

PURPOSE OR PAY CHECK? HOW GEN Z DEFINES CAREER FULFILMENT IN MODERN ORGANIZATIONS

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18630055>

Received	Accepted	Published
14 December 2025	28 January 2026	13 February 2026

ABSTRACT

The gen Z described as people born between 1997 and 2012 has unique expectations and values in the workplace market compared to the antecedent generations. The current qualitative research study investigated the views of career satisfaction among Gen Z workers in Lahore, Pakistan, in modern organisational settings. Ten full-time Gen Z employees aged 22-27 years were interviewed using semi-structured interviews, and the collected data were analyzed through thematic analysis, which revealed common patterns and common meanings of the experience of the interviewees. The results indicated that career fulfilment in Gen Z is a multi-dimensional phenomenon that entails purpose, meaningful work, personal and professional development, autonomy, organisational culture, financial security, ethical fit, and flexibility. The participants stressed the need to balance both intrinsic and extrinsic needs: social impact and personal development, and remuneration and occupational stability. Organizational support, recognition and psychological safety were found to be essential factors of engagement and satisfaction and a visible lack of ethical consistency in organisations was associated with dissatisfaction and turnover intentions.

These findings add to a subtle perspective of the career expectations of Gen Z and the urgency of organisations to take supportive, ethical and flexible approaches to attract, retain, and motivate young talent in the current workplaces.

Keywords: Gen Z, career satisfaction, qualitative research, organisational culture, psychological safety.

INTRODUCTION

The character of work and career demands has experienced tremendous changes over the past few years, which can be attributed to the rise in technology, changes in organisational models, and the change in generational values. The more the Gen Z population has been absorbed into the labour market, the more firms have to deal with a new generation whose expectations are vastly different compared to the previous generations.

The conceptualisation and experience of career fulfilment among this cohort has also become a critical issue of concern to scholars and practitioners due to its consequences on employee engagement, retention and long-term organisational sustainability.

Available studies reveal that Gen Z workers are seeking purposeful work, professional development, flexibility, ethical fit, and mental

health, and at the same time, recognise the need to have financial and job security (Jaiswal and Dhar, 2022; Nurul Chaerah, 2024).

Compared to previous generations, which largely focused on extrinsic incentives, like salary, tenure and hierarchical progression, Gen Z seems to define career fulfilment as a multidimensional construct that integrates intrinsic and extrinsic factors. Such a paradigm shift refutes the traditional theories of career motivation and requires a more subtle understanding of fulfilment construction in modern organisational environments (Choe et al., 2025).

An emerging literature explains the influence of meaningful work, career development and growth, supportive leadership, and organisational culture on career satisfaction and psychological wellness among younger workers (Wiley Newsroom, 2024). Such features as flexible work arrangements, autonomy, and access to continuous learning opportunities have been termed as being particularly salient to Gen Z, who display a disposition in favor of self-direction and the constant advancement. At the same time, a financial independence is one of the key issues, particularly when it comes to early-career professionals who have to face economic insecurity, family life, and the costs of living that grow increasingly high. The facts indicate that Gen Z does not avoid the financial incentive, but it wants the balance between economic stability and meaningful employment.

Despite the growing academic interest in Gen Z, much of the available literature is rooted in Western, high-income nation settings, which limits the applicability of the research to developing economies, where structural factors, cultural values, and socioeconomic stressors can influence career experience in a different manner. Young professionals in countries like Pakistan are often faced with difficult trade-offs between financial need, family demands and personal ambitions. Career fulfilment perception and negotiation are also affected by the organisational hierarchies, leadership style, and labour market conditions.

However, the number of empirical studies that investigate the experience of Gen Z in careers in the Pakistani setting is limited, especially studies

that use qualitative designs to understand the lived experiences.

Moreover, the scope of quantitative, survey-based studies on the same topic has constrained the ability to understand the subjective sense of fulfilment, purpose, and career success among Gen Z workers in their daily work experiences. Qualitative inquiry provides an excellent platform of discovering these meanings thus allowing the participants to define their values, motivations, and challenges in their own words. This method is particularly relevant when probing complex, situation specific constructs like career fulfilment. To fill these gaps, this paper attempts to analyse the way in which employees of Gen Z in Lahore, Pakistan, understand and conceive career fulfilment in contemporary organisational environments. The study uses qualitative design and semi-structured interviews with full-time Gen Z employees and asks questions that explore the factors contributing to or preventing fulfilment, such as purpose, growth, autonomy, organisational culture, financial stability, ethical alignment, and flexibility. This research attempts to project the voices of the Gen Z employees in a non-Western environment into the future, thus broadening the current theoretical ideas of career fulfilment and providing practical value to organisations that are willing to embrace and retain young talent within the changing world of work.

Rationale Of the Study

Career fulfilment has become a construct of relevance in organizational and career scholarship, due to its strong correlations with employee engagement, employee retention, employee well-being, and long-term employee performance. Since Gen Z is becoming an infiltrative force in the labor market, scholars are acknowledging that traditional concepts of career motivation, which are predominantly focused on extrinsic rewards and hierarchical promotion, may fail to capture the values and expectations of this generation. Empirical data shows that Gen Z has an increased emphasis on meaningful work, autonomy, ethical alignment and psychological safety but at the same time requires financial stability, thus providing evidence of a more complex and multidimensional

view of career fulfilment.

Nonetheless, the sparse literature is still insufficient in a number of aspects despite the growing academic concern. First, most of the empirical studies on GenZ careers have been placed in a Western context and might not be generalizable to the developing economies, which have different labor-market environments, socioeconomic limitations, and cultural beliefs that influence career decision-making processes. Second, the majority of the studies employ quantitative survey designs that, though useful in defining trends, lack the depth of understanding how the individuals themselves go about constructing, and negotiating the meaning of career fulfillment in the course of their everyday work life. As a result, the subtle interaction between purpose, financial need, organizational culture, leadership and ethical issues is not well-researched.

In addition, the modern workplaces are experiencing rapid changes due to the influence of technological changes, the flexibility of working conditions and the changes in the leadership practices. It is essential to know how Gen Z employees perceive such changes as well as how these interpretations affect their feeling of fulfillment because it is necessary to establish contextually relevant organizational strategies. In Pakistan, a country where young professionals are often torn between competing needs of economic security, family obligations and personal ambitions, a qualitative inquiry is specifically justified.

To this end, the current research aims to fill these gaps by utilizing a qualitative design to discuss the way Gen Z employees in Lahore, Pakistan, understand the concept of career fulfilment and what factors contribute to it and hinder it in contemporary organizational practices. The study adds to the literature by both generalizing conceptualizations of career fulfilment outside of Western settings and pre-empting the voices of Gen Z employees in an emerging economy by capturing lived experience via semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis. It is believed that the expected results will provide theoretical knowledge and practical implications on the organizations that are willing to transform

career structures, leadership practices, and workplace cultures to suit the emerging workforce that is dynamic.

Literature Review

According to recent scholarship, a strong orientation toward occupational activities that bring personal satisfaction and social topicality is observed in Gen Z. This group is more focused on having meaningful work than on traditional indicators of success like professional status. It has always been shown that Gen Z is becoming more and more drawn to organisations that are morally and ethically consonant to their value systems, especially when it comes to social justice, environmental sustainability and inclusiveness.

It has been analysed that the aspect of intrinsic motivation, namely, the satisfaction generated by the intrinsic nature of the task itself, including intellectual challenge, has a significantly stronger impact on the work motivation of Gen Z than Gen X and GenY. Therefore, to achieve a sense of fulfilment, a Gen Z employee needs to be engaged in a work that is purposeful towards the need to have a positive influence on society. This change relegates the pay check to a minimum demand and not a primary motivation of activity.

The work-life balance has become a mandatory part of career satisfaction among Gen Z members, with strong positive relationships detected between high career ambitions and the perception of high work-life balance among members of this generation. Gen Z attaches great importance to the flexible work mechanism, including remote work and flexible hours, which help create the balance of personal and professional lives.

In contrast to older generations, including the Baby Boomers, who often supported traditional work patterns that required many hours and high commitment, Gen Z shows a greater propensity to leave an organisation once its flexibility and wellbeing does not satisfy the needs of an individual. Technology is not understood as a utilitarian device but as a facilitator of independence, which allows virtual teamwork that breaks the strict office hierarchy. In this way, modern organisations that develop a flexible attitude and a free mindset are better equipped to retain Gen Z talent.

The efficient interaction and the realisation of the

Gen Z ambitions require the modern organisations to transform into learning organisations. Empirical research affirms that a culture of constant learning, conversation and enquiry is also useful in promoting Innovative Work Behaviour (IWB). To Gen Z, who values practical and flexible learning, the possibility to always upskill and connect with global intelligence is one of the defining factors of job satisfaction. Additionally, the learning environment and innovative output are connected through an ATC, which is an attitude of an individual toward change. In modern institutions which are creativity-focused, the ability to combine human and structural resources in order to facilitate healthier work behaviours is a pre-requisite to meet the needs of the modern workforce. Organisations with a culture of active participation, feedback, and encouragement of intellectual risk-taking create a setting where Gen Z can thrive.

Methods

Study Design

The qualitative research design was used to explore the conceptualisation of career fulfilment among Gen Z employees in contemporary organisations. Semi-structured interviews gave participants a chance to elaborate their perceptions and experiences and also gave the researcher the chance to pursue emergent themes. Interviews took about 22 to 30 minutes each and were audio taped so that they can be transcribed and analysed accurately.

Participants and Sampling

A purposive sampling of ten respondents aged between 22 to 27 years was carried out in various sectors within Lahore, Pakistan, such as in the private enterprises, non-governmental organisations, and call centres. All the respondents were full-time workers who were at least six months in their respective jobs. The purposive sampling method was used to sample the individuals who could give valuable and relevant information on the research. The inclusion criteria required that the participants be

of Gen Z cohort and full-time workers; those with extreme psychiatric disorders or with a tendency of distorting the response were not to be included.

Ethical Considerations

Before the data were collected, the participants were thoroughly informed about the purpose and procedures of the study, as well as signed an informed consent. Anonymity and confidentiality were assured and the participants were advised of their right to drop out any time without punishment. The Institutional Review Board of the University of Management and Technology, Lahore gave its ethical approval.

Data Collection

The semi-structured protocol that was used to conduct interviews included open-ended questions that addressed the knowledge of the participants on career fulfilment, aspects that affected their satisfaction, the relative importance of purpose and financial factors, and organisational background. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed to the word to help in the detailed analysis.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was done on the basis of the six steps of Braun and Clarke (2006). Primary codes were produced by a combination of both manual coding and AI-assisted coding, and later aggregated into sub-themes and narrowed down into broad categories by way of repetitive code revision. Comparison of participants revealed patterns and deviations thus guaranteeing analytical rigour and data saturation.

Trustworthiness

The credibility was also strengthened by using quotations of the participants so as to support the identified themes. Triangulation (manual and AI-supported) of the coding process enhanced the reliability of the results, whereas rereading transcripts promoted consistency in the development of the themes.

Results

Theme	Core Insight
Flexibility as a Core Component of Fulfilment	Remote/hybrid work, autonomy, flexible schedules drive engagement
Meaningful Work and Role Significance	Purposeful contributions and impact are central
Growth and Learning Over Immediate Pay	Skill development, responsibility, and progression prioritized
Psychological Safety and Work Culture	Respectful, supportive environments enhance motivation
Career Autonomy and Future Orientation	Control over career trajectory, promotions, and influence matter
Values-Based Career Decisions	Alignment with personal ethics and values critical
Socioeconomic and Generational Context	Family, financial background, and generational identity modulate priorities

Theme 1: Flexibility as a Necessary Component of Fulfilment.

In the case of Gen Z, flexibility was a key factor that determined career fulfilment. The participants emphasized the importance of freedom in working hours, having teleworking opportunities and the ability to have a wide range of career choice as opposed to following a traditional nine to five working schedules. Flexibility was described as a source of increased motivation, a stress coping factor, and a tool of maintaining a balance between personal and professional duties.

- Gen Z professions avoid the 9-to-5 model; working remotely, freelancing, and social-media jobs all contribute to the development of novel fulfilment ideas.
- I would rather be at the workplace when I can accomplish my work without straining my

mind. I am always motivated by flexibility.

Theme 2: Role and Work Significance.

The members emphasised the value of doing meaningful work and always seeing their role as a contributor to their organisation or society. This emphasis on meaning was associated with fulfilment and the belief that their work has consequential effects, be it through support, the advancement of organisational goals or the achievement of personal dreams.

- In my case, career fulfilment is a circumstance in which my personal goals, which include serving others, are actually achieved.
- I feel that my position is important when I see that my work is appreciated and corresponds to the goals of the company. (P9, 24, 98, Call centre)
- Any small job can be important when it

has an impact that improves the lives of other people. (P7, 26, NGO)

Theme 3: Growth and Learning rather than Short-term Pay.

It was focused on constant learning, skills acquisition and career growth instead of financial incentives. The respondents placed a value on professional growth, mentorship, and challenging assignments that helped to build long-term motivation and engagement. Although salary was recognized as a facilitator that was required, it was not regarded as a major source of satisfaction.

- Salary is a necessity but constant upgrading and acquisition of skills keeps me engaged and entertained at the workplace. (P9, 24, Call centre)
- I assess the development of my team leader in relation to mine; the profession is more about continued motivation than immediate monetary reward.

Theme 4: Work Culture and Psychological Safety.

A favourable organisational culture and psychological safety were identified as the reasons for engagement and well-being. Positive, reliable, and supportive working conditions increased motivation and decreased stress, as well as, unsupportive or toxic cultures decreased fulfilment.

- My managers and supervisors do not press us, but they cooperate, which makes it possible to work productively (P9, 24, Call centre).
- The key to workplace satisfaction is respect and trust without which even substantial remunerations will not yield satisfaction. (P8, 23, Private sector)

Theme 5: Career Autonomy and Future Orientation.

The participants wanted to be autonomous, have their career paths and develop over the long term. Both increased responsibility and mentorship roles and outcomes contributions were linked to higher levels of engagement and meaning. The organisations which were able to identify and

cultivate long-term growth were associated with greater fulfilment.

- I hope to be loyal to my company since they are also loyal to me and look forward to further opportunities to be promoted and grow in the future. (P9, 24, Call centre)
- Higher-level responsibilities, mentoring, and facilitation make my work more interesting (P8, 24, Private sector).

Theme 6: Career Choice based on Values.

The participants noted the importance of ethical congruence and congruence to personal values in professional decisions. A majority of them stated that they would reject the opportunities or work in organisations that are inconsistent with their values despite the attractive prospects. The perceptions of fulfilment were pegged on the decisions affected by the values, family commitments or moral ideals.

- When a task is against my personal values, I will decline it even when it is required by the organisation. There is no limit to compromise.
- My professional choices are influenced by the fact that I put the welfare of my parents first. (P9, 24, Call centre)

Theme 7: Generational and Socioeconomic Context.

Perceptions of careers depended on the generational identity and socioeconomic background. The participants were well-balanced in their purpose and economic stability, and they were driven by family and economic needs as well as cultural expectations. The demands of Gen Z were unique and reflected in the form of independence, flexibility, and meaningfulness, which indicated a generational change of priorities in careers.

- Career choice in some instances is overshadowed by family responsibility at the expense of personal choice. (P6, 23, NGO)
- We are the Gen Z, so organisations need to acknowledge our desires to be flexible and purposeful. (P10, 26, Private sector)

Summary

The Gen Z employees included in the sample

described career fulfilment as a complex balance that included purpose, growth, autonomy, and financial security. Financial stability was recognised as a desirable dimension, however, intrinsic motivation, which is expressed in meaningful work, ethical alignment, learning opportunities, and supportive organizational culture were always prioritized. Respondents also indicated that their engagement with the modern organisational structures was influenced by aspects such as flexibility, psychological safety and generational identity that demonstrates a refined understanding of fulfilment that is not tied to the traditional and salary-focused approaches.

Discussion

The current study evaluated the conceptualization of career fulfilment by Gen Z employees in Lahore, Pakistan in the context of modern organizations. The results show that career fulfilment is multidimensional and includes meaningful work, growth opportunities, autonomy, organizational culture, recognition, ethical fit and financial security. The given integrative approach is consistent with the existing body of literature suggesting that GenZ does not consider career success to be based on traditional extrinsic incentives, but about a synergistic mix of intrinsic and extrinsic factors that sustain both the professional and personal well-being (Sustainability, 2022).

One of the salient themes that have been evident among the participants was the significance of meaningful and purpose-driven work, especially work that brings benefits to others or work that is in line with the personal values. Respondents reported satisfaction being increased when their work had social or personal meaning, which often supersedes short-term economic rewards. Previous studies also show that the employees of Gen Z are highly concerned with meaningfulness of work, autonomy, and alignment of values, which have a positive impact on motivation, engagement, and retention (Sustainability, 2022; Administrative Sciences, 2023).

Even though purpose was core, financial well-being had to be a pre-condition to purpose achievement particularly among those participants with more family obligations. Salary was

interpreted as an instrument of independence, security and planning of future as opposed to being a complete source of satisfaction. It is a symptom of more general data that Gen Z is striking a balance between motivation and economic factors, especially when the situation is characterized by financial instability, with compensation and job security still being relevant in addition to personal satisfaction (Administrative Sciences, 2023; Sustainability, 2023).

Lastly, the opportunity to grow, independence, leadership that is supportive, and ethical organizational cultures were found to be important factors that contribute to continued engagement. They found that environments where participants reported dissatisfaction were those that were stagnant, lacked recognition, or had value incongruence and that psychologically safe and respectful cultures helped to increase motivation. In line with the previous results, Gen Z workers seek work environments that offer learning, feedback, flexibility and ethical congruence, and this factor once again highlights the importance of organizations using people-centred and development-focused practices in order to attract and retain young talent (SA Journal of Industrial Psychology, 2023; Sustainability, 2023).

Conclusion

The given research investigated the ways in which Gen Z workers in Lahore, Pakistan understands career fulfilment in the context of contemporary organisations. The results prove the idea that career fulfilment is a multidimensional construct that has been constructed through the combination of meaningful work, professional growth, autonomy, organisational culture, ethical alignment, and financial stability. Although financial security was regarded as the key to independence and long-term stability, the participants always stressed that fulfilment was much more than money as it relied on purpose, personal growth, and adherence to personal values. These results can be attributed to the previous studies, which show that Gen Z workers

are interested in the employment that brings meaning, is growth-oriented, and corresponds to the personal identity, as well as sufficient monetary rewards (Schroth, 2019). Besides, the article mentions that supportive leadership, psychological safety, flexibility, and recognition are of value in influencing engagement and retention of Gen Z employees. The preference of the participants was high towards organisations that give them autonomy, help them develop skills and promote an ethical and respectful work environment. Such results are complemented by the existing literature indicating that Gen Z considers the organisational culture, career growth, and work-life balance to be more important than the prior generations (Ozkan and Solmaz, 2015; Deloitte, 2023). On the whole, the research work is relevant in the expanding literature, as it presents qualitative data on a non-Western setting and highlights the need of organisations to embrace holistic and value-systematic work policies to attract, engage, and retain Gen Z employees in modern organisations. Nevertheless, the small qualitative sample, geographic confinement to Lahore, and use of self-reported data of interviews limits the generalisability, and a further study with bigger and more diversified samples is required to consolidate and expand these results.

Implications

Gen Z career fulfilment is complex and requires a balance between purpose, identity, and financial stability and not just intrinsic or extrinsic rewards. Central mechanisms that clarify the motivation of Gen Z are autonomy, growth opportunities, and psychological safety, thus, justifying the self-determination theory in a non-Western setting. Early responsibility and flexible work arrangements are also found to make a significant difference in engagement and retention of Gen Z employees. Individual and organizational values congruence is a critical determinant of the turnover and satisfaction intentions. A culture of recognition, respect, and supportive leadership has been found to be essential to maintaining Gen Z dedication and wellbeing in organizations.

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