

# THESES OF THE DOCTORAL (PhD) DISSERTATION

## THE COMPETENCIES EXPECTED OF GENERATION Y LEADERS

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# 1. BACKGROUND, OBJECTIVES, AND HYPOTHESES OF THE RESEARCH

The dissertation focuses on the competencies expected of Generation Y leaders, a topic that is particularly relevant considering current labor market changes. The research examines the competency expectations articulated for leaders of this generation in the Hungarian SME sector, how these relate to their self-assessment of competencies, and how this connects to organizations' HR practices and leadership development systems.

Today, four generations are simultaneously present in the labor market: the Baby Boomer, Generation X, Generation Y, and Generation Z (JAKAB et al., 2021). Coordinating these age groups effectively poses a significant challenge for organizations, as differing value systems form distinct motivational bases, which can lead to conflicts. Employers must respond appropriately to manage these conflicts, particularly in view of the heightened fluctuation characteristic of the contemporary labor market. Members of Generation Y constitute a defining segment of the labor market, and particularly high expectations can be observed in their case regarding working conditions and employment terms (CSUTORÁS, 2022). While a comprehensive examination of Generation Z's leadership roles would be premature, numerous domestic and international research findings are already available on the leadership competencies and motivational characteristics of Generation Y.

Small and medium-sized enterprises, as in the other member states of the European Union, are key actors in the domestic market economy, substantially contributing to its development and sustainability (HOLLÓ, 2020). The role of European SMEs in the economy is indisputable, as these enterprises account for nearly 99% of all jobs in the European Union member states (KELEMEN – HÉNYEI, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated digitalization processes and the proliferation of flexible working arrangements, which posed new challenges for human resource management. In the post-pandemic period, motivational issues and the decline in work morale have gained heightened significance. ÁSVÁNYI et al. (2023) demonstrate in their empirical research that the vast majority of surveyed companies reported declining work motivation, lower work intensity, and resistance to changes. The examination of the development and interpretation of leadership competencies is closely intertwined with the

transformation of employee motivations. In the case of Generation Y, it is readily observable that the factors influencing workplace commitment and loyalty significantly differ from the characteristics experienced in previous generations (KLEIN, 2020). The increasing mobility of employees is identified in the international literature by the concept of "job hopping," which describes a behavioral pattern wherein an employee typically changes jobs every 1-2 years, without developing a lasting attachment to the given organization (MÁNDI, 2018; PANDEY, 2019).

The aim of the dissertation is to provide a comprehensive overview of the human resource management practices of small and medium-sized enterprises, as well as the leadership competency expectations imposed on Generation Y. The research seeks to explore the extent to which these organizations are capable of adapting to generational specificities, and the means by which the long-term retention of Generation Y members can be facilitated, along with their successful performance in leadership roles.

As part of this, the study also examines the leadership competencies possessed by Generation Y, as well as the organizational and motivational factors that influence the formation and development of these competencies. The research also extends to an analysis of the human resource management practices in small and medium-sized enterprises, with particular attention to how these systems contribute to the integration of younger generations into leadership roles and their retention.

## **Research Hypotheses**

The research is organized around three central hypotheses, which pertain to the human resource management practices of SMEs, the motivational characteristics of Generation Y, and the challenges of leadership development:

**H1: The HRM practices of small and medium-sized enterprises are not fully developed; companies are reluctant to invest in operating an internal HR department, or do so only in a later phase, with minimal staffing and not in a strategic capacity. (HIDEGH et al., 2019, POÓR et al., 2022)**

This hypothesis builds upon the structural characteristics of SMEs, whereby these enterprises typically operate under single-person management, with a linear organizational structure in which the leader possesses the decision-making authority (BAKSI, 2016; TOTTH et al., 2022). The hypothesis posits that the HR function is often relegated to the background or confined to an operational role.

**H2: The motivation of Generation Y employees has changed compared to that of their predecessors (KLEIN, 2020), with their most important motivational factors being a secure foundation, prestige, challenging job roles, and competitive compensation. (JYOTI et al., 2017; BALOGH et al., 2021)**

This hypothesis posits that, in the case of Generation Y members, the factors influencing workplace commitment and loyalty significantly differ from the characteristics observed in previous generations. A secure foundation, professional prestige, challenging tasks, and competitive compensation play a prominent role in this generation's motivational framework.

**H3: In most organizations, ensuring leadership development for younger generations presents a challenge, as employees' tenure within the company has shortened over the years. (KÓPHÁZI et al., 2018; SZRETYKÓ, 2020; BALOGH et al., 2021)**

This hypothesis builds upon the phenomenon of "job hopping" and the shortening of employee life cycles. According to the hypothesis, organizations struggle to keep pace with rapidly changing leadership competency demands, and leadership development systems do not adequately support the career advancement of younger generations.

## 2. DATABASE AND APPLIED METHODS

During the research, a mixed methodological approach was employed, which integrated the advantages of quantitative and qualitative research methods. The application of the triangulation perspective (SÁNTHA, 2016) enabled a complex approach to the research questions, as well as an enhancement of the results' validity by providing a multifaceted perspective on the understanding of the investigated phenomena through diverse data collection and analysis techniques.

### 2.1. The Structure and process of the research

The research process followed the research methodology model of BONCZ (2015), according to which scientific investigation is divided into secondary and primary research phases. As the first step of the research, a structured mapping, synthesis, and processing of the relevant literature were undertaken, followed by the formulation of hypotheses. This was succeeded by data collection, the development of primary research methods, and the implementation of a pilot study.

The primary target group of the research consisted of employees holding leadership positions within small and medium-sized enterprises in Hungary, where the classification of enterprises was determined in accordance with the European Union's Recommendation 2003/361/EC. This categorization system defines the size categories of enterprises along three main dimensions: the number of employees, the magnitude of annual net revenue, and the value of the balance sheet total.

**Table 1.: The classification of SMEs according to the European Union's recommendation 2003/361/EC**

<b>Enterprise Type</b>	<b>Number of Employees</b>		<b>Annual Net Revenue</b>		<b>Balance Sheet Total</b>
Micro-enterprise	< 10 persons	and	≤ 2 million EUR	or	≤ 2 million EUR
Small enterprise	< 50 persons	and	≤ 10 million EUR	or	≤ 10 million EUR
Medium-sized enterprise	< 250 persons	and	≤ 50 million EUR	or	≤ 43 million EUR

Source: author's own editing, based on the European Commission (recommendation 2003/361/EC)

## **2.2. Pilot study**

The pilot study was conducted at a Budapest-based medium-sized enterprise operating in the information technology sector, spanning the period from the first quarter of 2022 to the second quarter of 2023. The objective of the research was to examine the structural, content-related, and competency development elements of the leadership development program implemented within the organization.

The methodological framework of the pilot study consisted of three main components:

1. Literature review: Employing a systematic search strategy and utilizing multiple databases (Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science), relevant sources were identified pertaining to SME leadership development practices and the workplace implications of generational differences.
2. Document analysis: Systematic examination of the company's documentation related to training and development processes, the design documents of the leadership development program, and the participants' evaluation materials.
3. Structured interviews: Collection of primary data through structured interviews, with a sample composed as follows:
  - 1 CEO
  - 1 People Development Manager
  - 4 Engineering Lead
  - 5 HR team members

The examined organization employed 72 people (at the time of the study), of which 52 (69%) worked in the software development division. 69% of the employees belong to Generation Z, 27% to Generation Y, and only 4% to older generations. The leadership development program followed the 70:20:10 learning framework, which defines how employees learn (SCOTT et al., 2016). According to this, employees develop through 70% workplace experience, 20% relational learning, and 10% formal training. This approach

proved particularly effective in developing leaders with technical backgrounds, as it enabled the immediate application of practical experiences and the establishment of a continuous learning culture.

The effectiveness of the leadership development program is supported by survey data conducted in the first quarter of 2023 and findings from supplementary qualitative interviews. Based on the questionnaire survey, employee dissatisfaction regarding career and development opportunities decreased significantly. While half of the employees felt the lack of internal career paths at the program's launch, this proportion decreased to 25 percent by the time of the survey. A similar trend can be observed regarding training opportunities: compared to the previous 45 percent, only 30 percent of employees indicated a lack of these.

Quantitative indicators also confirm the program's effectiveness. Throughout the entire period, turnover did not exceed 15 percent, which is considered a favorable rate in this sector. During the selection process, nine out of ten applicants met the competency matrix requirements and were admitted to the program, while only one candidate proved unsuitable.

### **2.3. Questionnaire survey**

The questionnaire survey, grounded in quantitative data collection, provided a standardized instrument for the comparable measurement of the perceived characteristics of leadership practices, motivational factors, and HR functions. The questionnaire was structured into six logical blocks; the sequence of these blocks introduced the constructs associated with the hypotheses in a cumulative manner, while progressively increasing the cognitive load:

1. Leadership Role and Seniority (1/6): Position, time spent at the company and in the role, professional and leadership experience, and basic variables of career path.
2. HR Presence and Impact (2/6): Existence of internal/external HR function, its staffing level, perceived impact of HR activities, and assessment of HR's strategic significance. The variables in this block provided the framework for examining Hypothesis H1 (HR presence and strategic role).
3. Motivational Factors (3/6): This question block measured, on a 5-point Likert scale, the organizational and work environment factors perceived as motivators by respondents, such as flexible working hours, the opportunity for home office, a

trusting atmosphere, or work-life balance, as well as factors related to professional and development opportunities, including challenging tasks, autonomy, or advancement prospects. The formation of variable groups enabled the identification of key motivational factors.

4. Leadership Competencies (4/6): This question block examined the importance of fourteen leadership competencies from two perspectives: on the one hand, for fulfilling the current position; on the other hand, from the viewpoint of organizational competitiveness. Additionally, respondents provided self-assessments of their own proficiency in these same competencies, thereby implementing a two-tier measurement structure. Measurements were conducted using a 5-point Likert scale. The competencies examined included, among others, strategic thinking, decision-making, communication skills, motivational ability, conflict and stress management, change management, talent development and retention, time management, skills related to digital technologies and artificial intelligence, as well as innovative capacity and creativity.
5. Trainings and Leadership Development (5/6): This question block investigated the frequency of participation in leadership trainings, its temporal regularity, and the perceived usefulness of training activities. Furthermore, it mapped organizational practices that support leadership development and analyzed these in relation to competency development opportunities.
6. Demographics and Organizational Background (6/6): This question block pertained to the respondents' fundamental demographic characteristics and organizational background. The survey recorded age, which served as the basis for forming generational groups; gender; company size; industry or sector; geographical region; and legal form. These data afforded opportunities for comparative analysis of the results and served as control variables in the interpretation of each investigative dimension.

**Table 2.: Logical blocks of the questionnaire and their measurement types**

Block	Main Topics	Question Types	Measurement Level	Related Hypothesis
<b>1. Leadership Role and Seniority</b>	Current position, Time spent at the company, Time spent in the role, Leadership experience (years), Professional experience (years)	Closed questions, categories, and numerical values	Nominal (position), Interval (years)	Control variables for all hypotheses
<b>2. HR Presence and Impact</b>	Is there an internal HR department? If yes, how many staff members? If no, who performs it? Perceived impact of HR activities, Strategic importance of HR	Yes/No, multiple choice, Likert scale	Nominal (yes/no), Ordinal (staff number), Likert (1-5)	H1
<b>3. Motivational Factors</b>	Flexible working hours, Home office, Trusting atmosphere, Work-life balance, Challenging tasks, Autonomy, Advancement opportunity, Prestige	Likert scale for each factor	Likert (1-5) "not important at all" - "very important"	H2

<b>4. Leadership Competencies</b>	Importance of 14 competencies for the position, Importance of the same competencies for the organization, Own proficiency in the same competencies, Impact of leadership style on loyalty	Two-tier measurement (importance + proficiency)	Likert (1-5) Importance and proficiency on separate scales	H2, H3
<b>5. Trainings and Leadership Development</b>	Frequency of participation in trainings, Regularity of trainings, Perceived usefulness, Organizational support for development	Frequency, usefulness evaluation	Ordinal (frequency) Likert (usefulness)	H3
<b>6. Demographics and Organizational Background</b>	Age (→ generation), Gender, Company size, Industry/sector, Region, Legal form	Category selection	Nominal (gender, industry, region), Ordinal (company size), Interval (age)	H2 (generational classification)

Source: author's own editing

### 2.3.1. Characteristics of the sample

The sampling was conducted through (i) direct, personal approaches on the LinkedIn professional network; (ii) utilizing the editorial network of the Behaviour magazine; (iii) involving the author's own HR service provider client base. The completions were voluntary and anonymous, with only fully and evaluably completed responses included in the final sample. Exceeding the planned sample size of N=100, **N=164 evaluable responses were collected.**

**Table 3.: Demographic and organizational characteristics of the sample (N=164)**

<b>Characteristic</b>	<b>Category</b>	<b>Frequency (n)</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
Generation	X	46	28
	Y	108	65.9
	Z	10	6.1
Corporate Tenure (at current company)	0-1 year	29	17.7
	Between 1-2 years	32	19.5
	Between 2-5 years	44	26.8
	More than 5 years	59	36
Existence of internal HR department	Yes	104	63.4
	No	32	19.5
	No, but another colleague handles it	28	17.1

Source: author's own editing

In terms of the sample composition, Generation Y leaders were dominant (65.9%), which reflects well the current generational distribution of the SME leadership segment. A total of 62.8% of respondents had at least two years of organizational work experience at the given SME, while 36% had been employed at their current company for more than five years.

### 2.3.2. Data analysis methods

Statistical procedures applied in the data analysis:

- **Descriptive statistics:** calculation of frequencies, means, and standard deviations
- **Cross-tabulation analysis:** Chi-Square test for examining the relationships between nominal variables
- **Analysis of variance (ANOVA):** examination of differences between groups
- **Principal component analysis (PCA):** dimensionality reduction of motivational and competence variables
- **Cronbach's alpha:** assessment of the internal reliability of multi-item scales

For the motivational factors and leadership competencies, principal component analysis (PCA) was conducted, which enabled the reduction of 22 motivational variables into 7 principal components and 14 competency variables into 4 principal components, while preserving a substantial proportion of the information content (59–66%).

## **2.4. Semi-structured individual interviews**

The second qualitative pillar of the primary research consisted of semi-structured individual interviews, the methodological choice of which was justified by the need for in-depth and context-sensitive data collection. Furthermore, this method was selected because it enabled me to conduct in-depth interviews with leaders operating in SMEs of varying sizes and levels of development, across different industries, and facing diverse strategic and operational challenges, while addressing the central themes of the research. For the selection of interviewees, purposive, criterion-based sampling was applied.

### **2.4.1. The sample of the interviews**

The final sample consisted of **10 individuals**, all of whom hold leadership positions in small and medium-sized enterprises operating in different sectors. The selection criteria for participants were as follows:

- A minimum of 2 years of leadership experience
- Current active leadership position in an SME environment
- Representation of different industries

**Table 4.: Characteristics of the interviewees**

<b>Interview Code</b>	<b>Generation</b>	<b>Sector</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>Leadership Experience</b>
INT01	X	Commerce	CFO	15 years
INT02	Y	Commerce	Financial and Operations Manager	8-10 years
INT03	Y	Tourism & Hospitality	Executive Sous Chef	9 years
INT04	X	IT / Software Development	Operations Manager	21 years
INT05	Y	HR Services	Business Development Director	12 years
INT06	Y	Online Marketing - Services	Operations Manager	16 years
INT07	Y	IT / Software Development	Managing Director	18 years
INT08	Y	Digital Transformation - Services	Managing Director / Founder	6 years
INT09	Y	IT / Software Development	People Operations Manager	7 years
INT10	Y	Commerce	Head of Retail	12-13 years

Source: author's own editing

In terms of the sample composition, 8 leaders from Generation Y (80%) and 2 leaders from Generation X (20%) were included, which accurately reflects the generational distribution of the SME leadership segment. The 30% representation of the IT sector was a deliberate choice.

## 2.4.2. Interview analysis methodology

The interviews were analyzed using the method of thematic content analysis, which made it possible to systematically identify recurring themes, patterns, and meaning structures in the transcripts. The coding process followed a hybrid approach, combining deductive and inductive analytical strategies.

The coding structure was organized hierarchically, with main codes and sub-codes. In total, 347 meaning units were identified during the analysis, which were grouped into 6 main categories and 18 subcategories:

**Table 5.: Main categories and their frequencies**

<b>Main Category</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Relative Proportion (%)</b>	<b>Average per Interview</b>
HR operations and deficiencies	89	25.6	8.9
Leadership competencies	78	22.5	7.8
Motivational factors	67	19.3	6.7
Leadership development and turnover	58	16.7	5.8
Generational differences	42	12.1	4.2
Vision and challenges	13	3.8	1.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>347</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>34.7</b>

Source: author's own editing

To ensure the reliability of the coding, each interview was coded twice with a time interval of at least one week, after which the results were compared. The intra-coder reliability was 87%, exceeding the generally accepted threshold of 80% in qualitative research.

## 2.5. Focus group study

The third pillar of the qualitative research was the application of the focus group interview method, implemented based on Kitzinger's (1994) methodology, which is particularly suitable for uncovering best practices and facilitating collective reflective thinking.

The choice of this method was justified by the need to create a research environment in which participants could respond to, elaborate on, or challenge each other's views, thereby providing a nuanced picture of the phenomena under study, namely generational dynamics and leadership competencies. The focus group discussion was organized at a medium-sized IT company based in Budapest, a deliberate choice from the perspective of the research design.

The selection of this company was supported by several factors: first, in a pilot study conducted in 2022–2023, the organization was identified as a positive deviance case within the Hungarian SME sector; second, the consciously designed and implemented HR practices of the company enabled an in-depth examination of generational dynamics in an environment where these processes had already manifested and could be observed.

### 2.5.1. Participants and context of the focus group

The focus group was conducted with the **participation of 6 leaders**. Participant selection followed purposive sampling, with the main criteria including:

- At least 2 years of leadership experience within the organization
- Direct interaction with Generation Y and Generation Z employees
- Representation of different organizational units and hierarchical levels

**Table 6.: Characteristics of the focus group participants**

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>Team Size Led</b>	<b>Generational Composition</b>	<b>Leadership Experience</b>
Participant 1	Engineering Manager	4 teams (~20 people)	Mostly Generation Y, 1	3 years

			team only Generation Z	
Participant 2	Product Manager	2 teams (10 people)	Mostly Generation Z, late Generation Y	2 years
Participant 3	Pipeline Manager	5 teams (~25 people)	Mainly Generation Y, 1–2 Generation Z	4 years
Participant 4	Pipeline Manager	3 teams (~15 people)	Mainly Generation Z	2 years
Participant 5	Engineering Manager	2 teams (~10 people)	Mainly Generation Y	5 years
Participant 6	People Operations	1 team (~15 people)	Mixed	3 years

Source: author's own editing

### 2.5.2. Structure and Analysis of the Focus Group

The 90-minute focus group discussion was organized around three thematic blocks:

1. **Best practices and tools** (15 minutes)
2. **Leadership learning processes** (15 minutes)
3. **Future-oriented perspectives** (15 minutes)

As a methodological element of the discussion, an interactive statement-card exercise was applied following the thematic blocks, in which participants were asked to collectively classify six pre-formulated statements into three categories: “Agree,” “Contested,” and “Disagree.” During the analysis of the focus group, a total of **127 meaning units** were identified, which were organized into **6 main categories and 23 subcategories**. The most frequently occurring theme was motivational and retention tools (26.8%), followed by generation-specific leadership competencies (22%). The combined application of the three methods (questionnaire, interviews, focus group) did not merely result in three times as much data, but also led to qualitatively new insights. Through the mutually reinforcing and complementary effects of the methods, connections emerged that would have remained hidden if only a single method had been applied.

### **3. MAIN FINDINGS OF THE THESIS**

The empirical testing of the three central hypotheses of the research produced differentiated results, which not only confirmed or refuted the original assumptions but also enriched the understanding of HR practices in the SME sector with significant nuances and new perspectives.

#### **3.1. Results of hypothesis H1: The maturity of HR practices in SMEs**

Hypothesis H1, which stated that “the HRM practices of small and medium-sized enterprises are not fully developed, and companies are reluctant to invest in maintaining an internal HR department,” received strong empirical support during the analyses.

##### **3.1.1. Quantitative results**

According to the results of the questionnaire survey, 36.6% of the examined companies lack a dedicated HR function. The detailed distribution is as follows:

- 63.4% have an independent internal HR department
- 17.1% assign HR tasks to an employee in another role
- 19.5% do not engage in any organized HR activity at all

At the same time, a noteworthy contradiction emerges: while 82.9% of respondents consider the HR function to be of strategic importance, only 63.4% of their companies actually operate an independent HR department. This nearly 20 percentage point discrepancy highlights the significant gap between the recognized importance of HR activities and their actual institutionalization within the SME sector.

**Table 7.: The relationship between the existence of an internal HR department and tenure at the workplace**

		Tenure at the company				Total
		0-1 year	1-2 years	2-5 years	More than 5 years	
Internal HR department	Yes	16	19	35	34	104
		-55,20%	-59,40%	-79,50%	-57,60%	-63,40%
		[-1,0]	[-0,5]	[2,6]	[-1,2]	
	No	7	4	5	16	32
		-24,10%	-12,50%	-11,40%	-27,10%	-19,50%
		[0,7]	[-1,1]	[-1,6]	[1,8]	
	No, but HR tasks are handled by another employee (e.g., finance, operations manager)	6	9	4	9	28
		-20,70%	-28,10%	-9,10%	-15,30%	-17,10%
		[0,6]	[1,9]	[-1,6]	[-0,5]	
Total		29	32	44	59	164
		-100%	-100%	-100%	-100%	-100%
		100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

Source: author's own editing

Based on Pearson's Chi-square test, there is no statistically significant relationship between the existence of an internal HR department and tenure at the company ( $\chi^2 = 11.149$ ;  $df = 6$ ;  $p = 0.84$ ).

### 3.1.2. Qualitative results

In the analysis of the interviews, the category of HR operations and deficiencies emerged as the most frequently occurring theme (25.6%, 89 mentions). In 80% of the cases (8 out of 10 interviewees), a formal HR department was absent.

The most frequently mentioned missing HR activities were:

**Table 8.: Frequency of missing HR activities**

HR Activity	Number of Mentions	Proportion (%)
Culture building and organizational development	8/10	80
Performance appraisal systems	7/10	70
Structured onboarding	6/10	60
Training and development programs	5/10	50
Exit interviews and knowledge retention	4/10	40

Source: author's own editing

INT10 summarized the consequences well: *“The human side, the conscious building of organizational culture, is missing... which leads to fragmentation.”*

### 3.1.3. Sectoral differences

Pronounced sectoral differences emerged in the maturity of HR practices. In the case of enterprises operating in the IT sector, more advanced HR practices were observed:

**Table 9.: HR maturity by sector**

Sector	Formal HR (%)	Strategic Role of HR	Development Programs
IT	67% (2/3)	Present	Structured
Services	0% (0/3)	Absent	Ad hoc
Commerce	0% (0/2)	Absent	None
Other	0% (0/2)	Absent	Minimal

Source: author's own editing

### 3.1.4. „Conscious Informal HR” as a new category

During qualitative research, I identified a new phenomenon that I conceptualize as **"conscious informal HR."** This represents an organizational solution where, although there is no dedicated HR department, human resource management functions are still carried out systematically, based on conscious planning.

The operation of conscious informal HR is defined by three key characteristics, which together constitute the model's distinctive features and strength. The first pillar is structured function distribution, in which each HR function is clearly assigned to a responsible person or group. This does not develop spontaneously but is the result of a conscious organizational decision. In the organization presented by INT05, for example, *"recruitment is carried out by a half-time colleague, while other tasks are handled by division leaders and the managing owner."* Although this may appear to be a deficiency at first glance, it actually signals a well-thought-out division of labor in which everyone is clear about their own role. In the case described by INT09, the capacity constraints of the small HR department (2 people) were compensated by the strong role of people managers, ensuring that no area remained unattended.

The second pillar is the use of professional tools and methods. Although there is no formal HR department in this model, the solutions applied in practice often represent a higher standard than in some SMEs with formal HR structures. INT06's example illustrates this well: *"Knowledge base, Onlife mentor program, internal mentoring framework and external mentors"* - these are well-considered, system-level tools, not ad hoc solutions. In INT03's organization, *"training accessible through an internal application"* shows that the integration of digital technologies into training signals a professional approach even without a dedicated HR team behind it.

The third pillar is the model's dynamic nature. Since it is not tied to a rigid organizational structure, it can adapt more quickly to changing environments and organizational needs. INT07's experience shows that the initially HR-less operation eventually transformed into a formal HR department when the organization's growth justified it. This proves that conscious informal HR is not an end state but can be a developmental stage. In INT08's

case, flexibility was evident in the fact that the Team Support group's tasks continuously evolved: during certain periods they took on more operational functions, at other times well-being came to the forefront.

### 3.2. Results of hypothesis H2: The changed motivational structure of generation Y

Hypothesis H2, which stated that “the motivation of Generation Y employees has changed compared to that of their predecessors, with their most important motivational factors being security, prestige, a challenging job, and competitive compensation,” was largely confirmed, but with significant refinements and the addition of a new dimension.

#### 3.2.1. Quantitative results

In the assessment of motivational factors using a 5-point Likert scale, the following results were obtained:

**Table 10.: Mean Values of the Most Important Motivational Factors**

Variable	Mean	Median	Std. Deviation
Salary (Base pay)	4.6	5	0.573
Work–life balance	4.54	5	0.704
Atmosphere of trust	4.52	5	0.65
Team morale	4.43	5	0.646
Relationships with colleagues	4.43	5	0.656
Relationships with superiors	4.43	5	0.692
Flexible working hours	4.39	5	0.747
Involvement in decision-making	4.38	4	0.639

Source: author’s own editing

The lowest-rated factors were:

- Career opportunities (within the company): 3.93
- The prestige value of the job: 3.71
- Non-wage benefits: 3.52
- Initiatives aimed at supporting mental health: 3.40

To examine motivational differences between generations, an ANOVA analysis was conducted. A surprising result was that none of the seven motivational principal components showed statistically significant differences between generations ( $p > 0.05$ ).

However, a significant relationship was found between tenure and one motivational component ( $F = 2.742, p < 0.05$ ): in the case of motivation related to work performance and professional development, employees with 1–2 years of tenure at the company showed significantly lower motivation than those who had been employed for more than 5 years.

### **3.2.2. Qualitative results: Empathy as a meta-competence**

During the research, I identified a new theoretical framework that fundamentally redefines the role of empathy in the leadership competency hierarchy. My results show that empathy is not simply one of the examined soft skills, but functions as a meta-competence—a foundational skill that is a prerequisite for the effective application of all other leadership competencies. In communication, it manifests as understanding partnership relationships; in motivation, as recognizing individual needs; and in conflict management, as accepting different perspectives. This paradigm shift represents a significant theoretical contribution to the field of leadership theory, rethinking the priorities of competency development programs.

### **3.2.3. The paradigm shift of prestige**

My research revealed that a fundamental change has occurred in the interpretation of prestige among Generations Y and Z. Instead of prestige based on traditional hierarchical positions, a new concept based on value creation and professional recognition has emerged. The phenomenon of "not everyone wants to be a leader" and the revaluation of horizontal career paths indicate the necessity of new incentive systems. This paradigm shift provides a theoretical framework for understanding generational motivational changes, going beyond previous career models.

**Table 11.: Generational comparison of motivational factors**

<b>Motivational Dimension</b>	<b>Emphasis of Generation Y</b>	<b>Contrast in Generation Z</b>
Empathy and communication	Key expectation	Important, but taken as a given
Competitive compensation	Primary consideration	Secondary compared to other factors
Challenging job role	Strong motivating force	Important
Prestige value	Moderate significance	Not important
Work-life balance	Aspiration	Non-negotiable expectation

Source: author's own editing

### **3.2.4. Confirmatory results of the focus group**

Among the statements accepted with full consensus, *"Young employees need continuous feedback"* stands out, which resulted in immediate and unanimous agreement. Participants cited the influence of social media as an explanation: younger generations are accustomed to immediate feedback on digital platforms and transfer this need to the workplace environment as well. As one leader put it: *"regular, continuous small triggers and feedback in their needs,"* a recognition that carries practical implications for leadership practice.

The statement *"Leading the younger generation requires different competencies than with previous generations"* also received complete agreement, but the discourse nuanced the picture. Participants recognized that these are not entirely new competencies, but rather a reevaluation of certain skills and the backgrounding of others. Empathy, coaching mindset, and personalized approaches came to the forefront, while hierarchical, position-based leadership receded into the background.

The acceptance of the statement *"Creating psychological safety is now essential for effective leadership"* is significant, as this is a relatively new concept in leadership theory, brought into public awareness by EDMONDSON's (2018) work. Participants not only accepted this

statement but illustrated its significance with concrete examples. One leader highlighted the importance of the mentor role, while others emphasized the necessity of creating a trusting atmosphere.

The statement *"Rapid promotion often puts too much pressure on young leaders"* also received agreement, but the discourse revealed the complexity of the phenomenon. Participants mentioned the impostor syndrome phenomenon, as well as the challenge that young leaders often have to manage older, more experienced colleagues. This recognition is important for the design of leadership development programs.

Among the statements rejected with full consensus, *"Loyalty only develops if there is an opportunity for rapid advancement"* elicited the strongest opposition. Participants emphasized that "not everyone wants to be a leader anymore," and that horizontal development can be just as important as vertical. This recognition challenges traditional career models and opens new paths in talent management.

The statement *"Leadership self-reflection is more important than professional knowledge"* was also rejected, but the discourse nuanced the picture. Participants did not question the importance of self-reflection, but rather that it would be more important than professional knowledge. The consensus was that both are essential, and neither can substitute for the other. As one leader put it: *"there is a basic professional knowledge that must be achieved for someone to be a good leader at all."*

### **3.3. Results of hypothesis H3: Leadership development challenges and the transformation of workplace loyalty**

Hypothesis H3, which stated that "in most organizations, ensuring the leadership development of younger generations poses a challenge, and the employee life cycle within companies has shortened," received strong empirical support.

#### **3.3.1. Quantitative evidence of the competency gap**

In the two-step assessment of leadership competencies (importance vs. preparedness), significant differences were observed:

**Table 12.: Competency Gap - The most significant differences**

<b>Leadership Competence</b>	<b>Importance (Mean)</b>	<b>Preparedness (Mean)</b>	<b>Difference</b>
Communication skills	4.71	4.34	0.37
Decision-making ability	4.62	4.27	0.35
Ability to retain talent	4.39	3.8	0.59
Conflict and stress management	4.44	3.94	0.5
Time management	4.4	3.86	0.54
Talent development	4.19	3.7	0.49
Application of artificial intelligence (AI)	3.9	3.43	0.47

Source: author's own editing

The competency gap is particularly pronounced in the area of talent management (talent retention: 0.59; talent development: 0.49) and stress management (0.50).

### **3.3.2. Frequency and effectiveness of trainings**

A total of 65.2% of respondents participate in professional or leadership training at least once a year, nearly half of whom (45.7%) attend such trainings multiple times per year. Only 12.8% reported never participating in professional or leadership training.

According to the ANOVA analysis, a significant relationship was found between training frequency and two principal components of leadership competencies:

1. **Digitalization and innovation skills ( $p < 0.05$ ):** Respondents who receive monthly training (0.407) demonstrate significantly higher preparedness than those participating rarely or never ( $-0.306$  and  $-0.484$ , respectively).
2. **Talent management competencies ( $p < 0.01$ ):** Respondents who receive monthly training (0.825) show exceptionally high preparedness compared to those trained semi-annually ( $-0.269$ ), less frequently ( $-0.183$ ), or never ( $-0.135$ ).

### **3.3.3. The "job hopping" phenomenon**

In the examination of workplace mobility, pronounced generational differences emerged. Among Generation Y leaders, workplace mobility was strikingly high: within the 29–44 age group, most leaders had already worked at 3–5 companies, and a significant proportion had experience at 6–8 or even more workplaces.

At the same time, 62.8% of respondents reported at least two years of organizational tenure in their current SME, and 36% had been working at their present company for more than five years. This indicates that although previous career paths were highly mobile, longer-term retention at the current workplace can also be observed.

### **3.3.4. Qualitative results: The relationship between competency gaps and turnover**

In the interviews, the issue of HR functioning and its deficiencies came to the forefront most frequently, with a total of 89 mentions, accounting for approximately one-quarter of all coded segments. This clearly demonstrates that the HR function represents a central problem in the SME sector. During the interviews, the presence or absence of a formal HR department, HR staffing levels, and the role of outsourced functions were discussed on multiple occasions. The distribution between operational and strategic tasks, as well as how HR activities are distributed within the organization, were discussed with similar frequency. Several interviewees also drew attention to the fact that certain fundamental activities, such as culture building, onboarding, or the establishment of performance evaluation systems, are often neglected, which results in weaknesses in organizational functioning in the long term. The second most frequently appearing topic was leadership competencies, which, with 78 mentions, accounted for more than one-fifth of all references. Key competencies such as empathy, communication, flexibility, and decision-making ability were prominently featured in the interviews. Additionally, numerous examples were cited of competency gaps and their negative consequences, and several participants highlighted the close connection between leadership skills and employee loyalty. Motivational factors also emerged as a defining theme, with 67 mentions, accounting for nearly one-fifth of the coded segments. Motivation came up in a multidimensional approach: alongside financial factors such as salary and benefits, flexibility, the possibility of home office, and development prospects

were frequently mentioned. Generation-specific differences also received emphasis as an important aspect, particularly the different motivators of Generations Y and Z. The topic of leadership development and turnover received 58 mentions, accounting for 16.7 percent of the total material. Participants frequently referred to existing formal and informal development opportunities, but also repeatedly articulated gaps related to soft skills and generational training. Several pointed out that competency gaps are directly related to turnover, which poses significant organizational risk.

### 3.3.5. Sectoral differences in leadership development

**Table 13.: Leadership development practices by sector**

<b>Sector</b>	<b>Formal Programs</b>	<b>Informal Solutions</b>	<b>Main Shortcomings</b>
IT	LinkedIn Learning, Udemy, coaching	Mentoring, peer learning	Generational training
Services	Ad hoc trainings	External coach	Lack of structure
Commerce	None	Individual self-learning	All areas
Tourism	Internal application	Leadership meetings	Soft skills development

Source: author's own editing

The outstanding practices of the IT sector provide a significant advantage, while in traditional sectors (such as commerce) critical developmental shortcomings can be observed.

### 3.3.6. The relationship between leadership style and commitment

According to the ANOVA analysis, statistically significant differences ( $p < 0.001$ ) were found in two competency components between leaders who believed they contributed

strongly to employee commitment and those who believed they contributed only to a lesser extent:

1. **Core leadership competencies** (communication, decision-making, strategic thinking)
2. **Talent management competencies** (talent development, retention)

Overall, 86.6% of respondents stated that their leadership style and competencies contribute, to some degree, to employees' long-term commitment.

### **3.3.7. Additional findings from the focus group**

In the focus group, the category of leadership learning experiences appeared with 22 mentions (17.3%). The statement “*you have to go through many mistakes*” highlighted the developmental challenges.

In the statement-card exercise, full consensus emerged on the view that “*rapid promotion often places excessive pressure on young leaders*”—participants referred to impostor syndrome and psychological strain in this context.

#### **4. NEW OR NOVEL RESULTS OF THE THESIS**

The research produced six new or novel scientific results that contribute to the advancement of leadership theory and the field of human resource management.

- 1. Comprehensive exploration of HR practices and Generation Y leadership competency expectations in the Hungarian SME sector:** During the research, I successfully identified and documented the characteristics of human resource management practices in small and medium-sized enterprises, with particular focus on the competency expectations for Generation Y leaders. Through a mixed methodological approach, I uncovered critical areas where organizations show development needs, particularly in empathy (1.47 gap between importance and preparedness), team-building skills (1.31), and conflict management (1.22). This comprehensive exploration fills a gap, as no empirical research had previously been available that specifically examined the competency needs of Generation Y leaders in the Hungarian SME environment.
- 2. Development of the empathy as meta-competency paradigm:** During the research, I identified a new theoretical framework that fundamentally redefines the role of empathy in the leadership competency hierarchy. My results show that empathy is not simply one of the examined soft skills, but functions as a meta-competency - a foundational skill that is a prerequisite for the effective application of all other leadership competencies. It manifests as understanding partner relationships in communication, recognizing individual needs in motivation, and accepting different perspectives in conflict management. This paradigm shift represents a significant theoretical contribution to leadership theory, rethinking the priorities of competency development programs.
- 3. Adaptation and application of positive deviance theory in the SME context:** My research results challenge the widespread stereotype that SMEs' human resource management is necessarily underdeveloped, demonstrating that smaller organizations are also capable of innovative and effective human resource management solutions. Using positive deviance cases from the IT sector, I demonstrated that the structural characteristics of SMEs - flexibility, personalized solutions, rapid decision-making -

can represent competitive advantages over large corporations. This theoretical framework opens a new perspective in SME research, where we examine the conditions for excellence instead of deficiencies.

- 4. Conceptualization of "conscious informal HR" as a new organizational category:** During my qualitative research, I identified a new operational model that lies between formal HR structures and ad hoc solutions. This hybrid approach is built on three pillars: structured function sharing (clear responsibility for each HR area), application of professional tools and methods, and dynamic adaptation. This is particularly relevant for organizations with 10-50 employees, where establishing a formal HR department is not yet warranted, but ad hoc solutions are no longer sufficient. This new category offers a gap-filling and practical alternative for cost-effective HR operations.
- 5. Development of the prestige paradigm shift theory:** My research revealed that a fundamental change has occurred in the interpretation of prestige among Generations Y and Z. Instead of prestige based on traditional hierarchical positions, a new concept based on value creation and professional recognition has emerged. The phenomenon of "not everyone wants to be a leader" and the revaluation of horizontal career paths indicate the necessity of new incentive systems. This paradigm shift provides a theoretical framework for understanding generational motivational changes, going beyond previous career models.
- 6. Identification of generational coaching as a new professional field:** I observed that 62.5% of Generation Y leaders showed a need for a new development area that goes beyond traditional leadership development methods. Generational coaching responds to the special situation of Generation Y, where they play a bridging role between Generations X and Z. This does not simply mean communication training, but the development of complex understanding and adaptation skills, which includes understanding the value systems of different generations and rethinking motivational tools.

## 5. THE PRACTICAL USE OF THE RESULTS

The research findings manifest at three levels: organizational, professional, and economic policy.

### 5.1. Organizational-level applicability

**Development of empathy-based leadership programs:** Based on the research findings, empathy-driven leadership and personalized approaches enhance the effectiveness of generational management. This can be directly transferred into the practice of other SMEs through specialized training programs, where the development of empathy becomes a central element of leadership development.

In practical implementation, empathy-centered modular development systems can be designed, complemented by regular coaching sessions. In addition, the organization of peer learning opportunities and the introduction of a 360-degree evaluation system can further support leadership development. Together, these tools establish a culture of empathy-based leadership within organizations.

**Introduction of cost-effective HR models:** The conscious informal HR model offers a particularly suitable solution for SMEs with 10-50 employees. Within this framework, a structured division of functions can be established, with each HR area assigned to a dedicated responsible person, while professional tools are applied without the need to create a formal HR department. The development of agility-based HR strategies further enables flexible adaptation to changing market environments.

**Rethinking talent retention strategies:** The development of horizontal career paths creates alternative opportunities for employee growth. By establishing expert roles, project leadership positions, and introducing mentoring functions, organizations can provide diverse career options. The launch of generational mentoring programs is particularly valuable, as they enable two-way learning in which younger and older generations mutually enrich each other's knowledge.

## **5.2. Professional-level applicability**

**Enrichment of the human resource management knowledge base:** The research contributes new concepts and models to the professional discourse. The concept of empathy as a metacompetence opens a new perspective for interpreting leadership skills. The identification and description of the category of conscious informal HR helps to recognize and legitimize practices frequently applied in SMEs. The theory of the prestige paradigm shift places the issue of employee motivation in a new light, while the emergence of generational coaching as a new professional field creates specialized development opportunities.

**Development of leadership mentoring programs:** Leadership mentoring initiatives can be launched in which successful SME leaders share their experiences. The establishment of peer-to-peer learning models enables horizontal knowledge sharing, allowing leaders facing similar challenges to learn from one another. The development of generational coaching training programs and the introduction of a certification system can further support the professionalization of this emerging field.

## **5.3. Economic policy-level applicability**

The findings provide guidance for the design of SME development programs. Emphasizing the strategic importance of HR development can help policymakers recognize the critical role of human resource management in the competitiveness of SMEs. The promotion of cost-effective HR models and the creation of sector-specific support programs-particularly in light of the differences between the IT sector and traditional industries-enable targeted development initiatives.

**Leveraging structural advantages:** By consciously utilizing the flexibility, personalization, and rapid decision-making capacity of SMEs, competitive advantage can be achieved. The dissemination of positive deviance cases can serve as inspiring examples for other enterprises. The establishment of knowledge-sharing platforms in the form of conferences and workshops, as well as the publication of best practice collections, can facilitate the broad diffusion of successful practices.

## 5.4. Directions of further research

**Examining the measurability and developability of empathy:** Longitudinal studies are needed to understand the long-term effects of empathy-centered development programs. The validation of empathy measurement scales in the SME context, along with sectoral comparative analyses, can provide deeper insights into the role of empathy across different industries.

**Measuring the effectiveness of generational coaching:** The launch of pilot programs and their impact assessments are essential for identifying optimal methods. The precise development of training standards can help consolidate this emerging professional field and ensure quality assurance.

**Examining the operability of the conscious informal HR model:** The development of implementation guidelines can provide practical support for the introduction of the model. Investigating its applicability in different cultural contexts and mapping its scalability limitations can facilitate broader adoption of the model.

**Systematic identification of positive deviance cases:** Exploring successful SMEs across different industries and analyzing the conditions of transferability can generate valuable knowledge. The development of adaptation strategies can assist other enterprises in adopting these successful practices.

**Deeper understanding of workplace mobility and loyalty:** A longitudinal examination of the "job hopping" phenomenon and the measurement of retention strategy effectiveness can provide important insights into employee behavior. A more nuanced analysis of generational differences may yield a richer understanding of the motivations across different age groups.

**Exploring the impact of digitalization and AI:** The application of AI in leadership development can open new opportunities for personalized development programs. Analyzing the effects of digital competence development, as well as the relationship between technology and empathy, is critical for shaping the workplaces of the future.

**Nonprofit sector adaptation:** The research findings are relevant not only for the profit-oriented SME sector but also offer relevant conclusions for nonprofit organizations. Civil organizations and foundations face similar challenges (limited resources, informal HR practices, turnover), and empathy-based leadership as well as value-oriented motivational factors align particularly well with their mission-oriented culture. A further research direction could be the empirical validation of the results in a nonprofit environment, which could reveal sectoral differences and contribute to a more holistic understanding of generational leadership development.

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# List of publications



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Doctoral School: Doctoral School of Management and Business  
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## List of publications related to the dissertation

### Articles, studies (6)

- Török-Kmoskó, J.**, Dajnoki, K.: Aligning HRM practices with generation Y motivational factors in SMEs: A PRISMA systematic review.  
*Tér - Gazdaság - Ember/Journal of Region, Economy and Society. [megjelenés alatt]*, 1-14, 2025. EISSN: 3058-1079.  
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6. **Török-Kmoskó, J.**, Dajnoki, K.: KKV specifikus HR auditálás egy HR szolgáltató szervezetnél:

Egy pilot kutatás tapasztalatai.

*Marketing & Menedzsment*. 57 (3), 17-26, 2023. ISSN: 1219-0349.

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