

DIGITIZATION AND GENERATION Z: RETHINKING LABOUR REALITIES IN LATVIA

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Abstract. In the context of active digital transition, the issue of digitalization's impact on the youth labour market becomes especially relevant. This article examines how changes brought about by the introduction of information technologies affect the professional activities and labour values of the younger generation in Latvia. The study is based on data obtained from surveys conducted among young people and working professionals, with a focus on analysing the risks associated with digitalization. The main goal of the article is to assess the risks arising on the path of digital transformation and to develop strategies for their reduction. The research tasks include: assessing internal and external risks related to the functioning of the youth labour market; exploring the career paths of young people and their work attitudes; analysing objective and subjective factors contributing to the entrepreneurial activity of the youth; examining the influence of the information environment on the self-determination of the youth and their professional development; determining preventive measures to minimize the negative consequences of digitalization on the labour market for young professionals. The subject of this study is the impact of digital transformations on the youth labour market in Latvia. The main research methods include a literature review, sociological survey, risk analysis, empirical analysis, and comparative analysis. Survey results conducted by the authors show that Generation Z values the flexibility and career growth opportunities that digitalization provides but also expresses concerns about the risks and uncertainties accompanying these processes. The findings indicate that to support young people and improve their adaptation to a changing market, modernization of the Latvian educational system is necessary. Special attention needs to be paid to the development of digital competencies and the integration of modern information technologies into educational programs. Furthermore, the study emphasizes the importance of creating favourable conditions for the development of entrepreneurial initiatives among the youth.

Key words: generation Z, digital transformation, labour market, educational strategies.

JEL code: J24, O33, L26

Introduction

The modern era of digital innovations, marked by unprecedented progress in information technologies, transforms digital technologies into a key tool for achieving social and economic progress. These technologies have a significant impact on all areas of society's life, making innovative activity, the latest automation systems, and the dynamics of communication processes determining factors of social development (Schwab, 2017; Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2014). Digitization and informatization pave the way to new scientific and technical horizons.

Among researchers, it is customary to highlight both positive and negative aspects of labour digitization. Positive aspects include economic growth, increased productivity, and global competitiveness in the field of digital technologies, e-commerce, and online business; improvement of well-being and quality of life, and growth of IT competencies thanks to online education (Manyika et al., 2017; Ford, 2015). Among the negative consequences are the increase in structural unemployment due to automation, the decrease in the level of social protection, the intensification of inequality in access to digital resources, and uncertainty in career planning (Autor, 2015).

In K.Leshinsky's study, the effect of digital technology-based education on the entrepreneurial intentions of Generation Z students from different countries in Europe and Central Asia is analysed. Generation Z, born after 1995, actively uses information technologies and makes choices for their future career in the context of digitization (Leshinsky, 2023).

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Some authors in the theory of generations argue that the socio-historical environment of youth has a significant influence on the generation (Mannheim, 1952). Generation Z is characterized as "digital natives" (Marc, 2001), grew up in the era of digital technologies, distinguished by the ability to quickly process information and use social networks for communication.

Generation Z values flexibility in working hours and aspires to continuous professional growth (Pinzaru et al., 2022). Leshinsky's conclusions emphasize the need for integrating digital tools into the educational process to stimulate entrepreneurial intentions among Generation Z, confirming their readiness for active use of technology in learning and in the labour market.

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated digitalization processes, yet its impact on economic and social processes has been twofold (OECD, 2020). Many organizations, including universities, have shifted to remote work and learning methods, which has facilitated more active acquisition of new information technologies by the youth. At the same time, this led to an intensification of problems related to the assessment and control of the work process, as well as a tendency for youth to use IT more for entertainment than for educational purposes (Witczak-Roszkowska, 2022).

Recent studies in Latvia reveal the complexity of the relationship between economic and human development, indicating that certain economic factors like added value and personnel costs are significantly correlated with the Human Development Index (Zarina, 2022). These findings suggest that Latvia's focus on enhancing industry-level economic outputs could positively impact human development, stressing the importance of strategic economic planning and investment in human capital development tailored to the demands of Industry 5.0 and the Sixth Technological Order. This integration aims to modernize Latvia's educational system and labour market to foster a workforce capable of thriving in a digital economy.

We argue that a crucial direction for Latvia should be the comprehensive modernization of the education system, taking into account global trends and a strategic approach to forming professional personnel capable of effectively functioning in a digital economy.

Hence, the research's objective is to evaluate the impact of digital transformations on the youth labour market through the lens of risk-oriented analysis. The tasks of the research include: assessing the internal and external risks associated with the functioning of the youth labour market; studying the career paths of young people and their work attitudes; analysing the objective and subjective factors contributing to the entrepreneurial activity of the youth; considering the impact of the information environment on the self-determination of the youth and their professional development; identifying preventive measures to minimize the negative consequences of digitization on the labour market for young specialists.

The main research methods include a literature review, sociological survey, risk analysis, empirical analysis, and comparative analysis based on data from two studies conducted by the authors. These methods combined offer a comprehensive approach to exploring the complex dynamics of digital transformation and its implications for young people in Latvia, with a focus on identifying risks and developing strategies to mitigate them.

Research results and discussion

1. The theoretical foundation and empirical base of the research

The empirical base of our analysis of the digital impact on youth consists of data from two studies. The first, conducted by Ltd. "Baltic Center" in February 2023, focused on youth aged 15 to 29 years with a sample of 98 respondents, making it representative in terms of gender, age, and place of residence. A

survey method with a multi-stage stratified sample was applied, with a margin of error of $\pm 4\%$. These data will serve as a basis for analysing the direct risks in the youth labour market.

The study is based on the concept proposed by Ulrich Beck (Beck, 1992), which elucidates the inevitability of various risks, both natural and anthropogenic, for modern society. According to this approach, progress in modern society entails both positive and negative consequences. Risks associated with digitization and modernization are mainly the result of human activity (Giddens, 1999), requiring a thorough analytical approach before taking steps to minimize them. The positive and negative aspects of digitization in the labour sphere require careful analysis to assess opportunities and threats for participants in the youth labour market and finding ways to mitigate them (Nickols, 2006).

The second study, conducted among the working population of Riga in November 2023, included 113 individuals engaged in work with information technologies, with a sample error of $\pm 5\%$. It is important to note that a significant portion of the study participants belonged to the age group of 18-29 years, allowing the data obtained to be used for further analysis within our study of the youth labour market.

2. Evaluation of digital risks

The study conducted in November 2023 revealed that actively working youth positively perceive digitalization. Ninety percent of respondents confirmed the favourable impact of digital technologies on career growth and educational processes (93.7%), creativity, self-realization, and self-expression (86%), increasing the level of social cohesion and trust in society (51.7%), and expanding opportunities for quality leisure (66%).

However, youth awareness of the potential negative aspects of digitalization remains low. For instance, 24 respondents noted that the transition to remote work formats increased the time needed to complete tasks due to constant distractions, such as messengers and email. Forty-one percent of the study participants indicated an increase in work intensity due to adapting to new technologies. At the same time, about 18% expressed concerns about the lack of necessary skills to work with new software and mobile applications, while less than 10% acknowledged feelings of insecurity and fear of the need to learn new technologies.

Youth entering the labour market face certain difficulties, particularly discrimination in hiring due to lack of experience, which is perceived as an indicator of insufficient qualification. Nearly all job vacancies require at least two years of experience in the field, making the acquisition of initial professional experience during university studies highly relevant (Smith et al., 2018). The trend of combining study and work is gaining momentum in Europe as a means of financial support and as an opportunity to gain professional experience before graduating from university. However, this can lead to undesirable consequences, such as a decrease in academic achievements and a deterioration of students' health, as well as a decrease in discipline levels, which negatively affects the educational process (Perna, 2023).

It should be noted that the positive aspects of labour digitalization are perceived by youth as obvious, whereas the risks associated with the implementation of information technologies are only recognized when directly encountered.

3. Labour values and IT competencies of youth

In the process of defining their own professional path, students often face uncertainty regarding what knowledge, skills, and abilities they will acquire during their university studies. Their career choice is often based on theoretical assumptions about the future profession and may not reflect their true needs, interests, and abilities, making the choice insufficiently considered (Kratus, 2007; Blustein, 2013). When

young people start their careers, they often lack a clear understanding of the qualifications required for the job and the prospects of their professional activity. This first encounter with the real labour world can lead to the need for re-evaluation or degradation of labour values, negatively affecting the socio-psychological state of youth and diminishing the value of professionalism in the younger generation.

The findings of a study conducted in February 2023 revealed that material aspects of work hold a higher priority for youth than its social significance and labour values. Among the key factors determining the choice of workplace by young people were: the level of salary; favourable working conditions, and the possibility of balancing professional activity and family commitments. Meanwhile, access to social guarantees and employment in prestigious companies are seen as less important criteria, according to only every fifth respondent.

Table 1

Professional value orientations of youth, %

The type of professional-value orientation of youth	%, respondents
Earning a high salary	77.4%
Favourable working conditions and schedule	56.3%
The possibility of combining work and family responsibilities	39.2%
Relative independence at the workplace	35.7%
Applying one's knowledge, experience, qualifications	34.5%
Positive relationships within the team	31.4%
Opportunities for advancement and career growth	29.8%
Contribution to society	27.9%
Work without excessive stress and overtime	23.3%
Development of interesting and innovative projects	22.6%
Collaboration with qualified colleagues	20.4%
Maintaining connections with representatives of various social strata	19.5%
Employment in a prestigious company	16.4%
Access to social benefits and guarantees	14.9%

Source: archive of authors

These results convince us that young people strive for material benefits and additional social goods. Many young people do not consider the labour sphere an important means of self-realization: it is viewed by young people primarily as a source of income, their work has lost its independent value and has turned into a pragmatic activity (Sennett, 2007; Standing, 2011; David, 2018). The trend towards the growing importance of wages has been shaped by many factors, including low salaries for young specialists and the impossibility of self-realization in a specific form of labour. Nevertheless, many young people have retained values such as career, independence, and professional development, although they are less pronounced.

4. Youth strategies in the labour market

In our research conducted in February 2023, a significant proportion of secondary employment among the younger generation was discovered: about 32% of respondents were engaged in additional professional activity, providing themselves with supplementary income. Despite the fact that part of these earnings was irregular, many young people indicated having stable side jobs, either in addition to their main employment or within their primary place of work. Secondary employment appears to be the main method of social adaptation in the face of economic crises, which leads to a decrease in the real income levels of the population and a reduction in the standard and quality of life (Standing, 2011).

Information from the Central Statistical Bureau shows that in 2023, the number of unemployed citizens of Latvia aged 15-74 was 61.5 thousand people. This is 3.7 thousand or 5.7% less than in the previous year. For youth aged 15 to 24, the number of unemployed decreased from 9.8 thousand in 2022 to 5.8 thousand in the second quarter of 2023 and rose again to 8.7 thousand by the fourth quarter (Central Statistical Office, 2023).

One of the main problems leading to youth unemployment in Latvia is the lack of alignment between the skills possessed by graduates and those demanded by employers. Educational institutions face the challenge of transforming their teaching approaches to match the dynamically evolving digital environment. Developing digital competencies among young professionals is extremely important in current conditions. Students and young professionals must be proficient in a wide range of information tools and technologies and be able to effectively find, process, store, and transmit information. Additionally, flexibility in professionals, their ability to adapt to new conditions, continuous striving for self-improvement, and education are important aspects of professional training.

Since 2013, the unemployment rate among youth in Latvia has been lower than the EU average, but in 2022 it was 0.8 percentage points higher. In 2023, Latvia had the lowest youth unemployment rate in the Baltic countries – 18.3% in Lithuania and 17.3% in Estonia.

In 2023, 34.9% of all young people were economically active, that is, were employed or actively looking for work (unemployed), while 65.1% of the youth were economically inactive — mainly they continued their education and were not looking for work (Central Statistical Office, 2023).

A higher education diploma does not guarantee successful employment and a good career. Individual researchers highlight the phenomenon of higher education inflation: despite its subjective attractiveness and prestige in public opinion, it begins to depreciate in terms of economic indicators (Penprase, 2018; Tan, 2020). The study of the issue revealed that the main reasons include not only a lack of IT knowledge gained over the years of study.

The structure of Latvia's economy indicates a need for specialized technical and professional skills that are not always adequately provided by traditional higher education programs. Insights from the conference 'Kā vadīt Latvijas cilvēkresursu attīstību?' highlighted this issue. A survey conducted among over 200 conference participants revealed a consensus on the necessity for students to develop more adaptable skills. This finding suggests that current university curricula might not fully meet the specific skill requirements demanded by employers, indicating a potential misalignment with labour market needs (Riga Technical University, 2023).

In Latvia, young professionals, facing limitations in the labour market after university, often reconsider their career paths. Digital data from a study conducted in February 2023 confirms that about 42% of respondents were engaged in work unrelated to their initial specialization. Moreover, a significant number of young professionals found professional opportunities in the public sector (76.2%), and management (63.4%), while the share of those who chose the path of entrepreneurs or agricultural workers was 16.3%. These data prove that the educational achievements of youth do not fully meet market requirements, which can be interpreted as successful employment only in cases where the graduate obtains a job according to their qualifications. Work that meets preferences regarding working conditions and schedule, salary level, employment guarantees, and career and creative development, remains a priority. However, work unrelated to the obtained specialty highlights economic and social issues, indicating the wasteful use of public resources. At the same time, according to the respondents' answers, a significant part of the youth in Latvia does not aspire to positions in accordance with their academic specialization, which is evident already during their education.

Annually, the labour market is oversaturated with graduates, while the number of high-tech jobs created by the state does not meet the employment needs of youth, as prescribed by legislation. Delays in updating educational regulations, and failing to keep up with socio-economic trends, lead to a mismatch in the market for educational services and labour (Cellini & Chaudhary, 2023).

The modernization of the educational system depends on many factors. Among the most important is the development and implementation of high-quality software, ensuring universal access to educational materials for all students. The integration of information technologies and distance learning into the educational process plays a key role, not only facilitating a better understanding of the study material but also stimulating the development of creativity and independent thinking among students (Tyrkba et al., 2022).

For many young people, remote employment has become not only the main source of income but also a supplementary one, helping to overcome difficulties in the labour market. According to the results of our study conducted in February 2023, autonomy in work is a priority for 39% of youth, and the possibility of combining work and family responsibilities (especially relevant for young women) was noted by 42% of respondents.

The development and implementation of new employment models become an important adaptive strategy for entering the modern labour market. Among these models, joint work, temporary project management, temporary assignments, work outside the office using information and communication technologies, crowdworking, crowdsourcing, and freelancing stand out. These forms allow workers to flexibly approach the organization of their labour activity and adapt to changing market conditions (Fleming et al., 2019).

In this context, it is noteworthy that freelancing as a form of employment is popular as a preferred form of employment where standard labour agreements are absent. For freelancers, key advantages include the ability to flexibly manage their working hours, independence from superiors, and the possibility of working remotely, not visiting an office. However, freelancers face the need to independently search for clients, manage their own accounting and taxes, and also with high demands for personal discipline and self-organization (Dunn et al., 2021).

The increase in the number of self-employed individuals in Latvia is also associated with freelancing as a primary source of income (State Revenue Service, 2023). The results of our analysis confirm that approximately every eighth young person in the country considers the possibility of working as a freelancer, despite the associated labour market risks, such as the lack of social guarantees in case of injury, disability, violations of working conditions, and the consideration of such activity in pension assignments. Among the youth, entrepreneurship stands out as the most attractive form of self-employment. In a survey conducted in February 2023, about 35% of young people expressed a desire to engage in business. Nevertheless, many evaluate the current conditions for starting and developing entrepreneurial activity in the country as difficult: every fourth of young respondents described them as unfavourable. Improving the institutional conditions for conducting business will contribute to increasing the entrepreneurial activity of the youth.

5. Communicative environment

The sphere of youth communication has undergone significant changes against the backdrop of digital transformation, moving into virtual space. Traditional social connections are increasingly giving way to online relationships. According to a study conducted in February 2023, practically all youth (97.3%) use the internet daily. The majority of respondents (83.4%) actively interact on social networks, every second regularly browse news and entertainment resources, while 65.4% of young people make purchases in

online stores. Only one-third of the young respondents have access to educational resources and platforms with scientific and reference information important. The most popular internet messengers are WhatsApp (68.4% daily users, 24.1% weekly users) and Instagram Direct (44.6% daily users, 28.3% weekly users).

Latvia is among the countries with an average level of digital competence among young people aged 16-24 years (Witczak-Roszkowska, 2022). This places Latvia in a group characterized by relatively stronger digital skills compared to countries with low or the lowest digital competence, but still lagging behind such leaders as Finland, Malta, the Netherlands, Spain, and Iceland.

Specifically, the young population of Latvia was identified by the synthetic Helwig index, equal to 0.500, which ranks it 9th among European countries in terms of digital competence (Witczak-Roszkowska, 2022). This assessment is based on 23 diagnostic characteristics reflecting skills in digital content creation, online communication, and collaboration, as well as internet privacy and data protection. The average level of digital competence suggests that young Latvians possess a moderate ability to effectively use digital technologies, which is crucial for adapting to the demands of the digital economy.

The study also shows a significant difference in digital competencies across different European countries, with some countries demonstrating much higher levels of digital skills. For Latvia, being in the middle category means there are significant opportunities for improvement to reach the level of digital competence observed in leading countries. This improvement is crucial for enhancing Latvia's competitiveness in the digital global economy and preparing its young workforce for the future labour market, which increasingly requires advanced digital skills.

Polish researchers point to a significant deficit in digital competencies among young people in many European countries, underscoring the need to adapt the educational system to the requirements of the digital economy. A systematic approach to developing digital skills, demonstrated by leaders in this field such as Finland and Malta, can serve as a model for Latvia in forming an effective digital education strategy (Witczak-Roszkowska, 2022). In particular, the importance of in-depth study of ICT, digital content creation, ensuring cybersecurity, and using the internet for educational and professional purposes should become a priority in updating curricula. Such an approach will not only increase the competitiveness of Latvian youth in the labour market but also promote the wider implementation of digital technologies in the country's economy, opening new opportunities for entrepreneurial activity and innovation.

Virtual networks of young people become not just a space for entertainment or political activity, as vividly demonstrated last year. It is also a field for realizing creative abilities and business ideas, a tool for distance learning, and professional self-realization. When young people have the opportunity to utilize the results of digitalization, they can successfully self-actualize (Rukavina, 2009). In the absence of digital skills and competencies, young people may experience a sense of social isolation. This, in turn, can provoke feelings of loneliness and depression not only in the professional and educational environment but also in everyday life (Arnd-Caddigan, 2015).

Research shows that modern young people consider active participation in online communications a key condition for success in life, a way to realize their own potential and improve their chances in the competitive labour market. Representatives of the younger generation use their presence in virtual social networks as a means for personal development, creative expression, and professional advancement.

Conclusions, proposals, recommendations

- 1) Digitalization is perceived as a critically important stage in the development of the global economy, ensuring the transition to a new technological level and contributing to the improvement of the

population's living standards. This process is a key trend of modern times, necessary for advancing the economy to more sophisticated technological stages and enhancing people's welfare.

2) Digital transformation plays a decisive role in the changes in the global economic situation and people's lifestyles, becoming the dominant factor of evolution. In the era of digital transformation of economic and labour processes, there is a growing need for the population to master digital technologies, affect both leisure and daily life.

3) The impact of digitalization on the labour sphere has become noticeable. Both quantitative and qualitative characteristics of employment are changing, including the balance of demand and supply in the labour market, the emergence of new professions, and the disappearance of outdated ones. At the same time, new forms and formats of labour relations are appearing.

4) The prioritization and modernization of the educational system in line with the digital era is an urgent task. Key directions include the development of digital competencies among students, the use of modern software, and the integration of remote information technologies into the educational process.

5) To stimulate entrepreneurial activity among youth, it is necessary to improve the institutional environment for business and introduce comprehensive legislative initiatives regulating labour relations in the context of new employment. After such transformations, entrepreneurship will become a significant factor, contributing to a more effective adaptation of youth in the labour market.

6) Latvia's commitment to enhancing digital skills by 2027 demonstrates a proactive approach to aligning its workforce with the demands of a digital economy. The country has set specific targets to ensure that 70% of its citizens will have at least basic digital skills, and 45% will possess above-basic skills (Jakobsone, 2021). This initiative is crucial for supporting not only individual career prospects but also for bolstering Latvia's overall economic development and its competitive stance in the global digital arena. The strategic focus on digital competencies aims to prepare young Latvians to thrive in an increasingly digital world, highlighting the importance of these skills in maintaining economic stability and growth.

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