

GENERATION Z AND THE FUTURE OF THE ACCOUNTING PROFESSION: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF CHALLENGES AND ADJUSTMENTS IN THE TECHNOLOGY ERA

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Abstract:

The digital transformation that has occurred in the world of accounting has given rise to fundamental changes in the roles and competencies required of an accountant. Generation Z, as the group that currently dominates higher education, is faced with the challenge of adapting to the dynamics of an increasingly technology-based profession. This study aims to understand how Generation Z accounting students view changes in the accounting profession and how they prepare themselves for the era of digitalization. This study uses a qualitative approach with a phenomenological study method. The subjects of the study were ten final-year accounting students selected through a purposive sampling technique. Data were collected through an open-ended questionnaire and analyzed thematically. The results showed that the majority of respondents had a positive attitude towards the digitalization of the accounting profession and realized the importance of mastering technology such as accounting software, cloud computing, and artificial intelligence. However, most respondents had not had direct experience with the technology and felt that learning on campus did not fully support their digital readiness. Within the framework of the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), it was found that students' positive attitudes and adaptive intentions had not fully developed into real behavior due to low perceptions of control over resources and weak social encouragement from the academic environment. This study recommends the need for stronger institutional support in the form of a curriculum that is responsive to technological developments and broader and more targeted access to training for students.

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INTRODUCTION

The technological transformation in the accounting profession is increasingly showing high intensity along with the rapid development of digital technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), big data analytics, cloud computing, and business process automation. This change not only touches on the technical aspects of accounting work but also deeply changes the work structure, competency expectations, and the direction of decision-making in the organization. The accounting function that was previously manual, administrative, and reactive has now changed into a more strategic, automatic, and analytics-based function. This requires all accounting practitioners, including the new generation who are studying in college, to adapt to existing developments quickly and adaptively (Amyati, Sari, & Sumarsih, 2024).

One of the groups that is of primary concern in this context is Generation Z, namely individuals born between 1997 and 2012. This generation grew up in a digital environment and has a high familiarity with information technology. However, although socially and culturally they are considered "digital natives", in a professional context, they still face serious challenges in adapting to technological changes that occur in the world of work, especially in the accounting profession. This generation is at the crossroads between the conventional learning system that is still applied in many higher education institutions and job market expectations that demand practical and professional mastery of the latest technology (Arianto, 2024).

Based on data from the Higher Education Statistics released by the Central Statistics Agency (BPS) for the 2019/2020 academic year, it was recorded that the number of accounting study program graduates in Indonesia reached 91,488 people. This figure reflects the high interest in accounting as a career choice, while also showing the great potential of human resources ready to enter the job market. However, this high quantity of graduates needs to be reviewed in terms of quality and relevance of competencies to industry needs, especially amidst the rapid flow of professional digitalization (Ayuningtyas, Lubis, & Makaba, 2024).

Although the volume of graduates continues to increase, the gap between graduate competencies and the needs of the workforce is becoming increasingly apparent. A comparative study between BPS data and findings from several universities shows that most graduates are still not equipped with essential digital skills, such as the ability to use ERP (Enterprise Resource Planning)-based accounting software, big data-based financial data analysis, and an understanding of cloud-based accounting information systems. As a result, many graduates experience obstacles in adjusting to the workplace or even have difficulty getting jobs that match their fields because they do not meet the competency expectations of the industry (Fadillah, 2024).

This problem becomes more complex because higher education institutions, in many cases, have not fully adapted their curriculum to the development of professional needs. Accounting learning still emphasizes the theory and basic concepts of manual accounting, while the practice of using digital technology is still minimal. This is certainly a big challenge in preparing Generation Z to face the world of accounting, which is now increasingly digitalized. Without adequate updates in the education system, graduates of accounting study programs are at risk of becoming less relevant to market needs, even though they are very abundant in great numbers (Kriswoyo & Samsiah, 2020).

This condition also creates the potential for an oversupply of accounting graduates that is not balanced with the skills needed by the industry. If this phenomenon is not immediately addressed, there will be an imbalance between the high number of graduates and the low level of workforce absorption, which can have an impact on increasing the number of educated unemployed in the accounting field. Furthermore, this can also be detrimental to educational institutions themselves because it reduces public trust in the relevance of the study programs offered (Manurung, Pertiwi, Azzura, & Kurniawan, 2025).

The following is a summary table of data from BPS for 2019/2020 S1 accounting graduates and a simple projection for the next 5 years (assuming an average increase of 3% per year):

Table 1. Projection of Number of Bachelor Accounting Graduates (Indonesia)

Year	Number of Graduates (S1)
2019/2020 (riil)	91.488
2020/2021	≈ 94.232
2021/2022	≈ 97.060
2022/2023	≈ 99.972
2023/2024	≈ 102.971
2024/2025	≈ 106.060

Source: BPS 2019/2020 + projection of 3% per year

This annual growth of around 3% shows a continuous upward trend. Although quantitatively promising, concerns have arisen regarding the quality of graduates, especially in terms of technological mastery, and soft skills such as critical analysis and collaboration.

In the digital era, routine accounting work is predicted to be largely completed by automation. ACCA and Deloitte even estimate that more than 60% of basic jobs will be replaced by technology by 2030. This means a big challenge for Generation Z to be able to transform (Permana et al., 2024).

Adaptation is not only technical, but also non-technical. Accounting graduates must master the interpretation of data-based financial reports, solve business problems, and communicate effectively

with various parties. This is starting to become an important requirement in the professional and industry recruitment process (Munawarah, Susilawati, Aprilia, & Cahyadi, 2024).

This qualitative study is very relevant because it can dig deeper: how does Generation Z perceive technology in accounting, to what extent does their curriculum support digital skills, and what strategies do they use to anticipate significant changes in their profession?

In conclusion, although the volume of graduates continues to increase (from 91,488 in 2019/2020 and is estimated to reach 106,060 in 2024/2025), their quality and readiness need to be assessed through research. The findings of this study can be the basis for recommendations for universities, industries, and policymakers in improving the quality of graduates to be more adaptive in the technological era.

METHODS

This research is qualitative research with a phenomenological approach. This approach is used to deeply understand the subjective experiences of Generation Z accounting students in adapting to technological developments in the accounting profession. The main focus of the research is to explore the meaning, perceptions, and adaptation strategies carried out by students in facing the challenges of professional digitalization.

The subjects in this study were Generation Z accounting students who met the criteria, namely still actively studying at least in the fifth semester, currently or have undergone internships, or have just graduated from the Accounting Study Program with a domicile or educational institution background located in the Province of Bali. The selection of subjects was carried out using a purposive sampling technique, considering certain characteristics that are relevant to the objectives of the study, so that researchers can explore in depth the experiences and views of students who are in the final stages of study or in the transition period to the world of work, where readiness and adjustment to the accounting profession in the digital era are becoming increasingly crucial. Data collection techniques were carried out through participatory observation to observe student behavior in academic activities or practices related to the use of technology, as well as documentation studies of syllabi, lecture modules, or internship reports related to accounting technology as supporting data. Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis techniques that included verbatim transcription of interview data, data reduction by selecting important parts of the transcript, coding to identify themes and patterns, categorization into themes based on components of the Theory of Planned Behavior such as attitudes, subjective norms, and behavioral control, as well as drawing conclusions and interpreting the meaning of findings in the context of theory and research objectives. To maintain the validity of the data, source and method triangulation techniques were used, including comparing data from various informants to see consistency, conducting member checking or confirming interview results with informants, peer debriefing through discussions with colleagues or supervisors to test the objectivity of data interpretation, and audit trails with systematic recording of the entire data collection and analysis process to increase research transparency. With this approach, it is hoped that the research will produce a comprehensive and in-depth picture of the challenges and adjustments of generation Z accounting students in facing the future of the profession amidst technological transformation.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Respondent Profile. Most of the respondents are final semester accounting students who are in the age range of 21 years and belong to Generation Z. The majority of respondents are female and have the status of active students who have not yet worked permanently.

Experience in Digital Accounting Training. The majority of respondents have never attended training or certification related to accounting technology, although they are aware of the importance of mastering technology in facing professional transformation.

Table 2. Sources Who Have Attended Digital Accounting Training

Ever Attended Digital Accounting	Total
No	4
Yes	6

Views on Changes in the Accounting Profession. All respondents stated that the accounting profession has undergone significant changes due to digital technology and artificial intelligence. They see a shift in the role of accountants towards a more strategic and data-based direction.

The Influence of Technology on the Role of Accountants. Respondents stated that technology such as accounting software, cloud computing, and AI greatly influences the role of accountants, especially in work efficiency, data processing, and system-based decision making.

Steps to Prepare Yourself for Digital Accounting. Some of the steps taken by respondents include:

- 1) Taking courses or training independently
- 2) Learning accounting software autodidactically
- 3) Improving the ability to use Excel and supporting technology

However, not all respondents stated that they had made intensive preparations.

Assessment of Learning on Campus. The majority of respondents felt that learning on campus had not fully equipped them to face the world of digital accounting. They considered that there were still limitations in the practice of using technology directly in the classroom.

Skills Needed by Gen Z Accountants. Respondents consider that important skills for Gen Z accountants include:

- 1) Mastery of accounting technology and software
- 2) Data analysis skills
- 3) Communication skills and adaptation to change

Views on the Future of the Accounting Profession. All respondents still see the prospects of the accounting profession as something positive and relevant. They believe that although the role of accountants will change, the need for this profession remains high with strong digital adaptation.

Relevance of the Profession in the AI Era. Most respondents stated that this profession will still be relevant even though AI and automation are developing. However, there are also those who expressed concerns because of the possibility of replacing routine tasks with machines.

Challenges in Adaptation. Challenges felt include:

- 1) Lack of practical experience with the latest software
- 2) Limited access to digital training
- 3) Time needed to understand new systems

The results of the study show that the majority of respondents are accounting students from Generation Z, namely the generation born between 1997–2012. This generation grew up in a rapidly developing digital technology and media ecosystem, but in the context of accounting education, exposure to accounting technology has not been fully maximized. In the perspective of the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), the characteristics of generation Z form the initial foundation of an attitude toward behavior that is open to change and technology, but the implementation of this attitude in real action requires additional elements in the form of social norms and perceptions of control (Sofa, 2025).

Most students stated that they had never participated in training or certification related to digital accounting, such as the use of cloud-based accounting software or RPA (robotic process automation) technology. This shows that even though they live in the digital era, access to professional accounting technology is still limited. In TPB, this reflects low perceived behavioral control, namely an individual's belief in their ability to carry out a behavior. When students feel inadequately equipped or do not have technical skills, they tend to postpone or avoid deeper adaptation efforts (Saraswati & Nugroho, 2021). However, almost all respondents showed a positive attitude towards changes in the accounting

profession. They understand that digitalization and artificial intelligence have changed the role of accountants from administrative work to more strategic and analytical-based. This illustrates the attitude aspect in TPB, which tends to be strong. This positive attitude is important because it is the main driving factor in forming a person's intention to act, for example, through independent learning, training, or adapting to the latest technology (Permana et al., 2024). However, if this positive attitude is not supported by adequate subjective norms and perceptions of behavioral control, then this intention will not necessarily become real action. Subjective norms in this context can come from environmental encouragement such as lecturers, campuses, professional organizations, or academic communities. In this study, students admitted that the lecture curriculum had not explicitly equipped them with practical technology skills. The lack of exposure to professional software, such as Accurate, SAP, or AI-based software, in class made students feel less prepared. This shows that the subjective norms of the academic environment are still weak in encouraging digital transformation.

In addition, students also show personal initiative in preparing themselves, such as studying Excel in depth, taking online courses, or trying accounting software independently. These efforts are commendable and indicate a positive intention. However, in TPB, the success of a behavior is highly dependent on actual behavioral control, namely the availability of resources, time, and support. If external factors such as limited access, lack of formal training, or lack of campus support become obstacles, then adaptive behavior remains difficult to realize widely and consistently.

Regarding views on the future of the accounting profession, the majority of students are optimistic that this profession will remain relevant despite major transformations. This reinforces their positive attitude towards accounting careers. However, some also expressed concerns that the role of accountants would be replaced by artificial intelligence and automation, especially in routine work such as data input or standard report creation. In TPB, this concern can be an indicator that their perceived behavioral control is decreasing because they feel they have no control over the larger system (technology, labor market).

The main challenges felt by students in adapting to the digital era are related to three things: (1) lack of direct practice using the latest software, (2) limited training or campus facilities that support accounting technology, and (3) the need for time and energy to learn new systems independently. These three challenges are directly related to perceived behavioral control because students feel that even though they have the intention, these practical obstacles become obstacles to realizing it.

Furthermore, TPB also emphasizes the importance of intention as a mediator between attitudes, subjective norms, and behavioral control towards real actions. From these findings, it can be seen that although some students have positive attitudes and intentions to adapt, if they are not supported by social norms (encouragement from lecturers, curriculum, and institutions) and behavioral control (access to technology, training, and guidance), then these adaptive actions will be limited to certain groups only, not becoming a collective movement.

Thus, the main challenge in the adjustment of Generation Z accounting students lies not in their attitudes, but in aspects of the environment and structural support. Higher education institutions have a key role in strengthening subjective norms and perceived behavioral control, for example, by inserting accounting technology modules in courses, collaborating with industry in training, or presenting digital accounting laboratories (Fadillah, 2024).

In this context, the TPB approach helps explain why some students still do not show adaptive behavior even though they realize the importance of digitalization. They may have good attitudes and intentions, but low control over the environment and the absence of social pressure or support prevent these intentions from developing into real actions.

In addition to the institutional side, the role of professional organizations such as the IAI (Indonesian Institute of Accountants) is also important in forming stronger subjective norms. If students see that the professional world is widely encouraging technological adaptation, then this social pressure will strengthen their intention to follow the changes.

In this case, the TPB shows that adaptive behavioral change among accounting students is not an instant process. This change requires systematic and layered interventions, starting from individual attitudes, social norms, to abilities and control over resources. All three must work together to produce the desired behavior, namely, adaptive ability and readiness to face the future accounting profession.

In closing, this discussion confirms that Generation Z has great potential to become a major actor in the transformation of the digital accounting profession. However, without the support of the education system, professional social norms, and access to technology, this potential will be difficult to realize fully. TPB offers a very relevant framework for understanding the complexity of these dynamics and can be the basis for future curriculum and training development strategies.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the research that has been conducted, it can be concluded that Generation Z accounting students generally have a positive attitude towards the transformation of the accounting profession in the digital era. They realize that technologies such as artificial intelligence, cloud-based accounting software, and business process automation have brought significant changes to the role of accountants, from administrative work to more strategic and data analysis-based.

However, not all students show optimal readiness in facing these changes. This is due to several factors, including low direct experience with accounting technology, minimal access to digital training or certification, and the lack of integration of technology learning into the campus curriculum. In the context of the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), students already have a positive attitude and intention, but the realization of adaptive behavior is still hampered by low perceived behavioral control and weak subjective norms that support change.

The forms of self-adjustment that have been carried out include independent learning, participating in informal training, and efforts to strengthen technological skills autodidactically, but these steps have not occurred massively and in a structured manner. Therefore, stronger support is needed from educational institutions, the industrial world, and professional organizations to encourage student self-adjustment more systemically and sustainably.

Thus, although the accounting profession is still seen as a relevant and promising field by Generation Z students, its sustainability is highly dependent on the extent to which this generation can carry out digital transformation in an adaptive and targeted manner.

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