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Characteristics of Gen Z Dealing with the Issue of Knowledge Workers: Opportunities and Challenges

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to explore the opportunities and challenges faced by generation Z in the context of the knowledge worker phenomenon, as well as identify potential gaps in skills that may affect their readiness for knowledge-based work. While generation Z is recognised as digital natives with strong technological capabilities, there is a potential gap between their technical skills and the non-technical skills required in knowledge-based work. These gaps include interpersonal skills, effective communication, as well as problem-solving and strategic decision-making. This research is important to provide in-depth insights into how generation Z can capitalise on the opportunities available and overcome the challenges they face in the knowledge worker era.

This research uses a quantitative descriptive approach with literature studies and surveys. The sample consisted of 100 students of the Faculty of Economics and Business (FEB) of Yogyakarta State University (UNY) who were selected by purposive sampling. Data were collected through survey questionnaires and literature studies and analysed using descriptive statistics and synthesis of findings from the literature.

The research revealed that Generation Z has a competitive advantage in terms of technological skills and adaptability to change. However, there is a significant gap in non-technical skills such as communication and problem solving. Recommendations to address this gap include developing a more holistic education and training curriculum, which not only focuses on technical skills but also interpersonal and managerial skills that are essential in a knowledge-based work environment.

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KEYWORDS:

Generation Z, Knowledge Worker, Challenge, Opportunity, Recommendation

1. INTRODUCTION

An increasingly dominant phenomenon in the world of work has been the digital age, where the phenomenon of knowledge workers has become increasingly dominant. Knowledge workers are individuals whose main job involves processing, analysing, and using information to create value and innovation [1], [2]. This phenomenon, introduced by Peter Drucker, represents a shift from physical skill-based jobs to jobs that require intelligence, creativity and expertise in information management.

Generation Z, those born between the mid-1990s and early 2010s, is the age group currently entering the workforce. They are known as digital natives who grew up in an environment of high technology and easy access to information. Along with the shift to knowledge-based work, this generation is faced with unique opportunities and challenges [3], [4].

Generation Z has a competitive advantage in dealing with the knowledge worker phenomenon. Their strong technological skills, familiarity with social media and multitasking abilities give them an edge in accessing, analysing and disseminating information efficiently [5]. They also tend to have an open attitude towards change and innovation, as well as a willingness to learn lifelong, which is crucial in an ever-evolving world of work.

However, the challenges are no less significant. Although generation Z has advanced technological capabilities, they may face difficulties in interpersonal skills, such as effective communication and teamwork, which are still important components in knowledge-based work [6], [7]. In addition, the speed of technological change may add pressure to constantly update their skills and knowledge.

The potential gap between Generation Z's technical abilities and their non-technical skills may hinder their ability to

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function optimally as knowledge workers [8], [9]. Previous studies suggest that while generation Z is proficient in the use of technology, they may be less skilled in other important aspects of knowledge work, such as complex problem solving and strategic decision making (Fitri et al., 2020; Sawitri, 2022). Identifying and understanding these gaps is critical to designing effective training and development programmes. This research is important to understand in depth how Generation Z can take advantage of the opportunities that exist in the knowledge worker era and overcome the challenges they face.

By examining potential gaps in their skills and knowledge, this research is expected to provide practical recommendations for educational institutions and companies to prepare generation Z to be more prepared and competent in facing the knowledge-based world of work. This research also contributes to the literature on modern workforce dynamics and the role of technology in shaping future careers. Based on the explanation above, the author determines that the purpose of this research is to answer the research question 'what are the opportunities and challenges for generation Z in responding to the knowledge worker phenomenon?

II. METHODS

This research design combines literature study for theoretical foundation and survey for empirical data, providing a thorough approach to the research topic.

This type of research is descriptive quantitative with additional literature study. The research approach uses mixed method in the form of sequential research. The population in this study were all FEB UNY students with a sample of 100 students from 4 departments selected by purposive sampling. The types of data include primary data, namely data from questionnaires, and secondary data derived from various literature published in credible journals, articles, and online media news.

Data collection techniques using surveys and literature studies. Data analysis techniques were carried out in 2 types, namely quantitative data analysis to descriptively examine survey results using Microsoft Excel, followed by qualitative data analysis, namely analysing findings from literature studies to identify relevant themes or concepts.

III. RESEARCH RESIULT

Descriptive Analysis of Gen Z Student Characteristics

The characteristics of FEB UNY students in the 2021-2023 batch fall into the generation Z category who were born between 1997-2012. Respondents in this study were FEB students who were divided into 4 departments, namely the Department of Management, Department of Accounting Education, Department of Economics Education, and Department of Administrative Education.

a. Dependence on technology

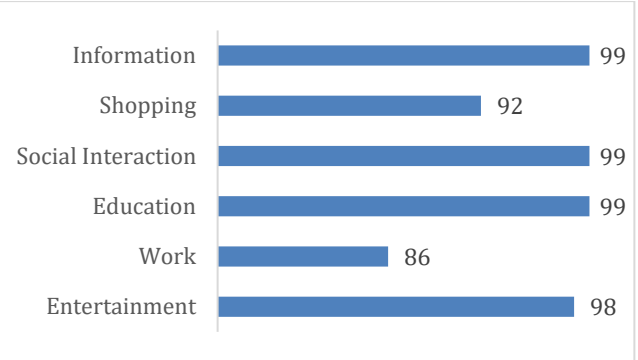

Figure 1. Data Student Dependence on technology based on the type of aspect

In Figure 1, it can be explained that as many as 98 out of 100 FEB UNY student respondents use technology as a source of information. Then as many as 91 out of 100 students use technology to shop online. When viewed from the aspect of social interaction, as many as 99 out of 100 FEB students use technology for their social interaction needs, while 86 students use technology for work, and as many as 98 out of 100 students use technology as a source of entertainment.

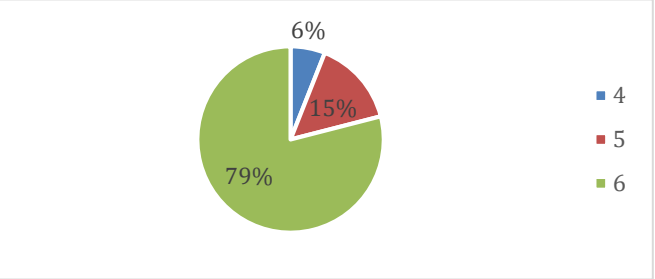

Figure 2. Data on student dependence on technology based on the number of aspects

In Figure 2, there are 79 out of 100 students showing a very high dependence on technology. This is reflected in the use of technology which includes 6 aspects, namely information, shopping, social interaction, education, work, and entertainment. A total of 5% use technology in 5 aspects, while the remaining 6 students use technology in 4 aspects only.

b. Excessive exposure to information

Generation Z, born between the mid-1990s and early 2010s, grew up in a digital age that provided unlimited access to information through the internet and mobile technology. Their characteristics in dealing with information overload are greatly influenced by technological advances. Information overload is a condition where a person is exposed to too much information, making it difficult to filter, process and make effective decisions. Generation Z is known to be a generation that is very accustomed to technology, but constant exposure to information can also have some negative impacts. Information overload often leads to difficulty in distinguishing relevant information from that which is not, as well as increasing stress levels and decreasing productivity.

The following is a description of data collection from the results of filling out questionnaires by respondents of 100 FEB students:

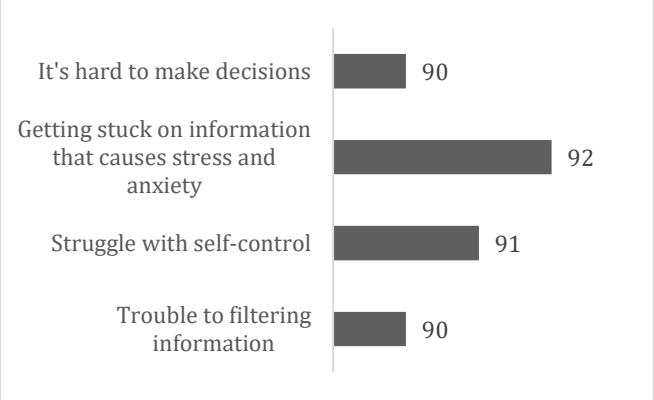

Figure 3. Excessive information exposure questionnaire data

Based on Figure 3, it seen that 92 out of 100 FEB student respondents stated that they had been trapped in conditions of information exposure that caused stress and anxiety. Furthermore, there were 91 students who stated that they had difficulty in controlling themselves when it came to post-truth and hoax issues, while 90 students stated that excessive information exposure caused difficulty in making decisions and difficulty in filtering information.

c. Mental health and concentration disorders

Intensive social media use among Gen Z is often associated with mental health issues, such as anxiety, depression and low self-esteem. Social media can create pressure to present a perfect self-image. Gen Z is also often exposed to digital multitasking, such as switching between apps, which can reduce the ability to focus on one task for a long time. The following is a description of data collection from the results of filling out questionnaires by 100 FEB student respondents:

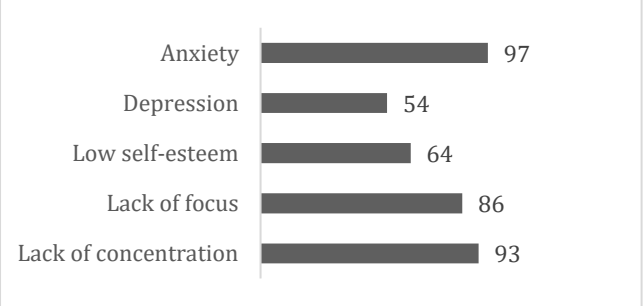

Figure 4. Data on Types of Mental Health and Concentration Disorders of Students caused by the use of technology

Based on the data in Figure 4, it can be explained that as many as 97 students have experienced anxiety, 93 students admit to having difficulty concentrating and 86 students declare themselves less focused because of using technology and 54 out of 100 students have experienced depression. While 64 students feel inferior due to exposure to technology.

d. Decline in critical thinking skills

Gen Z's reliance on search engines and technology for instant answers may reduce their opportunity to develop critical thinking and in-depth analysis skills. With easy access to information at their fingertips, they tend to look for quick solutions without going through a lengthy reflection process. This habit can hinder their ability to analyse information thoroughly and question the validity of the sources they find. Deep understanding often requires time and effort to explore multiple perspectives, which can be overlooked when focusing only on quick results. Without critical thinking practice, they may be more easily swayed by inaccurate or biased information that can weaken their ability to make well-considered decisions in everyday life.

The following is a description of data collection from the results of filling out questionnaires by respondents of 100 FEB students:

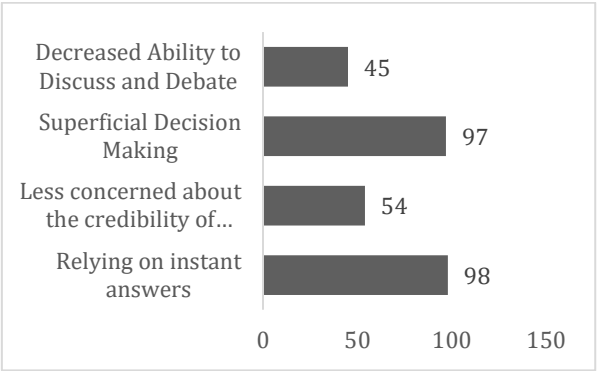

Figure 5. Data on the decline in students' critical thinking skills

Based on the results of the questionnaire filled out by FEB students, it was found that 98 out of 100 students stated that the use of technology causes them to rely on instant answers, and 97 students stated that with the help of technology, students tend to often make superficial or very fast decisions. As many as 54 students are less concerned with the credibility of information sources, while 45 students stated that they recognized a decline in debate and discussion skills.

e. Anti-social tendencies

While technology makes long-distance communication easier, over-reliance on digital devices can compromise the quality of face-to-face social interactions. In everyday life, face-to-face encounters with others play an important role in building strong emotional bonds and deep understanding. However, when communication happens mostly through screens, non-verbal elements such as facial expressions, body language and tone of voice are often lost. This can make relationships shallower and less authentic. The absence of direct interaction can also affect the development of social skills such as empathy, sensitivity to others' feelings, and the ability to resolve conflicts. The following is a description of data collection from the results of filling out questionnaires by 100 FEB student respondents:

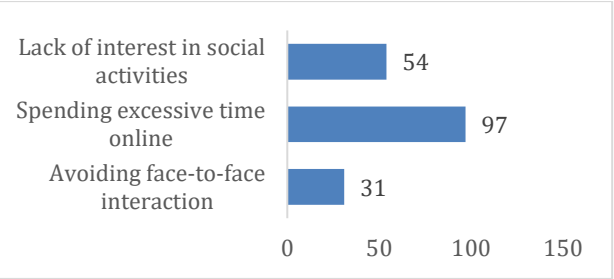

Figure 6. Data on anti-social tendencies

Figure 6 shows that 97 out of 100 students admitted to spending excessive time online, further 54 students mentioned a decrease in interest in social activities, while 31 students admitted to avoiding face-to-face meetings.

Knowledge Worker Literature Review

Based on various literature that has been collected, the authors group into 10 knowledge worker indicators, which can be tabulated as follows:

Table 1. Knowledge Worker Indicators

No.	Indicator	Description
1	Critical and analytical thinking ability [5], [7], [12], [13], [14]	Able to analyse complex problems and develop solutions based on data and logical reasoning. Skilled in evaluating multiple perspectives and approaches to reach the most effective decision.
2	Information management skills [3], [4], [6], [15]	Able to efficiently collect, manage and process information to convert it into knowledge that can be applied in decision-making. Accustomed to working with abundant data and able to sort out relevant information.
3	Data-driven Decision Making [13], [14], [16], [17], [18]	Ability to use quantitative and qualitative data and analyses to make decisions that support productivity and innovation. Rely on evidence and proven information in decision-making, not just intuition or assumptions.
4	Mastering technology and digital tools[1], [19], [20], [21], [22]	Proficient in using technology tools, software, and information systems that support analysis, decision-making, or data processing activities. Ability to learn and adapt to new technologies relevant to their field of work.
5	Collaboration skills [2], [9], [23]	Ability to work together in interdisciplinary teams and communicate well with other team members to achieve common goals. Actively share knowledge and work collaboratively in an environment that requires the exchange of information and ideas.
6	Communication skills [24], [25], [26]	Able to convey information, analyses and solutions in a clear and structured manner to diverse audiences, both orally and in writing. Able to explain complex concepts in a way that is understandable to others within or outside their field of expertise.
7	Continuous learning [20], [21], [22]	Have a strong desire to continuously learn and update their knowledge and skills to stay relevant in a changing field. Familiar with the latest developments in their industry or field of expertise, whether through formal training, courses, or self-learning.
8	Project and time management skills [17], [19], [27], [28]	Able to manage tasks or projects efficiently, including planning, execution and evaluation of results. Skilled in organising time and resources to complete tasks according to set deadlines.
9	Adaptability and Flexibility [1], [2], [9], [23]	Able to adapt quickly to changes in technology, market demands, or work environment conditions. Open to change and willing to change ways of working to improve efficiency and productivity.
10	Results-orientation [1], [8], [27], [28]	Focus on achieving real and measurable results in their work, both in the context of completing individual tasks and contributing to organisational goals.

Analysis of the Relationship between Generation Z Characteristics and the Knowledgge Worker phenomenon

When examined further, there are several things that are contradictory or contradictory and there are in harmony that

can support the characteristics of Gen Z with the phenomenon of knowledge workers in the world of work. These contradictory things become challenges while the things that are cloudy are opportunities for generation Z to be able to maintain their existence in the world of work.

Table 2. Analysis of challenges and opportunities for Generation Z facing the knowledge worker phenomenon

No.	Gen Z Characteristics	Relevant Knowledge Worker indicators	Opportunity	Challenge
1	Dependence on Technology	1. Ability to manage information 2. Data-driven decision-making 3. Mastering digital tools and technology 4. Communication skills 5. Continuous learning 6. Project and time management skills 7. Adaptability and Flexibility	√ √ √ √ √ √	 √
2	Excessive exposure to information	1. Critical and analytical thinking skills 2. Ability to manage information 3. Data-driven decision making 4. Mastering digital tools and technology 5. Communication skills 6. Continuous learning 7. Project and time management skills 8. Adaptability and Flexibility	√ √ √ √	 √ √ √ √
3	Mental health and concentration disorders	1. Critical and analytical thinking skills 2. Collaboration skills 3. Communication skills 4. Continuous learning 5. Project and time management skills 6. Adaptability and Flexibility 7. Result orientation	 √	√ √ √ √ √ √
4	Decreased critical thinking ability	1. Critical and analytical thinking skills 2. Ability to manage information 3. Data-driven decision making 4. Continuous learning 5. Adaptability	√ √ √	 √ √ √

		and Flexibility 7. Result orientation		
5	Anti-social tendencies	1. Ability to manage information 2. Collaboration skills 3. Communication skills 4. Continuous learning 5. Project and time management skills 6. Adaptability and Flexibility	√	√ √ √ √ √

IV. DISCUSSION

Gen Z, which is very familiar with technology, has an advantage in mastering digital tools and modern software needed by knowledge workers. They can quickly adopt new technologies to improve work productivity and efficiency. The ease of access to information enabled by technology makes it easier for Gen Z to collect and process data, allowing them to optimise the management of information relevant to their work. Reliance on technology makes Gen Z more prepared to adapt to technological change and the demands of digitalisation in the workplace, making them more flexible in dealing with the dynamics of knowledge-based work.

Reliance on technology, such as quick internet searches, can hinder the development of deep critical and analytical thinking skills. They tend to seek instant solutions rather than conduct complex analyses. Overexposure to technology can impact mental health, interfering with the capacity to learn independently and continuously evolve. This can hinder focus and life balance. Generation Z may struggle to stay focused on achieving tangible and measurable results due to distractions from technology, social media and information overload that disrupt their concentration. While technology facilitates digital collaboration, reliance on online interactions can weaken in-person collaboration skills, such as interpersonal communication required in real work environments.

Gen Z's biggest challenge is maintaining a balance between utilising technology productively while still developing critical thinking, self-management and strong social skills. Technology provides unlimited access to information and tools that can increase efficiency and innovation, but over-reliance on technology can reduce critical thinking and analytical skills. Gen Z often tends to rely on instant solutions and automation tools, which can hinder the development of the deep thinking and complex analysis skills that are critical for knowledge workers. In addition, self-management is also a big challenge. Constant exposure to technology and information can cause information overload, increase stress, and disrupt work-life balance. This has the potential to affect mental health, which in turn affects their productivity and work quality.

Social skills also need to be considered. While technology facilitates digital collaboration and remote communication, reliance on online interactions can weaken in-person interpersonal and collaboration skills. The ability to work effectively in teams, communicate face-to-face, and build strong professional relationships remains critical in complex and dynamic work environments.

To overcome these challenges, Gen Z needs to develop strategies to utilise technology efficiently without losing core skills. This involves a conscious effort to improve critical thinking abilities, manage stress and information overload, and strengthen social and collaboration skills. By adopting a balanced approach, Gen Z can maximise the potential of technology while ensuring that they retain the skills needed to succeed as knowledge workers.

Recommendations for the Faculty of Economics and Business UNY

In facing the challenges of the characteristics of Gen Z students who will act as knowledge workers, universities, especially the Faculty of Economics and Business, need to adapt their education and teaching approaches to be more relevant. Recommendations for dealing with this challenge involve changes to the curriculum, teaching strategies, and the facilities and support provided. Here are some recommendations that can be implemented:

1. Enhance Critical and Analytical Thinking Development: Faculty should design curricula that explicitly emphasise the importance of critical thinking, data analysis and evidence-based decision-making. For Gen Z who are often used to quick solutions from technology, developing these skills can be done through:

- The case study method: Introducing students to real case studies to encourage in-depth analysis and creative solutions.
- Problem-based learning projects: Encourages students to work in groups to solve complex problems that require research and collaboration.
- Class debates and discussions: Hone their ability to construct logical and critical arguments on economic issues.

2. Utilize Technology Effectively: Universities must integrate technology wisely into the learning process,

considering that Gen Z is very comfortable with technology. However, its use must be directed at strengthening analytical skills and independent thinking. Some steps you can take include:

• Use of economic simulation and software: Utilize economic simulation or data analysis applications (e.g., SPSS, STATA, or Tableau) to provide students with practical experience.

• Digital learning platform: Uses an interactive learning management system (LMS) to provide learning materials that can be accessed at any time, while promoting critical online discussions.

3. Overcoming Information Overload with Information Literacy: Faculties need to provide training in information literacy and data management. This is very important for Gen Z who are often faced with information overload. Some actions that can be taken include:

• Information literacy courses: Teaches how to sort and select valid and relevant information from diverse sources.

• Data analysis and market research training: Integrate data analysis and economic research skills into the curriculum so students can manage and interpret data effectively.

4. Mental Health and Soft Skills Development: Universities must pay special attention to the mental well-being of Gen Z students who are vulnerable to stress and mental health problems. Apart from that, social and collaboration skills need to be prioritized so that students are ready to work in teams and collaborate in the world of work. Some actions that can be taken are:

• Mental well-being program: Provides counseling services, seminars on stress management, and wellness programs that help students maintain a balanced life.

• Soft skills training: Faculty can hold courses or workshops that focus on communication, leadership, and other interpersonal skills important for knowledge workers.

• Collaborative experiences: Encourage collaboration in group assignments or projects that simulate teamwork in a real work environment.

5. Flexibility in Learning: Recognizing the characteristics of Gen Z who prefer flexibility and freedom in learning, universities can provide various adaptive learning options. This flexibility is important to create a more inclusive and effective learning experience. Some ideas that can be implemented are:

• Blended learning: Combining face-to-face and online learning so that students can learn according to their own pace and learning style.

• Flexible assignment settings: Provide opportunities for students to choose projects or topics that suit their interests, thereby motivating them further in their studies.

6. . Focus on Project-Based Learning and Work Practices: Faculty of Economics and Business should adopt a more practical and project-based approach to equip students with skills relevant to real jobs. Some actions that can be taken are:

• **Internships and industry partnerships: Collaboration with companies or economic and business organizations to provide internship programs that allow students to learn directly from the world of work.

• Collaborative projects with industry: Encourage students to work on projects involving real companies, so they can practice the theory learned in real contexts.

• Guest lectures from industry practitioners: Invite guest speakers from economic and business professionals to provide insight into the developing world of work, as well as the challenges faced by knowledge workers.

7. Integrate Future Skills in the Curriculum: Faculties must include future skills that are relevant to rapid changes in the world of work, especially related to automation, artificial intelligence, and big data analytics. Given the increasingly large role of technology, students must be ready to adapt to new challenges. Steps that can be taken include:

• Financial technology (fintech) and business analytics courses: Integrate topics such as fintech, blockchain, and big data analytics into the curriculum to prepare students for digital transformation in the business world.

• Innovation and entrepreneurship-oriented teaching: Equipping students with knowledge of entrepreneurship and innovation so that they can become self-starters in the work environment or even start their own business.

8. Evaluation and Assessment that Encourages Creativity and Collaboration: Evaluation systems in higher education should place more emphasis on project-based assessment, participation, and collaborative skills than simply rote-based exams. Gen Z students tend to be more responsive to assignments that require them to think creatively and work together. Some evaluation methods that can be adapted are:

• Project-based assessment: Provides assessment based on the results of group or individual projects that simulate real situations.

• Collaborative evaluation: Assess students' involvement and contributions in teams through observing their collaborative work processes.

V. CONCLUSION

The conclusions of this research are:

1. Technological Opportunities: Gen Z has advantages in terms of mastery of technology, access to broad information, and the ability to adapt to the latest digital tools. Technology enables them to increase efficiency and productivity and opens opportunities for global collaboration.
2. Critical Challenges: Dependence on technology can hinder the development of critical and analytical thinking skills, which are important for knowledge workers. In

addition, information overload and mental health affected by technology can interfere with focus and self-management. Social skills can also be affected as more interactions are done digitally rather than face-to-face.

3. Recommendation: To prepare Gen Z students to face the role of knowledge workers, universities must transform by enriching the curriculum, improving technology-based teaching, focusing on developing mental health and soft skills, and adapting a more flexible and practical learning approach. This approach not only increases the relevance of education, but also helps Gen Z students meet the challenges of the changing world of work.

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