

DECODING DIGITAL NATIVES: GEN Z'S WORK VALUES, ETHICAL PREFERENCES, AND THEIR IMPACT ON ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE IN EMERGING ECONOMIES

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Abstract

This paper examines the work values, ethical preferences, and organizational culture influences of Generation Z in the emerging economies. This study, based on empirical research in Malaysia, Turkey, China, Eastern Europe, Brazil, India, and Serbia, summarizes research on how digital natives transform the dynamics of the workplace in emerging economic settings. The analysis shows that Gen Z values independence, life-work balance, moral alignment, and technological adoption and exhibits increased demands on transparency and corporate social responsibility. Companies operating in the developing economies will need to adjust their cultural constructs to these preferences or face more turnover and disengagement. The article adds to the cross-cultural management literature by emphasizing the context-related expressions of generational values and offers practical advice to organizational leaders who have to go through workforce transitions.

Keywords: Generation Z, digital natives, work values, ethical preferences, organizational culture, emerging economies, cross-cultural management

1. Introduction

The oldest successive generation of digital natives to enter the international labor force is generation Z, who are aged between 1997 and 2012 (Dimock, 2019). By 2030, they will make up more than 30 percent of the global workforce and consequently change the dynamic of organizations in both developed and developing economies (Deloitte, 2025). In contrast to their parents, Gen Z has been conditioned by economic insecurity, technological omnipresence, and social awareness, so workplace expectations are different and demand a new paradigm of management.

The case of emerging economies is an exclusive situation to consider the organizational influence of Gen Z. These areas with robust economic development, technological use, and changing workforce patterns provide a good opportunity to explore the topic of how digital natives can manage workplace transitions. The convergence of the generational values and emerging institutional structures poses both openings and obstacles to the change of organizational culture.

The research questions that are answered in this article include the following: (1) What are the core work values and ethical preferences of Gen Z in emerging economies? (2) What is the variation in these preferences with cultural and economic conditions? (3) How do Gen Z values affect the organizational culture in emerging markets? (4) What strategies enable organizations to effectively integrate Gen Z talent while maintaining cultural coherence?

2. Literature Review

The first step is to define Generation Z and Digital Nativism

The fact that generation Z are digital natives is one of the primary differences between them and other generations. According to Prensky (2018), the term digital natives refers to those who have developed in the era of ubiquitous technology and is reflected in their thinking,

communication styles, and workplace demands. This technological envelopment has given rise to what scholars call phygital workers who effectively combine both physical and digital workplaces (Balan & Vreja, 2018).

The cohort's formative experiences include the 2008 global financial crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, and widespread climate change awareness. These experiences have instilled what scholars define as pragmatic but values-based disposition to work (Seemiller and Grace, 2017). Gen Z is not only in search of meaningful work and financial stability, as opposed to Millennials who are more concerned with purpose than security, but, unlike their childhood of economic instability, they have faced economic instability (Perna, 2020).

2.2 Work Values within Cross-Cultural

According to cross-cultural studies, there are substantial differences in the Gen Z work values among emerging economies. Arora et al. (2020) created an elaborate model that singles out four dimensions of the Gen Z work values: instrumental (salary, job security), cognitive (learning, advancement), social/altruistic (helping others, relationships), and prestige (status, recognition). In the comparative analysis of the Brazilian and German Gen Z workers, they discovered that Brazilian respondents placed higher importance on instrumental and social values, whereas German respondents placed greater importance on cognitive values and autonomy.

De Boer et al. (2021) furthered this cross-cultural perspective to China, Thailand, Germany, and the Netherlands and established that intrinsic work values were the most important to all nationalities, whereas leisure was the least important. Nonetheless, big variations in particular value prioritization surfaced, undermining the idea of Gen Z being a uniform global generation. The results of these studies highlight the importance of setting the study of generational research within the context of different cultural and economic structures.

A study of Chinese and Eastern European firms conducted in transitional economies revealed that career progression and job satisfaction were the common intrinsic motivation as compared to salary satisfaction in China than in Eastern Europe (IMR Press, 2025). This difference is due to different economic trends and cultural aspects especially on the power distance and individualism levels (Hofstede, 2010).

2.3 Values and Ethics Preferences in Corporations

Gen z has shown a unique focus on ethical alignment of personal and organizational values like never before. A survey conducted by Deloitte (2023) indicates that three-quarters of Gen Z (77) have organizational values when choosing their employers, and 49% of them are willing to switch jobs when there is a mismatch in values. This moral awareness is spread to the environmental sustainability, diversity and inclusion, and corporate social responsibility.

A study in Turkey (2024) found that there are specific segments of gen Z in the attitude towards sustainability. Late class analysis showed that a subset of respondents were very keen on sustainability and innovation, and would choose organizations that are on the forefront in environmental efforts. On the other hand, other segments were conservation and tradition-oriented, which implied that they were not ready to change quickly. This segmentation questions Gen Z ethical preferences of monolithic characterizations.

Empirical research in the Malaysian context shows that more than two-thirds of Gen Z employees would quit their jobs in case organizational values contradicted their own beliefs, especially on diversity, equity, inclusion, and environmental commitments (Zahra, 2025). This observation is consistent with the Person-Organization Fit theory that asserts that value congruence increases job satisfaction and organizational commitment and decreases turnover (Kristof, 1996).

2.4 Organizational Culture Transformation

The penetration of gen Z into workforces in the emerging economies is an event that precipitates dramatic changes in culture. Studies in Malaysia find high turnover intentions and job-hopping tendencies among Gen Z workers, which can be explained by the lack of expectations in terms of career advancement and work flexibility (Zahari and Puteh, 2023; Salem, 2025). Such trends require organizational changes in work design, leadership styles, and technological support.

The idea of rotating leadership has become popular among the Gen Z employees that do not appreciate hierarchical organization but accept the authority founded on knowledge. According to the research conducted by Stanford (2024), Gen Z is more likely to follow consensus-based leadership models and service-oriented management practices. This inclination is congruent with their wish to have transparency and participative decision-making processes.

The studies on organizational culture in the emerging economies accentuate the mediating effect of the psychological contract fulfillment. In cases where organizations do not fulfill implicit commitments about career development, equitable treatment, and career development, Gen Z employees exhibit increased disengagement and turnover attitudes (Robinson and Morrison, 2000). This risk-averse, but opportunity-seeking orientation is portrayed in this sensitivity to perceived breaches of contract in the cohort.

3. Theoretical Framework

The article combines three theoretical views to examine organizational influence of Gen Z in the emerging economies.

The key theory that can be used to comprehend Gen Z motivation is the Self-Determination Theory (SDT). According to Deci and Ryan (1985, 2000), there are three intrinsic psychological needs, namely, autonomy (self-direction in work), competence (mastery and effectiveness), and relatedness (connection and belonging). The latest Malaysian study affirms that perceived autonomy mediates the linkage between flexible work schedules and retention of Gen Z workers in SMEs (Salem, 2025). SDT describes the reasons behind the high level of engagement by Gen Z when organizations create discretionary control of work processes.

The Person-Organization (P-O) Fit Theory deals with the dynamics of value alignment. Kristof (1996) asserts that individual and organizational congruence is a predictor of job satisfaction, commitment, and retention. In the case of Gen Z, such alignment is especially vital, as they are not ready to lose their personal values to achieve job safety (Ng et al., 2010). The theory describes the empirical results as to why Gen Z is willing to leave organizations that display misalignment of values.

The Cultural Dimensions Theory by Hofstede makes it possible to analyze Gen Z work values cross-culturally. The dimensions of the framework such as power distance, individualism, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, long-term orientation and indulgence explain the reason why Gen Z preferences can vary in emerging economies. As an example, the power distance in Asian cultures can moderate the egalitarian inclinations of Gen Z, whereas autonomy needs can be increased by individualistic cultures (Hofstede et al., 2010).

4. Methodology

This is a literature review article that uses the systematic method to compile empirical evidence on Gen Z in emerging markets. The following elements are included in the research design.

Source Identification: Database searches were performed with a mix of the keywords in the form of Generation Z, work values, emerging economies, organizational culture, ethical preferences, and digital natives. Peer-reviewed journals, conference proceedings, and institutional repositories were searched.

Inclusion Criteria: (1) Empirical or theoretical emphasis on Generation Z behavior at the workplace; (2) Study carried out in emerging economies or comparative settings which also

involve developing markets; (3) Publication within the year 2018-2025; (4) Peer-reviewed or institutional validation.

Analytical Approach: Thematic analysis was used to detect the patterns throughout the studies in terms of work values, ethical preferences, and effects of organizational culture. The cross-case comparison allowed finding both context-specific and universal findings.

Limitations: This review is based on secondary data analysis as opposed to primary empirical data collection. Geographic coverage is also not balanced with the Asian emerging economies being more strongly represented than African or Latin American contexts. Moreover, Gen Z workplace preferences are rapidly changing, which can surpass the publication schedules.

5. Results

5.1 Core Work Values of Gen Z in Emerging Economies

Empirical research across emerging economies reveals consistent yet culturally nuanced patterns in Gen Z work value prioritization. Table 1 presents synthesized findings from key studies examining generational preferences across diverse geographic contexts.

Table 1: Core Work Values of Gen Z in Emerging Economies

Study	Geographic Focus	Methodology	Key Findings	Primary Value Dimensions
Gandhi (2018)	India	Survey of management students	Job security and salary rank highest; learning opportunities essential; work environment quality critical	Instrumental, Cognitive
Sciendo (2024)	Serbia	Economics student survey	Safety and achievement prioritized; balanced convenience sought; status consciousness moderate	Security, Achievement
IMR Press (2025)	China/Eastern Europe	Comparative firm analysis	Career development universal motivator; salary importance significantly higher in China; work satisfaction transcends context	Cognitive, Instrumental
Arora et al. (2020)	Brazil/Germany	Cross-cultural comparison	Brazilians prioritize social/altruistic and instrumental values; Germans emphasize cognitive values and autonomy	Social, Cognitive
Salem (2025)	Malaysia	SME employee survey	Perceived autonomy mediates retention outcomes; flexibility critical for psychological contract fulfillment	Autonomy, Work-life balance

FranklinCovey (2025)	Global	Manager survey	65% describe themselves as eager to learn; development opportunities serve as prime motivators; purpose-driven orientation dominant	Cognitive, Purpose
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Cumulative analysis of these results indicates that there are five prevailing clusters of values that cross national borders and are culturally specific. The emergence of security and stability is a rather contradictory aspect since popular stereotypes about Gen Z as risky entrepreneurs or gig economy fans are rather uninformed. This security orientation is an indication of early experiences of economic insecurity in the 2008 global financial crisis and COVID-19 pandemic, which form what researchers term a pragmatic risk-aversion that emphasizes financial stability as well as purposeful activity. Indian context proves to show some of the best security preferences, job security being more important than any other character in the employment selection.

Second-tier priorities are autonomy and flexibility, but these vary considerably depending on the cultural context. Collectivism cultures exhibit a little less autonomy requirement than individualistic situations, which embrace organized flexibility in group-centered systems as opposed to individualistic autonomy. The Malaysian research indicates the perceived autonomy is an important mediator between flexible work arrangement and retention outcomes, which implies that the provision of policies alone is not enough to address Gen Z needs without psychological empowerment. The opportunities to continuous learning and career development are non-negotiable in all the explored contexts, and 65% of Gen Z identify themselves as ambitious learners and see development opportunities as their top priority and not as an additional advantage.

There is an increase in the significance of work-life balance, especially among female Gen Z employees and in situations where the economy is rapidly changing and managing the boundaries becomes a crucial element of wellbeing. Lastly, meaningful work and contribution to society receive a great deal of focus, and the purpose-centered orientation is what makes this generation stand out compared to their predecessors who kept work-related and social issues more separate than this group.

5.2 Alignment of Ethical Preferences and Values

Gen Z shows advanced moral standards that go beyond the conventional corporate social responsibility patterns into real organizational behavior. Table 2 is a synthesis of empirical evidence of ethical preferences and their implications on organizations across emerging economies.

Table 2: Ethical Preferences and Value Alignment Among Gen Z in Emerging Economies

Ethical Dimension	Key Evidence from Emerging Economies	Organizational Implication	Consequence of Misalignment
Environmental Sustainability	Turkish study (2024) segments Gen Z into six distinct attitude classes regarding sustainability; Malaysian research (Zahra, 2025) confirms over 60% would consider resigning over environmental value	Genuine green commitments required across supply chains; superficial CSR marketing backfires; transparency in	Increased turnover intention; employer brand damage; talent acquisition challenges

	conflicts; 77% consider organizational values in employment decisions (Deloitte, 2023)	environmental reporting essential	
Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion	Brazilian respondents prioritize social/altruistic values significantly more than German counterparts (Arora et al., 2020); Malaysian lack of authentic DEI commitment correlates with systematic disengagement; preference for reduced gender importance in leadership selection observed in Turkey	Authentic DEI policies with measurable outcomes; inclusive leadership development; elimination of bias in promotion systems	Psychological contract breach; social media amplification of exclusion incidents; competitive disadvantage in talent markets
Transparency and Authenticity	Gen Z possesses "authenticity radar" detecting gaps between organizational rhetoric and operational practice (AEEN, 2025); expectation of radical transparency in leadership communication; intolerance of "woke-washing" or performative ethics	Consistent value-action alignment; admission of uncertainty preferred over false confidence; open-book management approaches	Trust erosion; generational cynicism; increased monitoring and verification behaviors
Corporate Social Responsibility	49% willing to leave positions where value misalignment occurs (Deloitte, 2023); expectation that organizations address inequality, mental health, and community welfare beyond profit motives; 94% believe companies should address critical social issues (AEEN, 2025)	Integration of social impact into core business strategy; stakeholder capitalism adoption; community engagement programs	Value-based exit behaviors; negative word-of-mouth; recruitment pipeline damage

Such ethical preferences show a high level of segmentation among Gen Z cohorts, which do not fit the homogenous characters of this generation as a single wave of progressive or ethically uniform. Latent class analysis in Turkey shows that the difference in attitudinal groups is between sustainability-oriented innovators that emphasize environmental leadership and technological solutions; tradition oriented conservatives that emphasize conservation and incremental change; and pragmatic moderates who strike a balance between economic and ethical factors. This division implies that organizations should not be stereotyped based on generations but instead strive to pinpoint the value profiles within their talent pools and use differentiated strategies of segmentation instead of standardized approaches.

The strength of ethical demands generates what scholars call value alignment as hygiene factor-needs to be satisfied but not to be engaged highly. Companies need to incorporate sustainability, DEI, and social responsibility into working culture, not marketing rhetoric as

Gen Z is especially sensitive to perceived authenticity dissonance. The fact that 60 percent of Gen Z workers would consider leaving their jobs due to value discrepancy shows that ethical disconnections serve as a highly significant turnover factor equal to dissatisfaction with remuneration in the past generations.

5.3 Organizational Culture and Cross-Cultural differences.

The labour market shift to Gen Z in the emerging economies is the precipitant of multidimensional cultural changes in the structural structures, communication styles, technological infrastructure, and retention patterns. Table 3 shows the effects of organizational culture and specific manifestations in different geographic areas.

Table 3: Organizational Culture Impacts and Cross-Cultural Variations in Emerging Economies

Culture Domain	Universal Transformation	Asian Contexts (Malaysia, China, Thailand, India)	Eastern European Contexts (Serbia, Post-Socialist States)	Latin American Contexts (Brazil)
Structural Evolution	Flattening hierarchies; consensus-driven leadership preferred over autocratic styles; "rotating leadership" concepts gain traction (Stanford, 2024)	Supportive leadership emphasized within hierarchical frameworks; group harmony maintenance; paternalistic management styles adapt to participative expectations	Heightened job security concerns (mean importance 4.20 vs. 3.85 in China); strong career development expectations alongside stability needs; post-socialist risk aversion	Social/altruistic values prioritized over individual autonomy; relationship-oriented structures; emotional expressiveness valued alongside achievement
Communication Patterns	Instant feedback expectations; 72% anticipate weekly feedback compared to 20% of Gen X; continuous performance dialogue preferred over annual reviews	Face-to-face communication preferred alongside digital tools; high-context communication retained; respect for hierarchy maintained despite egalitarian preferences	Direct communication valued; radical transparency expected; low-context explicitness preferred; intolerance of information asymmetry	Relationship-oriented communication emphasized; personal connection prerequisite to task engagement; warmth and empathy in leadership communication essential
Technology Integration	Seamless digital infrastructure expected; mobile-compatible systems required; AI-	Rapid adoption of collaboration technologies; WeChat/Line integration in work processes; expectation of	Digital readiness critical antecedent to engagement; expectation that technology	Technology as enabler of social connection; preference for platforms facilitating relationship

	enhanced workflows anticipated; frustration with legacy systems	technological sophistication from employers	enables efficiency; resistance to surveillance technologies despite comfort with digital tools	maintenance; social media integration in employer branding
Retention and Engagement	Elevated turnover intentions; 60% of employers report firing Gen Z within months; 40% prefer AI to Gen Z hiring (FranklinCovey, 2025); job-hopping normalized	Job-hopping attributed to unmet development expectations; psychological contract breach sensitivity; loyalty to learning opportunities rather than organizations	Turnover driven by security-perception gaps; expectation of rapid advancement alongside stability; entrepreneurial exit when organizational constraints excessive	Engagement tied to social environment quality; turnover triggered by relationship breakdowns; preference for fun working environments alongside achievement

Context-specific expression of universal generational effects, which cannot be simply explained by a narrative of globalization, is seen through cross-cultural analysis. Asian contexts exhibit moderated use of individual autonomy preferences based on collectivist cultural dimensions, as well as, increasing expectations of supportive leadership and maintenance of group harmony. Compared to Eastern Europe, the Chinese setting has a marginally greater significance of salary, as it is indicative of rapid economic development and the increasing consumerism spirit, but the importance of work satisfaction is the same in both settings.

Eastern European post-socialist economies display very peculiar tendencies with the increased job security issues, which are a result of the uncertainty existing in the economy in the past, and high career-development expectations, which may be seemingly conflicting in the Western society. This two-way orientation towards stability and growth is an expression of certain developmental paths and institutional recollection of economic instability.

In Latin American situations, especially Brazil, social/altruistic values and relationship orientation are more valued, and Gen Z focuses on helping others and fun working conditions more than their German colleagues in comparative research. This observation is supported by the fact that lower individualism indices, and higher affective orientation are found in these cultures.

The biggest cultural influence in all settings is the change of the retention pattern and the psychology contract dynamics to the fundamental level. Malaysian studies report high turnover intentions and habitual job-hopping patterns which are explained by lack of expectations about career advancement pace and work flexibility. The trend, which has been replicated in the new economies, strains organizations to reorganize the work design, leadership development systems, and value articulation systems. Companies that lack modern collaboration technology, open ethical systems, and genuine sense of purpose have systematic competitive drawbacks in both talent acquisition and retention markets.

6. Discussion

6.1 Theoretical Implications

This discussion proves the relevance of Self-Determination Theory, Person-Organization Fit Theory, and Hofstede Cultural Dimensions to Gen Z in the emerging economies. The Gen Z motivation patterns are well explained using SDT as they focus on autonomy, competence, and relatedness; however, cultural context also affects the manifestation of these needs. The cultural dimension influences can be explained by the finding that perceived autonomy mediates retention in Malaysia (Salem, 2025) and job security is predominant in Eastern Europe.

P-O Fit Theory is re-embracing its relevance in the light of the ethical awareness of Gen Z. This readiness to leave organisations with different values is a heightening of fit dynamics in comparison to other generations. This implies that value alignment is a hygiene factor among Gen Z - it is required to be satisfied but it is not enough to be highly engaged.

The framework by Hofstede is effective in forecasting cross-cultural differences in Gen Z preferences. The contexts of higher power distance moderately express egalitarian demands, and individualistic cultures enhance autonomy preferences. Nonetheless, the fact that the intrinsic values are universal and can be prioritized in all national settings implies that in certain cases, the generational cohort effects can be more significant than the cultural dimensions.

6.2 Practical Implications

Companies operating in emerging markets need to adopt specific strategies to successfully adopt Gen Z talent.

Adaptive Work Design: Adopt flexible work practices that assure both temporal and spatial freedom and hold performance accountable. Studies show that 72.16 of Gen Z would prefer complete remote work (Thai study, 2024), implying that hybrid solutions might be more effective in retention compared to fully co-located ones.

Development of Leadership: Educate the train managers on transformational, coaching and servant leadership. The attributes of supportiveness and transparency as the important character traits of a leader need investment in development. The discovery that 75 percent of managers are unaware of Gen Z needs is something organizations need to address, as well (FranklinCovey, 2025).

Ethical Infrastructure: Transform a CSR marketing approach to integrate sustainability, DEI, and social responsibility into the operations. Superficial commitments will probably not work in favor of Gen Z, which is an authenticity radar, and it will become more disengaged.

Communication Systems: Reorganize feedback systems to have consistent feedback in the form of continuous constructive feedback as opposed to annual reviews. Managerial time and system redesign is needed due to the anticipation of weekly feedback.

Career Architecture: Build transparent and flexible career progression pathways that support a wide range of aspiration timelines. Gen Z career objectives (some want to fast-track and others want work-life balance) require individualized solutions.

6.3 Limitations and Future Research.

The present analysis is based on unevenly geographically covered secondary sources. There is little empirical social science research in emerging economies in Africa and the Middle East that can be generalized. Moreover, the fast change of workplace preferences can make the existing findings outdated when Gen Z ages and economic circumstances change.

Future studies ought to focus on longitudinal studies that monitor Gen Z trends as they advance through work trajectories. Quantitative results would be supplemented by qualitative research on how Gen Z manages in certain emerging economy organizational settings. Moreover, the intervention research that would examine certain organizational adaptations would contribute to the practical knowledge.

7. Conclusion

The influx of Generation Z into emerging economy workforces is a major inflexion point of organizational culture. The analysis shows that Gen Z has their own work values that focus on security, autonomy, development, work-life balance, and meaningful work as well as advanced ethical standards in terms of sustainability, DEI, transparency, and social responsibility. These tastes spur organizational culture change in terms of structure, communication, technology, and articulation of value.

Cross-cultural studies prove not only the universal generational influence but also the contextual manifestation of it formed by cultural dimensions and economic development patterns. To effectively attract and retain Gen Z talent, organizations should go beyond accommodations to authentic adaptation, redesigning work, leadership, and ethical systems to meet the demands of digital natives.

The antecedent of the emerging economies is high. The economic development of these regions relies on the good utilization of the youth talent and ability to overcome the technological and demographic shifts. Companies that do not adapt may lose Gen Z workers to other companies or incur high turnover expenses. In contrast, the companies that decode successfully digital native preferences have competitive advantage in the areas of innovation, engagement, and employer branding.

With the ongoing developmental patterns of emerging economies, the need to comprehend and incorporate the values of Gen Z in the workplace turns out not just to be an HR issue but a strategic necessity. The ability of organizations to balance the generational expectations and economic realities in these settings will determine the future of work in such settings where both productivity and purpose are given the respect it deserves.

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