

Drivers of Employee Engagement for Gen Z in the IT Industry: A Qualitative Descriptive Study

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ABSTRACT

Purpose - Employee engagement has become a central strategic priority for organizations navigating rapid technological shifts and increasing competition for young talent in the Indian IT sector. Generation Z employees born between 1997 and 2012 enter the workforce with expectations shaped by digital fluency, global exposure and heightened awareness of well-being. Prior research suggests that Gen Z values work–life balance, supportive leadership, psychological safety, and meaningful development opportunities (Leslie et al., 2021; Barhate & Dirani, 2022). However, the majority of engagement studies rely on quantitative measures, leaving a gap in qualitative evidence capturing the lived experiences of Gen Z professionals within IT workplaces (Jayathilake et al., 2021; Das & Malik, 2024). This study addresses this gap.

Design / Methodology - This study uses a qualitative descriptive approach to analyze open-ended responses from 30 purposively sampled Gen Z IT employees. The participants were asked to identify the top four engagement practices influencing their intention to stay longer in an organization. Through thematic analysis, engagement drivers were identified.

Findings — Four dominant engagement drivers emerged: work–life balance, supportive supervisor behaviour, fair reward and recognition systems and opportunities for career growth. Other themes included autonomy, psychological safety, realistic workload distribution and healthy work culture. These results reinforce that for Gen Z ,engagement is multi-dimensional and to improve retention, IT organizations would need to focus on adopting empathetic leadership styles, maintaining transparent recognition practices, and offering developmental paths.

Originality - The paper has contributed to the limited number of qualitative studies on Gen Z engagement in India. The participants were asked to identify the top four engagement practices influencing their intention to stay longer in an organization and has also provided actionable insights for HR practitioners who intend to align organizational practices with generational expectations.

Paper Type - Qualitative descriptive research

Keywords: Employee Engagement, Generation Z, Retention, Indian IT Sector, Work–Life Balance, Supervisor Support, Reward and Recognition, Career Growth.

1. INTRODUCTION:

Employee engagement has emerged as a central theme in organizational research, particularly in sectors characterized by intensive knowledge work such as the Indian IT industry. In the face of increasing competition, rapid technological shifts, and rising voluntary turnover rates, nurturing a committed and engaged workforce is now recognized as a key strategic imperative for organizations (Ahsan et al., 2013; Das & Malik, 2024). Within this context, the current generation entering the workforce commonly referred to as Generation Z, born between 1997 and 2012 now constitutes a significant proportion of the entry-level IT workforce, with expectations that redefine work culture, communication, and career progression. (Barhate & Dirani, 2022; Chillakuri, 2020).

Gen Z employees bring distinct characteristics shaped by

digital nativity, global exposure, and heightened sensitivity to issues of well-being and work–life balance. Previous studies have shown that this cohort desires flexible work arrangements, empathetic leadership, transparent communication, and significant professional development opportunities. (Leslie et al., 2021; Borg et al., 2023). Unlike other earlier generations, the attitudes of Gen Z toward work are more strongly determined by psychological safety, fairness, and employer branding cues (Hendriana et al., 2023). These expectations bring into focus the need for organizations and most specifically IT firms to rethink their engagement strategies, which more precisely align with the values and motivations of this emerging workforce.

Despite employee engagement being one of the most widespread topics in research, most studies depend on quantitative designs and structured measurement scales (Schaufeli et al., 2002;

Lee et al., 2021). These provide statistical insights but often miss the more nuanced, experience-based perspectives that drive the choices young employees make about their levels of engagement and whether to stay or quit. There have been calls from scholars for qualitative approaches that better capture the subjective realities, workplace expectations, and emotional dimensions of engagement, particularly among Gen Z, whose life experiences substantially differ from earlier cohorts (Jayathilake et al., 2021; Drewery et al., 2023). Existing qualitative studies in India remain limited, with most focusing on onboarding (Chillakuri, 2020), talent attraction (Pandita, 2022), or employer branding (Gandasari et al., 2024), rather than the specific engagement practices that shape Gen Z retention in IT organizations. This gap indicates a need for genuine, narrative-driven insights that can help in the formulation of policies in HR based on actual employee experiences. Addressing this gap, the present study adopted a qualitative descriptive approach to explore specific practices of engagement that Gen Z IT employees consider meaningful and influential in making them stay longer with an organization. Analyzing open-ended responses from 30 purposively sampled Gen Z professionals provided a grounded understanding of their expectations about engagement practices, along with actionable implications for IT firms willing to retain young talent.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Employee Engagement

Employee engagement is the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral energy that employees invest in their jobs and is shaped by meaningful work, supportive relationships, and an enabling work environment. Engagement reflects the degree to which employees feel connected with their jobs and organization, influencing performance, satisfaction, and retention.

Various studies identified relational and structural factors as key for the nurturing of engagement. Recurring core drivers of engagement commonly involve supportive leadership, recognition, professional autonomy, and developmental opportunities in Nguyen (2020) and Sarkar et al. (2023). In knowledge-intensive industries, such as IT, workload balance and perceived fairness are also key along with organizational support structures in Bairi et al. (2011) and Erika et al. (2023). The **Employee Engagement Scale (EES)** consists of twelve items derived from **Kahn's (1990)** framework of personal engagement, which emphasizes three core dimensions — **cognitive, emotional, and physical engagement**. However, much of the extant engagement literature is dominated by quantitative models and survey instruments, which might limit the potential to capture the depth of personal experiences and contextual variations across age groups and industries

Gen Z in the Workforce

Generation Z is regarded as one of the most diverse and technologically adept cohorts to enter the professional workforce. Among the attributes consistently noted by researchers as setting them apart from Millennials and earlier generations are a desire for meaningful work, preference for feedback that is given rapidly and

constructively, heightened concern for well-being, and expectation of inclusive leadership. (Barhate & Dirani, 2022; Drewery et al., 2023).

According to Leslie et al. (2021), Gen Z employees value autonomy and flexibility in work conditions with a focus on psychological safety. Researchers have established that this generation assesses employers not just by the level of salary and stability but also by ethical practices, workplace culture, growth opportunities, and respect for personal boundaries (Pandita et al., 2023; Ma & Fang, 2023). In IT organizations, which are often subject to clients' tight timelines and pressures from project work, these expectations pose certain challenges and opportunities.

Recent studies across Asian contexts have shown that supervisor support, organizational purpose, fair treatment, and career pathways remain key drivers in the engagement and retention decisions of Gen Z employees. (Gabriel et al., 2022; Ali et al., 2024). These findings call for the application of relationally rich, development-oriented human resource practices.

Engagement and Retention of Gen Z Employees

Studies focusing specifically on engagement among Gen Z employees reveal that young professionals are more sensitive to burnout, workload inequity, and lack of recognition compared to older cohorts (Kodithuwakku et al., 2018; Hendriana et al., 2023). Work-life balance consistently emerges as a dominant theme, with Gen Z expecting employers to respect personal time, provide flexibility, and offer wellness-oriented policies (Chillakuri, 2020; Erika et al., 2023).

Reward systems also play a central role in influencing engagement. Acheampong (2021) found that Gen Z places strong emphasis on fair, transparent, and prompt recognition. Similarly, Das and Malik (2024) have identified growth opportunities and supportive leadership as critical determinants of stay intention from Indian Gen Z employees using a qualitative design.

While these are useful insights, most of the studies to this date have remained fragmented, largely focusing on various piecemeal engagement aspects, such as reward systems, leadership, and employer branding. Very few studies integrate different engagement dimensions within a qualitative framework, especially in the Indian IT context, where work pressures, project cycles, and client expectations uniquely shape employee experiences.

Gaps in Existing Research

Several critical gaps emerge from the current .First, many engagement studies rely on surveys, resulting in a lack of qualitative depth and limited narrative insight into how Gen Z employees actually experience and interpret their work lives (Lee et al., 2021). Second, there remains a limited industry-specific focus on the Indian IT sector, as existing qualitative studies on Gen Z engagement are either broadly framed or confined to general human resource practices rather than sector-specific realities (Das & Malik, 2024). Third, there is a notable absence of studies that meaningfully capture the lived experiences of this cohort in their own voices. Finally, prior research largely examines isolated variables, reflecting a lack of integrated perspectives that capture the interplay of multiple engagement drivers.

3. METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This qualitative research followed a descriptive study design, which is commonly adopted when researchers wish to capture participants' natural descriptions of experiences without imposing theoretical or interpretive complexity (Sandelowski, 2000). This is appropriate in workforce-related studies where the objective is to document employees' perceptions clearly and in a low-inference manner. Given the limited availability of qualitative evidence with regard to Gen Z engagement in the Indian IT sector, this approach allowed the researchers to access rich, first-hand insights reflecting how young employees articulate engagement factors in their own words.

Sampling and Participants

A **purposive sampling** technique was employed to identify participants who met the core inclusion criteria: belonging to Generation Z (age 20–27), being currently employed in the Indian Information Technology sector and having at least six months of organizational experience. A total of 30 participants satisfied these criteria and voluntarily contributed responses. The sample size aligns with qualitative descriptive norms, where depth of response is prioritized over statistical generalizability (Das & Malik, 2024).

Data Collection

Data were collected using a **single open-ended question**, strategically designed to minimize researcher bias and allow respondents to independently prioritize employee engagement practices. The guiding question was: “**What are the top four practices of employee engagement you look for in your organization to stay longer?**” This open structure enabled participants to freely express expectations without the constraints of predefined options typical of structured survey-based engagement research. Responses were collected through online forms to ensure comfort, anonymity, and psychological safety, thereby encouraging candid reflection among employees distributed across diverse Indian IT organizations.

Data Analysis and Findings

The responses were analyzed through **thematic analysis**, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) widely accepted stages of coding, pattern identification, and theme development. The analytic process involved multiple readings of responses, followed by initial open coding to identify repeated ideas. The initial codes were then systematically clustered into preliminary thematic patterns, after which theme boundaries were reviewed and refined. Finally, core thematic categories were defined and supported by verbatim excerpts. To supplement interpretation, a **word cloud** visualization was generated, highlighting frequently occurring concepts such as “work–life balance,” “support,” “reward,” “leadership,” and “growth.”



Figure 1 Author's own work

Overview of Participant Narratives

Participants described engagement practices that influence their intention to remain with an IT organization. The statements revealed a strong emphasis on well-being, relational support, career development, and fairness. The following examples reflect how Gen Z IT employees described the engagement practices that matter most to them:

Sample Respondent Statements

“One respondent indicated that the four practices most influential in their decision to remain with an organization, in order of priority, were a supportive work culture, a healthy work–life balance, effective leadership, and strong career-growth opportunities.” “Another respondent reported that their top retention priorities, in order, included maintaining a healthy work–life balance, access to career-growth opportunities, supportive supervisor behavior, and a fair reward system.” “A third respondent indicated that they prioritized work–life balance, opportunities for career growth, a fair and motivating reward system, and effective leadership as the key practices that would encourage them to remain longer with the organization.” “Another participant emphasized that their primary retention expectations included a supportive work–life balance, a fair reward system, realistic workload distribution, and effective leadership, which collectively influence their decision to remain with the organization.” “One respondent indicated that the key factors influencing their intention to stay with the organization were access to career growth opportunities, supportive supervisor behavior, a healthy work–life balance, and a fair reward system.”

These statements demonstrate how participants expressed their engagement expectations

Major Themes

Based on participants' statements, four dominant themes emerged:

Theme 1: Work–Life Balance

Work–life balance emerged as the most prominent theme. Participants repeatedly emphasized the importance of manageable workloads, flexibility, mental health considerations, and respect for personal time. Gen Z employees expressed that burnout and excessive pressure are strong drivers of disengagement echoing global findings on Gen Z workforce expectations (Erika et al., 2023; Chillakuri, 2020). They emphasized the need for hybrid or flexible schedules, realistic project timelines, and organizational policies that support well-being.

Theme 2: Supervisor Behavior and Support

Supervisor behavior significantly influenced perceptions of engagement. Employees associated positive engagement with supervisors who are approachable, understanding, and communicative. Leadership qualities such as empathy, fairness, accessibility, and timely feedback were considered essential. This aligns with research showing that leader member relationships are critical to Gen Z engagement and retention (Gabriel et al., 2022).

Theme 3: Reward and Recognition Practices

Fair reward systems—monetary and non-monetary were viewed as key to engagement. Participants stressed that appreciation, transparent evaluation, and timely acknowledgment of work enhance motivation. Recognition was not limited to financial incentives; verbal appreciation, team acknowledgments, and growth-linked recognition were also valued. Similar findings appear in Acheampong (2021) and Sarkar et al. (2023).

Theme 4: Career Growth Opportunities

Opportunities for learning, upskilling, and internal mobility were central to engagement expectations. Gen Z employees expressed that career stagnation reduces motivation, while structured growth paths improve retention intention. Common sub-elements included access to training, mentor support, and well-defined career pathways. These findings echo global patterns documenting Gen Z's desire for continuous development (Barhate & Dirani, 2022; Pandita et al., 2023).

Additional Supporting Themes

Secondary themes that supplemented the main findings included a healthy organizational culture, autonomy and decision-making freedom, transparent communication, realistic workload distribution, psychological safety, supportive team climate, and engagement-driven activities such as team-building. These elements reinforce the idea that Gen Z views engagement holistically encompassing both structural HR practices and interpersonal relational dynamics.

Discussion and Practical Implications :

The findings reveal a multi-dimensional understanding of engagement among Gen Z employees in the IT sector. The emphasis on work-life balance reflects shifting generational priorities, with younger employees placing mental health and personal well-being at the forefront of workplace expectations echoing trends documented by Leslie et al. (2021). Supervisor support played a central role in shaping engagement, illustrating the interpersonal component of engagement described in Kahn's (1990) foundational theory of personal engagement. To Gen Z, leadership behavior is less of a structural factor than an emotional anchor that impacts feelings of belongingness and trust. Reward and recognition practices further shape engagement by fulfilling the needs of this generation for fairness, transparency, and recognition. (Acheampong, 2021). Career development was also an important determinant, which is in coherence with the findings of Das and Malik (2024) that long-term learning and enhancement of employability are valued by the Generation Z workforce. Overall, the emerging patterns

support the contention that for the retention of young IT professionals, organizational strategies should integrate well-being, supportive leadership, career development, and mechanisms of fairness. The findings also underline the importance of relational approaches to leadership style, along with human-centered HR policies.

The findings of the study indicate that organisations should adopt a range of targeted strategies to enhance engagement among Generation Z employees. Emphasis on flexible and well-being-oriented work policies can help mitigate burnout while supporting work-life balance. Empower leadership development programs to develop empathetic, communicative, and supportive supervisory practices. The establishment of transparent and timely recognition systems is also essential to ensure that employee contributions are acknowledged in a meaningful manner. Further, the design of structured career progression and continuous learning pathways aligned with the aspirations of Gen Z can strengthen long-term commitment. Open and psychologically safe communication practices should be reinforced to encourage trust and participation. In addition, sustained investment in team-building initiatives can foster positive interpersonal relationships and inclusive work cultures. Collectively, these interventions enable organisations to better align their internal capabilities with the evolving expectations of the Gen Z workforce.

Conclusion

This qualitative study develops a nuanced understanding of the engagement practices that are valued by Generation Z employees working in the Indian IT sector. The four core themes that consistently emerged from participant responses were work-life balance, supportive supervisor behavior, fair reward systems, and career growth opportunities. These elements constitute the basic drivers of engagement for young professionals. The study contributes to the limited qualitative literature on Gen Z workforce dynamics in India and provides actionable insights for IT organizations to reduce turnover and enhance engagement.

Limitations & Suggestions:

This study is not exempt from limitations. One limitation is the relatively small sample size of only 30 IT employees and generalization is thus limited. As the data were collected through self-reported responses, the possibility of subjective bias cannot be entirely ruled out. Another limitation of this study pertains to the absence of empirical validation. Nonetheless, it is important to note that the primary goal of the current study was to identify factors of employee engagement that resonate with Gen Z in the IT sector. In addition, the use of a single open-ended question, while enabling focused depth, constrained the breadth and variety of narratives that could have been captured through more extensive qualitative techniques such as detailed interviews. Further, the exclusive focus on the IT sector limits the applicability of the findings to Generation Z employees in other industry contexts.

Future research may get benefit from in-depth interviews of employees and focus group discussions to obtain richer qualitative insights into employee engagement experiences. Comparative investigations across generational cohorts, particularly Generation Z,

Millennials, and Generation X, would enable a systematic assessment of generational variations in engagement drivers and work related expectations. The scope of future studies may also be extended across diverse industries and geographical regions to enhance the applicability of the findings. Longitudinal research designs would be

especially valuable to examine the dynamic nature of employee engagement over time and its evolution over time. Furthermore, the integration of qualitative insights with quantitative measures could support the development of robust hybrid models of employee engagement

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