

Organisational Behaviour among Generation Z: A Conceptual Exploration

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ABSTRACT

Generation Z (born between 1997 and 2012) is rapidly becoming a significant part of Malaysia's workforce, reshaping organisational behaviour and human resource management practices. Unlike earlier generations, Gen Z exhibits distinct values concerning work-life balance, organisational culture, leadership, and technological integration. Their entry into the Malaysian labour market presents both opportunities and challenges, particularly given the high turnover intentions and job-hopping behaviours observed locally. This conceptual paper investigates organisational behaviour among Gen Z by combining established theoretical perspectives such as Self-Determination Theory, Person-Organisation Fit, and Leader-Member Exchange, with emerging empirical findings from Malaysia. A conceptual framework is developed to connect antecedents (work design, leadership, digital readiness, and values alignment), mediators (psychological contract fulfilment, perceived autonomy, and work engagement), and outcomes (job satisfaction, organisational commitment, and turnover intention). The paper contributes to the literature by synthesising recent findings and providing a theoretical perspective to understand Gen Z in the workplace, offering implications for practice and future research.

Keywords: Generation Z, organisational behaviour, Malaysia, work values, leadership, psychological contract, employee engagement

INTRODUCTION

Organisational behaviour (OB) is continually reshaped by demographic changes, with new generational cohorts bringing different values, expectations, and working styles into the workplace (Zahra, 2025). Today, Generation Z (Gen Z), the first truly digital-native generation, is entering the workforce at scale. In recent years, Gen Z has become a central focus of OB research. Their arrival has generated increasing interest among scholars and practitioners regarding how their unique preferences influence organisational dynamics. By 2030, they are expected to constitute over 30% of the global workforce (Deloitte, 2025). In Malaysia, national surveys indicate that Gen Z and Millennials together will comprise the majority of employees by 2025, making their workplace preferences highly significant for organisations.

Unlike Millennials, Gen Z employees emphasise autonomy, inclusivity, meaningful work, and organisational transparency (Zahra, 2025). In the Malaysian context, empirical studies have revealed elevated levels of turnover intention, job hopping, and unmet expectations regarding career progression among Gen Z employees (Zahari & Puteh, 2023; Salem, 2025).

This paper aims to:

1. Examine Gen Z's workplace values and behaviours in relation to global theories and Malaysian research.

2. Propose a conceptual framework that integrates antecedents, mediators, and outcomes related to Gen Z organisational behaviour.
3. Discuss implications for Malaysian organisations and directions for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Generational Perspectives in Organisational Behaviour

The development of distinct organisational behaviours across different generations arises from their shared socio-historical experiences (Mitchell, 2025). The post-war period of economic growth influenced Baby Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964) to value job security, hierarchical structures, and workplace loyalty. Generation X (born between 1965 and 1980), however, matured during times of economic instability and organisational downsizing, which led them to prioritise independence, adaptability, and a pragmatic approach to work (Twenge et al., 2010). The entry of Millennials (born between 1981 and 1996) into the workforce occurred during a period of global expansion and technological advancement, motivating them to seek meaningful work alongside collaborative environments and opportunities for career progression (Ng et al., 2010).

According to Katz (2024), Gen Z (born from 1997 onwards) is often characterised as the first truly digital-native generation, having experienced their entire lives with smartphones, social media, and instant connectivity. The formative period of Gen Z coincided with global crises, including the 2008 financial downturn, the COVID-19 pandemic, and worsening climate change, which reinforced their values of flexibility, inclusivity, and resilience (Dimock, 2019). The evolving social values in society have made members of Gen Z more aware of diversity and social justice issues than earlier generations (Zahra, 2025).

Studies consistently show that Gen Z workers prioritise work-life balance, mental health, and meaningful work more than their predecessors (Deloitte, 2025). For instance, surveys reveal that Gen Z is more likely than Millennials to value mental health resources and flexible scheduling when assessing employers (Seemiller & Grace, 2019). Additionally, their demand for corporate social responsibility and organisational transparency aligns with societal shifts towards diversity, equity, and sustainability (Cubukcu Çeraşı, 2024).

In the Malaysian context, these generational shifts are particularly significant due to the country's multicultural workforce and rapidly digitalising economy. Local studies indicate that Gen Z employees in Malaysia show high mobility and tend to switch jobs when their needs for autonomy, recognition, and values alignment are not fulfilled (Zahari & Puteh, 2023). At the same time, Malaysia's organisational culture, which often blends collectivist traditions with emerging global business practices, presents unique challenges and opportunities in aligning Gen Z expectations with organisational realities (Noordin et al., 2019).

Taken together, these insights indicate that understanding Gen Z through the lens of generational theory is vital for organisations. As the fastest-growing workforce segment globally and in Malaysia, their values and expectations will not only influence human resource practices but also reshape organisational culture and leadership paradigms in the years to come.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and Gen Z Motivation

Ryan and Deci's (2000) Self-Determination Theory (SDT) offers a comprehensive framework for understanding the motivational factors affecting Gen Z employees in organisational settings. SDT claims that human motivation improves when three essential psychological needs, autonomy, competence, and relatedness, are fulfilled. Autonomy relates to the experience of volition and self-direction, competence involves the ability to master tasks and develop skills, and relatedness concerns establishing meaningful connections with others in the workplace. When these needs are met, individuals are more likely to exhibit intrinsic motivation, higher engagement, and sustained well-being.

Applying SDT to Gen Z highlights the importance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in shaping workplace expectations. The cohort values flexibility, hybrid work, and discretion in how and when work is done (Deloitte, 2025). They prioritise continuous learning and upskilling, showing higher motivation in organisations

with mentorship and professional development (çeraşı, 2024). Their emphasis on inclusive, diverse, and collaborative cultures underscores their need for respect and connection (Zahra, 2025). Recent evidence supports the application of SDT in Malaysia. Salem (2025) found that perceived autonomy mediates between flexible work arrangements and retention among Gen Z in Malaysian SMEs. This shows flexible policies alone are insufficient unless employees feel autonomous. These insights confirm that SDT explains why Gen Z employees are more engaged when organisations foster autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

Person–Organisation (P-O) Fit and Values Alignment

Kristof's (1996) Person–Organisation (P–O) Fit theory provides an insightful framework for understanding the importance of value congruence in shaping workplace attitudes and behaviours among employees. The theory states that employees experience higher job satisfaction, more substantial organisational commitment, and lower turnover when their personal values align with those of the organisation and its culture. On the other hand, a mismatch between personal and organisational values can lead to employee dissatisfaction, disengagement, and ultimately voluntary turnover. For Gen Z, this alignment is essential because various studies show that, unlike earlier generations, employees today are less willing to sacrifice personal values in exchange for job security (Ng et al., 2010).

Recent evidence suggests that value alignment has a significant impact on the career decisions of Gen Z. Deloitte (2025) revealed that over 60% of Gen Z employees would consider quitting if their organisation's values did not match their own. This generation, in particular, values diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), as well as environmental sustainability and corporate social responsibility. Zahra (2025) highlighted that organisations lacking genuine commitment to these principles face higher disengagement and turnover rates among Gen Z employees. Overall, these insights suggest that for Generation Z, aligning with organisational values is essential for long-term engagement and loyalty.

In Malaysia, P–O Fit is vital due to the country's multicultural and multiethnic workforce, which influences perceptions of fairness, inclusivity, and respect for diversity (Noordin et al., 2019). Local research indicates that value misalignment is a significant predictor of job hopping among Generation Z employees, who show a low tolerance for organisations perceived as lacking fairness, sustainability, and inclusivity (Zahari & Puteh, 2023). As a result, leaders must ensure alignment between individual and organisational values. Aligning corporate strategies with the expectations of Generation Z is both an ethical requirement and essential for maintaining competitiveness in Malaysia's changing labour market.

Leadership and Leader–Member Exchange (LMX)

Leadership significantly influences how organisations operate, mainly by impacting employee motivation, engagement, and retention. Introduced by Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995), the Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory highlights the importance of strong relationships between leaders and their teams. When these relationships are based on trust, respect, and mutual responsibility, workplace outcomes tend to enhance. This is particularly relevant for Generation Z, who value leaders who are transparent, authentic, and supportive. These qualities correspond with the traits of strong LMX relationships (Zahra, 2025).

Recent research on Gen Z leadership emphasises the need for leaders to go beyond traditional transactional methods. For example, Mitchell (2025) proposed the Connected Authentic Leadership model, which emphasises openness, empathy, and social awareness as essential qualities for engaging with Generation Z. Authentic leadership, as opposed to transactional or rigid styles, aligns well with Gen Z's values by fostering workplaces where employees feel safe, trusted, and find meaning in their work. This perspective is consistent with earlier studies showing that authentic leadership and strong leader-follower relationships enhance engagement, satisfaction, and commitment at work (Avolio & Gardner, 2005).

Research shows that transformational and coaching leadership styles are especially effective with Gen Z employees. Transformational leaders offer clear direction, motivation, and personal support, aligning with Generation Z's desire for guidance and growth. Coaching leadership emphasises mentoring and skill

development, which also aligns with Generation Z's interest in learning new things. A recent study in Malaysia found that both styles help increase engagement and reduce the likelihood of young employees leaving their jobs (Tran, 2025). These findings highlight the importance for organisations with many young employees to adopt leadership approaches centred on relationships and development.

Relational leadership plays a crucial role in Malaysia due to its distinct cultural landscape. Many Malaysian workplaces combine strict hierarchies with an emphasis on collective values, which can hinder the development of open and equitable relationships between leaders and staff. Nonetheless, research indicates that younger employees prefer leaders who are empathetic, inclusive, and attentive (Noordin et al., 2019). By adopting leadership strategies that strengthen LMX relationships, Malaysian companies can better address the expectations of Gen Z while honouring local cultural norms. This approach can enhance employee engagement and help retain young talent.

Technology, Communication, and Organisational Behaviour

Technology and communication practices are vital for understanding organisational behaviour within Gen Z. As the first generation of digital natives, Gen Z has grown up with constant access to smartphones, social media, and real-time digital platforms, which significantly shape their expectations for workplace communication and collaboration (Katz, 2024). Unlike previous generations who adapted to digitalisation later in their careers, Gen Z considers seamless technological integration a basic requirement rather than a privilege. This affects organisational behaviour, as technology not only facilitates task completion but also impacts employee engagement, team dynamics, and perceptions of organisational effectiveness (Tarafdar et al., 2019).

For Gen Z employees, communication must be immediate, transparent, and collaborative. Studies indicate their preference for open communication channels, real-time feedback, and the utilisation of digital collaboration platforms such as Slack, Microsoft Teams, or Zoom to enhance teamwork (Seemiller & Grace, 2019). This trend signifies a shift from hierarchical and formalised communication styles toward horizontal, networked modes of interaction, which correspond with Gen Z's values of inclusivity and accessibility. Moreover, organisational leaders are expected to employ digital tools not solely for operational efficiency but also to promote social connectivity, community, and inclusivity among staff (Cubukcu Çeraşı, 2024).

Integrating technology into organisational behaviour also involves challenges. Relying too heavily on digital tools can lead to information overload, digital fatigue, and a blurring of the lines between work and personal life. These issues are especially relevant for Gen Z, who prioritise mental health and work-life balance (Deloitte, 2025). Therefore, organisations should develop strategies that leverage the benefits of technology, such as speed, connectivity, and flexibility, while mitigating its drawbacks through policies promoting digital well-being and responsible communication (Tarafdar et al., 2019).

In Malaysia, the influence of technology on organisational behaviour is driven by the country's swift digital shift, exemplified by initiatives such as the Malaysia Digital Economy Blueprint (MyDIGITAL). Evidence indicates that Malaysian Gen Z employees highly appreciate organisations equipped with advanced digital tools and infrastructure, interpreting them as signs of innovation and competitiveness (Yusof & Sulaiman, 2023). However, generational gaps in digital skills within diverse workplaces can lead to communication issues, prompting organisations to adopt inclusive digital practices that close these technological gaps.

Overall, technology and communication are key to understanding Gen Z's workplace behaviour. Their desire for smooth digital integration and open, collaborative communication mirrors broader global trends and Malaysia's move towards a digital economy. Organisations that respond well to these changes are more likely to attract, retain, and motivate Gen Z workers in today's work environment.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This paper introduces a conceptual framework combining global organisational behaviour theory with empirical data from Malaysia to elucidate how Generation Z employees interact with their workplaces. The framework

consists of three elements: antecedents, mediators, and outcomes, which collectively illustrate how organisational practices shape Gen Z's workplace behaviours and attitudes.

Antecedents

Antecedents are the organisational conditions influencing employees' experiences. These factors combine to affect Generation Z's job satisfaction, organisational commitment, and performance. Work design is particularly vital, especially in terms of the availability of flexibility and autonomy, as Gen Z employees consistently value the ability to control when, where, and how they complete their tasks (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Salem, 2025). Leadership style also plays a key role, with transformational and coaching approaches well-suited to Gen Z's preference for leaders who are authentic, transparent, and supportive (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Mitchell, 2025). Digital readiness is another critical antecedent, as digital natives, such as Gen Z, expect seamless technological integration for collaboration, learning, and productivity (Katz, 2024). Lastly, values alignment is essential; according to P-O Fit theory, when employees' personal values match the organisation's commitments to diversity, equity, inclusion, and sustainability, they tend to feel more satisfied and committed to their employers (Kristof, 1996; Zahari & Puteh, 2023).

Mediators

The mediators describe how these antecedents influence employee outcomes. Psychological contract fulfilment refers to how much Gen Z employees feel the organisation has kept its implicit promises regarding career growth, fair treatment, and development opportunities (Robinson & Morrison, 2000). Perceived autonomy reflects the feeling of control and choice in performing tasks, which is essential to Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Work engagement, defined as vigour, dedication, and absorption in one's role, acts as another mediator that shows the energy and motivation employees devote to their work (Schaufeli et al., 2006). These mediators connect organisational practices with employee outcomes by explaining how Gen Z perceives and internalises organisational support.

Outcomes

The outcomes indicate the organisation-relevant effects of these processes. Job satisfaction occurs when employees' needs for autonomy, growth, and values alignment are satisfied (Cubukcu Çeraşı, 2024). Organisational commitment increases when employees feel connected to their employer and supported by authentic leaders (Zahra, 2025). On the other hand, turnover intention rises when key mediators, such as autonomy and psychological contract fulfilment, are absent (Salem, 2025). Additionally, organisational citizenship behaviour (OCB), where employees go beyond their job roles to benefit the organisation, is enhanced by engagement and shared values (Deloitte, 2025).

In conclusion, this framework suggests that organisations offering autonomy, authentic and coaching-oriented leadership, digital readiness, and value congruence are more likely to promote robust psychological contract fulfilment, perceived autonomy, and work engagement among Generation Z employees. These mediating mechanisms subsequently contribute to enhanced job satisfaction, increased organisational commitment, decreased turnover intentions, and the promotion of citizenship behaviours. By integrating both universal theoretical insights and empirical evidence from Malaysia, this framework highlights the importance of adapting organisational practices to meet the needs of Generation Z, which is crucial for ensuring long-term sustainability and talent retention within the Malaysian workforce.

METHODOLOGY

This paper adopts a conceptual approach, focusing on synthesising existing knowledge rather than collecting new data. Conceptual research facilitates theory development by integrating and interpreting prior findings. As Jaakkola (2020) observes, conceptual articles are essential in management and organisational research for consolidating dispersed evidence, clarifying concepts, and constructing new models to inform future inquiry. Consistent with this methodology, the present study utilises established organisational behaviour theories and recent research on Gen Z in both global and Malaysian contexts.

Literature Integration

The initial phase involved a thorough review of academic and industry sources that explored the workplace characteristics of Gen Z. Sources included journal articles, dissertations, industry reports, and surveys published between 2000 and 2025. Integrating these materials ensures that the framework includes both theoretical viewpoints and practical challenges faced by organisations employing Gen Z.

Theory Application

Subsequently, organisational behaviour theories were aligned with the identified traits of Generation Z. For instance, Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) elucidates Gen Z's emphasis on autonomy and flexibility. Person-Organisation Fit theory (Kristof, 1996) addresses their preference for shared values, while Leader-Member Exchange theory (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995) underscores their desire for authentic and supportive leadership. Applying these theories establishes connections between foundational organisational behaviour concepts and contemporary workforce challenges.

Framework Development

The third stage involved developing a framework by synthesising insights from theory and evidence into a proposed conceptual model. This model connects antecedents such as work design, leadership style, digital readiness, and values alignment with mediators like psychological contract fulfilment, perceived autonomy, and work engagement, and ultimately links to outcomes including job satisfaction, organisational commitment, turnover intention, and organisational citizenship behaviour. It integrates both global theoretical perspectives and Malaysia-specific empirical findings, providing a culturally contextualised contribution.

Implication Derivation

Finally, the fourth stage involved transforming the proposed framework into practical recommendations for organisational leaders, human resource professionals, and scholars. Conceptual research not only provides theoretical clarity but also serves as a foundation for practical applications and policy measures (Gilson & Goldberg, 2015). By pinpointing key antecedents and mediators of Gen Z workplace outcomes, this study emphasises actionable strategies for organisations, including fostering autonomy, encouraging authentic leadership, improving digital readiness, and aligning values.

This conceptual approach lays the groundwork for future empirical research that can test and confirm the proposed model. For example, survey studies might use structural equation modelling (SEM) to explore how psychological contract fulfilment mediates relationships. In contrast, longitudinal studies could observe shifts in Gen Z's workplace attitudes over time. By providing a solid theoretical foundation, this paper paves the way for building cumulative knowledge in organisational behaviour research.

DISCUSSION

Implications for Organisations

The findings presented in this conceptual exploration indicate that the workplace expectations of Generation Z should not be regarded as mere “preferences.” Instead, they represent fundamental structural demands that are reshaping the future of work. Flexibility, inclusivity, and digital readiness have transitioned from optional attributes to essential elements for organisational competitiveness in a labour market increasingly characterised by the presence of Gen Z employees (Deloitte, 2025). Organisations that resist these shifts risk alienating a significant proportion of their workforce, which may lead to reduced employee engagement, diminished loyalty, and increased turnover rates. Conversely, firms that actively integrate autonomy, relational leadership, and advanced technology into their organisational cultures are better positioned to enhance both engagement and retention. This observation aligns with broader global evidence that organisations aligning their practices with generational expectations demonstrate greater innovation, agility, and resilience in dynamic environments (Francis & Hoefel, 2018). In the context of Malaysia, where Generation Z is entering the workforce amidst rapid

digital transformation, organisations that incorporate these principles will not only attract talent but also secure a reputational advantage in employer branding.

Implications for Leadership

The transition to a Generation Z-dominated workforce necessitates a fundamental re-evaluation of leadership practices. Conventional command-and-control methodologies, which focus on hierarchy and compliance, are progressively becoming incompatible with Generation Z's emphasis on transparency, authenticity, and inclusion (Zahra, 2025). Consequently, leaders are required to adopt relational approaches aligned with Leader–Member Exchange (LMX) theory, emphasising the development of high-quality exchanges characterised by trust, respect, and open communication (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). This shift involves moving beyond transactional leadership toward authentic and transformational models that inspire purpose, offer constructive feedback, and embody organisational values (Mitchell, 2025). Evidence from Malaysian organisations suggests that leaders who demonstrate empathy, social consciousness, and coaching behaviours substantially enhance Generation Z's engagement and decrease turnover (Tran, 2025). Therefore, leadership effectiveness in the era of Gen Z will be increasingly evaluated not by positional authority, but by the capacity to foster meaningful relationships and align personal and organisational values.

Implications for HR Practices

The impact on human resource management is equally significant. HR leaders need to develop and enforce policies that meet Gen Z's structural expectations while ensuring organisational cohesion. Four key priorities stand out. Firstly, organisations must promote hybrid and flexible work arrangements, which address Gen Z's desire for autonomy and have been proven to boost retention (Salem, 2025). Secondly, HR practices should integrate diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) principles into recruitment, training, and performance evaluation, thus strengthening Person–Organisation Fit and sustaining employee engagement (Zahari & Puteh, 2023). Third, companies must offer ongoing learning and career growth options, as Gen Z highly values mentorship, skill development, and advancement (Cubukcu Çeraşı, 2024). Lastly, HR leaders should leverage digital platforms to enhance collaboration and efficiency while promoting interpersonal skills to mitigate digital fatigue and social disconnection (Tarafdar et al., 2019). By adopting these strategies, HR can meet the expectations of Gen Z and foster workplaces that are flexible and well-prepared for the future.

CONCLUSIONS

The arrival of Gen Z into the workforce signals a significant shift in organisational behaviour, introducing new expectations that question conventional work models. Influenced by digital exposure, economic uncertainty, and increased social consciousness, Gen Z workers are reshaping their priorities in professional settings. They prioritise flexibility, inclusivity, autonomy, and authentic leadership, which requires organisations to reevaluate their policies, practices, and core cultural and structural beliefs.

This paper combines global and Malaysian viewpoints, integrating theories like Self-Determination Theory, Person–Organisation Fit, and Leader–Member Exchange to create a framework that outlines the factors leading to, mediating, and resulting from Gen Z workplace behaviour. This approach adds value to both academic discussions and practical management by providing a clear model of how organisational structure, leadership, technology, and value alignment impact engagement, satisfaction, and retention in this emerging workforce.

For scholars, this framework provides a foundation for future empirical research. Quantitative studies could test the mediating roles of autonomy, psychological contract fulfilment, and work engagement. At the same time, cross-cultural research would enhance understanding of how generational patterns interact with local cultural norms. Longitudinal studies could capture how Gen Z's workplace expectations evolve as they progress in their careers.

For practitioners, the implications are immediate and actionable. Organisations that resist adapting to Gen Z's structural demands risk disengagement and high turnover. At the same time, those that adopt hybrid work models,

values-based leadership, technological integration, and ongoing learning opportunities are more likely to attract, retain, and develop this talent pool. In Malaysia, where the workforce is increasingly multicultural and digitally focused, these adaptations are not only advantageous but also vital to maintaining competitiveness in a rapidly changing labour market.

In summary, organisations that succeeded in the Gen Z era will be those that synchronise their structural practices with the values of this generation, creating workplaces that emphasise flexibility, inclusivity, and authenticity. These initiatives will not only attract and retain Gen Z employees but also enhance organisational resilience and foster innovation amid the ongoing transformation of the global workforce.

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