
Generational Factors in Employee Mental Well-Being: Insights from Poland

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Abstract:

Purpose: The purpose of this article is to identify the main mental disorders of employees in Poland and the factors that cause them.

Design/Methodology/Approach: This article conducts a deductive analysis of the mental health of employees in Poland. For this purpose, a study of the literature on the subject and inference based on statistical data were used. Data from the report were used, which included the results of surveys among 1,300 employees of enterprises in Poland. The research was carried out in April and May 2024 using the CAWI technique.

Findings: Surveys conducted among employees of medium and large enterprises have shown that ensuring the mental well-being of employees is becoming an increasing challenge for employers. A dynamically changing work environment often leads to increased stress, burnout and health problems. Maintaining the mental health of employees affects not only their well-being, but also the overall productivity and effectiveness of the organization.

Practical Implications: The conclusions from the analysis of previous research are both important for the development of knowledge in the field of HRM, as well as for management practice. The results may be useful for management when formulating recommended actions to improve the mental well-being of employees.

Originality/value: The research results are aimed at expanding knowledge in the field of human resources management, in particular in developing ways to reduce the risk of depression and burnout among employees and improve their mental well-being..

Keywords: Human resources management, mental well-being, burnout, depression.

JEL classification: M54, M12, J21, J24.

Paper Type: Research article.

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1. Introduction

An employee's mental well-being includes five important elements known as PERMA, which influence the level of job satisfaction he or she feels (Seligman, 2018; Białas *et al.*, 2023):

- P (positive emotions) – positive emotions, such as: joy, hope, curiosity, or a general sense of comfort. Feeling them increases satisfaction, increases creativity and allows you to build a good atmosphere at work;
- E (engagement) – commitment, i.e. a state resulting from devoting yourself to a task for which you have appropriate competences and which in itself motivates you to act, and its implementation brings satisfaction;
- R (relationships) – relationships established in a given environment, e.g. in a professional environment;
- M (meaning) – a sense of meaning associated with the awareness that we are needed and the actions we perform are important;
- A (accomplishment/achievement) – achievements and their appreciation, i.e. a state in which you have specific goals and the implementation of which allows you to develop.

Well-being at work can be defined as the state of an employee in which he or she knows and understands his or her capabilities; meets essential needs; copes with stress; works productively and contributes to his or her community; has a sense of security, meaning and job satisfaction (Guest, 2008).

The increasingly faster pace of life, the lack of a sense of socio-economic security, higher and higher expectations and demands placed on employees, work overload, job responsibility, and the increasing life needs - material and existential of society - cause an increase in internal mental tension and stress in an increasingly large group of employees.

This condition negatively affects cognitive processes (perception, thinking), which are necessary to perform tasks, as well as building positive relationships and the right atmosphere in the workplace. Ignoring psychosocial threats may lead to burnout or depression and, as a result, to the outflow of employee capital.

In the scientific literature, little space is devoted to examining whether there is a relationship between the generation of employees and their mental well-being. The article attempts to fill this gap by identifying the factors that determine the mental well-being of employees and presenting actions aimed at increasing it.

The aim of the article is to identify mental health problems of employees in Poland and to determine whether there are generational determinants of this phenomenon.

2. Literature Review

A generation means "a collective of all individuals belonging to a given cultural circle, people of similar age who, based on a common historical and social situation, show similar attitudes, motivations, attitudes and value systems (Iorgulescu, 2016).

In today's labor market, you can meet representatives of as many as four generations:

- Baby Boomers, born between 1946 and 1964,
- Generation X, i.e., the generation born between 1965 and 1979,
- Generation Y (Millennials) born between 1980 and 1994,
- Generation Z, people born between 1995 and 2011.

Each of them is characterized by different values, needs and worldviews (Table 1).

Table 1. *Characteristics of generations operating in the modern labor market*

Generation	Characteristics
Baby Boomers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — responsible — patient — resistant to stress — available — able to cope with difficult situations — prone to workaholism — loyal to employers
X	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — attached to tradition — pessimistic attitude — they can solve problems — they do not take actions under the influence of emotions — they have quite low self-esteem — ambitious and career-focused — they subordinate other aspects of their lives to work — they can wait patiently for a promotion or a raise — loyal to employers — prone to workaholism
Y	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — knowledge of new technologies — able to perform many activities at one time (multi-tasking) — creative — they are characterized by strong self-esteem — confident — well educated — they do not sacrifice their personal lives for work — teamwork oriented — they expect appropriate pay conditions and investment in their development — they often do not recognize the authority of their superior — they are not loyal to their employers

Z	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — very good knowledge of modern technologies — the great impact of social media on their social and professional lives — prefer virtual reality — open to taking on new challenges — well educated — claims regarding the amount of remuneration, employment conditions and workplace equipment — lack of willingness to acquire knowledge from older employees — unpunctual — does not follow work discipline — they are not loyal to their employers
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Source: Own elaboration based on Czycherska *et al.*, 2020.

Understanding the characteristics of individual generations allows you to understand the complexity of the modern labor market and its specific requirements.

The Baby Boomer generation is called the "workaholic generation". People from this generation are characterized by stable behavior, patience, recognition of authorities, respect for statuses and titles, balanced words, and a greater tendency to accept the rules imposed by the company. They demonstrate a need for affiliation with co-workers. They like to work in teams. The most important thing for them is a sense of stability, they are afraid of losing their job. They demonstrate great loyalty to their employer, which is why they usually pursue their professional careers within one company. They like to feel needed. The greatest motivation for them is money.

Representatives of this generation are accustomed to working in highly hierarchical structures, they expect active communication, cooperation and seeking consensus from their superiors (Czarnecka *et al.*, 2013)

The motto of Generation X is "I live to work." People from this generation can sacrifice themselves for the good of the company and take their responsibilities seriously. For them, the meaning of life is work and climbing the career ladder. The driving force behind Generation X's activities are: personal development, initiative, and independence. This generation values job stability, needs a sense of meaning in what they do, and at the same time is focused on cooperation. Generation X employees have a crisis of authorities and values shared by the previous generation.

However, humility and respect for work make X conscientious workers who appreciate what they have. They perceive education instrumentally, as a means to gain a more favorable position on the labor market.

Representatives of Generation Y (also called Millennials) act quickly, are open to innovation, and communicate using modern technologies. Generation Y representatives are characterized by a pragmatic approach to life. At work, in

addition to adequate remuneration, they also expect social security. For most of them, non-wage benefits, such as insurance or private health care, are important. The main motivators that stimulate Generation Y employees to act are:

- opportunity for development at work;
- maintaining work-life balance;
- friendly atmosphere in the company.

For representatives of Generation Y, flexibility at work (the ability to combine various tasks, breaking the routine) and freedom to organize the way and even hours of work are important. Moreover, employing people from Generation Y is associated with a high risk of employee turnover. The lack of loyalty is determined by the desire to develop, take on new challenges, seek diversity and high mobility.

Representatives of Generation Y are not attached to the workplace. They leave if the company does not meet their expectations.

Representatives of Generation Z are also referred to as Generation C (from the words: connected, communicating computerized). The advantage of Generation Z over their predecessors is their very good knowledge of modern technologies. The vast majority of Generation Z representatives are almost constantly connected to the Internet. People representing Generation Z are credited with creativity and a large number of contacts on social media. The characteristics of this generation include consumerism, the ability to perform many activities at the same time, low development of emotional intelligence, the need to obtain feedback quickly and aversion to professional monotony.

Research confirms that this is also a generation of individualists, loners, and people who perceive the world very pessimistically (Muster, 2020). High remuneration (compared to Generation Y) motivates representatives of Generation Z to stay in a given position and perform difficult work to a lesser extent.

Representatives of Generation Z believe that an employer who wants to retain staff in the organization's structures should, above all, respect his or her employees, be honest and sincere towards them, provide opportunities for professional development, skillfully build relationships with staff, pay fairly for work and assign adequate tasks to his or her employees. to their skills (Czyczerska *et al.*, 2020).

As the presented characteristics of the four generational groups operating in modern enterprises show, their representatives have different attitudes to work. Each group brings different skills, expectations, attitudes and ways of communicating to the organization. Each of these groups also has a different degree of susceptibility to mental disorders.

3. Research Methodology

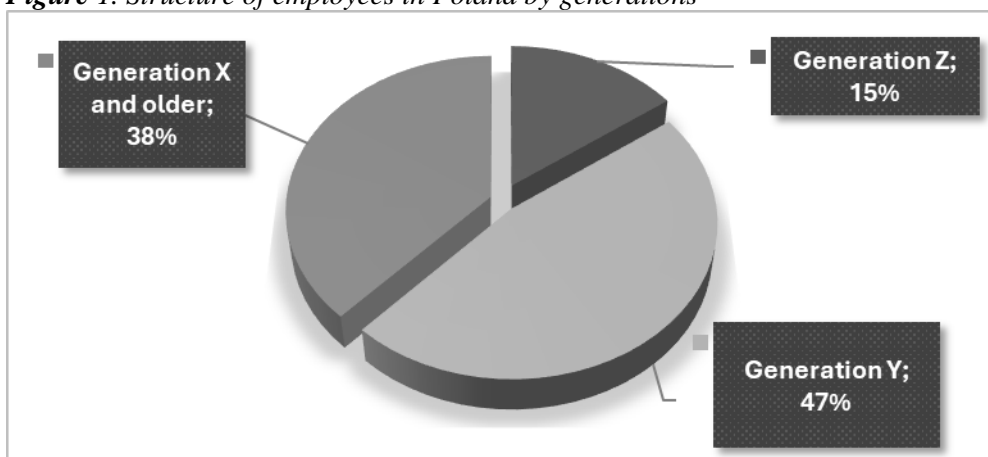
This article conducts a deductive analysis of the mental health of employees in Poland. For this purpose, a study of the literature on the subject and inference based on statistical data were used.

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4. Research Results and Discussion

The quantitative proportions between particular generations in the labour market change over the years. Representatives of Baby Boomers are already retiring, while the number of professionally active representatives of Generation Z who coexist with representatives of older generations is systematically increasing. The generational structure in the labour market is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. *Structure of employees in Poland by generations*



Source: GUS Report 2024, *People working in the national economy in Poland, April 2024*

As of April 30, 2024, there were 15,088,200 people working in Poland. The largest group (47%) were representatives of Generation Y. Representatives of each generation have different mental predispositions, resistance to stress, and susceptibility to burnout.

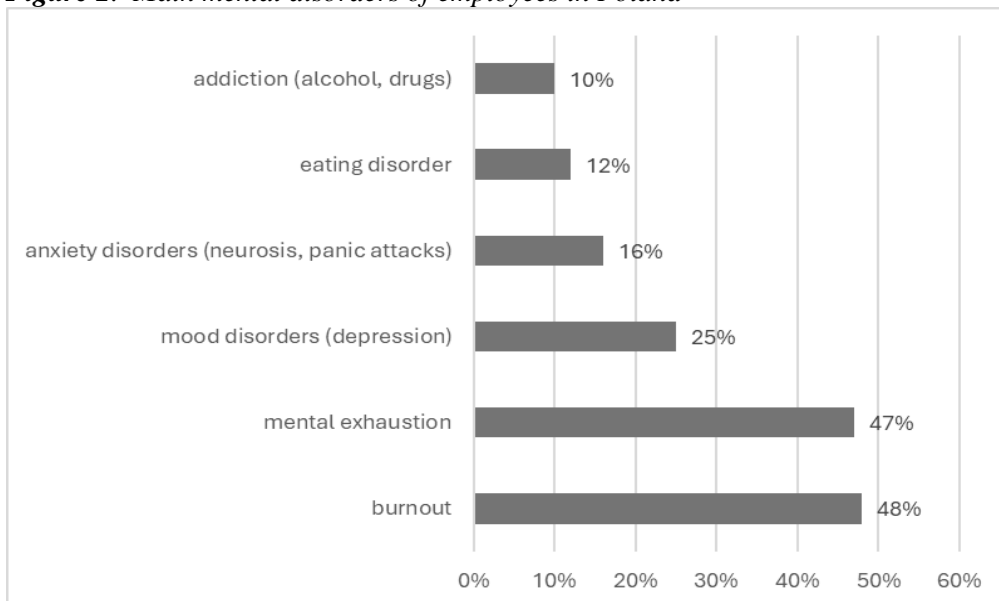
The issue of employees' mental health increasingly affects the labor market every year. The study results indicate that employees are affected by phenomena such as burnout, mood disorders (depression), anxiety disorders and stress-related adaptation disorders. Among the causes of mental disorders, respondents indicate primarily:

excessive stress, time pressure, excess tasks to be performed and pressure from superiors.

Also in Poland, mental disorders are becoming more and more common, which is confirmed by data on employee sickness absence and expenditure on social benefits. Data from the Social Insurance Institution show that in 2022-2023 the number of sick leaves issued due to mental disorders increased by 8.7%. In 2023, doctors in Poland issued over 1.4 million medical certificates due to mental disorders (such as depression, neurosis), which meant 26 million days of sickness absence. For comparison, in 2022, 1.3 million such leaves were issued, which meant 23.8 million days of sickness absence.

The main psychological difficulties faced by employees in Poland are burnout, mental exhaustion and depression (Figure 2).

Figure 2. *Main mental disorders of employees in Poland*



Source: Report 2024a: *Pressure for change and emotions and mental health in the work environment* <https://blizejsiebie.info/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Raport-Blizej-Siebie-Presja-zmian-a-emocje-i-zdrowie-psychiczne-w-srodowisku-pracy.pdf>.

Burnout syndrome develops in three dimensions (Maslach, 2011; Grobelna and Tokarz-Kocik, 2018; Maslach, 2022):

- emotional exhaustion,
- depersonalization,
- reduced sense of personal achievement.

Emotional exhaustion can be defined as a person's sense of being overly exploited emotionally, with his/her emotional resources having been significantly depleted. Characteristic of exhaustion is also the sense of excessive overload, discouragement to work and reduced activity. In order for the exhaustion to appear, the state of high arousal or work overload must first occur.

Exhaustion is accompanied by loss of energy and enthusiasm for action, lack of joy of life, increased impulsiveness and irritability. Free time and sleep do not bring the desired regeneration of strength. It is necessary to make more effort than before to perform at work at the right level. At the same time, emotionally exhausted people feel that they are not able to continue to work effectively. In social relations with others, emotional bonds are loosened, which results in the break-up of friendships and distances them from possible sources of support.

Depersonalization, also referred to as cynicism, consists in the increasing of psychological distance towards people who are recipients of a given service. You can observe negative attitudes toward others, coldness, indifference and the so-called thick skin, as well as distancing themselves from colleagues - tendencies to isolate themselves from them.

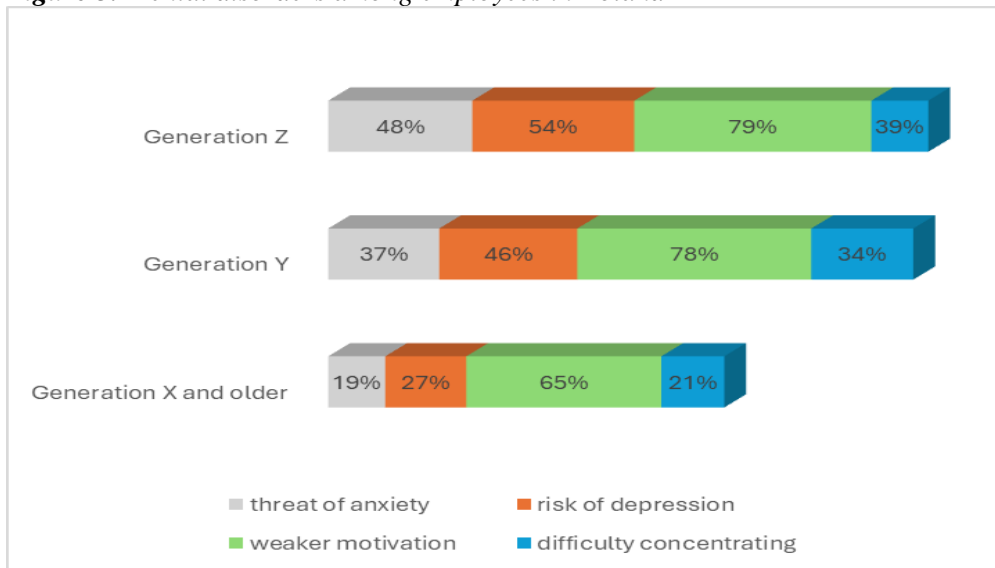
Depersonalization is the result of excessive exhaustion as well as the loss of emotional and physical resources. It is also one of the forms of how to deal with the conflict between the value system and the lack of confirmation in the form of successes, justifying the reasonableness of the actions taken. Thus, it involves the loss of idealism. Although this attitude and the creation of a buffer that is supposed to protect against contacts with others is intended to protect oneself, it nevertheless means a negative, soulless or indifferent reaction to other people and their problems. As a result, relationships with others become impersonal. There is a danger that such an indifferent attitude will be perpetuated and will lead to dehumanization.

A reduced sense of personal accomplishment is characterized by a reduced sense of own competence and successes achieved at work, a sense of inefficiency and loss of faith in one's own abilities. Lack of satisfaction related to professional work or other activity (e.g., studies) is accompanied by depressive moods, self-criticism, conviction about own uselessness and worthlessness. The sense of inadequacy is increasing and as a result, there may appear a sense of nonsense of work, resignation and willingness to withdraw from the profession. In the literature factors leading to employee demotivation which may result in job burnout are discussed (Dolot, 2015).

Apart from burnout, depression is a serious problem. It manifests itself in persistent sadness, lack of energy, sleep disorders, anxiety, guilt, loss of self-esteem and even the meaning of existence. According to WHO, 280 million people in the world suffer from depression (approximately 3.8% of the population). By 2030, this disease will become the most frequently diagnosed disease in the world (WHO, 2023).

It should be noted that the number of mental disorders among employees varies, depending on which generation the employee represents (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Mental disorders among employees in Poland



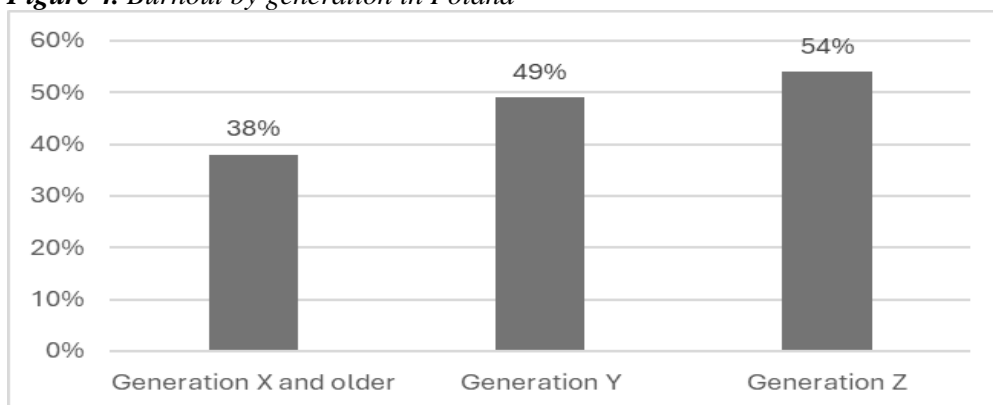
Source: Report 2024b: Study on the well-being of Polish employees, Mindgram, SW Research. <https://ebook.mindgram.com/pl/>.

As shown in Figure 3, most mental disorders occur in the group of Generation Z employees. They have: symptoms of anxiety (48% of them), depression (54% of them), weaker motivation to work (79% of them) and difficulty concentrating (39% of them).

The phenomenon of burnout also affects groups of employees representing different generations to varying degrees. They are felt most strongly by members of Generation Z. 54% of employees from this generation confirm burnout. The oldest workers from Generation X and baby boomers are most resistant to mental disorders (Figure 4).

"Burnout" can affect anyone, but it most often affects people with high ambition and high responsibility for results. The most common symptoms of this phenomenon are chronic fatigue, loss of motivation, reduced efficiency, difficulty concentrating, but also physical ailments such as headaches and sleep problems.

Burnout is also often manifested in an attitude of cynicism towards the tasks performed, which negatively affects team cooperation and interpersonal relationships. Burnout at an early stage leads to a decline in the quality of activities, increases the number of mistakes made, which translates into lower effectiveness of the entire team.

Figure 4. Burnout by generation in Poland

Source: Report 2024b: Study on the well-being of Polish employees, Mindgram, SW Research. <https://ebook.mindgram.com/pl/>.

The lack of mental well-being of employees (burnout, depression) is the greatest challenge faced by modern enterprises. Poor mental condition of employees is associated with:

- less commitment to work,
- reduced employee productivity,
- more frequent search for new professional opportunities outside the organization,
- increasing costs related to rotation,
- absences,
- lower efficiency of employees.

That is why it is so important for employers to take preventive measures. Taking care of employees' mental well-being requires an integrated approach that takes into account both organizational and individual needs. Introducing proactive actions, such as mental health support programs or regular employee satisfaction surveys, can significantly improve their well-being.

5. Conclusions

The mental well-being of employees is becoming one of the key aspects determining the situation on the labor market. Both employers and employees are becoming more and more aware of this issue, which affects employment dynamics, recruitment strategies and expectations towards the workplace. Regular actions are necessary to support the mental and emotional health of people in the work environment, which will also benefit the company in the long run.

Such activities include:

- providing access to specialist mental health help (consultations with a psychologist, psychotherapist, psychiatrist),

- implementation of programs focused on building a friendly environment for people experiencing psychological difficulties and promoting mental health.,
- implementation of counteracting programs against burnout, depression, anxiety disorders and excessive and chronic stress,
- implementation of stress management and relaxation training,
- organizing social and communication skills training,
- organizing time management training,
- organizing or financing training and conferences on mental health,
- preparation of training materials and dissemination of knowledge regarding the causes, symptoms and methods of dealing with psychological problems,
- implementation of programs to counteract mobbing and unequal treatment of employees,
- caring for a good atmosphere at work, implementing conflict resolution systems,
- organization of team-building events and family days, during which employees can present their workplace to their family members,
- adapting duties and tasks to employees' knowledge and skills,
- preventing excessive workload from superiors,
- providing flexible working conditions and hours whenever possible,
- organization of space for employees to calm down and relax,
- providing the possibility of bringing pets to the office, which has a beneficial effect on relieving tension and coping with stressful situations,
- conducting surveys on stress, employee well-being and issues related to working conditions - systematic implementation of activities in accordance with the obtained results,
- promoting physical activity and a healthy lifestyle.

Employers who actively address mental health needs will gain a competitive advantage by attracting and retaining top talent. In turn, those who do not adapt to these changes risk increasing staff turnover, decreased efficiency and a negative image on the market. Taking care of employees' mental health is no longer only an ethical, but also an economic necessity.

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