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The Post-Industrial Human Between Work, Meaning and Automation: An Investigation into Generation Z

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Abstract: The successive Industrial Revolutions have fundamentally transformed the nature of work, from the mechanization of physical tasks to the increasing integration of artificial intelligence and automated systems into professional activities. These developments have reshaped labor market expectations and raised questions about employment security, professional adaptation, and the values associated with work. Such changes are particularly relevant to Generation Z, whose entry into the labor market takes place in a context of accelerated technological transformation. This study aimed to examine young adults' perceptions of work and automation, their concerns regarding professional stability, and the relationships between work-related values, anxiety, work–life interaction, and adaptability. A quantitative, cross-sectional survey design was employed, involving 54 participants aged 20–23. Data were collected using the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI), the Survey Work–Home Interaction–NijmeGen (SWING), the NR-13 scale, and composite variables developed specifically for this study. The results indicated that more positive attitudes towards automation were associated with a lower perception of threats to professional stability. A positive association was also identified between non-material work values and the importance attributed to economic security. Furthermore, positive associations emerged between dimensions of work–life interaction and flexibility/adaptability. These findings highlight the complexity of young adults' perspectives on technological change and their professional future. The study is limited by its relatively small sample, restricted age range, cross-sectional design, and the use of study-specific items. The findings should therefore be interpreted with caution and further investigated in larger and more diverse samples.

Keywords: Generation Z, Automation, Work, Professional Stability, Work–Life Interaction, Adaptability, Technological Change.

Introduction

Against the backdrop of accelerating automation processes and fundamental transformations in the labor market, not only psychosocial challenges are emerging, but also major questions concerning the legal regulation of these changes. This paper aims to contribute to the field of labor law by examining the legal implications of the increasing flexibilization of work, professional retraining and the emergence of new forms of contractual relationships within the digital economy. Phenomena such as platform work, the automation of recruitment processes and the use of artificial intelligence in human resource management raise important issues relating to legal liability, social protection and workers' access to fundamental rights.

From this perspective, the research goes beyond exploring the perceptions and values of a particular generation (Rotaru, 2023a, pp. 62-79), opening up a necessary discussion on the adaptation of the legal framework to the new realities of work. Issues such as the right to professional retraining, the right to a fair working environment in the digital context, and legal accountability for algorithmic decision-making are becoming essential to shaping a body of labor law capable of addressing the challenges of the post-industrial era (Belea, 2025a, pp. 57-69). Thus, this paper provides a valuable empirical foundation for further reflection and policy intervention in the regulation of the future of work.

Aim and Direction of the Research

The present study aims to investigate how Generation Z perceives and responds to the accelerating changes in the labor market, within a context shaped by technological progress, automation, and the constant need for adaptation. In an era in which career paths are becoming increasingly non-linear and the boundaries between personal and professional life tend to blur, a better understanding of the values, perceptions, and coping strategies adopted by this generation is essential. Therefore, the research seeks to explore not only the level of anxiety associated with the professional future but also attitudes towards flexibility, continuous learning, and the redefinition of the meaning of work (Rotaru, 2021a, pp.87-92).

The analysis focuses on identifying significant associations between variables such as the perceived threat posed by automation, the level of awareness regarding the technological revolution, non-material work-related values, and the preference for a flexible professional lifestyle. Both the cognitive and emotional aspects involved in responding to these changes and the personal values that may influence career-related decisions are taken into consideration (Rotaru, 2024, pp. 301-318).

Through this approach, the research contributes to developing an up-to-date psychological profile of Generation Z in relation to labor market challenges and the profound transformations affecting the traditional career model. The findings may provide a starting point for future educational interventions, career counselling initiatives, and policies aimed at integrating young people into an ever-changing professional world (Rotaru, 2021b, pp. 190-196).

Research Methodology

To achieve the proposed research objectives, a quantitative methodology was employed, based on the administration of standardized questionnaires and a research instrument specifically developed for this study. The research design was correlational in nature, aiming to identify significant associations between the variables under investigation.

Data were collected online through a Google Forms questionnaire, which was distributed via social media platforms and direct personal contacts. Participants were informed of the purpose of the research and assured that their responses would remain anonymous and confidential. Participation was entirely voluntary. The average time required to complete the questionnaire was approximately 15 minutes.

Statistical analysis was conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics, version 26. Descriptive statistical analyses (means, standard deviations, minimum and maximum scores), Pearson's parametric correlation analyses for hypothesis testing and, where appropriate, statistical significance tests were employed. The selection of these methods was guided by the nature of the variables (numerical, measured on an interval scale) and the approximately normal distribution of the data.

Generational Characteristics: Generation Z

The tremendous advances in science and technology, together with the profound social transformations taking place in the contemporary world, give rise to new challenges that call for new solutions (Rotaru, 2023b, pp. 825–874). These emerging challenges demand a revolutionary vision not only of technology but also of society itself. This analysis is, in essence, the outcry of a society besieged by crises and gripped by the fear of its inability to maintain control (Toffler, 1973, p. 5).

People are classified into generations according to the Generational Theory developed by William Strauss and Neil Howe in the 1980s. The theory suggests that a new generation emerges approximately every 21 years, shaped by the political, financial, social and technological changes characteristic of its historical period (Petrică, 2025).

According to a concise analysis conducted by French researchers Marie Desplats and Florence Pinaud, contemporary global society comprises several distinct generations, classified according to their respective birth periods: Baby Boomers (1945–1964), Generation X (1965–1979), Millennials (1980–1994), Generation Z (1992–2012) and Generation Alpha (2010–present) (Adamescu, 2023).

Generation Z comprises individuals born between 1992 and 2012. Also referred to as Digital Natives, iGeneration, Gen Tech or Net Gen, this cohort spends considerable amounts of time on the internet and social media platforms. Its members demonstrate a reasonable ability to perform multiple tasks simultaneously (Aiken, 2019, p. 60), although they are also characterized by shorter attention spans.

Driven by the pursuit of financial gain, they have different points of reference and a distinct vision of life (Claparede, 1975, p. 243). Generation Z places considerable value on well-being, actively seeking ways to enjoy life and demonstrating a greater willingness than older generations to spend money on personal care. They tend to show less concern about saving for retirement (Roșu, 2024). Furthermore, Generation Z places a stronger emphasis on health, paying increased attention to dietary habits, particularly plant-based diets, as well as to their consumption choices (Mitrache, 2025).

Without seeking to demystify their jargon, hashtags such as #fitness, #fitspo, #fitfam and #fitgoals encapsulate their countercultural expression, which pervades social media. Rather than taking selfies with a beer mug in hand, they prefer to share their post-workout experiences within like-minded online communities. They are also drawn to the dietary supplement market, particularly protein products. They have an appreciation for aesthetics, aspire to personal development and maintain a forward-looking perspective. Nevertheless, the boundary between private life and exhibitionist behavior on social media appears increasingly blurred, as they seem willing to make their lives visible to virtually anyone, at almost any time (Dumitra, 2018).

Specific Objectives

- **Analyzing Generation Z's perception of automation and its impact on job security.** The aim is to identify the relationship between the perceived threat posed by automation and the attitudes expressed towards this technological transformation.
- Investigating the relationship between the level of awareness and attitudes towards professional adaptation in the context of the technological revolution. This objective seeks to determine whether and to what extent the level of awareness is correlated with anxiety regarding the professional future and willingness to embrace change.
- **Examining the influence of non-material values on perceptions of work among Generation Z.** The aim is to highlight how values related to meaningful work,

work–life balance, and professional flexibility shape attitudes towards work in relation to economic security.

- **Assessing the relationship between work–life balance and attitudes towards work flexibility and professional adaptability.** The analysis focuses on how the perceived harmonious interaction between these two domains is associated with openness to flexibility and the capacity for professional adaptation.

Research Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1. Generation Z perceives automation as a threat to job security.
Hypothesis 2. The level of awareness regarding the technological revolution is associated with the level of anxiety concerning the professional future.
Hypothesis 3. Perceptions of work are influenced by non-material values (e.g., meaningful work and work–life balance), rather than solely by economic security.
Hypothesis 4. A harmonious interaction between professional and personal life, as perceived by Generation Z, is associated with favorable attitudes towards work flexibility and professional adaptability.

Research Design and Variables

This study employs an exploratory correlational design aimed at identifying relationships between the psychological variables measured. The present study adopts a quantitative, correlational design, appropriate for exploring relationships between psychological and attitudinal variables relevant to Generation Z in the context of the transformations brought about by the technological revolution and the new dynamics of the labor market. This type of non-experimental design allows for the identification of associations between variables without their intentional manipulation. Within this research, all the variables analyzed are treated as dependent variables, as they result from the measurement of psychological and attitudinal constructs. The aim is not to test causal effects, but rather to explore statistically significant associations between relevant dimensions.
The variables included in the analysis are as follows:

- Threat Perception (measured using the NR-13 scale);
- Anxiety Regarding the Professional Future (STAI – State Anxiety subscale);
- Work-Related Values (scales from the questionnaire specifically developed for the present study: Non-Material Values and Economic Security);
- Attitudes Towards Automation and Reskilling (original questionnaire);
- Work–Life Balance Preferences and Work Flexibility (SWING subscales);
- Level of Information and Willingness to Embrace Professional Reinvention (original questionnaire).

All variables are numerical and were measured using five-point Likert-scale items, allowing for the calculation of composite scores and the application of parametric statistical analyses. This made it possible to test the correlational hypotheses, primarily using Pearson's correlation coefficient. The adopted correlational design is appropriate for the research objectives, as it seeks to outline the attitudinal and value-based profile of Generation Z in relation to labor market transformations within a dynamic and increasingly digitalised socio-economic context.

Participants

The sample used in this research consisted of 54 participants, all belonging to Generation Z, aged between 20 and 23 years. Participants were selected based on their availability and informed consent, using a non-probability convenience sampling technique. This type of

sampling is frequently employed in exploratory research, particularly when the aim is to investigate relationships between variables within a defined context. The majority of respondents are students or young adults at the beginning of their professional careers, making them relevant to the research topic, namely perceptions of work and adaptation to changes in the labor market. Regarding gender distribution, 38 participants (70.4%) were female and 16 (29.6%) were male, indicating a higher representation of women in the sample.

The inclusion criteria were as follows:

- Belonging to the 20–23 age group;
- Willingness to complete all questionnaires in full;
- Being engaged in an active educational or professional pathway.

Although the sample is not nationally representative, it provides relevant insight into the perceptions and attitudes characteristic of young people belonging to this generation, who are transitioning into the labor market and are directly exposed to the challenges posed by current technological and social changes.

Procedure

Data collection was conducted online using the Google Forms platform, which enabled the questionnaires to be distributed quickly and efficiently to participants. The link to the digital questionnaire was shared through social media networks and educational platforms, accompanied by an information letter and an informed consent form, in accordance with the ethical standards governing psychological research.

Participants completed all the instruments included in the study anonymously and voluntarily, in a single session lasting approximately 15–20 minutes. The questionnaires were completed individually, at each participant's own pace. Responses were automatically saved in the Google Forms database and subsequently exported for statistical analysis using IBM SPSS Statistics, version 26. All participants were informed about the confidential nature of their responses and their right to withdraw from the study at any time, without any consequences.

Research Findings. Data Analysis

IBM SPSS Statistics, version 26, was used to process and interpret the data obtained through the administration of the questionnaires. This software is widely recognized as a standard tool in psychological and social science research, enabling the rigorous statistical analysis of quantitative data. Its functionalities include descriptive statistical analysis, hypothesis testing, the assessment of the reliability and validity of research instruments, as well as the examination of relationships between variables through correlation and difference tests.

The database developed for this study comprises responses from 54 participants, all belonging to Generation Z, aged between 20 and 23 years. For each participant, socio-demographic variables (age and gender) were recorded, together with the scores obtained on questionnaire items addressing attitudes towards flexible work arrangements, lifelong learning and the meaning of work. Furthermore, validated research instruments were employed, including the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI), for assessing state anxiety; the Survey Work–Home Interaction–NijmeGen (SWING), for evaluating work–life balance; the NR-13 scale, for assessing psychological needs; and composite variables specifically developed for this study, in accordance with its research objectives and formulated hypotheses.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

	N		Mean	Median	Mode	Standard Deviation
	Valid	Non-valid				
Perceived Threat	54	0	12.5370	13.0000	13.00[a]	2.17805
AttitudesTowards Automation	54	0	11.5741	11.5000	10.00[a]	2.18573
Information and Reinvention	54	0	10.1296	10.0000	10.00	1.46720
Anxiety	54	0	45.3148	45.0000	44.00	2.41711
Non-Material Values	54	0	3.6296	4.0000	4.00	1.06923
Economic Security	54	0	3.5741	4.0000	4.00	1.03890
swing1	54	0	14.3704	14.0000	15.00	1.64025
swing2	54	0	13.3333	14.0000	14.00[a]	1.65973
swing3	54	0	18.3519	18.0000	19.00	1.68408
swing4	54	0	17.2037	17.0000	16.00[a]	1.39243
Flexibility and Adaptability	54	0	23.3519	23.0000	22.00[a]	2.45070

Note. Multiple modes – the lowest value is reported.
Mean. All values represent mean scores calculated for the respective variables.

In the initial stage of the statistical analysis, a descriptive examination of the variables under investigation was conducted in order to provide an overall perspective on the distribution of responses. The arithmetic mean, standard deviation, as well as the minimum and maximum values recorded for each of the analyzed variables were calculated. These data are summarised in Table 1.

The descriptive statistics indicate an approximately normal distribution of scores, with no significant extreme values or anomalies. This finding supported the subsequent use of Pearson's correlation coefficient to test the formulated hypotheses. The choice of this statistical test was justified by the nature of the variables included in the analysis—all of which were numerical and measured on interval scales—as well as by the aim of identifying linear relationships between them.

Table 2. Parametric Correlations Between the Dimensions Examined

		Perceived Threat	**Attitudes Towards Automation**	**Anxiety**	**Non-Material Values**	**Flexibility and Adaptability**
Perceived Threat	Pearson Correlation	1	**-.470****	.035	-.099	.172
	Sig. (2-tailed)		**.000**	.800	.475	.212
	N	54	**54**	54	54	54
Information and Reinvention	Pearson Correlation	.025	.118	**-.054**	.127	-.044
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.857	.397	**.697**	.359	.750
	N	54	54	**54**	54	54
Economic Security	Pearson Correlation	.111	.126	.099	**.552****	-.177
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.423	.363	.474	**.000**	.200
	N	54	54	54	**54**	54
swing1	Pearson Correlation	.001	.166	.013	-.039	**.624****
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.992	.231	.926	.781	**.000**
	N	54	54	54	54	**54**
swing2	Pearson Correlation	-.056	.175	-.060	.103	**.472****
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.689	.205	.669	.460	**.000**
	N	54	54	54	54	**54**
swing3	Pearson Correlation	.009	.180	-.023	-.031	**.564****
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.947	.193	.868	.824	**.000**
	N	54	54	54	54	**54**
swing4	Pearson Correlation	.013	.190	.009	.014	**.587****
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.926	.168	.951	.922	**.000**
	N	54	54	54	54	**54**

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Hypothesis 1. Young people belonging to Generation Z perceive automation as a threat to job security.

To test this hypothesis, the relationship between the perceived impact of automation on career prospects and the level of perceived psychological insecurity, as measured by the NR-13 scale, was examined. The automation dimension was constructed on the basis of three items specifically developed for this study, assessing the degree of concern regarding the influence of technology on professional stability: I fear that digitalization will render work in my professional field obsolete. Automation may significantly reduce young people's chances of finding stable employment. I believe that building a career is difficult in a world where technology is constantly changing. As all three items were negatively worded, they were reverse-scored so that higher scores indicate a more positive attitude towards automation and a lower perception of its potential threat to professional stability. The overall score was calculated as the mean of the three responses. To identify a possible association between the perceived threat posed by automation and the degree to which fundamental psychological needs remain unmet, Pearson's correlation coefficient was applied to the automation dimension score and the total score obtained on the NR-13 scale. The selection of this statistical method (Table 2) was justified by the numerical measurement level of both variables, the approximately normal distribution of the data and the assumed linear nature of the relationship between them.

A statistically significant negative correlation was identified between attitudes towards automation and the perceived threat to professional stability ($r = –0.470$, $p < 0.001$). This finding suggests that young people with a positive attitude towards automation are less likely to perceive it as a direct threat to job security. Conversely, individuals with negative perceptions of automation tend to associate these technological processes with increased risks to their personal career prospects.

Based on this finding, the first hypothesis may be considered confirmed. The inverse relationship between perceived threat and attitudes towards automation supports the assumption that acceptance of technological innovation is accompanied by a reduction in anxiety concerning job security. Young people who perceive automation as an opportunity rather than a loss of control appear to be less affected by feelings of vulnerability in the face of change.

This correlation is consistent with previous research indicating that positive attitudes towards technological change are associated with better adaptation and lower levels of occupational stress (Frey & Osborne, 2017; Selingo, 2020). Generation Z, having been familiar with technology since childhood, is often characterized as being more adaptable and less apprehensive about change. However, this tendency is not universal. Individuals who lack advanced digital skills or feel insufficiently prepared for professional retraining may perceive automation as a risk rather than an opportunity.

Against the backdrop of this polarization, the perceived threat may reflect not merely a rational fear of job loss, but also an identity-related tension: the feeling that one's professional worth is being called into question in an increasingly automated environment. For a generation that often defines its identity through the lens of performance and usefulness, this fear may extend beyond the economic sphere, taking on an existential dimension.

Hypothesis 2. The level of awareness of the technological revolution is associated with the level of anxiety regarding future career prospects. To test this hypothesis, the relationship between participants' willingness to adapt to the changes brought about by the technological revolution and the level of anxiety they experience concerning their own professional future was examined. The *Awareness and Adaptability* dimension was constructed on the basis of three items from the questionnaire specifically developed for this study, assessing openness to lifelong learning and professional flexibility: I feel prepared to

continuously acquire new knowledge and skills in order to remain competitive in the labor market; I believe that my generation needs to constantly reinvent itself in order to remain professionally relevant; and I would be willing to change my professional field entirely if automation affected my current occupation. The overall score for this dimension was calculated as the mean of the responses to the three items.

To explore possible associations between self-reported adaptability and anxiety levels, Pearson's correlation coefficient was used to examine the relationship between the score obtained on the Information and Reinvention dimension and the total score on the State Anxiety component of the STAI scale. The choice of this statistical test (Table 2) was motivated by the numerical nature of the variables involved, their approximately normal distributions, and the assumption of a linear relationship between openness to change and perceived anxiety.

The results indicate no statistically significant relationship between Information and Reinvention and anxiety, $r = 0.025$, $p = 0.857$. The coefficient is extremely low and statistically non-significant, suggesting the absence of a direct correlation between respondents' reported openness to learning and professional reinvention and their level of anxiety regarding their professional future. Therefore, the second hypothesis is not supported by the data obtained from this sample.

This lack of correlation may be interpreted from several perspectives. First, it is possible that information-seeking and willingness to reinvent oneself are perceived more as aspirational or socially desirable traits than as actual resources with an immediate emotional impact. In other words, the fact that respondents claim to be prepared to learn and adapt does not necessarily mean that these beliefs automatically reduce anxiety in the face of professional uncertainty.

Another possible factor is positive self-evaluation bias, which is frequently encountered in research involving youth samples. Generation Z tends to perceive itself as adaptable, open-minded, and flexible; however, these self-perceptions do not always correlate with individuals' deeper emotional states, particularly in a professional context perceived as unstable and uncertain.

These findings are consistent with recent studies suggesting that simply being informed about technological changes or expressing a proactive attitude is not sufficient to reduce professional anxiety (Haar, 2018; OECD, 2021). In fact, awareness of the accelerating pace of change may even increase pressure, particularly when accompanied by economic uncertainty, a lack of institutional support, or the absence of clear career pathways.

Although Generation Z is familiar with technology and the concept of lifelong learning, it nevertheless operates within a highly volatile professional environment. Thus, knowing does not automatically mean feeling emotionally prepared. This dissociation between the cognitive component (information) and the affective component (anxiety) represents one of the important psychosocial characteristics of young people at the beginning of their professional careers.

Hypothesis 3. Perceptions of work are influenced by non-material values (e.g., the meaning of work and work–life balance), rather than being determined solely by economic security. To examine this hypothesis, the relationship between the importance attached to non-material aspects of work and the value placed on economic security among young people belonging to Generation Z was assessed. The research instrument used was the questionnaire specifically developed for this study, which included items addressing personal values, flexibility, the meaning of work and professional stability.

The dimension Non-Material Values Associated with Work was constructed using a set of nine items exploring how participants relate to work beyond its economic component. These items assess aspects such as professional identity, work–life balance, the need for

autonomy, preferences for a flexible working style, and the desire for meaning and personal development: work is an essential part of my identity, I believe it is important to maintain a balance between my professional and personal life, work should offer me more than just an income—meaning, personal development and recognition, I consider it acceptable for someone to turn down a job if it does not align with their personal values, I would prefer a flexible working schedule, even if it involved greater responsibility, I would like to have the freedom to choose how I organise my work (Rotaru, 2025, pp. 772–790), I place greater emphasis on quality of life than on professional performance, I would accept a lower salary in exchange for a friendly and flexible working environment, and I believe that young people belonging to my generation will redefine the meaning of work. The final score was calculated as the mean of these nine items.

In parallel, a complementary dimension, *Economic Security/Stability*, was developed and operationalized through a central item: "I would prefer a stable career, even if it is not particularly well paid." This item reflects an individual's attachment to professional security, potentially prioritizing it over flexibility or other non-material values.

To test the hypothesis, Pearson's correlation coefficient was employed to investigate the relationship between the two aforementioned dimensions. The selection of this statistical test (Table 2) was justified by the numerical nature of the variables, their approximately normal distribution and the interest in identifying a linear relationship between work-related value orientations and preferences for professional stability.

The analyzed data reveal a statistically significant positive correlation between Non-Material Values and Economic Security ($r = 0.552$, $p < 0.001$). At first glance, this association may appear counterintuitive, as the initial hypothesis was based on an assumed tension between the two dimensions: symbolic values and the meaning of work, on the one hand, and economic security, on the other.

Nevertheless, the findings suggest, rather, the coexistence of these two types of values within Generation Z's professional mindset. Instead of choosing between meaning and stability, the young people in the sample appear to regard both as essential elements in defining satisfactory work. This orientation can be linked to the meaningful work model promoted by authors such as Sinek (2019), who argues that individuals belonging to younger generations increasingly seek a *why* (a sense of purpose) in their work, without relinquishing their need for financial security. Thus, what emerges is not a rejection of material stability, but rather its integration into a broader framework of non-material values, including autonomy, recognition, flexibility and personal well-being.

These findings support recent research characterizing Generation Z as an ambivalent yet strategic generation: on the one hand, its members seek personal fulfilment, while on the other, they are acutely aware of economic volatility and seek protection against potential risks. From this perspective, the hypothesis may be considered partially confirmed. Non-material values are indeed relevant to the way young people perceive work; however, they do not come at the expense of economic security, but rather complement it.

Hypothesis 4. A harmonious interaction between professional and personal life, as perceived by Generation Z, is associated with favorable attitudes towards work flexibility and professional adaptability.

To test this hypothesis, the relationship between the perceived quality of work–life interaction and openness towards flexible working arrangements and adaptation to labor market changes was examined. The work–life interaction dimension was assessed using the SWING scale, a validated instrument designed to measure the reciprocal influences between these two spheres. For the purposes of this analysis, the subscale reflecting the positive enrichment of personal life through professional experiences was used as an indicator of harmonious work–life interaction.

The variable *professional flexibility and adaptability* was constructed on the basis of six items included in the questionnaire specifically developed for this study. These items assess preferences regarding flexible working schedules, remote work, autonomy in organising one's own activities, willingness to engage in lifelong learning and openness to changing one's professional field. The items were formulated as follows: I would prefer a flexible working schedule, even if it involved greater responsibility. I would like to have the freedom to choose how I organise my work. I believe that remote work should become the norm. I feel prepared to continuously acquire new knowledge and skills in order to remain competitive. I believe that my generation needs to constantly reinvent itself. I would be willing to change my professional field entirely if automation affected my current occupation. The final score for this dimension was obtained by calculating the mean of the six responses.

To examine the association between the two dimensions, Pearson's correlation coefficient was applied (Table 2). The selection of this statistical test was justified by the numerical nature of the variables, the approximately normal distribution of the scores and the assumption of a linear relationship between work–life interaction and openness towards modern forms of employment.

The correlation analysis between the four SWING subscales (measuring various aspects of work–life balance) and the composite score derived from the questionnaire specifically developed for this study revealed statistically significant positive correlations, as follows:

- SWING 1 (Work–Life Balance) and professional flexibility/adaptability: $r = 0.624$, $p < 0.001$
- SWING 2 (Work–Life Strain) and professional flexibility/adaptability: $r = 0.472$, $p < 0.001$
- SWING 3 (Work–Life Interference) and professional flexibility/adaptability: $r = 0.564$, $p < 0.001$
- SWING 4 (Work–Life Overload) and professional flexibility/adaptability: $r = 0.587$, $p < 0.001$

These results indicate that a positive and balanced perception of the relationship between personal and professional life is strongly associated with favorable attitudes towards work flexibility, openness to continuous learning, and professional adaptability. In practical terms, Generation Z individuals who experience a harmonious balance between their professional and personal responsibilities demonstrate greater openness to flexible working arrangements, autonomy in organising their activities, and continuous adaptation to changes in the labor market.

This strong correlation supports the arguments put forward in contemporary research regarding Generation Z's need to integrate their careers harmoniously into their personal lives, viewing flexibility as a key element of job satisfaction and mental health (Haar, Russo, Suñe, & Ollier-Malaterre, 2014; Kelliher & Anderson, 2010). Furthermore, it supports the idea that flexibility is not merely a privilege but a perceived necessity for coping with a dynamic and unpredictable professional environment.

In conclusion, Hypothesis 4 is supported, highlighting the importance of work–life balance as a predictor of positive attitudes towards flexibility and adaptability among Generation Z.

Conclusions

The implications of the relationship between human beings and work can be fully understood only when approached from a multicultural and multi-level perspective. The First Industrial Revolution profoundly disrupted the agrarian age. Human beings were

bound to the land, their existence firmly rooted in agriculture. Entrenched in a relationship of dependency on agricultural labor, individuals often lived their entire lives in the very place where they had been born and worked. Against this backdrop, a deeply rooted rural mentality took shape, fostering strong attachments to local communities and places of origin. The Second Industrial Revolution was triggered by remarkable discoveries involving new sources of energy. Among other developments, investments in electricity and machinery facilitated advances in the automotive, electrical engineering and chemical industries, among others (Belea, 2025a, pp. 58-59). Although slowed by the consequences of the First World War, the emerging labor relations brought about imbalances in the psychological make-up of individuals at the time and gave rise to what was then a rather unusual appetite for films, theatrical performances, novels, self-help books and literature, as well as for mysticism and romantic pursuits.

Technological developments following the Second World War, particularly in the fields of machine tools and manufacturing process automation, and, above all, in microelectronics and computing, paved the way for the Third Industrial Revolution. Known as the Digital Revolution, this period is characterized by the widespread adoption of electronics, computers and automation across industry. It brought about major advances in transportation and communications, ultimately culminating in the emergence of the Internet.

The Artificial Intelligence Revolution represents the Fourth Industrial Revolution in the history of humankind. In this new era, human beings create new tools, while these very tools, in turn, shape human beings. Our present is marked by paradoxes. An information bomb has exploded around us, unleashing a torrent of images and radically transforming the way each of us perceives our own universe and interacts with it. Throughout this revolutionary transition, our very psyche is also being reshaped. These images do not emerge from nowhere. They are formed, in ways we do not fully understand, from the signals and information we receive from our surrounding environment. Generation Z, shaped by this retrospective perspective and its lasting echoes within the present socio-cultural context, finds itself at the centre of these dynamics. The analysis leads to the following conclusions:

Hypothesis 1. The results support the hypothesis that Generation Z perceives automation as a threat to job security. The significant negative correlation between threat perception scores and attitudes towards automation reflects a genuine tension between interest in innovation and the fear of professional instability. This finding indicates an increased perceptual vulnerability in response to rapid technological changes, driven by labor market uncertainty and the lack of clear guarantees regarding future employment security. Against the backdrop of this historical retrospective, with its far-reaching echoes, Generation Z emerges as a particularly fortunate—or perhaps overly privileged—generation within the contemporary socio-cultural context. The analysis yields the following conclusions: The findings support the hypothesis that young people belonging to Generation Z perceive automation as a threat to job security. The statistically significant negative correlation between perceived threat scores and attitudes towards automation reflects a genuine tension between an interest in innovation and the fear of professional instability. This finding points to increased perceptual vulnerability in response to rapid technological change, a vulnerability rooted in labor market uncertainty and the lack of clear guarantees regarding future employment prospects.

Hypothesis 2. The hypothesis that the level of awareness of the technological revolution is correlated with anxiety about future career prospects was not statistically confirmed. Although, in theory, greater awareness could contribute to reducing anxiety, the findings suggest that simply being informed about ongoing changes is insufficient to alleviate feelings of uncertainty. This may indicate that, in the absence of clear support

strategies, increased awareness can sometimes intensify feelings of helplessness rather than foster a sense of control over one's professional future.

Hypothesis 3. The hypothesis concerning the influence of non-material values on perceptions of work was supported by the positive correlation between the non-material values dimension and preferences regarding work–life balance, flexibility and personal fulfilment. Young people place increasing importance on subjective and qualitative factors when defining career success, reflecting a conceptual shift in comparison with previous generations, which placed greater emphasis on economic stability. Thus, Generation Z tends to redefine work in terms of authenticity, freedom and quality of life.

Hypothesis 4. The findings confirmed the hypothesis that the perceived harmony between professional and personal life is associated with favorable attitudes towards professional flexibility and adaptability. All four dimensions of the SWING scale showed significant correlations with the composite score measuring work flexibility. This relationship highlights the fact that a good work–life balance is perceived not merely as the outcome of a favorable environment, but also as a proactive attitude associated with a willingness to learn, reinvent oneself professionally and embrace more flexible working arrangements.

General Conclusions

Overall, the research highlights a generation at a critical turning point, caught between adaptability and uncertainty, between the pursuit of meaning and the realities of an ever-changing labor market. Young people belonging to Generation Z demonstrate both openness towards technological developments and a heightened degree of emotional vulnerability in the face of this transformation (Belea, 2025b, pp. 25-36). They build their relationship with work around personal values, while simultaneously expressing concerns about the instability brought about by automation and accelerated digitalization.

From a legal perspective, these findings highlight the need to rethink labor legislation in light of emerging realities. Increasingly pressing questions arise regarding accountability for algorithmic decision-making in recruitment and management processes, as well as the right to professional retraining. Furthermore, platform work (the gig economy), which often lacks adequate social protection and stable contractual arrangements, raises concerns about equity and equal access to fundamental rights. In this regard, the research makes an important contribution to identifying genuine regulatory needs and the need for a legal framework adapted to the digital context, in accordance with the values and priorities of Generation Z.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

The present study has several relevant methodological limitations. First, the sample, consisting of 54 participants, is relatively small and non-probabilistic, which limits the extent to which the findings can be generalised. Furthermore, the use of self-administered questionnaires may be subject to social desirability bias. In addition, the cross-sectional nature of the data prevents the formulation of causal conclusions.

For future research, it is recommended that the sample be expanded to a national level and that mixed-methods approaches (quantitative and qualitative) be employed to explore in greater depth the motivations underlying the measured attitudes. A comparative analysis across different generations would also be valuable, as would an investigation into the extent to which existing legal regulations address the realities of digitalised work and the specific needs and expectations of Generation Z.

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