

Motivational patterns across generations

Generációkon átívelő motivációs mintázatok

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Abstract

This study examines the motivational patterns of 1,529 employees with at least one year of work experience. Generational differences are most visible in career development, professional advancement, learning opportunities, and work flexibility, while several fundamental motivational factors appear to be largely shared across generations. The findings support flexible and individualised motivation and retention practices rather than rigid generation-specific incentive systems and highlight their relevance to organisational quality and continuous improvement.

Keywords: generations, employee motivation, incentive management, career development, employee retention, quality culture

JEL codes: J24, J28, M12, M53, M54

Absztrakt

Ez a tanulmány 1529, legalább egy év munkatapasztalattal rendelkező alkalmazott motivációs mintázatait vizsgálja. A generációs különbségek leginkább a karrierfejlődésben, a szakmai előmenetelben, a tanulási lehetőségekben és a munka rugalmasságában mutatkoznak meg, miközben számos alapvető motivációs tényező nagyrészt generációkon átívelőnek tűnik. Az eredmények a merev, generációs-specifikus ösztönző rendszerek helyett a rugalmas és egyénre szabott motivációs és megtartási gyakorlatokat támasztják alá, és kiemelik ezek relevanciáját a szervezeti minőség és a folyamatos fejlesztés szempontjából.

Kulcsszavak: generációk, munkavállalói motiváció, ösztönzőmenedzsment, karrierfejlesztés, munkavállalói megtartás, minőségi kultúra

JEL kódok: J24, J28, M12, M53, M54

1. Introduction

Sustaining organisational quality over the long term is not solely a matter of well-designed processes, technological infrastructure, control mechanisms, or formal management systems. Quality is ultimately created and maintained through the everyday behaviour of employees who operate processes, interact with customers and colleagues, identify problems, make decisions, share knowledge, and contribute to organisational development. Employee motivation therefore goes beyond the traditional boundaries of human resource management and becomes closely connected to quality culture, organisational learning, employee retention, and sustainable performance. A technically well-designed system is unlikely to deliver its intended results if employees have little motivation to use it effectively, improve it, or take responsibility for its outcomes.

One of the prominent challenges facing contemporary organisations is the simultaneous presence of several generations in the workplace. Baby Boomers, Generation X, Generation Y, and Generation Z have entered employment under different social, economic, and technological conditions, which has encouraged a widespread assumption that each generation requires a fundamentally different motivational approach. This assumption is also reflected in management practice, where older employees are frequently associated with security and financial stability, while younger employees are described as seeking flexibility, rapid development, meaningful work, and continuous feedback. Earlier Hungarian research similarly identified motivation, career management, flexible working arrangements, and digitalisation as important areas in which managers need to understand the expectations of new generations (Malatyinszki, 2020).

Recent international research, however, calls for a more cautious interpretation of generational differences. Costanza et al. (2021) argue that within-generation variability is often substantial and may be at least as relevant as differences between generational groups. Rudolph et al. (2021) similarly warn that generational labels can become stereotypes when they are used as direct explanations of individual behaviour. More recently, the meta-analysis by Ravid et al. (2025) found that many commonly assumed generational differences in workplace attitudes are smaller and less consistent than popular management discourse suggests. Schröder (2024) adds an important methodological argument by showing that differences often attributed to generations may instead reflect age, career stage, or historical period effects.

This debate is particularly relevant to the Hungarian organisational context because generational diversity is occurring simultaneously with digital transformation, changing labour-market expectations, and an increasing emphasis on employee retention. Malatyinszki (2022) describes digitalisation as a development that transforms not only technologies and business processes but also human resource requirements and managerial practices. Subsequent research has further emphasised that technological change affects work content, required competencies, employment structures, and the relationship between employees and organisations (Bujdosó-Kurucsó et al., 2025). Consequently, the question is no longer simply whether generations differ, but rather which differences are sufficiently robust and practically meaningful to justify differentiated management responses.

The present study addresses this issue by examining the motivational patterns of employees who have actual workplace experience. Its central aim is to identify those motivational dimensions in which meaningful differences appear across generations and to distinguish them from factors that are essentially shared by employees regardless of generational membership. From a management perspective, this distinction is critical. The objective should not be to create a separate motivational

system for each generation, but to determine where differentiation adds value and where common organisational standards provide a stronger basis for employee motivation, retention, and quality-oriented performance.

2. Theoretical background of workplace motivation

One of the principal theoretical frameworks of the study is Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which identifies autonomy, competence, and relatedness as fundamental psychological needs influencing the quality of human motivation (Deci et al., 2017; Gagné & Deci, 2005). Autonomy refers to the extent to which individuals perceive that they have meaningful choice and discretion in their work rather than merely executing externally imposed instructions. Competence reflects the experience of professional development, mastery, and effectiveness, while relatedness concerns the quality of relationships, belonging, and connection with other members of the organisation. Research applying SDT to the workplace suggests that the satisfaction of these needs is associated with more autonomous forms of motivation, stronger well-being, and favourable organisational outcomes (Deci et al., 2017; McAnally & Hagger, 2024).

The relevance of competence development has increased further as digital transformation continuously changes the content of work. Malatyinszki and Bartha (2024) emphasise that adult learning has become an important mechanism through which employees can adapt to digitalisation and acquire new competencies required by changing organisational processes. Their approach is particularly relevant to generational research because different age and experience groups may begin from different levels of digital familiarity but all face a need for continuous learning. The effective organisational response is therefore not simply to categorise employees according to age, but to create learning environments in which employees can continuously update their competencies and connect professional development to meaningful career opportunities.

A second theoretical foundation is Herzberg et al.'s (1959) two-factor theory, which distinguishes between hygiene factors and motivators. Salary, working conditions, employment security, and certain organisational policies can be interpreted primarily as conditions whose inadequacy creates dissatisfaction, while development, responsibility, achievement, recognition, and advancement have greater potential to stimulate higher-level motivation. Although later motivation theories have refined this distinction, it remains useful for understanding why an employee may consider adequate pay essential while still requiring opportunities for development and meaningful contribution to remain strongly motivated.

These approaches can be integrated into a broader sustainable human resource management perspective. Malatyinszki (2025) argues that long-term organisational competitiveness increasingly depends on the ability to retain, develop, and motivate employees while managing generational diversity in a sustainable manner. Such an approach shifts attention away from short-term motivational techniques and towards an organisational environment in which employees can develop, perceive meaningful opportunities, and remain engaged over time. This is particularly relevant to quality management because sustained quality performance requires stable competence, knowledge retention, employee involvement, and willingness to participate in continuous improvement.

The changing organisation of work also modifies the practical meaning of autonomy and relatedness. Remote and hybrid work can increase flexibility but may simultaneously weaken social cohesion if organisational culture, communication, and leadership practices are not adapted accordingly.

Malatyinszki et al. (2025) highlight the role of organisational culture in maintaining motivation, collaboration, and a sense of community in remote working environments. This suggests that flexibility should not be interpreted as an isolated employee benefit. Its motivational value depends on how work is organised, how communication is maintained, and whether employees continue to experience themselves as meaningful members of the organisation.

3. Research methodology

The analytical sample consisted of 1,529 respondents who were actively employed in non-managerial, middle-management, or senior-management positions, had at least one year of work experience, and could be clearly assigned to one of the generational groups on the basis of year of birth. Restricting the analysis to employees with actual work experience was methodologically important because the questionnaire contained items relating to managerial feedback, financial incentives, career opportunities, workplace flexibility, organisational support, and employment conditions. Respondents without meaningful workplace experience could have evaluated these questions largely on the basis of expectations rather than lived organisational experience, which would have weakened the interpretation of the findings.

Entrepreneurs were not included in the analytical sample because several central constructs have a substantially different meaning in self-employment. Salary, employer-provided benefits, promotion opportunities, hierarchical relationships, and managerial feedback cannot be interpreted in precisely the same way for business owners as for employees. The resulting sample contained 43 Baby Boomers, 441 members of Generation X, 674 members of Generation Y, and 371 members of Generation Z. Generation Y therefore represented the largest group, while the comparatively small Baby Boomer subsample requires particular caution when interpreting group-level differences.

Motivational statements were evaluated on seven-point Likert-type scales. The questionnaire covered autonomy, competence, and relatedness as defined by Self-Determination Theory, together with hygiene factors and motivators derived from Herzberg's framework. The internal consistency of the composite measures ranged from moderate to good, which justified the use of dimensional scores while also supporting the decision to examine particularly important individual items separately. This was necessary because an overall scale may conceal a practically important difference in a specific issue such as career transparency, flexible scheduling, or professional advancement.

Generational comparisons were conducted using Welch's analysis of variance because group sizes differed substantially and equal variances could not be assumed in all cases. Where relevant, Games-Howell post hoc comparisons were used to interpret differences between individual groups. Statistical significance was not treated as sufficient evidence of managerial importance; effect sizes were also considered because even minor differences can become statistically significant in a sample of this size. The interpretation therefore focuses primarily on patterns that are both statistically detectable and meaningful from a managerial perspective.

4. Results and interpretation

The overall results present a considerably more nuanced picture than a stereotypical generational approach would suggest. Differences were detected in autonomy, competence, and the set of factors related to professional development and advancement, but the explanatory power of generational

membership remained relatively limited. By contrast, relatedness and the broader group of hygiene factors showed virtually no meaningful generational differentiation. These findings suggest that generational membership provides some information about motivational tendencies but is far from sufficient to determine an individual employee's motivational profile.

Table 1. Summary of the principal generational patterns

Motivational area	Generational pattern	Practical interpretation
Autonomy	Significant difference	Small effect
Competence	Significant difference	Small effect
Relatedness	No meaningful difference	Largely shared need
Hygiene factors	No meaningful difference	Largely shared need
Development-related motivators	Significant difference	Small but consistent effect
Career-path transparency	Strongest difference among examined items	Managerially relevant
Professional advancement	Clear difference	Managerially relevant

Source: Author's own research.

The strongest practically relevant difference concerned the transparency of career opportunities. Younger respondents, particularly members of Generations Y and Z, attached greater importance to understanding how they could progress within the organisation. The effect associated with career-path transparency was larger than for the broader motivational dimensions, indicating that this is one area in which generational or career-stage differences deserve genuine managerial attention. A similar pattern appeared in the perceived motivational value of professional advancement, again showing substantially greater importance among younger employees.

These findings should not be interpreted as evidence that younger employees simply demand rapid promotion. A more plausible interpretation is that they place greater value on the visibility of future possibilities. Employees may remain motivated without immediate hierarchical advancement if they understand how current performance, competence development, and additional responsibility can lead to a future professional role. A transparent career architecture can therefore include specialist pathways, project leadership, lateral development, mentoring roles, and higher levels of professional expertise rather than relying exclusively on promotion into management.

This interpretation is consistent with Malatyinszki's (2020) earlier argument that career management represents one of the key challenges created by generational change in organisations. The present findings refine that argument by indicating that the critical issue may not be promotion itself but the transparency and credibility of possible future development. From a retention perspective, employees who cannot see a future within their current organisation may begin to search for that future elsewhere, even when they are not fundamentally dissatisfied with their present job.

Professional learning also emerged as an important area of differentiation, although the pattern was not simply linear by age. Generation Y displayed particularly strong demand for continuous learning and development, while Generation Z did not exceed it on every development-related item. This suggests that development needs cannot be explained by age alone and may be closely associated with career stage. Employees who have already accumulated meaningful professional experience but still have substantial career development ahead of them may be particularly sensitive to whether their organisation provides opportunities for learning, specialisation, and advancement.

The practical implication is that training should not be separated from career management. Malatyinszki and Bartha (2024) argue that adult learning is essential for helping employees adapt to digital transformation and changing competence requirements. Training is likely to have stronger motivational value when employees understand what it enables them to achieve. A course, qualification, project experience, or new digital competence becomes more meaningful when it is visibly connected to broader responsibility, professional progression, or participation in more complex organisational tasks.

Work flexibility also displayed a clear generational pattern. Younger employees attributed greater motivational value to flexible work arrangements, although flexibility was positively evaluated across the sample rather than being rejected by older generations. The finding therefore concerns degree rather than a complete difference in preference. Flexibility appears to be a broad employee expectation whose motivational intensity is stronger in younger groups.

It is important, however, not to equate flexibility exclusively with working from home. Many manufacturing, service, healthcare, logistics, or customer-facing positions cannot be performed remotely. Flexibility can also take the form of predictable scheduling, greater influence over starting times, easier shift exchange, temporary adaptation to life circumstances, or increased discretion in the sequencing of tasks. In this sense, flexibility is better understood as a quality of work design than as a single employee benefit.

The digital transformation of work further strengthens the importance of this interpretation. Malatyinszki (2022) and Bujdosó-Kurucsó et al. (2025) show that technological development is simultaneously changing work processes, competencies, and labour-market expectations. As digital systems make some tasks more location-independent and automate other activities, organisations gain new opportunities to redesign work. The managerial challenge is to use those opportunities without weakening coordination, organisational culture, and social integration.

5. Shared motivational foundations across generations

Perhaps the most important finding of the study is not where generations differ, but where they do not. The meaningfulness and perceived usefulness of work were strongly valued across generational groups, and no practically relevant generational difference emerged in this respect. This challenges the popular assumption that meaningful work is primarily a characteristic expectation of younger employees. The results instead suggest that people across age groups want to understand why their work matters and how their individual contribution creates value.

This finding has direct relevance to quality management. Employees frequently perform only one part of a larger process and may have little direct contact with the final customer or the ultimate output of their work. When a task is communicated merely as a procedure that must be followed, its motivational meaning can be limited. When the same requirement is explained in terms of the customer problem it prevents, the rework it eliminates, the safety risk it reduces, or the value it contributes to the next stage of the process, the employee can connect everyday activity with a broader organisational purpose.

Financial incentives also showed considerably more similarity than generational stereotypes would suggest. Younger respondents did not appear to be substantially less responsive to performance-related financial rewards than older employees. This is an important result because contemporary discussions sometimes imply that younger generations can be retained primarily through flexibility, experiences,

development, or organisational purpose even when financial conditions are less competitive. The present findings do not support such a substitution logic.

Adequate compensation should instead be interpreted as part of the common foundation of employment. Meaningful work, development opportunities, supportive leadership, and flexibility can strengthen motivation, but they cannot reliably compensate for a persistent perception that pay is unfair or uncompetitive. This relationship closely reflects Herzberg's distinction between basic employment conditions and higher-level motivators: organisations need a credible foundation before additional motivational interventions can produce their full effect.

Relatedness showed a similarly shared pattern. The importance of positive interpersonal relationships, belonging, and supportive organisational interaction did not meaningfully divide generations. This is especially relevant in the context of hybrid and remote work, where physical distance can reduce informal interaction and weaken organisational cohesion. Malatyinszki et al. (2025) emphasise that organisational culture, communication, and collaborative practices play a critical role in sustaining motivation and effectiveness in remote environments, suggesting that flexibility must be complemented by deliberate efforts to maintain social connection.

6. Generational patterns and employee retention

The intention to change jobs displayed a clearer generational pattern than many of the core motivational dimensions. Younger employees reported a higher short-term intention to consider leaving their employer, while older respondents generally expressed lower mobility intentions. This pattern should not be interpreted as evidence that younger generations are inherently less loyal. Differences in labour-market position, life stage, family responsibilities, accumulated organisational investment, and career experimentation are all likely to contribute to observed mobility.

The relationship becomes more useful managerially when turnover intention is considered alongside the results on career visibility and development. The same groups that displayed stronger mobility intentions also tended to place greater emphasis on visible career opportunities, advancement, and flexibility. This combination suggests that retention strategies should focus not only on whether employees are currently satisfied, but also on whether they can imagine a credible future within the organisation. An employee may be reasonably satisfied with present working conditions and still leave if professional development appears blocked.

This has implications for the timing of retention interventions. Many organisations react only when a key employee announces an intention to leave, at which point financial counteroffers may be one of the few remaining options. A more effective approach is to identify declining career expectations earlier through regular development conversations, internal mobility discussions, and employee feedback. Retention then becomes a continuous management process rather than a crisis response.

7. Practical applications for management and HR

The findings do not support the creation of four separate incentive systems for four generations. A more appropriate model is to establish a strong common organisational foundation while allowing selected motivational elements to be adapted to individual preferences and career stages. The common foundation should include fair compensation, reliable working conditions, respectful leadership,

meaningful work, transparent organisational expectations, and access to appropriate feedback. These conditions were either shared across generations or differed too little to justify age-based differentiation.

Beyond this common foundation, organisations can provide flexibility in how employees pursue development, recognition, autonomy, and work-life integration. One employee may value a specialist development programme, another may prefer greater schedule flexibility, and a third may be motivated by project responsibility or a more direct performance-related reward. The objective is therefore not to determine what “Generation Z wants” or what “Generation X prefers,” but to create a system capable of responding to different motivational configurations without becoming administratively unmanageable.

A particularly important practical development would be the introduction of transparent career maps. Employees should be able to understand not only which hierarchical position comes next, but which professional pathways are available and what competencies are required to progress. A high-performing specialist should not need to become a line manager merely to experience career advancement. Specialist, senior expert, project-lead, internal consultant, mentor, or trainer roles can provide meaningful alternatives and help organisations retain valuable knowledge.

Career conversations should also be distinguished from traditional performance appraisal. Performance appraisal primarily evaluates what the employee has achieved, whereas a career conversation should focus on where the employee would like to develop and what the organisation can realistically offer. When these conversations are conducted regularly, they can reveal emerging retention risks before they become resignation decisions. They also allow learning investments to be connected more directly to professional aspirations and organisational competence requirements.

Individualisation does not require a complicated HR analytics system. Even a short recurring motivational assessment can provide useful information about the relative importance of autonomy, pay, learning, flexibility, recognition, leadership support, meaningful work, and career prospects for individual employees. This is more informative than using generational membership as a proxy for preference. Generational data remain useful at aggregate level, but individual decisions should be based on actual employee needs rather than demographic assumptions.

8. Implications for quality management

The connection between motivation and quality is particularly important because continuous improvement depends on behaviour that cannot be produced by procedures alone. Kaizen systems, employee suggestion schemes, problem-solving groups, quality circles, and improvement projects all require employees to notice problems, invest cognitive effort in finding solutions, communicate their observations, and take responsibility for implementation. These activities involve discretionary effort and therefore depend partly on motivation.

Autonomy is especially relevant in this context. Employees who repeatedly experience that they have no influence over their own work processes may eventually stop proposing improvements, even when they identify clear opportunities. By contrast, an organisational environment in which employees can influence how work is performed and can see that useful suggestions lead to change reinforces both autonomy and ownership. In this way, motivational design becomes part of quality-system design rather than a separate HR issue.

Competence development provides a second direct connection. Participation in quality-improvement projects can itself become a development opportunity by strengthening analytical thinking, teamwork, project management, digital skills, and problem-solving capabilities. When such participation is recognised in career progression or professional advancement, improvement activity and employee motivation can reinforce each other. Instead of asking employees to contribute additional effort to quality initiatives without personal benefit, the organisation can make improvement work part of professional growth.

Meaningful work provides a third connection. Quality indicators are often communicated in abstract numerical form, yet employees are more likely to engage with them when the consequences are translated into concrete value. A reduction in defects can be explained as fewer customer complaints, less rework, lower resource consumption, and more reliable service rather than merely as a percentage-point improvement in a dashboard. Making this link visible helps employees understand that quality is not an administrative requirement but part of the value they personally help to create.

Generational diversity can also become a resource for quality improvement. Experienced employees often possess substantial tacit knowledge of processes, exceptions, customers, and historical solutions, while younger employees may bring stronger familiarity with emerging digital tools and new forms of information processing. Mixed-generation improvement teams can combine these capabilities rather than treating generational difference as a problem. This approach is compatible with Malatyinszki's (2025) sustainable HR perspective, in which generational diversity can be managed as a source of long-term organisational capability rather than merely as an HR challenge.

The same logic supports both traditional and reverse mentoring. Experienced employees can transfer professional and organisational knowledge, while younger colleagues can contribute digital competencies, new technological practices, and familiarity with emerging tools. Malatyinszki and Bartha (2024) similarly emphasise intergenerational cooperation and learning in the context of digitalisation. When knowledge transfer works in both directions, it also reduces the risk that mentoring is perceived as a one-sided relationship based purely on age.

9. Managerial implications

The central managerial lesson is that generational categories should be used as diagnostic background information rather than as decision rules. Knowing that younger employees are, on average, more sensitive to career visibility or flexibility can help managers identify areas that deserve attention. It does not justify assuming that every younger employee has the same preferences, nor that older employees have little interest in learning, autonomy, or flexible working arrangements. Effective management requires moving from demographic assumptions to actual conversations about motivation, career, and work design.

A practical motivational architecture can therefore be built on three interconnected principles. First, the organisation should establish credible and fair conditions that all employees can rely on. Second, it should create a portfolio of flexible motivational and work-design opportunities rather than applying identical solutions to everyone. Third, individual career and development pathways should connect employee aspirations with organisational competence needs, ensuring that personal development also contributes to long-term organisational quality.

Such an approach also helps avoid age-based stereotyping. Treating a generational group as homogeneous can unintentionally reduce perceived fairness and overlook high-value employees whose preferences do not match expected patterns. A more individualised system is therefore not only potentially more effective but also more consistent with the principles of fair and evidence-based people management.

10. Limitations and future research

The findings should be interpreted in light of several methodological limitations. The sample is not representative of the entire Hungarian employed population, and generational group sizes were unequal, with Baby Boomers forming a substantially smaller group than the other generations. Although robust statistical procedures were used, this imbalance requires caution when interpreting the results of the oldest generational category. The cross-sectional design also means that generational membership cannot be cleanly separated from age and career stage.

This limitation is particularly important because contemporary generational research increasingly questions whether observed differences should be interpreted as cohort effects. Ravid et al. (2025), Rudolph et al. (2021), and Schröder (2024) all provide reasons to consider age, historical period, work experience, and individual circumstances alongside generation. Future analyses should therefore examine whether the identified differences remain significant when work experience, leadership position, organisational size, work arrangement, education, and sector are controlled simultaneously.

A particularly promising next step would be to analyse employee retention in a multivariate framework. Career opportunities, autonomy, development, flexibility, leadership support, and perceived fairness could be modelled simultaneously to determine which factors explain turnover intention after controlling for age and experience. Such an analysis would move the research beyond the question of whether generations differ and towards the more practically important question of which organisational interventions can reduce unwanted turnover across different career stages.

Longitudinal research would provide an even stronger basis for interpretation. Following employees over time would help distinguish preferences that change as individuals age from those that may remain relatively stable within a birth cohort. This would allow organisations to design motivation systems that respond to actual developmental patterns rather than relying on assumptions derived from a single cross-sectional comparison.

11. Conclusions

The results show that motivational patterns across Baby Boomers, Generation X, Generation Y, and Generation Z contain both similarities and differences, but the differences should not be overstated. Generational membership explains only a limited proportion of variation in most motivational dimensions, and some fundamental factors, including relatedness, meaningful work, and key employment conditions, appear largely shared. This finding is consistent with contemporary international research challenging simplistic generational stereotypes and reinforces the need for more evidence-based management practices.

The most meaningful differences were concentrated around career-path transparency, professional advancement, learning, and flexibility. These factors tended to be more important for younger

employees, although the patterns were not always linear and are likely to reflect career stage as well as generation. The findings therefore support a shift from rigid generation-specific HR management towards career-stage-sensitive and individually adaptable motivation systems.

For quality-oriented organisations, this conclusion has broader significance. Continuous improvement, employee involvement, knowledge sharing, and responsibility for quality require more than formal processes; they require an organisational environment in which employees can develop competence, exercise appropriate autonomy, understand the meaning of their work, and see a credible future for themselves. Motivation should therefore be regarded not merely as an HR instrument but as one of the human foundations of organisational quality.

The most useful managerial question is consequently not “What does this generation want?” but rather “What does this employee need, at this stage of their career and in this particular role, to remain motivated, develop professionally, and contribute to high-quality organisational performance?” This shift in perspective allows organisations to benefit from generational diversity without converting it into generational stereotyping.

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