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Generation Z Enters the Workforce: HR Strategies in Austria and Hungary

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Background/Purpose: Generation Z (Gen Z) is entering the workforce, and their needs may differ from previous generations. This study explores how Human Resource (HR) professionals in Austria and Hungary are preparing to attract, support, and retain this new talent pool.
Methods: The study employed a qualitative approach through interviews with HR professionals in both countries. The DITTO framework—Diversity, Individualism and Teamwork, Technology, and Organizational Support—was used to structure the interpretation of the findings.
Results: Findings suggest companies recognize the need to adapt to Gen Z's needs. HR professionals are implementing new initiatives to attract and retain this generation. However, resource constraints and management resistance can hinder the implementation of these strategies.
Conclusion: This research provides insights into current HR practices for Gen Z talent in Austria and Hungary. The study highlights existing efforts and the challenges HR faces in attracting and retaining this new generation of workers.

Keywords: Personnel management, Diversity, Corporate culture, Worker empowerment, Human resources, Cohorts

1 Introduction

The global workforce is undergoing a significant transformation as Generation Z (Gen Z) begins to enter its ranks in ever-increasing numbers. Born between the mid-1990s and the early 2010s, Gen Z has come of age in a world characterized by ubiquitous digital technologies, constant connectivity, and rapid social change. This unique upbringing has fostered a generation with distinct values, preferences, and expectations regarding their careers. Unlike previous generations, Gen Z has never known a world without the internet, shaping their access to information, communication styles, and overall worldview (Chillakuri, 2020; Francis & Hoefel, 2018). As a result, organizations are faced with the critical task of understanding and adapting to Gen Z's needs to attract, retain, and empower this valuable talent pool.

A growing body of research sheds light on the characteristics of Gen Z and their potential impact on the workplace. Studies consistently highlight that Gen Z prioritizes work-life balance and flexibility (McKinsey & Company, 2023a). They seek opportunities for continuous learning and professional development, valuing employers who invest in their growth (Betts et al., 2019; Naim, 2022). Furthermore, Gen Z is highly attuned to social issues and desires to work for organizations that embrace diversity, equity, and inclusion (DE&I) (Chillakuri & Mahanandia, 2018). Their digital fluency and comfort with technology also suggest that they may readily adapt to new work mod-

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els and technological advancements within the workplace (Naim, 2022).

However, Gen Z's entry into the workforce also presents potential challenges for organizations. The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted traditional internship opportunities, potentially hindering their practical skill development. Gen Z's openness to freelancing and entrepreneurial opportunities could pose a talent retention challenge for some companies (Kreacic et al., 2023). Understanding these unique characteristics is crucial for organizations to develop effective strategies for attracting and retaining this generation.

The responsibility for adapting to the changing workforce landscape falls heavily on Human Resources (HR) departments. These departments play a central role in developing innovative strategies to recruit, onboard, and retain Gen Z talent. Existing research and theoretical frameworks provide valuable insights to inform HR practices.

The DITTO framework developed by Pichler et al. (2021) identifies four interrelated dimensions relevant to managing Generation Z: Diversity, Individualism and Teamwork, Technology, and Organizational Support. By prioritizing these dimensions, HR departments can create a work environment that resonates with Gen Z's values.

- Diversity: Gen Z values diversity and inclusion in the workplace. HR practices should emphasize attracting a diverse workforce and fostering a culture of respect. Diversity initiatives include unconscious bias training, employee resource groups, and inclusive recruitment practices.
- Individual and Teamwork: While Gen Z appreciates collaboration, they also value individual growth and development opportunities. HR can cater to these needs through personalized career development plans, mentorship programs, and opportunities for skill development.
- Technology: Gen Z is digitally native and comfortable with technology. HR can leverage technology to enhance the recruitment, onboarding, and training experience for Gen Z employees. This may involve utilizing online platforms for recruitment and offering e-learning modules for training.
- Organization Support: Gen Z values flexible and remote work arrangements. HR can explore and implement flexible work models such as compressed workweeks or remote work options.

The integration of Gen Z into multigenerational workplaces may create communication and leadership challenges, particularly when employees differ in their preferred communication channels, expectations regarding feedback, and interpretations of hierarchy. Gabrielova and Buchko (2021) argue that the relationship between Millennial managers and Gen Z employees can be better understood through leader–member exchange and generational cohort perspectives, with regular feedback, mentoring, and mutual adjustment playing central roles. However, differences observed between age groups should not automatically be attributed to stable generational characteristics. Meta-analytic and critical research suggests that many apparent generational differences are small or may reflect age, career stage, period effects, or organizational context rather than cohort membership alone (Costanza et al., 2012; Costanza & Finkelstein, 2015; Rudolph et al., 2021). Organizations should therefore avoid stereotypical assumptions and instead establish communication practices that accommodate individual preferences, promote reciprocal mentoring, and facilitate knowledge exchange between employees at different career stages.

While HR is critical in adapting to Gen Z, strong leadership is also essential. Leaders need to create a work environment that resonates with Gen Z's values and fosters a sense of purpose and belonging. This may involve promoting a culture of innovation, encouraging employee participation in decision-making, and aligning the organization's mission with broader social issues that Gen Z cares about. Furthermore, leaders can act as mentors and role models for Gen Z employees, providing them with guidance and support for their career development.

This research aims to bridge the gap in understanding how large company HR departments prepare for the practical integration of Gen Z employees. By examining the experiences of HR professionals, this study seeks to illuminate the steps organizations are taking to attract, retain, and support this valuable new generation of talent. Three research questions guide this investigation:

1. RQ1: How will the preferences and values of Gen Z workers for work flexibility, career development, and diversity impact organizations? This question explores the potential impact of Gen Z's influx on work processes and company culture. Research suggests Gen Z prioritizes work-life balance and flexibility (McKinsey & Company, 2023b). As Betts et al. (2019) highlight, this generation also values continuous learning and development, expecting employers to invest in their professional growth. Additionally, Chillakuri & Mahanandia (2018) argue that Gen Z is more open and accepting due to globalization and the internet, leading to a natural respect for diversity, a value confirmed by Betts et al. (2019) who emphasize the importance of gender, race, and identity diversity for this generation. Meeting these needs can be challenging for organizations with established cultures. However, failing to adapt could hinder attracting and retaining Gen Z talent.

2. RQ2: What HR practices are Austrian and Hungarian companies adopting to attract, onboard, develop, and retain Gen Z employees? This question delves into existing research on Gen Z's job expectations and leverages the insights of HR professionals to identify effective strategies for attracting and retaining this cohort. Ngoc et al. (2022) emphasize the importance of understanding Gen Z's needs

and expectations to attract them. The DITTO Framework (Pichler et al., 2021) serves as a valuable tool, drawing managers' attention to the need for innovative HR strategies while highlighting dimensions to focus on, making workplaces more attractive for Gen Z.

3. RQ3: How do HR professionals perceive the role of managers in supporting Gen Z employees and facilitating intergenerational cooperation? This question explores how current managers view the integration of Gen Z and seeks to identify methods that employers, with the support of HR, can utilize to foster a positive work environment and support Gen Z's career development. Hunter-Hart (2024) points out the challenge of managing a multi-generational workforce with varying work styles, expectations, and potential clashes. Gabrielova & Buchko (2021) emphasize the need for solid and supportive relationships with supervisors Gen Z sees as mentors facilitating their development (Chillakuri & Mahanandia, 2018). This research seeks to understand how HR professionals have addressed these challenges and what successful measures have been implemented.

This research takes a qualitative approach to explore the impact of Generation Z entering the workforce on firms, specifically from the perspective of HR professionals. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with HR experts to gain in-depth insights.

While the research findings aim to offer broader insights applicable internationally, the study focused on HR professionals from companies in Hungary and Austria. This choice was driven by the researchers' background and familiarity with both countries. Having experience in Austria and Hungary allowed for a deeper understanding of the cultural nuances that may influence HR practices and Gen Z's expectations in these regions.

HR professionals from companies in both Austria and Hungary were approached to participate in the interviews. The interviews were conducted online to ensure accessibility and convenience for participants. By focusing on these two countries, the research aimed to get an initial picture of the current situation regarding Gen Z integration within these specific labor markets. Additionally, the research investigated whether Gen Z's integration necessitates a fundamentally new approach from employers, regardless of national context. The interview findings ultimately provided valuable insights into aspects to consider when attracting and retaining Gen Z talent, irrespective of their nationality.

2 Theoretical Background

2.1 Characteristics of Generation Z

Generation Z, typically defined as those born between the mid-1990s and the early 2010s, is the first cohort to have grown up with widespread internet access, mobile devices, and social media as ordinary features of everyday life (Benítez-Márquez et al., 2022). Members of this cohort are therefore frequently described as digital natives. However, growing up in a technology-rich environment does not mean that all Gen Z employees possess the same level or type of digital competence. Digital skills vary according to education, socioeconomic circumstances, occupation, access to technology, and individual experience. Accordingly, digital nativity should be treated as a broad contextual characteristic rather than a uniform individual capability.

However, Gen Z exhibits a heightened awareness of privacy compared to previous generations. Witnessing the missteps of older generations on social media, they are more cautious about sharing personal content online (Lanier, 2017). Their constant exposure to technology comes with drawbacks, including internet and smartphone addiction, sleep disturbances, and an increased risk of mental illness (Pichler et al., 2021). Furthermore, the fast-paced nature of online stimuli cultivates shorter attention spans and reduced patience (Jones et al., 2019).

Beyond technological influences, Gen Z has been shaped by global events like economic crises, political instability, and climate change (Benítez-Márquez et al., 2022). They are highly adaptable due to their experience in a constantly changing world. The COVID-19 pandemic further impacted this generation, particularly those entering the workforce during lockdowns. Remote work presented challenges for newcomers, including isolation, constant online presence, and a lack of in-person connection with colleagues (Oliver Wyman Forum, 2023). These experiences have undoubtedly influenced their work expectations and post-pandemic worldview.

Gen Z strongly desires continuous learning and self-improvement (Chillakuri & Mahanandia, 2018). Progress is a core value, alongside respect for diversity and strong relationships (Ma & Fang, 2023). Their digital fluency naturally translates to independent learning and knowledge acquisition through online resources (Ngoc et al., 2022). They excel at multitasking and often utilize "crowdsourcing" to gather information for work or personal development (Jones et al., 2019).

However, financing education often requires significant student loans, making a competitive salary a significant factor when seeking employment (Chillakuri & Mahanandia, 2018). Economic anxieties stemming from the 2008 crisis and student loan burdens prioritize financial security for Gen Z. They are more conscious financial planners than previous generations (Gabrielova & Buchko, 2021). While financial stability is essential, Gen Z prioritizes work-life balance and avoids overwork without proper compensation (Kreacic et al., 2023). They value holistic well-being and will not compromise their personal lives for excessive work demands.

Research by Racolta-Paina and Irini (2021) highlights Gen Z's perceived strengths: transparency, innovation, tolerance, reliability, and a strong desire for continuous learning opportunities. HR professionals interviewed in their study agreed that Gen Z's introduction to the workforce could positively impact companies (Racolta-Paina & Irini, 2021). Their focus on innovation, continuous improvement, and technological proficiency can be instrumental in overcoming challenges like digitalization and rapid adaptation to emerging trends. Table 1 summarizes a SWOT analysis of Generation Z's characteristics for further comprehension.

While globalization fosters shared characteristics across generations, national cultures influence overall attitudes and life experiences (e.g., Benítez-Márquez et al., 2022). This holds for Hungarian and Austrian members of Generation Z. Despite being neighboring countries, cultural similarities and differences, as well as economic and political landscapes, can influence the experiences of Gen Z in each nation, impacting HR strategies.

Zyntern.com, a Hungarian job portal, conducts surveys on the preferences of Hungarian youth (16-28 years old) in the labor market (Túri, 2023). The 2023 results highlight competitive salary as the top priority when choosing an employer, with a preference for large international companies (Túri, 2023). Similar to global trends, development opportunities, good managers, and a stable, supportive work environment are also important considerations. However, working from home and company social responsibility initiatives appear less crucial for Hungarian Gen Z than what is typically reported in the international literature. This may be due to the housing situation, where many young Hungarians share accommodations during their university years, limiting work-from-home opportunities (Bereczki, 2022). Interestingly, research by Zyntern.com suggests that Hungarian Gen Z's average net monthly salary expectations (HUF 378,600, approximately €983 as of 31.01.2024) fall below the national average net monthly wage (HUF 384,900 in 2023) (KSH, 2023).

Table 1: SWOT-Analysis of Generation Z

Strengths	Weaknesses
teach-savvy, flexibility, consciousness, openness, resilience, desire for progress, respect for diversity, self-management, personal learning, creativity,	challenges with personal interactions, heavy reliance on technology, impatience, high tendency to mental illness, less loyal, lack of several interpersonal skills
Opportunities	**Threats**
continuous learning and development, globalization, and ongoing innovations, the world is increasingly open to new approaches	the unpredictability of the world, rapidly changing technological environment, global crises, climate change, uncertain economic and political environment

Source: Own construction of the authors

Table 2: Similarities and Differences of Generation Z in Austria and Hungary

Feature	Generation Z in Austria	Generation Z in Hungary
Similarities	• Concerned about the cost of living • Value flexibility • Seek learning and development opportunities • Prefer good managers and stable workplaces • Prioritize work-life balance	
Differences	• Side jobs often for self-development • Prioritize work satisfaction • Climate change is a significant concern	• Lower salary expectations than average • Work-from-home and CSR activities are less important • The home-office option is highly desired

Source: Own construction of the authors

A Deloitte (2023a) survey revealed that cost of living is the primary concern for young Austrians, followed by climate change. Notably, 40% of Austrian youth take on side jobs alongside their main occupation (Deloitte, 2023a). Another positive finding is that 47% of young Austrians perceive their employers strongly supporting their mental and work well-being (Deloitte, 2023a). Furthermore, only 38% of Austrian Gen Z workers report feeling under constant stress, compared to the global average of 46% (Deloitte, 2023a). These findings suggest that existing company efforts in this area yield positive results. However, companies can consciously focus on aspects relevant to Gen Z, such as flexibility, development opportunities, social responsibility, and work-life balance, to further enhance well-being.

Overall, evidence suggests that Gen Z in both countries share many characteristics and workplace expectations. The differences lie more in the degree of importance they place on specific aspects. Table 2 presents a comparison of these similarities and differences.

In conclusion, while Gen Z in both Hungary and Austria display some variations in emphasis, their core characteristics and workplace expectations are mainly similar. HR professionals can leverage this understanding to develop effective strategies for attracting and retaining this valuable generation of talent.

2.2 Career Aspirations of Generation Z

The Cambridge Dictionary (2024) defines "career" as a person's work trajectory, encompassing both their current job and potential for advancement and progression (professional development). It can also refer to the totality of one's work experience and achievements over time.

Career aspirations are shaped by individual ambitions, skills, and long-term goals (Coursera, 2024). For Gen Z, a key consideration when seeking employment is finding an organization that aligns with their values. This includes a company's active role in addressing social issues like sustainability, climate change, and environmental protection (Betts et al., 2019). Given their strong desire for continuous learning and development, Gen Z prioritizes employers who offer opportunities to hone their skills and advance their careers (Betts et al., 2019).

This generation exhibits a robust entrepreneurial spirit and ambition. They prefer active involvement in decision-making processes and opportunities to showcase their knowledge (Lazar et al., 2023). Their entrepreneurial nature motivates them to gain additional knowledge and experiment to achieve their goals (Jones et al., 2019). However, this requires supportive leadership styles, such as coaching, that guide career development and nurture personal and professional growth (Pandita et al., 2023).

Despite their youth, Gen Z demonstrates a heightened financial awareness. Witnessing their parents' financial struggles has instilled a cautious approach to money management (Oliver Wyman Forum, 2023). This translates to high salary expectations (Jones et al., 2019). They value their skills and expect employers to offer transparency in compensation and benefits that contribute to their well-being (Kreacic et al., 2023).

Gen Z thrives on challenges and opportunities to gain experience. They prioritize workplace flexibility, autonomy, and active participation in various organizational activities (Naim, 2022). They value open communication and opportunities to express their ideas in the workplace freely (Jones et al., 2019). As digital natives, they naturally gravitate towards immediate information sharing, access, and utilizing the latest technologies for work tasks (Naim, 2022).

Diversity is a cornerstone of an ideal workplace for Gen Z. This includes gender, race, sexual orientation, and identity (Betts et al., 2019). Their early exposure to the internet has fostered a global perspective and openness to diversity. University studies and continuous learning have also equipped them to work effectively within culturally diverse teams and handle potential work travel (Chillakuri & Mahanandia, 2018).

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) refers to a company's commitment to social, economic, and environmental well-being, integrating these concerns into its business practices to meet stakeholder expectations (UNIDO, n.d.).

A company's initiatives toward positive social and environmental change significantly influence Gen Z's job-seeking decisions. According to a Deloitte survey (2023b), over half of Gen Z job seekers scrutinize a company's social and environmental impact before applying for or accepting a job offer. They expect employers to demonstrate their commitment to these issues and offer opportunities for active participation in addressing them. This values alignment between Gen Z and their potential employers fosters loyalty and commitment (Oliver Wyman Forum, 2023).

2.3 Generation Z and the Digital Landscape

Different age cohorts encountered digital technologies at different stages of their lives. Gen Z is distinctive in having experienced internet connectivity, smartphones, social media, and on-demand digital content during childhood or adolescence. This experience may influence expectations regarding the speed, accessibility, and interactivity of workplace systems. Nevertheless, familiarity with consumer technologies should not be equated automatically with advanced workplace digital competence. Organizations should assess employees' actual digital capabilities and provide role-specific training rather than assuming that

younger employees are universally technologically proficient. From an HR perspective, the implication is twofold: organizations should offer efficient digital recruitment, onboarding, communication, and learning systems while simultaneously supporting the development of data-security awareness, critical digital literacy, and occupation-specific technical skills.

Research by Racolta-Paina and Irini (2021) highlights Gen Z's inherent digital fluency and ability to leverage technology effectively. HR professionals anticipate that older generations within the workplace must learn from Gen Z's digital expertise (Racolta-Paina & Irini, 2021). Gen Z's reliance on technology and social media fosters a need for easy and instant access to information (Dwivedula et al., 2019). Companies must embrace digital transformation to attract and retain Gen Z talent (Racolta-Paina & Irini, 2021).

Naim (2022) connects this digital shift with the emergence of the gig economy. This digitally driven economy fosters a free-market approach, offering short-term contracts and temporary jobs (McKinsey, 2023a). The gig economy relies on a pool of independent and flexible workers who engage in temporary, freelance, or side-hustle work. Gen Z's preference for multi-faceted work aligns with the gig economy's flexibility and the ability to leverage online learning opportunities. According to a 2023 survey by Oliver Wyman Forum (2023), over 30% of young Gen Z office workers reported having a side gig.

The rise of the gig economy necessitates a complete overhaul of traditional HR practices designed for full-time employees. Naim (2022) emphasizes the need to develop new talent management strategies to attract Gen Z talent and retain them as the future workforce.

2.4 Work Ethic of Generation Z

Work ethic refers to a set of personal values, including norms, beliefs, and behaviors, that shape an individual's approach to work and the value they place on it (Grabowski et al., 2021).

According to a 2023 Oliver Wyman Forum (2023) survey, Gen Z prioritizes working for "globally aware companies that provide fun, flexibility, autonomy, and work-life balance". Like Millennials, a sense of personal fulfillment beyond just the paycheck is essential (Scholz & Rennig, 2019).

Gen Z values practical experience over solely theoretical instruction (Chillakuri, 2020). They expect employers to invest in their education and provide training directly applied to their work. Companies can achieve this by combining technology with personalized learning opportunities (Chillakuri, 2020). E-learning platforms that offer readily accessible, flexible content in short, interactive modules cater well to Gen Z's preference for short bursts of focused learning (Pandita et al., 2023).

Beyond individual learning, Gen Z also values collaborative learning – gaining knowledge from colleagues and especially managers (Barhate & Dirani, 2022). "Learner Generated Content" solutions, where employees create their learning materials, can benefit both the company (increased knowledge base) and Gen Z's desire for interactive learning (Pandita et al., 2023).

This generation's comfort with technology translates to a preference for online, self-directed learning opportunities (Pichler et al., 2021). However, companies must be mindful of potential drawbacks associated with remote learning, such as maintaining boundaries between work and personal life (Deloitte, 2023b).

Unlike previous generations, Gen Z prioritizes work-life balance and shuns the idea of career success at the expense of personal life (Mahmoud et al., 2020). They admire colleagues who strike this balance and focus on continuous improvement, not material possessions, as markers of success (Deloitte, 2023b).

Flexible work arrangements, including hybrid or remote work options, are crucial for Gen Z (Chillakuri, 2020). An Oliver Wyman Forum and News Movement survey (2023) found that over 80% of Gen Z respondents would not work in a company that did not offer remote work options. Remote work's freedom and perceived efficiency are highly valued (Kreacic, 2023). However, employers must establish clear communication policies to ensure boundaries are respected, and employees are only sometimes expected to be constantly available (Deloitte, 2023b).

2.5 The Relationship of Generation Z with Colleagues and Managers

Contemporary workplaces commonly include employees of several age groups and career stages. This diversity can enrich organizational knowledge and problem-solving, but it may also be accompanied by differences in communication habits, feedback expectations, technology use, and perceptions of organizational hierarchy. Research has identified some variation in workplace motivation among Generations X, Y, and Z (Mahmoud et al., 2020). Nevertheless, such differences should be interpreted cautiously because age, career stage, occupation, national culture, and organizational context may overlap with cohort membership (Costanza & Finkelstein, 2015; Rudolph et al., 2021). Rather than assigning fixed communication preferences to entire generations, organizations should provide multiple communication channels, clarify expectations, and promote reciprocal learning among employees at different career stages.

Communication styles and workplace values differ notably between generations. While Generation X exhibits

strong technological skills similar to Gen Z, they generally prefer face-to-face or email/phone interactions with colleagues, contrasting Gen Z's preference for text-based communication (Mahmoud et al., 2020). Additionally, accepting and respecting diversity is a core value for Millennials and Gen Z, while Generation X may need to be more receptive to a globalized approach (Mahmoud et al., 2020).

Research on Gen Z's preference for Teamwork could be more consistent. Barhate and Dirani (2022) highlight studies suggesting Gen Z values working in a positive and collaborative team environment. However, other research indicates a preference for independent work, with some Gen Z workers reporting anxiety and frustration when collaborating with colleagues who have different work styles (Barhate & Dirani, 2022; Pichler et al., 2021). This may be linked to a perceived difficulty with face-to-face communication compared to previous generations (Pichler et al., 2021).

Despite this, fostering a positive work environment, strong relationships with colleagues, and an inspiring company culture hold significant value for Gen Z. They often favor virtual meetings but value regular in-person interaction, particularly with supervisors (Barhate & Dirani, 2022). While they may prefer independent work, Gen Z acknowledges the value of colleagues in achieving optimal performance (Ma & Fang, 2023).

Gen Z prioritizes supportive leaders who challenge them to learn and grow. Transparency in communication, guidance in developing interpersonal skills, and fostering positive relationships are all crucial qualities they seek in a leader (Gabrielova & Buchko, 2021). Practical conflict management skills are also more important for Gen Z than for previous generations (Dwivedula et al., 2019).

Regular feedback is essential for Gen Z's well-being. Without it, they may experience insecurity and struggle with stress and anxiety more readily than previous generations, impacting their work performance (Gabrielova & Buchko, 2021). While clear expectations are essential, Gen Z also appreciates feeling trusted and capable (Chillakuri & Mahanandia, 2018).

2.6 Managerial Perceptions Towards Generation Z and Challenges

Research by Barhate and Dirani (2022) highlights the uncertainty companies face in preparing for the influx of Gen Z into the workforce. Their findings emphasize the need for managers and HR departments to prioritize transparency, flexibility, and understanding Gen Z's work preferences to cultivate a positive work environment.

However, not all views towards Gen Z are positive. Some employers perceive them as self-centered, unreliable, and demanding, making it difficult for them to integrate into existing structures (Moffett et al., 2023). Additionally, as they are early in their careers, skill deficiencies in problem-solving and decision-making can affect their performance (Taibah & Ho, 2023).

Another potential challenge lies in Gen Z's preference for collaborative relationships with superiors rather than traditional hierarchical structures (Ma & Fang, 2023). This preference for a more egalitarian approach necessitates a cultural shift within organizations accustomed to hierarchical management styles. Developing a new mindset across generations can be a slow and challenging process. Leaders must learn how to navigate this age-diverse workforce effectively to achieve consensus.

A survey by Racolta-Paina and Irini (2021) explored HR professionals' experiences with Gen Z employees. While acknowledging the generation's high salary expectations, participants also highlighted resistance to tasks perceived as undesirable and a perceived overreliance on constant feedback (Racolta-Paina & Irini, 2021). Some employers view this need for feedback as a negative rather than a positive attribute.

A 2023 Resume Builder survey suggests a perception gap between managers and Gen Z. Over 70% of surveyed managers identified Gen Z as the most challenging generation to work with (Resume Builder, 2023). The top reasons cited were a lack of technological knowledge (surprising given Gen Z's digital fluency) and a lack of motivation. The survey identified three areas for improvement in Gen Z: face-to-face communication, receiving feedback, and adaptability (Resume Builder, 2023).

Integrating the literature review findings with managerial perceptions reveals critical areas for improvement. HR professionals can prepare managers for Gen Z's unique work ethic and communication styles (Barhate & Dirani, 2022). Additionally, fostering intergenerational cooperation and addressing potential friction points through conscious leadership practices will be crucial (Racolta-Paina & Irini, 2021). Furthermore, addressing potential biases and stereotypes managers hold can facilitate a smoother integration of Gen Z into the existing organizational culture (Racolta-Paina & Irini, 2023).

By understanding the expectations and challenges associated with Gen Z's entry into the workplace, HR and managers can develop strategies to create a win-win situation for the organization and its young talent.

2.7 DITTO Framework: A Guide for Engaging Generation Z

The DITTO Framework, developed by Pichler et al. (2021), offers a set of recommendations and policies for employers seeking to create an ideal work environment for Generation Z. While specifically targeted towards Gen Z, the framework's principles can benefit employees of all

generations. DITTO is an acronym for Diversity, Individualism and Teamwork, Technology, and Organizational Support.

The framework emphasizes fostering diversity within the workforce across factors such as age, culture, ethnicity, and professional skills (Pichler et al., 2021). A diverse workforce fosters a broader knowledge base and creates a more inclusive environment, increasing employee engagement (Pichler et al., 2021). Employers can achieve this by implementing programs encouraging interaction and collaboration between employees from diverse backgrounds.

While Gen Z may prefer independent work (Barhate & Dirani, 2022), effective Teamwork remains essential in many workplaces. The DITTO Framework acknowledges this by suggesting that companies provide programs to help Gen Z employees develop their interpersonal skills and feel comfortable integrating into the existing company culture (Pichler et al., 2021). This fosters a sense of belonging and allows Gen Z to contribute effectively in team settings.

Given Gen Z's digital fluency, the framework emphasizes the importance of technology-enabled communication and collaboration tools. Organizations should invest in solutions facilitating virtual connections and Teamwork to cater to Gen Z's preferred communication styles (Pichler et al., 2021).

The DITTO Framework highlights the importance of organizational support for employee well-being. Recognizing Gen Z's susceptibility to anxiety and their emphasis on work-life balance, the framework suggests that companies offer programs such as in-house psychologists and wellness initiatives (Pichler et al., 2021). Furthermore, the framework emphasizes the significance of informal support networks fostered by managers and colleagues, contributing to a positive work environment (Pichler et al., 2021).

This research focuses on assessing how companies adapt to meet the needs of the changing workforce, specifically Generation Z. The DITTO Framework provides a valuable tool for this purpose. By utilizing the framework during interviews and analysis, one can evaluate how companies have implemented practices that address the four critical dimensions of Diversity, Individualism and Teamwork, Technology, and Organizational Support. This allows us to assess a company's preparedness to integrate and retain Gen Z talent successfully.

2.8 The Employee Life Cycle and Generation Z

The employee life cycle (ELC) is a framework that maps the various stages of an employee's relationship with an organization (Verlinden, 2024). While interpretations vary in the number of stages, this research adopts a basic six-stage model: attraction, recruitment, onboarding, development, retention, and separation (Cattermole, 2019). The ELC offers a valuable lens through which to examine the impact of Generation Z's work-related expectations on Human Resource (HR) practices. The stages of the Employee Life Cycle are the following:

- Attraction: This initial stage focuses on attracting qualified candidates through employer branding and targeted strategies (Verlinden, 2024). A clear understanding of the desired employee profile and transparent communication of the company's values are crucial at this stage.
- Recruitment: The focus here is on selecting the best candidate from a pool of applicants. This involves job posting, application review, interviews, and hiring (Verlinden, 2024).
- Onboarding: This critical stage introduces the new hire to the company culture, processes, and colleagues (Mann, 2022). A positive onboarding experience lays the foundation for a strong employee relationship.
- Development and Retention: These interconnected stages emphasize providing opportunities for professional growth and fostering employee commitment. Offering development programs, initiatives, and benefits creates a sense of value and encourages retention (Verlinden, 2024).
- Separation: The final stage involves parting ways between employee and employer, which can be voluntary or involuntary. Focusing on a positive separation experience strengthens the employer brand (Verlinden, 2024).

The ELC framework is particularly relevant for understanding how to address the evolving needs of Generation Z in the workplace. By analyzing each stage through the lens of Gen Z's expectations, companies can identify areas for improvement and adapt their HR processes accordingly. This research utilizes the ELC to structure interview questions for HR professionals, gaining insights into current practices and potential modifications needed to attract, retain, and develop Gen Z talent.

The ELC serves not only as a framework for interview questions but also as a tool to provide HR professionals with a comprehensive roadmap for adapting to the needs of Generation Z. By understanding the specific actions that can be taken at each stage of the employee life cycle; organizations can effectively attract, develop, and retain this valuable segment of the workforce.

3 Methodology and Research Design

3.1 Research approach and interview design

This study adopted an exploratory qualitative design based on semi-structured interviews. This approach was selected because the study sought detailed accounts of how HR professionals and managers involved in recruitment and employee management perceived the integration of Generation Z into the workplace. Semi-structured interviews provided a consistent thematic structure while allowing the interviewer to ask follow-up questions and explore issues arising during the conversation (Young et al., 2018).

The interview guide was developed following the literature review and was informed by the three research questions, the DITTO framework (Pichler et al., 2021), and the employee life-cycle model. The questions covered attraction and recruitment, onboarding, workplace preferences, work ethic, intergenerational collaboration, organizational adaptation, managerial support, and retention. The same core interview guide was used in Austria and Hungary. Hungarian- and English-language versions of the guide were prepared before data collection.

3.2 Sampling and participants

Participants were selected through non-probability convenience and purposive sampling. Initial participants were identified through the researcher's professional and personal networks, while some additional participants were approached following recommendations from colleagues and acquaintances. Potential participants were contacted by email and received a summary of the research topic and purpose together with the interview questions.

The principal inclusion criteria were at least three years of relevant professional experience and employment, preferably in a multinational company, in an HR-related role or a managerial position involving recruitment, onboarding, employee development, or direct supervision of Gen Z employees. Although the study primarily targeted HR professionals, some participants were managers who worked closely with HR during recruitment and had direct leadership experience with Gen Z employees. Their inclusion provided an additional managerial perspective on the integration of younger employees.

Nine participants were interviewed: six worked in Hungary and three in Austria. The organizations represented several industries, including automotive, electronics and high technology, software and product development, food and beverages, insurance, pharmaceuticals, and manufacturing. The available source material does not provide sufficiently consistent information to report the exact job title or company size for every participant without risking identification. These details are therefore reported only at an aggregate level.

The initial plan was to conduct ten interviews, equally divided between Austria and Hungary. Recruitment difficulties and time constraints resulted in the final distribution of six Hungarian and three Austrian participants. Consequently, the study was not designed to produce representative national comparisons. Its purpose was to identify exploratory similarities and differences in the experiences reported by the participating organizations.

The interview documentation indicates that the Hungarian participants included HR professionals with experience in areas such as HR generalist work, recruitment, talent management, onboarding, and employee development. The Austrian subsample also included managers involved in employee selection and supervision, including participants working in electronics/high technology and software or product development. Because exact positions were not

Table 3: Interview sample and data-collection details

Participant	Country of employment	Interview date	Interview language
A	Hungary	2 April 2024	Hungarian
B	Austria	4 April 2024	English
C	Hungary	5 April 2024	Hungarian
D	Austria	9 April 2024	English
E	Austria	29 April 2024	English
F	Hungary	13 May 2024	Hungarian
G	Hungary	17 May 2024	Hungarian
H	Hungary	3 June 2024	Hungarian
I	Hungary	10 June 2024	Hungarian

Source: Authors' compilation based on the interview documentation

recorded systematically for all participants, it would be methodologically inappropriate to reconstruct them retrospectively from contextual statements in the transcripts.

3.3 Data collection and transcription

All interviews were conducted online through Microsoft Teams between 2 April and 10 June 2024. The interviews were conducted by Alexandra Krakkai, the researcher responsible for the original data collection. Before each interview, participants received information about the research purpose and interview topics. Written and oral consent was obtained before recording.

The Austrian interviews were conducted in English, while the Hungarian interviews were conducted in Hungarian. The Microsoft Teams sessions were recorded, after which full interview transcripts were prepared. The Hungarian transcripts were subsequently translated into English to enable the analysis and reporting of the complete dataset in a common language.

The original research documentation does not specify the duration of the interviews, whether transcription was performed manually or with automated assistance, which translation procedure or software was used, or whether the translations were independently checked. These details should therefore not be added retrospectively unless the original researcher can confirm them. Translation should be acknowledged as a potential methodological limitation because differences in terminology or nuance may have arisen when the Hungarian material was rendered in English.

3.4 Qualitative content analysis

The transcripts were examined using deductive qualitative content analysis based on Mayring's (2000) category-application model. The literature review, research questions, DITTO framework, and employee life-cycle model initially informed six broad analytical areas:

1. characteristics of Generation Z;
2. career aspirations and workplace preferences;
3. digitalization;
4. work ethic;
5. relationships with colleagues and managers; and
6. managerial perceptions of Generation Z.

After the first interviews had been reviewed, the initial category system was refined because the original categories were too broad to capture the detail of the interview material. The final coding scheme comprised nine categories:

1. attraction and recruitment;
2. onboarding;
3. preferences of Generation Z;
4. work ethic of Generation Z;
5. challenges;
6. adaptation to needs;
7. cross-generational cooperation;
8. retention and engagement; and
9. company-, industry-, or country-specific consider ations.

This process combined a predominantly deductive approach with a limited inductive refinement of the coding structure. The principal categories originated in the theoretical framework and interview guide, while more detailed categories were introduced after initial engagement with the empirical material. The ninth category, relating to company, industry, and country context, was added during the analysis because such contextual factors emerged repeatedly from the interviews.

After transcription and, where necessary, translation, relevant passages were highlighted and assigned to the coding categories. A separate analytical table was prepared for each interview, recording the findings under the applicable codes. These individual tables were subsequently consolidated to identify recurring themes, divergent accounts, and similarities and differences between the Austrian and Hungarian cases. The DITTO framework was then used as an interpretive lens for assessing the extent to which the reported organizational practices addressed diversity, individualism and teamwork, technology, and organizational support.

The research documents a researcher-led coding process and does not report the use of qualitative-analysis software, a second independent coder, or a formal inter-coder-agreement procedure. Coding should therefore be described as having been conducted by the researcher using structured coding tables. Because only one researcher appears to have coded the material, no coder disagreements arose for formal resolution. The absence of independent coding should be acknowledged as a limitation, as the interpretation and assignment of passages to categories may reflect the judgment of a single analyst.

3.5 Cross-case comparison

The same interview guide and coding scheme were applied to the Austrian and Hungarian material to support systematic comparison. The analysis first examined the accounts within each country and then compared the two groups to identify recurring patterns, similarities, and differences. The comparison was not intended to rank the two countries or establish nationally representative differences. Instead, it was used to explore how organizations operating in the two settings were responding to the entry of Gen Z into the workforce.

Given the small and uneven country subsamples and the diversity of industries represented, any apparent national differences were interpreted cautiously. Differences

could reflect organizational size, industry characteristics, managerial culture, resource availability, or the participants' roles rather than national context alone.

3.6 Confidentiality, informed consent, and research ethics

Each participant signed a written data-protection and consent form and also provided oral consent before the interview recording began. The form covered recording, transcription, research use of the interview material, possible use in further research and analysis, confidentiality, data protection, and the right to withdraw consent. Participants were informed that their personal information would be handled in accordance with applicable data-protection requirements.

Participant names were replaced with alphabetical identifiers, Interview Partners A–I. Company names and information that could directly identify an organization were omitted from the transcripts and analysis. Potentially sensitive organizational information that was not necessary for answering the research questions was excluded from the reported findings. Industries and professional backgrounds are therefore presented only at a level that does not compromise participant or organizational anonymity.

4 Results

4.1 Attraction and Recruitment Strategies for Gen Z Talent

This section explores the experiences of HR professionals regarding attraction and recruitment strategies for Gen Z talent.

HR professionals from Hungarian multinational companies acknowledged the changing recruitment landscape due to Gen Z's emergence. They emphasized the importance of a solid social media presence and employer branding to attract young job seekers. One approach involves utilizing Artificial Intelligence (AI) to tailor job advertisements with wording, style, and keywords that resonate with Gen Z preferences.

However, resource limitations restrict some companies from exclusively targeting Gen Z. One interviewee highlighted a focus on retention rather than differentiated recruitment strategies due to these limitations.

Other Hungarian companies implemented targeted strategies to attract Gen Z applicants. These strategies included:

- Early career development programs: Offering programs to support young professionals launching their careers.
- Collaboration with student organizations: Partnering with students to connect with potential candidates.
- Participation in job fairs and campus events: Engaging with Gen Z at career fairs and campus expos.
- Employee storytelling on social media: Leveraging employee experiences to build employer brand awareness on social media platforms.
- University partnerships: Collaborating with universities to access talent pipelines.
- Apprenticeship programs: Offering apprenticeship schemes to provide young people with work experience and career exploration opportunities.

The research identified social responsibility and transparency as essential factors influencing Gen Z's employer selection. Gen Z prioritizes companies that actively address social causes and communicate their efforts transparently. Diversity and inclusion are also crucial values for Gen Z, which considers a company's diversity policies when making employment decisions.

One interviewee observed that Gen Z candidates have access to more information than previous generations, potentially leading to over-preparedness for interviews. This can result in inauthentic responses focused on what candidates perceive interviewers want to hear.

Similar trends emerged from interviews with HR professionals in Austrian firms. Austrian companies also emphasized a solid social media presence and employer branding for recruitment. Several interviewees stressed the importance of a streamlined and user-friendly application process. They suggested a complex and time-consuming application process could deter Gen Z candidates.

Another critical insight involved companies needing to approach Gen Z candidates during recruitment directly. Given the abundance of online information, more is needed to rely solely on job postings. Proactive outreach through platforms like LinkedIn can more effectively capture Gen Z's attention. Gen Z candidates were also found to ask more questions and require more information compared to previous generations at similar career stages.

This section highlights the need for companies to adapt their recruitment strategies to attract Gen Z talent. Building a strong employer brand, utilizing social media effectively, and tailoring outreach efforts are crucial to success. Furthermore, companies should be prepared to answer Gen Z's questions and provide detailed information about the organization and its values.

4.2 Onboarding Strategies for Gen Z Integration

This section examines onboarding practices that Hungarian and Austrian companies employ to integrate Gen Z employees.

All Hungarian companies participating in the study offered buddy or mentor programs for new Gen Z hires. These programs aim to familiarize newcomers with company operations and company knowledge through the guidance of a senior employee (mentor/buddy). The focus extends beyond purely professional integration, aiming to foster informal connections and a sense of belonging within the organization. HR professionals believe these programs ensure smooth integration and promote intergenerational understanding and inclusivity.

Similar practices were observed in Austrian companies. They, too, emphasized the importance of building collegial, solid relationships between employees from different generations during onboarding. This is often facilitated by assigning a senior colleague to the new hire as a buddy.

One Austrian company highlighted the importance of supervisor involvement in the onboarding process for Gen Z employees. Their experience suggests that Gen Z newcomers benefit from supervisors who act as mentors from the outset, collaborating on developing career plans.

The findings emphasize the value of buddy or mentor programs and supervisor involvement in facilitating Gen Z integration during onboarding. These practices promote professional development, a sense of belonging, and intergenerational understanding within the workplace.

4.3 Preferences and Work Style of Generation Z

This section explores the characteristics, preferences, and work styles of Gen Z employees as perceived by HR professionals interviewed in the study.

A recurring theme across Hungarian companies was Gen Z's emphasis on speed. HR professionals observed their rapid learning abilities and desire for swift career progression. This drive can sometimes manifest as impatience, with Gen Z employees seeking quicker achievements.

The interviews revealed that Gen Z prioritizes work-life balance and flexibility. Home-office opportunities and flexible work arrangements are no longer considered perks but essential workplace features.

Hungarian HR professionals observed a preference for direct and open communication among Gen Z employees. They tend to favor face-to-face interaction with superiors and colleagues, often outside traditional hierarchical structures. Informal and collaborative working relationships are generally more comfortable for Gen Z.

A constant desire for change and innovation is another characteristic identified by HR professionals. Gen Z actively seeks development opportunities, often planning career paths from the outset. This generation demonstrates a solid willingness to experiment and embrace new technologies.

The interviews highlighted Gen Z's openness in expressing disagreement and willingness to challenge authority figures. They are less apprehensive about questioning decisions and more comfortable with change than previous generations. This openness extends to career choices, with Gen Z exhibiting less long-term job commitment and a greater propensity to switch jobs for better opportunities.

One interviewee suggested a materialistic streak in some Gen Z employees, who may consider changing jobs for even relatively small pay increases. They are reported to be market-aware and expect employers to offer competitive salaries.

Austrian companies largely mirrored the observations of their Hungarian counterparts regarding Gen Z preferences. A strong emphasis was placed on learning and development opportunities, work-life balance, transparency, and flexibility. Austrian Gen Z employees also demonstrated a preference for digital communication methods.

Environmental consciousness emerged as a more prominent concern for Gen Z in Austrian companies than in Hungary. They expect employers to demonstrate social responsibility and commitment to environmental protection actively.

Like Hungarian findings, Austrian HR professionals observed a career-focused mindset in Gen Z. They possess a clear vision of their aspirations. They are open to changing jobs if they perceive a misalignment with their goals. To optimize performance, they seek clear expectations and defined success metrics.

This section highlights several key characteristics of Gen Z employees. Their desire for rapid career advancement, work-life balance, and open communication styles present challenges and opportunities for organizations seeking to attract and retain Gen Z talent. Furthermore, their focus on continuous learning, innovation, and environmental awareness necessitates adaptation of traditional workplace practices.

4.4 Work Ethics and Preferences of Gen Z Employees

This section examines the work ethic, preferences, and communication styles of Gen Z employees as observed by HR professionals in the study.

Hungarian HR professionals emphasized the importance of Gen Z employees feeling valued and heard. They appreciate opportunities to contribute their ideas and receive feedback on their initiatives. New Gen Z hires are described as highly motivated and enthusiastic, eager to implement their ideas. However, impatience can manifest if progress fails to meet their expectations.

The study revealed that multitasking is a preferred work style for Gen Z, potentially leading to challenges with pri-

oritization. HR professionals highlighted the importance of providing clear and specific instructions, including the "what," "why," and "when" of tasks, to enhance time management and reduce anxiety for Gen Z employees.

Gen Z often operates outside traditional hierarchical structures, preferring a more egalitarian approach. One automotive company with a more ingrained hierarchical structure presented a contrasting viewpoint, highlighting potential challenges for Gen Z integration in such environments.

Austrian companies observed a greater need for information and background details among Gen Z employees when completing tasks. They actively ask questions and seek transparency regarding performance assessments and success metrics. This generation is accustomed to receiving feedback and desires tangible measurements of their achievements.

The interviews highlighted the independent nature of Gen Z employees as information gatherers and fast learners, surpassing previous generations in this regard. A clear preference emerged for online communication methods, particularly chat functionalities, due to their informal nature and immediacy compared to traditional emails or phone calls.

Like Hungarian observations, Austrian HR professionals described Gen Z as open and collaborative team players. They value Teamwork and independent work, with remote options allowing them to tailor their work style.

This section underscores the unique work ethic and preferences of Gen Z employees. Their desire for recognition, clear communication, and a work-life balance necessitates adjustments within traditional workplace structures. Organizations can enhance Gen Z engagement by fostering a culture of open communication, providing clear expectations, and offering opportunities for feedback and learning. Furthermore, catering to their preference for online communication and flexible work arrangements can contribute to a more productive and satisfying work environment for Gen Z talent.

4.5 Challenges in Managing Gen Z Talent

This section explores organizations' critical challenges in managing Gen Z employees, as identified by HR professionals interviewed in the study.

A consistent theme across interviews was the challenge of employee retention due to Gen Z's perceived short-term career commitment and job-hopping tendencies. Companies expressed concerns about the negative impact of high turnover on return on investment in employee training and development.

The impatience observed in Gen Z can lead to frustration when encountering slower-paced organizational processes. This mismatch in expectations can create conflict and potentially reduce employee engagement. One interviewee highlighted the need for Gen Z to develop greater tolerance for processes that may not deliver immediate results, particularly within large organizations. Some companies' ingrained hierarchical structures can also challenge Gen Z's preference for flatter organizational models, potentially leading to tension.

Austrian companies specifically mentioned the challenge of determining the optimal level of flexibility to offer Gen Z employees. While acknowledging the importance of adapting to employee needs, they emphasize the need to maintain a balance that does not compromise business objectives. This requires careful consideration regarding the allocation of control and the nature of the work.

The findings highlight the challenges of managing Gen Z's work style and preferences. High turnover, impatience, and expectations regarding work flexibility necessitate adjustments within organizations. Implementing clear communication channels, fostering a culture of tolerance, and offering opportunities for rapid learning and development can be instrumental in retaining Gen Z talent. Furthermore, balancing employee flexibility and business needs is crucial for maximizing engagement and productivity within the Gen Z workforce.

4.6 Strategies for Adapting to Gen Z Needs

This section explores how organizations can adapt their practices to accommodate Gen Z employees' preferences and work styles, as identified through interviews with HR professionals.

Many companies are developing effective feedback systems to recognize Gen Z's desire for continuous feedback. This includes performance evaluations with managers and providing support for professional development. Additionally, a standardized Leadership Framework outlining expected behaviors and competencies is a guideline for career progression and fosters transparent communication.

Understanding the importance of Gen Z's desire to have their voices heard, HR professionals emphasize involving them in projects that leverage their existing knowledge and skills. This fosters a sense of contribution and engagement. Learning and development opportunities are provided through in-house training, e-learning platforms, and career plans. Mentorship programs offered by managers further support the growth of young talent. While all companies acknowledge the need for learning opportunities, resource constraints can limit how much they can be provided.

The need for digitalization is recognized across all companies. Initiatives are underway to implement digital solutions that address Gen Z's preference for technology and enhance engagement and interactivity within the

workplace.

The importance of a modern physical work environment for Gen Z is highlighted. Providing features like adjustable desks, ergonomic chairs, and access to the latest technology creates a workspace that motivates Gen Z to choose the office over full-time remote work.

Nearly half of the companies interviewed reported data confidentiality and protection challenges due to Gen Z's digital upbringing and potential lack of awareness regarding sensitive information. Data protection training programs have been implemented to address this knowledge gap.

While only a few companies offer dedicated programs for Gen Z to explore entrepreneurial ventures, most acknowledge their interest in such pursuits. Flexibility in work arrangements is an essential strategy employed by many companies. This includes offering freelance contracts and opportunities for self-employment alongside a primary role. This caters to Gen Z's desire for autonomy and potentially allows them to pursue their entrepreneurial aspirations.

The findings suggest several strategies for adapting to the needs of Gen Z employees. Implementing a culture of continuous feedback, encouraging participation, and embracing digitalization are crucial aspects. Additional considerations include investing in a modern work environment and addressing data security concerns. Finally, catering to the entrepreneurial spirit of Gen Z through flexible work arrangements can foster a more engaged and productive workforce.

4.7 Challenges and Opportunities in Cross-Generational Collaboration

This section explores the challenges and opportunities associated with fostering collaboration between Gen Z employees and colleagues from other generations, as identified through interviews with HR professionals.

The companies interviewed strive to create an inclusive work environment that celebrates diversity regardless of age. They emphasize non-discriminatory policies and promote a culture of collaboration that transcends traditional hierarchies. Gen Z's openness to collaboration and informality is a positive influence, potentially leading to a more egalitarian workplace. Several companies encourage cross-generational project teams, leveraging the technical expertise of Gen Z to support and teach older colleagues, facilitating a bi-directional knowledge transfer.

Communication style emerged as a critical generational difference. Gen Z's preference for online communication necessitates adopting internal platforms catering to various communication needs. For example, a Hungarian company developed its app to offer a communication channel that appeals to all generations.

Gen Z's direct communication style and lower tolerance for delays can create friction with older generations, who may prefer a more hierarchical approach. HR professionals acknowledge the need to address these differences and bridge the gap between Gen Z's desire for immediacy and older generations' more patient work style. Gen Z's impatience can also lead to frustration when working with colleagues perceived as slow.

The emphasis Gen Z places on work-life balance can be misconstrued by older generations who may have a more work-centric mindset. This can lead to resentment on both sides.

The study highlights the critical role of manager development in fostering successful collaboration with Gen Z. Most companies acknowledge the need for HR to provide training and support to equip managers with the skills required to lead and motivate Gen Z employees. This often involves a significant change in mindset, as traditional leadership styles may be less effective with this generation. The specific challenges some industries face, such as the rigidly hierarchical nature of the automotive industry, further emphasize the need for leadership development programs.

The directness and ambition of Gen Z can be perceived as a threat by some managers who may feel insecure in their leadership roles. This insecurity can stem from a need for proper leadership training and a promotion system based on seniority rather than leadership skills.

Hungarian and Austrian companies recognize the need to address these generational differences despite the challenges. HR departments actively seek solutions, while managers gradually become aware of the need for change. Building stronger informal relationships and fostering a positive work environment are vital strategies many companies employ. Team-building activities are implemented, often catering to the preferences of all generations.

The findings suggest that successful cross-generational collaboration hinges on fostering an inclusive work environment, addressing communication gaps, and investing in manager development. While challenges exist, Gen Z's openness to collaboration and preference for a more egalitarian workplace present positive organizational change opportunities.

4.8 Retention and Engagement Strategies

This section explores the strategies employed by organizations to retain and engage young employees, with a specific focus on Gen Z. Interviews with HR professionals revealed a high degree of consistency in retention approaches across generations.

All companies surveyed emphasized the importance of core retention strategies, including flexible work hours, in-

house training, coaching and mentoring programs, career development opportunities, health insurance, and cafeteria benefits. Some Hungarian companies offer legal, financial, and mental health support through external partnerships. However, these companies maintain that such initiatives are not exclusive to Gen Z but apply to all employees.

The growing emphasis on sustainability is a noteworthy trend, partly driven by the environmental consciousness of Gen Z. Companies are increasingly implementing initiatives focused on ecological and social responsibility, supporting special needs, and promoting environmentally friendly activities. Hungarian companies are taking initial steps in this area, offering volunteering opportunities, fundraising events, selective waste collection programs, and educational programs. Austrian companies, however, demonstrate a more substantial commitment to sustainability with more established programs. For example, one Austrian company offers financial incentives for employees who choose environmentally friendly commuting options, such as discounted bicycle purchases.

Several Hungarian companies have implemented employee recognition programs. While not solely targeted at Gen Z, these programs address their desire for positive reinforcement and feedback. Furthermore, most companies offer internal mobility opportunities, allowing employees to explore different departments or participate in international rotational programs. Although not explicitly designed for Gen Z, these programs are attractive to this generation, who actively seek career development opportunities.

The findings suggest that organizations focus on core retention strategies and increasingly incorporate sustainability initiatives, particularly in response to Gen Z's environmental concerns. Recognition programs and opportunities for internal mobility further contribute to employee engagement and retention across generations.

4.9 Industry and Country-Specific Considerations

This section explores the influence of industry and national context on HR strategies for managing Gen Z employees. The interviews revealed that company location and industry sector can influence approaches to talent management.

The challenges of implementing change in established industries are highlighted. An HR professional in the Hungarian food and beverage industry describes the difficulty of achieving a cultural shift due to resistant middle management ("stuck and not open for innovation"). Similarly, another Hungarian interviewee from the automotive industry emphasizes the robust and traditional leadership style prevalent in that sector, which can clash with the preferences of Gen Z employees. These findings suggest that industries with entrenched cultures and leadership styles face more significant hurdles in adapting to the work style of Gen Z.

Resource and management resistance can impede the implementation of effective HR strategies. An interviewee from the Hungarian food and beverage industry acknowledges management initiatives but expresses concern about the lack of resources for developing comprehensive talent programs. Additionally, some managers may not perceive a strong need to invest in attracting and retaining young talent, further hindering the adoption of Gen Z-focused HR practices.

The findings suggest that industry and national context influence the effectiveness of HR strategies for managing Gen Z employees. Established industries with entrenched cultures may require additional effort to adapt to this generation. Furthermore, resource constraints and management resistance can challenge the implementation of effective HR practices.

4.10 Conclusion

The findings offer valuable insights for organizations seeking to attract, retain, and engage this new generation of talent:

- Career Aspirations and Open Communication: Gen Z employees enter the workforce with well-defined career goals and openly communicate their expectations from employers. They seek opportunities for development, including training, coaching, and mentorship programs, to achieve their career objectives. Lack of alignment between job responsibilities and career aspirations can lead to increased job mobility among Gen Z employees.
- Work Ethic and Engagement: Gen Z prioritizes a work environment that fosters speed, innovation, and development opportunities. Flexibility is also highly valued. The absence of these elements can lead to disengagement from the employer. Conversely, providing these opportunities serves as a powerful tool for retention.
- Cross-Generational Relationships: The arrival of Gen Z necessitates a shift towards a more informal and collaborative work culture. While efforts are underway to bridge generational gaps and foster understanding, this process requires patience and tolerance from all parties. Developing tolerance as a skill is crucial for both Gen Z employees and older colleagues. Serious tensions requiring HR intervention were not reported in the companies interviewed.
- Managerial Development: Effective management of Gen Z employees requires a shift in leadership

styles. Many companies recognize the need for manager development programs to equip them with the skills necessary to motivate and engage Gen Z talent. However, some managers resist change, negatively viewing Gen Z's expectations.
- Industry and Country Specificity: The industry sector and national context can influence the effectiveness of HR strategies for managing Gen Z. Established industries with entrenched cultures may require more effort to adapt to the work style of this generation. Resource constraints and management resistance can also challenge the implementation of effective HR practices.

Taken together, the findings indicate that the participating organizations are not replacing their entire HR systems with practices designed exclusively for Gen Z. Instead, they are adapting established practices—particularly employer branding, onboarding, learning and development, flexible work, feedback, mentoring, and digital communication—to make them more responsive to younger employees. These adaptations frequently benefit employees across generations. Differences between the Austrian and Hungarian cases were less pronounced than expected, whereas industry traditions, resource availability, and managerial willingness to change appeared to shape implementation more strongly. This suggests that effective Gen Z integration depends not only on understanding the expectations associated with a younger workforce but also on the organization's broader capacity for inclusive leadership, digital adaptation, and continuous HR development. Because these findings reflect HR professionals' perceptions in nine multinational companies, they should be interpreted as exploratory patterns rather than representative national differences.

5 Discussion

This section analyzes the findings from interviews conducted to explore the experiences of HR professionals regarding Gen Z in the workplace. It also examines how companies are currently preparing to welcome this generation. The analysis is based on the interview results alongside the literature review to answer the research questions formulated earlier. The section concludes by highlighting the significance of these findings and providing recommendations for other companies. Finally, limitations encountered during the research process are acknowledged.

5.1 Research Question 1 (RQ1)

RQ1: How do HR professionals in Austrian and Hungarian companies perceive the implications of Gen Z employees' preferences regarding work flexibility, career development, and diversity for organizational HR practices? This question investigated how employer strategies for recruiting, retaining, and developing their workforce are likely to change in response to the evolving work preferences of Gen Z.

The findings revealed a crucial shift in mentality for companies. They must accept that Gen Z members are more prepared for their career paths. They have a clearer idea of what they expect from their employers and want to know if these expectations align with the company's offerings. Transparent communication from employers is, therefore, paramount.

For Gen Z, work-life balance is a core value, and they expect employers to provide flexibility in work arrangements to respect this boundary (Chillakuri, 2020). Companies need to understand that maintaining work-life balance is crucial for Gen Z and that they actively seek to push boundaries to achieve this. They expect employers to offer a "feel-good" environment (Scholz & Rennig, 2019) based on autonomy, flexibility, and adaptability to their needs.

However, work flexibility goes beyond allowing employees to work from anywhere, anytime. Companies need clear policies on this. While Gen Z values autonomy, they also benefit from a framework that outlines expectations, obligations, and boundaries. Additionally, Gen Z demonstrates a tendency towards short-term commitments and rapid job changes, seeking opportunities that best support their career development. Therefore, companies are advised to develop mutually beneficial strategies, such as offering various contracts, flexible work hours, home office policies, and freelancing opportunities.

Since Gen Z desires continuous challenges and wants to actively contribute to the company's performance (Naim, 2022), companies should prioritize providing continuous development opportunities for talent (Ma & Fang, 2023). To achieve this, companies must be prepared to invest in the education and development of young talent, with technology playing a crucial role (Chillakuri, 2020). Offering well-structured, accessible, up-to-date, and professionally relevant e-learning materials allows young people to access content flexibly and from anywhere. Learner-generated content options empower young people to create content themselves, enriching the company's internal knowledge base and fostering interactive learning opportunities for employees (Pandita et al., 2023).

While Gen Z is adept at independent knowledge acquisition, learning from colleagues and gaining practical experience is also essential (Barhate & Dirani, 2022). Therefore, initiatives that facilitate group knowledge transfer will play a vital role in strengthening Gen Z's commitment to the company. Building on this and leveraging Gen Z's proactive behavior, reverse mentoring emerged in Pandita et al.'s (2023) research on strategies to strengthen Gen Z retention. In reverse mentoring, a young employee provides technology or knowledge transfer to a more senior colleague. This method allows companies to address Gen

Z's need to participate in the organization's life actively, strengthen relationships with leaders, and utilize their knowledge of new technologies (Pandita et al., 2023). Ultimately, this strategy can bridge the generational gap by breaking down traditional hierarchical perceptions associated with the "younger mentor and older mentee" dynamic, fostering greater sensitization.

As highlighted in the literature review and confirmed by interview partners, Gen Z views managers as mentors who play a crucial role in their career development path within the company. They also expect continuous feedback from their managers (Gabrielova & Buchko, 2021) and want to know precisely what is expected of them to perform well (Chillakuri & Mahanandia, 2018). Therefore, managers must communicate transparently how performance is measured, expectations are set, and goals are defined. However, this necessitates that managers be aware of Gen Z's needs and be equipped with the appropriate leadership toolkit to meet them.

Given Gen Z's openness to entrepreneurial opportunities and their active pursuit of self-discovery (Lazar et al., 2023), companies can strive to retain young talent long-term by promoting entrepreneurial and talent programs.

5.2 RQ2 - HR Strategies for Gen Z Integration

RQ2: How HR can prepare for Generation Z, based on existing research and stakeholder experiences. The Employee Life Cycle model is utilized to structure the analysis, highlighting key considerations for HR at each stage:

- Attraction & Recruitment
  - o Employer Branding & Transparency: Effective employer branding is crucial to attracting Gen Z talent (Betts et al., 2019). More than social media recruitment, targeted outreach via university lectures, campus expos, and job fairs is necessary (Oliver Wyman Forum, 2023). Furthermore, a streamlined and transparent application process creates a positive first impression (Chillakuri & Mahanandia, 2018).
  - o Value Alignment & Social Responsibility: Gen Z prioritizes working for companies that align with their values and actively contribute to social causes (Betts et al., 2019; Oliver Wyman Forum, 2023). Highlighting these aspects and opportunities for employee participation in social initiatives strengthens employer branding for Gen Z.
  - o Information Access & Proactive Engagement: Recognizing Gen Z's information overload, HR must present concise and compelling recruitment materials. Additionally, Gen Z actively gathers information about potential employers (Barhate & Dirani, 2022). HR should be prepared to provide comprehensive information and communicate openly throughout recruitment.
- Onboarding
  - o Mentorship & Buddy Programs: Informal onboarding programs, such as buddy or mentoring programs, foster a sense of belonging and support for new Gen Z hires. These programs also create opportunities for intergenerational interaction and sensitize colleagues to Gen Z's specific needs (Barhate & Dirani, 2022).
  - o Managerial Development: Given Gen Z's preference for mentoring solid relationships with managers (Gabrielova & Buchko, 2021), HR should equip managers with the necessary skills to mentor Gen Z employees effectively. Training initiatives can address generational differences and strategies for fostering growth and development (Ma & Fang, 2023).
- Development
  - o Learning & Development Opportunities: Continuous learning opportunities are essential for retaining Gen Z talent (Chillakuri, 2020). Regular employee surveys can be used to identify their specific needs and tailor development programs accordingly. Additionally, Gen Z values hands-on learning from colleagues (Ma & Fang, 2023). HR can facilitate cross-generational teams for knowledge transfer and skill development.
  - o Career Path Transparency: Clarity regarding career paths and advancement opportunities is critical for Gen Z. HR to develop well-defined career paths for each position and communicate transparent performance evaluation processes (Chillakuri & Mahanandia, 2018).
  - o Managerial Selection & Training: The right managers are crucial for successful Gen Z development. HR should prioritize managers who can be positive role models and support Gen Z's continuous learning aspirations (Gabrielova & Buchko, 2021). Training programs can equip managers with the skills to manage Gen Z effectively and address potential conflicts arising from generational differences.
- Retention
  - o Work-Life Balance & Flexibility: Work-life balance is paramount for Gen Z. HR should implement flexible work arrangements, including remote work options and clear boundaries between work and personal life (Chillakuri, 2020). Additionally, offering diverse contract options (full-time, part-time, freelance) caters to Gen Z's entrepreneurial ambitions and financial security needs (Oliver Wyman Forum, 2023).
  - o Social & Environmental Responsibility: Highlighting a company's commitment to social and environmental causes, along with opportunities for employee participation, strengthens Gen Z engagement (Oliver Wyman Forum, 2023).
  - o Digital Transformation: Leveraging Gen Z's technological expertise can be achieved by involving them in digitalization projects (Dwivedula et al., 2019; Racolta-Paina & Irini, 2021). This empowers them to contribute meaningfully while furthering their digital skillset.

o Positive Work Environment: Building a positive work environment is vital for all employees. Team-building activities and an "open office" concept can foster collaboration and break down traditional hierarchies, which Gen Z values (Racolta-Paina & Irini, 2021). Providing ergonomic workstations and cutting-edge technology demonstrates the company's commitment to employee well-being.

o Reward & Recognition Systems: While Gen Z may have distinct reward preferences compared to older generations, focusing on inclusivity is essential. HR can explore offering a variety of benefits packages, such as education funding or public transport support, allowing employees to choose options.

5.3 RQ3: Bridging the Generational Gap - Managerial Perceptions and Strategies

RQ3: How do current managers perceive Gen Z's integration into the workforce, and what measures can be taken to impact Gen Z's career and life positively? Research confirms that Gen Z prioritizes supportive managers as mentors and partners in their career development (Gabrielova & Buchko, 2021). They value transparency, clear expectations, accessibility, and role-model behavior (Chillakuri & Mahanandia, 2018). However, not all senior managers have the necessary leadership skills or experience to fulfill this mentoring role effectively. Furthermore, traditional hierarchical structures may clash with Gen Z's preference for direct communication and a more egalitarian work environment (Ma & Fang, 2023). This can lead to misunderstandings and negative perceptions, with Gen Z labeled as disrespectful or impatient, while managers may find their directness challenging (Moffett et al., 2023).

Pichler et al. (2021) propose the DITTO framework to bridge this gap. It outlines four critical dimensions for fostering a Gen Z-friendly workplace: Diversity, Individualism and Teamwork, Technology, and Organizational Support.

- Diversity (D): Companies should promote diversity and inclusion through policies and practices (Pichler et al., 2021). Examples include non-discrimination policies, diverse onboarding programs emphasizing equal treatment, and unified leadership frameworks accessible to all employees. Additionally, managers should be open to providing opportunities for young talent, even without extensive experience, to leverage their fresh perspectives and contribute to the company's success.
- Individualism & Teamwork (I & T): This dimension focuses on integrating Gen Z into the organizational culture while enhancing interpersonal skills (Pichler et al., 2021). Mentorship and buddy programs during onboarding, team-building activities, and cross-generational employee programs can facilitate this integration. Balancing individual and group projects is essential, allowing Gen Z to choose the work environment where they can perform optimally.
- Technology (T): Providing tools for virtual collaboration is crucial for attracting and retaining Gen Z talent (Pichler et al., 2021). Successful examples include digital onboarding processes, internal communication apps, e-learning platforms, and a company culture that embraces technological innovation.
- Organizational Support (O): Offering well-being programs, formal and informal support systems, and strong managerial and peer support. Solid support structures are vital for Gen Z (Pichler et al., 2021). Companies can achieve this through recognition programs, feedback systems, flexible work arrangements, modern work environments, external support services, performance evaluation systems, talent development programs, and benefits packages that cater to Gen Z's specific needs, such as healthy lifestyle initiatives and mental health support. Furthermore, training managers on Gen Z's communication style and preferences can foster better understanding and collaboration across generations.

The companies in this study are actively implementing strategies across all four DITTO dimensions to create a more welcoming environment for Gen Z. While there is room for improvement, particularly in technology adoption, the DITTO framework serves as a valuable tool for attracting, retaining, and empowering Gen Z talent, ultimately leading to increased company performance and competitiveness. By adopting these strategies and fostering a culture of continuous improvement, managers can bridge the generational gap and unlock the full potential of their Gen Z workforce.

6 Conclusion

This research successfully addressed the three initial research questions (RQ) through a combined analysis of existing literature and interviews with HR professionals.

- RQ1: Impact of Gen Z on HR Strategies: Companies need to adapt to Gen Z's preferences for work flexibility, career development opportunities, and diversity within the workplace. The research identified sub-categories within these areas for targeted HR strategy adjustments.
- RQ2: HR Professional Experiences: HR professionals acknowledge the need for change and

actively implement new strategies to attract and retain Gen Z talent. The Employee Life Cycle model provides a framework for tracking these adaptations throughout the employee journey.

- RQ3: Manager-Gen Z Relationships: The research underscores the importance of manager support for Gen Z career development. The DITTO Framework offers practical guidance for managers to bridge the generational gap and effectively support Gen Z employees.

The study extends the practical application of the DITTO framework by combining it with the employee life-cycle perspective. While DITTO identifies the organizational conditions associated with a Gen Z-supportive workplace, the employee life-cycle perspective indicates where corresponding HR interventions can be introduced—from attraction and recruitment through onboarding, development, and retention. The findings also suggest that many practices presented as Gen Z-oriented are more appropriately understood as inclusive HR practices that can benefit employees across age groups.

Several methodological limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the study used a small non-probability sample of nine participants, with six participants working in Hungary and three in Austria. The findings are therefore exploratory and cannot be generalized to either national population. Second, the participating organizations represented different industries and organizational settings, meaning that apparent country differences may instead reflect industry, company size, resource availability, or organizational culture. Third, the study relied predominantly on HR professionals and managers involved in recruitment or employee supervision; it did not collect accounts directly from Gen Z employees. Fourth, the Hungarian interviews were translated into English, but the original research documentation does not record an independent translation-validation procedure. Finally, the coding was undertaken through researcher-prepared analytical tables, with no reported second coder or formal intercoder-agreement assessment. The interpretation may consequently reflect a degree of single-researcher subjectivity.

This research provides valuable insights for HR professionals and companies seeking to attract, retain, and support Gen Z talent. It highlights the changes needed within HR strategies and managerial approaches to create a work environment that caters to Gen Z's specific preferences and fosters long-term engagement with this talented generation. Building on this foundation, future research can further refine these strategies and provide a more comprehensive understanding of Gen Z's impact on the workplace.

The limitations identified in this study highlight the dynamic nature of Gen Z's needs and preferences in the workplace. Future research should focus on the following areas to gain a more comprehensive understanding:

- Longitudinal Studies: Conducting longitudinal studies over several years will track the evolution of Gen Z's work values and expectations as they gain experience in the workforce. This will help to differentiate between natural characteristics and initial assumptions. For instance, research by Barhate and Dirani (2022) suggests inconsistencies in Gen Z's preference for independent or group work. Longitudinal studies can clarify these evolving preferences.
- Global and Industry Specificity: Expanding the research geographically across a broader range of countries will capture the influence of diverse social, economic, and environmental factors on Gen Z's career aspirations. Additionally, including a broader spectrum of industries will reveal potential variations in Gen Z's needs across different work environments. This will enable companies to develop more targeted HR strategies for attracting and retaining Gen Z talent within specific sectors.
- Managerial Perspectives: Including managers' voices in future research will provide valuable insights into their perceptions of Gen Z and their role in supporting their career development. This will facilitate exploring strategies for fostering positive working relationships and improving managers' understanding of Gen Z's communication style and expectations. Incorporating these perspectives can establish a more holistic picture of the manager-Gen Z employee dynamic.

By addressing these areas, future research can build upon the foundation laid by this study and provide a more nuanced understanding of Gen Z's impact on the workplace. This will ultimately empower companies to develop effective strategies for attracting, retaining, and empowering this talented generation.

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