

## Strategic Corporate Social Responsibility and Employees: An Analysis of Romanian Post-millennials' Perceptions

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### Abstract

*Strategic corporate social responsibility has been used to attract and retain valuable stakeholders. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge how the youngest workforce, respectively the Z individual, perceives the ongoing responsible initiatives. The purpose of the current paper was to comprehend how a responsible employer among other factors may influence the perception of Romanian post-millennials from an employee perspective. Hence, this study has been conducted through the use of a qualitative research method, respectively the group-focused discussion technique. The collected data has been examined following a content analysis approach. Even though it is assumed that generation Z may be sensitive to responsible practices and more willing to prioritize the common good, the results of the study sustain the contrary. Romanian post-millennials seem to evaluate the responsibility of an organization mostly based on the benefits a company may provide to them as workers, and rather less through social and sustainable practices.*

**Key words:** corporate social responsibility, strategic corporate social responsibility, generation Z, employees, Romania

**J.E.L. classification:** M14, L19, L29

### 1. Introduction

The comprehension and fulfillment of organizational stakeholders' expectations have become priorities for nowadays business. This is why more and more organizations, irrespective of their sector and size, have understood the need to implement the concept of social responsibility in their processes (Toma and Naruo, 2009; Imbrișcă and Toma, 2020). Due to the fact that it is impossible to meet all of the demands of the interested parties, organizations have focused on developing general pillars for establishing a common wellbeing. One of which is referred to as responsible behavior. The corporate social responsibility (CSR) concept aims to reshape the way of doing business and, moreover, to encourage the general enhancing of a responsible behavior. As a stand-alone term, CSR may be explained as "the company's extended engagement to proceed ethically and contribute to economic growth while increasing the life standards of workers and their families, along with the local community and society in general" (Watts & Holme, 2000, p. 5). Moreover, a responsible organization image represents a mean through which firms may attract employees.

Given that generation Z is the newest type of worker, businesses, particularly multinational corporations, have begun to develop and implement strategic corporate social responsibility (CSR) strategies in order to recruit post-millennials. Generation Z comprises individuals which have been born starting with the year of 1996 or even 1997 according to some practitioners (Seemiller & Grace, 2018). From an employee's perspective, younger representatives are attracted by companies which have a responsible business reputation, have people-driven perspectives included in their strategy, offer personal development opportunities, and are social actively, supporting the environment and those in need (McKee-Ryan, 2021). Therefore, another important characteristic of generation's Z individuals relays on its openness towards environmentally, socially and politically concerns

(Chillakuri & Mahanandia, 2018). Hence, Generation Z appears to be more interested in avoiding and solving certain problems in order to achieve a general wellbeing, having been exposed to a broader set of various issues, and benefiting from awareness in terms of how human actions may have negative consequences or impact among others (Chillakuri & Mahanandia, 2018).

The aims of the current paper are to establish the main factors that may motivate Romanian post-millennials to work for a specific organization and to understand in this regard to which extent a responsible company reputation may influence generation Z. Therefore, this study has been conducted through the use of a qualitative research method, respectively the group-focused discussion technique. The collected data has been examined following a content analysis approach. The paper's structure includes the other succeeding sections: literature review, findings, methodology, and conclusions.

## **2. Literature review**

Generation Z comprises individuals which have been born starting with the year of 1996 or even 1997 according to some practitioners (Seemiller & Grace, 2018). Additionally, while several researchers have stated that the last representatives of this generation have been conceived in 2012, others sustained that it is currently difficult to establish a certain age group for the Z population (Kardaras, 2016). Even though there may be some confusion regarding the possibility of including this generation within a certain period, the general characteristics of Z individuals are quite comprehensible and genuine. Foremost, generation Z is referenced frequently as the digital one (Singh & Dangmei, 2016). Moreover, Z individuals are acknowledged as post-millennials (Berkup, 2014).

Comparing with other generations, technology represents the first nature of these Z individuals (Dolot, 2018). Since they were newborns, the majority of them have been using smart gadgets (such as phones or tablets). Therefore, their ability to operate with these modern devices is outstanding comparing with other generations (Kim, et al., 2022). On the other hand, this orientation towards technological development has its drawbacks. Generation Z is acknowledged as being less patience as well as focused and apprehensive, although they have higher expectations from others (for instance, employers) (McKee-Ryan, 2021). They are not willing to listen carefully, and therefore receive feedback (Chillakuri, 2020). Most of generation's Z members are independent, transparent, speed driven and multi-tasking (McKee-Ryan, 2021). Thus, they have demonstrated a higher capacity of adaptation to changes that may occur (Mahmoud, et al., 2021). At first side, it can be stated that generation Z are more willing to enhance an entrepreneurial venture (Frunzaru & Cismaru, 2021).

In an uncessant changing global business environment (Săseanu et al., 2014; Grădinaru et al., 2017; Catană et al., 2021) business organizations have become aware of the necessity to think not only creatively (Tohănean et al., 2018; Toma et al., 2018) but also strategically (Toma, 2008; Toma, 2013; Toma and Grădinaru, 2015; Toma et al., 2016). From a business perspective, as a stand-alone notion, CSR has been perceived mostly as the overall actions that might benefit those vulnerable categories of individuals and their well-being-e.g., charity, voluntary work or other forms of philanthropy (Catană and Toma, 2022). Along with strategy, CSR reveals the ability of a business organization to develop and sustain value for various parties of interests and the company itself (Maas & Boons, 2010; Toma, et al., 2011). As a consequence, strategic CSR represents the manner in which enterprises capture the value and benefits of CSR through the use of strategy. For instance, this strategic CSR orientation, may assist a company in engaging with future employees. From an employee's perspective, beside the prestige of working for a responsible firm, a company's attractiveness increases along with the additional benefits provided for employees (Shahzadi, et al., 2019). Therefore, corporations design and implement through the Human Resource (HR) departments, programs such as trainings and workshops for personal or professional development (Cohen, 2017). Thus, these strategic CSR practices may help the organization to attract and retain valuable employees (Lee & Chen, 2018).

Therefore, within the scope of understanding the demands of post-millennials as employees, studies revealed that this generation is willing to collaborate with others, regardless of their nationality or beliefs (Jayathilake, et al., 2021). Therefore, they enhance diversity and as possible

organizational stakeholders, generation Z is inclined to respond in a positive manner towards companies which promote inclusive business. Additionally, a pleasant work environment may be perceived as mandatory for future employed representatives, such as students (Toma, 2012). As a consequence, studies imply that generation Z may seek and appreciate organizations which are concerned with the well-being of their employees and have a strong work culture (Jayathilake, et al., 2021). Thus, they respond positively towards initiatives such as workshops, trainings or events organized by the company, due to the fact that they perceive these as opportunities that may consolidate the relationships formed within the firm (for instance, with their co-workers or line managers) (Tarigan, et al., 2022). As new entries, Z individuals aim to grow and evolve quickly, and therefore they may require attention and patience. Furthermore, customized onboarding programs are critical in keeping or establishing a positive attitude among them (Chillakuri, 2020). Additionally, flexible working program may be perceived as appealing to generation Z. Moreover, studies sustain that post-millennials, comparing with others, are more interested in companies which have included in their business strategy the sustainability pillar (for example, waste reduction initiatives) or a triple bottom line perspective- planet, people, and profit (Dabija, et al., 2019). On the other hand, generation Z may not be receptive towards earning less and working for an acknowledged CSR profiled firm (Tarigan, et al., 2022).

### **3. Research methodology**

This study has been conducted through the use of a qualitative research method, namely the group-focused discussion technique. Within this scope, 12 undergraduate Romanian students born between 1997 and 2000, from both the rural and urban environment, have been selected for participating in the research. Participants have been chosen based on a recruitment questionnaire that confirmed they had not taken part in a similar study in the previous six months. In addition, the group-focused discussion has been conducted online, using the Zoom platform on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of March 2022, during 1 p.m. and 3 p.m.

The objective of the present study was to reveal and understand the CSR expectations of Romanian post-millennials from an employee's perspective. Moreover, the aim of this research was to comprehend to which extent Z individuals may be influenced and attracted by responsible companies. Therefore, in order to provide a response to the main research question (respectively, is generation Z aiming for responsible employers?), participants have been initially exposed to several images related frequently with the concept of CSR (the association technique). Afterwards, the following topics have been approached: how can a company demonstrate a responsible behavior?; which are the main reasons for which individuals, in general, do not take the initiatives of responsible organization?; which are the main benefits that generation Z strive for when deciding to work for a specific firm?; how many of the respondents have taken into consideration the responsible reputation of a company when applying for a certain position?; how may a responsible company reputation influence their decisions as employees? Additionally, the group-focused discussion has been recorded and the findings have been evaluated following a content analysis approach.

### **4. Findings**

When respondents have been requested to state what decisions companies ought to undertake in order to demonstrate a responsible behavior, participants have concertedly agreed that organizations should place a greater emphasis on their employees (Fig. no.1):

Figure no. 1: Voices of Romanian post-millennials students- CSR and employees

*Before focusing on the environment or the society in general, companies should understand and fulfill the needs of their employees. I, for one, would consider and appreciate firms which offer a flexible working program, opportunities to develop on personal and professional levels (for example, trainings and workshops).*

Source: Group-focused discussion conducted by the author

Furthermore, despite the potential benefits, the majority of Romanian post-millennials sustained that they would not be willing to participate in these developmental programs if they were held outside of work hours:

*I would not be thrilled to attend trainings or workshops outside of the working program. I have worked for a multinational company and I had to stay there for 9 hours every day (respectively from 9:00 to 18:00). In addition, I had to drive to the office, which added another 3 to 4 hours to my day. I usually left my home at 7 a.m. and returned around 8 p.m. I did not have any time for myself left at all. On weekends I had to do other activities that I was not able to do during working days.*

In addition, some Romanian individuals have been working into multinational companies and their perception regarding this form of business organization is not a favorable one. For instance, experienced working post-millennials have complained about the inflexible, incomprehensible and demanding line managers; the dwindled willingness of others to assist newcomers; the regularly and unpaid overtimes; the challenges encountered when attempting to integrate into a work collective; the burdened responsibilities and the overall pressure; the lack of information exchange among coworkers; the lack of appreciation; the implied and accepted work behavior; the inability of others to listen and sustain ideas of new joiners; the fewer available opportunities to develop on professional level; the lack of transparency regarding final evaluations. Even though they have described their experience as employees of a multinational company mostly in a negative manner, Romanian post-millennials declared that they are inclined to continue their carrier in the corporate domain if the raised problems would be resolved (Fig. no.2):

Figure no. 2: Voices of Romanian post-millennials students- Identified problems

*I have been working in the corporate domain for three years. It is a very hard. People are not nice; there is a lot of pressure; lack of appreciation and competition among coworkers. I am considering to opening my own business, if things do not change. [...] I would not try another corporation. The situation is the same, regardless of the company. Here, at least, I have earned my place and I know how things work.*

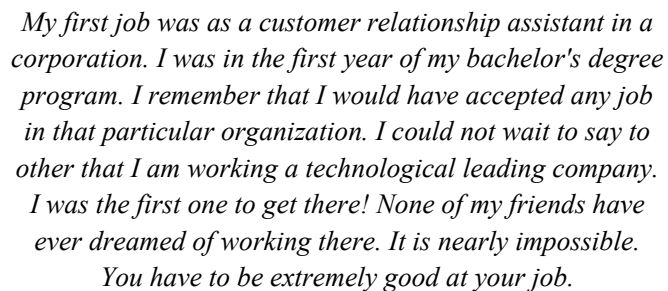
Source: Group-focused discussion conducted by the author

Moreover, the main reason for which Romanian members of generation Z chooses a corporate employer is represented by the organization’s reputation. Contrary to expectations, this reputation is not focused on the responsibility of the company in general (considering various stakeholders). However, it mostly concerns only one aspect, respectively the benefits they can receive as employees of a particular firm, starting with the proposed remuneration:

*I applied for a job at a well-known multinational company and I did not look online or asked anybody about the responsible practices of the organization. I would have asked someone who is working there or has been working there about the benefits of an employee, respectively salary, growth opportunities, health insurances, working hours [...]. At this moment, I do not care about their environmental or social initiative. For sure, I would not accept to be paid less just because the company is acknowledged as being socially responsible.*

Additionally, to some extent, Romanian representatives of generation Z may consider working in a corporation for prestige. Encore, from a Z individual perspective, this organization’s reputation is unrelated to responsible business behavior. Thus, a company’s prestige is associated with limited accessibility to others and with the enterprise’s leading position in a specific market (Fig. no.3):

Figure no. 3: Voices of Romanian post-millennials students- A company’s prestige



*My first job was as a customer relationship assistant in a corporation. I was in the first year of my bachelor's degree program. I remember that I would have accepted any job in that particular organization. I could not wait to say to other that I am working a technological leading company. I was the first one to get there! None of my friends have ever dreamed of working there. It is nearly impossible. You have to be extremely good at your job.*

Source: Group-focused discussion conducted by the author

All respondents sustained that CSR practices should be developed as much as feasible and tailored to the needs of workers. From a Romanian post-millennial standpoint, employee-oriented responsible companies, have the ability to create positive feedback among workers and therefore attract newcomers. Z individuals stated that a company should concentrate more on conceiving constructive word-of-mouth due to the fact that initially the only search in terms of how responsible a company is relies in finding and discussing with current or former employees of that particular organization:

*A company’s CSR effort should be oriented firstly towards the employee. Afterwards, the consumers, environment, society and other stakeholders should be considered. Employees help companies to sustain their business. Since, we do not actively search for what a company has done for the environment or the society when considering applying for a job, pragmatically would be for organizations to simulate in a positive manner workers to provide a good feedback regarding the firm.*

Moreover, Z individuals acknowledge that comparing with other generations, they are less skeptical when enterprises communicate broadly, using multiple channels, their philanthropic initiatives or sustainable practices. Although, post-millennials may not doubt the veracity of the practices designed to establish common good, they may not be also influenced by these when considering working in a certain organization:

*I am not that suspicious, comparing with elder people. I think that companies truly donate to those in need. Also, I believe that some organizations make efforts in becoming more sustainable, but I am not influence at all by all of these practices when I chose a job or a specific firm. It might be a plus, but not a determinant factor in my decision.*

Romanian post-millennials may have a different perspective on corporate responsibility than their employers. Generation Z seems to evaluate the responsibility of an organization more from an internal point of view, respectively through the benefits a firm may provide to its workers. Therefore, the social and sustainable pillar may not influence Romanian Z individuals when choosing to work for a specific organization. Based on the collected responses, a possible answer to the main research question may be considered the following: Romanian post-millennials strive to collaborate with responsible employers as long as these CSR practices provide tangible and intangible benefits mostly for its organizational stakeholders. Moreover, when targeting generation Z, companies should focus more on creating positive WOM among existing employees due to the fact that Romanian post-millennials are willing to ask them for feedback. Other types of company or brand communications (for instance, television commercials and even social media content) seem to be ignored by Romanian representatives of generation Z.

## 5. Conclusions

In the current business environment, firms strive for consumer's and employee's loyalty. Therefore, companies have been making efforts in understanding how these may be achieved to some extent. As a consequence, the comprehension and fulfillment of organizational stakeholder's expectations have become priorities for nowadays business. Due to the fact that it is impossible to meet all of the demands of the parties of interest, companies have focused on developing general pillars for establishing a common wellbeing. One of which is referred to as responsible behavior. The corporate social responsibility concept aims to reshape the way of doing business and, moreover, to encourage the general enhancing of a responsible behavior. The reality is that not only companies should act considering their impact among others. Humans are required also to change and be aware of the consequences of individual actions. Major positive change may occur if all involved parties of interest sustain the CSR practices. Individuals based on their generations have different responses towards the concept. Some individuals may hesitate supporting the CSR initiatives of a company, due to the fact that they may doubt the veracity of the organization's responsible actions. Others may not be interested at all in embracing a responsible behavior. However, latest generations such as post-millennials are perceived as possible main advocates of the CSR concept.

Considering the fact that companies currently use CSR in a strategic manner in order to attract and retain valuable stakeholders, it is important to acknowledge how the youngest workforce, respectively the Z individual, perceives the ongoing responsible initiatives. Even though it is assumed that generation Z may be sensitive to responsible practices and more willing to priorities the common good, the results of the study sustain the contrary. Romanian post-millennials seem to evaluate the responsibility of an organization based on the benefits a company may provide to them as workers. Social and environmental objectives achieved by an organization may not motivate Romanian representatives of generation Z to engage with the firm. Furthermore, the findings suggest that Romanian Z individuals may be more influenced by the opinions of current or former employees of a specific company when searching for a working position, rather than the responsible image or reputation that the firm has maintained through the use of various channels of communication.

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