Exploration of Gen Z perceptions of organizational culture, person organization fit and loyalty

by

Anne Brockseker Brown

B.A., Michigan State University, 1997
MBA, Loyola Graduate School of Business, 2003

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of Adult Learning & Leadership
College of Education

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
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Abstract

Generation Z (Gen Z), born 1995-2012, is projected to become the largest cohort in the U.S. workforce by 2030, coinciding with Baby Boomer retirements. As companies increasingly hire Gen Z, understanding their distinct values, expectations, and workplace behaviors is critical for retention. Organizational culture and employees' sense of fit are strongly linked to organizational loyalty. This study examines how full-time Gen Z professionals in U.S.-based companies perceive organizational culture and person-organization fit, and how these perceptions influence loyalty. Using a basic qualitative design grounded in social constructionism, the study gathered insights through two rounds of semi-structured interviews and workplace artifacts. The research applied both Schein's (1981, 1983) and Schein and Schein's (2017) three levels of organizational culture framework and Kristof's (1996) person-organization (PO) fit theory as a conceptual lens to explore how Gen Z interprets artifacts, values alignment, and underlying workplace assumptions. Findings show Gen Z needs to feel comfortable asking questions and strongly prefers flat organizational structures. They want cultures that promote learning and transparency from senior leaders. Participants emphasized the critical importance of aligning personal and professional values with company values. Career progression opportunities and supportive, positive, authentic environments foster loyalty, which for Gen Z is rooted in relationships and differs from traditional tenure-based definitions. The study offers organizational leaders and human resources development (HRD) executives' practical strategies to improve Gen Z engagement and retention.

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Approved by:

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Dr. Royce Ann Collins

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this study will, in some meaningful way, contribute to making your experiences in the workforce easier and more fulfilling.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

This study explored the experiences of Generation Z (Gen Z) professionals at work, focusing on their perceptions of modern organizational culture. This chapter offers a robust overview of the fundamental components that established the groundwork for the study. It encompasses the researcher's background, the relevance of the study, the problem statement, the aim of the study, the significance of the research, research questions, a synopsis of the research design, which includes the qualitative methodology utilized, the operationalization of terms, and the researcher's positionality.

Gen Z in the Workforce

When a new generation enters the workforce, organizations must adapt to new ways of working. Organizational cultures evolve as different generations come in and out of the workforce, bringing new beliefs, values, attitudes, and behaviors (Bhatt, 2020; Hofstede, 1980). The larger the generational cohort, the more significant the impact on organizational culture is likely to be. The newest generation to enter the workforce—Gen Z (born between 1995 and 2012)—is estimated to make up the largest percentage of the U.S. workforce by 2030 (Kumar, 2023). Organizations need to understand as much about them as possible to minimize business risk and to retain this large cohort of the U.S. workforce.

In addition to size, other factors suggest Gen Z will have a significant influence on the workplace, making it critical for leaders in organizations to understand as much about them as possible. For one, Gen Z are projected to spend more of their lives working than any generation before them. These projections are based on increasing lifespans and mounting uncertainty about having means of paying for retirement if social security runs out after the Baby Boomers generation (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017; Social Security Administration, 2023). Due to these

factors, Gen Z is projected to spend 50 to 60 years of their lives working (Deloitte, n.d.). Six decades is a longer career span than any previous generations in the U.S. experienced.

Furthermore, Gen Z is the first generation never to know a world without the internet or a smartphone. They are the first true digital natives. Unlike previous generations, the members of Gen Z have grown up immersed in a digital world, constantly connected to the internet, their devices, and social media. This constant connectivity has significantly influenced their social skills, communication, and learning preferences (Elmore & McPeak, 2019; Twenge, 2017). For example, Gen Z would rather text colleagues than use the phone to call someone. Communicating with people they have never met is unpleasant for many of them. Members of Gen Z would also rather complete corporate training programs on their own than be part of in-person group training courses (Pichler et al., 2021). Understanding as much as possible about Gen Z and their communication skills and preferences will be important for organizations looking to adapt human resource policies and business processes to prevent disruptions in business operations.

Further, Gen Z makes an unprecedented five generations in the workplace. Traditionalists, Baby Boomers, Gen X, Millennials, and Gen Z are the generations that make up the modern workforce in the U.S. Besides having distinct preferences for how they communicate with one another, each of these generations has inherently different values, attitudes, and behaviors (Elmore & McPeak, 2019; Gerhardt et al., 2022; Jiri, 2016; Twenge, 2023). Organizations have never managed five generations in the workforce before. While human resource development (HRD) leaders in organizations in the U.S. have had time to learn about the communication styles, values, attitudes, and behaviors of the other generations, Gen Z is new to them. Understanding as much as possible about Gen Z and their values, attitudes, and

behaviors is critical for organizations to minimize potential conflicts between the five distinctly different generations now working together (Shaw, 2013).

Organizations in the U.S. are facing numerous business headwinds today. Rapid technological advances—like artificial intelligence—mean the workforce is changing at a mind-blowing pace and in ways the world has never experienced before (Bray, 2017). Globalization, post-COVID-19 pandemic work arrangements, international political tensions, and shifting demographics are all causing marketplaces to be more challenging to predict than ever (Lee & Glosserman, 2022; McKinsey Digital, 2022; Toossi, 2016). In fact, researchers describe the modern business environment with the term VUCA, which means volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (Bennett & Lemoine, 2014). Five generations with inherently different perspectives on how to behave at work at a time when companies are experiencing unprecedented transformational organizational change means the potential for conflict at work and low employee engagement as a result is high (Adobe, 2022; Elmore & McPeak, 2019; Gerhardt et al., 2022).

Already, there is concern Gen Z is leaving the workplace faster than any other generation (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022). Gen Z appears to have less organizational loyalty than previous generations, or at least they are more likely to change jobs if their employers do not meet expectations (PWC, 2023; ThoughtExchange, 2022). For Gen Z, a critical expectation is that the organization's values align with their own. Close to 40% of Gen Z individuals across 46 countries have turned down a job or task that conflicted with their personal values (Deloitte, 2022), and 63% of Gen Z in the U.S. born between 1997 and 2007 say they would not want to work for an employer that does not share their values (Ernst & Young, 2021). Ninety-two percent of Gen Z professionals who responded to a recent survey from ThoughtExchange (2022)

said it was important their organizations' values aligned with their own, and 89% indicated they would leave their jobs within one year if they did not feel valued and heard at work. Post-pandemic research shows Gen Z is less engaged at work and more likely to be quiet quitters than other generations (Gallup, 2023, Lever, 2022).

Furthermore, recent research shows that Gen Z feels disconnected from their workplaces. Most young workers don't feel a close connection to their coworkers, manager or employer (Pendell & Vander Helm, 2022). Return to office policies are unlikely to solve the problem since 72 % of Gen Z has left or will leave a job if the organization does not provide flexible work options (Vitug, 2022). So, while feeling compatible with their organizations is especially critical for enhancing employee loyalty (Kristof-Brown et al., 2023; Memon et al., 2018), organizations need to understand what specific elements of their workplace make Gen Z feel more connected and thus more loyal.

On the other hand, those who approve of their employers' contributions to society and the environment, as well as their commitment to fostering diversity and inclusivity, are more inclined to remain with their employer for over five years (Deloitte, 2023). These statistics indicate Gen Z shows more organizational loyalty to employers whose values align with their own. Further, there is evidence that Gen Z is more likely to be loyal to employers that provide organizational support for their socioemotional needs (Yuniawan et al., 2021). Mental health issues have been rising, with emotional stress being a primary reason for college students dropping out, and this stress has carried over to Gen Z employees (Haynes et al., n.d.). Sixty-eight percent of Gen Z and younger millennials report frequent stress, which contributes to burnout, impacting job performance, career growth, and increasing job turnover (Pendell & Vander Helm, 2022). Two-thirds of Gen Z employees believe that investing in mental health and

wellbeing would enhance company culture and boost loyalty (Vitug, 2022). Thus, organizations that understand what Gen Z values in the workplace and adapt their organizational cultures accordingly may be more likely to foster a higher level of organizational loyalty among Gen Z employees.

There is a great deal of research conducted on Gen Z while in school (Albrecht et al., 2018; Albrychiewicz-Słocińska, 2022; Arora et al., 2020; Bako, 2018; Barhate & Dirani, 2022; Botezat et al., 2020; de Boer & Bordoloi, 2022; Dobrowolski et al., 2022; Fratričová, & Kirchmayer, 2018; Goh & Lee, 2018; Graczyk-Kucharska & Erickson, 2020; Grow & Yang, 2018; Iorgulescu, 2016; Kirchmayer & Fratričová, 2018; Maloni et al., 2019; Ozkan & Solmaz, 2015). However, there is a paucity of research on what Gen Z values in the workplace, particularly from the perspective of those who have been working full-time for at least one year. The research that does exist in the academic literature about Gen Z perceptions of work is not entirely helpful to organizations and HRD leaders for the reasons described in the following paragraphs.

Academic literature often lumps Gen Z and Millennials together (Elmore & McPeak, 2019; Kirby et al., 2020), which can make the research findings challenging to decipher in a way that is strictly relevant for Gen Z. Much of the academic research about Gen Z is based on the perspective of high school, undergraduate and graduate students (Leslie et al., 2021; Nicholas, 2020; Twenge et al., 2010). Study participants still in the process of finishing their educational journeys may not offer the most relevant data for HRD leaders who want to know what Gen Z professionals value most in their organizations. Another reason organizations may not want to base their policy and process decisions for retaining Gen Z based on studies that used students as research participants is because Gen Z students may not have the most realistic expectations of

the workplace. This is because Gen Z has been slower to enter the workforce in any capacity than previous generations (Fry & Parker, 2018). In 2002, for example, 63.3% of Millennials aged 16 to 24 were in the workforce compared to only 55.6% of Gen Z aged 16 to 24 in 2022 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022). For many Gen Z individuals, their initial professional role is often their first in-person employment experience (Fernandez et al., 2023).

Sometimes, traits, values, and preferences may not be evident until individuals enter the workforce full-time (Fratričová & Kirchmayer, 2018), so surveying students may yield data that does not match their actual experience once they are in the workforce. Much of the literature about what Gen Z wants in the workplace is also based on quantitative studies (Albrychiewicz-Słocińska, 2022; Arora et al., 2020; Botezat et al., 2020; de Boer & Bordoloi, 2022; Goh & Lee, 2018; Graczyk-Kucharska, & Erickson, 2020; Grow & Yang, 2018; Kirchmayer, & Fratričová, 2018; Lazányi & Bilan, 2017; Maloni et al., 2019) that do not offer nuance or depth that would be beneficial to HRD professionals, managers, and organizational leaders. There is a significant gap in the literature when it comes to qualitative studies with Gen Z participants who have full-time work experience.

Finally, many of the studies in the academic literature about Gen Z in the workplace are based in other countries such as India (Aggarwal et al., 2022; Arora et al., 2020;), Poland (Albrychiewicz-Słocińska, 2022; Dobrowolski et al., 2022; Dolot, 2018; Graczyk-Kucharska & Erickson, 2020;) Slovakia (Kirchmayer & Fratričová, 2018; Lašáková et al., 2023) or across multiple countries (de Boer & Bordoloi, 2022; Ganguli et al., 2022; Kutlák, 2021; Nedelko et al., 2022). Literature focused on Gen Z in other countries with different cultures and demographics (Aggarwal et al., 2022; Arora, 2020; Becker, 2022; Bencsik et al., 2016; Fratričová &

Kirchmayer, 2018; Popaitoon, 2022; Sidorcuka & Chesnovicka, 2017) may not be relevant to Gen Z in the U.S. workplace.

Due to the lack of research about Gen Z from the perspective of Gen Z, organizations know little about what Gen Z values and how to adapt their organizations to retain them. Thus, organizations must move more quickly to adapt to this new generation (Elmore & McPeak, 2019). It is imperative for HRD professionals to gain a deeper understanding of Gen Z's perceptions of their work environments to ensure their effective engagement, commitment, and retention within the workplace. Therefore, further research is needed from the perspective of Gen Z professionals in the workforce to help managers and HRD leaders understand what Gen Z values at work to hopefully effectively retain them.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework in this study was based on Schein's (1981, 1983) and Schein and Schein's (2017) three levels of Organizational Culture Model and Kristof's (1996) Person-Organization (PO) Fit Model. These concepts provided a framework to help illuminate how Gen Z professionals experienced their organizations and how their experiences impacted their sense of organizational loyalty.

Organizational Culture

In a study by PWC (2023), 66% of C-suite members said organizational culture is more important to organizational performance than strategy or operations. Organizational culture has a significant effect on employee retention (Clifton & Harter, 2019; PWC, 2023). Employee perception of organizational culture is influenced by the generation to which an employee belongs (Bhatt, 2020). In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic completely disrupted the workforce, and many workers who were once located in physical offices moved entirely online. Companies

that successfully adapted to these novel circumstances and retained their workforce and their productivity attributed much of their success to their organizational culture (PWC, 2023).

Organizational culture evolves over time as different generations come in and out of the workforce, bringing with them new beliefs, values, attitudes, and behaviors (Bhatt, 2020; Hofstede, 1980). The larger the generational cohort, the larger the impact on organizational culture. Since Gen Z is estimated to make up the largest percentage of the U.S. workforce by 2030, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2022), it makes sense for organizations to understand as much about them as possible.

How employees feel and act at work are manifestations of organizational culture (Bhatt, 2020), as are jointly held beliefs and interpretations of reality (Watkins, 2013). Positive organizational culture is linked to higher employee satisfaction and engagement (Clifton & Harter, 2019), and the experiences of people in the workplace have been shown to affect loyalty (Dunlop et al., 2023). A more positive organizational culture is also linked to higher performance (Tan, 2019) and profitability (Heskett, 2012; Kotter & Heskett, 2011; Seppälä & Cameron, 2015). Conflict between generations in the workplace can reduce employee motivation and productivity, which could negatively impact organizational culture (PWC, 2023). As organizational culture is dynamic and evolving over time (Bhatt, 2020; Watkins, 2013), it is critical for leaders to proactively pay attention to it and make attempts to influence it in a positive direction.

Schein's Three Levels of Organizational Culture Framework

Using Schein's three levels of organizational culture theory as part of the conceptual framework provides accessible terminology to describe organizational culture, which can sometimes seem intangible. Though every company has a unique organizational culture that

affects how people behave at work (PWC, 2023), the factors contributing to organizational culture are the same across employers (Ott, 1989; Schein & Schein, 2017). The three layers in Schein's (1981, 1983) and Schein and Schein's (2017) theory describe those factors and provide a framework to examine how people experience and perceive the organizational cultures in which they work. The model incorporates three levels of observability or analysis. The deciphering of each succeeding level signifies a deeper understanding of the organizational culture. The three layers in Schein's (1981, 1983) and Schein and Schein's (2017) model are summarized in the following paragraphs.

Level One—*Artifacts* represent the visible elements of an organization's culture. These include observable structures, processes, and practices that outside observers can easily see. Examples of artifacts include the physical layout of an office, the way people dress, and how they communicate with each other. According to Schein (1981, 1983) and Schein and Schein (2017), these artifacts reveal the organization's deeper values and assumptions.

Level Two—*Espoused values* are the stated beliefs, philosophies, and ideals an organization claims to uphold. According to Schein (1981, 1983) and Schein and Schein (2017), these are often articulated in mission statements, vision documents, and official communications. For example, when an organization emphasizes teamwork, innovation, or customer-centricity, these are its espoused values.

Level Three—The deepest layer of culture, and the most challenging to observe, is the *underlying assumptions*. These are the unconscious beliefs, taken-for-granted norms, and implicit rules that shape how people perceive, think, and feel within the organization. These assumptions might include beliefs about authority, trust, risk-taking, or competition. They often develop over time through shared experiences.

Schein asserts the three layers of the organizational culture model can be illustrated using the metaphor of a lily pond (Schein & Schein, 2017). Artifacts (the visible leaves and blossoms) constitute the only visible aspects of the culture. It is the farmer who creates the pond environment (the leadership and espoused values) in which the lilies will either thrive, perish, or only partially reach their potential. Yet, the farmer can only control the environment to a certain extent. Much of how the lilies turn out depends on the unseen conditions below the water. Basic underlying assumptions (the underwater root systems) significantly influence the ultimate color of the blossoms and the health of the leaves.

How employees perceive their organizational culture is influenced by the generation to which an employee belongs (Bhatt, 2020). It is essential for HRD leaders to understand how members of Gen Z perceive an organization's culture because they are likely to have different perceptions and interpretations than members of generations who have been in the workforce longer. Schein's three levels of organizational culture theory is a practical tool that can be used to articulate and analyze all the various aspects of organizational culture, which can be difficult to describe. Therefore, Schein's three levels of organizational culture theory provide a framework for the participants in this study to use to describe their perceptions and experiences of organizational culture in a way that can help make the seemingly intangible tangible.

Person Organization Fit

PO Fit examines the alignment between people and their organizational context, considering both antecedents and consequences of compatibility. Prior to Kristof's (1996) seminal article, which synthesized four prominent conceptualizations of PO fit into one comprehensive definition, PO fit research was largely defined as and mostly focused on individual outcomes resulting from the congruence between the values of the employee and the

values of the organization (Chatman, 1989). Building on the work of Chatman (1989) and Schneider et al. (1995), Kristof (1996) defined PO fit as "the compatibility between people and organizations that occurs when: (a) at least one entity provides what the other needs, or (b) they share similar fundamental characteristics, or (c) both" (pp. 4-5). That definition is still widely used today (Kristof-Brown et al., 2023).

Building on the work of Muchinksy and Monahan (1987), Kristof (1996) included two core components in her PO fit theory: (a) supplementary fit and (b) complementary fit. The key components of Kristof's (1996) theory and their subparts are described below.

Supplementary fit provides insights into the compatibility between individuals and the organizations they work for. According to Kristoff (1996), supplementary fit focuses on the fundamental attributes of an organization and an individual. For the organization, these attributes include *climate/culture*, *values*, *goals*, *and norms*. For the individual, these attributes include *personality*, *values*, *goals,* and *attitudes*. When there is alignment of organizational and individual attributes, supplementary fit is achieved. Most of the scholarly literature about supplementary fit focuses specifically on aligning values between employees or potential employees and their organizations (Kristof, 1996; Subramanian et al., 2022). With the inclusion of multiple attributes, not just values, Kristof's (1996) PO fit theory provides a more expansive lens through which to explore how employees perceive organizations and their fit within them.

Complementary fit refers to the compatibility between organizations and individuals when one completes the other. According to Kristof (1996), there are two types of complementary fit: (a) needs-supplies and (b) abilities-demands. "From the *needs-supplies* perspective, PO fit occurs when an organization satisfies individuals' needs, desires, or

preferences. In contrast, the *demands-abilities* perspective suggests that fit occurs when an individual has the abilities required to meet organizational demands" (Kristof, 1996, p. 3).

Understanding PO fit is essential for organizations because HRD leaders and managers can use PO fit principles to enhance employee satisfaction, commitment, and performance (Kristoff, 1996). The utilization of Kristof's PO Fit model as a conceptual framework provides attributes for investigating the perceptions that Gen Z professionals have about how well they fit into their organizations and whether their fit is based on the supplementary fit, complementary fit perspective, or both.

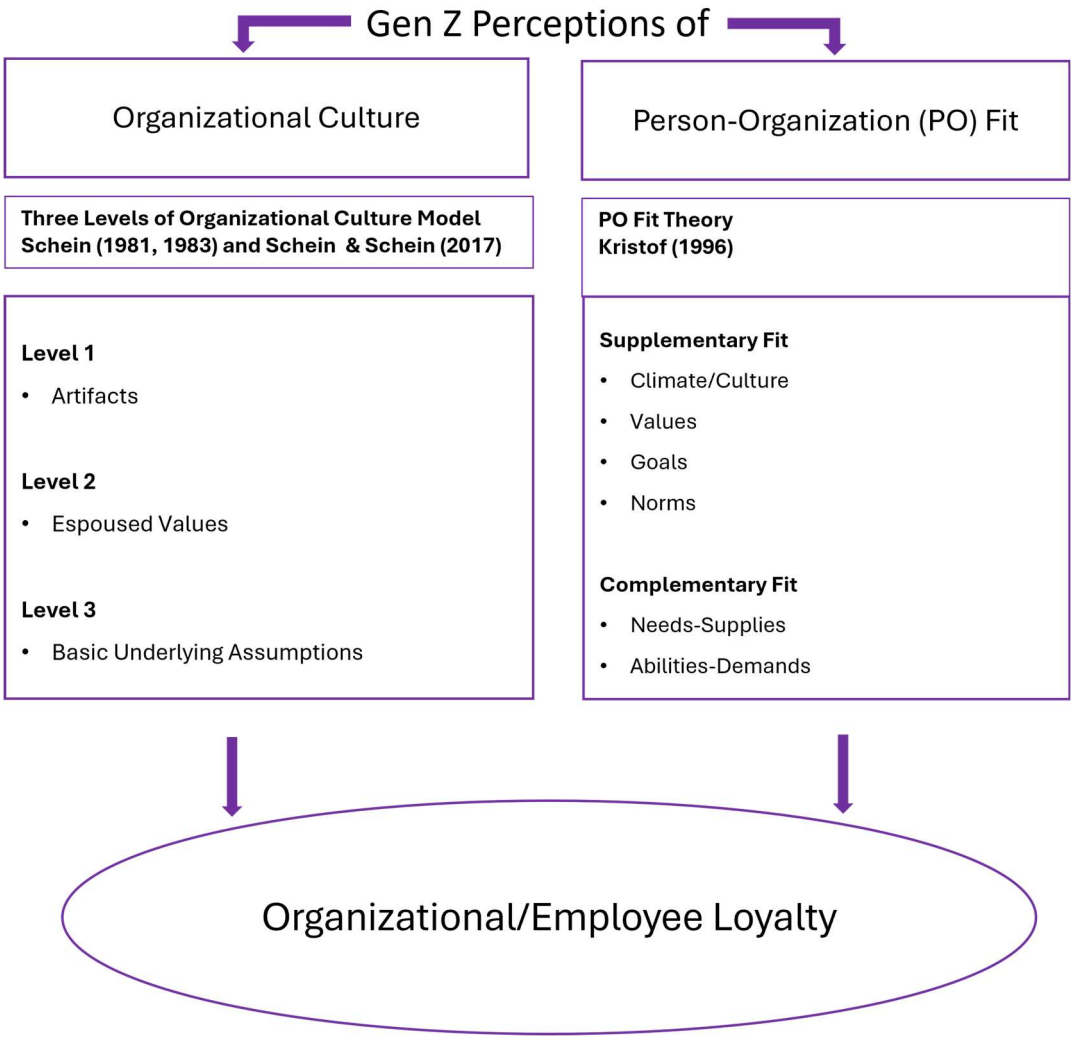
In summary, Kristof's PO Fit theory contributes to the understanding of how the alignment between individuals and organizations impacts various outcomes. PO fit researchers (Graczyk-Kucharska & Erickson, 2020) recently asserted new studies are needed that focus on present-day employee values because as organizations compete for employees to maintain competitiveness in these modern times, PO research is needed to understand what the contemporary workforce values. As Gen Z has different values than the previous generations, it is essential for organizations to understand those values and how they can shape their organizational cultures and values to attract the types of Gen Z professionals they wish to recruit and retain.

Organizational Loyalty

Several studies have shown links between organizational culture and organizational loyalty (e Cunha, 2002; Kreacic et al., 2021; Maignan et al., 1999; Pham & Tran, 2023). Research has shown that organizational culture directly influences organizational loyalty and that a positive and supportive organizational culture makes employees more committed and less likely to leave the organization (Pham & Tran, 2023). Research has also shown that employees

are less likely to want to leave an organization if there is strong PO fit (Abdalla et al., 2018; Kakar, et al., 2023; Memon et al., 2018). There is also evidence that organizational loyalty increases when employees have a sense of independence and, at the same time, feel that the organization's structure and procedures are there to support them in situations of uncertainty and complexity (e Cunha, 2002). Finally, there is some evidence that loyalty is not the same from generation to generation (Huyler et al., 2025; Kapoor & Solomon, 2011; Lancaster & Stillman, 2002; Twenge, 2017).

Figure 1.1. Conceptual Framework



Note. The conceptual framework pictured above demonstrates the relationship between the two key concepts, organizational loyalty, and how each concept was examined within the study.

These three conceptual lenses were incorporated to explore to what extent Gen Z professionals—who have worked at their companies full-time for at least one year—feel organizational culture influences their loyalty to their organization. By employing these theoretical frames, the research explored Gen Z professionals' perceptions of their experiences within organizations and how those perceptions aligned with their personal values and goals. By understanding the perceptions of Gen Z professionals in the first few years of their careers, this

study explored the attitudes, values, and thoughts that contribute to and potentially ultimately determine this generation's decisions about whether to extend or terminate their tenure at an organization.

Research Problem

Despite the growing prominence of Gen Z professionals in the U.S. workforce (Bryngelson & Cole, 2021; Dunlop et al., 2023; Terrazas & Zhao, 2023), and based on a review of the literature, there is a lack of qualitative research regarding how Gen Z professionals perceive their experiences in the U.S. workforce. Most studies are quantitative and focus on students or individuals not yet fully employed, often emphasizing anticipated values and preferences (Deloitte, 2022; Ernst & Young, 2021; Grow & Yang, 2018; Maloni et al., 2019). However, little attention had been given to understanding Gen Z's actual perspectives on the workforce once they gained firsthand experience.

Research Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore how Gen Z professionals with at least one year of full-time work experience in the U.S. perceived organizational culture and person-organization fit at their companies and how those perceptions informed their organizational loyalty. By exploring what makes Gen Z professionals more likely to experience organizational loyalty through the theories of organizational culture and person-organization fit, this research can assist organizations in their efforts to encourage loyalty and retention of Gen Z professionals.

Research Questions

The research questions for this study were:

- RQ1: How do Gen Z professionals' perceptions of organizational culture and PO fit support their organizational loyalty?

    - SRQ1. How do Gen Z professionals describe the ways in which organizational artifacts, espoused beliefs and values, and basic underlying assumptions create their perceptions of organizational culture?
    - SRQ2. How do Gen Z professionals describe the factors that contribute to their PO fit?
    - SRQ3. How do Gen Z professionals describe organizational loyalty?
- RQ2: What are the characteristics of Gen Z professionals?

Research Design Overview

The foundational elements of the research design for this study are outlined in this section. High-level summaries of the proposed methodology, participant population, data collection, and data analysis approaches are provided. A detailed description of the research design is provided in Chapter 3 - .

The qualitative research design of this study explored the experiences of Gen Z professionals at work, specifically investigating how they perceive their work values, and the values of their organizations. This study utilized a basic qualitative study design as described by Merriam and Tisdell (2016) and Kostere and Kostere (2022). Basic qualitative research studies are focused on how participants interpret their experiences, how they construct their reality, and what meaning they assign to their experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Ultimately, a basic qualitative study approach is appropriate when "the overall purpose is to understand how people make sense of their lives and their experiences" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 24). This study used a basic qualitative methodology grounded in social constructionism epistemology to explore the perceptions and life experiences of Gen Z professionals working at a professional full-time job in the U.S.

Crotty (1998) elaborates on the social constructionism of anthropologist Clifford Geertz, explaining that human behavior is derived from the culture in which it is embedded, not the other way around. According to Crotty (1998), Geertz's social constructionism purports that neither human thought nor behavior can occur in the absence of culture. Crotty (1998) asserts, "As a direct consequence of the way in which we humans have evolved, we depend on culture to direct our behavior" (p. 53). Further, the symbols existing within cultures are control mechanisms, rules, and instructions for regulating human behavior (Crotty, 1998; Geertz, 2017). Therefore, social constructionism provided this study with an appropriate epistemological approach with which to explore the perceptions of organizational culture from the perspective of Gen Z professionals.

Participants

The participants for this study were people born between 1995 and 2001 who lived and worked in U.S. All participants possessed at least a bachelor's degree from a higher education institution and worked for their companies for at least one year. Criterion sampling was the primary sampling technique used to find 13 Gen Z professionals who met these study criteria. The average length of employment for the participants was 2.8 years.

Data Collection

Data were gathered during interviews with Gen Z professionals. Interviewing is a well-established technique of data collection used in qualitative studies (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Kim, 2016; Kostere & Kostere, 2022) and is an appropriate method to use when participants cannot be directly observed in their environments (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Kvale (1996) asserts, "The qualitative research interview attempts to understand the world from the subjects' point of view, to unfold the meaning of peoples' experiences, to

uncover their lived world prior to scientific explanations" (p. 1). Interviewing was, therefore, an appropriate data collection technique for this study, which examined the perceptions and experiences of Gen Z professionals working for organizations. Semi-structured interviews were the specific type of interviewing technique used in this study. Two rounds of interviews were conducted with each of the participants, as described below.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were used for this study because they offer flexibility in both the structure and order of questions (Appendix A). Additionally, this interview format allows for the spontaneous exploration of new ideas and perceptions as they emerge since it does not require a rigid set of questions or a fixed structure (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

There were two rounds of interviews with each participant. The first round of interviews focused on participants' experience and perception of organizational culture at their places of employment. In the second round of interviews, participants shared tangible artifacts from their companies that represented their perceptions of organizational culture and their sense of fit within the organization. These artifacts included digital objects, documents, books, photographs, and other physical objects.

Data Analysis

This basic qualitative research study was designed to investigate what themes emerged from semi-structured interviews with multiple Gen Z professionals about their experiences and perceptions of organizational culture. In a basic qualitative study design, "The analysis of the data involved identifying recurring patterns that characterize the data" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 25). The themes or patterns identified during data analysis then became the findings of the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

An inductive approach was used to analyze the qualitative data collected during one-on-one interviews. The one-on-one interviews were recorded with the permission of the interviewees. The interviews were transcribed using video conferencing software and analyzed in two coding cycles: values coding in the first cycle and pattern coding in the second.

Significance of Study

Exploring what Gen Z professionals value from their experience working in the U.S. contributes to the fields of organizational change management (OCM), HRD, and human resources management (HRM) by increasing the knowledge and understanding of what Gen Z professionals find most and least appealing at their places of employment. This knowledge and understanding can help equip HR leaders as they develop policies, programs, and practices aimed at retaining Gen Z workers. By understanding more about Gen Z, managers can learn how to encourage higher levels of engagement, inclusivity, and productivity among teams. This research has the potential to positively impact the engagement of Gen Z in the workplace, communication between generations, and organizational productivity.

Limitations of Research

The participants consisted of ten females and three males. This presents a limitation as the results may be disproportionately influenced by female perspectives. To address this, efforts were made to gather in-depth qualitative data equally from all participants, and to pay attention to making sure the male perspectives were listened to and analyzed. Although gender distribution leaned more heavily female, the interview questions and analysis aimed to capture perceptions and viewpoints regardless of gender. This approach helped mitigate potential gender bias from the imbalance while acknowledging it as a study limitation.

Researcher Background

As a leadership development coach and learning facilitator with over 30 years of professional experience, I've worked across diverse industries—including consulting, finance, healthcare, marketing, media, and technology—in both small start-ups and large global organizations. My career has included leadership roles in operations, change management, project management, and talent development, all of which have strengthened my passion for making workplaces more accessible and engaging for emerging generations, particularly Gen Z and millennials. Through my experience, I've seen how organizational culture and leadership profoundly influence the creation of positive, thriving workplaces. In this study, I sought to learn directly from Gen Z professionals to better understand their perspectives on work and leadership. I believe that organizations that fail to evolve with changing needs risk losing ground in innovation, productivity, and retention. My ongoing mission is to help organizations cultivate agility, inclusivity, and a culture of continuous growth for all employees.

Definitions

- Generation—Generation refers to "a group of people or cohorts who share birth years and experiences, and they move through time together, influencing and being influenced by a variety of critical factors" (Kupperschmidt, 2000, p. 66).
- Generational Cohort—A group of people the same age in a similar social location experiencing similar social events (Mannheim, 1952). For example, the five generational cohorts in the workplace today are Traditionalists, Baby Boomers, Gen X, Millennials, and Gen Z.
- Generation Z (Gen Z)—Refers to the Generational Cohort born between 1995 to 2012.

- Gen Z Professionals—People born between 1995 and 2012 who held a bachelor's degree before starting a full-time job for which a degree from an institution of higher education was either a requirement or a preferred qualification and who have at least one year of experience at that job.
- Human Resources (HR)—In this study, the term *human resources* refers to the department responsible for all human resource activities or as an umbrella term for all activities related to human resources.
- Human Resource Management (HRM)—The operational processes of managing human resources, including recruitment, benefits management, labor relations, and legalities such as employee safety and health (Haslinda, 2009; Richman, 2015).
- Human Resource Development (HRD)—The strategic aspects of human resources that support behavioral change, learning opportunities and upskilling for employees. HRD is focused on developing employee skills and resilience to increase efficiency, productivity, job satisfaction and profitability of the organization (Jacobs, 1990; McLagan, 1989; Swanson, 1995).
- Hybrid Organization—Refers to an organization where professionals have the option to work a few days in the office and a few days at home or from a location of their choosing.
- Remote Organization—Refers to an organization where professionals work every day from home or from a location of their choosing.

Summary

Five generations with different values (Twenge, 2023) are working together in a workforce that has experienced tremendous change in the past decade due to globalization, technological advances, and demographic shifts in the population. Competition for high-

performing Gen Z knowledge workers is expected to be fierce between organizations through at least 2027 as the labor force is predicted to remain in a contracted state until then and potentially beyond (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, n.d.). The oldest members of Gen Z joined the workforce in 2017 prior to a significant upheaval to the professional social norm brought on by office closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic. There is evidence that organizations are not adjusting fast enough to attract and retain Gen Z (Elmore & McPeak, 2019), and not enough research exists from their perspective of how they experience their life inside modern organizations and what conditions are most likely to get them to stay (Kristoff-Brown et al., 2023). Collecting data using semi- interviews, this basic qualitative research study explored Gen Z working professional's perception of the organizational culture and their PO fit.

Chapter 2 - Review of Literature

This research is focused on generations as sociocultural constructs (Campbell et al., 2017) that play a pivotal role in shaping societies, influencing cultural norms, and driving historical change. Defined by shared experiences, cultural environments, values, and historical context, generations represent distinct cohorts of individuals who share birth years and come of age during specific time periods (Campbell et al., 2017; Strauss & Howe, 1991). The concept of generations gained prominence in the mid-1900s, with sociologists and demographers delving into generational theory (National Academies of Sciences, 2020; Rudolph et al., 2021). Notable works by Mannheim (1952) and Strauss and Howe (1991) laid the groundwork for understanding generations in this capacity. In addition to generational cohort research, research on organizational culture and person-organization (PO) fit will also be reviewed in this chapter.

Introduction to Generations

Mannheim (1952) posited that generations consist of individuals of similar age who collectively experience significant historical events, which in turn shape their collective consciousness. Building on Mannheim, Strauss and Howe (1991) introduced the "cohort-group" concept, defining it as a collection of individuals born within a specific time frame. Furthermore, they contributed to the popularization of generational cohort labels—Traditionalists, Baby Boomers, Generation X (Gen X), and Millennials—asserting that each cohort possesses a distinct "peer-personality." Twenge et al., (2010) and Twenge (2023) compellingly demonstrated that generational cohorts possess distinct characteristics that are not simply due to aging or developmental stages. By employing meta-analysis on multiple long-running, government-funded surveys and databases spanning several decades, Twenge successfully isolated generational effects from those related to developmental age.

Presently, generations are delineated by birth years and identified using these cohort labels, which serve as broad descriptors of their shared characteristics. Defining generations by birth years is not an exact science. There is fluidity in the generational demarcations over time as researchers and demographers become aware of cultural shifts that provoke them to readjust birth years for emerging generations (Dimock, 2019; Elmore & McPeak, 2019; Tulgan, 2022). The span of each generation is based on when new attitudes, characteristics, and behaviors start to emerge, indicating a shift between the new generation and the one that immediately preceded it (Dimock, 2019; Seemiller & Grace, 2019; Strauss & Howe, 1991).

In addition to generational cohorts such as Baby Boomers, Generation X (Gen X), and Millennials, researchers have identified what they call *cuspers*. Though the concept of cuspers is outside the scope of this research proposal, a brief explanation is provided here to ensure the reader gains a comprehensive understanding of generational dynamics. A cusper is someone born at the intersection of two generations, typically near the end of one and the start of another (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002). These individuals often display a mix of traits commonly found in both adjacent generations. However, they don't closely resemble those born in the middle of either generation. Essentially, cuspers embody aspects of both the past and the future, bridging the generational gap.

Some researchers dismiss the concept of generational cohort theory, arguing there is little empirical evidence for the concept of generations and that everyone goes through life stages, meaning any variance in behaviors and attitudes between people of different ages is due to their current stages of life and cannot be ascribed to their generation (Costanza & Finkelstein, 2015; Rudolph et al., 2021). Rudolph et al. (2021) proposed researchers adopt social constructionist and lifespan perspectives as alternatives to generational cohort theory for studying age-related

attitudes and behaviors at work. However, Twenge (2023) debunked the idea that differences between generations do not exist using 24 longitudinal datasets compiled over several decades, allowing age groups and generations to be examined separately. This methodology is called age-period-cohort analysis (Lau & Kennedy, 2023). Here, "age" signifies an individual's phase in life, "period" indicates the time of data collection, and "cohort" denotes a set of individuals born during the same timeframe. Therefore, limiting the argument in the literature regarding differences in attitudes, characteristics, and behaviors were due solely to life stages and not influenced by generational cohorts.

Critics of generational cohort theory argue that generational research promotes stereotyping in the workplace (Costanza & Finkelstein, 2015; Kriegel, 2016; Zabel et al., 2017) and in general. However, this view misses the point. The purpose of generational research is not to promote stereotypes; it is to promote understanding (Elmore & McPeak, 2019; Lancaster & Stillman, 2002; Twenge, 2023) and empathy. By embracing generational research, leaders and HRD professionals can foster empathy, enhance communication, and create tailored learning opportunities, ultimately leading to a more satisfied and productive workforce.

History of Generational Research

Generational researchers are interested in how each cohort perceives the world and behaves as they age. Generational researchers investigate how generations shape culture, policy, and interpersonal relationships. One way they do that is by researching the differences in attitudes, behaviors, and characteristics among generational cohorts to understand how those differences impact various facets of society. According to Twenge (2023), "when you were born has a larger effect on your personality and attitudes than the family who raised you does" (p.2). Over the years, researchers have delved into generational traits and examined how events like

wars, economic shifts, and cultural movements have influenced and been influenced by each generational cohort.

Generational research started with Mannheim (1952), who pondered the problem of how to best qualify and study generations. He asserted that sociology was the appropriate discipline to serve as the organizing center of generational research. Mannheim also proposed social classes and birth years as ways to define the location of a generation in society and historical context. He asserted that multiple groups holding opposing mentalities or beliefs could exist within one generation. He used the example of political leanings to illustrate his point and concluded that these distinct groups within a single generation form separate generational units (Mannheim, 1952). Mannheim's work served as the foundation for generational research as we know it today.

As stated previously, Strauss and Howe (1991) built upon Mannheim's work and are largely credited in the U.S. as popularizing generational research and making the concept of generations mainstream. In 1991, Strauss and Howe argued that the emergence of generational cohorts follows a cyclical pattern. Specifically, they asserted that generations have four distinct types (idealist, reactive, civic, and adaptive), which "recur in a fixed order" (Strauss & Howe, 1991, p. 72). Strauss and Howe (1997) focused much of their research on understanding how previous generations shaped subsequent generations and what political, social, economic, cultural, and religious impacts resulted or could result in the future because of generations.

Five Generations in the U.S. Workforce

While this study will focus on the perceptions and experiences of Gen Z in the workplace, it is helpful to understand the unique attributes of the other generations in the modern U.S. workforce also because, with the entrance of Gen Z into the workforce, there are now an unprecedented five generations in the workforce. This many generations working together is a

relatively new phenomenon, and it is probable, for a couple of reasons, that the number of generations in the workforce at one time will continue to increase in the future. The reasons for this include: (a) longer life expectancies in the U.S., (b) uncertainty around Social Security Benefits, and (c) the modern workforce is predominantly made up of knowledge workers who can work well into their elderly years.

When Millennials entered the workforce in 2002, it was the first time four generations worked side by side (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002). Unlike in the industrial era, when jobs were predominantly fueled by manual labor in factories, though many still worked in labor-intensive jobs on farms, knowledge workers can extend their careers much longer. This means more generations are in the workforce at one time because the older generations do not need to retire when they are no longer able to spend as much physical energy as they could when they were younger (Zemke et al., 1999). Generations with more education are also more likely to stay in the workforce longer (Toosi & Torpey, 2017); thus, this trend is likely to continue.

A brief overview of each generation currently in the U.S. workforce is provided below, including a description of their size, the key historical events that shaped them during their formative years, and their characteristics. A summary of what each generation experienced as they entered the workforce is also provided. It is worth noting that while both birth rates and immigration affect the population size for each generation, there appears to be a gap in the literature about the latter. This gap may exist because immigrants who arrived in the U.S. during the Traditionalist, Baby Boomer, Gen X, and Millennial generations may have been more likely to seek and find jobs not requiring a college degree (Fry & Parker, 2018; Pew Research Center, 2015). Therefore, it may be that the voice of the immigrant population within each generation is not well represented because academic studies about the generations were so often based on the

views of undergraduate student participants. Where possible, information about how immigration has affected the size of each generation in the U.S. is included.

Traditionalists (1928-1945)

There were 47 million people born in the U.S. that fall into the Traditionalist generation (Fry, 2020). Sometimes referred to as Veterans (Zemke et al., 1999), Builders (Elmore & McPeak, 2019), or Silents (Strauss & Howe, 1991; Twenge, 2023), Traditionalists were raised during the Great Depression and World War II. They are called Traditionalists because of their traditional values, such as frugalness, resourcefulness, loyalty, and hard work (Strauss & Howe, 1991). This generation was taught to show deference to authority, and they respect hierarchies at work (Raines, 2003). Generally described as conservative, Traditionalists strove for stability and achieved success by conforming to social norms. In the workplace, this meant a well-delineated chain of command (Raines, 2003).

As Traditionalists entered the workforce, they felt as if they were in the shadow of the war-hero generation that preceded them and who possessed more power and influence (Strauss & Howe, 1991). However, they were able to make a comfortable living and accumulate wealth over the years. Men were largely the breadwinners in the family and were able to find stable jobs with large companies that enabled them to buy houses and cars and support a wife well enough that she did not have to work. According to Strauss and Howe (1991), this generation venerated hierarchies and built bureaucracy in the workplace.

> In politics and business, the Silent have been a proven generation of bureaucratizers. Compared with the G.I.-dominated Congresses of the early 1960s, Silent Congresses in the mid-1980s convened twice as many hearings, debated for twice as many hours, hired four times as many staff, mailed six times as many letters to constituents, and enacted

one-third as many laws. Eighty-four committees had oversight responsibility for HUD in the years just prior to its scandal. (Strauss & Howe, 1991, p. 285)

The Traditionalists were envious of the Baby Boomer generation that came after them. The sexual revolution and the feminist movement of the 1960s affected the Traditionalists as "men and women born between the mid-1930s and early 1940s showed the biggest age-bracket jump in the divorce rate" (Strauss & Howe, 1991, p.284). According to the authors, this generation increased the number of states where no-fault divorces were legal from 0 to 45. According to Strauss and Howe (1991), this dissatisfied generation grew up fast to try and emulate their parents and then became disillusioned in mid-life.

Baby Boomers (1946-1964)

The 76 million babies born between 1946 and 1964 in the U.S. after World War II (Fry, 2020) are referred to as the Baby Boomer generation. This generation is aptly named for the boom of babies born after the war. The unprecedented size of this generation guaranteed they would have an outsized impact on the demographic, economic, social, political, and consumer trends in the U.S., and that may be the reason the Baby Boomer generation is the only social generation tracked by the U.S. Census Bureau. Because there were so many of them, Baby Boomers also grew up competing with their peers for everything and are, therefore, highly competitive (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002).

As they entered the workforce, their competitiveness resulted in the Baby Boomers being driven, goal-oriented (Huyler et al., 2025; Kapoor & Solomon, 2011; Raines, 2003) and wanting material rewards, recognition, and appreciation for their work. "For this generation of strivers, rewards came to be about money, title, a better shift, seniority, the corner office, the up-front parking spot, and any other marker that let you and especially others know how you were doing"

(Lancaster & Stillman, 2002, p. 82). Yet Baby Boomers also grew up being told to work well with others, so at the office, they led by consensus and excelled at teamwork (Raines, 2003).

The Baby Boomers grew up amidst an era of economic growth, optimism, opportunity, and progress (Zemke et al., 1999). Their parents, from the two generations that preceded them, tried to give them all the advantages they did not have themselves during years of war and economic depression. Having a more privileged childhood and adolescence than their parents, Baby Boomers had the time and resources to devote to higher education and social causes. Events such as the draft for the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights Movement, the Sexual Revolution (prompted by the invention of the birth control pill), and the Watergate scandal fueled Baby Boomers with a passion for social activism and drove a wedge between them and their parents. Baby Boomers became known as the idealistic, optimistic, and principled citizens who sought to make the world a better place (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002; Strauss & Howe, 1991). Yet, they are also considered to be non-conformists who rebelled against their parents. (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002; Strauss & Howe, 1991). By midlife, however, Baby Boomers had "patched up the rift with their parents" (Strauss & Howe, 1991, p. 313) and became more focused on work and success.

Gen X (1965-1980)

The 55 million born in the U.S. between 1965 and 1980, known as Gen X, constitute a much smaller generation than the generations that preceded and succeeded them (Fry, 2020). The smaller size of this generation is attributed to the invention of the birth control pill (McKenna, 2024; Strauss & Howe, 1991), rising feminism, and Baby Boomers prioritizing their careers (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002; Strauss & Howe, 1991).

Though the name Gen X has stuck after being popularized by Coupland (1991), this generation was also known as latchkey kids because they often had to let themselves into their

houses after school using their own key or stay at after-school latchkey programs until an adult could pick them up (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002). This phenomenon of coming home to an empty house was due in part to rising divorce rates, more mothers in the workforce (Raines, 2003), and a more permissive parenting approach (Strauss & Howe, 1991).

Because their parents were working all the time, Gen X grew up resourceful and independent and carried those traits into the workplace with them (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002; Raines, 2003). Gen X prefers to work autonomously, are self-reliant (Huyler et al., 2025; Kapoor & Solomon, 2011) and they are skeptical of authority (Raines, 2003). This is because Gen X grew up in a time that did not feel safe due to pictures of kidnapped children printed on their milk boxes at school, AIDS, and complex family situations at home (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002; Strauss & Howe, 1991). They developed a lack of trust in adults and institutions (Raines, 2003) and were labeled as "job-hoppers" when they entered the workforce (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002, p. 243). Overall, Gen X takes a more balanced approach to work. This generation is largely unwilling to sacrifice personal and family time for corporations that are just about making money.

Since Gen X grew up having to rely on themselves, they learned to lean on their friends for support more than their parents. As a result, Gen X is more likely to consider friends as members of their family. This is illustrated by the immense popularity of shows during the 1990s like *ER*, *Beverly Hills 90210*, *Melrose Place*, *The Real World,* and *Friends* that revolved around a group of friends navigating life (Poindexter, 1998).

Millennials (1981-1996)

The 62 million born in the U.S. from 1981 to 1996 are known as the Millennial generation (Fry, 2020). They were named ‘Millennials’ by sociologists Strauss and Howe in

1991, as they would enter adulthood at the beginning of the new millennium in 2000. Immigration has contributed to the growth of the Millennial generation more than any other generation in the U.S. (Fry, 2020). Over 20% of Millennials in the U.S. are either immigrants or children of immigrants (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). Today, Millennials are currently the largest generation in the U.S., with an estimated population of 72.7 million as of 2023 (Statista, n.d.) and the Millennial population is expected to peak at 74.9 million in 2033 (Fry, 2020).

Millennials grew up in a robust economy raised by Baby Boomer parents focused on self-esteem enhancement (Strauss & Howe, 1991; Twenge, 2023). The emphasis on self-worth during their formative years is exemplified by the practice of awarding participation trophies rather than limiting recognition to top achievers (Tulgan, 2016). The focus on boosting Millennial's self-esteem extended to education. Millennials often received higher grades than previous generations for the same quality of work, reflecting a shift towards affirming self-esteem over academic mastery (Twenge, 2023). Dubbed the "me me me generation" and "me first" generation, Millennials are characterized by their individualistic tendencies, optimism, self-assurance, and self-centeredness (Twenge, 2023).

Millennials grew up alongside the internet's ascent to the mainstream and the rise of social media as a primary communication channel as they got older (Twenge, 2023). Their online engagement often surpassed traditional media consumption, such as television. The advancements in communication technology also meant their parents placed more pressure on Millennials to attend college because the jobs of the future would require a bachelor's degree. Therefore, Millennials became the most educated generation in history and entered the workforce with high expectations (Twenge, 2023).

When Millennials entered the workforce in 2001, they were described as coddled, entitled, and high maintenance (Tulgan, 2016) because they asked for promotions much faster than previous generations, higher salaries, and flexibility without having earned these things. Managers found it challenging to manage them, and overall, this generation received a lot of negative press for appearing so self-serving.

However, their optimism was soon met with the harsh reality of a rapidly changing environment. The terrorist attack on the World Trade Center happened the same year the oldest Millennials entered the workforce, and the Great Recession hit less than a decade later in 2008 (Elmore & McPeak, 2019). Many Millennials could not find the high-paying jobs they were expecting and moved back in with their parents or were saddled with even more student loans when they matriculated into graduate schools instead of taking or continuing at jobs in retail, hospitality, or service to tide them over (Twenge, 2023). Eventually Millennials were described more diplomatically as expressive in the workplace, and as employees who prefer to work in teams and have flexible work arrangements (Huyler et al., 2025). They also expressed a desire to do more than one job (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002), meaning organizations were forced to come up with ways to keep them busy and motivated by creating less rigid career ladders.

Gen Z

Generation Z, the cohort following Millennials, is variously defined as beginning in 1990 (Talmon, 2019; Tulgan, 2013), 1995 (Seemiller & Grace, 2019; Twenge, 2017, 2023), or 1997 (Dimock, 2019; Tulgan, 2022), with the final birth year commonly cited as either 2010 (Seemiller & Grace, 2019; Stillman & Stillman, 2017) or 2012 (Tulgan, 2022; Twenge, 2017, 2023). Elmore and McPeak (2019) purports that Gen Z begins in 2001 with the last birth year reported as 2018. For scholarly precision, this study adopts the birth years established by Jean M.

Twenge, a leading authority on generational research. Twenge (2017, 2023), drawing from extensive national survey data, defines Gen Z as those born from 1995 to 2012 and that is what we will use here. Gen Z is also called iGen, Founders, Zoomers, Homelanders, Pivotals, and post-Millennials. According to data from the U.S. Census Bureau, Gen Z includes approximately 69 million people.

Though globally, Gen Z is already the largest generation alive, in the U.S., Gen Z is still smaller than the Millennial generation. This is partly because there were more Millennials born in this country and partly because immigration to the U.S. peaked in 2005, prior to the Great Recession (Fry & Parker, 2018). Gen Z is expected to be the largest generational cohort in the U.S. workforce by 2034, at 78 million (Reisenwitz, 2021).

This research study is focused on Gen Z behaviors and attitudes in the workplace. However, to ground the reader with an understanding of how Gen Z perceives and is perceived in the workplace, it is worthwhile to first describe the characteristics attributed to Gen Z in the literature, both as children and as adults, to better the characteristics, behaviors, and attitudes that have been attributed to them in the workplace literature.

Characteristics

Most often, Gen Z is characterized by their intrinsic digital nativism (Elmore & McPeak, 2019; Sparks & Honey, 2015; Twenge, 2017); having been born into a world suffused with technology, this cohort exhibits social behaviors that significantly diverge from those of previous generations (Katz et al., 2022). The following several paragraphs summarize the unique characteristics of Gen Z in the U.S. as found in the literature.

Technologically Savvy

Gen Z grew up with more technology than any generation preceding them due to increased access to the internet and the invention of social media (Turner, 2015; Twenge, 2017). Gen Z was born when the internet went mainstream (Dobrowolski et al., 2022; Twenge, 2017), and they grew up with it in the palm of their hands (Graczyk-Kucharska & Erickson, 2020) on smartphones and iPads. The iPhone was introduced when the oldest members of Gen Z were teenagers (Twenge, 2017). Social media platforms became ubiquitous around roughly the same period between 2005 and 2012 (Elmore & McPeak, 2019). Recent studies show that up to 95% of Gen Z teenagers use social media platforms and tend to access social media while they perform other tasks (Rideout et al., 2022; Vogels & Gelles-Watnick, 2023). According to a study by Sparks and Honey (2014), Gen Z tends to multi-task across five devices simultaneously.

With so much experience with social media and internet technology at a young age, Gen Z became highly conscious about protecting their privacy online (Elmore & McPeak, 2019). They watched the generations before them get scammed online, have their identities stolen, and get trolled (Elmore & McPeak, 2019). In response, Gen Z creates fake accounts on social media to hide their real identities and use apps like SnapChat to share vanishing messages with their friends (Elmore & McPeak, 2019). As a result of all this exposure at such an early age to the benefits and dangers of the internet, social media, and various WIFI enabled technical devices, members of this generation are often referred to as digital natives and described as technologically savvy (Elmore & McPeak, 2019; Seemiller & Grace, 2019).

Anxious and Depressed

Although Gen Z is savvy online, the amount of time they spend online has become problematic, and the constant exposure to social media has created a mental health crisis for this

generation (Riehm et al., 2019; Twenge, 2017). Elmore and McPeak (2019) asserts since Gen Z derives much of their identity from social media, they are constantly on an emotional rollercoaster depending on how they are being perceived and interacted with on these platforms. Gen Z lives in an environment where it is nearly impossible to get a break from others because of always being plugged into their phones and devices. Being constantly plugged in means children are more likely to be exposed to harmful content (Carville, 2022; Rideout et al., 2022), receive poor sleep quantity and quality (Alonzo et al., 2021), and know when they are being excluded from social events (Elmore & McPeak, 2019). As many as 95% of adolescents between the ages of 13 and 17 are reported to engage with at least one social media platform (Anderson et al., 2023; Rideout et al., 2022; Vogels & Gelles-Watnick, 2023). Approximately 97% of teens admit to daily social media use (Massarat et al., 2022). At the same time, around one-third describe their usage as almost constant (Anderson et al., 2023), and a recent study shows that overall, U.S. teenagers spend an average of 3.5 hours a day on social media (Miech et al., 2022). With evidence pointing to more than three hours a day on social media being likely to more than double the risk of mental health issues (Riehm et al., 2019), it is likely that the constant online exposure to potentially harmful content and inability to unplug has led to this generation struggling with mental health issues, especially anxiety and depression more than any other generation (Elmore & McPeak, 2019; Twenge, 2017).

Delayed Maturity

Interestingly, though Gen Z is exposed to mature content online sooner than previous generations, Gen Z is maturing at a more measured pace compared to their predecessors, leading to a delay in engaging in traditional rites of passage (Elmore & McPeak, 2019). This cohort is navigating milestones such as dating, securing part-time employment, and attending social

events independently from their parents much later than seen in past generations (Elmore & McPeak, 2019; Twenge, 2017). Consequently, they are extending their adolescence in terms of social and experiential development. Ultimately, Elmore and McPeak (2019) sums up the immaturity of Gen Z by explaining that childlikeness is nearing extinction while childishness is being extended.

Gen Z, despite unprecedented access to mature content online through social media and the internet—ranging from explicit adult content to graphic depictions of conflict and violence—possesses less firsthand life experience than prior generations (Elmore & McPeak, 2019). When Gen Z socializes, they are more likely to be doing so online than in person, which means they are missing out on experiences that involve being with people. They are more likely to be hanging out with their parents and friends at the same time, which is like the way playdates were arranged when they were in elementary school. Gen Z is delaying learning to drive, working part-time jobs, dating, and drinking alcohol (Elmore & McPeak, 2019; Twenge, 2017). Thus, Gen Z is more immature than previous generations, especially in terms of their social lives.

Safety Conscious and Risk Averse

Gen Z grew up in a culture of safety consciousness (Schroth, 2019) due to being raised by very protective Gen X parents (Elmore & McPeak, 2019; Twenge, 2023). Twenge (2023) posits that U.S. culture became heavily focused on safety the same year that the first members of Gen Z were born. The trend continued as they entered kindergarten, as illustrated by Twenge's (2023) assertion that "Concerns around safety proliferated since the 2000s, with safety the stated reason for everything from school policies prohibiting students from carrying over-the-counter drugs such as aspirin to giving 9-year-olds smartphones" (p. 385).

Gen X are also very involved parents (Elmore & McPeak, 2019; Seemiller & Grace, 2019; Twenge, 2023). Unlike Gen X, who often experienced neglect, Gen Z was "reared on helicopter parenting on steroids" (Tulgan, 2016, p. 6). However, other researchers argue that the highly involved parenting style of Gen X is different from the hovering helicopter parenting of the Baby Boomers. According to Seemiller and Grace (2019), "For those in Generation Z, rather than seeing their parents hovering and monitoring their every move, many believe their parents are more like co-pilots, invited by them for the ride" (p. 106). Regardless, parents of Gen Z ensured their children had plenty of organized activities, shuttling them from one to another, leaving little time for informal socialization with peers. Elmore and McPeak (2019) assert that adults managed every aspect of their Gen Z children's lives, creating a scenario where Gen Z is more risk-averse and less equipped to handle the challenges of adulthood.

In addition to overly involved parenting styles, Gen Z has grown up in a post-9/11 world with mass school shootings and has become accustomed to practicing active shooter drills at school. Gen Z has also grown up as society is developing a growing awareness of violence and discrimination against marginalized groups (Twenge, 2023). Thus, this is a generation described in the research as hyper-aware that the world is not safe; neither the physical world (i.e., school shootings) nor the virtual world (i.e., cyberbullying) (Elmore & McPeak, 2019; Twenge, 2017). As a result of all these factors, Gen Z is proving to be a more risk-averse generation than previous generations. According to Twenge (2017), Gen Z is less likely to engage in risky behaviors like drinking, sex, smoking, and driving with someone who has been drinking alcohol or taking drugs. While avoiding these types of risks may be viewed as positive, Twenge (2017) also asserts there is a downside to Gen Z's reluctance to take chances. For example, Twenge (2017) asserts Gen Z is far more concerned with emotional safety than previous generations,

which means they are more likely than their predecessors to avoid any type of situation that makes them uncomfortable. This includes avoiding people who have different viewpoints. In addition, Gen Z may be less likely to speak up in class or social situations due to fear that someone will disagree with them. This type of aversion to risk may make it tricky for Gen Z to assert themselves appropriately in work settings.

Individualistic and Open-Minded

In addition to being more safety conscious than previous generations online, Gen Z is more individualistic. Gen Z values individualism and wants every person to feel respected regardless of gender, race, and sexual orientation (Elmore & McPeak, 2019; Twenge, 2017, 2023). Rather than buy products to fit in, Gen Z wants to own clothing and other items that their peers and friends do not have in order to stand out (Twenge, 2017). Regarding learning preferences, Gen Z would rather learn alone than in groups (Elmore & McPeak, 2019). It is this sense of individualism that "grounds their bedrock sense of equality as well as their rejection of traditional social rules" (Twenge, 2017, p. 3).

One of the ways that Gen Z has broken through traditional rules is through their open-mindedness when it comes to ideas of gender. In fact, gender fluid is one of the characteristics most often used by mainstream media to describe Gen Z as a 2016 study by Walter J. Thompson Innovation Group (now VML) reported that just 48% of Gen Z 13 to 20 year olds identified as solely heterosexual (Elmore & McPeak, 2019). Twenge (2023) asserts that Gen Z made gender an individual choice and posits Gen Z's gender fluidity is the logical extension of rising individualism. Rather than be restricted to norms associated with things like race, sexual orientation, and gender stereotypes, Gen Z allows everyone to choose what gender they want to be or to be unassociated with gender altogether.

Highly Educated and Money Conscious

Compared to the generations that came before them, Gen Z is more likely to graduate and attend college. In research conducted by the Pew Research Center, 57% of 18 to 21-year-olds were enrolled in a two-year or four-year college in 2018. This is 5% higher than Millennials in 2003 and 14% higher than members of Gen X in 1987 (Parker & Igielnik, 2020).

While Gen Z is on track to become the most educated generation in history, their approach to education may differ from previous generations. Gen Z watched Millennials take on massive amounts of financial debt to attend four-year colleges. This seems to have made Gen Z careful about money. They are more likely to seek alternatives to attending a four-year college on campus to save money (Seemiller & Grace, 2019).

Socially Conscious

Researchers also depicted Gen Z as socially conscious (Seemiller & Grace, 2019; Turner, 2015) and not afraid to speak up for what they believe in (Mărginean, 2021). Some researchers propose that their social consciousness stems from Gen Z being the most diverse generation yet in the U.S., with a higher ratio of their generation being bi-racial and multiracial than previous generations (Rodriguez et al., 2019; Turner, 2015). Other researchers additionally suggest the events that shaped them as they were growing up played a significant role in cultivating their social consciousness. For example, as children, Gen Z experienced the first Black president to be elected in the U.S., witnessed the legalization of gay marriage, and watched men be put in jail for the abuse of women during the #MeToo movement (Elmore & McPeak, 2019).

Gen Z in the U.S. Workplace

Gen Z is entering the workforce at an older age than any of the previous generations. This is largely attributed to more focus being placed on academic achievement due to tougher

competition for college admissions (Dimock, 2019; Schroth, 2019). Given their relative lack of work experience as youths and their elevated levels of education, Gen Z tend to enter the workforce with unrealistic expectations (Schroth, 2019).

Understanding the workplace preferences of Gen Z is vital for U.S. organizations and HRD practitioners. However, scholarly research dedicated solely to Gen Z in the U.S. workplace remains limited. Only a handful of relevant studies could be located which explore Gen Z perceptions, expectations, and values in the U.S. workplace (Janssen & Carradini, 2021; Lee et al., 2021; Leslie et al., 2021; Maloni et al., 2019: Pichler et al., 2021; Posner, 2021; Whilhoit Larson, 2024). These studies focus on workplace expectations and perceptions of members of Gen Z likely to become U.S.-based knowledge workers or professionals. While empirical studies are limited, existing research provides valuable insights into several recurring themes about what Gen Z wants in the workplace, including: (a) career growth, (b) stability, and (c) work-life balance. In this literature review, these themes are explored, shedding light on Gen Z's perceptions, preferences, and expectations within the U.S. workplace.

Before diving into the specific desires of Gen Z in the workplace, it is essential to recognize that this cohort cannot be treated as a monolithic entity. Despite common grouping, Gen Z comprises distinct intragenerational subgroups, each with varying expectations and preferences. Acknowledging this diversity is critical for a comprehensive analysis.

Leslie et al. (2021) conducted a study to explore Gen Z's attitudes toward the workplace. Their research involved 41 participants aged 18 to 24, including college students preparing for careers and early-career professionals. The study identified three distinct subgroups within Gen Z: (a) social investors, (b) chill worker bees, and (c) go-getters. Social investors prioritize work-life balance, chill worker bees seek a comfortable workplace environment, and go-getters focus

primarily on career advancement. This study underscores the significance of recognizing intra-generational differences and overlaps when studying generational cohorts, providing a more nuanced understanding of Gen Z's dynamics in the workplace. Leslie et al.'s (2021) findings are also significantly emblematic of the literature about Gen Z in the U.S. workplace, which is elaborated on in more detail in the following sections.

Career Growth and Continuous Learning

Gen Z workers place more importance on opportunities for growth and advancement in their careers (Lee et al., 2021; Leslie et al., 2021; Maloni et al., 2019) compared to other cohorts of workers. They are motivated by the prospect of learning new skills, taking on new challenges, and progressing in their careers (Iorgulescu, 2016; Leslie et al., 2021; Maloni et al., 2019). Gen Z views the workplace as an opportunity for development and seeks out experiences that will enhance their skills and position them for success in their careers (Leslie et al., 2021; Maloni et al., 2019).

The Go-Getters, identified as an intragenerational subgroup group of Gen Z by Leslie et al. (2021), prioritize advancing their career. According to the study, career growth allows Go-Getters the opportunity to learn new skills, take on more challenging roles, and increase their level of responsibility. Go-Getters perceive career growth as a measure of their success and a way to fulfill their goals and aspirations. Additionally, career growth provides Go-Getters with a sense of fulfillment and satisfaction as they are constantly striving to achieve more and make a significant impact in their chosen field.

Individualistic Approach to Workplace Learning

Gen Z places significant value on workplace learning as a means to advance their careers. Their motivation stems from a genuine desire to acquire new skills and knowledge. Proactively,

they seek out feedback and seize opportunities for growth and continuous learning—whether through attending conferences, assuming leadership roles, or participating in regular training programs (Leslie et al., 2021).

Interestingly, Gen Z differs from previous generations in their learning preferences. They tend to spend more time alone and are less inclined to enjoy group learning projects or in-person learning classes where social interactions are more likely to take place (Leslie et al., 2021). This individualistic approach to their learning style means they rely heavily on technology for independent learning (Leslie et al., 2021; Maloni et al., 2019) and prefer a technologically advanced workplace (Janssen & Carradini, 2021).

Another indicator of Gen Z's preference for a more individualized approach to learning and development is Posner's (2021) study findings that Gen Z employees primarily look to their parents as role models. Thus, managers may need to provide more personalized and tailored learning opportunities and development plans for Gen Z employees, taking into account their unique needs and aspirations.

Prefer Parents as Role Models and Mentors

Posner (2021) investigated the role model preferences of Gen Z individuals in their pursuit of leadership skills. Posner (2021) found that managers and direct supervisors are much less likely to be viewed as role models or mentors by Gen Z than by older generations. Surveying over 34,000 participants, including 13.1% Gen Z respondents, the study revealed that family members, especially parents, were considered the most crucial role models (62.8%). Teachers and coaches ranked second (11.7%) after family members. Workplace role models (immediate supervisor/manager, business leader, coworker/colleague) followed in third, fourth, and fifth positions. The implications of Gen Z considering their parents as their primary advice-givers and

role models in the workplace are significant. It suggests that Gen Z may prioritize the values and beliefs instilled by their parents over those of their managers, potentially leading to conflicts or misunderstandings.

Stability

In addition to having a strong focus on career growth and promotion, Gen Z prioritizes stability in the workplace (Leslie et al., 2021; Maloni et al., 2019). They view stability to achieve their career goals and believe that developing strong skill sets and acquiring experience will lead to faster advancement and financial rewards (Maloni et al., 2019). Stability can refer to social, physical, or emotional safety in addition to career or financial security (Leslie et al., 2021; Maloni et al., 2019; Pichler et al., 2021; Wilhoit Larson, 2024), which are all desired by Gen Z. Gen Z also prioritizes stability in terms of opportunities for growth, learning, and advancement in their chosen field. So, while stability is important to them, it is not at the expense of career growth. They see both stability and career growth as interconnected and necessary for their long-term success (Maloni et al., 2019).

In their study of 535 undergraduate business students, Maloni et al. (2019) investigated workplace expectations among Gen Z individuals. The findings revealed that Gen Z business students prioritize stability in their careers, emphasizing job security, a consistent income, and opportunities for professional growth. In this context, stability refers to good retirement benefits, a stable future, and a career, not necessarily loyalty to a specific employer. The researchers attribute this need for stability to the economic uncertainties and challenges Gen Z has witnessed, including the global financial crisis and the impact of automation on job security (Maloni et al., 2019). Notably, the study highlighted that faculty and career services personnel are relatively unaware of Gen Z's workplace expectations, underestimating the significance of

stability in Gen Z's ideal job. Thus, organizations and HRD professionals may not receive the most accurate information from higher education institutions about what Gen Z wants in the workplace, which could impede the creation of appropriate policies and processes to recruit and retain Gen Z.

Maloni et al.'s (2019) findings are consistent with the description of the Gen Z intragenerational subgroup described as the chill worker bees in the mixed methods study by Leslie et al. (2021). According to Leslie et al. (2021), the chill worker bees value social, physical, and emotional stability as components of career stability and security.

Social Stability and Security

Socially, Gen Z workers appreciate a positive and supportive work culture where they can build relationships with their colleagues. This finding aligns with Pichler et al. (2021), who assert that "Gen Z has a need to feel socially supported by others at work" (p. 603). It is also consistent with the finding by Wilhoit Larson (2024) that Gen Z values positive working relationships in the workplace.

Physical Stability and Security

Further, Gen Z values physical comfort in their work environment, such as ergonomic furniture and a pleasant atmosphere (Leslie et al., 2021). This is consistent with Wilhoit Larson's (2024) finding that Gen Z prioritizes physical comfort in their work environment, seeking spaces that offer flexibility, comfort, and the ability to move around rather than being confined to traditional cubicles or desks. Overall, the chill worker bee's subgroup values a workplace that provides them with a comfortable and balanced environment, allowing them to thrive both personally and professionally.

Emotional Stability and Security

Emotionally, Gen Z seeks stability in a workplace that promotes mental well-being and reduces stress (Leslie et al., 2021). According to Pichler et al. (2021), "Perceptions of organizational support improve well-being" (p. 603). Gen Z prioritizes a healthy work-life balance, which allows them to have time for personal interests and activities outside of work. An elaboration on the importance Gen Z places on work-life balance is elaborated on in the section below.

Work-Life Balance

Gen Z prioritizes work-life balance and seeks greater autonomy and flexibility in their work environment. This is a generational cohort that wants work-life balance and has concerns about the lack of boundaries between personal and professional life (Janssen & Carradini, 2021; Leslie et al., 2021). Janssen and Carradini (2021) surveyed 207 college students ages 18 to 24 from 37 universities in the U.S. and interviewed six of the students to understand the personal communication habits of Gen Z and how such habits impact Gen Z's expectations of workplace communication. They found that Gen Z wants boundaries between their work life and their personal life. Interviewees expressed frustration and even resentment about their employers' expectations that they always be connected to work via technology (Janssen & Carradini, 2021). Gen Z seeks work-life balance, expressing concerns about blurred boundaries between personal and work life due to constant technology access. They appreciate practical efforts from employers and value time away from technology to relax.

The findings by Janssen and Carradini (2021) are consistent with the description of the Gen Z intragenerational subgroup described as the social investors in the mixed methods study by Leslie et al. (2021). To social investors, work-life balance is important because it allows them

to prioritize their well-being, pursue personal fulfillment, maintain relationships, and achieve optimal performance in both their personal and professional lives. Social investors seek workplaces that support and promote a healthy work-life balance to ensure their overall happiness and success (Leslie et al., 2021).

In addition, Leslie et al. (2021) found that Gen Z recognizes that a balanced approach to work and personal life can enhance their productivity and performance. Gen Z believes that taking breaks, engaging in self-care, and pursuing personal interests outside of work can lead to increased motivation, creativity, and overall job satisfaction. Ultimately, the Gen Z subgroup, described as social investors, understands that a well-rested and fulfilled individual is more likely to be productive and successful in their professional endeavors (Leslie et al., 2021).

As a component of work-life balance, Gen Z desires more autonomy and flexibility in the workplace (Janssen & Carradini, 2021; Leslie et al., 2021). Gen Z seeks a balance that allows them to have control over their time and schedule, enabling them to fulfill personal responsibilities, pursue hobbies, and maintain relationships. They value the ability to integrate work with other aspects of their lives rather than feeling overwhelmed by work dominating their time (Leslie et al., 2021).

Gen Z in the International Workplace

While research specifically focused on Gen Z work preferences and values within the U.S. workplace remains limited, there exists more abundant international research on this topic. Notably, studies from India (Aggarwal et al., 2022; Arora et al., 2020; Bhatt, 2020; Mahapatra et al., 2022) and Poland (Albrychiewicz-Słocińska, 2022; Dobrowolski et al., 2022; Graczyk-Kucharska & Erickson, 2020) contribute significantly to our understanding. While much of the international research aligns with findings from the U.S., notable differences and additional

themes are evident. This section explores both the shared characteristics and unique aspects of Gen Z in the workplace. Furthermore, emerging themes identified through a comprehensive review of international studies are examined.

Multiple international authors conducted studies to identify the work preferences of Gen Z to help inform organizations about what Gen Z employees are expecting at work. Consistent with findings from the U.S., the themes of career growth (Arora et al., 2020; Barhate & Dirani, 2022; Dwivedula et al., 2019; Fratričová and Kirchmayer, 2018; Iorgulescu, 2016), learning opportunities (Arora et al., 2020; deBoer & Bordoloi, 2022; Dobrowolski et al., 2022; Graczyk-Kucharska & Erickson, 2020; Kirchmayer & Fratričová, 2018; Mărginean, 2021; Yuniawan et al., 2021), stability (Dwivedula et al., 2019; Mărginean, 2021), work-life balance (Arora et al., 2020; Böhlich & Axmann, 2020; Dwivedula et al., 2019;) and flexibility (Aggarwal et al., 2022; Albrychiewicz-Słocińska, 2022; Böhlich & Axmann, 2020; Graczyk-Kucharska & Erickson, 2020; Sidorcuka & Chesnovicka, 2017) emerged as key priorities for Gen Z in several studies. For example, Arora et al. (2020) conducted a study to understand the work values and priorities of Gen Z students when making career choices. The authors administered a questionnaire-based survey to 264 undergraduate and graduate students ages 18 to 25 from vocational colleges. Consistent with findings from U.S. research, Arora et al. (2020) discovered that Gen Z students prioritize career growth, learning opportunities, job security, and work-life balance.

Though most global literature arrived at conclusions consistent with existing U.S. research about what Gen Z prioritizes in the workplace, several studies yielded results that diverged from U.S. findings. The following paragraphs discuss areas where international research findings differ from U.S. results or where additional themes emerged.

Notably, Kirchmayer and Fratričová (2018) surveyed 235 Gen Z undergraduate students in Slovakia to understand their motivators at work. Their study revealed that work-life balance, flexibility, and job security hold significantly less importance for Gen Z when evaluated in qualitative studies than when these values are included on questionnaires in quantitative studies. According to Kirchmayer and Fratričová (2018), "work-life balance, the importance of flexible working time actually seems to sit at the bottom of the list" (p. 6028) of their qualitative findings. Similarly, in a study of Gen Z students ages 21 to 25 in Germany, Böhlich and Axmann (2020) found that employers inaccurately perceived Gen Z expectations in the workplace, particularly regarding flexibility. According to their findings, employers underestimated Gen Z's willingness to work on the weekends and overtime, believing instead that Gen Z would be more desiring of strict boundaries between their work and personal lives. Both studies conclude that Gen Z places less value on work-life balance and flexibility, which diverges with U.S.-based research findings from Janssen and Carradini (2021) and Leslie et al. (2021).

Supportive Organizational Culture and Sense of Belonging

Arora et al. (2020) identified highly supportive organizational culture as important to Gen Z which was consistent with findings from Graczyk-Kucharska and Erickson (2020), Iorgulescu (2016), Yuniwan et al. (2021), and Barhate and Dirani (2022). A supportive organizational culture provides opportunities for career growth, learning and development, and work-life balance and is more likely to enhance employee engagement because it aligns with the values of Gen Z (Barhate & Dirani, 2022; Graczyk-Kucharska and Erickson, 2020; Lee et al., 2021). Notably, fostering a strong sense of belonging within the organization is crucial for retaining Gen Z employees (Botezat et al., 2020). In a study of 156 Gen Z undergraduate students in Romania, Iorgulescu (2016) concluded that organizations focused on providing

supportive and engaging work environments that offer opportunities for growth and development would be more likely to retain members of Gen Z.

Meaningful Work

Gen Z prioritizes meaningful work that aligns with their values and offers opportunities for growth (Fratričová & Kirchmayer, 2018; Popaitoon, 2022). Illustrating the importance of meaningful work, a qualitative study of 235 Gen Z undergraduate Slovakian students revealed that barriers to work motivation include not enjoying the work content and lacking a sense of purpose (Fratričová & Kirchmayer, 2018). According to Fratričová and Kirchmayer (2018), making a positive impact at work is important to members of Gen Z.

Organizational Culture

Organizational culture is often described as the DNA of an organization (Schein & Schein, 2017). It is widely acknowledged by executives and human resource management professionals that organizational culture significantly influences nearly every aspect of human behavior and interaction within the workplace. However, this recognition was not always prevalent. It required the pioneering research of early proponents of organizational culture, like Edgar H. Schein of the MIT Sloan School of Management, to persuade practitioners and scholars of its importance and validity. Schein is widely recognized as a pioneering figure in the field of organizational culture due to his extensive research and influential theories that have shaped the contemporary understanding of organizational dynamics.

Overview of Organizational Culture

Organizational culture emerged from organizational psychology in the 1970s and 1980s. At the same time, U.S. business and management schools were on the rise in popularity and influence (Ott, 1989). During this time, organizations in the U.S. were seeking academic

guidance from business schools on leadership, performance, and productivity because they were falling behind international competitors, particularly Japan, in these areas (Ott, 1989; Schein, 1988). The concept of organizational culture marked a radical shift from the prevailing structure and systems theory (Ott, 1989).

In the scholarly realm of organizational theory, the concept of organizational culture transitioned from merely a subtle idea for academic consideration (Selznick, 1952) to a widely acknowledged and necessary organizational leadership and management concept. Initially, when scholars and practitioners first introduced this concept, many regarded it with skepticism, dismissing it as a countercultural and rebellious response to the dominant management ideologies of the time. Early advocates like Schein and J. Steven Ott of the University of Maine actively challenged the then-prevailing positivist views of organizational theory, advocating for a more nuanced understanding of the workplace as a complex social system (Ott, 1989; Schein, 1981, 1983). They, among others, argued that organizational culture was not merely an abstract concept but a reliable driver of corporate productivity and performance. They argued that employee preferences, performance, and productivity were shaped by cultural norms, values, beliefs, and assumptions rather than formal rules or authority (Ott, 1989; Schein, 1981, 1983, 1985). In essence, they posited that intangible and invisible factors drive organizational behavior, making traditional management approaches, which focus on quantifiable elements, ineffective (Ott, 1989; Schein, 1981).

Further, proponents argued organizations should be viewed as akin to societal cultures (Ott, 1989). Over time, through rigorous research and practical application, proponents of organizational culture gained acceptance for their ideas. They established the concept of organizational culture as a key factor in achieving a company's strategic objectives and in being

able to successfully navigate change through innovation (Ott, 1989; Schein & Schein, 2019). Therefore, in most academic and practitioner circles, as evidenced by the content of many academic journals and practitioner publications, today, it is taken for granted that organizational culture profoundly shapes almost every facet of human behavior and interaction within the workplace.

Definition of Organizational Culture

One of the earliest obstacles to establishing organizational culture as a respected concept worthy of investment was the lack of a robust and agreed-upon definition (Ott, 1989). When Ott (1989) conducted research about the organizational culture perspective, he discovered 58 definitions of organizational culture in the literature. Thus, he asserted that organizational culture is holistic and cannot be reduced to mere components, stating, "Trying to think about organizational culture reductionalistically is like trying to appreciate a painting by analyzing its stroke patterns or its chemical content" (Ott, 1989, p. 190). Even today, organizations tend to define culture to suit their needs (Schein & Schein, 2019).

The definition of organizational culture most often cited is Schein's (2017). Before delving into Schein's perspective on organizational culture and his definitions of it over the years, it is important to note that Schein and other proponents of organizational culture continuously emphasize the difficulty that exists in attempting to define this ever-evolving concept (Bhatt, 2020; Ott, 1989: Pettigrew, 1979; Schein & Schein, 2017, 2019). As the most prolific researcher on the topic of organizational culture— Schein has researched and published on organizational culture for over four decades—Schein's definition has evolved slightly during that time, but only in subtle and useful ways to keep up with the ever-changing modern times. Each of his significant definitions of organizational culture is still relevant for researchers and

practitioners today. Below is a summary of Schein's descriptions of organizational culture throughout several of his writings, followed by the specific definitions of organizational culture that are still widely used today.

Schein (1983) described the early years of a start-up organization as being in its first generation when it is still being controlled by the founder, and he wrote extensively about the interconnectedness of the concept of organizational culture and the role of the organization's founder in creating the culture. Referring to first-generation cultures, he posited that no organization could claim to have a culture until a group of people came together to form a "definable organization" (Schein, 1983, p. 13) and until the organization had experienced challenges of growth and survival and come out on the other side stronger. A consistent thread throughout his writings is that the founder was the person responsible for developing the way to handle the challenges facing the organization. Eventually, the founder's approach to managing the business and tackling challenges becomes the way things are done at the organization, but only after the founder's approach has been proven successful. As this way of doing things becomes ingrained in the culture, no one consciously remembers or even knows that they started doing things this way.

Throughout his extensive career, Schein consistently emphasized the role that learning plays in creating and perpetuating an organization's culture. It was through this lens that Schein crafted his definition of organizational culture.

> The culture of a group can be defined as the accumulated shared learning of that group as it solves its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, which has worked well enough to be considered valid and therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, feel, and behave in relation to those problems. This

> accumulated learning is a pattern or system of beliefs, values, and behavioral norms that come to be taken for granted as basic assumptions and eventually drop out of awareness. (Schein & Schein, 2017, p. 6)

Going further than a mere definition, Schein also developed a comprehensive way to assess and analyze an organizational culture in a way that enables scholars, leaders, and consultants to arrive at a true understanding of it in a way that would benefit business leaders searching for solutions to complex organizational issues. What use is a definition of organizational culture if it cannot help scholars and practitioners solve their most pressing business problems (Schein & Schein, 2017)?

Significance of Schein's Organizational Culture Model

Schein (1981, 1983, 1984, 1985) introduced a comprehensive and flexible model for analyzing and managing organizational culture, emphasizing the critical role of leadership in embedding and evolving cultural values within organizations. His model delineates culture into three levels of analysis or observability: artifacts, espoused values, and basic underlying assumptions. This framework provides a robust method for understanding organizational culture, with each successive level offering a deeper insight (Schein, 1981, 1983, 1984, 1985; Schein & Schein, 2017). Each of these three levels is essential for understanding, describing, diagnosing, and transforming organizational culture. Schein's contributions have not only advanced academic discourse but have also provided practical insights for leaders and managers aiming to foster effective and adaptive organizational environments and cultures. Due to these contributions and the numerous research studies that have utilized his model (Alankarage et al., 2024; Heracleous, 2001; Mohebi, 2019; Scott-Findlay & Estabrooks, 2006), Schein's model was used for this research.

Schein's Three Levels of Organizational Culture

Schein's (1981, 1983, 1984, 1985) and Schein and Schein's (2017) model emphasizes elements of the organizational culture that are either visible or hidden to observers. The first two levels of Schein's analysis framework are observable by both insiders and outsiders of an organization. Insiders include tenured employees and leaders. Outsiders include new employees, visitors, consultants, media personnel, and researchers; essentially, anyone not officially associated with the organization but who interacts with it in some way. Schein's third level of organizational culture is only accessible to insiders. An overview of Schein's framework for the analysis of organizational culture is provided in the following paragraph, followed by a more detailed description of each of the levels.

Level one—*artifacts*—includes physical structures, symbols, language, products, technology, myths, published list of values, and observable behaviors and processes (Schein & Schein, 2017). Level two—*espoused beliefs and values*—includes goals, strategies, ideals, ideologies, and rationalizations that may not align with the behavior and other artifacts observable in level one. Level three—*basic underlying assumptions*—are the most difficult to decipher because they are usually unspoken and undocumented. They are the unconscious beliefs and values that have been reinforced by the culture over time so as to eventually determine perception, behavior, thoughts, and feelings (Schein & Schein, 2017).

Level One - Artifacts

Level one of Schein's three levels of organizational culture are known as artifacts, or what he refers to as "feelable phenomena" (Schein & Schein, 2017, p. 17). This is because artifacts encompass tangible and observable aspects within an organization. All the elements of organizational culture categorized into this bucket are visible to outsiders. These include physical

structures, symbols, language, products, technology, myths, published lists of values, and behaviors and processes that are readily visible to external observers (Schein, 1981; Schein & Schein, 2017). Examples of artifacts include physical office buildings, organizational processes, annual reports, press releases, organization charts, and more.

Though artifacts are observable by outsiders, Schein cautions that does not mean that an organization's artifacts are *understood* by outsiders. In fact, Schein asserts that artifacts are usually easy to observe but difficult to decipher, requiring the assistance of an insider to decode the actual meanings (Schein & Schein, 2017). Schein posits that outsiders shouldn't independently interpret an organization's artifacts to understand its culture because such interpretations are inevitably influenced by their own cultural perspectives.

There are three major categories of artifacts, according to Schein and Schein (2017). First, the *climate* of an organization is the feeling that is conveyed in the group by the physical layout of the office space and how employees interact with each other, customers, and outsiders. This is something that is easy for outsiders to observe but difficult to interpret because an outsider cannot understand why the group is behaving in specific ways. Thus, the second category of artifacts is *observed behavioral regularities* when people interact. An example of artifacts within this category includes the language and common phrases employees use throughout the day to interact with one another. The third category is *formal rituals and celebrations*. Examples include how business wins, promotions, and retirements are announced and recognized. While easily observed by outsiders, only insiders understand why things are done the way they are.

Level Two - Espoused Beliefs and Values

Level two of Schein's framework is referred to as espoused beliefs and values. Examples are the ideals, strategies, goals, values, and aspirations of an organization (Schein & Schein, 2017). Additionally, the expressed ideologies, philosophies, and rationalizations of an organization make up its espoused beliefs and values. What is most important to understand about this level of the framework is that espoused beliefs and values are the visible and explicitly stated aspects of why organizations do things the way they do. Such beliefs and values are developed within an organization over time as groups learn through experience about the worthiness of the beliefs and values over time and come to accept them as beneficial means to ends. However, such espoused beliefs and values may or may not be correlated with actual performance (Schein & Schein, 2017). Additionally, what people say they believe and value may not line up with their observable behavior. To truly understand why people behave the way they behave within an organization, one must uncover the secrets of level three —basic underlying assumptions.

Level Three - Basic Underlying Assumptions

Level three of the framework refers to the basic underlying assumptions of an organization. A way to think about this concept is that if culture is the DNA of an organization, the basic underlying assumptions are the DNA (Schein & Schein, 2017). These assumptions are the unspoken beliefs and values held by members of an organization and operate at a deep, unconscious level. According to Schein (1981), they are the most influential factor in shaping how people truly behave within an organization, even if those behaviors do not align with the explicitly espoused beliefs and values of the organization's culture. Changing basic underlying assumptions is extremely difficult due to their being mostly subconscious and invisible.

According to Schein and Schein (2019), it is because of the invisible nature of basic underlying assumptions that achieving transformational organizational change is so challenging for so many companies. Ultimately, while espoused values provide some insight into an organization's culture, it's the underlying assumptions that truly drive behavior and shape the core essence of the culture.

Research Using Schein's Organizational Culture Model

Schein's three levels of organizational culture model has been used by researchers across various countries and industries in recent years. Notable applications include healthcare in Denmark (Handberg & Werlauff, 2022; Madsen et al., 2021), construction in Australia (Alankarage et al., 2024), higher education in the U.S. (Gosen & Mielly, 2021), law enforcement in Germany (Gutschmidt & Vera, 2020), the Canadian Olympic rowing team (Walinga et al., 2021), a professional rugby team in New Zealand (Cole & Martin, 2018) renewable energy, and religion in Portugal (Amaro et al., 2023; Curado et al., 2021). Additionally, Salvador et al. (2022) used Schein's model to explore relationships between various elements of organizational culture and turnover in public and private sectors in Portugal.

In these studies, researchers use Schein's three levels of organization framework in a variety of ways. For example, Amaro et al. (2023) use both Schein's (1984) definition of organizational culture and his three levels of organizational framework holistically to illustrate how organizational culture impacts transformational change in an organization. Amaro et al.'s (2023) case study research proposed a new model to assist organizations adopt more agile operating methods. Thus, the Integration of Lean Thinking in the Organizational Culture (ILTOC) model incorporates Schein's three-level model as a foundational element for assisting companies in implementing lean thinking principles.

Alternatively, Curado et al. (2021) applied Schein's organizational culture theory to study knowledge sharing in Catholic organizations in Portugal. The researchers sought to discover what conditions (i.e., votes, rituals, significance, and a sense of community) within the three institutions they studied led to different levels of knowledge sharing and whether the artifacts (rituals), espoused values and beliefs (significance), and basic underlying assumptions (sense of community) played a role. Schein's three levels of organizational culture provided the theoretical support Curado et al. (2021) needed to tie the conditions of the study to the concepts of culture and knowledge sharing.

Similarly, Salvador et al. (2022) applied Schein's organizational culture theory to examine the relationship between organizational culture and turnover intentions in public and private sectors in Portugal. Approximately 661 participants working in public and private organizations in Portugal were surveyed to determine if either job insecurity or perceived organizational support affected the relationship between organizational culture and turnover intentions. Salvador et al. (2022) used Schein's model to interpret the relationship between organizational culture and perceived organizational support.

Person Organization Fit Theory

Before diving into what the literature says about PO fit theory, it is helpful to understand that PO fit is one facet of a broader construct referred to as Person-Environment (PE) fit theory (Kristoff-Brown et al., 2005). Whereas PE fit pertains to the degree of compatibility between an individual's traits or characteristics and the general work environment, PO fit focuses more narrowly on the congruence between an individual and the organization for which they work (Kristof-Brown et al., 2023). The scope of research encompassing both PE and PO fit is extensive, broad, and often overlapping (Ahmad et al., 2024), examining the myriad facets of

compatibility between individuals and their work environments. To clarify the nuanced relationship between PE fit and PO fit, an initial discussion of PE fit theory is essential. This will provide context for the subsequent, more focused examination of PO fit within this literature review.

Overview of Person Environment Fit Theory

PE fit theory emerged from organizational and social psychology and, according to fit researchers, can trace its roots to Lewin's (1936) concept that behavior is a function of both person and environment (De Cooman & Vleugels, 2022; Kristoff-Brown et al., 2005). The underlying premise of PE fit theory is that for each person, there are environments that are most compatible with that individual's personal characteristics (De Cooman & Vleugels, 2022). Under the broad heading of PE fit research, authors have studied how characteristics like personality (O'Reilly III et al., 1991; Rentsch & McEwen, 2002), values (Rentsch & McEwen, 2002), goals (Rentsch & McEwen, 2002; Sun et al., 2014), and preferences (Hyland et al., 2005) (e.g., work location, schedule) affect individual outcomes such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment, turnover intention and organizational outcomes such as productivity, profitability, and retention. There are several examples in the literature that suggest the level of compatibility between the employee and the organization affects the employee's attitude (Kühner et al., 2024; Resick et al., 2007), behavior (Fernandes et al., 2023; Greguras & Diefendorff, 2009), mental (Furnham & Schaeffer, 1984; Hennekam et al., 2020; McDonald & Ronayne, 1989) and physical health (Merecz & Andysz, 2012; Newton & Jimmieson, 2009).

Early studies primarily focused on the congruence between individuals and their environments. In contrast, later, research expanded into the topic of mismatch, or the psychological, physical, and behavioral effects resulting from a lack of alignment between

individuals and their environments. Both congruency and mismatch continue to be areas of focus for PE fit research today. By exploring how Gen Z professionals perceive their fit with an organization, instances of congruency and/or mismatch may emerge and illuminate how each or both experiences are influenced by perceptions of organizational culture.

As the workplace and societal norms have continued to evolve, so too has PE fit research. The field has burgeoned over the years, branching into various sub-types emphasizing different characteristics relevant to the fit between a person and a particular aspect of their environment. To more clearly distinguish PE fit and PO fit research for the reader, a brief description of each significant sub-type is included in the following section.

PE fit theory encompasses several related concepts, or sub-dimensions as they will be referred to for the purposes of this literature review. The five sub-dimensions of PE fit found in the literature include: (a) Person-Vocation (PV) fit, (b) Person-Job (PJ) fit, (c) Person-Supervisor (PS) fit, (d) Person-Group (PG) fit, and (e) PO fit. A brief description of each sub-dimension is provided here for the purpose of distinguishing them from PO fit. The concept of PO fit will be explored in depth later in this section.

Person-Vocation (PV) fit refers to the relationship between individuals and their occupation or vocation. Person-Job (PJ) Fit refers to how compatible the job or tasks performed in the role are with an individual's knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSA's). Person-Supervisor (PS) Fit refers to the congruency of goals, personality, and values between an employee and their direct supervisor. Person-Group (PG) Fit refers to the compatibility between individuals and their work teams. This research aligns with PO fit as described below.

Overview of Person Organization Fit Theory

PO fit is a concept that refers to the compatibility between an individual's values and the values of the organization they work for (Chatman, 1989; Kristof, 1996). Argyris (1957) is credited with the theoretical research from which PO fit theories emerged (Verquer et al., 2003). Of all the subdimensions of PE ft research, PO fit has consistently garnered the most scholarly interest (Ahmed et al., 2024; Kristoff et al., 2023). This is evidenced by the increasing volume of publications on PO fit each year, indicating a clear upward trajectory in research within this specific area (Subramanian et al., 2022). In fact, the number of peer-reviewed articles published in academic journals has risen significantly from less than 10 articles published per year during 1982 to 1999 to more than 50 articles published per year per year since 2015 (Subramanian et al., 2022). According to Kristoff-Brown et al. (2023), "PO fit remains a viable explanation for why people are attracted to, selected by and stay with organizations" (p. 386).

Significance of Kristof's Person Organization Fit Theory

Kristof (1996), building on the seminal works of other PE fit researchers (Chatman, 1989; Schneider, 1987), provided the first integrative review of PO Fit, offering a comprehensive definition, theoretical framework and conceptual model that distinguished PO Fit from other forms of fit. PO fit, according to Kristof (1996), refers to the compatibility between individuals and their organizations in terms of values, goals, needs, culture and climate. Her model includes two types of fit, supplementary and complementary. Supplementary fit exists when the individual and the environment share similar characteristics. Complementary fit occurs when individuals' characteristics fill a gap in the current environment, or the environment fills a gap in the person. She defines PO fit as the compatibility between people and organizations that occurs

when at least one entity provides what the other needs, or they share similar fundamental characteristics or both (Kristof, 1996; Kristof-Brown et al., 2023).

Perceived vs. Calculated Fit

There is a difference between perceived PO fit and calculated fit, though researchers assert both are essential to understanding how individuals' fit perceptions influence their attitudes, behaviors, and outcomes in the workplace (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). Perceived fit, according to Kristof-Brown et al. (2005), refers to individuals' subjective assessments of how well they believe they align with the organization based on personal perceptions, beliefs, and feelings about compatibility. Perceived fit is assessed by asking individuals to describe themselves, as well as their perceptions of organizational characteristics. Then, the level of PO fit is determined by assessing the gap between a respondent's self-description and that same respondent's description of the organization (Hoffman & Woehr, 2006). On the other hand, calculated fit involves a more objective and systematic evaluation of the congruency between an individual's skills, qualifications, and preferences with the organization using quantitative assessments or measurements (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). Ultimately, perceived fit relies on subjective judgments and is more often utilized in qualitative research, while calculated fit uses data-driven analyses to determine alignment between individuals and their work environment. While examples of studies examining both types of fit can be found in the expansive PO fit literature, quantitative studies appear more numerous.

Research using Person Organization fit

Because PO fit research is so voluminous, this section of the review is focused on U.S.-based, peer-reviewed studies from the past three years that ground their concept of PO fit in Kristof's (1996) model. Her conceptualization of PO fit has been applied to many studies across

numerous industries, including education (Issah, 2021; Miller & Youngs, 2021; Redding, 2022), finance (Garrido-López et al., 2023), hospitality (Cobos & Ingram, 2022; Giffen et al., 2023), public agencies (Ahn, 2022; Bright, 2021) among others. Researchers have conducted studies of PO fit across various career stages, including the recruitment process, the initial onboarding and orientation period, the pivotal first three months of employment, and ultimately, the phase of career conclusion or transition into retirement. Most of the research has focused on individual outcomes with less research focused on organizational outcomes.

Job Satisfaction

Recent PO fit research indicates that when employees feel a good match between their personal values and the company's culture, they tend to be happier at work. Several recent studies showed that when employees see their own values reflected in the company's culture, they enjoy their work more (Ahn, 2022; Bright, 2021; Miller & Youngs, 2021) get along better with colleagues and even view their compensation packages more positively (Issah, 2021).

Ahn (2022) surveyed 8,513 full-time employees from 25 federal agencies and found those who felt aligned with their organization's mission were more likely to be satisfied at work. A study by Issah (2021) revealed that a strong person-organization PO fit enhances job satisfaction in five key areas: the nature of work itself, pay, promotions, supervision, and co-worker relations. Notably, alignment with organizational culture most significantly boosts satisfaction with work and co-worker interactions. While PO fit also affects satisfaction with pay, its impact is less pronounced compared to the other facets.

Tenure and Work Experience

Research indicates that the perception of PO fit plays a significant role in job satisfaction across different tenure stages (Thomas & Scroggins, 2023). In their study of 416 employees

from the banking, information technology, and education industries, Thomas and Scroggins (2023) discovered that both new hires and long-term employees tend to stay with the company longer when there's a strong emphasis on managing their perception of PO fit. However, they posit the focus of human resource initiatives aimed at increasing employees' perception of PO fit must be tailored based on tenure levels. "Whereas value congruence drive retention in the earliest and later windows of the lifecycle, job demands and rewards hold precedence in the middle years, where workers may have the greatest opportunity for promotions and career progression in an organization" (Thomas & Scroggins, 2023, p. 59).

Consistent with this finding, Issah (2021) found that older staff members and those with longer tenure at the university tended to have higher levels of satisfaction with the promotion opportunities available compared to younger staff members and those with shorter service durations. Finally, Bright's (2021) study of 500 federal employees found that older individuals and those with more work experience tend to have higher levels of PO fit, which leads to increased job satisfaction. Thus, customizing human resource strategies to address the unique needs of employees at various career stages can lead to higher job satisfaction and retention rates, with value alignment being crucial for early career and long-term employees and job rewards being key for mid-career employees.

Organizational Culture

When individuals feel their personalities align with the culture and climate of their organizations, it is more likely that PO fit will be achieved, leading to higher job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and retention rates (Kristof, 1996; Kristof-Brown et al., 2005; Kristof-Brown et al., 2023; Lauver & Kristof-Brown, 2001). Recent studies affirm correlations between personality types, aspects of organizational culture, and PO fit (Giffen et al., 2023). In a

survey of 231 hourly and salaried employees from 14 upscale hotels in California, Giffen et al. (2023) found that when employees agree with the way their hotel interacts with guests, they are more likely to feel a strong sense of PO fit. Further, employees with a more assertive and directive personality type were found to be the dominant personality type working in the hotels and more likely to feel compatible with their organization when they were given opportunities to achieve goals in alignment with those of the organization. Thus, alignment of individual values, goals, and personality with organizational culture was once again found to lead to higher levels of PO fit.

There is some evidence in PO fit literature that job candidates and early career professionals experiencing career transitions may face more challenges convincing recruiters, peers, and managers that they are a good culture fit. This is especially true for entrepreneurs looking to enter the traditional workforce (Waddingham et al., 2024), former military personnel entering the civilian workforce (Cobos & Ingram, 2022), and first-year teachers adjusting to work life (Miller & Youngs, 2021). As illustrated by Waddingham et al. (2024), job applicants with an entrepreneurial background are less likely to be recommended for interviews at traditional companies due to recruiter concerns about their skills and perceived fit with the organization's culture. Cobos and Ingram (2022) investigated how leaders in the hospitality industry view the viability of military veterans as employees. They found that while leaders acknowledge veterans' positive attributes, they also worry about effectively supporting veterans to ensure their success in the industry. Finally, Miller and Youngs' (2021) study on first-year teachers highlights a broader issue faced by early career professionals: the difficulty of assimilating into an organization's culture while navigating the steep learning curve of a new

job. Despite the importance of connecting with colleagues for a sense of PO fit, the initial workload and new responsibilities can impede the formation of these essential relationships.

Diversity

With Gen Z being the most diverse generation in the current U.S. workforce, many human resource leaders and organizations want to know more about how to recruit and retain individuals with different experiences and viewpoints. In recent years, diversity, equity, and inclusion programs have been implemented in many companies across the U.S. as well. Therefore, as organizations grapple with how to implement effective human resource practices to attract and retain diverse workforces, it is helpful to understand how diversity-focused human resource practices are perceived by job candidates and current employees and whether they improve PO fit for individuals and organizations.

Much of the recent PO fit research in the U.S. has focused on workplace diversity issues (Austin & Biesel, 2023; Folberg et al., 2024; Posner & Han, 2023; Redding, 2022; Schultz et al., 2022; Wayne et al., 2023) at different career lifecycle phases. Austin and Biesel (2023) and Folberg et al. (2024) conducted studies to explore how job candidates respond to race-based and diversity-focused communications while being recruited for jobs while other researchers focused on diversity issues that occurred after candidates were hired.

The research indicates that Black employees face unique challenges and opportunities in the workplace influenced by racial bias, self-promotion practices, and organizational fit. Schultz et al. (2022) explored how Black employees experience more negative consequences than other racial groups when they attempt to bolster their personal brand at work due to racial bias and stereotypes. Consistent with their findings, Wayne et al. (2023) found that with less self-promotion, Black employees often receive higher ratings for fitting well with the organization

and are granted more opportunities for personal development compared to peers from other racial backgrounds. Finally, Redding (2022) found that Black or Latino/a teachers from urban areas who return to their home districts to teach experience higher levels of PO fit while also promoting workplace diversity.

Ultimately, there is evidence that initiatives aimed at increasing diversity in the workplace are viewed differently based on race and religious affiliation. Therefore, perceptions of PO fit may also be affected by race and religious affiliation.

There is a gap in PO fit literature related to qualitative studies that explore what information professionals use to assess their organizations. This gap was initially identified by Piasentin and Chapman (2006), and to date, there has been minimal momentum in this vein of PO fit research. Other than Billsberry et al. (2004), which Piasentin and Chapman (2006) point out as the only open-ended interview study to examine how employees conceptualize various dimensions of PO fit, I am unable to locate any research that uses a qualitative lens to examine the perceptions of new employees.

Despite the growing presence of Gen Z in the workforce, there is a paucity of research on PO fit that specifically addresses this cohort within the U.S. workplace. In fact, only one study in the past five years could be located that focused specifically on Gen Z and the perception of PO fit (Graczyk-Kucharska, 2020). However, their study included only teenage participants from Poland and is therefore not relevant to this review. This gap in the literature highlights the need for current studies to explore PO Fit through the lens of Gen Z's values and workplace behaviors to ensure that organizations can effectively attract, engage, and retain this emerging segment of the workforce. The unique characteristics and expectations of Gen Z—such as their digital nativity, individualism, and desire for flexibility—suggest a need for PO fit research that

captures the nuances of aligning the needs, values, and skills of this generation with modern organizational cultures. The absence of such research represents a significant gap in the literature, given the potential impact of generational shifts on organizational dynamics and success.

Organizational Loyalty

Organizational loyalty, also referred to as employee loyalty, traditionally denotes an employee's commitment and willingness to remain with their organization over the long term. Although closely related, job satisfaction and organizational commitment are distinct concepts; they generally function as antecedents rather than synonyms of organizational loyalty, with organizational commitment being a stronger indicator of loyalty than job satisfaction (Porter et al., 1974). Many definitions in scholarly literature characterize organizational loyalty as a desire to stay with the organization resulting in tenure (Fielder, 1992; Porter et al., 1996; Smarżewska, 2019), allegiance to something greater than oneself (Hirschman, 1970; Hoffmann, 2006), a readiness for self-sacrifice (Fielder, 1992), and even a sense of moral obligation or duty toward the organization (Oldenquist, 1982).

Organizational loyalty is reflected in employees' commitment to advancing company goals, boosting productivity, and delivering outstanding customer service (Reichheld & Teal, 1996; Zanabazar et al., 2024). It involves employees' willingness to go beyond their basic duties for the success of the organization (Xie et al., 2022) and to fully embrace its values and objectives (Fiedler, 1992; Porter et al., 1996; Reichers, 1985; Smarżewska, 2019). Loyal employees refrain from speaking negatively about their company to family, friends, the public, or competitors. They also exhibit a strong sense of group identity and a desire to conform to group norms, driven by feelings of belonging, recognition, and achievement (Fiedler, 1992).

Organizational loyalty manifests in various ways that are advantageous to companies. For instance, loyalty can improve revenue through quality service and customer loyalty (Agyeiwaah et al., 2022; Reichheld & Teal, 1996; Yee et al., 2010; Zanabazar et al., 2024), performance and productivity (Veloso et al., 2021) and facilitate the development of a competitive advantage (Dai et al., 2022; Reichheld & Teal, 1996; Smarżewska, 2019). Additionally, organizations are more likely to retain loyal employees, thereby saving money on the typical operational expenses associated with turnover such as the costs of recruiting, hiring onboarding and training (Veloso et al., 2021; Werther, 2001).

Organizational loyalty also provides benefits to the employees who exhibit it. For example, loyal employees tend to be more satisfied with their jobs (Pham, 2023) and enjoy greater job stability due to longer tenure with the organization. There is also evidence that employees benefit socially and in well-being because they are meeting people and developing personal bonds with the people they work with (Birmingham et al., 2024).

Although measuring employee loyalty remains an imprecise science (Hong et al., 2021; Reichers, 1985), evidence suggests certain factors positively influence organizational loyalty. For instance, trust in leadership has been shown to foster loyalty among marketing employees in Egypt (Abd-El-Salam, 2023) and Millennial e-commerce workers in Jakarta (Maulidiani & Bhinekawati, 2020). Financial compensation was found to increase loyalty among healthcare professionals in the Middle East (Khan et al., 2020). Furthermore, opportunities for training and career advancement enhanced loyalty in government employees in Jordan (Albtoosh et al., 2022), e-commerce workers in China (Choudhary et al., 2024), and service industry staff in Hong Kong (Yee et al., 2010). Organizations that empower their employees likewise experience greater loyalty (Abd-El-Salam, 2023; Pham, 2023; Yee et al., 2010). Finally, multiple studies

indicate that employees who feel a strong sense of belonging and identification with their organization are more likely to demonstrate loyalty (Abd-El-Salam, 2023; Cachón-Rodríguez et al., 2022).

Organizational loyalty has been extensively studied across various industries, including education (Cachón-Rodríguez et al., 2022; Hong et al., 2021; Nguyen & Ha, 2023), hospitality (Agyeiwaah et al., 2022; Aristana et al., 2021), e-commerce (Choudhary et al., 2024), IT (Shetty et al., 2023; Veloso et al., 2021), manufacturing (Abd-El-Salam, 2023), healthcare (Pham, 2023; Romi et al., 2022), service sector (Weerarathne et al., 2022; Yee et al., 2010) and government (Albtoosh et al., 2022).

Organizational Loyalty and Person Organization Fit

Research has shown that organizational loyalty is closely related to PO fit. Both supplementary and complementary fit can positively influence employee loyalty (Dhir et al., 2020; Kristof-Brown et al., 2023). Supplementary fit occurs when employees share similar values and characteristics with the organization, leading to a sense of alignment and belonging. Complementary fit happens when employees' strengths meet the organization's needs, and vice versa, fostering a sense of value and contribution.

Several studies since 2020 have examined the relationship between PO fit and organizational loyalty. Dhir et al. (2020) found that PO fit significantly influences employee loyalty, with job satisfaction as a mediating factor. Straatmann et al. (2020) discovered that PO fit had a stronger effect on organizational loyalty compared to Person-Job (PJ) fit. Similarly, Jin et al. (2024) found that a good fit between employees and the organization in terms of values and goals resulted in higher levels of employee loyalty. The average length of tenure at their organizations for the participants in the study conducted by Dhir et al. (2020) was approximately

4.5 years, 8.1 years in the study by Straatmann et al. (2020), and six months in the study by Jin et al. (2024). However, all three studies show that alignment between an individual and the organization's values, goals, and mission plays a significant role in fostering organizational loyalty.

Organizational Culture and Organizational Loyalty

The relationship between organizational culture and organizational loyalty has been extensively studied. Choudhary et al. (2024) assert that "corporate culture has become one of the driving forces behind employee loyalty, making employees more cohesive" (p. 139). In a study involving 194 employees with at least one year of work experience at a global e-commerce company in China, researchers found that a favorable corporate culture—characterized by transparency, inclusivity, employee well-being, empowerment, participation, and acknowledgment—promotes a sense of belonging and unity among employees, thereby enhancing loyalty (Choudhary et al., 2024). Furthermore, the study highlighted that trust, transparency, recognition of employees' efforts, respect for work-life balance, and organizational commitment are key cultural factors that can significantly increase employee loyalty.

Not only are organizational culture and employee loyalty are closely intertwined, they are also significantly influenced by generational differences within the workforce (Huyler et al., 2025). Each generational cohort brings distinct values, expectations, and workplace behaviors shaped by their unique historical contexts, which impacts how they relate to organizational culture and their sense of loyalty. As a result, organizations face the challenge of managing a diverse workforce where multiple generations coexist, each requiring leadership approaches tailored to their specific characteristics and needs. Effective leadership in such environments

involves recognizing these generational distinctions and adapting strategies to foster a cohesive culture that supports engagement and loyalty across all age groups (Huyler et al., 2025).

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this research includes two theories: Schein's three levels of organizational culture and PO fit. PO fit and organizational culture are two interrelated yet distinct concepts that significantly influence employees' perceptions of their workplace. PO fit emphasizes the alignment between individual employees and the organization, while organizational culture pertains to the overall environment and collective behaviors within the organization. Both organizational culture and PO fit have been shown to positively affect employee loyalty (Dhir et al., 2020; Choudhary et al., 2024), with each having a complementary yet unique impact.

The purpose of this research is to explore how Gen Z professionals in the U.S. perceive their fit within their organizations and how their experiences of organizational culture influence this perception. Specifically, this study aims to discover what elements of organizational culture and PO fit will support Gen Z professionals' loyalty to their organizations. This knowledge is crucial for the stability of organizations given that loyalty has declined for employees of all ages over the past several decades (Twenge, 2017) and significantly since 2020 (Harter, 2024a). Gen Z, in particular, tends to feel more disconnected than other generations (Harter, 2024b; Pendell & Vander Helm, 2022) and is more likely to leave an organization after a short tenure if their needs are not met (ThoughtExchange, 2022).

These theories offer a lens through which participants' perceptions and interpretations of organizational culture and their organizational fit can be examined, articulated, illustrated, and discussed. PO fit directly impacts individual job satisfaction, loyalty, and retention. It is often

synonymous with what recruiters mean by culture fit. For HRD leaders, evaluating whether a candidate is a good culture fit is crucial, as employees who align well with the organization's values and culture are more likely to be satisfied, loyal, and have longer tenures (Cable & Judge, 1996; Lauver & Kristof-Brown, 2001). Organizational culture directly affects the overall performance, innovation and adaptability of an organization (Schein & Schein, 2017). An organizational culture that is perceived as positive can in turn enhance employee loyalty as well as job satisfaction and productivity. A strong PO Fit ensures that employees feel personally aligned with the organization's mission and values, leading to higher engagement and loyalty. Meanwhile, a positive organizational culture fosters a supportive and motivating environment that enhances overall job satisfaction and loyalty. By integrating both concepts into this study, factors that contribute to employee loyalty can be explored at both the individual (PO fit) and collective (organizational culture) levels. This comprehensive approach could potentially lead to strategies for fostering sustained loyalty for Gen Z.

The conceptual framework diagram in Figure 1.1 presents both theories and their specific components, which will be used to illustrate and explain how specific aspects of organizational culture and PO fit influence participants' experiences within their organizations and their perceptions of fitting into those organizations. Schein's three levels of organizational culture model divides organizational culture into artifacts, espoused values and beliefs, and basic underlying assumptions. Each of these layers represents aspects of professional organizational cultures that Gen Z professionals are likely to experience daily. The third layer, basic underlying assumptions, includes aspects of organizational life that are mostly hidden from those not directly employed by the organization. PO fit theory, as defined by Kristof (1996), illustrates how organizational fit can be categorized into supplementary fit or complementary fit.

Supplementary fit occurs when there is alignment between the fundamental attributes of an organization (climate/culture, values, goals, norms) and an individual (personality, values, goals, attitudes), indicating compatibility between the two (Kristof, 1996). Kristof's (1996) model includes two types of complementary fit: (a) needs-supplies and (b) abilities-demands. The needs-supplies perspective posits that PO fit happens when an organization meets the needs, desires, or preferences of individuals. Conversely, the demands-abilities perspective indicates that fit occurs when an individual possesses the abilities necessary to fulfill the organization's demands (Kristof, 1996). Using the conceptual framework depicted in Figure 1.1 will help examine and discuss how Gen Z professionals experience their organizational cultures and perceive their sense of fit within their organizations. This examination aims to illuminate elements of organizational culture and PO fit that will support Gen Z's organizational loyalty.

Summary

This study utilizes a theoretical framework that includes generational cohorts in the workforce, organizational culture, and person-organization (PO) fit to explore Gen Z's perceptions of their working environments to understand their workplace experiences and what they describe as enhancing their organizational loyalty. The literature review explored the history of generational research, descriptions of generational cohorts (Strauss & Howe, 1991, characteristics of Gen Z, as well as a breakdown of Schein's (1981, 1983) and Schein and Schein's (2017) three levels of organizational culture model and PO fit theory (Kristof, 1996).

Since Gen Z is the newest generational cohort to the enter the U.S. workforce and will make up the largest percentage of the workforce within the next ten years (Kumar, 2023; Reisenwitz, 2021) research like this is essential to understand their workplace experiences and what they describe as enhancing their organizational loyalty. Using Schein's (1981, 1983) and

Schein and Schein's (2017) organizational culture model will allow the perception of Gen Z professionals' working environments to be examined across three increasingly more illuminating levels including artifacts, espoused values and basic underlying assumptions. Exploring Gen Z's perceptions of PO fit using Kristof's (1996) model consisting of complementary and supplementary fit will allow for deeper understanding of what contributes to Gen Z's sense of belonging to and within an organization. Using this theoretical framework to explore Gen Z's professionals' experiences of their working environment will help illuminate what factors enhance Gen Z professionals' experience of organizational loyalty.

Chapter 3 - Methodology

This chapter presents the aspects of the basic qualitative research methodology used in this study. The purpose of this study was to understand how Gen Z professionals perceive their experiences working in organizations. This chapter offers an overview of basic qualitative research traditions, details the methods of data collection, highlights the significance of the coding cycles, and underscores the role of ethical considerations in the study.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the research study:

- RQ1: How do Gen Z professionals' perceptions of organizational culture and PO fit support their organizational loyalty?
    - SRQ1. How do Gen Z professionals describe the ways in which organizational artifacts, espoused beliefs and values, and basic underlying assumptions create their perceptions of organizational culture?
    - SRQ2. How do Gen Z professionals describe the factors that contribute to their PO fit?
    - SRQ3. How do Gen Z professionals describe organizational loyalty?
- RQ2: What are the characteristics of Gen Z professionals?

Subjectivity Statement

Because my research focused on examining how Gen Z professionals experienced working in organizations, acknowledging my subjectivity within this study is critical. Over the past 30 years, my professional experience has included working for small, medium, and large organizations in the Pacific, Mountain, Central, and East regions of the U.S. Fifteen years of my career have been spent in managerial and executive leadership roles. My experience includes

having worked in the consulting, financial, healthcare, professional services, and technology industries. I have worked in the fields of change management, executive coaching, entrepreneurship, learning and development, project management, and publishing. In my current role, I serve as an executive coach and leadership development consultant to clients across a broad range of industries. This broad business experience has significantly shaped my perspective of what it is like to work for organizations.

Over the past four years, I've noticed that human resource development (HRD) teams are increasingly asking managers to take on more responsibility in helping early career professionals, mostly Gen Z, acclimate to work life. This trend has become more pronounced since the COVID-19 pandemic began in 2020. Additionally, "the great resignation" has put extra pressure on HRD, especially those in talent development and talent acquisition, to enhance onboarding experiences and reduce voluntary turnover.

From my firsthand experience, managers are now more responsible than ever for coaching new hires and helping them quickly adapt to the company culture. At the same time, Gen Z, more so than any previous generation, seems more resistant to coaching and mentorship from managers, preferring more often to seek professional advice from parents and friends. This made me curious about how Gen Z experiences their first few years in the workforce. Are current HRD initiatives designed to help socialize and retain Gen Z truly aligned with their values, or are the current HRD playbooks based on outdated ideas about millennials?

I am deeply interested in understanding what motivates Gen Z to stay with an organization long-term and identifying the key factors that influence their decision-making. As an executive coach and leadership development consultant, my role is to offer personal and professional growth opportunities to those in the corporate world. Gaining insights into Gen Z's

experiences and challenges at work will enable me to create leadership and coaching programs that truly resonate with them. Ultimately, my aim is to provide more relevant and impactful guidance, benefiting my executive clients, the individuals they manage, and the organizations they serve.

Conducting research on how Gen Z perceives their work experiences could benefit human resources professionals by providing actionable insights that could lead to more effective HR strategies for attracting, socializing, and retaining early-career employees. By aligning recruitment strategies with Gen Z's preferences, HR could attract top talent from this generation. Additionally, this research could improve onboarding processes, thereby ensuring new hires integrate smoothly and quickly into the company culture. Understanding Gen Z's unique values, preferences, and expectations potentially allows HR to develop customized policies and practices that enhance job satisfaction and retention. Ultimately, these insights could enable HR professionals to create a more engaged and motivated workforce, which is crucial for the long-term success and competitiveness of the organization.

Social Constructionism

The epistemological perspective used for this study was social constructionism. Social constructionism emphasizes that all experience is constructed through social interactions and cultural contexts (Crotty, 1998; Geertz, 2017). This view suggests that our understanding of the world is shaped by our environment and the social processes and interactions we engage in within those environments. It also posits that our reality is constructed through our experiences and the interpretations we make of those experiences (Crotty, 1998). Social constructionism says culture is a system of shared meanings and symbols that people use to make sense of their world (Geertz, 2017). Thus, meanings are not inherent but created and maintained through social

practices and communication. This perspective emphasizes the importance of understanding the cultural and social contexts in which individuals operate to fully grasp their experiences and perceptions.

Applying social constructionism to a study on how Gen Z perceives their organizational culture and PO fit within that culture was particularly appropriate because it allowed an exploration of the subjective and constructed nature of the participant's perceptions. Gen Z, having grown up in a digitally connected and rapidly changing world, is the most diverse cohort in the U.S. workplace and brings unique values, expectations, and communication styles to the workplace. By using a social constructionist lens, I was able to explore how these young professionals interpreted and made sense of their organizational experiences, considering the influence of their heavily technology-dependent social interactions and cultural backgrounds. This approach acknowledged that Gen Z's perceptions of their organizations are not static but continuously formed and molded by interactions with colleagues, managers, and the broader organizational culture.

Finally, social constructionism aligned with the goal of understanding the nuanced and diverse experiences of Gen Z in the workplace. It allowed for a more holistic and in-depth exploration of how these individuals navigated and constructed their professional experiences in organizations. By focusing on the meanings and interpretations that Gen Z attaches to these experiences, I was able to derive insights relevant for developing effective HR strategies, leadership programs, and organizational policies that are likely to resonate with this generation. Ultimately, this epistemological perspective provided a robust framework for capturing the complex and nuanced nature of Gen Z's experiences in the corporate world.

Pilot Study

A pilot study was conducted in October 2024 to ensure the data collection processes of semi-structured interviews and artifacts would indeed gather the type of information intended to answer the research question. The pilot study provided an opportunity to gather feedback from participants as to what they suggested could be done differently in the actual study to better collect data on how Gen Z professionals experience the workplace and perceive their fit with their organizations. Specifically, the pilot study was conducted to test whether the wording of the interview questions landed well and elicited the type of data required for the study. Data were collected from one participant through semi-structured interviews and artifacts. Specifically, two rounds of semi-structured interviews were conducted, one of which included the participant presenting an artifact. Following each interview, a debriefing session was conducted with the participant to elicit feedback on the utility of the questions.

The pilot study resulted in a total of ten questions being worded in an alternative way to elicit more insightful content and context from study participants. The changes to the original questions were made for two reasons: (1) clarity, and (2) to prompt a more descriptive answer from participants. Ultimately, five of the original 12 questions for the first-round interview and four of the second-round interview questions were re-worded for clarity and optional prompts added to help interviewees better understand and respond to the question. For example, question eight: "How do the stated core values align with how day-to-day work gets done?" This question was changed to "How do the stated core values *of the company* align with how day-to-day work gets done?" Question four of the second-round interview originally stated, "What are the norms in your organization?" After the debriefing session it was changed to, "I'm curious about the norms at your company…meaning standard behaviors, communication styles, ethical standards,

performance expectations, rewards and such. Can you describe what you would consider norms at your company and how you feel about those norms?" In addition, the first-round interview originally included 12 questions, but based on the debriefing session, an additional question was added, "How do you define loyalty, as in loyalty to the company you work for?" Thus, the pilot study resulted in the refinement of interview questions for clarity and depth to better capture Gen Z professionals' workplace experiences and boost the chances that the three research questions in this study would be answered.

Rationale for Research Design

This section details the key components of the research design, emphasizing the important considerations and decisions made throughout the study. It provides a thorough overview of the research design, including the rationale for the chosen methodology, the selection of the participant population, the data collection methods used, and the applied data analysis techniques.

Basic Qualitative Research

The basic qualitative research design of this study focuses on the perceptions Gen Z professionals have of their organizational cultures and how well they feel they fit into those organizational cultures. Qualitative data are particularly effective for understanding the meanings individuals assign to events, processes, and structures in their lives and for linking these meanings to the broader social context (Miles et al., 2020). Basic qualitative research is defined as "a methodology that seeks to understand human experience by taking a qualitative stance and using qualitative procedures" (Kostere & Kostere, 2022, p. 3). This methodology is especially suitable for research aimed at understanding participants' perceived experiences and their unique perspectives on those experiences (Ellis & Hart, 2023). A basic qualitative research methodology

is also aligned with the exploratory nature of my research questions and appropriate for the exploration of firsthand experiences as described by Gen Z professional participants within a real-world context (Ellis & Hart, 2023; Kahlke, 2014; Kostere & Kostere, 2022). Further, this approach is an appropriate choice of methodology for this study, given the scarcity of research examining the perception of working for organizations from the viewpoint of Gen Z professionals and the suitability of basic qualitative studies for exploring novel topics with limited existing research (Ellis & Hart, 2023; Kahlke, 2014; Kostere & Kostere, 2022).

Additionally, this approach allows a thorough exploration of participants' subjective experiences across various environments and facilitates an examination of how they interpret these experiences (Ellis & Hart, 2023; Kahlke, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This approach is adaptable, which will allow me to refine my areas of focus if new insights emerge during the study (Kostere & Kostere, 2022; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Using a basic qualitative research design will allow me to gain deep, nuanced insights into how Gen Z professionals experience their fit with their organizations that might not emerge using quantitative methods.

Participants

Thirteen participants participated in this study. Participants for this research were from Generation Z, born between 1995 and 2012. Additionally, this study included participants who had worked full-time at their U.S.-based organization for at least one year and held at least a bachelor's degree from an accredited university in the U.S.

Table 3.1. Participants

Pseudonym	Birth Yr	Degree	Yrs at Org.	Industry	City
Andrew	2001	Bachelor's	1	Sports Apparel	Chicago
Cindy	2000	Master's	1.7	Consulting	Washington D.C.
Denise	1996	Bachelor's	2.5	Technology	San Francisco
Flavia	1996	Bachelor's	4.5	Technology	Kansas City
Jasmine	2000	Bachelor's	1.9	Non-Profit	Houston
Jeffrey	1996	Bachelor's	3.4	Technology	New York
Lisa	2000	Bachelor's	2.5	Food Science	Chicago
Lola	1999	Bachelor's	3	Technology	Kansas City
Mimi	1996	Master's	2.5	Advertising	Kansas City
Molly	1999	Bachelor's	3	Non-Profit	Houston
Shelby	1996	Bachelor's	4.5	Technology	Houston
Whitney	2001	Bachelor's	1	Non-Profit	Chicago
Will	1995	Bachelor's	3	Technology	Houston

While there is no universally agreed-upon number of participants for a basic qualitative research study, many researchers agree that reaching the saturation point—where no new information is being obtained from participants—is a good indication of an appropriate sample size (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). There are two types of saturation: code saturation, which occurs when no new codes can be generated from the data, and meaning saturation, which occurs when no new nuances or insights can be obtained by interviewing additional participants (Hennink et al., 2017). To reach code saturation, it is possible to stop at nine participants; however, reaching meaning saturation can require between 16 to 24 participants (Hennink et al., 2017). Since qualitative research aims to explore complex human phenomena in-depth, smaller sample sizes are appropriate, allowing researchers to gather more nuanced and detailed data from each participant, which is critical for understanding the underlying meanings and experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Kostere and Kostere (2022)

recommend 8 to 15 participants as an appropriate sample size for a basic qualitative interview research study. Therefore, while an initial sample size of 10 to 12 participants was targeted, the final number of participants was 13 which is when code saturation and meaning saturation were reached. As new and inexperienced researchers are advised against stopping the interview process too soon, I continued to recruit new participants using purposive sampling until I was able to make a reasonable case for reaching meaning saturation (Hennink et al., 2017; Kostere & Kostere, 2022).

Nonprobability sampling is the most appropriate sampling method for qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Criterion sampling (Patton, 2002), which is a nonprobability sampling technique, was used to solicit volunteer participants for the study. The inclusion criteria for this study were included in the recruitment emails (Appendix B -) I sent to my professional contacts at organizations that employed Gen Z, who then passed the emails on to participants who they thought likely to meet the criteria and were interested in volunteering. Criterion sampling is a sub-type of purposive sampling that involves selecting participants who are best positioned to provide information about the research questions and who meet the inclusion criteria (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2002). Purposive sampling is the primary sampling approach used in qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2018) and basic qualitative research specifically (Kostere & Kostere, 2022). Purposive sampling, and specifically criterion sampling, allow researchers to use their judgment to choose individuals who are most likely to provide valuable insights. Snowball sampling, which is another common form of purposive sampling, was the secondary sampling approach used. Snowball sampling allows a small group of initial participants to then refer others that meet the research criteria (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). By

combining these techniques, researchers can effectively solicit specific populations by utilizing the networks of the initial participants (Kostere & Kostere, 2022; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Protection of Human Subjects

Before any interviews were conducted, this proposed study was submitted to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Kansas State University for review and approval. After receiving approval from the IRB, an email solicitation letter was sent to my contacts at several companies asking if they would be willing to send them out on my behalf to Gen professionals who meet the relevant criteria, offering them the opportunity to volunteer in this study. Those who volunteered were emailed an informed consent form (Appendix C -) consistent with the ethical guidelines outlined by the American Educational Research Association (AERA) Standards of Ethics (AERA, 2011). Participants were required to sign the form and return it via email prior to the commencement of the first interview. The consent form explained the purpose of the study and details for data collection, including that there would be two recorded interviews—audio and video—which would be conducted over Zoom or Microsoft Teams (participants preference).

The privacy of the participants was protected throughout the entirety of the research study. Participants were given pseudonyms, which were used on all stored documents and data. Additionally, all identifiable information was removed from documents to help maintain the confidentiality and privacy of the participants.

To uphold ethical practices and data protection guidelines, all collected data were securely stored. Documents and recordings were stored on a password-protected computer. All handwritten notes were kept in a locked cabinet in my home office when not in use during data analysis. Audio and video portions of the interviews were used for transcription, and those

transcriptions will be kept on a secure password protected laptop for three years. Ethical standards were adhered to and maintained throughout the entire research process.

Data Collection

This basic qualitative research study used triangulation, or more than one way of collecting data (Kostere & Kostere, 2022). The use of triangulation increases the trustworthiness of qualitative research because it allows data to be gathered from multiple sources and identifies consistencies to be identified in the data (Kostere & Kostere, 2022).

Two methods of data collection were used in this basic qualitative research study, interviews and artifacts. Interviews were used because they are the predominant method for gathering data in basic qualitative research studies (Kim, 2016; Kostere & Kostere, 2022; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) and because they were the best method for gathering the descriptive data needed for the purpose of this research. Artifacts, or personal documents that help the participant narrate their experience and the meaning they attribute to it, is another data collection technique commonly used in basic qualitative research studies to achieve triangulation (Kostere & Kostere, 2022).

Semi-Structured Interviews

One-on-one interviews with 13 participants were conducted using semi-structured interviews (Appendix A -). Semi-structured interviews allowed flexibility to adjust the sequence and format of questions, enabling real-time responses to the interviewee (Kvale, 1996). This approach facilitated the discovery of new insights and perspectives as they arose (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Each participant was asked a series of questions in a sequenced order; however, the sequence was sometimes changed based on the responses from the participants. This flexibility

ensured participants could fully explore new thoughts or ideas related to the topic (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The interviews were conducted in two rounds. Boths rounds focused on participants' experiences and perceptions of organizational culture and PO fit at their workplaces and what elicits loyalty to their organizations. Additionally, in the second round, participants were asked to share tangible artifacts from their companies and describe how those artifacts influenced their perceptions and beliefs about organizational culture. Artifacts are described in more detail in the section below.

The interview guides shown in Appendix A - were used to help me facilitate the interviews with participants. All interviews were conducted using the video conferencing software Zoom, because that is what each of the participants preferred. Interviews were recorded and transcribed using Zoom's built-in recording and transcription software. The transcript produced by the video conferencing software, Zoom, was manually edited for accuracy. All transcripts were manually edited for corrections multiple times while I replayed the interviews in Zoom. All transcripts, audio, and video files are currently stored on a password-protected laptop and will be kept for three years.

Artifacts

In the second round of interviews, participants presented physical items via video from their companies and explained how those items shaped their views and beliefs about their organizational cultures and their sense of fitting within them. The use of artifacts aligns with Schein's model. Artifacts could include digital items, documents, emails, logos, photographs, physical objects, or reports—anything from their workspace that helped participants explain why they perceived organizational culture the way they did and how it impacted their sense of fitting into the organization and their organizational loyalty (Kostere & Kostere, 2022). Artifacts can be

reliable sources of data for basic qualitative research studies because they are highly subjective, and through probing questions, they can help illuminate how the participant is making meaning of a particular experience (Kostere & Kostere, 2022; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Data Alignment

A data alignment table is included in Appendix D - . The data alignment table illustrates how the research questions, conceptual framework, interview questions, and artifacts fit together. Ensuring data alignment in a qualitative study is crucial for maintaining credibility, rich rigor, coherence, and overall quality and trustworthiness of the study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). Such data alignment helps in connecting key elements such as the research problem, purpose, methodology, and data analysis, all of which, when aligned, contribute to a cohesive study of high quality and worth.

Data Analysis

Individual steps for the data analysis were conducted in a back-and-forth rather than linear fashion because that approach allowed me to answer the research questions at hand (Bhattacharya, 2017; Percy et al., 2015; Saldaña, 2021). An inductive data analysis process was used for this study with only the most "salient" portions of the data corpus related to the interview questions and discussions about the artifacts being coded (Saldaña, 2021, p.27). This inductive data analysis process consisted of two iterative coding cycles: (1) values coding, and (2) pattern coding. These coding cycles were conducted in a back-and-forth fashion that allowed me to review transcripts in printout form. As more data were collected, analyzed, and more codes were applied to the printouts, various categories were identified. Data were continuously analyzed as it was collected and compared to previously analyzed data using an inductive thematic analysis process (Percy et al., 2015). This iterative approach allowed emerging and

evolving patterns and themes to surface throughout the study (Saldaña, 2021). By consistently comparing new participant data with existing analyses, a deeper understanding was gained of how Gen Z professionals perceive their organizational culture, their fit within it, and how this affects their organizational loyalty. As this coding process continued, several substantial themes emerged from the data. This process allowed me to become much more familiar with the data, more engrossed in the analysis, more confident in the generation of insights and ultimate reporting of findings.

Values Coding

Values coding is a type of affective coding appropriate for research exploring intrapersonal experiences (Saldaña, 2021). In this study, since the overarching research question seeks to answer how Gen Z professionals perceive their organizational culture, fit within it, and how that perception contributes to their feelings of loyalty towards their organizations, affective type coding methods were used because they explore subjective qualities of human experience (Saldaña, 2021). Values coding is also recommended for studies that examine the values of people from the same generational cohort (Saldaña, 2021, p. 168), as people from the same age range may have similar value patterns. Values coding supported analysis of Gen Z professionals' subjective responses to questions about perceptions of organizational culture by providing a structure for categorizing their responses into three buckets: values, attitudes, and beliefs.

Saldaña (2021) recommends using a "generic" coding approach of values coding for the first cycle as a way of acclimating to the perceptions of the participants and pattern coding for the second cycle. Therefore, for this first pass of coding, as I read through each transcript, data gathered from participants was coded as a value, attitude or belief. Next, I went through the transcripts and added a code that categorized what that value, belief or attitude might be. A

Microsoft Excel file was then created to list all of the values, beliefs, and attitudes codes, what their category was, and which participants had one or more of those codes. Saldaña (2021) recommends using a "generic" coding approach of values coding for the first cycle as a way of acclimating to the perceptions of the participants and pattern coding for the second cycle. To stay consistent with the concept of using a generic coding approach for the first cycle, my values codes were not overly specific or rigid.

Figure 3.2 shows a sample of the 52 values codes that resulted from the first coding cycle. The left column displays the initial identification of values, attitudes, and beliefs. The right column, titled "VAB Description," presents the actual values, attitudes, and beliefs expressed by the participants. This coding process was conducted after each interview transcript was thoroughly cleaned and the participant had the opportunity to conduct a member check, if they chose to do so.

Figure 3.1. Values Coding Cycle Excel File

VAB	VAB Description	Andrew	Cindy	Denise	Flavia	Jasmine	Jeffrey	Lisa	Lola	Mimi	Molly	Whitney	Will	TOTAL
VALUE	New Experiences			X	X			X			X			4
VALUE	Financial						X	X			X		X	4
VALUE	Recognition							X						1
VALUE	Events / Travel	X	X			X								3
VALUE	The People - Surrounded be people who have your back	X	X			X	X		X	X		X	X	8
VALUE	My Manager / Leaders			X				X	X	X		X		5
VALUE	Feeling Appreciated	X			X		X	X		X		X		6
VALUE	Flexibility				X	X		?			X			3
VALUE	Inclusivity					X								1
VALUE	Positive Culture					X								1
VALUE	Autonomy						X							1
VALUE	Well-Being [Being Heard]								X					1
VALUE	Diversity								X					1
ATTITUDE	Want more direction				X								X	2
ATTITUDE	Remote affects perception, comm, connection - Like the personal Connection [ATTITUDE]		X				X	X				X	X	5

Pattern Coding

Second-cycle coding is used to synthesize the analysis from the first cycle of coding and to uncover deeper meanings and insights (Saldaña, 2021). As recommended by Saldaña (2021),

pattern coding was used in the second cycle to categorize the data. Pattern coding, as a second-cycle coding approach, collapses the initial analysis "into a smaller number of categories, themes, or concepts" (Miles et al., 2020, p. 79). This method is helpful for identifying more meaningful units of analysis and for piecing together a holistic view of the research topic (Miles et al., 2020; Saldaña, 2021).

For this second-cycle of coding I used three different highlighters to mark which passages in each of the transcripts applied to the key components of the conceptual framework: (1) organizational culture (Schein, 1981, 1983; Schein & Schein, 2017), (2) PO fit (Kristof, 1996), and (3) organizational loyalty. An orange highlighter was used to indicate instances in the transcript where the values code corresponded to organizational culture, blue to denote alignment with PO fit, and pink to signify references to organizational loyalty.

Figure 3.2. Pattern Coding - "Organizational Culture" Codes

In addition, as shown in Figure 3.3, a "pattern" column was added in my excel sheet that identified which of the three initial pattern codes of: (a) organizational culture, (b) PO fit, and (c) organizational loyalty, corresponded to the transcript snippets that were already coded during the first cycle. A column that *described* the pattern theme was also added on the right-hand side.

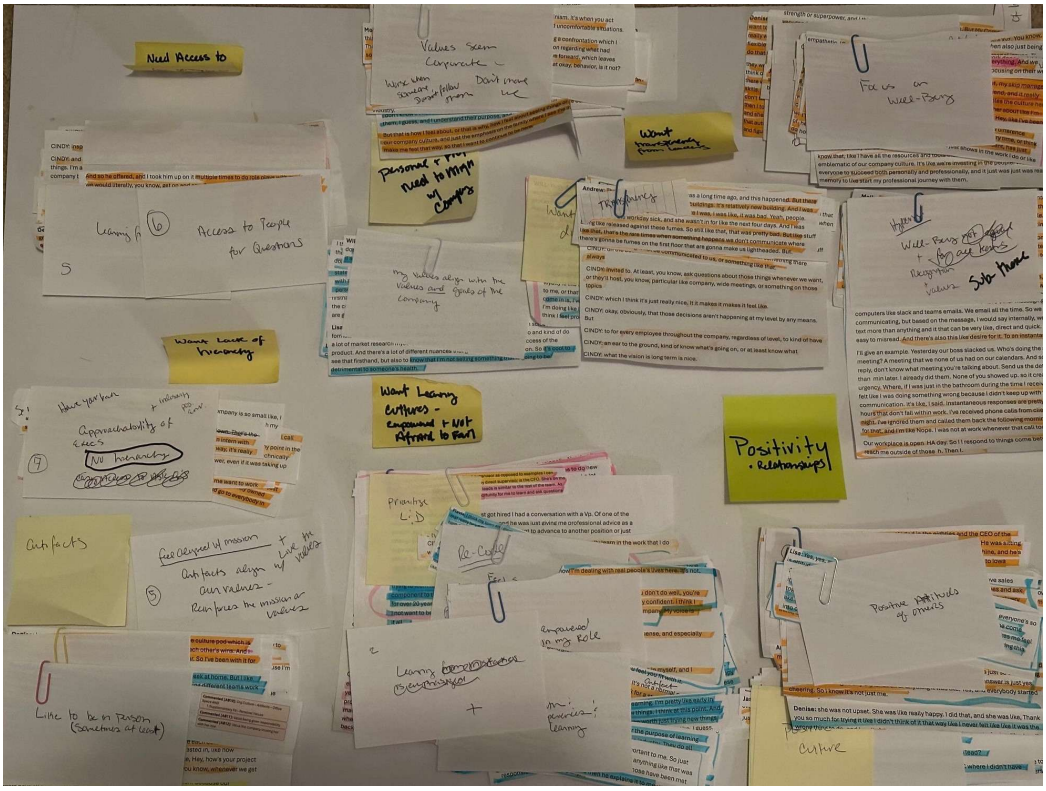
Figure 3.3. Pattern Coding

Pattern	VAB	VAB Description	Pattern / High Level Theme	Andrew	Cindy	Denise	Flavia	Jasmine	Jeffrey	Lisa	Lola	Mimi	Molly	Whitney	Will	TOTAL
Loyalty	VALUE	Career Progression & Planning	**"My company gives me the opportunity to grow and experience new things"**	X	X		X		X	X			X		X	7
Loyalty	VALUE	New Experiences	Learning			X	X			X			X			4
Loyalty	VALUE	Financial							X	X			X		X	4
Loyalty	VALUE	Recognition	Individualization							X						1
Loyalty	VALUE	Events / Travel	Connection to People	X	X			X								3
Loyalty	VALUE	The People - Surrounded be people who have your back	**"Knowing people have your back"**	X	X			X	X		X	X		X	X	8
Loyalty	VALUE	My Manager / Leaders	***Connection to People***			X				X	X	X		X		5
Loyalty	VALUE	Feeling Appreciated	Individualization	X			X		X	X		X		X		6
Loyalty	VALUE	Flexibility	My Company Trusts Me				X	X		?			X			3

For example, one value participants discussed was career progression and planning. Several snippets discussing career progression and planning were coded pink because they were talked about in the context of loyalty. These additional columns allowed for easy identification of how each coded transcript snippet related to the conceptual framework, facilitating a more integrated and efficient analysis process.

Pattern coding is particularly useful for investigating the data for underlying causes and explanations (Miles et al., 2020; Saldaña, 2021). By creating the three color coded pattern categories, it became easier to further categorize the values, beliefs, and attitudes of Gen Z professionals, providing deeper insights into their perceptions of how they perceived their experiences within their organizations. Index cards and post it notes were then used to group the coded transcripts snippets according to the emerging themes as shown in Figure 3.4.

Figure 3.4. Grouping and Clarifying Themes



Themes were then arranged by research questions on poster boards (Figure 3.5) and the excel file was updated to keep a record of the analysis (Figure 3.6).

Figure 3.5. Arranging Findings by Research Questions

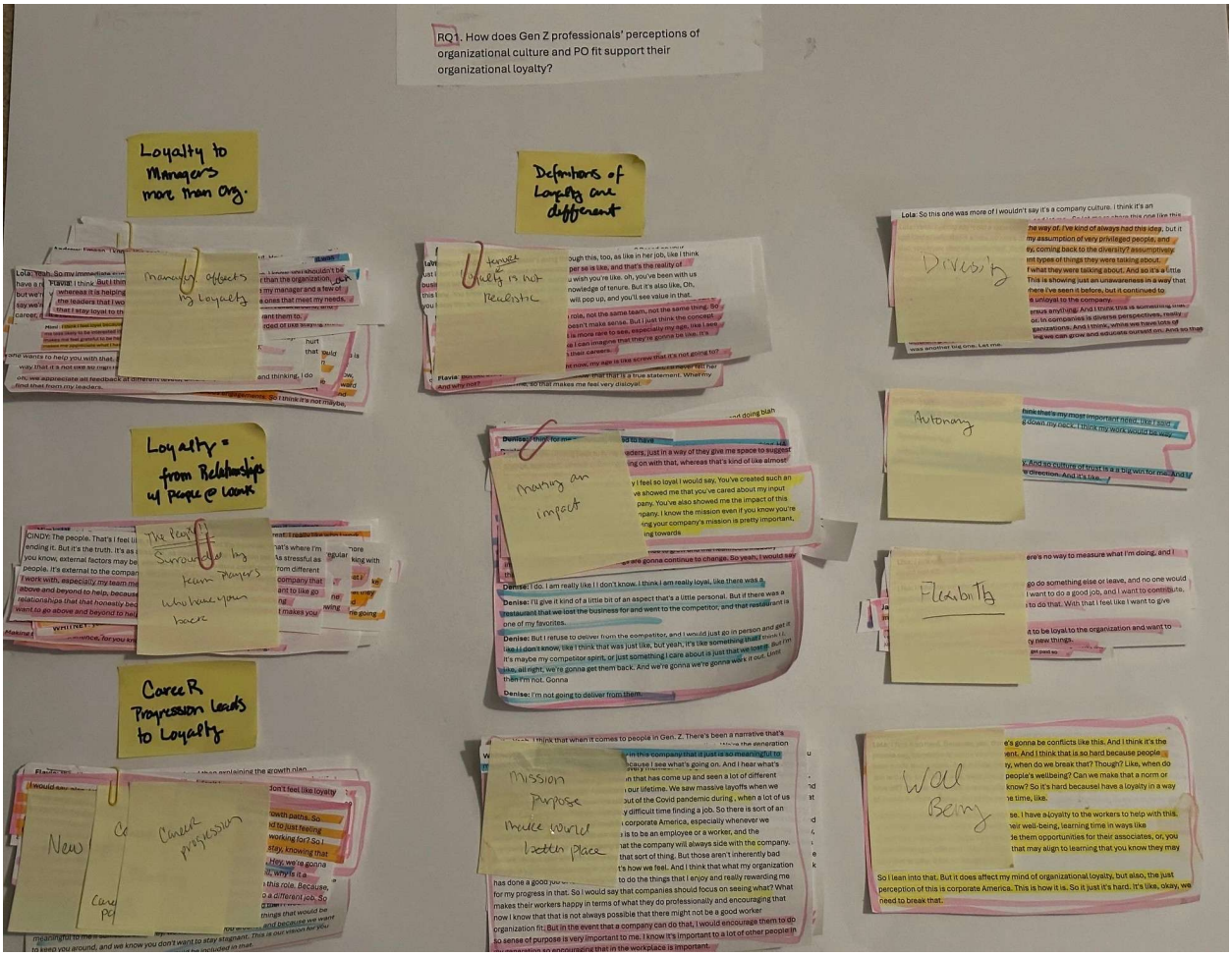
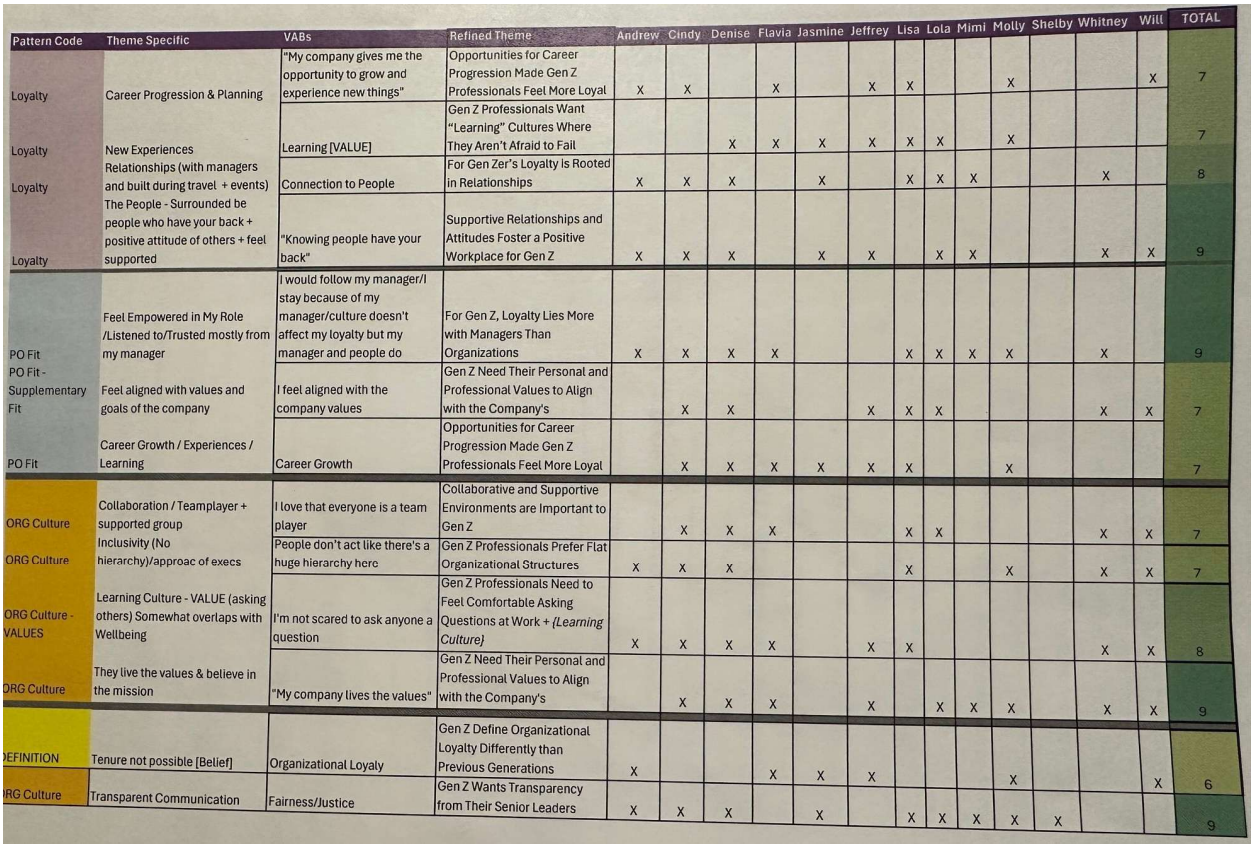


Figure 3.6. Updated Excel File



Pattern Code	Theme Specific	VABs	Refined Theme	Andrew	Cindy	Denise	Flavia	Jasmine	Jeffrey	Lisa	Lola	Mimi	Molly	Shelby	Whitney	Will	TOTAL
Loyalty	Career Progression & Planning	"My company gives me the opportunity to grow and experience new things"	Opportunities for Career Progression Made Gen Z Professionals Feel More Loyal	X	X		X		X	X			X			X	7
Loyalty	New Experiences	Learning [VALUE]	Gen Z Professionals Want "Learning" Cultures Where They Aren't Afraid to Fail			X	X	X	X	X	X		X				7
Loyalty	Relationships (with managers and built during travel + events)	Connection to People	For Gen Zer's Loyalty Is Rooted in Relationships	X	X	X		X		X	X	X			X		8
Loyalty	The People - Surrounded be people who have your back + positive attitude of others + feel supported	"Knowing people have your back"	Supportive Relationships and Attitudes Foster a Positive Workplace for Gen Z	X	X	X		X	X		X	X			X	X	9
PO Fit	Feel Empowered in My Role /Listened to/Trusted mostly from my manager	I would follow my manager/I stay because of my manager/culture doesn't affect my loyalty but my manager and people do	For Gen Z, Loyalty Lies More with Managers Than Organizations	X	X	X	X			X	X	X	X		X		9
PO Fit - Supplementary Fit	Feel aligned with values and goals of the company	I feel aligned with the company values	Gen Z Need Their Personal and Professional Values to Align with the Company's		X	X			X	X	X				X	X	7
PO Fit	Career Growth / Experiences / Learning	Career Growth	Opportunities for Career Progression Made Gen Z Professionals Feel More Loyal		X	X	X	X	X	X			X				7
ORG Culture	Collaboration / Teamplayer + supported group	I love that everyone is a team player	Collaborative and Supportive Environments are Important to Gen Z		X	X	X			X	X				X	X	7
ORG Culture	Inclusivity (No hierarchy)/approac of execs	People don't act like there's a huge hierarchy here	Gen Z Professionals Prefer Flat Organizational Structures	X	X	X				X			X		X	X	7
ORG Culture - VALUES	Learning Culture - VALUE (asking others) Somewhat overlaps with Wellbeing	I'm not scared to ask anyone a question	Gen Z Professionals Need to Feel Comfortable Asking Questions at Work + *(Learning Culture)*	X	X	X	X		X	X					X	X	8
ORG Culture	They live the values & believe in the mission	"My company lives the values"	Gen Z Need Their Personal and Professional Values to Align with the Company's		X	X	X		X		X	X	X		X	X	9
DEFINITION	Tenure not possible [Belief]	Organizational Loyalty	Gen Z Define Organizational Loyalty Differently than Previous Generations	X			X	X	X				X			X	6
RG Culture	Transparent Communication	Fairness/Justice	Gen Z Wants Transparency from Their Senior Leaders	X	X	X		X		X	X	X	X	X			9

Trustworthiness

There are eight criteria for a qualitative research study that indicate its trustworthiness and quality (Tracy, 2010). These eight criteria are: (a) worthy topic, (b) rich rigor, (c) sincerity, (d) credibility, (e) resonance, (f) significant contribution, (g) ethics, and (h) meaningful coherence. This section describes how I ensured that the research topic, processes, and procedures complied with six of the eight specified criteria.

Worthy Topic

The perception of organizational culture and person-organization fit and its influence on the organizational loyalty of Gen Z professionals is highly relevant for human resources professionals and organizational leaders looking to retain this generational cohort. The entry of

Gen Z into the workforce is a "timely societal event" (Tracy, 2010, p. 840) that deserves attention due to Gen Z's unique characteristics, such as size, digital nativity, and diversity, which differentiate it from previous generations. Further, the study of Gen Z professionals' perceptions of their experiences working for organizations based in the U.S. is significant because this is the first generation to start their careers during a global pandemic. The workplace shifted significantly just as Gen Z was entering it for the first time and attempting to get their bearings. Due to the limited research on Gen Z professionals' perceptions of their organizational cultures and their sense of fit within their organizations, human resource, and organizational leaders are likely to be interested in understanding which aspects of this generation's work experiences contribute to their development of loyalty to their organizations.

Rich Rigor

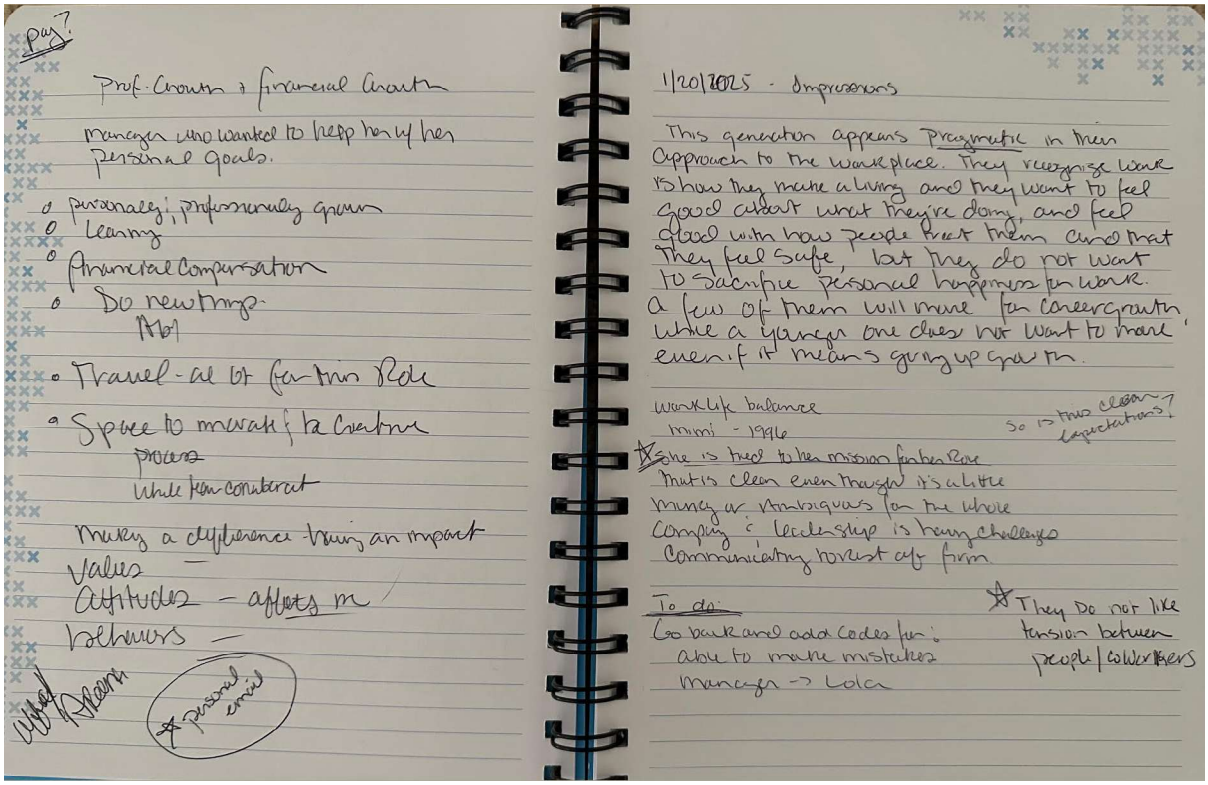
Rich rigor is demonstrated by dedicating ample time to gather significant and interesting data, using an appropriate sample size, collecting sufficient data to support claims, and following rigorous methodological processes and procedures (Tracy, 2010). This research study was designed and conducted with those key principles in mind. Each of the 13 participants underwent two rounds of in-depth, semi-structured interviews. These interviews explored participants' experiences within their organizations and examined artifacts that represented aspects of organizational culture. This approach was designed to gather diverse, rich, detailed data.

In addition, this study used triangulation (Kostere & Kostere, 2022) which added to the complexity and comprehensiveness of the data collection methods. Finally, two rounds of coding were conducted using values and pattern coding.

Sincerity

Meeting the criteria of sincerity was accomplished by acknowledging and working to manage my subjective values, biases, and inclinations. To address this, I engaged in reflective practices such as journaling, reflecting and gaining clarity on what those biases might be. I intentionally worked to remain mindful of them, continually reexamining the material to reduce the risk of personal perspectives shaping the findings. Maintaining a research journal supported this process. The use of a research journal is recommended by scholars such as Bhattacharya (2017) and Merriam and Tisdell (2016) as a tool for fostering self-awareness and critical reflection throughout the research process. Documenting my assumptions, preconceptions, and reactions enabled me to better understand how these perspectives could influence data collection and analysis (Bhattacharya, 2017; Saldaña, 2021).

Figure 3.7. Research Journal



The journal also served as a detailed record of participant interactions, capturing not only direct responses but also observations such as body language, tone, and nonverbal cues that could inform interpretation. At the same time, it provided a space to record emergent analytical insights, potential themes, and patterns observed during interviews. By documenting both my initial impressions—whether of surprise, curiosity, or discomfort (Saldaña, 2021)—and my evolving analysis, the journal functioned as both a methodological safeguard and a reflective companion. Ultimately, this practice enhanced transparency, deepened ethical consideration, and strengthened the rigor of data interpretation.

Credibility

Credibility in research is achieved through trustworthiness, verisimilitude, and plausibility of the findings (Tracy, 2010). By employing methods like crystallization, triangulation, and member checks and reflections (Tracy, 2010), research findings are more likely to be trustworthy, believable, and reflective of participants' true experiences. Crystallization uses multiple data forms and perspectives for a comprehensive understanding. Triangulation cross-checks findings with multiple data sources, methods, or investigators to increase reliability and validity. Member checks involve sharing interview transcripts with participants to ensure accurate representation.

To achieve crystallization and triangulation, two rounds of interviews with 13 participants will were conducted. These interviews explored their experiences within their organizations and their descriptions of artifacts. With my coaching experience and interview skills, I built a comfortable rapport with the participants, encouraging them to share genuine and accurate experiences from their organizations. This helped illuminate how each participant interpreted their organizational culture. Lastly, I offered every participant the opportunity to

review their transcripts and to provide modifications or clarifications as an additional way to validate the transcripts. Of 13 participants, only five participants completed member checks. Zero out of the five participants who wished to review their transcripts had any revisions or clarifications.

Ethics

Ethical considerations are crucial in qualitative research to protect participants' rights and well-being and maintain the study's integrity. Key ethical principles include procedural ethics, such as those overseen by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Kansas State University, which involve avoiding deception, doing no harm, obtaining informed consent (Appendix C -), and protecting participants' privacy and confidentiality (Tracy, 2010). Relational ethics, evidenced by continuous reflection on my part, respected participants' dignity and exhibit mutual respect and connectedness (Tracy, 2010). According to Tracy (2010), ethical considerations must be maintained even after data collection to ensure the accurate representation of participants' lived experiences without sensationalizing or subverting data for personal gain.

This study adhered to these ethical practices by being approved by the IRB at Kansas State University for compliance with ethical guidelines for human subjects. Participants were informed of the study's purpose and procedures, and informed consent (Appendix C -) was obtained in writing before interviews commenced. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather rich data and were securely recorded and stored on a password-protected laptop and kept in a locked file cabinet. I have done my best to represent the data accurately and authentically, maintaining a reflective journal throughout the research process to address any biases or judgments. This commitment to ethical conduct was upheld throughout the entire research process.

Meaningful Coherence

The final criterion necessary for achieving quality in qualitative research is meaningful coherence (Tracy, 2010). Meaningful coherence refers to the successful achievement of the study's objectives using methodologies, data collection, analysis, and representation methods that are appropriately aligned with the overall research design and conceptual framework (Tracy, 2010). Additionally, all the components of qualitative studies must complement each other and fit well together to be meaningfully coherent (Tracy, 2010). Therefore, in this research study, the literature, research questions, methodology, and methods was aligned with the study and its findings to ensure the study did everything it advertised it would. Every attempt was made in this proposal to ensure the ontology, epistemology, and methodology were aligned with the research questions and literature review.

Summary

This chapter describes the methods, methodologies and procedures for executing a qualitative research study through the lens of social constructionism, aimed at understanding how Generation Z professionals perceive their experiences within U.S. organizations and their sense of organizational fit. To safeguard the ethical treatment of human subjects, the study was submitted and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Kansas State University. A pilot study was conducted to validate that the data collection methods, including semi-structured interviews and artifact analysis, effectively captured the necessary information to address the research question. The collected data were subjected to inductive analysis techniques, such as values and pattern coding. Throughout the data analysis process, a research journal was maintained to identify potential biases and refine insights. To ensure the study's quality and

trustworthiness, six of Tracy's (2010) eight criteria—worthy topic, rich rigor, sincerity, credibility, ethics, and meaningful coherence—were rigorously applied.

Chapter 4 - Findings

This chapter presents the findings of this qualitative study, which explored how Gen Z professionals perceive organizational culture and person-organization (PO) fit, and how these perceptions influence their sense of organizational loyalty. Additionally, the study examined the defining characteristics of Gen Z professionals as they navigate the workplace. Eight key themes and nine subthemes emerged from the data, characterizing Gen Z professionals' perceptions of organizational culture, loyalty, and the attributes they exhibit. These themes and subthemes collectively demonstrate the complexity and multifaceted nature of Gen Z's workplace experiences and expectations.

Themes and Subthemes

The themes and subthemes from the findings of this study are detailed in the following sections, supported by illustrative quotes and summarized insights that illuminate both their organizational experiences and professional perspectives.

Table 4.1. Themes and Subthemes

Theme	Subtheme
1. Gen Z Want Learning Cultures Where They Aren't Afraid to Fail	a. Comfortable Asking Questions at Work b. Flat Organizational Structures Empower Gen Z to Ask Questions
2. Career Growth and Professional Development Opportunities are Important	a. Gen Z Expects Transparency from Senior Leaders
3. Gen Z Need the Company's Values to Align With Their Own	a. Strong Aversion to Organizational Hypocrisy
4. Gen Z Prefer Supportive, Collaborative Cultures that Build Positive Relationships	
5. Gen Z Redefines Organizational Loyalty	a. Definition Excludes Tenure b. Career Progression Informed Loyalty c. For Gen Zer's Loyalty is Rooted in Relationships d. For Gen Z, Loyalty Lies More with Managers Than Organizations
6. Gen Z Prioritize Psychological Safety, Well-being and Work-life Balance	
7. Gen Z Navigate Their Careers with Pragmatism	a. Work is Not Central to Their Identity
8. Gen Z have Cynical View of Corporate Structures	

Gen Z Professionals Want "Learning" Cultures Where They Aren't Afraid to Fail

The opportunity to learn without fear of failure or punishment emerged as a theme in Gen Z professionals' reflections on their experiences in the workplace. Gen Z professionals strongly value organizational cultures that emphasize on-the-job learning and personal growth, with a focus on environments where mistakes are seen as part of the learning process rather than failures. Participants emphasized the importance of learning new skills and stepping outside their comfort zones to grow both personally and professionally. Many described how their

organizations provided environments where they could experiment, take on challenges, and learn without fear of failure.

Flavia expressed how she appreciates being able to seek out new opportunities to learn new skills:

> I'm pretty early in my career, so I just want the opportunity to try new things because I don't know what I'm going to be best at. I want to explore other teams, and my managers are supportive of that which is great.

Lisa shared a similar perspective, emphasizing how her organization fosters an environment where she can learn through experimentation. She stated, "I'm constantly learning and doing new things, and I get to test out a lot of things without the fear of failing."

Cindy echoed Lisa's sentiments, emphasizing how her organization supports her desire for learning by offering opportunities to push herself in new ways. Cindy stated,

> To push myself in different ways is really important to me. Whether it's just gaining new experiences, leadership skills or anything like that is really important to me every step of the way and I feel my company meets my needs in that way.

Denise highlighted the value of a culture that encourages learning through failure, contrasting it with previous employment experiences in more punitive environments. She stated:

> [This culture] is just go do it, learn from it. Fail. Like, they want you to fail, because then you'll learn from that and then get an even better solution. At my last company, [the culture was] no mistakes…and it was a very scary environment when you [did] make a mistake. So I like that here [the culture is] fail, but fail fast, and then learn from it and move on.

Jasmine described how a supportive learning environment not only tolerates mistakes but also uses them as opportunities for personal and professional growth. She explained:

> I do feel like I'm learning and growing because I'm given opportunities to learn… and just grow as an individual in my field. If I say something or do something that I'm not supposed to …then I'm checked for that [without it being a negative thing], and it allows me to [grow]. I really like that, and I don't think everyone in corporate gets that.

Similarly, Jeffrey echoed these sentiments by describing a workplace culture that prioritizes learning on the job and values progress over perfection. He stated, "Our culture is very much learn on the job, don't stew on something or try to make it perfect. Move quickly, learn from mistakes and keep going and I really like that."

Lola shared her enthusiasm for the diverse learning opportunities her organization provides, which have enabled her to develop new skills and discover unexpected passions. She reflected:

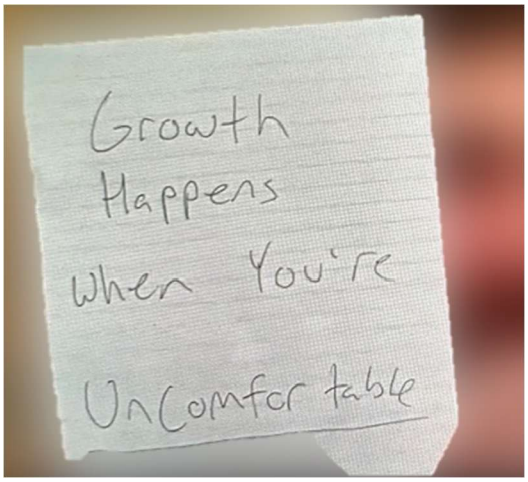
> Working for this company has allowed me to take on so many learning opportunities that I never would have saw myself taking on. Taking on a learning management system, becoming the HR artificial intelligence person; I would have never expected it, but here I am and it makes me so passionate about being here.

Several of the artifacts participants chose to represent their organizational cultures related to the concept of learning. For example, the artifact that Jeffrey shared to describe his organizational culture was directly related to how he viewed his company as giving him an opportunity to grow and learn in a new role for which he had no experience. He brought in a piece of paper (Figure 4.1) on which he had written the words, "Growth happens when you are uncomfortable." He explained the quote was inspired by a book he read by Carol Dweck and

referred to the experience he had being promoted and allowed to learn on the job. He explained that the leaders had said,

> We…acknowledge the fact that…we would never hire you into this role externally, because your resume doesn't match the profile that we look for. But you know…let's do it. You've sort of proven yourself, and…if you want to take a chance on yourself, we'll take a chance on you too and let you grow [into this].

Figure 4.1.Carol Dweck Quote from a Participant



The artifact that Lisa chose to represent her organizational culture was a watercolor paint palette and she described how it emphasized the culture of learning at her organization. She explained:

> I specifically brought a watercolor palette, and not a regular paint palette, because when you just put the brush on the paint, nothing shows up on the page. You have to add water to it...for it to live up to its full potential. So I kind of see the water as the training. I'm new to the industry...and I knew nothing about it before coming in.

Flavia shared a sticker she received when she was an intern prior to joining the company full time. She described how the sticker represented the company's focus on allowing interns and employees to grow in areas that interested them. She explained:

> I brought in this sticker from the internship program because they gave us a lot of…real work and…opportunities to really understand…what we want[ed] to do and how we want[ed] to grow. And I feel like that…kind of wraps the core concept of…trusting your people and giving them a lot of opportunities… and seeing how they grow from there. I feel like I saw a lot of that through the internship program…and throughout my time here as a full-timer.

Gen Z professionals deeply value organizational cultures that encourage continuous learning, personal growth, and experimentation without fear of failure. Next, two subthemes that highlight key aspects of learning-oriented cultures important to Gen Z professionals are presented.

Gen Z Professionals Need to Feel Comfortable Asking Questions at Work

Gen Z professionals described thriving in organizations where they feel genuinely comfortable asking questions—a state they see as fundamental to their learning and growth and to learning cultures. For this generation, a positive workplace is synonymous with a culture in which open dialogue and inquiry are encouraged, not discouraged. Andrew captured this sentiment by explaining how support from colleagues and leaders makes him feel unafraid to ask questions:

> Everybody, from the top to bottom, is pretty much supportive, and asks each other questions. We can rely on each other, which I like and makes me feel like I want to do a good job at work. I don't feel afraid to go to my managers in any situation, or… asking someone a question. [Everyone has] your back.

Additionally, Lisa described the importance of feeling comfortable asking questions. She stated, "I think not being nervous to communicate with the people around you and ask questions,

is a big thing…because I feel comfortable calling the Vice President or Director of Operations and asking a really stupid question."

Mimi highlighted the role of supervisors in creating this culture. She stated:

> I appreciate my direct supervisor never making me feel like there's a dumb question or acting like I should know something and then getting frustrated if I don't. That's created a space that I feel very comfortable trying and failing and asking questions. I think it's so important to feel comfortable like that in order to learn and go further.

Molly pointed out how the chief executive officer (CEO) the organization helped to create a supportive culture where it was safe to ask questions. She stated:

> So the CEO of the company, he's made it very clear that his door is always open for questions or to talk. And that's a nice feeling that I can go and do that and not feel scared of him.

Similarly, Cindy stated:

> We understand that everyone's coming into a project or a task with a different background, a different level of baseline understanding, so there's no dumb questions here. Everyone can come in and be met at their level of what they need. Leadership always stresses that to us, to not get in our heads about asking a question, because they're always like somebody else has the exact same question, don't worry. If I didn’t have this kind of environment, I couldn’t thrive.

Finally, Shelby stated, "I like that we are able to openly ask questions on our teams and feel like the teams are dependable, kind of like friends."

Gen Z professionals emphasized that feeling genuinely comfortable asking questions, with support from leaders and peers, was essential to their learning, growth, and ability to thrive

in workplace learning cultures. Building on this emphasis on psychological safety, the next subtheme examines how flat organizational structures and accessible leadership further empower Gen Z professionals to voice curiosity and seek guidance without hesitation.

Flat Organizational Structures Empower Gen Z to Ask Questions

Gen Z professionals indicated that feeling safe to ask questions at work was closely tied to their perception of organizational structure. The participants consistently expressed a strong preference for flat or non-hierarchical organizational structures, viewing them as essential for accessibility to senior leaders and feeling comfortable asking questions without fear. Thus, a sub-theme was that flat or less hierarchical organizational structures empowered Gen Z to ask questions.

When a flat hierarchy in their organization was observed, participants reported feeling more comfortable communicating openly with leaders and colleagues. For example, Lisa highlighted how the absence of a hierarchical structure in the workplace made it easier for her to communicate with leadership. She stated, "There's no fear of contacting leadership here. There's no hierarchy or that you have to act a certain way by having to contact this person before that person." Denise stated: "I like how easy it is to connect with anyone…there's not so much of a hierarchy here."

Will appreciated the flat structure within his organization also. He stated, "We run pretty flat in terms of there's not a lot of hierarchy, and everyone is expected to pull their weight significantly which I like." Similarly, Molly stated, "I appreciate how the hierarchy doesn't feel as stringent as in other workplaces that I've been in."

Overall, Gen Z professionals described feeling positive about environments where they feel genuinely comfortable asking questions, viewing open dialogue as essential to their learning

and development. They perceive supportive, psychologically safe cultures where managers and colleagues encourage inquiry as motivating and inclusive, thereby fostering trust and continuous learning. In addition to learning, growth is important to Gen Z professionals as discussed in the next theme.

Career Growth and Professional Development Opportunities are Important

The second theme that emerged in this study illustrates how Gen Z professionals highlight career growth as a crucial factor for job satisfaction and long-term engagement. Many expressed the need for clear career paths, opportunities for promotions, or role diversification to stay engaged and motivated. Interestingly, for them, career growth has a broader definition than just referring to upward mobility. Career growth also means increased responsibilities, learning opportunities, and being able to contribute in ways that expand skills or showcase their value. Professional development programs that include training, in-person events, travel, mentorship, and support for certifications are highly valued as essential drivers of their continued progress and motivation. Conversely, lack of advancement or unclear growth trajectories often leads to thoughts of leaving the organization.

Career growth for Gen Z extends beyond titles to encompass meaningful development and impact. Denise described how her early career ambition centered on promotions as a validation of competence: "My main goals were getting promoted. And I think that was just related to feeling like I have confidence in my role that I'm there, that's pure validation." However, over time, Denise's perspective evolved beyond chasing promotions: "I got jaded by the process…but the shift to my current company made me focus more on learning and doing good work."

Many participants reinforced the value they place on continuous learning and diversified growth. Andrew expressed a long-term commitment fueled by a belief in growth opportunities: "Personally, I want to grow with the company like that I can see myself staying for three to five to ten years and just do a really good job." Similarly, Flavia emphasized the broad spectrum of career growth for her: "I want to keep learning…try new things…get experiences that allow me to show my value," and she acknowledged the pressure to self-advocate in navigating her own career path. This reflects the Gen Z desire for professional development opportunities at work.

The desire for transparent communication and regular feedback is also a key element supporting career growth and professional development. Denise appreciated the open feedback culture facilitating her growth: "I have monthly career chats with my manager and peer feedback…that has really helped because we can share openly and be transparent." Cindy similarly valued the opportunity to have honest conversations: "Being able to have very open talks with your managers on personal goals…and if those goals are being met." These practices directly contribute to a sense of alignment between personal drive and organizational support, strengthening participant commitment.

Personalized career ambition and vision also shape how Gen Z perceives growth potential within organizations. Jasmine articulated a clear aspiration: "I want to own my own marketing firm eventually and enjoy the freedom and flexibility," and she connected her ongoing professional development to these goals: "I feel like I am learning and growing because I'm given opportunities to participate in events…that allow me to grow as an individual." This underscores how providing tailored growth opportunities resonates deeply with Gen Z.

Ultimately, career growth and professional development are multifaceted imperatives for Gen Z, encompassing measurable advancement, skill diversification, meaningful contribution, and ongoing learning supported by transparent communication.

Gen Z Expects Transparency from Senior Leaders

Transparency from senior leadership emerged as a sub-theme and a foundational need for Gen Z professionals to navigate their career growth. For this generation, clear and open communication from the top creates the essential context for making informed decisions about their professional futures. They require not only insight into operational realities and organizational direction but also assurance that their personal values align with the evolving company culture. Eight Gen Z participants expressed that open communication from leadership is not just appreciated but expected. They shared that when senior leaders are candid about company goals, changes, and expectations, it cultivates trust and a sense of security vital for long-term engagement. This transparency reassures Gen Z employees that their aspirations can be supported and nurtured within the organization, helping them visualize viable and authentic career pathways. The following quotes illustrate how transparent leadership communication enables Gen Z to feel more secure in career growth opportunities and in trusting that the organization is aligned with their values.

> Cindy emphasized the importance of transparency from senior leadership by sharing: Transparency is key here. I think they do a really good job of constantly letting employees know, like peek behind the curtain of, their broader vision for the organization's growth, and where they see the organization going. We're always invited to ask questions and it's really nice because then I can plan my future as well.

Denise highlighted how transparent communication shapes her positive view of her organization. She stated, "When people ask me what I like about my current company, I say I love the transparency. They tell us exactly what they expect through the values, and I love the transparency [they] show during tough situations."

Lisa provided a more personal example, describing how a senior leader's transparent advice about her career prospects made her feel appreciative:

> [He said] if you want to be successful, you should probably look in a different direction because this particular role in this industry is really middle aged white men buying from middle aged white men. He wasn't trying to be offensive in any way, he was just trying to look out for my success and he was very transparent which I appreciated.

Lola emphasized transparency should extend beyond organizational goals to include leaders' personal beliefs, stating, "I think it's important for [leaders] at work to be transparent not only about the vision for the company, but also their beliefs. This is a really big thing for me." Similarly, Mimi described her organization's transparency as one of its most valuable aspect. She said, "Being at a company that's willing to be transparent; share what they're doing…I think that is one of the best things here."

Molly underscored the need for transparency from leadership, especially regarding how organizational changes will personally affect employees. She stated:

> Just trying to understand the direction the company is going, and seeing if that aligns with me, [means] transparency is really important. I need to see concretely how a change would impact my life. There needs to be that level of transparency [from leadership].

In contrast, Andrew described two situations in which he felt let down by the communication from senior leaders for not being more transparent with he and his co-workers.

In the first instance, Andrew described how his team is the only team at the company not allowed to work remotely and that there is no explanation for this. He stated: "I can do my job anywhere, [so] I don't understand it. There have been rumors that something happened with someone previously on this team, but there's zero transparency about it; no explanation why we can't work remote." Secondly, one time while working in his building there were some strong fumes that made him lightheaded and his eyes red and no one from leadership communicated what was going on or what was causing the fumes. He said, "I wish we had more transparency when these types of things are happening. It's just crazy, really something bad could have been happening."

Ultimately, open and honest dialogue about company goals and leadership beliefs deepens trust, informs loyalty, and provides the context necessary for Gen Z professionals to make informed career decisions. This expectation of transparency extends beyond formal communication to include leaders sharing their personal convictions and explaining how organizational changes may personally impact employees.

Gen Z Need the Company's Values to Align with Their Own

Participants described when their personal and professional values closely aligned with their organizations' values, it created a sense of belonging at work. Many emphasized how this sense of belonging fostered a deeper connection to their work, strengthened their commitment to their organizations, and provided opportunities for meaningful contributions. Ultimately, participants found that alignment with values was key to feeling a sense of fit with their organizations.

Will shared a sentiment about how his organization's values of efficiency and productivity aligned with his personal values. He stated:

> I enjoy being here. I'm very much of a I don't want to do fluff work, right? So, the fact that it's just expected to get in and get done what you need to get done…like I'm on board with that.

Jeffrey appreciated his organization's experimental approach that mirrored his own values. He explained, "I think that actually the organization and their values and me and my values are relatively closely aligned … We have a culture of experimentation here and that's how I like to live my life personally too." Cindy said, "I just really think I espouse the values that [my organization] looks for in a member of the organization."

Lola reflected on how her organization's value of diversity of thought deeply resonated with her personal value of diversity. She stated:

> Diversity of thought is a new value for our company and one that is a personal value. That's a really big thing that I've tried to educate myself on and put in the forefront of my life and also advocate for. This is a big thing that really connects me to my organization.

Mimi stated, "My values align well with [those of my organization]. [The organization's] values are all the same ones that I would look for in [my own] relationships [outside the office]." Finally, Whitney stated:

> [I feel] really aligned with the values of this organization. I always wanted to work for a non-profit and help people. I see a lot of challenges in this world. I face a lot of challenges being disabled. I really feel for people that have gone through a lot of challenges. I always wanted to work for a company that helped people and now I do.

Denise highlighted how her organization's values had become second nature to her, which empowered her to take more initiative in her role:

> The company values are just part of my lingo now, and it's something that just comes naturally to me. Like, I buy in. One of our values is 'act like an owner'. And it's like, alright let's become an owner. My manager is not here and that's fine. Let's make sure I own this and get it done.

Strong Aversion to Organizational Hypocrisy

Several of the Gen Z professionals expressed a strong aversion to organizations and leaders that behave in hypocritical ways. For example, Mimi shared that she would leave her company if the leaders took big raises while layoffs were happening. While this was not taking place at her company, she was familiar with another company where this was happening and expressed her disdain. Jasmine shared that her company had a policy against leaving the office during work hours to attend personal appointments, yet the managers did this all the time and she cited that as a major reason for her dissatisfaction with the culture.

A few participants directly experienced hypocrisy and contradictions within their organizations. The anecdotes they shared, along with the tones they used, suggested they felt significant irritation toward value clashes and organizational doublespeak. For example, Molly remarked, "I don't really believe what [the company] says all the time because they will say one thing and do another." She went on to describe how she sometimes witnessed unethical behavior driven by personal gain go unpunished, which led to her disillusionment with the company's approach to enforcing ethical standards: "Sometimes [things] that... could be considered unethical... don't necessarily lead to reprimanding."

Additionally, Flavia expressed frustration that quarterly employee engagement surveys, promoted as a way to understand employees' feelings, would simply omit questions that received

unfavorable responses in the next cycle. She said, "I think that's a big problem for me when we notice that the question that got negative feedback just isn't there the next time."

Denise shared how much she appreciates that her current company embodies the values they espouse. She said:

> Before my current company, I was at a larger company that also…had values. But I didn't feel like they actually like stuck with the values. So, I was pleasantly surprised when joining my current company how they really embodied the values and took [them] seriously. I hear them…repeat them in meetings and…I was surprised how kind of seamlessly folks [weave them into their everyday language] and share them.

Thus, Gen Z professionals expressed a strong aversion to organizational hypocrisy, valuing authenticity and ethical consistency, with perceptions of genuine alignment between their values and the company's values and actions significantly influencing their engagement. On top of their desire for authenticity, the next section examines how Gen Z professionals prioritize supportive and collaborative cultures that cultivate positive interpersonal dynamics.

Gen Z Prefer Supportive, Collaborative Cultures that Build Positive Relationships

The findings show that Gen Z professionals prioritize organizational cultures that are both supportive and collaborative, where positive relationships flourish. They thrive in environments that nurture open communication, mutual respect, and teamwork, seeing these elements as essential to their engagement and success at work.

Andrew emphasized the importance of having colleagues he can rely on, highlighting how positive relationships at work make daily interactions less scary. He stated:

> It's really important to have positive relationships and people that I feel like I could go to when I'm having trouble or just…to ask a question. What I value most about our culture

is how everybody is just positive. Really, just going into work every day, and not fearing seeing someone or having an issue [with someone], or anything like that. Just having positivity and wanting to have the people [I work with] come into work every day, I think, is the biggest thing I [value here].

Lisa pointed out that the most critical aspect of culture for her is being surrounded by nice, positive people; noting how a community of positive people can be energizing. She shared:

I think the…most important thing for me when it comes to culture…is the people just being nice and wanting to be there. Just a community of support around you and people with positive attitudes. You got to be surrounded by people that make you positive because you…feed off each other's energy.

Similarly, Cindy explained that supportive colleagues and a positive culture are essential for both sustainability and a better employee experience, especially during difficult projects. She stated:

The organizational culture and the people you work with are so important to me that I feel like without those building blocks it's just not sustainable long term. Having a positive environment, it just makes…my experience as an employee just better. If you're working on a difficult project or with a difficult client, ultimately a positive attitude on a team makes the process go by easier. It's a positive, healthy feeling atmosphere that you want to do your work in and exist in.

Denise expressed her perception that caring about the people you work with leads to a more positive environment and therefore, a greater desire to come to work. She stated:

My number one priority is the people. Personally, that aspect of actually caring about the people you work with is really important for me. And if that happens, you tend to be in a

more positive work environment. And then you want to come into work because you are surrounded by people who care about you.

Echoing this sentiment, Jasmine added that a positive environment makes her look forward to work, stating:

> Having a positive environment is really important to me. That means I look forward to going into work and don't dread it. It means my work peers are also [like] friends and family. [For example], people give compliments to each other on a daily basis.

For instance, Jeffrey highlighted the collaborative nature of his organization's culture stating, "The vibe of our culture is very collaborative… and. we can challenge each other in collaborative ways."

Similarly, Lola reflected on how teamwork contributed to her positive perception of workplace culture:

> One thing about our culture that stands out is how willing people are to be collaborative and transparent with each other. So just really working together as a team and not against other teams or other people or anything like that makes the culture positive for me.

Flavia shared how the collaborative atmosphere within her organization increased her enjoyment of the workplace by stating, "The people, and just like the collaboration, and the culture they built just really swayed me in trusting and enjoying the organization."

Whitney emphasized her organization's strong teamwork orientation, contrasting it with negative experiences she had heard about in other workplaces. "I hear stories of people getting yelled at work and I could never imagine that ever happening to me at my company. It is very much teamwork oriented, very, very, very teamwork oriented." Similarly, Lisa stated:

> Instead of people saying, ‘This is the right way…I’ve been doing it like this for this many years so you should do it like this,’ we all kind of listen to each other and collaborate and feed off each other.

Additionally, Cindy shared, "A sense of teamwork is really important to me. We’re all a team trying to help each other towards a common goal." Finally, Will highlighted how his organization’s collaborative approach ensured that challenges were addressed collectively rather than falling on one individual. He stated, "Something positive about our culture, is that in most scenarios people do work together to figure out what a solution to a problem is and nothing is thrown on to just one person." Finally, Molly illustrated how leadership plays a role in cultivating this type of culture, noting that positive attitudes are not only encouraged but actively promoted through regular communication:

> [Leadership] says that it's desirable to work hard with a positive attitude that's really emphasized, and it's desirable to treat each other with respect and kindness. So those are the things they're trying to promote. And they do that through meetings, through emails regularly.

Gen Z participants in this study expressed a profound need for emotional stability and psychological safety within their workplaces, even though they didn’t use the term "psychological safety." They consistently described experiencing anxiety related to work and expressed a strong need for clear support and guidance from their managers to mitigate this stress. Lola emphasized the value of leaders who check in genuinely and provide grace, sharing that managers often ask about personal well-being and create space for conversations beyond just tasks: "Talking to leaders about just like... how was your weekend or anything like that… set aside time like, Hey, let's go get a coffee or talk about our careers here." Mimi highlighted the

crucial role of a supportive manager who fosters a safe learning environment by encouraging questions without judgment and offering help when needed: "She provides every opportunity for me to learn and ask questions and make mistakes… She's made me feel very much like I do have a partner in this."

Lola also highlighted the culture of leaning on and teammates giving each other grace, emphasizing the importance of genuine human connection amid work demands: "We really value volunteer time... just really leaning on each other and like just checking in... always being there for help." Andrew similarly noted the significance of approachable leadership and open communication in fostering psychological safety within the organization: "Everybody really is there for you... I don't feel afraid to go to my managers in any situation... they really have your back."

The data also indicated that Gen Z professionals may also have some self-doubt about their professional skills and that relying on support and collaboration to navigate challenges and complete assignments at work may be a way to help relieve some of that doubt. For example, Jeffrey shared having some concerns about missing critical skills:

> I think there's a good chance that many of us [in Gen Z] are missing critical skills that we'll need to jump to the next level [of our careers]…because our careers have been spent in our bedrooms. I have a real anxiety that I have stunted my development because remote work comes with many crutches…like a second monitor to look at notes during presentations…and having a barrier between you and who you're working with.

Denise spoke openly about reaching out to others to come up with ideas, "I get really messy or hairy problems... It's hard when you have to work with only yourself... I basically reach out to others to brainstorm." This attitude reflects self-doubt about tackling complex problems

alone. Though participants also claimed to want more independence and autonomy at work, they often described being more comfortable seeking guidance and collaboration with others to complete their tasks. At the same time, this could perhaps be perceived as reluctance to openly acknowledge gaps in their knowledge or skills as well. Will's remarks suggest a challenging environment where mistakes carry risks, making solo risk-taking less appealing: "It's fun until you mess up or do something that maybe off the [mark] a little bit."

Ultimately, these participant insights highlight how collaborative culture and support systems play a crucial role in participants' ability to manage work demands successfully amid anxiety and self-doubt. These reflections underscore that anxiety is a common emotional experience among Gen Z professionals. They keenly seek clear directions, empathetic communication, and dependable support from their managers and colleagues to feel stable and confident in their roles.

Gen Z Redefines Organizational Loyalty

Gen Z professionals in this study define organizational loyalty in ways that diverge notably from previous generations. Interestingly, 11 of the 13 participants do not associate loyalty with remaining at one company for an extended period; rather, they root their definition in effort, integrity, and mutual benefit during their time with an employer. Most, like Jasmine, instead described loyalty as "doing their best," which for her entails "being on time...being respectful, being honest. Being understanding, being a good listener, and just the way you communicate, I mean body language is like so big…everything in communication. So yeah, that's it." This reflects a focus on acting ethically, meeting responsibilities, and maintaining professionalism. Only a few equated loyalty with long-term commitment—and even then, that meant one to five years, not multiple decades.

Definition Excludes Tenure

For example, Will's reflection on loyalty was representative of the overarching theme that organizational loyalty does not equal tenure:

> Loyalty is just working as hard as I can to get the job done. I think the days have long gone where people are working years and retiring from the same company. And I don't think companies necessarily expect that anymore either.

Andrew echoed this by explaining:

> I would say it's someone who really goes in and does the absolute best that they can at their job and like isn't on their phone at work, or…like stealing company hours or viewing websites [they shouldn't] while they're on their work computer. I wouldn't go as far as like looking for another job or anything like that, because at the end of the day, if something happens they could get rid of me just like that. So, I need to care about myself, too.

For this cohort, loyalty is conditional and reciprocal, based not on blind allegiance but on feeling valued, supported, and genuinely aligned with the organizational culture. As Mimi succinctly put it, "I feel appreciated, and I feel wanted, so that in turn makes me…want to be at an organization like this." Similarly, Lola stated, "Organizational loyalty is doing your best…doing what you say you're going to do…and helping drive impact [for the company]." Whitney described loyalty as a willingness to pitch in and "go the extra mile." She said,

> I would define organizational loyalty as your willingness to do a job. Some weeks I could finish everything up in one day and be done. So, I think part of loyalty is when I'm done with all my stuff, going to my boss who is always overflowing with [work] and say Can I

help you? Being willing to go the extra mile for them means you're going to be loyal to them.

Going above and beyond, or "going the extra mile," is viewed as situational and more about mutual respect and relationships than obligation. Lisa explained, "If someone is willing to help me and listen to me and what I need, I am willing to go the extra mile for them…it's more like on a person-to-person basis." Both Molly and Mimi expressed that true loyalty is demonstrated by putting in one's best effort even during tough times. Molly reflected, "I think loyalty boils down to sticking to your organization even when it feels awful. And I know that sounds crazy but there are definitely times where we are doing the most [we can] and then we're asked to do even more and it feels like whatever I do isn't enough. But they'll give me a Starbucks gift card and I'll feel a bit better." Mimi added, "I think [loyalty is] definitely showing up and putting your best foot forward daily. Even if...you don't want to show up. I think that's important that you're always giving your best."

Integrity and honesty remain essential attributes of loyalty for this group. For example, when describing how she defined loyalty, Jasmine stated:

> I would say being on time, that's a very big one. Being respectful, being honest, understanding and being a good listener. I would say I feel very loyal because I keep track of our competitors and I'm always trying to find new ways to [innovate].

Lisa also emphasized honesty as being a big part of being loyal. She stated:

> Loyalty is being honest about what you're doing. With working remotely there's no way to measure my phone calls or emails or what I'm doing during the day. I'd say to be loyal to the company is to actually work when I'm not expected to. The biggest thing is being honest about doing work even when I'm not being watched like a hawk because I'm

being trusted with that. Just making sure I have the integrity they want. Also, I don't share internal documents or things like that."

Taken together, for Gen Z, organizational loyalty is defined far less by tenure and far more by consistently doing one's best, upholding integrity, and being honest in one's work. Loyalty for this generation is fundamentally conditional and reciprocal—they expect a genuine, two-way exchange of value and respect in return for their commitment and contributions during their time with an organization.

Career Progression Informed Loyalty

Career progression also emerged as a workplace attribute influencing Gen Z professionals' sense of organizational loyalty. Participants described how opportunities for growth and advancement affected their loyalty to their organizations. While some participants expressed gratitude for their organizations' support in fostering their career growth, others highlighted how the lack of progression opportunities diminished their loyalty.

Cindy and Mimi both reflected that opportunities for growth influenced their organizational loyalty. Cindy shared how her organization's viable path for growth strengthened her loyalty and commitment to staying long-term: "I see myself staying with the organization for a long time and growing within the organization because I can see a viable path for my growth here. So, I do feel loyal to my company." Mimi emphasized how knowing there were opportunities to advance within her organization made her want to stay. She stated, "I think something that I really appreciate and makes me want to stay is knowing there are always opportunities here to move up."

Jeffrey highlighted how his organization's flexibility in offering him a new role he wasn't initially qualified for fostered his gratitude and loyalty:

> They offered me the flexibility to try a new role that I wasn't necessarily qualified for on paper and helped me grow in my career skills-wise and financially. … They did right by me so yes, I'm loyal. I'd be a lot slower to jump ship even if the perfect scenario came along.

Lola reflected on how her loyalty was contingent on continued career development, noting that stagnation would prompt her to seek opportunities elsewhere. She stated, "Continuing my career development is really important to me. Something I would consider changing companies for is if I hit a wall here and my growth was going to be stunted."

In contrast, Will, Molly, Andrew, Lisa, and Flavia highlighted how stagnation or limited progression opportunities undermined their loyalty. Will expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of career growth opportunities at his company, stating, "I think the potential for career growth at my company is non-existent…ultimately I want to move somewhere else so that I have an opportunity to advance my career to the next level." Molly shared similar frustrations, explaining how the absence of clear career mapping eroded her loyalty. "For me to want to stay…I think it's creating a clear path forward in terms of growth progression, and that includes career mapping. But I don't have those things here and that seriously erodes my loyalty to this company."

Andrew noted that while he wanted to stay with his company long-term because he feels like he is growing, the requirement to relocate for advancement made him feel stagnant and less committed. Andrew stated:

> Knowing that I am growing here helps [me feel more loyal]. I want to stay here long term [for three to five to ten years] and grow with the company and do a really good job. But

> they want me to move out of state to [reach the next level] and I really don't want to. … So just kind of feeling stagnant here [is eventually going] to make me leave.

Lisa reflected on her previous experience at a company with structured career tracks but noted that limited flexibility within those tracks ultimately led her to leave a previous employer. She stated:

> At my old company we had a career track program … But I eventually left that job because it felt like we were really being trained for one specific role and [I didn't see a way] to grow anymore through that.

Flavia echoed these frustrations, sharing how her current company's lack of promotion opportunities impacted her sense of loyalty. She stated, "I don't feel loyalty here because they are never going to give me a promotion to a different job. … There's no growth in that."

These findings show that career growth and advancement opportunities strongly influence Gen Z professionals' organizational loyalty. Conversely, stagnation or lack of progression leads to diminished loyalty for this cohort.

For Gen Zer's Loyalty is Rooted in Relationships

Gen Z professionals described their sense of loyalty as often more strongly tied to the people they worked with than to the organization itself. Participants emphasized how positive relationships, camaraderie, and mutual support among colleagues created an environment where they felt motivated, valued, and connected, reducing their desire to leave. Their focus on interpersonal relationships highlights how loyalty is affected by how people feel around other people in their organization.

Lola succinctly shared that while she feels loyal to her company, her deeper loyalty lies with the people she works with. She stated, "I'm loyal to the company, but I'm more loyal to the

people around me." Whitney echoed this sentiment, stating, "[I feel loyal to] the people for sure." Cindy reflected a similar sentiment, stating:

> It's ultimately the people I work with, especially my team members, that make me want to go above and beyond to help because we are able to foster such good working relationships that become part of a really positive environment. The reason I stay at my job is because of the people I work with.

Similarly, Mimi emphasized how the value of mutual support among colleagues strengthened her sense of loyalty. She stated, "When you are surrounded by people that are truly subscribed to [the value of] having each other's backs and supporting each other…it really gives you a sense of loyalty."

Jasmine highlighted how her positive relationships with coworkers helped to diminish her dissatisfaction with other aspects of her organization:

> I'm happy with the people I work with, and that falls along with the loyalty in the company. If I didn't like the people I work with I would definitely not be there. Because I already don't like how structured the company is…so the people are what make me stay there longer.

Jeffrey emphasized how camaraderie among coworkers has become increasingly important to him over his career, noting that poor relationships can overshadow even exciting projects. "Who you are working with is a lot more important than what you are working on. … If you are working with bad people it doesn't matter how cool the project is…everything is going to suck."

For Gen Z, Loyalty Lies More with Managers Than Organizations

The relationship with direct supervisors emerged as another critical factor influencing Gen Z professionals' organizational loyalty. Participants described how supportive, approachable, and invested leaders fostered their growth, provided opportunities, and created environments where they felt valued. Many shared that their loyalty to their organizations was directly tied to the quality of leadership they received, with some noting that losing a trusted supervisor would prompt them to reconsider remaining with their organization.

Mimi emphasized how her loyalty was rooted in the support and opportunities provided by her direct supervisor. Mimi stated, "[My loyalty] really comes from my direct supervisor… [because] she provides every opportunity for me to learn and ask questions and make mistakes." Similarly, Lola shared that her manager and other leaders she works with directly are the primary reason for her loyalty to the organization:

> I really do appreciate my manager and a few of the leaders that I work with directly. So, I think that they are really the ones that meet my needs and the reason that I stay loyal to the company.

Mimi further reflected on how her supervisor's presence is so central to her experience that her departure would prompt Mimi to reconsider staying with the organization:

> Something that would make me leave…if my direct supervisor were to retire. She is responsible for so much of my learning and so much of where my opportunities come from. [If she left] that would definitely…make me reconsider [being here].

Lola said something very similar, stating. "I told my boss if she ever leaves there better be a spot for me wherever she is going."

When participants felt like their managers went out of their way to help them, this increased their sense of loyalty as well. For example, Lisa highlighted how her manager's willingness to drop everything to provide support inspired her to reciprocate that effort. "My boss goes out of his way to support me and help me. He'll stop whatever he is doing if I have a problem. And that makes me want to return the favor to him as well." Whitney echoed this sentiment, noting how her boss's willingness to go above and beyond motivated her to do the same. She stated, "When my boss is willing to go the extra mile, I know that I want to go the extra mile."

Gen Z professionals anchor their loyalty more in relationships, including connections with colleagues and managers, rather than in the organization itself. These meaningful interpersonal connections, characterized by support, trust, and mutual respect, fostered loyalty even when other organizational factors fall short.

Gen Z Prioritize Well-being and Work-life Balance

Gen Z participants in this research study consistently emphasized setting firm boundaries between their personal time and work responsibilities. Many expressed a clear reluctance to sacrifice personal well-being for career advancement. As Lola put it, "We're not afraid to leave…if [our] well-being is not being taken seriously." Denise articulated that when workload pressures become overwhelming without adequate support, it leads to her considering leaving, stating, "If the workload is too much, and I voice that, but nothing is changing, I may have to leave if I don't feel supported." She also revealed the mental toll of workplace distress: "If I'm not able to sleep at night, or if I'm thinking about work in my dreams, and like really anxious before the week, I just don't want that to be a constant feeling."

Mimi stated, "I wouldn't be here if my company didn't encourage work life balance and realize we have lives outside of work." Will explained, "I'm happy to work extra hours as long as I don't miss family stuff or anything important like that."

Participants described well-being in the context of excessive work hours and lack of psychological safety at work. For example, Molly shared that she often worked more than 10 hours per day due to travel and client demands, noting the stress and wear such schedules caused her: "There are some weeks...the longest day I ever worked...I work 20 hours straight one day...it can be incredibly demanding and stressful." Molly shared that her well-being was suffering so she pushed back on how much she was traveling and working and her boss agreed that "work-life balance was necessary," so she was able to negotiate several extra vacation days.

Flavia said that she felt people her age should consider staying at their companies longer than they were because she believed the longer you worked for a company the better work-life balance you might have. She said, "I think there's…repercussions to [changing companies]…and people don't tell you those things. They just tell you they got hired and got an increase in salary and are doing amazing. But they won't admit…there's no work-life balance."

Several participants highlighted the importance of psychological safety and feeling secure to speak up and contribute. Jasmine described feeling secure and able to speak her mind because of the safe space created by her team: "It makes me feel secure, and it makes me feel like I am...climbing up and making a difference...I feel like there's a lot of psychological safety there." Denise experienced distress and diminished confidence under a micromanaging manager but improved dramatically when new leadership allowed autonomy and trust: "My first manager was a micromanager...it was really tough...I felt like...maybe I'm going to get fired...when I moved to

my second manager...I felt like I got the confidence and well-being back because she trusted me".

These quotes illustrate how participants framed well-being as challenged by overwork (e.g., long hours, heavy travel, complex projects) and compromised psychological safety (e.g., lack of trust or support, micromanagement), impacting their sense of loyalty and satisfaction at work. The following section explores how Gen Zers approach their career paths with a pragmatic mindset, navigating complexities with practical strategies and realistic expectations.

Gen Zers Navigate Their Careers with Pragmatism

Several participants demonstrated pragmatic and flexible approaches to advancing in their careers, noting that they either needed more experience to excel at the next level or lacked certain skills required for promotion. Overall, the participants did not express a strong sense of urgency to advance in their careers. Instead, they appeared appreciative of any opportunities their organizations or managers provided to help them learn and become more competent in their roles.

Jeffrey voiced this attitude by acknowledging: " I think there's a good chance many of us [in Gen Z] are missing critical communication skills that we'll need to jump to the next level…because our careers have all been spent in our bedrooms [since COVID]." Andrew stated, "I go into every day just wanting to take everything in, do a good job, keep impressing my company, and just…keep growing." Lola shared, "Right now I'm getting exposed to lots of different business problems and stakeholders, and I could never expect to get into higher role in a few years without getting this experience…I'm grateful." Denise said, "I'm early in my career and just trying to learn and grow before I worry about moving up."

Work is Not Central to Their Identity

Most of the participants viewed work primarily to meet financial needs rather than as a defining aspect of their identity or a source of fulfillment. For example, Molly stated, "I'm like, okay, this is my job. This is where I go to work, and in exchange I will receive benefits and money. So, I have that understanding."

Jasmine said about her day-to-day feelings: "I always say the saying…same thing different day. So I kind of just feel like I'm just repeating my day to day whenever I go in." She also acknowledged, "I don't know if there's a word that describes it, but... work is work. When I'm there it's work, and I get it…and I'm doing work. It pays the bills." Her words and tone as she said it reflects a resignation to work as a necessary routine.

Alternatively, Jeffrey described how he does derive much of his fulfillment in life from work and how he feels he is performing. He explained:

> I really sink myself into work and have trouble sort of separating it, and it is one of the…most influencing factors in my overall happiness and fulfillment. When things are going really well at work, I feel much more confident in other aspects of my life, and feel great about the direction that my life is heading.

However, he then went on to say that he recognized his current role as a "cog in the machine" with limited autonomy but embraces doing his part, showing the pragmatism in "needing to work," despite not wanting to necessarily identify with that role fully. His career aspiration is to own a company, so currently he explained, "The whole fulfillment and purpose piece is missing, but I recognize I need to be doing something to get [me where I want to] be someday. I'm not too worried about it now."

Gen Z professionals approach their careers with a pragmatic mindset, focusing on developing the necessary skills and experience to advance rather than feeling pressured to rapidly climb the corporate ladder. While work is generally viewed as a means to financial stability rather than a defining identity, many appreciate opportunities for growth and express a measured attitude toward career progression, balancing realism with personal values.

Their pragmatic mindset of perceiving work as a means to an end, may have shaped the participants overall skepticism about the authenticity of organizational culture and corporate values, which to them often seemed constructed or performative. Such sentiments set the stage for examining deeper skepticism and cynicism of corporate culture and organizational practices in the following section.

Gen Z have Cynical View of Corporate Structures

Several participants expressed clear skepticism and cynicism toward corporate structures and practices. Some disliked the rigidity and conformity associated with company cultures. Describing how she perceives the culture at her organization Jasmine said, "I've learned to deal with it. It was a shock at first…[and] it's not my favorite just because I feel like we're programmed as robots at [this] point." Jasmine further characterized her organizations culture as "very much old corporate...we follow the rules…come into the office...dress code is necessary," pointing out a rigid, outdated environment. In fact, the artifact Jasmine chose to represent her organizational culture was her company name tag. Describing it, she stated:

> So, I brought my name tag. It says my name and the company logo. I brought it because…my company is very structured. So, I feel like whenever I put on my name tag, I am identifying as an individual who belongs to [the company]. So, I'm no longer like

> myself…I have to put my likes, my beliefs away and be more corporate led and driven… Which I don't love, but it pays the bills.

Some participants perceived organizational practices to be ambiguous and not transparent. For example, Flavia described her distrust in the talent evaluation processes, saying, "There's tension of like, how do I grow here when it all feels very subjective of how I'm being analyzed in my performance." Shelby also expressed a certain disillusionment with corporate advancement explaining, "The work culture includes networking as a big thing to get promoted. They don't say that outright, but it's how it works."

In addition, some participants described their view of company cultures as manufactured rather than genuinely meaningful. Flavia explained how people talk about her culture at work, implying that the culture feels artificially constructed rather than organically experienced. She said:

> I think part of our culture is just confusing people with all the buzzwords we have. Even our values, like hardly anyone even knows what they mean. Culture is nothing…it's saying these buzzwords like a billion times and try[ing] to figure out how they apply to your role.

Molly shared that the values her company espoused were created by a third party. "I know that our organization partnered with some…human organizational performance consultant to come up with [our values]. So, they are written well, but I'm not sure I buy into the authenticity of…them."

Even Jeffrey acknowledged, "There's definitely a gap on that fulfillment and meaning piece, but I don't... I'm not stressed out…about it." Molly was more direct about her feelings, noting, "I view companies and organizations with an inherent level of cynicism." Ultimately,

these perspectives reveal a common attitude among the participants of doubt and wariness toward traditional corporate norms and expectations.

Summary

This chapter presented the key themes that emerged from the data analysis, exploring the characteristics of Gen Z professionals, their perceptions of organizational culture and PO fit, and how these perceptions influence their sense of organizational loyalty. Eleven key themes and four additional attitudes emerged from participants' narratives, reflecting critical aspects of their workplace experiences and values.

In summary, these findings highlight a generational shift in workplace expectations. The next chapter will examine the implications of these findings and compare them to existing literature.

Chapter 5 - Discussion and Conclusions

This study explored how Gen Z professionals experienced working at U.S. based organizations. Specifically, the study explored how Gen Z professionals perceived organizational culture, a sense of fit within their organizations, and how and if organizational culture and fit affected their loyalty to their organizations. These areas of exploration were examined using a conceptual framework consisting of two organizational behavior theories: Schein's (1981, 1983) and Schein and Schein's (2017) three levels of organizational culture theory and Kristof's (1996) PO fit theory. In this chapter, the research questions are answered first, followed by a discussion of the major and additional themes identified, which are explored and analyzed through the lens of the conceptual framework.

Research Questions

In this section, the research questions are addressed in sequence. The primary research question is examined first, followed by the sub-research questions, and concluding with the second research question.

Research Question 1

The first research question was: How do Gen Z professionals' perceptions of organizational culture and PO fit support their organizational loyalty?

Gen Z professionals' perceptions of organizational culture were influenced more by the quality of relationships they formed at work and the extent to which they felt psychologically safe and supported than by Schein's (1981, 1983) and Schein and Schein's (2017) model of artifacts, espoused values, and underlying assumptions. While the findings indicate that components of organizational culture identified in Schein's framework did shape how Gen Z professionals understood their workplace experiences, these elements had little to no impact on

their sense of loyalty to the organization. Instead, participants described loyalty as being driven primarily by opportunities for career growth and the quality of interpersonal dynamics.

Further, for the participants, PO fit was less about conformity to a collective culture, either through supplementary or complementary fit, and more about the alignment of organizational practices and values with their individual identities and career growth aspirations. Hence, Gen Z professionals' loyalty is less anchored in traditional, collective conceptualizations of organizational culture and more in personalized experiences of psychological safety, positive interpersonal relationships, support for career growth and learning, and value alignment. Thus, when organizations create cultures where Gen Z employees connect with others, feel safe to express themselves, make mistakes, and grow, their perceived PO fit improves, fostering stronger loyalty.

The preference for flat structures and transparent leadership reflects Gen Z's desire for equitable, authentic, and positive interactions, which contrasts with more traditional hierarchical organizational structures or cultural models. Moreover, the importance the participants placed on the quality of workplace relationships, especially with immediate managers rather than the organization as an abstract entity, highlights a shift away from traditional definitions of organizational loyalty and more towards relational foundations of loyalty.

In summary, Gen Z professionals' perceptions of organizational culture and PO fit show that their organizational loyalty is primarily driven by practices and norms that emphasize individual needs, psychological safety, transparency, and relational support. This generation interprets cultural artifacts and practices through personalized lenses, seeking workplaces that respect their distinct identities and foster continuous learning and open communication. For organizations aiming to cultivate loyalty amongst Gen Z, positive workplaces are going to be

non-negotiable for this generation. It is likely that intentional efforts to provide growth opportunities, encourage flat structures, promote transparent leadership, and facilitate strong interpersonal supportive relationships are essential.

Sub-Research Question 1

The first sub- question was: How do Gen Z professionals describe the ways in which organizational artifacts, espoused values and beliefs, and basic underlying assumptions create their perceptions of organizational culture?

Organizational Artifacts

Organizational artifacts are the first level of Schein's (1981, 1983) and Schein and Schein's (2017) three levels of organizational culture model. Schein defines organizational artifacts not only as visible and tangible aspects of an organization but as elements that can be difficult to interpret without understanding the deeper *shared* cultural meanings behind them. Strikingly, the concept of shared cultural meaning seemed to be missing from many of the participants' selection of and descriptions of the artifacts they chose.

Many of the artifacts participants chose to present during their second interviews were, in fact, *personal* representations of organizational meaning, rather than collectively recognized symbols of the organization's culture. For example, in several instances participants presented books gifted to them by a manager, personal notes, or pictures; items that did not have a shared meaning within their organizations. Often, participants imbued these objects with deeply individual meanings, representing moments of care, personal growth, or reflection. For example, Denise referenced a book given to her by a supervisor during a time of personal difficulty; Jeffrey described a handwritten quote on a post it note stuck to his computer monitor as representing the growth-mindset ethos that motivated him to give extra effort.

While these examples clearly illustrate that participants had projected organizational cultural meaning to these objects, they do not necessarily qualify as artifacts as Schein intended them. For Schein (1981, 1983) and Schein and Schein (2017), artifacts must be collectively shared, widely recognized, and deeply embedded symbols or regularized behaviors that outsiders would associate with the shared identity of the organization. In contrast, many participant objects were symbolic primarily for the individual, not the organization at large. This creates an analytical challenge: the artifacts function authentically for the participants as representations of organizational culture experience, but they do not fully operate within the definitional boundaries of Schein's most visible layer of culture. This suggests a generational reinterpretation of what constitutes a cultural artifact. For Gen Z professionals, individual meaning-making appears deeply fused with their understanding of organizational culture. The emphasis on personalized tokens may reflect the increasing priority placed on personal identity within contemporary workplace dynamics or point to a true divergence of identifying with a collective organizational culture for this new generation.

Perhaps most compelling is how these personalized artifacts point to a paradox within Schein's framework. While the model cautions against interpreting artifacts without the insider's understanding—artifacts being visible but opaque to outsiders—many participants themselves were imbuing privately held items with organizational meaning, despite these lacking any collective visibility. This inversion complicates notions of what counts as "cultural expression" in generationally distinct ways. It also indicates that participants understand their organizational culture through emotional resonance and relational experience just as much as (or perhaps more) than they do through institutionally sanctioned symbols or processes.

Moreover, a few artifacts introduced implicit contradictions. For example, Jasmine selected a company-issued name tag but described it in negative terms, suggesting it represented a loss of personal identity and signaling strict corporate identity rather than belonging. This suggests that some cultural artifacts can simultaneously symbolize inclusion and detachment, depending on how the individual relates to the broader culture of their organization. Once again, Gen Z participants highlighted the complex interplay of identity and structure, autonomy and conformity—underscoring that artifacts may serve as contested or dual-symbol items rather than uniformly embraced elements of culture.

In summary, the individualized nature of many chosen artifacts introduces a generational reimagining of Schein's artifact category. Rather than representing shared cultural symbols, these participant-selected items often operate as individualized representations of their personal experiences within a workplace culture. This divergence underscores a shift: rather than experiencing culture through commonly recognized organizational symbols, younger professionals draw on artifacts that reflect their own perceptions. These artifacts are often not seen as cultural markers by others, yet they allow individuals to sustain their connection to the company through identity-driven and emotionally meaningful cues. Understanding these nuances challenges any rigid applications of Schein's framework and perhaps invites a more evolved interpretation of how organizational culture is constructed and experienced by Gen Z today.

Espoused Values and Beliefs

Schein (1981, 1983) and Schein and Schein (2017) define the second level of the model, espoused values and beliefs, as the explicitly stated ideals, aspirations, and behavioral norms that organizations claim to have. [For conciseness, Schein's second level will be referred to simply as *espoused values*.] Schein further describes espoused values as a bridge between observable

artifacts (level one) and deeply ingrained underlying assumptions (level three). Espoused values form the organization's stated ethos and serve as the guidepost by which organizations intend their employees to evaluate behaviors and decisions. These espoused values often appear in mission statements, values statements, websites, employee handbooks, and onboarding materials. However, based on the findings of this study the extent to which these values are recognized, internalized, and perceived as authentic by Gen Z professionals' is dependent on socialization and how consistently leadership acts in accordance with the espoused values. The Gen Z participants in this were more attune to the values *demonstrated* in their workplaces than to the values preached by organizational leaders. Schein (1981, 1983) and Schein and Schein (2017) intentionally point out that an organization's espoused values may not always be consistently reflected in day-to-day behaviors, raising important questions about authenticity and credibility—qualities that turn out to be non-negotiable for Gen Z when it comes to organizational culture.

Challenges in Identifying Espoused Values. An observation from the interviews was the difficulty some Gen Z participants had in naming their organization's core stated values. For example, when Shelby was asked to describe her company's stated values she said, "I'm trying to think…can we come back to this…do you mean goals maybe?" When asked the same question, Jasmine said, "Safety, it's always just safety." However, there are four stated core values on her company's website and safety is not one of them. Unless the values were actively built into onboarding programs and reinforced frequently, most Gen Z employees struggled to even recall what the core values were. This suggests that espoused values are often abstract or invisible to Gen Z professionals unless they are tangibly integrated into their daily work experience and explicitly referenced throughout their duration of employment. A consistent

participant narrative implied that onboarding programs serve as a crucial mechanism for embedding and reinforcing espoused values. Organizations with intentional, immersive onboarding experiences that emphasized the espoused values enabled Gen Z professionals to become familiar with the organization's stated values more readily, leading to greater engagement and alignment. In contrast, lack of substantive value integration during onboarding led to difficulty recalling what they were and weak connections to the organization's espoused cultural elements. However, their inability to recall the stated values from memory did not reduce their need for their personal values to align with the stated values of their organizations.

Alignment of Personal and Espoused Values. A consistent theme for Gen Z professionals was a strong desire for alignment between personal and organizational values. Yet, Gen Z did not feel compelled to assimilate to the company's stated values or internalize them in any way unless those values matched their own sense of what is morally or socially desirable (e.g., autonomy, inclusivity, diversity, integrity, etc.). According to the participants in this study, values must not only be stated, but they must also resonate personally and be reflected in everyday organizational actions. This was evident in the theme that Gen Z need their personal and professional values to align the company's. When misalignment was observed, Gen Z participants often described this as a dealbreaker, affecting their sense of belonging and willingness to stay. Jobs with insufficient alignment between personal and espoused organizational values were described as "just a way to pay bills," and lacking in any meaningful engagement. For Gen Z, quitting to search for a "better fit" was seen as pragmatic; a realistic

response when the organizational culture failed to live up to its stated values or to meet their personal needs. For example, Lisa said:

> I don't want to be viewed as a lazy generation just because I'm not willing to stay at an organization that doesn't share my values… or if I feel like it's not meeting my needs. I know there is a stigma about jumping jobs, but I look at it as we do it because it's just not the right fit.

Reactions to Divergence from Espoused Values. Gen Z professionals demonstrated little tolerance for divergence between espoused values and observed leader behavior. If hypocrisy or value breaches by leadership were noticed, participants expressed doubt about the authenticity of the culture and often became disengaged or even cynical. This acute awareness of misalignment contributed to negative perceptions of organizational culture and was often cited as a reason for planning to seek employment elsewhere. For example, Jasmine described how at her company, employees were told not to schedule appointments during work hours and to only have personal appointments on weekends, yet some people were allowed to come and go as they pleased while others were not. She said, "Some people would get a write up, and others don't and it's such a hypocritical thing. I think it's important to practice what you preach…. because this just contributes to me not really liking it here."

Espoused Values Summary. Ultimately, Gen Z professionals evaluated espoused organizational values not on their existence, but on their authentic and consistent application by organizational leaders and by daily reinforcement through company policies and messaging. Unless values were systematically integrated and modeled by leadership, Gen Z professionals were quick to recognize and challenge hypocrisy or superficiality. This generation's insistence on values congruence, combined with their willingness to leave organizations that do not meet

their individualized expectations, sets a new standard for organizations seeking to build genuine, shared, sustainable cultures. For example, the themes of Gen Z professionals needing their personal and professional values to align with their organization's values, as well as their desire for transparency from leadership, underscore the critical importance of moving beyond company value statements to everyday cultural integration and authentic leadership behavior. These findings also indicate that Gen Z may be less likely than previous generations to overlook the inconsistencies between what the company says it should do, and what it does. This is a generation that would rather quit than tolerate hypocrisy.

Basic Underlying Assumptions

The participants in this study offered insights that closely align with Schein's third level of culture. In their descriptions of their workplace experiences, the Gen Z professionals revealed implicitly and at times explicitly, the deeper assumptions about what an organization "should be." For example, several participants described a supportive workplace as crucial for being considered a positive organizational culture and as foundational to their sense of belonging. Further, the comfort to ask questions, approach supervisors, and make mistakes without fear aligns with basic underlying assumptions that organizations should be psychologically safe and collaborative rather than hierarchical or punitive.

Gen Z Professionals Awareness of Basic Underlying Assumptions. While Schein (1981, 1983) and Schein and Schein (2017) posit that basic underlying assumptions often operate outside of conscious awareness, they also state that it is only the employees who can describe how these assumptions affect their behavior at work. The findings in this study suggest that Gen Z professionals are somewhat more sensitive to these deep cultural elements than prior generations may have been when the basic underlying assumptions cause behaviors to diverge

from the organization's espoused values. For example, many participants were able to articulate key aspects that made them feel aligned or misaligned with their organizations such as the value placed on being curious, transparency from leadership, and genuine collaborative teamwork.

That said, even when participants did not overtly label these as "basic assumptions," their references to the invisible "building blocks" of workplace experience, such as daily interpersonal kindness and approachable leadership, indicate an awareness that goes beyond what can be detected at surface-level organizational culture. For example, Cindy remarked, "Without those building blocks [positive culture and supportive relationships] it's just not sustainable long term… it's a positive, healthy feeling atmosphere that you want to do your work in and exist in." This statement reflects an implicit understanding that certain fundamental values such as authenticity and inclusivity form the foundation of a desirable organizational culture.

Sub-Research Question 2

The second sub- question was: How do Gen Z professionals describe the factors that contribute to their PO fit?

PO Fit

According to Kristof, PO fit refers to the compatibility between individuals and their organizations, with alignment occurring through either supplementary or complementary fit. Supplementary fit emerges when personal and organizational characteristics are similar, such as shared values or goals. On the other hand, complementary fit refers to mutual need fulfillment; where one party provides what the other lacks (Kristof, 1996). This dual-dimensional model provides a structured theoretical frame through which to assess Gen Z professionals' articulated experiences in the workplace. It is worth noting that the term person-organization fit, or PO fit did not mean anything to the participants, nor did they use that term in their responses.

In the following paragraphs, the thematic findings are interpreted and discussed through the lens of Kristof's (1996) PO fit theory. Five themes emerged in this study that were particularly relevant to PO fit. They were: (1) Gen Z professionals want "learning" cultures where they aren't afraid to fail, (2) career growth and professional development opportunities are important, (3) Gen Z need the company's values to align with their own, (4) Gen Z prefer supportive, collaborative cultures that build positive relationships, and (5) Gen Z prioritize psychological safety, well-being and work-life balance.

Four sub-themes also emerged in this study. The list of themes and sub-themes that were relevant to PO fit are shown in Table 5.1 below.

Table 5.1. Themes and Sub-themes relevant to PO Fit

THEME	SUBTHEME
1. Gen Z Want Learning Cultures Where They Aren't Afraid to Fail	a. *Comfortable Asking Questions at Work* b. *Flat Organizational Structures Empower Gen Z to Ask Questions*
2. Career Growth and Professional Development Opportunities are Important	a. *Gen Z Expects Transparency from Senior Leaders*
3. Gen Z Need the Company's Values to Align With Their Own	a. *Strong Aversion to Organizational Hypocrisy*
4. Gen Z Prefer Supportive, Collaborative Cultures that Build Positive Relationships	
5. Gen Z Prioritize Psychological Safety, Well-being and Work-life Balance	

Many participants described feeling empowered to speak up within organizational cultures that emphasized egalitarianism and easy access to higher ups. Several participants also described how important it was to be at an organization where they felt safe asking questions. For example, speaking about how leadership consistently encouraged employees to ask questions, Cindy stated, "If I didn't have this kind of environment, I couldn't thrive."

Interpreted through Kristof's (1996) model, this sense of comfort articulated by participants illustrated both types of PO fit. Supplementary fit was evident in the congruency between organizations norms of non-hierarchical communication structures, and the participants' communication styles and preferences. Participants felt compatible within organizations that reflected their preferences for decentralized, approachable leadership which made them comfortable asking questions which helped them learn and feel more confident in their roles at work. Hence, supplementary fit was achieved because there was congruency of values, climate, norms and goals between the organizations and the participants. Complementary fit applied to the theme of also applied, as flat organizational structures met Gen Z's articulated need for psychological safety and accessibility to leaders in communication. In these described experiences, the organizations did not merely reflect participants values, but actively addressed their needs (Kristof, 1996).

Additionally, participants frequently shared that interpersonal support and camaraderie was a key driver of workplace satisfaction and long-term engagement. For example, Andrew stated, "Just having positivity and wanting to have the people [I work with] come into work every day, I think, is the biggest thing I [value here]." These two themes align strongly with the supplementary fit dimension of PO fit. Participants sought out and felt greater alignment in organizations where cooperative norms and emotional support systems were existent. While some participants further described these dynamics as instrumental in reducing stress or improving productivity, which suggests a complementary fit element, the central emphasis remained the congruence of personal and organizational values around collaboration, community, and emotional support. Kristof's model supports this interpretation by highlighting how shared *interpersonal* priorities reinforce person-organization commitment (Kristof, 1996).

Complementary fit, specifically *needs-supplies*, was demonstrated in the theme: Gen Z professionals want "learning" cultures where they aren't afraid to fail. Here, Gen Z professionals needed to learn and grow in their roles to be successful and feel competent, and desired environments that would not make them feel afraid to fail while they were learning. The organizations supplied them with positive environments where their needs could be met. For example, Denise shared, "[They] want you to fail, because then you'll learn from that and then get an even better solution."

Hence, supplementary fit is visible in the goals, values, and ethics congruence. At the same time, complementary fit is observed where organizations provided managerial support, growth and learning opportunities, and wellbeing support in direct response to participant needs.

Across the themes discussed in this section, participants' general perceptions of PO fit tended to reflect a dynamic interplay between aligned values and the proactive fulfillment of identified needs. Meaning, the participants responses tended to suggest an expectation that organizations align with their values and aspirations, as well as anticipate their needs and respond in real time. Interestingly, the presence of either dimension of Kristof's model (i.e., supplementary fit or complementary fit) was often sufficient to explain initial attraction to an organization. However, long-term commitment, loyalty and positive workplace outcomes appeared contingent on the presence of both supplementary and complementary fit. Participant narratives, therefore, suggest that PO fit is not a singular, fixed construct that can predict loyalty, but rather an evolving alignment process shaped by organizational responsiveness and personal growth trajectories (Kristof, 1996).

This study reinforces the utility of Kristof's (1996) PO fit theory as a useful heuristic for understanding how Gen Z professionals evaluate the compatibility of their workplace

environments. The dual framework of supplementary and complementary fit proved particularly useful in parsing the nuanced ways that values and needs converged to shape participants' experiential perceptions of belonging, loyalty, and satisfaction within their organizations.

Sub-Research Question 3

The third sub- question was: How do Gen Z professionals describe organizational loyalty?

Gen Z's Concept of Loyalty Contrasts with Traditional Definitions

Gen Z professionals described organizational loyalty in varied and nuanced ways, but two common themes were evident in most of their responses. First, most participants did not rely on traditional definitions of loyalty, such as tenure, allegiance, self-sacrifice, or a sense of duty. Even when these ideas were mentioned, the participants interpreted them quite differently from previous generations. As a result, the Gen Z professionals in this study defined and perceived organizational loyalty in ways that differ from existing literature and generational norms. For example, out of 13 participants, only three associated organizational loyalty with long-term commitment, defining "long-term" as anywhere from one to five years. In contrast, previous generations typically viewed long tenure as spanning most of a career or several decades—highlighting a clear shift in perspective.

Second, the most consistent definition of loyalty described by the participants was "doing their best," even when they did not feel motivated or inclined to do so. The Gen Z professionals explained that doing their best included behaviors such as "providing good customer service," "not stealing hours" or "actually working when no one would really know if you were working from home or not." It also involved acting with professional integrity, such as refraining from using their phones while working. Essentially, loyalty was understood as fulfilling one's job

responsibilities while employed by the company. Although a more traditional definition of loyalty was mentioned by two participants, their interpretations differed from the conventional notion of going above and beyond for one's organization. Both Lisa and Whitney described loyalty as "going the extra mile." However, Whitney's interpretation of this phrase involved putting in extra hours and effort to support organizational goals, whereas Lisa explained that "going the extra mile" meant, "If someone is willing to help me and listen to me and what I need, I am willing to go the extra mile for them…it's more like on a person-to-person basis."

Several participants described loyalty as reciprocal and dependent on feeling appreciated or supported. For example, Mimi stated, "I feel appreciated, and I feel wanted, so that in turn makes me…want to be at an organization like this." Participants emphasized that loyalty depends on mutual trust, organizational support, growth opportunities, shared values, and a positive, respectful culture. If these conditions are absent or a better opportunity is available, they feel justified in leaving—challenging the traditional view that loyalty requires staying regardless of circumstances.

Organizational loyalty has steadily declined with each generation, as employees increasingly view job changes as normal and sometimes necessary for advancement (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002). Traditionalists saw loyalty as staying with a single employer for life, while Baby Boomers believed career growth came from long-term commitment to one organization. Members of Gen X were more likely to job hop, valuing flexibility and distrusting institutions, and Millennials normalized frequent job changes as part of career development (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002).

While all of these generations still tended to see work as a significant part of life, Gen Z demonstrates a distinctly different attitude toward employment and loyalty. For Gen Z, work is

often viewed as something to endure rather than a source of pride or identity. Gen Z is less motivated by organizational allegiance and more focused on personal well-being, positive relationships, flexibility, and alignment with their values. In fact, recent research indicates that Gen Z workers are being fired at unprecedented rates—some employers cite lack of motivation, poor professionalism, and dissatisfaction with workplace norms as notable challenges (Intelligent, 2023; Royle, 2024; The HR Digest, 2024). Studies and surveys reveal that one in six employers are hesitant to hire Gen Z graduates, with significant numbers fired just months after being hired (Intelligent, 2023). Three in four managers dislike working with Gen Z and would prefer to work with Millennials (Resume Builder, 2023). This trend signals an attitude shift, as many Gen Z professionals feel little guilt about leaving jobs when their needs are not met, further challenging the idea of loyalty as staying "no matter what".

In summary, although organizational loyalty has been declining across generations for decades, Gen Z's relationship with work and loyalty sets them apart from previous generations in how they even define loyalty. Rather than loyalty being about tenure, loyalty for Gen Z is conditional, reciprocal and based on Gen Z's needs in the workplace being met.

Research Question 2: What are the Characteristics of Gen Z Professionals?

U.S.-based research on Gen Z indicates that this cohort prioritizes work-life balance (Janssen & Carradini, 2021; Leslie et al., 2021) stability and security (Leslie et al., 2021; Maloni et al., 2019; Wilhoit Larson, 2024), and career growth and continuous learning (Lee et al., 2021; Leslie et al., 2021; Maloni et al., 2019). While the majority of findings presented in chapter 4 about Gen Z professionals characteristics in the workplace corroborate the existing literature, several nuanced differences emerged. The following section provides a comprehensive

discussion of these findings, highlighting both areas of convergence and divergence relative to the extant research.

Gen Z Prioritize Well-Being and Work-Life Balance

Participants from Generation Z in this study frequently highlighted the importance of maintaining clear distinctions between their work duties and personal time. A strong theme emerged around their unwillingness to compromise their own well-being in order to advance their careers. This signals a shift from previous generations, highlighting a stronger emphasis on preserving individual well-being and maintaining a deliberate separation between work and personal life. These findings align with recent studies showing that Gen Z is less likely to derive identity or fulfillment from work success compared to earlier cohorts, especially Baby Boomers (Seifert et al., 2023). As Lola put it, "We're not afraid to leave…if [our] well-being is not being taken seriously." This attitude reflects a broader generational trend valuing well-being at work that underscores a focus extending beyond traditional notions of work-life balance as described in the existing literature (Janssen & Carradini, 2021, Leslie et al., 2021). This attitude also reflects the concept that Gen Z is not concerned with adapting their approach to work to meet the expectations or traditions of older generations which is consistent with the findings of existing research such as Maloni et al. (2019).

Gen Z participants emphasized that maintaining "positive" workplace relationships is integral to their sense of well-being. This finding aligns with existing research by Pichler et al. (2021), which found that Gen Z needs social support from coworkers, and by Wilhoit Larson (2024), who found that a positive work environment is crucial for Gen Z.

The data from this study show that emotional stability and psychological safety in interactions with both peers and organizational leaders are regarded as essential, non-negotiable

factors for sustaining employment with an organization. Although participants did not use the specific term "psychological safety," their descriptions made clear that any deficit in emotional stability or supportive relationships was enough to prompt thoughts of leaving their current positions. For example, Denise shared, "We care about each other as humans here and if that wasn't the case, I don't think I could stay working here." Cindy stated, "The people you work with are so important to me that without being surrounded by positive, supportive people… working here just wouldn't be sustainable."

This aligns with existing research that characterizes Gen Z as being focused on their well-being and psychological safety (Leslie et al., 2021; Pichler et al., 2021). Much of the current research underscores Gen Z's strong expectation for emotionally supportive and relationally safe environments at work (Pichler et al., 2021; Wilhoit Larson, 2024). Overall, my findings were consistent with the existing research and further suggest that even moderate interpersonal discomfort, rather than outright toxicity, can play a crucial role in their decision to stay with or leave an organization. Thus, for Gen Z, well-being is not only about individual mental health but is closely linked to the positivity of relationships and the sense of psychological safety experienced at work.

Participants consistently described themselves as anxious about making mistakes and eager to avoid being perceived as incompetent. At the same time, they sought positive relationships with managers and clear feedback about job performance. Existing research notes that Gen Z's lifelong exposure to social media and public feedback cycles has heightened their need for affirmation and support (Elmore & McPeak, 2019; Twenge, 2017). The findings of this research reinforce the fact that Gen Z's workplace confidence appears to depend on receiving constructive, non-punitive feedback, and having managers willing to foster a safe environment

for learning. Any perceived lack of supportive relationships appeared to provoke anxiety and incite a willingness to find another job.

Gen Z Need Supportive Relationships at Work

Existing international studies found that Gen Z prioritizes supportive organizational cultures and relationships in the workplace. For example, Arora et al. (2020) studied the values of Gen Z professionals in India and concluded that highly supportive organizational cultures are crucial to Gen Z professionals. Similar conclusions were found by additional international scholars including: Graczyk-Kucharska and Erickson (2020), Iorgulescu (2016), Yuniwan et al. (2021), and Barhate and Dirani (2022). The supportive cultures described in these studies were typically credited with providing Gen Z professionals with opportunities for career growth, learning and development, and work-life balance, which are values identified in Gen Z professionals both internationally and in the U.S. Gen Z's values of working in an environment where they felt supported by the organizational culture and the relationships within that culture helped to encourage higher employee engagement (Barhate & Dirani, 2022; Graczyk-Kucharska & Erickson, 2020; Lee et al., 2021). Furthermore, the development of a strong sense of belonging within organizations was identified in the international literature reviewed for this study as essential to retaining Gen Z talent (Botezat et al., 2020). Iorgulescu's (2016) study of 156 Gen Z undergraduate students in Romania specifically concluded that supportive, engaging organizational cultures providing career growth opportunities are more likely to retain Gen Z employees.

These international findings are aligned with the findings from this study, which identified supportive relationships and cultures as key values for Gen Z professionals. Participants emphasized the importance of feeling comfortable asking questions and having

collaborative, supportive coworkers which reflect the supportive organizational cultures described in international literature. The participants also expressed a strong need for "learning" cultures at work where failure is not punished but encouraged as part of growth. This aligns with findings that Gen Z professionals value transparent leadership, flat organizational structures, and positive interpersonal connections that nurture belonging and loyalty.

It is important to note that while these supportive culture themes strongly emerge both internationally and, in this study, they appear less prominent in the U.S.-based literature. This contrast suggests that U.S. organizations may benefit from further emphasizing relationship building and supportive cultural practices to better meet Gen Z's expectations and enhance their organizational loyalty.

Gen Z may use Collaboration to Manage Self-Doubt

Whereas Lee et al. (2021), Leslie et al. (2021), and Maloni et al. (2019) portrayed Gen Z as favoring an individualistic approach to learning in the workplace, the experiences shared by participants in this study offer a different perspective. Instead of seeking to figure things out on their own, many of the Gen Z participants said they genuinely prefer to turn to colleagues for support and fresh ideas, especially when learning something new on the job. Collaboration and teamwork were themes that came up repeatedly, with participants emphasizing how much they value talking things through with others rather than going it alone.

Perhaps this preference for working together is more than just a conflicting learning style, but rather a way for these young professionals to navigate the workplace with more confidence. As discussed in the findings, specifically the additional theme of self-doubt about individual abilities, some participants mentioned moments of self-doubt, especially when faced with unfamiliar tasks. In those situations, being able to lean on supportive teammates seemed to help

them manage uncertainty and feel more capable. So, the collaborative nature that showed up in their stories might not only reflect a love of teamwork, but also a practical strategy for coping with insecurities that naturally come with starting out in a career.

A unique factor for this group is the timing of their entry into the workforce. Many Gen Z professionals missed out on in-person connections, networking, and typical social experiences during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Their preference to brainstorm and learn alongside colleagues could be partly about regaining some of what was lost during those years, and partly about building their own sense of confidence and belonging on the job.

Taken together, this study's findings suggest Gen Z may be more interested in collaboration and more motivated to seek it out during learning situations on the job than past research indicates. For these participants, learning is not just an individual act; it happens best when surrounded by encouraging and collaborative colleagues who help lighten the load and build a sense of security at work.

Gen Z Views Work as a Necessity, Not as Central to Their Identity

Throughout the interviews, only one participant, Jeffrey, referred to his job in terms of a career trajectory, and only one participant, Whitney, indicated that her job was reflective of a lifelong calling. The rest of the participants characterized their employment as "a way to pay the bills." This latter sentiment indicates that Gen Z is redefining the concept of careerism entirely, shifting toward a paradigm in which work must fit their lifestyle rather than dictate it; which aligns with existing research indicating that Gen Z is determined to integrate their work with their personal lives (Janssen & Carradini, 2021; Leslie et al., 2021). Further illustrating this shift, even Whitney stated, "It's really important to [my generation] to not just be work, work, work all the time." Thus, Gen Z's identity is less likely to be anchored in their professional roles than

previous generations (Barone et al., 2019; Deloitte, 2023; Katz et al., 2022; Sandeen, 2008; Seifert et al., 2023).

Gen Z Professionals Are Realistic About Professional Progression

Unlike their Millennial predecessors, who often entered the workforce expecting rapid advancement and high starting salaries, the Gen Z professionals who participated in this study demonstrated a more pragmatic approach to career growth. Consistent with findings by Schroth (2019) and Maloni et al. (2019), Gen Z views experience and skill-development as essential prerequisites for promotions and higher salaries. The Gen Z professionals interviewed for this study explained that they believed that professional development can be a gradual process and are neither disheartened nor discouraged by that.

This realistic outlook can be traced to Gen Z's formative years during periods of economic upheaval and uncertainty, which shaped their expectations for the workplace. Schroth (2019) explains that Gen Z is less likely than Millennials to assume that hard work alone guarantees advancement or financial security. Instead, they recognize that accumulating experience and demonstrating competence are necessary foundations for career advancement. Similarly, Maloni et al. (2019) found that Gen Z prioritizes stability and realistic career goals based on actual achievements rather than entitlement.

Importantly, while career growth is not unimportant to Gen Z, the findings of this study indicate that this generation is not willing nor rushing to climb the corporate ladder at any cost. Both Schroth (2019) and Maloni et al. (2019) highlight Gen Z's unwillingness to sacrifice personal well-being, values, or quality of life for faster professional gains. This marks a shift from previous generations, who often prioritized career progression above all else. On the other hand, it should be noted that while the participants stated they were unwilling to sacrifice their

personal lives for career mobility, one of the top reasons they gave for deciding to look for a new job was a lack of career growth at their current organization. Overall, this study supports the earlier findings by Schroth (2019) and Maloni et al. (2019), illustrating Gen Z's balanced approach to professional development; valuing experience, development and patience without compromising their personal lives and priorities.

Gen Z are Cynical Towards Corporate America

A significant and perhaps under-discussed characteristic was Gen Z's underlying cynicism regarding corporate America. Molly stated:

> There is sort of an inherent cynicism that we have towards corporate America, especially whenever we fundamentally understand that our role is to be an employee or a worker, and the company's role is to be the company that the company will always side with the company.

Participants explained that, while they recognize the need to accrue professional experience, they see most companies as primarily self-serving, with stated values perceived as insincere or performative. For example, Mimi observed that company values "were very well crafted by the consultants who were hired to write them for the company." This degree of skepticism expands on existing findings that Gen Z desires "values-driven" workplaces (Maloni et al., 2019), by highlighting the generational suspicion that organizational messaging is not necessarily viewed as 100% authentic. Participants suggested that this perceived gap between espoused and enacted values makes them less likely to feel loyalty or a sense of duty to employers, reinforcing short-term orientations and willingness to move on if misalignment is detected.

Modern Relevance of Schein's Model for Understanding Gen Z Professionals

The findings of this study illustrate the continued relevance of Schein's three levels of organizational culture model and its applicability to the modern workplace. Overall, the experiences of Gen Z professionals in this study reinforce the continued relevance of Schein's three-level model. The depth and nuance of their reflections suggest that Schein's three levels of organization model remains an effective lens for interpreting organizational dynamics, particularly as the workforce becomes more generationally diverse. Gen Z's ability to recognize and challenge the underlying assumptions within their workplaces does not render Schein's model less relevant; instead, it affirms the importance of surfacing, questioning, and aligning those basic underlying assumptions with employee expectations.

Moreover, as Gen Z becomes a dominant generational cohort in the workforce, their demand for congruence between professed values and actual behaviors puts new pressure on organizations to be more intentional about the assumptions embedded within their cultures. While Schein's model provides a useful framework for analyzing organizational culture through artifacts, espoused values, and underlying assumptions, it requires updating to better address the preferences of Gen Z professionals. This cohort tends to prioritize lived experience over stated values, often perceiving espoused values and cultural artifacts as somewhat contrived and inauthentic. Therefore, organizations aiming to attract and retain Gen Z employees would benefit from a model that shifts emphasis toward the quality and authenticity of workplace relationships rather than traditional cultural symbols and declared values. Such an adaptation would more effectively align organizational culture efforts with what truly matters to this emerging generation.

Authenticity, Transparency, and the Dislike for Hypocrisy

Gen Z professionals in this study consistently expressed a need for authenticity, transparency, and congruence between what organizations say and what they actually do; qualities directly related to Schein's third level. The third level of Schein's (1981, 1983) and Schein and Schein's (2017) three levels of organizational culture model, basic underlying assumptions, represents the most deeply embedded, least visible, and most powerful elements of organizational culture. These core, taken-for-granted beliefs ultimately shape the actual behaviors and interpretations of meaning within an organization, and often operate below conscious awareness (Schein, 1981, 1983; Schein & Schein, 2017). For Gen Z, experiences of incongruence or perceived hypocrisy in organizational behavior are not merely surface irritants but breaches of core expectations of trustworthiness and fairness. For instance, several participants cited transparency as critical for planning their careers and feeling secure in their roles. For example, Cindy stated:

> Transparency is key here. I think they do a really good job of constantly letting employees know, like peek behind the curtain of, their broader vision for the organization's growth, and where they see the organization going…and it's really nice because then I can plan my future as well.

Similarly, Gen Z's dislike for hypocrisy and their anxiety about unstable, emotionally unsafe or insincere environments reveals a sensitivity to misalignments at the deepest organizational cultural level. When organizational practices do not align with stated values or when the true nature of power and communication is obscured, Gen Z respondents interpret this as a violation of what an organization should fundamentally be. These findings suggest that Gen Z not only notices but also responds strongly to basic underlying assumptions in their

organizations, whether consciously recognized or not. Their heightened expectations regarding authenticity and transparency demand that organizations examine and, where necessary, recalibrate their basic assumptions to foster loyalty, sustained engagement and retention. As noted previously in the study, loyalty for Gen Z often centers more on relationships with managers and the lived realities of their day-to-day experiences than on abstract organizational ideals alone.

In summary, the data underscore that Schein's three-level model is still highly relevant for modern organizations navigating generational change and seeking to retain Gen Z professionals. By surfacing basic underlying assumptions and ensuring alignment with Gen Z's articulated needs, organizations can build cultures that not only attract young talent but also sustain their loyalty and commitment in an increasingly dynamic and diverse workforce.

Modern Relevance of Kristof's PO Fit Theory for Understanding Gen Z

Kristof's (1996) PO fit theory is highly relevant for evaluating how Gen Z professionals connect with their organizations and how HRD executives and organizational leaders can leverage her framework for effective talent development and management. PO fit examines the compatibility between an individual's characteristics (e.g., values, beliefs, goals, skills, needs, and work preferences) and those of the organization. This alignment is typically characterized through two dimensions: supplementary fit, where individual and organizational values or norms are similar, and complementary fit, where mutual needs are met through what each party contributes to the employment relationship.

For Gen Z professionals, PO fit is particularly relevant. This cohort has entered the workforce with professional expectations shaped by technological fluency, a strong preference for transparency, flat hierarchies, continuous learning, and a need for genuine alignment between

personal and organizational values. The research findings indicate that Gen Z professionals consistently seek organizations where they feel comfortable asking questions and feel supported in their development. Such environments, which encourage psychological safety and foster open communication, exemplify strong supplementary fit: meaning there is a high congruence between what Gen Z values and what the organization practices.

Simultaneously, Gen Z also expects organizations to provide resources, processes and organizational structures that meet their specific developmental and relational needs, highlighting the relevance of complementary fit. For instance, opportunities for learning without fear of punitive consequences, transparent communication from leadership, and enhanced avenues for career progression are all organizational practices that fulfill Gen Z's articulated needs, thereby strengthening the employment relationship. When these components of fit are present, Gen Z professionals report greater job satisfaction, engagement, and a higher likelihood of remaining with the organization over time, or at least in the short term while those components are present.

While this study primarily focused on the workplace experiences and fit of Gen Z professionals after they were hired, it is important to point out that, based on the findings of the study regarding the relevance of PO fit theory in the modern workforce, HRD executives can best apply PO fit theory by embedding its principles throughout the *entire* employment lifecycle. During recruitment, HR leaders should prioritize both cultural and value assessments; ensuring the organization authentically communicates its culture, mission, and goals, and evaluates candidate alignment beyond technical skills alone. Onboarding should reinforce organizational values, norms and create early opportunities for Gen Z professionals to build supportive relationships, participate in transparent dialogues with leaders, and experience on the job

learning opportunities allow safe experimentation and growth. Continued training and development opportunities address Gen Z's need for complementary fit by providing the resources and direct feedback from managers that they require to thrive.

Furthermore, HRD executives should recognize that Gen Z views loyalty and retention differently from prior generations: their commitment is rooted in continuous relational and ethical alignment rather than tenure-based incentives. Organizations that fail to adapt to these values risk experiencing higher turnover and reduced engagement. Regularly reassessing and evolving organizational practices to maintain congruency with Gen Z's evolving expectations could improve both retention and efficacy.

In summary, PO fit theory remains a vital tool for understanding and fostering effective socialization for Gen Z professionals. By using PO fit as a guiding principle for designing and implementing HR strategies, from recruitment and onboarding to continuous development and retention, HRD executives can build workplaces where Gen Z professionals thrive, feel a sense of belonging, and contribute to the sustained success of the organization.

Implications for Practice

The purpose of this study was to examine how Gen Z professionals in the U.S., with at least one year of full-time work experience, perceive organizational culture and PO fit, and how these perceptions affect their organizational loyalty. Understanding the factors that contribute to organizational loyalty among Gen Z professionals is critical for HRD and organizational leaders, as Gen Z represents an increasingly significant segment of the workforce. By applying the theories of organizational culture and PO fit, the findings of this study offer several practical implications for informing strategies to enhance loyalty and improve retention and efficacy of Gen Z professionals within U.S. organizations.

First, organizations may want to focus less on creating shared symbols to serve as a rallying cry for the organizational culture and focus more on ensuring interpersonal dynamics are inclusive, positive and supportive. The relational aspects of work matter far more to this new generation than the prestige of the organization or its externally recognized artifacts. Shared experiences with supportive colleagues are more attractive for Gen Z than flashy office spaces or well-crafted values statements. Therefore, companies may be better served by investing less in fancy office buildings and impressive signage and more on team development activities and sophisticated conflict intervention techniques should interpersonal issues arise.

Second, leadership development programs will be critical for managers to help coach this new generation in the workforce. That's because the findings show that Gen Z workers want to do good work while they are there but needs lots of transparency, accessibility to ask questions, and ability to learn on the job without the fear of failure. This is a highly anxious generational cohort, and managers will need extra development to acquire the emotional intelligence and coaching skills needed to empower Gen Z professionals. Additionally, the findings show that Gen Z feels more loyal to managers than they do organizations, so developing managers who can form strong working relationships with Gen Z and support their career growth and well-being will be crucial to encouraging organizational loyalty for this generation.

Third, because this new generation places such an emphasis on work life balance, managers will need to adapt and allow ample time for learning on the job. Organizational and HRD leaders should think about implementing practices and training programs that emphasize organizational "learning" cultures.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research in this area could benefit from several key directions to deepen our understanding of how organizational culture and PO fit is conceptualized and perceived across generations and how organizational loyalty is impacted in a multi-generational workforce. As the composition of organizations becomes increasingly diverse, especially in terms of age and generational identity, it is essential to investigate how these evolving perceptions influence trends of organizational loyalty. This section explores those recommended directions for further research on this topic.

Gender Differences

First, examining and comparing the role of gender in shaping perceptions of organizational culture, PO fit and loyalty would provide valuable insights into if and how these dynamics differ between men and women, potentially informing more inclusive organizational practices. It would also be interesting to study gender perceptions *across* the generations as well to understand more about how gender impacts perceptions differently across the generations.

Mixed Methods

Second, employing mixed methods approaches that combine quantitative and qualitative data would allow future researchers to capture both broad data sets of preferences and the nuanced experiences of organizational cultures underlying Gen Z professionals' organizational loyalty and cultural fit. This methodological approach could significantly broaden and enrich the interpretation and applicability of findings. It could also potentially lead to more generalizable findings because a much larger sample of Gen Z professionals could participate.

Longitudinal Studies

Third, conducting longitudinal studies following individuals from college through their first and fifth, and even tenth years of employment would offer a comprehensive view of how organizational values, perception of PO fit and loyalty evolve over time during critical career stages. This research approach could help identify pivotal moments or experiences that influence long-term and shorter-term organizational commitment.

Generational Comparison Studies

Finally, comparative analyses between different generations are recommended to explore how attitudes toward organizational culture and PO fit vary across age cohorts. Such comparisons would clarify which factors are most important for each generation in fostering organizational loyalty and could guide organizational and HRD leaders in tailoring strategies to meet the distinct needs and expectations of multigenerational workforces.

Conclusion

This study explored the experiences of U.S. based Gen Z professionals with at least one year of full-time work experience to understand how their perceptions of organizational culture and their sense of fit within their workplaces influenced their loyalty to their employers. The conceptual framework guiding the research drew on Schein's (1981, 1983) and Schein and Schein's (2017) three levels of organizational culture (artifacts, espoused values, and underlying assumptions) and Kristof's (1996) PO fit theory (supplementary fit and complementary fit).

Schein's theory was central to framing the inquiry into how Gen Z professionals recognize and respond to the visible (artifacts), stated (espoused values), and deeply embedded and often subconscious (underlying assumptions) elements of organizational culture. Based on the findings, Gen Z professionals take a more individualistic approach to interpreting the visible

elements of organizational culture (i.e., artifacts) than Schein's model indicates. This finding underscored a generational difference in how organizational symbols are interpreted. Gen Z is more likely to interpret their organizational culture through their own lenses and individualistic reflections than institutionally sanctioned symbols or processes to understand organizational culture.

When it came to espoused values, participants demonstrated a sharper focus on the authenticity with which these values were enacted. There was clear difficulty recalling the organization's espoused values unless those values were consistently integrated into onboarding and company messaging and daily communications. Any observed discrepancies or hypocrisy between stated values and leader behaviors sparked skepticism and even progressed to disengagement. Gen Z professionals insisted on consistency and transparency, quick to withdraw loyalty if they detected gaps between what organizations claimed to value and what was actually rewarded.

Similarly, Gen Z professionals were sensitive to discrepancies between an organization's stated values and its underlying behaviors. Positive, deeply embedded behaviors such as psychological safety, inclusivity, and kindness resonated strongly with them. However, when these behaviors conflicted with espoused values, the resulting inconsistency created discomfort and unease for Gen Z employees.

Overall, Kristof's PO fit theory was more useful than Schein's in interpreting how Gen Z professionals gauge and develop loyalty. Supplementary fit was evident in the way participants sought alignment between personal values and workplace culture, particularly regarding collaboration, emotional support, and transparency. Complementary fit surfaced in their need for continuous learning and growth-supportive environments—participants wanted to feel safe to fail

and learn, with organizations supplying the necessary psychological safety and encouragement. The presence of both forms of fit was necessary not just for initial attraction to an employer, but for the growth of long-term commitment and loyalty.

In conclusion, Gen Z's organizational loyalty is built less on attachment to artifacts or broad company ideals and more on the quality of interpersonal relationships, psychological safety, transparent and consistent leadership, and robust career growth opportunities. Their loyalty is more relational and immediate, frequently directed toward managers, coworkers or teams, rather than to abstract organizational identities signifying a generational shift toward relational foundations of loyalty. These findings confirm much of the emerging literature, which points to Gen Z's desire for work-life balance, preference for authentic interactions, and prioritization of stability and personal well-being. For HRD and organizational leaders hoping to attract and retain Gen Z, these findings highlight the need to cultivate supportive and authentic environments, operationalize values transparently, and provide clear, accessible pathways for career progression and skill development. As this generation continues to expand its role in the workforce, organizations that genuinely prioritize these areas will be best positioned to harness Gen Z's talents, commitment, and potential.

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Appendix A - Interview Guide

Exploring Gen Z perceptions of organizational loyalty

Name: _____Location: _____Time/Date:_____

Questions and Interview Process:

Interview Protocol

Part 1: Introductions

1. Confirmation of Informed Consent signature, and receipt of the project summary handout allowing for questions and clarifications.
2. Remind participants steps taken to ensure confidentiality, and their participation is voluntary, allowing them to withdraw at any time without penalty.

First Interview Questions:

1. How would you describe the culture or personality of your organization? (Follow-up if needed: What experiences or observations lead you to describe the organization's culture or personality in this manner?
2. Can you describe any visible elements of your organization's culture? In what ways do these elements influence your perception of the organization? (Prompt if needed: (e.g., office layout, dress code, rituals)
3. What are your organization's stated values? (If answer is I don't know: Based on your observations within the organization, what values do you believe are most emphasized)
4. How do the values you just stated align with your personal values?
5. What are your organization's stated goals or objectives?
6. What are your professional goals and aspirations?
7. How do those goals and aspirations align with your organization?
8. How do the stated core values of the company align with how day-to-day work gets done?
9. What attitudes, behaviors, characteristics and values do leadership say is desirable at your company?
10. What is rewarded at your company?
11. Are there any specific aspects of your organization's culture you value most?
12. How do you define loyalty as in loyalty to the company you work for?
13. Do you feel loyal to the company? (Follow-ups if needed: Explain why or why not. What would help you feel loyal to the organization?)

Second Interview Questions

1. Tell me about this artifact and why you chose it to represent your organizational culture. (Prompts if needed: What meaning does it represent for you? In what ways does this artifact explain how aligned you feel with your organization?)

2. What is important for you in a workplace? (Prompts: a certain climate, certain values,)
3. What do you like most (i.e. value) about your organization?
4. I'm curious about the norms at your company…meaning standard behaviors, communications styles, ethical standards, performance expectations, rewards and such. What are the norms in your organization?
5. If you could change something about this organization's work culture, what would it be and why?
6. How do the way things operate on a day-to-day basis influence how you feel about being part of the organization?
7. In what ways do you feel your organization meets your needs and vice versa?
8. Can you describe a situation where you felt particularly aligned or misaligned with your organization's culture? How did this impact your sense of loyalty?
9. What aspects of the organization make you want to stay with the company long-term? Conversely, what factors might make you consider leaving?
10. Provide an example of how you are able to use your talents and skills for the organization. (Prompt if needed: How does this make you feel?)
11. How does the type of support you receive at the company affect your sense of fit with your organization? How does this influence your loyalty?
12. What specific factors within your organization make you feel motivated to go above and beyond your regular duties to help the organization achieve its goals and succeed?

Part 3: Debriefing statement to be read aloud at the conclusion of the interviews

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed as a part of this study. Following each interview, I will be reaching out to you to ensure the accuracy of what you have shared with me and to ask for clarification on anything that is not clear. My aim is to represent your words as accurately as possible. I will keep your contributions anonymous and use pseudonyms to protect your identity and that of your organization in any publications that come from this research. Please know that you may withdraw from the study at any time, without penalty, and you are welcome to contact me at any time if you have questions or concerns. Thank you for your contributions to this research.

Appendix B - Recruitment Email

Exploring Gen Z perceptions of organizational loyalty

Hello,

My name is Anne Brown, and I am a doctoral candidate at Kansas State University. I am writing to seek your assistance for my dissertation study, which focuses on how Generation Z (b. 1995-2012) professionals experience working for organizations. My research is focused on understanding how Gen Z professionals experience their organizational cultures and how that experience influences their sense of fit with their organizations.

Specifically, I am looking for professionals who have been employed at their current U.S. based organization for at least one full year, were born between the years of 1995-2012, and who hold a bachelor's degree. People who wish to volunteer for this research study may be in any state within the U.S.

To achieve this research effectively, I plan to conduct two rounds of interviews using the Teams or Zoom video conferencing platforms. Both interviews will be recorded for research purposes, however, prior to commencing the first recorded interview there will be an opportunity off camera to ask questions and to address any concerns you may have. You may withdraw from the process at any time. Recorded interviews will follow a structured set of questions. Additionally, for the second interview, you will be asked to bring an artifact that you feel is representative of your organizational culture and helps explain your perception of the organizational culture.

I want to emphasize that your participation in this study will be treated with the highest level of confidentiality. You will be given a pseudonym and no identifying information will be retained with the transcription of the interview to ensure your privacy is fully protected.

Your involvement in this research will be valuable and would make a significant contribution to advancing our understanding of how Generation Z professionals experience working for their organizations. If you would like to participate or if you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me at anne44@ksu.edu. I am happy to schedule a call to discuss the process and address any further details that you may have questions about.

Thank you for considering assisting me in this research project. I look forward to the possibility of collaborating with you.

Best regards,

Anne Brown

Doctoral Candidate, Adult Learning & Leadership
Kansas State University
anne44@ksu.edu

Appendix C - Informed Consent Form

PROJECT TITLE: Exploring Gen Z perceptions of organizational loyalty

APPROVAL DATE OF PROJECT:

EXPIRATION DATE OF PROJECT:

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATORS: Dr. Royce Ann Collins, Professor

CO-INVESTIGATORS: Anne Brown, Doctoral Candidate

CONTACT NAME AND EMAIL FOR ANY PROBLEMS/QUESTIONS: Dr. Royce Ann Collins, racollin@ksu.edu

IRB CHAIR CONTACT/PHONE INFORMATION: Lisa Rubin, Chair, Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-3224; Brad Woods, Associate Vice President for Research Compliance, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-3224.

PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH: This study aims to investigate how Gen Z professionals in the U.S. with a minimum of one year of full-time work experience perceive organizational culture and person-organization fit at their companies, and how these perceptions impact their organizational loyalty. Organizational culture involves the espoused values, artifacts that represent the values of the organization and the workplace norms. Person-organization fit involves your personal values and how that fits with the organization.

PROCEDURES OR METHODS TO BE USED: You're being asked to participate in at least two formal, semi-structured interviews. Follow-up interviews will only be scheduled to gain clarification. For the second interview, you will be asked to share an artifact (e.g., document, photo, drawing, email, corporate swag) that you feel represents aspects of the organizational culture at your workplace.

RISKS OR DISCOMFORTS ANTICIPATED: There are no foreseeable physical, psychological, social, or employment-related risks.

BENEFITS ANTICIPATED: The benefits of this study can highlight how Gen Z professionals experience organizational culture and how their perception of organizational culture affects the way they feel about their fit with the organization. It may also assist leaders and human resource professionals in understanding more about how Gen Z conceives of and forms organizational loyalty.

EXTENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY: Each interview participant will be assigned a pseudonym which will be used for all documents and reports, except personal correspondence with the participant. The organizations will also be given pseudonyms to aid in confidentiality. The researcher will video and audio record the interviews. The video portion will be deleted after the transcription is completed. No personally identifying information will be linked to published reports of the study. The information that will be collected as part of this research will not be shared with any other investigators.

Each interview participant will have the opportunity to review transcripts to identify potentially sensitive data for exclusion. If requested, reviews can be handled over a password-protected Zoom link with the researcher sharing her screen to display the interview transcript. Hard copies will be kept in a locked cabinet in the researcher's locked home office and shredded by the researcher three years after the completion of the research. The audio recordings will be kept on password protected computer and deleted by the research after three years.

The information or biospecimens collected as part of the research, even if identifiers are removed, will not be used or distributed for future research studies.

TERMS OF PARTICIPATION: I understand this project is research, and that my participation is voluntary. I also understand that if I decide to participate in this study, I may withdraw my consent at any time and stop participating at any time without explanation, penalty, or loss of benefits, or academic standing to which I may otherwise be entitled.

I verify that my signature below indicates that I have read and understand this consent form, and willingly agree to participate in this study under the terms described, and that my signature acknowledges that I have received a signed and dated copy of this consent form.

Signed Name _____ Date _____

Printed Name _____

Appendix D - Data Alignment Table

RQ1: How does Gen Z professionals' perceptions of organizational culture and PO fit support their organizational loyalty?

Research Question	Conceptual Framework	Interview Question	Artifacts
SRQ1. How do Gen Z professionals describe the ways in which organizational artifacts, espoused beliefs and values, and basic underlying assumptions create their perceptions of organizational culture?	Schein's Three Levels of Organizational Culture Model	1. How would you describe the culture or personality of your organization? (Follow-up if needed: What experiences or observations lead you to describe the organization's culture or personality in this manner? 2. Can you describe any visible elements of your organization's culture? In what ways do these elements influence your perception of the organization? (Prompt if needed: (e.g., office layout, dress code, rituals) 3. What are your organization's stated values? (If answer is I don't know: Based on your observations within the organization, what values do you believe are most emphasized) 4. How do the values you just stated align with your personal values? 5. What are your organization's stated goals or objectives? 6. What are your professional goals and aspirations? 7. How do those goals and aspirations align with your organization? 8. How do the stated core values of the company align with how day-to-day work gets done? 9. What attitudes, behaviors, characteristics and values do leadership say is desirable at your company? 10. What is rewarded at your company? 11. Are there any specific aspects of your organization's culture you value most? 12. How do you define loyalty, as in loyalty to the company you work for? 13. Do you feel loyal to the company? (Follow-ups if needed: Explain why or why not. What would help you feel loyal to the organization?)	Participant will share an artifact they feel is representative of their organizational culture and helps explain their perception of the organizational culture. There will be a discussion about what types of artifacts the participant chose and in what ways the participant feels these artifacts represent the organizational culture. He criteria for the artifact will be something from the participants' workplace that represents their culture and has helped shape their perception of that culture.

Research Question	Conceptual Framework	Interview Question	Artifacts
SRQ2. How do Gen Z professionals describe the factors that contribute to their PO fit?	PO Fit Theory	1. Tell me about this artifact and why you chose it to represent your organizational culture. (Prompts if needed: What meaning does it represent for you? In what ways does this artifact explain how aligned you feel with your organization?) 2. What is important for you in a workplace? (Prompts: a certain climate, certain values,) 3. What do you like most (i.e. value) about your organization? 4. I'm curious about the norms at your company…meaning standard behaviors, communications styles, ethical standards, performance expectations, rewards and such. What are the norms in your organization? 5. If you could change something about this organization's work culture, what would it be and why? 6. How do the way things operate on a day-to-day basis influence how you feel about being part of the organization? 7. In what ways do you feel your organization meets your needs and vice versa? 8. Can you describe a situation where you felt particularly aligned or misaligned with your organization's culture? How did this impact your sense of loyalty? 9. What aspects of the organization make you want to stay with the company long-term? Conversely, what factors might make you consider leaving? 10. Provide an example of how you are able to use your talents and skills for the organization. (Prompt if needed: How does this make you feel?) 11. How does the type of support you receive at the company affect your sense of fit with your organization? How does this influence your loyalty? 12. What specific factors within your organization make you feel motivated to go above and beyond your regular duties to help the organization achieve its goals and succeed?	Participants will be asked to describe how the artifact they chose affects the way they feel they fit within their organization.