Navigating the Hybrid Paradigm: A Qualitative Study of Generation Z Engagement, Well-being, and Productivity in the Indian Information Technology Sector

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Abstract
As the Indian IT sector is getting used to the "new normal" following the pandemic, the increase in involvement of Generation Z (Gen Z) individuals in the workforce has raised certain organizational issues for them. This research looks at analysing the experience of Gen Z workers at the workplace in hybrid work environment from the point of view of 20 Human Resources (HR) practitioners from the Indian IT industry. With the help of qualitative thematic analysis, it was found that hybrid work serves as a double-edged sword. While on the one hand, hybrid work helps to improve well-being of the workers by reducing stress associated with traveling to the office and adding flexibility to work, on the other hand, it decreases the sense of organizational affiliation of the workers, makes mentorship of young workers difficult and reduces collaboration opportunities and innovation. Additionally, the research showed that many Gen Z workers view their jobs not as careers but as transactions, thus, organizations should switch from monitoring the effort made by the worker to the performance results.

Keywords: Hybrid Working, Gen Z, Engagement, Wellbeing, Indian IT Sector

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Context

One of the significant economic sectors in India, would be the IT sector as it helps to provide a large volume of exports, employment, and innovation. This particular sector has undergone various changes over the last three decades, converting itself into a leading centre of software development, ITES, consulting, and digital transformation that hires a huge number of employees from various fields. However, the pandemic of 2020 caused serious disruptions to ways of doing usual business as companies had to move from office-based work to remote working within a short span of time. It would not have been made possible if we did not have cloud computing, collaboration technologies, and digital communications (Kniffin et al., 2021; Waizenegger et al., 2020).

Even though remote work originally came into existence due to a crisis situation, its sustainability over time contradicted all the traditional beliefs related to productivity and physical presence at work. The companies realized that many activities that are based on knowledge can be efficiently performed even outside the usual working environment. As a result, once the restrictions related to the pandemic were loosened, the organizations did not return to the way things were before. They started operating with hybrid work models that combine both remote and office-based work as a way of finding a balance between efficiency, cooperation, innovation, and people's well-being. Recent data shows that hybrid work has become prevalent in the Indian technology industry. According to a recent study of the industry conducted in 2024, nearly six in ten IT companies have embraced the hybrid work model, while only about 25 percent of them have abandoned the work-from-home practice. Moreover, close to 38 percent of IT job advertisements in India provide the possibility of hybrid or remote work.

The transition towards the hybrid work model has not been equally implemented across all organizations. Whereas some of the major technology firms have urged their employees to come back into the office for collaboration, innovation, mentoring, and organization socialization, others have stuck to their flexible working models in order to stay ahead in the competition for skilled labour. Organizations like Infosys, Wipro, HCL Tech, and Cognizant have opted for a structured hybrid model wherein employees are required to come to the office for certain days during the week, while also allowing remote working wherever it is possible.

Alternatively, there has been a significant change in the demographic mix of the Indian IT workforce as the quick addition of the Generation Z (Gen Z) takes place. Gen Zs are those individuals who were born between 1996 and 2012 (Dimock, 2019), and they are becoming one of the fastest growing employee groups in technology companies. Depending upon the size of the organization, its recruitment efforts, and the nature of work, Gen Z employees account for a large

population of employees, especially in software development, digital engineering, analytics, cybersecurity, and other emerging technology positions. In comparison to the previous generations, the members of Gen Z have been brought up in an era of constant internet connectivity, smartphone usage, social media, artificial intelligence, and digital interactions. They are the digital natives who are technologically proficient but at the same time have very different expectations from the workplace as compared to their predecessors (Prensky, 2001; Francis and Hoefel, 2018).

Consistent research also points to the fact that Gen Z values flexibility, meaningfulness, learning, career growth, well-being, and integration of work and life more than their predecessors. Flexibility is no longer just seen by Gen Z as something that comes with being employed but as an important factor of the ideal workplace itself. There is also recent evidence showing that younger people, especially in India, value flexible work options, autonomy, employee well-being, along with good pay, highlighting the changing priorities in the world of work.

Nevertheless, there are both benefits and drawbacks of hybrid work for Gen Z workers. While flexible working conditions increase autonomy, decrease commuting time, provide better work-life balance and individual productivity, less interaction can lead to less mentoring, professionalization, learning on the job, organization identification, and career advancement – which is especially significant when it comes to the early stages of the careers of employees. New research in software engineering and organizational behavior also indicates that while hybrid work usually results in positive outcomes for individuals, there are still some challenges faced by organizations regarding teamwork, knowledge sharing, innovations, and integration of employees in hybrid settings.

This has led to a complicated situation with regards to organizational structure, whereby technology firms must deal with changing work models and at the same time the demands of a new generation of employees. Hybrid working model coupled with Gen Z's unique values at work have become an fascinating research subject.

It is critical to understand that that reviewing the effects of hybrid work on engagement, well-being, collaboration, learning, and commitment of Gen Z employees to their respective organizations is mainly relevant to the Indian IT industry, where the key factor of competitive advantage depends on how you deal with human capital. Analysing the above-listed phenomena may be quite useful both from the theoretical perspective regarding the future of work and also from the practical perspective for designing employee-centric hybrid workplaces.

1.2 Objectives

The primary objectives of this research are:

- To assess the efficacy of existing hybrid work policies in the Indian IT landscape.
- To comprehend how hybrid work arrangements impact engagement and organizational belongingness amongst Gen Z employees.
- To evaluate the impact of these hybrid models on the mental and physical well-being of Gen Z workforce.
- To establish the relationship between remote flexibility and individual versus team-level productivity and innovation.

1.3 Problem Statement

Though lot of tech firms use hybrid work as a retention magnet for Gen Z, HR leaders have reported spike in "infantile attrition" along with a lack of cultural integration among those who have joined during the remote-work period. There is an increasing disconnect between senior leadership (typically from Millennials and Gen X), who lay great importance to "face time" and informal mentoring, and Gen Z, who give more importance to "quality of life" over "quality of work life". This strain negatively impacts the long-term organizational health and the development of the future generation of technical leaders.

2. Generation Z Workforce And Theoretical Perspectives on Hybrid Work

The fast emergence of Gen Z in the workforce has led to changes in traditional strategies used for work design, engagement, and talent management by organizations. The members of this generation were born roughly between 1996 and 2012. This means that they are the first group of people who spent their whole lives in a connected world. This makes them extremely competent in using digital technologies and virtual communication tools (Dimock, 2019; Prensky, 2001). Nevertheless, Gen Z's expectations from workplaces go beyond digital benefits. The research shows that they expect transparency in organizational communication, authenticity from leaders, diversity and inclusiveness, the opportunity for continuous learning, as well as the consistency between organization's values and wider societal issues like sustainability, social responsibility, and ethics (Francis and Hoefel, 2018; Deloitte, 2024).

Unlike the older generations, Gen Z often sees working as part of the holistic package of an individual's life rather than the ultimate meaning of it. Such a perception has resulted in the development of a concept referred to by the researchers as the "gig mindset," which is based on such traits as flexibility, portfolio careers, skills development, and increased freedom to make decisions about their career path. Rather than considering it necessary to spend the whole life in one company, most Gen Z workers see the importance of being employable, gaining experience, and learning more about different industries and companies.

The increasing relevance of ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance) factors adds another dimension in the contrast between Gen Z and earlier generations. Various surveys conducted around the

world about the workforce reveal that young employees are becoming increasingly critical about their employers and take into account not just the salary and career options offered by them but also their ethical values, sustainability efforts, diversity, and impact on society (Deloitte, 2024).

The Theory of Personal Engagement developed by Kahn (1990) is significant theoretically for examining the experiences of workers in hybrid workplaces. In his theory, Kahn defines engagement as the degree of personal involvement in one's work activities. The Theory of Personal Engagement posits that the most engaged people will be those who fulfill three psychological requirements, namely psychological meaningfulness, psychological safety, and psychological availability (Kahn, 1990). Psychological meaningfulness is the perception that employees hold about their work being valuable and meaningful. Psychological safety is the perception that employees can engage in self-expression without any negative repercussions, whereas psychological availability relates to the availability of physical, emotional, and mental resources required for performing their roles effectively.

The hybrid model significantly redefines these aspects of psychology. Although working from home can improve autonomy and balance between work and personal life, this type of arrangement might, at the same time, result in fewer spontaneous meetings and mentoring, which would contribute to meaningfulness and connection. In many companies, compulsory attendance in the office without any well-defined goals for collaboration can further decrease the sense of meaning of work for employees since their visits to the office will seem like a duty and not an activity that adds value. Modern research shows that hybrid working models increase employee engagement when attendance at the office is goal-oriented and aimed at collaboration and innovation (Allen et al., 2021; Kniffin et al., 2021).

The well-being of employees in hybrid working environments could equally be examined using the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) theory (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007). This theory suggests that the well-being of employees stems from the interplay between demands at the job and the resources present there. Demands are those aspects of the job that drain one's physical and psychological resources, while resources are the factors in the environment that enable one to stay motivated and engaged in one's job.

From the JD-R approach, hybrid work drastically cuts down one of the most critical job demands that urban workers face, which is daily commuting. Especially in metropolitan cities where the distance is long and the commute stressful, cutting down or eliminating the commuting time will help in improving the work-life balance, decreasing exhaustion levels, and making more time for themselves. However, there are some additional psychological demands with hybrid work. Long-term remote work may increase the risks of feeling socially isolated, a sense of disconnectedness with the organization, digital exhaustion, a blurring of work-life separation, and heavy reliance on digital gadgets for communication purposes. The continuous use of screens, numerous virtual meetings, and the need for continuous connectivity have been found to increase cognitive exhaustion and decrease psychological recovery (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007; Kniffin et al., 2021).

Another useful theory to understand the working style of Gen Z is Self Determination Theory (SDT). This theory has been formulated by Ryan and Deci (2000). According to this theory, people enjoy intrinsic motivation and psychological well-being if their three psychological needs, which include autonomy, competence, and relatedness, are satisfied. Autonomy means having control over our behaviour and choices, whereas competence implies having capability to do work and relatedness means having relationships.

It can be said that hybrid work is consistent with the Gen Z need for autonomy since it gives workers more freedom to choose when and where they do their job. It allows workers to regulate themselves better, integrates work and life, and gives them control over the work schedule, meeting thus the primary psychological need recognized by SDT. But autonomy alone will not be enough to keep workers motivated over the long run. If hybrid work will deprive workers of mentoring, cooperative learning, feedback, and socializing, their needs for competence and relatedness will not be satisfied. Therefore, companies should create such hybrid work environments where there will be a balance between autonomy and collaboration, coaching, and professional development.

As a whole, these theoretical approaches indicate that the success of hybrid working among Gen Z is not only dependent on flexibility but the creation of workplaces that allow autonomy, meaningfulness, psychological safety, social connections, and well-being to coexist at once. Drawing on the insights provided by Kahn's engagement theory, JD-R theory, and Self-Determination Theory offers a holistic perspective of the impact of hybrid work on Gen Z employees in the Indian IT industry.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The current study utilizes the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) method to investigate the understanding and interpretation of HR leaders regarding the effects of hybrid work on Generation Z engagement, collaboration, well-being, and productivity in the Indian IT industry. IPA is an idiographic research paradigm based on phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography that focuses on understanding the subjective experiences of people and helps one to comprehend how people understand important life events (Smith et al., 2009). The aim of this paradigm is not to create objective knowledge but rather to understand subjective perceptions of events, thus, making IPA a very useful

framework in studying complex organizational phenomenon where perceptions and meanings affect decision-making processes.

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, work in organizations has been significantly transformed, which resulted in organizational challenges for HR leaders, including management of hybrid work environment, maintaining the engagement of employees, creating opportunities for collaboration among employees from distant geographic locations, and meeting the needs of Generation Z employees. These events entail ongoing interpretation and reflection on the part of the HR leaders. Thus, IPA is highly relevant for studying such events since it allows analysing the idiographic experience of participants through in-depth analysis of their accounts and identification of common themes afterward (Smith et al., 2009).

Another principle underlying IPA is the idea of the double hermeneutic, which implies that participants try to make sense of their experience, and the researcher makes sense of this sense-making (Smith and Osborn, 2015). Therefore, interpretative methods are especially helpful in the organizational context since HR leaders tend to hold strategic roles and try to balance the expectations of employees and corporate goals. The narratives of HR leaders will shed light on how hybrid work affects organizational culture, HR practices, and employee engagement.

Data collection involved 20 semi-structured interviews with senior HR leaders from IT organizations operating in Indian technology hubs such as Bengaluru, Chennai, and Hyderabad. This interview approach was chosen since it provides enough space for participants to tell their stories while making sure that conversations will be concentrated on the main topics of the study, namely employee engagement, collaboration, well-being, productivity, leadership challenges, and hybrid work implementation. Such an interview approach enables collecting rich reflective narratives and leaves some room for unexpected issues raised by participants (Creswell and Poth, 2018).

In terms of sample size, IPA follows the methodological recommendation that emphasizes depth of data over diversity of representation. Unlike quantitative studies where representative sampling is needed, qualitative research involves purposive sampling. In this study, senior HR leaders were chosen as participants since they have strategic involvement in implementing hybrid work practices and dealing with the expectations of Generation Z employees.

Although the overall methodological framework is Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, the data analysis incorporated constant comparative coding procedures inspired by Grounded Theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 2014). Interview transcripts were analysed through multiple iterative stages involving open coding, comparison of emerging concepts across interviews, clustering of related codes into higher-order categories, and refinement of overarching themes. This iterative analytical process ensured that the findings remained closely connected to participants' narratives rather than being imposed by predetermined theoretical assumptions.

The constant comparison strategy aided the process of identifying the repetitive patterns concerning employee engagement, collaboration in the work environment, mental health, productivity, organizational culture, leadership styles, and the specific workplace requirements of the Generation Z employees. While analysing new interviews, new categories were constantly being compared to the previously coded data, thus allowing for recognizing similarities, dissimilarities, and various context. Such an inductive research design added to the validity and reliability of the results as the themes emerged directly from the experience of the participants rather than from any existing theoretical models (Charmaz, 2014).

The research was conducted within the major hubs of information technology in India, which include such cities as Bengaluru, Chennai, and Hyderabad. These are the cities that feature the largest concentrations of technology-based businesses in the country and that are distinguished by their diverse workforce, multinational companies, global delivery centres, and fast-paced change of work practices. Analysing the experience of HR professionals in these particular socioeconomic settings allows for gaining a better comprehension of the impact of organizational policies, work culture, and labour market on the process of implementation of hybrid work practices and on the experience of Gen Z employees.

3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

The data was gathered using in-depth semi-structured interviews of 20 senior Human Resource (HR) practitioners working in some of the most prominent Information Technology (IT) companies in India's major IT hotspots such as Bengaluru, Chennai, and Hyderabad. Purposive sampling was used to select the interviewees, which is one of the most commonly used methods of qualitative sampling and allows researchers to identify knowledgeable individuals who have a wealth of information about the phenomenon being studied (Patton, 2015). The research employs the approach of purposive sampling whereby I have selected people rich in information that are responsible for the design and implementation of workforce policies in the Indian IT industry. The targeted sample of experienced HR professionals with at least 10 to 25 years of experience in the industry offers a long-term outlook needed to compare the "digital-first" approach of Gen Z against the traditional office-based norms of preceding generations. In this way, the chosen sampling technique makes sure that the selected leaders deal with a huge number of Gen Z employees up to 70% of the total number of employees. It is crucial since this gives an opportunity to observe

major generational changes on the example of the company. Moreover, the chosen leaders belong to a variety of IT companies including global consulting and services providers, semiconductor and FinTech companies that enables providing a holistic analysis of the trend instead of one-off events. Moreover, the leaders are also in possession of the sensitive information concerning "infantile attrition," mentoring problems, and mental health crises in organizations.

Interviews have been chosen as the main mode of collecting data since they offer enough flexibility for the exploration of experience lived by the participants along with uniformity across interviews through the use of an interview guide (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Such an approach would allow participants to expand on their experience, perceptions, and problems encountered by them during the process of working in organizations, while the interviewer could inquire into new themes that have emerged. The interview guide has been developed according to four related themes that have appeared in light of the research objectives, namely employee engagement, collaboration, employee well-being, and productivity.

The interviews provided extensive narrative data about the experience of HR managers when leading the process of organizational transformation after the COVID-19 pandemic. The areas discussed included changes in the behaviour of employees, organizational culture, communication, leadership style, mentorship, performance management, employee expectations, and organizational measures to retain engagement in hybrid working. Also, the uniqueness of Generation Z workers was addressed in terms of their expectations in relation to flexibility, career advancement, work-life balance, psychological well-being, and organizational culture.

The interviews were analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2021). Braun and Clarke describe Reflexive Thematic Analysis as “a systematic approach to analysing qualitative data through the identification, organization, and reporting of themes.” This approach was chosen because of its ability to analyse explicit and implicit meanings expressed in data, without being limited by any theory paradigm. The steps in conducting thematic analysis involved Braun and Clarke’s six-step process, namely: 1) Familiarizing oneself with the data; 2) Coding the data; 3) Searching for themes; 4) Reviewing the themes; 5) Defining and naming themes; and 6) Writing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The transcription and re-reading of the recorded interviews was conducted verbatim for familiarization that entailed note taking and observation of emerging themes. Open coding came after familiarization where the researcher sought meaningful textual units in regard to the emerging themes and experiences. The inductive approach of codes was employed in the data analysis because it was derived from the participant stories (Saldaña, 2021). Some of the themes that arose out of the process of open coding include "commuting avoidance," "mentoring problems," "digital exhaustion," "less informal learning," "independent workers," "virtual work" and "work-life balance."

Once coding was done for the first time, the codes of the concepts having similarity were compared and categorized under broad themes. Method of constant comparison was used during the analysis because it helped compare the similarities and differences within the narratives of the participants. This approach helped enhance the credibility of the themes that were derived from the data (Charmaz, 2014). Also, emphasis was placed on the language used by the participants because it symbolized their organizational experience.

A few organizational terms and workplace idioms including "floating seats," "bro culture," "notorious traffic," "office visits for a purpose," "Zoom fatigue," and "coffee talks" served as first-order codes as they were considered common experiences of many participants. The aforementioned descriptive codes were then synthesized into second-order themes, which included hybrid workplace flexibility, sense of belonging to an organization, knowledge sharing and mentoring, well-being of employees, collaborative environment, and workplace productivity. The coding hierarchy facilitated me, as a researcher, in going beyond just descriptive analysis and forming interpretative themes about the dynamic relationship between hybrid workplaces and Gen Z employees' engagement.

In order to improve the reliability and validity of the study, coding was done continuously during the analysis process. The thematic categories were compared thoroughly with the transcript of the interviews to ensure that they represented the point of view of the interviewees and not that they became indistinguishable from one another. This made the interpretation more credible, dependable, and valid because the themes were very closely related to the experience of the participants within the organizational setting of the Indian IT sector (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

3.2.1 Thematic Map and Analysis

The below table illustrates the various themes and their connection with various aspects of engagement, well-being and productivity.

Table 1: Thematic Analysis

Theme Name	Definition	Respondents (n=20)	Representative Quotes	Connection
Flexibility as a Non-Negotiable Contract	The shift from viewing hybrid work as a benefit to a foundational career requirement.	18 (90%)	"For Gen Z, flexibility is a non-negotiable… 74% felt they will leave if the policy is removed." "They take it as a basic minimum… [not] an enablement."	Engagement: High preference for hybrid models acts as a retention magnet.
The Mentorship and Innovation Deficit	The struggle to transfer institutional knowledge and foster spontaneous innovation in remote settings.	15 (75%)	"Our ability to [get] individuals in client engagements has dropped… because seniors would mentor freshers [in person]." "Innovation… mindset has itself eroded… unless it's become a real difficult situation."	Productivity: Individual tasks remain high, but team innovation and "readiness" suffer.
The Health Paradox: Commute Relief vs. Digital Overload	The benefit of avoiding "notorious" traffic balanced against blurred boundaries and gadget addiction.	17 (85%)	"They dread coming to office… traffic related challenges." "Without a laptop and without charger, he felt he just can't live… his mental state was super hyper."	Well-being: Physical health improves through saved time, but mental resilience is low.
Evolution of Workplace Hierarchy (Low Power Distance)	The rejection of traditional corporate etiquette and "micromanagement" in favour of transparency and results.	12 (60%)	"Some of the Gen Zs… end up calling the manager, bro." "They will not blindly follow what you say… they need to see leadership in you."	Engagement: Requires a shift from tracking "seat time" to measuring "impact."

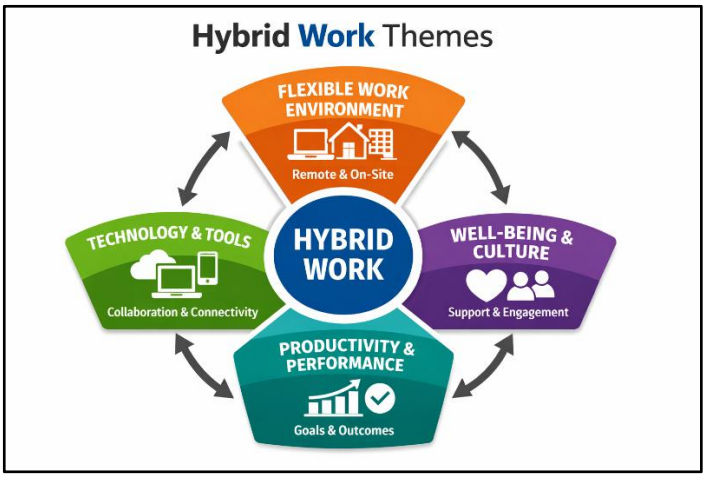

Figure 1: Pictorial Representation of the themes

3.2.2. Contradictions and Divergent Views

- **Productivity Measures:** Certain managers say their productivity levels have not fallen but rather increased because of concentration, whereas other managers cite "productivity loss" and "lack of professionalism" in the workplace because the employees are "wasting time" at work or going "off video" during meetings.
- **"The Social Need":** There is a division between the majority who like to work from home and a "minority segment" who are "exhausted from work from home" and come to the office for the sake of meeting people.

3.2.3. Unexpected/Emergent Themes

- **"Paying Guest Loneliness":** A recent trend related to the loneliness felt by Generation Z workers staying in PG accommodation without their families while working remotely.
- **Entitlement versus Caring:** A cultural phenomenon that Gen Z believes they need to be “taken care of” by their parents (living at home) even while earning money for the corporations they work for.

4. Findings

4.1 The Policy Spectrum: From Guidelines to Mandates

Most firms in the Information Technology (IT) industry have gradually discontinued their remote working setup adopted during the coronavirus disease and adopted a hybrid approach to working, which basically entails having the employee physically present in the office for three days in a week. The employee is expected to be in the office between six and nine hours in a day and remote from home for the rest of the time. Such trends are an indication of how companies have increasingly concentrated on collaborating, innovating, and engaging the employees through physical presence while maintaining the flexibility that was attained during the pandemic period (Allen et al., 2015; Choudhury et al., 2021; Gartner, 2024). Nevertheless, despite the embracement of the hybrid models of working, their adoption is entirely different from one firm to another based on various factors:

- **Decentralized Flexibility:** Several organizations have taken up the approach of decentralization, allowing individual project managers or heads of the business units to decide on the schedule of office attendance. This decision is made on the basis of project deliverables, customer meetings, teamwork requirements, and delivery deadlines, rather than being governed by any organizational policy. Decentralized decisions allow the organizations to be flexible, while still meeting their customer requirements and organizational goals (Choudhury et al., 2021; Microsoft, 2022).
- **Consequence Management:** Several organizations have adopted strict compliance procedures for ensuring return to office. The attendance process has been more linked to human resource management processes, and in some cases, the lack of compliance has been linked to penalties, which include deductions in salary, leaves, poor performance appraisal, or loss of pay. This is in reaction to the managers' fears that voluntary attendance policies might not be adequate in encouraging the workers to return to offices physically. However, scholars warn against using such coercive means as they can negatively impact the motivation and welfare of the employees (Bloom et al., 2024; Gallup, 2023).
- **The "Hometown" Exception:** On the other hand, there continues to be provision of selective flexibility for employees who have highly specialized or niche technical skills. Employees who have expertise that is critical, unique or specific to their clients sometimes get to work from their hometowns or any remote location of their choosing. This kind of flexibility has been

granted only under certain exceptions where the individual is required to attend strategic discussions, information exchange, trainings, or team building exercises periodically at the home base of the organization. In most organizations, it has been noted that the cost incurred by employees in traveling for these essential visits are usually not covered except in special cases that have been stated in employment contracts.

To sum up, current hybrid work strategies clearly show that businesses are trying to find a balance between effectiveness and flexibility. Although the strict office attendance policy attempts to encourage collaboration and organizational culture, the decentralized nature of the approach and exceptions for certain roles point to the fact that hybrid work has become a situational approach to management.

4.2 Engagement: Digital Relationships and the Belongingness Gap

Paradoxes associated with employee engagement within the hybrid work environment for Generation Z employees are quite evident. Indeed, on the one hand, Gen Z employees feel significantly more satisfied about their jobs, work-life balance, and well-being if they are given the opportunity to engage in flexible work arrangements. The possibility to be able to choose where and when to do the job increases their sense of control over their work-related tasks, helps them save time by avoiding commuting to and from the office, and, consequently, improves their overall employee experience (Choudhury et al., 2021; Deloitte, 2024). On the other hand, even though these employees face increasing flexibility at work, there is a growing tendency toward decreased levels of emotional involvement in the organization, decreased organizational identification, and decreased engagement with the long-term vision and values of the organization. In contrast to other generations that developed stronger organizational commitment due to increased contact with other employees and organization, Generation Z feels much more transactional about their job and focuses more on career growth, meaningfulness of work, learning, and personal well-being than on organizational loyalty (Gallup, 2024; PwC, 2024).

- **Digital-First Collaboration:** Another trait of Gen Z that emerges as an important one is the digital first nature of collaboration. Earlier generations had built up their interpersonal relationships through informal interactions within the workplace prior to engaging in professional collaboration. Gen Z, however, being more accustomed to digital technologies and virtual platforms of communication, tends to build up professional relationships through collaborative interaction. Communication happens mainly through instant messengers, collaborative software solutions, project management platforms and virtual meetings instead of face-to-face interaction. As a result, interpersonal trust and workplace relationships arise as the result of collaboration (Prensky, 2001; Microsoft, 2023). This approach makes it possible to achieve efficient communication and coordination of work among distant teams but at the same time limits mentoring and knowledge exchange.
- **Social Loafing and "Off-Video" Culture:** One more challenge that has been highlighted by the HR professionals concerning employee engagement is “social loafing”, which is quite common in virtual environments. This refers to the behavioural trend according to which people put forth less effort while working as part of a group compared to working individually (Latané et al., 1979). In hybrid workplaces, such a behaviour is noticeable when holding virtual meetings since most people who join virtual meetings tend to switch off their cameras, remain muted throughout the whole process of the meeting and take part in discussions only if they are asked to do so. Switching off the camera in a virtual meeting setting implies that there is no interaction at all and it is difficult for the supervisor to determine whether employees are engaged.
- **Floating Seats:** The physical design of the hybrid workspaces has an effect on the level of employee engagement, especially because of the popularity of the concept of floating seats. It means that most companies have stopped assigning fixed workstations to employees because hybrid work practices help make better use of office space. Even though this practice increases operational effectiveness and helps cut down on costs, there is a downside that becomes visible to HR specialists, especially in relation to Gen Z employees. The lack of a fixed workstation makes young employees feel like guests rather than real members of the company. Also, employees often come to their offices only just before meetings, eat at their stations and leave immediately after finishing the work to save themselves from heavy traffic. All these behaviors prevent employees from having informal discussions and learning from others, exchanging experience between different departments and building relationships that used to be established during lunch or other breaks in the office.

Overall, these results indicate that the engagement of the employees in hybrid working conditions is not limited to flexibility and efficiency. While hybrid work improves personal satisfaction and freedom of the

workers, it might unintentionally lead to their disengagement from the organizational life, decrease spontaneous cooperation, and limit social integration. With respect to the employees of Generation Z, who have unique expectations compared to previous generations, organizations need to create opportunities for socializing, mentoring, building the community, and integrating into the culture.

4.3 Collaboration and the Mentorship Deficit

One of the consequences of the hybrid mode of operation, stated by the Human Resources specialists, refers to the disappearance of the "shadowing" phenomenon which used to help young professionals to obtain necessary experience and to improve their professional performance. Traditionally, the newcomers used to learn the technical knowledge, corporate culture, and professionalism through watching seniors at work. But, because of the decrease in the frequency of direct contact in the hybrid environment, the opportunities for learning in this way are minimal. This means that members of the Generation Z depend mainly on written information, video conferencing software, and collaboration tools which only give explicit knowledge but do not allow them to acquire tacit knowledge via observations (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Allen et al., 2015).

- **Technical Silos:** The other theme that has been prevalent among the findings from the conducted interviews is the growing trend towards Gen Z employees working in silos in technical fields. With hybrid working settings, people can immerse themselves into the assigned coding and project assignments. Hence, productivity can increase among such employees. However, the HR leaders found that younger employees focus more on their assigned duties, leaving no time for discussions about the overall project among others. In case of technical issues, conflicts between stakeholders, and unclear project requirements, many Gen Z employees are believed to escalate issues instantly or take a temporary break from the task without finding a compromise or a solution through collaboration. This type of task-oriented approach is facilitated by digital processes and clear duties but can affect an employee's ability to be adaptable, resilient, and capable of systems thinking in complicated organizations (Leonardi, 2021; Microsoft, 2023).
- **The "Bro" Culture:** Moreover, there is a growing trend in communication style becoming more informal, sometimes even called "bro culture". This culture is characteristic of Gen Z employees who often use highly informal language influenced by social media, gaming communities and digital communication tools. According to managers, some junior employees tend to address supervisors in very informal ways using expressions like "bro" or "buddy" and prefer direct communications instead of hierarchical communication style. While the mentioned communication style can promote openness, psychological safety and lower power distance, it may be sometimes problematic for organizations that still adhere to the formal communication style and business etiquette. In addition, HR managers noticed that sometimes junior employees skip hierarchical structure and communicate directly with customers or senior management without adhering to organizational communication procedures. Despite the fact that this practice shows confidence and initiative on the part of junior employees, it may lead to inconsistency and inefficiency in communication in case organizational communication procedures are not well known (Schein & Schein, 2021; Deloitte, 2024).
- **Problem Solving:** The interview sessions revealed another trend relating to the decreasing contribution of the informal exchanges in the workplace towards problem-solving and organizational learning. Informal "water cooler" chats, lunchtime talks, and informal contacts among peers have always been an important source of gaining knowledge by asking questions, getting technical information, understanding the organization's expectations, and learning about the experience of more senior professionals. Such contacts allowed the exchange of tacit knowledge that was hard to document using project management software or collaborative systems. However, under hybrid working conditions, there are no such informal learning chances anymore. Graduates and young professionals rely more on formal information obtained through collaborative platforms like Jira, Microsoft Teams, or other internal sources of knowledge. Such systems allow recording explicitly all procedures and technical documentation but are not able to deliver information on context, organizational politics, preferences of customers, and technical rationale behind decisions (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Wenger, 1998). As a result, HR managers found out that freshers needed more time to adapt to the organizational culture, gain context-specific competence, and solve difficult problems independently even though they had high technical competence.

In conclusion, the results suggest that the hybrid model of work has changed radically the way that Gen

Z workers learn at work and collaborate with each other. While new technology has made communication easier and improved information access, it is incapable of completely replacing the natural observation learning process and collaboration that takes place in a physical working environment. Therefore, the companies should combine their digital collaboration with mentoring programmes, learning sessions, communities of practice and cross-functional interactions to ensure the transfer of tacit knowledge and professional growth of young employees.

4.4 Well-being: The Commute Advantage vs. Blurred Boundaries

One more significant advantage of hybrid work mentioned by the HR managers repeatedly was the absence of time-consuming commutes. Until the emergence of hybrid work, the workers used to spend from two to four hours each day on commutes between home and work due to traffic jams and overcrowded public transportation. There are many negative outcomes related to the problem of long commutes including fatigue, unbalanced work-life ratio, additional stress, and overall poor well-being. With hybrid work, employees get rid of long commutes by remote working on some days of the week. To be more precise, it was noted that this advantage is especially appreciated by the Generation Z workers since it gives them an opportunity to use the time for personal growth, relaxation, family communication, and health. As evidence to the claim, scientific literature states that the decrease in commuting positively impacts job satisfaction, well-being, and work-life balance in general, reducing commuting-related stress and burnout (Allen et al., 2015; Choudhury et al., 2021; OECD, 2023).

- **Physical Health:** Lesser commuting time has had a positive effect on the physical health-related practices of many Gen Z employees. It was noticed by HR managers that there is a rising trend towards the adoption of "nonlinear micro-workouts" wherein the saved time was used by employees for engaging themselves in short flexible fitness exercises like gym sessions, yoga, running, cycling, trekking, and various other forms of recreational exercise. This is because the Gen Z employees nowadays give high importance to the preventive aspect of healthcare and fitness and are trying to achieve a better work-life balance (Deloitte, 2024). However, some health-related issues were also noted due to the prolonged working period remotely. The reason behind this was that many employees worked 10 to 12 hours at once while being in front of their computers with very little physical activity, leading to the development of Computer Vision Syndrome (CVS), including eye strain, headaches, blurred vision, and dryness of the eyes due to continuous exposure to computer screens (Rosenfield, 2016). Sitting for a prolonged period of time and improper ergonomics have also resulted in neck pain, back pain, shoulder pain, and various other musculoskeletal disorders amongst remote workers (Oakman et al., 2020).
- **Mental Resilience:** One more aspect of employee experiences in hybrid workplaces is their mental well-being. Although HR managers recognized that there were positive changes in stress management as a result of higher levels of flexibility and autonomy of employees, they noted their worries about the decreasing level of psychological resilience of young employees. The interviewees stated that Gen Z employees have difficulties with managing their emotions when facing any kind of criticism, performance reviews, and setbacks in the workplace. Feedback provided by managers that aimed at improving the performance of employees could be misinterpreted by young people as an attempt to make them feel uncomfortable, resulting in high levels of stress and, in severe cases, in hopeless feelings or suicidal thoughts. Although such outcomes were considered relatively rare events, it was noted that they demonstrate certain problems with emotional regulation, coping, and psychological resilience of modern employees. Research studies have also revealed that younger employees value more psychological safety, empathy of managers, and support in their work while being very sensitive to stress factors and uncertainty in the workplace (American Psychological Association, 2023; Deloitte, 2024).
- **Isolation:** Although there are various advantages of hybrid working, the human resource experts found that one of the biggest challenges of hybrid working is social isolation, especially among the members of Generation Z who stay far away from their families by renting PGs or staying in a shared apartment. Most young professionals who move to metropolitan areas lack social support, and remote working decreases the possibilities of making effective connections with their co-workers. It has been seen that individuals who live alone tend to feel more lonely, less motivated, and lack emotional support than individuals who live with their families. The lack of interaction at the office limits the chances of making workplace connections, mentoring, and building professional relationships. Loneliness is the most significant psychosocial threat of remote

working that creates disengagement, anxiety, depression, and poor well-being among the employees (Eurofound, 2020; Golden et al., 2008). For early career employees, the workplace is not just a place where they work but also learn and develop socially and professionally.

4.5 Productivity and Innovation: Individual Gains, Team Losses

- **Execution Focus:** It is important to note that hybrid work allowed for increased productivity among workers due to the nature of tasks performed. Tasks which required high levels of focus and less interruptions could be completed with higher efficiency due to hybrid work. Coding of software, bug fixes, documentation, code review, data analysis, and writing were some of the activities which could be done better in a remote setting since there would be less work-place interruptions and greater control over the environment of the employee. The ability to design tasks according to periods when employees can work at their cognitive best will enable them to complete what Newport (2016) calls "deep work," which refers to deep focus on cognitively challenging tasks without any interruption for extended periods. Therefore, in an IT industry, where most of the assignments require critical thinking and solving problems, employees are able to accomplish their tasks more effectively. Work from anywhere strategy could also enhance productivity due to reduced commuting time, interruptions and autonomy over schedule (Choudhury et al., 2021; Bloom et al., 2015).
- **Innovation Erosion:** Hybrid work also raised issues regarding its long-term effect on innovation and collaborative problem-solving processes. Even though remote work provides support for routine execution processes, HR leaders recognized that innovation requires impromptu face-to-face interactions, which cannot be replicated in the online space. The process of innovation relies on spontaneous meetings and discussions, which create an environment conducive to the generation of new ideas and prompt problem solving. Since remote work prevents in-proximity interaction, companies still organize co-located "war rooms" for key moments of projects, product launches, system integration, and problem-solving initiatives. According to HR professionals, such meetings promote better communication, faster decisions, feedback, and collaboration. The literature confirms the importance of physical proximity for building trust, transferring tacit knowledge, and facilitating innovation through impromptu collaboration (Allen & Henn, 2007; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). Similarly, current studies point out that hybrid work makes organizations more efficient but excessive remote collaboration hinders innovation over time due to a lack of spontaneous interactions (Microsoft, 2023; Schein & Schein, 2021).

In summary, the results obtained from the above analysis reveal that there is equilibrium in the hybrid working system between productivity and innovation. Working remotely is extremely productive and improves individual concentration, although organizations should collaborate face to face in order to innovate and resolve certain problems at some point. The hybrid work system needs to maintain equilibrium between remote and face-to-face interactions to innovate and create knowledge.

5. Discussion Points

5.1 Shifting Power Distance

The research demonstrates a significant decrease in power distance, which is one of the cultural dimensions proposed by Geert Hofstede, in the Indian IT industry. Power distance in Indian organizations is traditionally rather high, since employees have to respect hierarchies and adhere to the decisions made by their superiors (Hofstede, 2001). Yet HR managers have noticed that Generation Z workers tend to violate this rule, demanding explanation of decisions made in the organization. This generation expects transparency and openness of communication and understanding of goals of particular decisions.

Another constant pattern discovered was the response from Generation Z regarding the mandate to return to the office. Rather than instantly complying with the mandate, the employees resist the need for coming to the office and what added value it might bring to their job. Companies need to provide employees with certain perks like collaboration, mentoring, innovation, and development of skills. In case there is no added value for employees, then the notion of forcing employees to come to the office will appear unnecessary and "draconian". This pattern corresponds with the current literature on Generation Z and its desire to have more autonomy, meaningfulness, and participative leadership rather than to work traditionally through command-and-control (Deloitte, 2024; Gallup, 2024). Consequently, power distance kept decreasing in Indian IT organizations.

5.2 Work as a "Contract" vs. a "Career"

On the grounds of the findings obtained during the research process, it may be concluded that there is a growing trend towards developing what can be called a "gig mentality" of employees belonging to Generation Z in terms of employment relations. As observed by HR leaders, many young people do not

see the point in their employment relations from the angle of being loyal to the organization but rather view this relationship from the angle of flexibility, learning, career advancement, and work-life balance benefits they get. Thus, the employee is willing to change the place of his/her employment even without having something else. Usually, the lack of flexibility that means the hybrid/remote format becomes the reason for such actions. HR specialists say that many young employees prefer personal freedom, wellbeing, and career development to stability and seniority. This corresponds to the results of other researches proving that Generation Z values professional development and meaningful work more than employers' loyalty (Deloitte, 2024; PwC, 2024). One can conclude that the development of a new attitude towards work is a transformation of the psychological contract where mutual value creation and flexibility become essential elements.

5.3 The "Digital Detox" and Gadget Addiction

Generation Z creates a contradictory picture in terms of well-being. Although HR leaders noticed that Generation Z members put a lot of value on their physical and mental well-being, they were also concerned about the growing use of digital devices by the generation. Since Generation Z members are digital natives, they tend to depend greatly on their laptops and smartphones to perform not only professional but also personal tasks. One of the HR leaders shared an example of an employee's emotional breakdown during a flood caused by the lack of connectivity after the loss of a laptop and a charger. Despite being just one example, it shows the growing psychological dependence on digital devices among young people. There is evidence proving that such dependence may lead to anxiety and psychological unease if connectivity is disturbed (Elhai et al., 2017; Montag & Walla, 2016).

6. Recommendations

Some of the recommendations for managing Gen Z in Hybrid Work Environments

- **Embrace Intentional Collaboration With "Anchor Days":** Businesses must move away from keeping tabs on physical attendance in the office and work toward creating meaningful in-person experiences. Rather than measuring commitment based on physical presence in the office, businesses must ensure that the workplace becomes a collaborative space wherein "anchor days" can be used to engage in collaboration-based events like design thinking workshops, innovation sprints, cross-departmental problem-solving, mentoring sessions, hackathons, and other team building efforts.
- **Shift Towards Outcomes-based Performance Management :** Systems of performance management need to be more outcome focused, quality of deliverables, and business impact oriented rather than judging the performance in terms of number of hours put in and presence. The managers need to be trained to assess their subordinates on the basis of performance parameters, project progress, innovation, and value addition from the perspective of customers.
- **Implementing Flexible Contextual Hybrid Working Practices:** Instead of following a standardized hybrid working policy, businesses need to adopt a customized approach based on individual needs of different teams within the organization. Project managers need to decide upon the necessity for attendance in the workplace according to the nature of projects, client specifications, interdependency of teams, and collaborative activities. The need for flexibility arises due to the variability of hybrid working among various teams.
- **Enhance Structured Mentorship and Sense of Work Belonging :**Organizations can ensure mentorship by implementing structured buddy programs, formal induction sessions, and continuous personal meetings between juniors and seniors. The leaders should ensure that their schedules at the office match that of the young professionals to help them learn from observation and feedback. Providing constant interaction among individuals can help in minimizing the feeling of isolation that comes from open seats, also known as floating seats.

7. Conclusion

Based on the results obtained in this research, it can be stated that the hybrid way of working has transitioned from being a temporary post-pandemic strategy to becoming an inherent requirement for Generation Z members in India's IT industry. For some young people, workplace flexibility is not perceived as an extra perk anymore but as a part of the value proposition offered to employees. Failure to offer flexible options will become increasingly difficult to cope with for organizations seeking to attract and retain talented Gen Z workers because of the importance attached to this generation to autonomy and meaningful work experience.

In addition to this, the research brings to light the fact that hybrid working offers a double-edged problem for companies. In that respect, while being conducive to individual wellbeing and decreasing commuting pressures, it can also result in erosion of organizational culture, lack of learning through informal channels, and limitations of chances to engage in impromptu collaborations and innovations. The depletion of mentoring, social interactions, and knowledge sharing can pose some problems for the company regarding employee motivation, leadership

development, and organizational capability. Such results support the idea that productivity should not be the only metric used to assess the success of hybrid working; collaboration, culture, and innovation also need to be taken into account (Allen et al., 2015; Schein & Schein, 2021).

Looking to the future, competitiveness of India's IT industry would become contingent upon companies' capacity to reimagine hybrid work through trust rather than surveillance. Instead of focusing on monitoring people's attendance or time spent at their desks, companies must shift to result-based assessment, promote open communication within management and develop psychologically safe atmosphere that motivates staff without loss of accountability. Another key aspect is to ensure that each visit to the office is motivated by some objective - be it mentoring, innovation, collaboration, education or relationship building. Once going to the office delivers additional value apart from just doing routine tasks there, then workers tend to see it as an occasion to grow professionally rather than mere formality. In such a light, future of hybrid work does not lie in deciding about places for workers to perform their jobs, but in crafting work experience that will improve engagement, company culture and innovation.

8. Gaps For Future Research

Long-term Career Growth: What effect will the absence of in-person mentoring in the first three years have on the leadership qualities of Gen Z when they graduate to mid-level managers?

Effect on Innovation KPIs: A quantitative study needs to be conducted to quantify the delta of patents filed or products developed among remote workers, hybrid workers, and office-based workers.

Socio-economic Differences: Investigating how the effects of hybrid work will differ for Gen Z professionals working in Tier-2 and Tier-3 cities as opposed to those based out of Tier-1 cities.

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