

Understanding Workplace Priorities of Generation Z: Insights from Internship Experiences through Self-Determination Theory

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Abstract

The growing entry of Generation Z into the workforce has prompted organizations to rethink workplace practices to align with their evolving expectations. This study explores how internship experiences shape the workplace priorities of Gen Z through the lens of Self-Determination Theory, focusing on autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Adopting a qualitative, interpretivist approach, data are collected through semi-structured interviews with students who have completed internships, and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings are expected to show that varying levels of independence, opportunities for skill development, and the quality of interpersonal relationships significantly influence Gen Z's expectations of future work environments. The study also identifies gaps between actual internship experiences and ideal workplace preferences. By integrating experiential insights with a theoretical framework, the research contributes to organizational behavior and human resource management, offering practical implications for designing effective internship and early career development programs.

Introduction

The contemporary workforce is undergoing significant transformation with the increasing entry of Generation Z, a cohort characterized by distinct values, expectations, and career aspirations. As digital natives who have grown up in a highly connected and rapidly evolving environment, Gen Z individuals tend to seek flexibility, meaningful work, continuous learning opportunities, and supportive organizational cultures. These evolving expectations are reshaping traditional workplace structures and challenging organizations to rethink how they attract, engage, and retain emerging talent.

One of the most critical stages in the transition from education to employment is the internship experience. Internships provide a practical platform for students to apply theoretical knowledge, develop professional competencies, and gain exposure to real-world organizational settings. More importantly, this phase allows individuals to form and refine their perceptions of the workplace, influencing their expectations regarding work design, career growth, and interpersonal relationships. As such, internship experiences play a pivotal role in shaping early career attitudes and future workplace preferences.

While existing research has examined the general workplace expectations of Gen Z, much of the literature remains descriptive and lacks a strong theoretical grounding. There is limited understanding of the underlying psychological mechanisms that drive these expectations. To address this limitation, the present study adopts Self-Determination Theory as a guiding framework. This theory posits that human motivation is influenced by the fulfillment of three

basic psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—which are essential for fostering engagement, satisfaction, and well-being in work settings.

By focusing on internship experiences, this study aims to bridge the gap between theoretical understanding and practical insights into Gen Z's workplace priorities. It seeks to explore how these experiences influence their expectations and how such expectations can be interpreted through the lens of Self-Determination Theory. In doing so, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of early career development and offers valuable implications for organizations in designing more effective internship programs and talent management strategies within the domains of Organizational Behavior and Human Resource Management.

Literature Review and Research Gap

The entry of Generation Z into the workforce has attracted growing scholarly attention, particularly in relation to their workplace expectations, values, and motivational drivers. Recent studies suggest that Gen Z employees prioritize flexibility, meaningful work, continuous learning, and supportive organizational cultures (Chillakuri, 2022; Ahmad & Khan, 2023). Compared to earlier generations, they demonstrate a stronger inclination toward autonomy, rapid skill development, and purpose-driven careers, which significantly influence their engagement and retention (Bencsik et al., 2022; Kundi & Hollet-Haudebert, 2023).

A substantial body of literature has explored generational differences in workplace attitudes and expectations. For instance, Lub et al. (2022) highlight variations in work values across generations, while Iorgulescu (2022) emphasizes the increasing importance of digital integration and flexibility for Gen Z. Similarly, Tang et al. (2024) found that Gen Z employees in emerging economies exhibit distinct career attitudes shaped by socio-economic and cultural contexts. However, much of this research remains broad, cross-sectional, and largely descriptive, offering limited insight into how such expectations are formed and evolve over time.

Internships are widely recognized as a critical mechanism for bridging the gap between academic learning and professional practice. Drawing on experiential learning theory, internships provide opportunities for individuals to acquire practical skills, test career preferences, and develop workplace expectations (Kolb, 1984; Jackson, 2015). Recent studies (Czakó & Juhász, 2023; Kim & Park, 2024) suggest that internships play a pivotal role in shaping early career attitudes, influencing perceptions of organizational culture, leadership, and work design. Despite this, existing research has largely focused on employability outcomes and skill acquisition, with comparatively less emphasis on how internship experiences shape deeper psychological needs and long-term workplace priorities.

To address motivational aspects, Self-Determination Theory has emerged as a robust framework for understanding human behavior in organizational contexts. The theory posits that autonomy, competence, and relatedness are fundamental psychological needs that drive motivation, engagement, and well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2017). Recent advancements have extended the application of this theory to workplace settings, highlighting its relevance in explaining employee engagement and meaningful work (Gagné et al., 2023). However, its application to early career stages, particularly within internship contexts, remains underexplored.

Research Gap

Despite the growing body of literature, several important gaps remain:

1. Lack of theoretical integration: Many studies on Gen Z workplace preferences are descriptive and lack a strong theoretical foundation, with limited use of frameworks such as Self-Determination Theory.
2. Limited focus on internship experiences: While internships are acknowledged as important, there is insufficient research examining how these experiences shape workplace priorities rather than just skills or employability outcomes.
3. Neglect of psychological need formation: Existing studies rarely explore how autonomy, competence, and relatedness are experienced during internships and how they influence future work expectations.
4. Insufficient qualitative insights: Much of the current research relies on quantitative surveys, thereby overlooking the rich, subjective experiences that shape Gen Z's perceptions of work.
5. Contextual gaps in emerging economies: There is limited research examining these dynamics in emerging contexts, where organizational environments and cultural factors differ significantly.

Problem Statement

Organizations are increasingly engaging Generation Z individuals through internships and entry-level opportunities as they transition into the workforce. However, a noticeable gap exists between what organizations offer and what this cohort expects from the workplace (Schroth, 2019; Francis & Hoefel, 2018). Although earlier research has examined Gen Z's general work preferences, much of it remains largely descriptive, lacks theoretical depth, and offers limited integrative insights.

Internships represent a crucial stage in the transition from academic life to professional employment, during which individuals actively construct and reassess their perceptions of work environments (Kolb, 1984). These experiences significantly influence their expectations related to independence, professional growth, and social connections within organizations. Despite the importance of this phase, there is a scarcity of research that systematically examines how internship experiences shape workplace priorities using a well-established theoretical framework such as Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2017).

This research gap becomes even more relevant in emerging economies, where workplace dynamics, cultural norms, and employment conditions vary considerably. A limited understanding of the psychological drivers underlying Gen Z's workplace expectations may hinder organizations in designing effective strategies for engagement, retention, and talent development (Gagné & Deci, 2005). Therefore, this study aims to investigate how internship experiences influence the workplace priorities of Generation Z and to interpret these priorities through the lens of Self-Determination Theory.

Research Objectives

1. To explore the primary workplace priorities emerging from internship experiences of Gen Z students.
2. To assess how experiences related to autonomy during internships influence expectations of future work environments.
3. To investigate how opportunities for skill development, learning, and feedback contribute to shaping career preferences.

4. To analyze the influence of interpersonal relationships, mentorship, and organizational culture on workplace expectations.
5. To interpret these priorities in terms of underlying psychological needs as proposed by Self-Determination Theory.
6. To identify discrepancies between actual internship experiences and ideal workplace expectations.
7. To propose a conceptual framework connecting internship experiences with workplace priorities.
8. To provide practical recommendations for enhancing internship programs and early career engagement strategies.

Research Questions

RQ1: In what ways do internship experiences influence the workplace priorities of Generation Z, and how can these be interpreted using Self-Determination Theory?

RQ2: What key workplace priorities are formed by Gen Z students based on their internship experiences?

RQ3: How do these experiences shape their understanding of an ideal work environment?

RQ4: How is autonomy experienced by Gen Z interns during their internships?

RQ5: How do these experiences influence their expectations regarding flexibility, independence, and decision-making?

RQ6: In what ways do internships contribute to the development of competence and professional skills?

RQ7: How do learning opportunities, feedback, and training affect their workplace expectations?

RQ8: How do interns perceive interpersonal relationships and organizational culture during their internships?

RQ9: How do these perceptions influence their expectations of belonging and workplace relationships?

RQ10: What psychological needs underlie the workplace priorities of Gen Z interns?

RQ11: What differences exist between their actual internship experiences and their expectations of future workplaces?

Methodology

1. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design to gain a comprehensive understanding of how internship experiences influence the workplace priorities of Generation Z. A qualitative approach is particularly suitable for capturing individual perceptions, lived experiences, and deeper motivational factors (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The study is guided by Self-Determination Theory, which enables the interpretation of participants' experiences through the dimensions of autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

2. Research Approach

An interpretivist research paradigm underpins this study, emphasizing how individuals make sense of their experiences. Thematic analysis will be employed to systematically identify and interpret recurring patterns within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2017).

3. Study Population and Sampling

Population

The study focuses on:

- Final-year undergraduate and postgraduate students
- Individuals belonging to Generation Z
- Students who have completed at least one internship

Sampling Technique

Purposive sampling will be used to select participants who can provide meaningful and experience-rich insights.

Sample Size

- Approximately 20 to 30 participants, with data collection continuing until saturation is achieved (Guest et al., 2006)

Inclusion Criteria

- Completion of at least one internship lasting 4–8 weeks
- Willingness to participate in detailed interviews

4. Data Collection Method

Data will be gathered through semi-structured, in-depth interviews, allowing flexibility while ensuring alignment with the research objectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Mode of Interviews

- Face-to-face or virtual platforms such as Zoom or Google Meet

Duration

- Each interview will last approximately 30 to 60 minutes

Focus Areas

- Internship experiences
- Workplace expectations
- Perceptions of autonomy, competence, and relatedness
- Views on an ideal work environment

5. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis will be conducted through the following stages (Braun & Clarke, 2006):

1. Data familiarization through transcription and repeated review
2. Generation of initial codes
3. Identification and development of themes
4. Linking themes to the components of Self-Determination Theory
5. Interpretation and integration of findings

Both inductive (data-driven) and deductive (theory-driven) coding approaches will be utilized to ensure comprehensive analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2017).

Expected Outcome of the Study

The proposed study is expected to generate meaningful theoretical and practical insights by examining how internship experiences shape the workplace priorities of Generation Z through the lens of Self-Determination Theory. It will identify key expectations such as flexibility, career growth, and supportive work environments, while explaining the underlying psychological drivers of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The study is also anticipated to develop a conceptual framework linking internship experiences with workplace expectations, and to highlight gaps between actual experiences and ideal preferences. In doing so, it will contribute to advancing knowledge in Organizational Behavior and Human Resource Management, while offering practical recommendations for organizations to design more effective internship programs and early career strategies, ultimately helping to align organizational practices with the evolving expectations of Gen Z.

Conclusion

This study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how internship experiences influence the workplace priorities of Generation Z, using Self-Determination Theory as a guiding framework. By focusing on the transitional stage between education and employment, the research extends beyond surface-level observations and delves into the psychological factors shaping workplace expectations.

Through a qualitative and interpretive methodology, the study is expected to generate meaningful insights into how autonomy, competence, and relatedness are experienced during internships and how these experiences shape future work preferences. The findings are anticipated to contribute to theoretical advancement by contextualizing Self-Determination Theory within early career experiences, while also offering practical implications for organizations in designing effective internship and talent management practices (Gagné & Deci, 2005).

Ultimately, the study seeks to bridge the gap between organizational practices and the evolving expectations of Generation Z, thereby contributing to the development of more engaging and sustainable workplace environments within Human Resource Management and Organizational Behavior.

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