Generation Z and the reality of employment in Indonesia: A problematic portrait of the youngest workforce

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ABSTRACT

The employment problems experienced by Generation Z (born in 1997-2012) as the youngest workforce are currently attracting the attention of many parties. Various studies and the existing literature show that employment problems are structural and cultural. However, from various studies and literature, there is still not much comprehensive discussion of the various employment problems experienced by this generation. Therefore, this study aims to describe the various employment problems experienced by Gen Z. This research uses a descriptive qualitative approach through library research with Miles and Huberman's interactive model of data analysis techniques. The results of this study show that there are four main categories that color the dynamics of Gen Z employment: the decline in employment in the formal sector, the generation gap and differences in work preferences, the tendency to be voluntarily unemployed, and the dynamics of the gig economy that color the Gen Z job market. The findings show that Generation Z's employment problems are related to limited employment opportunities and changes in the orientation, values, and expectations of the younger generation towards the world of work, which are interrelated. This research is expected to contribute academically and practically to current employment issues, especially as a study material for developing employment policies that are pro-Gen Z and benefit many parties.

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RESEARCH & PUBLISHING

1. INTRODUCTION

Employment is an important and crucial issue in many countries, including Indonesia. According to data from the Central Statistics Agency (BPS) in 2024, 20.31 percent of young Indonesians aged 15-24 are not in school, not working, or undergoing training (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2025). In addition, Indonesia's national open unemployment rate (TPT) reached 4.91 percent in 2024 (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2024). This illustrates Indonesia's alarming employment situation, marked by a decline in the formal employment sector at various levels of education (Wisanggeni et al., 2024).

Generation Z, currently the youngest workforce born between 1997 and 2012, faces various obstacles in finding decent work. An article published on Kompas.com shows that employment opportunities for Generation Z have experienced a significant downward trend in the formal sector during the period 2009-2024 (Wisanggeni et al., 2024). Employment is a serious challenge that must be addressed immediately by various parties. However, to overcome this employment problem, an academic study is needed to determine the direction of clear regulations so that the root causes of the problem can be accurately identified.

In a study conducted by Fotaleno and Batubara (2024) on the difficulties faced by Generation Z in obtaining employment, reviewed from the perspective of generational gap theory, the main factors causing Gen Z to experience difficulties in entering the formal workforce are high expectations regarding the suitability of interests and salary standards, lack of relevant work experience, a shift towards a more flexible meaning of work, and limited job opportunities in the region. This study uses a qualitative approach with in-depth interviews, observations, and documentation of secondary data, and analyzes it through the framework of intergenerational value gap theory.

An article by Ismail & Nugroho (2022) reveals that Generation Z also faces significant challenges in the world of work due to the significant changes brought about by the 4.0 industrial revolution and Society 5.0. To be competitive, Gen Z must equip themselves with hard skills (e.g., digital technology, coding, AI, and UX design), soft skills (e.g., communication, collaboration, creativity, and self-management), as well as global cultural intelligence and foreign language skills. Digital technology has changed the structure of work, blurring the boundaries of working hours and creating new competency demands that did not exist in previous eras.

Additionally, another study by (S. A. Putri, 2025) shows that Generation Z perceives work in three main orientations, namely as a means of earning income (job), a space for self-development and social status improvement (career), and a form of worship and social contribution (calling). They expect jobs that not only provide decent wages but also match their interests, provide room for growth, have a supportive work environment, and allow work-life balance and flexibility. For Gen Z, a career is seen as a means of self-actualization that includes professional advancement, application of knowledge, and creation of change, with success measured by one's position, experience, and improved well-being. Their choices and commitment to their careers are greatly influenced by internal factors, such as interests and talents. In addition, external factors such as family, friends, social media, and the work environment greatly influence Gen Z's job choices.

Based on research findings (Retnaningsih, 2025), Generation Z, as a productive age group, should be able to contribute significantly to national development efforts and the achievement of national welfare goals. However, in reality, Gen Z often experiences difficulties adapting to the world of work, which demands discipline and compliance with certain rules and regulations. The gap between the characteristics of Gen Z and the demands of the world of work is a major challenge that needs to be bridged through state attention and policy-making. By having decent jobs and incomes, Gen Z can not only meet their own needs independently, but also become a reliable human resource in supporting the vision of Indonesia Emas 2045. Therefore, the state and stakeholders, such as Commission IX of the Indonesian House of Representatives, need to encourage the creation of an inclusive employment ecosystem and relevant policies to optimize the role of Gen Z in the job market.

The previous studies show that Generation Z, as the youngest workforce group today, faces various obstacles and challenges in entering the world of work. However, there have not been many

comprehensive studies discussing the employment issues faced by Gen Z, especially those covering the social, economic, and cultural backgrounds that influence this. Therefore, this article aims to describe the various employment issues experienced by Gen Z, including the generation gap, the tendency to choose voluntary unemployment, mental health pressures in the workplace, and the dynamics of the gig economy, which increasingly dominate their employment choices. This research is relevant and interesting because it provides a more complete picture of the social reality of Gen Z employment.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach to address the research questions using the library research method, which involves searching, collecting, and analyzing literature relevant to the research topic (Sari & Asmendri, 2020). The descriptive qualitative approach was chosen to enable the researcher to interpret and describe previous ideas, theories, and findings in depth, thereby gaining a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under study (Jamaludin, 2021). Through library research, the collected data were critically and descriptively analyzed to construct a conceptual framework and answer the research problems.

The data used in this study were obtained from books, journal articles, popular articles, government data publications, and other literature discussing employment issues, particularly among Generation Z Z. This study employs Miles and Huberman's interactive model of analysis. Data analysis in qualitative studies, as stated by Miles and Huberman, can occur simultaneously with field activities and afterward (Rijali, 2018). In the context of this research, the analysis process was conducted alongside the data collection stage by following the flow of the interactive analysis model. Data analysis was carried out by identifying and describing data in three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing (Sugiyono, 2013).

The first stage, data reduction, was conducted using various documents used in this study. The second stage, data display, involved selecting data relevant to the research focus to examine their validity. In this study, data presentation was elaborated in the form of brief descriptions, figures, tables, and relationships between categories. The third stage, conclusion drawing, was delivered descriptively to illustrate the phenomena of this research.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section outlines the issues faced by Generation Z when entering and navigating the world of work. Based on the research findings, at least four main problems arise. First, the decline in labor absorption in the formal sector indicates limited stable and long-term employment opportunities. Second, there is a generational gap and differences in work preferences between Gen Z and previous generations, which often create tension in the work environment. Third, some Gen Z individuals tend to choose voluntary unemployment or delay their entry into the workforce due to their values, expectations, and psychosocial conditions. Fourth, the growing dynamics of the gig economy provide new opportunities but also present challenges related to income uncertainty and a lack of job protection.

3.1 Declining Job Absorption in the Formal Sector

To understand the dynamics of employment in Indonesia over the past decade, it is essential to examine the development of labor force data over time to identify current employment trends. Based on the researcher's data processing from the National Labor Force Survey (Sakernas) reports of Statistics Indonesia (BPS) for the period of February 2015–2025, Table 1 presents the number of labor force participants, including the employed population, unemployed population, and open unemployment rate (TPT). These data serve as the foundation for analyzing the objective conditions of Indonesia's labor force, which in turn provides a basis for understanding the employment challenges faced by Generation Z. see Table 1

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Table 1. Indonesian Labor Force Condition from February 2015-2025

Years	Total Labor Force (in million)	Total Working Population (in million)	Number of Unemployed (in million)	Open unemployment rate (TPT) *in percent
2015	128,30	120,85	7,45	5,81
2016	127,67	120,65	7,02	5,50
2017	131,55	124,54	7,01	5,33
2018	133,94	127,07	6,87	5,13
2019	136,18	129,37	6,82	5,01
2020	137,91	131,06	6,88	4,99
2021	139,81	131,91	8,75	6,26
2022	144,62	135,61	8,40	5,83
2023	146,62	138,63	7,99	5,45
2024	149,38	142,18	7,20	4,82
2025	153,04	145,77	7,27	4,76

Source: Sakernas February period 2016-2025, BPS

Based on Sakernas data for the 2015–2025 period, as shown in Table 1, the number of labor force participants in Indonesia demonstrates a consistent upward trend, increasing from 128.30 million people in 2015 to 153.04 million in 2025. This growth indicates the expansion of the working-age population, most of whom are from Generation Z entering the labor market. In line with this, the number of employed persons is expected to rise from 120.85 million in 2015 to 145.77 million in 2025. This reflects the labor market's capacity to absorb new workers, although it has not fully kept pace with the growth of the labor force.

The number of unemployed individuals during this period fluctuated (unstable conditions characterized by increases and decreases). In 2015, the figure stood at 7.45 million, declining to 6.87 million by 2019. However, a significant surge occurred in 2020–2021, with unemployment reaching 8.75 million by 2021. This condition is closely related to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted various economic sectors (R. R. K. Putri et al., 2021). Subsequently, unemployment gradually declines, reaching 7.27 million by 2025. A similar trend is observed in the open unemployment rate (TPT). In 2015, the TPT stood at 5.81 percent and declined steadily to 5.01 percent in 2019. However, the pandemic triggered another increase, with TPT rising to 6.26 percent in 2021, before gradually falling again to 4.76 percent in 2025, the lowest level in the past decade.

Overall, the data presented above indicate that Indonesia's labor force has gradually moved in a positive direction, marked by increased employment absorption and a declining TPT in the post-pandemic period. Nevertheless, the fact that unemployment still stood at around 7 million people in 2025 highlights that employment issues remain a significant challenge, particularly for Generation Z. This condition illustrates that they must compete intensely in the job market while being encouraged to explore alternative employment sectors that are more aligned with their preferences and work values. Data published by the Kompas.com R&D team also show that the absorption of formal sector workers has decreased over the past 15 years (Wisanggeni et al., 2024). During the 2009-2014 period, employment absorbed 15.6 million people, declining by almost half to 8.5 million people in the 2014-2019 period and falling to 2 million people in the 2019-2024 period (Wisanggeni et al., 2024). This is certainly a serious problem faced by Gen Z, the youngest workforce today.

3.2 Generation Gap and Differences in Work Preferences

In addition to the issue of labor absorption in the formal sector, the employment problems faced by Generation Z are also closely related to the generation gap and differences in work preferences. This issue is important and related to each other because it affects the pattern of interaction in the workplace and determines the direction of career choices taken by Gen Z in facing the dynamics of the labor market

in Indonesia. Some differences in work expectations and preferences among several generations, as proposed by Fuchs et al. (2024), are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Summary of Key Expectations and Preferences Related to Generations in the Workplace

Generation	Key Preferences and Expectations	Also Important
All	*Attractive financial compensation *Good working atmosphere *Quality leadership (not uniformly defined across generations)	*No complaints (even if they are vague) *Allowed to participate
X	*Security and long-term relationships with employers *Company stability *Opportunity for advancement *Employer customer orientation·	*Work-life balance and personal life *Personal fulfillment opportunities *Social bonds in the workplace *Supportive environment (also around new technologies)
Y	* Career opportunities, status and prestige * Job security * Meaningful and fulfilling work content *Opportunities for skill development *Leadership that provides purpose and mentoring	*Working in a team *Supportive work environment (leaders and coworkers) *Flexibility, especially in terms of working hours, but also allow for some time for recreation * Independence and freedom in making work-related decisions *Engagement and fun at work
Z	*Flexible working that supports a good work-life balance *Teamwork and a socially permissive environment *Job security *Opportunities to learn and gain diverse experiences * Modern technology, digital environment *Supportive teams and bosses who provide quick feedback	*Short and concise communication *Meaningful work *Companies that value CSR and green causes *Personal connection and fun *Clear career opportunities and plans

Source: (Fuchs et al., 2024)

Table 2 illustrates the differences in preferences and key expectations regarding the world of work among several generations, namely Generation X, Y, and Z, along with the general points considered important across all generations. In general, all generations desire an attractive financial compensation package, positive work environment, and quality leadership. Other important aspects include fairness in the workplace and opportunities to participate in decision-making.

For Generation X, the main preferences are job security and long-term relationships with employers, company stability, opportunities for career advancement, and a customer-oriented outlook. In addition, Generation X emphasizes the importance of work-life balance, opportunities for self-fulfillment, social bonds in the workplace, and a supportive work environment, including openness to adopting new technologies. Meanwhile, Generation Y places greater emphasis on career opportunities, status, and prestige, along with the need for job security. They also value meaningful and fulfilling work, opportunities for skill development, and leadership that provides purpose and mentoring. Other important factors for this generation include teamwork, a supportive work environment, flexible working hours, autonomy in decision-making, and a pleasant and communal workplace atmosphere.

Generation Z, on the other hand, has somewhat different preferences. They prioritize flexible working arrangements that support life balance and opportunities to work in teams with high social interaction while still valuing job security. Furthermore, Gen Z highly appreciates opportunities for learning and diverse experiences, a modern and digitally based work environment, and support from colleagues and supervisors who provide quick feedback. Other important aspects for Gen Z include concise and clear communication, meaningful work, corporate commitment to sustainability values (CSR and green goals), personal connections, a fun work atmosphere, and clarity regarding future career plans.

According to Fotaleno & Batubara (2024), these differences in work expectations and preferences among generations are driven by shifting values and the meaning of work for Generation Z, which differ from those of previous generations. This is one of the factors contributing to the difficulties that Gen Z faces in entering and remaining in the workforce. In line with the Generation Gap Theory, these differences are attributed to various factors, including life experiences, social conditions, and technological developments specific to each generation (Sutrasna, 2023).

3.3 The Dynamics of the GIG Economy

As mentioned in the previous section, Gen Z's work preference refers to flexibility in work that creates a work-life balance situation. One form of employment transformation that supports this flexibility is the gig economy, which is a pattern of work based on short-term contracts or freelance work, where individuals work independently and offer services based on projects (Zulfani, 2024). Data from the Central Bureau of Statistics show that Gen Z prefers to work as freelancers rather than permanent workers (Badan Pusat Statistik Kabupaten Bandung, 2025). In line with these findings, Rachmawati's research emphasized that Gen Z tends to like office jobs with flexible work schedules, while allowing them to build careers in parallel (Rachmawati, 2019).

However, the GIG economy has complex dynamics, including the digitization process, legal protection, income, social, and labor issues (Kamarudin & Arif, 2024). To provide a more comprehensive picture, a summary of the opportunities and challenges inherent in the development of the gig economy is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Economic GIG Opportunities and Challenges

Aspect (Category)	Opportunities	Challenge
Digitization	Allows remote and flexible working using digital devices	Digital devices must be adequate including internet network and electricity access
Income	Allows for multiple jobs at one time	Income insecurity: workers earn an uncertain income.
Law	Open opportunities for legal workers, consultants, or advocates to be involved in drafting policies, digital labor regulations, and legal assistance services for freelancers and platform-based companies.	*Legal uncertainty: some countries have no legal guarantees regarding freelance work. *Gig workers often do not receive the same social protection as permanent workers.
Social	*Expand work opportunities across geographical boundaries, allowing workers to connect with global clients without having to move. *Create space for new digital communities or professional networks that strengthen social solidarity among freelancers.	Social stigma in the community considers jobs in the GIG Economy field less prestigious
Labor	An alternative for the young labor force who find it difficult to enter the formal sector due to limited employment opportunities.	Limited access to training and career development

Source: Processed by Researcher

Table 3 shows that the GIG Economy has opportunities and challenges in various aspects such as digitization, income, law, social, and workforce. With the development of information technology, it is increasingly possible to work in the digital realm, increasing job opportunities and creating new community spaces. However, the challenges and problems of the GIG economy are also of concern to many parties, especially Generation Z, such as uneven access and use of digital technology, especially in remote areas, income uncertainty, legal uncertainty, social stigma, and limited career development. There are several reasons why decent and fair work has not been accepted by gig workers, both due to structural issues and the lack of agency power of the gig workers. In the critical industrial relations approach, employers will not give workers rights if there is no push from outside (Kelly, 2002 in Novianto et al., 2021).

3.4 Tendency of Voluntary Unemployment

The employment issues faced by Generation Z carry their own complexities, particularly with the emergence of the phenomenon in which many Gen Z individuals prefer voluntary unemployment rather than facing workplace pressures that may affect their mental health, such as stress and depression (Haq & Noorrizki, 2022). A study by Randstad Workmonitor in 2022, as cited in Fotaleno & Batubara (2024), also revealed that 58 percent of Gen Z workers chose to resign rather than continue in jobs they disliked or had no interest in. This preference for voluntary unemployment is influenced by internal factors such as personality and external factors such as unhealthy work environments (Haq & Noorrizki, 2022). Such tendencies arise from generational gaps and differences in job preferences, as discussed in the previous section.

Unlike earlier generations, who tended not to prioritize mental health in the workplace, Generation Z demonstrates greater awareness of its importance (Humanoo, 2023). This condition shapes how they define an ideal job, which is not only measured in terms of economic stability but also in relation to social aspects, work-life balance, and psychological well-being. However, this situation also creates new challenges, such as the emergence of stereotypes about Gen Z. Common stigmas regarding their characteristics in the workplace often portray them as individuals who seek instant results, are overly dependent on technology, too selective in choosing jobs, lack work ethic, and are considered sensitive or unable to withstand pressure (Setiadji et al., 2023).

Overall, the findings and discussion of this study indicate that the employment problems faced by Generation Z in Indonesia are complex and interrelated. At least four main categories can be identified: the decline in employment absorption in the formal sector, generational gaps and differences in job preferences, the tendency toward voluntary unemployment, and the dynamics of the gig economy. This shows that the employment challenges faced by Gen Z are not only related to the limited availability of jobs but also to shifts in values, orientations, and perspectives toward work. These findings suggest that both policy strategies and social approaches to employment need to be more adaptive and responsive to the characteristics of Generation Z to address the needs and challenges of the future labor market.

4. CONCLUSION

The employment problems faced by Generation Z in Indonesia cannot be separated from the various structural and cultural changes in the labor market. The results of this study show that these problems are interrelated, and are not only economic in nature, but are closely related to the socio-cultural aspects that influence Gen Z's preferences in the world of work. Specifically, there are four main problems faced by Gen Z: First, the reduction of jobs in the formal sector narrows stable employment opportunities; second, there is a generation gap and differences in work preferences with previous generations; third, the dynamics of the GIG Economy provide new job opportunities that suit the character of Gen Z, but there are challenges in various aspects, including income uncertainty and regulation; fourth, there is a tendency to be voluntarily unemployed as a strategy to deal with pressure or incompatibility with the conventional world of work.

These four aspects emphasize that employment issues are not only related to the availability of jobs but also to changes in the orientation, values, and expectations of the younger generation towards the world of work. Thus, more adaptive and responsive efforts are needed, both in terms of government policies, educational institutions, and the industrial sector, to formulate employment strategies that are in line with the characteristics of Generation Z. Only in this way, the great potential of this generation can be optimized while the structural challenges of employment can be overcome in a sustainable manner.

Ethical Approval
Ethical approval was not required for this study

Informed Consent Statement
Informed Consent was not required for this study

Author Contributions
RHP was responsible for conceptualizing the research framework and interpretation of the journal results. ASD supported the final editing process. All authors have reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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The authors declare no conflict of interest

Data Availability Statement
The data presented in this study are available upon request from the corresponding author for privacy

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