ACROSS
Journal of Interdisciplinary Cross-Border Studies
Vol.10, No.7, 2026

Economy and Business

Generation Z and the Transformation of the Modern Labour Market: An Economic Analysis of Causes and Consequences

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Abstract

This article analyses the transformation of work values and professional behaviour patterns among members of Generation Z amid structural changes in the modern labour market. The study aims to identify the socioeconomic factors that have led young workers to reassess traditional notions of work, career development, and professional loyalty. The paper examines the impact of the 2008 global financial crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, rising costs of living, declining affordability of housing and education, and changes in work organisation on the formation of new work strategies among Generation Z. Particular attention is paid to phenomena such as the Great Resignation, quiet quitting, and the revival of the trade union movement in the United States as manifestations of young workers' adaptation to changing socioeconomic conditions. Based on an analysis of official statistics, sociological research, and scientific literature, the study shows that changes in work behaviour among Generation Z stem primarily from objective institutional and economic factors, rather than a decline in work motivation or a change in work ethic. It is concluded that members of Generation Z are not so much initiators of the crisis in the existing model of labour relations as indicators of the profound institutional changes occurring in the modern economy. The shift in their work attitudes reflects their adaptation to new labour market conditions and significantly affects the further development of employment systems, corporate governance, and social policy.

Keywords: Generation Z; labour market; labour values; The Great Resignation; quiet quitting.

Introduction

In recent years, the labour market in developed economies has undergone a major transformation, accompanied by shifting perceptions of work, professional stability, and career development. One of the most noticeable manifestations of these changes is the shift in work behaviour among members of Generation Z, who have entered the active phase of their professional careers amid high economic uncertainty, digitalisation, and rising costs of living. The traditional social contract model, which holds that education, hard work, and loyalty to an employer ensure economic stability and social mobility, is gradually losing its

effectiveness. The 2008 global financial crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, changing employment structures, and declining housing affordability have shaped young workers' perceptions of professional activity and its relationship with quality of life.

This article analyses the factors that have influenced the transformation of Generation Z's work values and explores how economic and social changes have contributed to the emergence of new models of work behaviour. Attention is paid to phenomena such as the "Great Resignation," the growing interest in flexible forms of employment, changing attitudes toward corporate loyalty, and the revival of union activism among young workers.

Socioeconomic factors shaping the work attitudes of Generation Z

Drastic socioeconomic transformations often manifest not through large-scale political events, but through localised incidents that later acquire symbolic significance. One such example was the incident that occurred in the summer of 2021 in Nebraska, USA, when employees of a fast-food restaurant simultaneously terminated their employment, leaving a message on the notice board: "We are all quitting. We apologise for the inconvenience." Initially, this incident was seen as the result of local organisational problems and did not go beyond a typical labour dispute. However, its widespread dissemination in the digital media space soon coincided with a much larger trend.

In the second half of 2021, the United States experienced an unprecedented rise in voluntary layoffs. Each month, approximately four million workers left their jobs, often without any prearranged alternative employment. The mass nature of this phenomenon affected a wide range of industries, including food service, retail, logistics, and the administrative sector. Such a scale of voluntary exit from the labour force is unprecedented in the modern history of the American labour market.

In public discourse, this trend has often been interpreted as a manifestation of the younger generation's reluctance to work, their lack of resilience to professional pressures, or inflated expectations regarding employment conditions. However, empirical data reveals a more complex picture. Despite comparable, and in some cases even higher, levels of labour force participation compared to previous generations, members of Generation Z have significantly lower purchasing power. Furthermore, they are the most educated generation in modern history, yet they are also the first generation in decades whose long-term economic prospects are assessed as less favourable than those of their parents.

These circumstances suggest that these changes are linked less to the individual characteristics of young workers than to the transformation of the socioeconomic model itself, which for decades has determined the relationship between work effort and expected life outcomes. While the previously entrenched notion that conscientious work ensures financial stability, homeownership, and social mobility was once seen as a fundamental element of the social contract, its effectiveness has increasingly been called into question. Members of Generation Z were among the first social groups to openly identify this contradiction.

In recent years, a gradual revision of traditional models of work behaviour has been observed, accompanied by a refusal by some young workers to follow established career strategies. These processes suggest the emergence of a new model of interaction between individuals and the labour market, whose consequences could significantly affect economic development, the functioning of the employment market, and the sustainability of existing socioeconomic institutions.

To understand the transformation of Generation Z's work attitudes, it's first necessary to define the characteristics of this demographic cohort. Generation Z is generally defined as individuals born between approximately 1997 and 2012. This is the first generation whose socialisation occurred almost entirely amid the widespread adoption of digital technologies, the internet, and mobile devices. Unlike previous generations, members of this age group have no experience of life outside the digital environment, and their coming of age coincided with a period of continuous socioeconomic and political upheaval.

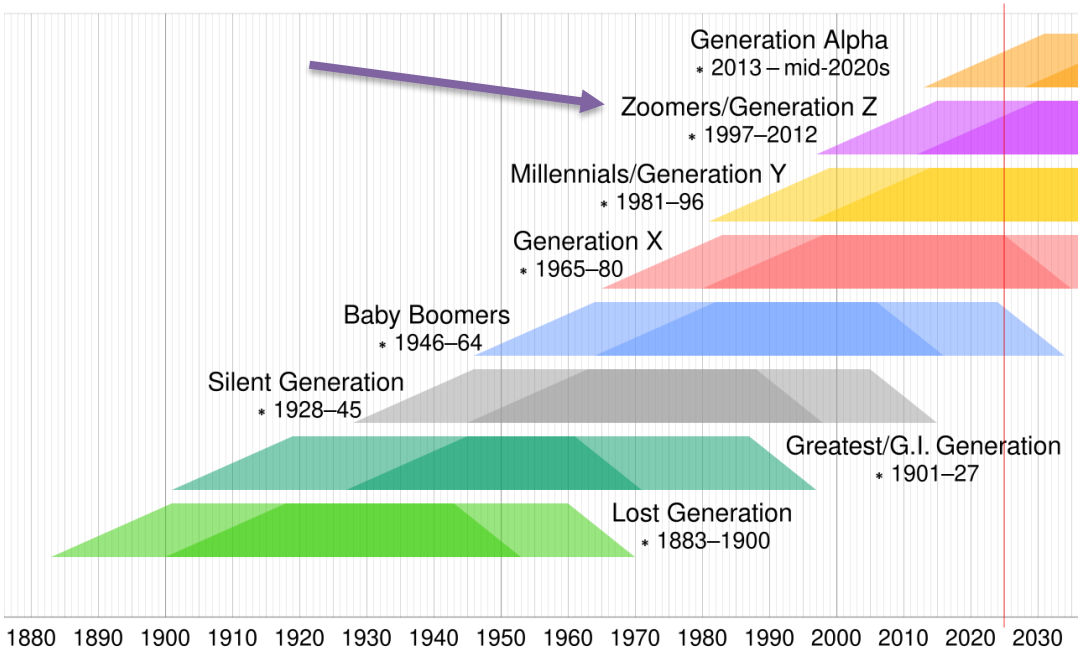

Figure 1. Generation timeline

Source: Cmglee. Generation timeline.svg. Wikimedia Commons, licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0.

The 2008 global financial crisis, the most widespread economic upheaval since the Great Depression, largely shaped Generation Z's worldview. Although most members of this generation were still children when the crisis struck, its aftermath significantly shaped their perceptions of economic stability and employment prospects.

While the professional community associated the 2008 crisis primarily with the collapse of the mortgage market, the banking sector, and systemic financial risks, for the children of that period it manifested itself through direct family life experiences. In many households, parents faced job losses, reduced incomes, the need to relocate, or to give up their usual level of consumption. Financial instability became part of everyday life, shaping young people's early awareness of the existing economic system's vulnerability.

The crisis also showed the limits of the traditional model, which holds that conscientious work and financial discipline guarantee economic security. For many members of Generation Z, this period was the first evidence that even adherence to generally accepted rules does not protect against large-scale economic shocks driven by systemic factors.

The long-term consequences of the crisis have also been empirically confirmed. Research shows that university graduates who entered the labour market during an economic recession experienced a prolonged decline in income compared to those who began their careers in more favourable macroeconomic conditions. On average, their salaries were

approximately 17.5% lower, and the negative impact persisted for the next decade and a half of their professional careers. Thus, the timing of labour market entry proved a significant factor in long-term economic prospects, regardless of educational level, professional competencies, or individual effort.

Under these circumstances, many young people viewed continuing their education as a rational strategy for adapting to the crisis. Higher education was seen not only as an investment in human capital but also as a way to postpone entering the unstable labour market until the economy recovered. However, during their years of study, the economic and technological environment continued to rapidly transform. As a result, many graduates faced employment conditions fundamentally different from what they had anticipated when entering university. This became a key factor in the subsequent reassessment of the role of education, work, and career development in Generation Z's value system.

The crisis of the traditional employment model and new strategies of employee behaviour

Despite the formal recovery of the global economy after the 2008 crisis, the effects of this recovery were significantly less noticeable for young workers than for overall macroeconomic indicators. By the mid-2010s, unemployment in the US had reached historically low levels, corporate profits were growing steadily, and public discourse characterised the period as a time of economic recovery. Even so, for the generation entering independent life at this time, key indicators of well-being painted a different picture.

One of the most significant indicators of this changing economic reality was housing affordability. In the 1980s, the cost of an average home in the US was about three times the average worker's annual income; by the early 2020s, that ratio had risen to about seven times the average worker's annual income. Thus, purchasing a home now requires a significantly longer accumulation period, even with stable employment and the absence of other significant financial obligations.

Similar trends were observed in the rental housing market. In the early 2000s, the average share of income spent by American households on housing was around 20%. By 2022, this figure had increased significantly, exceeding 30% nationally and reaching 40% or more in major metropolitan areas. For young workers, this meant a significant portion of their income went not to capital accumulation or improving their quality of life, but solely to meeting basic housing needs.

At the same time, the rising cost of living was accompanied by limited growth in real wages. Despite nominal income increases, after adjusting for inflation, young workers in the early 2020s earned lower comparable real incomes than young workers in previous decades. This matters especially given overall growth in labour productivity and the increase in economic value created. The gap between productivity growth and wage dynamics contributed to young workers' perception that the benefits of economic growth were unevenly distributed.

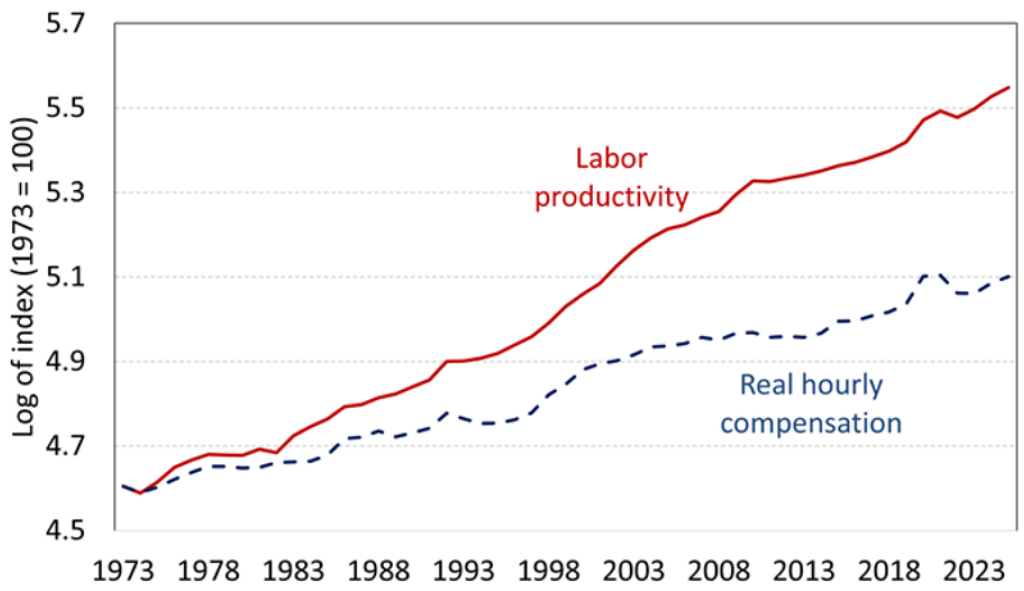

Figure 2. Labour productivity and real hourly compensation, 1973-2025

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labour Statistics

This trend is not unique to the United States. Similar processes are observed in a number of developed economies in Europe and Asia, where younger generations are facing rising housing costs, increasing education expenses, and declining access to traditional life goals. Despite differences in national institutions and cultural contexts, younger people across countries are increasingly coming to the same conclusion: education and stable employment no longer automatically guarantee economic independence.

As a result, the very perception of work as a social institution is changing. For previous generations, professional activity was viewed as the primary mechanism for achieving long-term stability—buying a home, starting a family, and advancing social status. For Generation Z, work is increasingly perceived primarily as a source of current income necessary to cover everyday expenses, rather than as a guaranteed path to economic mobility.

This transformation became especially evident during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the spring of 2020, the global labour market faced an unprecedented crisis: millions of jobs were temporarily or permanently lost, and the hardest-hit sectors were those that traditionally employed a significant portion of young workers—food service, retail, hospitality, and the service sector. In April 2020, the unemployment rate among young workers in the US reached historic highs, significantly exceeding the levels of the previous economic crisis.

For 2020 university graduates, the transition to the labour market was particularly challenging. Many job offers were cancelled, internships were terminated, and education was completed amid distance learning and social isolation. This experience reinforced distrust of the notion that consistently following a traditional life plan automatically leads to stable results.

Unfortunately, the pandemic had an impact beyond economic losses. It also served as an experiment that challenged many established norms of work organisation. The widespread shift to remote work demonstrated that a significant portion of intellectual activity can be accomplished without a permanent physical presence in the office. Workers

found they could complete professional tasks with more flexible time management, without needing to be in the workplace solely to appear busy.

Thus, the pandemic acted not only as an economic crisis but also as a catalyst for changing work expectations. With work rules temporarily disrupted, many members of Generation Z received practical confirmation that alternative employment models were feasible. This contributed to the wider spread of flexible work arrangements, a shift in attitudes toward career loyalty, and a search for new economic adaptation strategies, including interest in alternative financial instruments and new income-generation models.

"The Great Resignation" as a manifestation of changing labour strategies

The COVID-19 pandemic has also significantly shaped Generation Z's attitudes toward work. In addition to its widespread economic consequences, the pandemic has been accompanied by a significant deterioration in the psycho-emotional state of the population, particularly among young people. Prolonged social isolation, uncertainty about the future, intense information overload, and constant coverage of morbidity and mortality data have led to an unprecedented rise in anxiety, stress, and depression. According to numerous studies, a significant proportion of Generation Z members reported a deterioration in their mental well-being during the pandemic.

At the same time, daily practices have undergone a radical transformation. Work, education, and social interaction shifted to a digital environment, and prolonged self-isolation created conditions for rethinking life priorities. For many young people, the pandemic has become a time to confront a limited lifespan and critically evaluate the relationship between professional activity, material compensation, and quality of life. An increasing number of workers concluded that emotionally and physically draining work was not compensated by either wages or prospects for long-term well-being.

By the end of 2020, not only had the economic situation worsened, but workers' psychological attitudes had also shifted. One of the most significant consequences of the pandemic was a decrease in the fear of voluntary resignation. While concerns about the impossibility of finding alternative employment had previously kept many employees in unsatisfactory jobs, the pandemic showed the limits of that strategy. Mass layoffs, business closures, and general instability showed that even high loyalty to an employer does not guarantee continued employment in the face of a systemic crisis. As a result, workers' willingness to reconsider their career paths increased significantly.

Following the gradual lifting of restrictions in 2021, the American labour market faced a phenomenon later dubbed "The Great Resignation." In the second half of 2021, approximately four million workers voluntarily terminated their employment each month, a record high in the history of statistical observation. The scale of these layoffs led to a serious labour shortage in food service, retail, hospitality, and other industries traditionally reliant on relatively low-wage labour.

Initial public reactions largely attributed this to a changing work ethic among the younger generation. Claims that young workers had lost their motivation to work, had become more demanding, or were preferring to rely on government benefits were widely circulated in the public sphere. However, further analysis revealed that such interpretations only partially reflect the real reasons behind these processes.

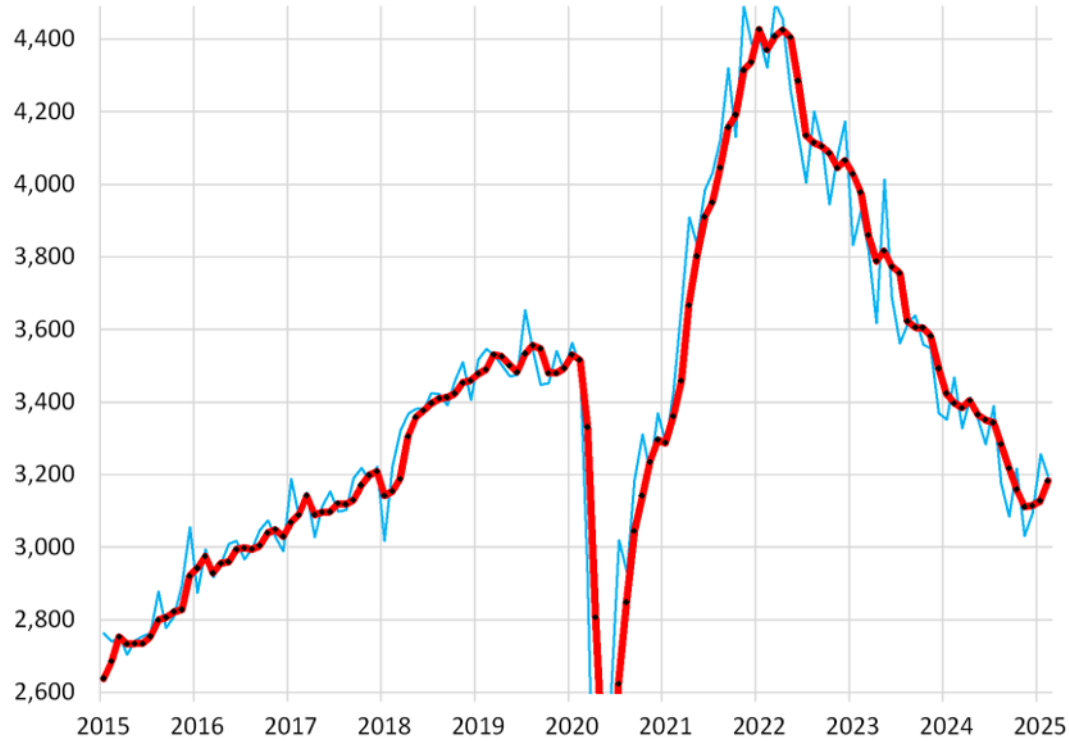

Figure 3. Dynamics of the number of people who voluntarily left their jobs (Thousands)

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labour Statistics

In fact, the pandemic has facilitated a large-scale redistribution of labour between economic sectors. A significant portion of workers did not abandon work per se, but rather moved to sectors offering higher wages, greater employment flexibility, or more favourable working conditions. Food service workers moved into higher-paid roles in logistics and warehousing, retail employees shifted to remote customer service, and many young professionals chose professions that offered greater autonomy and a better work-life balance.

Faced with a talent shortage, employers were forced to adapt to the changing labour market. Many sectors saw accelerated wage increases, additional employment benefits, expanded health insurance programs, education reimbursement programs, and other social benefits. Thus, for the first time in a long time, the balance of bargaining power partially shifted in workers' favour. For members of Generation Z, this became practical confirmation that changing employers can effectively increase wages and improve employment conditions. In other words, the value of one's own labour ceased to be perceived solely as an abstract concept and was directly expressed in concrete economic advantages available through alternatives in the labour market. One characteristic feature of Generation Z's work behaviour is high labour market mobility. Unlike previous generations, members of this age group demonstrate less attachment to a single employer and more often view changing organisations as a tool for professional and financial development.

This phenomenon is associated not so much with a lack of desire for stability, but rather with a shift in the economic logic of career advancement. In a context where internal salary increases within a single company often occur more slowly than income growth when moving to a new employer, job hopping has come to be perceived by young professionals as a rational strategy for increasing income. Labour market research shows that workers who

regularly change jobs sometimes experience higher salary growth than those who maintain long-term loyalty to one organisation.

As a result, the traditional career development model, based on long-term commitment to an employer in the expectation of gradual increases in status and rewards, has lost its appeal. While professional stability was once seen as the result of loyalty and steady advancement within a single company, Generation Z more often embraces a career-management model based on accumulating experience, building skills, and pursuing the most lucrative opportunities in the external labour market.

The concept of "quiet quitting" gained widespread notoriety in 2022 after videos circulated on social media in which young professionals described abandoning the culture of constant availability and performing additional duties not stipulated by their employment contracts. However, this did not involve actual dismissal or a reduction in the quality of core tasks. Instead, it reflected workers' desire to re-establish boundaries between professional and personal life: to fulfil obligations within working hours, limit unpaid overtime, and not view work as central to personal identity. The spread of this phenomenon sparked a heated debate among employers and HR experts. Corporate representatives often interpreted quiet quitting as a decline in engagement and a change in the work ethic of younger workers. However, a closer look suggests the problem is not solely generational. According to Gallup research, employee engagement levels in the US remained relatively stable over a long period and did not show a sharp decline immediately after the term "quiet quitting" emerged. This suggests that this phenomenon is not a sudden abandonment of work by a new generation, but a new form of public expression of long-standing problems in the organisation of employment.

The main distinguishing feature of Generation Z is not the desire to limit work efforts to formal duties, but their willingness to openly discuss this issue. Young workers have questioned the traditional notion that high professional performance should automatically come with career advancement and financial rewards. In a context where additional effort often leads only to increased responsibilities without a corresponding increase in compensation, avoiding excessive work commitments has become a rational strategy for some workers to maintain work-life balance.

These attitudes are rooted in Generation Z's collective experience. Observing economic crises, job instability, and layoffs after long periods of service at the same organisation, young professionals have become more critical of corporate loyalty as an unconditional value. For them, professional activity remains an important part of life, but it is no longer perceived as the sole source of social identity and personal meaning.

Therefore, quiet quitting should be viewed not as a sign of declining work motivation, but as an indicator of a bigger change in labour relations. This phenomenon reflects a shift from a model based on maximum employee involvement in the organisation's interests to one in which balance, autonomy, and mutuality of obligations between employer and employee are particularly important.

Changing the economic exchange between labour and welfare

As structural changes in the labour market intensified, differences in work values between generations moved beyond the latent level and became a matter of open public debate. Representatives of older generations, including executives of large corporations, entrepreneurs, and public figures, increasingly attributed these changes to the unique work motivations of young people. Claims of declining work discipline, excessively high career

expectations, and Generation Z's insufficient readiness for professional demands became widespread in the public sphere.

This rhetoric rested on a traditional model of professional success, which assumes that high material well-being is achieved solely through long-term, intensive work. According to this view, career advancement, financial stability, and social recognition result from years of professional effort and therefore cannot be expected early in working life.

Still, these statements provoked a widespread public reaction, primarily among young workers. An alternative discourse has emerged in the digital environment, questioning the applicability of the experience of previous generations to modern economic conditions. The most common argument was the significant shift in the relationship between wages and the cost of necessities. Members of Generation Z increasingly emphasised that the economic environment in which their parents began their careers was fundamentally different from today's, making a direct comparison of work strategies across generations inappropriate.

Public debate has gradually shifted from assessing young workers' individual qualities to analysing objective economic factors. The central focus of discussion has shifted to the affordability of housing, education, and basic consumer goods relative to the population's labour income.

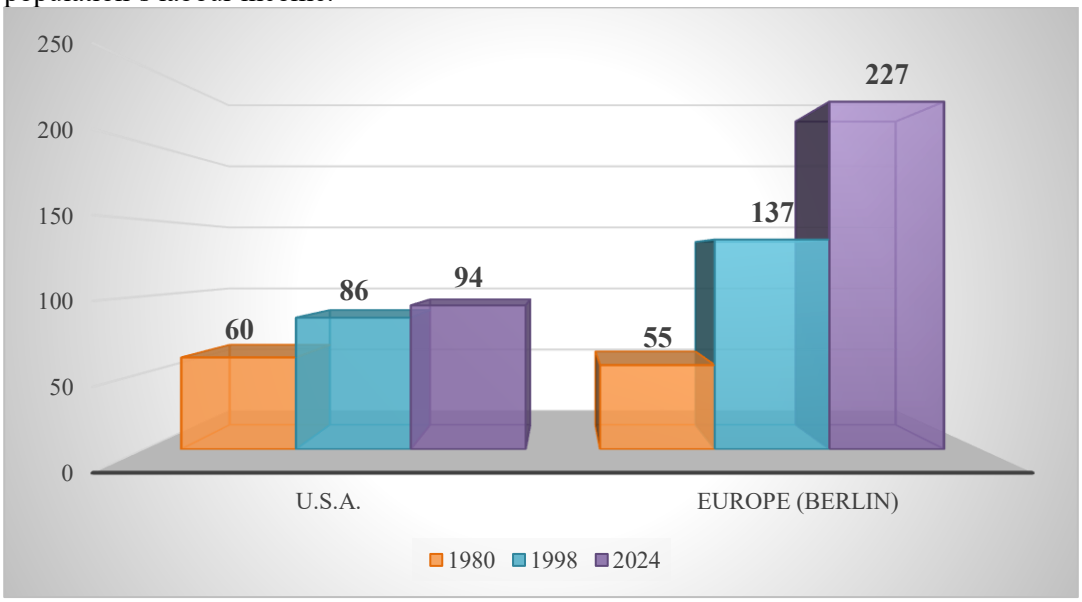

Figure 4. The number of working hours required to purchase 1 m² of housing

Source: calculated by the author based on data from the U.S. Bureau of Labour Statistics (BLS), Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis (FRED), OECD Housing Prices Database and Eurostat.

Comparative analysis shows that, despite nominal wage growth, the rate of increase in housing costs has significantly outpaced income growth in both the United States and most European countries. For example, in the United States, purchasing one square meter of housing in 1980 required approximately 60 hours of work, with a median hourly wage of $6.66. By 1998, this figure had increased to 86 hours, and by 2024, to approximately 94 hours, despite an increase in the average hourly wage to $34. Consequently, real housing affordability decreased over the period under review.

A similar trend is observed in food costs. In 1980, a basic household food basket cost about 18% of average monthly income, equivalent to about 27 hours of labour; by 2024,

it had risen to 24% of income, or about 37 hours of labour. For that reason, even meeting basic needs requires greater labour input than in previous decades.

The trend in the cost of higher education is no less telling. Although the ratio of nominal wages to tuition has shown some improvement, the overall financial burden on students remains high due to significant increases in housing, transportation, and daily consumption costs. As a result, higher education has not become significantly more affordable, despite rising incomes.

Similar processes are also evident in European countries. For example, in Germany, the number of working hours required to purchase one square meter of housing has increased from approximately 55 hours in 1980 to 227 hours in 2024. At the same time, the share of income spent on renting a one-bedroom apartment rose from about 22% to 38%, indicating a significant increase in the housing burden on young households.

These data suggest a persistent trend toward declining affordability of key life benefits for younger generations. Despite continued high labour force participation and rising educational levels, young workers face a clear decline in their ability to accumulate capital, purchase their own home, and achieve financial independence. In other words, increased hours and intensity of work no longer provide the level of socioeconomic mobility characteristic of previous generations.

Consequently, the traditional social contract model, based on the assumption that conscientious work inevitably leads to material stability, starting a family, and acquiring a home, is gradually losing its universality. This transformation is most pronounced among members of Generation Z, for whom the gap between labour effort and economic outcomes is becoming not a subjective perception but an objectively confirmed characteristic of the modern labour market.

At this stage, the key contradiction between generations becomes clear: it stems less from differences in work ethics than from the fundamentally different economic conditions in which they were socialised. Members of older generations built their careers during a period when individual effort was relatively closely tied to material reward. Long-term employment with one organisation, gradual career advancement, saving for a home, and building a pension were perceived as the natural results of conscientious work.

For members of Generation Z, this model is increasingly out of reach. The modern labour market is characterised by high instability, rising living costs, declining housing affordability, and rising precarious employment. In these conditions, even significant working hours do not always ensure financial independence. Moreover, numerous studies show that changing employers often leads to larger salary increases than long-term loyalty to one organisation. At the same time, workers remain highly dependent on employers for social benefits, including health insurance, further limiting their freedom of professional choice.

In this way, intergenerational conflict is largely driven by differences in institutional conditions rather than by conflicting values. Recommendations based on the experiences of previous generations were formed in a different economic environment and therefore increasingly prove ineffective when applied to the realities of the modern labour market.

Revival of collective forms of protection of labour interests

A telling example of the changing attitudes of young professionals toward employment conditions was a situation that generated widespread public attention in the spring of 2021 at the investment bank Goldman Sachs. A group of junior analysts prepared

an internal presentation detailing their working conditions. According to the data presented, the average workweek reached 98 hours, and daily sleep was about five hours. The authors of the document characterised this regime as “inhumane.” After the publication, a large-scale public debate unfolded in the media.

The public reaction once again showed polarised interpretations of the situation. Some viewed such statements as evidence of young professionals’ lack of readiness for high professional demands, while others saw them as a necessary public discussion of the systemic problem of excessive worker exploitation. Under public pressure, company management announced plans to increase headcount and revise work schedules. Regardless of how fully these initiatives were implemented, young employees' public opposition to established corporate practices became an important indicator of a shift in work culture.

A characteristic feature of the public debate was the increasing use of empirical data as an argument. In response to accusations of insufficient work motivation, representatives of the younger generation increasingly responded with statistics showing the discrepancy between labour productivity growth and real income dynamics. Economic research indeed shows that in many developed countries, labour productivity has increased significantly faster than real wages over the past decades. This circumstance has reinforced doubts about the fairness of the existing model for distributing the benefits of economic growth and called into question the traditional notion of a direct correlation between labour effort and material well-being. At the same time, public debate often shifted attention from analysing the structural causes of the ongoing changes to discussing the individual characteristics of different generations. Debates about work discipline, digital culture, or the value orientations of young people often obscured the fundamental problem—the gradual weakening of the mechanism by which labour had for decades ensured sustainable social mobility and wealth accumulation.

Against the backdrop of these discussions, processes were unfolding with far more significant institutional consequences. Young workers increasingly shifted from public expressions of discontent to collective efforts to defend their labour interests. One of the most notable manifestations of this trend was the revival of the private-sector trade union movement.

A landmark event occurred when employees at a Starbucks coffee shop in Buffalo voted overwhelmingly in December 2021 to form the company’s first union. The average age of those voting was approximately 23, and many had no prior experience with labour unions. The primary motivations for unionisation were demands for more predictable work schedules, higher wages, and improved working conditions.

The employer’s initial response followed traditional strategies for countering union activity, including closing individual units and firing the most active organisers. Even so, the widespread use of digital communication platforms significantly changed the nature of such conflicts. Information about each instance of pressure on workers quickly spread on social media, fuelling public support for the union movement. As a result, by the end of 2023, unions had been established in more than 300 Starbucks coffee shops across the United States.

Similar processes were observed at Amazon. In the spring of 2022, employees at a Staten Island distribution centre supported the formation of the first independent union in the company’s history. Chris Smalls, a former employee dismissed after organising protests over working conditions during the pandemic, initiated the movement. This case showed

that collective self-organisation by young workers is not an exception, but part of a broader trend characterised by a shift in attitudes toward protecting labour rights.

A fundamental difference in this new phase of trade union activism lies in the social profile of its participants. Unlike traditional trade union movements of the second half of the 20th century, today's organisers are increasingly young workers with little experience in collective struggle. Their professional socialisation took place amid the development of digital communications and mass social movements focused on protecting civil rights and social justice. Consequently, they perceive collective action in labour relations not as an exceptional form of conflict with employers, but as a natural mechanism for realising the right to decent working conditions and employee participation in regulating social and labour relations.

Statistics indicate that the rise in union activity in the early 2020s is systemic, not episodic. In 2022, the number of applications to form unions in the United States increased by more than 50% compared to the previous year, the most significant increase in decades. At the same time, public support for the union movement has risen sharply: sociological research finds that about 74% of Americans express a positive attitude toward unions—the highest level since the mid-20th century. Generation Z shows the highest support, at about 80%.

The high popularity of unions among young workers is driven less by ideological preferences than by pragmatic considerations. Empirical studies show that workers at companies covered by collective bargaining agreements receive higher wages on average, enjoy more predictable work schedules, have greater access to paid vacations and sick leave, and have more effective mechanisms to protect their labour rights. Consequently, Generation Z views unions primarily as a tool for improving job quality and their financial situation.

Notably, collective self-organisation has spread far beyond traditionally low-wage industries. Union initiatives have also begun to emerge among employees of large technology companies, media outlets, and other organisations whose employees have traditionally been classified as highly skilled specialists. Regardless of skill level and salary, many of them have faced similar problems: unstable employment conditions, excessive workloads, limited opportunities to participate in organisational decision-making, and a lack of effective mechanisms for influencing corporate policy.

Concomitantly, modern union activism differs significantly from the classic models of collective labour organisation characteristic of the second half of the 20th century. Generation Z representatives actively use digital communication technologies, which allow them to quickly coordinate joint actions, disseminate information, and draw public attention to labour conflicts. Social media, digital platforms, and online petitions are becoming integral elements of modern collective mobilisation, complementing traditional forms of union activity. In this way, the collectivism of Generation Z is taking on new organisational forms that correspond to the conditions of a digital society.

By 2024, it has become clear that the ongoing changes are not a short-term response to the pandemic or temporary economic difficulties. Instead, they reflect a sustainable transformation in the work behaviour patterns of young workers. This generation, often characterised as overly individualistic, has demonstrated a high level of readiness for collective action. However, unlike previous generations, they pursue these actions primarily through modern digital tools that enable faster communication and social mobilisation.

In this regard, it is becoming clear that changes in the labour market cannot be explained solely by a decline in the younger generation's work motivation. On the contrary,

Generation Z members' behaviour shows a high degree of rationality and adaptation to changing institutional conditions. Their professional strategies have been shaped by the 2008 financial crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, rising costs of living, declining housing affordability, and the weakening link between educational attainment, work effort, and expected economic outcomes. As a result, young workers are increasingly focusing not on long-term loyalty to a single employer, but on finding the most favourable employment conditions and balancing work and personal life.

Phenomena such as quiet quitting, the mass voluntary layoffs of the Great Resignation period, and the revival of the trade union movement should not be viewed as manifestations of a refusal to work, but rather as various forms of adaptation to new socioeconomic conditions. They are united by workers' desire to rethink established norms of labour relations and achieve a more equitable distribution of risks and benefits between employers and employees.

The practical results of such changes are already being reflected in the operations of organisations. Companies implementing more flexible employment models, including remote work and shortened workweeks, are in some cases demonstrating reduced turnover, increased employee satisfaction, and the maintenance, and sometimes even growth, of productivity. At the same time, the spread of collective forms of labour advocacy is indirectly affecting non-unionised organisations, forcing them to raise wages and improve employment conditions to remain competitive in the labour market.

Still, these processes should not be viewed as an irreversible strengthening of workers' bargaining power. As economic growth slows and the labour market cools, workers' influence over employers may diminish, and rising layoffs once again reinforce the importance of stable employment. Nevertheless, a number of these changes have already become sustainable. Open discussions about wage levels, recognition of the importance of employees' mental well-being, a commitment to work-life balance, and a willingness to leave jobs that do not provide acceptable working conditions are gradually becoming part of the new organisational culture.

Hence, the central question is not whether Generation Z's demands are normatively justified. Far more important is the fact that this generation was the first to explicitly identify a fundamental contradiction of the modern economy: in the context of the structural transformation of the labour market, work activity alone no longer guarantees the level of well-being and social mobility that characterised previous generations. The recognition of this fact by millions of young workers is becoming not only a factor in changing their individual behaviour but also a driving force behind broader institutional transformations of the modern labour market.

Conclusions

The analysis shows that the shift in Generation Z's work attitudes is not a consequence of declining work motivation or abandoning professional activity, but rather the result of young workers adapting to new socioeconomic conditions. This generation emerged amid successive crises - the 2008 global financial crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, rising costs of living, declining housing affordability, and changing employment structures. These factors have significantly impacted perceptions of the connection between work effort, career development, and achieving economic stability.

One key finding is that the traditional social contract model, based on the assumption of a direct link between education, hard work, professional loyalty, and improved quality of

life, has become less effective in today's environment. For Generation Z, work is increasingly no longer seen as a guaranteed path to social mobility. Despite their high level of education and readiness for professional development, young workers face limited housing affordability, rising costs of basic services, and diminishing predictability of long-term career prospects.

Changing attitudes toward work are manifested in several interconnected trends: increased professional mobility, the spread of flexible employment options, increased attention to work-life balance, and a growing interest in collective forms of advocacy for labour interests. Phenomena such as "The Great Resignation," quiet quitting, and the new wave of union activism should not be regarded as isolated manifestations of worker indiscipline, but as responses to changing labour market conditions.

Notably, Generation Z does not reject the value of work itself but rather reconsiders the principles of interaction between employee and employer. Young professionals are willing to work, develop professional skills, and deliver results, but increasingly expect reciprocity from organisations: fair compensation, respect for personal time, transparent development conditions, and participation in decision-making.

Intergenerational conflict in the world of work should be understood not as a clash of values, but as a clash of historical conditions. Older generations developed their work strategies during a period when stable employment could truly ensure economic security and social growth. Generation Z entered the workforce in a different economic reality, where the old mechanisms for achieving success have become less accessible and less predictable.

Going forward, the labour market's future development will depend on organisations' ability to adapt to new employee expectations. Companies that can build employment models based on flexibility, fair compensation, and respect for employees' quality of life will gain a competitive advantage in attracting and retaining talent. In this sense, Generation Z is not the cause of the crisis in the traditional work model, but rather an indicator of deeper changes occurring in the modern economy and society.

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