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The Effect of Competence on Work Readiness with Career Adaptability as a Mediating Variable among Generation Z in South Nias Regency

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A B S T R A C T

This study examines the effect of competence on work readiness with career adaptability as a mediating variable among Generation Z in South Nias Regency, Indonesia. A quantitative causal design was applied, and an online questionnaire was distributed to 133 Generation Z respondents aged 20–24 years who were selected through purposive sampling. The data were analysed using partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM). After four indicators with outer loadings below 0.70 were removed, the measurement model met the criteria for convergent validity, discriminant validity (HTMT < 0.90), and reliability. The results show that competence has a significant but negative direct effect on work readiness (β = −0.552; t = 5.429), so the first hypothesis was rejected. Competence positively affects career adaptability (β = 0.842; t = 30.120), and career adaptability positively affects work readiness (β = 1.136; t = 11.543). Career adaptability mediates the effect of competence on work readiness (indirect effect = 0.957; t = 9.028) in a competitive mediation pattern, with a positive total effect of 0.405. The findings indicate that competence improves work readiness mainly when it is accompanied by career adaptability. Local government, higher education institutions, and training providers are therefore encouraged to combine competence development with career guidance for Generation Z.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Digitalisation, globalisation, and the adoption of artificial intelligence are reshaping labour markets and require workers to keep developing their competence and their ability to adapt, rather than relying on academic qualifications alone. The World Economic Forum (2025) projects that technological change, demographic shifts, the green transition, and AI adoption will transform the labour market through 2030, and it lists analytical thinking, resilience, flexibility, agility, creative thinking, and technological literacy among the most needed skills. One outcome that reflects how prepared individuals are to meet these demands is work readiness, that is, the extent to which individuals possess the attitudes, attributes, knowledge, and skills needed to succeed in the workplace (Caballero et al., 2011; Indrawati et al., 2023).

Generation Z, born between 1997 and 2012 (Dimock, 2019), is the cohort that is now moving from education into work. Although this generation is often described as digital natives (Putra, 2016), familiarity with technology is not enough to face a dynamic labour market. In Indonesia, the labour force reached 153.05 million people in February 2025, about 3.67 million more than a year earlier (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2025), while skills mismatch affects roughly 25% of the labour force (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2021).

The challenge is also visible at the local level in South Nias Regency, North Sumatra. People aged 20–24 years number 45,288, or 12.26% of the regency's population (Badan Pusat Statistik Kabupaten Nias Selatan, 2024). However, only 10.84% of the employed work in the formal sector while 58.77% work in the informal sector, and the local government notes that productive employment is limited (Pemerintah Kabupaten Nias Selatan, 2025). The open unemployment rate was only 2.98% in 2025 (Badan Pusat Statistik Kabupaten Nias Selatan, 2025), but this low figure does not necessarily describe an ideal labour market because informal work absorbs much of the labour force. The main challenge for young people in the regency is therefore not simply finding a job, but preparing for decent work in a limited job market.

A preliminary interview with 15 Generation Z individuals in the regency indicates that work readiness is not yet optimal. Of the interviewees, 53.33% said that they were not confident to compete in the labour market, did not understand workplace demands, and had no clear picture of their career, and 66.67% had felt anxious about their career future. Interestingly, 80% already had work or internship experience, which suggests that the problem lies more in self-confidence, understanding of the workplace, and clarity of career direction than in a lack of experience.

Competence, defined as the underlying characteristics of an individual that are related to effective performance, namely motives, traits, self-concept, knowledge, and skills (Spencer & Spencer, 1993), is expected to support work readiness. However, this relationship may also depend on the ability to cope with career change and uncertainty. Career Construction Theory (Savickas, 2013) positions career adaptability, consisting of concern, control, curiosity, and confidence, as a psychosocial resource that connects individual resources, such as competence, with adaptation results, such as work readiness.

Previous studies show that competence is related to career adaptability (Tian et al., 2022; Leung et al., 2021; Gerçek, 2024) and that career adaptability is related to work readiness (Yilmaz & Sunbul, 2023; Diva & Satwika, 2024; Ayuni & Nio, 2025). The meta-analysis by Rudolph et al. (2017) also supports the position of career adaptability in the adaptation process between individual resources and adaptation results. Nevertheless, studies that test

the effect of competence on work readiness through career adaptability among Generation Z in regions with limited formal employment such as South Nias remain scarce, because most research focuses on university students. This study therefore analyses (1) the effect of competence on work readiness, (2) the effect of competence on career adaptability, (3) the effect of career adaptability on work readiness, and (4) the mediating role of career adaptability. Based on Career Construction Theory, four hypotheses were proposed: H1, competence positively affects work readiness; H2, competence positively affects career adaptability; H3, career adaptability positively affects work readiness; and H4, career adaptability mediates the positive effect of competence on work readiness.

2. METHOD

This study used a quantitative approach with a causal (explanatory) design and a survey method (Creswell, 2023; Sekaran & Bougie, 2020) to test the relationships among competence (X), career adaptability (M), and work readiness (Y). The research was conducted in South Nias Regency, North Sumatra, Indonesia, in 2026.

The population was Generation Z individuals aged 20–24 years who were domiciled in South Nias Regency. Because aggregate data on the number of people meeting all criteria were not available, purposive sampling was used (Andrade, 2021) with four criteria: (a) domiciled in South Nias Regency, (b) aged 20–24 years, (c) in the final year of higher education or seeking employment, and (d) willing to complete the questionnaire. The minimum sample size was set at 130 respondents, ten times the 13 indicators in the model (Hair et al., 2022), and 133 complete responses were obtained.

Data were collected through an online questionnaire (Google Form) using a five-point Likert scale (Likert, 1932), from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Competence was measured with 15 items covering five indicators (motives, traits, self-concept/attitude, knowledge, and skills) based on Spencer and Spencer (1993). Career adaptability was measured with 12 items covering four dimensions (concern, control, curiosity, and confidence) based on the Career Adapt-Abilities Scale (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). Work readiness was measured with 12 items covering four indicators (previous experience, maturity level, mental and emotional state, and intelligence) based on the Student Work Readiness Scale (Sultoni et al., 2022).

Descriptive analysis used the mean and the respondent achievement rate (TCR), which expresses the mean score of a variable as a percentage of the maximum score of 5 (Equation 1), interpreted with the categories of Arikunto (2019): very good (90–100%), good (80–89.99%), fair (65–79.99%), low (55–64.99%), and poor (below 55%). Inferential analysis used PLS-SEM with SmartPLS (Ghozali, 2014; Hair et al., 2019, 2022). The measurement model was evaluated through convergent validity (outer loading > 0.70 and average variance extracted [AVE] > 0.50; Fornell & Larcker, 1981), discriminant validity (Fornell–Larcker criterion, cross loading, and heterotrait–monotrait ratio [HTMT] < 0.90; Henseler et al., 2015), and reliability (Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability > 0.70). The structural model was evaluated using SRMR, NFI, R^2, and f^2 (0.02, 0.15, and 0.35 for small, medium, and large effects; Hair et al., 2017). Hypotheses were tested by bootstrapping at the 5% significance level (t > 1.96), and mediation was assessed from the specific indirect effect and the pattern of the direct and indirect effects (Zhao et al., 2010).

$$TCR = (Mean / 5) \times 100\% \quad (1)$$

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

3.1. Characteristics of Respondents

Table 1 shows that, of the 133 respondents, 54.9% were male and 45.1% were female. The most frequent age was 22 years (32.3%), followed by 23 years (29.3%), 21 years (19.5%), and 24 years (18.8%). By status, 52.6% were final-year students, 45.9% were job seekers, and 1.5% were graduates. All respondents (100%) were domiciled in South Nias Regency. This composition represents young people at the point of transition from education to work, the stage at which work readiness and employability are usually examined (Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007; Rothwell & Arnold, 2007).

Table 1 Characteristics of Respondents

Characteristics of Respondents		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	73	54.9%
	Female	60	45.1%
Age (years)	21	26	19.5%
	22	43	32.3%
	23	39	29.3%
	24	25	18.8%
Status	Final-year student	70	52.6%
	Graduate	2	1.5%
	Job seeker	61	45.9%
Total		**133**	**100%**

3.2. Descriptive Analysis

Table 2 presents the descriptive results. Competence had a mean of 2.501 (TCR 50.02%, poor), career adaptability had a mean of 2.785 (TCR 55.70%, low), and work readiness had a mean of 3.137 (TCR 62.74%, low). Thus, all three variables were below the fair category (TCR ≥ 65%), with competence the lowest. The low scores on all three variables are consistent with the preliminary interview and with the view that knowledge, generic skills, and career development learning are core components of employability (Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007).

Table 2 Descriptive Statistics of the Research Variables

Variable	Items	Mean	TCR (%)	Category
Competence (KOM)	15	2.501	50.02	Poor
Career adaptability (CAR)	12	2.785	55.70	Low
Work readiness (KES)	12	3.137	62.74	Low

3.3. Measurement Model (Outer Model)

The initial measurement model contained 39 indicators. Four indicators had outer loadings below the recommended 0.70 (Hair et al., 2019) and were removed: CAR7 (0.667), KES2 (0.576), KES7 (0.546), and KOM12 (0.428). After re-estimation, 35 indicators remained (14 for competence, 11 for career adaptability, and 10 for work readiness), all with outer loadings above 0.70 (Table 3). The AVE of every construct exceeded 0.50 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981), and Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability exceeded 0.70, so convergent validity and reliability were established. The composite reliability of competence (0.958) and work readiness (0.956) is slightly above 0.95, which may indicate redundancy among items (Hair et al., 2019), but it does not weaken the conclusion that the instrument is reliable.

Table 3 Convergent Validity and Reliability (Final Model)

Variable	Indicators retained	Outer loading	AVE	Cronbach's α	CR (rho_c)
Competence	14 of 15	0.706–0.854	0.618	0.952	0.958

Variable	Indicators retained	Outer loading	AVE	Cronbach's α	CR (rho_c)
Career adaptability	11 of 12	0.717–0.865	0.618	0.938	0.947
Work readiness	10 of 12	0.771–0.860	0.687	0.949	0.956

Discriminant validity was examined in three ways (Table 4). First, the Fornell–Larcker criterion (Fornell & Larcker, 1981) was not met for the pair of competence and career adaptability, because the square root of AVE of each construct (0.786) was lower than their correlation (0.842), whereas work readiness (0.829) met the criterion. Second, all indicators loaded highest on their own construct in the cross-loading analysis, except CAR11, which loaded slightly higher on competence (0.773) than on career adaptability (0.736); this indicator was retained because its outer loading exceeded 0.70. Third, all HTMT values were below 0.90 (Henseler et al., 2015), so discriminant validity was accepted. The HTMT of competence and career adaptability (0.887) is close to the threshold, which confirms the very close relationship between the two constructs.

Table 4 Discriminant Validity

Construct pair	Correlation (Fornell–Larcker)	HTMT
Competence – Career adaptability	0.842	0.887
Competence – Work readiness	0.404	0.416
Career adaptability – Work readiness	0.670	0.704

3.4. Structural Model (Inner Model)

The structural model showed acceptable fit, with SRMR = 0.078 (below 0.10) and NFI = 0.747. The NFI is below 0.90, but it is not the main fit criterion in PLS-SEM (Hair et al., 2022). As shown in Table 5, competence explains 71.0% of the variance in career adaptability (R^2 = 0.710), and competence and career adaptability together explain 53.8% of the variance in work readiness (R^2 = 0.538), both of which fall in the moderate range, with career adaptability approaching the substantial level (Hair et al., 2017).

Table 5 Coefficient of Determination (R^2)

Endogenous variable	R^2	Adjusted R^2
Career adaptability	0.710	0.707
Work readiness	0.538	0.531

3.5. Hypothesis Testing

Table 6 summarises the hypothesis tests, which were based on bootstrapping (Hair et al., 2019), together with the effect sizes. Competence has a large effect on career adaptability (f^2 = 2.444), career adaptability has a large effect on work readiness (f^2 = 0.811), and competence has a medium direct effect on work readiness (f^2 = 0.192) (Hair et al., 2017). All paths were significant at the 5% level (t > 1.96; p = 0.000). H2 and H3 were supported because the coefficients were positive. The direct effect of competence on work readiness (H1) was significant but negative (β = −0.552), which is opposite to the hypothesised direction, so H1 was rejected. The specific indirect effect of competence on work readiness through career adaptability was positive and significant (β = 0.957), so H4 was supported.

Table 6 Results of Hypothesis Testing

Hyp.	Path	β	SD	t-statistic	p-value	f^2	Decision
H1	Competence → Work readiness	−0.552	0.102	5.429	0.000	0.192	Rejected (negative)

Hyp.	Path	β	SD	t-statistic	p-value	f²	Decision
H2	Competence → Career adaptability	0.842	0.028	30.120	0.000	2.444	Accepted
H3	Career adaptability → Work readiness	1.136	0.098	11.543	0.000	0.811	Accepted
H4	Competence → Career adaptability → Work readiness	0.957	0.106	9.028	0.000	–	Accepted

3.6. Discussion

The effect of competence on work readiness (H1). Competence has a significant direct effect on work readiness (β = −0.552; t = 5.429; p = 0.000), but the sign is negative, contrary to H1, which predicted a positive effect. H1 is therefore rejected. This result should be interpreted with care. Competence and work readiness are positively correlated when considered alone (r = 0.404), and the negative sign appears only after career adaptability enters the model. Because competence and career adaptability are very strongly related (r = 0.842; HTMT = 0.887), most of the positive influence of competence is channelled through career adaptability, which may change the sign of the remaining direct path. The result does not mean that competence lowers work readiness in general. Rather, among Generation Z in South Nias, possessing competence without the ability to direct it towards career planning, decision-making, exploration, and self-confidence does not by itself translate into greater readiness. This is consistent with Career Construction Theory (Savickas, 2013), in which individual resources lead to adaptation results through adaptability. The same reading appears in the employability literature, where knowledge and skills are necessary but not sufficient unless they are combined with career development learning, experience, and self-awareness (Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007). The studies used to justify H1 (Tian et al., 2022; Gerçek, 2024) linked competence to career adaptability rather than directly to work readiness, so the present finding does not contradict them. Because all constructs were measured with the same self-reported questionnaire, common method bias may also have inflated the association between competence and career adaptability (Podsakoff et al., 2003; Kock, 2015). The low scores of competence and work readiness (Table 2) are not sufficient to explain the negative coefficient, and the direct path should be re-tested with larger and probability-based samples.

The effect of competence on career adaptability (H2). Competence has a strong, positive, and significant effect on career adaptability (β = 0.842; t = 30.120; f² = 2.444), which supports H2. Individuals who have knowledge, skills, and self-understanding are better equipped to recognise career options, make decisions, and face career challenges, as explained by Career Construction Theory (Savickas, 2013), in which career adaptability is the readiness and set of resources for coping with career tasks, transitions, and unexpected changes (Savickas, 1997; Savickas et al., 2009). The result is consistent with Tian et al. (2022) and Leung et al. (2021), and with the association between career competencies and career adaptability reported by Gerçek (2024). Because the career adaptability of the respondents is still low (TCR 55.70%), competence development should be accompanied by activities that help young people use their competence for career planning, such as skills training, career information, and career guidance.

The effect of career adaptability on work readiness (H3). Career adaptability has a positive and significant effect on work readiness (β = 1.136; t = 11.543; f² = 0.811), which supports H3. A coefficient above 1 is possible in PLS-SEM when predictors are highly correlated, so it is read as the direction and relative strength of the effect rather than as a proportion. The finding

agrees with Yilmaz and Sunbul (2023), Diva and Satwika (2024), and Ayuni and Nio (2025), who found positive effects or relationships between career adaptability and work readiness among university students, and with the evidence in Rudolph et al. (2017). Career adaptability has also been found to predict subjective career success above and beyond personality traits and core self-evaluations (Zacher, 2014), which suggests that it works as a resource that carries over to later career outcomes, including readiness to enter work. Individuals who care about their career future, control their career decisions, explore opportunities, and are confident in facing challenges are better prepared to enter the workplace, particularly in a regency where formal employment is limited.

The mediating role of career adaptability (H4). The specific indirect effect of competence on work readiness through career adaptability is positive and significant (β = 0.957; t = 9.028; p = 0.000), which supports H4, while the direct effect is significant and negative. Because the two effects are significant and have opposite signs, the pattern is classified as competitive mediation (Zhao et al., 2010). According to Zhao et al. (2010), this pattern may signal that another mediator is missing from the model, which is a direction for future research. The total effect of competence on work readiness is positive (0.957 − 0.552 = 0.405), which shows that competence increases work readiness mainly through career adaptability. This agrees with Career Construction Theory, in which competence provides resources, career adaptability is the psychosocial mechanism that manages career transitions, and work readiness is the adaptation result. In practice, programmes that only develop competence may fail to raise work readiness unless they also strengthen planning, decision-making, exploration, and confidence.

4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that (1) competence has a significant but negative direct effect on work readiness among Generation Z in South Nias Regency, so H1 is rejected; (2) competence positively and significantly affects career adaptability (H2 accepted); (3) career adaptability positively and significantly affects work readiness (H3 accepted); and (4) career adaptability mediates the effect of competence on work readiness in a competitive mediation pattern, with a positive total effect of 0.405 (H4 accepted). Competence therefore improves work readiness mainly when it is accompanied by career adaptability.

Generation Z is advised not only to improve competence but also to practise career planning, exploration, and decision-making. The local government of South Nias Regency, higher education institutions, and training providers are encouraged to combine skills training with career guidance, job-market information, and career-planning assistance, and to monitor competence, career adaptability, and work readiness periodically, given that the three variables were still in the poor to low categories.

This study has limitations. It used only three variables, with 46.2% of the variance in work readiness explained by other factors such as internship experience, work motivation, self-efficacy, and family support. It relied on self-reported questionnaires, which are open to common method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003), and purposive sampling in one regency, which limits generalisation. Competence and career adaptability were very closely related, so the negative direct effect should be interpreted cautiously. Future studies should add other variables, use larger and probability-based samples, examine collinearity, and combine quantitative and qualitative methods.

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