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DOSSIER: GENERATIONS, AGEISM, AND WORK

The effect of autonomy on the motivation and performance of Generation Y and Z employees

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Abstract

The aim of this research is to analyze the effect of autonomy on the motivation and performance of Generation Y and Z employees in the workplace. In terms of methodology, a quantitative study was conducted with 198 individuals, operationalized through a survey. To test the hypotheses, regression, moderation, and moderated mediation analyses were performed. The results demonstrated that autonomy can significantly increase the motivation and performance of employees from these generations at work. In addition, it was found that motivation partially mediates the relationship between autonomy and employee performance. Furthermore, it was verified that the employees' age range influences the effect of autonomy, being particularly significant for Generation Z. The study highlights autonomy as a key driver of motivation and performance for younger generations at work, suggesting that organizations adapt their cultures and policies to meet these needs.

Keywords: autonomy, performance, motivation, Generation Y, Generation Z.

O efeito da autonomia na motivação e no desempenho de funcionários das gerações Y e Z

Resumo

O objetivo desta pesquisa é analisar o efeito da autonomia na motivação e no desempenho de funcionários das gerações Y e Z no trabalho. Quanto ao método, foi realizada uma pesquisa quantitativa com 198 indivíduos, operacionalizada por meio de uma *survey*. Para o teste das hipóteses, foram realizados testes de regressão, moderação e mediação moderada. Os resultados demonstraram que a autonomia pode aumentar significativamente a motivação e o desempenho dos funcionários das referidas gerações no trabalho. Além disso, foi constatado que a motivação medeia parcialmente a relação entre a autonomia e o desempenho dos funcionários. Adicionalmente, verificou-se que a faixa de idade dos funcionários influencia o efeito da autonomia, sendo particularmente significativa para a Geração Z. O estudo destaca a autonomia como chave para a motivação e o desempenho das gerações mais jovens no trabalho, sugerindo que as organizações adaptem suas culturas e políticas para atender a essas necessidades.

Palavras-chave: autonomia, desempenho, motivação, Geração Y, Geração Z.

El efecto de la autonomía en la motivación y el desempeño de los empleados de las generaciones Y y Z

Resumen

El objetivo de esta investigación es analizar el efecto de la autonomía en la motivación y el desempeño de los empleados de las generaciones Y y Z en el trabajo. En cuanto al método, se realizó una investigación cuantitativa con 198 individuos, operacionalizada a través de una encuesta. Para el contraste de las hipótesis, se realizaron análisis de regresión, moderación y mediación moderada. Los resultados demostraron que la autonomía puede aumentar significativamente la motivación y el desempeño de los empleados de dichas generaciones en el trabajo. Además, se constató que la motivación media parcialmente la relación entre la autonomía y el desempeño de los empleados. Adicionalmente, se verificó que el rango de edad de los empleados influye en el efecto de la autonomía, siendo particularmente significativo para la Generación Z. El estudio destaca a la autonomía como una clave para la motivación y el desempeño de las generaciones más jóvenes en el trabajo, sugiriendo que las organizaciones adapten sus culturas y políticas para satisfacer estas necesidades.

Palabras clave: autonomía, desempeño, motivación, Generación Y, Generación Z.

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INTRODUCTION

Organizational literature has highlighted that the historical, technological, and social contexts in which individuals develop influence their values, expectations, and behaviors at work. In this regard, studies on generations seek to understand how cohorts formed in different historical periods may exhibit relatively similar patterns of professional attitudes and preferences. However, this approach has also been criticized, mainly due to its tendency toward excessive generalizations and the difficulty of dissociating generational effects from age or historical period effects (Rudolph et al., 2021). Recognizing such limitations is essential for advancing generational research in a more rigorous and theoretically consistent manner.

Despite these criticisms, empirical evidence indicates that structural transformations in the world of work, such as intensive digitalization, the flexibilization of labor relations, and the reconfiguration of career expectations, particularly affect younger generations, especially Generation Y and Z (Lazar et al., 2023; Thomas & George, 2021). These generations are entering the labor market in a context marked by greater instability, accelerated technological advancement, and questioning of traditional management models, which is reflected in the demand for greater flexibility, autonomy, and alignment between personal and organizational values.

Recent phenomena, such as the increase in voluntary turnover and the rejection of rigid work models, illustrate this movement and indicate shifts in the priorities of younger workers, who are beginning to value more autonomous and meaningful work experiences (Hopkins & Figaro, 2021). In this context, job autonomy emerges as a central element, not only as a feature of job design, but as a psychological resource capable of influencing motivation and, consequently, employee performance.

To effectively address these challenges, organizations must adopt multifaceted strategies that recognize and accommodate the unique attributes and preferences of each generation, while also fostering a collaborative and inclusive work environment. A deeper understanding of the distinct characteristics and motivations of each generation can facilitate the development of customized approaches to leadership, communication, and talent development (Lazar et al., 2023; Mesquita et al., 2020).

Although the literature widely recognizes the relationships among autonomy, motivation, and performance, many studies have addressed these constructs in isolation or without considering possible differences between generational groups. Furthermore, there is still a scarcity of investigations that simultaneously analyze the mechanisms through which autonomy influences performance, explore the mediating role of motivation, and examine whether these effects manifest differently between Generation Y and Generation Z. This gap is particularly relevant in light of criticisms of generational studies, as it requires more robust analytical models that move beyond superficial comparative descriptions.

Given this context, this study aims to analyze the effect of autonomy on motivation and performance among employees from generations Y and Z, investigating the mediating role of motivation in this relationship and examining whether the worker's generation exerts a moderating effect on this process. By adopting a moderated mediation model, this study seeks to contribute to the literature by integrating perspectives from job design and Self-Determination Theory, providing empirical evidence on how motivational resources operate across different generational cohorts.

From a managerial perspective, the results can assist organizations in formulating more effective people management practices, especially regarding job design, the flexibilization of work methods and schedules, and the development of environments that foster intrinsic motivation. By identifying how autonomy impacts performance differently across generations, this study supports strategies that are more aligned with the expectations of contemporary workforces.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Generations in the work context

A generation is more than a group of individuals defined solely by their year of birth; it refers to people who share similar historical and sociocultural experiences situated within the same temporal dimension of the social process (Alwin & McCammon, 2007; Rudolph et al., 2021). Although this approach is widely used, recent studies have warned of the risk of excessive generalizations and the difficulty of dissociating generational effects from age or contextual effects, which demands caution when interpreting differences between cohorts (Rudolph et al., 2021).

Currently, different generations coexist in the labor market: Baby Boomers, Generation X, Generation Y or Millennials, and Generation Z. However, in this study, generational categorization is used as an analytical lens, not as a behavioral determinism, with its interpretive limitations being acknowledged (Prund, 2021).

The literature also notes that the chronological classification of generations is not consensual, with variations in the temporal boundaries proposed by different authors (Rudolph et al., 2021), as shown in Table 1. This variability reinforces the need to interpret such classifications in context.

Table 1
Chronological classification of generational cohorts

Generation	Baby Boomers	X	Y	Z	Alpha
Berkup (2014)	1946 – 1964	1965 – 1979	1980 – 1994	1995 – ...	-
Ozkan & Solmaz (2015)	1945 – 1964	1965 – 1979	1980 – 2000	2000 – ...	-
Dimock (2019)	1946 – 1964	1965 – 1980	1981 – 1996	1997 – ...	-
Żarczyńska-Dobiesz & Boniecka (2022)	1945 – 1964	1965 – 1979	1980 – 1994	1995 – ...	-
Jha (2020)	-	-	-	-	2010- 2025
Thomas & George (2021)	-	-	-	-	2010- 2024

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

In the work context, the literature suggests that Generation Y and Generation Z share some expectations, such as valuing flexible environments and development opportunities, but differ in the intensity with which they respond to certain organizational resources. For example, Generation Y tends to value autonomy associated with career development, employability, and work-life balance (Anggraeni, 2018; Maharani et al., 2020).

Generation Z, on the other hand, demonstrates greater sensitivity to work practices that increase flexibility, control over activities, and the possibility of self-regulation, which is reflected in a higher appreciation of autonomy at work (Z. Berge & M. Berge, 2019; Nadeem & Rahat, 2021). This generation tends to respond more strongly to intrinsic rewards and work contexts that foster engagement and motivation, although extrinsic factors also play a relevant role (Kirchmayer & Fratričová, 2020).

In this scenario, job autonomy emerges as a central resource, since it can influence motivation and, indirectly, worker performance. Empirical evidence suggests that autonomy can have different meanings and impacts depending on the generation to which an individual belongs, reinforcing the importance of considering generational variability in the analysis of these relationships (Mesquita et al., 2020; Nadeem & Rahat, 2021; Rudolph et al., 2021).

Autonomy at work

Autonomy at work can be understood as the degree of freedom individuals have to decide how to structure, organize, and carry out their own tasks. This construct has been widely associated with positive outcomes in the organizational context, such as higher performance, satisfaction, and employee well-being, as it enhances the sense of control and responsibility over one's own work (Hackman & Oldham, 1976; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Beyond a structural characteristic of the job, autonomy constitutes a relevant psychological resource, capable of influencing motivational states and workplace behaviors. Classic job design models indicate that higher levels of autonomy foster greater task engagement, internalization of organizational goals, and the perception of meaningfulness at work (Hackman & Oldham, 1976; Morgeson & Humphrey, 2006).

Empirical evidence supports these assumptions by demonstrating that workplace autonomy is positively associated with employee performance (Lucas & Marcon, 2021). When workers perceive greater autonomy, they tend to exhibit higher levels of engagement, satisfaction, and quality in task execution, resulting in productivity and effectiveness gains at work (Gagné & Deci, 2005; Lucas & Marcon, 2021).

Additionally, organizational practices that enhance autonomy, such as flexible work arrangements and greater discretion over methods and pace of tasks, can foster more autonomous motivational states, contributing to adaptive behavior and well-being at work (Junça-Silva & Menino, 2022). In this sense, autonomy plays a strategic role in understanding how job characteristics influence both motivation and employee performance.

In light of this body of evidence, autonomy stands out as a central element for analyzing performance and motivation at work, especially in organizational contexts characterized by greater flexibility and generational diversity, supporting the hypotheses proposed in this study.

Job performance

Job performance constitutes a central dimension for organizational success and can be influenced by individual and contextual factors, among which job characteristics such as autonomy stand out (Lucas & Marcon, 2021). These characteristics directly affect how individuals organize, execute, and evaluate their activities. Autonomy at work, workplace communication, and employee-related factors such as intrinsic motivation, skill flexibility, skill level, proactivity, and adaptability significantly influence performance (Diamantidis & Chatzoglou, 2019). These elements operate in an integrated manner, influencing performance by enhancing the sense of control, perceived competence, and engagement with work (Hackman & Oldham, 1976).

This understanding emerges from contemporary studies that suggest that autonomy not only empowers employees by granting them greater control over their work activities but also acts as a facilitating mechanism to improve both performance and job satisfaction (Nasution et al., 2021). The interaction between job demands and resources and personal autonomy, highlighted by Pandey (2019), underscores the importance of a work environment that nurtures and supports employees independence. By expanding discretion over work methods and pace, autonomy favors more adaptive responses to organizational demands (Hackman & Oldham, 1976).

The relationship between job satisfaction, performance, and motivation, explored by Jalagat (2016), and the connection between motivation, responsibility, and performance, investigated by Ghaffari et al. (2017), reinforce the need for a holistic and integrated approach to understanding and promoting job performance. Kumari et al. (2021) complement this view by showing that both intrinsic motivation and financial rewards are vital for driving employee performance, with informal recognition serving as an additional motivational factor. These findings reinforce that performance does not arise solely from external rewards or demands, but from motivational states sustained by job characteristics.

Taken together, empirical evidence indicates that job autonomy acts as a central resource for employee performance, especially in contexts that require greater initiative, adaptation, and task involvement (Gagné & Deci, 2005; Hackman & Oldham, 1976; Lucas & Marcon, 2021). These findings support the proposition that higher levels of autonomy are associated with better performance outcomes. In light of this body of evidence, Hypothesis 1 (H1) proposes the following:

H1: Autonomy positively influences the performance of Generation Y and Z employees.

Motivation

Motivation refers to the psychological processes that guide the direction, intensity, and persistence of human behavior toward goals (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020). In the work context, the literature distinguishes intrinsic motivation, associated with the interest and satisfaction inherent to the activity itself, from extrinsic motivation, which is related to external rewards and contingencies (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Self-Determination Theory holds that the quality of motivation depends on the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness, with autonomy being a central element for the development of intrinsic motivation (Deci et al., 2017; Ryan & Deci, 2000). When individuals perceive greater control over how they perform their tasks, they tend to internalize organizational goals and display higher levels of well-being and work engagement (Gagné & Deci, 2005).

Empirical evidence indicates that job autonomy is positively associated with motivation, as it fosters the perception of self-direction and alignment between personal values and organizational demands (Deci & Ryan, 1995; Gagné & Deci, 2005). In this sense, autonomy acts as a psychological resource that contributes to the activation of more autonomous motivational states, with relevant implications for behavior and job performance.

Moreover, studies suggest that motivation plays an explanatory role in the relationship between job characteristics and organizational outcomes, functioning as a mechanism through which resources, such as autonomy, translate into better performance (Gagné & Deci, 2005; Liao & Chuang, 2004). In light of these assumptions, job autonomy can be understood as a relevant antecedent of motivation, as it fosters self-direction and internalizes organizational goals (Gagné & Deci, 2005; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Thus, Hypothesis 2 (H2) is proposed:

H2: Autonomy positively influences employee motivation.

Once more autonomous motivational states are activated, they are expected to translate into more engaged and effective behaviors at work, with direct implications for employee performance (Gagné & Deci, 2005; Liao & Chuang, 2004). Studies suggest that individuals endowed with greater autonomy in their tasks achieve better results in their execution (Gagné & Deci, 2005; Lynggaard et al., 2018) and that people who possess autonomy are intrinsically motivated (Deci & Ryan, 1995).

Liao and Chuang (2004) suggest that these positively motivated attitudes are associated with work performance when they are autonomous. In this sense, motivation functions as an explanatory mechanism that connects job characteristics, such as autonomy, to performance outcomes. Nadeem and Rahat (2021) showed that job autonomy and trust act as moderators in workplace practices and outcomes, with motivation having a positive mediating role in perceived organizational performance.

Nadeem and Rahat (2021) and Liu and Ren (2022) reported that trust and psychological empowerment are additional elements that enrich this dynamic, suggesting that motivation not only accompanies but also enhances the connection between perceived autonomy and work performance. Based on this evidence, Hypothesis 3 (H3) is proposed as follows:

H3: Motivation has a positive influence on employee performance.

These findings indicate that motivation can serve as an explanatory mechanism through which job characteristics, such as autonomy, translate into better performance outcomes. By fostering more autonomous motivational states, autonomy tends to indirectly affect employee performance (Gagné & Deci, 2005; Liao & Chuang, 2004). Thus, Hypothesis 4 (H4) was formulated:

H4: Motivation mediates the relationship between autonomy and performance.

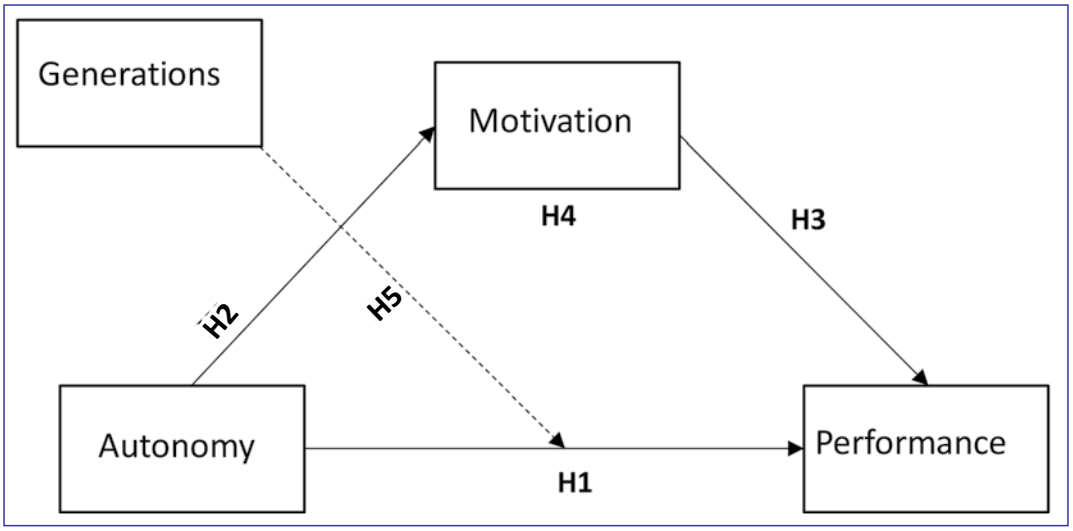
In addition to the direct and mediated relationships discussed earlier, the literature suggests that the way individuals respond to job resources, such as autonomy, may vary according to contextual and individual characteristics, among which the generation to which they belong stands out (Mesquita et al., 2020; Rudolph et al., 2021). Although such differences should not be interpreted deterministically, studies indicate that different generations may assign different meanings to autonomy at work, especially regarding the activation of motivation and subsequent effects on performance (Nadeem & Rahat, 2021).

In this regard, generation is considered in this study as a conditional factor that may influence the strength of the indirect effect between autonomy, motivation, and performance. Given this theoretical context, Hypothesis 5 (H5) is articulated as follows:

> H5: The effect of autonomy on performance, mediated by motivation, is moderated by employee generation, with this relationship being stronger for Generation Z than for Generation Y.

Given this theoretical framework, the present study adopts a quantitative design with the aim of empirically testing the proposed hypotheses, considering direct, mediating, and moderating effects in the relationships between autonomy, motivation, and performance. The theoretical model of this study, developed based on the hypotheses presented, is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1
Theoretical model



Source: Elaborated by the authors.

The model includes variables autonomy (independent), motivation (mediator), performance (dependent), and generations (moderator) and the hypotheses that will be tested in this study. The theoretical model follows template number 5 of PROCESS for moderated mediation (Preacher & Hayes, 2004).

METHOD

To investigate the proposed phenomenon and test the formulated hypotheses, a quantitative research approach with descriptive orientation was adopted. A non-probabilistic sampling method, specifically convenience sampling, was used to maximize participant accessibility and representativeness. The adoption of non-probabilistic sampling may entail limitations regarding the representativeness of the results, a factor that is considered when interpreting the findings. Data were collected from 233 respondents who had employment ties with companies and were born within the generational ranges observed in this study: 1980–1994, Generation Y; 1995–2009, Generation Z (Berkup, 2014; Jha, 2020). The inclusion criterion was the year of birth, which had to be between 1980 and 2009, as well as the establishment of an employment relationship.

Data collection instrument

Data were collected using a questionnaire developed and hosted on the Google Forms platform. The research instrument was made available via an accessible link, which was digitally disseminated through social networks such as Instagram and instant messaging applications such as WhatsApp. The data collection instrument was structured in four sections: i) nine items aimed at assessing autonomy; ii) 19 items for measuring motivation; iii) 18 items focused on performance evaluation; and iv) sociodemographic information and inclusion criteria, including open-ended questions.

To quantify employee performance, the present investigation adopted the Individual Work Performance Questionnaire (IWPQ), a validated and widely accepted tool in the scientific literature for the holistic, non-specific measurement of job performance (Koopmans et al., 2014).

This instrument was selected because of its demonstrated empirical robustness (Koopmans et al., 2014) and its applicability across diverse organizational contexts, which facilitates its adaptation for the specific purposes of this study. The IWPQ comprises 18 items subdivided into three dimensions: i) task performance (five items); ii) contextual performance (eight items); and iii) counterproductive work behavior (five items). The latter dimension required reverse scoring because its items referred to negative situations. The items were assessed using a 7-point Likert scale (e.g., 1 corresponds to "strongly disagree" and 7 to "strongly agree").

The autonomy of employees from generations Y and Z was measured using the instrument developed by Breaugh (1985), recognized in the literature (Gagné & Deci, 2005; Morgeson & Humphrey, 2006), consisting of nine observable variables, subdivided into three dimensions: method autonomy (three items), scheduling autonomy (three items), and criteria autonomy (three items). Similarly, the variables were measured using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

To measure motivation, the Multidimensional Work Motivation Scale (Gagné et al., 2015) was applied, developed, and tested with data from more than 3,000 workers in seven languages and nine countries (Broeck et al., 2016; Deci et al., 2017; Howard et al., 2016). Factor analyses indicated that the scale had the same factorial structure in all seven languages.

Before the presentation of the scale's observable variables, an introductory question was posed: "Why do you put or would you put effort into your current job?" Based on this question, participants responded to 19 statements divided into six dimensions: amotivation (three items); extrinsic regulation – social (three items); extrinsic regulation – material (three items); introjected regulation (four items); identified regulation (three items); and intrinsic motivation (three items). These were measured using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The "amotivation" dimension was reverse scored at the database preparation stage because it consisted of three negative items.

The scales used in this study were selected based on their widespread use and prior validation in the literature. Although a specific confirmatory factor analysis was not conducted for the present sample, the internal consistency of the scales was verified using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient, as recommended in exploratory studies (Hair et al., 2009).

Treatment and analysis of the data

The primary data collected, hosted on the Google Forms platform, were imported into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet to be tabulated and subsequently analyzed using the statistical software IBM SPSS Statistics (Statistical Package for Social Science).

Initially, after the data were available in SPSS, cleaning was carried out, during which missing values and outliers were checked (Hair et al., 2009). There were no missing values, as the electronic form was set so that all responses were mandatory; thus, the form could not be submitted without a response. For outlier observations, a descriptive analysis of the variables was performed, and a new variable was generated with their respective ZScore values, making it possible to exclude observations with ZScore > |3|, which may indicate univariate outliers, as indicated by (Hair et al., 2009).

After cleaning the database, descriptive analyses were conducted to examine the frequency, mean, and standard deviation for each observable and latent variable, as well as respondent profiles such as gender, generation, and educational attainment. The scales adopted in the research were subjected to reliability testing using Cronbach's Alpha index. Additionally, analyses were conducted to assess data normality using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests.

Moderated mediation analysis was conducted using the PROCESS macro (model 5), as proposed by Preacher and Hayes (2004), employing the bootstrap resampling method with 5,000 resamplings to estimate 95% confidence intervals for the indirect effects. Model 5 was selected as it allows for the simultaneous analysis of direct, mediating, and moderating effects, aligning with the proposed theoretical model.

It should be noted that the sample was predominantly composed of Generation Z respondents, which may have influenced the magnitude of the observed effects, especially in the moderation analyses. This aspect is considered in the discussion of the results. Furthermore, regression analyses were performed in accordance with the recommended statistical assumptions for this type of model, ensuring the adequacy of the results obtained.

RESULTS

During the data preparation stage, 35 cases were excluded from the initial sample of 233 responses. This decision was based on the identification of outliers using Z-score calculations. Following the guidance of Hair et al. (2009), Z-score values greater than |3| and less than |-3| were considered indicative of univariate outliers. After these were excluded, the final sample for analysis consisted of 198 valid cases. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk normality tests indicated that the variables were normally distributed. Thus, parametric analyses were conducted for the measurement model and for moderated mediation.

The results are presented considering the limitations inherent in the sample composition, especially the predominance of Generation Z respondents.

Respondents' profile

The analysis of the survey respondents' data revealed a diverse profile in terms of generation, gender, and education level. The majority of respondents belonged to Generation Z (62%), with a slight predominance of males (53%) over females, and with incomplete undergraduate education (42%). This distribution reflects the greater presence of Generation Z in the context investigated but should be considered when interpreting comparative analyses between generations.

Hypothesis testing

Effect of autonomy on job performance (H1)

The standardized beta coefficient ($\beta = 0.238$; $p < 0.05$) indicates a positive and significant relationship between autonomy and job performance, supporting H1. The coefficient of determination ($R2 = 0.128$) suggests that autonomy helps explain 13% of the variance in performance, highlighting the relevance of autonomy as a lever for operational effectiveness in the mentioned cohorts.

Although the coefficient of determination indicates that autonomy explains a moderate portion of the variance in performance, this result is consistent with organizational studies that recognize the multifactorial nature of job performance (Pandey, 2019).

Effect of autonomy on motivation (H2)

Similarly, autonomy emerged as a significant predictor of motivation ($\beta = 0.322$; $p < 0.05$), explaining 10% of its variability ($R2 = 0.105$), corroborating Hypothesis 2. This finding aligns with the understanding that autonomy in the workplace can stimulate a positive motivational state and promote engagement.

This result reinforces the role of autonomy as a relevant psychological resource for activating motivation at work, even though other individual and contextual factors also influence this process.

Effect of motivation on performance (H3)

Motivation, in turn, showed a significant effect on performance ($\beta = 0.229$; $p < 0.05$), reinforcing H3 and indicating that employees' motivational state plays a crucial role in accomplishing their tasks. This finding supports the inclusion of motivation as a key variable in the proposed theoretical model.

Mediator effect of motivation between autonomy and performance (H4)

The mediation analysis revealed a significant indirect effect of autonomy on performance via motivation, as evidenced by a confidence interval that does not include zero (95% CI; Lower Limit = 0.034; Upper Limit = 0.119). This result supports hypothesis 4, indicating partial mediation by motivation, since autonomy and motivation combined explain a greater percentage of the variance in performance (23%). The models depicting the relationships between variables are presented in Table 2.

Table 2
Mediation effect of the variable "motivation" between autonomy and performance

	B	Standard error	t	p
Dependent variable: Motivation; R^2: 0.105				
Autonomy(X)	0.322	0.067	4.771	0.000
Dependent variable: Performance; R2: 0.233				
Autonomy(X)	0.164	0.044	3.698	0.000
Motivation (M)	0.229	0.044	5.120	0.000
Indirect effect	Effect	Boot SE	Confidence Interval	
	0.073	0.021	0.034	0.119

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

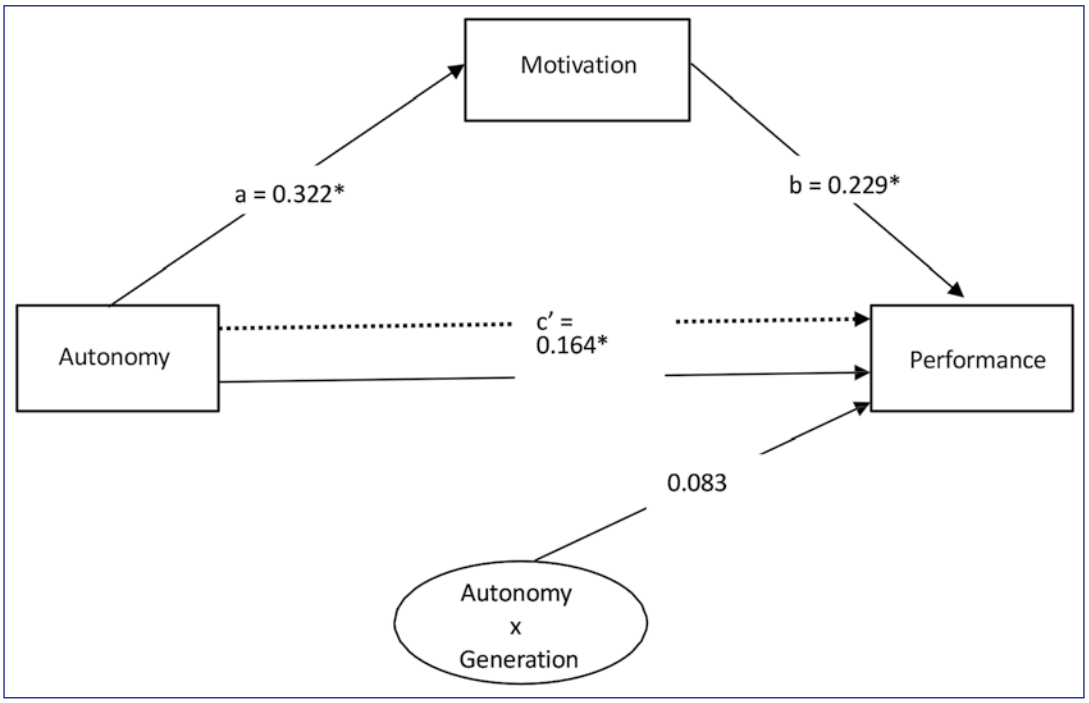
Partial mediation observed indicates that autonomy influences performance both directly and indirectly, through motivation, suggesting that this psychological mechanism explains part, but not all, of the relationship.

Finally, H5 predicts that individuals' generation moderates the association between autonomy and performance. The PROCESS results indicated that the interaction between generation and autonomy ($\beta = 0.083$; SE = 0.088; $t = 0.939$; $p > 0.05$) was positive and not significant for workers' performance. This result indicates that generational differences do not act as a universal moderator of the relationship between autonomy and performance, but their effects may manifest in specific groups.

The conditional effect test explored that the positive effect of perceived autonomy on employee performance was considered stronger and significant only for Generation Z ($\beta = 0.175$; $t = 3.257$; $p < 0.05$), compared to Generation Y ($\beta = 0.092$; $t = 1.271$; $p > 0.05$). The significance observed only for Generation Z suggests that, although moderation is not generalizable, autonomy has a greater impact on the performance of this specific group.

The moderated mediation model was significant ($p < 0.05$), with R2 = 0.260, that is, this result suggests that the predictor variables jointly explain 26% of the performance of Generation Z employees, highlighting the uniqueness of this demographic group in terms of their expectations and responses to the work environment. The R2 value obtained is consistent with studies in applied social sciences, in which explanatory models often capture moderate proportions of the variance in complex phenomena such as job performance (Hair et al., 2019). Thus, H5 was partially supported, considering the conditional effect observed in Generation Z. The conditional process model is illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2
Result of the moderated mediation model (conditional process model)



Note: *p < 0.05.
Source: Elaborated by the authors.

DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

The literature has consistently linked autonomy to positive outcomes, such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and performance (Junça-Silva & Menino, 2022; Tran et al., 2021). This study aimed to deepen the understanding of this phenomenon by investigating autonomy as a mediating variable between workers' generation and their performance, as well as a possible predictor of motivation. The findings should be interpreted in light of the multifactorial nature of job performance and the limitations inherent to the adopted study design.

The research indicated that autonomy is directly related to employee performance, accounting for 13% of the variance in this outcome. Notably, the initial research hypothesis (H1), which posited a positive relationship between autonomy and performance, was supported by the collected data. Although the observed effect is of moderate magnitude, it reinforces the understanding that autonomy is a relevant, though not exclusive, resource in job design for explaining performance. This result corroborates Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), which identifies autonomy as one of the basic psychological needs for the flourishing of intrinsic motivation - which, in turn, is intrinsically connected to job performance.

Regarding the relationship between autonomy and motivation (H2), the data revealed that autonomy accounted for 10% of the variance in employee motivation, serving as a significant predictor. This figure is noteworthy, given the complexity and multidimensionality of the factors that may affect motivation in an organizational context. This model infers that autonomy is not only a significant component but also a measurable predictor of employees' motivation levels. This result is aligned with Self-Determination Theory, as it indicates that autonomy supports the satisfaction of basic psychological needs, especially in relation to the perception of control over work (Deci et al., 2017; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

In line with H3, motivation has a positive and significant effect on employee performance, providing evidence that motivational aspects are relevant predictors of effectiveness in the workplace. This finding suggests that positive motivational states contribute to performance, although they do not fully explain its variations, thereby reinforcing the complex nature of this construct. This association is corroborated by the findings of Dysvik and Kuvaas (2013), who emphasized job autonomy as a fundamental ingredient for employee motivation and performance. They postulate that, by granting employees greater freedom in work-related decision-making, there is a direct stimulus to intrinsic motivation, which translates into deeper engagement and, consequently, better job performance.

The mediation analysis revealed the complexity of the relationship between autonomy and performance, confirming the premise that motivation acts as a significant mediating variable between these two constructs (H4). When motivation was included in the model, the direct effect of autonomy on performance was attenuated but remained significant, indicating partial mediation and suggesting that motivation constitutes a relevant psychological mechanism through which autonomy translates into performance, without, however, exhausting this relationship (Gagné & Deci, 2005). This phenomenon highlights the substantial influence of intrinsic motivation on the mechanism by which autonomy affects performance. This result is reinforced by Spivack and Milosevic (2018), who identified a positive relationship between perceived autonomy and intrinsic motivation, suggesting that this type of motivation may be a channel through which autonomy influences performance.

The quantitative reduction in the direct effect of autonomy on performance, when mediated by motivation, highlights the integral role of motivation as an effective driver of performance. This suggests that interventions aimed at increasing autonomy in the workplace should be carefully designed to promote motivation, in order to maximize the positive impact on employee performance.

Contrary to Hypothesis 5, generation did not significantly moderate the relationship between autonomy and performance. This result suggests that generational differences do not operate as universal moderators of the relationship between autonomy and performance, corroborating recent criticisms of the excessive generalization of generational effects (Rudolph et al., 2021).

The results indicate that autonomy has a significantly greater impact on the performance of Generation Z workers compared to Generation Y. This finding suggests that, although generational moderation does not manifest in a generalizable way, autonomy tends to play a more relevant role in this specific group. This result can be interpreted in light of studies showing that individuals from Generation Z place greater value on work practices that increase control, flexibility, and the possibility of self-regulation of activities, which contributes to higher levels of motivation and engagement at work (Lee et al., 2022; Loring & Wang; 2022).

The findings of this study corroborate the importance of autonomy in the workplace as a fundamental factor for employee performance and motivation. The confirmation of the initial hypotheses highlights the relevance of granting workers freedom in decision-making related to their tasks, since this not only stimulates intrinsic motivation but also positively influences organizational performance.

Mediation analysis revealed the complexity of these relationships, highlighting motivation as a significant mediator between autonomy and performance. Furthermore, the discovery of the different impact of autonomy on Generation Z underscores the need to consider the particularities of each generational group when implementing people management strategies. Therefore, strategies aimed at increasing workplace autonomy should be carefully planned to promote intrinsic motivation, with the goal of maximizing the positive impact on employee performance, especially among Generation Z.

In general, the results reinforce the importance of understanding autonomy as a work resource whose impact on motivation and performance depends on context and individual characteristics, avoiding homogeneous or deterministic interpretations.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Throughout this investigation, it was found that autonomy at work is not only a motivational factor, but also a driver of the performance of these generations. These findings are corroborated by a series of contemporary studies that examine autonomy in different sectors and work contexts. These results reinforce that autonomy does not act in isolation, but as part of a set of job resources that influence motivational states and performance outcomes.

The results indicate that when employees have decision-making freedom and control over their tasks, they are more likely to feel motivated and satisfied with their work, which consequently leads to better performance. The study also suggests that the influence of autonomy on motivation and performance may vary slightly between Generation Y and Generation Z. Although both generations show a positive relationship between autonomy, motivation, and performance, the results indicate that the intensity of this effect tends to be greater among Generation Z workers, suggesting greater sensitivity in this group to work practices that increase control and flexibility.

From a theoretical standpoint, the study contributes by integrating Self-Determination Theory and work design approaches into a moderated mediation model, highlighting the role of motivation as an explanatory mechanism between autonomy and performance. Furthermore, by addressing generation as a contextualized moderating variable, this study advances the debate on the boundaries and possibilities of generational analyses in organizational research.

The conclusions of this study provide insights into the specific needs and preferences of Generation Y and Z in the workplace, which have significant implications for global organizational culture and workforce development. Understanding how autonomy and motivation relate to their performance can serve as a catalyst for change and organizational growth.

From a generational perspective, the findings suggest that people management practices aimed at increasing autonomy, such as greater flexibility in working hours, autonomy in work methods, and less prescriptive job design, can foster motivation and performance, especially among Generation Z workers. Such practices should be implemented in a manner that aligns with the organizational culture and specific demands of the teams.

As a limitation, it is important to note the cross-sectional nature of this study, which restricts the ability to establish causal relationships between generational characteristics, organizational outcomes, and workforce dynamics. Longitudinal research designs could provide a more comprehensive understanding of how generational factors evolve over time and their sustained impact on organizational performance. Additionally, the predominance of Generation Z respondents in the sample and the use of convenience sampling may limit the generalizability of the results, especially with regard to comparative analyses between generations.

Future research may deepen the understanding of these relationships through longitudinal or multi-method designs, as well as by exploring different organizational contexts, economic sectors, and countries. Studies that include additional variables, such as leadership styles, perceived organizational support, and organizational culture, may also contribute to expanding knowledge of the mechanisms that connect autonomy, motivation, and performance. Additionally, approaches that combine self-reported data with supervisor performance evaluations can strengthen the empirical robustness of the analyses.

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RESEARCH DATA AVAILABILITY

The entire dataset supporting the findings of this study is available upon request to the corresponding author, Juliane Ruffatto. The dataset is not publicly available due to its size and format.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE USAGE

The artificial intelligence tool ChatGPT was used to assist in the technical-grammatical review of the text and the normalization of references.

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