

Research Article

# Construction of Work Values and Meaning Among Generation Z: A Qualitative Study on Motivation, Productivity Meaning, And Job Satisfaction

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**Abstract:** This study explores how Generation Z constructs work values and meaning in modern organizations shaped by digitalization and social transformation. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach under a social constructivist paradigm, the research investigates the lived experiences of young professionals in the digital, creative, and startup sectors. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and non-participant observation and analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Moustakas, 1994). Findings show that Generation Z defines work through three interrelated dimensions: (1) intrinsic motivation grounded in personal purpose and self-expression, (2) redefined productivity emphasizing creativity and emotional balance rather than quantitative output, and (3) job satisfaction derived from inclusive culture and adaptive leadership. These results support Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) and Social Constructionism (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), showing that work meaning is socially constructed rather than objectively given. Overall, the study concludes that for Generation Z, work represents not merely economic activity but a medium for identity, contribution, and personal growth, urging organizations to embrace meaning-centered and value-driven leadership to enhance engagement and fulfillment.

**Keywords:** Generation Z; Job Satisfaction; Motivation; Productivity; Work Meaning

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## 1. Introduction

Significant global demographic shifts over the past decade have marked the rise of Generation Z as a dominant force in the modern workforce. Born between 1995 and 2010, this generation has come of age in an environment shaped by digital transformation, technological disruption, and accelerated globalization (Francis & Hoefel, 2018; Twenge, 2017; Deloitte, 2023). Unlike previous generations such as Baby Boomers and Millennials, Generation Z demonstrates unique value orientations, behavioral patterns, and career expectations. They prioritize work-life integration, personal meaning, and social contribution over mere financial stability, indicating a fundamental redefinition of what constitutes meaningful work (Schawbel, 2019; Prabowo & Santoso, 2023; Gallup, 2022).

In the post-pandemic era, the meaning of work for Generation Z has expanded beyond financial productivity to encompass identity formation, personal

values, and psychological well-being. According to Gallup (2022), 70% of Gen Z employees identify meaningful work that aligns with their values as the primary determinant of job satisfaction—surpassing material compensation. This finding echoes Wrzesniewski et al. (1997), who argue that individuals relate to work as a job, a career, or a calling, and Generation Z tends to emphasize the latter, where work becomes a vehicle for self-expression and purpose. Similarly, Steger et al. (2012) note that meaningful work serves as a key component of psychological well-being, motivation, and engagement.

However, this transformation introduces new challenges for organizations. Research by McKinsey & Company (2022) and the World Economic Forum (2023) reveals that many companies struggle to attract and retain young talent due to cultural misalignment and lack of perceived meaning. Generation Z resists rigid, hierarchical structures and instead values flexibility, autonomy, and purpose-driven environments (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018; Edmondson, 2019). Such findings resonate with Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which posits that intrinsic motivation and satisfaction emerge when individuals experience autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2017). For Generation Z, therefore, motivation is not primarily extrinsic but deeply value-based, sustained by opportunities for growth, creativity, and meaningful contribution.

The concept of productivity is also being reimagined. Traditional metrics—long hours or quantitative output—are increasingly replaced by indicators of creativity, digital fluency, and psychological flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Schawbel, 2019). This shift reflects what Schein (2017) calls a “cultural transformation in the meaning of work,” where productivity is measured not by external control but by internal engagement and authenticity. Generation Z's definition of success is thus tied to personal fulfillment and collective impact rather than hierarchical advancement (Berkup, 2014; Deloitte, 2023).

Moreover, job satisfaction among Generation Z is strongly influenced by organizational culture and leadership style. Edmondson (2019) highlights the role of psychological safety—the freedom to express ideas, experiment, and even fail—as a prerequisite for engagement and innovation. Similarly, Uhl-Bien and Marion (2009) propose that adaptive leadership fosters dynamic learning and responsiveness, qualities that Generation Z values in a rapidly changing environment. When organizations fail to cultivate openness, empathy, and reflection, younger employees often experience a meaning crisis, leading to disengagement or quiet quitting (WEF, 2023; Goleman, 2013).

In Indonesia, this issue is increasingly relevant. Data from the Central Bureau of Statistics (BPS, 2024) indicates that 56% of the formal labor force is under 35, dominated by Generation Z. Many work in technology, digital services, and creative industries—sectors that prioritize innovation and flexibility. Yet, a Kompas (2023) survey shows that 48% of young workers feel they have not found meaning in their work, despite financial stability. This gap between expectation and organizational culture reveals a growing existential dissatisfaction among young professionals (Siahay, 2023).

From a theoretical standpoint, this phenomenon aligns with social constructionism (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Burr, 2015), which posits that meaning is socially constructed through interaction, communication, and shared narratives.

Work values are not objective realities but are continuously reconstructed through language, social relations, and organizational experiences (Moustakas, 1994; Wrzesniewski et al., 1997). Thus, understanding Generation Z's meaning of work requires exploring how they negotiate identity, productivity, and satisfaction within complex socio-organizational systems.

Consequently, this study adopts a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore how Generation Z employees construct and interpret work meaning in contemporary organizations. It seeks to uncover the lived experiences through which motivation, productivity, and satisfaction are intertwined with personal values, digital culture, and collective ethics. By amplifying their narratives, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how generational consciousness, social values, and work structures intersect to redefine meaning and purpose in the modern workplace.

## 2. Research Methodology

### Type and Approach of Research

This study employs a qualitative phenomenological approach grounded in the social constructivist paradigm. This approach was chosen to deeply explore the meaning of work experiences constructed by Generation Z individuals through personal reflection and social interaction within the workplace.

According to Creswell and Poth (2018), phenomenology seeks to understand *the essence of lived experience* — the core meaning of human experiences as they are consciously lived. The constructivist paradigm, as described by Berger and Luckmann (1966), views social reality as a human construction formed through processes of interpretation, symbolization, and communication. Thus, this study does not aim to test hypotheses but rather to interpret the meanings embedded in the narratives of Generation Z's work experiences, particularly concerning motivation, productivity, and job satisfaction.

### Research Location and Participants

The study was conducted across various organizations and companies in the digital, startup, and creative industries, which predominantly employ young professionals. The research sites were selected through purposive sampling, considering organizational openness to qualitative research and participants' willingness to share personal experiences.

The participants were Generation Z employees aged 21–28 years who had been working for at least two years and met the following criteria:

- a. Actively engaged in professional activities that require collaboration and innovation;
- b. Possess a reflective understanding of the meaning of work and job satisfaction;
- c. Willing to participate in in-depth interviews and share subjective experiences.

The number of participants was determined based on the principle of data saturation, meaning that data collection was discontinued once no new or relevant themes emerged (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006).

### Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected using two primary techniques:

**In-Depth Interviews:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted to allow participants to narrate their personal experiences, emotions, and reflections regarding the meaning of work. The questions focused on aspects such

as motivation, work values, experiences of productivity, and perceived job satisfaction.

**Non-Participant Observation:** The researcher observed participants' work behaviors and social dynamics within their workplace — including team interactions, task execution, and communication patterns that reflected underlying work values and meanings. Observations were conducted naturally, without disrupting daily activities, to obtain contextual understanding of the meanings being constructed.

### **Data Analysis Techniques**

Data were analyzed using a thematic phenomenological approach, as developed by Moustakas (1994) and Braun & Clarke (2006). The steps included:

a. **Transcription and Familiarization**

All interview data were transcribed verbatim and read repeatedly to gain a comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences.

b. **Horizontalization**

All statements relevant to the meaning of work were treated with equal value, without initial interpretation.

c. **Thematic Coding**

Recurring meaning units were identified and grouped into major themes such as "*work as self-actualization*," "*innovation as personal value expression*," and "*work-life balance as inner satisfaction*."

d. **Textural and Structural Description**

Textural descriptions explained *what* participants experienced, while structural descriptions explained *how* these experiences occurred within their social and organizational contexts.

e. **Synthesis of Essence**

The final step involved synthesizing the essence of the phenomenon — the meaning of work for Generation Z as an interplay between personal values, social experiences, and organizational culture.

### **Data Trustworthiness**

Data trustworthiness was ensured through several strategies:

Source triangulation, by comparing information across participants from different backgrounds;

Member checking, by asking participants to validate the researcher's interpretations;

Researcher reflexivity, through awareness of the researcher's subjective position in interpreting data;

Thick description, to provide rich contextual detail of social and work experiences, enhancing the transferability of findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

## **3. Result & Discussion**

### **Results**

Based on the analysis of in-depth interviews and non-participant observations, this study identified three major themes that represent the construction of work values and meanings among Generation Z employees — namely: (1) Work as a Form of Self-Expression and Purpose, (2) Productivity as Creative Autonomy, and (3) Satisfaction through Emotional Balance and Social Connection.

Theme 1: Work as a Form of Self-Expression and Purpose

For Generation Z, work is not merely a means of earning income, but a medium for self-expression, identity formation, and the pursuit of personal meaning. Many participants described their work as an “extension of who I am,” emphasizing alignment between professional activities and personal values. Participants expressed that meaningful work provides a sense of *purpose*, allowing them to see the broader social or ethical impact of their contributions.

One respondent, a 25-year-old content strategist, explained:

“I don’t want to just have a job — I want my work to represent my ideas and values. If I can’t express myself, I lose motivation.”

This finding reflects what Deci and Ryan (2000) describe in Self-Determination Theory (SDT): when autonomy and purpose are fulfilled, intrinsic motivation flourishes. The data show that Generation Z’s sense of meaning emerges from autonomy in decision-making, alignment with moral values, and recognition of personal impact — all of which go beyond traditional definitions of career success.

#### Theme 2: Productivity as Creative Autonomy

Participants consistently rejected conventional metrics of productivity such as hours worked or volume of output. Instead, productivity was understood as creative flow and problem-solving freedom supported by technology and collaboration. The ability to innovate — even in small ways — was perceived as the core of productive performance.

A 23-year-old software engineer noted:

“I feel most productive when I’m trusted to experiment. If I’m micromanaged, my creativity dies.”

This sentiment reinforces the argument of Schawbel (2019) and McKinsey & Company (2022) that Generation Z measures productivity by value creation, flexibility, and learning. Organizational cultures that provide *psychological safety* (Edmondson, 2019) and autonomy enable these employees to sustain engagement and creativity. Conversely, rigid evaluation systems and excessive control discourage innovation and lower intrinsic motivation.

#### Theme 3: Satisfaction through Emotional Balance and Social Connection

Job satisfaction for Generation Z was strongly associated with emotional well-being and interpersonal belonging rather than material rewards. Participants repeatedly mentioned the importance of feeling seen, heard, and connected at work. While compensation remained relevant, it was described as “secondary” to an environment that supports growth, trust, and empathy.

Several participants emphasized that emotional support from peers and leaders helped them recover from stress and maintain enthusiasm. This echoes the notion of psychological safety (Edmondson, 2019) and the relatedness need in SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2017), illustrating that meaning and satisfaction arise when work relationships are authentic and supportive.

### Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that Generation Z constructs the meaning of work through reflective and contextual social processes. Work meaning is neither objective nor universal but rather a social construction shaped through personal experience, social interaction, and organizational culture. This understanding aligns with social constructionism (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), which posits that social

reality—including the concept of work—is a dynamic result of *collective sense-making* within a community or organization.

#### **Work as a Reflection of Identity and Moral Consciousness**

For Generation Z, work is not merely an economic activity but a project of identity and morality. They perceive their professional roles as platforms for expressing personal ethics, creativity, and social consciousness. Interviews revealed that participants view value congruence between personal and organizational values as essential for sustaining motivation and emotional commitment at work.

This finding supports Burr's (2015) notion that meaning is never singular; it is co-created and negotiated through dialogue and reflection. When organizations fail to provide space for personal value expression—such as through rigid leadership or limited autonomy—employees experience *value dissonance* or a conflict between personal and organizational ethics. Conversely, when organizations promote honesty, empathy, and inclusivity, the meaning of work becomes authentic and emotionally engaging.

Thus, leadership that emphasizes value alignment becomes essential in managing Generation Z employees. Value congruence is not only motivational but also existential, as it shapes professional identity and fosters a deep sense of belonging.

#### **Reframing Productivity through Autonomy and Creativity**

The findings show that Generation Z rejects traditional definitions of productivity based on quantitative output or working hours. For them, productivity derives its meaning from autonomy, flexibility, and creative opportunity. This represents a shift from industrial-era efficiency toward creativity-driven value creation.

These findings reinforce Uhl-Bien and Arena's (2018) theory of *adaptive leadership*, which argues that flexible and non-hierarchical systems enable sustainable innovation. In such environments, freedom to experiment, learn, and fail safely enhances both engagement and ownership.

On the other hand, organizations emphasizing control, surveillance, and rigid metrics tend to suppress intrinsic motivation and innovative behavior, leading to *creative disengagement*. Therefore, reframing productivity from efficiency to creativity is not a cultural choice but a structural necessity for thriving in the digital era.

#### **The Central Role of Emotional Culture in Job Satisfaction**

For Generation Z, job satisfaction is deeply rooted in emotional culture and empathetic leadership, not merely financial rewards. Organizational cultures that foster psychological safety (Edmondson, 2019) enable employees to express ideas, take risks, and admit mistakes without fear of punishment.

The study found that supportive relationships—both among peers and between employees and leaders—play a critical role in sustaining engagement and meaning at work. This resonates with Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2017), which highlights *relatedness* as a core psychological need.

When emotional safety is absent, employees experience disconnection and are more prone to quiet quitting (WEF, 2023). Hence, cultivating *emotional culture*—built on empathy, open communication, and shared support—becomes central to long-term retention and satisfaction.

#### **Theoretical Implications**

Theoretically, this study enhances the understanding of work meaning construction among younger generations, especially within digital and post-pandemic contexts. By integrating phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994) and social constructivism (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), it demonstrates that motivation, productivity, and job satisfaction are interconnected social meanings rather than isolated psychological variables.

This research also highlights the need to extend work meaning theories beyond quantitative analysis, emphasizing narrative and contextual interpretations. For Generation Z, work meaning is rooted in lived experience, relational ethics, and existential purpose. Thus, this study contributes a conceptual model of “Work as Meaningful Existence”, underscoring the interplay between personal values, social interaction, and organizational morality.

#### ***Practical Implications***

Practically, the findings suggest that organizations and HR leaders should implement a meaning-centered management approach—a strategy that focuses on cultivating meaning and purpose in the workplace. Recommended practices include:

Encouraging dialogue on work values and meaning, through reflective discussions and intergenerational mentoring; Revising productivity indicators to reward creativity, collaboration, and continuous learning; Integrating psychological well-being programs to foster emotional balance and resilience; Developing empathetic leadership, where managers act as facilitators of meaning rather than mere performance supervisors. By adopting such approaches, organizations can bridge the gap between corporate goals and the existential expectations of young workers. Adaptive and human-centered leadership can transform work from a contractual obligation into a shared journey of purpose, identity, and growth.

#### **4. Conclusion**

This study concludes that the meaning of work for Generation Z transcends traditional notions of employment as merely a means of economic survival. Instead, work is understood as a moral, social, and identity-forming process — a space where individuals seek authenticity, creativity, and purpose. Drawing on the phenomenological and social constructionist perspectives, the findings emphasize that meaning is not discovered but constructed through lived experiences, social interactions, and cultural contexts within organizations.

The research demonstrates that motivation, productivity, and job satisfaction among Generation Z are interrelated social constructs. Motivation emerges when personal values align with organizational ethics; productivity is redefined through autonomy and creativity rather than efficiency alone; and job satisfaction flourishes in emotionally safe and inclusive work environments. Hence, meaning at work is not static — it evolves through the interplay of personal identity, collective relationships, and organizational structures.

Practically, organizations that wish to attract and retain Generation Z talent must embrace meaning-centered management — emphasizing empathy, adaptability, and value congruence. Leaders should act as facilitators of purpose, enabling employees to co-create meaning through reflection, dialogue, and shared goals. Only by cultivating such environments can organizations transform work from a transactional obligation into a shared journey of purpose, growth, and fulfillment in the digital age.

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