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Developing Soft Skills of Thai Gen Z Accountants: Key to Success in the Digital Era

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Abstract

This research aims to study the level of soft skills among Generation Z accountants in Thailand, analyze regional differences in soft skill levels, and examine the relationship between personal factors and soft skill levels. The sample consisted of **510** Generation Z accountants from all regions of Thailand. Data were collected using an online questionnaire and analyzed through descriptive statistics, ANOVA, and chi-square tests. The findings revealed that Generation Z accountants have a moderate overall level of soft skills. There are significant regional differences, with Bangkok and its metropolitan area, as well as the Eastern region, having higher average soft skill levels than other regions. Additionally, work experience and education level were found to be significantly correlated with soft skill levels. The study highlights the need to develop soft skills among Generation Z accountants, particularly in creativity and innovation. Policy recommendations include revising educational curricula, organizing continuous skill development programs by professional organizations, promoting collaboration across sectors, and supporting skill development in regions with lower scores to reduce disparities. Suggestions for future research include comparative studies with other generations, qualitative research to understand factors influencing skill development, long-term studies on the impact of soft skills on career success, and research on the effectiveness of skill development methods.

Keywords: Soft skills, Generation Z accountants, accounting professional development, Digital era

Introduction

In an era where digital technology is rapidly transforming the landscape of the accounting profession, the development of soft skills has become a critical factor determining the success of new-generation accountants, particularly Generation Z, who are entering the workforce. The World Economic Forum (2023) has indicated that while the demand for accountants remains, the required skills have shifted significantly, especially in terms of digital literacy, data analysis, and advanced technology comprehension. Poláková *et al.* (2023) ^[11] emphasized that soft skills are essential for accountants to adapt and succeed in an increasingly dynamic work environment. While technology enhances efficiency and accuracy, soft skills enable accountants to fully leverage these technological tools, create distinctive value, and respond to evolving business needs.

However, there is still a gap in the research regarding the soft skill levels of Generation Z accountants in Thailand and the factors influencing their skill development. This research is crucial for enhancing the understanding of the soft skill levels of Generation Z accountants, analyzing regional differences, and investigating the relationship between personal factors and skill levels. The findings aim to guide policy-making and strategic approaches to soft skill development among new-generation accountants, ensuring alignment with the challenges of the digital era. The study utilizes data collected through an extensive online questionnaire, covering all regions, and employs advanced statistical methods to test hypotheses and draw reliable conclusions.

Literature Review

Soft Skills in the Accounting Profession

In today's highly competitive and rapidly evolving business world, accountants must not only possess strong technical expertise but also a diverse range of soft skills to succeed. Soft skills refer to attributes that influence an accountant's ability to lead, communicate effectively, engage in analytical thinking, solve problems, innovate, collaborate with others, and manage themselves. Research by Tan and Laswad (2018)^[15], which explored employers' perspectives on essential skills for accountants, found that communication, teamwork, and analytical thinking are highly valued. Similarly, Abbasi *et al.* (2018)^[11] investigated the gap between the soft skills possessed by accounting graduates and the skills required by the labor market, identifying significant deficiencies in areas such as communication, critical thinking, and problem-solving.

Previous research highlights the critical importance of soft skills in the accounting profession and the need to align these skills with the changing demands of the labor market. The most essential soft skills for accountants in the modern era can be categorized into six key areas: (1) adaptability and continuous learning, (2) critical thinking and problem-solving, (3) creativity and innovation, (4) digital and technological skills, (5) communication and collaboration, and (6) self-management and self-regulation (Ogbonnaya, 2022; Poláková *et al.*, 2023; Rkein *et al.*, 2019; Tan & Laswad, 2018)^[11, 15, 12].

Characteristics of Generation Z Accountants

Generation Z, defined as individuals born between 1997 and 2012, has grown up immersed in digital technology and internet connectivity, resulting in distinct characteristics compared to previous generations. Chicca and Shellenbarger (2018)^[2] synthesized existing research on Generation Z, revealing that this cohort is technologically adept, desires flexibility in the workplace, and prioritizes continuous self-development. These traits shape their expectations and readiness to become professional accountants. A study by Gomez *et al.* which surveyed Generation Z accounting students on essential future skills, found that they place high importance on technology and data analysis skills. Moreover, they expect educational institutions and professional organizations to play a significant role in developing the skills necessary for the digital era.

Understanding the unique characteristics of Generation Z accountants and studying their soft skill levels are crucial for designing appropriate skill development strategies that align with the changing work environment. This preparation is essential to ensure that new-generation accountants can adapt and achieve sustainable success in their careers.

Importance of Soft Skills in the Digital Era

The transition to the digital era is impacting all professions, including accounting. The World Economic Forum's Future of Jobs report (2023) highlights that the skills required for future work are rapidly changing, with digital skills, data analysis, critical thinking, creativity, and adaptability becoming increasingly crucial for competing in the labor market. Research by Rkein *et al.* (2019)^[12] on the impact of technological change on the accounting profession found that automation and artificial intelligence are replacing many accounting tasks, particularly repetitive and technically

oriented ones. However, tasks requiring strategic thinking, communication, and innovation still rely heavily on human capabilities. Similarly, Leitner-Hanetseder *et al.* (2021)^[7] emphasized that, in the digital era, accountants must shift from being recorders and reporters of financial information to becoming business advisors and strategic decision-makers, which necessitates soft skills to integrate professional knowledge with business contexts, interpret data, and effectively communicate insights to stakeholders.

Therefore, as technology increasingly replaces technical tasks, the focus on developing accountants' soft skills will become key to adding value and maintaining long-term competitiveness in the profession. These skills will enable accountants to fully harness the potential of technology, create differentiated value, and respond to the evolving needs of businesses.

Factors Affecting Soft Skills Development

Previous research has explored various factors that may influence the development of soft skills among accountants, particularly work experience, educational level, and geographic context. The study by Low *et al.* found a positive correlation between accountants' work experience and their level of soft skills, with more experienced accountants tending to exhibit higher levels of communication, problem-solving, and leadership skills. These findings may reflect the role of experiential learning in developing accountants' soft skills. Similarly, Thi Van Pham and Thi Thu Dao (2020)^[16] investigated the relationship between accountants' educational level and their soft skill development, concluding that accountants with higher educational attainment tend to demonstrate stronger critical thinking, communication, and teamwork skills. Higher education may provide accountants with more opportunities to enhance their skills through more rigorous and diverse learning experiences. Moreover, Daff *et al.* (2012)^[4] highlighted differences in the soft skill levels of accountants across different geographic contexts, revealing that accountants in major cities or business hubs are more likely to exhibit higher levels of communication, teamwork, and strategic thinking skills compared to those in more remote areas. This may be due to differences in access to education and training, as well as the diversity and complexity of work experiences in each context.

However, there is limited research on the influence of these factors on Generation Z accountants, particularly in the context of Thailand. Further studies on the factors affecting soft skill development among this group would provide a deeper understanding and lead to more target and effective skill development strategies.

From the literature review, it is evident that soft skills are crucial for success in the accounting profession in the digital era. However, there remains a knowledge gap regarding the status and factors influencing soft skill development among Generation Z accountants in Thailand, a group with unique characteristics that is entering the profession. This research aims to fill this gap and provide policy recommendations to enhance the capabilities of new-generation accountants, equipping them to face challenges and create value in the digital world.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a quantitative research approach using a cross-sectional study design to examine the level of soft skills

among Generation Z accountants in Thailand. This method is appropriate for collecting data from a large sample at a single point in time and effectively describing the characteristics of the target population (Creswell & Creswell, 2017) [3]. The population for this research consists of Generation Z accountants (born between 1997 and 2012) in Thailand. A sample of 510 participants was obtained through multi-stage sampling, stratified by region, followed by convenience sampling within each region. This sampling method ensures a representative and diverse sample (Etikan, 2016) [5].

Research Instruments

The data collection instrument was an online questionnaire consisting of three main sections: (1) general information of the respondents, (2) a soft skills measurement scale (24 items covering six domains) using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = very low, 5 = very high), and (3) additional comments and suggestions. The questionnaire underwent content validity assessment by three experts to ensure its comprehensiveness and alignment with the research objectives (Taherdoost, 2016) [14]. The reliability of the instrument was measured using Cronbach's alpha, yielding a coefficient of 0.871, which is considered high and acceptable (Taber, 2018) [13].

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using the SPSS statistical software (version 26) with various appropriate statistical methods, including: (1) descriptive statistics, such as frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation, to describe the characteristics of the sample and the level of soft skills; (2) one-way ANOVA to compare differences in soft skill levels across regions, which is a suitable method for testing differences in means across three or more groups (Kim & Kim, 2017); and (3) the chi-square test to analyze the relationship between personal factors and soft skill levels, a statistical tool effective in testing associations between categorical variables (McHugh, 2013) [9].

Results

General Information of the Sample

The majority of the sample in this study were female (94.90%), held a bachelor's degree (99.80%), had 1-2 years of work experience (35.49%), worked as accountants (77.65%), and were employed in limited companies (70.98%) with an average monthly income of 15,001-30,000 baht (62.94%). These characteristics reflect the context of Generation Z accountants in Thailand, who are recent graduates accumulating work experience in small and medium-sized enterprises.

Soft Skills of Generation Z Accountants

The analysis revealed that Generation Z accountants have a moderate-to-high overall level of soft skills (Mean = 3.726, S.D. = 0.668). The highest mean scores were in communication and collaboration (Mean = 3.774, S.D. = 0.386), followed by digital and technological skills (Mean = 3.724, S.D. = 0.534). In contrast, creativity and innovation had the lowest mean score (Mean = 3.418, S.D. = 0.505) (Table 1). These findings are consistent with the characteristics of Generation Z, who have grown up with technological advancements and are proficient in using digital tools and communicating through online platforms (Chicca & Shellenbarger, 2018) [2]. However, the lower average score in creativity and innovation highlights the need

for further development in this area, as it is a critical skill for accountants to add value to their organizations in the digital era (Rkein *et al.*, 2019) [12].

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Soft Skills for Generation Z Accountants

| Soft Skills | Mean | S.D. |
|---|-------|-------|
| Adaptability and Continuous Learning (ACL) | 3.717 | 0.417 |
| Critical Thinking and Problem-solving Skills (CTPS) | 3.537 | 0.507 |
| Creativity and Innovation (CI) | 3.418 | 0.505 |
| Digital and Technological Skills (DTS) | 3.724 | 0.534 |
| Communication and Collaboration (CC) | 3.774 | 0.386 |
| Self-management and Self-regulation (SMS) | 3.674 | 0.408 |

Differences in Soft Skill Levels across Regions

The one-way ANOVA analysis revealed significant differences in soft skill levels across various regions of Thailand ($F = 24.318$, $p < .001$). Bangkok and its metropolitan area ($M = 4.179$, $SD = 0.623$), as well as the Eastern region ($M = 4.066$, $SD = 0.645$), had significantly higher average scores compared to other regions (Table 2). These differences may be attributed to unequal access to education and skill development opportunities across regions, particularly in Bangkok and its metropolitan area, which serve as the economic center, and the Eastern region, which has benefited from the development of special economic zones. These areas have better resources and infrastructure (Office of the National Economic and Social Development Council, 2018). The findings highlight the need to distribute skill development opportunities more equitably across regions to reduce disparities and enhance the capabilities of new-generation accountants nationwide.

Table 2: Analysis of Average Scores by Region

| Soft Skills | Percentage | Frequency | Mean | SD |
|----------------------|---------------|---------------|--------------|--------------|
| Bangkok and vicinity | 15.21 | 77.00 | 4.179 | 0.623 |
| Central region | 13.58 | 69.00 | 3.735 | 0.658 |
| Northern region | 8.16 | 42.00 | 3.457 | 0.701 |
| Northeastern region | 33.67 | 172.00 | 3.296 | 0.715 |
| Southern region | 16.41 | 84.00 | 3.647 | 0.672 |
| Eastern region | 7.74 | 39.00 | 4.066 | 0.645 |
| Western region | 5.23 | 27.00 | 3.705 | 0.663 |
| Total | 100.00 | 510.00 | 3.726 | 0.668 |

Relationship between Personal Factors and Soft Skill Levels

The analysis of the relationship between personal factors and the soft skill levels of Generation Z accountants, using the chi-square test, found that work experience was significantly associated with soft skill levels ($\chi^2 = 15.726$, $p < .05$). Accountants with more work experience tended to have higher levels of soft skills. Additionally, educational level was also significantly associated with soft skill levels ($\chi^2 = 9.854$, $p < .05$) (Table 3), with accountants holding higher educational degrees tending to exhibit higher soft skill levels. These findings align with previous research, which has shown a positive correlation between work experience, education level, and the development of soft skills (Thi Van Pham & Thi Thu Dao, 2020) [16]. Accumulated experience and continuous education provide opportunities to practice and enhance a variety of skills. This research highlights the importance of supporting accountants in gaining work experience through internships or on-the-job training, as well as promoting continuous education in fields relevant to the

profession, to ensure well-rounded and ongoing skill development.

Table 3: Chi-square Test Results for Personal Factors and Soft Skills Levels

| Personal Factor | χ^2 Value | p-value | Significance |
|-----------------|----------------|---------|--------------|
| Work Experience | 15.726 | < .05 | Supported |
| Education Level | 9.854 | < .05 | Supported |

Discussion

This study provides an overview of the soft skills of Generation Z accountants in Thailand, highlighting both strengths and areas for improvement. The strengths include communication and collaboration skills, as well as digital and technological skills, which align with the characteristics of Generation Z, who grew up in the digital era and are familiar with online communication platforms (Chicca & Shellenbarger, 2018) [2]. However, areas that need further development include creativity and innovation skills, which are critical for adding value to the accounting profession in the digital age (Rkein *et al.*, 2019) [12]. Therefore, educational institutions and relevant organizations should prioritize the enhancement of these skills by revising curricula and organizing activities that promote out-of-the-box thinking and innovation.

Moreover, the findings reveal significant regional differences in soft skill levels, reflecting disparities in access to skill development opportunities, particularly in remote areas or regions with limited resources. These regional differences align with Leitner-Hanetseder *et al.* (2021) [7], who highlighted the changing role of accountants in the digital era, which requires equitable access to technology and skill development opportunities. Government and professional organizations should implement policies that ensure more widespread access to skill development opportunities, such as conducting workshops in rural areas, providing scholarships, or utilizing digital technologies to disseminate knowledge to a broader audience. This would help bridge the gap and elevate the skills of new-generation accountants across all regions, ensuring their competitiveness and sustainable career growth.

Regarding the personal factors associated with soft skill levels, the results underscore the importance of accumulating experience and continuous education in enhancing capabilities. Therefore, accountants, organizational leaders, and relevant agencies should encourage on-the-job training while supporting further education, such as pursuing higher degrees or specialized courses related to the profession. This approach will enable accountants to develop a well-rounded set of skills that align with the evolving demands of the labor market.

However, this study has certain limitations that should be acknowledged. The cross-sectional design, which collects data at a single point in time, may not capture the long-term development or changes in skills. Additionally, while the online questionnaire facilitated access to a large sample, it may have limitations in providing in-depth explanations of the underlying causes or qualitative factors influencing skill levels. Future research could adopt a mixed-methods approach, supplementing quantitative research with in-depth interviews or focus group discussions to obtain more diverse and comprehensive insights.

Conclusion

This study found that Generation Z accountants in Thailand possess an overall moderate-to-high level of soft skills. Their strengths lie in communication, collaboration, and digital and technological skills, but there are areas for improvement, particularly in creativity and innovation. Additionally, the research revealed significant regional differences in soft skill levels, as well as correlations between work experience and educational level with soft skill development. These findings highlight important considerations for developing the potential of new-generation accountants in the digital age. Key areas include promoting strengths, enhancing essential skills, reducing regional disparities, and supporting continuous learning to ensure Generation Z accountants are equipped to adapt and create value for the profession sustainably in the face of rapidly changing technology and business environments.

Recommendations

1. Revise educational curricula to emphasize the development of soft skills alongside professional knowledge, particularly in creativity and innovation.
2. Implement continuous training and soft skills development programs for accountants at all levels through collaborations between professional organizations, the private sector, and government agencies. Fostering tangible cooperation across sectors will be key to creating an ecosystem that supports comprehensive and accessible skill development for accountants.
3. Encourage accountants to gain hands-on learning experiences through internships or on-the-job training programs.
4. Promote opportunities for accountants to pursue higher education or specialized courses related to the profession, ensuring they continually develop new knowledge and skills.
5. Establish measures to ensure equitable access to skill development opportunities across regions by organizing local training, providing scholarships, or using digital technologies to disseminate knowledge. This will help reduce disparities and enhance the capabilities of accountants in all regions.

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