
Bridging Generational Gaps at Workplace through empathy-driven simulation

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Abstract: This study introduces an innovative solution to ease generational gaps and build soft skills in the workplace. Today, Generation Z, Millennials, and Generation X often work together, but differences in values, communication, and digital skills can lead to friction. These differences can result in misunderstandings and lower productivity, while traditional corporate training often neglects empathy and collaboration as key competencies. A pilot program was tested in a medium-sized service company with nine employees from different generations. They took part in real-life-inspired simulation challenges that encouraged teamwork, problem-solving, and open dialogue in a safe space. Post-session interviews were analyzed to capture key outcomes.

The findings showed three main results: (1) self-awareness and soft skills are essential for effective teamwork, (2) AI support created a sense of comfort and inclusion, and (3) experiential learning proved highly impactful for training innovation.

This early study highlights strong potential for scaling the method across industries, especially in HR, leadership, and diversity programs.

Keywords: Gen Z, soft-skill development, empathy, generational gap, self-awareness, transformation, sustainability, AI, innovation, primary research

Introduction

The complex challenges of the 21st century affect every generation, especially Generation Z, who are already shaping the society of today and tomorrow (Emma, 2025). Supporting more conscious life planning is key, but our research shows that self-awareness and daily self-improvement are not yet a focus for Generation Z when it comes to consciousness (Garai-Fodor and Huszak, 2025). However, more conscious career planning, which determines their lives and futures, is extremely important, so

guidance or transition to more conscious life planning can take place through the world of work. Changing labor market conditions have led to an increase in the value of soft skills, which, on the one hand, can enable a more successful or conscious career path, and on the other hand, are the cornerstones of self-knowledge and self-development (*Futurework - Chapter1 (continued)*, 2000; *OECD Employment Outlook 2025: Staying in the game: Skills and jobs of older workers in a changing labour market*, 2025; Rabenu and Baruch, 2024; World Economic Forum, 2025).

In light of the above, we have come to the conclusion that, in searching for the connections behind generational differences, we highlight the importance of soft skills, self-awareness, and self-development (3. *Skills outlook - The Future of Jobs Report 2025* | *World Economic Forum*, 2025). Since this issue has also emerged as a market problem, we have devoted part of our research to finding solutions to workplace difficulties arising from generational differences (2024; *Gen Z is driving change in the multigenerational workforce* | *World Economic Forum*, 2025).

The research began in September 2024 and consists of several phases. In the very first phase, we wrote several articles about how the awareness, self-knowledge, and desire for self-improvement of the new generation can currently be linked exclusively to more conscious consumption habits, more conscious purchasing habits, and environmental awareness (Mónika Garai-Fodor; Nikolett Huszák, 2024). They are mostly open to individual coaching and soft-skill development workshops but have not yet participated in such programs. Some of the respondents have not yet discovered the self-awareness aspect of mindfulness, which is why conscious life planning has not yet been introduced in such a direct form (Garai-Fodor and Huszák, 2025). We have observed that when awareness or conscious career planning is linked to a career, it becomes much more understandable and acceptable to Generation Z. For Generation Z, a career path is an opportunity to achieve a high quality of life and an adequate standard of living. (Mónika Garai-Fodor; Nikolett Huszák, 2024). If we approach awareness, the importance of self-development, and the significance of soft skills in both our private lives and at work from this perspective, it will be easier for the new generation to understand and accept. In this way, we can gradually highlight the importance of soft skills as a labor market requirement, which in recent years has become not just an extra but a basic expectation on the part of employers (*Soft Skills Matter Now More Than Ever, According to New Research*, 2025). Knowledge can be acquired, but soft skills can hardly be learned; they can only be shaped and refined (Poláková *et al.*, 2023).

The pain point for Generation Z is career advancement, as this determines what they can achieve, what quality of life they can build, and thus how they can realize their goals and dreams (Mind the Gap | McKinsey & Company, 2025; „McCrindle_Trends-of-2025_Infographic.pdf 2025”, 2025). Generational differences in the workplace stem mainly from misunderstandings, which can be mitigated and resolved by developing certain soft skills (empathy, communication, teamwork).

Between February and June 2025, the simulation pilot was planned and the methodology refined, and then in July, the opportunity arose to test the original hypothesis in a real corporate environment with real people, real employees.

The purpose of the study and main objective was to find a solution as a potential answer for the specific market problem. We defined intergenerational conflict, lack of empathy, and communication difficulties as the main market problems. This can often lead to collaboration difficulties and a lack of true teamwork (Ravid, Costanza and Romero, 2024).

It is also worth mentioning the underlying causes of the market problem, as the existing problem is also present at deeper levels in Generation Z. It would be worthwhile to create a complete generational overview, broken down by country, but our current research worked with a smaller scope (*UKG: 83% of Gen Z Frontline Employees Are Burned Out at Work, Over One-Third May Quit Because of It* | UKG, 2024; *1 in 5 Managers Have Considered Quitting Due to Stress of Overseeing Gen Z Employees*, 2024; Travers, 2025).

Our main research question was:

RQ: Does this simulation intervention really contribute to resolving generational differences at workplace?

Hypothesis: This type of intervention provides a useful starting point for establishing whether simulation interventions are acceptable.

Table 1 Research questions and Hypothesis

<i>Research questions</i>	<i>Hypothesis</i>
1. How does the importance of soft skills manifest itself during the simulation?	1. Based on our assumption, interpersonal skills such as communication and empathy, listening to each other, and attunement.
2. How does the use of AI during testing affect participants?	2. Our assumption is that they would rather reject the use of AI than immediately adapt and use it during testing.
3. How novel did participants find the simulation testing?	3. Our assumption is that participants find the solution novel, unique, and enjoyable.

Source: Own research (n=9), primary research

The aim of the research is to explore whether this innovative, empathy-focused, and collaboration-based soft skill simulation can be used as a solution to real market problems to resolve generational tensions and, if so, what further refinements and developments are needed to bring it to market.

The study examines the early results of this research, which we tested in a corporate environment. The goal was to assess the potential of the intervention to improve intergenerational collaboration and reduce communication barriers in professional teams.

This paper allows us to highlight a potential solution to an existing market problem, whereby workplace differences arising from generational differences can be partially or wholly remedied through the development of soft skills. This research approach and practical implementation, based on the methodology, has resulted in concrete, tangible testing and validation. From the corporate side, based on feedback from HR professionals and the literature, this is a real problem, but there are hardly any studies on its practical implementation. With this study, it is conceivable that there will be a shift in the future from a theoretical approach and purely theoretical research towards practical implementation. After all, what is the point of research results that end up in a drawer if they are not further utilized in practice?

The researchers' knowledge and experience gained in an international multinational environment, combined with the professional experience of coaches and supplemented and reinforced by literature research, has resulted in a solution that is demonstrably usable and innovative among the development opportunities currently known in the corporate world.

Our personal mission is to raise awareness of the importance of soft skills, educate people about them, and present methodological recommendations and practical implementation options (soft-skill awareness) so that new generations realize that soft skills are important, that sensitivity is needed, and that the importance of soft skills must be emphasized (Association, 2015). Labor market demands have changed, soft skills are becoming more valuable – you can acquire knowledge, but not soft skills, research findings suggest that this can lead to social well-being (Howaldt *et al.*, 2016; Hussein, 2024; Smith, 2025).

From an innovation management perspective, the research is truly significant and unique for two reasons. 1) One is the new methodological approach defined by us, researcher-innovator, which enabled concrete implementation based on an idea. 2) The European Union's EdTech Talents program provided a platform for the researcher-innovator to use a tool created by a start-up company to develop a methodology based on her idea, then synthesize her thoughts and carry out a successful research project from the idea through the development, testing, and validation of the methodology to its final implementation. These are still the initial steps, but further steps will follow in the next phases of the research ('Home - EdTech Talents', 2023).

This approach also supports the importance of the Quadruple Helix model, where we can move towards social innovation by involving multiple stakeholders (Lindberg, Lindgren and Packendorff, 2014). We felt important enough to mention it, however, this topic is not part of the research, and it may be relevant in a later phase.

Method

We conducted qualitative research of an exploratory nature, which we divided into two parts. We divided the intervention into two parts: a simulation test and then a focus group interview to share experiences. The number of participants is not representative in terms of sample size; the testing required an open-minded and curious corporate partner. Participants took part on a voluntary basis, registering in advance and receiving access to the platform. In terms of composition, the team was diverse in terms of both generational background and gender composition.

The intervention was piloted in a medium-sized enterprise operating in the service sector, engaging three intergenerational focus groups (n=9 total) composed of employees across departments. Participants navigated a series of structured, real-life-inspired simulation challenges designed to provoke collaborative, interpersonal approach combining problem-solving and perspective-shifting. Qualitative data were collected via post-simulation focus group interviews and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis framework and MAXQDA Analytics Pro (*Using thematic analysis in qualitative research - ScienceDirect*, 2025). The intervention method was a focus group interview, which was conducted in three groups of three people each, with Gen Z, Gen Y, and Gen X participants in each group, using semi-structured questions.

The research began in February 2025 with the preparation of the research plan, the definition of steps, and the timing. The simulation was first tested in an educational environment, and then successfully implemented with a corporate partner in July 2025.

Table 2 Own research (n9), 2025, Participant composition of Alpha testing és focus group

<i>Participants</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Generation</i>	<i>Expertise</i>
P6	F	Y	People&Culture
P4	F	Y	Logistics
P7	F	X	People&Culture
P2	F	X	People&Culture
P8	F	X	People&Culture
P9	F	Z	Marketing
P5	F	Z	Sortiment management
P1	F	Y	Finance
P3	M	Z	Marketing

Source: Own research (n=9), primary research

Participant Demographics and Expertise

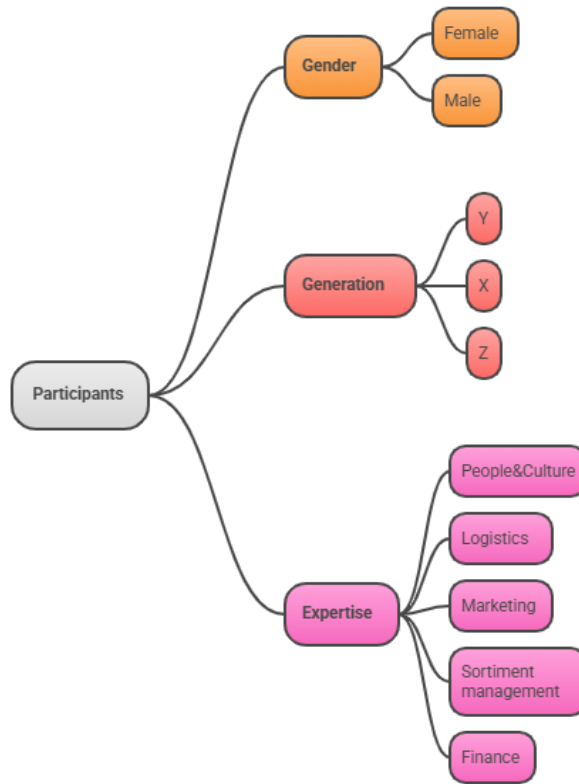


Figure 1 Own research(n=9), primary data, 2025, Napki.ai

During the simulation intervention carried out of the research, we used a simulated environment to study and test the results of a real event or intervention. We did this by creating realistic scenarios using computer models, which gave us a preliminary picture and allowed us to collect data on human reactions, performance, experiential learning, and communication.

The first intervention was a simulation exercise focused on bridging the generational gap by developing soft skills, primarily empathy, collaboration, and teamwork.

The simulation task took place in a personal space, which was also recorded on video. In the personal space, the teams worked on the task in one space, online, with the involvement of AI, divided into three teams. They gained their own experience of the task, each other, and themselves, as they were faced with a situation they had not experienced before, which was unfamiliar and created a situation outside their comfort zone.(Latham and Saari, 1979; Kim *et al.*, 2009; *Effectiveness of Learning Through Experience and Reflection in a Project Management Simulation* - Silke Geithner, Daniela Menzel, 2016, 2016)



Figure 2 Own research (n=9), 2025, Corporate on-site Alpha testing

Following the testing, we asked the participants about their experiences and impressions in a focus group interview. One of the keys to the success of the entire intervention is the right facilitator, whose personality can greatly influence the results in either a positive or negative direction.

The focus group interview was conducted using semi-structured questions. A total of 16 questions were asked, from which we selected three to formulate the research questions. We used thematic analysis based on Braun and Clarke's six steps model and analyzed the data using MAXQDA Analyses Pro qualitative analysis software. (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Braun and Clarke's Thematic Analysis Cycle



Figure 3 Own research (n=9), 2025, Napki.ai

In this case, it was thanks to the facilitator that the corporate partner was involved. Their prior acquaintance, credibility, and reliability provided a good foundation, which brought advance trust to the process (Flenady *et al.*, 2022).

The testing and focus group interviews took place at the company's headquarters, in a familiar and comfortable environment. The company was selected based on preliminary networking. As they were open, curious, and cooperative, we were able to test the concept with this company. Participants within the company were able to volunteer by means of an online registration form, the content of which included details related to GDPR regulations and information related to data management. The necessary documentation was prepared by the University's GDPR expert, and the process was agreed upon and approved by the Faculty Ethics Committee. It was indicated to the subjects that a video recording would be made, both in the documents and verbally, and they consented to this, on the condition that the recording would be used exclusively for research and analysis purposes. The data was stored on a central server, and no data was disclosed to third parties. The simulation test and focus group was originally administered in Hungarian; however, due to extensive research, it was subsequently possible to present the transcript in English. All sessions data (transcripts and minimal session metadata) is stored securely in a controlled access environment, restricted to approved team members. Personal data (such as participant emails) was collected only for registration and access purposes, not used in analysis, and was deleted after the session. All personally identifiable information was removed or anonymized before any research or analytical use. Data used for reflection or reporting is always aggregated or pseudonymized. Chat transcripts are generated automatically during the simulation. No manual transcription or external data entry is required. In this specific case video was recorded which is stored in university internal storage until the research phase is closed and fully agreed with participants. Regarding the use of external tools, OpenAI API is used in specific simulations to support dynamic dialogue. All processing complies with OpenAI Ireland's privacy policy, and no personal information is passed to external providers.

Based on an idea and its development all other details are under confidentiality. Due to data security none of the data would be available however, in anonymised format, transcript maybe shown if the reviewing process would need it. The language of available documentation in Hungarian or English. After uploading the transcript, we coded the text and then developed themes. Following categorization, we visualized the data. Validation was performed by an academic professor.

Results

Although there are few articles in the literature related to social sciences and simulation interventions in corporate settings (Bauer *et al.*, 2021). Some of them confirm that practical testing and implementation rarely occur within the framework of research (Jääskeläinen, Kortelainen and Hinkkanen, 2013; Levant, Coulmont and Sandu, 2016; Kulkarni *et al.*, 2022; *Virtual Reality as a Tool for Sustainable Training and Education of Employees in Industrial Enterprises*, 2023).

A 2018 systematic literature review, examining two primary articles, concluded that there is clearly a research area in the development of tools for monitoring large-scale gamified systems. These findings support gamification experts in their gamification analyses and end users in obtaining real-time feedback, and also demonstrate the need for further development of gamification processes (Bell, Kanar and Kozlowski, 2008; Lamé and Simmons, 2020; Salvadorinho *et al.*, 2024). Our research is unique in this form, and its continuation is one of the rare exceptions when there is an opportunity to refine the product or service in a co-creation process, thinking together with a corporate partner (Kempf *et al.*, 2023).

The findings showed three main results: (1) self-awareness and soft skills are essential for effective teamwork, (2) AI support created a sense of comfort and inclusion, and (3) experiential learning proved highly impactful for training innovation.

This early study highlights strong potential for scaling the method across industries, especially in HR, leadership, and diversity programs.

Table 3 Research questions, hypothesis and relevant focus group questions

Research questions	Hypothesis	Focus group questions
1. How does the importance of soft skills manifest itself during the simulation?	1. Based on our assumption, interpersonal skills such as communication and empathy, listening to each other, and attunement.	1. What soft skills did you discover in yourself during the simulation?
2. How does the use of AI during testing affect participants?	2. Our assumption is that they would rather reject the use of AI than immediately adapt and use it during testing.	2. What soft skills do you think this simulation helps to develop?
3. How novel did participants find simulation testing?	Our assumption is that participants find the solution novel, unique, and enjoyable.	3. Was there a moment when teamwork made a difference?
		4. How would you describe the overall experience in three words?

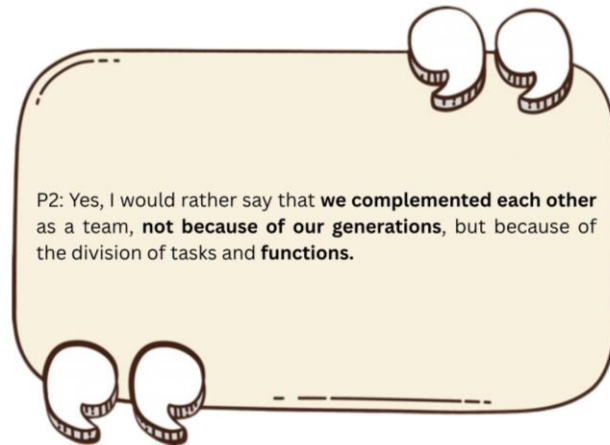
Source: Own research (n=9), primary research

We identified four themes, all of which are related in some way to the research questions:

1) Impression of simulation, 2) AI impact, 3) Work related, 4) Soft skills.

From the coding below, the findings regarding generational differences were most evident in relation to attitudes toward work. Work ethic and adherence to certain generational patterns appeared in the reflections. While completing the task, especially under time pressure, caused stress and tension for Generation Y, Generation Z colleagues completed their work with complete calm, allowing themselves to go with the flow. This tension was minimal in terms of team dynamics, and it did not hinder the team's progress in completing the work efficiently. The other observation regarding the generations was

related to the topic of tasks and generations. It was suggested that sometimes they did not approach certain subtasks in a manner appropriate to their generation, but rather in a manner appropriate to their role or job description. Further research could be conducted on this suggestion in terms of behaviour analysis.



Quote 1 by Participant 2

With regard to soft skills element of the testing, the word cloud below shows the names of the soft skills mentioned, that the participants as being most applicable to themselves. They confirmed that the task helped them a lot in self-reflection and in observing how they behave in certain situations. At the same time, it was also mentioned that this simulation was perfect for their own behavioural confirmation, however any change does not happen after just one session. Therefore, it is worth considering a solution that can be used on multiple occasions, which can bring about noticeable change.



Figure 4 Soft skills mentioned in focus group

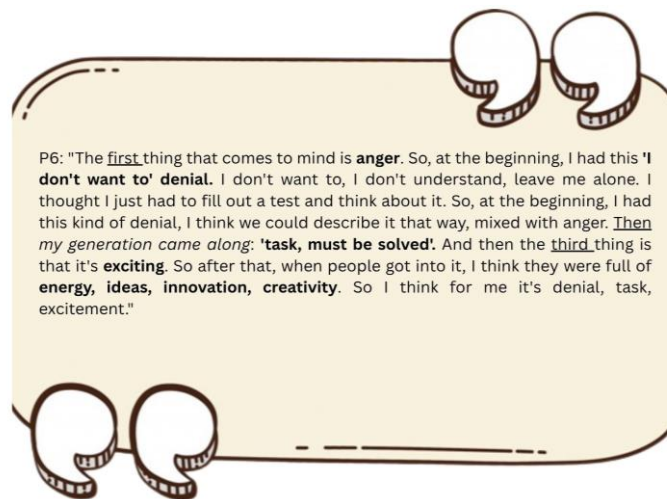
Generational patterns and codes appeared in work-related behavior, with Generations X and Y approaching the task from a different angle and with more stress factors, while Generation Z tackled the challenge more easily and with less tension.

Table 4 Data from MAXQDA Analyses Pro qualitative analysis software

Code System	Memo	Frequency
Code System		50
Impression of simulation	all connected mentions about the simulation, experience, feelings, opportunities	
overall experience	key words, phrases, emotions, everything which can describe the overall simulation experience	5
Simulation	user experience as a whole: user friendly, clear, design, structure, content	6
AI impact	all things mentioned or in connection with AI	
AI related	impact, what should be changed, realistic, real problem	6
Work related	Attitude, patterns, behaviors	
Moments made a difference	any kind of feelings, happenings, positive or negative, anything would be information	4
generations' reaction to an exercise	further patterns to realize - how Gen Y works compared to Gen Z (stress), new topic: functions - in some situations not generations but the job function defines their reaction	2
Generations vs functions	work ethics or behaviour - Gen Y is much more stressful than Gen Z in this kind of unknown situation, new topic - in some situations not generations but job functions (roles) define their reaction 2025. 10. 25. 15:49	4

Time pressure	time pressure is equal to stress 2025. 10. 25. 15:49	4
Soft skills	All answers which are in connection to soft skills	
Self-learning	self-reflection, behavior, self-awareness, self-feedback, self-confirmation 2025. 10. 25. 15:53	10
Trainings	features, potential, target groups	5
Soft-skills	teamwork, collaboration, empathy, problem-solving, critical thinking self-reflection, self-awareness	4

Source: Own research (n=9), primary research



Quote 2 by Participant 6

We were unable to prove our hypothesis regarding the use of AI. We assumed that participants would be dismissive of AI and would resist its use. However, the feedback we received was clearly positive, and when participants learned that AI could be used, they immediately felt reassured.

We got permission to take video recordings during the testing and focus group interview. Based on the video recording we prepared a full transcript. Thanks to this transcript we went through and put a pros and cons table together to have a clearer view on them.

Pilot simulation project

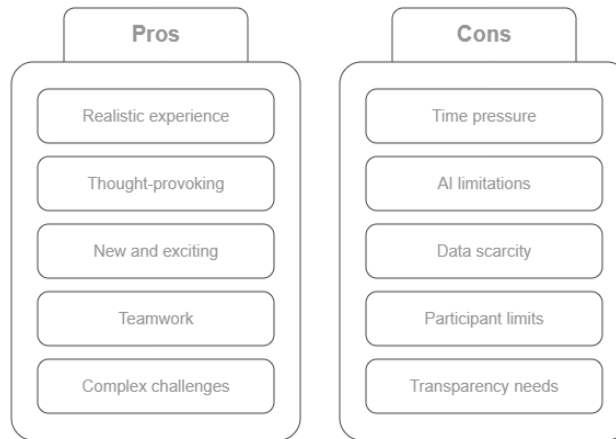


Figure 5 Own research (n=9), Corporate simulation Alpha testing, 2025, Napkin.ai

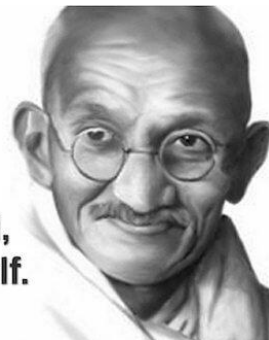
Our main research question was:

RQ: Does simulation intervention really contribute to resolving generational differences at workplace?

Hypothesis: This type of intervention provides a useful starting point for establishing whether simulation interventions are acceptable.

Focus group feedback makes it clear that a single session cannot change the world. However, even the first session prompted a level of self-reflection among participants that surprised them. This finding suggests that participants from different generations did not perceive faults or problems in other generations. Instead, they focused on self-examination to identify opportunities for personal development. The process of change is initiated internally and subsequently manifests externally. The present authors have a strong conviction in the importance of the proposed change and consider it to be their mission and passion. They regard it as the first step towards the creation of a better world.

**If you want to
change the world,
start with yourself.**
— Mahatma Gandhi



Quote 3 by Mahatma Gandhi

Given the openness demonstrated by the corporate partner with regard to further development, there is potential for collaborative product creation. It is therefore anticipated that the phases related to the corporate aspect of the research will be continued through joint collaboration.

Discussion

Taking into account the recommended structure of the discussion, we summarize the main points of the research by following the steps below.

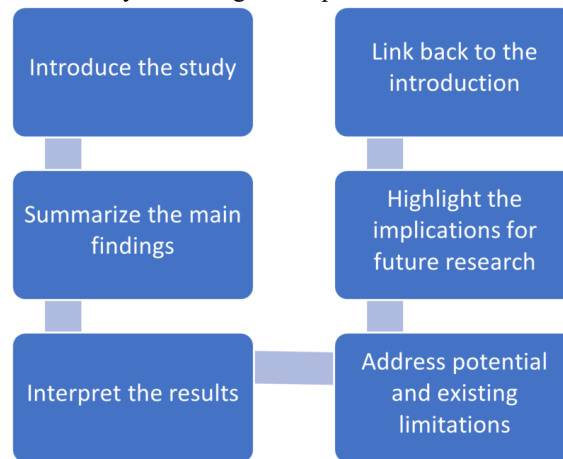


Figure 6 Discussion frame structure (Services, 2024)

The present study examined intergenerational cooperation using simulation intervention and its effects in a corporate environment. Previous studies have examined generational differences and disparities but have not specifically addressed the possibilities for practical solutions.

In terms of limitations, the research is still in its early stages and has so far only been implemented within one company. However, given the multinational and international nature of the company, it can be considered a very good starting point. Testing was carried out with three teams within the company. All generations were represented in the three teams. In order to increase the number of elements, it may be worthwhile to conduct further corporate testing to gain more insight. At the same time, previous research and literature confirm that this single test is sufficient to produce demo material that is ready for market launch. Nevertheless, we will continue to refine the product development process with a view to optimising its market fit.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Acknowledgement



Project: 101119689 — EdTech Talents — HORIZON-WIDERA-2022-TALENTS-03



“PROJECT NO. 2025-2.1.1-EKÖP-2025-00019-D-116 HAS BEEN IMPLEMENTED WITH THE SUPPORT PROVIDED BY THE MINISTRY OF CULTURE AND INNOVATION OF HUNGARY FROM THE NATIONAL RESEARCH, DEVELOPMENT AND INNOVATION FUND, FINANCED UNDER THE 2025-2.1.1-EKÖP UNIVERSITY RESEARCH SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAMME (EKÖP) FUNDING SCHEME.”

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