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Managing the diverse potential of university staff by motivating their development

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Abstract:

Research objectives (aims) and problem(s): The study focuses on factors that motivate and support the personal potential of university employees. The aim of the research is to identify these factors in the generations represented by the respondents. Another objective is to determine university managers' courses of action for developing strategies to motivate and support the growth of academic teachers from different generations. The main research problem was formulated as follows: What factors motivate and support employees from different generations (Baby Boomers and Generations X, Y, and Z) in the workplace?

Research methods: The research was conducted as a quantitative study. The method used was a survey conducted by means of a questionnaire using convenience sampling. A pilot study involving 198 teachers was conducted at universities in Poland in March 2025. As the study focused on generational differences, the respondents were grouped into four generational groups.

Process of argumentation: Polish literature lacks publications on the subject in question. This allows us to assume that the results presented herein are innovative and fill a gap in the research regarding motivating and supporting different generations of university teachers.

Research findings and their impact on the development of educational sciences: The study reveals generational differences among academic teachers in expected motivations and support in the workplace. For Baby Boomers and Generation Y, personal development opportunities and employment stability were the most important; for Generation Z, it was flexible working hours and promotion/recognition

opportunities; and for Generation X, it was flexible working hours and employment stability.

Conclusions and/or recommendations: Further in-depth investigations are required to diagnose the situation of academic staff members and introduce adequate motivating and support solutions.

Introduction

The effectiveness of human work depends on one's well-being in the workplace, social climate, and interpersonal relations. These factors facilitate the creation of a workplace that motivates employees to develop themselves, fulfill their individual and collective goals, and act for change. According to Day (2008, pp. 169–170), when taken as natural, interpersonal relations (based on high social, interpersonal, and communication competence) and principles (respect, kindness, integration, trust, speaking up, showing emotions, and engagement) create, deepen, and increase positive attitudes toward and motivation to work. Thus, the quality and intensity of relations between people become particularly important when creating a growth-oriented workplace. It is relationships that are the main component of a workplace atmosphere. When speaking about a university as the workplace for academic teachers, their quality influences not only the achievement of research, scientific, educational, and development goals but also, and above all, teachers' well-being, motivation, and willingness to participate actively in the fulfillment of the university's mission. This, in turn, translates into their professional development as scientists, including the attainment of degrees and titles, greater individual and professional prestige, and greater opportunities and accomplishments for students (Łukasik, 2018, pp. 92–93).

It has been assumed that creating a climate that favors university teachers' growth depends mainly on leaders who manage the human potential within the university's organizational structure. Thus, effective employee motivation depends on the managing staff, their interpersonal competencies and predispositions (such as being goal-oriented, design abilities, decisiveness, openness to alternative solutions, high inner

motivation, commitment to constant self-development, etc.), and their dominating traits (empathy, decisiveness, consistency, responsibility, reflectiveness, etc.). These features allow them to respond to any situation in the workplace. They can act as:

- catalysts – recognize a need for change and try to motivate the team to introduce it;
- solution providers – have clear ideas about what needs to be done and offer applicable solutions (consultants, experts);
- process experts – help others adapt to change and deal with it (typical change agents); or
- resource collectors – gather people with diverse skills and help them use their resources in the best way possible (Makin et al., 2000, p. 280).

The focus of this article is on a specific method for managing the resources and potential of academic staff through motivation that meets their needs and expectations regarding personal development, depending on the generation they represent. Four generations were taken into account: Baby Boomers and Generations X, Y, and Z. Representatives of these generations in this study are professionally active in universities, where they work as teachers, and their needs and expectations are often completely different. This requires leaders or managers to apply appropriate management methods and use their knowledge, predispositions, and traits to facilitate the development of multi-generational R&D teams. The article proceeds by presenting the theoretical assumptions of the above-mentioned research project, including the development and motivation categories based on which the research methodology was designed, followed by a description of the research procedure, the results, and a discussion with final conclusions.

Motivating and development – definitions

In his two-factor motivation theory, Herzberg (1966) identifies two sets of determinants: external (hygiene factors) and internal (motivators). His theoretical assumptions (mainly those regarding motivators) served as the basis for reflections on their possible theoretical and practical applications in managing personnel resources in universities. According to the concept, motivators are the factors that “contribute to employees’ increased effort and performance” (Paliga, 2021, p. 23). For Herzberg, motivators include “achievement, recognition, the work itself, responsibility and advancement” (Herzberg 1966, p. 46).

Employees’ effectiveness, development, motivation, and engagement depend, in particular, on factors related to social relations, recognition, and development opportunities provided by the hiring organization. This has been confirmed by Myjak (2011), who indicates that greater motivation to work and develop, followed by increased satisfaction, depend on whether the workplace is an environment that ensures:

- personal fulfillment, understood as personal development opportunities, using one’s individual talents and qualifications, and the sense that one’s work is useful,
- good relations with supervisors,
- good relations with coworkers,
- good organization, that is, a system of rules, methods, and actions to connect people and resources with the means and objects/subjects of work and workers, and
- professional achievements resulting from the need for development, leading one to become an even better professional with even greater accomplishments (Myjak, 2011, pp. 33–36).

Personal fulfillment is a particularly important motivator. This factor allows academic teachers to meet their needs, especially the very important need for (personal) growth, acceptance, recognition, meaning, etc. (Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). To fully

grow, realize their potential, use their abilities, feel accomplished, and, thus, feel recognized and useful, university teachers need workplace conditions that support the completion of professional goals as well as individual accomplishments (Łukasik, 2018, pp. 69–70)

Self-fulfillment opportunities, including motivating by stimulating development and creating the proper conditions for it, are directly linked to Maslow's theory of needs. In this context, it can be assumed that favorable working conditions and a good team leader can satisfy the need for safety in the workplace. According to Maslow, the need for safety is one of the most important. Safety can be viewed in different areas of human life, for example, physical, emotional, or economic. Satisfaction thereof reduces anxiety, facilitates order and self-esteem, is the basis of a positive attitude toward building friendly relationships with others, and enables the development of both the self and others (in the case of university teachers, fellow academics and students). Other important factors based on the need for safety that facilitate development in the workplace include acceptance and recognition, prestige, and development opportunities (Maslow, 1990).

Some of the other work motivators most commonly mentioned in the literature on the subject include remuneration and other material benefits, fair treatment, safe work conditions, job security, connection (relationships with others), prestige (respect), power/influence (over others), access to information, interesting work (absence of boredom), challenges (adrenaline), tasks consistent with one's interests, work consistent with one's calling (sense of mission, noble cause), changes, style of work in accordance with preferred lifestyle (e.g. pace of work), independence, and satisfaction (Sak-Skowron & Skowron, 2017, p. 246). Acceptance and recognition are basic needs that, when met, enable proper functioning at work and in private life. Their absence translates into distrust, disengagement, conflicts, negative competition, and strained relations, which, in turn, hinder one's development and distort the experience of success and professional fulfillment (Łukasik, 2018, pp. 109–115). This was confirmed by Springer, who identified determinants of motivation to work and satisfaction and grouped them into four categories of needs: safety, affiliation, power and recognition, and development (Springer 2011, p. 167).

Most studies of motivation and job satisfaction focus on meeting individuals' needs, which determines one's internal motivation, performance, and the completion of developmental goals. Among the individually satisfied needs that determine employees' growth, satisfaction, and contentment, Spector lists the following: appreciation, effective communication, relations with coworkers, the nature of the work itself, the organization's policies and procedures, pay, personal growth, promotion opportunities, recognition, security, and supervision (Spector, 1997, p. 64). To these, Lewicka adds motivation procedures and opportunities for knowledge sharing (Lewicka, 2010, p. 65). Sak-Skowron and Skowron indicate that meeting one's needs and increased motivation to work depend on three groups of factors: work-related, non-work-related, and individual (Sak-Skowron & Skowron, 2017, pp. 247–250). In the context of meeting individuals' needs and fostering their engagement to work, factors from the first group are critical. These include:

- Promotion opportunities (growth) – “if employees see no opportunities for development and future promotion, they are less satisfied with their job conditions. On the other hand, the higher their position in the organization's hierarchy, the greater their satisfaction with work, which generally results from the fact that people in higher roles have access to more motivators, greater autonomy and responsibility, and their tasks are more difficult” (Robbins, 2003, p. 71).
- Personal growth opportunities – “with time, if employees do not grow, they can feel stuck and less satisfied. Lack of change can also lead to greater discouragement and a passive attitude. This factor is usually associated with age and years of experience” (Sak-Skowron & Skowron, 2017, p. 247; see also Piķuła, 2016, 2022; Jagielska, 2022a).
- Achievements – “some employees have a great need for success. If their employer does not create conditions that will help them meet this need, it can decrease their level of job satisfaction” (Sak-Skowron & Skowron, 2017, pp. 247–248).
- Appreciation – “lack of feedback from supervisors, in the form of credit or financial gratification, stimulates dissatisfaction among

employees” (Sak-Skowron & Skowron, 2017, p. 248; see also Piłkuła, 2016).

- Independence (level of autonomy) – “independent completion of tasks is important for individuals with a deep need for accomplishments. Such persons like to act independently and often make risky decisions that can lead to the organization’s success. If their actions are somehow blocked, their frustration will grow” (Sak-Skowron & Skowron, 2017, p. 248).
- Supervision (level of control during completion of tasks and level of autonomy) – “the level of control expected by employees depends on many factors (e.g., personality, experience); some workers need greater supervision during work, others will expect more independence. Inappropriate supervision can cause frustration and translate into less satisfaction from work” (Sak-Skowron & Skowron, 2017, p. 248).
- Nature of the work – “so-called working conditions, including the workplace equipment, working hours, as well as benefits like health-care, parking place, etc.” (Skowron & Gąsior, 2017, p. 343; see also Sak-Skowron & Skowron, 2017, p. 248).
- Coworkers (nature of relations with other people, level of competition, and/or pro-social attitudes) – “the promotion of pro-social attitudes and cooperation between employees can, in some cases, increase job satisfaction, whereas in other cases, it can generate discouragement and dissatisfaction, especially among determined, success-driven individuals” (Sak-Skowron & Skowron, 2017, p. 248; see also Piłkuła, 2016).
- Stress – most often connected with “one’s role within the organization or role conflict; it significantly affects job satisfaction and potential readiness to change the workplace. However, job satisfaction is influenced not only by work-related stress but also by stress in private life” (Sak-Skowron & Skowron, 2017, p. 249).

In order to successfully motivate and support university teachers’ growth, managers should take the above factors into account. In addition, managers should apply the following qualities in their daily practice:

a passion to achieve and maintain excellence by using new insights and practical solutions; a pro-active attitude and anticipatory thinking and acting; recognizing the importance of innovation; the ability to recognize and develop talent in the organization; and the ability to coordinate work using the strengths of both the team and the organization as a whole (Madalińska-Michalak, 2012, p. 38). In order to support teachers in change and stimulate their development, they should also:

- introduce solutions that would not be in place without their intervention
- act toward creating working conditions that facilitate a friendly and engaging environment that allows employees to give their best
- encourage others to take risks
- require an innovative approach from others
- teach others to learn from both successes and failures
- shape individual career paths
- set goals and show what is important and meaningful
- inspire individuals to accomplish goals that previously seemed unreachable
- acknowledge that satisfaction from work guarantees the success of the organization
- ask “Why?”, not “Why not?” (Madalińska-Michalak, 2012, pp. 38–39)

This article’s research focuses on the needs and expectations of university teachers toward their unit managers. The above approaches to needs, motivation for growth and change, and managers’ activities are applied in the context of the expectations of employees from different generations.

Methodological assumptions

The object of the study is the factors that motivate and support the personal potential of university employees. The aim of the research is to identify these factors in the generations represented by the respondents.

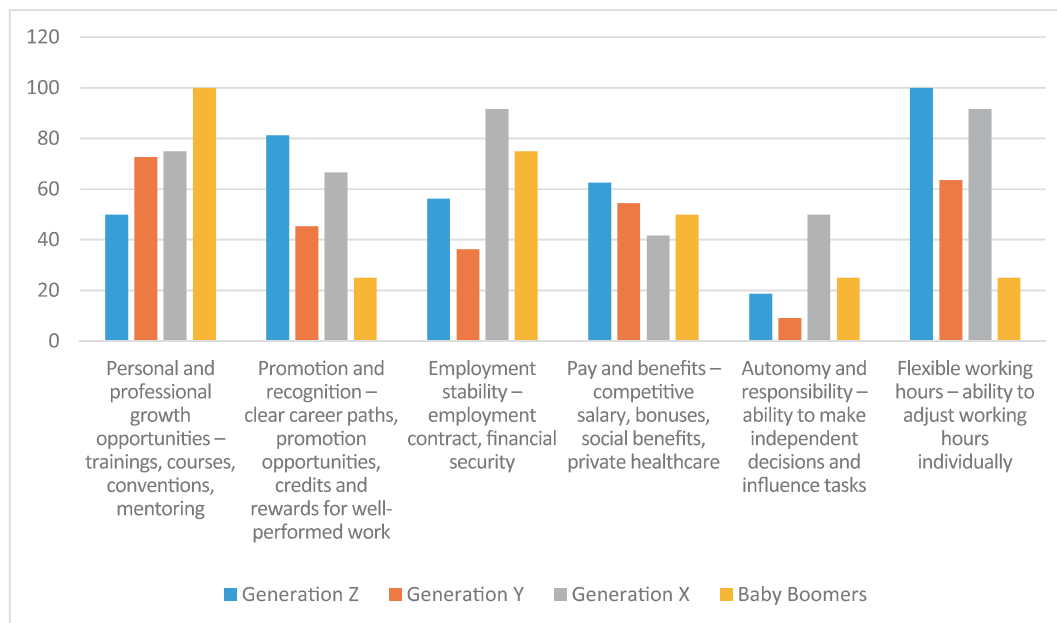
Another objective is to determine the courses of action of university leaders, managers, and directors for developing individual and institutional strategies to motivate and support the growth of academic teachers from different generations. Even though the problem is so important for individual development and for the promotion of science, no studies have been conducted in this area in the Polish literature. This allows us to assume that the results presented herein are innovative and fill a gap in the existing research. The research was conducted as a quantitative study. The main research problem was formulated as follows: What factors motivate and support employees from different generations (Baby Boomers and Generations X, Y, and Z) in the workplace?

The method used was a survey conducted by means of a questionnaire using convenience sampling. The questionnaire included demographic questions and 10 semi-open-ended items about the scope of individuals' motivation, needs, and expectations regarding professional development in the workplace. A pilot study was conducted at universities in the Małopolskie region of Poland in March 2025. The sample consisted of 198 teachers working in different roles (assistant, assistant professor, professor) in different universities. As the study focused on generational differences, the respondents were grouped into generations: 47 respondents were Baby Boomers (born in 1946–1964); 56 persons were from Generation X (born in 1965–1980); 51 persons were from Generation Y (Millennials, born in 1981–1994), and 44 persons were from Generation Z (iGen, born in 1995–2010).

Factors motivating and supporting growth in the workplace

With regard to the project's conceptual and methodological assumptions, the results of the study and analyses thereof will be presented in relation to workplace motivators and supporting factors as indicators of growth and increased motivation to work. These insights will be particularly meaningful to those who manage multi-generational teams of academic teachers within university organizational units. The data regarding the motivating factors are presented in Figure 1.

**Figure. 1. Factors motivating university teachers to grow
in their workplace**



Source: Author's own research

The following motivators were identified: personal and professional opportunities for growth – training, courses, conventions, mentoring; promotion and recognition – clear career paths, promotion opportunities, credits and rewards for well-performed work; employment stability – employment contract, financial security; pay and benefits – competitive salary, bonuses, social benefits, private healthcare; autonomy and responsibility – ability to make independent decisions and influence on tasks; and flexible working hours – ability to adjust working hours individually.

The respondents' preferred choices reveal some generational differences. Most Baby Boomer respondents (almost 75%) declared that personal growth and employment stability were the strongest motivators for them. Similar results (nearly 75%) were obtained for Generations X and Y. For Generation Z, however, this was the least important factor. For them, the strongest motivators were flexible working hours (100%), followed by promotion opportunities and recognition (80%). Flexible working hours and employment stability were important motivators for Generation X teachers (more than 90%). These results for Generations X, Y, and Z are

consistent with other studies conducted by Kwiatkowski (2018), Cybal-Michalska (2013), Piorunek (2004, 2009), Jagielska (2022a, 2022b, 2024), and the results for Baby Boomers are consistent with the studies of Piłkuła (2016, 2017a, 2017b, 2022) and others.

Factors ranked as less important by respondents across all generations included autonomy (though there was a difference of about 20% between Generation X and other generations) and pay and benefits (Generation Z recorded a significantly higher score). Promotion opportunities and recognition were valued very low among the oldest generation (Baby Boomers); only one-quarter of them declared that this factor motivated them to work. Most likely, this is because people in this generation already hold the highest scientific degrees/titles and have been promoted accordingly, expecting to retire in the near future. Similar results for this age group were reported by Piłkuła (2016, 2017a, 2017b, 2022). The preferences connected with motivation and needs in the workplace identified in this study are also consistent with previous findings on generational preferences among workers (Cybal-Michalska, 2013; Jagielska, 2022a, 2022b, 2023; Kwiatkowski, 2018; Piłkuła, 2016, 2017a, 2017b, 2022).

**Table 1. Factors supporting university teachers
 in their growth at work**

	Generation Z	Generation Y	Generation X	Baby Boomers
Support from superiors – availability of leaders, openness to discussion, constructive feedback	56,25	72,72	66,66	75,00
Clear communication – transparent flow of information between all levels of the organization	75,00	54,54	58,33	75
Good team spirit – cooperation, trust, respect, team integration	87,50	100	75	100
Infrastructure and work tools – ergonomic offices, well-equipped workstations, and appropriate software and hardware	18,75	9,00	25,00	25,00
Work-life balance – initiatives supporting work-life balance (e.g., hybrid work, additional days off)	87,50	100	50,00	25,00
Employee support programs – access to psychological assistance, mediation, and well-being programs	31,35	18,18	8,33	0

Source: Author's own research

Among the higher-rated factors that support teachers in the workplace were a good team atmosphere and support from superiors through availability, openness, and constructive feedback. The latter factor was not scored as highly by Generation Z, who preferred employee support programs such as access to psychological assistance, mediation, and well-being programs (over 30%).

The importance attributed to the support factors varied depending on the respondents' generational group. For Baby Boomers (75% of respondents), clear communication – the transparent flow of information between all levels of the organization – is a supportive factor, as it is for Generation Z. For representatives of other generations, it is less important. It is also worth noting that Generations Z and Y valued work-life balance, i.e., initiatives supporting work-life balance, such as hybrid work and additional days off (nearly 90% of Generation Z and 100% of Generation Y). The data obtained show that the demand for forms of support is also consistent with the dominant expectations characteristic of the represented generation. Hence, the youngest respondents valued support outside the institution (work-life balance or employee support programs), while the oldest valued support within the institution (atmosphere, cooperation, communication, integration) (Cybal-Michalska, 2013; Jagielska, 2023; Kwiatkowski, 2018; Piłkuła, 2016).

Summary and conclusions

This study has shown that there are generational differences among academic teachers in their motivations and expectations regarding support in the workplace. For Baby Boomers and Generation Y, personal development opportunities and employment stability were the most important; for Generation Z, it was flexible working hours and promotion/recognition opportunities; and for Generation X, it was flexible working hours and employment stability. For Generations X, Y, and Z, the results are consistent with other studies (Cybal-Michalska, 2013; Jagielska, 2022, 2023; Kwiatkowski, 2018). The same applies to Baby Boomers (Piłkuła, 2016, 2017a, 2017b, 2022).

The study has also shown that motivating and supporting university staff in their growth requires actions adapted to the expectations of specific age groups (generations). Thus, effective motivation will only be possible when their needs, expectations, objectives, and attitudes are properly identified. Actions oriented to the needs and expectations of certain generations will guarantee openness to change and development of staff members, scientific disciplines, and universities. Managers are responsible for creating working conditions that ensure a favorable work climate characterized by positive emotions and good relations among employees from different age groups (Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Madalińska-Michalak (2012, pp. 126–127) claims that this is possible when the potential of the staff and the characteristics of these generations are diagnosed. This potential is mainly determined by:

- knowledge, experience, skills, motivation for growth and change, openness to change, flexibility in action and thinking, pace of learning;
- a learning community within which teachers cooperate and learn from each other; and
- coherent actions and means used to complete them.
- The role of unit managers is to recognize the human potential of academic teachers and motivate them to put in effort, change, grow, and outdo themselves.

Method limitations and further research

Like any method, the one used in this study has its limitations. The research tool needs to be standardized, and a proper study must be conducted with a purposefully sampled university teacher population with considerations made for generational differences. Given the absence of literature on supporting and motivating the development of university teachers, further in-depth investigations are required. Such research

would help diagnose the situation of academic staff members, their needs and expectations, and introduce appropriate motivating and supportive solutions by the management.

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