



The Pursuit of Happiness at Work: Behavior Pathway of Gen Z Employees

İşyerinde Mutluluğun Peşinde: Z Kuşağı Çalışanlarının Davranışsal Yolu

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Abstract

This study explores how young employees from Generation Z pursue happiness at work through a series of proactive and adaptive behaviors. Grounded in Self-Determination Theory, the research proposes a psychological pathway in which job crafting enhances career adaptability, which subsequently fosters work engagement and thriving, ultimately leading to greater workplace happiness. A cross-sectional survey was conducted with 462 employed Gen Z individuals in Indonesia, using validated instruments to measure job crafting, career adaptability, work engagement, thriving at work, and happiness at work. Structural equation modeling supported the hypothesized serial mediation model. The results demonstrate that job crafting significantly predicts greater career adaptability, which in turn leads to higher levels of engagement and thriving—two psychological experiences that contribute substantially to workplace happiness. The total indirect effect of job crafting on happiness at work through these mediators was statistically significant. These findings highlight that workplace happiness is not merely a product of external conditions or fixed individual traits but can be actively cultivated through motivational and developmental mechanisms. By underscoring the dynamic interplay of personal agency, adaptive capacity, and psychological vitality, this study contributes to the expanding literature on positive organizational behavior. Practical implications are offered for HR practitioners and organizational leaders to support Gen Z employees by fostering environments that encourage job crafting, adaptability development, and sustained engagement—thereby enabling them to experience meaningful happiness at work.

Keywords: Job Crafting, Career Adaptability, Work Engagement, Thriving at Work, Happiness at Work

Öz

Bu çalışma, Z kuşağına mensup genç çalışanların işyerinde mutluluğu, proaktif ve uyum sağlayıcı davranışlar dizisi yoluyla nasıl aradıklarını incelemektedir. Öz Belirleme Kuramı'na (Self-Determination Theory) dayanan araştırma, iş tasarımı (job crafting) davranışının kariyer uyarlanabilirliğini artırdığı, bunun da işte bağlılık (work engagement) ve işte gelişme (thriving at work) düzeylerini yükselttiği, nihayetinde ise işyeri mutluluğunu desteklediği psikolojik bir yol önermektedir. Endonezya'da çalışan 462 Z kuşağı bireyle kesitsel bir anket çalışması gerçekleştirilmiştir. İş tasarımı, kariyer uyarlanabilirliği, işte bağlılık, işte gelişme ve işyeri mutluluğunu ölçmek için geçerliliği kanıtlanmış ölçekler kullanılmıştır. Yapısal eşitlik modellemesi (SEM) önerilen sıralı aracılık modelini desteklemiştir. Bulgular, iş tasarımı, kişisel özerklik, uyum kapasitesi ve psikolojik enerjinin dinamik rolünü ortaya koyarak olumlu örgütsel davranış literatürüne katkı sağlamaktadır. İnsan kaynakları uzmanları ve yöneticiler için, Z kuşağı çalışanlarının iş tasarımı, uyarlanabilirlik geliştirme ve sürekli bağlılık yoluyla desteklenmesine yönelik pratik öneriler sunulmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İş Tasarımı, Kariyer Uyarlanabilirliği, İşe Bağlılık, İşte Gelişme, İşyerinde Mutluluk

Introduction

As Generation Z increasingly enters the workforce, scholarly interest has grown in understanding how young employees conceptualize and pursue happiness at work (Andrea et al., 2016; Burger et al., 2021; Janssen & Carradini, 2021; Poeschel et al., 2020). This cohort, shaped by formative experiences markedly different from previous generations, has come of age amidst economic volatility, accelerated digitalization, and global crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Hence, their career expectations extend beyond conventional notions of stability, emphasizing flexibility, personal relevance, and psychological sustainability (Francis & Hoefel, 2018).

In contrast to earlier generations that prioritized job security and financial stability, Generation Z is more inclined to seek meaning, personal growth, and emotional fulfillment in their professional lives (Benítez-Márquez et al., 2022; Francis & Hoefel, 2018; Guan, 2024; Open Knowledge, 2021). However, the pursuit of workplace happiness among Gen Z employees is not solely driven by individual motivations; it is also shaped by the organizational structures and cultural contexts in which they are embedded. This generational shift necessitates a more nuanced understanding of how happiness at work is constructed, especially in emerging economies, where traditional hierarchical norms intersect with evolving expectations of younger employees (IDN Research Institute, 2024).

Happiness at work refers to a comprehensive positive appraisal of one's job experience, encompassing emotional satisfaction, work enjoyment, and a sense of fulfillment (Salas-Vallina & Alegre, 2021a). Distinct from conventional job satisfaction, it reflects broader indicators of psychological well-being within the workplace. From a behavioral science perspective, happiness at work is understood as the culmination of motivational and adaptive processes—triggered by proactive job behaviors and sustained through engagement and thriving (Elayan et al., 2023; Sudibjo & Manihuruk, 2022).

While happiness at work has been associated with a range of psychological and behavioral factors, prior research has often examined these elements in isolation—focusing primarily on single predictors such as job satisfaction or engagement (Geldenhuys et al., 2021). Consequently, there remains a limited understanding of how proactive behaviors, adaptive capacities, and motivational states function collectively within an integrated psychological process. This fragmented approach leaves an important gap in the literature: how do these mechanisms interact dynamically to foster enduring workplace happiness? Addressing this question is crucial for developing a holistic framework of employee well-being, particularly in a changing workforce.

To address this research gap, this study adopts Self-Determination Theory (SDT) as a guiding framework to explain how individuals pursue well-being by fulfilling three fundamental psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan et al., 2017). When these needs are met, employees are more likely to exhibit intrinsic motivation, proactive behaviors, and sustained engagement at work (Deci et al., 1989; Gagné & Deci, 2005). In organizational settings, such motivational resources are manifested through job crafting (Rošková & Faragová, 2020), the development of career adaptability (Jiang, 2017) and experiences of thriving (Goh et al., 2022) - all of which serve as key antecedents to happiness at work and broader psychological well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Yet, when these psychological needs are thwarted, individuals may exhibit diminished motivation, reduced adaptability, and eventual disengagement (Zhou & George, 2001).

Building on this framework, the current study proposes a serial mediation model to examine how job crafting fosters happiness at work through career adaptability, work engagement, and thriving. Few existing studies offer integrative frameworks to explain how multiple psychological mechanisms interact over time to foster well-being at work. The present study not only addresses this theoretical gap but also contributes to the cross-cultural validation of SDT, extending the applicability of positive organizational constructs across diverse institutional contexts.

Job crafting refers to the self-initiated changes employees make to their job tasks, relationships, and cognitive framing in order to enhance work meaningfulness and align job demands with personal strengths and interests. Wrzesniewski and Dutton (2001) define it as the physical and cognitive modifications individuals apply to the task and relational boundaries of their work. Through job crafting, employees actively shape their work environment, thereby satisfying the core SDT needs for autonomy and competence (Gagné et al., 2022; Hulshof et al., 2020; Plomp et al., 2019; Ryan et al., 2017). In this study, job crafting is conceptualized as the initial proactive behavior that activates a cascade of adaptive and motivational processes leading toward workplace happiness.

Career adaptability is a psychosocial resource reflecting an individual's capacity and readiness to manage career-related tasks, transitions, and traumas. Comprising four dimensions—concern, control, curiosity, and confidence—it enables individuals to anticipate and navigate future career challenges effectively (Jiang, 2017; Maggiori et al., 2017). By enhancing employees' sense of personal agency and competence, career adaptability fulfills fundamental psychological needs, promoting sustained engagement and well-being (Ma et al., 2023; Rottinghaus et al., 2005; Zhao et al., 2022).

Work engagement is defined as a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption (Taris et al., 2020; van Tuin et al., 2020). Engaged employees exhibit high levels of energy and resilience, deep involvement in their tasks, and intense focus (van den Berg et al., 2013; Wang et al., 2020). From an SDT perspective, engagement arises when the work context supports employees' autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Meyer, 2008). Within the proposed model, work engagement mediates the relationship between career adaptability and thriving at work, serving as a motivational catalyst.

Thriving at work refers to a dynamic psychological state wherein employees experience both vitality and continuous learning (Spreitzer et al., 2005). It reflects not only the feeling of being energized but also the perception of personal growth and development—both of which signal the fulfillment of basic psychological needs in SDT (Farid et al., 2023). In this study, thriving is positioned as a key transitional state that bridges the motivational experience of engagement to the broader outcome of happiness at work.

Despite growing interest in the predictors of workplace happiness, most existing frameworks tend to emphasize direct, isolated relationships between individual variables and happiness at work. Hence, the dynamic interactions that unfold over time tend to be overlooked. For Generation Z employees navigating rigid organizational structures, workplace happiness should be reconceptualized not as a static trait or end-state, but as a dynamic psychological outcome shaped by personal initiative, adaptability, and developmental support.

This limitation is particularly salient in high power distance and collectivistic cultural contexts such as Indonesia, where workplace hierarchies often constrain employees from proactively redefining their roles. This study proposes a behavioral pathway model in which job crafting initiates a sequence of psychological mechanisms—career adaptability, work engagement, and thriving—that culminate in happiness at work. This model aims to illuminate how young employees in hierarchical and transitional work environments actively shape their work experiences in pursuit of psychological well-being (see Figure 1).

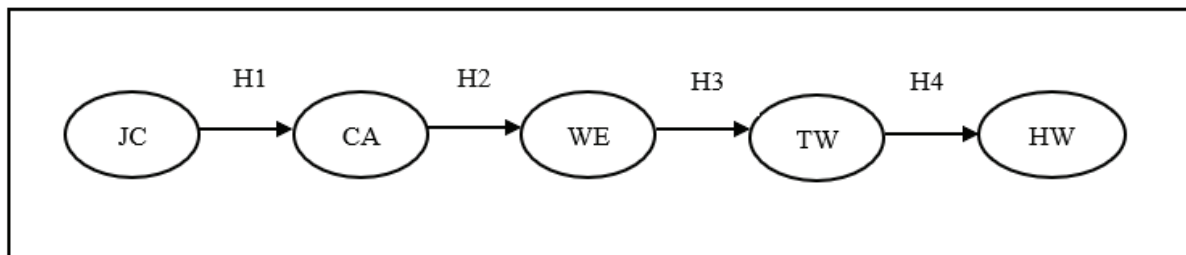


Figure 1. Proposed conceptual framework

Based on the theoretical framework and proposed model, the following hypotheses are formulated:

H1. Job crafting positively predicts career adaptability

H2. Career adaptability positively predicts work engagement.

H3. Work engagement positively predicts thriving at work.

H4. Thriving at work positively predicts happiness at work.

H5. Job crafting indirectly influences happiness at work through a serial mediation of career adaptability, work engagement, and thriving at work.

Method

This study employed a quantitative approach with a cross-sectional survey design to examine the sequential behavioral pathways contributing to happiness at work among Generation Z employees in Indonesia. To test the proposed serial mediation model, structural equation modeling (SEM) was utilized.

The target population comprised Indonesian Gen Z employees, defined as individuals born between 1997 and 2005 who had formal work experience. Eligible participants were aged between 18 and 27 years and currently employed at the time of data collection. Convenience sampling was applied, and participants were recruited through targeted social media advertisements and professional networks to ensure diversity across sectors and regions.

The model tested in this study included five central constructs: job crafting, career adaptability, work engagement, thriving at work, and happiness at work. These variables were selected based on SDT, which

posits that the fulfillment of basic psychological needs fosters sustained motivation and psychological well-being (Gagné & Deci, 2005, 2014). Each construct represents a critical stage in the proposed behavioral pathway model.

To ensure cultural and linguistic validity, all instruments were subjected to forward and backward translation. This process was followed by expert panel reviews to assess semantic and conceptual equivalence. Revisions were made based on expert feedback, with minor linguistic adjustments to enhance clarity, cultural resonance, and item relevance for the Indonesian context.

Data were collected entirely online using a secure survey platform. All instruments were selected based on theoretical relevance and prior validation in similar populations. Confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) were conducted to assess construct validity, and model revisions were made where necessary to optimize fit.

- Job crafting was measured using the Overarching Job Crafting Scale (OJCS) developed by Vansbelle (2017), consisting of four items assessing self-initiated modifications in job tasks and structures (e.g., “I change my job so it would better fit with who I am”). All items demonstrated strong and significant factor loadings (0.89–1.00), with acceptable residual variances below 0.65. No problematic indicators were identified.
- Career adaptability was assessed using the Career Adapt-Abilities Scale – Short Form (CAAS-SF) by Maggiori et al. (2017). This 12-item scale covers four dimensions: Concern, Control, Curiosity, and Confidence (e.g., “I think about what my future will be like”; “I take responsibility for my actions”). One item, CA_06 (“I count on myself”), showed a relatively weak factor contribution (loading = 0.85; residual variance = 0.84). A revised model excluding this item improved overall fit, with standardized loadings ranging from 0.89 to 1.16.
- Work engagement was measured using the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale - 9 (UWES-9) developed by Schaufeli & Bakker (2004). The nine items reflect three dimensions: Vigor, Dedication, and Absorption (e.g., “At my work, I feel bursting with energy”; “My job inspires me”). The model showed excellent fit, with all standardized loadings between 0.75 and 1.00 and statistically significant.
- Thriving at work was measured using a 10-item scale developed by Porath et al. (2012). It consisted of 10 items measuring two dimensions: learning (e.g. “*I continue to learn more as time goes by*”) and vitality (e.g. “*I feel alive and vital*”). One reverse-coded item (TW_08R: “I do not feel very energetic”) showed poor factor loading and residual overlap. Removing this item led to improved model fit, with loadings ranging from 0.83 to 1.34.
- Happiness at work was measured using the Shortened Happiness at Work Scale (SHAW) adapted by Salas-Vallina and Alegre (2021b). This nine-item scale captures Engagement, Job Satisfaction, and Affective Organizational Commitment (e.g., “At my job, I feel strong and vigorous”; “I feel emotionally attached to this organization”). Item HW_05 (satisfaction with pay) showed weak contribution and high residual variance (0.81). Excluding HW_05 improved internal consistency, with remaining items loading between 0.90 and 1.21.

Prior to participation, all respondents were presented with an informed consent form detailing the purpose of the study, their rights as participants, and data protection measures. Participation was voluntary and anonymous.

Data were analyzed using JASP statistical software. The analytical process involved several stages. First, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to validate the measurement model. This was followed by evaluation of model fit indices and examination of direct and indirect effects within the proposed serial mediation framework.

Preliminary data screening confirmed that key statistical assumptions were met. All variables demonstrated acceptable skewness and kurtosis values (within ± 2), indicating normal distribution. Tests also confirmed linearity and the absence of multicollinearity. To assess the potential for common method bias, Harman's single-factor test was performed, and results indicated no dominant factor, suggesting that bias was not a significant concern.

The final sample was demographically diverse, including respondents from multiple regions and industry sectors across Indonesia. This diversity enhances the generalizability of the findings within the context of Generation Z employees in emerging economies.

Results

A total of 462 respondents participated in the study. The final sample included individuals from across Indonesia, including Java, Sumatra, Kalimantan, and Eastern Indonesia, with a majority residing in major urban centers such as Jakarta, Surabaya, and Medan. This geographic and demographic diversity reflects the decentralized and evolving nature of Indonesia's emerging workforce, particularly among Generation Z employees.

Descriptive statistics for the five primary study variables are presented in Table 1. Mean scores ranged from 15.28 to 50.65, with standard deviations between 3.00 and 6.49. The Shapiro–Wilk test indicated statistically significant deviations from normality for all variables ($p < .001$). However, skewness and kurtosis values remained within acceptable thresholds for structural equation modeling (SEM) under robust estimation procedures. These findings supported the use of robust SEM techniques in subsequent analyses.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of study variables

Variable	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Skewness	Shapiro-Wilk (p)
Job Crafting	15.28	3.00	4.00	21.00	.96	<.001
Career Adaptability	50.65	5.25	36.00	60.00	.97	<.001
Work Engagement	34.13	6.20	11.00	45.00	.98	<.001
Thriving at Work	40.48	5.07	23.00	50.00	.98	<.001
Happiness at Work	32.82	6.49	12.00	45.00	.98	<.001

Note. Skewness = Shapiro-Wilk W statistic. All p-values indicate non-normal distribution.

Table 2 presents Pearson's correlation coefficients among the five core study variables. All intercorrelations were positive and statistically significant at the $p < .001$ level, providing preliminary support for the hypothesized relationships.

The strongest association was observed between work engagement and happiness at work ($r = .81$, $p < .001$), indicating a high degree of overlap between motivational states and well-being outcomes. Additionally, moderate-to-strong correlations were found between job crafting and career adaptability ($r = .55$), as well as between career adaptability and thriving at work ($r = .65$). These results are consistent with the proposed sequential mediation model, in which proactive and adaptive capacities are expected to contribute cumulatively to psychological well-being.

Table 2. Pearson's correlation among the study variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
Job Crafting	-				
Career Adaptability	.55***	-			
Work Engagement	.55***	.56***	-		
Thriving at Work	.55***	.65***	.76***	-	
Happiness at Work	.52***	.48***	.81***	.66***	-

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

The structural model was evaluated using multiple fit indices and variance explained in the endogenous variables (see Table 3). The results indicate that the model accounts for a substantial proportion of variance in the key outcome variables. Specifically, the model explained 49.8% of the variance in career adaptability, 54.0% in work engagement, 89.5% in thriving at work, and 78.7% in happiness at work. These R^2 values suggest a strong explanatory capacity, particularly for the final outcomes in the proposed behavioral pathway. The high proportion of explained variance in thriving and happiness underscores the robustness of the sequential mediation mechanism.

Table 3. Model fit indices and explained variance

Index	Value
CFI	.89
TLI	.88
RMSEA [90% CI]	.56 [0.05-0.06]
SRMR	0.06
Hoelter's Critical N (.05)	204.78

As shown in Table 4, all hypothesized direct paths in the model were positive and statistically significant ($p < .001$), providing strong support for the proposed behavioral sequence. Specifically, job crafting significantly predicted career adaptability ($\beta = 0.71$, $p < .001$), which in turn significantly predicted work engagement ($\beta = 0.74$, $p < .001$). Work engagement positively predicted thriving at work ($\beta = 0.95$, $p < .001$), which subsequently predicted happiness at work ($\beta = 0.89$, $p < .001$). The indirect effect of job crafting on happiness at work—operating through the full sequence of career adaptability, work

engagement, and thriving—was also statistically significant ($\beta = 0.44$, 95% CI [0.377, 0.493]). These results confirm the hypothesized serial mediation mechanism, in which proactive behavior initiates a chain of adaptive and motivational processes culminating in workplace happiness. The model accounted for a substantial proportion of variance in key outcomes, explaining 89.5% of the variance in thriving at work and 78.7% in happiness at work, underscoring the strength and coherence of the proposed framework.

Table 4. Path estimates in the serial mediaton model

Path	β	SE	z	p	95% CI
Job Crafting → Career Adaptability (H1)	.71	.03	22.27	<.001	[.64, .77]
Career Adaptability → Work Engagement (H2)	.74	.03	28.11	<.001	[.68, .79]
Work Engagement → Thriving at Work (H3)	.95	.01	91.33	<.001	[.93, .97]
Thriving at Work → Happiness at Work (H4)	.89	.02	60.44	<.001	[.86, .92]
Job Crafting → Happiness at Work (H5 indirect)	.44	.03	14.76	<.001	[.38, .49]

All five hypotheses (H1–H5) were fully supported by the structural equation modeling results (see Table 5). The direct paths from job crafting to career adaptability (H1), career adaptability to work engagement (H2), work engagement to thriving at work (H3), and thriving at work to happiness at work (H4) were all positive and statistically significant ($p < .001$). In addition, the indirect effect of job crafting on happiness at work via the sequential mediators—career adaptability, work engagement, and thriving—was also significant (H5), confirming the presence of a full serial mediation mechanism.

These findings offer robust empirical support for the proposed theoretical framework, demonstrating how proactive job behaviors trigger a cascade of psychological and behavioral adaptation processes that ultimately enhance happiness at work. The results align with the assumptions of SDT, reinforcing the importance of need-fulfilling work experiences in cultivating sustainable employee well-being.

Table 5. Summary of hypothesis testing

Hypothesis	Description	Result
H1	Job crafting positively predicts career adaptability	Supported
H2	Career adaptability positively predicts work engagement.	Supported
H3	Work engagement positively predicts thriving at work	Supported
H4	Thriving at work positively predicts happiness at work	Supported
H5	Job crafting indirectly influences happiness at work through a serial mediation of career adaptability, work engagement, and thriving at work	Supported

Discussion

The findings of this study offer compelling support for the proposed behavioral pathway linking job crafting to happiness at work through a sequence of adaptive and motivational mechanisms. Consistent with Hypothesis 1, job crafting significantly predicted career adaptability ($\beta = .71$, $p < .001$), affirming prior research that highlights the role of proactive role modification in fostering adaptive psychological

resources (Maggiori et al., 2017). Generation Z employees who actively reshape their work environments demonstrate a heightened sense of agency, aligning tasks with personal strengths and fostering greater control over their career trajectories.

Hypotheses 2 and 3 were likewise supported, as career adaptability predicted work engagement ($\beta = .74, p < .001$), which in turn predicted thriving at work ($\beta = .95, p < .001$). This sequence reflects a developmental progression in which adaptive capacity enables deeper psychological investment, culminating in vitality and continuous learning—two hallmark components of thriving (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004; Spreitzer et al., 2012). These findings align with SDT, which posits that fulfillment of autonomy and competence needs fosters internalized motivation and sustained engagement (Ryan et al., 2017).

Moreover, thriving at work emerged as a strong predictor of happiness at work ($\beta = .89, p < .001$), underscoring the centrality of growth-oriented experiences and vitality in generating positive affect within organizational settings (Porath et al., 2012). Crucially, the total indirect effect from job crafting to happiness at work—via career adaptability, engagement, and thriving—was statistically significant ($\beta = .44, p < .001$), confirming the model's processual logic. Rather than functioning in isolation, proactive and adaptive behaviors appear to operate synergistically, forming a dynamic psychological pathway that culminates in workplace well-being.

This study examined a serial mediation model grounded in SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2000) to explain how proactive and adaptive behaviors contribute to happiness at work among Generation Z employees in Indonesia. The results provide strong empirical support for the proposed model, confirming that job crafting indirectly predicts happiness at work through a sequential pathway involving career adaptability, work engagement, and thriving.

Each path in the model was statistically significant, indicating a coherent developmental process. Job crafting predicted career adaptability, suggesting that self-initiated changes in work roles foster the psychological resources needed to navigate evolving career demands (Maggiori et al., 2017). This is particularly relevant for Generation Z employees, who often seek alignment between work and personal strengths. Career adaptability, in turn, predicted work engagement, highlighting the importance of future-oriented self-regulation in driving deeper psychological involvement. Engagement predicted thriving—an energizing state of vitality and learning—underscoring the motivational engine that sustains well-being over time (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004; Spreitzer et al., 2012). Finally, thriving significantly predicted happiness at work, confirming that feelings of growth and energy are central to positive affect in organizational contexts (Porath et al., 2012).

These results reinforce SDT's core proposition: well-being emerges when individuals experience autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci et al., 2017). Job crafting reflects autonomous initiative, career adaptability signals competence and control, and thriving manifests as the integration of intrinsic motivation with meaningful experience. Together, these constructs offer a comprehensive account of how young employees navigate complex work environments to sustain happiness.

This study contributes to the literature on positive organizational behavior by integrating four previously fragmented constructs—proactive behavior (job crafting), psychological adaptability (career adaptability), motivational engagement (work engagement), and psychological vitality (thriving)—into a single, process-based model. Previous research has often examined these variables in isolation (Maggiori et al.,

2017; Plomp et al., 2019; van Tuin et al., 2020), whereas the present study demonstrates that they form an interdependent pathway leading to well-being.

Importantly, this study also responds to calls for culturally contextualized models. Conducted in Indonesia - a country characterized by collectivist values and high power distance (Hofstede, 2001) - the findings challenge the notion that proactive work behaviors are only viable in autonomy-supportive, Western contexts. The data suggest that even in hierarchical organizational cultures, young employees can engage in bottom-up change when supported by psychological readiness and adaptive capacity. This is a notable insight, as it expands the applicability of SDT to emerging markets where structural empowerment may be limited.

Furthermore, the discussion highlights how digital fluency and generational identity shape how happiness at work is constructed among Gen Z employees. For this cohort, job crafting may include not only traditional task modification but also digital boundary setting, content curation, and strategic online engagement for career exploration. Similarly, career adaptability may involve navigating digital visibility, hybrid skill development, and personal learning ecosystems. Thriving, in this context, may be understood not merely as emotional vitality, but as agency in building a portfolio career or aligning work with personal values.

These insights underscore the need for inclusive definitions of work-related well-being that account for the lived realities of younger, digitally native employees. Moreover, the findings support Porath et al. (2012) in showing that thriving serves as a bridge between engagement and personal growth. They also extend the literature by suggesting that digital identity and online self-construction may serve as contextual moderators of motivational pathways, particularly among Gen Z.

From a practical perspective, organizations aiming to improve workplace happiness—especially among younger employees—should invest in developmental environments that foster job crafting, career adaptability, and opportunities for thriving. This may include creating space for small-scale autonomy, peer mentoring, and open communication channels. In emerging market contexts where formal empowerment structures are limited, informal mechanisms become critical for sustaining motivation and well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

One notable avenue for future research is the integration of psychological safety as a boundary condition in this behavioral pathway. Although not directly measured in the present model, psychological safety plays a key role in enabling proactive behaviors, especially in rigid organizational environments. For Gen Z, who place high value on authenticity and transparency, feeling safe to speak up, take initiative, and explore career directions is likely essential for engagement and thriving. In high power-distance cultures, promoting psychological safety may thus serve as both a strategic investment and a cultural innovation.

In sum, this study advances the understanding of how happiness at work is cultivated through a dynamic, self-driven process, even in contexts marked by cultural and structural constraints. It affirms the relevance of SDT in non-Western settings and highlights the evolving nature of proactivity, adaptability, and engagement in a digital world. Workplace happiness, as these findings suggest, is not merely the result of favorable conditions, but a constructive outcome of personal agency, psychological resources, and enabling environments.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This study provides empirical support for a behavioral pathway model that explains how Generation Z employees pursue happiness at work through a sequence of proactive and adaptive psychological mechanisms. Grounded in SDT (Deci et al., 1989), the findings confirm that job crafting contributes to workplace happiness indirectly via career adaptability, work engagement, and thriving. All hypothesized paths were supported, underscoring the model's coherence and reinforcing the theory's assertion that autonomy-supportive behaviors and internal resources jointly promote well-being.

Rather than viewing workplace happiness as a static outcome or trait-dependent phenomenon, this study conceptualizes it as a dynamic psychological state—emerging from individuals' capacity to shape their work environment, adapt to career demands, and maintain psychological vitality. This perspective offers a meaningful contribution to the literature on positive organizational behavior, particularly in understanding generational differences in employee motivation and well-being.

From a theoretical standpoint, the integration of job crafting, adaptability, engagement, and thriving into a single serial model offers a process-oriented view of well-being that has been rarely tested in emerging-market contexts. Conducted in Indonesia—a collectivist, high power-distance society—this study challenges the prevailing assumption that proactive behaviors thrive only in autonomy-supportive cultures (Hofstede, 2001). It demonstrates that, even within hierarchical systems, young employees can enact bottom-up change when equipped with sufficient psychological readiness.

At the same time, the study acknowledges several limitations. Its cross-sectional design precludes causal inference, and reliance on self-report measures introduces potential common method bias. Furthermore, the sample was limited to Gen Z employees in Indonesia, which may constrain the generalizability of findings across generations and cultural contexts.

From a systems-level perspective, the findings highlight the need for institutional adaptation. While many organizations implement well-being programs, these efforts often overlook structural rigidity, lack of autonomy, and insufficient developmental pathways. For Generation Z—who value purpose, autonomy, and rapid skill acquisition—such gaps can lead to disengagement. Rather than relying on isolated wellness initiatives, organizations must embed well-being into their core architecture, through job enrichment, participatory decision-making, and continuous learning systems.

Educational institutions also play a crucial role. The foundations of career adaptability and engagement can and should be nurtured prior to formal employment. By integrating real-world projects, mentorship opportunities, and reflective practices into curricula, universities and vocational schools can prepare graduates for psychologically sustainable careers. Embedding SDT-informed strategies into career education may enhance both motivation and resilience in workforce entry.

At the policy level, governments and professional associations can support workplace happiness by incentivizing inclusive leadership, mental health provision, and generational diversity in organizational planning. As the future of work becomes increasingly shaped by digitalization and demographic shifts, the ability to engage with the human aspirations of the next workforce generation will be a defining challenge.

For practitioners, this study offers several actionable recommendations: (1) Enable job crafting through structured platforms such as development plans, redesign conversations, and growth check-ins, (2) Build career adaptability by incorporating uncertainty-management and career goal-setting modules into training programs, (3) Support thriving by embedding indicators of vitality and learning into employee feedback systems and pulse surveys, (4) Train line managers to recognize early signs of disengagement and empower them to make small but meaningful task or role adjustments, and (5) Prioritize psychological safety, especially in hierarchical contexts, to ensure employees feel free to express ideas and take initiative.

Ultimately, fostering happiness at work must be recognized not merely as a psychological concern, but as a strategic investment in organizational health and sustainability. Research shows that happy employees exhibit greater engagement, creativity, and retention (Diener & Seligman, 2004). As Generation Z continues to redefine the contours of the modern workplace, organizations that support their proactive, adaptive, and value-driven approaches will be better positioned to attract talent and thrive. By investing in empowerment and creating space for personal agency, institutions help cultivate the collective well-being and long-term resilience of the workforce.

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