Human Resource Management 4.0 - Empowerment from a Holistic Perspective

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Abstract: The aim of this work is to examine the communication behaviour of Generation Z in a professional context and to identify their specific wishes regarding the behaviour of superiors. In addition, success factors of contemporary Human Resource Management 4.0 (HRM 4.0) are identified. A further goal of this paper is to demonstrate companies and superiors how they can meet the needs of Generation Z, in order to position themselves as good leaders and as an attractive employer in order to maintain the company's performance in the long term. The most important results of this study show that appreciative leadership behaviour creates trust between employees and superiors. This optimizes Generation Z's communication behaviour towards superiors. Furthermore, for Generation Z, an appreciative management culture that is committed to the well-being of employees is crucial for their choice of employer, their work productivity, their employee loyalty and their fluctuation behaviour. In consequence, it is essential for companies to consider the demands of Generation Z in order to remain competitive.

Keywords: empowerment; Generation Z; human resource management; leadership; social sustainability

1 INTRODUCTION

It is widely accepted that sustainability is a crucial success factor for companies, but many companies still only focus on ecological aspects. If social goals are considered, this often happens primarily regarding external social aspects in the context of corporate citizenship or donations [1, 2]. However, given the increasing shortage of employees and a new generation of employees – so-called Generation Z – this will no longer be sufficient to remain competitive. Companies must focus on internal sustainability and thus social responsibility for their employees to meet requirements of Generation Z (Gen Z). For instance, the consideration of internal social aspects such as appropriate appreciative leadership behaviour, which is also reflected in investments in the physical and mental health of employees, is increasingly important [3]. Employees are a company's most important asset, and their physical and mental health are essential factors for long-term company success [4].

This work focuses on Generation Z, those born between 1995 and 2010, since they are entering the workforce in increasing numbers [5]. The study focuses on the following research questions: (1) How can the communication behaviour of Gen Z in the workplace be described and what are the reasons for this? (2) How can superiors positively change communication behaviour of Gen Z employees? (3) What are the components of appreciative and thus trust-building leadership for Generation Z? (4) What are the effects of appreciative leadership on Generation Z?

The aim of this work is to examine the trends of the actual communication behaviour of Generation Z in a professional context and to identify their specific needs regarding the behaviour of their superiors. In addition, success factors of contemporary leadership for Gen Z Human Resource Management 4.0 (HRM 4.0) are identified, that in consequence are relevant for companies to remain competitive. The aim of this study is to generate practice-relevant insights that support companies in establishing a contemporary leadership culture 4.0 that takes into account the needs of Generation Z employees and thus promotes

internal social sustainability. Only if social capital in the broader sense is preserved by ensuring the physical and mental well-being of employees can internal social sustainability be guaranteed in the long term. Hereby, the appreciation of employees is not only proclaimed, but also implemented in the long term through appropriate leadership behaviour and investments in their physical and mental health.

The article is divided into several sections to provide a comprehensive approach to examining the success factors of HRM 4.0 in the context of companies' internal social sustainability. The second section creates a theoretical framework that clarifies the basic concepts and relevant theories. Chapter 3 describes the methodology of the empirical study, including the research design, sample selection, survey instruments and procedures, and data analysis. Afterwards the results of the study are presented and discussed. Chapter 4 summarises the most important findings, followed by implications and practical recommendations for action for designing a contemporary HRM 4.0 that meets the requirements of Generation Z. It will be shown how these results can be used in practice to increase productivity and employee satisfaction.

2 SUSTAINABILITY-ORIENTED HRM 4.0

Social objectives in corporate management such as respect for human rights, fair working conditions as well as the promotion of employee engagement and employee development are crucial for a holistic sustainability strategy and contribute significantly to the long-term stability and competitiveness of companies [2].

Companies which neglect the internal social dimension of sustainability will face challenges such as lower employee satisfaction, higher turnover rates, and a poor reputation, which will affect their competitiveness in the long term. Particularly in view of the increasing shortage of employees and the demands of Generation Z, the aspect of social sustainability in companies is coming to the fore.

Social sustainability in an internal context requires, above all, modern HRM that takes into account the needs of Generation Z in order to be sustainable. HRM 4.0 often focusses on the technological component of digitalization and forgets that still people use these technologies and are confronted with them. For this reason, the concept of HRM 4.0 is expanded in this work so that the focus moves away from technological aspects towards the employees of the future, Gen Z.

HRM 4.0 is based on an appreciative leadership culture, which is reflected in an appreciative behaviour of managers as well as in investments in the mental and physical health of employees, which is increasingly affected, especially in times of digitalization [5, 6] (Fig. 1).
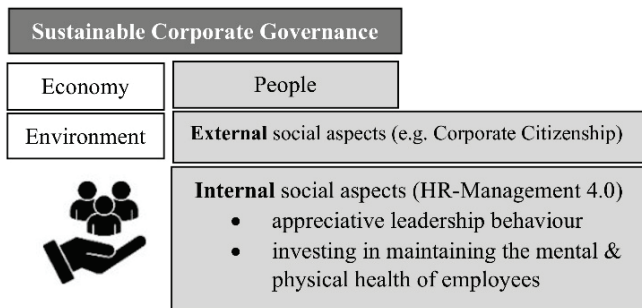

Figure 1 Elements of sustainable corporate governance

Companies which implement HRM 4.0 through a culture of appreciation will be able to successfully position themselves as attractive employers to Generation Z in the long term, as the following study will show.

3 STUDY ON GENERATION Z

In the following, the chosen methodology and research design as well as the sample selection are explained and justified. Then, the data analysis and results are presented, critically reflected, and compared with the results of other studies.

3.1 Methodology, Research Design and Sample Selection

The aim of this study is to examine the communication behaviour towards superiors and leadership preferences of Generation Z in a professional context. Moreover, this study aims to show effects on the behaviour of Generation Z and resulting advantages for companies when these demands are met. Thus, the interest of this study is to demonstrate companies and managers the relevance, components, and extent of the positive effects of an appreciative leadership culture that meets the requirements of Gen Z. Only then can social sustainability not only be proclaimed in the company, but also actively lived and anchored.

The study was sent to 320 students. The participants live and work in various cities in Germany such as Karlsruhe, Stuttgart, Freiburg, Regensburg, Mannheim, and Frankfurt. In this context, 265 questionnaires were received. Due to quality standards, only 251 were used for the analysis ($n = 251$). This is because some participants did not answer all questions on the questionnaire. Another reason for the rejection of the questionnaires was that some students were too old and therefore did not belong to Generation Z. To ensure that the research design is valid, objective, and reliable, various factors were considered when conducting this survey.

To ensure reliability, the questionnaire was used as a standardised measurement tool and care was taken to ensure that the questions were clear and consistent when conducting the survey. So, the same results would be obtained with repeated questioning. In addition, various test versions were tested prior to the final version of the questionnaire to identify and eliminate potential problems with data collection.

To ensure objectivity as an important quality criterion for empirical studies, care was taken to minimise the bias of the researcher, both in the formulation of the questions and in the interpretation of the results. Thus, the objectivity of the study is ensured by the design of the questions, as all questions were formulated neutrally and do not contain any implicit opinion of the researcher. The answer options, which only offer clear, unambiguous evaluation options, also leave no room for interpretation, and can therefore be evaluated objectively, regardless of who analyses the data. In addition, the anonymised, standardised survey procedure, the use of coding procedures and the deployment of independent observers ensured an objective evaluation of the data.

Furthermore, quantitative, and qualitative methods were combined to improve the validity of the results and identify potential sources of error. In this context the study uses a standardized questionnaire based on the Likert scale with integrated open questions [7].

It is also important that the selection of the sample adequately reflects the research topic. For this reason, not the entire age range of Gen Z was surveyed, but only those who are already working. Gen Z is generally categorised as people born between 1995 and 2010 [5, 8], which means that the oldest is 29 and the youngest is 14. Hereby, it is important to mention that this paper only focuses on the working part of this generation, as it is important to have experience in professional life. Therefore, only participants between the ages of 18 and 29 were selected to ensure the validity of the study. The participants are students at the International University in Germany. They are studying e.g. media design, tourism management, marketing management, human resource management, health management, business administration, media design, tourism or marketing management. All participants are dual students, i.e. they are already working in their field of study, e.g. as a medical assistant, media designer or hotel waitress. The fact that all participants have a specific educational background, namely that of the degree programme, could lead to a bias of the answers. In addition, only a subset of the Gen Z age group, namely adults, is covered. The younger subgroup of Gen Z is underrepresented. The generalisation to the entire Gen Z is therefore limited.

The reason why Generation Z in particular was chosen as the target group for this study is, firstly, that they are entering the workforce in increasing numbers [5]. Therefore,

their preferences and behaviours have a significant impact on organisational dynamics and practices. Secondly, Generation Z is the first generation to have grown up entirely in the digital age. Their fluency with technology and social media has fundamentally changed the way they handle information and interact with other people. This also affects their behaviour at work. It is therefore important to recognise and analyse the potential changes compared to previous generations and to respond appropriately in order to remain competitive as an attractive employer.

The mixed methods approach was chosen as research method, which combines quantitative and qualitative data analysis [9]. It is justified for several reasons that can be derived directly from the objectives and requirements of the study: The combination of quantitative and qualitative methods makes it possible to capture both the breadth and depth of the subject of the study [9]. While quantitative data offers the measurement and analysis of the general trends and correlations between appreciative leadership culture and their impact on employee behaviour and company success, qualitative data allows a deeper understanding of the individual wishes, experiences, and perceptions of Generation Z. By using both methods, the results can be validated, and the credibility of the findings can be increased. When both quantitative and qualitative data support similar conclusions, the reliability of the study is strengthened. This is particularly important to provide convincing evidence of the importance of an appreciative leadership culture. The qualitative data can be used for further research to generate or refine hypotheses, which are then tested through quantitative analysis. This allows for an iterative approach to the topic, where qualitative insights guide the quantitative investigation and vice versa. Quantitative methods provide a comprehensive overview of the effects of an appreciative leadership culture, while qualitative methods provide additional dimensions and context that may not be captured in quantitative data. This expands the understanding of the effects and mechanisms of an appreciative leadership culture.

In summary, mixed methods approach was chosen to enable a comprehensive and valid investigation of the effects of an appreciative leadership culture on Generation Z employees and company success. This combination of methods allows both general trends and statistical correlations to be identified as well as deeper insights into individual experiences and contextual factors. The visual representation of the results supports the quick and effective communication of the study results to managers, which is crucial for the practical implementation of the theoretical findings.

The research design and therefore the structure of the study is presented below, which describes how the study was carried out to answer the research questions already presented.

A multi-stage research process took place. In a preliminary study, many statements were collected during interviews to specify the main possible dimensions and important aspects of the survey. This was followed by another round of interviews, which served to further specify the components of appreciative, trust-promoting leadership

and to shed light on the effects of such leadership on the behaviour of employees.

A standardized questionnaire was then designed. This resulted in standardized data collection that combines quantitative and qualitative elements. On the one hand, as part of the quantitative data analysis, the students were presented with individual statements and the respondents' agreement, or disagreement was scaled. Hereby, the Likert scale was used with 5-point scales with verbal support (strongly disagree – completely agree) being presented for each statement [7, 10]. On the other hand, the survey also collected qualitative data, which was obtained and analysed based on the open questions in the questionnaire. Based on this, the answers were categorized according to Mayring's qualitative content analysis methodology [10].

The dimensions of the survey initially included the communication behaviour of Gen Z in the work environment towards superiors, as well as the question of possible reasons for the uncertainty found here. The question was then asked about possible behaviours of superiors that could have a positive influence on the communication behaviour of Generation Z. Significantly, appreciation and the resulting trust were shown to be fundamental for positive leadership behaviour. The question was then asked about the most important factors that characterize appreciative leadership. Finally, the effects of such leadership on the behaviour of the respondents in the work environment were asked.

3.2 Data Analysis and Results

The study shows that high personal insecurity among Generation Z is a common phenomenon in communication between Generation Z employees and managers (70% agree). The reasons for this general uncertainty are the increasing flood of information, the increased consumption of social media and the ideals of beauty conveyed therein, which, in the opinion of the respondents, promote self-doubt (77% strongly agree, 23% agree). According to the participants, these effects cause a strong sense of insecurity, especially at a young age, which also persists in later life. Generation Z is also characterized by very unstable living conditions and the resulting additional uncertainty, which is experienced as an unpleasant permanent condition [5, 8].

As a result of this uncertainty, Generation Z is inhibited in their communication behaviour, especially towards superiors (70% agree). Generation Z employees are hesitant to openly express their thoughts and ideas because they fear negative consequences or rejection. This leads to a lack of transparency, innovation and efficiency in the work environment and affects long-term team performance. In this context the participants have the opinion that managers could counteract existing communication problems through appreciative, trust-promoting behaviour.

For the respondents appreciative, trust-promoting leadership is based on several aspects such as support by superiors (46% strongly agree, 38% agree), respect and appreciation for performance (76% strongly agree, 23% agree), empathy and understanding in dealing with employees and, above all, communication at eye level (76%

strongly agree, 23% agree). Moreover, a trust-promoting leadership is characterized by an open communication (46% strongly agree, 53% agree). Managers should actively listen to understand the needs and perspectives of their employees. In addition, the reliability of statements from managers (69% strongly agree, 30% agree), transparency (76% strongly agree, 23% agree) and fair and equitable treatment of all employees regardless of their position were rated as important for sustainable trust building (53% strongly agree, 46% agree) (Fig. 2).
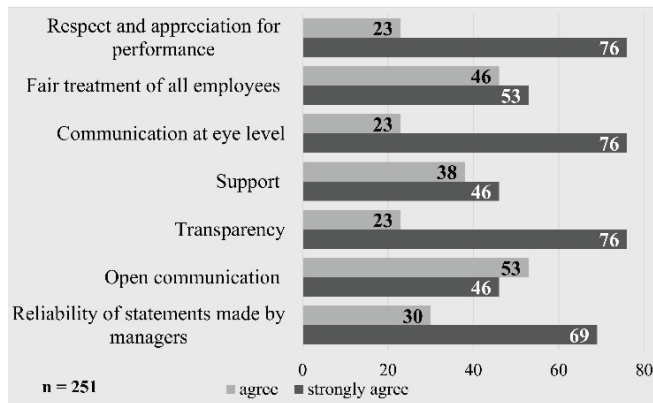

Figure 2 Components of appreciative trust-promoting leadership

Hereby, the appreciation of employees includes not only verbal expressions of appreciation such as praise, but also support in the form of investment. Especially investments in mental well-being and mental health are viewed as very important (62% strongly agree) as an expression of appreciation. Hereby, individual coaching to maintain physical and psychological stability is becoming increasingly important in uncertain times. This is caused in the reason that the demands on employees in terms of their performance and productivity are high, which often leads to stress, overwork and burnout [5]. Coaching, focusing on mental and physical aspects, is therefore an effective tool for promoting employee health and performance, which Generation Z employees are increasingly demanding. Employees learn, for example, effective coping strategies for stressful situations and concrete measures to strengthen their resilience.

In the following the direct and indirect effects of appreciative leadership on Generation Z are shown. The implementation of appreciative HRM 4.0 is identified as a solution to the existing uncertainty and inhibited communication behaviour of Gen Z towards superiors. Superiors act as role models and demonstrate credibility by actively modeling such appreciative behaviour [11]. The respondents are convinced that such a HRM 4.0 has direct influence on building trust and thus reduces indirectly existing insecurities (83% strongly agree, 17% agree). This would significantly improve their communication behaviour with superiors in everyday work (77% strongly agree, 15% agree), because it eliminates the fear of rejection or negative reaction from the superior, which the respondents consider to be the main reasons for this inhibited communication behaviour. Moreover, appreciative leadership and the building of trust promote work productivity (70% strongly

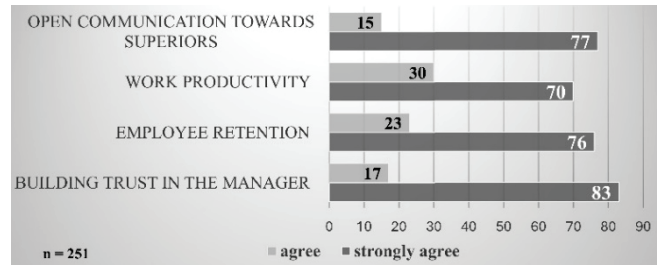agree, 30% agree) and employee loyalty (76 % strongly agree, 23% agree) (Fig. 3).

Figure 3 Direct and indirect effects of appreciative leadership

The results of the study clearly show that for Gen Z, an appreciative management is crucial for their choice of employer (62% stronlgy agree), employee loyalty (76% strongly agree) as well as fluctuation behaviour and thus staying in the company.

Failure to comply with these requirements could result in termination. The most common reason given by those surveyed for changing employers is a lack of appreciation from managers (69% stronlgy agree, 30% agree), followed by poor working conditions (54% stronlgy agree, 46% agree), a lack of support (38% stronlgy agree, 38% agree) and financial aspects (46% stronlgy agree, 54% agree).

Now the question arises: How can these results be used in practice to increase productivity, efficiency and employee satisfaction? First, it is important for managers to understand that Generation Z's communication behaviour has changed due to the existing personal uncertainty. This can have a negative impact on the work area. Furthermore, the demands and needs of Gen Z are different from those of previous generations. Therefore, it is crucial to deal with their demands appropriately. Second, options for overcoming these challenges are presented.
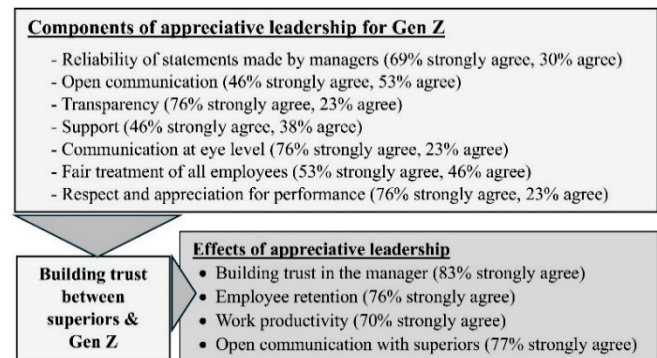

Figure 4 HRM 4.0 & its effects on Generation Z

According to the results, superiors who treat employees on an equal level with respect and support can build a relationship of trust. As the study shows, this is very important. On the one hand, this will change the communication behaviour of Generation Z employees. Hereby, an open communication optimizes business activities, as problems that arise can be mentioned and solved directly instead of creating even worse consequences. From a practical perspective, it can be useful for Generation Z

employees to privately present their ideas, suggestions or their own emerging problems and challenges to their manager. So, neither the manager loses authority nor the employee is afraid of losing respect from others. On the other hand, appreciative, trust-promoting leadership will increase also the productivity, and employee satisfaction, what is crucial for choosing an employer and staying in the company, as the results show (Fig. 4).

3.3 Discussion of the Results

In the following the results of the study are discussed critically and limitations of the paper are presented. Moreover, the results are aligned to other studies in this field.

With regard to the sample, a broad spectrum of different participants from different geographical regions in Germany was selected. Care was also taken to ensure that they cover a variety of study programs and related professions. However, all participants are dual students with a specific educational background, namely studying at a university. So, the focus was placed on students. This could lead to a bias of the answers. Therefore, surveying members of Generation Z who are currently undergoing or have already completed vocational training could lead to further interesting results. In addition, only a subset of the Gen Z age range is covered, as a study of 14 to 17-year-olds does not make sense regarding the research questions. The generalisation to the entire Gen Z is therefore limited. The results rather present the adults of Gen Z. The subgroup of Gen Z is underrepresented here. Moreover, the survey focuses only on German students. So, it would be interesting to extend further research to other countries.

Another limitation of the study is its theoretical focus. As described in the paper, fulfilling the wishes of Generation Z requires the active involvement of superiors. In their role as mentors, they should offer the employees of Generation Z guidance and support each employee individually. These additional demands on employee management pose a challenge in view of the existing burden on management staff. Managers are often required to perform a balancing act between their previous understanding of their role and the changed expectations of the Generation Z which are shown in this paper. Therefore, a reorientation of the management role and additional training in leadership as well as in employee management issues are necessary. In this context the knowledge of the specific requirements of the Generation Z shown in this paper can serve as an initial orientation. Nevertheless, a limitation of the study is that it does not show an impementation plan or a guideline how these conflicts and challenges can be solved in practice. These aspects would be interesting for further research.

In the following the results are compared with the results of other studies. There are corresponding studies that also examine the characteristics of Gen Z and their expectations of employers and managers. For example, when it comes to the characteristics of Generation Z, Deloitte also notes that nearly half of Generation Z feel stressed or anxious at work all the time or very often [12]. Results of other studies show that feel-good factors are particularly important for Generation Z when choosing an employer. A caring attitude from superiors in professional life is therefore recommended [13, 14].

A study by the Federal Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs examined the extent to which employees of all age groups are willing to commit themselves to the workplace and commit to an employer in the long term. The result of this study is that this depends above all on an employee-oriented organizational culture. In general, fairness, respect, team orientation and individual support of employees are considered important [15]. This also agrees with the results of the present study. In addition, there are studies that, in line with the present study results, show that good, harmonious collaboration promotes employee satisfaction. According to the studies, this is how companies secure their workforce and their existence in the face of demographic change [16]. In this context, Klaffke's generation management also aims to increase employer attractiveness by designing the operational conditions in such a way that all age groups in the company are able and willing to contribute and exploit their performance potential [13]. In this respect, there is agreement with the study results of this study.

Although some of the studies mentioned reached similar conclusions, Gen Z's communication behaviour specifically with their managers was neglected. This study closes this gap by focusing on the relationship between employees and their superiors. It also highlights Gen Z's expectations of their managers' behaviour and the resulting positive impact when these expectations are met.

Likewise, previous studies lack a concrete analysis combined with a clear visualization of the extent of the direct and indirect effects of appreciative and trust-building leadership on the behaviour of Gen Z employees in the professional environment. This gap is closed by the present study. The results are clearly visualized and presented graphically in bar charts and in the theoretical model, which shows the effects of HRM 4.0 on employee behaviour (Fig. 2, 3, 4).

This visualization of the direct and indirect effects of modern HRM 4.0 is important to give today's managers a quick and meaningful impression of the influence their leadership behaviour has on Generation Z employees. Only with a clear presentation can the necessity and importance of appropriate leadership behaviour be made clear, especially since managers hardly have time to deal with articles and their most important quintessences. This is crucial for ensuring that the theoretical recommendations find their way into practical implementation. So, visualization shows companies and managers the relevance of modern HRM that meets the requirements of Gen Z, which is becoming increasingly important in times of labour shortages.

4 CONCLUSIONS

First of all this study focuses on the research question how can the resulting communication behaviour of Generation Z in the workplace be described and what are the reasons for this? The study shows that Generation Z is

characterized by a high level of personal insecurity when communicating with superiors (70% agree). This high level of uncertainty has an impact in the professional context through the resulting inhibited communication behaviour towards managers. The reasons given for this uncertainty were the increasing flood of information, the increased consumption of social media and the ideals of beauty conveyed therein, which, in the opinion of those surveyed, promote self-doubt (77% completely agree).

The second research question was if superiors could change that communication behaviour in a positive way. The participants clearly confirm this and state that appreciative leadership behaviour creates trust between them and their superiors and thus optimizes their communication behaviour towards superiors.

The third research question focuses to concretize the components of appreciative and trust-building leadership for Generation Z. For the participants, appreciative, trust-promoting leadership is characterized by support and open communication. It also includes respect and appreciation for performance, empathy and understanding when dealing with employees, and communication on an equal level. In addition, the reliability of managers' statements, transparency and the fair and equal treatment of all employees were assessed as essential for building trust (Fig. 2).

The last research question focusses on the effects of appreciative leadership on Generation Z. The results of the study clearly show that for Generation Z, an appreciative management culture is important. The respondents are convinced that it has direct influence on building trust and thus reduces indirectly existing insecurities. This would significantly improve their communication behaviour with superiors, because it eliminates the fear of a negative reaction from the superior. Moreover, appreciative leadership and the building of trust promote work productivity and employee loyalty (Fig. 3).

The results of this study clearly show that appreciative leadership and investments in employee health promote a positive culture of trust in which Generation Z employees can develop freely and exploit their full potential. Managers act as key people for successful organizational cultural change because appreciative leadership improves decision-making processes, especially in today's uncertain, complex times, and promotes employees' identification with the company [3], which has a positive effect on company performance.

A contemporary HRM 4.0 that meets the needs of Generation Z should consider holistic coaching as an integral part of its personnel development strategy. Programs that are tailored to the individual needs of employees should promote physical and mental health [17]. This can be done through workshops, and individual coaching on topics such as stress management, work-life balance, and personal development. These investments in the well-being and physical and mental health of employees are increasingly being demanded by Generation Z as an expression of appreciation.

HRM 4.0, which meets the needs of Generation Z, will help companies position themselves as an attractive employer and maintain the company's performance in the long term.

Although Generation Z, unlike previous generations, is not original in its attitudes, thoughts and demands, there is a significant difference from previous generations. Generation Z grew up with a large presence of social media, countless information and insecurities that influence personality and result in a lack of self-confidence. Of course, newcomers are always looking for respect or open communication with superiors and expect constant improvement of their knowledge through courses and training. Nevertheless, the mentioned significant change in the communication behaviour and the growing insecurity of Generation Z represents a new challenge for companies. This is crucial because companies need an appropriate communication culture to be able to react quickly to increasingly rapidly changing circumstances. In addition, they need Generation Z as employees who will choose the company that best meets their needs. So, yes, Generation Z is not original in their attitudes and in their thoughts and demands, but they are original in terms of the circumstances in which they grew up, which have a great influence on the workplace and the success of companies. This allows companies to decide whether to ignore the insights presented in this paper or remain competitive. Especially at a time when the war for talent is becoming increasingly intense, employee appreciation as a tool for retaining and recruiting employees is becoming more and more important for the long-term success of companies.

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