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HUMAN CAPITAL AS THE MAIN RESOURCE OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Demchenko Kateryna

PhD in Economics, Lecturer

ORCID ID: 0000-0002-4097-9407

Department of Social Economics

Makov Borys

PhD Student (Third Level of Higher Education)

ORCID: 0009-0005-5780-3917

Department of Social Economics

Abstract. In the context of globalization, digitalization, and economic transformation, human capital is gaining decisive importance as a key resource of socio-economic development. It serves as the foundation for national competitiveness, innovation-driven growth, and improvement of the population's quality of life. This article provides a comprehensive analysis of the essence of the concept of "human capital," summarizes domestic and foreign scientific approaches to its interpretation, and characterizes its main components, including education, professional skills, health, innovative and social potential of individuals. Particular attention is paid to the impact of innovation, digitalization, and technological change on the development of human potential in the knowledge economy and under rapid labor market transformations. The necessity of investing in human capital as a strategic direction of sustainable societal development is substantiated, ensuring long-term economic growth, social stability, and inclusive development. As a result, generalized conclusions are formulated regarding the role of human capital as a determining factor in societal adaptation to contemporary challenges and prospects for its effective use in the 21st century.

Keywords: human capital, human potential, innovation, digitalization, economic development, sustainable development, investment in human capital.

In the 21st century, the world has entered a phase of profound and rapid changes affecting all spheres of life – from the economy and politics to culture and education. Technological progress, digitalization, globalization processes, demographic shifts,

and the growing role of knowledge are fundamentally transforming perceptions of the sources of societal development. Under these conditions, traditional factors of economic growth, such as natural resources, industrial capacities, or financial capital, are gradually losing their dominant significance. The individual – his or her intellect, skills, health, creative potential, and adaptability – comes to the forefront. Therefore, the concept of human capital today is one of the key notions in scientific research and practical development policy.

Human capital is considered a set of knowledge, skills, competencies, motivations, and values possessed by individuals that can be used to create economic and social value. Unlike material resources, it does not depreciate but rather can grow and improve through learning, experience, and investment in personal development. In the modern world, it is precisely the level of human capital development that determines countries' competitiveness in the global arena, their capacity for innovation, and their ability to respond effectively to new challenges.

This topic becomes especially relevant in the context of the knowledge economy, where information, science, and high technologies act as the main driving forces. Automation and artificial intelligence are changing the structure of the labor market, displacing routine professions while simultaneously creating demand for specialists with high qualifications, critical thinking, and creativity. In such a situation, an individual's ability to engage in lifelong learning, reassess personal skills, and adapt to change becomes a decisive condition for both personal success and sustainable societal development as a whole.

Beyond the economic dimension, human capital has significant social importance. It directly affects the level of well-being, social mobility, quality of life, and societal stability. Educated, healthy, and socially active citizens form strong institutions, promote democratic development, and reduce social inequality. Therefore, investments in education, healthcare, and human potential development are not only economically justified but also strategically necessary.

Thus, in the 21st century, human capital becomes the main resource of development, on which the future of states, economies, and civilization as a whole depends. Awareness of its role and significance is a prerequisite for the formation of effective policies aimed at long-term growth, innovative breakthroughs, and the harmonious development of society.

The purpose of the article is to study the essence of human capital and substantiate its role as a key resource of socio-economic development in the 21st century, as well as to identify the main factors of its formation and effective use.

The objectives of the article are as follows:

to reveal the content of the concept of "human capital" and characterize its main components;

to characterize the impact of innovation, digitalization, and technological changes on the development of human potential;

to substantiate the necessity of investing in human capital as a strategic direction of sustainable societal development.

Human capital is a set of knowledge, skills, abilities, experience, motivation, creative potential, health, and other qualities of an individual that ensure contribution to economic activity and value creation. The phenomenon of human capital emphasizes that investments in education, health, and personal development increase productivity and competitiveness in the labor market. Table 1 presents definitions of this concept in the works of domestic and foreign scholars.

Table 1 Definitions of the Concept of “Human Capital” in the Works of Domestic and Foreign Scholars

Author	Definition of the concept	Keywords
O. O. Khandii, D. A. Kobotseva [1]	A set of knowledge and skills formed through education, experience, and investment in personnel that contributes to economic growth.	Knowledge, skills, investment in personnel, productivity
O. Pavlova [2]	Knowledge, skills, and abilities of people used to create economic value.	Knowledge, skills, abilities, economic value
A. S. Boyce, J. M. Cottrell [3]	A complex phenomenon that adapts to innovative and technological changes, stimulates progress, and acts as a driving force of socio-economic development.	Innovation, social and economic development
F. Stein, D. Sridhar [4]	A set of economically productive human characteristics inherent in an individual's physical and intellectual nature.	Human characteristics
B. D. McDonald [5]	Human capital is defined as the stock of knowledge and skills that are acquired through personal experience or through education and training.	Knowledge, skills, education, training

Thus, as the analysis shows, the concept of human capital encompasses not only formal knowledge but also acquired professional skills, creativity, adaptability, and innovation capacity. It is through the development of human capital that society can achieve long-term economic growth, social stability, and sustainable development.

The main components of human capital include knowledge and education, professional skills and competencies, physical health, psychological qualities and motivation, experience, and social skills. These components are interconnected and form a dynamic resource capable of growth through continuous learning, self-improvement, and a healthy lifestyle.

In the 21st century, innovation, digitalization, and rapid technological changes have become decisive factors in societal and economic development. They fundamentally transform production, communication, management, and learning processes, changing the role of individuals in economic and social systems. Under these conditions, the development of human potential acquires new meaning, as the

ability to adapt to technological shifts, acquire new knowledge, and generate innovation determines competitiveness and self-realization opportunities.

Innovation acts as a driving force for human potential development by stimulating demand for new knowledge, skills, and competencies. The emergence of new products, processes, and business models requires employees not only to possess technical training but also creativity, critical thinking, and the ability to work in interdisciplinary teams. In the modern economy, individuals are increasingly becoming generators of ideas and innovative solutions rather than mere executors of standardized operations.

Digitalization represents one of the key manifestations of technological change with a comprehensive impact on human potential development. It encompasses the introduction of digital technologies into all areas of life – from production and finance to education, healthcare, and public administration. Digital platforms and network technologies increase access to information and knowledge, creating new opportunities for self-learning and professional growth.

At the same time, digitalization changes the requirements for human potential in the labor market. Demand for digital competencies is growing, including data analysis, software use, information processing, and cybersecurity. Even in traditional economic sectors, digital skills have become essential, making lifelong learning a crucial concept of human potential development.

Technological changes, including automation, robotics, and artificial intelligence, have a dual impact on human potential. On the one hand, they increase labor productivity, reduce the need for routine and physically demanding work, and improve working conditions. On the other hand, automation leads to job displacement and exacerbates structural unemployment, requiring workforce retraining and adaptability.

Education plays a particularly important role in developing human potential under technological change. Traditional educational models are being transformed toward the development of universal competencies such as critical thinking, digital literacy, communication skills, and teamwork. Innovative learning methods, including digital platforms, simulations, and virtual and augmented reality, make education more flexible and practice-oriented.

Innovation and digital technologies also influence the development of social and creative potential. Social networks, digital communication, and collaborative platforms expand opportunities for cooperation, idea exchange, and social capital formation. Human potential thus transcends national borders and acquires a global dimension.

Along with positive effects, technological changes generate new challenges, including digital inequality, limited access to education and technology, and insufficient digital skills among certain population groups. Information overload and constant adaptation pressures also pose risks to mental health, which is an important component of human potential.

The state plays a crucial role in human potential development under innovation and digitalization by shaping education policy, supporting research, innovation

infrastructure, and digital skills development. Business and civil society also bear responsibility for creating conditions for professional growth and self-realization.

Thus, innovation, digitalization, and technological change have a complex and multidimensional impact on human potential development. They create new opportunities for learning, creativity, and productivity growth while requiring adaptability, lifelong learning, and social responsibility. In the 21st century, human potential development becomes a key condition for successful integration into the digital and innovation-driven economy.

In the context of global transformations, investment in human capital becomes one of the key strategic priorities of sustainable societal development. Unlike material resources, which are limited and subject to depreciation, human capital has the capacity for continuous reproduction and qualitative growth. Therefore, investments in human development should be considered long-term investments with high socio-economic returns.

Human capital includes education, professional skills, health, creative abilities, and social and digital competencies. Investment in these components directly affects labor productivity, innovation activity, and economic growth (Table 2).

Table 2 The Role of Investment in Human Capital in Ensuring Sustainable Development

Investment area	Main content	Effect on sustainable development
Education and lifelong learning	Formation of knowledge and professional and digital competencies	Productivity growth, innovation, adaptability
Healthcare	Maintenance of physical and mental health	Increased work capacity, quality of life, social stability
Professional training and retraining	Workforce adaptation to technological change	Reduced unemployment, increased competitiveness
Social development and equal opportunities	Access to education and employment	Reduced inequality, inclusive growth
Development of innovation culture	Support for creativity and entrepreneurship	Sustainable economic and technological development

An educated and healthy population is better able to use modern technologies, create high value-added products, and adapt quickly to change, which is particularly important for sustainable development. One of the key arguments for investing in human capital is its multiplicative effect. Investments in education and healthcare increase individual incomes, contribute to national welfare growth, reduce inequality, and support middle-class formation. Socially protected and educated societies are more stable and conducive to economic development, innovation, and democratic processes. Investment in human capital is also an essential component of the environmental dimension of sustainable development. Environmental awareness, responsible resource use, and the ability to implement green technologies depend directly on education and cultural development.

In the context of digitalization and technological change, investment in human capital is necessary to prevent structural unemployment and social marginalization. Retraining programs, digital skills development, and lifelong learning reduce social risks and increase national economic competitiveness. The state plays a key role in implementing human capital investments by shaping institutional conditions for education, science, healthcare, and social protection. Business and civil society also act as active investors in personnel development and social programs. Coordinated interaction among all stakeholders ensures systemic and long-term effects.

Thus, investment in human capital is a strategic direction of sustainable societal development, combining economic efficiency, social justice, and environmental responsibility. Human potential development forms the basis for innovation-driven growth, improved quality of life, and a stable future for future generations.

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