

Exploring the Suitability of Trainee Programs for Generation Z in the Workplace

Hana Trávníčková¹

Abstract: Generation Z is entering the workforce with distinct expectations that challenge employees. Some companies implement trainee programs to deliver specific learning activities for university graduates, such as job rotation, project management, mentoring or other methods for employee development in a form of a trainee program. However, the relevance of these programs for Generation Z remains in question. A pilot qualitative research study was conducted using a literature review and a mixed-methods approach. The article aims to contribute to the theory of employee development as it relates to Generation Z. Additionally, it offers practical recommendations for companies on how to design training programs that are suitable for today's university graduates, along with identifying key elements of a successful training program for Generation Z in a business environment. Findings from semi-structured interviews, supplemented by Computer-Assisted Web Interviews (CAWI), highlight the motivations of Generation Z and the critical aspects of training programs, particularly in onboarding and their participation during the first year. These findings raise further research questions regarding training methods for Generation Z employees.

Keywords: Training, Graduates, Employee, Company, Business

JEL Classification: J24, M53, O15

1 Introduction

A company can influence its competitiveness through various tools; one of the key elements is its employees (Deloitte, 2024b). For example, onboarding a newcomer can bring new ideas to the enterprise and help develop and adapt to today's challenging environment (Becker & Bish, 2021). Another success factor for a business is talent management (Kral et al., 2022) or employee development (Saadouli, 2015). The company should work with the skills of their employees nowadays to be more competitive worldwide (World Economic Forum, 2023). The specific training method, especially onboarding programs in a business, should reflect the anticipation and needs of the target employee group, especially in the case of Generation Z (Chillakuri, 2020).

Generation Z refers to those born between the mid-1990s and early (Benítez-Márquez et al., 2022; Deloitte, 2024a; Egerová et al., 2021). The main characteristics of this generation include meaningful work, technological proficiency, and an appetite for tackling significant tasks ideally suited to the individual (Bhushan, 2023). Generation Z is not afraid to leave a job if the job does not suit them, they seek the best job where they can apply their skills (Deloitte, 2024a). However, intergenerational differences are natural, and businesses must learn to work with them (Chillakuri, 2020).

A *trainee program* is a highly selective and structured initiative designed to attract, develop, and retain high-potential individuals, often recent university graduates (Kral et al., 2022). For a successful trainee program, the firm should focus on individual development, job rotation, mentoring, and continuous feedback (Prasetyo & Khow, 2022). Companies use trainee programs for graduates in practice, even though they are not addressed much in the academic literature (Kral et al., 2022). Developing employees at different organisational levels is an investment for the firm that needs to be carefully considered (Saadouli, 2015). Retaining talent, especially from younger generations such as Generation Z, will be one of the important challenges for organisations (Kral et al., 2022).

2 Methods

This article aims to determine whether it is still appropriate for companies to offer trainee programs for Generation Z graduates nowadays. Based on a literature search in the international scientific databases Web of Science and Scopus, the following research questions were established:

RQ1: Why should a trainee program in a company be interesting for Generation Z?

¹ Technical University of Liberec, Faculty of Economics, Department of Business Administration and Management, Voroněžská 13, 460 01 Liberec, Czech Republic, hana.travnickova@tul.cz

RQ2: How to design a suitable trainee program for Generation Z?

Answers were researched not only in the scientific literature, but also through a pilot survey of trainee or alumni trainee program participants from three different companies.

2.1 Pilot Qualitative Research

The pilot study is based on semi-structured interviews with representatives of the trainee program in three companies. The respondents were between 21 and 23 years of age and belonged to Generation Z. The interview lasted one hour and was conducted in person or through an online meeting. The pilot survey was conducted from July 2023 to October 2024. The following areas were monitored within the pilot survey:

- Overall satisfaction with the trainee program
- Job task complexity, job content
- Communication with superior, inclusive feedback from superior
- Colleagues communication
- Improvement ideas

The profile of each company where the survey was conducted is shown in Table 1. These firms have been operating on the Czech market for more than 15 years and come from different sectors. In terms of the number of employees, they belong to large enterprises.

Table 1 Profile of companies, their trainees participated in the pilot qualitative research in the period July 2023 to October 2024

	Company A	Company B	Company C
Dominant Classification of economic activities (CZ-NACE)	29320 - Manufacture of other parts and accessories for motor vehicles	23190 - Manufacture of other glass, including technical glass	Non-specialised wholesale trade (46900)
Number of employees	500 – 999 employees	1000 - 1499 employees	500 - 999 employees
Institutional sector (according to ESA2010)	11003 - Foreign-controlled non-financial corporations	11002 - National private non-financial corporations	11003 - Foreign-controlled non-financial corporations

Source: Own processing

Company A newly introduced the Trainee Program in July 2023, which has recruited five university students. The program was designed for one year and was inspired by a foreign parent company. In this company, data collection regarding the trainee program was also conducted using CAWI method for one year. The monitoring was based on a scale of one to ten, with ten being the highest satisfaction in a given area and zero being the lowest. The survey started in the program's first month and was followed by a semi-structured interview with the respondent. Further questioning occurred after the completion of approximately three months of the programme, i.e. quarterly. In addition to the scale choices, the respondent was allowed to add verbal comments or to consult on the topics.

Both Company B and Company C have long experience with the trainee program. Their participants were interviewed in a semi-structured interview. For Company B, the respondent had been with the company for over one year. In company C, the respondent was a new participant in the trainee programme who had been with the company for over three months.

This is still a pilot phase of the research to examine whether the outcomes of the in-depth interviews are consistent with the outcomes of the literature search or whether a new research gap emerges. The pilot phase's limitations so far are the limited literature search from two international scientific databases and the low number of interviews, which are limited by time, financial, and human resources.

3 Research results

The literature review showed that the topic of the trainee program concerning the graduate concept has been investigated in scientific fields as diverse as medicine, social sciences, psychology or technical fields, as shown by the search of sources in Web of Science or Scopus. As of 19 October 2024, a total of searches of “Trainee” and “Graduate” into searching fields “Title”, “Abstract”, and “Author keywords” or “Title, abstract, keywords” included:

- Web of Science: 4495 scientific articles, but only 40 in the category Management or Business;
- Scopus: 7332 scientific articles, but only 121 in the category Business Management and Accounting.

These results show the potential to explore the topic of trainees and graduates more in the business environment. The author's key findings, both from the literature search and the pilot qualitative research, are presented in the following subsections.

3.1 Motivation of Generation Z to participate in the trainee programme in the company

Trainee programs are employee development tools in large, medium, and small companies worldwide, mainly focused on talented students or university graduates (Kral et al., 2022). The benefits of a trainee program include the opportunity to rotate through different jobs, mentoring from an experienced colleague or supervisor, and participation in an interesting project or individually constructed assignment (Bhushan, 2023).

The motivation and needs of the new employee should be identified during the onboarding process (Becker & Bish, 2021). It is crucial for a company to identify the motivation of trainee candidates and manage their expectations for the success of the trainee program (Kral et al., 2022). The semi-structured interviews revealed that there might be different motivations for undertaking a trainee programme among Generation Z, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2 Motivations of Generation Z to a trainee program based on semi-structured interviews between July 2023 and October 2024.

Motivation of Trainee	Statement
To gain specific job experience	<i>Getting practical training in the field, improving organisational skills (Trainee, Company A)</i> <i>Familiarisation with the production and the whole business process, performing practical daily tasks of a specific job position, and increase my professional knowledge (Trainee, Company A)</i>
To fulfil a study obligation	<i>I applied because I wanted to cooperate with the company on my thesis, and also I needed to fulfil the obligatory internship connected with my studies. (Trainee, Company A)</i>
To test “safely” a specific job role	<i>A training program allows me to try out the department without having to leave the company if I am dissatisfied with the job content. (Trainee, Company C)</i> <i>It allows me to see if I would enjoy a similar job role within full-part time job. (Trainee, Company A)</i> <i>It was a great experience and a chance to try working in the industry – which traditional temporary jobs do not allow. (Trainee, Company A)</i>

Source: Own processing

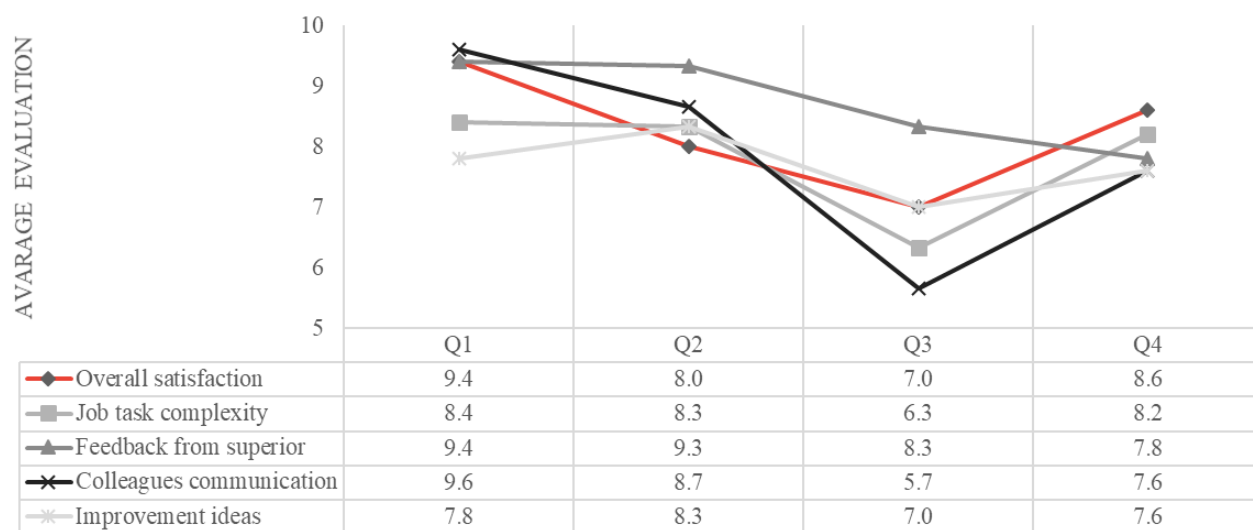
As shown in Table 2, the main motives for Generation Z participation may be to gain work experience and work experience, to meet educational obligations, or even to try out a specific work experience or job role.

3.2 How to design a suitable trainee programme for Generation Z?

Each generation has its own specific employee requirements (Egerová et al., 2021; Yılmaz et al., 2024). For example, Generation Z prefers a people-oriented management style of supportive, empathetic and respectful communication (Yılmaz et al., 2024). The literature review further suggests that generational differences must be addressed in employee development and other areas of the company (Benítez-Márquez et al., 2022; Egerová et al., 2021). For example, among university students in Italy, research has revealed that important values for Generation Z are personal growth, enjoyment, environmental and sustainability concerns, acceptance of disability-related issues, and preference for authenticity rather than a false representation (Tirocchi, 2024).

Krale et al. (2022) found that the structure and position of a trainee program in a company could discourage some graduates, so a company may be losing out on promising talent that it has challengingly selected. Also pilot qualitative research find out that over 70% of trainee program participants remained with the firm, either on a part-time job or going on to a specific job in that firm. However, as Figure 1 shows, participants went through different stages of satisfaction.

Figure 1 Average satisfaction of the trainee program in company A in different quarters on the scale of null to ten, where ten is the most satisfied level, quarterly from July 2023 to October 2024



Source: Own processing

Figure 1 shows the average satisfaction of trainee program participants in the five areas. It represents the trend in time perspective by quarter. Respondents rated their satisfaction on a scale of zero to ten, with ten being the best rating. On average, the values ranged from 5.7 to 9.6, as Figure 1 illustrates. The maximum value of ten was also mentioned several times within each rating. However, a value of two or three also appeared in the evaluation, particularly in the third quarter.

The overall satisfaction of trainees at the programme's start averaged 9.4, with most respondents scoring their satisfaction at 9 or 10. The interviews revealed that respondents enjoyed and went through the first month's onboarding phase. As Generation Z onboarding notes, onboarding starts with the interview (Chillakuri, 2020), and expectations and motivation must be worked on from the start (Kral et al., 2022). However, sensitivity is individual, as the comments below show.

Thanks to the trainee program, I have experience in multiple departments during my university studies, which is a nice combination of a part-time job and gaining practice and expertise. (Trainee, Company A)

The trainee program was more like a temp not very effective or meaningful. The only outcome of my trainee program was a completed requirement for university. (Trainee, Company A)

In terms of the difficulty of the task or job assignment, it can be seen that here, the average satisfaction of the trainee is relatively mainly at a similar level, oscillating around 8.2. The exception is the third quarter, which shows a deterioration of two points in this area, with, for example, following comment:

These were mostly routine jobs, not activities related to creativity and testing abilities or skills." (Trainee, Company A).

According to (Chillakuri, 2020), the job's meaningfulness is important for Generation Z, and individual task setting also plays a big role (Bhushan, 2023). However, according to research by Egerová et al. (2021), Generation Z is not more sensitive to job content than the previous generation. Related to job content setting, especially in conjunction with personal development and autonomy, can be an important factor in trainee satisfaction, as supported by the findings (Chillakuri, 2020).

The trainee programme allowed me personal development, I was given free space for my creativity, and I also valued the involvement in a specific project. (Trainee 1, Company A)

I missed to develop more my English languages skills. (Trainee 1, Company A)

Other important aspect of Generation Z is the importance of the feedback on their work and empathetic guidance (Yılmaz et al., 2024). As shown in Figure 1, satisfaction with communication with the supervisor was high, especially at the beginning of the trainee program, ranging from 9.4 to 9.3 in the first part of the program. However, it gradually

began to decline, after a year it was rated at an average of 7.8. However, finding from the interviews indicates that most supervisors supported trainees and communicated with them regularly whole the time. Thus, it is necessary for managers and supervisors of trainees to maintain a high level of open communication and stay empathetic really whole training program. Constant feedback is very important for Generation Z (Silva et al., 2023).

A different situation emerged in the case of communication with colleagues and other employees. In this case, it became clear during the interview that mostly direct colleagues tried to help the trainee but sometimes there could be some exceptions or problems with other colleagues outside the team. The importance of socialisation in the case of Generation Z is also mentioned by other authors (Chillakuri, 2020; Silva et al., 2023; Yılmaz et al., 2024). As shown in Figure 1, there was a dramatic deterioration on average in the third quarter. It was influenced by a conflict with a colleague and an unaddressed change within the other employees. A misunderstanding of the role of the trainee company by other employees can reduce visibly satisfaction with the trainee program. Therefore, it is also necessary to communicate the program and the role of the trainee in the whole enterprise well so that there is a proper understanding of the program's prestige (Kral et al., 2022).

As a newcomer, the trainee also brings new ideas for improvement (Becker & Bish, 2021). Overall, this area scores an average satisfaction between 7.0 and 8.3. According to Figure 1, this satisfaction averagely increased in the second quarter. The interviews revealed that satisfaction is also related to communication with the supervisor, who is often the recipient of ideas for improvement in the company. The interviewees mentioned no other tool for collecting new ideas.

In the case of the question "Would you recommend this Trainee program to your friends?" it was found that after the end of the program, 40% would recommend the program completely at the level ten, 20% at the level of eight points and rest recommended the training program to their friends at the level of five.

To sum up, key elements of the trainee program for Generation Z include communication with the supervisor, colleagues, and other company employees. Furthermore, the job description is an important factor for Generation Z, less the opportunity to give ideas for improvement. However, these are findings from a pilot qualitative survey with the following limitations.

The relatively few available scientific articles related to trainees and graduates in the business environment limit these findings. Another limitation of this study is the number of scientific databases used or available secondary data and the low number of respondents in the qualitative interviews. This opens new opportunities for future research.

On the other hand, the findings also reveal that Generation Z is still open to trainee programs in the business environment. In particular, if there is good communication with supervisors and other employees combined with an interesting job description, Generation Z will recommend the trainee program to others.

4 Conclusions

The important values of Generation Z include continuous learning and authenticity, as well as empathetic communication and leadership. The companies should reflect these values in the trainee program when they want it to offer to Generation Z. It is also very important for the sustainability of the trainee program to set and communicate expectations correctly and to find out the motivation of each trainee individually at the beginning of the trainee programme or even during the hiring process. Generation Z would like to work meaningfully and have space for self-development. Findings from semi-structured interviews indicate the importance of communication with their superiors, team colleagues or other employees in the company. A well-set job content with a complex task helps the trainee to know his or her potential more easily.

A trainee of Generation Z should be supported during the whole time of the training program by empathetic communication and a suitable task. Then he or she will more probably recommend the trainee programme to his/her friends. One of the important motivations for Generation Z is to gain practical work experience and have the opportunity to try out the job safely. Other trainees of Generation Z could be motivated by fulfilling study requirements such as a compulsory internship or a thesis topic related to studies. It opens the next research gap if there is any connection between university study requirements and successful employee training or even company competitiveness.

Despite the limitations of the research, this article provides further insight into how Generation Z employees and university students can work and develop in enterprises and opens up further potential research questions in this area.

In conclusion, a trainee program in a business can still be a sustainable alternative for Generation Z to develop and gain work experience, as long as the company respects the above mentioned points important for Generation Z.

Acknowledgement

This paper was financially supported by the Student Grant Competition of Technical University of Liberec under the grant number SGS-2024-1434..

References

- Becker, K., & Bish, A. (2021). A framework for understanding the role of unlearning in onboarding. *Human Resource Management Review*, 31(1), 100730. doi: 10.1016/j.hrmr.2019.100730
- Benítez-Márquez, M. D., Sánchez-Teba, E. M., Bermúdez-González, G., & Núñez-Rydman, E. S. (2022). Generation Z Within the Workforce and in the Workplace: A Bibliometric Analysis. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2021.736820
- Bhushan, B. (2023). Developing generation Z employees: A two-stage mediation model. *Development and Learning in Organizations: An International Journal*, 37(1), 5–7. doi: 10.1108/DLO-03-2022-0051.
- Chillakuri, B. (2020). Understanding Generation Z expectations for effective onboarding. *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, 33(7), 1277–1296. doi: 10.1108/JOCM-02-2020-0058.
- Deloitte. (2024a). *2024 Gen Z and Millennial Survey: Living and working with purpose in a transforming world*. Deloitte Global.
- Deloitte. (2024b). *2024 Global Human Capital Trends*.
https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/insights/articles/glob176836_global-human-capital-trends-2024/DI_Global-Human-Capital-Trends-2024.pdf
- Egerová, D., Komárková, L., & Kutlák, J. (2021). Generation Y And Generation Z Employment Expectations: A Generational Cohort Comparative Study From Two Countries. *E+M Ekonomie a Management*, 24, 93–109. doi: 10.15240/tul/001/2021-03-006
- Kral, P., Richterová, M., & Kralova, V. (2022). Why does Talent Leave Organizations? Talent Retention of Trainee Program Graduates. In *European Conference on Management Leadership and Governance*, 18. doi: 10.34190/ecmlg.18.1.889.
- Prasetyo, Y., & Khaw, J. (2022). *Macroergonomics-Based Approach for a Management Trainee Program in the Utilities Industry* (pp. 820–826). doi: 10.1007/978-3-030-74614-8_101.
- Saadouli, N. (2015). Optimal Allocation Of Training Resources. *Journal of Applied Business Research (JABR)*, 31(2), Article 2. doi: 10.19030/jabr.v31i2.9151.
- Silva, P., Hanashiro, D., & Vieira, A. (2023). Organizational Socialization: A study with Generation Z Trainees. *Revista Pensamento Contemporâneo Em Administração*, 17, 1–19. doi: 10.12712/rpca.v17i3.59963.
- Tirocchi, S. (2024). Generation Z, values, and media: From influencers to BeReal, between visibility and authenticity. *Frontiers in Sociology*, 8, 1304093. doi: 10.3389/fsoc.2023.1304093
- World Economic Forum. (2023). *The Future of Jobs Report 2023*. World Economic Forum.
<https://www.weforum.org/publications/the-future-of-jobs-report-2023/>
- Yılmaz, B., Dinler Kısaçutan, E., & Gürün Karatepe, S. (2024). Digital natives of the labor market: Generation Z as future leaders and their perspectives on leadership. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 15. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2024.1378982.