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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Is 'Generational Difference' to Blame?

Organisational Anomie and the Multigenerational Workforce in Malta

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ABSTRACT

Two forces are reshaping contemporary work: the rapid diffusion of generative AI (GenAI) and the age diversity of a workforce in which as many as five generations now work side by side. Friction at their intersection is habitually read in generational terms; yet the evidence for stable, cohort-level differences in work attitudes is weak and inconsistent. This paper takes that discrepancy as its problem. It examines how workplace and labour-market actors perceive generational difference and GenAI adoption across four domains: digital competence; communication and learning; work values and the employment relationship; and the integration of GenAI. It draws on eight focus groups with 64 participants across the labour market of Malta – a small state – with the resulting data analysed through reflexive thematic analysis. Participants consistently perceived difference along generational lines while declining to attribute it to generation itself. Drawing on the work of classical sociologist Émile Durkheim, the paper argues that what is taken at face value for generational conflict is more accurately understood as organisational anomie: a lag in which technological and organisational change outpaces the shared norms needed to coordinate work. Generational categories, functioning as collective representations, supply the vocabulary through which this normlessness is misread as a function of age.

KEYWORDS

collective representations; digital literacy; generations; generative AI; Malta; multigenerational workforce; normlessness; organisational anomie

1. Introduction

1.1 Two converging pressures

Friction in age-diverse workplaces is almost reflexively explained by generation. Yet the evidence that generations genuinely differ at work is weak and inconsistent. There is a gap between what is perceived and what can be shown: this paper takes this gap as its starting point. Simultaneously, two developments are now reshaping work at once. The first is the increasingly technology-mediated character of work, intensified by generative AI (GenAI): most organisations now use GenAI in at least one business function, though only a few call their deployment mature (McKinsey & Company,

2025a). GenAI reaches beyond routine tasks into cognitive, communicative, and creative work (Eloundou et al., 2023), and its near-term effect falls on the reconfiguration of tasks within jobs rather than the automation of whole occupations (International Labour Organization, 2023; McKinsey & Company, 2024). The second is the age diversity of the workforce receiving these tools: longer working lives and rising old-age employment mean that up to five generations now work alongside one another (Eurofound, 2025; Urick, 2022). This shift toward digitally mediated work is not new but long-running, and different cohorts entered it at different points, under different technological, institutional, and economic conditions. The two developments intersect where unfamiliar tools are adopted and established practices renegotiated at once, across cohorts whose relationships to work and technology were formed differently. It is this intersection, not either development alone, that the study examines.

1.2 Generational framing and its limits

A generation is a group of people who share a position in history, shaped by living through the same major events at the same formative stage of life, usually late adolescence and early adulthood (Mannheim, 1952). Mannheim separated three levels: generational location, meaning the structural position a birth cohort holds; generation as actuality, meaning the shared outlook that develops when a cohort actually participates in those events; and generational units, meaning the different and sometimes opposing ways groups within a generation respond to them. Contemporary work retains this basic logic while treating generational boundaries as analytical conventions rather than natural divisions, since formative influences vary in strength across individuals and the effects of cohort, age, and historical period are difficult to separate empirically. Birth year remains the standard operational marker, working as a proxy for the shared experience that gives a generation its character (Pew Research Center, 2015).

Friction in age-diverse workplaces is routinely read in generational terms, with problems of communication, learning, or technology use attributed to cohort traits. This contested evidence is worth setting out: meta-analytic and review studies have found cohort-level differences in work-related attitudes to be weak and inconsistent, and frequently better explained by age, formal education, career stage, role, and context than by generational membership (Costanza et al., 2012; Costanza & Finkelstein, 2015; Costanza et al., 2023; Ravid et al., 2025; Rudolph et al., 2021). A gap therefore separates the thin evidence for generational difference from the prevalence of generational framing. This paper addresses that gap. It does not deny that age-patterned differences appear; it denies that generation, as such, explains them. Generation, the paper argues, is a visible shorthand for a more complex configuration of career stage, role, organisational context, training access, and a long-running technological transition that cohorts entered at different points. The paper asks how generational difference is perceived, and what that perception reveals about the organisational conditions producing it.

1.3 Organisational anomie as the lens

The paper argues that perceived generational conflict is better understood as a symptom of unsettled organisational norms, as technological and organisational change outpaces the shared expectations needed to coordinate work. We draw on French sociologist Émile Durkheim's (1893) concept of anomie to characterise this condition, examining it across four domains where research locates multigenerational difference: communication and collaboration; learning and development; work

values and the employment relationship; and the integration of GenAI. Each maps to one of the study's sub-questions. Why the resulting friction is so consistently read as generational is a further question, addressed through the concepts of collective representations and stereotype activation, developed in the next section.

1.4 The Maltese context

Malta – population: around 580,000; land area: 316 km2 – is the smallest member state of the European Union. Its services-led, micro- and SME-dominated economy exposes a wide range of roles to digital and AI transitions, while firms retain little capacity for structured change management (Government of Malta, 2025; National Statistics Office [NSO], 2024). Where formal training and change-management infrastructure are thin, transitions are absorbed through informal learning, workplace relationships, ad hoc adaptation, and implicit expectation rather than codified policy. This dependence on informal norm-setting is what makes the setting revealing: it is here that the links between technological change, the lag in shared norms, and the reading of friction as generational become most visible. Adult learning participation, though comparatively high, is uneven by age, with younger adults participating more than older cohorts (European Commission, 2025). A tight labour market of low unemployment and high job vacancies shifts the emphasis from recruitment toward retention and workplace learning (NSO, 2025). Small-state economies are structurally more open and concentratedly exposed to external shocks (Briguglio, 1995); though how far such findings transfer to larger settings remains moot.

1.5 Research question and contributions

The paper asks: how do workplace and labour-market stakeholders in Malta perceive the impact of generational difference and GenAI adoption on digital competencies, workplace norms, and organisational dynamics? This question was addressed through four sub-questions, each isolating a domain in which stakeholders locate generational difference: how participants understand digital literacy and its variation by age; how they experience communication and learning preferences; how they perceive differences in work values and organisational expectations; and how they expect GenAI integration to affect work across generations. The central finding is not that fixed generational differences exist, but that rapid technological change exposes unsettled organisational norms, so that generational friction is better understood as the visible surface of organisational normlessness. The paper makes three contributions. Empirically, it offers evidence on generational differences from a small-state, age-diverse, GenAI-adopting workforce, a type of setting rarely represented in a literature dominated by North American samples and survey designs (Costanza et al., 2012; Twenge, 2023). Theoretically, it develops a Durkheimian account of why these perceptions take a generational form even where participants reject generational determinism. Practically, it explains why generation-targeted interventions tend to fail, and where organisational attention is better directed. What appears as generational conflict is thus the visible surface of organisational anomie: generation names, but does not explain, the normlessness that arises when technological change outruns shared norms.

2. Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

The review develops the framework in three steps. Section 2.1 sets the theory of generational difference against the contested evidence for it, and introduces the two concepts the paper uses to explain why difference is nonetheless perceived in generational terms: collective representations and stereotyping. Section 2.2 reconsiders digital literacy under GenAI. Section 2.3 sets out organisational anomie and solidarity, the concepts that frame the discussion.

2.1 Generational difference, in principle and in practice

The claim that workers can be grouped by generation rests on the idea that cohorts sharing formative historical experiences develop durable, distinguishing orientations. Mannheim's (1952) sociology of generations is the foundational statement, locating generational formation in significant events experienced during a cohort's formative years. Strauss and Howe (1991) extend this into a cyclical model in which generational types recur, yielding the familiar five categories: the Silent Generation (pre 1945); Baby Boomers (1946-1964), Generation X (1965-1980), Millennials (1981-1996), and Generation Z (1997-2012). Twenge (2023) offers a technological variant, arguing that the dominant technology of a cohort's youth shapes its psychology and expectations, so that cohort differences reflect conditions of formation rather than age.

This standing is contested. Much work argues that reported generational differences are artefacts of method rather than robust cohort effects, since cross-sectional designs cannot separate age, period (effects of the historical moment of measurement), and cohort (Costanza et al., 2012; Rudolph et al., 2021), and meta-analytic evidence finds differences in work attitudes to be small and inconsistent (Ravid et al., 2025). The "digital native" thesis, that younger cohorts are inherently more competent through early exposure (Prensky, 2001), illustrates the problem: it is undercut by wide within-cohort variation and by the greater weight of socioeconomic background, education, and occupation rather than birth year (Bennett et al., 2008).

This leaves an interpretive problem which the critical literature documents but does not fully explain: generational categories remain a salient way workers interpret difference despite their weak analytical validity. To account for this, the study draws on Durkheim's (1912) concept of collective representations: socially shared categories that organise perception and persist at the level of the collective. Generational categories are collective representations of this kind, offering a ready, shared vocabulary for classifying workplace difference (Brink et al., 2015). How such categories are applied is specified by the stereotyping literature. Social categorisation theory holds that people routinely sort others into in-groups and out-groups by salient category (Tajfel & Turner, 1979); the Stereotype Content Model identifies warmth and competence as the axes of evaluation (Fiske et al., 2002) matching the recurrent image of older workers as experienced but less adaptable and younger workers as capable but less reliable. Research on age stereotyping documents these characterisations (Posthuma & Campion, 2009); and work on meta-stereotypes, beliefs about how one's own group is seen by others, shows they operate reciprocally across groups (Finkelstein et al., 2013). Crucially, stereotypes are activated most strongly under uncertainty and ambiguity, when category-based inference substitutes for individuating information: a property that links generational framing to the organisational conditions examined in the discussion.

A further literature examines how age-related difference shows up in workplace practice, recurring in communication, learning, leadership expectations, and values. Communication is the most cited issue: younger workers are associated with instant, computer-mediated channels and older workers with

face-to-face interaction (Venter, 2017). This needs qualification, since channel preference depends on task, context, and perceived effectiveness rather than cohort alone (Woodward & Vongswasdi, 2017). Cohort-related variation in work values has also been reported, including shifts in emphasis on leisure, extrinsic reward, and intrinsic satisfaction (Twenge et al., 2010): though this is better treated as a pattern to examine than an established property. The literature also identifies mechanisms that make intergenerational difference productive rather than merely frictional: reverse mentoring – where junior staff mentor senior colleagues in areas such as digital fluency while gaining institutional knowledge – is one documented model of reciprocal exchange (Chaudhuri et al., 2022; Hans et al., 2023; Kuyken & Costanza, 2024; Marcinkus Murphy, 2012).

2.2 The transformation of work under GenAI and the reconception of digital literacy

GenAI is reshaping the workplace by reconfiguring the tasks around which competence and coordination are organised. Unlike earlier automation, it reaches into cognitive, communicative, and creative work (Eloundou et al., 2023), and field evidence shows its effects vary by task and worker experience, improving performance in some functions while requiring users to judge when outputs are reliable, incomplete, or misleading (Brynjolfsson et al., 2025; Dell'Acqua et al., 2023). The capabilities it renders most durable are those least automatable: critical judgement, ethical reasoning, and human communication (World Economic Forum, 2025).

What this demands of workers is less familiarity with particular tools than the evaluative capacity to judge and use plausible machine output responsibly, which bears directly on how digital competence should be understood. Interpreting competence as age-linked depends on a narrow conception of digital literacy as technical proficiency, one which contemporary frameworks reject. Digital literacy is better understood as a composite capability integrating technical, cognitive, and social dimensions: it is not only about operating tools but critically about evaluating digital content, attending to safety and privacy, exercising ethical judgement, and deciding when and how tools should be used (Grech, 2025). Critical traditions likewise stress evaluative and reflective capacities over functional skill, locating competence in the ability to interrogate the systems that mediate information rather than in platform familiarity (Buckingham, 2015; Koltay, 2011; Pangrazio & Sefton-Green, 2021). So conceived, digital literacy is not acquired automatically through early exposure: as the digital-native critique shows, competence is decoupled from age, and the platform familiarity often attributed to younger workers does not confer the critical capabilities responsible practice under GenAI requires. These are developmental, requiring sustained acquisition across all cohorts (Grech, 2025). How they are experienced within multigenerational workplaces remains underexamined, especially outside the North American settings that dominate the literature.

2.3 Organisational anomie and solidarity

What unites the four domains is that each is a site where established norms are being unsettled: communication practices outrun shared protocols, learning expectations diverge without reconciliation, the employment relationship is renegotiated without acknowledgement, and GenAI is adopted ahead of governance. To characterise this, the study draws on Durkheim's (1893) analysis of the division of labour, and specifically anomie: the condition that arises when economic and occupational change outpaces the norms needed to regulate it, leaving relations between specialised functions insufficiently governed and adrift. The concept has since been extended from the individual to work and organisations (Johnson & Duberley, 2011; Tsahuridu, 2006). Anomie is used here in a

deliberately narrow sense: the breakdown or absence of shared workplace norms under accelerated socio-technological change. It has been criticised as imprecise and as carrying conservative assumptions about an implicit desirability of/for order (Besnard, 1988; Meštrović & Brown, 1985). Here, the present use makes no claim that the prior order was stable or preferable, treating anomie strictly as a description of normative lag.

The same analysis supplies a related concept, used in the discussion to specify the normative strain at issue in the domain of work values. Durkheim (1893) distinguishes mechanical solidarity, where cohesion derives from shared identity, from organic solidarity, where it derives from functional interdependence among differentiated roles. Crucially, organic solidarity requires more than interdependence: it requires norms capable of regulating relations between differentiated roles, and anomie is what arises when that regulation regime lags behind differentiation practice. The distinction is introduced not as a typology of generations but to specify what kind of normative order is strained when the employment relationship is reorganised around greater mobility, specialisation, and technological mediation without corresponding or adjourned norms. Together, anomie names the condition the four domains share: collective representations and stereotyping explain why it is read as generational; and the solidarity distinction deepens the argument for work values and the employment relationship.

3. Method

3.1 Design

This paper reports the first, exploratory phase of a three-phase research programme. The study is qualitative and interpretivist: because its object is how workplace and labour-market actors perceive and interpret generational difference and GenAI adoption, rather than how prevalent any view is. A focus-group design was chosen, prioritising interpretive depth over representativeness. The research was conducted jointly by the 3CL Foundation (https://www.3cl.org/) and the National Skills Council (https://nscmalta.gov.mt/), whose respective expertise in critical digital literacies and workforce policy in Malta has shaped the study's design and interpretation. An earlier practitioner report (Garzia et al., 2026) drew on the same fieldwork, but the present paper develops an independent argument and cites only primary sources.

3.2 Sampling and participants

Sampling was purposive, reaching sectors in which digital and generational change is already salient. Sixty-four participants took part across eight focus groups, organised between March and August 2025, with members aged 18 to 65 and broadly balanced by gender. Two youth-organisation groups were added during fieldwork to address the under-representation of younger participants. Recruitment through the professional networks of the two organisations weights the sample toward the professionally engaged, so the findings are indicative rather than representative. Group composition is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. *Focus group composition*

Focus group	Sector	Participants
FG1; FG2	Education and lifelong learning	14
FG3	Social partners	9
FG4	Policy and innovation	6
FG5	Civil society organisations	9
FG6	Business associations and employers	6
FG7; FG8	Young people	20
Total		**64**

3.3 Data collection and analysis

Sessions lasted approximately 90 minutes each; the first six were held online and the two youth groups were held in person. Discussions followed a shared question bank adapted to each group, and were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and translated from Maltese where required. Transcripts were analysed through reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019), proceeding through its six phases with predominantly semantic coding.

The focus groups were not asked identical questions but addressed similar themes adapted to each group's specialisation, so saturation in its conventional sense was not an appropriate criterion, as it assumes a common line of questioning across a homogeneous sample. Saturation has itself been questioned as a coherent stopping point for reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Data sufficiency was judged instead through information power (Malterud et al., 2016). Information power holds that the amount of data required varies with the narrowness of the aim, the specificity of the sample, the use of established theory, the quality of dialogue, and the analytic strategy, and that a study scoring highly across these dimensions needs fewer participants. The present study scores highly on each. The aim is narrow, addressing perceptions of generational difference and GenAI adoption within a single national labour market. The sample is specific by design: each group was purposively aligned with the sub-questions most relevant to its sector, so that every group contributes concentrated, highly relevant material on its portion of the inquiry, and the adaptation of questions across groups is a source of this specificity rather than a departure from it. The dialogue was correspondingly rich, as participants with direct professional involvement in workplace and labour-market matters engaged substantively with one another rather than responding in isolation. The analysis is theoretically informed, drawing on established work in the sociology of generations and organisational norms. Eight focus groups with 64 participants therefore carried sufficient information power for the questions asked.

3.4 Ethics

The researchers obtained ethical approval from the University of Malta (REDP form: MAKS-2025-00127). All participants gave informed consent to take part and be recorded. Data were anonymised prior to analysis and handled in accordance with GDPR; contributions are attributed by group and descriptor rather than by name.

4. Findings

The findings are organised under four themes matching the study's sub-questions: digital literacy and competence; communication and learning; work values and the employment relationship; and the integration of GenAI. They are reported descriptively, as accounts of how participants perceive change across these domains; interpretation is reserved for the discussion. Three observations recur. First, participants used generational labels as a starting point but resisted them as explanations, attributing difference more to disposition, role, and context than to age. Second, what shaped a person's response to technological change was less their year of birth than their openness to learning. Third, transversal capabilities, not proficiency with particular tools, were seen as the most durable basis for relevance as work changes. A tension follows: participants perceive real differences along generational lines yet decline to locate their cause in generation itself. And, in each domain, they pointed to a missing shared norm, a common standard, an agreed protocol, a settled expectation, whose absence underlay the friction they described.

4.1 Competence over familiarity

Participants characterised digital literacy as a broad and composite capability rather than a discrete technical skill. Asked what the term encompassed, they identified the selection of an appropriate tool for a given purpose, awareness of safety and privacy, openness to learning, ethical considerations, and the critical evaluation of digital content. There was no single shared definition: some treated digital literacy as the baseline ability to operate a tool, while others extended it to effective and context-appropriate use, closer to proficiency. As one participant put it, "if you're literate in something, I understand your ability to use it, not necessarily to use it effectively... I think you're going beyond the strict definition" (Civil Society, FG5). This divergence concerned terminology more than substance, since participants across groups consistently identified critical evaluation as essential, particularly where tools produce outputs that appear plausible but may be incorrect. That no common definition of digital competence was available is itself notable: participants were describing a capability widely demanded of them yet nowhere agreed.

Where generational patterning was described, it concerned perceived disposition toward tools rather than capability as such. Younger workers were often perceived as more willing to experiment and to learn by doing, acquiring "just what you need to know to get that job done" (Workplace Social Partners, FG3). The same readiness was held to carry costs: participants noted that younger colleagues were sometimes seen to bypass established practice, to place "blind trust" in technology (Employer, FG6), or to lack depth in workplace-standard applications, with several observing that younger workers often "don't know how to use Track Changes or simple Excel functions" (Education and Lifelong Learning, FG1) while older colleagues remained proficient with them. Older workers were described, conversely, as often slower to adopt new tools and more hesitant, with some perceived to exhibit a "fear of failure" (Education and Lifelong Learning, FG1) and reluctance to risk that "something will break," (Education and Lifelong Learning, FG1) but as inclined to master a tool more thoroughly once adopted.

Most significantly, participants resisted the inference that these patterns are caused by age. While younger individuals were frequently perceived as more digitally proficient, the determining factor was repeatedly located in attitude rather than birth year: "I don't think it's the age. It's the attitude of the people" (Education and Lifelong Learning, FG2). Participants accordingly framed the practical task

as one of cultivating curiosity and creating conditions in which experimentation feels safe, rather than treating age as a fixed barrier to competence. Underlying this domain is the absence of any shared standard for what digital competence means or how it is to be developed: competence is acquired informally, through individual disposition and ad hoc effort, in the absence of agreed definitions or infrastructure for its cultivation.

4.2 Channel mismatch

Communication emerged as the most visible site of generational difference, and participants described it with notable consistency, summarised by one as "older: phone; younger: messages and posts" (Youth, FG7). Younger participants were associated with instant-messaging platforms such as Slack and Microsoft Teams, valuing immediacy and asynchronous exchange, and with a preference for messaging over email, including the receipt of documents through channels such as WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger. Older colleagues were perceived as preferring verbal communication, by telephone or in person, and as regretting that the "social element" of speaking to a colleague directly was giving way to a constant flow of written messages (Education and Lifelong Learning, FG1).

These divergent preferences were reported to generate tangible friction. Where different groups default to different channels, conversations fragment into parallel streams: "you have, like, a conversation going on email and then parallel conversations going on" (Civil Society, FG5). A concrete consequence arises when a junior colleague sends a message and "leaves it at that," (Youth, FG7) while a senior colleague, expecting a call or a conversation in person, misses it. Difference extended beyond platform to register: an employer observed that "emails become like messages... [the] older generation keeps everything formal," (Workplace Social Partners, FG3) and younger workers' use of informal language and emoji was frequently perceived by older colleagues as unprofessional. A further dimension concerned boundaries: younger participants described themselves as more protective of the separation between work and non-work time, with one expressing frustration that older colleagues "can annoy you whenever they like" (Youth, FG7) through contact at inappropriate hours, a boundary-setting that older participants did not regard negatively.

Participants also pointed toward resolution, and in doing so named the missing element. Several employers valued explicit communication protocols specifying which channel suits which purpose: for instance, email for formal requests, instant messaging for quick queries, and telephone for urgent matters. They reported that such measures reduced both miscommunication and overlooked messages. They stressed, however, that such protocols work best when developed collaboratively rather than imposed, and take time to establish. What they described was friction arising not from incompatible abilities but from the absence of agreed norms governing channel, register, urgency, and boundary, with the remedy lying in establishing them.

4.3 Shifting meanings of work

Participants described a marked contrast in what different groups expect from work. Older workers were seen as valuing loyalty, stability, duty, and security of tenure, formed in a context where staying with one employer for decades was common. Younger workers were described as prioritising personal fulfilment, autonomy, financial wellbeing, and ethical alignment, and as readier to move when these expectations went unmet. Participants framed this not as disloyalty but as a different understanding of what loyalty means under reduced economic security and a tight labour market.

A distinctly pessimistic financial outlook recurred in the youth groups and was largely absent from discussions with older participants; one younger participant described a "fatalistic, pessimistic" environment and a fear of being unable to afford basic costs of living (Youth, FG7). This perception is notable against the objective position of young people in Malta, who are by several measures comparatively well placed: youth unemployment stood at 5.1% (NSO, 2025), below the EU average, and household real income per capita has risen substantially since 2004 (Eurostat, 2025). The clear exception was housing: the prospect of purchasing property emerged as a consistent source of anxiety in the youth groups and one not raised in the same way by older participants.

This outlook was associated with what participants described as a more instrumental orientation toward employment. For many younger participants, work was characterised less as a source of identity than as a means to support a life beyond it, "a vehicle to fund the life" one wants (Youth, FG7). Yet this instrumental stance coexisted with strong attentiveness to organisational values: several younger participants described having declined or left positions on ethical grounds despite favourable pay or conditions, a pattern largely absent from the older groups. One youth explained, "I've left a job over ethical concerns... I live as myself 24/7 so I need something... I feel comfortable with" (Youth, FG7). Both younger and older participants observed that, where organisational values were seen as performative rather than substantive, trust diminished and job resignation became more likely, particularly among younger employees. The domain thus presents an apparent paradox, taken up in the discussion: younger participants were at once more attentive to their employer's values and less committed to the organisation itself. Underlying the contrast is an absence of shared understanding of the employment relationship itself: of what employees owe organisations and what organisations owe employees; and of how loyalty, mobility, and value alignment are to be weighed, transactionally.

4.4 GenAI: welcomed, feared, ungoverned

Participants viewed GenAI with markedly mixed perspectives, combining enthusiasm for its efficiency with concern about its wider implications. Most resisted any simple judgement that the technology is either good or bad, describing it instead as a "two-sided coin" whose effects depend on how it is used (Youth, FG7). On the positive side, participants valued GenAI as a tool for productivity and support, likening it to having "research assistants on speed," (Policy and Innovation, FG4) and described its use as a drafting aid, a means of automating routine tasks, and a tutor able to explain difficult material or translate it into more accessible terms. Some framed its significance competitively, observing that the risk is less that the technology replaces people directly than that, as one academic participant put it, "a person who can use AI effectively will take your job" (Education and Lifelong Learning, FG1).

Against these benefits, participants raised a series of concerns. A recurrent worry was over-reliance and the erosion of independent capability: "you start losing... your ability... because you're handing it over to AI to do it" (Youth, FG7). Others identified risks to privacy where sensitive material is entered into publicly accessible tools, the reproduction of bias, and ambiguity over who is accountable for AI-assisted output. A particular concern centred on early-career development. Participants observed that GenAI increasingly performs the routine tasks through which junior staff have traditionally built experience, with one employer noting: "if legal research is taken up by AI, there is less need for legal interns... these legal interns one day become the partners... and they need that experience" (Youth, FG7). The risk identified here is developmental: that automating foundational work weakens the pipeline through which professional judgement is formed.

Across these discussions, participants converged on transversal skills as the most durable basis for continued relevance. Capabilities such as communication, teamwork, creativity, adaptability, problem-solving, and critical thinking were identified as those least susceptible to automation and most important as tasks change, with one participant describing them as the "fulcrum of everything" (Workplace Social Partners, FG3). Younger participants observed that technical skills are the "root" of a job; but that, without communication and empathy, the work "just doesn't work" (Youth, FG7). Lifelong learning was correspondingly described as having shifted from an option to a necessity, with the emphasis falling on "learning how to learn" rather than mastering any particular tool (Youth, FG7), given how quickly specific tools may become obsolete. What was conspicuously absent from these accounts was any settled organisational position: GenAI was being adopted, and its risks anticipated, in the absence of agreed governance over acceptable use, accountability, privacy, and the preservation of judgement.

5. Discussion

5.1 Summary of findings

Participants understood digital competence as a composite, evaluative capability rather than tool familiarity, and located its variation in disposition rather than age. They identified communication as the most visible site of generational friction, arising less from differing abilities than from the absence of shared expectations about channels, registers, and boundaries. They described a renegotiation of what work is for, in which younger participants combined an instrumental orientation toward employment with heightened attention to organisational values. And they regarded GenAI with both enthusiasm and concern, adopting it ahead of any settled position on its governance. Across all four themes a single pattern recurs: participants perceived real differences along generational lines while declining to attribute them to generation itself. It is this pattern, not the differences themselves, that the discussion here seeks to explain.

5.2 Generational friction as a symptom of organisational anomie

The findings present an interpretive problem. Participants saw generational difference as pervasive yet repeatedly denied age as its cause, locating it instead in attitude, role, and context. At face value, this is contradictory: difference is both affirmed and explained away. The contradiction dissolves once the object of perception is reconsidered. What participants described across the four domains was not a set of age-based traits but a set of points at which shared workplace norms had failed to keep pace with change. No common standard existed for what digital competence comprises; no agreed protocols governed communication channels, registers, and boundaries; the terms of the employment relationship had shifted without shared acknowledgement; and GenAI had been adopted without settled governance. Each is an instance of what this paper terms organisational anomie: a normative lag in which the coordination of differentiated work outruns the norms required to regulate it.

Reading the findings this way specifies what a general account leaves vague. To say that workplaces are changing rapidly, or that change breeds instability, is correct but not helpful: it identifies neither the friction nor its remedy. Anomie specifies both. The friction is not turbulence in general but the absence of shared norms in particular, so it surfaces precisely where norms are least settled: in communication protocols, competence standards, the employment relationship, and GenAI governance, rather than diffusely. The remedy is correspondingly specific: establishing shared

expectations, agreeing which channel suits which purpose, what acceptable GenAI use comprises, and what the employment relationship offers, rather than the generic resourcing or change-management measures an account of instability would suggest. The participants' own proposed solutions, notably the collaboratively developed communication protocols in 4.2, are recognisably attempts to restore the normative regulation whose absence the framework identifies.

This argument should not be mistaken for the digital-native thesis in another form. The claim is not that birth cohort produces distinctive capacities or values, but that workers enter a long-running technological and organisational transition at different points, giving them uneven exposure to tools, practices, and expectations that were themselves in flux. Different age and career groups began work under different technological, institutional, and economic conditions, and may therefore carry different habits and expectations; this is a matter of position along a transition, not of birth year as a cause. These uneven exposures are then simplified into generational explanations. Generation thus operates as a visible shorthand for a more complex configuration of career stage, role, organisational context, training access, and technological change.

This accounts for the friction but not for its consistent misattribution to generation, which requires the second element of the framework. If the underlying condition is normative rather than generational, why is it so reliably read in generational terms, even by participants who reject generational determinism? The answer lies in what generational categories do. As collective representations, they furnish a socially shared, readily available vocabulary for classifying workplace difference; one that is handy in a way that the abstract language of normative lag is not. How they are applied is specified by the literature on stereotyping. Social categorisation sorts colleagues into age-defined groups, and the conditions of activation are decisive: stereotypes are drawn on most strongly under uncertainty and ambiguity, when category-based inference substitutes for individuating information. Anomie is precisely such a condition. The breakdown of shared norms creates ambiguity about why coordination is failing; and, in the absence of a settled account, the available and manifest representation – i.e., generation – is mapped onto the friction. The resulting attributions match what the Stereotype Content Model predicts, older workers cast as experienced but less adaptable, younger workers as capable but less reliable, reproducing its warmth and competence dimensions; and their reciprocal, cross-directional form is consistent with meta-stereotypes, each group describing how it is regarded by the other. On this reading, generational framing is less an error to be corrected than a predictable response: under anomic uncertainty, friction is attributed to the most legible available category, and that category is age.

This also explains the resilience of generational framing to its own refutation. Because the categories' function is classificatory rather than explanatory, their persistence does not depend on their explanatory adequacy. Participants could reject age as a cause yet still perceive difference generationally, because the two operations are distinct. The rejection concerns explanation; the perception concerns classification. The categories endure not despite the evidence against them but because their work is of a different kind than that which the evidence addresses.

5.3 An anomic transition in the employment relationship

The findings on work values and retention admit a more specific reading, one that deepens rather than departs from the anomie argument. Durkheim's distinction between mechanical and organic solidarity helps here, not as a typology of generations but as a way of specifying the normative strain

the findings reveal. For Durkheim, the move toward organic solidarity requires more than functional interdependence; it requires norms capable of regulating the relations between differentiated roles, and anomie arises where that regulation lags behind differentiation. The work-values finding reads in this light. Participants did not simply report older and younger workers holding different values. They described uncertainty over the terms of the employment relationship itself: whether work should command loyalty, whether organisations must offer value alignment and development in return, whether mobility signals disloyalty or rational adaptation, and whether employment remains a source of identity or mainly a means of sustaining a life beyond it (Coetzee & Deas, 2021; Coetzee et al., 2018). The apparent generational contrast is better understood as the visible form of a deeper unease in the normative basis of employment attachment.

So understood, the apparent paradox – that younger participants were at once more attentive to organisational values yet less loyal to the organisation – reflects not two generational solidarities but a single unsettled normative order. Older participants' emphasis on loyalty, tenure, and belonging may reflect expectations formed under a more stable employment settlement, in which attachment and the recognition of values moved together. Younger participants' emphasis on autonomy, value alignment, financial wellbeing, and mobility may reflect a more individualised, flexible, and insecure labour market, in which attachment to the organisation and attentiveness to its values are no longer in synch. This positional reading is reinforced by the financial-outlook finding: the pessimism in the youth groups, set against the comparatively favourable objective position of young people in Malta and focused on housing, is more plausibly a response to particular economic and housing conditions than a generational disposition toward work. That a structural-economic condition should present as a generational difference in work ethic is itself an instance of the paper's central claim: that generation compresses a more specific configuration of factors into a single visible but analytically weak category.

5.4 Alternative explanations

Several of the differences that participants described may be explained without reference to generation at all. Some may reflect life stage rather than cohort; some career stage, role, sector, or hierarchical position. The financial pessimism of younger participants may reflect housing and economic insecurity, as argued above. Communication preferences may reflect the demands of particular tasks or workplace cultures. Anxiety about GenAI may reflect differential occupational exposure rather than age. These alternatives do not weaken the argument; they strengthen it. The paper's contention is precisely that generation compresses several more specific factors into one legible category, and the availability of these more specific explanations is what marks the generational account as analytically inadequate, however socially serviceable.

5.5 Implications for practice

The analysis carries a clear if non-prescriptive implication: organisational attention is better directed at the conditions that generate friction than at the generational categories through which it is perceived. Interventions targeted at generation, premised on age-based traits as the operative variable, address a misdescription of the problem and can be expected to disappoint. The findings point instead to measures that restore normative regulation where it is absent: agreeing communication norms, providing conditions for learning across the workforce, developing clear positions on acceptable GenAI use, and, for the employment relationship, making mutual expectations

explicit rather than leaving them to divergent assumption. These are not generationally specific measures; they address the organisational conditions which the generational framing obscures.

5.6 Limitations

Several limitations qualify these findings. The study is exploratory and prioritises interpretive depth over representativeness; its results are patterns and mechanisms to be examined further, not population-level claims. The setting is a single small state, with a preponderance of service-based, small and micro enterprises; and how far the dynamics observed transfer to larger or structurally different economies remains to be established. The sample, recruited through professional networks, is weighted towards professionally engaged participants, under-representing lower-paid, precarious, and less digitally engaged workers. Because the focus groups spanned sectors rather than single organisations, some differences attributed to generation may reflect differing organisational cultures or job designs; and the design cannot cleanly separate generational from life-stage and career-stage effects, a limitation especially relevant to the financial-outlook finding in 4.3. Finally, the study relies on participants' accounts rather than observation, reporting perception rather than behaviour.

5.7 Future research

These limitations mark directions for the wider programme of which this study is the first phase. Later phases will examine human-AI collaboration in concrete organisational settings through case studies with small and medium-sized enterprises, allowing the task-level reconfigurations discussed here to be observed rather than reported. It will add a quantitative component to gauge how widely the perceptions identified are distributed. Comparative studies in other small states, and longitudinal work tracking how these perceptions and conditions evolve as GenAI adoption matures, would further test the framework advanced here.

6. Conclusion

This paper set out to examine how workplace and labour-market stakeholders in Malta perceive the impact of generational difference and GenAI adoption on digital competencies, workplace norms, and organisational dynamics. Across four domains – competence, communication, work values, and GenAI – participants perceived difference along generational lines while consistently declining to attribute it to generation itself. This pattern is not a contradiction but a clue. What participants described was not a set of age-based traits but a set of points at which shared organisational norms had failed to keep pace with technological and organisational change. This condition is more adequately characterised as organisational anomie than as generational conflict.

The value of a Durkheimian reading lies in what it specifies. Anomie identifies the friction as a failure of shared norm-setting rather than instability in general, and locates it where norms are least settled. Generational categories, as collective representations, supply the vocabulary through which that friction is classified; stereotyping, activated under the uncertainty that anomie produces, supplies the mechanism by which it is mapped onto age. The persistence of generational framing despite its weak evidential basis follows, since the categories' work is classificatory rather than explanatory and is therefore untouched by evidence against their explanatory adequacy.

The argument does not deny that age-patterned differences appear in workplaces; it denies that generation, as such, explains them. Workers enter a long-running technological and organisational transition at different points and under different conditions, and generation operates as a visible shorthand for a more complex configuration of career stage, role, context, training access, and economic position.

The reflex to explain workplace friction by generation is understandable, but it mistakes the symptom for the cause. What looks generational is the visible surface of organisational normlessness. It is there, in the conditions rather than the categories, that the remedy lies. The practical implication follows directly: organisations facing what they take to be generational tension are better served by addressing the conditions that generate it: the absence of agreed communication norms, learning infrastructure, GenAI governance, and a shared understanding of the employment relationship, and not by interventions aimed at generational categories that hide those conditions from view.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Use of generative AI

Generative AI tools [ChatGPT (GPT-5, OpenAI); Claude (Opus, Anthropic)] were used during the preparation of this paper to assist with structuring sections and refining prose. All use was iterative and critically supervised: outputs were treated as drafts requiring verification and revision, checked against the source material and the underlying data, and all references were verified against their original sources. The authors formulated the research questions, developed the theoretical argument, and conducted and interpreted the analysis, and take full responsibility for the content of the paper, including all claims, interpretations, and references.

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