

WELL-BEING AT WORK FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF DIVERSE GENERATIONS (BABY BOOMERS, X, Y, Z) AND OCCUPATIONAL GROUPS

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Abstract

This paper aims to identify differences in the understanding and priorities of well-being among different generations and representatives of diverse professional groups. The study aims to answer the question: How do priorities regarding well-being at work differ depending on age and professional experience, i.e., generational affiliation and job type? Are there significant differences in the perception of the hierarchy of well-being priorities among representatives of Generations BB, X, Y, and Z, who function as academic teachers, managers, and professionals? The study participants were a group of 137 individuals, composed of representatives of diverse generations (BB, X, Y, and Z), all with higher education. In the next part of the study, in-depth interviews were used. A total of 48 individuals participated from the group described above, 12 representatives of each generation, and three from each professional activity. All participants had higher education and represented diverse professions: academic teachers, management staff, and professionals employed in independent positions, four from each professional group. The added value of this article is its comprehensive overview and generational breakdown of representatives of specific professions, addressing significant priorities in their lives related to well-being, which has not previously appeared in the literature, and its emphasis on the application value of the research findings. It can be expected that stereotypical opinions about the preferences of representatives of specific generations hinder the realization of their potential, particularly in relation to Generation Z graduates.

Keywords: *Well-being, generations, academic teachers, managers, professionals.*

1. Theoretical considerations

Health is a complex concept. It encompasses physical, mental, and social well-being and is not simply "the absence of disease or infirmity", as defined by the World Health Organization (Constitution of the World Health Organization, 2024). Mental health, in turn, is fundamental to fulfilment in life and is important for both the individual and the community in which they live, determining their well-being. Dodge and colleagues (2012) define well-being as a manifestation of the balance between the resources and challenges associated with an individual's professional and non-professional activities. One of approaches is associated with a sense of happiness and well-being in life, achieved through the ongoing pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of suffering in relation to a "here and now" life perspective (Csikszentmihalyi, 2013). The second of trends, eudaimonism, argues that well-being is a state of emotions, experiences, and experiences that accompany a person's actions aimed at realizing their own potential, as well as living in accordance with their own subjective intentions (cf. Obuchowski, 2000). The third, and most well-known, model of psychological well-being is Ryff's six-dimensional model (1989, Ryff & Singer, 1998), which consists of the following elements: self-acceptance; positive relationships with others; autonomy; mastery over the environment; purpose in life; and personal development. This model emphasizes the relationship between psychological well-being and the quality of professional life, although it is difficult to clearly define the relationship between these phenomena, although they most often co-occur. Similar to Seligman's model, the approach to well-being adopted in this study is integrative (referring more to the eudaemonist approach) and simultaneously holistic, considering the context of human functioning. Considering all three concepts of well-being, the survey participants, a group of people from different generations and professions, were offered an integrative, yet compilatory, list of 11 elements, asking them to select the three most important ones that determine their sense of well-being. The author's integrative and holistic model included three main priorities: dimensions of well-being: work and its importance, psychological well-being, assessment of emotional burden, professional and non-professional development - interests. Currently, there are four distinct adult generations in the labour market: Baby

Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964), Generation X (born between 1965 and 1980), Generation Y or Millennials (born approximately between 1981 and 1996), and Generation Z (born between 1997 and 2012, or according to some sources, between 1995 and 2005). Generation Z is well-informed about global trends and remains strongly connected (Kubatova & Kulelkova, 2012). The emergence of generational theory has brought new interest in individual factors, raising questions about whether a given generation, unlike its predecessor, possesses distinct and innovative attitudes and talents related to ethics, shaped by its environment (Boyd, 2010). The values held by each generational group tend to shape individual lives and serve as reference points for interpreting subsequent life experiences. Belonging to the same generation, with its specific, shared historical and social experiences, may limit its members to a range of experiences that may be perceived and evaluated differently by other generations. Each group seems to be programmed to respond to situations with similar thought processes and reactions when confronted with similar circumstances (Bańka, 1996). These differences, manifested in generation-specific life experiences and reactions to situations, clearly distinguish generations from one another.

2. Research method

These considerations led to the formulation of the following research questions:

1. How do well-being priorities at work differ depending on age and professional experience, and therefore on generational affiliation and job type?

2. Are there significant differences in the perception of the well-being priority hierarchy between representatives of Generations BB, X, Y, and Z, who function as academics, managers, and professionals?

The research was quantitative and qualitative in nature and conducted in two stages: the first involved selecting three priorities from the proposed dimensions, which were a compilation of the three selected well-being concepts. The sampling was purposive. Taking into account all three concepts of well-being, the study group of 137 people, composed of representatives of diverse generations BB, X, Y, and Z, and professions (academic teachers from Poland, foreign academic teachers from public and private universities; managers from small and medium-sized commercial and service enterprises, and specialists, mainly IT specialists), was offered an integrative yet compilatory list of 11 items, asking them to select the three most important items that determine their overall sense of well-being. This list included the following elements: positive emotions, achievements at work, a sense of purpose and meaning at work: relationships with other people and engagement (Seligman's model) and job satisfaction (Diener's model), as well as autonomy; mastery over the environment; purposefulness in life; and personal development, understood as related to one's profession and beyond (Ryff's concept). Each item was to be supplemented with comments and observations, which were then assessed by four expert judges. A well-being dimension was shortlisted for inclusion in the responses and comments of more than 50% of the participants. Analysis conducted using the expert judge method identified three priorities: work-related well-being, psychological well-being, and professional and non-professional development. In the next phase of the study, the identified priorities were used to establish their hierarchy among representatives of different generations and representing diverse professional activities. Forty-eight individuals participated in this phase of the study. Interviews were used in this phase of the study, with 12 representatives of each generation participating. All participants held higher education degrees.

Each participant was asked the following questions:

1. How do they understand their well-being related to their work, their sense of psychological well-being, and their professional and non-professional development?

2. What is their hierarchy of elements (identified in the first phase of the research priorities) that constitute overall well-being?

Before formulating the questions, each participant received information regarding their understanding of the concepts of work-related well-being, mental well-being, and professional and non-professional development. It was explained that work-related well-being should be understood as a source of personal well-being, job satisfaction, the nature of work, its organization and autonomy, and a sense of meaning. Mental well-being is defined by the level of stress and the level of awareness related to one's mental well-being. Opportunities for professional and non-professional development, on the other hand, refer to the acquisition of competencies enabling the realization of one's future professional plans, the need to stay current with workplace requirements, and activities related to one's interests, hobbies, and life passions.

3. Research results

The second stage of the research involved conducting 48 interviews with representatives of four different generations and professional groups, four of which are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Well-being and belonging to a generation and professional group.

Generation, occupation and biographical information	Professional well-being	Mental well-being	Professional and non-professional development
Baby Boomers, Polish academic teachers Female, PhD 65 years old	I like my job, and it's the source of my satisfaction, which is what I mean by professional well-being. I value independence and autonomy, a good relationship with my boss, and not having to deal with things related to someone else's nonsense. I put it second, although I can't imagine doing anything else.	For me, the most important thing for my mental well-being at this stage of life is to have predictable, peaceful work. I get annoyed by anything that's pointless and lacks development...formal requirements sometimes scare me...	I don't think about professional development, although I'm not closed off to current knowledge. For me, well-organized vacations are important. I enjoy my own garden and traveling to warm countries in winter... So, for me, mental well-being is important, followed by work, and then developing my interests, and finally, professional development.
X Generation Foreign academic teachers 54-year-old woman, lecturer.	I like my job. I don't complain about autonomy, which is important, and I must assume that teaching students makes sense. It's never been my only passion in life.	I don't like being surprised by some job due yesterday that ruins my plans and stresses me out. Peace and mental health, especially at work... I have a good husband... are as important to me as work.	I'm constantly improving my Polish and go skiing at my place twice a year. So, I don't know which type of well-being is most important to me...
Y Generation 35-year-old manager, corporation	My well-being is developing dynamically. I have a good team, which makes me happy with my job, also because of remote work, but I don't intend to work here until retirement. Five years ago, work was the most important thing to me, and now it's still important, but I try not to exceed 8 hours a day. I work because of the financial conditions, which are currently the most favourable.	Currently, my mental well-being is just as important to me as work or development. What I do: monthly trips with my family abroad, close to Europe, but always, that's how I recharge my batteries.	I need to develop professionally, sometimes even paying for it myself. The situation at the company can change, so I should be prepared. I still enjoy skiing, and I even have decent equipment.
Z Generation Specialists 29-year-old woman, IT specialist	I have a job that I like, compared to my previous one, and it's developmental, even though I'm sometimes very tired. I wouldn't trade it for anything else. I have a good boss.	I try to maintain a balance between time spent at work and time spent with my boyfriend, traveling, and attending musical performances. It's difficult for me to assess my level of autonomy at work, but I'm convinced it makes sense. I don't think about my mental well-being, probably not entirely... but I manage.	My job provides me with opportunities for education. I'm starting a new field of study, so I don't have to travel on business trips. I want to learn another foreign language. I have a certificate in Spanish next to English. My order of well-being is work and professional development first, followed by mental well-being

Source: own research

Research has shown that the priorities preferred by representatives of professions and generations vary considerably, and the characteristics of individual generations described in the literature do not align with the data obtained during the study.

The specific nature of the academic teaching profession is associated with high commitment and satisfaction derived from teaching students and research, even if this comes at the cost of increased emotional burden. Younger teachers, representatives of Generations Y and Z, surprisingly value their professional work very highly, contrary to persistent stereotypes. Among foreign academic teachers, preferences were somewhat different, reflecting their treatment of Poland as a temporary residence. Some younger teachers, representatives of Generation Y, emphasized the possibility of compensating for their low salaries by working as lecturers in additional locations—usually universities—and, due to the shorter working hours, the ability to balance family responsibilities. In summary, working in an environment of foreign academic teachers plays a more instrumental role, allowing for additional income.

Generally, among managers, most often from small and medium-sized companies, among representatives of Generations BB, X, and Z, work proved to be the most important activity. As the analysed responses revealed, executives from this generation, perhaps due to a sense of responsibility, or perhaps due to the specific nature of family businesses, are highly involved in managing their company and view work as a source of financial stability. Their professional activity intertwines with their 24/7 life activities. The former may not be typical but rather stems from previous negative experiences in corporate management. However, the pursuit of financial stability among those pursuing a professional career contradicts the prevailing opinions about this generation (Bartkowiak, Krugielka, 2016). In both Generations Y and Z, a significant level of commitment and focus on work as the most important element of human well-being were observed.

Both Generation BB and Generation X professionals working as IT specialists or programmers viewed professional activity as the most important element of well-being. They cited a sense of autonomy, i.e., the ability to independently organize their work, and financial well-being as reasons. As with managers, this observation confirms the generally accepted opinion about the professional preferences of this generation. A similar attitude was observed among their younger colleagues, representatives of Generations Y and Z. All research participants, from the specialist group, valued their work highly and, regardless of the arduous nature of their commitment, would not want to trade it for another activity. In summary, representatives of all four generations emphasized the significant role of professional work. Psychological well-being, regardless of the work performed, unfortunately took a back seat when confronted with it. This situation may be a result of their preference for externally acquired values, which in turn serves to build self-esteem. Polish teachers proved to be the most engaged. It can be expected that their motivation was more autotelic in nature. On the other hand, professional work and its outcomes may be the result of a eudaimonistic approach to well-being (Seligman, 2011a, 2011b) as a source of satisfaction resulting from effort. The secondary role of psychological well-being may stem from a lower valuation of a hedonistic vision of the world (Csikszentmihalyi, 2013). This means that there are many paradigms explaining the preferences and choices of the subjects. Choices in the areas of professional and non-professional development seem relatively neutral (Bartkowiak, 2022), and the more the area of interest differs from the nature of professional work, the more beneficial it is for the individual (Bartkowiak, 2015) and serves as an antidote enabling "recharging the batteries." It can also be expected that psychological well-being, in relation to well-being related to professional work and professional and non-professional development, is linked to the level of stress, emphasizing a person's subjective preferences, and is culturally treated because of a specific human weakness.

4. Results, application and conclusions

When analysing the current state of research on the relationship between well-being and generational belonging, attention should be paid to the results of research conducted recently in Indonesia (Dwidienawati et al., 2025). The research led to the identification of external and internal factors influencing well-being among representatives of the following generations: The research identified external and internal factors influencing well-being among Generation Z representatives. These factors indicate differences in preferences stemming not only from generational affiliation, but also from the multitude of factors that shape these preferences, which do not support generalizations about Generation Z characteristics.

The study conducted by the authors confirms these conclusions. Similar research was conducted among Russian researchers during the same period (Baskhin et al., 2025). They focused on the relationship between psychological well-being (according to Ryff's concept) and seeking mental health help. This research was also quantitative in nature and included representatives of Generations Y and Z. The results showed that personal growth is positively correlated with the willingness to seek professional help, while a fatalistic vision of reality is negatively correlated. Furthermore, in Generation Y, a positive attitude toward seeking mental health help is associated with adopting a hedonistic perspective, focusing on the present, while in Generation Z, a eudaimonistic perspective, focusing on the future, is associated with seeking help.

In the discussed original research, the eudemonistic perspective on well-being is more prevalent, both for teachers, managers, and professionals. The hedonistic perspective, which focused on psychological well-being, appeared significantly less frequently.

The obtained data suggest specific recommendations of an applied nature. From a systemic perspective, these include avoiding generalizations across generations and deepening awareness of the sources of job satisfaction, such as autonomy and a sense of purpose in professional activity, among representatives not only of specific generations but also of specific professional groups. Furthermore, building career paths is also crucial. From an individualistic perspective, developing self-awareness, participating in psychoeducational activities, recognizing and nurturing one's passions, caring for professional development, building a sense of agency, and nurturing non-professional interests seem crucial.

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