ADAPTING LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT FOR SMES IN THE ERA OF REMOTE WORK FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF GENERATION Z: MODERN APPROACHES AND CHALLENGES

Judit TÖRÖK-KMOSKÓ[1], Krisztina DAJNOKI[2]

[1]*PhD student, University of Debrecen, Faculty of Economics and Business, Károly Ihrig Doctoral School of Management and Business, Debrecen, Hungary*
[2]*University Professor, University of Debrecen, Faculty of Economics and Business, Debrecen, Hungary*
judit@kmosko.eu
dajnoki.krisztina@econ.unideb.hu

Abstract
This study investigates the impact of remote work on leadership development within small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), particularly examining how the expectations and skills of Generation Z play a role. The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the adoption of remote work, underscoring the urgent need to address the unique challenges faced by SMEs through targeted leadership training programs. Effectively addressing these challenges requires a nuanced understanding of Generation Z's perspective, which is essential for devising strategies that align with the dynamics of remote work. The widespread use of digital tools has revolutionized communication and management practices, presenting both opportunities and challenges for leaders, especially when catering to the preferences of Generation Z. Online training emerges as a cornerstone for nurturing effective leadership in virtual environments, offering flexibility and accessibility that resonate with the digital-native Generation Z. Generation Z's values, including efficiency, supportive leadership, and work-life balance, significantly shape their expectations of leadership roles within SMEs. Through a comprehensive analysis of empirical data and practical insights, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how leadership development initiatives can evolve in response to changing work paradigms. A case study illustrating an SME's successful adaptation of leadership development to remote work offers valuable lessons and actionable insights for similar organizations. Recommendations underscore the importance of innovative, inclusive, and flexible program designs tailored specifically to the needs and demographics of SMEs. In conclusion, this study offers valuable insights into the evolving landscape of online leadership development programs, with the overarching goal of empowering SMEs to thrive in tomorrow's workplace.

Keywords: remote work; SMEs; Generation Z; leadership development; talent management; online training

Introduction

In 2020, the global economy and employment patterns were profoundly influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic. (Carillo et al., 2020) As a result, numerous sectors witnessed a compulsory shift towards remote work arrangements (Ónodi - Holló, 2020) and its impact has been more deleterious for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). SMEs often lack organizational capability and, thus, experience a higher risk in pursuit of innovation. (Demirkan et al., 2022) With the advent of flexible employment arrangements, SMEs are facing the demand for novel leadership models and skills, calling for the exploration of new training opportunities to facilitate understanding and adaptation. SMEs constitute the backbone of the EU economy, not only in terms of number of enterprises and contribution to employment and GDP (over 60% of the business economy's GDP is produced in SMEs) but

also as a key source of innovation, creativity, and flexibility. Demirkan proposes that there is a positive causal link between employee training and SME innovation, therefore, the SME development is crucial and to a large extent determines the development of the EU economy in general. (Panteia research, 2023) The ageing workforce is even more evident in some industries and occupations. Planning now to deal with this ageing workforce is a key role of leaders. (McCrindle - Fell, 2019) Recognizing the distinctive challenges that SMEs encounter underscores the importance of identifying and addressing these issues in leadership development initiatives. Moreover, understanding the perspectives of Generation Z is paramount for crafting effective strategies that resonate with the demands of remote work.

Telecommuting can have a positive impact on the work-life balance, increases job autonomy, means flexible working hours, reduces or eliminates the commuting time, reduces environmental costs. (Ónodi - Holló, 2020, Martin et al., 2022)) The convergence of digital and telecommunications innovations has enabled work to be performed without the need for physical presence across various domains, leading to the widespread adoption of remote work due to the pandemic. While employers have recognized advantages such as cost savings **(**Venkatesh - Speier, 2000), challenges persist in ensuring effective communication and implementing suitable leadership models. Conversely, Generation Z employees value benefits such as work-life balance and possess advanced digital skills conducive to remote work. (Martin et al., 2022, Gabrielova - Buchko, 2021, Seemiller - Grace, 2017, McCrindle - Fell, 2019)

An illustrative case exemplifying the intersection of these trends is the 2020 workshop conducted by Budapest Corvinus University. This workshop brought together participants from diverse professional backgrounds to engage in a comprehensive exploration of the topic. Through interactive discussions, presentations, and collaborative exercises, attendees delved into the multifaceted aspects of leadership development in the context of remote work and Generation Z preferences. The workshop highlighted the transformative impact of digitalization and telecommunications innovations, which have enabled work to be carried out without the need for physical presence across various domains. From the employer's perspective, remote work offers significant cost savings, eliminating the need for office space and enabling the engagement of professionals from around the globe. However, challenges persist in ensuring effective communication and implementing suitable leadership models. It is essential for employees to coalesce into cohesive teams aligned with common corporate goals, even when working remotely, necessitating the adoption of a new type of leadership culture. Additionally, remote work allows employees to spend less time commuting to the workplace, resulting in more leisure time. Advanced digital skills are particularly crucial for roles that can be performed remotely, favoring Generation Z's adeptness in this domain. (Cserháti, 2020)

Material and methods

This research study employed a comprehensive approach to investigate the strategic significance of career planning and leadership development within small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), particularly in response to the evolving landscape of remote work arrangements and the increasing presence of Generation Z in the workforce. The methodology encompassed a thorough literature review and case study analysis.

Literature Review
The literature review provided a foundational understanding of the challenges faced by SMEs in adapting to remote work and meeting the expectations of Generation Z employees. It synthesized existing research on topics such as remote work dynamics, Generation Z

preferences, leadership qualities, and online training initiatives. Drawing from scholarly sources such as Scopus and Google Scholar, the literature review informed the conceptual framework guiding the research study.

Case Study Analysis
Additionally, a case study approach was employed to examine real-world examples of successful talent management and leadership development strategies within SMEs. A Budapest-based IT sector SME served as the primary case study, offering insights into its remarkable evolution and adaptation strategies. Data collection involved analyzing company documents, reports, and publicly available information, supplemented by observations of organizational processes and practices. The case study provided valuable insights into the practical implementation of career planning, leadership development, and online training initiatives within a specific organizational context.

Results and discussion

The preferences of Generation Z regarding the workplace
As Generation Z (born between 1997 and 2013) is already present in the workforce, it's crucial for employers to recognize their impact. (Gabrielova - Buchko, 2021, Chillakuri, 2020) In the current managerial environment, leaders face the challenge of effectively managing and understanding the distinct traits molded by the experiences of Generation Z. (Schroth, 2019) Generation Z is characterized by their strong inclination towards connectivity, thriving in an era dominated by high-tech communication, technology-driven lifestyles, and extensive use of social media. (Gaidhani et al., 2019, McCrindle - Fell, 2019, Dwivedula et al., 2019)

Competitive Salary and Career Opportunities
Generation Z exhibits a distinct set of preferences when it comes to workplace dynamics and leadership expectations. Among these preferences is the desire for a competitive salary that transparently increases alongside career opportunities. (Kirchmayer - Fratričová, 2018, 2020, Patel, 2017) Additionally, they value quick career advancement and development opportunities (McCrindle - Fell, 2019), seeking avenues for professional growth and skill enhancement. (Adecco, 2016)

Flexibility in Working Conditions
Flexibility is another key aspect that Generation Z looks for in a workplace (Chillakuri, 2020). They seek flexibility not only in terms of working conditions but also in job roles. This flexibility allows them to adapt to changing circumstances and pursue diverse interests within their careers. (Barhate - Dirani, 2022)

Autonomy and Mentorship
Generation Z values autonomy in their work (Wieldmer, 2015), alongside proper mentoring (Barhate - Dirani, 2022) and onboarding (Chillakuri, 2020) processes. (McCrindle - Fell, 2019) They appreciate the opportunity to take ownership of their tasks (Patel, 2017) while also benefiting from guidance and support from experienced mentors. (Gabrielova - Buchko, 2021) This combination fosters a sense of empowerment and encourages innovation.

Emphasis on Soft Skills
In addition to technical skills, Generation Z places importance on the acquisition of "soft" skills alongside "hard" skills. (Gabrielova - Buchko, 2021, Grow - Yang, 2018) Soft skills such as communication, teamwork, and emotional intelligence are considered essential for success in the modern workplace. (Tripathy, 2020)

Culture of Continuous Feedback

Continuous feedback and evaluation are integral to the preferences of Generation Z. (Turner, 2015, Patel, 2017, Randstad, 2016, Chillakuri, 2020) They value a culture of continuous feedback, where constructive criticism and recognition are provided regularly (Chillakuri, 2020). This approach, often facilitated through Continuous Performance Management systems, enables ongoing growth and development. Continuous Performance Management (CPM) entails collaboratively establishing employee goals with their manager, fostering more frequent dialogues between managers and subordinates, facilitating two-way discussions on performance, and providing real-time and crowdsourced feedback (Zenger, 2017).

As Generation Alpha emerges as the most educated, technologically advanced, and affluent generation, it becomes increasingly clear that Generation Z, who will soon lead them, must develop strong leadership skills to effectively navigate this evolving landscape. With more than 2.5 million Gen Alphas born globally every week, and an estimated total population nearing 2 billion by 2025, Generation Z will play a pivotal role in shaping the future of this burgeoning demographic. (McCrindle - Fell, 2019) In conclusion, the rise of Generation Z within the workforce is inevitable, and their transition into leadership roles will likely occur rapidly. In addition to meeting the immediate needs of Generation Z in the workplace, understanding their expectations is crucial because these will shape the leadership style they will learn from and emulate as they progress in their careers. Employers must therefore be proactive in understanding and accommodating their preferences and expectations to ensure mutual success and organizational sustainability in the rapidly evolving business landscape. It is imperative for organizations to delve deeper into understanding what Generation Z expects from their leaders, as aligning leadership practices with these expectations can foster a more inclusive and effective work environment.

In a research illustrated by the following table by Nihan Yavuz Aksakal and Ebru Ulucan from the Department of Business Administration, Faculty of Business Administration, Istanbul Ticaret University, Turkey, 183 participants from Generation Z were surveyed to identify the characteristics they deem important for their leaders to possess.

These characteristics are divided into two categories: traditional management competencies, indicated in green, and new/novel management competencies, indicated in blue.

Among the traditional management competencies, the highest-ranking characteristic, identified by 153 out of 183 participants (approximately 83.61% of respondents), is the ability to set vision and goals. Following closely behind is fairness, with 98 respondents (approximately 53.55%) considering it important for leaders to possess. Regarding new/novel management competencies, the top-ranked characteristic is confidentiality, marked in blue, with 120 respondents (approximately 65.57%) recognizing its significance. This is followed by consciousness, with 114 respondents (approximately 62.30%) considering it important. Other notable characteristics include the ability to take responsibility for mistakes, management skills, and the ability to work as part of a team, all of which received significant attention from respondents across both traditional and new/novel competencies.

Overall, the research highlights the evolving expectations of Generation Z regarding leadership qualities, emphasizing the importance of both traditional and new management competencies in today's dynamic work environment.

Table 1. Characteristics that a leader should possess according to Generation Z

Vision (goal-setting) ability	**153**
Management skills	**135**
Ability to take responsibility for mistakes	**122**
Confidentiality	**120**
Consciousness	**114**
Fairness	**98**
Ability to work as part of a team	**89**
Digital skills	**73**
Ability to recognize talent	**70**
Emotional intelligence	**64**
Strong communication skills	**57**
Openness	**48**
Honesty	**44**
Empathy	**23**
Respect for others	**19**

Source: Own editing based on the research of Yavuz - Ulucan, 2024

The strategic importance of career planning and leadership development

We investigated the strategic importance of career planning and leadership development within the dynamic landscape of contemporary organizational frameworks, shedding light on insights for effective workforce management and organizational success.

Career Planning
Generation Z students value hands-on opportunities that prepare them for career success. (Seemiller - Grace, 2017, McCrindle - Fell, 2019) Flexible employment arrangements predominantly cater to the younger generation, creating abundant opportunities for mass employment. With a growing trend of frequent job changes, organizations are reacting by incorporating long-term individual career planning as a pivotal element of talent nurturing.

Leadership Development
In their 2019 study McCrindle and Fell underscored the need to understand and connect with Generation Z before leading them, emphasizing that this generation values inclusive, participative leadership. They found that Gen Z appreciates managers who prioritize communication, transparency, and respect, favoring a consensus-based leadership style. (Barhate - Dirani, 2022) Recognizing individual contributions and fostering an emotionally supportive environment are also key.

Additionally, instead of fostering a culture of hierarchy, organizations should prioritize interpersonal relationships. This focus not only fosters a collaborative environment but also enhances leadership skills. Ağın's (2023) study underscores the transformative leader's role: they strive to merge their own and their subordinates' interconnected yet separate goals. They use their power not to balance the power of the other party but to support each other.

By embracing strategic career planning and cultivating transformational leadership, organizations can foster a culture of collaboration, innovation, and collective success,

enhancing both individual leadership capabilities and overall organizational performance. (McGaha 2018)

Exploring the Potential of Online Training: Benefits, Challenges, and Recommendations

The individual nature of technology has helped Generation Z become comfortable and accustomed to learning independently. They value the ability to concentrate, proceed at their own speed, and derive personal insights before collaborating with others. (Seemiller - Grace, 2017) Gen Z's proficiency in online learning can be attributed to their adeptness with technology. (Chillakuri, 2020, (Fratričová - Kirchmayer, 2018) Their exposure to digital platforms from a young age has made digital language and technology almost innate to them. They are what can be termed as "digital integrators," seamlessly incorporating technology into their daily lives. (McCrindle - Fell, 2019)

The commonly known eLearning definition usually describes the activities of conducting learning using information and communication technologies. (Alsharhan et al., 2021) Online training stands as a pivotal tool in modern organizational learning landscapes, offering a wealth of opportunities alongside its distinct challenges. (Oeb insights, 2023) At the forefront of online training's appeal is its global accessibility, fostering a borderless learning environment. (Mosharraf - Taghiyareh, 2016) Collaborations with training centers worldwide empower organizations to access diverse educational resources, enriching the learning experience for employees across geographical boundaries. (LinkedIn learning, 2024)

Central to the appeal of online training is its inherent flexibility, enabling participants to tailor learning experiences to their individual pace and preferences. (Alsharhan et al., 2021) Online learning system has the potential to diversify educational curricula and foster engagement by facilitating immediate feedback, encouraging learner interaction with peers and instructors, cultivating digital literacy, and enhancing the overall learning experience. (Abdulkareem - Eidan, 2020)

Yet, online training is not immune to challenges. There is intense requirement for self-discipline and even more intense requirement of self –direction (Abdulkareem - Eidan, 2020) Another limitation of online learning is its one-directional approach, hindering the ability to delve deeper into material that requires additional explanation or understanding. (Simamora, 2020)

Despite these challenges, online training offers compelling benefits (Mosharraf - Taghiyareh, 2016), including reduced cognitive load and increased interactivity. By integrating learned skills into daily work routines under the guidance of supportive leaders, organizations can ensure the practical application of training outcomes.

To optimize the effectiveness of online training initiatives, organizations must implement robust monitoring and feedback mechanisms. (Randstad, 2016, Chillakuri, 2020) Through ongoing support and guidance, leaders can facilitate the successful integration of online training into organizational learning cultures, (Chillakuri, 2020) driving sustained growth and development.

In this exploration of online training, we aim to provide actionable insights and strategies for leveraging its potential to the fullest in today's dynamic organizational environments.

Crafting Future Leaders: A Case Study on Organizational Growth and Innovation in an IT SME

We are presenting the success story of a Budapest-based IT sector Small and Medium Enterprise (SME), offering insights into their remarkable evolution and adaptation strategies regarding developing their future leadership team.

We utilized a case study approach, focusing on a Budapest-based IT sector SME known for its outstanding talent management and innovation. Data collection involved analyzing company documents, reports, and publicly available information, supplemented by observations of organizational processes and practices.

In the first quarter of 2022, the company had 25 employees, a number that emerged to 35 by Q1 of 2023 and skyrocketed to an impressive 105 by Q1 of 2024. This rise in workforce size is testament to the organization's dynamic approach to talent management, particularly in the realm of generational leadership, as the workforce is predominantly of Generation Z individuals. The company has prioritized initiatives aimed at aligning career opportunities and training programs with the preferences and aspirations of this demographic. A staggering 85% of employees express satisfaction with the plethora of career growth opportunities and training initiatives provided by the organization.

Since the global pandemic, the company's embrace of hybrid work models and a culture of transparency has fostered a sense of empowerment and trust among employees. Robust leadership development programs, coupled with the establishment of "Employee Insight Group" forums, ensure that the voices and perspectives of employees are heard and valued.

Central to the organization's remarkable success is its steadfast commitment to continuous learning and development. Based on the research, the company employs a diverse array of training platforms, including LinkedIn Learning, Udemy, and in-house tailored workshops for employees. Notably, they have developed a 30-60-90 day onboarding plan for all new employees, a method praised for its effectiveness in facilitating a smooth transition into the organization. This structured onboarding process ensures that new hires receive the necessary training and support to quickly integrate into their roles and the company culture. Most of these training initiatives are conducted online, aligning with the company's findings that online training improves employee satisfaction by being less time-consuming and catering to the preferences of Generation Z, especially in the era of home office setups. Additionally, the company reinforces its dedication to talent recognition and nurturing through biannual performance evaluations and promotions at all levels.

At the heart of its operations lies a pioneering "Distributed leadership model," which empowers employees at all levels to take ownership of their roles and contribute meaningfully to the organization's collective success. Distributed leadership is primarily concerned with the practice of leadership rather than specific leadership roles or responsibilities. It equates with shared, collective and extended leadership practice that builds the capacity for change and improvement. (Harris, 2009) Through this innovative approach, the company has not only achieved remarkable growth but has also cultivated a culture of collaboration, innovation, and excellence.

This case study serves as a testament to the transformative power of strategic talent management and organizational agility, offering valuable lessons for businesses seeking to thrive in today's dynamic and competitive landscape.

Conclusions and Recommendations for Sustainable Business Practices

We encapsuate our insights into actionable recommendations tailored to the unique needs and challenges of SMEs, empowering them to thrive in an ever-evolving business environment.

Strategic Adoption of Online Learning Initiatives
To harness the transformative potential of online learning, SMEs should adopt a strategic approach to selecting and customizing training modules and knowledge-sharing platforms. Collaborative tools such as Jira and Confluence offer avenues for streamlining project management processes, enhancing team communication, and fostering a culture of transparency and accountability across all organizational levels.

Recognizing Gen Z's expectations and embracing Agile Organizational Structures
Recognizing Generation Z's leadership expectations is paramount, as their evolving style will influence future organizational norms. Employers must actively accommodate these preferences to ensure mutual success and sustainability. Additionally, amid the rapidly changing business landscape, small SMEs are urged to embrace agile structures. Unlike larger multinational corporations, SMEs can adapt more quickly due to their smaller size. Cultivating close-knit workgroups within SMEs fosters innovation and adaptability, enabling teams to respond swiftly to market shifts. Moreover, fostering a sense of community in physical workspaces promotes creativity and collaboration, reinforcing the bonds essential for collective success.

Empowering Supportive Leadership Practices
At the heart of SME success lies the cultivation of supportive leadership practices. Accessible mentorship and coaching opportunities empower employees to unlock their full potential, driving organizational excellence from within. By prioritizing continuous feedback mechanisms and performance evaluations, SMEs can nurture a culture of growth and development, fostering an environment where teams thrive and flourish.

By implementing these targeted strategies, SMEs can fortify their competitive edge, navigate market complexities with confidence, and embark on a trajectory of sustained growth and prosperity. As SMEs continue to adapt and evolve in response to emerging trends and challenges, the cultivation of innovative business practices will serve as a cornerstone for long-term success and resilience in an ever-changing business landscape.

Research Limitations and Further Research Opportunities

While our study has provided valuable insights into the strategic importance of career planning, leadership development, and online training within SMEs, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of our research and identify avenues for future exploration.

Limitations
Sample size and generalizability: Our study was conducted within a specific SME context, which may limit the generalizability of our findings to other organizations. Additionally, the sample size for structured interviews was relatively small, potentially impacting the depth and breadth of insights gained from participant responses.

Cultural and geographic context: The study was conducted within a specific cultural and geographic context, which may influence the applicability of our findings to different cultural and regional settings.

Scope and depth of analysis: While we have endeavored to provide a comprehensive analysis of career planning, leadership development, and online training practices, the scope and depth of our study may not capture all relevant factors and nuances within these domains.

Future Research Opportunities
Comparative studies: future research could explore career planning and leadership development practices across different SMEs and industries to identify common trends, challenges, and best practices. Comparative studies could enhance our understanding of contextual factors influencing these practices. Cross-cultural studies: Cross-cultural studies examining career planning and leadership development practices in diverse cultural contexts could shed light on the cultural factors influencing these practices and their effectiveness.

While our study has contributed to the existing body of knowledge on career planning, leadership development, and online training within SMEs, there remain opportunities for future research to address the limitations identified and further advance our understanding of these critical organizational practices. By continuing to explore these topics, researchers can contribute to the development of evidence-based strategies for enhancing organizational effectiveness and employee engagement in SMEs.

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