

# Dignity in Gainful Employment: A Young Employee's Perspective. A Pilot Study

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## Abstract

*Each generation has its own experiences of paid work and its dignity. The aim of this article is to identify the opinions of representatives of generation Z on the tangible and intangible values related to dignity in paid work from the point of view of a young employee—a working student. This objective was achieved by literature review and a pilot study among a purposefully selected group of management students at the Faculty of Management and Quality Sciences of the Gdynia Maritime University. The study used an auditory survey as a data collection method. The respondents, who are representatives of Generation Z, look for more than just material values in work (a decent salary adequate to the hardship incurred). According to them, work is also a source of intangible values (personal development, mutual respect, meaning, work-life balance). Thanks to such a composition of values obtained through paid work, this work acquires the dimension of dignified work.*

**Keywords:** paid work, dignity in paid work, work ethics, Generation Z

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## Introduction

Human work is a universal value<sup>1</sup> (Haarjärvi and Laari-Salmela 2022, 421; Winchenbach, Hanna, and Miller 2019, 1030). It is an inalienable condition of human existence and its meaning, determining man's status in society (Fontrodona and Melé 2022, 181; Mariański 2017; Wysocka 2011). Work has accompanied man since the beginning of civilization. At first, it provided him with the possibility of survival, and when man began to learn to work, it became a purposeful activity related to his development (Orczyk 2007). It became paid (professional) work and a basic human need (Polańska 2007), through which man satisfies his other needs and aspirations, improves himself, and contributes to the development of organizations (Cierniak-Emerych 2012, 7–8) and society (Mariański 2017).

Human labor is not a commodity (Liszczyk 2016)<sup>2</sup> because “it cannot be freely produced and reproduced, nor can it be used like any other commodity” (Juchnowicz 1993, 4). Work is a human good (Polańska 1995), it shapes the quality of life (Wysocka 2011), determines man's place in

1. Value is everything that is valuable (good in some respect) and is the goal of human endeavor: truth, goodness, beauty, and holiness (based on: Podsiad 2000, 920–921; Sobol 2002, s.v. “wartość”). The strength of values consists in their building in a person the conviction of who they actually are, what they are (or are not) capable of, what reality they create around them, what is the core of their thoughts, motives and choices in their lives and work (Kowalczyk-Kroenke 2022, 247).

2. See also: Declaration concerning the aims and purposes of the International Labour Organisation, (Philadelphia Declaration), International Labour Conference, Record of Proceedings, 26th Session, Philadelphia, (Montreal), pages 621–623, available at [https://www.ilo.org/public/libdoc/ilo/1944/44B09\\_10\\_e\\_f.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/public/libdoc/ilo/1944/44B09_10_e_f.pdf).

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the world of values, and leads to social integration and the well-being of society (Haarjärvi and Laari-Salmela 2022, 419; Mariański 2017). Therefore, it should be dignified. “Man desires the kind of work that is fruitful, meaningful, and fairly paid. This also the kind of work in which he is not exposed to loss of health or good name, and in which he can undertake creative activity. He desires to be a respected subject” (Polańska 2007, 128; see also Fontrodona and Melé 2022).

Each generation has its own experiences of paid work and its dignity. These issues are perceived differently by people born in the second half of the 20th century (during the systemic changes in Poland and in the difficult times afterwards) and differently by Generation Z. This generation comprises people brought up in an affluent society who take material values for granted (work comes only in seventh place in their hierarchy). They attach greater importance to non-material values (e.g., family, love, health, personal development, peace and harmony) (Kukla and Nowacka 2019).

Hence, the aim of this article is to identify the opinions of representatives of Generation Z on the tangible and intangible values that make up dignity in gainful employment from the point of view of a working student. This objective was achieved by means of a pilot study among a purposefully selected group of young employees—working management students at the Faculty of Management and Quality Sciences at Gdynia Maritime University. The study used an auditory survey as the data collection method and a questionnaire as the measurement tool. The results and conclusions of the study are presented in the following section.

## 1 Literature review

In order to determine the state of knowledge about the dignity of gainful employment in the opinion of young workers—i.e., representatives of Generation Z, a systematic literature review<sup>3</sup> was conducted using the Web of Science Core Collection database and the Scopus database. The phrase “dignity in gainful employment” was used first. No articles relating to this issue were found in either database. Therefore, the next round of the review began with the phrases “dignity at work,” “Z generation,” and “young employee.” Again, no hits were obtained. Therefore, the next round again used the phrase “dignity at work,” entered in the “article title, abstract, author keywords” field, and the filters “years,” “subject area: business, management and accounting,” “journal articles,” “English”, and “open access.” The results obtained for both databases are presented in table 1.

The analysis of the received articles indicated what issues related to dignity in gainful employment were addressed in them.

Nikolaeva and Dello Russo (2017) found that physical environment (office structure and layout, office decor and ergonomic aspects of design) as an aspect affecting dignity at work is grossly overlooked in the literature. Proper shaping of these elements can positively affect employees’ physical and mental well-being, job satisfaction, team cohesion, and productivity. Even so, employees are almost never asked about their preferences in this regard, and the need for different solutions for different types of employees and their work contexts is not recognized, even when office infrastructure and office buildings generate high costs for organizations.

**Table 1.** Results of the systematic literature review search

Criteria	Scopus	Web of Science Core Collection
Years	(2007–2023) 69	(2004–2023) 65
Subject area: business; management and accounting; management; business	30	15
Articles in journals	17	40
English language	17	15
Open access	5	6

3. It is “a form of research that deals with existing publications and uses a systematic methodology to synthesize already published data.” It helps to identify the scientific gap and define the research problem, objectives or research hypotheses (Lenart-Gansiniec 2021, 43–47).

Lucas (2015) surveyed adult employees in order to explore their personal subjective experiences and understanding of dignity at work. She found that the respondents affirmed or rejected the presence of dignity in their workplace by evaluating the following elements: inherent dignity recognized by respectful interactions, earned dignity recognized by messages of competence and contribution, and repaired dignity recognized by social interactions and organizational practices that conceal the instrumental and unequal nature of work. The theoretical analysis of the interrelationship of these elements showed that dignity in the workplace is something different from human dignity.

The authors of other articles studied the experience of dignity at work and its limitations among employees from different professional groups. Shaffer, Álvarez, and Stievano (Shaffer, Álvarez, and Stievano 2022) analyzed the devastating effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on ethical recruitment and respect for dignity in the work of nurses and health workers. They concluded that in order to ensure that the dignity of every nurse is respected and to prevent their unethical abuse at work, the WHO “Code of Practice on the International Recruitment of Health Personnel” should be introduced immediately.

Winchenbach, Hanna, and Miller (2019) focused on establishing a conceptual grounding for the value of dignity in tourism employment for achieving decent work as part of the sustainable development agenda. The authors critically reviewed the theoretical framework and the incidence (or lack thereof) of dignity in the workplace. They pointed out the key importance of dignity in tourism employment for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. They concluded that it is necessary to undertake further empirical research and refer directly to the experience of employees in the tourism industry.

In turn, Nimri, Kensbock, Bailey, Jennings, and Patiar (2020), drawing on a qualitative study conducted among hotel room attendants in five-star hotels in Australia, presented the difficulties of these workers in achieving dignity at work. They found that despite exploitation, marginalization and oppression rooted in working conditions, hotel room attendants achieve dignity at work through personal inclinations, dispositions, capabilities, and attitudes.

Vieno (2023) addressed the dignity of long-term workers in Finland's state-owned postal service experiencing cost-driven organizational restructuring. The author distinguished between everyday dignity, organizational dignity and social dignity, and presented the respondents' efforts to maintain their dignity under the threat of occupational devaluation caused by restructuring. He showed that this restructuring destabilized the previous historically shaped configuration of work in the public service, including employer organization, employment relations, and occupational values. It created a clear disconnect between dignity in daily work and the experienced organizational indignities resulting from restructuring. To prevent threats to dignity at work generated by long-term restructuring processes, organizational support is essential.

A study by Thompson and Newsome (2016) concerned low-skilled and low-paid factory migrant workers at the end of supermarket supply chains in the United Kingdom. It showed that a source of dignity and pride for many Polish and other migrant workers is their willingness to work harder or harder than their local counterparts. Cassell and Bishop (2019) studied cab drivers' experiences related to dignity at work. Based on these, they evaluated three separate qualitative data analysis tools, which was the purpose of their study.

As can be seen above, the topic of dignity in gainful employment touches on various issues related to it and various professional groups, but it does not take into account the perception of this issue by young workers entering the labor market. Thus, based on the aforementioned analysis, a scientific gap has been identified in the form of a small number of studies and publications on the perception of dignity in gainful employment by young workers (including working students) belonging to Generation Z.

## 2 Work in human life

Work is a human activity aiming at the production of specific material or cultural goods (Sobol 2002, s.v. “praca”). Kotarbiński states that it is “any combination of actions . . . having the character of overcoming difficulties in order to satisfy someone's essential needs.” He emphasizes the

significance of human labor in social applications (Kotarbiński 1969, 88). He also explains that it is about satisfying the specific needs of the general public through the effects (labor as a result) of specific actions (labor as an activity) (cf. Haarjärvi and Laari-Salmela 2022, 420–421). In other words, work is “a purposeful and meaningful activity, inherent only to man, creating new goods and values, aiming at satisfying various human needs, and having a specific social significance” (Król and Ludwiczynski 2006, 19).

This significance manifests itself, among other things, in the fact that a person, providing their paid work in various organizational and legal forms for the benefit of an organization, contributes to its activities in the form of knowledge, skills, abilities, health, vitality, and commitment (Pocztowski 2018, 33). These contributions form the human capital of the organization. Thanks to it, in turn, the value of the organization and its competitive position in the environment is created (Juchnowicz 2014, 133).

A human being is neither human capital nor, still less, a human resource (Jamka 2011, 150; Pocztowski 2018, 33). Human capital is the potential inherent in man, which consists in the intangible values embodied in him. This potential is put at the disposal of employers, who provide gainful work for their employees. At the same time, through this work, man improves his creative potential and his competencies, and can develop himself (Fontrodona and Melé 2022, 183; Juchnowicz 2007, 14).

Man is a subject in the labor process (Cierniak-Emerych and Gableta 2022, 47–48; Fontrodona and Melé 2022, 181; Mariański 2017, 136; Potasińska 2014, 117; Szaban 2011, 18–19). Work is not a commodity but a human good (Liszczyński 2016, 62–80), “an essential particle of man’s entire life, a vocation and an obligation, a duty and a right, a privilege and a dimension of life” (Polańska 2007, 136–137). It does not only constitute the source of his livelihood. It is a value in man’s life (Gruszczyńska-Malec and Hoffmann 2011), a value and an end in itself (Jacko 2017, 16; Oleksa 2012, 13–24; Zawadzki 2018, 172), and a fundamental human right that is subject to protection (Liszczyński 2016, 62; Świątkowski 2015, 78–87). It is the basis of man’s participation in social life and family life, providing him with a certain social status, determining the level of his consumption, and contributing to his well-being. Through work, a person creates new material and spiritual values and at the same time transforms and improves himself or herself (Gruszczyńska-Malec and Hoffmann 2011).

The meaning of human labor is therefore complex, as its function is both to change material reality and to provide an opportunity for the externalization and formation of human personal qualities (Haarjärvi and Laari-Salmela 2022, 418). For these reasons (and many others as well), work is an inalienable value, thanks to which other values of a material and immaterial nature are created (Wysocka 2011).

The above reflections on the essence and importance of paid work in human life can be summarized by the following set of universal principles of work ethics:

- Work is man’s vocation, need and duty.
- Man is the subject of labor relations. He is neither a slave nor a factor of production. Man’s labor creates capital, but man is not capital.
- Work is a good of man because it allows him to be a creator of goods that people need and enables him to cooperate with other people. Work is a good accompanied by many ailments and tribulations.
- Man is a social being; he has the right to create, belong to and lead organizations of various kinds.
- Man expects a decent income for his work.<sup>4</sup>

Among the values important to man, a special place is given to the moral values of labor dignity (Haarjärvi and Laari-Salmela 2022, 421), labor freedom, and responsibility (Furmanek 2007, 126).

Work in organizations (enterprises) should proceed in such a way as to protect the well-being of individuals, including the dignity of their work, at all costs. Dignity, which depends on the self-esteem of employees and their autonomy in their relationships with others, is based on concern and respect for others (Zawadzki 2018, 173).

4. See: “O etyce nauki społecznej Kościoła” [On the ethics of the Church’s social teaching]. Presented by Aurelia Polańska in 2016, on manuscript rights, pages 8–10.

The dignity of paid work is evidenced by man as the subject of work and his values—values that find their expression in the principles of work ethics and the laws relating to work. These values can also represent the valuable capital that a person brings to an organization (Gruszczyńska-Malec and Hoffmann 2011; Haarjärvi and Laari-Salmela 2022, 421).

### 3 The essence of dignity in human work

Dignity is an enigmatic concept, difficult to grasp. It occupies the attention of psychologists, philosophers, ethicists and representatives of other sciences (Vieno 2023, 18; Zawadzki 2018, 175–176). It is also used in everyday life. Picco della Mirandola wrote about dignity as early as in the 15th century. Koziński (1996, 170–182) distinguishes two of its meanings.

Firstly, dignity is a general human value in the light of which people have inalienable rights (Fontrodona and Melé 2022, 183–184; Winchenbach, Hanna, and Miller 2019, 1028). These rights are defined by the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights enacted in 1948.<sup>5</sup> Articles 23 and 24 state—with emphasis on the normative meaning of dignity—that every human being has the following rights:

- the right to work, to the free choice of work, to adequate and satisfactory working conditions, and to protection from unemployment
- without exception of any kind, the right to equal pay for equal work
- the right to an adequate and satisfactory remuneration providing them and their family with a decent living, which contributes to their dignity, and, in case of need, the right to have this remuneration supplemented by other means of social assistance
- the right to form and join trade unions for the protection of their interests
- the right to rest after work.

Secondly, dignity is a personal characteristic of human character (Koziński 1996, 173), which is inseparable from man's actions (Fontrodona and Melé 2022, 182; Ossowska 2000, 51). According to an encyclopedic definition, dignity is a positive value of a human being (Haarjärvi and Laari-Salmela 2022, 420–421), which should be respected in contact with other people (Wojnowski 2002, s.v. “godność”). In a dictionary definition, dignity is understood as self-esteem that makes a person act according to certain rules, as well as the respect they have for others (Sobol 2002, s.v. “godność”).

In paid work and in interaction with one's colleagues, dignity applies to self-esteem that makes a person act according to certain principles and to the respect they command from others (Haarjärvi and Laari-Salmela 2022, 421; Mackiewicz 2017; Winchenbach, Hanna, and Miller 2019, 1027). These principles are an expression of the tangible and intangible values (distinguishing features of dignity at work) that are important to a person and prompt them to behave in a certain way towards other people and towards themselves. The result is dignified or undignified gainful employment (cf. Winchenbach, Hanna, and Miller 2019, 1029, 1031). The material values that make up decent paid work include remuneration that ensures that a person's needs are met. The intangible values that make up decent paid work include the opportunity to be creative, the meaning and usefulness of work, the atmosphere in the workplace, the opportunity to develop, the enjoyment of work, and others (cf. Winchenbach, Hanna, and Miller 2019, 1029, 1036).

### 4 Generation Z and paid work

A generation is “a group of people shaped by similar or the same life events, experiences, etc.”<sup>6</sup> There is no consensus in the literature as to the age of the people belonging to Generation Z. Some specialists define them as people born in 1990 and later; others claim that they are people born between 1993 and 2012 or even after 1995 or 2000.<sup>7</sup> Representatives of Generation Z have actually

5. See: “Universal Declaration of Human Rights” proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly in Paris on 10 December 1948 (General Assembly resolution 217 A), available at <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>.

6. See: “pokolenie” entry [in Polish—Ed.] at <https://sjp.pwn.pl/slowniki/pokolenie.html> (accessed 2023-03-30).

7. See: “Zawodowy alfabet pokolenia Z, czyli młodzi w pracy” [The professional alphabet of Generation Z—i.e.,



had access to digital technology since birth, which, compared to the Baby Boomers, Generation X, or even Generation Y, indicates the distinctiveness of this generation. Hence, they are sometimes referred to as Digital Natives, the Connected Generation, the Net Generation, or the Multitasking Generation. The vast majority of these people are virtually constantly connected to the Internet (Muster 2020, 133). Familiarity with new technologies, constant presence online, and access to information are undoubtedly competencies with which Generation Z enters the labor market. In addition, contacts with representatives of other cultures (if only thanks to computer games, social media or ERASMUS+ trips) and knowledge of foreign languages make them open to diversity as employees. These characteristics make representatives of Generation Z attractive employees in organizations operating in a dynamically changing environment. Business relationships require not only familiarity with new technologies but also the ability to implement them—something that perhaps comes easily to Generation Z. A company's online presence also provides an opportunity to operate in a global environment. This is where the ability to communicate in different languages, knowledge of social media and universal communication codes, flexibility, and multitasking come in hand (Opalińska 2018).

Research shows that representatives of Generation Z, accustomed to getting what they need very quickly in the virtual world, also have similar expectations in real life. This applies both to acquiring knowledge and building a career. That is why they are also referred to as the “claiming” generation. Unlike in the case of the Baby Boomers or Generation X, expressing one's expectations or dissatisfaction is not a problem for Generation Z. At the same time, this is a generation that is used to and expects to receive feedback. This information does not contribute to their discomfort, as it does for the Baby Boomers (Wiktorowicz and Warwas 2016, 27–33). Rather, it points them in the direction of development. Representatives of Generation Z say of themselves that they are lazy, ambitious, hardworking, determined, motivated, relaxed, bored, and curious about the world (Kukla and Nowacka 2019). Hence, they are considered to be very diverse and even full of contradictions. On the one hand, they are confident; on the other hand, they are full of fears about the future—not only their own future but also that of other people and the planet. Referred to as the “we” generation, they are more socially oriented than older generations. Zetas attach great importance to corporate social responsibility, ecology, human rights, etc. Values such as fairness and non-discrimination are more important to them than money and social status. They also transfer the values that guide them in their personal lives to their professional lives (Czyczerska, Ławnik, and Szlenk-Czyczerska 2020).

Representatives of Generation Z, when asked about the values that are important in their lives, mention work only in seventh place (after such values as family, love, health, personal development, moral values, including justice, goodness and nobleness, inner peace, and harmony). “Such results confirm numerous theses appearing in the literature that indicate that Generation Z, as people raised in a welfare society, value intangible values more highly. They take material values for granted” (Kukla and Nowacka 2019, 129). At work, however, they are focused on success and on a fast and dynamic career. They want to work in comfortable conditions and gain knowledge from experienced employees, develop their skills, realize their ambitions, and reach a balance between their private lives and work.<sup>8</sup> Relationships in a team of employees, flexible working hours and job security are important to them. Values related to work bring Generation Z closer to representatives of Generation Y (Mazur-Wierzbicka 2016, 171). Both of these generations value work-life balance. In addition, representatives of Generation Y expect work to be their passion, want to develop themselves, and value challenges. On the other hand, for Generation X, such values as personal development, independence, diversity, and diligence are important at work (Wiktorowicz et al. 2016, 130–144). For Generation X and the Baby Boomers, work is an autotelic value, being the purpose of their lives, while for representatives of Generation Z and Generation Y, it is a path to personal development and improving the quality of their lives, also outside of work (Kowalczyk-Kroenke 2022, 244–248).

young people at work]. Report published by Atemira HR, available at <https://www.aterima.hr/raport-pokolenie-z>.

8. See: “Pokolenie Z — czego oczekuje na rynku pracy?” [Generation Z — what do they expect on the labor market?]. Lat updated 2023-03-15, <https://porady.pracuj.pl/kariera-i-rozwoj/jak-chca-pracowac-i-awansowac-przedstawicieli-pokolenia-z/> (accessed 2023-06-15).

The peculiarity of Generation Z, especially in the context of transferring its professed values to the professional sphere, makes this group interesting also in terms of the subject matter of this article. The questions concerning Generation Z's understanding of the dignity of gainful employment, its distinguishing features, and the importance of dignified gainful employment may be of research interest.

## 5 Research methodology

The aim of the study is to verify the universal principles of work ethics held by representatives of Generation Z and to identify opinions on the tangible and intangible values related to dignity in gainful employment from the point of view of young employees—working students. The study has a pilot character. It was conducted among a purposefully selected group of students in the management course of the Master's Supplementary Studies at the Faculty of Management and Quality Sciences at the Gdynia Maritime University.

At the design stage, conceptualization was used to define the research problem, the selection of people for the study was determined, an auditory survey was selected as the data collection method, and a questionnaire was developed as the measurement tool. Closed-ended questions were used in the questionnaire in order to identify the universal principles of work ethics, manifestations of dignified and undignified treatment of employees, and types of motivation in the workplace. The purpose of this was to pinpoint the distinguishing features of dignity at work to which the respondents attached importance in their workplace. The questionnaire also included metric questions regarding sex, specialization, mode of study (full-time, part-time), and work experience. The respondents were also given an opportunity to answer an open-ended question on what, in their opinion, dignity in paid work is. The close-ended questions used a nominal, one-dimensional scale to measure attitudes (rank scale, comparative summed rating scale). The choice of the measurement scale used in the close-ended and open-ended questions determined the choice of data reduction and analysis methods. The study presented the data in tables and used frequency ratios as well as dominance and arithmetic means as descriptive statistics methods in the data analysis stage. The results were then interpreted and conclusions were drawn. It should be mentioned that, due to the pilot quality of the study, the results and conclusions are only applicable to the study population.

The survey was conducted in February and March 2023, with a total of 58 students with paid work experience taking part in it. 90% of the respondents were part-time students and 10% of them worked full-time). 72% were female and 28% were male. 88% worked in the private sector and 12% worked in the public sector. Moreover, 83% of the students who took part in the survey felt they were treated with dignity in their workplace, 14% felt they were treated with little respect, and 3% did not answer.

## 6 Results of the empirical study

### 6.1 Universal principles of work ethics as perceived by the respondents

The respondents were asked to evaluate statements regarding universal work ethics<sup>9</sup> (table 2 on next page). It can be seen from the above results that the respondents confirm the validity of most of the analyzed statements regarding work ethics. In particular, they emphasize the importance of the following:

- Every person has the right to work (YES, 98%).
- A person has the right to remuneration that provides them and their family with a decent living, which contributes to their dignity (YES, 95%).
- Man has the right to equal work for equal pay (YES, 90%).

The respondents are least likely to agree with the statement that every person has a duty to work (NO, 67%).

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9. See: "O etyce nauki społecznej Kościoła," op. cit.

**Table 2.** Respondents' responses on issues relating to the universal principles of work ethics—most indications YES / NO / I DON'T KNOW—number of answers and percentage

Content of the statement	Answer (n)	%
Every person has the right to work.	YES (57)	98
Every person has a duty to work.	NO (39)	67
Man is capital.	YES (40)	69
Man creates capital.	YES (50)	86
A person has the right to equal work for equal pay.	YES (52)	90
A person has the right to remuneration that provides them and their family with a decent living, which contributes to their dignity.	YES (55)	95
A person has the right to associate to protect their interests at work.	YES (48)	83
Work is an asset for man because it allows him to be a creator of assets that people need.	YES (50)	86
Work is an asset to a person when they work with other people.	YES (36)	62

## 6.2 Respondents' views on work and dignity in paid work

Tables 3 and 4 present the results of the respondents' assessment of the situations that are most indicative of undignified (table 3) and dignified (table 4) treatment of employees in the workplace. Thus, it is possible to identify the distinguishing features of dignified gainful employment from the perspective of the respondents— young employees.

As can be seen from table 3, the following situations were cited by the respondents as ones where undignified treatment of employees in the workplace was manifested to the highest degree: lack of respect for employees (64%); no decent remuneration for work (64% each); discrimination in terms of sex, age, and others (60%); and publicly pointing out employees' mistakes (43%).

The respondents most frequently indicated the following situations as manifestations of the highest degree of decent treatment of employees in the workplace: employees being fairly rewarded (72%); employees being treated with respect by their superiors, superiors caring about profit without losing sight of their employees (52% each); a friendly atmosphere and respecting the work-life balance (38% each).

The respondents were asked to give a list of distinguishing features to which employees might attach importance in gainful employment. For this purpose, a simple scale was used to measure attitudes, starting with the most important distinguishing features (6 points) and finishing with the least important ones (1 point). The answers given by the respondents are presented in table 5. The respondents were also asked to identify the factors that motivated them to make an effort in gainful employment (table 6).

**Table 3.** Situations that are manifestations of undignified treatment of employees in the workplace

Content of the statement	n	% <sup>a</sup>
Lack of respect for employees	37	64
Overloading some workers with tasks and underloading others	8	14
Publicly pointing out employees' mistakes	25	43
Failing to give recognition for a well-done job	3	5
Sex, age, etc. discrimination	35	60
Failure to maintain work-life balance (overtime)	7	12
When a job is eliminated because of new technology/artificial intelligence (AI)	1	2
When profit is of paramount importance and employees are of secondary importance	20	34
When there is no decent remuneration for work	37	64

<sup>a</sup>More than 1 answer could be given to the question.



**Table 4.** Situations that are most indicative of decent paid work in the workplace

Content of the statement	n	% <sup>a</sup>
When employees are proud of their company and say “my boss” and “my company.”	12	21
When the work is meaningful.	11	20
When the work is useful.	3	5
When there is a friendly atmosphere.	22	38
When employees are treated with respect by their superiors.	30	52
When the work-life balance is respected.	22	38
When employees are fairly rewarded.	42	72
When there is an employment contract.	2	3
When superiors care about profit without losing sight of their employees.	30	52

<sup>a</sup>More than 1 answer could be given to the question.

**Table 5.** Levels of importance given by survey respondents to individual job characteristics

Distinguishing features of the work	Number of valid responses	No data available	Average importance rating
Remuneration	58	0	5.2241
Personal development	58	0	4.7241
Work in a company with a strong market position	58	0	2.5345
Stability resulting from an employment contract	58	0	3.2241
The atmosphere at work	58	0	3.9655
Other	12	46	2.5833
		Mean	3.7092

**Table 6.** The “mottos” that guide the respondents in their assessment of dignity in paid work

Statements	Frequency of indications (number)	Percentage breakdown <sup>a</sup>
I do what I value.	4	7
I want to make a living.	6	10
My work has meaning.	14	24
My work gives me joy.	18	31
I can earn a lot of money here	24	41
I develop myself	27	47

<sup>a</sup>More than 1 answer could be given to the question.

Analyzing the above results, it should be noted that the overall assessment of the importance of the distinguishing features of gainful employment ranks at an average level: 3.71 points on a 6-point scale. The respondents gave the highest ratings to such distinguishing features of gainful employment as remuneration (5.22 points), personal development (4.72 points), and the atmosphere at work (3.97 points). On the other hand, in the opinion of the respondents, the following factors were of least importance as far as dignity in gainful employment is concerned: work in a company that has a position in the market (2.53 points), “other distinguishing features,” such as benefits, flexible working hours, and quick promotion prospects (2.58 points), and stability resulting from the employment contract (3.22 points) (see table 5).

Respondents were also asked to identify the motto that motivated them to make an effort in gainful employment (table 6). When analyzing the frequency of the respondents’ indications of the mottos that guided them in their efforts in gainful employment, it was noted that they were most

often expressed in the following statements: I develop myself (47%); I can earn a lot of money here (41%); my work gives me joy (31%); my work makes sense (24%).

## Conclusion and discussion

According to the pilot survey, what young workers who are representatives of Generation Z and working GMU students value most about paid work is that it is a human right, an asset, and a meaningful activity through which they can be creators of goods and capital for society, thus improving themselves and the organization. This conclusion confirms the findings presented in the article (Haarjärvi and Laari-Salmela 2022, 419; Liszcz 2016, 62; Polańska 2007; Świątkowski 2015; Wysocka 2011). Human labor is a value in itself (Kowalczyk-Kroenke 2022; Zawadzki 2018). It gives every person an opportunity to satisfy their needs and to pursue their passions, in this way contributing to their personal development and the development of society (Cierniak-Emerych 2012, 7–8; Haarjärvi and Laari-Salmela 2022, 419; Mariański 2017, 129–135).

At the same time, paid work is also a need and a necessity for man, being an essential aspect of his existence (Polańska 2007, 128–130). This is primarily due to the material value of labor. However, reducing paid work only to its material dimension does not reflect its nature. Such an understanding of work can only make it hard and toilsome (Polańska 2007; also: Winchenbach, Hanna, and Miller 2019, 1029, 1036). The cited survey results and people's experiences indicate that in gainful employment, in addition to material values, people find something more. They find the meaning of this work. Meaningful work can be a source of joy and give those who perform it a sense of fulfilment and agency. Through work, a person can feel creative and can experience development (Haarjärvi and Laari-Salmela 2022, 421). In gainful employment, people can find recognition from their superiors or co-workers (Kowalczyk-Kroenke 2022, 249–251). However, this is not always the case (Lucas 2015, 624–626). Work is so important to a person that it becomes part of them, so they need to be treated as subjects (Cierniak-Emerych and Gableta 2022, 47–48; Mariański 2017, 129; Potasińska 2014, 117–118). For Generation Z, the important values in life are family, love, health, personal development, peace, and harmony. In this hierarchy, the salary is only in seventh place (Kukla and Nowacka 2019). This is confirmed by the results of the survey conducted. The respondents, who are representatives of Generation Z, look for more than just material values in work (a decent salary adequate to the hardship incurred). According to them, work is also a source of intangible values, such as personal development, mutual respect, meaning, and work-life balance (Haarjärvi and Laari-Salmela 2022, 419–421). Thanks to such a composition of values obtained through paid work, this work acquires the dimension of dignified work.

In addition to dignity in paid work understood primarily as a decent remuneration for work, the respondents recognize the need for development, creativity, and a good working atmosphere (Haarjärvi and Laari-Salmela 2022, 421). This indicates a subjective understanding of work. In addition, the results of the study are also important: 86% of the respondents answered that man creates capital, and 69% that man is capital. This means that most of the respondents correctly interpret the human capital of the organization. They know that man is not capital but creates it for the benefit of the organization and society (Juchnowicz 2014, 133; Król and Ludwiciński 2006, 16).

Man is not only *homo oeconomicus*. The surveyed students are motivated not only by remuneration but also, to a large extent, by personal development and other non-material values of work. This underscores the results of other studies presented in the literature. These studies show that for the younger generation, gainful employment is only a means to an end (personal development, better living standards) rather than the goal of their lives, as in the case of Baby Boomers or Generation X (Kowalczyk-Kroenke 2022, 246).

It is also worth noting the aspects of work indicated by the respondents that do not correspond to decent work. These are primarily the lack of decent pay and respect for employees as well as manifestations of discrimination (cf. Winchenbach, Hanna, and Miller 2019, 1028–1029). It is especially the last aspect, highlighted by the respondents as a negation of decent work, that requires further research, according to the authors.

One limitation of the conducted study is its pilot nature, which results in the impossibility of making broad conclusions. For this reason, there is a need for further scientific inquiry into the meaning of work and dignity in gainful employment for the younger generation of workers. They will soon be a leading force in the labor market (Kowalczyk-Kroenke 2022; Mazur-Wierzbicka 2016)—a force for whom gainful employment is only one of the values that are important in life (along with family, work-life balance, the need for self-development, a sense of security and harmony, mutual respect, and partnership in professional relationships (Kukla and Nowacka 2019; cf. Winchenbach, Hanna, and Miller 2019, 1028–1029). Therefore, employers should learn about the preferences, needs and expectations of their young employees, skillfully build relationships, establish rules of cooperation with them (Opalińska 2018), and use their strengths, such as their knowledge of foreign languages and new technologies, online presence, quick access to information, and openness to diversity and other cultures (Muster 2020). It is important that employers do not just complain about the different value system of young employees but recognize the positive aspects associated with the generational diversity of employee teams, so that they treat them in terms of a natural stage of development rather than sudden and radical changes. Employers (managers) should take such measures and manage their employees in such a way that they use the potential and attributes of each generation for the business success of the company (Mazur-Wierzbicka 2016, 171).

At the same time, they should keep in mind what is important for today's workers, especially Generation Z, i.e. work-family balance, personal development, and dignity in gainful employment, including decent remuneration, mutual respect and the atmosphere at work (cf. Haarjärvi and Laari-Salmela 2022, 422–423).

Further in-depth research into the changing preferences of the young generations of paid labor is necessary so that the resulting conclusions and recommendations can effectively serve economic practice. Openness to the values of the young generations of workers is an opportunity to build the competitiveness of organizations by creating workplaces whose idea of operation and way of functioning, as well as goods and services provided, will be close to the values that are particularly relevant to these people and their perception of dignity in gainful employment (Moczydłowska 2020). The research undertaken by the authors, although pilot in nature, has identified an important scientific gap in the form of the lack of studies and research on dignity in the paid work of young workers. The authors have thus contributed to the development of management and quality sciences. They have provided preliminary conclusions and guidance on the direction of further research on dignity in gainful employment of Generation Z workers, who are closely related to the problems of the modern world. The authors have also developed recommendations for business practitioners on how to realize the potential of Generation Z in terms of its perception of dignity in gainful employment in organizations operating in a knowledge-based economy subject to significant demographic, civilizational, technological, and cultural changes (cf. Fontrodona and Melé 2022, 184).

The research problem signaled in the study, which results from the identified scientific gap, requires further in-depth literature studies and representative empirical research. The lack of such research undertaken by Polish representatives of management and quality sciences is pointed out, among others, by Zawadzki (2018, 171). Therefore, in the future, the authors plan to address the issue of dignity in gainful employment in a more detailed way.

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## Appendix

### Questionnaire

1. In the table below, please write an “x” in the cell that most closely corresponds to your opinion regarding the statement analyzed:

Content of the statement	I agree	I disagree	I don't have an opinion
Every person has the right to work.			
Every person has a duty to work.			
Man is capital.			
Man creates capital.			
A person has the right to equal work for equal pay.			
A person has the right to remuneration that provides them and their family with a decent living, which contributes to their dignity.			
A person has the right to associate to protect their interests at work.			
Work is an asset for man because it allows him to be a creator of assets that people need.			
Work is an asset to a person when they work with other people.			
Other statements (please, specify which).			

2. What does decent gainful employment mean to you? Please, answer in any of the following ways (text, drawing, symbol, metaphor, association or other).

.....

.....

3. From the following situations, please choose those which, in your opinion, manifest **the highest degree** of undignified treatment of an employee in the workplace. **You can choose three answers:**

- ☐ lack of respect for employees (e.g., notifying them of the dismissal by email and preventing them from entering the office/company)
- ☐ overloading some workers with tasks and underloading others
- ☐ publicly pointing out employees' mistakes
- ☐ failing to give recognition for a well-done job
- ☐ sex, age, etc. discrimination
- ☐ failure to maintain work-life balance (overtime)
- ☐ when a job is eliminated because of new technology/artificial intelligence (AI)
- ☐ when profit is of paramount importance and employees are of secondary importance
- ☐ when there is no decent remuneration for work
- ☐ other situations (please, specify which) .....

4. Which of the following statements, in your opinion, manifests **the highest degree of dignified** gainful employment in the workplace? You can choose **up to three answers:**

- ☐ when employees are proud of their company and say “my boss” and “my company”
- ☐ when the work is meaningful
- ☐ when the work is useful
- ☐ when there is a friendly atmosphere
- ☐ when employees are treated with respect by their superiors
- ☐ when the work-life balance is respected
- ☐ when employees are fairly rewarded
- ☐ when there is an employment contract
- ☐ when supervisors care about profit without losing sight of their employees
- ☐ other statements (please specify which?) .....

5. What is your work experience?
- ☐ I work for a living in the private sector.
  - ☐ I work for a living in the public sector.
  - ☐ I work on a casual basis.
  - ☐ If you have no experience in gainful employment, please go to question 7.
6. How do you feel you are treated at your place of gainful employment:
- ☐ with dignity
  - ☐ unworthily
7. Please divide 100 points between the following pair of values, according to importance:  
paid work ( . . . . . ) + personal life ( . . . . . ) = 100
8. Here is a list of distinguishing features to which you may attach more or less importance. Please, enter into the boxes of the scale from 1 to 6 the letter symbols corresponding to each of the distinguishing features in such a way that the one that is of greatest value to you is in the first box, the second most important distinguishing feature is in the second box, and so on.
- A — remuneration  
B — personal development  
C — work in a company with a strong market position  
D — stability resulting from an employment contract  
E — the atmosphere at work  
F — other distinguishing features (please specify which?) . . . . .
- |   |   |   |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
9. Which of the following statements could be your motto for making efforts at work:
- ☐ I do what I value.
  - ☐ I want to make a living.
  - ☐ My work has meaning.
  - ☐ My work gives me joy.
  - ☐ I can earn a lot of money here.
  - ☐ I develop myself.
  - ☐ Other statements (please specify which?) . . . . .
10. Please indicate your gender:
- ☐ female
  - ☐ male
11. Please enter the course you are attending  
. . . . .

Thank you very much for completing the questionnaire,

Hanna Mackiewicz, Ph.D; Edyta Spodarczyk, Ph.D; Katarzyna Szelągowska-Rudzka, Ph.D

## Reliability and accuracy of the measurement tool

### Reliability of measurement

The selection of subjects for the study was nonrandom. The survey was conducted on a purposively selected group of students. It covered part-time students of Gdynia Maritime University with experience of gainful employment. An auditory survey method was used. The study had a pilot character.

### Accuracy of the measurement tool

The structure of the survey and the questions included in it are responsible for the accuracy of the measurement instrument. A formula of closed- and open-ended questions with metric questions was used.

In order to determine attitudes towards universal ethical principles in relation to dignity in gainful employment, students were asked to evaluate a set of statements. The respondents rated them according to a nominal alternative scale with a bipartite classification (“I agree” and “I disagree”) with the option of choosing the answer “I have no opinion.”

- In the questionnaire, students were asked to select the situations that manifested the highest degree of dignified and undignified treatment of an employee in the workplace. For this purpose, two questions on a nominal non-alternative scale with a multidivisional classification were used. Care was taken to ensure that the classification was comprehensive and disjunctive. The possibility of recording other respondents’ answers in open-ended form was also added.
- To assess the filter through which the respondents spoke in the questionnaire, they were asked to rate the importance of gainful employment using a comparative summed rating scale paired with their personal lives. It was also important for the respondents to indicate their feelings about whether they were treated with dignity in their place of gainful employment.
- The questionnaire included metric questions characterizing the respondents in terms of gender, the specialty studied, and work experience.

The responses to the following three questions provided insight into the importance of dignity in gainful employment according to the respondents:

- The open-ended question about the dignity of gainful employment;
- The question about the distinguishing features to which the respondents attach more or less importance (the scaling of responses using a rank scale was used);
- The question about the motto guiding the respondents in their efforts at work. It provides insight into the importance of dignity in gainful employment in the opinion of the respondents (questions on a nominal non-alternative scale with multidivisional classification were used).