

Flexible Employment for Generation Z Youth: Characteristics and Challenges

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Abstract. Employment is a major challenge faced by young people, mainly due to fierce market competition and limited job demand. The employment development of Generation Z youth is an important issue that urgently needs to be addressed in the reform of the labor market system. With the tremendous changes in production organization and employment methods driven by the digital economy, the employment pattern of Generation Z youth has also undergone significant changes. Currently, the full-time employment form of "nine to five" is no longer able to meet the employment needs of Generation Z youth. With the rise of "digitalization" development, employment forms characterized by "personalization, part-time, part-time, and atypical" and "independent and flexible" have also emerged. The development trend of flexible employment has an impact and challenge on the existing labor market system, mechanism, and legal system based on full-time employment. The labor market system in the new era also urgently needs to be reformed to provide more employment forms for Generation Z youth, promote the sustainable and healthy development of the new employment market, and increase employment opportunities for young people.

Keywords: Generation Z Youth; flexible employment; Transformation of employment patterns.

1. Introduction

Generation Z is the people who born from 1995 to 2009 in the communication environment, and called "Digital Natives"[1]. They have a high level of education and strong digital ability, and are the most creative new generation among young people. Currently, there are approximately 2.4 billion people in Generation Z globally, accounting for 32% of the global population[2]. With the entry of Generation Z youth into society, their influence continues to expand, and the future global competition will be the competition of Generation Z youth, with their employment issues have attracted widespread attention.

The employment trend of the Generation Z youth shows two significant changes:

Change 1: Personalized, part-time, part-time, and atypical "autonomous and flexible" employment forms have become important employment choices for Generation Z youth. The World Employment and Social Outlook (2015) released shows that 76.7% of young people worldwide choose flexible employment. The survey of the American Freelancer Survey (FIA) conducted by the American freelance platform Upwork also shows that an increasing number of workers regard flexible employment as a long-term career choice, with 50% of Generation Z youth choosing flexible employment in 2020. As digital aborigines, they prefer new forms of flexible employment based on the Internet platform. According to the 2021 Pew Research Center's ATP survey (US Trends Series), Generation Z youth have the highest proportion of employment among any type of platform worker, reaching 30%, nearly half higher than the average (see Table 1).

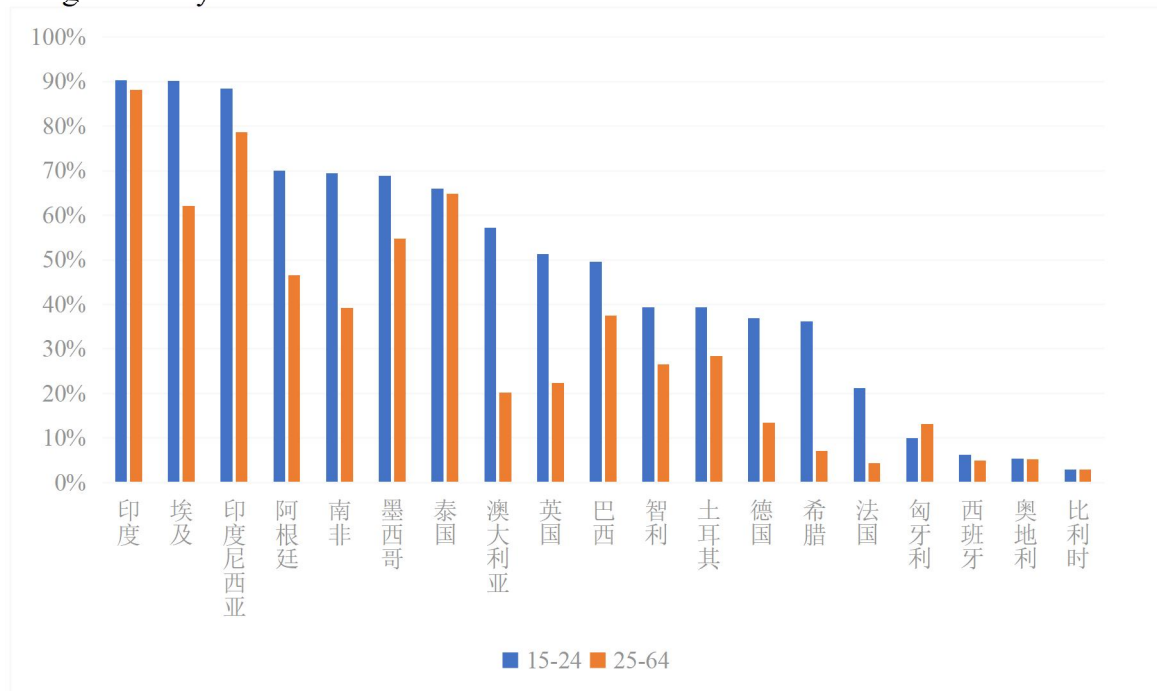
Meanwhile, according to a recent survey by the International Labour Organization (ILO) on informal employment, the Z youth group is more likely to choose flexible employment based on age. In most countries, the proportion of young people in flexible employment is much higher than that of non young people, especially in developed countries with more complete social security systems and more suitable economic conditions for flexible employment. Young people are more likely to choose.

Table 1. Employment proportion of various types of platform jobs shown in the 2021 ATP survey

category	Representative platforms	Any type of platform work	Online delivery personnel	Home service or running errands	Online ride hailing driver	Online grocery store	Deliver packages	Other similar work
		-	DoorDash, UberEats	TaskRabbit, Angi	Uber, Lyft	Instacart, Peapod	Amazon Flex	-
	All	16%	7%	6%	5%	4%	3%	4%
age	18-29 years old	30%	18%	8%	9%	9%	6%	5%
	30-49 years old	18%	7%	6%	6%	4%	3%	5%
	50-64 years old	13%	4%	6%	4%	2%	2%	3%
	65 years old and above	7%	1%	3%	1%	<1%	<1%	2%

Source: Pew Research Center

flexible employment (see Fig. 1 for details). According to the "Digital Economy 2.0 Report" by Alibaba Research Institute, within the next 20 years, the 8-hour working system will be broken, and 400 million workers will choose to self-employ and flexible work through the internet, accounting for 50% of the total workforce. It can be seen that flexible employment and new forms of employment have become important sources of employment in the future labor market, and the employment environment is tending towards more flexible employment relationships and more frequent high mobility.



Data source: International Labour Organization (ILO) database

Fig. 1 The situation of flexible employment by age

Change 2: As the "digital natives" of Generation Z, digital labor is the main form of flexible employment for new forms of employment. Digital employment is an important way for them to cope with unemployment problems, and actively participate in labor to realize their self-worth in the digital economy. The Generation Z youth unemployment problem is a key challenge facing the

international community at present. The diversified digital labor in the digital economy provides an important way for Generation Z youth to alleviate employment pressure. China is the largest Internet market in the world and has the largest Internet user group in the world. Driven by the digital economy, the digital platform liberates the labor space and time of workers that eliminates the intermediary force of physical organizations. With digital as the key production factor, based on the difference of their own knowledge and skills, the flexible employment team of digital labor of Generation Z youth has attracted two groups: digital gig jobs and digital smart jobs. Digital gig jobs mainly involve low skilled, repetitive, and physical labor, such as food delivery riders, ride hailing drivers, etc. Its entry barrier is low and need low labor skills, attracting a large number of key youth groups such as poverty, unemployment, and migrant workers for employment. The average annual growth rate of the number of riders earning income through the Meituan platform from 2019 to 2021 was 645000, which is equivalent to about 5% of the new urban employment in China. The scale of young riders aged 18-24 continued to expand, with an average annual growth rate of 18.6%, higher than the average annual growth rate of all riders. Digital smart workers mainly focus on highly skilled, creative, mental or spiritual labor, such as media creators, online writers, short video bloggers, Internet marketers, etc. Employment fields are concentrated in online literature, games, education and other industries, and official account, Zhihu, Tiktok, etc. become the main platforms for digital smart work[3]. The digital ecosystem composed of WeChat official account, applet, video account, WeChat payment, enterprise WeChat, etc., will have 50.173 million employment income opportunities in 2022, and the proportion of young and middle-aged WeChat applet developers and service providers will reach 73.4% and 67.1% [4]. With the continuous deepening of the digital economy, the scale of Generation Z digital gig workers and digital flexible workers is constantly expanding, and digital employment will become the mainstream of the future labor market.

Overall, in the digital economy environment, the employment characteristics of Generation Z are showing a trend of transformation from "organized and fixed" to "flexible and autonomous". This trend will put forward new requirements for the country's public employment service system and labor law construction.

2. Theoretical Mechanism

2.1 Analyze the flexible employment trends of Generation Z youth

The labor market supply and demand theory holds that the equilibrium of the labor market depends on the balance of supply and demand, and the changes in the labor market are dynamic processes. Both supply and demand sides will continuously adjust their behavior according to market changes. Supply and demand are two sides of economic development. The current booming digital economy has had a profound impact on the labor market and work patterns. The demand side and supply side of the labor market are undergoing new changes, showing a trend from traditional full-time employment models to diversified and non typical flexible employment models. This change is the result of the interaction between supply and demand in the labor market.

On the one hand, from the demand side of the labor market, the digital economy has prompted market entities to actively choose flexible employment methods to adapt to the changes in modern production organization. Driven by the digital economy, the digital transformation of production methods has given rise to the form of gig labor[5]. From the perspective of enterprise production methods, digitalization has led to significant changes in the production organization of enterprises. Highly organized, large-scale, and standardized production organization methods are gradually being replaced by flexible, small-scale, and non-standard production organization methods. From the perspective of factor allocation, labor is the only viable factor among production factors. In the trend of industrial digitization, labor factors need more flexible and flexible resource allocation methods, and flexible employment methods. From the perspective of improving management efficiency, flexible employment in enterprises can effectively solve temporary employment needs

caused by seasonal factors, diversify job positions, work methods, and employment channels, and minimize employment costs and risks[6].

On the other hand, from the perspective of the supply side of the labor market, technological progress and changes in employment concepts have led Generation Z to actively choose flexible employment methods, to enhance their self-worth and meet the demand for autonomous and flexible employment. From an external perspective, digital technology has empowered the creation of a large number of new industries, formats, and positions, making the employment choices of Generation Z youth more market-oriented, diversified, and autonomous. With the help of new media technology platforms, emerging professions such as micro commerce, "internet celebrities", online anchors, e-commerce print models, online writers, and online fitness coaches have emerged. From an internal perspective, Generation Z youth have a stronger demand for self actualization and personalized development in employment, and their employment concept tends to be independent, flexible, and free in order to better balance work and life. More and more Generation Z youth prefer to engage in flexible and free work, becoming "inclined youth" who value freedom and equality more and strive to realize their own value[7].

2.2 Perspective of Labor Reserve Army Theory

The theory of labor reserve forces focuses on the potential labor resources in society, including the unemployed and unemployed population. Marx believed that under the general law of capital accumulation, the market needs a labor reserve force to adapt to changes in the degree of accumulation. It often exists in the economy in a mobile, potential, or stagnant form, including those who are excluded from stable work and frequently change their forms of work and employment[8]. The theory of labor reserve forces believes that the stability and changes of the labor market mainly depend on the quantity and quality of the reserve forces. When the demand for labor increases, the reserve forces can quickly supplement the labor market to meet the needs of economic development. When the economy declines, the unemployment rate rises, and the reserve forces can also absorb some of the unemployed population, reducing the employment pressure on society. In the labor market, informal gig economy is often employed as an institutionalized form of capital utilization of labor reserves[9]. According to the China Sharing Economy Development Report (2021), the number of participants in the sharing economy in 2020 was approximately 830 million, of which approximately 84 million were service providers or new forms of employment workers[10]. At the same time, a group of creative and capable "new individual businesses" are growing rapidly, and diversified and flexible employment opportunities such as WeChat, e-commerce, online live streaming, maker platforms, and cloud based fitness coaches have opened up new employment opportunities[11]. Flexible employment is an inevitable product of the transformation of modern enterprise production organization in the digital economy era, and is an important choice for the employment of Generation Z youth.

3. Employment characteristics of Generation Z youth

In 1969, American psychologist Clayton Alderfer proposed the "ERG theory" based on Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory. He believed that people have three core needs: the need for survival, which is the desire to satisfy basic material living conditions; Relationship needs, that is, the desire to maintain friendly relationships between people; Growth requires the individual's inner desire to pursue self-development, improvement, and growth. Compared with other generations, the growth process of Generation Z youth has fully integrated digitalization, and their employment concepts and career choices have shown obvious new characteristics.

3.1 Employment characteristics in the dimension of survival needs

In terms of ability and quality. Outstanding learning ability and easy acceptance of new things are the outstanding professional abilities of Generation Z. In the process of labor, there is a strong

sense of professional ethics, strong planning and independence, and a desire to prove oneself in the workplace, requiring immediate feedback[12]. As the "first generation of people who have grown up completely in the digital era", they are better at learning with the help of mobile Internet tools, are more comfortable with the use of digital tools, and pay more attention to the learning and improvement of their own digital capabilities such as data and information mining, processing, analysis, transmission, connection and integration.

In terms of workplace values cognition. In terms of salary, they pursue fairness and justice. They value both money and physical and mental health. According to survey data from job search website Monster, 70% of Generation Z consider salary and medical insurance as their top concerns for job hunting[13]. According to a survey by Changjiang Business School, the top five values of Generation Z are: physical and mental health, increased wealth, experiential expansion, self realization, material and spiritual enjoyment. They pay more attention to the matching of work interests. If they are not satisfied with their work, Generation Z will choose more diverse and flexible ways of handling it, such as creatively joining their hobbies, looking for other job opportunities, internal job transfers or adding part-time jobs[14]. According to a Deloitte survey, 46% of Generation Z also engage in another full-time or part-time job in addition to their main job, such as selling products or services online, working as delivery drivers or ride hailing drivers, creating art, or becoming internet celebrities on social media[13].

3.2 Relationship needs dimensions, employment characteristics

In terms of interpersonal relationships in the workplace. Pursuing like-minded individuals with distinct personal interests and preferences, we construct a broad social network in the workplace, forming different interest oriented social circles for interpersonal communication. They are more inclusive, able to interact with different people, not easily judge others, like to express their most authentic self, unwilling to cater to others, have their own principles of interpersonal communication in the workplace, maintain independence and autonomy, and have a sense of boundaries. They prefer simple workplace relationships and do not like to get caught up in complex interpersonal relationships and struggles within the workplace. They prefer an equal, democratic, and respectful interpersonal atmosphere among internal clients, as well as a workplace interpersonal environment recognized by external clients for their careers.

In terms of working methods. Prefer unconventional workflow, dislike the limitations of established rules and regulations, do not adhere to conventions, do not like the complexity of the workplace, expect unconventional management rules that can be explored rather than mechanically followed, value the creativity of oneself[15], and pursue a more flexible, open, shared, and cooperative diversified work mode. The process oriented work paradigm that relies on standards, performance, and traditional evaluation in traditional organizations is gradually being replaced by the Z generation's creative, unique, and self valued independent work paradigm[16].

3.3 Employment characteristics in the dimension of growth needs

In terms of growth motivation. Compared to other generations, they have a higher level of self motivation, seeking a sense of identification with self-worth and a sense of achievement in their work, striving to realize their own value, and pursuing career diversity challenges that are unpredictable and impossible. They enjoy diverse job responsibilities and enjoy having more new experiences. Only 28% of Generation Z believe that money will motivate them to work harder, and promotion opportunities and honor rewards are the main driving forces behind their hard work[17].

In terms of career planning. Generation Z has strong independence and exhibits unique characteristics in their understanding and planning of careers. Career planning is no longer limited to a single position, and they often prefer to become "slash youths" who hold multiple positions [14]. Their loyalty and dependence on the organization are not high, and in the face of crises, Generation Z is less likely to choose to share hardships with the company. Meanwhile, independent

entrepreneurship is also a preferred employment method for Generation Z, who believe that entrepreneurship can bring higher economic income and independent experiences[7].

Overall, Generation Z have higher quality, keep up with the times, do not like to be bound, have strong independence, like to challenge the unknown, and have the characteristics of unstable employment [18]. They pursue a more flexible work schedule, flexible work location, and can better utilize their expertise and abilities in the form of employment. They have a higher recognition of the new employment created by the digital economy.

4. The risks and challenges faced by the flexible employment trend of Generation Z youth

4.1 Structural employment difficulties

The report "Global Youth Employment Trends 2020" released by the International Labour Organization points out that in the digital economy era, Generation Z face the risk of digital skill shortages and job automation being replaced. Technical anxiety is more pronounced in the employment of young people, and the International Labour Organization believes that one of the reasons is that the school education and skill training received are not adequately prepared for future work, and young people cannot smoothly transition from school to the workplace [19]. The contemporary workplace places higher skill requirements on Generation Z youth, and the structural imbalance of skills puts them in a dilemma of "high scoring skills" in employment choices, leading to unemployment or employment instability.

4.2 Labor overwork among workers

The gig economy provides workers with free, autonomous, and flexible employment opportunities, but it also lowers their institutional status. On the one hand, due to the lack of industry labor standards, market competition intensifies, leading to the problem of spontaneous involution and overwork among workers. Research has shown that the fragmented gig labor process of Generation Z flexible workers actually further reduces their autonomous control over their labor. The "algorithmic control" or "digital control" models targeting gig workers exhibit more covert and stringent characteristics[20], but in reality, their exploitation of workers is more profound. On the other hand, due to weak industry regulation and inconsistent standards, there are many complaints about labor quality. For example, live streaming sales on the internet has become a popular new form of employment in recent years, but the legal and regulatory system based on which it is regulated is still not sound, industry standards have not been unified, the definition of responsibilities between platforms, merchants, and anchors is not clear, industry regulation is weak, consumer complaints are frequent, and service quality is declining. In 2020, a total of 25500 complaints and reports related to "live streaming" were received by the 12315 platform nationwide, with nearly 80% of the demand for "live streaming sales" accounting for a year-on-year increase of 357.74% [21].

4.3 Unfair treatment of the employment environment

Due to the informal nature of employment patterns, Generation Z flexible workers often face employment discrimination and unfair treatment due to occupational stigmatization. Firstly, labor opportunities are unfair. Many people are not very certain about the flexible employment opportunities of Generation Z, and offer less inclusive growth opportunities. For example, regarding new forms of employment such as live streaming sales, online writing, and self media creation, they are considered as non mainstream industries and relatively low-level industries [22], and the professional recognition of workers in new forms of employment is low. Secondly, labor income is unfair. Social protection for workers in China is mostly tied to labor relations, and workers with stable formal jobs often enjoy higher labor income and more welfare benefits than flexible workers

in informal employment models. Thirdly, the labor process is unfair. Most flexible employment workers in Generation Z face the dilemma of being trapped in the system during the labor process, enduring the impact of fragmented employment patterns and profound labor control, and the disadvantaged position of vulnerable groups continues to solidify. The instability, low recognition, and insufficient security of professions are not conducive to the healthy development of flexible employment, and even lead to serious consequences.

4.4 Insufficient protection of labor rights and interests

According to the "New 360 Rows: 2021 Youth New Career Guide" jointly conducted by Bilibili and DT Finance, data shows that Generation Z prefer to try new professions that are in line with their interests, unrestricted freedom, and value identity. However, they have concerns about new professions, mainly due to concerns about income not being able to support themselves (77.1%), unstable work (58.3%), and incomplete security mechanisms (42.6%) [23]. In the flexible employment market, the diversification of employment forms makes the identification of labor relations more complex, and the current labor laws and social security system are difficult to meet the development needs of new employment forms. The externalization of organizational relationships and the transfer of labor relations are the two most prominent issues. Firstly, the externalization of organizational relationships weakens the joint risk resistance ability of flexible employees, and collective rights cannot be protected. Platform capital adopts a strategy of externalizing organizational relationships, transforming a large number of workers who were originally suitable for internal employment relationships into independent contractors outside the organization. Due to the lack of stable organizational affiliation, the opportunities for flexible employment groups to form internal unity and cooperation with each other are constantly decreasing, and the potential risks they face will continue to accumulate and increase[5]. Secondly, by signing civil contracts such as cooperation agreements, service agreements, or labor agreements, labor relations can be transferred to avoid the application of labor laws, and risks can be transferred from employers to workers. The relationship between Generation Z flexible employment workers and platforms is mostly in the form of labor cooperation or self employment, and there is a common phenomenon of multi platform employment, which makes it difficult to enjoy social insurance benefits and lacks labor security.

5. Strategies and suggestions for career development of Generation Z youth

5.1 Strengthening the construction of digital education and training systems

One is to create a system of "blood transfusion" education and training programs. Explore the implementation of government, school, enterprise, community and other multi-party linkage youth employment and vocational training assistance projects, such as youth activity projects, employment work group projects, youth construction projects, etc., accumulate resources from all parties, and increase education, training, and employment assistance for "key youth groups" (disabled youth, mobile youth, young migrant workers, school and dropout students, retired soldiers, etc.). The second is to create a "hematopoietic" education and training project system. Firstly, enhance the digital skills and literacy of Generation Z, and reduce structural unemployment caused by a lack of digital skills. The Boston Consulting Group's "Towards the Future of 2035: 4 Billion Word Economy Employment" points out that mastering specific professional skills and possessing machine intelligence, which cannot yet replace human interpersonal interaction, creativity, and other abilities on a large scale, have become important job barriers. Digital skills have become a fundamental and universal ability in various industries, and related vocational skills should become the "standard" for Generation Z to learn. The second is to strengthen career planning and guidance. The external labor market transformation is intensifying, and education departments and public employment service institutions should strengthen the guidance of career cognition, planning, and advanced methodology for Generation Z, so that they can have a clear understanding of their own

advantages and preferences, combine career cognition with full life cycle career development to make reasonable planning, choose suitable employment methods, and promote long-term career development. The third is to promote the concept of lifelong learning and build a lifelong learning guarantee mechanism. Regardless of the changes of the times and the iteration of technology, the Z generation of Generation Z should continue to improve their self-learning and innovative thinking abilities, strengthen their ability to resist employment risks, and obtain active choices in the labor market.

5.2 Construction of industry standards and occupational systems for new formats

Clear labor standards are the foundation of standardized management, improving the construction of new vocational skill standards and management systems, and constructing a multi-level vocational skill standard system. In terms of formulating industry standards, clarify industry labor standards, regulate the market behavior of new business organizations, and accelerate the process of identifying new professions. The government department takes the lead in regularly organizing leading enterprises, industry associations, research institutions, and social organizations to timely track, research, and update the latest occupational dynamics and development situation based on new changes in the field of occupational activities, and timely formulate new industry standards (including occupational skill standards, labor time standards, labor safety and health standards, etc.) and management systems [22]. In terms of vocational skill evaluation, we will strengthen the construction of a vocational skill evaluation system mainly based on digital labor and digital employment, issue relevant vocational skill level certificates, allocate flexible employment special training funds, establish supporting skill training mechanisms, and improve the vocational skill level certification work of Generation Z flexible employment workers. In terms of data statistics construction, a statistical system based on new forms of digital economy should be established to objectively and comprehensively collect employment data of practitioners in new employment forms, assess the health and effectiveness of labor market development, alleviate economic pressure and unemployment risks caused by market changes, and enhance the employment risk resistance and employment matching ability of Generation Z flexible employment workers.

5.3 Creating a fair and harmonious employment environment

A sense of fairness is the cornerstone of sustainable economic development and harmonious and stable labor market. The improvement of social identity and integration of Generation Z flexible employment workers depends on the understanding and support of the whole society, creating a fair employment environment and social atmosphere. Through the optimization approach of "crowd characteristics-fair needs-fair measures" and drawing on the suggestions of scholar Guo Yuankai[22], different fair and just employment environments are constructed based on the work characteristics and fair needs of different flexible employment groups in the new Z generation industry. For the Z generation of Generation Z in the new life industry represented by express delivery guys, we should start from ensuring fairness in labor rights and introduce supporting fairness measures in employment and entrepreneurship policy system, social security payment, labor capital relations, employment disputes, vocational training, and other aspects; Starting from industry standards of fairness, fair construction standards are introduced for the Z generation of Generation Z in the online industry, represented by online anchors, in areas such as value guidance, ideological management, and cultural product dissemination; Regarding the independent literary and artistic Generation Z youth represented by online writers, we pay attention to the issue of fair promotion and development, and establish fair protection measures in professional title evaluation, talent cultivation, intellectual property protection, and other aspects.

5.4 Strengthen the construction of flexible labor law and metallurgical system

At present, there are three typical employment relationships in the labor market, namely standard labor relations, non-standard labor relations, and labor relations. The existing labor legal system is in line with the standard full-time employment relationship and cannot solve the problems brought about by the characteristics of flexible employment and new forms of employment. The legislative body should intensify research and supervision on various forms of flexible employment and new forms of employment, and formulate rules that can not only eliminate excessive flexibility but also improve low safety, protect the rights and interests of workers, and innovate development. It is suggested to add new types of labor within the existing labor dichotomy framework, define flexible employees represented by delivery riders as "quasi employees", include them in the scope of labor protection, expand the coverage of labor laws for all types of labor, and establish a labor protection legal framework of "civil law quasi employee law labor law"[24], The quasi employee law mainly targets employees in informal labor relations, including flexible employees, and is parallel to labor laws.

6. Summary

The current complex and severe economic environment shows more uncertainty and incompleteness, and the employment pattern of Generation Z youth is gradually shifting from the traditional stable employment model of "nine to five" to a flexible and autonomous flexible employment model. However, the current flexible employment of Generation Z youth faces the dilemma of coexistence of high flexibility and low safety, which is reflected in the mismatch of skills education, lax industry standards and supervision, lack of a fair employment environment, and insufficient guarantee of legal construction. With the deepening of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, countries are establishing inclusive, sustainable, and resilient economic structures under the wave of digitization, and the development trend of flexible employment models that match them has become increasingly prominent[25]. Therefore, the government should adhere to the principle of attaching equal importance to opening up, invigorating and standardizing development, incorporate the healthy development of flexible employment into the overall strategic plan of employment priority, follow the trend, speed up the removal of unreasonable restrictions that hinder the development of flexible employment, deepen the reform of the operating mechanism and system of the labor market based on the industrial economy, and build a new mechanism of the labor market needed for Chinese path to modernization matching the digital economy, Strengthen the construction of industry standards and occupational systems for new formats, create a fair and just harmonious employment environment, strengthen the construction of flexible employment laws and regulations, and promote the healthy development of the "flexible" employment trend in the future workplace for Generation Z youth.

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