

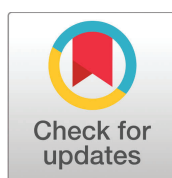
ORIGINAL ARTICLE

GEN Z WORKPLACE EXPECTATIONS AND ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE: A THEMATIC ANALYSIS AND REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: Generation Z, the newest cohort entering the labour market, brings workplace expectations that differ markedly from those of earlier generations. This paper consolidates contemporary research to examine how Gen Z's workplace expectations intersect with prevailing organizational cultures and to identify the organizational mechanisms most effective in supporting retention.

Design/methodology/approach: A thematic review of peer-reviewed studies published between 2020 and 2025 was conducted. A Scopus database search using the keyword "workplace expectation" returned 182 documents, which were screened in three stages to produce a final corpus of 59 papers. The selected studies were coded deductively in NVivo, guided by two research questions, and organized around three broad dimensions: HR policy adaptability, the integration of digital HRM practices, and sustainability-driven organizational methods.

Findings: The synthesis shows that Gen Z consistently expects flexibility and autonomy, continuous learning and meaningful work, open communication

with supportive leaders, and value-based organizations that act on their ethical, diversity, and social commitments. These expectations reflect a changed psychological contract in which growth and purpose are basic conditions of engagement rather than rewards for loyalty. However, a persistent gap remains between these expectations and actual management practice, as many organizations still rely on top-down authority and rigid hierarchies, fuelling disengagement and turnover.

Practical implications: Organizations should shift from controlling to coaching leadership, build culture and psychological safety from onboarding onward, keep communication transparent, protect well-being and work-life balance, and offer fair, personalised rewards and continuous upskilling.

Originality/value: By synthesising a fragmented body of literature, the paper offers an integrated framework linking Gen Z expectations to organizational culture and human resource practice, along with directions for future longitudinal and cross-national research.

Keywords: Generation Z; workplace expectations; organizational culture; psychological contract; employee retention; leadership; thematic review.

INTRODUCTION

Generation Z is the newest cohort to enter the labor market, and its workplace expectations; anchored in inclusivity, ethical leadership, and flexible structures; demand a fundamental reconsideration of conventional organizational cultures (Berea, 2025).

Unless organizations grasp what this generation values, they can neither design workplaces that attract its members nor sustain the engagement and retention that modern talent management requires (D & R, 2026; Nugroho et al., 2025). The stakes of this transition are heightened by the fragmented state of the current literature, which has yet to reconcile the individual preferences of Gen Z employees with the institutional practices that shape their working lives (Zahra et al., 2025).

Against this backdrop, the present paper consolidates prior research to examine how the expectations of this generation intersect with prevailing organizational norms (Dwivedula et al., 2019). Two research questions guide the review: first, how are the values and behavioral expectations of Generation Z defined, and what factors primarily determine their sense of person-organization fit in contemporary workplaces (Graczyk-Kucharska & Erickson, 2020; Wei & Yazid, 2026); second, which organizational mechanisms are most effective in mediating the friction between digital-native preferences and traditional corporate structures (Dolher & Călugăreanu, 2025)? Viewed through the lenses of self-determination and psychological contract theories, the study seeks to clarify the drivers of retention and turnover among this emerging workforce (C. & Padmakumari, 2026).

The analysis centers on a broader paradigm shift in organizational practice: a generation that privileges professional development, mental health, and autonomy over purely financial inducements (Andrabi & Heena, 2026). This shift reflects a wider movement toward meaningful work and support systems that protect individual well-being (Muralidharan, 2025). It also unsettles long-standing assumptions about hierarchical progression and transactional employment, pointing toward organizational models built for long-term sustainability rather than short-term exchange (Singh & Sinha, 2026). The question that follows is whether current human resource frameworks can adapt to these values without sacrificing operational effectiveness (Rocha, 2026). Accordingly, this review evaluates whether prevailing retention strategies, flexible work arrangements, sustained career development, and the like; genuinely match the vocational aspirations of this cohort (Mokoagow & Permadi, 2025), and it synthesizes empirical findings and industry discourse to illuminate the interplay between demographic change and institutional agility in the post-pandemic era (McKee-Ryan, 2021).

By delineating the specific aspirations of Gen Z, particularly its demand for purpose-driven environments and digital competency, this synthesis offers a framework for aligning institutional policy with the psychological needs of a new workforce demographic (Sihite & Damanik, 2025). The remainder of the paper is organized into a review methodology, an analysis of Gen Z workplace expectations, an examination of organizational culture themes, a discussion of theoretical and practical implications, and a conclusion. Together, these sections assess how traditional management models must evolve to accommodate the behavioral drivers and psychological needs of this generation (Monika & Israel, 2026).

REVIEW METHODOLOGY

This section explains how the review was carried out. The purpose is to make the process clear and repeatable: what was searched, how studies were selected, and how the findings were grouped into themes.

Review Design

This study is a thematic review of existing research rather than a formal systematic review. It brings together peer-reviewed studies published between 2020 and 2025 (Mulya et al., 2026), a period when Generation Z entered the workforce in large numbers and attracted growing attention in management research. The review was limited to this recent window so that the findings reflect the current realities of Gen Z at work.

Search Strategy

The search was conducted in the Scopus database using a single keyword, “workplace expectation,” which returned 182 documents. These records were then screened in three steps:

Title and abstract screening: Each record was checked for relevance to the review’s research questions, and clearly unrelated papers were set aside (Lazar et al., 2023).

Full-text review: The remaining papers were read in full and retained only if they addressed employer branding, value propositions, or talent retention strategies in the context of Generation Z or sustainability-oriented organizational frameworks (Kristia, 2023).

Final selection: After this review, 59 papers remained and formed the final corpus for thematic analysis.

Table1: Search & Screening Summary

Stage	What was done	Outcome
Database search	Scopus database; keyword “workplace expectation”	182 documents retrieved
Title and abstract screening	Relevance check against the review’s research questions	Unrelated records removed
Full-text review and final selection	Papers read in full; inclusion criteria applied	59 papers included

Documents by year

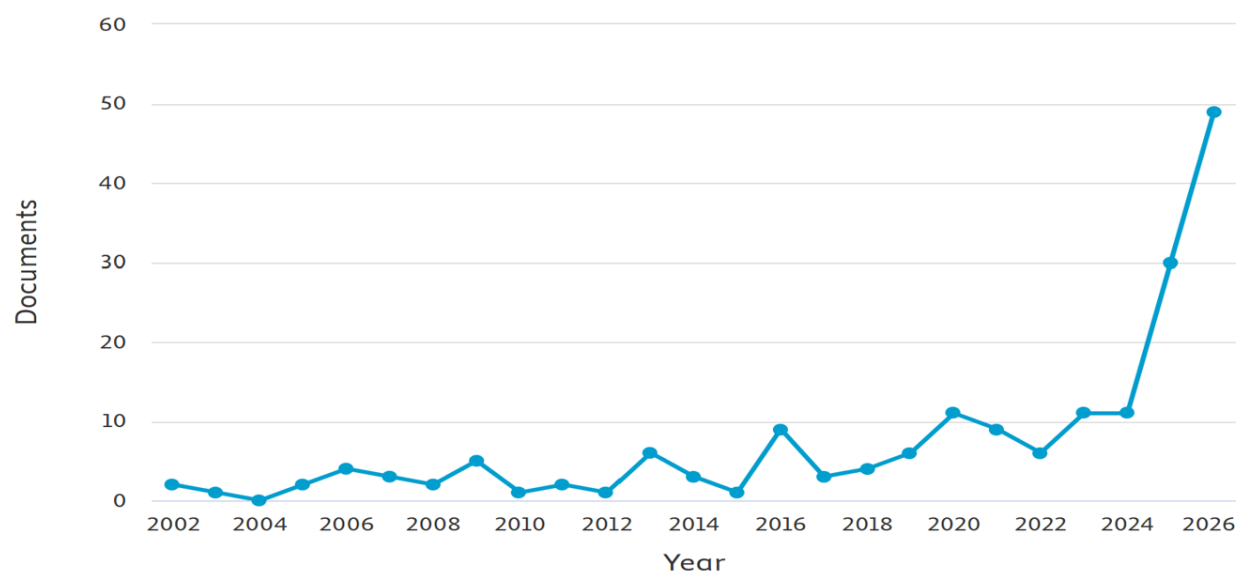


Figure1: Documents by Year

Source: Scopus Database

Documents by type

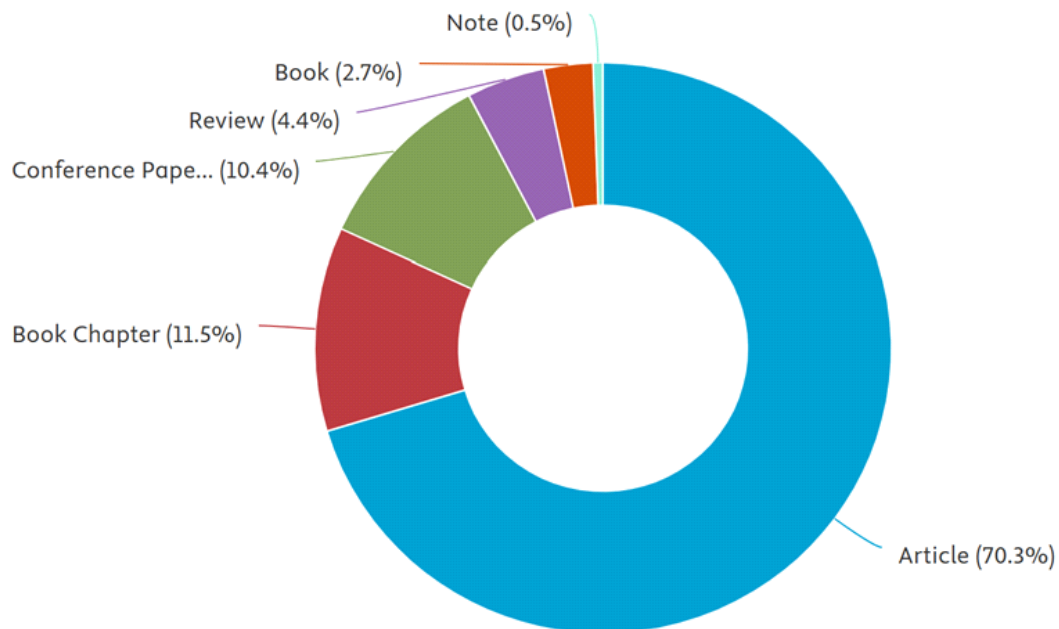


Figure 2: Documents by Type
Source: Scopus Database

Documents by country or territory

Compare the document counts for up to 15 countries/territories.

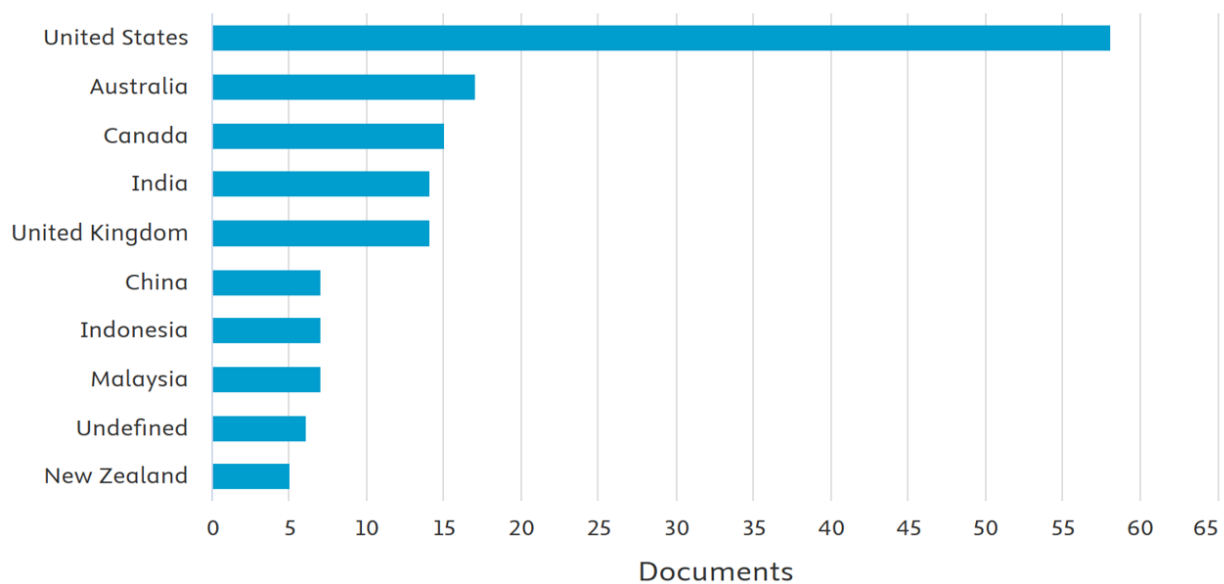


Figure 3: Documents by Type
Source: Scopus Database

The Scopus record shows a sharp growth in research publications, rising from fluctuating output during 2002–2024 to 30 documents in 2025 and 49 documents in 2026, indicating increasing research interest in the topic. In terms of document type, articles dominate (70.3%), followed by book chapters (11.5%) and conference papers (10.4%), while the United States leads country-wise contributions (58 documents), followed by Australia and Canada; India ranks fourth with 14 documents. The country-wise distribution shows that the United States has the highest research contribution with around 58 documents, followed by Australia and Canada. India ranks fourth, with approximately 14 documents, while China, Indonesia, Malaysia, and New Zealand show comparatively lower contributions.

Table 2: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Criterion	Included	Excluded
Publication period	2020–2025	Published before 2020
Database	Scopus	Sources outside Scopus
Topic relevance	Gen Z expectations, employer branding, value propositions, talent retention, or organizational culture	Topics outside these areas
Article type	Peer-reviewed journal articles and academic studies	Non-academic, opinion-based, or unpublished material

Coding and Thematic Analysis

The selected papers were analyzed using a deductive coding approach, in which the themes were guided by the research questions and then looked for across the corpus — particularly patterns related to autonomy, digital fluency, and institutional diversity (Siarot & Salapa, 2025). The studies were organized and coded in NVivo, a qualitative data analysis tool that helped compare the papers and group similar findings together (Bandara et al., 2015). This process produced three broad dimensions: HR policy adaptability, the integration of digital HRM practices, and sustainability-driven organizational methods.

Research Questions

To guide the search, selection, and coding, the review was built around two research questions, also stated in the Introduction:

- Q1. How are the values and behavioral expectations of Generation Z defined, and what factors primarily determine their sense of person-organization fit in contemporary workplaces (Graczyk-Kucharska & Erickson, 2020; Wei & Yazid, 2026)?
- Q2. Which organizational mechanisms are most effective in mediating the friction between digital-native preferences and traditional corporate structures (Dolher & Călugăreanu, 2025)?

Taken together, these steps ensured that the review was focused, transparent, and grounded in credible, current evidence.

WORKPLACE EXPECTATIONS

Research on Generation Z shows that this generation enters the workplace with a different set of demands than earlier cohorts. Across the reviewed studies, three expectations appear again and again: flexibility and autonomy, continuous learning and meaningful work, and open communication with supportive leaders. Each is discussed below.

Flexibility and Autonomy

Gen Z wants control over when and where work happens. They reject rigid, fixed scheduling and prefer arrangements that protect their personal well-being (Sharma & Abraham, 2024). Far from seeing flexibility as a luxury, they treat it as

a driver of efficiency and productivity in their daily work (Hofer et al., 2024). Alongside this, they look for visible routes to growth — clear task guidance, chances to build new skills, and work that feels purposeful (Puspitasari3, 2025).

Learning and Career Growth

This generation expects steady development: accessible training, regular feedback, and career paths that fit their personal goals (Revuru & Bandaru, 2024). They respond well to on-demand learning and are far less attached to the old model of a long-term, static job, expecting organizations to offer more personalised ways to progress (Dhand et al., 2025). Growth, for them, is not a reward for loyalty — it is a basic condition of staying engaged.

Communication and Leadership Support

Gen Z values clear instructions, supportive leadership, psychological safety, and timely feedback (Puspitasari3, 2025). They respond better to collaborative leadership than to top-down control, and they watch closely whether transparency is actually practised in daily management (Syafani et al., 2025). For organizations, this means HR policies must stay agile and give employees a real voice in decisions that affect them (Kulkarni & Rai, 2023).

Values and Social Impact

Beyond personal growth, Gen Z cares about the character of the organization itself. They want employers to act ethically, support diversity and inclusion, and take genuine positions on social and environmental issues (Yahya et al., 2023). Engagement depends on purpose: employees stay when they believe the company's values match their own, and they quickly notice when ethical commitments exist only on paper (Westover, 2025). This marks a clear shift from loyalty-based employment, where pay was the main bond, to value-based employment, where personal fulfilment and social responsibility carry equal weight (Lašáková et al., 2023).

A New Kind of Employment Relationship

At the level of daily work, Gen Z expects leaders to act as partners rather than bosses, building trust through authenticity and openness instead of relying on hierarchy (Wasiluk, 2025). They want a fair, democratic environment where they can contribute without fear of pressure (Yılmaz et al., 2024). The psychological contract has therefore changed: managers are expected to give ongoing feedback, set clear development milestones, and replace vague performance reviews with frequent, personal communication (TIDHAR, 2022, 2023).

Gen Z also wants workplace relationships built on ethics, respect, and mutual openness, where supervisors understand not only career goals but also personal life priorities (Korombel & Ławińska, 2023). Managers must therefore move from supervising to facilitating — supporting both professional growth and employee well-being (Benedikt, 2025). These relationships are often maintained through digital channels, which allow autonomy and collaboration to work side by side (RAGIN-SKORECKA et al., 2024). In the end, organizations that integrate this generation successfully build cultures of trust and agility, where the line between professional duties and personal development stays deliberately soft (Romański & Łukasiński, 2025).

Table 3: Expectations of Gen Z and Their Implications for Organizational Culture

Thematic dimension	Generation Z workplace expectation	Organizational culture implication	Supporting sources
Flexibility and autonomy	Gen Z values flexible work schedules, choice over when and where work is performed, and autonomy in managing tasks and responsibilities.	Organizations should replace rigid supervision with trust-based work arrangements, outcome-oriented performance management, and employee participation in decision-making.	(Sharma & Abraham, 2024)

Thematic dimension	Generation Z workplace expectation	Organizational culture implication	Supporting sources
Career development and meaningful work	Gen Z expects continuous learning, accessible training, personalised career pathways, regular feedback, and opportunities to perform purposeful work aligned with personal values.	Organizational cultures should institutionalise mentoring, upskilling, developmental milestones, and meaningful assignments as central components of engagement and retention.	(Revuru & Bandaru, 2024)
Transparent communication and organizational support	Gen Z prefers frequent, constructive feedback, honest communication, psychological safety, supportive leadership, and fair treatment.	Leaders should cultivate open communication, provide timely recognition and guidance, and demonstrate empathy, transparency, and consistency in everyday management.	(Syafani et al., 2025)
Values, ethics and social impact	Gen Z expects employers to support diversity and inclusion, act ethically, and stand behind social and environmental commitments.	Organizations should state their values clearly and demonstrate them through concrete policies and actions, not just statements.	(Lašáková et al., 2023; Yahya et al., 2023)
Ethical and supportive relationships	Gen Z wants leaders who respect them as individuals, understand their life priorities, and communicate with openness and honesty.	Managers should act as mentors and facilitators who build trust, show empathy, and actively support employee well-being.	(Benedikt, 2025; Korombel & Ławińska, 2023)

DISCUSSION

The findings point to a clear gap between what Gen Z expects and how most organizations actually run. Gen Z wants openness, quick feedback, and a real say in decisions, but many firms still depend on top-down authority and rigid hierarchies (WASILUK, 2024). This friction is not a small issue: when employees feel their psychological safety and autonomy are not respected, engagement falls and turnover rises (Rocha, 2026).

Closing this gap calls for leadership that is ethical and purpose-driven (Mihai, 2024). Relationship-based leadership — where leaders build personal connections instead of controlling through rules — matches Gen Z's expectations far better than bureaucratic oversight (Linus, 2023). When rules are unclear or rewards feel unfair, employees lose motivation and leave (Alimbudiono & Tandianto, 2025). Practical steps such as real-time recognition and hybrid work models also help, because they give Gen Z the structured growth and psychological safety this cohort needs (Bajpai, 2025).

Theoretical Implications

These findings question older theories of motivation. Herzberg's two-factor theory, for example, treats satisfaction mainly as a matter of hygiene factors like pay and working conditions. For Gen Z, motivation appears to depend more on a mix of digital leadership and organizational purpose than on static hygiene factors alone (Anggiani & Fatonah, 2025; Baldonado et al., 2018). Success, in other words, now comes from combining technology with human-centred values rather than from preserving old bureaucratic structures (Al-Moteri et al., 2025).

Psychological Contract Theory helps explain the rest. Gen Z's commitment depends on whether expectations around inclusion, diversity, and development are actually met (Berea, 2025). When organizations fail these expectations, employees see the deal as broken and quietly withdraw. The literature still lacks a clear picture of how firms can turn these unwritten expectations into formal policy without losing the flexible, decentralized structures Gen Z wants

(Zahra et al., 2025). Organizations should therefore go beyond surface-level policy changes and build open practices; such as onboarding days and continuous coaching; into everyday work (Xueyun et al., 2023).

Longitudinal research is still underdeveloped, especially on how rapid advances in artificial intelligence may change the link between Gen Z's expectations and long-term career commitment (Wei & Yazid, 2026). Future studies should examine human-AI collaboration at work, since these tools can strengthen both the intrinsic motivation and the professional autonomy that Gen Z values (Graczyk-Kucharska & Erickson, 2020). Researchers also need to explore how sustainability-driven identities, sometimes called eco-identities, connect with organizational goals to sustain engagement over time (C. & Padmakumari, 2026).

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

To meet Gen Z's needs, leadership should shift from controlling to coaching; supporting autonomy, flexibility, and visible career growth (Andrabi" & Heena, 2026). Onboarding should build culture and psychological safety from the very first day (Chillakuri, 2020). Communication must be open and transparent, so employees feel genuinely heard (Nugroho et al., 2025). Workplaces that protect mental health and work-life balance reduce the turnover that comes from poor integration (Jain, 2020). Leaders should also consider segmented benefits and performance-based pay, so rewards match individual effort (Cuba & Genoud, 2025). Above all, management should stay human-centred while using digital tools wisely, keeping flexibility at the heart of retention (Rocha, 2026). Finally, continuous upskilling; delivered through technology and tailored to each employee's career goals; keeps development personal and current (Mokoagow & Permadi, 2025).

Table 4: From Expectation to Action; Practical Recommendations

Gen Z expectation	What organizations should do	Supporting sources
Coaching-style leadership	Move from control to mentoring; support autonomy and growth	(Andrabi" & Heena, 2026)
Inclusive onboarding	Build culture and psychological safety from day one	(Chillakuri, 2020)
Open communication	Keep feedback loops transparent and continuous	(Nugroho et al., 2025)
Well-being and work-life balance	Protect mental health; reduce integration-driven turnover	(Jain, 2020)
Fair rewards	Use segmented benefits and performance-based pay	(Cuba & Genoud, 2025)
Flexible, human-centred management	Combine digital tools with people-first practices	(Rocha, 2026)
Continuous development	Offer personalized, technology-supported upskilling	(Mokoagow & Permadi, 2025)

CONCLUSION

Across the reviewed studies, the literature forms a clear picture. The thematic clusters run from digital integration and workplace expectations to the changing psychological contract between employees and employers (Benítez-Márquez et al., 2022). Research also shows a steady move from general digitalization toward the deeper use of artificial intelligence, which makes human-centred management in virtual settings more important than ever (Vraðaková et al., 2026). Gen Z stands out as the first workforce of the Industry 5.0 era, using digital skills to balance personal identity with collective performance (Kupczyk et al., 2023). Future studies should move beyond cross-sectional student samples and track the same people over time, so that career paths can be observed rather than assumed (Jayatissa, 2023). Research should also test whether sustainability-focused employer branding genuinely shapes the

psychological well-being and long-term commitment of Gen Z workers (Anute et al., 2024). Finally, studies should include different countries and levels of economic development, since national context and culture likely shape these generational expectations in important ways (Hovová & Pauknerová, 2023).

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