

# Exploring the Emotional and Social Intelligence Competencies of Generation Z Employees: A Scoping Review

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## Abstract

**Objective:** This scoping review aims to explore and map the breadth of evidence on the Emotional and Social Intelligence (ESI) competencies of working professionals from the Generation Z (Gen Z) cohort.

**Introduction:** Unemployment among Gen Z is rife (Noah & Aziz, 2020). Many claim their low soft skills or ESI competencies are to blame (Deluliis & Saylor, 2021; Succi & Canova, 2019). Employers argue Gen Z does not have the ESI competencies organisations require and refer to the skills discrepancy as the soft skill gap (Cinque, 2016; Noah & Aziz, 2020; Stewart et al., 2016). However, there is no clear definition or parameters between soft skills and ESI competencies, nor is there enough literature on Gen Z to get a comprehensive insight into their ESI competencies, strengths and deficiencies. Clarifying these conceptual differences and determining Gen Z's ESI competencies will help determine how their ESI compares against industry expectations and what competencies to improve on to close the soft skills gap.

**Inclusion criteria:** All academic literature on economically active Gen Z's ESI competencies will be considered. This includes Gen Zs across countries, industries, and genders. All literature on the soft skills, emotional intelligence, and social intelligence of Gen Z will also be considered if it falls within the parameters of ESI competencies as outlined by Boyatzis (2018).

**Methods:** Data will be derived from Scopus and other research evidence sources such as EBSCO and Web of Science through a two-stage selection process. Most of the information will be collected from Scopus because the University of Stellenbosch has a subscription to Scopus, and it is one of the biggest bibliographic databases for peer-reviewed journal articles, conference papers, working papers, and white papers. The search will be conducted in March 2024 and include evidence sources from any language, which will be translated into English with translation software. The study selection will include all sources published between 2019 and 2024 that address the soft skills, ESI competencies, or emotional intelligence (EI/EQ) of the economically active Generation Z population. The objective is to

identify and map the breadth of evidence on the ESI competencies of economically active Gen Zs in order to understand their key ESI characteristics, strengths, and weaknesses, and if applicable, identify potential knowledge gaps in the field. The information gathered during the extraction and analysis phase will be presented in a tabular format and visually illustrated in pie charts with accompanied narrative descriptions.

**Results (For Reviews ONLY):** The bulk of the abstract should be reserved to convey the main results of the review in relation to the objective/question. Report the number and type of included evidence as well as any pertinent study characteristics.

**Conclusions (For Reviews ONLY):** Provide a conclusion based on a general interpretation of the review findings in line with the review's objective/s and any limitations of the review. Briefly convey key implications of the findings for practice and research (if any).

## Introduction

Generation Z (Gen Z), born between 2009 and 1995, is the most academically qualified generation ever (Schroth, 2019). Yet, they struggle to secure employment and flourish at work (Sharvari & Kulkarni, 2019). Researchers blame Generation Z's workplace challenges on their low social and emotional intelligence (ESI) competencies, informally known as soft skills competencies (Deluliis & Saylor, 2021; Succi & Canovi, 2019). These non-technical competencies are associated with personality, attitude, and the ability to connect with others effectively (Stewart et al., 2016). Emotional and social intelligence gives Gen Z a competitive edge by differentiating themselves from the volume of applicants in their generational cohort who are equally qualified and experienced (Bano & Vasantha, 2022). Evidence also suggests graduates with higher levels of ESI get more job offers and interviews and are generally more satisfied with their career choices and work (Kastberg et al., 2020).

Yet, preliminary evidence indicates that Gen Z lacks specific ESI competencies employers require. A systematic literature review by Noah and Aziz (2020) revealed that Gen Z's top three soft skills deficiencies are in sequence of order: interpersonal communication skills, teamwork, and leadership skills. This study also pointed out that, ironically, employers value these three skills the most when recruiting and appointing Gen Z graduates across industries and continents (Cinque, 2016; Noah & Aziz, 2020). According to an intergenerational study by Machová et al. (2020), Generation Z scored the lowest on all levels of ESI despite the precedence they place on it. Generation Z also rates their social-emotional skills much higher than their employers, who view their ESI skills as a liability rather than an organisational asset (Cinque, 2016; Noah & Aziz, 2020; Stewart et al., 2016). Evidently, there is a discrepancy between employers' experience and expectations of Gen Z's ESI competencies and how Gen Z rates themselves, which is popularly referred to as the 'soft skills gap'.

Even though the term 'soft skills gap' is widely used, it lacks a coherent definition and there is no clear indication of the ESI skills employers value as opposed to the skills Gen Z have and where they fall short in employers' expectation. Moreover, the concepts of soft skills, emotional intelligence, emotional and social intelligence, non-cognitive skills, and non-technical skills are used interchangeably without a clear distinction between the differences. There is extensive overlap between these concepts and there need to be more consensus on the parameters of ESI and its relating concepts (Riley & Nicewicz, 2022; Sharvari & Kulkarni, 2019). While some argue that soft skills are the labour market's jargon for emotional intelligence (EQ/EI) or ESI (Ritter et al., 2018), others maintain that ESI falls under the umbrella of soft skills (Wheeler, 2016).

Even within the domain of emotional intelligence research disagree on a uniform definition. Ashkanasy and Daus (2005) categorise EI into three schools of thought they call streams: the cognitive-based ability model, the self-report model, and a mixed-model approach. Boyatzis (2018) proposes a fourth stream, namely the behavioural model and refers to EI as ESI. Thus, EI theories can be differentiated according to whether they advocate for a personal trait or a behavioural disposition focussing on observable patterns of actions (Lui & Boyatzis, 2021). However, these different conceptual streams do overlap as all four EI streams agree on two domains: 1) self-awareness and self-management and 2) social awareness and relationship management (Haricharan, 2022). Serrat (2017) ties the four EI streams into one uniform definition of EI and describes it as "the ability, capacity, skill, or self-perceived ability to identify, assess, and manage the emotions of oneself, of others, and of groups" (p.330). The researcher is particularly interested in how Gen Z's ESI manifests in the workplace and therefore Boyatzis (2018) behavioural model of ESI provides the conceptual framework for this study. However, evidence sources from all four streams of EI

will be considered as well as terminologies that relate to the four domains and twelve sub-competencies of ESI namely, emotional intelligence, social intelligence, self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship management, achievement orientation, adaptability, self-control, positive outlook, empathy, organisational awareness, coach and mentor, conflict management, leadership, influence, and teamwork.

Exploring the ESI characteristics of Gen Z will help to understand the cohort and plot their ESI competencies. Ensari (2017) argues that Generation Z is an under-researched cohort, simply by virtue of age and that more research is needed to understand their workplace behaviour, motivations, and preferences. Even though research has touched on Gen Z's soft skills or ESI capacity, no source known to the researcher has summarised these findings in one comprehensive report.

As an emerging field, a scoping review will help to explore what research has been done on the ESI of working Gen Z professionals, their correlating strengths and weaknesses, and what, if any, research gaps exist. The culmination of this data can be used to highlight which ESI competencies Gen Z generally have to improve on to adhere to employers' requirements and subsequently minimise the soft skills gap.

The researcher conducted a preliminary search on Google Scholar, Scopus, EBSCO, and Web of Science to explore what research exists on ESI, as well as economically active Gen Z's ESI competencies. No scoping review on these criteria were found.

The objective for the scoping review is, therefore, to assess the extent of literature on economically active Gen Zs' ESI competencies to understand where their strengths and weaknesses lie in terms of their ESI competencies. The data will be charted and presented in a tabular format accompanied by a narrative description.

## Review Questions

Question 1: What literature is available on Generation Z employees' Emotional and Social Intelligence competencies?

- 1.1. What is known about Generation Z's Emotional and Social Intelligence as it manifests in the workplace?
- 1.2. Which ESI competencies does literature consider as Gen Z's strengths or weaknesses?

## Keywords

Economically active Generation Z; Generation Z/Gen Z; emotional and social intelligence; soft skills; soft skills gap.

Preliminary searches on the keywords yielded very few results which necessitate the researcher to expand the keywords to ESI domains and its underlying constructs namely; emotional intelligence; social intelligence; self-awareness; self-management; social awareness; relationship management; achievement orientation; adaptability; self-control; positive outlook; empathy; organisational awareness; coach and mentor; conflict

management, leadership; influence; and teamwork. Each of these keywords were used in combination with the keywords Generation Z.

## Eligibility criteria

### Participants

All studies pertaining to ESI competencies will be integrated given that it includes the target audience and falls within the timeframe of studies published between 2019-2024.

Participants must be from the Generation Z cohort. More specifically, only economically active Gen Z participants will be considered because the research aim is to explore the current state of research on the ESI of young working professionals. Restricting the scope of participants enables the researcher to narrow down a very large generational cohort to the older economically active segment of Gen Z. Thus, Gen Z participants that are unemployed, scholars, or tertiary students, will be excluded from the study.

### Concept

This study will include all concepts and terminology pertaining to the non-cognitive transferrable skills of the economically active Generation Z population. For the purpose of this study all concepts that are encapsulated by emotional and social intelligence and its related sub-competencies will be included, namely emotional intelligence, social intelligence, self-awareness; self-management; social awareness; relationship management; achievement orientation; adaptability; self-control; positive outlook; empathy; organisational awareness; coach and mentor; conflict management, leadership; influence; and teamwork. All soft skills competencies related to any of the above concepts will also be included.

### Context

Generation Z entered the workplace as recently as 2019 (Scroth, 2019), which coincides with the volume of research done on Gen Z in the workplace that depicts an incremental spike from 2019 onwards (see appendix A). Therefore, only research evidence on the ESI competencies of economically active Gen Z dating from 2019 to 2024 will be considered for this scoping review.

Research evidence on the ESI competencies of economically active Generation Zs across all industries, nationalities, geographical locations, genders, and qualifications will be included. Furthermore, all evidence will be considered regardless of the language as it will be translated into English through Google Translate or any other relevant translation software.

### Types of Sources

All research evidence sources will be considered for the scoping review on the condition that it meets the inclusion criteria and that the sources help answer the central research question. This may include all qualitative studies and designs, quantitative studies, experimental and quasi-experimental studies, all types of observational studies, systematic literature reviews, text, and opinion papers. Grey literature will also be accepted. However,

all popular media, Social Media platforms, and mainstream media channels will not be included because of time and resource constraints.

## Methods

This scoping review will be conducted in accordance with the JBI methodology for scoping reviews (Peters et al., 2020) and reported according to the PRISMA extension for scoping reviews (PRISMA-ScR) (Tricco et al., 2018).

### Search Strategy

The search strategy will aim to locate all primary sources, published and unpublished studies, articles and reviews, which will be derived from electronic databases and reference lists. A two-step search strategy will be employed by three independent reviewers. During step one titles and abstracts will be scanned for keywords and index terms that is relevant to the topic. These evidence sources will be examined to ensure that it adheres to the inclusion criteria and is relevant to the research objective and research questions. In step two, the remaining evidence sources will be used to develop a full search strategy on Scopus, Web of Science, and EBSCO (See Appendix B). The search strategy, index terms, and keywords will be adapted for each database and information source and the reference lists of all the evidence sources will be screened for additional studies.

Studies published in any language will be included and translated to English with translation software. Only research evidence from 2019 to 2024 will be included because Gen Z entered the workplace in 2019 and there is no research evidence on the workplace behaviour or occupational character traits and competencies of Gen Z prior to 2019.

The Stellenbosch library catalogue is an electronic, multi-database search engine that includes platforms such as Scopus, EBSCO, and Web of Science. Unpublished studies and grey literature sources will include reports, conference proceedings, datasets/statistics, and doctoral thesis.

### Study/Source of Evidence Selection

Following the search, all citations will be combined and uploaded into ATLAS.ti (version 22) and all duplicates removed. ATLAS.ti is a qualitative data analysis software. The researcher uses ATLAS.ti because the University of Stellenbosch has an institutional licence for it.

After the initial pilot test, titles and abstracts will be screened by three independent reviewers, against the inclusion criteria. All potentially relevant evidence sources will be reviewed in full, and their citation details imported into the JBI System for the Unified Management, Assessment and Review of Information (JBI SUMARI) (JBI, Adelaide, Australia) (Munn et al., 2019). The full text of selected citations will be assessed in detail against the inclusion criteria by three independent reviewers.

The reasons for excluding evidence sources, during the full text phase, that do not meet the inclusion criteria will be recorded and reported in the scoping review. Any disagreements between the reviewers at each stage of the selection process will be resolved through discussion and consultation with an additional reviewer. All search results as well as the

study inclusion process will be reported in the final scoping review and presented in a PRISMA-ScR flow diagram (Tricco et al., 2018).

## Data Extraction

Data will be extracted from papers by three independent reviewers using a data extraction tool developed by the reviewers. The data extracted will include specific details about the participants, concept, context, study methods, and key findings relevant to the review questions.

A draft extraction form is provided (see Appendix 4). The draft data extraction tool will be modified and revised as necessary during the process of extracting data from each included evidence source. Modifications will be detailed in the scoping review. Any disagreements that arise between the reviewers will be resolved through discussion, or with an additional reviewer.

## Data Analysis and Presentation

*Guidance for authors: The evidence presented should directly respond to the review objective and question(s). The data is commonly presented graphically or in diagrammatic or tabular form. Preparation of the review protocol is the opportunity for authors to pilot and determine how to best present their data or map and provide detailed description for the reader. Insert information on data presentation/mapping techniques, if any. A narrative summary will accompany the tabulated and/or charted results and will describe how the results relate to the reviews objective and question/s.*

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## Conflicts of interest

There is no conflict of interest in this project.

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## Appendices

### Appendix I: Search strategy

*Guidance for authors: For protocols - present a full search strategy for at least one electronic database including planned limits, such that it can be reviewed and repeated. For systematic reviews, all search strategies should be presented.*

### Appendix II: Data extraction instrument

#Only append the JBI or non-JBI data extraction instrument if the standardized tool has been modified in any way, otherwise simply cite the tool used in the text. Any modifications made to the instrument should also be described in the text.