

Comparative Analysis of Work Engagement, Work-Life Balance, and Soft Skills on Employee Performance: A Generational Perspective (Gen Y vs. Gen Z)

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This study examined levels of work engagement, work–life balance, soft skills, and employee productivity; the relationships among these variables; and how their effects differ across generations.

Methodology/Approach: A quantitative cross-sectional survey of 800 Thai employees used validated Likert-scale questionnaires and using descriptive statistics, correlation, regression, t-tests, ANOVA, and MANCOVA.

Findings: Work–life balance scored highest, work engagement lowest. Work engagement and work–life balance significantly predicted productivity ($p < 0.001$); soft skills did not. Generational differences were significant for engagement, balance, and productivity, but not soft skills.

Research Limitation/Implication: The cross-sectional design, non-probability sampling, and self-reported measures limit causal inference. Findings support strengthening engagement and work–life balance to boost productivity, while soft skills remain valuable for teamwork.

Originality/Value: This study integrates work engagement, work–life balance, and soft skills into one framework explaining productivity among Generation Y (Gen Y) and Generation Z (Gen Z) employees in Thailand, informing generation-specific HR strategies.

Category: Research paper

Keywords: work engagement; work–life balance; soft skills; employee performance; generation Y and Z

Research Areas: Quality of Life; Strategic Quality Management

1 INTRODUCTION

The modern workforce is undergoing transformation due to rapid technological change, demographic transition and changing employee expectations, creating new challenges for organisations that aim to maintain employee commitment and performance. One of the major changes is the increasing presence of the younger generation, particularly Generation Y (Gen Y) and Generation Z (Gen Z), in the global and Thai labour markets. With these two cohorts increasingly taking on operational and service-oriented roles, organisations are pressured to understand how younger employees differ in their work attitudes, motivational drivers, and performance-related behaviours (Dimock, 2019; Schroth, 2019). In this context, work engagement, work-life balance, and soft skills have become core constructs to explain how employees perform in modern workplaces and why generational comparison is important for human resource management (Deloitte, 2023).

Generation Z are generally described as born between 1997 and 2012, and Generation Y as born between 1981 and 1996 (Dimock, 2019). Many scholars have described Gen Z as digital natives whose ways of thinking, communicating and learning are strongly shaped by constant technological immersion (Prensky, 2001; Turner, 2015). This generation has been raised in an environment profoundly influenced by high-speed internet, mobile technologies and social media. Besides their tech savviness, Gen Z is often described as adaptable, inclusive and deeply invested in identity, personal purpose and continuous learning in their careers (Francis & Hoefel, 2018; Parker & Igielnik, 2020). However, Gen Y represents a cohort that largely experienced, rather than was entirely born into, the digital era, yet is widely portrayed as technologically savvy and comfortable with intensive Information and Communication Technology (ICT) use in work contexts. This generation is frequently characterized as valuing collaboration, flexible working arrangements and meaningful, development-oriented tasks, while placing strong emphasis on maintaining a healthy balance between work and personal life, with empirical evidence showing that their job satisfaction and engagement are closely linked to quality of work life and work-life balance (Muskat & Reitsamer, 2020; Riyanto, Riyanto, & Lukertina, 2019).

Demographic evidence backs the growing importance of these two generations. The evidence shows that Gen Z is quickly becoming a sizable group in the workforce; McCrindle Research (McCrindle & Fell, 2020) states that Gen Z will account for 27% of the global workforce by 2025, and 31% by 2030. According to national labour data from Thailand, Gen Z comprised 7.4 million individuals, or 18.3% of the labour force in 2024, and this share is anticipated to increase as older generations retire (Adecco Thailand, 2023; McCrindle & Fell, 2020). Moreover, Gen Y and Gen Z already represent over half of the workforce in Thailand, making them especially significant for organizational research and practice (ManpowerGroup Thailand, 2024). These changes indicate that one cannot separate an understanding of employee performance from the generational characteristics of the workforce itself (Schroth, 2019).

2 METHODOLOGY

This study used a quantitative research design with a cross-sectional approach to analyse the relationship between work engagement, work-life balance, soft skills, and employee productivity. Moreover, the study examined the differences of these variables among Gen Y and Gen Z employees in the Thai workforce. A quantitative approach was deemed suitable for testing hypothesized relationships between predefined variables, comparing mean differences between generational cohorts, and generating empirical evidence from structured survey data.

2.1 Respondents

The target population consisted of Generation Y (1981 – 1996) and Generation Z (1997 – 2012) employees in Thailand. The study was conducted on 800 respondents, the sample comprised 440 Gen Z respondents (20 – 29 years; 55.0 percent) and 360 Gen Y respondents (30 – 45 years; 45.0 percent). The data were collected using online (Google Form) and offline questionnaires. Participation was voluntary and all respondents provided their informed consent before completing the survey.

2.2 Sampling and Data Collection

Data were collected through questionnaire-based surveys administered to employees who met the study criteria. The questionnaire was made available both online and offline to facilitate access and encourage participation. The online version was administered via Google Forms, and the offline version was given to reachable participants in suitable field settings. Before the full survey, the questionnaire was piloted on a small group of respondents to check the clarity of the wording and to test the reliability of the instrument. Some items were refined based on pilot feedback to make them more appropriate for Thai Gen Y and Gen Z employees. Participation in the study was voluntary and data collection was carried out after informing the participants about the study and obtaining their consent to participate. Table 1 presents the demographic profile of the 800 respondents.

Table 1 – Sample demographics (Survey data, N = 800)

Demographic	Category	N	%
Gender	Male	296	37.0%
	Female	504	63.0%
Generation	Gen Z (Age 20 – 29)	440	55.0%
	Gen Y (Age 30 – 45)	360	45.0%
Occupation	Government employee (Thai organisations in public sectors)	461	57.6%
	Self-started business owner	204	25.5%

Demographic	Category	N	%
	Private company employee	120	15.0%
Job Level	Operational staff	424	53.0%
	Executive	205	25.5%
	Supervisor	102	12.8%
Income (THB/mo)	30,001 – 40,000	381	47.6%
	50,001 and above	209	26.1%
	20,001 – 30,000	190	23.8%

2.3 Instrumentation

The research instrument was a structured questionnaire that was developed from existing measures of work–life interface, work engagement, soft skills and job performance and adapted to the Thai employment context for Gen Y and Gen Z respondents. Responses were recorded on a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 5 (“strongly agree”). Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual framework linking work-life balance, soft skills, and work engagement to employee productivity. The instrument was made up of four constructs:

- Work-Life Balance (X_1) was composed of seven items that measured time management, work from home flexibility, family conflict, co-worker interaction, and work-location autonomy.
- Soft Skills (X_2) included six dimensions, namely initiative–resourcefulness, assertiveness, conflict management, interpersonal communication, decision-making, and integrity.
- Work Engagement (X_3) consisted of three dimensions: vigor, dedication, and absorption, based on Kahn’s work (1990) and the engagement literature.
- Employee Productivity (Y) consisted of six items relating to satisfaction with remote work, motivation, task completion, efficiency, personal standards of performance, and contribution to team goals. In line with the overall focus on employee performance, these productivity items were used as behavioural indicators of individual performance at work.

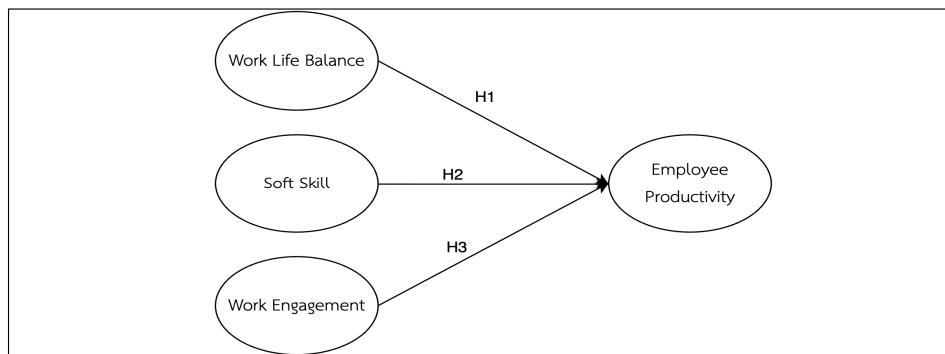


Figure 1 – Conceptual framework

2.4 Data Analysis

Statistical software was used for data analysis. Initially, descriptive statistics were used to summarize the general characteristics of respondents and to describe the distributions of the main study variables. Pearson correlation analysis was used to assess the bivariate relationships between work engagement, work-life balance, soft skills and employee productivity. The test of the predictive effects of the independent variables on the employee productivity was conducted using multiple regression analysis for the whole sample and for the Gen Y and Gen Z groups separately. In addition, independent samples t-tests and MANCOVA were used, when appropriate, to compare the mean levels of work engagement, work-life balance, soft skills and employee productivity between generations. The statistical techniques selected were consistent with the research objectives of examining group differences and estimating the effects of the main explanatory variables on employee productivity.

3 RESULT

This section presents the results of the statistical analyses conducted to address the research objectives. It begins with descriptive statistics to illustrate the levels of work-life balance, soft skills, work engagement, and employee productivity among the respondents. Subsequently, multiple linear regression analysis is employed to examine the effects of work-life balance, soft skills, and work engagement on employee productivity. Finally, generational differences between Generation Y and Generation Z employees are investigated using ANOVA and MANCOVA to determine whether significant differences exist across the study variables. The findings provide empirical evidence regarding the relative importance of each factor in explaining employee productivity and reveal how these relationships vary across different age groups.

Table 2 – Overview of all variables (Survey data, N = 800)

Variable	Mean	Std. Deviation	Level
X1: Work-Life Balance	4.10	0.584	High
X2: Soft Skills	3.85	0.391	High
X3: Work Engagement	3.79	0.550	High
Y: Employee Productivity	3.97	0.572	High

As shown in Table 2, all four variables were rated at a high level by respondents, with Work-Life Balance receiving the highest mean score (4.10) and Work Engagement the lowest (3.79).

Table 3 – Work-life balance (X₁) (Survey data, N = 800)

Item	Mean	Std. Deviation
1. Managing time between work and personal life is not as good as intended	4.22	0.746
2. Can adjust schedule to suit lifestyle when working from home	4.13	0.802
5. Having freedom to choose workplaces positively affects happiness	4.13	0.768
4. Reduced interaction with colleagues since remote work	4.11	0.788
3. Family conflicts have increased since working from home	4.08	0.812
7. Remote work results in encountering work problems	4.02	0.767
6. Remote work has improved work-life balance	3.98	0.776
Overall	4.10	0.584

As presented in Table 3, the highest-rated item was the difficulty in managing time between work and personal life (Mean = 4.22), indicating that respondents, although working from home, still found it challenging to achieve the intended balance. The ability to adjust schedules and freedom of work location were also highly rated (Mean = 4.13), reflecting that flexibility in remote work is perceived as beneficial to personal well-being.

Table 4 – Soft skills (X₂) (Survey data, N = 800)

Dimension	Mean	Std. Deviation
Decision-Making (Maladaptive decision making)	3.95	0.626
Interpersonal Communication	3.91	0.673
Integrity (Ethics)	3.90	0.639
Conflict Management	3.84	0.749
Initiative-Resourcefulness	3.80	0.624

Dimension	Mean	Std. Deviation
Assertiveness	3.72	0.772
Overall	3.85	0.391

Table 4 shows that soft skills were rated at a high level overall (Mean = 3.85). Decision-making received the highest rating (Mean = 3.95), followed by interpersonal communication (Mean = 3.91) and integrity (Mean = 3.90). Assertiveness received the lowest rating among the six dimensions (Mean = 3.72), suggesting this competency may require targeted development.

Table 5 – Work engagement (X_3) (Survey data, $N = 800$)

Dimension	Mean	Std. Deviation
Dedication	3.87	0.528
Absorption	3.77	0.638
Vigor	3.74	0.767
Overall	3.79	0.644

According to Table 5, work engagement was rated at a high level (Mean = 3.79). Dedication – reflecting respondents' sense of self-worth and challenge in their work – was the highest-rated dimension (Mean = 3.87). Vigor, encompassing enthusiasm and motivational drive, received the lowest rating (Mean = 3.74), suggesting that energy and resilience may be areas for organizational support.

Table 6 – Employee productivity (Y) (Survey data, $N = 800$)

Item	Mean	Std. Deviation
1. Satisfied with work during remote work (WFH)	4.14	0.765
2. Motivation decreased when working from home	4.10	0.808
3. Able to accomplish more work when working from home	4.04	0.802
4. Managed work faster and more effectively from home	3.87	0.840
5. Set high personal performance standards	3.83	0.841
6. Always plays a role in driving the team to achieve goals	3.82	0.793
Overall	3.97	0.572

Table 6 indicates that employee productivity was rated at a high level of employee productivity (Mean = 3.97). The highest-rated item was satisfaction with work during remote work (Mean = 4.14), while the lowest-rated item was taking a role in driving team goals (Mean = 3.82). Notably, respondents simultaneously reported high satisfaction with remote work but also acknowledged reduced

motivation while working from home, indicating a nuanced and somewhat paradoxical productivity experience during remote work conditions.

Table 7 – Multiple linear regression: predictors of employee productivity (dependent variable: employee productivity (Y), Survey data, N = 800)

Variable	Mean	Std. Deviation	B (Unstandardized)	t	p-Value
Constant	—	—	0.716	4.101	< 0.001
X ₁ : Work-Life Balance	4.10	0.584	0.231	8.151	< 0.001
X ₂ : Soft Skills	3.85	0.391	0.064	1.184	0.237
X ₃ : Work Engagement	3.79	0.550	0.542	14.523	< 0.001

Table 7 presents the multiple regression results, revealing two statistically significant predictors of employee productivity:

- Work Engagement (X₃) had the strongest influence on employee productivity (B = 0.542, p < 0.001), indicating that for every one-unit increase in work engagement, employee productivity increased by 0.542 units when controlling for other variables.
- Work-Life Balance (X₁) was the second significant predictor (B = 0.231, p < 0.001), affirming that employees who achieve better balance between work demands and personal life demonstrate measurably higher productivity.
- Soft Skills (X₂) did not demonstrate a statistically significant effect on employee productivity (B = 0.064, p = 0.237), suggesting that while soft skills contribute to interpersonal quality and team dynamics, they do not directly predict individual productivity in this sample.

3.1 Generational Comparison: ANOVA Results

Table 8 – Age vs. Work-life balance

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial η^2
Age Group	41.119	6	6.853	23.480	< 0.001	0.151
Error	231.454	793	0.292	—	—	—
Total	272.573	799	—	—	—	—
R ² = 0.151 (Adjusted R ² = 0.144)						

As shown in Table 8, age group significantly influenced work-life balance perceptions (F = 23.480, p < 0.001, η^2 = 0.151). Parameter estimates show that all age groups except ages 20 – 23 (Gen Z early starters) had significantly higher

work-life balance concerns compared to the oldest reference group (ages 43 – 45). Notably, the 30 – 32 age group (early Gen Y) showed the strongest effect ($B = 1.069$, $p < 0.001$). The younger Gen Z group (ages 20 – 23) did not reach statistical significance ($p = 0.067$), likely because this cohort is still in the early stages of their careers after undergraduate graduation.

Table 9 – Age vs. Soft skills

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial η^2
Age Group	1.457	6	0.243	1.595	0.145	0.012
Error	120.743	793	0.152	—	—	—
Total	122.200	799	—	—	—	—
$R^2 = 0.012$ (Adjusted $R^2 = 0.004$)						

Table 9 shows that age group did not significantly influence soft skills perceptions ($F = 1.595$, $p = 0.145$). This finding suggests that soft skills development is driven more by individual experience and personal disposition than by generational membership alone – consistent with the view that emotional maturity is an individual rather than a purely generational characteristic.

Table 10 – Age vs. Work engagement

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial η^2
Age Group	7.423	6	1.237	4.185	< 0.001	0.031
Error	234.441	793	0.296	—	—	—
Total	241.864	799	—	—	—	—
$R^2 = 0.031$ (Adjusted $R^2 = 0.023$)						

As indicated in Table 10, age group significantly influenced work engagement ($F = 4.185$, $p < 0.001$), though the effect size was modest ($\eta^2 = 0.031$). Parameter estimates indicate that the youngest Gen Z group (ages 20 – 23) showed the highest engagement differential compared to the reference group ($B = 0.635$, $p = 0.002$), followed by ages 24 – 26 ($B = 0.663$, $p < 0.001$) and 27 – 29 ($B = 0.648$, $p < 0.001$). Although age group significantly influenced work engagement, the effect size was modest, and the overall pattern across generations showed considerable similarity in engagement attitudes. This was particularly evident among the Gen Y age groups (36 – 39), whose engagement scores clustered around the sample average.

Table 11 shows that age group significantly affected employee productivity ($F = 5.139$, $p < 0.001$), with the early Gen Y cohort (ages 30 – 32) showing the highest productivity differential ($B = 0.757$, $p < 0.001$) and the Gen Z early cohort (ages 20 – 23) also showing a significant effect ($B = 0.714$, $p < 0.001$). Different

age groups demonstrated distinct productivity orientations, reflecting varying career stages, responsibilities, and performance expectations.

Table 11 – Age vs. Employee productivity

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial η^2
Age Group	9.789	6	1.631	5.139	< 0.001	0.037
Error	251.725	793	0.317	—	—	—
Total	261.514	799	—	—	—	—
R ² = 0.037 (Adjusted R ² = 0.030)						

4 CONCLUSION

4.1 Work Engagement as the Primary Driver

In this study, work engagement was the strongest predictor of employee productivity ($B = 0.542$, $p < 0.001$), consistent with previous research by Hanaysha (2016) and Abdelwahed and Al Doghan (2023). The dedication dimension – especially the self-perceived value in the work – was the highest scoring (3.87) of the three engagement sub-dimensions. This implies that employees in both Gen Y and Gen Z groups are significantly more productive when they feel that their work has meaningful value and they have a chance to showcase their skills.

Vigor had the lowest score among the engagement dimensions (Mean = 3.74), and thus, energy-sustaining interventions such as managerial recognition, flexible workload policies, and career development opportunities may be needed to fully activate engagement-productivity linkages, especially for Gen Z workers who are still early in their careers.

4.2 Work-Life Balance as a Significant Contextual Resource

The second major predictor of employee productivity was work-life balance ($B = 0.231$, $p < 0.001$). This finding corresponds to the literature on the double-edged nature of flexible work arrangements as respondents reported high satisfaction with remote work (Mean = 4.14) but reduced motivation when working from home (Mean = 4.10). The highest rated item on the work-life balance scale (Mean = 4.22) was the challenge of managing time between work and personal life, implying that employees need organizational support structures and boundary management tools to fully realize the productivity benefits of flexibility. The significant ANOVA result for age vs. work-life balance ($F = 23.480$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.151$) (largest effect size of all ANOVA comparisons) reveals that generational membership is a substantial moderator of the experience of work-life balance. In particular, the 30 – 32 age group (early Gen Y) had the highest concern for work-life balance ($B = 1.069$), probably because the group is experiencing

competing demands for career consolidation and family responsibilities at the same time.

4.3 Soft Skills: Significant for Relationships, Not Directly for Productivity

Theoretically, it is interesting that soft skills did not significantly predict employee productivity ($B = 0.064$, $p = 0.237$), which may suggest that soft skills may be necessary for interpersonal quality, team cohesion and relational results (Sumiati & Puspita, 2023), but may be more determinant of productivity at the team level than the individual level in the Thai workforce context. The lack of significant effect of age-group on soft skills ($F = 1.595$, $p = 0.145$) also supports the interpretation that the development of emotional and social skills is an individualized journey, less reliably predicted by generational identity than by personal experience and occupational socialization.

Across the MANCOVA comparisons, three of the four outcome variables – work–life balance, work engagement and employee productivity – were significantly differentiated by age group, whereas soft skills were not. This pattern is consistent with generational theory, which posits that Gen Y and Gen Z differ in how they prioritize work-life integration and what organizational conditions sustain their engagement — but suggests that the personal nature of soft skill development cuts across generational boundaries.

We studied the relationships between work–life balance, soft skills, work engagement, and employee performance, using self-reported productivity as the outcome measure, among Gen Y and Gen Z employees in Thailand ($n = 800$). The main findings are as follows: Work engagement is the most important predictor of employee productivity ($B = 0.542$, $p < 0.001$). With the entry of Gen Z into the workforce, organisations should invest in conditions that encourage dedication, vigor, and absorption. Work-life balance is an important predictor of productivity ($B = 0.231$, $p < 0.001$). Work-life balance differs significantly among age groups ($\eta^2 = 0.151$). Tailored flexibility policies could also serve early-career Gen Z and career-consolidation Gen Y employees. Soft skills do not directly predict individual productivity in this sample ($p = 0.237$), but their value for interpersonal relationships and team dynamics should not be discounted. HR development programmes should position soft skills training as an investment at the team level, not as a lever for individual productivity.

Although there are generational differences in work-life balance, work engagement and productivity perceptions, these are not uniform. The youngest Gen Z group (ages 20-23) showed different patterns than their older Gen Z counterparts. This suggests that career stage and life-stage demands are important contextual moderators. The results provide actionable evidence for HR professionals and organizational leaders seeking to craft engagement strategies, flexibility policies, and talent development programmes that are sensitive to the generational diversity of Thailand's changing workforce.

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Conceptualisation, N.T. and R.R.; Methodology, N.T.; Formal analysis, N.T.; Investigation, N.T.; Data curation, N.T.; Original draft preparation, N.T. and R.R.; Review and editing, R.R.; Supervision, R.R.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

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