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Beyond Retention: A Hybrid Bibliometric and Systematic Literature Review of Generation Z Workforce Engagement, Leadership, and Sustainable Employment Systems

Piyush Jhalani[1]
ICFAI University Jaipur
Ankita Chauhan[2]
JECRC University
Shalini Sayiwal
shalini.sayiwal@jaipur.manipal.edu
Manipal University Jaipur
Ajay Banerjee[1]
ICFAI University Jaipur

Systematic Review

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Beyond Retention: A Hybrid Bibliometric and Systematic Literature Review of Generation Z Workforce Engagement, Leadership, and Sustainable Employment Systems

Piyush Jhalani[1], Ankita Chauhan[2] Dr. Shalini Sayiwal*, Ajay Banerjee[1]

[1]Assistant Professor, ICFAI Business School, ICFAI University Jaipur, Jaipur, India

[2]Assistant Professor – I, JECRC University, Jaipur, India

Associate Professor Manipal University Jaipur, India

Assistant Professor, ICFAI Business School, ICFAI University Jaipur, Jaipur, India

Abstract

Generation Z's distinct expectations around meaningful work, flexibility, wellbeing, and authentic leadership are reshaping how organizations attract, engage, and retain talent, yet the growing research literature on this cohort remains fragmented across disconnected streams. This study synthesizes 97 Scopus-indexed articles published between 2016 and 2026 through a hybrid bibliometric and systematic literature review to consolidate this knowledge base. Bibliometric analysis, conducted using the Bibliometrix package and Biblioshiny interface in R, mapped the field's publication trends, influential sources and authors, keyword structure, and intellectual foundations through co-citation and historiographic analysis. A complementary thematic synthesis of the full-text corpus identified four interconnected themes: employee engagement and workplace expectations, talent management and retention strategies, leadership and organizational culture, and sustainability, wellbeing, and future workforce dynamics. Findings show the field has grown rapidly since 2020 (27.1% annual growth rate), with research increasingly converging on psychological and relational drivers of engagement and retention rather than compensation alone. Integrating these findings, the study proposes the Human-Centric Workforce Ecosystem Framework, linking organizational systems, psychological mechanisms, and workforce outcomes. The review offers theoretical, managerial, and future-research implications for organizations seeking to build sustainable, human-centric workforce strategies for Generation Z employees.

Keywords: Generation Z; employee engagement; talent management and retention; leadership; workforce sustainability; bibliometric analysis

1. Introduction

Organizations across sectors are rethinking how they attract, engage, and retain talent as digital technology, sustainability pressures, Industry 5.0, and shifting employee expectations remake the employment relationship. Generation Z sits at the center of this shift. Having grown up amid constant connectivity, social media, and a heightened awareness of social and environmental issues, this cohort brings expectations that differ markedly from those of earlier generations. Meaningful work, flexibility, wellbeing, career development, inclusivity, and organizational values now weigh more heavily in how they judge employers, challenging long-held assumptions about motivation, commitment, and retention [1, 2, 3, 4].

This shift in organizational priorities has drawn considerable attention from scholars across human resource management, organizational behavior, hospitality, sustainability, and future-of-work research. Early studies established that Generation Z employees weigh workplace flexibility, culture, employer reputation, sustainability, and development opportunities alongside compensation when evaluating employers; organizational image, employer branding, and corporate social responsibility now factor heavily into how younger workers choose where to work [1, 2, 3, 5, 6]. A parallel body of research looks at engagement itself. Workforce diversity and job meaningfulness build engagement and organizational citizenship behavior [7]. Redesigned people practices and engagement mechanisms sustain motivation among Generation Z employees [8]. Trust, empathy, and psychological safety strengthen commitment among younger workers, who tend to seek workplaces marked by transparency and supportive interpersonal relationships [9, 10, 11].

This focus on engagement connects directly to concerns about retention and workforce sustainability, now a strategic challenge for many organizations, particularly in knowledge-intensive and service-oriented industries where turnover can significantly affect performance. Generation Z employees are less inclined toward unconditional organizational loyalty and more willing to change employers when developmental, psychological, or lifestyle expectations go unmet, so retention now hinges on a combination of HR practices, career development, organizational commitment, work-life balance, and employer value propositions [1, 12, 13, 14]. This has pushed scholars toward employer branding, talent management, and employee-experience strategies as retention levers [3, 15, 16].

Leadership has emerged as a related, equally prominent concern in this literature. Traditional hierarchical approaches tend to fall short with this cohort, which values communication, authenticity, inclusivity, and developmental support over formal authority. Ethical leadership strengthens work engagement through trust-building processes, while empathetic and inclusive leadership practices contribute positively to job crafting and engagement [9, 10]. Put simply, a leader's ability to build supportive, psychologically safe environments now matters more than positional authority.

The scope of inquiry has also broadened to sustainability, wellbeing, and future workforce dynamics. Generation Z employees weigh sustainability initiatives, corporate social responsibility, and environmental performance when choosing employers [3, 5, 4], and wellbeing considerations

shape organizational commitment more broadly [1, 4]. Research on robotics, AI, and workforce transformation adds a further layer of opportunity and uncertainty [17]. Sustainability, resilience, and future-readiness have become organizing lenses for much of this work.

This growth has not produced a unified picture, though. Engagement studies emphasize psychological and organizational drivers; retention research focuses on turnover and loyalty; leadership studies examine trust and inclusion; sustainability research addresses organizational responsibility and wellbeing. For the most part these remain separate conversations rather than interconnected dimensions of one workforce system. The evidence itself tells a different story. Workplace flexibility affects engagement, satisfaction, commitment, and retention simultaneously [1]. Employer branding links reputation, sustainability, and development to both attractiveness and retention [3, 6]. Leadership research ties trust and inclusion to both engagement and commitment [9, 10]. Generation Z workforce outcomes emerge from organizational, psychological, and contextual factors acting together, not from isolated practices, and this picture grows more complicated still once digital transformation, evolving employment relationships, and workforce resilience concerns enter the frame [17, 4].

Against this backdrop, the present study synthesizes the Generation Z workforce literature through a combined bibliometric and systematic review of 97 Scopus-indexed articles published between 2016 and 2026. By pairing science-mapping techniques with qualitative thematic synthesis, it seeks to consolidate fragmented knowledge, identify dominant research streams, trace the field's intellectual evolution, and build a fuller understanding of Generation Z engagement, talent management, leadership, and sustainability.

The study makes four contributions. It maps the intellectual structure and evolution of the field (publication trends, influential sources, leading contributors, emerging domains). It synthesizes the literature into four interconnected themes: employee engagement and workplace expectations, talent management and retention, leadership and organizational culture, and sustainability, wellbeing, and future workforce dynamics. It proposes an integrated conceptual framework, the **Human-Centric Workforce Ecosystem for Generation Z Employees**, linking organizational systems, psychological mechanisms, and workforce outcomes. And it offers theoretical, managerial, and future-research implications.

These objectives translate into four research questions:

RQ1: How has research on Generation Z in the workplace evolved over the past decade?

RQ2: What factors shape employee engagement, talent retention, leadership expectations, and workplace sustainability among Generation Z employees?

RQ3: How do organizational practices influence the attitudes, behaviours, and workplace experiences of Generation Z employees?

RQ4: What opportunities exist for future research and managerial practice in managing the Generation Z workforce?

2. Research Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This study uses a combined bibliometric and systematic literature review (SLR) approach to synthesize the fast-growing body of knowledge on Generation Z workforce research, pairing quantitative science mapping with qualitative thematic synthesis to capture both the intellectual structure and the substantive content of the field.

This combination suits Generation Z workforce research well, given how substantially the field has grown over the past decade and how far it now spans employee engagement, talent management, retention, leadership, sustainability, wellbeing, and future workforce dynamics.

The workflow proceeded in stages: data collection and screening first, then two complementary analytical streams, then integration into a single conceptual framework.

2.2 Data Collection and Search Strategy

Scopus was chosen as the primary data source for its broad coverage of management, human resource management, organizational behavior, and sustainability research, and its compatibility with the Bibliometrix package. A single database kept the dataset consistent and limited the risk of duplicate indexing.

The literature search took place on **28 April 2026**. To capture research on Generation Z employees and workforce outcomes, a structured search query combined keywords for both the population and the constructs of interest. These terms were drawn from an examination of commonly used terminology in prior Generation Z workforce studies and related reviews. Alternative expressions for the target population (Generation Z, Gen Z, Zoomers) and for workforce outcomes (employee retention, talent management, employer branding, employee engagement) were included to maximize retrieval without pulling in irrelevant studies.

The search was limited to article titles, abstracts, and keywords, and to peer-reviewed journal articles published in English. The review covered **2016 to 2026**, spanning the period in which scholarly interest in Generation Z workforce issues emerged and grew. Restricting the search to peer-reviewed articles meant the review drew only on studies that had undergone formal scholarly evaluation, which supports the reliability of the evidence base.

The search initially returned **270 records** from Scopus. These formed the preliminary dataset for screening and eligibility assessment.

Table 1

Search Strategy and Dataset Parameters

Component	**Description**
Review Type	Hybrid Bibliometric Analysis and Systematic Literature Review (SLR)
Research Domain	Generation Z Workforce Research
Database	Scopus
Search Date	28 April 2026
Time Span	2016–2026

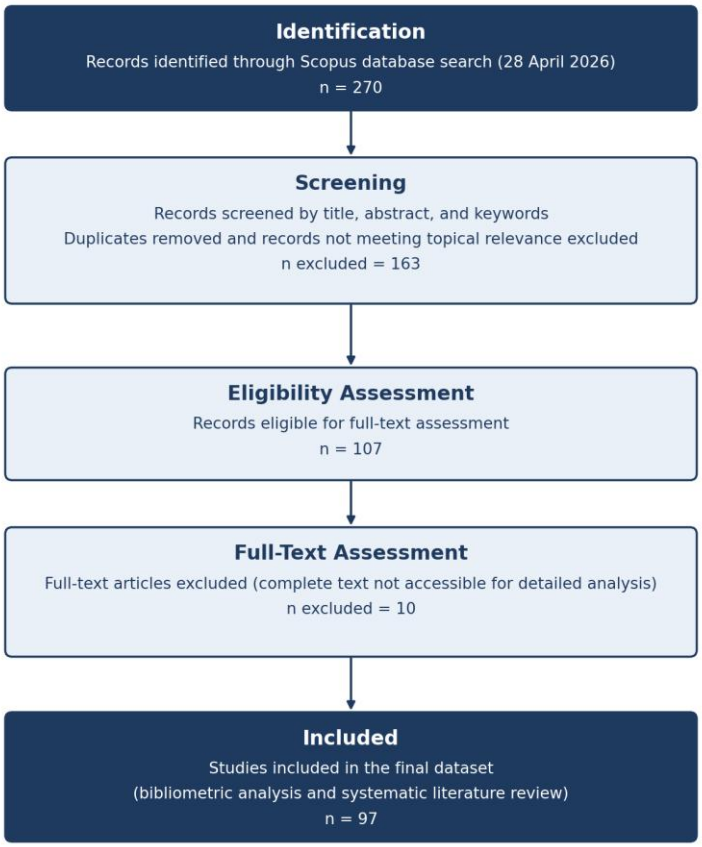
Search Fields	Title, Abstract, and Keywords
Search Keywords	"Generation Z", "Gen Z", "Zoomers", "Employee Retention", "Talent Retention", "Employee Turnover", "Talent Management", "Employer Branding", and "Employee Engagement"
Search Query	TITLE-ABS-KEY(("generation z" OR "gen z" OR "zoomers")) AND TITLE-ABS-KEY(("employee retention" OR "talent retention" OR "employee turnover" OR "talent management" OR "employer branding" OR "employee engagement"))
Document Type	Peer-reviewed Journal Articles
Language	English
Initial Records Retrieved	270
Records After Screening	107
Articles Excluded After Full-Text Assessment	10 (Inaccessible Full Text)
Final Sample Size	97 Articles
Bibliometric Software	Bibliometrix Package and Biblioshiny Interface in R
Bibliometric Techniques	Annual Scientific Production, Citation Analysis, Source Analysis, Country Analysis, Keyword Analysis, Co-word Network, Thematic Mapping, MCA, Co-citation Analysis, and Historiographic Analysis
SLR Approach	Thematic Synthesis
Final Themes Identified	(1) Employee Engagement and Workplace Expectations of Generation Z; (2) Talent Management and Retention Strategies; (3) Leadership and Organizational Culture; (4) Sustainability, Wellbeing, and Future Workforce Dynamics
Outcome of Review	Development of the Human-Centric Workforce Ecosystem Framework for Generation Z Employees
Inclusion Criteria	Peer-reviewed English journal articles addressing Generation Z workforce issues
Exclusion Criteria	Conference papers, books, editorials, notes, non-English studies, consumer/education-focused studies
Data Extracted	Authors, Year, Journal, Country, Research Design, Theory, Key Findings, Managerial Implications

Note. Source: Authors' own compilation, based on the study's Scopus search and screening protocol.

2.3 Screening and Selection Process

Article selection followed a structured screening procedure designed to keep only studies directly relevant to the review's objectives, illustrated through the PRISMA flow diagram in Figure 1.

Figure 1. *PRISMA Flow Diagram of the Study Selection Process*



Note. Source: Authors' own construction, based on the study's search and screening protocol.

Of the 270 records initially retrieved, titles, abstracts, keywords, and bibliographic information were checked for relevance. Duplicates were identified and removed first. The remaining studies were then screened by title and abstract for relevance to Generation Z workforce research, and those meeting the preliminary criteria moved to full-text assessment, where compliance with the inclusion and exclusion criteria was verified before the final sample was set.

Studies were kept when they addressed Generation Z employees or workforce-related issues in organizational settings and touched on themes such as employee engagement, talent management, retention, employer branding, leadership, wellbeing, sustainability, workplace experiences, or future workforce dynamics.

Several exclusion criteria applied. Conference papers, book chapters, editorials, notes, non-English publications, and studies without a clear workplace or employment focus were excluded, as were studies examining Generation Z purely from a consumer, marketing, or educational angle with no workforce relevance.

Screening left **107 articles** eligible for full-text assessment. Ten were then excluded because complete full-text versions were not available for detailed analysis and thematic synthesis. That left a final dataset of **97 peer-reviewed journal articles**, which underpinned both the bibliometric analysis and the systematic review.

This sample gives a reasonably comprehensive picture of the contemporary Generation Z workforce literature, drawing on organizational behavior, human resource management, leadership, sustainability, and future workforce research.

2.4 Bibliometric Analysis

Each bibliometric technique targeted a specific dimension of the field's knowledge structure, together covering its performance, conceptual development, collaboration patterns, and intellectual foundations. Analysis was conducted using the Bibliometrix package and Biblioshiny interface in R.

The bibliometric phase aimed to trace the intellectual evolution and knowledge structure of Generation Z workforce research, using several complementary techniques to build a holistic picture.

Performance analysis evaluated annual scientific production, source productivity, influential journals, country contributions, institutional affiliations, and highly cited publications, offering insight into the field's growth trajectory and its key contributors.

Keyword-based analyses (frequency analysis, co-word analysis, thematic mapping, and multiple correspondence analysis, or MCA) probed the conceptual structure of the literature, helping identify dominant themes, emerging topics, and shifting conceptual relationships.

Co-citation analysis and historiographic mapping rounded out the intellectual structure work. Co-citation networks pointed to influential scholarly foundations and theoretical clusters; historiographic analysis traced how key research streams unfolded over time. Together, these techniques gave a fairly complete view of the field's intellectual, conceptual, and social structure.

2.5 Systematic Literature Review and Thematic Synthesis

The full texts were examined through an iterative thematic synthesis process to identify recurring topics, theoretical perspectives, empirical findings, and organizational practices. This qualitative

work went beyond what quantitative science mapping alone could offer. Concepts, findings, and theoretical insights were compared repeatedly and grouped into broader conceptual categories, which were then refined into four overarching themes.

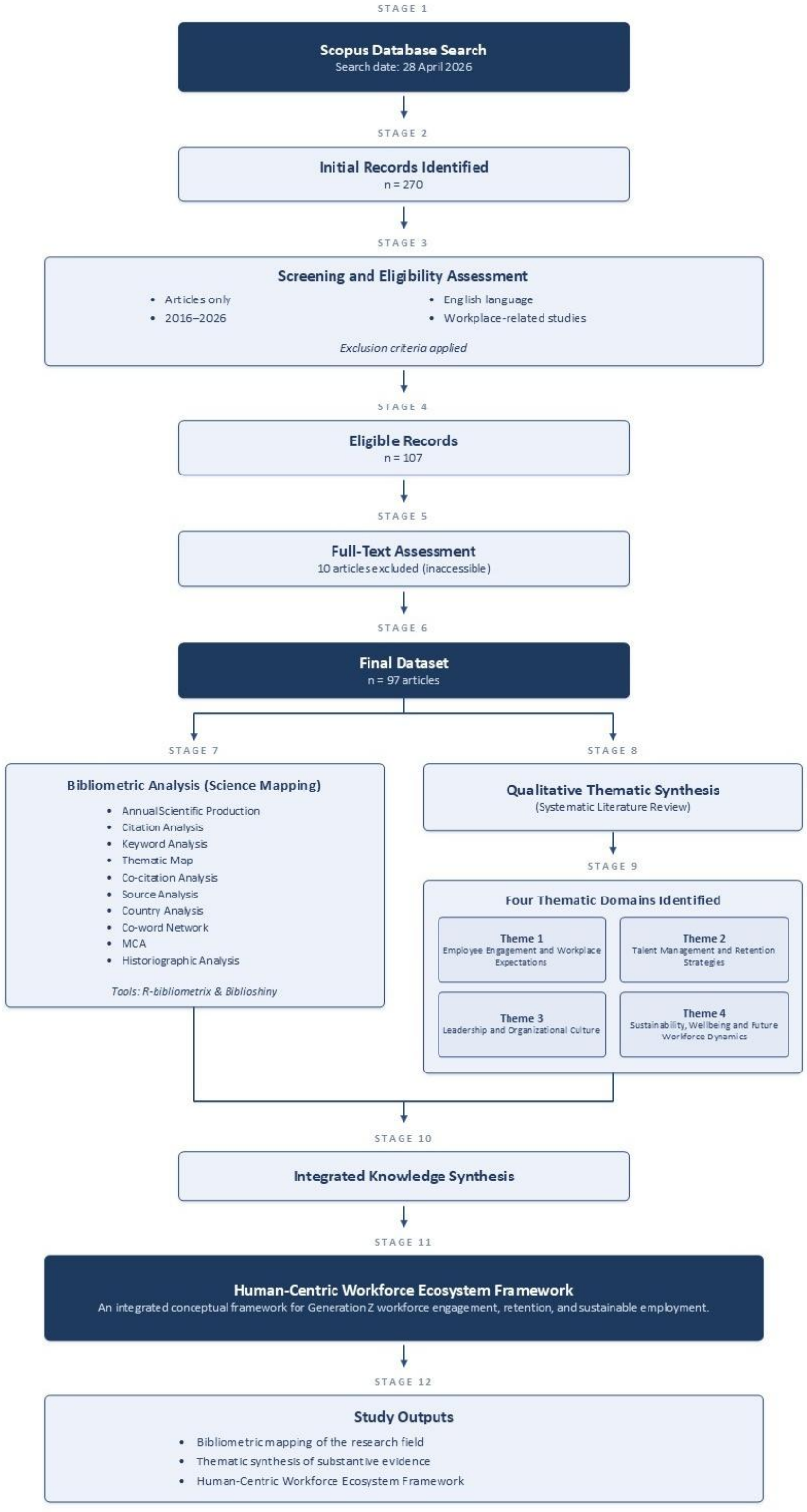
These four themes are: **(i) Employee Engagement and Workplace Expectations of Generation Z, (ii) Talent Management and Retention Strategies, (iii) Leadership and Organizational Culture, and (iv) Sustainability, Wellbeing, and Future Workforce Dynamics**. Together they capture the dominant areas of scholarly inquiry in the Generation Z workforce literature and offer an integrated view of what shapes employee attitudes, behaviors, and organizational outcomes.

Theme development was iterative. Recurring concepts identified across the included studies were organized progressively into broader domains, with continuous comparison and consolidation sharpening the category boundaries until four coherent, complementary themes remained.

Beyond naming these domains, the synthesis examined how organizational practices, psychological mechanisms, leadership approaches, and workforce outcomes relate to one another. Integrating these findings led to the Human-Centric Workforce Ecosystem Framework, which brings the evidence together into a single conceptual representation of what drives Generation Z employee engagement, retention, wellbeing, and sustainable workforce development.

Figure 2 illustrates the resulting workflow: data collection and study selection feed into two complementary analytical streams, which are then integrated through evidence synthesis to produce the Human-Centric Workforce Ecosystem Framework.

Figure 2. *Research Methodology Workflow*



Note. Source: Authors' own construction.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Main Information and Field Growth

The dataset comprises 97 papers from 75 sources published between 2016 and 2026, with a 27.1% annual growth rate that marks a field expanding quickly within management, organizational behaviour, sustainability, and HR research. Scholarly interest in sustainable employment systems, leadership, and worker involvement among Generation Z has grown accordingly. An average document age of 1.84 years confirms how recent this literature is, and 11.65 citations per document on average is a meaningful figure for a field this young. The dataset's 362 author keywords and 138 Keywords Plus entries speak to real conceptual breadth.

Annual publication volume stayed modest through the early years before rising sharply after 2020, tracking the growing salience of workforce transformation, changing employee expectations, work–life integration, and digital work environments in organizational research. Nothing in the trend suggests a plateau. Publication activity keeps diversifying across employee engagement, employer branding, organizational commitment, and workforce retention. This is no longer a niche interest; it has become a recognized and strategically important research stream.

3.2 Citation Structure and Intellectual Influence

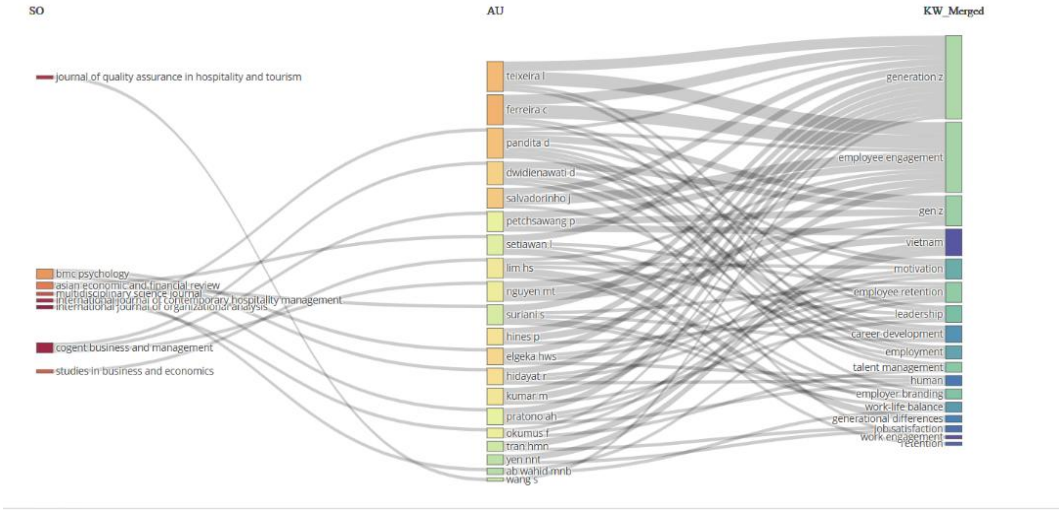
Citation patterns track the field's influence alongside publication volume. Earlier studies attract more citations, unsurprisingly, given their longer exposure window. That influence touches organisational culture, employee engagement, sustainable HRM, technological adaptation, and retention tactics. Few of these threads sit in isolation; citation activity has begun tying them together, and academic visibility has followed.

3.3 Three-Field Plot: Sources, Authors, and Themes

The three-field plot (Figure 3) links influential sources, authors, and themes, mapping the field's intellectual configuration and how contributions distribute across thematic clusters. Strong connections show up among employee engagement, motivation, retention, leadership, career development, talent management, and work-life balance, which tells us research is targeting the workforce concerns distinctive to this generation rather than generic HR topics. Contributions come from management, organisational studies, psychology, business, and hospitality journals, a range of theoretical and methodological angles that speaks to how broadly workforce transformation concerns apply.

The authorship side of the plot reveals moderate scholarly integration, with several researchers contributing across multiple thematic areas. Scholars are not, for the most part, studying isolated variables; they investigate how leadership, engagement, retention, organizational culture, and employee expectations relate to each other, a pattern that suggests the field is moving gradually toward conceptual integration.

Figure 3. *Three-Field Plot of Sources, Authors, and Keywords*



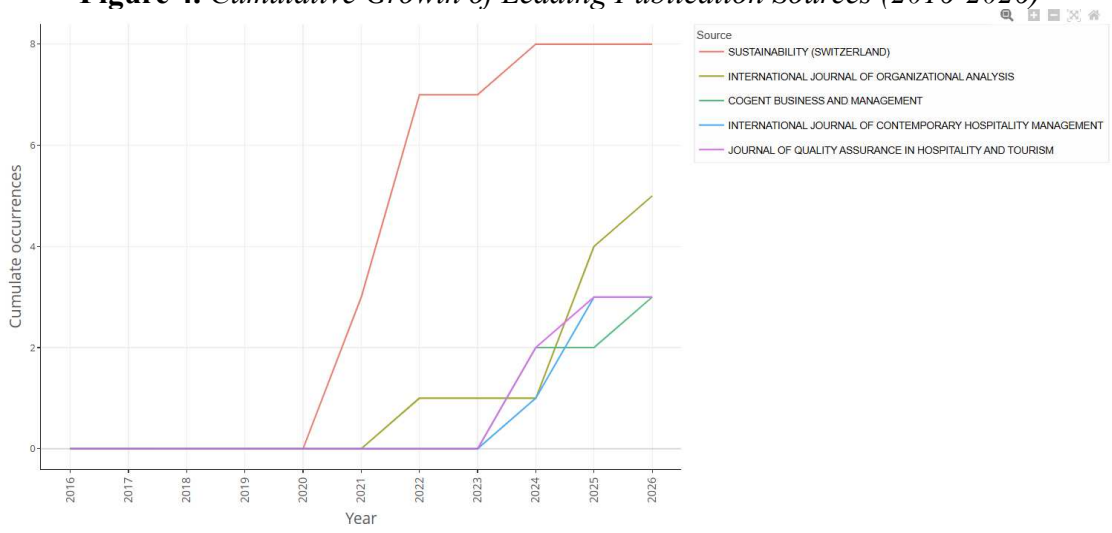
Note. Source: Authors' own elaboration using the Bibliometrix R-package (Biblioshiny interface) based on Scopus-indexed data.

Organizational outcomes correlate strongly with generational-identity terms. Engagement, motivation, and retention are frequently tied to Generation Z and generational-difference language, which suggests these shifts get treated as strategic organisational issues rather than simple demographic change. Context-specific terms such as Vietnam also turn up, hinting at growing interest in non-Western labour contexts and a research community that is collaborating across disciplinary lines.

3.4 Most Relevant Sources and Growth Dynamics

Sustainability (Switzerland) leads as a publication outlet, which suggests engagement, retention, and leadership are increasingly being read through a sustainability and organisational-resilience lens. The International Journal of Organisational Analysis follows, consistent with ongoing interest in workplace dynamics and employee attitudes. The International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management and the Journal of Quality Assurance in Hospitality and Tourism show how much these workforce issues matter in service-intensive industries specifically. Frontiers in Psychology, Administrative Sciences, and Problems and Perspectives in Management round out the list, marking a convergence of psychological and managerial perspectives.

Figure 4. *Cumulative Growth of Leading Publication Sources (2016-2026)*

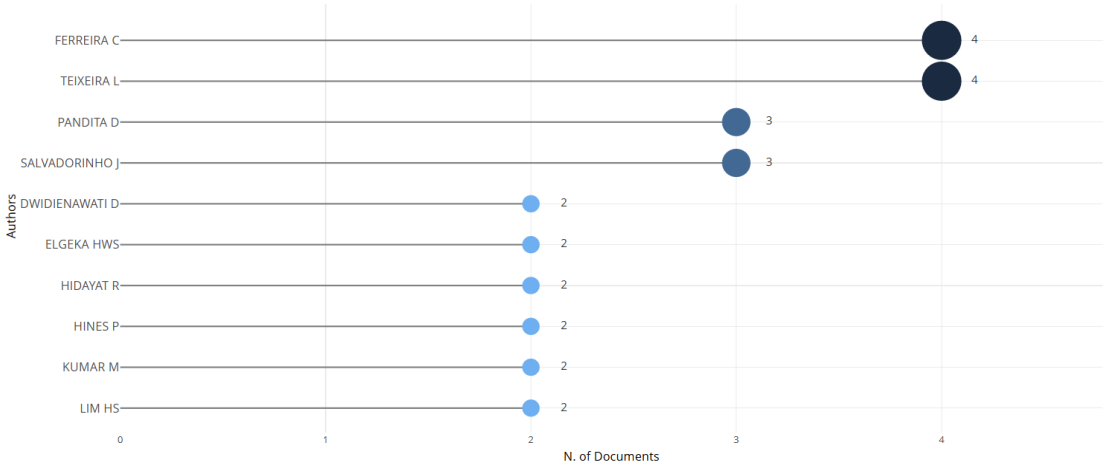


Note. Source: Authors' own elaboration using the Bibliometrix R-package (Biblioshiny interface) based on Scopus-indexed data.

Sustainability (Switzerland) (Figure 4) also posts the strongest post-2020 growth among the leading outlets, in line with the growing use of sustainability and organisational-resilience concepts to analyse workforce challenges. Talent retention, workplace wellbeing, employee engagement, and generational alignment are, increasingly, treated as essential to long-term organisational success rather than side issues. Growth concentrates after 2020 across the leading journals, and none of them show any sign of decline. The publication base keeps diversifying across sustainability, management, psychology, and hospitality outlets, a field earning steadily more legitimacy within mainstream organizational research.

3.5 Author Productivity and Collaboration

Figure 5. *Most Relevant Authors by Number of Documents*



Source: Authors' own elaboration using the Bibliometrix R-package (Biblioshiny interface) based on Scopus-indexed data.

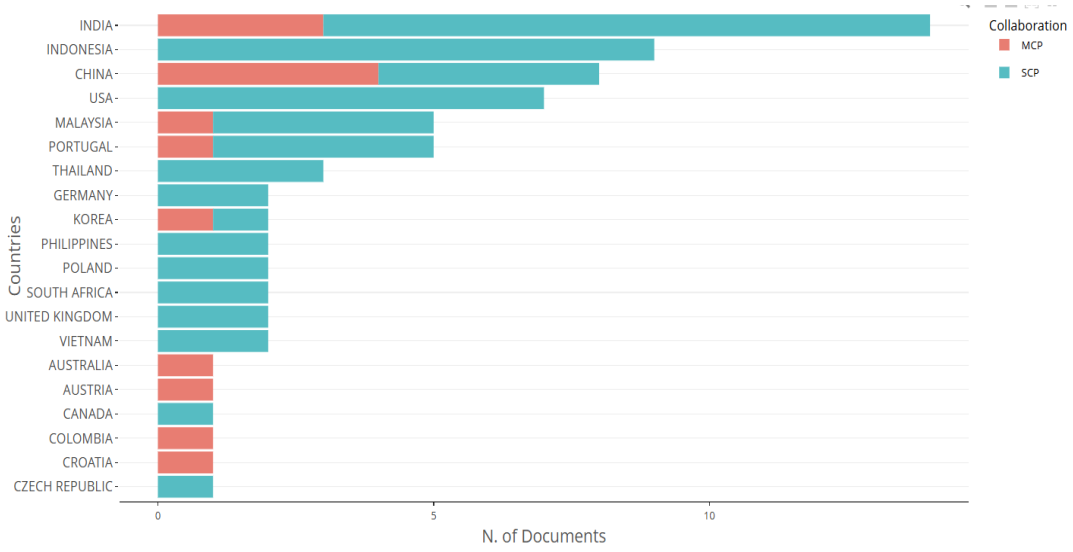
Author productivity (Figure 5) is fairly dispersed rather than concentrated among a handful of dominant scholars: a pattern typical of emerging fields where diverse perspectives and interdisciplinary collaboration carry theoretical development forward. Ferreira C and Teixeira L are the most productive contributors, with steady publication records that speak to their role in advancing workforce transformation, employee engagement, and organisational-adaptability research. Salvadorinho J and Pandita D also stand out, for work on organisational culture, leadership, employee engagement, and talent retention.

This relatively balanced distribution, combined with continued participation from management, HRM, psychology, sustainability, and hospitality scholars, suggests a field still in an active developmental stage rather than one a few established voices have come to dominate. Wider interdisciplinary involvement means more conceptual diversity, and a broader base of contributors to draw on as the field keeps growing.

3.6 Geographical Distribution and Institutional Contributions

Where corresponding authors are based tells us something about the global diffusion, regional concentration, and collaborative structure of this research. Corresponding-author geography (Figure 6) spreads across a diverse set of countries, which marks workforce transformation and generational change as an internationally relevant concern rather than a regionally confined one. India leads, tracking growing scholarly interest in workforce integration, talent retention, and employee engagement within its fast-growing labour market; the predominance of single-country publications there points to a solid domestic research base built around regional organisational challenges. Indonesia, China, and the US also contribute significantly, underscoring how broadly workforce transformation and shifting employee expectations matter, and Malaysia, Portugal, Thailand, and Korea extend the field's geographic reach further still.

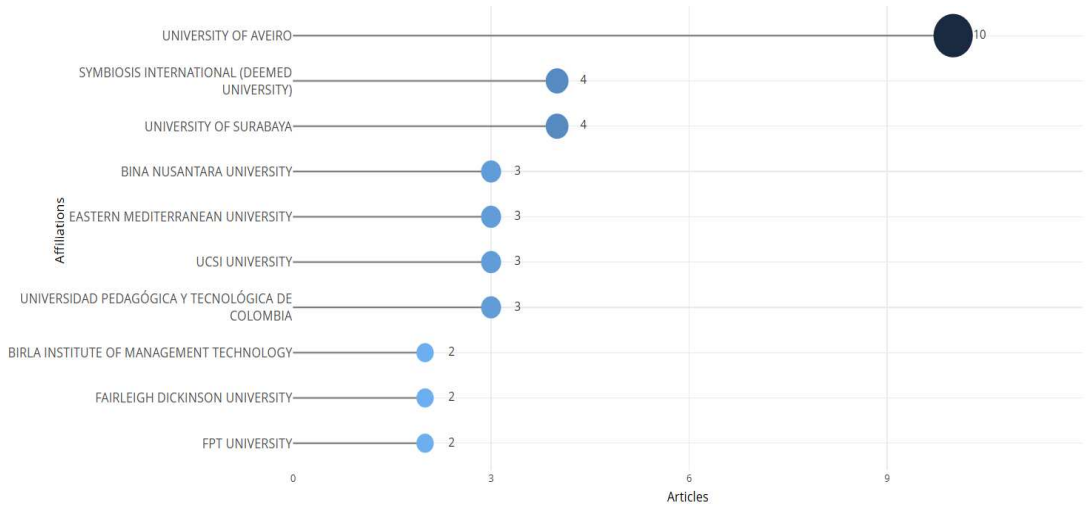
Figure 6. *Corresponding Author's Country and Collaboration Type*



Note. Source: Authors' own elaboration using the Bibliometrix R-package (Biblioshiny interface) based on Scopus-indexed data.

Institutional contributions (Figure 7) show a similar spread, across universities in Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America. The University of Aveiro leads, reflecting its role in advancing workforce dynamics and organizational sustainability research, followed by Symbiosis International (Deemed University) and the University of Surabaya. No single centre dominates. That spread points to a field still finding its shape, held up by broad institutional participation and growing international collaboration.

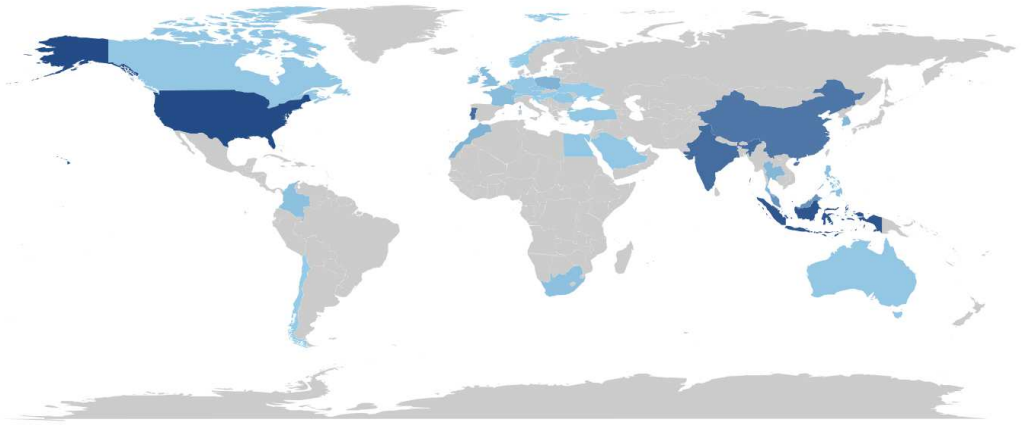
Figure 7. *Most Relevant Affiliations by Article Count*



Note. Source: Authors' own elaboration using the Bibliometrix R-package (Biblioshiny interface) based on Scopus-indexed data.

Global production patterns (Figure 8) confirm the picture: scholarly contributions span multiple continents. Workforce transformation and generational employment dynamics are, plainly, a global concern rather than a regional one.

Figure 8. *Country Scientific Production*

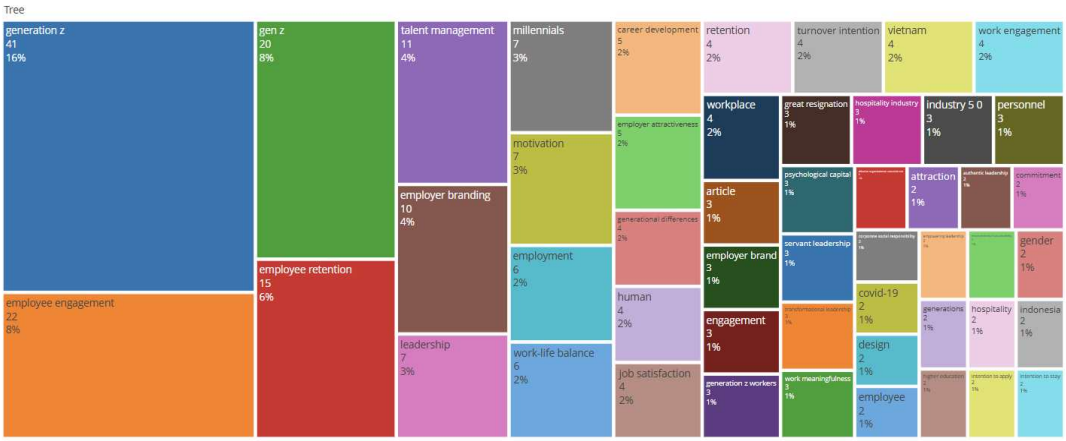


Note. Source: Authors' own elaboration using the Bibliometrix R-package (Biblioshiny interface) based on Scopus-indexed data.

3.7 Keyword Frequency and Dominant Themes

Keyword analysis (Figure 9) confirms Generation Z as the most frequent term, alongside talent management, employee engagement, and employee retention. That combination alone tells us how much interest centres on attracting, motivating, and retaining younger workers. Terms such as leadership, motivation, work-life balance, and employer branding show the field has moved well beyond traditional HRM into behavioural, cultural, and strategic territory, with employee-centred workforce strategies getting more attention as it does.

Figure 9. *Most Frequent Keywords*



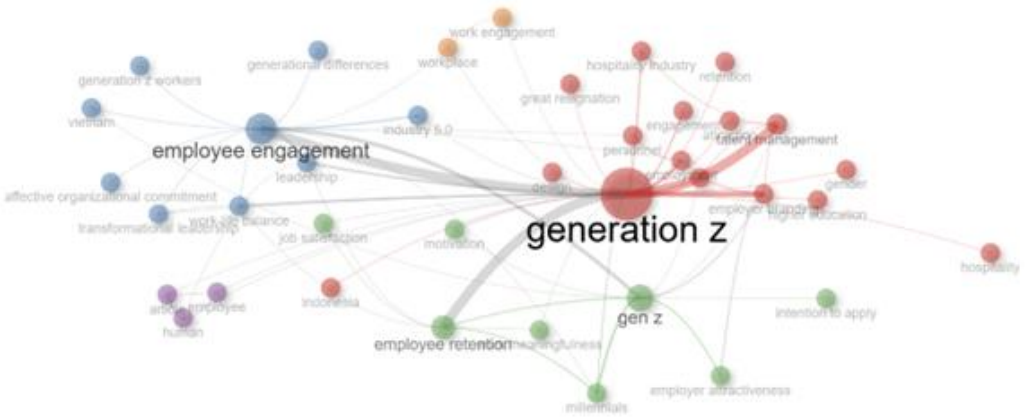
Note. Source: Authors' own elaboration using the Bibliometrix R-package (Biblioshiny interface) based on Scopus-indexed data.

"Generation Z" and "Gen Z" co-occur simply because both terms are in use, not because the literature is split. Employee engagement's prominence marks it as a central mechanism for retention, satisfaction, and performance. Workplace flexibility, organizational commitment, wellbeing, and employer branding sit alongside it as emerging topics, and the field's boundaries keep stretching to accommodate them.

3.8 Co-Word Network and Conceptual Structure

The co-word network goes deeper than simple keyword frequency, capturing how strongly concepts associate with one another and revealing the conceptual architecture of the field. Generation Z anchors the network (Figure 10), sitting at the centre of multiple research streams, a reflection of how much the field concerns itself with the organizational, behavioral, and managerial implications of this cohort specifically. Employee engagement is the second most prominent node, central to attracting, motivating, and retaining younger employees. Retention, employer attractiveness, motivation, work–life balance, job satisfaction, talent management, and leadership form further interconnected nodes around it, all pointing toward employee-centred approaches to changing workforce expectations.

Figure 10. *Co-Word Network of Author Keywords*



Note. Source: Authors' own elaboration using the Bibliometrix R-package (Biblioshiny interface) based on Scopus-indexed data.

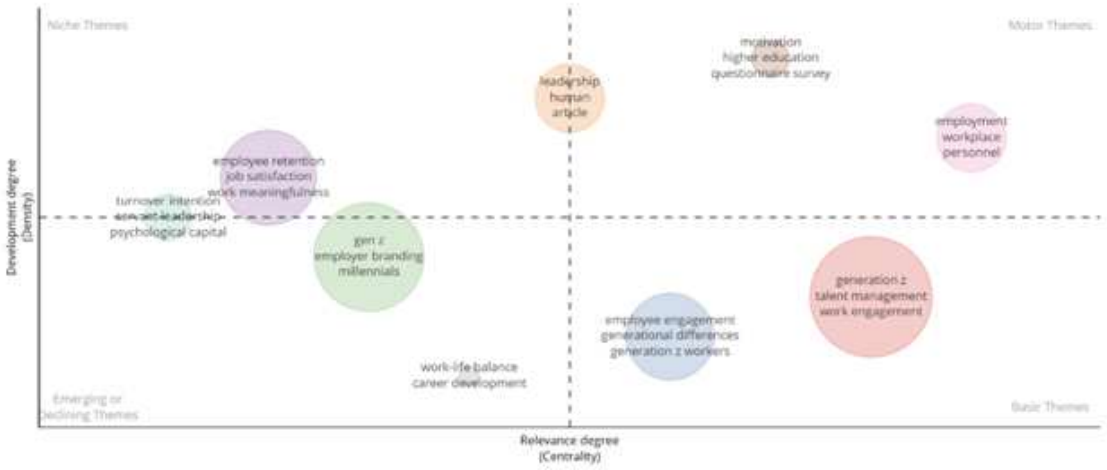
Contextual diversification shows up too, through keywords tied to the hospitality industry, higher education, Industry 5.0, and various regional settings; Generation Z workforce dynamics are clearly being examined across a wide range of sectors and environments. Emerging themes such as meaningfulness, servant leadership, and the "great resignation" suggest the field keeps pushing

into new territory. Connectivity across organizational, behavioral, leadership, and human resource themes runs strong throughout the network, which speaks to a research domain that is maturing conceptually even as it keeps opening up new questions to answer.

3.9 Thematic Map

The thematic map (Figure 11) places Generation Z, talent management, and work engagement as dominant basic themes: high centrality, moderate density. These concepts anchor the field but still have room for theoretical development. Employee engagement, generational differences, and Generation Z workers sit in similarly central positions, while employment, workplace, and personnel register as motor themes: mature, high-relevance areas that the literature has already worked through in some depth.

Figure 11. *Thematic Map of Research Themes*



Note. Source: Authors' own elaboration using the Bibliometrix R-package (Biblioshiny interface) based on Scopus-indexed data.

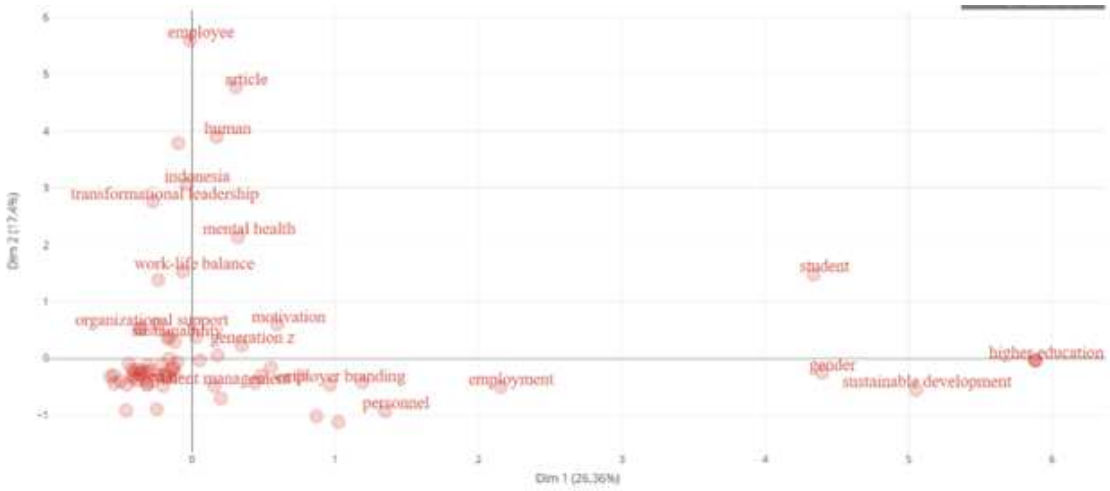
Employee retention, job satisfaction, psychological capital, work meaningfulness, and servant leadership fall into the niche-themes quadrant. They are less central to the overall structure, but they show high internal coherence, which suggests the psychological and employee-centered side of workforce management is getting more sophisticated treatment than its position on the map alone would suggest. Work–life balance and career development register as emerging themes with lower current maturity, though changing workforce expectations and flexible work arrangements could well push them further into focus. Taken as a whole, the map shows a field anchored in Generation Z workforce management, engagement, and talent management that is, at the same time, stretching toward psychological wellbeing, leadership, and workplace sustainability.

3.10 Conceptual Structure via Multiple Correspondence Analysis

The MCA map (Figure 12) shows a well-defined intellectual core built around Generation Z, talent management, employee engagement, organizational support, motivation, and employer branding.

Most of the literature centres on strategies for attracting, engaging, and retaining younger employees through employee-centred HRM frameworks, and Generation Z itself functions as the concept that ties everything else together, closely linked to motivation, workplace support, and talent management.

Figure 12. *Conceptual Structure Map (Multiple Correspondence Analysis)*



Note. Source: Authors' own elaboration using the Bibliometrix R-package (Biblioshiny interface) based on Scopus-indexed data.

Peripheral clusters tell a different story. Higher education, student, gender, and sustainable development form more specialised streams with their own theoretical and contextual orientations. Higher education and student sit near each other, which fits with growing attention to pre-employment workforce expectations and the career perceptions people form while still in school. Gender and sustainable development sit together too, hinting that inclusivity and sustainability perspectives are working their way into workforce research, gradually. Leadership- and wellbeing-related themes (transformational leadership, mental health, work-life balance) occupy the middle ground, which suggests the field is only beginning to fully register how psychological and leadership factors shape engagement.

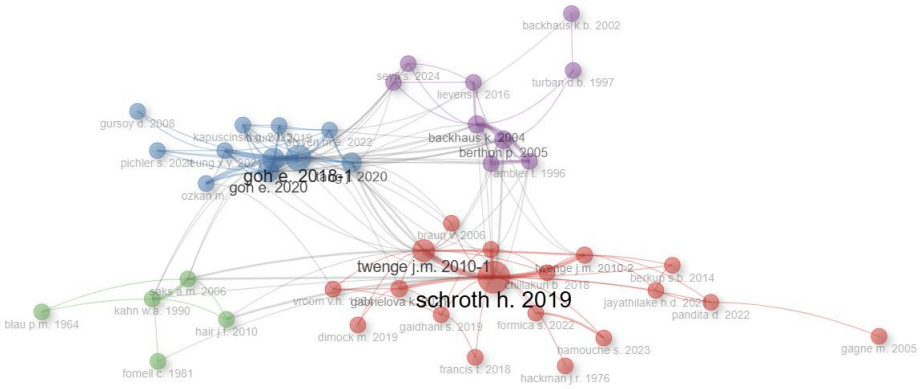
So the MCA structure shows two things happening at once: a core that keeps consolidating, and a periphery that keeps diversifying across organizational, psychological, educational, and sustainability lines. The gap between them is itself useful: it marks out where future research could do more to connect mental health, sustainability, gender, and educational transition issues with mainstream engagement and organizational adaptation work.

3.11 Co-Citation Network and Intellectual Foundations

Co-citation analysis gets at the intellectual foundations and theoretical lineage of the field, showing which studies get cited together often enough to form a shared knowledge base. The network (Figure 13) draws on organizational behavior, employer branding, employee engagement, leadership, workforce psychology, and talent management, with no single perspective dominating.

Schroth [18] sits at the most central position, foundational to discussions of Generation Z, workforce expectations, and organizational adaptation. Goh [19] follows closely; hospitality and workforce-management research has clearly shaped how the field understands engagement and retention among younger employees.

Figure 13. *Co-Citation Network of Foundational Studies*



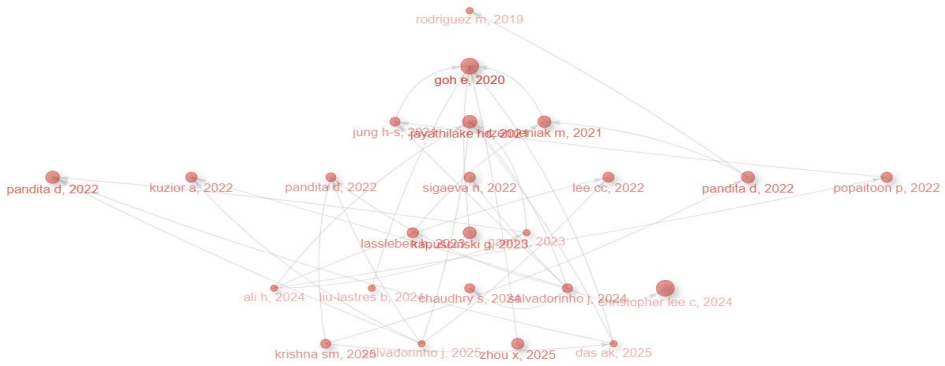
Note. Source: Authors' own elaboration using the Bibliometrix R-package (Biblioshiny interface) based on Scopus-indexed data.

Employer-branding studies form their own distinct cluster, anchored by Berthon [20] and Backhaus [21], which tracks with how much organisational attractiveness, talent acquisition, and employee commitment now matter in workforce research. Leadership and organizational-behavior literature are strongly integrated as well, leaning on psychological and relational frameworks to explain engagement and workplace outcomes. Older, foundational studies sit alongside recent ones throughout the network. The field stays grounded in established theory even as it takes on newer workforce challenges, and dense interconnections across HRM, organizational psychology, leadership, hospitality, and sustainability research bear that out.

3.12 Historiographic Development

Historiographic analysis takes a temporal view of the field's development, tracing citation linkages among influential studies to show how knowledge progressed chronologically rather than just which studies got cited most. The network (Figure 14) traces rapid development since 2019 through a tightly interconnected sequence of studies. Goh [19] and Rodriguez [22] stand out as foundational, shaping the research that followed on workforce engagement, retention, and organizational adaptation among younger employees, and a dense cluster of studies between 2021 and 2024 marks a period of accelerated growth, both theoretical and empirical.

Figure 14. *Historiographic Map of Citation Development*



Note. Source: Authors' own elaboration using the Bibliometrix R-package (Biblioshiny interface) based on Scopus-indexed data.

The network also shows a shift away from purely organizational concerns toward employer branding, sustainability, leadership, talent management, and employee wellbeing. Citation linkages among the more recent studies run strong, which points to cumulative knowledge-building rather than scattered, disconnected inquiry. Perspectives from organizational behavior, human resource management, leadership, psychology, and sustainability all feed into this network now. What began as a narrow, organizationally focused conversation has become something considerably broader in under a decade.

Theme 1: Employee Engagement and Workplace Expectations of Generation Z

Generation Z employees define engagement differently than earlier generations did. Where job security and loyalty once anchored the concept, this cohort looks for meaningful work, flexibility, wellbeing, technology, and value congruence: purpose-driven environments that support growth, autonomy, and psychological wellbeing [23, 24]. Engagement rises when organizations offer development, social contribution, and alignment with sustainability and ethical values [25, 26]. Flexibility and work–life integration matter a great deal too, though excessive digital connectivity carries its own risk of burnout and blurred boundaries [27, 28].

Technology-enabled workplaces help as well. Gamification and responsive digital communication can boost engagement and creativity among digitally native employees [29]. Organizational commitment, though, stays fluid; it hinges more on meaningful experience, wellbeing, and development than on traditional incentives, and Saraiva and Nogueiro [30] show the inverse holds too, tracing how the absence of these conditions drives disengagement specifically among Generation Y and Z workers. What emerges from this literature is engagement built from several moving parts at once: meaningful work, flexibility, technology, and psychological support. Organizations hoping to attract, engage, and retain younger workers will need human-centric, development-oriented practices to hold all of that together.

Theme 2: Talent Management and Retention Strategies

Retention approaches built mainly around compensation and job security no longer work well for Generation Z. Talent management has become a system with several interlocking parts: career development, flexibility, organizational support, value alignment, and psychological wellbeing [31, 32]. Employees now weigh workplace experience and organizational authenticity more heavily than long-term loyalty to any one employer.

Employer branding sits at the center of both attraction and retention, a link Vieira et al. [36] frame explicitly in their systematic review of Generation Z talent management through an employer-branding lens. Organizational values, development opportunities, sustainability orientation, and transparent communication all shape how attractive an employer looks to Generation Z workers [3, 25], and digital recruitment and social media presence reinforce that image further. Career growth and continuous learning matter just as much: training, mentoring, skill development, and advancement opportunities are shown to raise both engagement and intention to stay [33, 31]. Flexible work arrangements, recognition, and wellbeing support increasingly hold their own against financial rewards, which speaks to how important the psychological side of the job has become, not just the material one [34, 35].

Organizational support, psychological contract fulfillment, and value congruence matter too. Supportive leadership, fairness, and emotionally sustainable environments strengthen commitment, and sustainability plus ethical practice bolster employer attractiveness on top of that [32, 26]. None of these levers works especially well in isolation. Retaining Generation Z talent means pulling employer branding, career development, flexibility, psychological support, and ethical alignment together into one adaptive, employee-centered strategy.

Theme 3: Leadership and Organizational Culture

Leadership and culture matter a great deal to Generation Z engagement, wellbeing, commitment, and retention. Younger employees favour authentic, transformational, and participative leadership, built on trust, transparency, emotional support, and developmental guidance, over traditional hierarchical models [37, 38]. They treat leadership as something relational, a lens through which they judge whether an organization is legitimate and psychologically safe.

Transformational, authentic, and servant leadership consistently raise engagement, motivation, and organizational commitment by building meaningful relationships, trust, and opportunities for development. Supportive cultures that emphasize inclusivity, fairness, open communication, and psychological safety strengthen employee attachment and cut down on turnover intentions [39, 40], a pattern Katsaros [41] confirms directly, linking inclusive leadership to Generation Z employees' adaptive performance through the mediating role of workplace happiness. Leadership also plays a role in wellbeing and resilience specifically: empathetic leadership, mentoring, and participative management improve psychological sustainability, creativity, and learning, and ethical leadership paired with value congruence builds organizational trust on top of that. For organizations trying to hold onto Generation Z talent, the takeaway is fairly direct: cultivate leadership that is human-centric, and build cultures that are psychologically supportive and aligned with what this generation actually values.

Theme 4: Sustainability, Wellbeing, and Future Workforce Dynamics

Sustainability and wellbeing now shape Generation Z's employment expectations in a real way. Younger employees judge organizations on ethical conduct, environmental responsibility,

wellbeing support, and authenticity almost as much as on economic reward [26, 25]. ESG practices, sustainable HRM, and ethical leadership all positively influence employer attractiveness, engagement, and retention, and psychological wellbeing, mental health support, and work-life balance are treated more and more as organizational responsibilities rather than personal matters. That said, flexible, digital work systems can raise the risk of burnout and digital fatigue when support mechanisms fall short [27], a tension Goel and Singla [42] trace across two decades of remote-work research, where wellbeing gains appear strongest when organizations pair flexibility with deliberate social and managerial support rather than treating it as a standalone benefit.

Industry 5.0 and human-centric workforce systems come up often in this literature too, integrating technological innovation with employee wellbeing, inclusivity, and continuous learning, a direction Itam and Warrier [43] chart explicitly in their systematic review of work-from-everywhere arrangements, positioning location-flexible work as a structural feature of the future workforce rather than a temporary pandemic-era accommodation. Future workforce models will need to balance digital transformation against psychological sustainability, resilience, and supportive leadership. Sustainable, wellbeing-oriented workplaces are not a nice-to-have layered on top of conventional HR practice; the findings suggest they are becoming central to whether organizations can attract and keep Generation Z employees at all.

Discussion

This review points to a shift away from traditional retention-focused models and toward human-centric, psychologically sustainable workforce frameworks. Generation Z employees now prioritize meaningful work, flexibility, wellbeing, ethical alignment, and authentic leadership over the incentives that used to define employment relationships. These findings line up well with Self-Determination Theory, which treats autonomy, competence, and relatedness as the key drivers of engagement and retention.

Leadership expectations have shifted too. Transformational and emotionally intelligent leadership styles consistently outperform traditional supervisory approaches in this literature. Wellbeing, sustainability, and value congruence have become major determinants of organizational commitment in their own right. Taken together, these findings suggest organizations need to weave psychological support, developmental opportunities, and ethical practice into how they operate, not treat them as separate initiatives, if they want to sustain engagement and retention over time.

Theoretical Implications and Integrative Perspective

This review advances Generation Z workforce literature by proposing a framework that draws together psychological, relational, and sustainability perspectives. The findings support Self-Determination Theory, Social Exchange Theory, Psychological Contract Theory, Job Demands–Resources Theory, Conservation of Resources Theory, and Social Identity Theory, all at once rather than any single one in isolation.

Employee engagement and retention are shaped by how autonomy, psychological safety, meaningful work, leadership quality, organizational support, sustainability orientation, and

technological adaptation interact with one another. What the review adds to existing theory is this: Generation Z tends to view organizations as psychological and value-based systems, not purely economic ones.

Managerial Implications

These findings point managers toward flexible, wellbeing-oriented, development-focused workforce strategies. Hybrid work systems, mental health support, continuous learning opportunities, and psychologically safe workplaces deserve priority. Leadership development programs should lean on emotional intelligence, coaching, mentorship, and inclusive communication.

Employer branding benefits from authentic ESG practices, ethical leadership, and sustainability initiatives too, not as marketing exercises but as substantive commitments. Technological transformation needs to be balanced against employee wellbeing, or burnout and digital fatigue will follow. In the end, retention strategies that work are the ones built as integrated systems, supporting organizational performance and employee wellbeing at the same time rather than treating them as competing priorities.

Future Research Agenda

Several gaps in the existing literature deserve attention. Longitudinal studies would help show how Generation Z workforce expectations change over time, something the current cross-sectional evidence cannot really capture. Industry 5.0, AI-enabled HR systems, and the effects of digital transformation on wellbeing and engagement also warrant closer study.

Cross-cultural and comparative work is needed too, to understand how these patterns vary across industries and regions rather than assuming they hold everywhere equally. Mental health, psychological resilience, hybrid work challenges, sustainability outcomes, and the coming transition from Generation Z to Generation Alpha employees all remain open questions. Addressing them would sharpen theoretical integration and give a clearer picture of where workforce dynamics are headed next.

Conceptual Framework

The proposed framework works in three layers. Organizational inputs (flexible HR systems, authentic leadership, developmental cultures, ESG orientation, supportive workplaces, digital technologies) shape key psychological mechanisms: autonomy, trust, meaningfulness, psychological safety, wellbeing, and value congruence.

Those mechanisms, in turn, shape workforce outcomes: engagement, commitment, creativity, resilience, retention, workforce sustainability. Contextual factors (digital transformation, hybrid work, Industry 5.0, labor market conditions) moderate these relationships throughout. Generation Z workforce outcomes, in this framework, are products of organizational systems, psychological processes, and environmental influences acting on each other, not any single factor working alone.

Conclusion

This review shows Generation Z employees reshaping contemporary employment relationships around meaningful work, flexibility, wellbeing, authentic leadership, sustainability, and ethical alignment. Engagement and retention now depend on psychological and relational factors as much as, or more than, compensation and job security.

Organizations that can offer supportive leadership, developmental opportunities, sustainable HRM practices, and psychologically safe environments stand a better chance of attracting and keeping younger talent. Theoretically, this review brings several organizational and psychological perspectives together into one human-centric framework. The evidence, taken as a whole, points toward a simple conclusion: workforce sustainability going forward will hinge on how well organizations balance technological advancement against employee wellbeing, ethical authenticity, and sustained psychological support.

Declarations

Clinical trial number-Not applicable.

Ethics, Consent to Participate, consent to publish declarations-Not Applicable

Declaration of AI Use in Manuscript Preparation

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used an AI-based language and research assistant (Claude, Anthropic) to support literature verification, citation formatting, and language refinement. The authors reviewed, verified, and edited all AI-assisted content and take full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, and integrity of the published work.

Author Contributions (CRediT): conceptualization, methodology, formal analysis, investigation, data curation, some part of writing, review and editing was done by Dr. Piyush Jhalani. Dr. Ankita contributed toward substantial writing of the manuscript. Mr. Ajay Banerjee has contributed toward final writing review and sintesizing the manuscript. Mr Devashish Joshi is responsible for all the submission regarding formalities and will also handle the further reviews in the manuscript. Dr. Shalini reviewed the manuscript and suggested editing.

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Author Information

Dr. Piyush Jhalani (First Author)

Assistant Professor, ICFAI Business School, ICFAI University Jaipur, Jaipur, India

Email: pjhalani@iujaipur.edu.in

Dr. Ankita Chauhan

Assistant Professor - I, JECRC University, Jaipur, India

Email: iamankita2792@gmail.com

Dr. Shalini Sayiwal **(Corresponding Author)**

Associate Professor, Manipal University Jaipur

Email-shalini.sayiwal@jaipur.manipal.edu

Mr. Ajay Banerjee (Third Author)

Assistant Professor, ICFAI Business School, ICFAI University Jaipur, Jaipur, India