



Career Expectations of Entry Level Gen Z Professionals in Sri Lanka: Insights through the Job Characteristic Model

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Abstract

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Despite Gen Z's growing workforce presence, limited research has examined their entry-level career expectations in Sri Lanka. This qualitative study addresses this gap by exploring how Gen Z professionals prioritize career-related expectations. Semi-structured interviews with ten participants were analyzed thematically, identifying ten key expectations clustered into job-centric, workplace-centric, and person-centric categories. The findings highlight distinctive Gen Z traits, including a strong preference for intrinsic rewards such as recognition and appreciation, and a higher propensity for job switching in pursuit of better opportunities. Traditional expectations, including job stability, supportive work environments, flexible work arrangements, and skill development, also emerged as important. Overall, the study offers insights into the early-career outlook of Gen Z professionals in Sri Lanka, with practical implications for human resource practitioners in talent management and for Gen Z job seekers in making informed career decisions aligned with personal growth, and long-term satisfaction.

Keywords: Career expectations, Entry-level, Gen Z professionals, Job Characteristics Model, Sri Lanka.

1. Introduction

Generational differences shape work values, aspirations, and career paths. By 2025, Generation Z (Gen Z) will comprise 27% of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) workforce (World Economic Forum, 2022), and represents over one-fourth of Sri Lanka's population, positioning them as a transformative cohort in the labor market. Generations are cohorts sharing historical experiences that shape attitudes and behaviors (Lyons et al., 2015). Career expectations encompass beliefs about professional futures, including compensation, stability, fulfillment, and organizational fit (Ahmad et al., 2019; Metz et al., 2008). For Gen Z, these expectations reflect aspirations for growth, meaningful work, and sustainable careers.

Prior studies show generational differences of the previous generations. Baby Boomers often extend careers beyond retirement (Boveda & Metz, 2016), Gen X emphasizes employability and skill development (Lyons et al., 2015), and Millennials prioritize mobility and lifestyle (Ng et al., 2018). Gen Z exhibits greater heterogeneity, valuing individuality and diverse career paths, from stable employment to freelancing or entrepreneurship (Hauff, 2015).

Existing studies on Gen Z are fragmented and sometimes contradictory. Some highlight preferences for traditional employment aligned with personal values (Ivanovic, 2022), while others note interest in freelance and entrepreneurial work (Hutanu et al., 2020). Although financial security is important (De Silva et al., 2022; Jayatissa, 2023; Maloni et al., 2019), meaningful work and value alignment are equally central. These variations underline substantial intra-cohort diversity.

There is a significant gap that the most studies focuses on Western contexts, and few studies examines entry-level Gen Z professionals, particularly in countries which has emerging economies (Agarwal & Vaghela, 2018; Iorgulescu, 2016). Addressing this gap, this study investigates the career expectations of entry-level Gen Z professionals in Sri Lanka using Job Characteristics Theory (JCT). By exploring how task variety, autonomy, significance, and feedback influence career expectations, the study extends JCT to a non-Western generational context and clarifies inconsistencies in prior literature.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Generation Z and Entry-Level Generation Z Professionals

A generation refers to individuals born within a shared historical period whose experiences shape common attitudes and behaviors (Costanza et al., 2023). The contemporary workforce includes Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials, and Generation Z (Gen Z). Among them, Gen Z which covers the individuals born between 1995 and 2010, is the newest cohort entering the workforce and is characterized as digitally native, with work values shaped by advanced technology (Agarwal & Vaghela, 2018; Bencsik et al., 2016; Barhate & Dirani, 2022).

Early Gen Z members are transitioning from education into entry-level roles with limited work experience (Agarwal & Vaghela, 2018; Pallais, 2014). Despite their early career stage, they report relatively high expectations for financial stability and career advancement (White, 2019). Gen Z's influence is expected to increase substantially as they currently comprising approximately 20% of the global workforce (Barhate & Dirani, 2022).

2.2 Career Expectations

Careers represent the sequence of work roles an individual holds throughout life (Opatha, 2009), while career expectations refer to beliefs about future career outcomes, including compensation, advancement, and fulfillment (Ahmad et al., 2019). Research indicates a shift from extrinsic rewards toward intrinsic outcomes such as meaningful work and psychological success (De Silva, 2022). Career expectations differ across generations and are influenced by contextual and individual factors, particularly during early career stages (De Hauw & De Vos, 2010; Tolbize, 2008). Alignment between individual expectations and organizational opportunities is essential, as misalignment can result in dissatisfaction and employee turnover (Gibson & Borges, 2009; Heslin, 2005).

2.3 Generational Differences in Career Expectations

Prior studies reveal distinct generational differences in career priorities. Traditionalists value stability, loyalty, and long-term commitment, shaped by economic hardship and hierarchical work environments (Tolbize, 2008). Baby Boomers similarly emphasize job security while prioritizing ambition and professional achievement (Meriac et al., 2010). Generation X favors autonomy, flexibility, and employability over organizational loyalty (Arar & Yuksel, 2015). Millennials differ by prioritizing meaningful work, work–life balance, flexibility, and continuous development, showing high engagement when work aligns with personal values and growth opportunities (Ng et al., 2010; Çelik et al., 2016).

2.4 Career Expectations of Generation Z

Generation Z enters the workforce with career expectations shaped by digital immersion, economic uncertainty, and social diversity (Schroth, 2019). Earlier generations prioritize supportive organizational culture, fair pay, stability, flexibility, autonomy, and work–life balance, along with continuous feedback, unbiased supervision, clear communication, and recognition (Barhate & Dirani, 2022; Bielen & Kubiczek, 2020). Gen Z also values skill development, career advancement, and employment in large or international organizations (Iorgulescu, 2016). Despite growing research, limited empirical evidence exists on how these expectations develop during early career stages, particularly in emerging economies, highlighting the need to examine entry-level Gen Z professionals' career expectations.

2.5 Linking Generation Z Career Expectations to Job Characteristics Theory

This study adopts Job Characteristics Theory proposed by Hackman and Oldham in 1976. It consists of five core job characteristics such as skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy, and feedback. Although widely applied, JCT has received limited attention in relation to Gen Z career expectations.

JCT provides a relevant lens for understanding Gen Z's preference for meaningful, autonomous, and development-oriented work. Skill variety and task identity reflect learning and visible outcomes, task significance aligns with purpose and social impact, autonomy supports flexibility, and feedback corresponds with preferences for continuous communication and recognition. Together, these linkages position JCT as a useful framework for examining entry-level Gen Z career expectations and addressing gaps in generational careers research.

3. Methodology

This study adopts an interpretivist paradigm with a qualitative approach, appropriate for exploring how career expectations are socially constructed and experienced by professionals. Prior studies in similar contexts have successfully applied interpretivist qualitative designs to examine subjective meanings and contextual influences (Fernández et al., 2023; Najam & Ghazal, 2022). As Saunders et al. (2009) argue, interpretivism facilitates rich, contextual understanding of socially embedded phenomena, making it suitable for examining career expectations shaped by cultural norms, personal experiences, and workplace contexts. A qualitative approach enables in-depth exploration of participants' diverse and dynamic perspectives, as career expectations are inherently subjective and evolving (Kodagoda & Deheragoda, 2021). The study follows a cross-sectional time horizon, with data collected at a single point in time (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016).

Data were collected through face-to-face semi-structured interviews using an interview guide with open-ended questions. This method is widely recognized as effective for generating credible and detailed qualitative data (Saunders et al., 2009) and has been employed in related studies (Jensen, 2021; Lakmal & Weerasinghe, 2023). Face-to-face interaction encouraged openness and authenticity. Interview transcripts were reviewed, finalized, and coded on the same day to enhance accuracy and reliability. Thematic analysis was used for data analysis, following Braun and Clarke's four-step process which includes data familiarization, initial coding, theme development, and documentation. The analysis was guided by the JCT framework.

The sample comprised ten Gen Z entry-level professionals currently employed in Sri Lanka was selected using purposive sampling. This technique allows the selection of participants most relevant to the research objectives (Bryman, 2016). Participants were born between 1995 and 2001 (aged 23–30) and represented diverse educational backgrounds such as graduates, undergraduates, professional qualification holders, and A/L-qualified school leavers from science, mathematics, commerce, and arts streams. Gender balance was ensured with five male and five female participants.

Initially, fifteen individuals were invited. However, only ten were participated for the study. A sample size of ten is consistent with prior qualitative studies as well (Andersen et al., 2008; Coleman et al., 2012; Sabil et al., 2016). Participants were drawn from multiple industries, including healthcare, information technology (IT), finance, marketing, Human resource, education, and manufacturing-related services. All participants had actively transitioned from education to employment. Table 1 summarizes participant demographics and interview details.

Table 1: The Participant Profile

Research participant	Details of the Entry Level Position	Age	Highest Educational Qualification	Gender	Interview Duration
A	Medical officer (intern) at a government hospital	27	A final year undergraduate specializing in Medicine at a government university	Male	40 Minutes
B	UI/UX designer at a website designing company	27	Pursuing a Higher National Diploma in Information Technology at a government university	Male	45 Minutes
C	Software engineering intern at an office equipment supplying company	24	Third year undergraduate specializing in Information Technology at a private university	Female	30 Minutes
D	Human resource intern at a government office	25	Final year undergraduate specializing in human resource management at a government university	Female	40 Minutes
E	Marketing intern at a private bank	25	Final undergraduate specializing in Marketing at a private university	Male	35 Minutes

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F	Finance executive at a public bank	29	Graduate specialized in Finance from a government university	Male	30 Minutes
G	Junior accounts executive at a consumer goods manufacturing company	30	Completed professional courses in Accounting at private academic institutes	Female	40 minutes
H	Audit trainee at a global audit firm	26	Graduate specialized in Accounting from a government university	Female	45 Minutes
I	Facilitator at an academic institute	28	Passed A/Ls in the arts stream	Male	35 Minutes
J	Assistant in a clothing design shop	23	Passed A/Ls in the science stream and selected to a government university	Female	40 Minutes

Source: Developed by the author

4. Results

The thematic analysis identified ten career expectation themes: job stability and security, intrinsic and extrinsic rewards, skill development, job switching, friendly supervision, flexible work arrangements, supportive work environment, and work–life balance. These were grouped into three clusters: job-centric, workplace-centric, and person-centric career expectations.

4.1 Job-Centric Career Expectations

Job centric career expectations are the expectations that the Gen Z are forming about what they need to achieve or experience specifically within their current job roles. The study found two types of job centric career expectations as job stability and job security.

4.1.1 Job Stability

Job stability means the expectations that individuals have to retain in the job for a long period without the risk of unexpected unemployment or frequent changes in the job.

“If my team can't work without me, that means I have stabilized myself there. For that, I have to be an expert in whatever the things I'm doing.”

As Participant A stated above, it is clear that being an expert in whatever tasks and getting others dependent on own knowledge enhances the ability to stabilize in the job. Further, Participant F also proved that the expertise stabilizes the job by stating as below.

“I expect to be an expert in whatever the things I carry out. That expertise has the power to stabilize me in my career journey.”

In addition to that, Participant B noticed that joining a well-recognized organization provides in job stability than a company at the startup stage. Because sometimes those new business initiatives create a risk for the job existence of entry-level job positions. However, the developed and well-reputed companies have strong aspirations regarding the career advancement of each level of employee. Hence, it indicates the advantage of joining a well-reputed company to maintain stability in a job.

“Most of the time, I have seen that new companies that are at the start-up level create a risk for the job existence of entry-level jobholders. As an intern who belongs to the IT field, I think it is better to join a developed and well-reputed company to maintain our job stability.”

Moreover, Participant E mentioned that it is essential to grab different opportunities and understand the trends in the field while gradually climbing up the career ladder. Because it adds immense value to the job stability of the entry-level jobholders.

“I think if I become advanced in my career gradually by grabbing available opportunities and understanding trends, I’ll be able to stabilize my position in my career path.”

Further, Participant D adds something more to this finding. Even though the usage of user-friendly and advanced software is a modern trend in every field, it poses a significant threat to the job stability of entry-level job holders. Hence, Participant D stated that it is more beneficial to gain an in-depth understanding of the usage of software for stabilizing jobs with this challenge.

“Nowadays, user-friendly and advanced software is making a threat to the stability of our jobs. However, in my point of view, if I gain a thorough understanding of the usage of software, I don’t want to get scared of those threats.”

4.1.2 Job Security

Job security refers to what extent the current job of an individual safe, consistent and long-lasting without losing unexpectedly.

“I think both knowledge and skills matter in the same way to secure my position in the career path. Mainly, I have to develop myself uniquely for that. Then organizations can’t replace me easily.”

According to the above statement of Participant A, it is clear that knowledge and skills are equally important to securing a job position. Further, a considerable number of participants stated this fact. Hence, it is a very crucial concern of Generation Z jobholders who are at the entry-level. In addition, uniqueness impacts survival from the replacements within the workplace. The same idea was confirmed by Participant F as below.

“I expect to make myself unique in the work setting. Then the workplace can’t easily substitute someone else for my position while carrying out something.”

Furthermore, Participant G expressed the importance of awareness of the next level in the job hierarchy of the workplace. It strengthens the security of the job. For that, Participant G suggested intensifying the understanding of career paths by creating networks with experts who have succeeded in their careers.

“I wish to have a proper awareness of the next steps in my career to secure my position in the desired career path. For that, I need to increase my understanding of my career path by interacting with experts who have succeeded in their careers.”

This finding was also proved by Participant C as below. And also, Participant C values the ability to be aware of the qualifications and requirements that have to be fulfilled to be promoted to the next level in the career path.

“Since I’m currently working under the Junior human resource manager, I got to know the qualifications and requirements that I have to fulfill to be promoted to that position.”

Thus, the above findings align with the findings of the study conducted by Iorgulescu (2016).

4.2 Workplace-Centric Career Expectations

workplace-centric career expectation refers to the expectation that individuals have specifically related to their workplace culture, conditions and environment. These findings reveal work-life balance, flexible work arrangements, friendly supervision, and supportive work atmosphere as four types of workplace-centric career expectations.

4.2.1 Work-Life Balance

Work-life balance is a critical expectation of Generation Z jobholders. Since most of the Generation Z jobholders who are in entry-level positions are still following their higher studies, they consider work-life balance as a great support to succeed in their studies while working.

"I mostly prefer working from home to maintain my work-life balance."

Participant A indicated the essence of remote working to maintain a proper balance between work matters and academic matters simultaneously. Hence, according to the opinion of Participant A, the work-from-home option is beneficial to save the time that is spent on traveling to organizations physically.

Further, Participant F also expressed the same idea as below, since Participant F prioritizes the academic stuff and job tasks equally.

"In terms of my work-life balance, I hugely expect to manage both my work matters and studies simultaneously."

Moreover, some of the participants who specialized in the IT field emphasized maintaining good health in terms of their work-life balance.

"In terms of my work-life balance, I mainly expect to be careful about my health level and work matters equally."

According to the response of Participant I, staying in front of a computer for a long time negatively affects physical and mental health. As a result, Participant I mainly expects to be mindful of physical and mental health while working. Similarly, Participant B came up with the same idea as follows.

"Actually, the software engineering field is a more stressful profession. In terms of my work-life balance, I mainly expect to maintain my personal mental and physical health well while carrying on my work life."

Some of the participants believe that family life directly influences work life. That means the effectiveness of work significantly relies on family matters. The response of Participant G is strong evidence for that.

"I really like to maintain a proper balance between work life and family life in the same way. Because if I have a peaceful family life only, I can focus properly on my work life with a clear mindset."

Participant C also provided a similar idea as below. In addition, Participant C indicated that if Generation Z jobholders have to struggle to balance work and family simultaneously, they tend to resign from their jobs.

"If I'm not able to have a proper work-life balance in the future, I'll quit my job for sure, and I'll start my own business to manage both work and family in the same way."

However, the majority of the participants try to provide an equal weight to their work life and their family life. Hence, it is evident that they put an equal effort into their professional stuff

as well as their personal stuff to succeed in both career life and family life. Participant H stated it as follows.

“I highly expect a proper work-life balance. Because it directly impacts my professional and personal success.”

Furthermore, Participant E also confirmed this by emphasizing the value of considering personal interests and relationships while working.

“I prefer to carry out my professional life while allocating plenty of time for my personal interests and relationships as well.”

In addition to that, Participant D considers work matters and family matters as entirely separate aspects. That means Participant D allocated working hours entirely to work matters and the rest of the time to personal matters.

“I think I should have to avoid taking my personal problems into the office as well as avoid bringing official problems into my house. That’s the major rule in my life to maintain my work-life balance.”

Hence, it is clear that even jobholders who belong to the same generation have different views on their work-life balance.

4.2.2 Flexible Work Arrangements

Flexible work arrangements refer to the options that allow employees to control over their work schedules, work location, and workload, while achieving the goals of the business. According to Participant E, flexible work arrangements are very important as they increase productivity, efficiency, and the quality of the work. The hybrid working option is especially beneficial for both organizations and employees. Because it reduces the operational cost of the organization and saves the traveling costs and time for employees.

“As a Gen Z, I consider flexible work arrangements as an extremely valuable option.”

Moreover, most of the participants emphasized the need to obtain flexible working hours. Participant A stated that if the organization allows them to complete the weekly workload within three days, the remaining days can be utilized for personal stuff, such as pursuing higher studies. From that perspective, flexible working hours can be considered a valuable option.

“I immensely value flexibility in my work arrangement. Because, if I can complete my work matters within three days, the rest of the days can be utilized for my personal matters such as following courses and studying for exams.”

In addition, according to the idea of Participant G, it is clear that Generation Z is not willing to work standard working hours. Instead, they prefer to cover the workload at once and use the rest of the time to enjoy life. Because Generation Z admires the quality of the work rather than the quantity.

“I don’t like to work for typical standard working hours, such as from 8.00 a.m. to 5.00 p.m. Instead, I like to complete my weekly workload within two to three days and have a break on the rest of the days. Because Gen Z is more concerned about quality rather than quantity.”

Furthermore, Participant I expressed the preference to have flexibility, freedom, and autonomy within the workplace. According to Participant I, the deadline-oriented working style leads to increased flexibility in the work setting. Because it prioritizes completing tasks

at the given time rather than following the same tasks repetitively throughout the career. Hence, it provides freedom for jobholders to make their own decisions about the way of work completion to meet the deadlines. And also, it allows jobholders to have breaks where necessary rather than work for the entire day.

“Luckily, my current workplace provides flexibility and freedom in work to some extent. If we can meet the deadlines properly, we do not need to work on the entire eight hours continuously, and we can have breaks when necessary. So, I highly value it as a Gen Z.”

However, the applicability of flexible work arrangements depends on the nature of the work and the preference of the employers. According to Participant B, team-based work requires physical interaction rather than working online. Because team-based projects need more collaboration and supervision to lead to success. Especially the jobholders who are at the entry-level, require proper guidance while contributing to the teamwork. Hence, flexible work arrangements are not applicable to this type of work.

“I extremely prefer working physically instead of working online since it is more convenient for us.”

Similarly, the implementation of flexible work arrangements depends on the preference of the employers. Sometimes, the majority of senior staff members who are involved in management and administration roles belong to the previous generations. Hence, they are not familiar with the latest technology and new concepts of working. As a result, they are reluctant to adapt to the new concepts of working. Therefore, it is hard to implement flexible work arrangements under that kind of management team.

“Even though Generation Z is more familiar with the latest technology, their supervisors, who are from previous generations, aren’t that familiar with the latest technology. As a result, those supervisors are resistant to change and adapt to new concepts of working.”

4.2.3 Friendly Supervision

A considerable number of participants consider a friendly supervisor a treasure. Because the contribution of a friendly supervisor is priceless. According to the response of Participant A, on the one hand, a friendly supervisor has the power to retain an entry-level job seeker for a long period at the organization with higher job satisfaction. On the other hand, a strict supervisor can lead jobholders to resign from the job with high stress and dissatisfaction.

“As I feel that if the supervisor makes us stressed by blaming us always, we leave that place quickly due to that stress and dissatisfaction. I feel that my group head is a more friendly and supportive person for us. And also, he guides and secures us since we are still at the entry level. So, we consider him a strength for us.”

In addition, Participant D also stated that entry-level jobholders tend to provide their creative ideas and fullest effort while working under a friendly supervisor.

“Of course, it helps the employees to overcome the fear of the bossy attitude. So that, if our supervisor is friendly, we can give our creative ideas and our fullest effort to carry out the tasks perfectly.”

Moreover, participants emphasize the value of obtaining timely and constructive feedback. As a piece of evidence, Participant F mentioned that the expectation of obtaining timely feedback from the supervisors leads to properly carrying out duties and responsibilities.

“So, as an entry-level job seeker who deals with finance, I highly expect proper guidance and timely feedback from my supervisors to carry out my duties and responsibilities properly.”

Participant C added something more to this fact. Participant C mentioned the need to clarify doubts and unclear areas from the supervisor as a major concern of Generation Z entry-level jobholders.

“I personally prefer to obtain constructive feedback from my supervisor after completing my assigned task. Further, I would like to clarify my unclear areas and doubts from the supervisors.”

In addition, Participant H also made this fact stronger. Participant H emphasized that Generation Z is a more rational set of people. As a result, they often raise doubts while carrying out something, and need to clarify those doubts. For that, they are required to interact closely with the supervisors.

“Since I’m a rational person, I raise doubts often and need to clarify my doubts when carrying out something. For that, I expect to maintain a close interaction with my supervisor.”

Additionally, talented supervisors can provide proper guidance and direction to entry-level jobholders. According to Participant G, making mistakes at the initial stage of the career is normal. As a result, it is essential to track and show them the proper direction when necessary. Further, it is very important to let them try things on their own as entry-level jobholders and let them learn things from their own mistakes.

“I see, making mistakes at the entry level is very normal. But the supervisor has to track us and show us the proper direction at the right time. In addition, the supervisor has to let us try out things on our own as interns and let us learn things from our own mistakes.”

4.2.4 Supportive Work Atmosphere

A supportive and pleasant workplace is a critical expectation of entry-level jobholders who belong to Generation Z because Generation Z values freedom more. Hence, they do not prefer to stay in an organization that has high control over them. Participant G explained it as follows.

“If I have to work under high control and many restrictions, I’ll quit my career quickly, as it is difficult for me to work within that environment.”

Furthermore, Participant H also shared the same idea. And also, Participant H added more facts to provide a better understanding of that.

“Even though I can earn a high salary, I may not be retained in an unpleasant workplace as it makes me unsatisfied to work there. So, I’m more concerned about the cleanliness and tidiness of the hospital premises, as it makes my life easier to work there. Additionally, I can ensure the safety of patients’ lives and my life by having adequate medical equipment and tools.”

Therefore, it is evident that Generation Z jobholders are not willing to work in an unpleasant workplace even at a higher salary, as it makes them dissatisfied.

Additionally, the usage of proper infrastructure and equipment at the workplace is another crucial expectation of Generation Z jobholders. Because it supports day-to-day business operations and motivates jobholders to work happily in the work environment. Participant C stated that as follows.

"I expect proper infrastructure, such as enough workspace, sanitary facilities, lunch rooms, and adequate tools, as essential matters in a workplace."

The same idea is stated by Participant D. The utilization of modern technical tools and methods is essential for organizations to ensure their existence in the rapidly changing business world. Similarly, it is more important for jobholders to update their knowledge of modern technology. Hence, this finding aligns with the findings of the study conducted by Marginean in 2021.

"Well, I would like to work in an environment that provides modern IT infrastructures. For example, the usage of systematic software, some latest machines, and furniture."

Moreover, Generation Z jobholders expect a well-established work culture and autonomy in the work setting. According to Participant A, a work culture that promotes collaboration and open communication is essential for Generation Z jobholders. Because it allows them to raise their voices and share their ideas freely.

"I prefer the culture of my workplace. Because it enables collaboration and open communication. As a result, we can raise our voices and share our ideas among the team members to achieve team goals more conveniently."

As Participant I mentioned, Generation Z prefers to enjoy working life. Hence, they prefer to work in a relaxed manner.

"I really prefer my current workplace because it has a more pleasant atmosphere. Our organization has small trees inside it, and it is fully air-conditioned. And also, we are allowed to listen to music and use social media during working hours. So, I think it is an ideal place for Gen Z to work."

Hence, it is clear that working in a pleasant and supportive work environment encourages Generation Z jobholders to work comfortably.

4.3 Person-Centric Career Expectations

Person centric career expectations mean the expectations that individuals have related to their careers aligning with their personal values, passions, and desires. Intrinsic rewards, extrinsic rewards, skill improvement, and job switching are the four types of person-centric career expectations.

4.3.1 Intrinsic Rewards

According to the responses of the interviewees, the majority of Generation Z have higher expectations regarding intrinsic aspects. As per Participant E, Generation Z entry-level jobholders prefer to obtain proper recognition and appreciation when they put a massive effort into achieving the assigned tasks and goals. Because it boosts their satisfaction and encourages them to continue the good work.

"I expect proper recognition and appreciation for my contribution at work."

Participant C also confirmed this concern by explaining the need to be appreciated by seniors for the higher level of performance of jobholders who belong to Generation Z, because it significantly impacts them to maintain a good self-image among their co-workers and supervisors while working within the organization.

"I prefer to be appreciated by my supervisors for my work performance."

In addition, Generation Z prefers to grab development opportunities to improve their own talents and skills. As entry-level jobholders, they are more concerned about their development

while climbing up the career ladder gradually. And also, they prefer to be involved and engaged in the different events organized by the workplace to enhance social interaction. It is proven by Participant C as follows.

“Even though I’m still an intern, my current workplace always provides me with opportunities to develop my talents and to be a part of all the events similar to its permanent staff members.”

This expectation is confirmed by Participant F as follows. Further, Participant F mentioned the preference to have a proper career advancement as a crucial expectation. Because proper career advancement is essential to becoming more successful in career life. Thus, this finding aligns with the findings of the study conducted by Ivanovic in 2022.

“I mostly prefer to have proper career advancement and development opportunities in the workplace.”

Moreover, Participant G mentioned the requirement to obtain diverse, challenging, and exciting job tasks instead of following a set of routine tasks regularly. Generation Z prefers to enjoy their work life by being involved in some interesting and novel tasks. And also, it is more important for them to gradually shift to the next level in their career.

“I wish to have diverse and challenging tasks instead of routine tasks. Marketers need to observe different viewpoints to succeed in their job tasks.”

Furthermore, Participant F also proved it as follows. Because repeating the same tasks again and again throughout the career leads to feeling bored and unsatisfied. As Generation Z is keen on exploring new knowledge, they are demotivated by carrying out the same set of tasks repetitively.

“I prefer to gain experience in different job tasks without repeating the same tasks throughout my career life.”

As mentioned above, Generation Z prefers to seek new things and improve their lives by gaining proper education. Therefore, they have a strong inspiration to grab learning opportunities throughout their career. In the modern business world, every professional who belongs to any industry needs to update themselves according to the new trends and the rapidly changing technology. Participant H mentioned that as follows.

“I hope to grab learning opportunities more. Because I need to update myself according to the new trends in the industry.”

Hence, it is crucial to provide a set of learning opportunities within the workplace for Generation Z jobholders. Because they prefer to learn new things while working. Therefore, the learning culture of the workplace is more critical to retaining Generation Z jobholders within the workplace for a long period. It is stated by Participant B as follows.

“I mostly prefer to work in a work environment that provides me with many learning opportunities.”

Additionally, Generation Z jobholders expect to gain proper work experience and training in the initial stage of their careers since it considerably impacts career success in the future. Participant C mentioned it as follows.

“At this stage, I’m mostly concerned about gaining proper work experience as an human resource intern. Because it’s extremely essential for my future career success.”

This is confirmed by Participant H also. Therefore, the opportunity to have proper work experience and training is a key expectation of Generation Z jobholders who belong to the entry level, as it is the foundation for their career life.

"I mostly prefer to gain proper work experience and training."

4.3.2 Extrinsic Rewards

"I don't aim to earn a big salary in the initial stage of my career."

According to the data analysis of the study, it is evident that the majority of the interviewees are not bothered about their financial allowances at the entry level. As they feel, they need to consider gaining proper practical exposure rather than earning a big salary in the initial stage of their career. They see gaining proper work experience at the entry level as a foundation for the career ladder. Participant H clearly stated this matter as above.

"Since I have less experience, I'm not bothered about my financial allowances yet."

Moreover, as Participant C mentioned entry level jobholders cannot expect to gain higher financial allowances since they have less work experience. However, gaining proper fundamental exposure at the initial stage leads to earning higher financial rewards in the upcoming career life. Hence, Participant G also stated the same thing as follows.

"I don't have a high level of expectations about financial rewards in my initial job."

However, few interviewees consider financial allowances as their key expectations. According to Participant B, some jobholders expect a fair salary considering their contribution and the workload that they completed. Otherwise, it makes them dissatisfied and demotivated.

"I expect a reasonable salary considering my contribution and workload."

In addition, Participant I stated that even Generation Z entry-level jobholders need to focus on the financial rewards to bear the higher living costs that result from the economic crisis. Hence, due to that reason, entry level jobholders also have to emphasize obtaining financial allowances to some extent.

"I'm more focused on my financial rewards due to the high cost of living in our country."

4.3.3 Skill Improvement

Generation Z jobholders are highly concerned about their skill improvement. Basically, most of the interviewees are concerned about the improvement of their common basic skills. According to Participant G, entry level jobholders are keen on improving their soft skills.

"I also need to enhance my soft skills such as creativity, communication skills, time management, teamwork, and critical thinking."

Participant A also emphasized the need to improve a similar set of skills at the entry level of the career. Because the improvement of skills at the initial stage in the career is a massive support to smoothly climb up their career ladder.

"I'm seriously concerned about improving my logical thinking, leadership skills, and teamwork ability related to my career."

Especially, Generation Z jobholders commonly prefer to improve their IT skills since it is essential for each employee currently, regardless of the industry they belong to. Because IT changes rapidly. And also, IT skills are equally important in the work life in the present as well as in the future. Participant D stated that as follows.

“Actually, I mostly prefer to improve my IT skills more as it is more important for my work life in the present as well as in the future.”

According to the data gathered from the interviews, it is evident that the majority of interviewees have crucially considered the improvement of the skills that are required to be an expert in the field in the future. For that, they started enhancing those skills from their entry level. According to Participant B, entry-level jobholders initially recognize the trends in the industry and their own passion. Based on that, they take initiatives such as pursuing higher studies to absorb the necessary skills.

“I feel that there is a contemporary trend and progression in the DevOps engineering side. I’m enthusiastic in that area and I would like to enter that field. So, I’m currently following some courses even for that.”

Further, as per the response received from Participant G, entry level jobholders can grab the opportunities and face the challenges in the industry well by recognizing modern industry trends and improving skills.

“I’m seeking more digital marketing. Because the development of artificial intelligence impacts marketing massively. So, as a marketer, I need to improve my knowledge of digital marketing. And also, I prefer to expand my knowledge in tourism and hospitality management because it is a contemporary trend in the marketing stream, and it provides a bunch of job opportunities for new talents.”

Not only, that but also skill improvement at the initial stage of the career significantly impacts increasing effectiveness and productivity when carrying out the job tasks in the future. This matter is ensured by Participant H as follows.

“I’m extremely concerned about the enhancement of my soft skills, such as patience, focus, and confidence. Because a neurosurgeon has to do brain surgeries always, and it takes a lot of time to complete one surgery.”

Participant F also confirmed it as follows. In addition, it is clear that Generation Z jobholders always try to enhance their skills to succeed in their future careers.

“Well, I mainly expect to improve my analytical skills more. Because I need to analyze financial data more to make insightful decisions based on that data.”

4.3.4 Job Switching

According to the responses received from the interviewees, it is clear that there is a high tendency to change job content among the individuals who belong to Generation Z. As a result, they are involved in various jobs throughout their careers. This matter has been explained by Participant E as follows.

“However, I don’t like to limit myself to a particular career throughout my entire lifetime.”

Therefore, it is clear that Generation Z individuals who are at the entry level are genuinely open to changing their jobs. Because they do not prefer to gain the same experience repetitively. Instead, they prefer to test different jobs until they find their passion. This concern is proven by the response received by Participant E.

“I plan to gain knowledge and experience in both the medicine and clothing design fields in the same way. Additionally, I expect to seek the best opportunities in both of these fields to succeed in my professional life.”

Further, it is evident that before switching to another job, Generation Z tries to be involved in different jobs at the same time. Accordingly, they can recognize which one works well for them and then shift to the best one. Participant H has explained this matter as follows.

“I would like to become a neurosurgeon because I’m interested in neuroscience a lot. In addition, I prefer to conduct my tuition classes in the future as well. Because I’m very passionate about teaching.”

Not only switching jobs, but also Generation Z is interested in gaining exposure in different industries. According to the response received by Participant D, most of Generation Z need to gain work exposure in various industries from time to time.

“I like to gain different work experiences in different industries.”

Moreover, this concern is strengthened by the response of Participant C as follows. Even though Participant C is currently involved in the tourism industry, thereafter need to shift to other industries such as the garment and banking sectors. Therefore, it is confirmed that the majority of Generation Z individuals are not expected to be involved in a particular job or industry throughout their careers as previous generations. They prefer switching to other opportunities and gathering various experiences in their careers.

“If I leave my current workplace, I definitely wish to join either the garment sector or the banking sector.”

Figure 1 illustrates the key categories and subcategories of career expectations among Sri Lankan entry-level Gen Z professionals identified through the study.

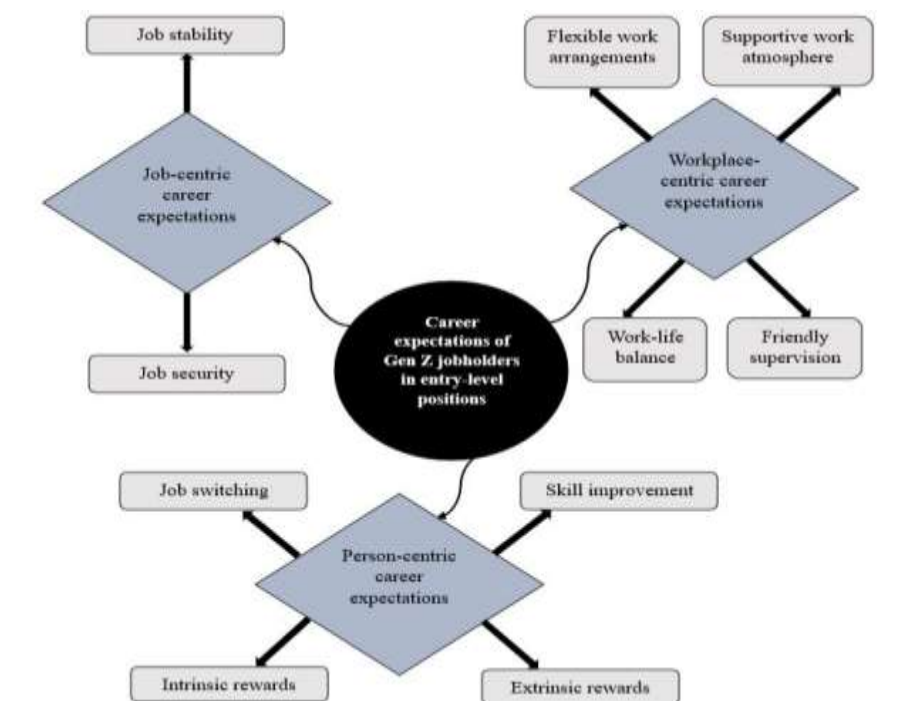


Figure 1: Thematic Map

Source: Developed by the author

5. Discussion

The ten career expectations of Gen Z entry-level professionals align with the Job Characteristics Model. They seek meaningful contributions (task identity), impact on colleagues (task significance), autonomy supported by flexible arrangements and work-life balance (autonomy), timely guidance (feedback), diverse tasks (skill variety), and intrinsic rewards (work meaningfulness). These expectations highlight how job attributes influence their motivation, engagement, and career development, emphasizing the importance of designing roles that support both individual growth and organizational impact.

Figure 2 depicts the connection between the final themes of the research and the elements of the Job Characteristics Model identified through the study.

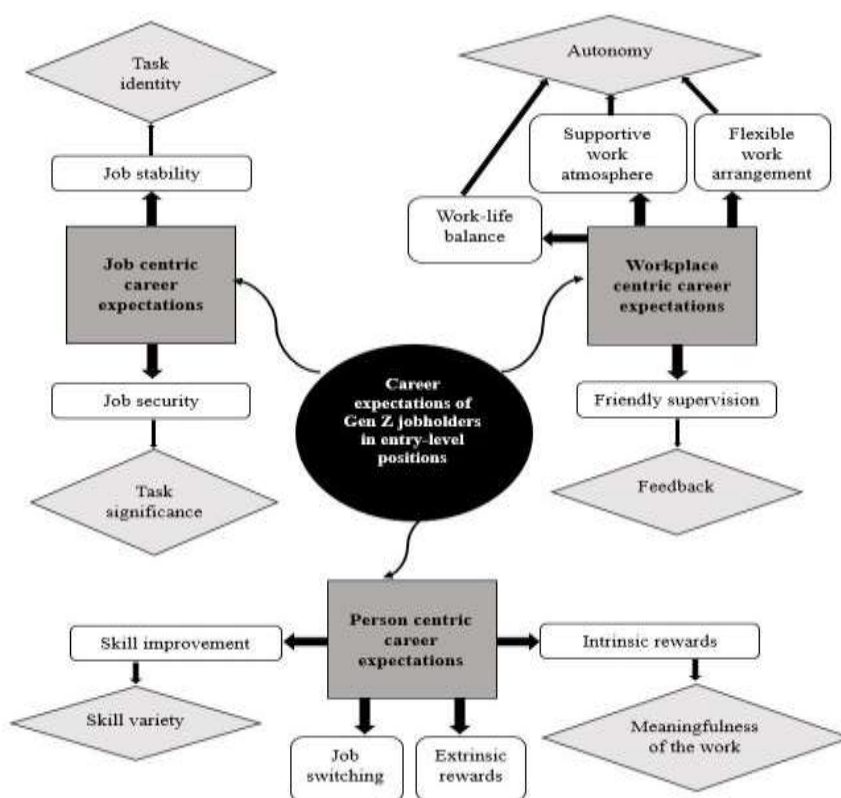


Figure 2: The connection between the final themes of the research and the elements of the JCT Model

Source: Developed by the author

Expectations regarding career life differ across generations. Gen Z exhibiting distinct priorities. This study examined the career expectations of entry-level Gen Z professionals and compared them with existing local, Asian, and Western studies.

Findings align with prior studies in several areas. Job security and stability were highly valued, consistent with Western (Barhate & Dirani, 2022; Iorgulescu, 2016) and local studies (Jayatissa, 2023). Friendly supervision was deemed essential, corroborated by Western

(Hutano et al., 2020; Iorgulescu, 2016; Marginean, 2021) and Asian studies (Ivanovic, 2022). Work-life balance, supportive work atmosphere, and flexible work arrangements were also prioritized, reflecting Western (Barhate & Dirani, 2022; Marginean, 2021) and local findings (De Silva et al., 2022; Jayatissa, 2023).

Entry-level Gen Z professionals emphasized skill development and career advancement, supported by Western (Iorgulescu, 2016) and Asian studies (Ivanovic, 2022). Extrinsic rewards were moderately important, aligning with some local studies (De Silva et al., 2022; Jayatissa, 2023; Pathirana et al., 2025). Notably, intrinsic rewards such as recognition, appreciation, and meaningful work were prioritized over extrinsic incentives, highlighting a shift toward motivation driven by personal growth and purpose rather than financial gain.

Overall, the study reveals both consistencies and context-specific variations, underscoring the importance of considering cultural and organizational settings when examining Gen Z career expectations.

6. Implications of the Study

This study contributes to theory and practice by examining entry-level Gen Z employees' early career expectations through Job Characteristics Theory (JCT). Unlike prior studies focused on established employees, it demonstrates that career expectations form before full organizational integration. By linking Gen Z's preferences for autonomy, task variety, meaningful work, feedback, and skill utilization to JCT's core job characteristics, the study extends the theory's relevance to a digitally oriented generation with boundaryless career perspectives and strong purpose orientation. It also advances generational and cross-cultural research by showing that, even in a collectivist emerging-market context, Gen Z prioritizes intrinsic job characteristics alongside context-specific extrinsic expectations.

Practically, the findings suggest the human resource strategies by highlighting the importance of flexible work, supportive environments, meaningful roles, clear career development, and transparent communication about growth and stability to enhance engagement and retention.

However, there are several limitations of the study as it has a small sample size and qualitative design, restricting generalizability. Future research could expand sample sizes, apply quantitative approaches, compare different professional levels, and explore intersectional influences such as gender, education, and geography on Gen Z career expectations as further improvements.

7. Conclusion

This study explored the career expectations of entry-level Generation Z professionals in Sri Lanka, identifying three distinct expectation clusters. The findings show that Gen Z prioritizes purposeful, developmental, and balanced careers, emphasizing learning, autonomy, and recognition over financial stability. These expectations reflect a strong orientation toward self-growth and meaningful contribution within the constraints of an emerging economy. By capturing how Sri Lankan Gen Z interprets early-career work, the study adds new evidence to global studies on generational work values and career expectations.

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