

# Understanding Work Meaning in Generation Z and Its Implications for Character Education

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## Abstract

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**Kata Kunci:** *Arti Pekerjaan; Generasi Z; Pendidikan Karakter; Orientasi Pekerjaan; Orientasi Panggilan*

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Perubahan cepat pasar tenaga kerja di era digital telah secara signifikan mempengaruhi cara generasi muda memandang pekerjaan. Sebagai generasi digital, Generasi Z menunjukkan orientasi kerja yang unik, yang dibentuk oleh kemajuan teknologi, fleksibilitas, dan kepuasan pribadi. Memahami makna pekerjaan di kalangan Generasi Z sangat penting, terutama dalam kaitannya dengan penguatan pendidikan karakter sebagai landasan pengembangan sumber daya manusia di masa depan. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis bagaimana Generasi Z di Surakarta memandang makna pekerjaan dan untuk mengeksplorasi implikasinya bagi pendidikan karakter. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan teknik pengumpulan data berupa wawancara mendalam, observasi, dan dokumentasi. Informan dipilih melalui sampling purposif untuk memastikan relevansi dengan fokus penelitian. Data dianalisis melalui interpretasi tematik untuk mengidentifikasi pola terkait orientasi kerja dan pembentukan nilai. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa Generasi Z secara dominan memaknai kerja sebagai panggilan hidup rather than sekadar pekerjaan atau jalur karier. Kerja dipandang sebagai ekspresi minat pribadi, passion, dan aktualisasi diri. Akibatnya, mereka cenderung menghindari struktur pekerjaan yang kaku dan jangka panjang yang membatasi fleksibilitas dan kreativitas. Studi ini juga mengidentifikasi tiga implikasi utama bagi pendidikan karakter: meningkatkan kemampuan siswa dalam pengambilan keputusan karier yang reflektif, memperkuat kemampuan mereka untuk membedakan antara kebutuhan dan keinginan, serta menumbuhkan tanggung jawab dan komitmen dalam penyelesaian tugas. Temuan ini menekankan pentingnya mengintegrasikan perspektif makna pekerjaan ke dalam pendidikan karakter untuk mempersiapkan Generasi Z dalam keterlibatan profesional yang adaptif dan berorientasi nilai.

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## Abstract

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**Keywords:** *Meaning of Work; Generation Z; Character Education; Work Orientation; Calling Orientation*

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The rapid transformation of the labor market in the digital era has significantly influenced how young generations interpret work. As digital natives, Generation Z demonstrates distinct work orientations shaped by technological advancement, flexibility, and personal fulfillment. Understanding the meaning of work among Generation Z is essential, particularly in relation to strengthening character education as a foundation for future human resources development. This study aims to analyse how Generation Z in Surakarta interprets the meaning of work and to examine its implications for character education. This research employed a qualitative approach using in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation as data collection techniques. Informants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure relevance to the research focus. Data were analysed through thematic interpretation to identify patterns related to work orientation and value construction. The findings reveal that Generation Z predominantly interprets work as a calling rather than merely a job or career

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path. Work is perceived as an expression of personal interest, passion, and self-actualization. Consequently, they tend to avoid rigid and long-term employment structures that restrict flexibility and creativity. The study further identifies three major implications for character education: enhancing students' capacity for reflective career decision-making, strengthening their ability to differentiate between needs and desires, and fostering responsibility and commitment in task completion. These findings underline the importance of integrating work-meaning perspectives into character education to prepare Generation Z for adaptive and value-driven professional engagement.

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## INTRODUCTION

The world of work in today's technological developments poses different challenges for organisations in terms of planning, organising, implementing, and monitoring (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The driving force behind all these managerial processes is the organisation's human resources (HR) (Haidar et al., 2022; Hariadi et al., 2024). A new challenge faced in the managerial process is the current state of HR (Desmiati et al., 2023; Kristanu, 2013). HR in today's organisations typically consists of four different generations, namely *baby boomers*, Generation X, Generation Y, and Generation Z (Ferreira & Fernandes, 2017). Different social and economic conditions have led to the emergence of generational differences in values, behaviours, and attitudes (Sholahudin, 2017). Each generation has characteristics influenced by different values, ambitions, and work styles.

Andrea, B., Gabriella, H.-C., & Timea (2016) found in their research that the differences in characteristics possessed by each generation began with the *baby boom* generation (1946-1960), generation X (1960-1980), generation Y (1980-1995), and generation Z (1995-2010). One of the main factors that distinguishes Generation Z from previous generations is their mastery of information and technology, which has become part of Generation Z's lives and subsequently influences their values, views, and life goals (Pujiono, 2021). Research conducted (Andrea et al., 2016) shows that there are significant differences in characteristics between Generation Z and other generations. One of the main factors that distinguishes Generation Z from previous generations is their mastery of information and technology, which has become part of their lives and subsequently influences their values, perspectives, and life goals. Research on the characteristics of each generation in the workplace is conducted to prevent problems arising from differences in the characteristics of workers from different generations (Dwidienawati & Gandasari, 2018). Efforts to understand the existence of each generation need to be made because the success of an organisation depends on its ability to manage its various resources, one of which is human resources (Bickle et al., 2019).

Based on Statistics Indonesia data (2019), it is known that workers aged 15-24 years in Indonesia number 16,729,540 people out of a total of 124,004,950 workers aged 15 to over 60 years. (Dwidienawati & Gandasari, 2018) state that in 2020, Generation Z is estimated to reach 2.56 billion people globally who will enter the workforce, or it can be said that 20% of workers in 2020 will be Generation Z. Generation Z is a generation of professionals who have technical skills, a high level of language proficiency, and are

excellent workers (Erri Wahyu Puspitarini, 2016). States that Generation Z are effective workers in the digital age. Research conducted by (Dwidienawati, D., & Gandasari, 2018) states that Generation Z in Indonesia is a more realistic generation compared to Generation Y or the millennial generation, and requires *security* and stability.

Generation Z is an excellent workforce in the digital era because they have technical skills and are accustomed to being surrounded by rapid technological developments, as stated by (Putra, 2016) and (Gopal et al., 2021), (Andrea, B., Gabriella, H.-C., & Timea, 2016) also mention that Generation Z tends to lack commitment (Turner, 2015). Dwidienawati, D., & Gandasari (2018) also mention that Generation Z lacks confidence in taking long-term jobs, but Generation Z also fears taking short-term jobs. From the statements of Dwidienawati, D., & Gandasari (2018), researchers understand that Generation Z has doubts when they have to be tied to a particular job for a long period of time. The characteristics of Generation Z, which are uncertainty about long-term employment, lack of commitment and attachment to a job or organisation, can become a problem in the world of work (Aghaei et al., 2022; Dolot, 2018; Javid et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2019).

Nindyati (2017) mentions that if human resources do not stay long in an organisation, it can become a problem for the organisation's continuity. The results of (Wahyuningrum & Si, 2005) research show that the meaning of work influences work attachment. The meaning of work is the way workers view and respond to their work (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997). Wrzesniewski et al. (1997) state that the meaning of work consists of three dimensions, namely *job*, *career*, and *calling*. To understand the unique characteristics of Gen Z related to work behaviour, such as uncertainty about long-term employment, lack of organisational commitment, and attachment to a job, the researcher aims to conduct an in-depth descriptive analysis of how Gen Z perceives their work, viewed from the dimensions of *job*, *career*, and *calling* (Abu Daqar et al., 2020; Witt et al., 2018).

This article seeks to prove that the meaning of work is not merely an economic orientation, but rather an important factor that shapes attitudes of responsibility, commitment, and maturity in career decision-making. By understanding the dominance of certain orientations particularly calling orientation this study confirms that the perspective of the meaning of work has a significant contribution in formulating character education strategies that are relevant to Generation Z as future human resources (Tafonao et al., 2020).

## RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a descriptive quantitative approach to describe and analyse the empirical conditions related to the meaning of work among Generation Z. This approach was chosen because it provides a comprehensive mapping of perceptions, experiences, and work orientations based on phenomena that occur in the field (Bungin, 2005). This study uses one main variable, namely the meaning of work. This variable refers to the way individuals understand and give meaning to their work. The operational definition of the meaning of work refers to the concept developed by Wrzesniewski et al. (1997), which includes three main orientations: 1) Job orientation, where work is seen as a means of earning income. 2) Career orientation, where work is seen as a path for self-development. 3) Calling orientation, where work is seen as a calling that is in line with personal values and interests.

The research population comprised Generation Z individuals residing in Surakarta, aged between 18 and 25 years old, as representatives of the digital-native

generation. Respondents were selected using purposive sampling, with the following criteria: (1) belonging to Generation Z, (2) having work experience or currently involved in work activities, and (3) willing to be research respondents.

Data was collected using a structured questionnaire designed based on the indicators of work meaning according to (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997). This instrument used a Likert scale to capture variations in respondents' perceptions and orientations towards work. Content validation was carried out through expert judgement to ensure the indicators were in line with the theoretical concept.

Data collection was conducted through the distribution of online and offline questionnaires. The use of these two distribution channels ensured a wider and more representative range of respondents and increased data accuracy. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics to describe the general trends in work meaning orientation among Generation Z. The analysis was conducted by calculating frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations. Data processing was performed using SPSS version 25 to ensure the accuracy and consistency of the analysis results.

## RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Results

#### **The Influence of Work Meaning on Job**

The paradigm shift for Gen Z regarding work is not only a form of self-actualisation to achieve financial stability. This paradigm shift also reflects the characteristics of Gen Z. Gen Z's character is demonstrated by their choice of jobs that provide opportunities for communication. However, for Gen Z, the act of communication is more important than its meaning. Therefore, their thinking is still very superficial due to a lack of meaning.

Based on an interview with Mr ZI, he stated that the meaning of work for Gen Z is closely related to their job performance. However, what often happens is that Gen Z's familiarity with technology makes it very easy for them to apply for jobs and be responsive, but when called for a face-to-face interview, the applicants do not show up and there is no news. It seems that applying for a job is just a trial and error process.

The next interview was conducted with MK, a student who stated that Gen Z does not really like to be tied to a job for a long period of time. This is because Gen Z enjoys freedom. Work does not become a necessity for identity if the type and place of work does not have a big name in the eyes of society.

Based on the results of interviews with Wn, it was revealed that Gen Z tends not to view *careers* as something necessary due to their character trait of not liking to save money, "if I have money today, I will spend it today". Even more extreme, Gen Z does not have long-term plans, which affects the jobs they choose. Gen Z is not persistent in pursuing a career and gets bored easily. This is also accompanied by Gen Z's dislike of being tied to a job for a long time.

When observed, if Gen Z pursues a particular field of work, they are only willing to work according to the hours they are paid for. Their loyalty to their work is low, and they place a high value on the wages they receive for the work they have done. Wages are not that important, but they are sufficient to finance Gen Z's social needs.

#### **The Influence of Work Meaning on Calling**

Based on the results of LK's interview regarding the meaning of work towards *calling*, he stated his view that work for Gen Z is a calling in life but it must also be in line with *their passion*. This *passion* is very important because it is related to work

motivation, long-term goals in pursuing a job, and, equally important, maintaining mental health.

When viewed from another perspective, Gen Z's technological savvy gives them space in the workplace to contribute to the organisation's performance in the online realm. Gen Z is more knowledgeable about the use of social media and digitising traditional work patterns to suit the modern era. The characteristics of Gen Z differ from previous generations. Emotionally, Gen Z is more fragile due to the ease of access they typically have, so their emotional maturity tends to be unstable. Additionally, Gen Z often experiences boredom or fatigue in their work, and if they do stay in a job, they tend not to stay for very long.

**Results of the Analysis of the Influence of Work Meaning on Job, Career, and Calling**  
**The Influence of Work Meaning on Job**

Based on the questionnaire responses obtained from 49 out of 52 students, the results are presented in the following table:

**Table 1. Average Responses on the Meaning of Work on Job**

Assessment Aspect	∑Total	Percentage
Teamwork	234	67
Job satisfaction	230	66
Resilience and perseverance	229	66
<b>Total</b>	693	66
<b>Average</b>	231	66

Based on the table above, it is known that aspect 1 on teamwork received a percentage of 67%. Aspect 2 on job satisfaction received an assessment per aspect with a total score of 230 and a percentage of 66%. In aspect 3 concerning resilience and perseverance, the assessment per aspect received a total score of 229 and a percentage of 66%. The total score for all aspects was 693 with an average of 231, and the total percentage of feasibility for all aspects and the average percentage was 66%.

**The Influence of Work Meaning on Career**

Based on the questionnaire assessment obtained from 49 students out of 52 students, the results can be seen in the following table:

**Table 2. Average Responses on the Meaning of Work on Career**

Assessment aspect	∑Total	Percentage
Dedication	270	78
Self-development	265	76
Self-confidence	250	72
<b>Total</b>	785	75
<b>Average</b>	262	75

Based on the table above, it is known that aspect 1 on dedication received a percentage of 78%. Aspect 2 on self-development received an assessment per aspect with a total score of 265 and a percentage of 76%. In aspect 3 concerning self-confidence, the assessment per aspect with a total score of 250 resulted in a percentage of 72%. The total

score for all aspects was 785 with an average of 262, and the total percentage of feasibility for all aspects and the average percentage was 75%.

### The Influence of Work Meaning on *Calling*

Based on the questionnaire assessment obtained from 49 students out of 52 students, the results can be seen in the following table:

**Table 3. Average Results of Responses to the Meaning of Work in Relation to *Calling***

Assessment aspect	$\Sigma$ Total	Percentage
Long-term commitment	250	72
Work-life balance	230	66
Contribution to the common good	252	73
<b>Total</b>	732	71
<b>Average</b>	244	71

Based on the table above, it is known that aspect 1 on long-term commitment received a percentage of 72%. Aspect 2 on work-life balance received an assessment per aspect with a total score of 230 and a percentage of 66%. In aspect 3 regarding contribution to the common good, the assessment per aspect has a total score of 252 and a percentage of 73%. The total score for all aspects is 732 with an average of 244, and the total percentage of eligibility for all aspects and the average percentage is 71%.

### Discussion

The meaning of work is defined as the way workers view and respond to their work (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997). Job selection is a process that involves various factors, such as internal and external factors. Job selection factors can influence a person's satisfaction and success in their career.

The paradigm shift for Gen Z regarding work is not only a form of self-actualisation to achieve financial stability. Gen Z has unique characteristics related to job selection that provide space for communication. However, communication is more important to Gen Z than its meaning. Therefore, their thinking is still very superficial due to a lack of meaning (Santosa, 2017).

The meaning of work for Gen Z is closely related to their performance level. However, Gen Z's familiarity with technology often makes it very easy for them to apply for jobs and receive responses, but when called for an interview, the applicants do not show up and do not provide any updates. It seems that applying for a job is just a trial and error process for them. Additionally, Gen Z is influenced by external factors stemming from their exposure to fast-paced technology, making them less able to wait for responses to their applications within a certain timeframe (Şerban, 2025). Gen Z's work behaviour reflects a preference for flexibility and diversity in the workplace. They are influenced by technology and seek employers who accommodate their needs, affecting job application patterns and shaping labour market dynamics across cultural and regional contexts (Onyeaku, 2024). Generation Z positively influences the dynamics of the job market through their ability to adapt to new technologies. However, they face challenges due to generational diversity, limited corporate investment in digital tools, and educational institutions that underestimate the human component, affecting their work behaviour and application patterns (Dieguez et al., 2024).

In the work process, Gen Z also shows data that working in teams, job satisfaction, resilience and determination in carrying out obligations tend to be low, as indicated by the average percentage obtained, which is 66%. This is consistent with the fact that Gen Z does not particularly like to be tied to a job for a long period of time. This is because Gen Z enjoys freedom. Work does not become a necessity for identity if the type and place of work does not yet have a big name in the eyes of society, as stated by Fikriyani et al. (2020). This study highlights that Generation Z's work behaviour is influenced by technological integration, emphasising the utilisation of skills and job satisfaction. Cultural and regional differences influence their attitudes towards work, particularly regarding trust in employers and experiences of discrimination in the job market (Pietruszyńska, 2023).

Career choice is one of the most important decision-making processes in a person's social life that must be made after going through several phases in life. In general, job selection is a process in which a person chooses a career or job based on various considerations, including interests, skills, values, and economic conditions. It also involves evaluating factors such as career prospects, work environment, and compensation. The results of the data analysis obtained from this study show something very different, namely that Gen Z tends not to view a *career* as something necessary due to their character trait of not liking to save money, living by the motto "if I have money today, I will spend it today". Even more extreme, Gen Z does not have long-term plans, which affects the jobs they choose. Gen Z is not persistent in their field of work, gets bored easily, and often changes jobs according to their mood. This is also accompanied by Gen Z's character of not liking to be tied to a job for a long time.

When observed, if Gen Z pursues a particular field of work, they are willing to work only during the hours they are paid for. Their loyalty to their job is low, and they are highly calculating when it comes to the wages they receive for the work they have done. Wages are not that important, but they are sufficient to finance the social needs of Gen Z. To complement the above statement, the results of research related to the meaning of work in terms of *career* provide a dimension that deserves attention in terms of Gen Z's performance in carrying out their job responsibilities. The aspect of dedication scored the highest at 78%. These research results are in line with the findings of Kirchmayer & Fratričová (2020), who stated that the opportunity for rapid career development is one of the things that influences Generation Z in making decisions about work.

In relation to the above, the results of the analysis reviewed from the aspect of the meaning of work towards *calling* state that work for Gen Z is a calling in life but must also be in line with *their passion*. Generation Z mentions that work must be an enjoyable activity and in line with *the passion* of the individual concerned. This *passion* is very important because it is related to work motivation, long-term goals in pursuing a job, and, equally important, maintaining mental health.

When viewed from another perspective, the characteristics of Generation Z, who are tech-savvy, provide space in the workplace for their presence and role in contributing to the achievement of organisational performance in the online realm. Generation Z is more knowledgeable about the use of social media and digitising traditional work patterns towards work patterns that are in line with the times. Therefore, the aspect of contribution to the common good shows the highest percentage, namely 73%. Generation Z views work as a calling that aligns with their passions, emphasising enjoyment and motivation. This connection to their interests is crucial for maintaining mental health and achieving long-term career goals. Their technological

savvy enables them to adapt traditional work patterns to the modern digital environment, improving organisational performance. Furthermore, Gen Z's strong inclination to contribute to the common good is evident, with 73% prioritising this aspect in their professional lives, highlighting their desire for meaningful engagement in the workplace (Mahayosnand & Sabra, 2024). This finding highlights that 73% of Generation Z values contributing to the common good, reflecting their desire for meaningful work that aligns with their values and skills (Dwivedula, 2024).

The characteristics of Gen Z differ from previous generations. Gen Z is more fragile in spirit due to the ease of access they are accustomed to, so their emotional maturity tends to be unstable. In addition, Gen Z often experiences boredom or fatigue in their work, and if they do stay in a job, they tend not to stay for very long. This also involves an evaluation of factors such as career prospects, work environment, and compensation. The meaning of work for Generation Z will shape the character of the workforce in the future. Efforts to strengthen character education need to be further enhanced.

## CONCLUSION

This study found that the dimensions of work meaning among Generation Z in Surakarta showed a dominant tendency towards career orientation (75%), followed by calling (71%) and job (66%). These findings indicate that although career orientation had the highest quantitative score, qualitatively Generation Z did not always view a career as a long-term commitment that must be pursued consistently. They tend to avoid rigid commitments, experience boredom easily, and are more flexible in changing jobs. On the other hand, calling orientation appears strongly in work preferences based on personal interests and calling. These findings show that the meaning of work has a more complex impact than expected, while challenging the old assumption that generalises Generation Z as a completely uncommitted generation. Scientifically, this research reinforces the three-dimensional framework of work meaning introduced by Amy Wrzesniewski, while expanding its application in the context of Generation Z and character education. This study also introduces the integration of work meaning analysis with educational character indicators such as the ability to distinguish between needs and wants, career choice reflection, and responsibility in completing tasks as a conceptual contribution to interdisciplinary studies between work psychology and education.

However, this study has limitations in terms of the number of informants and the specific regional context, so the generalisation of the findings is still limited. Demographic variables such as gender, socio-economic background, and education level have not been analysed in depth. Therefore, further research with a broader sample coverage and diverse methodological approaches is needed to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of Generation Z's meaning of work.

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