

„Generation Z” and the civil service – Challenges in the field of personnel selection

Abstract

As Generation Z enters the labor market, public administrations across Europe face pressure to modernize their recruitment practices. Gen Z candidates expect transparent, efficient, and digitally driven application processes, yet public sector hiring remains formal mainly. This study explores how the digital transformation of human resource (HR) processes—particularly personnel selection—can bridge the growing gap between Gen Z expectations and traditional public administration practices. Drawing on quantitative and qualitative data from a large-scale Hungarian and European research project, the findings confirm that Hungarian public administration relies heavily on conventional recruitment tools, such as job advertisements and university collaborations, while underutilizing modern digital platforms and assessment technologies. This generational mismatch contributes to the underrepresentation of Gen Z in the civil service, raising concerns about the future sustainability of the workforce. The article recommends five strategic actions: the creation of a centralized, mobile-friendly e-recruitment portal, the digital training of HR professionals, the adoption of online selection tools, the use of analytics to monitor candidate experience and a cultural shift in viewing recruitment as strategic talent acquisition.

Keywords

Digital selection

Generation Z

Public sector recruitment

HR digital transformation

Candidate experience

Introduction

Public administrations across Europe are experiencing a generational transition with the emergence of Generation Z (Gen Z) in the labor market. Born between 1995 and 2010, Gen Z is characterized by high digital literacy, an expectation for transparency, and a preference for efficiency and speed. In contrast, public sector recruitment and selection processes remain

largely formal and slow in some cases. These contrasting dynamics create a critical mismatch. This article examines the extent to which the digital transformation of human resource management (HRM) processes can bridge this gap, with a particular focus on the recruitment selection phase. As OECD (2022) notes, strategic and technology-driven HRM is essential for attracting and retaining young talent in public service. Generation Z grew up in a digital environment.

The fundamental conditions for public administration employment include merit-based selection processes, fairness, equal opportunity, respectful treatment, and adherence to ethical standards. These principles help maintain the quality of public services and strengthen public trust. The right to hold public office is a fundamental principle in Hungary's Fundamental Law (Fundamental Law of Hungary, Article XXIII, Section 8), which emphasizes transparency and professionalism in the recruitment and selection process. In Hungary, the administrative body initiates the procedure or coordinates it with the Personnel Centre (within the Government Office of the Prime Minister). If it does so, the post may be filled by a restricted or self-administered application procedure (Ludányi, 2022).

In democratic states with a well-developed public service culture, establishing a civil service relationship¹ is a legally protected institution. Legal guarantees safeguard it and are enshrined in the constitution at the highest regulatory level, either in general provisions or detailed regulations (György & Hazafi, 2014). In European countries, the selection of civil servants is based on the principles of transparency, merit, and professional independence. However, applying these procedures may vary by country, as they adapt to each public administrative system (Ciobanu, 2015). With these core values in focus, modern technologies further support fair and effective hiring practices.

Recruitment practices in central public administration significantly shape the integration of younger generations, influencing their willingness to enter and remain in the public sector.

European public administrations — with a particular focus on Hungary — are adapting their recruitment and personnel selection processes to attract Generation Z. Yet, they face notable challenges in aligning with Gen Z's expectations for digital engagement, transparent communication, and modern recruitment tools.

Research context

¹ Civil service relationship: the formal employment connection between a government or public administration.

Generation Z grew up in a digital environment. They are used to intuitive interfaces, rapid communication, and tailored user experiences. As job seekers, they expect recruitment processes to reflect these realities. Lengthy application forms, lack of feedback, and outdated portals can quickly discourage them. Moreover, employer branding through online platforms plays a crucial role in shaping the public's perception of public service. Their desire for meaningful work and development opportunities must be reflected in the early stages of the selection process. Without digital responsiveness and transparency, the public service risks losing the attention of this new talent pool.

Gen Z is characterized by their digital fluency, preference for flexible work arrangements, and a strong emphasis on work-life balance and mental health (Schroth, 2019). Unlike previous generations, they have grown up in a digitally interconnected world, which has influenced their communication styles, career aspirations, and workplace expectations (Francis & Hoefel, 2018). Similarly, research by Tulgan (2016) notes that Gen Z prefers positions that offer opportunities for continuous learning, fast-paced environments, and immediate feedback, which challenges the more hierarchical nature of many public administration environments. Smith (Smith et al., 2021) also highlight generational differences, emphasizing the need for public administrations to adapt DEIA (diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility) strategies to meet Gen Z's expectations of fairness and diversity in the workplace (Yeo & Jeon, 2023). Integrating insights from digital and social networks is crucial for effectively attracting Generation Z candidates (Rad, Valmohammadi, & Shayan, 2019).

A recent study (Ma & Fang, 2024) explores Generation Z perspectives on job selection and the influence of digital technology on their career choices and job search processes. Research in Hungary and Austria also indicates a strong connection between social media and Gen Z's job search habits. To attract young candidates, organisations should establish a broad social media presence and maintain an appealing online profile (Garai-Fodor et al., 2021).

According to Turner (2015), Gen Z values quick, accessible, and transparent recruitment processes. Public administration's lengthy and bureaucratic hiring procedures are typical and may discourage younger applicants. Multiple studies highlight the misalignment between Gen Z's expectations and traditional public sector recruitment practices.

The European Commission (2020) further emphasizes the need for the public sector to update its recruitment tools to incorporate modern technologies, such as social media platforms, AI-driven selection tools, and video-based recruitment, in order to better align with the preferences of Gen Z.

As digital natives, Gen Z expects technology to be integrated into all aspects of work, including recruitment. A study by Lyons and Kuron (2014) highlights that public administration slowly adopts the digital tools necessary to attract and select Gen Z effectively.

Gen Z candidates, particularly in Poland and Hungary, place high importance on a company's online presence, especially on social media. Studies highlight that Gen Z's digital fluency and reliance on online platforms make a digital recruitment approach essential. Organisations that actively engage on social media channels can connect more effectively, as this generation prioritises digital engagement when assessing potential employers (Koleva, 2023; Karácsony et al., 2020).

Methods

The study aims to shed light on how public administration can adapt recruitment strategies to accommodate the expectations and needs of the digital area while maintaining the principles of meritocracy, transparency, and professionalism.

We hypothesized that Hungarian public administration makes limited use of modern recruitment tools that appeal to Generation Z, and traditional recruitment practices are more prevalent (H1).

The article analyses findings from a large-scale international and Hungarian research project, including questionnaires and statistical analyses.

As a result, it highlights the low adoption of modern recruitment tools, particularly in Hungary, and underscores the generational divide resulting from this gap.

The domestic Hungarian) questionnaire targeted the government officials governed by Act CXXV of 2018 on Government Administration (Kit) in Hungary. Data were collected using an electronic questionnaire (CAWI – Computer-Assisted Web Interviewing). This method allowed potential access to the entire population, the full sampling frame. The Ministry of Interior sent the questionnaire to all 77,000 computer-using employees, eliminating the need to narrow down the sampling frame (population); therefore, probability sampling was not used. Of the 77,000 individuals approached, 12,500 completed the questionnaire ($12,500/77,000 \approx 16\%$). After data cleaning, 12,435 responses were included in the final dataset. The maximum sampling error of the cleaned responses (12,500) at a 95% confidence level is $\pm 0.8\%$.

We requested organizational data, including information on workforce size, gender and age composition, and turnover rates.² We gained data from the organisational questionnaire, which

² Employee turnover rate: The percentage of employees leaving an organization within a given period. It may include voluntary departures, retirements, and dismissals, depending on the specific definition used.

was completed by the HR departments of the Hungarian ministries and government offices (4 ministries and 20 government offices). We analysed these parts of the organisational questionnaire using content analysis. The data collection took place in the summer of 2024.

Aging Trends in Hungary's civil service

The average age of the public administration workforce in EUPAN countries is 47 years (Hazafi, 2024). Many countries face challenges in recruiting younger employees. Hungarian public administration exhibits a unique age distribution compared to European trends. The middle generation represents a significantly higher proportion, while the older generation is underrepresented relative to the European average. Workforce changes across Europe have impacted age composition differently. In most states, workforce growth has coincided with an increased proportion of young employees. However, Hungary has experienced a different trajectory: despite workforce growth, the proportion of young employees has not increased, while older age groups have grown. Two contrasting trends shape the age composition of Hungary's public administration. In the early 2010s, government measures such as the Hungarian Public Administration Scholarship, mandatory retirement at retirement age, and early retirement options for women aimed to rejuvenate the workforce. These efforts reduced the average age to 42.8 years, thereby increasing the representation of younger employees and decreasing the proportion of older cohorts. However, recent data highlight a reversal: the proportion of young employees has sharply declined, while the older demographic has grown, shifting the workforce towards an aging profile. Over the next 5 to 15 years, Hungarian public administration is projected to face a gradual but significant wave of retirements (Hazafi, 2024). Statistical analyses highlight the increasing challenge of attracting and retaining young talent (Ludányi, 2024).

Recruitment methods and tools in Hungary

An effective ageing strategy includes fostering a multigenerational workforce. Selection methods should be inclusive and designed to attract talent from different age groups, ensuring a balanced and diverse workforce. Selection methods must align with these goals by appealing to younger generations, such as using digital platforms and innovative recruitment tools that resonate with Generation Z.

A recent study explores strategies for attracting and retaining Gen Z in the public sector. It uses a systematic review to highlight their preferences for both extrinsic (salary, career growth) and intrinsic rewards (meaningful work). Findings suggest that Gen Z's unique values and motivations make tailored reward systems vital for effective recruitment and retention (Acheampong, 2021).

In Hungary, we had the opportunity to conduct detailed data collection involving multiple segments, including government administrative bodies, and employees, examined through separate data collection processes simultaneously.

Recruitment practices in public administration are gradually evolving to meet the expectations of Gen Z. During our research, we conducted a separate organizational survey in which we asked the HR managers of selected Hungarian ministries and all government offices about their preferred recruitment methods.³ According to the results of the content analysis conducted based on the responses (N=24), the most frequent recruitment methods are:

- (1) job advertisements,
- (2) direct outreach to educational institutions,
- (3) job fairs,
- (4) resume databases and
- (5) the internal and professional network.

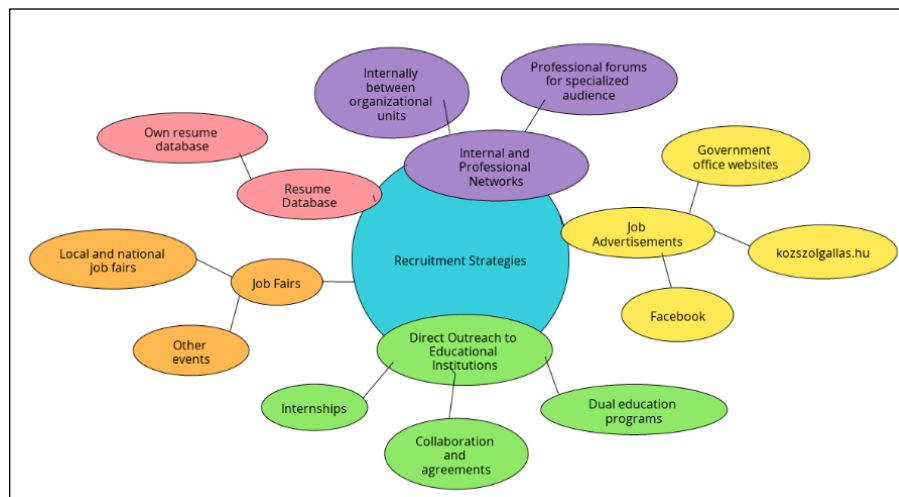


Figure 1. Frequently used recruitment strategies in the Hungarian civil service

Source: own editing

³ The ministries carry out the Hungarian state administration tasks, and below them are the government offices (capital and county). Currently, there are 13 ministries and 20 government offices in Hungary.

The job advertisements are primarily posted on the (kozszolgallas.hu)⁴ and the government office websites. Social media (mainly Facebook) is a common platform for posting job advertisements. Regular collaborations and agreements with universities for long-term recruitment include dual education programs and internships. The organisations participate in various university, local, and national job fairs. These events provide a platform to promote open positions, particularly in high-turnover areas. Resume databases are maintained where job seekers can submit their resumes, which are regularly reviewed for matching open positions. Lastly, popular techniques are sharing applicant information internally between different organizational units with consent and promoting positions on professional forums to reach a more specialized audience.

Modern recruitment methods and tools in Hungary

The table (N = 24) outlines various recruitment tools, indicating whether they are currently used (✓) or not used (X) in Hungarian public administration.

TOOL ⁵	USED (✓)	NOT USED (X)
ATS (Applicant Tracking System)		X
Social Media Recruitment	✓	
Programmatic Advertising		X

⁴ The KÖZSZOLGÁLLÁS is the online selection and application system managed by the Prime Minister's Office of Hungary (<https://kozszolgallas.ksz.gov.hu/>). Since 2007, Köszolgáltatás has been the public sector recruitment, selection, and application system that facilitates filling government official, civil servant, and public employee positions advertised by state agencies across all areas of the public sector. This includes positions in governmental administration, law enforcement, public education and higher education, local government, and healthcare sectors.

⁵ ATS (Applicant Tracking System): Software to organize and track candidate applications through the hiring process. Social Media Recruitment: Using social platforms to find and engage candidates. Programmatic Advertising: Automated job ads targeted to specific audiences online. AI & Machine Learning: Automated tools for screening and matching candidates based on skills. Recruitment Platforms: Websites where employers post jobs and connect with candidates. Video Interview Software: Tools for conducting interviews remotely via video. Referral Programs: Employees recommending candidates for open positions are often incentivized. Talent Pools & Databases: Pre-screened candidates stored for future job opportunities. Assessment & Gamification Tools: Tests or games to evaluate candidate skills and behaviors. Content Marketing: Creating engaging content to attract and inform potential candidates.

AI & Machine Learning		X
Recruitment Platforms	✓	
Video Interview Software		X
Referral Programs		X
Talent Pools & Databases	✓	
Assessment & Gamification Tools		X
Content Marketing		X

Table 1. Modern recruitment tools in Hungarian public administration

Source: own editing

The organizations use Social Media Recruitment, Recruitment Platforms, and Talent Pools and databases, focusing on digital outreach. However, key tools such as Applicant Tracking Systems (ATS), AI and Machine Learning, and Video Interview Software are not in use, according to the results of the organisational questionnaire, indicating potential gaps in automating and streamlining the hiring process. They are not utilizing Referral Programs, Programmatic Advertising, or Content Marketing, limiting their ability to attract a diverse range of candidates. Social media platforms, particularly Facebook, are currently used for job postings. However, younger generations are more active on platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok, and the public administration of Hungary does not use them.

In our domestic questionnaire sent to the personnel, we also asked the same question (Application of modern technologies in recruitment (e.g., chatbots, virtual assistants, social media). The respondents (N=11,431) rated on a scale of 1-6 the extent to which their organization uses modern technologies in recruitment (e.g., chatbot, virtual assistant, social media).

STATEMENT	1	2	3	4	5	6	NO/ NR
Application of modern technologies in recruitment	4546	1625	1010	741	536	372	2601

Table 2. Application of modern technologies in recruitment

Source: own editing

According to 70% of respondents, these technologies are either not used at all or very little in their organization. We also examined the use of modern technologies in recruitment along organizational dimensions and found that their use is marginally more frequent at the central level. However, even so, 55% of respondents at the territorial level marked the lower third (1-2), compared to 51% at the central level. The calculated average rating is 2.12, indicating that respondents generally do not find these technologies highly effective or prevalent in recruitment processes at both central and territorial administrative levels. The high no opinion/no response (22.75% of the respondents) suggests limited familiarity or experience with these tools among the officials.

Discussion

This study highlights the generational challenges in public administration, particularly in attracting and retaining Generation Z (Gen Z) employees. The age distribution in European public administrations and Hungary shows a predominance of middle-aged workers, with a low presence of Gen Z (approximately 8% in Hungary). This generational imbalance raises concerns about future talent shortages as the older workforce nears retirement.

Gen Z's entry into the workforce presents unique challenges for European public administration recruitment. Their new expectations require public administrations to rethink traditional personnel selection processes.

Hungarian public administration predominantly uses traditional recruitment methods, such as job advertisements and university collaborations, with limited adoption of digital recruitment tools.

Despite recent efforts, many organizations still rely on traditional, bureaucratic recruitment practices. Applications are typically submitted via static platforms, often requiring the upload of scanned documents or postal submissions. Job announcements are lengthy and formal, published primarily on governmental websites. Feedback, if provided, arrives late and lacks detail. There is limited use of structured interviews or objective evaluation tools. As a result, the candidate experience is often rigid and impersonal, which contrasts sharply with trends in the private sector and internationally.

The findings indicate that modern technologies are underutilized in both areas, suggesting significant room for improvement in leveraging digital tools for recruitment. This finding highlights a critical gap in the adoption of innovative recruitment practices. Despite slight differences between levels, the data suggest that central and territorial administrations lack opportunities to modernize their processes and align with contemporary recruitment trends.

To align public sector recruitment with Gen Z expectations, several strategic actions are necessary. First, a centralized, mobile-friendly e-recruitment portal should be developed, integrating vacancy announcements, application processes, assessments, and feedback channels in a seamless and accessible way.

It is equally important to train HR professionals in the use of digital tools and in communication styles that resonate with Gen Z, including the effective use of social media and real-time applicant engagement.

Digital selection tools such as video interviews, online case studies, and competency-based assessments explicitly tailored to public service roles should also be introduced.

Furthermore, adopting analytics and HR dashboards can help monitor key aspects such as candidate experience, application rates, and diversity indicators.

Ultimately, a cultural shift is necessary within public sector organizations: recruitment should no longer be viewed as a purely administrative function, but rather as a process of talent acquisition and a strategic investment in the future workforce.

Recruitment preferences among Gen Z differ significantly from traditional public administration practices. Unlike previous generations, Gen Z values quick, technology-driven application processes, seamless digital engagement, and flexible work environments. However, Hungary's public administration relies heavily on conventional recruitment tools such as job advertisements and university collaborations, with limited adoption of advanced digital recruitment technologies. This gap highlights an essential area for reform, as current public administration practices do not adequately meet Gen Z's expectations for digital fluency and efficiency in recruitment. The study primarily focuses on recruitment strategies from organizational and leadership perspectives (except for the domestic questionnaire, which was also completed by government officials of Generation Z), with less direct input from Gen Z individuals, who are currently potential job seekers.

Therefore, we complement research (thorough telephone survey) by incorporating direct input from Gen Z job seekers to provide a more accurate and comprehensive understanding of their expectations and preferences. A nationwide public opinion survey will be launched in 2025 to explore the career and professional opportunities perceived by the Hungarian population aged

18–29, the adult members of Generation Z (with a sample size of 1,000 participants) within Hungarian public administration, and their attitudes toward this field. This addition will balance the current focus on organizational and leadership perspectives, offering more profound insights into how recruitment strategies align with their priorities.

Conclusions

Our hypothesis (H1) has been confirmed that the Hungarian public administration makes limited use of modern recruitment tools that appeal to Generation Z and strongly relies on traditional recruitment practices. The findings suggest a preference for conventional methods, including job advertisements and university collaborations. At the same time, the use of advanced digital tools and platforms, which are popular among Generation Z, remains underutilized. This supports the assertion that the recruitment strategies currently employed in Hungarian public administration are not adequately aligned with the expectations and technological preferences of younger generations.

A significant barrier to attracting Gen Z to public administration is the slow and complex recruitment process, contrasting with their preference for quick, simple, and mobile-friendly applications. Gen Z prefers short video content to visualize their future workplace and expects streamlined, digital recruitment platforms. Public administration needs to modernise the recruitment processes by incorporating digital tools and flexible approaches to align with Gen Z's tech-driven preferences and build a sustainable future workforce. Public administration institutions should integrate AI-driven recruitment tools to increase engagement and expand outreach through Gen Z-preferred platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube. The age imbalance in Hungary's public administration underscores the need for targeted recruitment strategies and retention practices to attract younger employees. As Gen Z expects faster, technology-driven hiring processes, Hungarian public administration should modernize the recruitment approach, integrating digital tools.

The digital transformation of selection processes in public administration is not merely a technical upgrade—it is a strategic imperative. Generation Z will not engage with rigid, outdated systems. By modernising selection tools and adopting a user-centered design approach, the public sector can enhance its attractiveness, legitimacy, and effectiveness. If governments wish to remain competitive employers and build a diverse, committed workforce for the future, they must embrace digital innovation in recruitment. The gap between Gen Z

expectations and current practices can be narrowed—if institutions are willing to act decisively and strategically.

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