NAVIGATING CORPORATE CULTURE: PERSPECTIVES FROM GENERATION Z BUSINESS STUDENTS

Vlad Diaconescu [1*]

[1] *Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Bucharest, Romania, diaconescuvlad17@stud.ase.ro*

Abstract

This research is a qualitative study based on the focus group technique and examines the opinion of business students, as a niche of Generation Z, in relation to organizational culture and its role in choosing and keeping a job. For this purpose, 3 focus groups were conducted with students from the Faculty of Business and Tourism of the Bucharest University of Economic Studies. The first focus group had only 3 participants and served more to test the discussion guide. The next two focus groups had 10 and 12 participants respectively, boys and girls, with the difference that the second group consisted of undergraduate students and the third of students in a master's program. A surprising finding was that none of the 25 student participants in the 3 focus groups were familiar with the concept of organizational culture. However, after some brief explanations, they understood what the concept referred to and were able to participate in in-depth discussions. The key findings made it clear that Gen Z students are looking for companies with a positive culture and a workplace that allows them to have a good work- life balance. These aspects become even more important than a higher salary if it is to be achieved in a company with a toxic culture.

Keywords: Generation Z, organizational culture, workplace expectations, focus group

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1. Introduction

The theory according to which the people of a generational group (cohort) are shaped by historical events and experiences such as family, politics, wars, work, technology and globalization was proposed by Mannheim in 1952 in his work "The Problem of Generations" (Maloni et al., 2019). It is assumed that a generation has a duration of 17-20 years, as this is considered the time required for cultural change (Howe and Strauss, 1991). The most important generational cohorts are: Baby Boomers or Boomers (1946-1964), Generation X or Gen X (1965-1979), Generation Y or Gen Y, Millennials (1980-1994) and Generation Z or Gen Z, Post-Millennials, iGen (1995-2012) (Maloni et al., 2019). Although there is no consensus on significant generational differences and some authors question the impact of historical experiences on generational cohorts (Costanza and Finkelstein, 2015), most researchers agree that these differences exist, even if the changes are not abrupt (Campbell et al., 2015).

This article follows the majority opinion that there are differences between generations, including in relation to the workplace, attitudes and career expectations (Ng and Parry, 2016). While for Generation Y the following values related to work prevail: extrinsic (salary, promotion, status), intrinsic (career development, results achieved, creativity), social (sense of belonging, friendship, shared interests), altruistic (helping others, useful work for society), leisure (vacation, time for other hobbies), supervision (feedback, commitment, professional guidance) and job stability (pension plan, health insurance, job stability) (Maloni et al., 2017), these values are at least partially changing for Generation Z (Beall, 2017). In addition, some studies also point to some heterogeneity within a generation, suggesting the need to examine subgroups (Ng and Parry, 2016). For example, business students exhibit certain characteristics in their generational cohort, but this segment has not been sufficiently researched (Maloni et al., 2019). Based on this gap, the research question for this study is as follows: *What is the importance of corporate culture for Gen Z and how does corporate culture influence their job choice and retention?*

[*] contact author

The paper continues with a literature review section and describes the qualitative research methodology based on focus groups, followed by a findings and discussion section and ends with conclusions, practical implications and limitations of the research.

2. Literature review

2.1 Generation Z and their workplace expectations

Young people entering the labour market today and in the near future belong to Generation Z. They were born after 1995, have a college degree or are about to graduate (Lassleben and Hofmann, 2023). So far, research into their work values, attitudes and expectations of employers is still in its infancy (Chillakuri, 2020; Mahmoud et al., 2020). To offer attractive jobs, companies need to understand exactly what this generation expects from employers and what they value in a workplace (Schroth, 2019).

During their college years, Gen Z youth were encouraged to debate and stand up for their point of view, and they bring this behaviour into the corporate world by challenging conventional ways of doing things (Chillakuri and Mahanandia, 2018). Young Gen Z people tend to be loyal to a profession, but not necessarily to an employer. They will leave a job if they do not receive an attractive salary (Tang et al., 2020) or experience some other form of dissatisfaction (Graczyk-Kucharska and Erickson, 2020). They are usually willing to learn new things and quickly get bored in repetitive jobs (Mahmoud et al., 2020). Collaboration comes naturally to them, either in person or online (Schroth, 2019). As they are used to technology, they do not see much difference between working at home and in the office. Being born in the age of globalization, Generation Z youth feel comfortable working from any corner of the world and easily adapt to cultural, religious, racial and ethnic differences (Chillakuri and Mahanandia, 2018). Having grown up in a computerized environment with constant access to the internet and electronic devices, they expect everything, including feedback, to be quick and immediate (Turner, 2015). All of these aspects shape their specific values, attitudes and expectations of a company and a workplace. Studies have identified four main characteristics of Gen Z related to work style that further influence their communication preferences, objectives ranking, and workplace expectations and needs (Gabrielova and Buchko, 2021; Barhate and Dirani, 2022; Yacine and Karjaluoto, 2023).

The first characteristic is related to the fact that we are talking about the first native digital generation, whose mobile phones have always been smartphones, who very easily incorporate digital technology into their everyday lives. Generation Z prefers email and text communication rather than phone calls and face-to-face interactions. They seem less practiced at communicating in person or using traditional technologies typically used in the workplace (Graczyk-Kucharska and Erickson, 2020). The second characteristic of Generation Z describes an individualism in their learning, working and communication style (Pichler et al., 2021). They show confidence and self-reliance, so they rely heavily on their skills and therefore prefer independent work to teamwork, which can become a real challenge in organizations where the activity is based on collaboration (Pichler et al., 2021). At the same time, Generation Z seems to be able to multitask, which is also reflected in their preference for short and concise digital communication (Barhate and Dirani, 2022; Yacine and Karjaluoto, 2023). The third characteristic was highlighted by the impact of COVID-19 and recent political and social situations, which highlighted the emotional sensitivity of these young people and the challenges associated with mental health (Greenwood and Anas, 2021). A Deloitte study (2023) highlighted that almost half of Gen Z employees surveyed stated that they experience constant stress or anxiety at work. Consequently, Gen Z values work-life balance and looks for companies where mental health support is seen as an organizational necessity (Deloitte, 2023; Gurchiek, 2023). Young Generation Z would seriously consider changing jobs in order to receive more benefits related to mental health or work-life balance (Gurchiek, 2023; Monster, 2023). In addition, Generation Z employees are actively interested in building social relationships with both peers and superiors. They expect regular feedback and mentor-like relationships (Gabrielova and Buchko, 2021). They expect support and understanding from their managers (Barhate and Dirani, 2022; Deloitte, 2023; Egan, 2023) and tend to leave an organization if they do not receive frequent management feedback and communication (Staffcircle, 2023). The fourth characteristic of Generation Z reflects the fact that they tend to make career decisions in line with their values (Deloitte, 2023), and organizations that support and prioritize diversity and equity are attractive to them (Graczyk-Kucharska and Erickson, 2020).

2.2 Key elements of organizational culture

Organizational culture benefits from several approaches. Among others, the culture of an organization can be defined as the values, attitudes, beliefs and behaviours that constitute the work environment, organizational purpose and vision of an organization (Hofstede, 1984). Organizational culture can significantly influence productivity, commitment to performance, self-confidence and ethical behaviour. Moreover, organizational culture is one of the factors that influence employee behaviour at work (Ojo, 2012). Although invisible, organizational culture is a force that strongly influences both employer and employee behaviour. Studies have shown that employees are more attracted to organizations whose culture values their work and focuses on the well-being of the organization. There is also a positive relationship between organizational culture, job satisfaction and employee organizational commitment (Sarantuya et al., 2021). According to Griswold (2012), culture encompasses the concept of social roles, relationships, abstract ideas, and material possessions acquired by a group of people over generations through their individual and collective efforts. In studying the best-managed US companies, Peters and Waterman (2006) found that a variety of organizational and individual outcomes, including productivity, performance, commitment, and self-confidence, are influenced by organizational culture.

Baumgartner (2009) shows that organizational culture can be explained by four key elements: it is a shared phenomenon; there are different levels of culture; culture can be learned; culture changes slowly. First, culture is a characteristic of a group that begins to form whenever the group has enough shared experiences (Schein, 2009). Culture expresses the values (Kotter and Heskett, 2008) and tacit assumptions (Schein, 2009) of group members, and culture shapes the group's sense of what is acceptable and valid (Wilson, 2001). Secondly, different levels of culture can be distinguished. Some researchers have identified two levels of culture (Wilson, 2001; Kotter and Heskett, 2008), which differ in their visibility and resistance to change (Kotter and Heskett, 2008). The visible level refers to behavioural patterns or organizational style and the deeper and less visible level refers to group values (Kotter and Heskett, 2008; Schein, 2009), which are shared by most group members and tend to persist even when group membership changes (Kotter and Heskett, 2008). The visible level is referred to as artifacts, i.e., everything that can be seen, heard, and felt, such as the visible organizational structure, various processes (Schein, 2009), behavioural patterns, the physical and social environment, and written and spoken language (Wilson, 2001). However, the third level of culture, the deeper and less visible level, can be divided into two components according to Schein (2009): firstly, the values held, such as strategies and goals, and secondly, the underlying assumptions, such as the collective unconscious, self-evident beliefs, perceptions, thoughts and feelings. The underlying assumptions are the source of the values and actions in the organization. They are necessary to understand possible contradictions with the artifacts and the values held (Schein, 2009). The third element concerns the way in which new members learn about the culture. The culture can be learned formally through learning processes such as training programs (Lehto and Aaltonen, 2021; Schein, 2009) and informally by existing employees and through informal socialization processes (Schein, 2009; Wilson, 2001), reflecting the feeling of belonging to the group and being accepted by other members and gaining a sense of psychological safety (Wilson, 2001). Fourth, organizational culture changes slowly over time (Wilson, 2001; Baumgartner, 2009). It tends to be stable and difficult to change because it is the result of learning processes and expresses the ways of thinking and feeling that have made the group successful (Schein, 2009). The factors that trigger changes in organizational culture are more likely to be a threat (economic, political, technological, legislative, social) or internal dissatisfaction (Schein, 2009). Aspects of the deeper and less visible levels are more difficult to change than the behavioural patterns and norms of the visible levels (Kotter and Heskett, 2008), and the underlying assumptions must first be understood if cultural change is desired (Schein, 2009).

Organisations may have multiple cultures (Kotter and Heskett, 2008) or subcultures (Wilson, 2001; Schein, 2009), which are usually associated with different functional groups, geographical locations (Kotter and Heskett, 2008; Schein, 2009) or different levels of organizational (Wilson, 2001; Schein, 2009). Subcultures can exist in harmony, in conflict or in indifference to each other (Wilson, 2001). However, the management of organizational culture is a controversial topic. Some authors believe that organizational culture is easy to manage (Anthony, 1994), while for others this process is much more difficult (Burack, 1991). According to these authors, the management of organizational culture is

complicated by various factors, such as: the multiplicity and complexity of subcultures, conflicting political interests, faulty timing and communication failures.

“Pragmatists” argue that organizational culture can be managed, should be managed and has always been managed, and often provide guidance on how to do so. The organizational culture "purists' consider it ridiculous to talk about managing organizational culture: organizational culture cannot be managed, it evolves (Martin, 1985). This debate about the management of organizational culture seems to depend on the researcher's approach to organizational culture. Some researchers believe that organisations should be conceptualised in terms of cultures. They argue that organizational culture belongs to what an organisation is, rather than what an organisation has (Smircich, 1983). Those researchers who understand organizational culture as a socially constructed system of shared beliefs and values find it contradictory to accept the possibility of managing or systematically attempting to control the phenomenon of organizational culture. They argue that organizational culture can only be influenced indirectly and is the result of the interaction between the individual and the organizational processes. In contrast, other researchers looking for more predictable methods of organizational control believe in the management of organizational culture. These researchers argue that an organisation has or produces a culture and usually define it as the social and normative “glue” that holds the organisation together (Deal and Kennedy, 1982).

The extent to which an organisation's culture can change to meet the expectations of Generation Z continues to be a hot research topic.

3. Methodology

This study is based on qualitative focus group research. Focus groups have been embraced in the realm of social sciences as a valuable method for gathering qualitative data and are recognized for their ability to offer valuable insights (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009). This approach is designed to gather data from a deliberately chosen group without specifically focusing on creating a statistically representative sample from a larger population. Once the research methodology was chosen, the primary aspects regarding the research design were established, encompassing the formulation of the protocol for facilitating the discussion, the size and makeup of the group, the venue and length of the discussions, as well as the specifics of participant recruitment and the responsibilities of each research team member during the discussion sessions. Based on the research questions, the research objectives for the focus group technique were defined as follows: a) to identify the level of awareness of the concept of organizational culture among business students; b) to identify their opinions about the desired workplace culture; c) to identify the influence of organizational culture on the choice of workplace; d) to identify their opinions about organizational culture in Romanian companies. Based on the literature and considering the research objectives, a list of questions was prepared as a guide for the focus group discussions. The first one was more of a test to calibrate the questions and to know how the focus group should be conducted. Later, I intervened in the original wording of the questions to make them more informal and to facilitate good conversation (Mellinger and Chau, 2010). I also took care not to violate any ethical rules. To this end, a consent form was developed for the participants in which they were verbally informed about the purpose of the study and the fact that they could withdraw from the study at any time.

The focus group questions were as follows:

1. Are you familiar with the concept of organizational culture? What do you know about this topic? What do you understand by the term organizational culture?
2. How would you like the organizational culture to be in your workplace?
3. Would you choose a job just because you like the organizational culture there? Would you give up a job because the organizational culture does not suit you? How would you handle a situation where you felt that the organizational culture was not inclusive, respectful or to your liking? If you needed the job, could you tolerate a culture you did not like?
4. What does a positive organisational culture mean to you? What do you think are the key elements that contribute to a healthy organisational culture? Can you give an example of a positive cultural experience you have had at work?
5. What does a negative/toxic organisational culture mean to you? Can you give an example of a toxic cultural experience you have had at work?

6. What impact do you think organisational culture has on productivity and job satisfaction?
7. How important is it to you that the organisational culture aligns with your personal values?
8. If you were applying for a job in a company, to what extent would you be interested in learning details about the organizational culture?
9. What problems do you think exist in the organizational culture of Romanian companies?
10. How do you think a company's culture affects its ability to deal with external changes or crises?

The next step was to identify the participants. All participants were students at the Faculty of Business and Tourism, the first two groups were undergraduate students and the third group consisted of graduate students. The first group consisted of 3 students and was more of a pilot test. The other two groups consisted of 10 (the undergraduates) and 12 members (the graduate students). In the graduate group, all participants were employed at the time of the group discussion. In the undergraduate group, one-third of them were currently employed or had work experience. In the first group, 2 people were employed and 1 person had no work experience. Their usual classrooms at the university were chosen as the venue. The data was collected by the author. The author took notes during the conversations and all conversations were audio recorded. The author also focused on non-verbal messages. An important aspect of the conversations was the length of the sessions. All sessions lasted approximately 40 minutes. At the beginning of each discussion session, the group discussion was introduced: (1) a welcome; (2) an overview of the topic and the purpose of the research; after this introduction, the first question was asked.

Table 1. Participants in the focus groups

Groups and participants	Gender	Age	Working experience
G1/P1	W	19	No
G1/P2	M	19	Yes
G1/P3	M	19	Yes
G2/P1	W	18	No
G2/P2	W	18	No
G2/P3	W	19	No
G2/P4	W	19	No
G2/P5	W	19	Yes
G2/P6	W	19	Yes
G2/P7	M	19	No
G2/P8	M	19	No
G2/P9	M	19	Yes
G2/P10	M	19	Yes
G3/P1	W	20	Yes
G3/P2	W	20	Yes
G3/P3	W	21	Yes
G3/P4	W	21	Yes
G3/P5	W	21	Yes
G3/P6	W	21	Yes
G3/P7	W	21	Yes
G3/P8	M	20	Yes
G3/P9	M	21	Yes
G3/P10	M	21	Yes
G3/P11	M	21	Yes
G3/P12	M	21	Yes

Source: author own observations

The first focus group (G1) was conducted with 3 participants, two of whom were working at the time and one of whom had no work experience. All participants were 19 years old, one girl (W) and two boys (M). The second focus group (G2) was conducted with 10 participants, 4 of whom were working at the time and the other 6 had no work experience. Again, all participants were 18-19 years old, 6 girls (W) and 4 boys (M). The third focus group (G3) was held with 12 participants. All were employed, all participants were 20-21 years old, 7 girls (W) and 5 boys (M). Table 1 shows the structure of the 3 groups participating in the study, where G symbolizes the group and P the participants.

4. Results

To achieve the research objectives, the information obtained from the transcription of the discussions in the three focus groups was analysed using the content analysis technique. The results that are of particular interest are listed below.

4.1 The concept of organizational culture

An initial finding, which is quite unexpected given that the participants are business students, is that all participants in the three groups stated that they were unfamiliar with the concept of organizational culture. Later, only one participant said that he could remember having heard of a business course. This participant was from the graduate group. The fact that the participants were not familiar with the concept required an explanation and the giving of examples. After the explanations received, the participants stated that they were aware of these aspects but did not know that they represented the concept of organizational culture.

The discussion then continued fairly consistently, analysing elements of "healthy", positive organizational cultures that represent aspects they would like to find in their work. After the three discussions, three elements emerged that were found each time: Respect (both among colleagues and between coworkers and supervisors), Understanding, and Empathy.

Students believe that a healthy culture is one where people are not stressed (in the negative sense of the word) and where there is no extra work, emails, or phone calls after hours or on weekends related to work. Young people are looking for the feeling of "going to work with love" (W, 18, no work experience) and not seeing themselves as "just one person working there, but as part of the group, that you belong" (M, 20, work experience).

In addition, some young people said that they wanted to find personal values in the culture of the organization where they work. Examples of this were freedom or respect. There are opinions that "there can be things you don't like, it's not possible to be perfect, but the good things should be more or more important than the bad".

4.2 The ideal workplace

Young people want their relationship with their superiors to be more of a friendship that is not just about work. At the same time, they are aware that this aspect can vary from area to area. The young people want to be able to speak freely and openly with their superiors and for them to trust them. At the same time, the graduate students group expressed the idea that young people would like to have separate offices between employees and supervisors. The participants want a collegial, friendly environment among colleagues, across departments and with everyone they deal with in the company. The young people believe that a good relationship between them and their colleagues would also bring better results for the company.

One participant (W, 19 years old) said: "I wish all workplaces were like my previous workplace: colleagues got along very well, the boss understood them when they needed something. Although it was a very stressful environment because of the work, colleagues and superiors helped each other very well as a team. That counted more than anything else. "

The young people believe that teamwork is important and that "by trying to make other people's lives a little better, they are also making their own lives better" (W, 20, work experience). It also emerged from the third focus group that young people want to have everything they need from a logistical perspective in order to carry out their work in optimal conditions.

Effective communication is generally seen as an essential factor in the workplace. They believe that effective communication also increases productivity. At the same time, young people want freedom of expression so that they can say what they think is good or bad.

An important factor emphasized by all young people in the three focus groups relates to an increasingly important element of culture, namely working hours. Young people emphasize the ability to have a flexible schedule, both as a daily schedule - to choose the time to start or finish work - and as a work style, from the office, from home or as a hybrid. The overwhelming majority of young people prefer the hybrid work option, with the option of a flexible schedule, i.e. start and finish times and lunch

breaks, which should not be counted as additional time if possible. Young people want to come to the office to meet colleagues, have real human interaction, make friends, and they believe they can develop personally in this way, but they also want to have the opportunity to work remotely. All were in favour of the opportunity to work hybrid, even if it is the option of 3 days in the office and 2 days at home or even 4 days in the office and 1 day at home.

One student (19 years old) stated that he chose one company because he could work completely remotely, even though he had options with a higher salary for the same position at other companies that did not offer him this opportunity. The ability to have a flexible schedule would also increase their productivity at work.

4.3 The toxic workplace

After defining what a positive culture means and which aspects they would like to find in the workplace, it was also analysed what a negative/toxic culture means and which elements they would not like to find in the workplace.

In all three discussion rounds, certain aspects emerged that young people would not like to find in the workplace. Harsh words towards colleagues, humiliation, threats ("I will fire you if you do not do this, assigning tasks that have nothing to do with your work and threats" - M, 20 years old), unfair treatment between people, harassment, authoritarian behaviour from superiors, superior behaviour from others, especially the employer (in an ostentatious way), dishonesty, lies, all demoralize employees, create stress and employees become unproductive. In the second and third focus groups, the young people also mentioned problems related to the working environment: it must not be noisy, it must not be cold and there must not be many people in the same space as this can be tiring.

A student (20 years old) said that punishments are practiced at his workplace: "The salary was cut for a day or the employee in question had to work an extra day; many have resigned".

A girl (21 years old) reported on her experiences at her previous workplace: "Failure to adhere to the work schedule was the order of the day - I also worked on weekends -, tasks were received very late, disorganization, I worked on holidays, without additional pay, without rest through days off. I was 'favoured' by working from home on these days." The behaviour of her colleagues was inappropriate, they did not try to integrate her, she was the youngest, she was 20 years old at the time, while the others were at least 35 years old, and she did not feel like she was part of the group. "With the others, I encountered a 'slave' mentality: We are just peasants, you work 10 years and what? Do you have any demands?", her colleagues often say. There was general dissatisfaction, but no one said anything. Another girl (21 years old) said that she did not have a meal break, but had to eat in between when she was dealing with customers. She worked at the medical reception and although she had a colleague at the same workstation, she could not even leave for 15 minutes to eat. Such a practice was not part of the company culture.

4.4 Does the organizational culture influence the choice of workplace?

When asked whether they would only choose a job because they liked the organizational culture there, all young people in all groups answered positively. The problematization went even further. Students were asked if they had a choice between a company with a corporate culture, they liked but with various external obstacles associated with the job, such as a long distance from home, a lower salary than elsewhere, etc., and they still answered that they would choose that job. For young people, company culture and well-being at work are the most important criteria when choosing a company. Most of the opinions expressed were: "Culture is very important when choosing a job". "It's important to feel part of the collective, you need to feel comfortable considering you will be at your job for a long time."

Would they choose a job where they receive a significantly higher salary than other companies, with other external benefits such as proximity to home, but a toxic culture? Most students answered that they could not choose such a job, others, a smaller proportion of those present, said that they would try, but if they did not feel comfortable, they would leave, despite all the benefits.

Another answer was that they would work temporarily until they found something better, but that decision would also depend on how much tolerance they had. Even if they did what they liked - but the organizational environment would not be good - they would look for another job. The question is not

whether he would stay, but how long he would stay in such a job. Only one girl (18 years old, no work experience) said: “I would try to see this situation as a challenge, but if I did not feel comfortable, I would leave”. Another girl (21 years old) said she had been in the situation described but had not lasted longer than 7 months because she was not motivated by the salary or anything else. She lasted longer because there was a momentary context, otherwise she would have left earlier.

When asked if they were specifically interested in corporate culture during the interview, or if they thought to ask about it, they responded that they were not specifically asking about the company's organizational culture, but about many individual aspects that they noted were elements of organizational culture.

Most asked about communication within the company and how work is done. Some responded that they were told about the cultural aspects without asking, and others reported that they were promised from the beginning during the integration phase and afterwards “that they would not be alone and that if they needed anything, they could ask”.

Others have asked about the schedule, whether it is flexible, remote, office-based or hybrid, or whether it allows for changes during a certain time. They all asked about the salary. In general, the young people did not ask many questions, only the ones they thought were important. However, after the discussions in the focus groups, the students concluded that it would be good to ask more aspects related to the culture of the company during the interview.

4.5 The organizational culture in Romanian companies

As far as the organizational culture in Romanian companies is concerned, the students were of the opinion that no or too little importance is attached to it. These opinions were based either on their own experiences or on the experiences of their friends. In general, they stated that they had not heard of positive situations. The examples given concerned aspects such as: unpaid overtime (“a lot is demanded with little reword”). The students believe that the reasons why cultural development is not emphasized are that “it is assumed that people need a salary and a job and this aspect can be neglected or maybe it is just disinterest” (M, 21 years old, with work experience).

A girl (20 years old) who works in the hotel industry spoke about her experiences at work. “There are no benefits at work apart from the salary (which is slightly higher than the market level), and that's why people are disinterested. Even if the supervisor wants to, he can not motivate them because the company basically offers nothing more. Breaks are counted towards working hours, in the hotel restaurant employees do not even get one meal a day, whereas elsewhere they even get two meals a day. In all departments there is always one person who is put against the wall, and managers do not address these issues so as not to get into trouble with their superiors. All of these aspects combined create an environment where employees have no interest in coming to work because they have no perks, no developmental environment, and no other benefits. They only come to work to have a place to go to get their pay check and live their life, not to work with pleasure. Employees are no longer productive. Salary alone is not for everyone. People have different needs that need to be met in a different way.”

One student (21 years old) spoke about his experience that while there are perks at work, they are not given based on objective criteria, but as the boss decides.

When asked what role the organizational culture plays for the company when faced with crises, especially external crises, the young people unanimously answered: “If it is a healthy culture, it resists better, while if the internal environment is not the best, the company will be even more affected in the event of a crisis. If people get along well, the organization will withstand otherwise.”

“Culture is important - it's essential to have a structure and to be managed properly - if that's the case, any change can be implemented more easily and with less impact. If there is a positive culture, it is easier for the company and for the employees - culture is important.”

5. Conclusions

The study of organizational culture is still in full swing, with unprecedented external influences on organizations being reflected in corporate culture. Among the external factors, social factors have a major impact, mainly because they directly affect the current and future workforce. Among these

factors, the characteristics of Generation Z are one type of influence that cannot be ignored. Young people of this generation have a different attitude towards work in general and the workplace in particular.

Although they do not seem to have extensive conceptual baggage (the concept of organizational culture, for example, was unfamiliar to the 25 business students who participated in the three organized focus groups), young people are well aware of what they want from a workplace. Even if they do not work with precise notions, they know how to accurately describe their expectations of the workplace and the company. As a result, young people are not willing to compromise (at least not in the long term) and place more emphasis on work-life balance. An ideal workplace is described as being based on respect, understanding and empathy. A toxic workplace is characterized by inequity, lack of benefits, overtime and even tension caused by conflictual relationships, authoritarianism and inappropriate language.

Based on their own experiences or those of their friends, the students have a rather negative opinion of companies in Romania. They see them as unattractive workplaces where employees (especially young ones) are exploited by employers who show them no recognition or respect, and where employees are resigned because they have no alternative. This perception may not correspond to reality, but it appears as if it does.

This study has therefore highlighted aspects that are of interest to both the young people concerned and, above all, to employers. In times of labour shortages, Generation Z is becoming even more important. The characteristics of this generation, especially their digital skills, make these young people an interesting and attractive workforce for employers. It is therefore important for employers to know both the characteristics of this generation and, above all, what they think about the organizational climate and the attitude of employers. These aspects should be taken into account during job interviews and can become an honest basis for discussion and negotiation. The young people of Generation Z must be listened to, respected, and understood.

Even though this research has certain drawbacks, since the students included in the study were not intentionally recruited but were invited to participate in the discussions the students presented in the didactic activities, the results obtained are consistent with previous studies as far as the characteristics and their expectations are concerned, which leads us to believe that the other aspects that emerged in the discussions also reflect reality. Thus, the present study has the merit of shedding light on students' opinions about organizational culture in Romania, which should be of interest to employers. Also, the fact that students are not aware of established concepts, but implicitly work with them when making decisions, indicates that the discourse about them and the discussions with them need to be more pragmatic and based on concrete examples.

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