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GENERATION Z AND ITS PERCEPTION OF WORK

Empirical
study

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Abstract

One of the major demographic phenomenon registered in the present times is represented by the aging of the Romanian population and, consequently, of the workforce, this issue having several implications for the human resource management in organizations. As generation Z prepares to enter the labor market, managers will be facing a set of generational differences between their employees. As a result, the paper presents the characteristics of generation Z, as highlighted by recent studies. Moreover, the paper presents the results of a survey based on a questionnaire addressed to university students, members of generation Z. The results of the study highlight generation Z perception of the ideal workplace and working conditions, the main priorities in selecting a job and its career expectations and aspirations. The implications of the study, as well as future research directions are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Academics recognize that organizations face a problem they have never faced before, as employees from four different generations are nowadays active on the labour market: Baby-Boomers, generation X, generation Y (millennials) and, the youngest, generation Z, each of them being characterized by different values, ambitions and styles of working (Addor, 2011; Bennett et al., 2012; Robert Half, 2015). There are different points of view regarding the delimitations between generations. For example, generation Z is considered to be formed by those who were born after 1995 (Williams, 2010, cited by Bolser and Gosciej, 2015; Wood, 2013; Adecco, 2015), but there are authors who consider the year 2000 as the starting point for the development of generation Z (Bennett et al., 2012; Pološki Vokic, 2014; Ozkan and Solmaz, 2015), while others report the year 1992 (Glass, 2007, cited by Bennett et al., 2012) or even the year 1990 as the year of birth of the oldest representatives of this generation (Addor, 2011; Tulgan, 2013; Robert Half, 2015).

This new generation has definitely captured academics' and consultancy companies' attention, the characteristics of generation Z - also recognised as "generation me" (Glass, 2007, cited by Bennett et al., 2012), the "internet generation [...] and the first mobile mavens" (Ozkan and Solmaz, 2015), the "Net Generation or digital natives" - being researched, as its members start to enter the labour market (Addor, 2011) and start to have the financial power to become well desired customers for several markets. The majority of the studies identified in the literature review process (Adecco, 2015; Bolser and Gosciej, 2015; Tulgan, 2013; Robert Half, 2015) mainly focus on the differences between generation Z and generation Y. Although one may consider that these two consequent generations should have similar characteristics, research indicates that generation Z is different than millennials from many points of view (Adecco, 2015; Tulgan, 2013; Bolser and Gosciej, 2015).

Research on generation Z attitude towards work and professional life is extremely important, considering that a study developed by Adecco in 2015 on the US labour market indicates that in less than three years (in 2019), generation Z will represent more than 20% of the workforce (Adecco, 2015). In Romania, in 2015, according to the data provided by the National Statistics Institute (<http://statistici.insse.ro/shop/>), an average of 6,38% of the occupied population was represented by persons aged between 15 and 24 (as a result, members of generation Z).

These being considered, the paper aims to present the specific characteristics of generation Z, by

discussing the results of a study examining Romanian university students' perception and expectations of their future professional life.

GENERATION Z – A DIFFERENT TYPE OF EMPLOYEE?

Some authors (Bolser and Gosciej, 2015; Robert Half, 2015) state that generation Z is "unlike other generation ever seen before [...], the first truly global generation", that will determine "the greatest generational shift the workplace has ever seen before" (Tulgan, 2013). Other authors (Wood, 2013) admit that generations Z shares a series of characteristics with generation Y, mainly related to their ability to adapt to the global world and to use the newest technologies. Robert Half (2015), which recommends itself as "the world's first and largest specialized staffing firm" draws attention on the fact that generation Z will bring something new in terms of expectations for their prospect professional life. Compared to the prior generation (Y), whose ability to multi-task is already acknowledged, generation Z has an even greater ability to work on several tasks at the same time, while being more productive (Addor, 2011; Adecco, 2015; Ozkan and Solmaz, 2015). This ability is related to their broad access to information and social networks from an early age, generation Z having a great ability to process a great amount of information (Lyon, 2010, cited by Addor, 2011).

Moreover, research shows that the persons who belong to generation Z are extremely self-confident, have an optimistic view on their future professional life and tend to have entrepreneurial initiatives (Adecco, 2015), as they are very creative and innovative (Robert Half, 2015). Another interesting characteristic is the fact that despite being constantly connected on social media, generation Z seems to be less involved in civil engagement, compared to older generations (Addor, 2011).

Studies (Adecco, 2015) indicate that generation Z prefers independent work and tends to be reluctant to involve in teamwork. This fact can be determined by generation Z propensity for communicating in a virtual environment, using an abbreviated language that affects their listening, interpersonal and socialization skills (Addor, 2011; Tulgan, 2013). Moreover, the activity on social media negatively influences the writing skills of generation Z, as they seem to need in-depth training on developing formal communication skills (Robert Half, 2015).

However, a generally accepted idea is that generation Z could easily be integrated in organizations by developing mentorship programs with the help of more experienced generations

(Adecco, 2015), this idea being proposed since millennials have entered the labour market, in order to support their work-related relationship with Baby-Boomers (Bennett et al., 2012). The study conducted by Robert Half (2015) strengthens the need to mentor generation Z at the workplace, as the members of this generation strongly need to be constantly taught and require constant feedback on their activity. Also, Tulgan (2013) stresses that compared to millennials, generation Z tends not to resist authority relationships, as the representatives of this cohort report a strong need for human connection – this meaning that generation Z could only work for superiors who manage to develop a strong working relationship with their subordinates. Moreover, Bolser and Gosciej (2015) bring under the light the idea of „reverse mentoring”, a program that can easily help employees of different ages to bond, as junior employees can also share their knowledge and abilities to senior employees. In the present workplace conditions, when „diversity” is a key characteristic, reverse mentoring can become a strong instrument for increasing the engagement of employees from all generations, the final result being the enhancement of organizational performance (Bolser and Gosciej, 2015).

Furthermore, when considering the development of their professional life, the persons belonging to generation Z tend to value more the importance of “soft skills”, in the detriment of “hard skills” (Adecco, 2015), which may seem surprizing, as another study (Tulgan, 2015, cited by Robert Half, 2015) indicates that the members of this generation tend not to have soft skills as they begin their professional life. Moreover, as retaining generation Z employees in the company for several years may be a difficult issue to resolve, the persons in this generation could become loyal to their employer if the organization offers them the opportunity to grow, to experience new things and to achieve leading positions (Adecco, 2015; Robert Half, 2015). In fact, the advancement opportunities are the most important factor when members of generation Z select a full-time job, which explains why they tend to prefer to work in midsize companies or for multinational corporations (Robert Half, 2015).

Moreover, Wood (2013), Tulgan (2013) and Robert Half (2015) highlight generation Z need for security, as the members of this cohort grew up in a recessionary period. As they developed in a competitive environment, a survey conducted by Robert Half (2015) indicates that almost 80% of the members of generation Z expect to work harder than the generations older than them, in order to have a successful professional path. Moreover, the social and economic conditions they grew up with influenced generation Z, as they are reported to be more realistic in terms of demands and

expectations at the workplace than their forerunners (Tulgan, 2013).

This being said, the paper aims to present a profile of Romanian representatives of generation Z, by indicating the results of a study aimed at identifying generation Z expectations regarding the workplace and the professional life.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In order to study generation Z perception of work, the author conducted an exploratory research, a survey based on a structured questionnaire. The author considered suitable to use a research instrument similar to the one used by Robert Half (2015) in his own survey targeting 770 college and university students (part of generation Z) from the United States and Canada in 2015. As a result, the questionnaire used in the survey was designed with 11 closed questions (structured questions, with a total of 24 items to be answered) and 2 identification items (aimed at indicating the age and sex of the respondents). In this study, the author joins Williams (2010), cited by Bolser and Gosciej (2015), Wood (2013) and Adecco (2015) in considering that generation Z is formed by those persons born after 1995.

In conducting the research, the author considered suitable to use a convenience sampling method, by choosing to conduct the survey among generation Z representatives who were easy to contact and willing to participate at the study. As a result, the survey was conducted in the period April 4th – April 12 2016, among second year students at the Faculty of Business and Tourism (Bucharest University of Economic Studies). As the author held seminars on eight study groups of students, all 188 students the author worked with during the second semester of the 2015-2016 university year received via e-mail the invitation to take part in the study, by completing the questionnaire using a specific link indicated in the e-mail. Finally, 156 students born after 1995 completed the questionnaire, resulting a 82,98% response rate. Also, there were registered another four responses from persons born between 1988 and 1993, but their answers were not taken into consideration in the results’ analysis. The respondents were predominantly women (87,2%), only 12,8% being members of generation Z of male gender. This distribution on gender was determined by the structure on gender of the students registered at the faculty, out of the 188 students enrolled in the eight study groups, only 37 being men.

The author is aware that the sample is not representative for Romanian generation Z, but the results are interesting, as they offer an insight into this cohort’s expectations and perception regarding the professional life.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

First of all, in order to properly analyse generation Z perception of the labour market and workplace conditions, the survey intended to identify whether the respondents have any professional experience. The survey indicated that most of the respondents (65,4%) were not currently working, while only 34,6% already had a job. As the respondents are aged 21 and enrolled in the second year of study at the university, this situation can be considered natural. It is not surprising that only 6,41% of the respondents have a full-time job, while most of the ones actively involved on the labour market (20,51% of the respondents) have a part-time job. Moreover, 7,69% of the respondents stated that they are involved in an internship program, while 12,82% are voluntarily working in an organization. One of the main objectives of the study was to identify generation Z perception of the ideal workplace. The survey indicates that most of the students questioned (44,9%) would like to work in a large international corporation, while 19,2% would like to work in a midsize company, this results confirming the conclusions of the study conducted by Robert Half (2015). Furthermore, 19,2% of the respondents are willing to work in a start-up or in an entrepreneurial initiative, while only 5,1% would like to work in an NGO. Surprisingly, only 11,5% would like to work independently, as consultants or freelancers.

Furthermore, the study aimed at identifying generation Z perception on the ideal working conditions. The survey indicates that most of the respondents (47,7%) would like to work in a large team, in an open-space office, while 34,6% would like to work independently, in their own (private) office. Only 10,3% of the representatives of generation Z who were questioned stated that they would like to work in a small-sized team, in a closed-door office, while even less (7,7%) stated that they would like to work independently, but off-site. These results indicate that Romanian representatives of generation Z tend to prefer collaborating work, which contradicts the study conducted by Adecco (2015), indicating that generation Z prefers independent work and seems reluctant to involve in teamwork. Moreover, the results of the present survey are different than the ones of the Robert Half (2015) study involving students from US and Canada, which indicated that generation Z tends to prefer working (in 64% of the cases) in a small group, in an office.

The survey also intended to highlight what influences generation Z in choosing a full-time job. As a result, the respondents were asked to choose three priorities, from a list of 12, the results being presented in Figure 1 (as multiple responses were allowed, the sum of all choices is higher than 100%). When evaluating a job, the members of

generation Z who took part in the survey value the most the possibility of advancement in a company (87,18% of the respondents chose this as a top-priority), the opportunity of being generously paid for their work (in 60,26% of the cases) and the security of the job (in 43,59% of the cases). These results are in accordance with the ones of previous studies (Wood, 2013; Tulgan, 2013; Adecco, 2015; Robert Half, 2015). Moreover, the survey indicates that generation Z has indeed a need for constant development and looks for creating a good relationship with superiors, as the interaction with a manager from whom one has something to learn was scored as the fourth most important factor in choosing a job. Having this in mind, it is obvious that members of generation Z expect to be mentored at their workplace, as previous studies have already indicated. The least important factors in selecting a full-time job mentioned by the members of generation Z who were questioned were the possibility of working on a position with an impressive name, having good healthcare insurance and numerous paid vacation days.

Furthermore, the research aimed to highlight the maximum amount of time the representatives of generation Z are willing to spend each day to travel to their workplace. The survey indicates that 48,7% of Romanian members of generation Z questioned are willing to travel between 15 and 30 minutes from their home to their workplace, while a similar proportion (44,9%) are willing to travel up to one hour from the place they live in to the place they work. Only 6,4% of the respondents stated that they would not choose a workplace that would involve traveling for more than 15 minutes from their home, while none of the respondents would be willing to travel for more than one hour from their home to their workplace.

When asked about the expected salary for their first job after graduating from college, 38,5% of the respondents mentioned they believe they could earn up to 1500 lei (approximately 330 euro) in a month, while 33,3% expect a monthly salary of up to 2000 lei (approx. 445 euro), while only 14,1% consider they could receive up to 2500 lei (approx. 560 euro) in a month. While 3,8% of the respondents tend to more reserved, expecting a monthly salary of less than 1000 lei (approx. 225 euro), 10,3% of the respondents are more confident, and expect from their first job a salary above 2500 lei. Considering the fact that in Romania, according to the data provided by the National Institute of Statistics (<http://statistici.insse.ro/shop/>), the average net monthly earning was in 2015 of 1808,44 lei (approx. 404 euro), it could be said that generation Z has realistic expectations.

Another objective of the study was to identify generation Z perception on the needed skills for developing a successful career. As a result, the respondents were asked to grade (using a semantic

differential scale from 1 - "not at all required" to 5 - "required in a great extent") ten skills. In order to identify the opinion of the entire sample, an average of all the responses was computed for all ten abilities and skills taken into account, the results being presented in Figure 2.

As presented in the figure mentioned above, all the abilities and skills taken into account were considered important or very important for a successful professional life, as all the computed averages have values higher than 3,5. However, the representatives of generation Z who took part in the study consider that the ability to constantly learn new things is the most important ability that could help them develop a career (average – 4,57), almost equally important being considered the ability to communicate, both orally and in writing, in a diverse professional environment (average – 4,44) and the ability to solve problems (average - 4,41). Moreover, it should be noticed that the respondents considered that the ability to work in a team is more important than the ability of working independently. As the research results indicate, generation Z considers that the least important ability they will need in order to develop a successful career will be the ability to work in a diverse cultural environment, which may seem surprising, as most of them stated that they would want to work in a multinational corporation.

As previous studies (Adecco, 2015; Robert Half, 2015) discuss the importance of "soft skills" in the present working environment, the survey also aimed at identifying generation Z perception on its own soft skills. As a result, the respondents were asked to evaluate the extent to which they have 5 specific soft skills (similar to the previous question, it was used a semantic differential scale from 1 - "not at all" to 5 - "in a great extent"). As proceeded before, in order to identify the opinion of the entire sample, an average of all the responses was computed for all five skills taken into account, the results being presented in Figure 3. The representatives of generation Z questioned believe they are strongly able to take responsibility for their own actions (average – 4,14) and they also perceive themselves as able to create a good public image (by proving timeliness, organization and productivity, quality, follow-through and initiative). However, the survey indicates that the respondents believe they could further develop other soft skills, such as: the ability to maintain a positive attitude (average – 3,68), having a healthy life-style, with a positive impact on their professional life (average – 3,46) and the ability to evaluate themselves in a correct manner (this being the less developed soft-skill, with an average score of 3,45).

Furthermore, the study aimed at highlighting generation Z's vision on their career path. As a result, the respondents were asked to mention in what professional circumstance they image

themselves in 5 years after graduating from their bachelor studies. Most of the respondents (34,6%) stated that they expect to be working on the corporate ladder (without having a supervising position yet), while almost as many (32,1%) expect to have their own business by then. Only 15,4% of the members of generation Z questioned stated that they believe they will have a management position in a company in the next 5 years after graduating from college, while the same proportion (15,4%) intends to develop their academic background, by pursuing another form of higher education (a master's degree or a PhD). One may say that these career aspirations can be considered realistic.

Last but not least, the study aimed at identifying generation Z's perception on the effort they believe they should make in order to have a successful professional life, compared to the previous generations. Not surprisingly, 84,62% of the respondents stated they believe they will be forced to work (a lot) harder than their forerunners, while 10,3% believe there will be no difference between generations and only 5,1% expect to work less hard than past generations. These results are similar to the ones highlighted by the study conducted by Robert Half (2015), which also concluded that the members of generation Z expect to work until the age of 70 years old.

CONCLUSIONS

As generation Z starts to enter the labour market, the need to better understand its characteristics becomes stronger. As a result, the present paper aimed at creating a profile of the Romanian representatives of generation Z, by presenting its perception of their future career, the ideal workplace and their career aspirations. The results of the survey presented in this paper indicate that generation Z does not want to work in isolation, but tends to prefer working in groups, in open-space offices. Also, the study confirmed the conclusions of previous research, indicating that generation Z has a constant need for development, expects to be mentored by its superiors and desires to develop good working relationships. In addition, the study confirmed that generation Z has a strong need for security, reflected in their desire for secure jobs and generous pay.

These being said, the author acknowledges that the research presented in this paper has a series of limitations, most of them occurring from the fact that the study used a convenience sampling method, as the representatives of generation Z were selected based on their accessibility to the author (the respondents were the researcher's students). As a result, it would be interesting to develop this study using a probabilistic sampling method. Moreover, the study only focuses on persons studying economic sciences. As a result, it would

be interesting to identify the perception of work and career expectations of generation Z representatives with interests in other activity domains as well. Moreover, the present study mainly focused on female respondents; therefore, a future research may investigate the influence of gender on work values and career expectations. As a consequence, the results presented in this paper may be considered a strong starting point for further, more comprehensive studies.

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ANNEXES

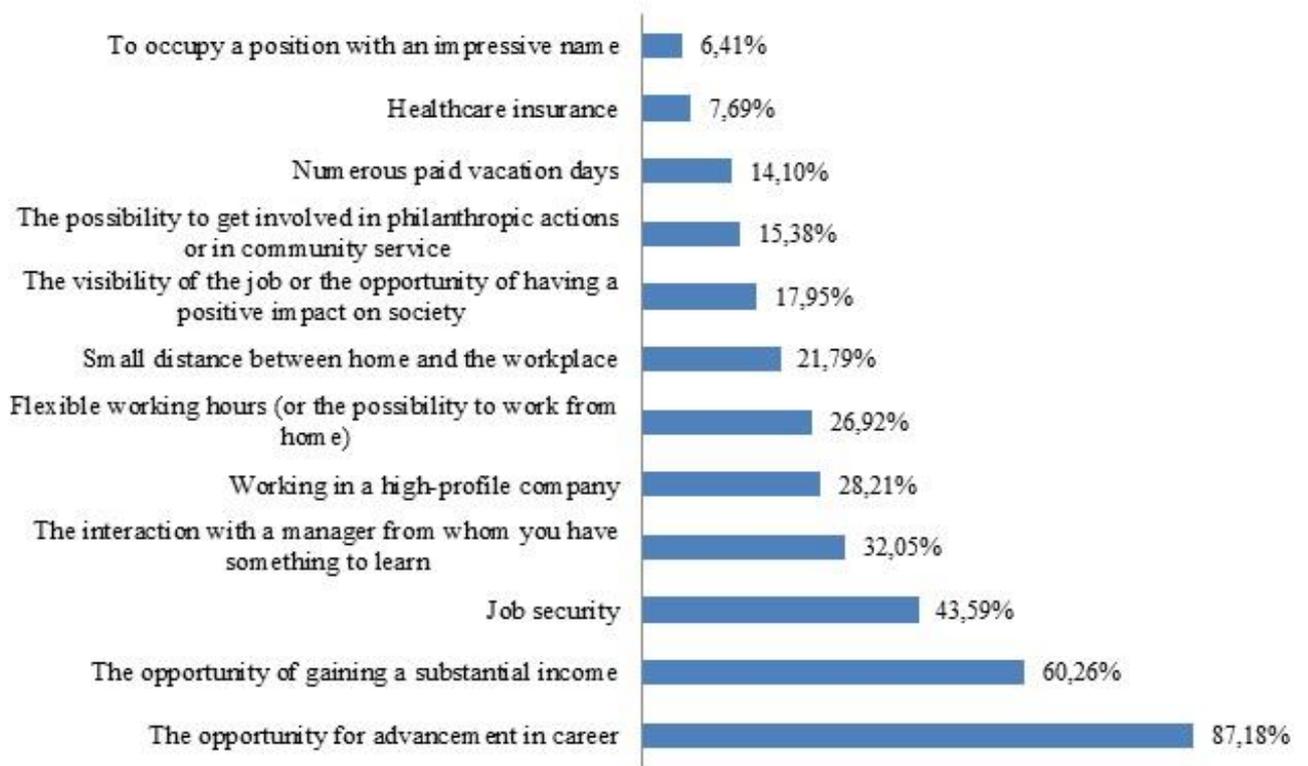


Figure No.1 Generation Z top priorities in choosing a full-time job
Source: research results

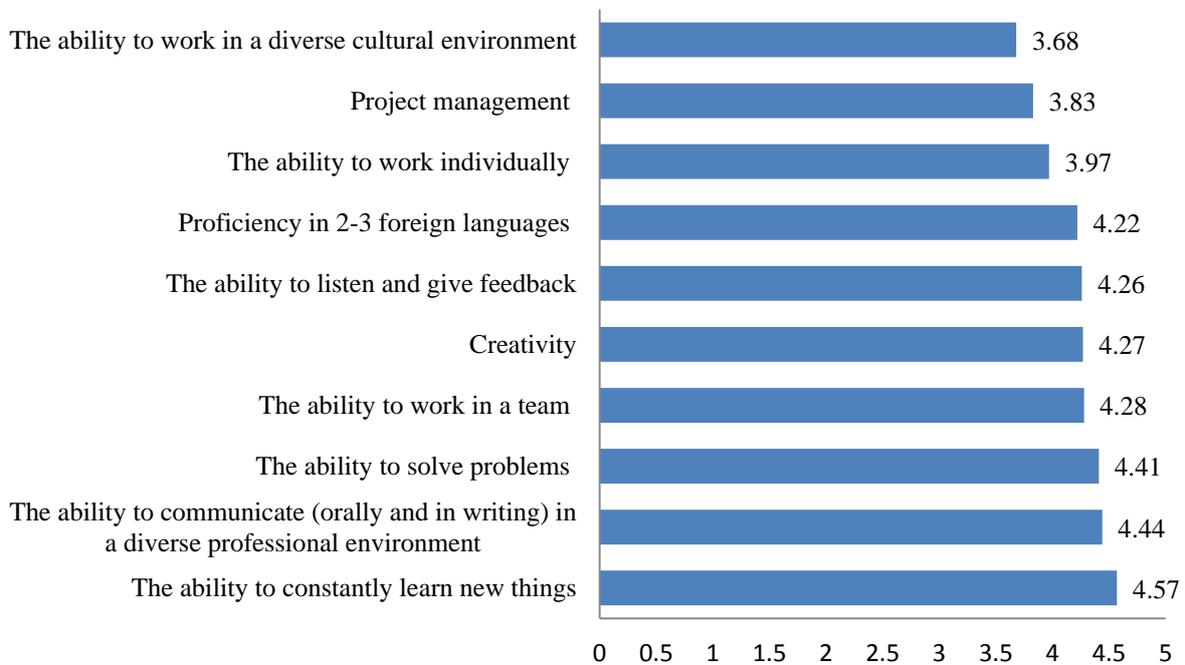


Figure No.2 Generation Z perception of needed abilities for a successful career
Source: research results

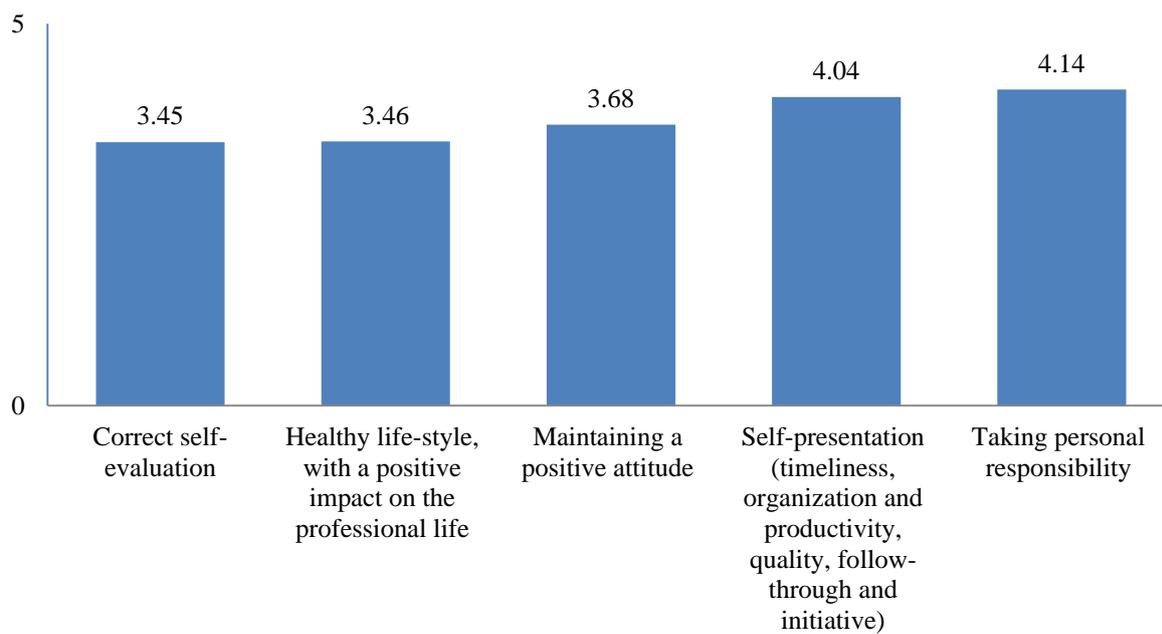


Figure No.3 Generation Z perception on their „soft-skills”

Source: research results