

There are various interpretations of the form and content of HRM. According to some authors, it involves the processes of hiring, training, evaluating, and compensating employees, as well as addressing their labor relations, health and safety, and fairness concerns (Dessler, 2020, p. 39). Other scholars emphasize not the processes but the activities encompassed by HRM in areas such as strategic HRM; human capital management; knowledge management; corporate social responsibility; organizational development; recruitment, selection, and talent management: learning and development: performance and reward management: employee relations; employee well-being; and employee services provision (Armstrong and Taylor, 2014, p. 4). Additionally, some focus on behavioral and competency issues, defining HRM as the development and implementation of human resource policies and practices that generate the competencies and behaviors needed by a company to achieve its strategic objectives (Dessler, 2020, p. 52). Meanwhile, others adopt a functional perspective in discussing HRM, frequently using interchangeable terms like personnel function or HR function. This perspective views HRM as comprising activities organized into functions, which for consistency are termed subfunctions (see: Boxall et al., 2007; Dowling et al., 2017; Listwan, 2010; Pocztowski, 2018; Stor and Haromszeki, 2020). These subfunctions might include: staffing the organization, employee training, employee development, employee compensation (compensation & pay systems, benefits), employee performance appraisal, performance management, directing people, motivating employees, leading people, communicating with employees, competency management, talent management, employer branding, fostering employee engagement & job satisfaction, enhancing organizational commitment, promoting a positive workplace experience, and fostering employee well-being. In the realm of business, managerial staff organize these subfunctions in a coherent manner that enhances the company's overall performance and outcomes (Stor, 2023c). This comprehensive understanding of HRM highlights the necessity of integrating mental health initiatives as core components of human-focused business management. For organizations aiming to be human-centric, especially with Generation Z, this means creating environments where mental well-being is actively supported and promoted as part of daily business operations, directly contributing to enhanced employee engagement and overall organizational health.

The pivotal element of achieving success of the enterprise is the set of their employees (Wachowiak, 2019). Achieving success in implementing HRM activities is associated with several key factors:

- Alignment with organizational goals. Effective personnel policy should harmonize with the organization's strategic objectives. When personnel actions support business goals, it signifies success (Dessler, 2020; Gratton and Truss, 2003).
- Efficiency in recruitment and selection: A key element of personnel policy success is the proper selection of employees with appropriate qualifications, skills and competencies (Compton, 2009; Stor, 2024a).
- Employee satisfaction and engagement: High levels of employee satisfaction and engagement indicate the effectiveness of the personnel policy, as satisfied employees are more productive and loyal to the organization (Markos and Sridevi, 2010; Stor, 2024b).
- Employee development and training: Providing employees with opportunities for development and training contributes to increasing their skills and productivity, which is a significant aspect of personnel policy success (Armstrong & Taylor, 2014; Koval, 2015).
- Effective employee performance appraisal: The employee appraisal system should be fair, objective, and based on specific assessments. Effective employee appraisal enables the identification of areas for improvement and supports employee career development (Listwan et al., 2016; Stor, 2023b).
- Employee retention: Effective personnel policy contributes to retaining talent in the organization through proper management of compensation, development opportunities, and job satisfaction (Mitchell et al., 2001; Pocztowski, 2018).
- Reduced employee turnover: Low employee turnover indicates the effectiveness of the personnel policy, as it means that employees are satisfied and loyal to the organization (McEvoy and Cascio, 1985).
- Sustainable organizational development: Personnel policy should support sustainable organizational development, considering social, economic, and environmental aspects (Mishra, 2017).

From the points raised about the key factors in implementing HRM activities, it's clear that integrating mental health initiatives is critical for achieving broader organizational success. Aligning HRM with organizational goals means not only supporting business objectives but also enhancing the psychological well-being of employees. A focus on mental health contributes to employee satisfaction, engagement, and retention, which in turn reduces turnover and builds a more resilient workforce. Effective mental health strategies within HRM ensure that employees are not only productive but also happy and loyal, creating a sustainable and supportive work environment that nurtures both individual and organizational growth. This holistic approach is particularly important in a dynamic business environment where the well-being of employees is increasingly recognized as fundamental to long-term success.

7.3. The Methodics of the Conducted Empirical Research

In order to explore the needs of Generation Z in the workplace and their attitudes towards fulfilling them, interviews were conducted with qualified coaches working as internal trainers in various companies with more than 250 employees in Poland, as well as coaches and psychologists from external firms who worked with Generation Z individuals within the last six months.

The interviewees were asked about organizational solutions related to HRM, particularly to personal development programs and the possibility of individual coaching work. In in-depth interviews, they were also asked about noticeable problems faced by Generation Z employees, potential threats to organizations related to employing Generation Z individuals, as well as diagnosing individual needs in terms of Generation Z aspirations, needs, and specific skills. Additionally, the interviewees were also questioned about their personal attitude towards the youngest employees and coaching work with them. Finally, the coaches were asked to assess the effectiveness of these interactions in working with the youngest generation in the job market.

In-depth interviews were conducted with 19 participants, and the analysis of these interviews facilitated the formulation of hypotheses for quantitative research planned for the future. This paper presents the material from the conducted interviews, aiming to verify similarities in coaching experiences with Generation Z employees and to draw conclusions for the implementation of organizational and HRM developments in the future. The study focused on the needs, aspirations, and skills to simplify the understanding of the characteristics of Generation Z, so that the data from the collected interviews could be helpful for future personnel policy planning and building the organization's image in this regard. Focusing on competency aspects, although some described categories are undoubtedly related to them, could create unnecessary clutter due to differences in purposefulness.

7.4. The Empirical Research Findings

The interview results based on the questions asked are presented in Table 16 as a matrix composed of two sets. The first set of elements covers the needs, aspirations and resources in relation to other generations. The other set covers resources, problems and challenges for the organization. The items at the intersection of rows and columns cover common points, observations and conclusions done by the interviewed people.

The specialists' reflections on achieving goals while collaborating with individuals from Generation Z provided insights into interesting phenomena. Namely, surveyed specialists agree that both coaching and psychotherapeutic work with employees from the youngest generation are highly satisfying because these individuals positively respond to such interventions and willingly engage with them. The reason for this is the current age of the subjects of interest – according to specialists, a young age favors receptiveness to psychological, coaching, and therapeutic interventions. Another reason is the issues associated with direct contact, which can be overcome through such interventions.

Table 16. The characteristics of Gen Z and related organizational challenges from the perspective of respondents

Category of thematic focus	Needs	Aspirations	Resources in relation to other generations
Resources	 Related to experiencing related to building knowledge about one's identity Caring for work-life balance The need for feedback and attention from supervisors or colleagues The need for a personal approach The need for consistent monitoring of personal commitment by the supervisor The need for sensitivity to personal issues 	 Engaging work considering specific abilities Opportunity to leverage virtual identity Remote work options in international companies Potential for rapid advancement Opportunity and desire for personal development as a determinant of professional motivation 	 Ability for empathy towards crisis situations as well as cultural and personal differences Capability to utilize new technologies Enhanced ability for communication through virtual forms with satisfaction derived from this type of communication Flexibility regarding remote work Skills in creating one's own job position
Problems	 Issues related to gender and identity identification – needs for recognition Issues regarding feelings of depression – needs for emotional support Issues related to self-worth and belief in one's abilities independent of work outcomes – needs related to self-improvement Problems in recognizing personal goals – relational needs High willingness to engage in professional development opportunities 	 Unrealistic expectations related to promotion and earnings Considering resigning from work in the face of difficulties in fulfilling duties Considering starting one's own business as opposed to meeting organizational requirements Desire for high earnings at first employment Competition with supervisors regarding the use of technology 	 Sometimes there are needs for changes in pronouns in direct communication, flexibility – remembering about changes Better knowledge and speed in using available internal technologies Greater empathy and capacity for cultural differences Reduced communication barriers and increased openness to people from other countries Lack of direct rebellion and conflict, reluctance to confrontation – permissiveness Concern for the environment Openness to working in international teams
Challenges for organization	 The possibility of providing continuous access to coaching or utilizing psychological/therapeutic services in the workplace The possibility of providing feedback after each task Scheduling work hours in a task-based and remote work system The opportunity to work in small teams for greater individual engagement by the supervisor The possibility of providing flexible remote work The need for training supervisors in coaching and mentoring to assist in setting work and personal goals 	 Providing access to programs Ability to respond to emotional crises related to employees' failure to fulfill personal aspirations Reaching a financial compromise during employment Ensuring a structure based on quick and multiple promotions Opportunity to expand cooperation to the international environment 	 Creating opportunities for realizing resources for managing differences and empathy Creating opportunities for utilizing networking solutions in work Creating opportunities for working using virtual identity Overcoming barriers when withdrawing Recognizing strengths despite symptoms associated with identification with psychopathological descriptions – acting despite identity crises unrelated to skills

Source: own empirical research.

Furthermore, aspirations related to the desire for and concern for mental health of Generation Z are associated with greater motivation linked to personal changes introduced, and these, as an inseparable part related to the work environment, influence the implementation of both HRM activities and the setting of goals and strategies of organizational HR policy, which, in the case of managing the resources of Generation Z, must take into account their needs related to personal and identity issues in terms of needs, aspirations, and unique resources.

Past traumas and personal significances also play a role in an individual's functioning in the workplace. Specialists agree that current realities are linked to the understanding of employees' needs, also from the perspective of their personal difficult experiences, especially those that have occurred on an international scale, such as war experiences, loss of loved ones and livelihoods, and personal concerns about the future.

Specialists argue that caring for mental health at various levels, including maintaining work-life balance and addressing developmental deficits, is the primary and fundamental need of Generation Z, often overlooked in HRM practices. Modern companies increasingly provide psychological, therapeutic, and coaching assistance directly in the workplace. For Generation Z employees in Poland, this is particularly crucial, given their personal difficult experiences and identity-related challenges. A humanistic understanding of HR policy is gaining more significance compared to managing previous generations. Access to assistance in setting goals, overcoming identity crises, addressing personal issues, and finding motivation to fulfill tasks while dealing with personal problems becomes the basis for employment requirements and needs, as well as for more effectively performing job duties while minimizing the risk of turnover.

Interviews with specialists demonstrate that ensuring access to mental health support can be highly effective and contribute to achieving organizational goals because overcoming personal difficulties is intertwined with professional aspirations for Generation Z employees. In this case, providing such opportunities by the organization will translate into success in implementing HRM practices related to reducing employee turnover, fostering talent assessment, and providing feedback. The effectiveness of psychological, therapeutic, and coaching interventions promotes the development of employees in both personal and professional spheres, contributing to the balanced development of organizations, social aspects, and the environment.

And finally, to effectively link the theoretical framework on HRM subfunctions and success factors discussed in the previous section with the empirical findings presented in Table 2, it's essential to illustrate how the real-world data about Generation Z's preferences and challenges informs our understanding of HRM practices. In the theoretical part of the chapter, HRM is described as a comprehensive set of practices that include recruitment, selection, employee development, performance management, and many others, all of which are crucial in influencing employee behavior and overall company performance. According to the findings, Generation Z shows a strong preference for personalized approaches in these areas. For example, their aspiration for engaging work that considers specific abilities suggests that HRM strategies need to be highly adaptable and personalized, reflecting the insights gathered about their needs for feedback and consistent monitoring by supervisors.

Moreover, the data indicates that Generation Z values a balance between work and personal life, and a desire for rapid advancement within the company. These findings can help refine HRM practices such as the development and training subfunctions. For HR managers, this means creating programs that not only advance skills but also provide clear and rapid career progression paths, tailored to the fast-paced expectations of Generation Z. Empirical data also highlights Generation Z's capability to handle crises and their high adaptability to new technologies, suggesting that they could be pivotal in roles that require managing change and technological integration. This aligns with strategic HRM that leverages human capital to achieve business goals, a key success factor outlined in the theoretical framework. Furthermore, the challenges noted in the empirical findings, such as issues related to identity and self-worth, suggest that HRM practices must go beyond traditional roles to include more support in areas like mental health and well-being. This supports the theoretical assertions that modern HRM must consider a wider range of stakeholder needs, not just traditional business outcomes.

7.5. Summary and Final Conclusions

The main goal of this chapter was to make preliminary findings on how HRM practices need to evolve to effectively address the unique characteristics and needs of Generation Z in the era of human-centric management. In terms of these evolving needs, this goal has been met, and the interpretation of these findings from the perspective of human-centric management will be conducted here.

A key finding from the empirical research is the significant preference of Generation Z for workplaces that integrate mental health, personal development, and ethical considerations into their core practices. This aligns closely with human-centric management principles, which emphasize the well-being and individual needs of employees as central to organizational success. As organizations strive to adapt their HRM strategies, it becomes imperative to shift towards practices that not only cater to these needs but also promote a culture where young employees feel genuinely valued and understood.

Adapting HRM to better fit Generation Z's expectations involves redefining traditional roles and workflows to accommodate their desire for meaningful and flexible work environments. This includes the implementation of more robust mechanisms for feedback and growth, as well as support systems that address mental health in the workplace. This evolution towards human-centric management practices underscores the necessity of transitioning from a focus on productivity alone to a more balanced approach that fosters long-term engagement and satisfaction.

Furthermore, the findings suggest that human-centric organizations are better positioned to attract and retain Generation Z talent. These organizations are characterized by their commitment to aligning business strategies with employee well-being, which not only enhances job satisfaction but also drives innovation and productivity. Therefore, creating human-centric organizational practices is not merely a response to the changing workforce demographics but a strategic approach to thriving in a competitive business environment.

In conclusion, the insights garnered in this chapter indicate that the integration of human-centric management practices within HRM is crucial for addressing the nuanced demands of Generation Z. As we look towards the future, it will be essential for organizations to continue evolving these practices to ensure they remain relevant and effective in meeting the needs of a new generation of workers. This shift towards a more human-centric approach in management not only benefits Generation Z but also enhances the overall organizational culture, promoting a healthier, more productive, and more inclusive workplace.

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