

Generation Z in Inside Sales: Exploring Career Construction and Aspirations Through an Interpretive Qualitative Lens

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Abstract

Generation Z is becoming the dominant workforce, with many organizations, especially in high-pressure fields like inside sales, relying on Gen Z graduates for entry-level roles. However, high turnover within the first year disrupts operations and reduces profitability. To address this, HRD practitioners must understand how Gen Z constructs their careers. This study uses career construction theory and an interpretive qualitative design to explore how Gen Z employees in inside sales form their career identity and adaptability. The findings offer insights to reduce turnover and support long-term development. The study's stakeholders include HRD practitioners focused on Gen Z retention, HRD scholars conducting generational research, and Gen Z employees whose experiences are validated and supported through this research.

Keywords

career construction • career aspirations • Gen Z • inside sales • interpretive qualitative inquiry

Introduction

Career construction theory (Savickas, 2013) explains how individuals construct meaning around their careers through evolving career identities and adaptive strategies. For instance, for Gen Xs (born between 1965 and 1980), career is constructed based on their experiences with technology making their work-life simpler, allowing them to stay employed with the same organization (Rani & Samuel, 2019). Born between 1981 and 1996, millennials constructed their careers to ensure self-preservation and financial stability because of their experiences with economic and societal turbulence after the 9/11 terrorist attack and the 2008 financial crisis. Millennials, thus, became known for job-hopping (Rani & Samuel, 2019). As digital natives, Generation Z (born between 1995 and 2012) has been exposed to a global world from a young age, contributing to the development of their values and expectations (Barhate & Dirani, 2021).

Some universally expressed Gen Z career expectations include high importance on salary and desire for their workplace environment to be flexible, technologically driven, and appreciative of their contributions (Hatoum & Nassereldine, 2025; Loring & Wang, 2021; Novel & Tresna, 2025). Gen Z is also known to have low career resilience, thereby prompting them to quit their jobs in environments they perceive to be unsuitable for their

careers (Barhate et al., 2024). Roles such as inside sales, thus, have become very attractive to Gen Z.

The inside sales role is ideal for Gen Z college graduates as it is an entry-level job and does not require any prior experience (Loring, 2021). Currently, the field of inside sales is growing by 7.5% annually, and most organizations are hiring new (Gen Z) college graduates for entry-level inside sales roles (Sleep et al., 2020). In fact, 50% of college graduates, regardless of major, start their careers in sales roles (Morgan, 2025). Inside sales proves to be a desirable starting point for new college graduates who are starting their careers because of the multitude of opportunities (Morgan, 2025). Furthermore, the inside sales role offers high autonomy, flexibility, and opportunities for growth (Loring, 2021; Morgan, 2025). It also fulfills Gen Z's career expectations such as learning and development opportunities, work-life balance, and meaningful work (McConnachie, 2022).

Paradoxically, despite positive organizational outcomes, over 60% of first-time salespeople quit within their first year of employment (Kimerer, 2020) because of factors like a lack of operational support. The inside sales roles can also require individuals to persist in high-pressure, toxic environments, which may mean a lack of flexibility and remote work options (Kimerer, 2020). This threat to work-life balance poses

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another unattractive feature of the sales role for Gen Z. Additionally, the inside sales role requires employees to work in a call-centre-like environment and make “cold calls” to attract customers (Sleep et al., 2020). Being tied to a desk and performing tasks that may or may not produce expected results further makes some aspects of the inside sales role unattractive to Gen Z, prompting their exit.

Inside sales offers opportunities for career growth, flexibility, and attractive rewards match the aspirational desires of Gen Z on one hand, and on the other, Gen Z also quit this career in a few years. These early exits suggest potential misalignments between Gen Z employees’ emerging career identities and the realities of the inside sales role. It also raises questions about Gen Z’s career adaptability in terms of managing career misfit, uncertainty, and transitions. While high turn-over is a key characteristic of the inside sales role, Gen Z’s attitude to quit any industry after a few months is a growing workforce issue. Over 47% of Gen Z employees in the U.S. reported they will voluntarily leave their current roles in the next six months (ManpowerGroup, 2025). This early exit along with quiet quitting and great resignation have become characteristic features of how Gen Z perform their careers in a post-pandemic and remote-working world. For HRD, this presents an opportunity to understand how Gen Z employees make sense of their early careers to design developmentally appropriate interventions that support career aspirations for these young employees in their evolving sense of being and future directions. It will also allow organizations to develop strategies to support Gen Z’s long-term development rather than short-term job placement.

When conducting any generation-based study, it is important to note that although generational theories can help explain broad workforce trends, scholars caution that generationalism may reinforce stereotypes and overlook stronger influences such as age, career stage, and labour market conditions (Cho et al., 2025; Rudolph et al., 2021). Therefore, this study treats Gen Z as a socially constructed cohort identity for examining how early-career individuals navigate careers within a specific cultural context. We use Gen Z as a cohort to explore how early-career employees who entered the workforce during a period of digitalization, economic volatility, and post-pandemic workplace change make sense of their careers. Career construction theory (Savickas, 2013), provides an excellent framework to explore individual sense-making of early-career individuals and their development of psychosocial resources to cope with career tasks, transitions, and disruptions.

Career Construction Theory

Career construction theory (CCT) served as the guiding framework in this study to analyse how Gen Z participants

construct meaning around their career decisions and aspirations. The CCT is considered the grand theory of career development (Rudolph et al., 2019). Developed by Savickas (2002), it explains the process individuals use to “construct themselves ... and make meaning of their careers” (Savickas, 2013). It is suitable for exploring careers of a specific demography in a heterogeneous workforce. Career construction theory is especially relevant when investigating how individuals make vocational choices and construct successful and satisfactory work lives (Rudolph et al., 2019). It adopts a developmental, differential, and dynamic view toward career development (Savickas, 2013). It begins with developing self-awareness or career identity, and eventually career adaptability, which focuses on how people construct their careers (Savickas, 2005). Using the career construction theory, we aim to provide rich descriptions of Gen Z’s process of proactive and adaptive career development (Rudolph et al., 2019).

We will utilize the career identity dimension of the career construction theory to understand Gen Z’s proactive career development. Career identity is a person’s ability to construct meaning through the assimilation of career experiences and link them with their motivations, interests, and competencies to make career choices (Meijers, 1998). This is an evolving process and often requires individuals to engage in meaning-making processes to develop a career identity within the career construction framework. Often, research has concluded that young people are generally not interested in meaning-making discussions (Damon, 2009). They make career choices based on what will bring them immediate enjoyment and keep career options open (Meijers, 1998). This leads us to believe that Gen Z chooses a temporary career that seems to fit now, but they remain flexible and do not hesitate to change careers later.

Recent research has explored the influence of formative events (globally or in the immediate socio-economic contexts) that have shaped Gen Z’s career identity (Sakdiyakorn et al., 2021). For instance, the COVID-19 pandemic has derailed several Gen Z careers (Barhate et al., 2024), forcing Gen Z to choose careers that can be performed remotely or survive a crisis. Sakdiyakorn et al. (2021) found that Gen Z is prepared and cautious in their careers, contrary to seminal research on career identity that concluded young people prioritize enjoyment over serious career-related decisions. Tang et al. (2020) also found that prudence (making choices to avoid risks) is the most prioritized career identity among Gen Z. This shift emphasizes how Gen Z’s lived experiences of uncertainty and disruption are shaping their career identity increasingly anchored in risk aversion and adaptability.

Career adaptability highlights an individual’s adaptive career development strategy within the domains of career

construction theory. Career adaptability explains how “individuals construct themselves, impose directions on their vocational behaviour, and make meaning of their careers” (Savickas, 2013, p. 1). In other words, career adaptability is the individual’s psychosocial ability to anticipate workplace ambiguities to make suitable career changes or transitions (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). It develops as individuals construct links between their abilities and the needs of their careers.

Career adaptability is the most widely studied phenomenon among Gen Z (Barhate et al., 2024). Compared to older generations, Gen Z is less committed to their organization and more likely to leave a career to prioritize passion instead (Hamzah et al., 2021). Gen Z is navigating and establishing its career in a post-pandemic world laden with economic, political, social, and global uncertainties (Barhate et al., 2024). This generation is thus challenged to construct a career in a different reality than older generations and remain adaptable in an uncertain labour market.

Building on these shifts in identity and adaptability, we believe that career aspirations emerge as a crucial component of Gen Z’s career construction process. Traditional notions of aspiration are generally rooted in hierarchical advancement or taking pride in a long-term tenure at an organization. However, Gen Z’s career aspirations are shaped by the desire for purposeful work, alignment with personal values, and opportunities for continuous growth. Their aspirations seem to reflect a dynamic negotiation between stability and self-fulfilment. We believe that Gen Z wants a career that offers both security and the flexibility to pivot when values or interests evolve. With Gen Z soon to become the largest population in the workforce and ultimately our future leaders, it is essential to understand their career aspirations. Through this investigation, organizations can support Gen Z in constructing careers that are not only adaptable but also meaningful in an ever-changing world.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this interpretive qualitative study is to explore how Gen Z employees working in inside sales roles construct their careers through the development of career identity and career adaptability, and how these processes shape their long-term career aspirations. By foregrounding meaning-making and development, this study responds directly to HRD’s concern with designing environments that foster sustainable career development rather than short-term retention alone. Specifically, this study seeks to illuminate how Gen Z employees interpret their early work experiences, how they develop adaptive strategies in response to career uncertainty, and how these experiences inform their evolving aspirations. In doing so, the study contributes to HRD scholarship by advancing an integrated understanding of identity, adaptability,

and aspirations as interconnected developmental processes that can be influenced through intentional HRD practices. The following research questions guided the study:

1. How do Gen Z employees working in inside sales roles develop their career identity?
2. How do Gen Z employees working in inside sales roles demonstrate career adaptability?
3. How do Gen Z employees’ career identity and adaptability shape their long-term career aspirations in inside sales roles?

Significance to HRD

In this study, we explored how Gen Z engage in career construction and develop long-term career aspirations. Based on an extensive review of the literature, no past research has explored how career identity and career adaptability interact to help Gen Z develop their career aspirations. Our study, thus, contributes to HRD literature in four ways. First, HRD professionals and organizations will gain deep insights into how Gen Z defines their careers, which impacts their career choices. Second, this study explains how recent Gen Z college graduates choose their sales careers but also continue to explore other careers in pursuit of life and career satisfaction. Third, this study emphasizes that Gen Z values an alignment between their personality and career (Santer et al., 2023), and Gen Z will choose jobs or careers which foster environments where they can be their authentic self. Last, the findings of this study have important implications for how organizations can meet Gen Z’s career-related needs and retain them by offering adaptable career opportunities.

Methodology

We employed an interpretive qualitative design (Wiesner, 2022) to explore how Gen Z employees construct their careers through meaning-making, aligning with the interpretivist paradigm. Interpretive qualitative design explores how participants assign meaning to their experiences and interpret the world around them (Wiesner, 2022). This approach is particularly appropriate for investigating career construction, as it enables researchers to uncover how Gen Z interpret their past experiences, values, motivations, and aspirations in relation to their careers. This design thus allowed us to gather deep and contextualized understanding of why Gen Z participants made certain career decisions and how they assigned meaning to their roles, relationships, and work environments. By eliciting rich narratives and examining individual perceptions, the interpretive design allowed us to capture the evolving and personalized nature of career identity and adaptability, which are the core

constructs in career construction theory. This approach was thus methodologically aligned with our aim to illuminate the complex and subjective ways in which Gen Z employees define, experience, and shape their careers and lead to career construction.

Sampling and Participants

We employed purposeful criterion sampling to select twelve participants for the study, by applying the following selection criteria: a) participants had to be born after 1995; b) they have at least one year of work experience; and c) they work in an inside sales role. According to Patton (1990), purposeful sampling allows the researcher to select participants based on “the resources available, the questions being asked, and constraints being faced” (pp. 181–182). Consistent with the characteristics of purposive samples, our sample size was small, however we deemed this sufficient considering the anticipated depth and richness of information we expected to gather during the interviews (Ary et al., 2010). Through the third author’s professional network, we identified eight participants. Further, through snowball sampling, we identified four more participants. Snowball sampling assists researchers in identifying potential participants who meet the research selection criteria by reaching out to well-situated people who can nominate others (Emmel, 2013).

Finally, a diverse sample of twelve Gen Z employees working in an inside sales role participated in our study and aided our exploration of Gen Z’s career development, adaptability and career aspirations. Data analysis from the career construction experiences of the twelve participants confirmed saturation. It is important to note that we do not claim saturation of all possible Gen Z career construction experiences; rather, we claim thematic saturation within this sample and occupational context. By the final interviews, we observed repeated patterns across participants’ accounts related to career identity, career adaptability, value alignment, relational support, and transferable skill development. We therefore determined that the data provided sufficient thematic depth for the purpose and scope of the study.

The participants were employed in different organizations and worked in different flexible work environments such as remote, hybrid, or in-person. The sample comprised a higher number of male participants, and most participants were 22 years of age. Using pseudonyms to preserve participant identities, Table 1 summarizes their work experience and educational qualifications at the time of this study. We noted the participants’ choice of primary field of study (major) and a secondary specialization (minor) while pursuing their degrees and their current career to emphasize their career decisions. All participants majored in business but did not consider a career in sales until their last semester or after graduation.

Table 1. Participant Demography

Participant	Age	Degree and Major	Gender
Aanya	24	Bachelor of Business Administration (Marketing)	F
Arjun	22	Bachelor of Business Administration (Marketing and Management)	M
Mary	23	Bachelor of Business Administration (Marketing and Entrepreneurship)	F
Sophia	22	Bachelor of Arts (Communication)	F
Liam	22	Bachelor of Science (Business)	M
Leia	23	Bachelor of Science (Journalism - Strategic Communication)	F
Noah	22	Bachelor of Science (Statistics)	M
David	22	Bachelor of Business Administration (Marketing)	M
Emma	22	Bachelor of Science (Human Resource Management)	F
Ethan	24	Bachelor of Science (Economics and Business)	M
Priya	22	Bachelor of Business Administration (Marketing)	F
Amir	22	Bachelor of Science (Economics)	M

Data Collection

We employed semi-structured interviews to understand the participant’s process of career construction when performing inside sales roles. Two researchers conducted in-depth interviews via the online meeting platform Zoom. Before conducting the interviews, participants were provided with a roster of available time slots to facilitate scheduling. Each participant selected a preferred time, after which meeting links were distributed via email. With the participants’ permission, we recorded all interviews for transcription and data analysis. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. Since the purpose of our study was to explore early work experiences, and their influence on career decision making, longitudinal data was not required; a single interview was conducted with each participant to meet the study’s scope.

The interview questions guided participants’ reflections of their careers and understanding of their career identity and career adaptability, and how they lead to developing their long-term career aspiration. To understand career identity,

we asked questions like “How do you define your careers?” and “How did you choose a career in sales?” While career adaptability was explored through questions like, “What helps you stay at your current career?” and “What role does your manager/supervisor play in your success in your job?” All interviews were audio and video recorded and transcribed verbatim using the artificial intelligence software – otter.ai. This yielded approximately 176 pages of transcripts, which we then reviewed to ensure accuracy.

Data Analysis

We followed Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis approach, applying both deductive (theory-informed) and inductive (data-driven) coding cycles to ensure rigour (see Table 2). The flexibility inherent in interpretive qualitative design allowed us to adopt a data analysis approach best suited to our research context. Given the use of CCT (Savickas, 2013) as the guiding framework, we began with a deductive coding strategy, applying these specific pre-defined codes derived from the theory’s core constructs: career identity and career adaptability (Wiesner, 2022). Through deductive coding we first perused interview transcripts to focus on participants’ experiences and concepts related to their career identity and career adaptability. This allowed us to closely anchor our analysis to the research questions and theoretical constructs while ensuring coherence between the conceptual framework and emergent insights.

However, as is common in qualitative inquiry, the data revealed patterns and meanings that extended beyond the original theoretical categories. To remain attuned to the participants’ lived experiences, we adopted a flexible analytic stance, incorporating inductive coding alongside our deductive process. When segments of the data did not fit the initial coding structure but appeared relevant to the research questions, they were assigned new codes. As these novel codes accumulated, we examined them for patterns and clustered them into emergent sub-themes. Following Wiesner’s (2022) recommendation, we returned to the previously coded data to re-examine and re-code where necessary, ensuring analytical consistency and depth.

This combined deductive-inductive coding procedure enabled us to honour the theoretical underpinnings of CCT and remain responsive to the nuanced, emergent meanings embedded in participants’ narratives. As shown in Table 2, the final analysis supported the two primary themes of career identity and career adaptability, each comprised multiple sub-themes, reflecting the complex, evolving ways in which Gen Z participants construct their careers.

Trustworthiness

Due to the exploratory and flexible nature of interpretive qualitative studies, there is an increased threat to maintaining research objectivity (Kahlke, 2014). Thus, the researcher must first acknowledge their role in the research and then diligently examine any biases and threats that may emerge throughout the data analysis (Ary et al., 2010). All three authors in this study are millennials and have remained intrigued by how Gen Z remains focused on their career-related goals as reported by industrial literature. The first and second authors, engage in generational research in the workplace, and were keen on exploring Gen Z in the workforce, given the distinct characteristics of this generational cohort. The third author, a sales professor at a business school, has a unique insight into the sales industry and has experience counselling and mentoring Gen Z students to make career-related decisions. At the onset of this research, the authors acknowledged their respective motivations to engage in this study to clarify the roles they would play when this study was conducted.

Two authors conducted joint interviews to ensure consistency in our understanding of the data collection and analysis. Field notes allowed us to capture participants’ emotions and reflect on their responses. After each interview, we compared our overall reflection and some preliminary themes through peer debriefing. To ensure the trustworthiness of our data and analysis, we approached all twelve participants to take part in member checking to verify the accuracy of our transcripts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Further, trustworthiness was also achieved through an intra-rater code–recode strategy, in which the

Table 2. Coding Tree/matrix

Deductive Category	Inductive Codes	Theme/Subtheme
Career identity	personality fit, sales personality, family influence, recruiter influence, internship exposure	Internal influences; external influences
Career identity	benefits, flexibility, work-life balance, family, community service, culture	Values
Career identity	commission, recognition, praise, milestones	Motivations
Career adaptability	peer support, supervisor mentoring, friendships, psychological safety	Building meaningful relationships
Career adaptability	transferable skills, internal mobility, career pivoting, learning through sales	Building transferable skills
Integrative outcome (career aspirations)	Staying with organization, leaving sales role, moving into HR/marketing/recruiting/product roles	Career aspirations as developmental outcome

researchers conducted an initial round of coding, allowed a time lapse, and then re-coded the data to compare the two sets of coded material. All authors engaged in data analysis thereafter.

Findings

Through a combined deductive and inductive data analysis procedure and honouring CCT, two main themes (from deductive coding) and six subthemes (from inductive coding) were generated: (a) career identity, explained by internal influences, external influences, values, and motivations, and (b) career adaptability, explained by building meaningful relationships and building transferable skills. The inductive codes were not treated as separate themes disconnected from the theoretical framework. Instead, after iterative comparison, we found that the emergent codes elaborated and contextualized the two deductive categories. Career aspiration emerged as an integrative outcome shaped by the interaction between identity and adaptability and has been presented in the discussion section. In the sections below, we present the themes career identity and career adaptability in response to research questions one and two, respectively. Research question three is answered through the discussion section.

Career Identity (RQ1: How do Gen Z employees working in inside sales roles develop their career identity?)

During the interviews, the participants reflected on their career experiences, allowing them to form preliminary meanings about their careers forming their career identity. All participants defined careers as a lifelong journey that encompasses the jobs you perform during your lifetime with the goal of bringing personal satisfaction and success. As described by one of the participants, Arjun, “a job is a source of income, but a career is something you want to be involved in and be passionate about throughout your life.” The way participants defined their careers was deeply rooted in several subthemes revealing how they make career-related decisions and form a career identity. All participants perceived careers to stretch beyond their current organization, considered them to be non-linear, evolving over time, and a result of their overall experiences through life.

Notably, we found that participants in this study developed career identities because of internal and external influences, and their perceived values and motivations regarding their inside sales careers.

Internal Influences

Despite working in an inside sales role, none of the participants pursued sales as their undergraduate major. When asked why

they chose a sales career after graduation, most participants cited their friendly, outgoing, and emotionally intelligent personalities. They believe individuals who like working with people and don't shy away from challenges thrive in sales careers. Additionally, they believed that employees in sales must have soft skills, understand the product they are selling, and be good at building relationships. Participants' motivation to choose a sales career was thus derived from their self-assessed perception of their personalities, and sometimes from other's perceptions.

For instance, Liam, a pre-med student, chose sales after being told that he has a “sales personality” by his family and friends. Priya shared that she never wanted to be in sales because of its bad reputation, however, her father inspired her to view herself in a sales role, and she ultimately chose that career. Similarly, Ethan, an economics major embarked upon a sales career – noting, “I really enjoy sales in general. I am a pretty personable person, and I like talking to people. I've always kind of had a salesman like personality so it was a good fit for me.”

Through these participant reflections, we conclude that participants chose sales careers because of the perceived alignment with their personalities, which they believed to be fit for a career in inside sales.

External Influences

Some participants shared that they chose a sales career because of experiential influences through interactions with sales representatives in the classroom (Aanya). Mary shared for instance, that a recruiter at a career fair invested considerable time in getting to know her, explaining the inside sales role, while answering questions transparently. This interaction made the sales role personable and attractive. Noah shared also how his internship experience converted to a full-time opportunity:

I wanted to intern in a data science role but did not have the skills. When an internship opportunity in sales at a technology company presented itself, I thought I may enjoy it because I am a people person. The organization has a very good internship programme, and I ended up getting a full-time offer after graduation. And yep, this is what I am doing now.

Additionally, earning money via commissions was very attractive to some participants. Arjun shared, “I'm driven by money and, therefore, like being in a sales role since half of my salary comes from my commission. I don't want to waste time while I'm here and while I can sell.” While there is no evidence from the data collected in this sample which suggests that the participants were attracted to the inside sales role because of the salary, there is ample evidence suggesting that participants

chose to work in organizations that offered good benefits. For example, retirement contribution match (Priya), quality health insurance (Arjun), rewards and bonuses for meeting sales goals (Leia, Priya), access to learning resources (Noah), long maternity and paternity leaves (Mary), the availability of snacks and games (Ethan), and opportunities to do service for the community (Sophia, Emma) were attractive to participants. Arjun summarizes, “maybe one job pays \$5,000 more, but the health insurance offered is significantly at a lower grade, and so you might be better off taking the lower salary and getting a lot better benefits.”

It can be concluded that when selecting a career, the Gen Z participants in this study prioritized and researched the benefits offered by the organization before accepting a job offer.

Values

The relationship between participant values and organizational values, was another noteworthy theme which emerged in our study. Participants in this study believed that their growth in work should benefit their personal lives and vice versa. Amir highlighted that, “I am the same person in both places, and if one of them is out of balance, it affects the other”. Some participants reported that they chose organizations with locations in proximity to their hometown, family, or partners underscoring their familial values of wanting strong family units. This aligned with the participants’ values of prioritizing family. In fact, Leia shared that she chose her organization because, “one of the six core values here is ‘family’, which is big for me ... we have open office layouts, and we know what’s going on in each other’s lives probably a little too much, but it’s all good.”

All participants voiced their preference to have flex-work opportunities and noted they had the option to work from home, which gave them flexibility to choose their hours and achieve their targets without micro-management. Participants also exhibited how the alignment between their altruistic values and the organization helped them develop respect and loyalty toward their organization. Sophia shared that she valued her organization since it, “promotes community engagement like cleaning up the street ... Volunteer[ing] at animal shelters ... they gave us a half-day off to do different charity works during Christmas”.

Despite the alignment between individual and organizational values, participants indicated that they found sales to be a “high stress” field, especially because their commissions were dependent on sales they made, resulting in intensive need to reach clients or making cold calls. This environment contradicted their values, and they shared that they often questioned if the stress was worth their time and effort and questioned whether it was the right career for them (Noah).

However, despite participants perceiving sales being a stressful role, they still valued their specific organization’s work environment:

I was really drawn to this company because it is super Gen Z, you know? There are a lot of young people in the same role as me. We have an open office layout, casual and laid-back work environment, and there is no need to wear a formal attire every day. (David)

These alignments between personal and organizational values made the participant’s sales career a worthy career choice before venturing into other career options.

Motivations

Rewards and recognition act as important motivating factors for Gen Z to perform effectively and take up challenging roles. Two main reward systems that motivated Gen Z participants to make sales were – rewards for meeting sales milestones and receiving recognition after making sales. For instance, participants would get a cash reward for having a meeting scheduled with a prospective customer and an additional reward if the customer attended the meeting (Liam). Emma emphasized, “Since this is commission-based, some people stick around because once you start seeing success, they want more of that.”

In another instance, David shared that when employees work remotely and make a sale, they post a bell icon on their slack channels (workplace communication and project management application), which attracts congratulatory messages from others. “When I see other people post a bell, I am like ‘oh! I got to start calling people and get the exact same thing’. A monetary reward is obviously welcome but just getting a thumbs up is definitely as motivating.” When participants received recognition leading to instant gratification, this contributed toward making the participants feel engaged, contributing to the development of their career identities.

Career Adaptability (RQ2: How do Gen Z employees working in inside sales roles demonstrate career adaptability?)

As participants gained experience in their inside sales careers, their career definitions continued to evolve. Despite participants being in an early career stage, they quickly recognized the importance of building meaningful relationships and having the ability to adjust and adapt to their sales roles developing confidence in their careers. Their interaction with the entry-level sales role allowed them to acknowledge that they were building transferable skills, and how that would apply to any other career of their choice.

Building Meaningful Relationships

Participants shared that their careers thrive when they make close personal friendships with their colleagues. They appreciated the social events organized at their workplaces that would bring employees together, thereby facilitating relationship building. Participants also shared that they received emotional support from their colleagues, which was instrumental in developing their confidence in navigating workplace challenges. These relationships were critical to building confidence at the workplace as participants recognized, “we do not compete with other salespeople. In fact, we all help each other by sharing our call recordings, which give us ideas about our own customer conversation scripts” (David).

Participants expected a similar seamless relationship with their supervisors, too. They expect their supervisor to be their manager, mentor, and friend, allowing them to share and get feedback on all aspects of their lives. Mary shared, “My supervisor is deeply invested in my personal growth and has prioritized my learning. We often get lunch together and discuss books, recipes, and my career aspirations.” Similarly, Amir emphasized the importance of building relationships, highlighting that:

I've just created such strong relationships with my team members, with my manager, VP, and even my VP's boss, they know my name, right? I think that directly correlates to anyone's happiness ... especially mine.

Arjun also noted that he enjoyed a positive relationship with his manager, who he perceives as a mentor, “it's so hard to find a good mentor. But my manager - she's been the greatest mentor ever ... and we've also become really good friends at work and even outside of work, so yeah, gotten like really close to like past year.”

Thus, participants' recognition of how their work and personal lives are intertwined led them to have seamlessly intersecting career identities, demonstrating their adaptability. Most participants thus preferred to work in small to medium-sized companies where there was an increased chance of building close, long-lasting relationships with their supervisors and colleagues.

Building Transferrable Skills

As the conversations with all participants, except for one, progressed into long-term career plans, and career adjustments they intended to make, they shared that they would soon transition out of the inside sales role, preferably within the same organization. They shared that the inside sales role was “a great place to start” (Aanya), but that they will soon evolve into roles like human resources, marketing,

finance, etc. Priya shared also that, “upper management appreciates the hard work and the skills you gain by doing sales, making you a potential candidate to move into other positions.” Sophia further underscored this sentiment and shared:

I've been excelling and enjoying my time at the company. But I'm really interested in the recruiting aspect, and I'm really interested in the commercial Support Manager aspect as well. I see myself staying at [company], but I don't know if it will be in sales.

Sales can thus be considered an attractive starter job for participants to gain experience and transferrable skills further evident from David's journey:

I want to be in product marketing, and as an intern in that field, I realized all managers had sales experience because product marketing is so heavily based in sales and learning how to capture customers and learning about their pains. I chose sales as my first career. It just seemed like a natural way to transition into product marketing as that field does not hire fresh graduates.

Notably, participants indicated that while they wished to remain with the same organization, they found career progression into advanced sales roles unattractive and therefore preferred opportunities in other areas:

I have seen what my outside sellers go through to be successful. And they don't enjoy it. they do it because they have families to feed and a mortgage. So, seeing that they are not entirely content where they're at makes me question if I would want to do that. (Priya)

All participants showed high potential for career adaptability and had clear short-term career plans. Although they acknowledged uncertainty about their long-term career paths, they viewed it as an opportunity rather than a limitation. In some cases, the desire to transition was unrelated to their sales careers, but was instead influenced by personality and openness to change. This sentiment was echoed by Aanya who shared that, “I don't know exactly what my future holds for me ... knowing myself [however], I'll probably change careers once or twice in my life.”

Based on our findings, participants showcased an inherent sense of career adaptability rooted in their definitions of career as fluid, lifelong, and evolving. In addition, their concurrent exploration of alternative careers showcased their high career adaptability.

Discussion

This study set out to explore how Gen Z employees working in inside sales construct their careers through the development of career identity and career adaptability, and how these processes shape their long-term career aspirations. Guided by career construction theory and an interpretive qualitative design, the findings reveal that Gen Z's early career construction is neither random nor purely opportunistic. Instead, it reflects a deliberate, developmentally informed process in which identity formation and adaptability operate together to guide career aspirations.

Career Aspirations as an Outcome (RQ3: How do Gen Z employees' career identity and adaptability shape their long-term career aspirations in inside sales roles?)

Participants did not describe their future careers as fixed or linear. Instead, they viewed inside sales as an opportunity for learning, relationship-building, and skill acquisition. Their evolving career identity helped them evaluate whether sales aligned with their personality, values, and preferred work environment. Career adaptability helped them identify how the skills gained in sales could support movement into other roles. As a result, participants' aspirations cannot be simply categorized as their intention to leave or stay; rather, they showcased an openness to change while seeking continued alignment between personal values, organizational culture, and future career possibilities. Thus, career aspirations emerged as a developmental outcome of the interaction between identity and adaptability as demonstrated by our findings and demonstrated below in detail.

One of the most surprising findings in the study was that none of the participants had formally studied sales in college yet intentionally chose sales as their first career. Clearly, Gen Z participants make conscious, value-aligned career choices based on self-perceived strengths, personality traits, and external feedback. This finding is antithetical to seminal career development literature which emphasizes that formal education opens and dictates the pathways to an individual's first career (Lent et al., 1994). Gen Z graduates are choosing careers in an economically turbulent environment (Gopinath, 2020). They may already recognize that their educational pathway may not guarantee a relevant career option (Collisson & Eck, 2021). This is in alignment with generational theory that states generational cohorts choose careers based on external influences in their socio-cultural-economic environments (Mannheim, 1952). Considering the current volatility in their socio-cultural-economic environments, Gen Z are prioritizing working in organizations that allow them to be authentic, maintain work-life balance, and perform value-driven work. The participants in this study, thus, actively chose

the organization where they want to work, guided by their career identity, deliberately choosing sales careers.

This finding thus accentuates that it is more important for Gen Z to choose an organization aligning with their values over a job aligning with their education. With evolving career identities, Gen Z shared that they intend to adapt to a new career by staying within the same organization. This presents a critical area for consideration related to attracting, retaining, and engaging Gen Z in organizations. Notably, this insight challenges prevailing narratives in the literature that suggest Gen Z employees are predisposed to leave organizations within the first two years (Novel & Tresna, 2025). In contrast, participants in this study demonstrated a clear intention to stay, contingent upon whether the organization continues to support their evolving career identity and aspirations. This finding supports past studies on Gen Z's career resilience (Barhate et al., 2024) and repositions Gen Z not as transient job-hoppers, but as purpose-driven professionals who seek long-term alignment between their work and their values.

Consistent with career construction theory, the findings demonstrate that Gen Z employees actively construct meaning around their careers by integrating self-perceived strengths, external feedback, and work experiences into evolving career narratives (Savickas, 2013). This study extends existing career construction literature by illustrating how these processes unfold within organizational development contexts, rather than in isolation. Career identity and adaptability emerged as outcomes shaped through organizational relationships, learning opportunities, and value-aligned environments.

Another surprising finding in this study was that although the participants initially viewed sales negatively because of reputational stigma, they later enjoyed it after discovering relational influences and personality alignments. As with previous studies, we found that Gen Z is motivated by the desire to establish positive relationships when choosing careers (Leslie et al., 2021). The finding indicates that relational and emotional dimensions at work such as friendships, mentorship, social events enhanced Gen Z participants' career adaptability by creating a supportive, integrated environment. This helped participants to confidently and curiously navigate their careers while maintaining control over their evolving professional identity. Consistent with past literature, the ability to develop close relationships with their supervisors and receive mentorship from them made participants feel that the organization was invested in them (Barhate, 2022).

There is evidence in this study that suggests, some Gen Z chose a sales career because of their experiences and interaction with the role during an internship, highlighting the role of experiential learning among Gen Z (Drewery et al., 2023). We believe Gen Z participants have a "try it to believe it" (Dweck, 2006) mindset suggesting they trust first-

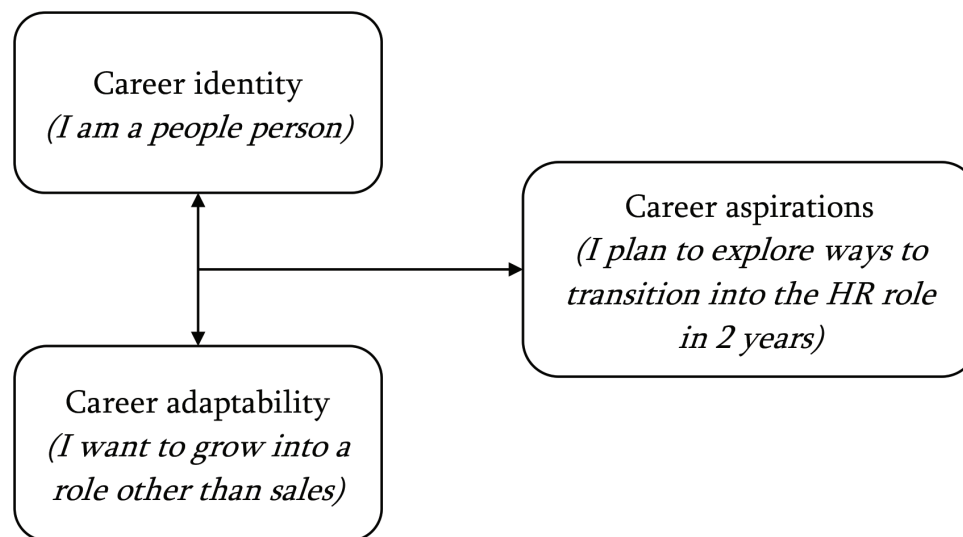


Figure 1. Career Construction Among Gen Z Working in Inside Sales Roles.
Source: Created by authors based on research data.

hand experience. We thus conclude that it is important for Gen Z to be completely invested in their career construction processes and have no regrets, building their career confidence. Gen Z participants' career identities were accelerated post-employment emphasizing the role of experiential learning for career maturity (Bridgstock et al., 2019).

Gen Z participants in this study chose a sales career based on their under-developed career identity. However, being in early career stages, the evolution of their career identity is inevitable. Findings from this study suggest that Gen Z participants' career adaptability contributed to their evolving career identity and vice versa. This dynamic interplay between their career identities and adaptability led them to forming career aspirations. Participants showed their intentions to navigate career transitions intentionally, rather than reactively. The Gen Z participants' career aspirations will serve them as a compass during external changes to help them find long-term fulfillment.

Limitations and Future Research Implications

Based on our findings, the career construction theory provided a meaningful interpretive lens for exploring how Gen Z employees construct and navigate their careers. However, some findings in our study do not directly align with the theory as they reveal nuances of Gen Z's process of career construction. We suggest that in the context of Gen Z, value congruence acts as a core construct as they prioritize aligning values such as flexibility, recognition, and psychological safety over role fit or academic background. This study reveals that career construction is not only intrapersonal (resulting from identity and adaptability) but also deeply contextual to the organizational culture.

Exploring Gen Z in the workforce continues to be critical since research on Gen Z is still in its infancy stage. In this study, we explored career construction, namely career identity, career adaptability and long-term career aspirations. Although our findings are generally consistent with other studies, we note that Gen Z who intentionally embarked upon sales careers did not constitute the sample in our study. While it was not our intention to exclude such individuals, it presents an opportunity for future research to examine if differences exist when Gen Z are intentional about their career paths, when compared to careers that emerge otherwise.

The individual job role plays a pivotal role in career development. Since our study explored Gen Z in inside sales, our findings can guide and inform HRD professionals in other high stress environments on how to manage their Gen Z workforce. There is also opportunity to conduct research in other industries, which can facilitate comparisons with what we have uncovered in this study. Additionally, we note that in this study, participants were between 22 and 24 years old, in their first jobs. Leslie et al. (2021) note that there are intra generational differences within the Gen Z cohort, so this too presents opportunities for future research to examine career construction and aspirations of older Gen Z's, who have been in the workforce for longer periods.

Relatedly, the selection of participants early in their careers and capturing their perspectives at a single point in time, limited us from studying career construction as a developing and evolving process. While an interpretative qualitative design guided participants to deeply reflect on their experiences so far, a longitudinal study will reveal how participants' career aspirations undergo stability and transformation. Longitudinal

studies will help with tracking how Gen Z's career identity and adaptability evolve across different roles or over time.

A further limitation concerns the use of generational categorization. Several findings, including value congruence, relational support, and desire for career mobility, may not be unique to Gen Z and may also describe other early-career employees or workers in high-pressure roles. Therefore, the study's contribution is not to characterize Gen Z, but to illuminate how participants in this specific age cohort and occupational context narrated their career construction.

Finally, this study is contextually bounded to Gen Z employees working in inside sales roles within a developed-economy, U.S.-based employment context. Although the findings may offer transferable insights for HRD practitioners working with early-career employees in similar high-pressure, entry-level roles, they should not be interpreted as representative of all Gen Z employees across national, cultural, economic, or occupational contexts. Careers are constructed within specific social, economic, political, and organizational conditions (Savickas, 2005); therefore, this study uses career construction theory as a sensitizing and interpretive framework rather than as a universal explanation of Gen Z career development.

Practical Implications

This study concludes that career aspirations are not pre-determined but co-constructed over time through a dynamic interplay between who one is (identity) and how one adjusts (adaptability). Organizations hiring Gen Z will need to invest in their ability to build meaningful relationships with peers and supervisors to promote learning and development (Waight & Waight, 2025). As evident from our findings, participants did not consider inside sales as a sustainable long-term career. This implies that organizations must deploy strategic retention practices that cultivate value-centric cultures and support internal mobility and personalized career development pathways. Designing onboarding programmes that include structured career construction conversations that go beyond role training, can motivate younger employees to start thinking about their careers more intimately. They could also be provided with internal mobility options to understand the transferable skills they might gain during their inside sales role training. This will help them make connections between their current role and future opportunities and movement within the organization rather than outside it.

Gen Z participants expected to receive mentorship from their superiors but also have a meaningful relationship with them. A traditional mentoring model that dispenses

learning hierarchically between a young worker and older supervisor, has high potential to fail among Gen Z. This implies that adapting to reverse mentoring models, which serve as a mutual learning and development tool to engage a multigenerational workforce (Chaudhuri & Ghosh, 2012; Gordon, 2025), may serve as a better alternative for HRD professionals. By pairing Gen Z with older millennials or Gen X with the purpose to learn from each other serves as a great social exchange tool and fosters both relationship development and learning outcomes. Knowing that the organization is investing in their holistic development, reverse mentoring has the potential to improve Gen Z's organizational commitment (Chaudhuri & Ghosh, 2012). This requires organizations to invest in developing supervisors' coaching skills, feedback practices, psychological safety, and career-development conversations.

In addition, it is important to build strong recognition systems that balance short-term performance reinforcement with long-term growth. Participants were motivated by immediate recognition, such as public acknowledgment of sales milestones, but they also wanted evidence that the organization was investing in their future. HRD practitioners can combine sales-based recognition with learning badges, skill-development milestones, stretch assignments, and internal career planning to make Gen Z feel challenged and engaged, in order to minimize instances of early organizational exit.

Gen Z's experiences with global uncertainties have contributed to them developing an astute financial acumen (Brigham, 2025). The findings of this study also confirm their attraction to organizations with competitive benefits packages. However, to motivate Gen Z to choose the organization, HRD professionals must involve Gen Z in discussions about the benefits package and its potential impact in case of continued long-term employment with the organization. Gen Z's career immaturity may impede their ability to ask the right questions at the time of recruitment. HRD professionals can overcome this challenge by proactively advertising organizational benefits. Relatedly, participants in this study emphasized that a positive organizational culture was a non-negotiable prerequisite in their career-related decision-making. Employer branding must thus take precedence in all recruitment strategy discussions among HRD professionals (Pandita, 2022). Employer branding strategies amplify organizational characteristics and market themselves to their target audience (Rzemieniak & Wawer, 2021). This implies that organizations that want to attract Gen Z must have a positive online presence on social media websites like Instagram and TikTok. They should also invest in creating videos about their culture, testimonials of people working there, and office tours on YouTube to become relatable with Gen Z.

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