

# Remote work and Knowledge Exchange Strategies in the Opinions of Generation Z

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**Abstract:** The situation of the Covid-19 pandemic has forced many companies to switch to a remote work system. This phenomenon took a massive form in the first stage of the pandemic mainly due to the lockdown. However, in the following months, many employees found this professional arrangement convenient and conducive to the organisation of work and personal life. Remote work seems to be particularly attractive for employees of the young generation. At the same time, employers have noticed that this form of work definitely has benefits, but also brings disadvantages. Today, management practitioners are increasingly pointing to the hybrid work model as the preferred one. In order to learn about the preferences of the Generation Z employees in terms of the forms of work and their impact on various aspects of work, a survey was designed. The research was conducted in December 2021 on a sample of the Generation Z representatives with the aim to identify their attitudes and opinions about the remote type of work based on their experiences and expectations. For the research purposes, the Likert scale-based questionnaire technique was applied. The data was analysed in the STATISTICA program using Kruskal-Wallis ANOVA on ranks test, Mann-Whitney test, and the Pearson's chi-square test. The strength of the correlation between the variables was assessed using the Spearman's rank correlation coefficient. The results of the research reveal interesting dependencies between the reasons for knowledge exchange in the remote work.

**Keywords:** knowledge exchange, pandemic COVID-19, remote work, generation Z

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## 1. Introduction

Many years have passed since Drucker's (1999) publications, where he pointed out that besides labour, capital and land, knowledge is the fourth and most important factor of the production, and although the importance of labor, capital and land for economic processes has significantly decreased, and the global economies shifted their focus from production to services, the future still belongs to people and organisations possessing knowledge (Hamel and Prahalad 2006, p.46). In a knowledge-based society, the knowledge manager is the most perfect asset for a company. Currently, creation of a competitive edge involves predictions of the directions of transformations in the world and taking advantage of the opportunities entailed by said transformations. Therefore, in a modern world, neither land, capital, nor even the possession of a workforce is a guarantee of success. Knowledge (both individual and organisational) is a factor allowing one to search for new solutions, recognise emerging opportunities and threats, and create opportunities for development (Słocińska 2013).

In literature, we find references that knowledge is (Probst et al, 2004, p.29): structured, complex, context-dependent, dependent on the person using it, and reflected in models of behaviour. It is the result of a complex process of knowledge creation and assimilation during the stages of socialisation, externalisation, combination and internalisation (Makselon 2007). These processes are influenced by the environment, levels of social and content-related competences, but also by the availability and usage of various technological solutions. Taking the above into account, it should be assumed that the perception of knowledge, and also of its acquisition and exchange will also be influenced by e.g. belonging to specific age group. Current workforce includes representatives of several generations of workers, starting from still professionally active employees of the Baby Boomers generation, through the dominant Generation X and Generation Y, to the youngest professionally active people representing Generation Z. Literature on the subject shows differences in the terminology related to the nomenclature of individual generations, and the delineation of the divisions between the latter. The aim of the study is to present the results of studies on the opinions of Generation Z representatives in relation to knowledge exchange in the context of attitudes to remote work.

## **2. Attitudes of Generation Z in relation to the knowledge exchange in remote work conditions**

In the literature on the subject, the legitimacy and correctness of grouping employees by age category, as well as the definition of the term 'generation' itself is still a hotly debated topic. Therefore, various authors writing on issues analysed here cite various classifications of generational divisions (Rodriguez et al, 2019; Bencsik et al, 2016; Bencsik and Machova 2016; Goh and Lee 2018; Kirchmayer and Fratricova 2018, Lazanyi and Bilan 2017; Bejtkovsky 2016; Hejnova 2015). The most popular division assumes that Generation Z includes people born after 1995, although some research also includes people born in 1990, while others include only those born in 2000 and later; Generation Y are people born in the years 1980-1994, Generation X are people born in the years 1965-1979 and the Baby Boomers are the generation of the post-war population spike, being born between 1946 and 1964.

Analysis of reports and studies (Dolot 2018; Duffy 2018; Hijzen and Menyhert, 2016; Lazanyi and Bilan 2017; Lyons et al, 2017; O'Boyle et al, 2017; OECD, 2014; Robak 2017; Singh and Dangmei 2016; Tulgan 2013; Zwart and Baker 2018) that focus on the organisational behavior (including sharing of knowledge) among the youngest employees representing Generations Y and Z, allows us to summarize the observations made by the authors. What connects both generations is a great commitment to or even dependence on modern information technologies and tools used to support them. It should be noted, however, that the iconic device of Generation Y is a laptop, while the representatives of Generation Z definitely prefer smartphones. These are the basic communication tools used by the representatives of both generations and their usage overshadows direct communication. Through them, young workers acquire and share knowledge. However, for both generations, knowledge is almost synonymous with the category of information. It also seems that the representatives of Generation Z have much greater difficulties with verifying the quality of knowledge and information available on the Internet. What distinguishes these generations from the previous ones is the perception of knowledge and information themselves - they are not competing goods for the above-mentioned groups. Young people share this resource freely, not considering it unique and necessary for shaping their own career.

The results of the research highlight the fact that there may be problems related to the exchange of knowledge, or to the recognition and expression of tacit knowledge that employees themselves are not always aware of. Gaps in the social and communication skills of the youngest generations may hinder the processes of encoding and decoding of such messages. Social transformations described above were put to the test during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the face of strict sanitary measures and the lockdown introduced in many countries, many enterprises decided to switch to remote work, and the young students were forced to accept the conditions of remote learning.

Before the pandemic, remote work for employees of many companies was known as the 'premium class benefit'. It could have only been used occasionally or in exceptional circumstances. The massive shift in thinking and perception of remote work seemed like an impossible process. Spring 2020 brought a real revolution in this regard. A large and very fast technological transformation took place. Remote work quickly became a standard from the first months of the pandemic.

Literature studies in the field of remote work indicate that there is a wide variety of terminology in relation to this issue. The introduction of terms such as teleworking and telecommuting to the literature stems from the works of Nilles (2003, p. 21) who defines teleworking as transferring work to employees, instead of employees to work, i.e. a form of substitution of ordinary work with information technology. On the other hand, telecommuting seems to be a narrower term, referring to the periodic work performed outside the main, stationary office (for example, in customer's facilities, in a telework center, or at home), with the main emphasis being placed on eliminating the daily travel to and from the workplace. However, there are also studies (Pyöriä 2011) in which the distinction between the two terms is limited only to the geographical area of operation, what means that 'telecommuting' is just an American equivalent of 'teleworking'. In case of Polish publications, these terms are also used interchangeably, and their Polish standardised substitute is 'remote work'.

For the purposes of this study, the understanding of the concept of the remote work has been narrowed down, identifying it with the work performed outside the workplace, usually at home, using the internet connectivity with company servers. It should be noted however that in Poland, due to an applicable legal basis, the terms 'teleworking' and 'remote work' are not interchangeable (Krzyżanowska 2020). Thus, a remote worker does not

have a permanent workstation in the office, and their visits to the workplace are occasional and associated with exceptional situations.

The main advantages of this form of work include, first and foremost, an increase in organisational flexibility, reduction in operating costs. decrease of absenteeism, better catering to the people with disabilities, ability to live in rural areas or places distant from industrial centers, as well as the ability to take better care of children or other dependents. On the other hand, the most mentioned disadvantages of remote work include problems resulting from the need to provide the employee with specific IT instruments and the operationalisation of this form of work organisation (Czarnecka and Słocińska 2016).

Assuming that the knowledge sharing is always a people-to-people process (Liyanage et al, 2009, p. 122), makes understanding of the mechanisms controlling the exchange of knowledge more meaningful. According to T. H. Davenport and L. Prusak (2000, p. 30), knowledge has its sellers and buyers, as well as the intermediaries in the transactions of exchange and acquisition of knowledge. In the opinion of the aforementioned authors, people share their knowledge because it satisfies their basic needs and expectations. Therefore, employees can share their views based on the following reciprocity rules (Davenport and Prusak 2000, pp 30-38):

- reciprocity - an employee 'selling' their knowledge expects the possibility of 'acquiring' knowledge attractive to themselves, either immediately or in the future;
- reputation - having the reputation of a person 'selling' knowledge (being an expert) can be a form of satisfying the need for the recognition or power, but also helps to attract new knowledge by multiplying the number of exchange transactions based on the principle of reciprocity.
- altruism - results from the internal need to share and help (although, as Kukowska (2016, pp 165-174; 2019, pp 152-163) notes, altruism in the light of evolutionary psychology is most often characterized by the rule of reciprocity - mutual altruism), from the organisational point of view and process of knowledge exchange, a group of employees selling knowledge without vested interest is particularly valuable.
- trust - a condition for bypassing the barriers blocking the exchange, such as monopoly on knowledge or its artificial shortage, with such barriers resulting from a fear that 'selling' knowledge might lead to a loss of the traits that make the employee attractive and valuable for the organisation, with personal relationship in the workplace playing an important role in this mechanism.

A specific challenge for the effective completion of the knowledge exchange process is the transformation of explicit knowledge into the tacit knowledge that involves usage of the knowledge by the new 'holder'. It is a cognitive and emotional experience mandating the adoption of a personalisation strategy as a basic strategy for the organisational activities related to the stimulation of the knowledge exchange processes. It appears that due of the egoism typical of Generation Z, this stage of knowledge exchange is particularly difficult to implement and requires supporting young employees in experimenting with what is a form of implementation of the newly acquired knowledge.

### **3. Methodology**

The research results presented in the study constitute part of a quantitative survey conducted among young people (Generation Z and Generation Y) at the turn of 2021/2022. The research focused on the impact of the remote learning experiences on the preferences concerning the remote work among young people in the terms of employee relations, knowledge, development and learning, motivation, communication, teamwork, creativity, work organisation and work-life balance.

The study presents a fragment of the research results related to knowledge exchange. The following research assumptions were adopted in the area of analysis of the influence of preferences concerning the remote work on the perception of knowledge exchange processes within the organisation:

- the COVID-19 pandemic situation resulted in a mass transition of young people to the remote learning and work, what contributed to the popularisation of remote work.
- the advantages and disadvantages of remote work, also in reference to knowledge exchange, are described in literature on the subject.
- the motives of the knowledge exchange transactions were described in accordance with the typology of Davenport and Prusak and include trust, reciprocity, reputation and altruism.

In the course of research, the following problem was presented: has the experience of remote learning contributed to the creation of an erroneous (relative to the features of remote work described in literature) perception of remote work and its impact on the exchange of knowledge?

The survey was conducted using quantitative research methods and the survey technique. The latter has been chosen because it allows a direct contact with the respondents. The study involved young people (representatives of Generations Z and Y) studying various fields of knowledge and living in the Silesian Voivodeship. These particular groups were selected, because their age and professional competences make it very likely that will perform remote work in the future.

The main research tool used was a standardised questionnaire consisting of 75 closed questions and statements. A Likert scale (the so-called Likert scaling technique) was used to assess the responses, allowing to determine a relative intensity of the different responses (Babbie 2004, p. 192). Stable conditions that were presented beforehand allow for a reliable and quick analysis of the collected material, its uniformity and ease of preparation (Churchill 2002, p. 309). The research tool (the questionnaire) is original and was created by the members of the research team consisting of the employees of the Department of Applied Sociology and Human Resource Management, at the Faculty of Management of Częstochowa University of Technology. Four questionnaire validity procedures have been used: content (Rossiter 2008), face (Czakon 2014), construct (Cronbach and Meehl 1955) and nomological (Czakon 2014) ones. The scale reliability was validated using Cronbach's alpha that is a measure of internal consistency ( $\alpha = 0.9338$ ).

STATISTICA software was used in the process of compiling the research results. To assess the significance of differences in the analysed variables, the following non-parametric tests were used: Mann-Whitney U test (UMW), Kruskal-Wallis ANOVA (AKW) test, and the chi-square test. The obtained statistics were analysed using the publication by Stanisz (2006, pp 369-391). Spearman's rank correlation coefficient was used to assess the strength of correlations occurring between variables.

For the purposes of analysing the results of the study, we adopted several statistical hypotheses concerning the occurrence of significant differences in the respondents' statements because of their characteristics and experience of employment, remote learning and remote work. H0 is a hypothesis stating that there are no differences due to the grouping variable, while H1 is an alternative hypothesis that there are such differences. These hypotheses were verified by the aforementioned statistical tests that allowed for the rejection of the H0 hypothesis about the lack of statistically significant differences and the adoption of an alternative hypothesis about the existence of such differences. The study presents dependencies verified with statistical tests that allow to infer about the regularities in the studied group.

## Results of the research

The survey involved 226 students. In the literature, the representatives of the Generation Z are most often described as people born after 1995, although some researchers include those born in 1990 while others include only those born in 2000 or later. Using the above criteria, the distribution of respondents in the investigated group is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1:** The distribution of the studied group according to the definitional categories of Generation Z

	Born in 1990 and later %	Born in 1995 and later %	Born in 2000 and later %
Generation Z	89.82	83.19	29.20
Others	10.18	16.81	70.80
Total	100.00	100.00	100.00

Source: own elaboration based on the research result

Since the most common division into generations in the literature indicates the year 1995 or 1990 as the liminal year for Generation Z, it was assumed that the dominant population in the study group was composed of the representatives of that generation. As the statistical tests did not reveal statistically significant differences in the opinions of Generation Z representatives and other respondents regarding the analysed issues, the description

and analysis of the research results will present the overall results without distinguishing between Generation Z and the older respondents that can be considered representatives of Generation Y.

The study groups consisted in 50.44% of women and in 48.23% of men with 3 respondents (1.33%) not declaring their gender identity. Among the respondents, 86.72% declared at least some experience with remote learning, with 12.83% declaring lack of such experience (one person did not express their opinion in this area). In regard to work experience, vast majority of the respondents (86.28%) confirmed such experience, and 13.27% denied having it (1 person did not provide definite response). In addition, 48.67% of respondents had experience with remote work, with 50.88% declaring lack of such experience (1 person did not provide response). When asked about their preferences regarding the form of work in the future, the most common response was a hybrid form of work (50.00%), followed by stationary work (35.40%) and remote work (12.39%), with 2.21% of respondents not providing a response.

In regard to the issue analysed in the study, authors of the study selected five indicators representing the respondents' opinions on the motives of knowledge exchange transactions in the case of remote work:

1. remote work fosters knowledge exchange.
2. remote work allows you to share knowledge without vested interest.
3. remote work allows to share knowledge only with selected employees who can give me something in return.
4. remote work enables to create the image of a competent employee.
5. remote work helps to build trust in relations with employees.
6. remote work enables a quick exchange of information

The indicators above were analysed in terms of the differentiation of the respondents' statements with regard to independent variables such as:

1. age
2. gender
3. remote learning experience
4. work experience
5. experience in working remotely
6. form of work preferred in the future (stationary, remote or hybrid)

Regarding the issue of knowledge exchange, the majority of respondents (41.15%) stated that remote work is conducive to the exchange of knowledge, 27.88% did not have a decisive opinion in than matter, and 27.43% had the negative opinion (Table 2). Regarding the statement that remote work enables quick exchange of information, 57.08% of the respondents expressed their positive opinion, and 19.47% had opposite opinion, with 19.91% of the respondents were not able to define their firm stance on this issue.

**Table 2:** Percentages of answers in the field of knowledge exchange

Responses	%					
	A	B	C	D	E	F
N/A	3.54	3.10	5.31	5.31	5.31	3.54
1	7.52	7.96	11.95	7.52	19.47	6.64
2	19.91	14.16	12.83	8.85	22.58	12.83
3	27.88	35.40	34.96	38.49	36.28	19.91
4	25.22	28.32	22.56	27.88	11.50	26.55
5	15.93	11.06	12,39	11.95	4.86	30.53
total	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00

1 - completely disagree; 2 - rather disagree; 3 - neither agree nor disagree; 4 - rather agree; 5 - completely agree.  
Source: own elaboration based on the research result

In regard to the exchange of knowledge without vested interest, the distribution of respondents' answers was a bit less optimistic, with 39.38% of the respondents supporting such advantage of the remote work, 22.12% having the opposite opinion and 35.40% not being able to express their opinion on this issue. When asked whether remote work allows sharing knowledge only with selected employees who can give them something in return, 34.95% of respondents agreed that remote work allows for such verification of recipients of knowledge, the same number of them was undecided on this issue, and 24.78% believed that remote work is not conducive

to such a knowledge exchange strategy. In terms of the exchange of knowledge forming the image of a competent employee in remote work conditions, 39.83% of the respondents agreed with this statement, 38.49% was undecided and 16.27% had a negative opinion (what is the lowest indication across all five determinants). As the exchange of knowledge takes place mainly under conditions of trust, the respondents were also asked whether remote work allows building trust in employee relations. Here, the distribution of answers significantly differed from the previous answers. Only 16.36% of the respondents confirmed the positive impact of remote work on building trust, 36.28% were undecided and 41.95% stated that remote work is not conducive to trust building.

To assess the significance of the differences in the analysed variables, the non-parametric ANOVA Kruskal-Wallis (AKW) test was used. The distribution of the results is presented in Table 3. The data presented therein show only statistically significant differences that allow for the rejection of the H0.

**Table 3:** The ANOVA Kruskal-Wallis test for independent variables and selected indicators

Independent variables AKW test at the accepted level of significance ( $\alpha = 0.05$ )	Analysed indicators					
	A	B	C	D	E	F
I.	-	-	-	-	-	-
II.	-	-	-	-	-	-
III.	-	-	-	-	p = 0.0385	-
IV.	-	-	-	-	-	-
V.	-	-	-	-	p = 0.006	-
VI.	p = 0.0045	p = 0.0205	-	-	p = 0.0106	-

Source: own elaboration based on the research result

The variable that differentiated the respondents' answers to the greatest extent was the form of work preferred in the future. There was no indication that preferred form of work was influenced by respondent's age.

The form of work as a variable differentiating the analysed indicators (AKW test) indicates the connection of the evaluation of remote work as conducive to the exchange of knowledge, allowing selfless knowledge sharing and helping to build trust in relations with employees. Whereas:

- the largest percentage of respondents confirming that remote work is conducive to knowledge exchange indicated preference for a hybrid or stationary form of work;
- among the respondents who indicated that remote work allows selfless sharing of knowledge, the largest percentage preferred hybrid work first, and stationary work second;
- respondents denying that remote work allows to build relationships with coworkers have chosen mostly stationary or hybrid work; it should be noted however, that among people expressing negative or ambiguous opinions about the positive impact of remote work on employee relations, the largest group was formed of the respondents with no remote work experience (AKW) and with remote learning experience (AKW); people with experience in remote work more often expressed positive opinions about the possibility of building employee relationships in remote work conditions.

In the analysed area, attempts were also made to observe regularities related to the recognition of differences between information and knowledge by the respondents (Table 4).

**Table 4:** Spearman's rank order correlation for selected variables at  $p < 0.001$

Remote work	It favours the exchange of knowledge	It enables the quick exchange of information
It helps you building trust among employees	0.27523	-
It allows you to share knowledge disinterestedly	0.58396	0.35502
It allows you to share knowledge with selected employees only	-	-
It allows you to shape the image of a competent employee	0.23157	0.27041

Source: own elaboration based on the research result

During the examination the results of the correlation of the Spearman's rank order between the indicators, it was noted that the respondents who indicated that remote work is conducive to the exchange of knowledge were also convinced that it is a form of work that allows to build trust between employees. No such relationship

was found in regard to the provision of information. Of note are the correlations indicating that the respondents admitting that remote work allows for selfless sharing of knowledge also indicated their positive opinions on the impact of remote work on the exchange of knowledge and on the ability to exchange the information quickly. It was also observed that the respondents recognizing the benefits of remote work in terms of knowledge and information exchange also state that remote work allows building the image of a competent person.

#### **4. Discussion**

During the analysis of the research findings, certain limitations have to be taken into account. First, the study is a pilot study, and therefore does not present the opinion of a representative sample of the surveyed population in Poland, narrowing it down only to those inhabiting the Silesian Voivodeship. Second, much like in other studies relating to Generation Z, the use of year-of-birth criteria is still disputed, especially given that Generation Z coming from developed countries may differ from the representatives of Generation Z in Poland, a country that advanced from the group of developing countries to the prestigious group of developed markets only in 2018. Despite these limitations, the presented research results nevertheless provide an insight into the analysed problem and indicate some interesting dependencies.

The discussed topic does not have publicly available literature presenting the results of research on the preferences of work forms and knowledge exchange strategies in the context of the remote learning experience of Generation Z. This is undoubtedly related to the fact that due to the COVID-19 pandemic, young people around the world have experienced a massive shift towards remote education and work, therefore the consequences of such shift are still being investigated. The effects of this phenomenon were first felt by the employers, who more and more frequently find that the remote work is a preferred form and that it can be beneficial to them.

At the same time, the conducted research revealed some interesting regularities that may be of significant importance for the shaping of the work environment by employers and for the management of the knowledge exchange processes.

One of the conclusions that can be drawn from the research results is optimistic because it indirectly indicates that the Generation Z respondents see the difference in the concepts of 'knowledge' and 'information' (the respondents were not asked during the study how they understand these terms). The respondents relatively more often agreed with the statements that remote work allows the exchange of information in comparison with statements about exchange of knowledge. It is especially visible in relation to employee relations building. It seems that the relationship between these indicators may be mutual, that is, the knowledge exchange processes may shape relations between employees and good relations may support the knowledge exchange processes.

In the context of the study, it should be emphasized that many publications indicate that the relationships in the workplace are a key aspect determining the work selected by the representatives of Generation Z who also usually notice that remote work does not facilitate such relationships. Such opinions are expressed mainly by people with no remote work experience (AKW) and the respondents with the remote learning experience. Such a regularity is probably a consequence of the negative experiences related to e-learning that was introduced in an unplanned, chaotic manner and was formed spontaneously as a rapid response to the realities of the pandemic. There was no proper substantive preparation on the part of both teachers and students. In this situation, young people often reacted negatively as they were abruptly denied direct contact with their peers and teachers. However, it is worth investigating whether the belief about the negative impact of the remote work on relationships is caused only by the experience of remote learning, or does it result from the combination of the compulsory distance learning with the lockdown experience that in the perception of Generation Z representatives is combined into one. The optimistic premise of the discussed results are the opinions of people with actual remote work experience who agreed that such form of work allows building the desired relations between the employees.

Taking the above into account, the opinions indicating that the majority of respondents agree that remote work is conducive to knowledge exchange may be somewhat surprising. It should be considered here whether the Generation Z representatives understood 'knowledge' solely as formal and explicit knowledge. As young employees or people with no work experience, they may have not yet seen the power of the tacit, informal

knowledge that stems primarily from the employment, internship, or other professional experience, and from general maturity.

The indications and regularities regarding selfless knowledge sharing as a strategy for knowledge exchange may also be interesting. A question arises here whether the disinterested exchange of knowledge is not equated by generations Z with the unilateral transfer of knowledge they deal with in social media or have been in relation to distance learning.

## **5. Conclusions**

The period of forced transition to remote work, however, made employers aware that remote work translates not only to the benefits of saving time and reducing the cost of the workplace maintenance, but frequently causes a loss of employee motivation and problems with work organisation, building trust, and employee involvement. Also, the employees who previously have often perceived remote work as an arrangement allowing them to maintain their work-life balance better, have verified their expectations since, noting that remote work can be as absorbing as the stationary one, and its effectiveness is based primarily on self-discipline, self-motivation and self-organization.

The result of this mass social experience of the COVID-19 pandemic is the introduction of the hybrid work opportunities in many organisations on a large scale. Therefore, it should be observed how the social processes occurring among employees who have so far been performing stationary work will shape in the future after switching to hybrid or remote work. One of such processes is the knowledge exchange between the employees.

The analysis of the research material in the area covered by the subject of the study brings up the crucial question: to what extent are the categories of the knowledge exchange motives developed by Davenport and Prusak still valid? The market approach to the exchange of knowledge based on the perception of knowledge as a commodity traded on the market of buyers and sellers assumed that in these processes both parties strive for satisfaction and profit maximisation (even regarding the altruism rule). This theory, however, was developed under the conditions specific to the 1980s and 1990s, when Generation X was the dominant age cohort in the general workforce and it struggled with serious economic crises and high unemployment rates. For the representatives of this generation, knowledge has become a desirable merchandise, increasing the employee's advantage on the labour market. Currently, the situation we observe in the area of knowledge exchange seems to be related to the mass dissemination of knowledge rather than the knowledge exchange. Undoubtedly, the motives and expectations of the Generation Z representatives concerning knowledge exchange should be the subject of research in the near future. And the results of such research will certainly have a significant impact on the employment policy in organisations, and on the processes of building attractive work environments.

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