Leadership Practices for Sustaining Work Engagement: A Gen-Z Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Leadership practices play a crucial role in sustaining work engagement among Generation Z (Gen Z) employees. The challenge of recruiting and retaining talented employees within companies is currently at its peak, presenting a significant concern for leaders across all levels. The main driving force behind this study is to comprehend effective leadership practices according to Gen Z individuals, identifying factors that would foster their motivation to remain within an organization and those that would prompt them to seek alternative opportunities. This research employs an exploratory model, utilizing a qualitative research design; data was collected through face-to-face and telephonic interviews with 104 Gen Z individuals working in the IT industry. Conditional sampling criteria ensured participants were born on or after 1997, aged 20 or above, and employed full-term in the IT sector, excluding interns. The study reveals that Gen Z values authenticity, meaningful work, and work-life balance in their leaders, with subtle variations based on gender. The study also reveals that "Me Time" and meaningful work are important indicators of employee engagement, and without them, employees would be forced to look outside for opportunities. Overall, this study contributes to understanding Gen Z's work values and leadership preferences, offering guidance for organizations to attract, retain, and motivate this emerging workforce effectively.

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Organizations worldwide are grappling with the formidable task of retaining talent amidst intensifying competition and evolving workforce dynamics. In this landscape, leadership has assumed paramount importance as a crucial determinant of employee retention. Different generations, including Gen Z, encounter distinct challenges in the workplace, necessitating tailored leadership approaches to effectively engage and retain them (Naqshbandi et al., 2024). Gen Z, the newest entrants into the workforce, brings unique expectations and preferences

shaped by their digital upbringing and societal influences. Unlike previous generations, Gen Z values authenticity, work-life balance, and opportunities for personal growth and development. They seek meaningful connections with their work and prioritize environments that foster collaboration and flexibility (Bălan & Vreja, 2018).

Engaging Gen Z becomes pivotal for organizations due to their potential to drive innovation and contribute to long-term success. However, retaining Gen Z poses significant challenges, exacerbated by the disruptions wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic. Remote work, economic uncertainties, and shifting priorities have further complicated the task of retaining this cohort. Leadership plays a critical role in addressing these challenges and fostering Gen Z engagement. Understanding Gen Z's perspective on effective leadership practices and demotivators is essential for crafting strategies that resonate with this generation in the Indian Context. Gen Z values transparent communication, mentorship, and opportunities for skill development. Leaders who demonstrate empathy, adaptability, and a commitment to their team's well-being are better positioned to retain Gen Z talent (Naqshbandi et al., 2024; Yadav & Chaudhari, 2024). The recent pandemic, COVID-19, has underscored the importance of effective leadership in navigating unprecedented challenges and maintaining employee morale and productivity. Leaders must adapt their leadership styles to accommodate remote work arrangements and address the unique needs and concerns of Gen Z employees (Naqshbandi et al., 2024). While currently a smaller portion of the workforce due to age Gen Z's influence is undeniable. Their perspective on leadership emphasizes authenticity, adaptability, and a healthy work-life balance (Laudert, 2018; Ogunsola et al., 2024). This shift in expectations coincides with a concerning trend: disengagement among employees across generations. The rise of "Quiet Quitting" exemplifies this growing dissatisfaction (Gallup, 2022). Social movements like #MeToo and ongoing technological advancements have shaped a distinct set of values and priorities for Gen Z workers (Howe & Strauss, 2000).

In summary, organizations face mounting pressure to retain Gen Z talent amidst shifting workplace dynamics and the impact of COVID-19. Leadership is crucial in this endeavor, requiring a nuanced understanding of Gen Z's expectations and preferences. By prioritizing employee engagement and implementing effective leadership practices, organizations can foster a supportive and inclusive work environment conducive to retaining Gen Z talent (Singh & Dangmei, 2016).

Review of Literature

As stated by Ogunsola (2024) in his research paper, Gen-Z, the demographic succeeding millennials, is rapidly expanding globally and is projected to comprise a significant portion of the population by 2025. With a population of approximately 72.8 million, Gen Z is poised to enter the workforce in substantial numbers, prompting employers to recognize and understand the distinctive characteristics that distinguish this cohort. Born between 1997 and 2012, Gen-Z individuals grew up during a period marked by widespread internet usage, facing challenges such as climate concerns, pandemic impacts, and economic uncertainties from an early age. Termed "digital natives," they are the first generation to integrate the internet seamlessly into their daily lives. Also referred to as "Gen Zers," "post-Millennials," or "iGen," this generation encompasses individuals ranging from 12 to 27 years old, with some already navigating jobs and financial responsibilities. Gen Z prioritizes authenticity and seeks leaders who resonate

with their values and experiences, highlighting the importance of fostering genuine connections in leadership roles. Ultimately, effective leadership entails not only guiding but also empowering others to lead, emphasizing the continuous learning and application of leadership principles to drive positive change and growth (Buschman, 2024).

Results from the research conducted by Das and Malik (2024) unveiled six key factors— transformational leadership, employee investment strategies, egalitarian practices, work-life balance, job crafting, and sustainability—that substantially boost both employee engagement and retention intentions within the Gen Z workforce. Notably, quantitative content analysis revealed that transformational leadership emerged as the most prevalent factor linked to enhancing employee engagement and retention intentions, followed by employee involvement, egalitarian practices, work-life balance, job crafting, and sustainability.

When examining leadership and its effect on Gen Z employee engagement, it is essential to explore the qualities that Gen Z seeks in leaders and the factors that drive them to leave organizations. Research in this area often delves into various leadership styles and behaviors individually, investigating their correlations with different types of leadership. Additionally, studies frequently investigate how leadership impacts employee success, company strategies, and organizational structure. Some research also considers leadership characteristics alongside leadership styles. For example, Wang et al. (2014) emphasized the importance of creativity for transformational leadership, while Asree et al. (2010) highlighted qualities like self-management and effective communication for leaders in the accommodation sector.

Effective leaders are often described as having vision, the ability to align employees with the company's vision, and the competence to make balanced decisions (Hao & Yazdanifard, 2015). Emotional intelligence has also emerged as a critical attribute for successful leadership (Hotamışlı & Efe, 2015). Ağın (2023) explored how globalization affects leadership, advocating for leaders to prioritize interpersonal relationships and skills over hierarchical structures. Taşer et al. (2022) found positive effects of various leadership styles on employees and emphasized the importance of ethical leadership in fostering organizational justice.

Parimalam and Mahadevan (2013) demonstrated a positive correlation between leadership support and employee engagement in banking organizations. Transformational and transactional leadership approaches have garnered significant attention in this regard. Transformational leadership, characterized by behaviors like inspirational motivation and individualized consideration, aligns employees' values with organizational goals, fostering intrinsic motivation and high engagement levels (Avolio & Bass, 1991; Lee et al., 2018; Li et al., 2018). In contrast, transactional leadership focuses on contingent rewards and goal-setting to drive employees' extrinsic motivation (Bass et al., 2003; Li et al., 2018).

Using social exchange and social identity theories, Gaan and Shin (2023) examined how resonant leadership influences self-efficacy, organizational identification, work performance, and turnover intentions among Gen-Z software professionals. A survey of 73 leader-subordinate pairs from ten major software companies in India was conducted, and hierarchical linear modelling was applied to analyze the data. The results indicated that resonant leadership impacts work-related outcomes among Gen-Z professionals through self-efficacy and organizational identification, suggesting its potential for managing this demographic's expectations and improving work outcomes.

The existing research provides a framework for understanding engagement and leadership, but there is a gap in understanding the specific leadership practices that resonate most with employees across genders in IT industry. This gap led to the formulation of the first research question:

1. *What leadership practices do Gen Z expect from a leader to keep them engaged at work?*

This question aims to capture employee perspectives on the leadership behaviors they find most engaging.

Piwowar-sulej and Iqbal (2023) argue that effective leadership entails employing particular methods while also aligning employees within the organization to achieve its vision or objectives. This implies that the success of a leader largely hinges on the practices implemented. Members of Generation G exhibit a tendency to change jobs more frequently compared to other generations. For example, they are quick to seek new opportunities if they encounter dissatisfaction with their current situation (Csiszarik-Kocsir & Garai-Fodor, 2018).

Lašáková et al. (2023) addressed the need for a more nuanced understanding of intragenerational differences, offering detailed insights into how Generation Z men and women perceive work motivation. Unlike most previous research in this area, this qualitative study uses empathy-based stories (MEBS) to directly capture the (de)motivators for Gen Z from their perspective. With a sample of 437 business students, most of whom have work experience, the results reveal distinct gender differences: Gen Z women prioritize social aspects of workplace relationships, intrinsic factors such as having a dream job, low levels of routine, job success, and the need for recognition. In contrast, Gen Z men focus more on making a meaningful difference, the benefits associated with work, and maintaining a stress-free personal life.

When Flippin (2017) assessed the professional values specific to Generation Z, she found that they ranked six values in the following order: 1) excelling in their current role, 2) earning more money, 3) maintaining work-life balance, 4) gaining promotion, 5) changing careers, and 6) planning for retirement. Bălan and Vreja (2018) mentioned that Generation Z members displayed greater optimism than other generations, with more than 95 percent believing their expectations were achievable. They ranked life opportunity expectations as follows: 1) achieving goals, 2) financial security, 3) pursuing education, 4) freedom of speech, 5) building a legacy, and 6) home ownership. However, significant differences emerged when comparing responses by gender. Both men and women ranked achieving goals as their top priority, but the order diverged for other values. Men prioritized 2) financial security, 3) freedom of speech, 4) pursuing education, 5) building a legacy, and 6) home ownership, while women ranked 2) pursuing education, 3) financial security, 4) freedom of speech, 5) home ownership, and 6) building a legacy.

Urgal (2020) mentions that while salary holds importance, Gen Z prioritizes job satisfaction, security, mentorship, growth opportunities, and a supportive working environment to foster holistic development. This preference is rooted in their recognition of the competitiveness prevalent in today's society, where proficiency in diverse skills is crucial for staying relevant. Gen Z, characterized by their penchant for a balanced lifestyle, values leisure activities, socializing, and personal time alongside work commitments, highlighting the importance of maintaining work-life harmony. Flexible work arrangements rank high on their list of priorities when considering job prospects, aligning with their vision of establishing a more inclusive,

accessible, and humane workforce. Their vision for change in the current workforce includes prioritizing mental health and combating burnout, abolishing the expectation of after-hours work, evaluating performance based on outcomes rather than hours worked, exploring shorter work weeks, challenging discriminatory practices and biases, etc. These trends underscore the consistent values and aspirations of Gen Z, evident in their responses and broader societal analysis.

Most papers have primarily focused on exploring what characteristics Gen Z seeks in leaders, their preferred leadership styles, and their priorities in life and career. While this research provides valuable insights into understanding Gen Z's expectations and preferences, there has been limited exploration into the specific triggers that may prompt Gen Z employees to seek new opportunities, particularly beyond monetary factors. There is a gap in the existing literature regarding the non-monetary factors that influence Gen Z's decision to explore new job opportunities, highlighting the significance of the second research question in this study.

2. *In the context of leadership, aside from monetary factors, what is the top reason that would prompt Gen -Z to seek new opportunities?*

This question aims to identify the single most important non-monetary reason employees consider leaving, providing valuable insights for leaders to prioritize their efforts in retaining talent. The initial question sought to understand the specific leadership practices that Gen Z expects to keep them engaged at work. However, while exploring engagement is essential, it is equally crucial to grasp the factors that may lead Gen Z employees to consider leaving their current positions. High turnover rates can be costly for organizations in terms of recruitment, training, and lost productivity. This paper focuses on leadership practices. This choice stems from the research's objective of identifying and examining specific leadership practices that sustain employee engagement, particularly among Generation Z (Gen Z) individuals. Leadership styles outline overarching approaches to leadership, whereas leadership practices encompass the day-to-day behaviors, actions, and strategies that leaders utilize to effectively engage their teams. Through addressing these aspects, the research aims to offer valuable insights into both employee engagement and job-seeking behavior. Understanding the leadership practices that promote engagement and the non-monetary factors influencing employee retention enables organizations to devise strategies for creating a more fulfilling and motivating workplace.

Method

The exploratory research method was employed in this study to effectively address its objectives. Firstly, the aim was to identify specific leadership practices conducive to sustaining work engagement and reasons leading to employees leaving the organization, particularly among Gen Z individuals. Additionally, the study sought to explore potential variations in the perception of leadership practices based on gender. This method allows for the exploration and discovery of new insights and phenomena, making it suitable for investigating relatively unexplored topics such as the specific leadership practices preferred by Gen Z employees.

Given the exploratory nature of the study, a qualitative research design was adopted. To achieve these objectives, data was gathered through face-to-face interviews and Telephonic Interviews from Gen Z. However, since it is not feasible to reach all the Gen Z employees of

IT Industry, the sample was selected using a conditional sampling method and limited to 104 individuals. Limiting to 104 was done to mitigate data redundancy and maintain study efficacy (Baltacı, 2018).

The conditional Sampling rules include Participants born on or after 1997 and working in an IT industry with a minimum age of 20 years. Interns were excluded, and only full-term employees were considered for this study. Participants not meeting these criteria were excluded from the study. The study focused on the age and gender of employees working in the IT industry as its primary criteria; additional demographic factors of the participants were not included in the study. During the data collection process, participants who met the conditions were asked two questions using a semi-structured questionnaire. The questions are shown below:

1) *What leadership practices do you expect from a leader to keep you more engaged at work?*
2) *In the context of leadership, leaving monetary aside, tell me one top reason that would make you look out for new opportunities.*

The data gathered underwent analysis utilizing the content analysis approach. This method involves grouping similar data based on predefined concepts, coding them accordingly, and interpreting them in a manner accessible to the reader (White & Marsh, 2006).

In step one, the voice recordings obtained in the interviews were transcribed to a digital format, resulting in a document of 29 pages. The final document was cross-verified by an academician and an HR to rule out wrong interpretations and spelling errors. The member check method was used to increase the reliability of qualitative research. All the documented information was read back to the interviewees to validate its accuracy (Sahakyan, 2023).

Once the documented information was validated by participants within the context of the leadership practices under investigation, the gathered information was reviewed. Essential phrases directly pertinent to the two key questions were identified through frequent repetition. Expressions sharing similar meanings were coded for subsequent analysis. Following this, all expressions and codes were scrutinized, and the underlying concepts targeted by each interview question were interpreted descriptively.

During the analysis process, participants' responses were directly quoted and integrated into the findings to illustrate their perspectives. In adherence to data protection and confidentiality principles, participants' names were replaced with identifiers (P1, P2, etc). To maintain the coherence and integrity of the study, any colloquial expressions or linguistic irregularities in the quotations were adjusted without altering the original meaning. In lengthy responses, only phrases relevant to the interview questions were included, with ellipses (...) indicating omitted sections.

Results

Table 1 shows the demographic statistics of participants. As shown in Table 1, the study had 104 participants, out of which 56 (53.8%) were male, and 48 (46.2%) were female, 63 (60.6%) employees had less than two years of experience, and 41 (39.4%) employees have three to six years of experience. 58 (55.8%) employees were less than 24 years of age, and 46(44.2%) employees' ages ranged between 25 and 27.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics

	N	%
Gender		
Male	56	53.8
Female	48	46.2
Total	104	
Experience		
0-2 years	63	60.6
3- 6 years	41	39.4
Age		
20-24 years	58	55.8
25 -27 years	46	44.2

The qualitative analysis identified three key themes related to leadership practices for sustaining employee engagement, each with its subthemes. Table 2 lists themes and sub-themes identified in qualitative data analysis regarding the most important practices a leader should practice to foster work engagement among employees.

Table 2

Preferred Leadership Practices

Question		Theme	Number of Answers
What leadership practises do you expect from a leader to keep you more engaged at work?	**1**	**Being Authentic and Transparent**	
	1.1	Being Empathetic	89
	1.2	Walking the talk	76
	1.3	Authenticity over Image	43
	1.4	Clear Communication and Open dialogue	65
	2	**Focus on Purpose & Growth**	
	2.1	Meaningful work	91
	2.2	Talent assessment	45
	2.3	Feedback and recognition	103
	2.4	Learning and development opportunities	71
	3	**Work life balance & Flexibility**	
	3.1	Realistic timelines and targets	79
	3.2	Flexible working	56
	3.3	Balance work and Life- Me Time	91

Note. Participants have selected multiple options.

Theme 1: Being Authentic and Transparent

Being Empathetic: Participants emphasized the importance of leaders being empathetic towards team members, understanding their challenges, and offering assistance to foster trust and collaboration.

Walking the Talk: Participants highlighted the necessity for leaders to lead by example, emphasizing the importance of consistency between words and actions.

Authenticity over Image: Participants stressed the significance of leaders being authentic and true to themselves, rather than worrying about maintaining false images.

Clear Communication and Open Dialogue: Participants underscored the need for leaders to communicate openly, providing factual information without sugarcoating, and encouraging dialogue and reasoning within the team.

"A leader should regularly check in with team members to understand their challenges and offer assistance, fostering a sense of trust and collaboration within the team. Understanding the problems is of utmost importance. How can a leader solve a problem if he can't see from the team perspective (P23)"

"…Well, first, I think the best practice is to follow what you say. If a leader can't walk his path or talk, he has no right to say. (P78)"

"To foster engagement, a leader has to be authentic; this is when the leader accepts people as they are. A leader needs to be true and authentic and not worry about false images. (P67)"

"…A leader must be open in communication and tell facts as they are without hiding or sugar coating. (P45)"

"A leader must express things right and give a chance for reasoning and conversation. One side doesn't help. If he can understand, be available, and be empathetic, it helps; otherwise, what use? (P89)"

"…Nevertheless, if a leader is genuine and has an open conversation, the team feels encouraged to work in that atmosphere. (P99)"

Theme 2: Focus on Purpose and Growth

Meaningful Work: Participants expressed the importance of work aligning with their interests and goals, emphasizing the need for meaningful tasks to foster engagement and retention.

Talent Assessment: Participants highlighted the role of leaders in identifying and nurturing employees' talents, linking it to retention and growth within the organization.

Feedback and Recognition: Participants emphasized the need for regular feedback and recognition of their efforts to enhance engagement and motivation.

Learning and Development Opportunities: Participants emphasized the importance of organizations providing opportunities for continuous learning and skill development to retain employees.

"I need work that aligns with my interests and goals. If a leader can do this then I am more than happy to stay in that organization else not. (P100)"

"Some work we get anywhere, we need work which makes sense. If you ask an engineer to do a sales job, is it meaningful? Work needs to be in the interest of the employee. (P21).

"…At times, we don't know our talents; leaders must find it and nurture it. Any place it is done I am sure employees will stay on. After all, we need to grow right. (P34)"

"…And they give feedback only before appraisals, and some don't even. I need feedback and recognition for my efforts to stay in the organization. (P11)"

"There is always a gap between industry and academia. Also, technologies evolve. A leader must assess talent and give opportunities for learning and development. If an organization doesn't give me an opportunity to learn, I won't stay there. (P101)"

Theme 3: Work-life Balance & Flexibility

Realistic Timelines and Targets: Participants stressed the importance of leaders setting realistic timelines and targets to prevent burnout and maintain work-life balance.

Flexible Working: Participants highlighted the need for flexibility in work arrangements to accommodate personal and professional needs, avoiding unnecessary stress and exhaustion.

Balance Work and Life - Me Time: Participants emphasized the significance of having time for oneself outside of work commitments, highlighting the importance of work-life balance in employee retention and engagement.

"...I have seen managers over-committing. One must understand that timelines and targets should be reasonable and realistic. Giving tough timelines and complaining that we don't meet is unreasonable. Work is part of life, not entire life. By unrealistic timelines, employees lose time. To engage an employee, this practice should be taken care of, or else people may leave. (P65)"

"...And then overseas clients, an expectation to stay late for them, then what is the need for being available early also? Flexibility is needed as per the project and requirements. Else, it gets taxing. (P32)"

"Work is part of life; I need flexibility to manage both work and life. Otherwise, what is the use of earning money? There is no point in working like millennials. (P9)"

Table 3 explains the distribution per Male and Female. Both Males and Females have similar views on leadership practices for employee engagement. The analysis indicates some similarities and differences in the leadership preferences of male and female respondents, highlighting areas where leaders can tailor their approaches to effectively engage employees across genders.

Being Authentic and Transparent:
- *Being empathetic:* Female participants expressed a slightly higher preference (79.17%) for leaders who demonstrate empathy compared to Male participants (73.21%).
- *Walking the talk:* Male participants (51.79%) showed a higher inclination towards leaders who "walk the talk" compared to females (35.42%).
- *Authenticity over image:* Both male (30.36%) and female (25.00%) participants emphasized the importance of authenticity over image, with males expressing a slightly higher preference.
- *Clear communication and open dialogue:* Both genders valued clear communication and open dialogue, with a slightly higher preference among male participants (55.36%) compared to females (47.92%).

Focus on Purpose & Growth:
- *Meaningful work:* Male participants (60.71%) emphasized meaningful work more than females (39.58%).
- *Talent assessment:* Interestingly, female participants (70.83%) expressed a higher preference for leaders who assess talent compared to males (37.50%).
- *Feedback and recognition:* A similar level of importance was placed on feedback and recognition by both male (41.07%) and female (43.75%) participants.
- *Learning and development opportunities:* While both genders valued learning and development opportunities, females (27.08%) expressed a slightly lower preference compared to males (37.50%).

Work-life balance & Flexibility:
- *Realistic timelines and targets:* Both male (66.07%) and female (64.58%) participants almost equally emphasized the importance of realistic timelines and targets.
- *Flexible working:* Female participants (72.92%) preferred flexible working arrangements more than males (55.36%).

- *Balance work and Life- Me Time:* Both male (73.21%) and female (81.25%) participants highly valued "Me Time" and achieved a balance between work and personal life, with a slightly higher preference among females.

Table 3

Preferred Leadership Practices as per Males and Females in the sample

Question		Theme	Number of Answers (Male)	Number of Answers (Female)
What leadership practices do you expect from a leader to keep you more engaged at work?	**1**	**Being Authentic and Transparent**		
	1.1	Being Empathetic	41	38
	1.2	Walking the talk	29	17
	1.3	Authenticity over Image	17	12
	1.4	Clear Communication and Open dialogue	31	23
	2	**Focus on Purpose & Growth**		
	2.1	Meaningful work	34	19
	2.2	Talent assessment	21	34
	2.3	Feedback and recognition	23	21
	2.4	Learning and development opportunities	21	13
	3	**Work life balance & Flexibility**		
	3.1	Realistic timelines and targets	37	31
	3.2	Flexible working	31	35
	3.3	Balance work and Life- Me Time	41	39

Note. Participants have selected multiple options.

Table 4 shows the reasons for looking out for new opportunities. This question tends to identify the leadership practice other than monetary, which would force an employee to look out for employment. The results are coded into Lack of Me time, Expectation of Presenteeism, Lack of Meaningful work and Focusing on Negative rather than Positive. Each person is asked to give only one response, so the total of responses is 104. Lack of Me time (47.12%) is the most important factor for looking out for new opportunities, followed by lack of meaningful work (32.69%), focusing on negatives rather than positives (14.42%), and expectation of presenteeism (5.77%).

Table 4

Reasons for looking out for a New Opportunity

Question	Code	Number of Answers
In the context of leadership, leaving monetary aside, tell me one top reason that would make you look out for new opportunities.	1. Lack of Me Time	49
	2. Expectation of Presenteeism	6
	3. Lack of Meaningful work	34
	4. Focusing on Negative than Positive	15

Table 5 presents the gender-specific distribution.

Table 5

Look Out for New Opportunity – Male and Female

Question	Code	Number of Answers (Male)	Number of Answers (Male)
In the context of leadership, leaving monetary aside, tell me one top reason that would make you look out for new opportunities.	1. Lack of Me Time	29	31
	2. Expectation of Presenteeism	1	4
	3. Lack of Meaningful work	18	7
	4. Focusing on Negative than Positive	8	6

"...I won't stay if I can't take out time for myself. No use working like a robot and effect mental health. (P98)"

"If I am forced to be available and present always come, what may I will leave. (P87)"

"…There are other things important as well. If my work has no meaning and staying there has no meaning. (P9)"
"If negatives are given importance over positives, I won't stay for sure. (P7)"

Here's a breakdown of each reason:

1. **Lack of Me Time:**
   - Male: 51.79%
   - Female: 64.58%

   Both male and female participants expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of personal time or "Me Time" as a significant factor driving their consideration of new job opportunities. This indicates that a considerable portion of both genders' values work-life balance and seeks roles that allow them to have sufficient time for themselves outside of work commitments.

2. **Expectation of Presenteeism:**
   - Male: 1.79%
   - Female: 8.33%

   While a small percentage of male participants (1.79%) cited the expectation of presenteeism (being physically present at work regardless of productivity) as a reason for seeking new opportunities, a slightly higher percentage of female participants (8.33%) reported the same. This suggests that some participants feel pressured to prioritize presence at work over productivity, potentially leading to dissatisfaction and job search.

3. **Lack of Meaningful Work:**
   - Male: 32.14%
   - Female: 14.58%

   Both male and female participants indicated dissatisfaction with the lack of meaningful work as a reason for considering new job opportunities. However, a higher percentage of male participants (32.14%) cited this factor compared to female participants (14.58%). This implies that male participants, to a greater extent, prioritize finding roles that align with their interests and provide a sense of purpose.

4. **Focusing on Negative than Positive:**
   - Male: 14.29%
   - Female: 12.50%

   A similar percentage of both male and female participants reported focusing on negative aspects of their current job rather than positive ones as a reason for seeking new opportunities. This suggests that a portion of both genders may be influenced by negative experiences or perceptions in their current roles, leading them to consider alternative options.

Discussion

This exploratory study sheds light on the leadership practices that Gen Z, the generation born between 1997 and 2012 (Ma & Fang, 2023), deems crucial for work engagement. It delves into their perspectives on ideal leadership behaviors and the dealbreakers that would push them to

seek new opportunities. By employing qualitative methods and thematic analysis, the research paints a compelling picture of Gen Z's workplace expectations.

The Primacy of Authenticity and Transparency

The study reveals that Gen Z prioritizes authenticity and transparency as the cornerstone of effective leadership. This resonates with the tenets of Authentic Leadership Theory (Singh & Dangmei, 2016), which emphasizes genuineness, leading by example, and fostering trust within teams. The emphasis on clear communication and open dialogue aligns with the need for psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999) - a work environment where individuals feel comfortable sharing ideas and admitting mistakes without fear of retribution. Interestingly, the data suggests that both empathy and "walking the talk" are valued sub-themes. This highlights Gen Z's desire for leaders who not only understand their challenges but also act with integrity, bridging the gap between words and actions.

Beyond the Paycheck: The Pursuit of Purpose and Growth:

The findings reveal that Gen Z craves not just financial security but also a sense of purpose in their work. This aligns with the Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), which posits that intrinsic motivation flourishes when individuals feel a sense of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in their work. The importance placed on meaningful work suggests a desire for their contributions to hold significance (Febriana & Mujib, 2024) and align with their personal values. Additionally, the emphasis on talent assessment, feedback, and learning opportunities underscores Gen Z's desire for continuous development This generation seeks growth opportunities that allow them to hone their skills and advance in their careers (Cantrell & Carr, 2024).

Work-Life Balance: Striking the Equilibrium

The study highlights the paramount importance Gen Z places on work-life balance and flexibility. This resonates with the growing trend of prioritizing well-being and avoiding burnout within the workforce (Racolţa-Paina & Irini, 2021). Realistic deadlines, flexible work arrangements, and respect for personal time emerge as crucial factors for work engagement (Achmad et al., 2023). This aligns with research by Deloitte (2022) suggesting that Gen Z prioritizes work-life balance alongside career goals. The emphasis on "Me Time" suggests a need for sufficient personal space to recharge and maintain mental well-being, a stark contrast to the hustle culture often associated with previous generations.

Navigating the Gender Divide: Subtle Variations in Preferences:

While both genders prioritize similar leadership practices, the study suggests subtle variations. Women seem to value flexible work arrangements slightly more than men. Future research could delve deeper into these gender differences to understand the nuances of Gen Z's leadership preferences across demographics.

Understanding the work values and leadership preferences of Generation Z presents organizations with the opportunity to create more engaging and sustainable work environments. To capitalize on this, several actionable steps can be taken. Firstly, investing in leadership development programs that prioritize authenticity, empathy, communication, and fostering a

growth mindset can cultivate effective leaders who resonate with Gen Z employees. Secondly, integrating purpose into job descriptions and performance evaluations can help employees understand how their roles contribute to the organization's goals, fostering a sense of meaning and fulfillment. Thirdly, implementing work-life balance initiatives such as flexible work arrangements, remote work options, and encouraging breaks and vacation time can promote employee well-being and productivity. Additionally, providing opportunities for continuous learning and development through skill development programs, mentorship initiatives, and access to online learning resources can support Gen Z's desire for growth and advancement. Finally, prioritizing employee well-being by promoting healthy work habits, facilitating open communication about mental health, and offering resources for stress management can create a supportive and inclusive workplace culture. These steps can help organizations effectively engage and retain Gen Z talent, driving success and innovation in the modern workforce.

The study acknowledges limitations inherent to its exploratory nature. The sample size (104) and focus on the IT industry might limit generalizability. Additionally, self-reported data can be susceptible to bias. Further exploration of the concept of "Me Time" within the context of Generation Z's work environment is essential to grasp its specific implications. Understanding whether it entails disconnecting after work hours, ensuring sufficient breaks, or encompasses other factors can aid leaders in devising strategies to promote work-life balance effectively. Moreover, future research endeavors could delve into actionable practices, translating identified leadership practices into tangible actions and behaviors that leaders can implement to enhance work engagement among Gen Z employees. Addressing the limitations of the current study and conducting larger-scale investigations across various industries can offer more comprehensive insights, and longitudinal studies tracking the evolution of Gen Z's preferences over time can shed light on changing expectations. Additionally, exploring how different leadership styles can integrate the preferred practices identified in this study and examining ways in which organizational cultures can adapt to align with Gen Z's work values present promising avenues for future research in this domain.

By elaborating on these themes, limitations, and future research directions, this discussion provides a richer understanding of the study's findings and their significance for Gen Z work engagement and leadership practices.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study utilized an exploratory research method to effectively address its objectives, which focused on identifying specific leadership practices conducive to sustaining work engagement and understanding reasons leading to employee departure, particularly among Gen Z individuals. Additionally, the study aimed to explore potential variations in the perception of leadership practices based on gender.

The analysis revealed three main themes related to leadership practices for sustaining employee engagement: authenticity and transparency, focus on purpose and growth, and work-life balance and flexibility. Within these themes, participants emphasized the importance of empathetic leadership, meaningful work, realistic timelines, and opportunities for learning and development.

Furthermore, the study found some similarities and differences in the leadership preferences of male and female participants. While both genders valued authenticity and transparency in leadership, female participants preferred talent assessment and flexible working arrangements.

Regarding reasons for considering new job opportunities, lack of "Me Time" emerged as the most significant factor for both male and female participants, highlighting the importance of work-life balance. Other reasons included a lack of meaningful work and a focus on negative aspects of the current job.

Moving forward, the implications of this research extend to organizational strategy and leadership development. By aligning leadership practices with the values and preferences of Gen Z employees, organizations can create a positive work culture that enhances engagement, satisfaction, and loyalty. Investing in leadership development programs that foster authenticity, empathy, and continuous learning will be crucial in cultivating the next generation of leaders who can effectively engage and retain top talent.

Overall, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the dynamics between leadership practices and employee engagement, offering practical insights for organizations seeking to navigate the evolving needs and expectations of their workforce. By embracing the principles of authenticity, empathy, and flexibility, organizations can build resilient and adaptive cultures that drive sustained success in the ever-changing landscape of work.

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