

Generation Z in the Workplace: Do Distraction and Non-Commitment Signal a Paradigm Shift in Human Resource Management?

Abstract

Generation Z (broadly, those born between approximately 1997 and 2012) is entering the workforce in growing numbers, and popular and practitioner discourse frequently characterizes this cohort through two recurring deficit labels: “distraction” – a purportedly shortened attention span and a preference for constant digital stimulation – and “non-commitment” – a reduced willingness to remain with a single employer, role, or career trajectory. This conceptual paper interrogates whether these behavioral signatures represent superficial generational idiosyncrasies to be absorbed within existing human resource management (HRM) paradigms, or whether they are symptomatic of a deeper structural shift in the psychological contract between employees and organizations. Drawing on generational cohort theory, psychological contract theory, social exchange theory, and self-determination theory, the paper develops an integrative conceptual framework that reinterprets “distraction” as an adaptive response to information-saturated environments and reconfigured attention economies, and “non-commitment” as a rational recalibration of loyalty under conditions of eroded organizational reciprocity. The paper argues that generational explanations alone are insufficient and frequently overstated, yet the confluence of technological, economic, and cultural conditions surrounding Generation Z's labor market entry constitutes meaningful pressure toward a genuine paradigm shift in HRM – from tenure-based, hierarchical, and compliance-oriented models toward engagement-based, purpose-driven, and flexibility-oriented models. Implications for recruitment and employer branding, onboarding, performance management, career architecture, and the governance of workplace technology are discussed, followed by the paper's limitations and directions for future empirical research.

Keywords: Generation Z, human resource management, psychological contract, employee engagement, generational differences, paradigm shift, attention economy, job-hopping

1. Introduction

Every generation that enters the workforce is met, at first, with a measure of managerial suspicion. Baby Boomers were once accused of naive idealism, Generation X of cynicism and detachment, and Millennials of entitlement and impatience (Twenge, 2017; Parry & Urwin, 2011). Generation Z – the first cohort to have no memory of a world without smartphones, broadband internet, and social media – has inherited its own pair of stigmatizing labels: “distracted” and “uncommitted.” Trade publications, employer surveys, and management commentary routinely describe Gen Z employees as unable to sustain attention through a meeting, unwilling to complete a probationary year, and quick to resign the moment a marginally better offer appears (Deloitte, 2024; Gallup, 2023). These claims are rarely neutral descriptions; they are typically framed as deficiencies relative to an implicit standard of the ideal employee – one who is fully present, loyal, and willing to subordinate personal preference to organizational demand over an extended tenure.

This paper takes a different starting position. Rather than accepting “distraction” and “non-commitment” as self-evident character flaws of a generation, it treats them as behavioral signals that require interpretation, and asks what those signals imply for the theory and practice of human resource management. Two competing readings are possible. The first is a deficit reading, in which Gen Z's behaviors are anomalies to be corrected through better discipline, stricter onboarding, and renewed emphasis on traditional loyalty norms; HRM's task, on this reading, is to socialize Gen Z into pre-existing organizational paradigms. The second is a structural reading, in which Gen Z's behaviors are rational, patterned responses to genuine changes in labor markets, technology, and the psychological contract between employers and employees; HRM's task, on this reading, is to adapt its own paradigms to a workforce, and a world of work, that has changed underneath it.

The central research question addressed in this paper is therefore conceptual rather than empirical: do the phenomena popularly labeled “distraction” and “non-commitment” in Generation Z employees signal a paradigm shift in HRM, or are they better explained as surface-level generational friction within an otherwise stable HRM paradigm? Answering this question requires, first, a careful unbundling of what is actually meant by distraction and non-commitment; second, a review of the theoretical resources available for interpreting these behaviors; third, an integrative framework that positions these behaviors within a broader account of change in the employment relationship; and fourth, a considered judgment, informed by theory rather than by anecdote, about the scale and nature of the shift underway.

The paper contributes to the literature in three ways. Conceptually, it reframes two popular deficit narratives as theoretically tractable constructs – attentional allocation under

conditions of digital saturation, and psychological contract recalibration under conditions of eroded organizational reciprocity – that can be studied, rather than merely lamented. Theoretically, it integrates four literatures that are rarely brought into direct conversation: generational cohort theory, psychological contract theory, social exchange theory, and self-determination theory, in order to explain why Gen Z's behaviors take the particular form they do. Practically, it offers HRM practitioners a framework for distinguishing between symptoms that call for tactical adjustment and symptoms that call for structural redesign of HRM systems. The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 profiles Generation Z as a cohort. Sections 3 and 4 unpack distraction and non-commitment as constructs. Section 5 reviews the assumptions of traditional HRM paradigms that these constructs place under strain. Section 6 introduces the theoretical lenses used to interpret them. Section 7 presents an integrative conceptual framework. Section 8 evaluates the paradigm-shift thesis directly. Section 9 draws out practical implications for HRM. Sections 10 through 12 discuss theoretical contributions, limitations, and conclusions.

2. Understanding Generation Z: A Demographic and Psychographic Profile

Generational cohort theory holds that individuals who come of age during the same historical period, and who are exposed to the same formative social, economic, and technological events, tend to develop shared values, attitudes, and behavioral tendencies that persist across the life course (Mannheim, 1952; Twenge, Campbell, Hoffman, & Lance, 2010). Generation Z, typically defined as those born between the mid-to-late 1990s and the early 2010s, is distinguished from preceding cohorts along at least four dimensions that are directly relevant to workplace behavior.

First, Generation Z is the first fully “digitally native” generation, having never experienced a pre-internet, pre-smartphone adolescence. Where Millennials adapted to digital technology during adolescence or early adulthood, Gen Z's cognitive and social development occurred concurrently with, and partly through, mobile devices, social media platforms, and algorithmically curated content streams (Twenge, 2017). Second, Generation Z's formative years were marked by pronounced economic instability: many entered adolescence during or shortly after the 2008 global financial crisis and entered the labor market during or immediately following the COVID-19 pandemic, an event that disrupted education, early employment, and the socialization rituals – internships, office attendance, in-person mentorship – through which prior generations learned organizational norms. Third, Generation Z displays markedly higher self-reported rates of anxiety and reported burnout than preceding cohorts at comparable ages, a pattern documented across multiple national surveys and linked, though not uncontroversially, to social media use, academic pressure, and economic precarity (Gallup, 2023; Deloitte, 2024).

Fourth, Generation Z expresses, on average, stronger stated preferences for purpose-driven work, transparent organizational values, and flexible work arrangements than prior cohorts expressed at the same career stage, alongside lower average tenure expectations.

It is important to state, and to hold in view throughout this paper, that generational categories are heuristic constructs rather than deterministic ones. Considerable within-cohort variation exists, and several scholars have argued that many so-called generational differences are better explained by life-stage effects (the fact that all early-career workers, regardless of birth cohort, tend to be more mobile and less financially entrenched) or by period effects (the fact that all workers, regardless of age, are navigating the same contemporary labor market conditions) than by generation per se (Costanza, Badger, Fraser, Severt, & Gade, 2012; Rudolph & Zacher, 2017). This paper does not treat Generation Z as a monolith, nor does it treat generational membership as a sufficient causal explanation on its own. Rather, it treats the generational label as a convenient shorthand for a cluster of cohort, life-stage, and period effects that happen to converge, at this historical moment, on a recognizable pattern of workplace behavior. The task of the sections that follow is to specify that pattern with more precision than the popular labels “distracted” and “uncommitted” permit.

3. Conceptualizing “Distraction” in the Generation Z Workplace Narrative

“Distraction” as commonly used in workplace commentary is an imprecise composite of at least three distinct phenomena, which this paper proposes to separate analytically: (a) reduced sustained attention in low-stimulation environments, such as long meetings or repetitive administrative tasks; (b) habitual multitasking across digital devices and communication channels during work activity; and (c) a demand for rapid feedback loops and frequent task-switching, in contrast to sustained, single-track project work.

A structural reading of these phenomena locates their cause not in individual deficiency but in the attention economy that has shaped Generation Z's cognitive habits since early childhood. Digital platforms are commercially optimized to capture and monetize attention through variable-reward mechanisms, algorithmic personalization, and near-continuous notification streams (a design logic well documented in the human-computer interaction and media studies literatures). A cohort socialized within this environment can reasonably be expected to develop different default patterns of attentional allocation than a cohort socialized within an environment of scarcer, less continuously stimulating media. On this reading, what managers observe as an inability to concentrate is, at least in part, a learned and reinforced pattern of attention-switching that was adaptive within its originating environment (rapidly triaging a high-volume information stream) but that reads as dysfunctional within an

organizational environment still designed around assumptions of sustained, single-channel focus – the multi-hour meeting, the quarterly performance cycle, the annual review.

A second, complementary reading treats apparent distraction as a rational response to poorly designed work rather than as evidence of any underlying cognitive change at all. Long meetings without clear agendas, redundant status-reporting rituals, and administrative tasks with no visible link to outcomes are, on this account, objectively low in engagement value; a worker who disengages from such tasks – of any generational cohort – is responding sensibly to their design, not exhibiting a pathology. What may differ across generations is less the underlying rational calculus than the willingness to mask disengagement: Generation Z employees, having grown up in environments (classrooms, social platforms) that reward visible reaction and discourage passive endurance, may be simply less practiced at performing attentiveness they do not feel, compared with generations socialized into workplace norms of visible deference regardless of actual engagement.

Taken together, these two readings suggest that “distraction” is best conceptualized not as an attribute of individuals but as a mismatch between an attentional style shaped by digital-native socialization and an organizational architecture of attention – meeting cadence, task design, feedback timing – largely inherited from mid-twentieth-century industrial and bureaucratic models of work. This reframing matters because it relocates the intervention point: rather than asking how to train Gen Z employees out of distraction, it invites HRM scholarship and practice to ask how the organizational architecture of attention itself might be redesigned.

4. Conceptualizing “Non-Commitment”: Job-Hopping, Quiet Quitting, and Fluid Careers

The second deficit label, “non-commitment,” similarly bundles together several distinguishable behaviors: shorter average job tenure and higher voluntary turnover intentions; “quiet quitting,” or the deliberate confinement of effort to the formal boundaries of a job description; and a stated preference for portfolio or fluid careers over single-employer, linear career ladders. Each merits separate treatment.

Shorter tenure and higher turnover intention are, in part, an artifact of life stage: early-career workers across all generations have historically changed jobs more frequently than mid-career or late-career workers, since early job changes typically carry the largest wage and skill-fit gains (a pattern long documented in labor economics). However, several features distinguish Generation Z's tenure patterns from those of earlier cohorts at equivalent life stages. Labor market transparency has increased substantially: salary information, employer reviews, and peer

comparisons that were once privately held or slowly diffused are now instantly and publicly available through professional networking platforms and review sites, lowering the search costs associated with changing jobs and making the opportunity cost of staying in an unrewarding role more salient. In parallel, the implicit promise historically extended by employers in exchange for loyalty – job security, predictable advancement, a defined-benefit pension, or at minimum a stable long-term relationship – has been substantially eroded across the last four decades of restructuring, offshoring, and the shift toward defined-contribution retirement models (Rousseau, 1995). Generation Z did not create this erosion; it entered a labor market in which the erosion was already an established fact, observed directly in the career experiences of parents and older siblings during and after the 2008 financial crisis.

“Quiet quitting” is best understood through the lens of psychological contract theory (Rousseau, 1995) and social exchange theory (Blau, 1964): employees calibrate their discretionary effort – effort beyond the formal requirements of a role – to their perception of the reciprocity extended by the organization. Where the psychological contract is perceived as balanced or generous, employees tend to reciprocate with discretionary effort, organizational citizenship behavior, and extended commitment. Where the psychological contract is perceived as breached or merely transactional, employees tend to withdraw discretionary effort while maintaining formal compliance – precisely the behavior described as quiet quitting. On this reading, quiet quitting is not a Generation Z invention but a long-documented response to perceived psychological contract breach that has become newly visible and newly named because Generation Z, unlike prior cohorts, discusses workplace dissatisfaction openly and publicly on social platforms, and because economic and cultural conditions (widely publicized corporate layoffs alongside record profits, visible gaps between executive and median compensation) have made perceived breach unusually salient and unusually easy to justify as normatively legitimate rather than as personal failure.

A preference for fluid or portfolio careers – sequences of varied roles, employers, and even industries, sometimes combined with freelance or entrepreneurial activity – represents the most structurally significant component of the non-commitment narrative, because it implies a redefinition of career success itself. Where prior generational paradigms of career success were substantially organization-referenced (advancement within a single firm's hierarchy, tenure-based status, defined-benefit retirement), Generation Z's stated career aspirations are more frequently skill- and identity-referenced (breadth of competence, alignment between work and personal values, optionality across multiple possible paths). This is consistent with a broader, decades-long shift documented in career theory from the “organizational career” toward the “boundaryless career” (a shift first named in relation to Generation X and Millennials but arguably reaching its most complete expression in Generation Z), in which the individual, rather

than the employing organization, is the primary unit of career management (Lyons & Kuron, 2014).

5. Traditional HRM Paradigms: Assumptions Under Strain

To evaluate whether Generation Z's behaviors constitute a paradigm shift, it is necessary first to specify the paradigm against which they are being measured. Mainstream twentieth-century HRM, as it developed from personnel administration through strategic human resource management, rests on a cluster of largely tacit assumptions that this paper groups into four categories.

The first assumption is that of tenure as a proxy for value: HRM systems – seniority-based pay structures, vesting schedules for benefits, promotion ladders premised on years of service, defined-benefit pensions where they persist – have historically encoded the expectation that an employee's value to the organization, and the organization's reciprocal investment in the employee, both increase monotonically with tenure. The second assumption is that of the organization as the primary locus of career and identity: traditional career development frameworks (succession planning, internal promotion pipelines, organization-specific competency models) presume that employees derive professional identity and long-term security chiefly from a single employing organization. The third assumption is that of presence and visible effort as proxies for productivity: management practices built around fixed office hours, in-person supervision, and observable busyness historically substituted for direct measurement of output, particularly in knowledge work where output is difficult to observe directly. The fourth assumption is that of a stable, largely one-directional psychological contract, in which the employer defines the terms of the relationship (job design, career paths, performance criteria) and the employee's principal obligation is compliance and loyalty in exchange for security.

Each of these assumptions is placed under direct strain by the phenomena catalogued in Sections 3 and 4. Tenure-as-value is strained by a workforce that does not expect, and in many cases does not want, extended single-employer tenure. Organization-as-primary-identity-locus is strained by a workforce whose career narratives are increasingly self-authored and cross-organizational. Presence-as-productivity-proxy is strained by a workforce socialized into digitally mediated, asynchronous, and outcome-visible modes of collaboration, and by the post-pandemic normalization of remote and hybrid work. The one-directional psychological contract is strained by a workforce operating in an information environment where organizational rhetoric about values and culture is constantly and publicly checked against observable organizational behavior. None of this, by itself, proves that a paradigm shift is underway; it establishes only that the traditional paradigm's foundational assumptions no longer align comfortably with the

empirical behavior of a growing share of the workforce – which is the necessary, though not sufficient, precondition for a paradigm shift in the Kuhnian sense of accumulating anomalies that a prevailing model cannot comfortably absorb.

6. Theoretical Lenses for Interpreting Generation Z's Workplace Behavior

6.1 Generational Cohort Theory

Generational cohort theory (Mannheim, 1952) provides the foundational logic for treating Generation Z as an analytically meaningful category, while also supplying the necessary caution against over-attribution. Mannheim's original insight was that a shared generational location does not automatically produce a shared generational consciousness; it produces only a shared exposure to formative events, which may or may not crystallize into distinctive, durable attitudes depending on the intensity and clarity of those events. Applied here, the theory suggests that the intensity of Generation Z's formative exposure – near-universal smartphone use from childhood, a global pandemic during early career formation, unusually visible economic precarity – is sufficient to expect a genuine, non-trivial generational imprint on workplace attitudes, while cautioning against treating every observed behavior as generational in origin rather than as a life-stage or period effect.

6.2 Psychological Contract Theory

Rousseau's (1995) psychological contract theory conceptualizes the employment relationship as a set of largely implicit, subjective beliefs about reciprocal obligations between employee and employer. Contracts can be relational (long-term, open-ended, encompassing loyalty and security) or transactional (short-term, narrowly economic, encompassing specified performance for specified pay). This paper's central theoretical claim is that Generation Z enters employment with a psychological contract schema that is, on average, less relationally weighted and more transactionally and developmentally weighted than that of prior cohorts at labor market entry – not from disposition, but because the relational contract's traditional guarantees (security, defined progression) have been visibly withdrawn from the labor market Generation Z observed while forming its expectations.

6.3 Social Exchange Theory

Blau's (1964) social exchange theory supplies the behavioral mechanism connecting psychological contract perceptions to observable workplace conduct: individuals calibrate the discretionary component of their contribution to organizations according to the perceived generosity and fairness of what they receive in return. This mechanism explains why non-

commitment behaviors (turnover, quiet quitting) function as adaptive, reciprocity-tracking responses rather than as fixed dispositions – and, correspondingly, why they are responsive to changes in organizational practice, a point of considerable practical importance developed in Section 9.

6.4 Self-Determination Theory

Deci and Ryan's (2000) self-determination theory holds that sustained motivation and well-being depend on the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. This paper argues that Generation Z's stated preferences – flexibility (autonomy), rapid skill acquisition and frequent feedback (competence), and purpose-aligned, socially connected work (relatedness) – map closely onto these three needs, suggesting that what is popularly read as an idiosyncratic generational demand for constant novelty is more parsimoniously read as an ordinary human motivational structure operating in an environment – modern organizational life – that has historically under-supplied autonomy and rapid competence feedback relative to what digitally native workers now regard as a normal baseline, calibrated against their experience of digital platforms that supply both abundantly.

7. An Integrative Conceptual Framework: From Deficit Narrative to Paradigm Shift

Integrating the four theoretical lenses above, this paper proposes a conceptual framework in which distraction and non-commitment are modeled not as independent generational traits but as two observable surface expressions of a single underlying variable: the degree of alignment between an organization's HRM architecture and the psychological-contract expectations of a digitally native, economically cautious cohort. The framework comprises three linked propositions.

Proposition 1 (Antecedents): Generation Z's formative exposure to a saturated attention economy and a visibly de-relationalized labor market produces, on average, a psychological contract schema weighted toward transactional and developmental exchange, and an attentional style calibrated to high-frequency, high-feedback information environments.

Proposition 2 (Mechanism): Where organizational HRM architecture continues to assume a relational, tenure-based psychological contract and a low-frequency, low-feedback attentional environment, a structural mismatch arises between organizational design and employee schema. Consistent with social exchange theory, employees respond to this mismatch by withdrawing discretionary effort and relational investment (manifesting as apparent distraction and apparent non-commitment), not because they are constitutionally incapable of sustained attention or

loyalty, but because the exchange, as designed, does not warrant it in their own calculus of reciprocity.

Proposition 3 (Moderation and Paradigm Response): The magnitude of observed distraction and non-commitment is moderated by the degree to which organizational HRM practice has already adapted – through flexible work design, rapid and frequent feedback systems, transparent and purpose-linked employer branding, and skills-based rather than tenure-based progression – to the psychological contract schema described in Proposition 1. Organizations whose HRM architecture remains unadapted will continue to interpret Generation Z's behavior through a deficit lens and to experience it as a persistent problem; organizations whose HRM architecture adapts will experience the same underlying cohort characteristics as comparatively engaged and comparatively committed, because the mismatch driving the withdrawal behavior has been substantially closed.

This framework carries an important implication for the paper's central question: the presence of a paradigm shift is not simply a fact about Generation Z, to be discovered by studying the cohort in isolation, but a joint property of the cohort and the HRM systems it encounters. A paradigm shift is underway to the extent that organizations, in aggregate, are being compelled – by turnover costs, engagement costs, and reputational costs associated with the unadapted condition – to redesign their foundational HRM assumptions (Section 5) rather than merely to tighten enforcement of the existing paradigm. The following section evaluates the evidence and argument for and against this claim.

8. Discussion: Evaluating the Paradigm-Shift Thesis

8.1 Arguments Supporting a Genuine Paradigm Shift

Several converging developments in HRM practice over the past decade are consistent with genuine, rather than merely rhetorical, paradigm change. Skills-based hiring and progression, in which competencies rather than credentials or tenure determine role eligibility and advancement, has moved from a niche practice to an explicit strategic priority at a growing number of large employers. Continuous performance management – frequent, informal check-ins replacing or supplementing the annual review – has become mainstream practice in knowledge-intensive sectors, a change that directly addresses the high-feedback-frequency expectation identified in Proposition 1. Flexible and hybrid work arrangements, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic but sustained afterward by employee expectation and competitive necessity, represent a substantive redefinition of the presence-as-productivity assumption catalogued in Section 5. Employer branding practice has shifted markedly toward the public communication of

organizational purpose, values, and social impact, a response to a workforce that treats such information as material to the employment decision rather than as peripheral marketing. Taken together, these shifts are not merely tactical concessions to a demanding cohort; they represent changes to the foundational architecture – progression criteria, feedback cadence, the locus of work, the terms of employer communication – identified in Section 5 as constitutive of the traditional HRM paradigm. On this reading, Generation Z functions as a catalyst that has accelerated and made visible a paradigm transition whose structural preconditions (technological capability for distributed and asynchronous work, labor market transparency, the long-run erosion of the relational contract) predate Generation Z's labor market entry.

8.2 Arguments Against a Paradigm Shift, and Alternative Explanations

A countervailing position, well represented in the generational-differences literature, holds that the paradigm-shift thesis over-attributes to generation what is more parsimoniously explained by life stage and period effects (Costanza et al., 2012; Rudolph & Zacher, 2017). On this account, every generation of early-career workers has displayed comparatively high turnover, comparatively low institutional deference, and comparatively transactional engagement relative to their more tenured colleagues; what is being observed in Generation Z may be the same life-stage pattern, merely amplified by contemporaneous economic conditions (a historically tight labor market in several sectors during the early 2020s, which increased Generation Z's exit options) and made unusually visible by social media, rather than by any distinctive generational psychology. Under this reading, the current wave of HRM adaptation (Section 8.1) is better explained as a response to competitive labor market conditions and to the pandemic's disruption of work arrangements than as a response to Generation Z specifically; the same adaptations would plausibly have occurred, in time, regardless of which generation happened to be entering the workforce during this historical window.

A related caution concerns the risk of essentializing a highly heterogeneous cohort. Generation Z spans a wide range of national labor markets, socioeconomic backgrounds, and occupational sectors, and the behaviors catalogued in this paper are documented with greatest consistency among white-collar, credentialed workers in high-income economies; evidence for equivalent patterns among Generation Z workers in frontline, manual, or lower-wage occupations, or in labor markets with weaker worker bargaining power, is considerably thinner, raising the possibility that the paradigm-shift discourse reflects the experience of a visible, professionally vocal subset of the cohort rather than the cohort as a whole.

8.3 A Synthesized Position

The most defensible position, and the one advanced by this paper, integrates rather than adjudicates between these two arguments. Life-stage and period effects unquestionably account for a substantial share of the observed behavior, and generational framing should not be permitted to obscure this. However, the magnitude and durability of the specific period effects coinciding with Generation Z's labor market entry – a historically unprecedented degree of digital saturation from early childhood, a global pandemic disrupting the socialization function of early career experience, and a labor market in which the relational psychological contract had already been substantially eroded before Generation Z arrived – are themselves sufficiently large and structurally embedded to constitute more than transient noise. The paradigm shift thesis is therefore best understood not as a claim that Generation Z possesses a uniquely different psychology, but as a claim that Generation Z's labor market entry has coincided with, and substantially accelerated the visibility and urgency of, a set of pre-existing structural pressures on the traditional HRM paradigm identified in Section 5. The shift is real, but it is more accurately described as a shift being revealed and accelerated by Generation Z than a shift caused by Generation Z as a discrete generational agent. This distinction matters practically, because it implies that the appropriate HRM response is architectural redesign rather than generation-specific management tactics that would become obsolete as Generation Z itself ages into mid-career.

9. Implications for Human Resource Management Practice

9.1 Recruitment and Employer Branding

If the psychological contract underlying Generation Z's engagement is developmental and transactional rather than purely relational, recruitment communication should foreground concrete, verifiable information – skill development pathways, compensation transparency, realistic previews of day-to-day work – over abstract loyalty appeals. Employer brand claims regarding purpose and values should be substantiated by observable organizational behavior, since a digitally networked and information-transparent workforce can and does verify such claims against public evidence, and a perceived gap between stated and enacted values functions as an early psychological contract breach that predicts later disengagement.

9.2 Onboarding and Early Socialization

Because Generation Z entered the labor market with reduced access to the informal socialization channels (in-person internships, incidental mentorship, office-based observational learning) through which prior cohorts absorbed organizational norms, onboarding design should treat explicit socialization as a first-order HRM function rather than an administrative formality.

Structured mentorship, explicit articulation of unwritten norms, and frequent early check-ins address both the relatedness need identified by self-determination theory and the psychological-contract-formation function that Rousseau (1995) identifies as most consequential in an employee's earliest weeks of tenure, when contract expectations are most malleable and most durably set.

9.3 Performance Management and Feedback Architecture

Consistent with Proposition 2 of the framework in Section 7, replacing or supplementing annual review cycles with more frequent, lower-stakes feedback loops directly addresses the attentional and motivational mismatch driving apparent disengagement. This need not imply abandoning rigor; it implies redesigning the cadence and format of feedback to align with a competence-need satisfaction model that rewards visible, incremental progress rather than deferring recognition to an annual or semi-annual cycle poorly matched to a high-feedback-frequency attentional style.

9.4 Career Architecture and Retention

If Generation Z's career aspirations are skill- and identity-referenced rather than organization-referenced (Section 4), retention strategy premised primarily on tenure-based incentives (vesting schedules, seniority-linked benefits) is likely to be of limited effectiveness for this cohort and may be more productively supplemented, though not necessarily replaced, by internal mobility programs, cross-functional project rotation, and explicit skills-portfolio development that allow employees to accumulate marketable competence within the organization rather than only through it. Paradoxically, organizations that make internal movement and skill accumulation easiest may retain Generation Z talent longer than organizations that attempt to restrict mobility, since the availability of internal alternatives to external job search directly substitutes for the turnover behavior identified in Section 4.

9.5 Technology and Attention Governance

Rather than treating digital distraction purely as an individual disciplinary matter, HRM and organizational design can address the mismatch identified in Section 3 directly, through meeting design reform (shorter, agenda-driven, purpose-justified meetings), asynchronous-first communication norms where feasible, and explicit organizational norms around notification management and focused work time. Such interventions treat attention as a jointly managed organizational resource rather than as a purely individual trait to be corrected through exhortation.

10. Theoretical Contributions to HRM Scholarship

This paper's principal theoretical contribution is the integration of generational cohort theory with psychological contract theory, social exchange theory, and self-determination theory into a single explanatory framework for a phenomenon that has, until now, been addressed largely through separate and non-cumulative literatures: generational-differences research, which documents cohort variation but has been repeatedly criticized for weak theoretical mechanisms (Costanza & Finkelstein, 2015); and popular management commentary on distraction and job-hopping, which offers vivid description but little theoretical grounding. By specifying antecedent, mechanism, and moderation propositions (Section 7), the framework proposed here renders the paradigm-shift question empirically tractable: each proposition implies testable hypotheses – for instance, that the relationship between generational cohort membership and turnover intention should be substantially attenuated in organizations with high feedback frequency and flexible work design, a moderation hypothesis directly derivable from Proposition 3. The framework also contributes a reconceptualization of two heavily moralized popular constructs – distraction and non-commitment – as theoretically neutral outcome variables jointly determined by cohort-level antecedents and organization-level design choices, rather than as fixed traits of individuals or generations, a reframing consistent with, and extending, the situational-strength perspective within organizational behavior theory.

11. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

As a conceptual paper, this work offers a theoretical framework rather than empirical validation, and several limitations should temper its application. First, the framework's propositions, while derived from established theory, have not been tested against longitudinal or cross-organizational data within this paper; future research should operationalize the constructs proposed – psychological contract orientation, attentional style, HRM architecture adaptation – and test the moderation hypothesis implied by Proposition 3 using matched samples of organizations with varying degrees of HRM adaptation. Second, as noted in Section 8.2, the evidentiary base motivating this discussion is weighted toward white-collar, credentialed, high-income-economy workers; future research should examine whether the proposed framework generalizes to frontline, manual, gig, and lower-wage segments of Generation Z, where labor market power, technology exposure, and psychological contract dynamics may differ substantially. Third, generational cohort boundaries are inherently somewhat arbitrary, and future research would benefit from within-cohort analysis (for example, contrasting the oldest and youngest members of Generation Z, who entered the labor market under materially different macroeconomic conditions) rather than treating the cohort as internally homogeneous. Fourth, longitudinal research is needed to establish whether Generation Z's currently observed attitudes

and behaviors persist as the cohort ages into mid-career (a genuine cohort effect) or converge toward the patterns of prior generations at equivalent tenure (a life-stage effect), a question that can only be resolved with the passage of time and that bears directly on how durable, and how architecturally significant, HRM's current adaptations will prove to be.

12. Conclusion

This paper set out to ask whether the behaviors popularly labeled distraction and non-commitment among Generation Z employees signal a genuine paradigm shift in human resource management, or merely a generational variant of familiar early-career friction. The answer proposed here is neither a simple yes nor a simple no. Generational cohort theory, properly applied, cautions against attributing Generation Z's workplace behavior to an essential and fixed generational psychology; life-stage and period effects unquestionably contribute substantially to what is observed. At the same time, the specific historical conditions of Generation Z's formation and labor market entry – unprecedented digital saturation, pandemic disruption of early-career socialization, and entry into a labor market whose relational psychological contract had already been substantially eroded – are sufficiently distinctive and sufficiently structurally embedded that dismissing the paradigm-shift thesis entirely would be equally mistaken. The more defensible conclusion is that Generation Z functions as an accelerant and a visibility mechanism for a paradigm transition in HRM whose deeper causes – technological change, economic restructuring, and the long erosion of organizational reciprocity – substantially predate this cohort's labor market entry. Distraction, reframed through this lens, is less an attentional deficit than a mismatch between digitally native cognitive habits and an organizational architecture of attention inherited from an earlier era; non-commitment, reframed similarly, is less a loyalty deficit than a rational recalibration of reciprocity under conditions the employing organization, not the employee, substantially created. For HRM as a field, the practical implication is that the durable response to Generation Z is not tighter enforcement of the traditional paradigm's assumptions, but their deliberate redesign – in recruitment, onboarding, feedback architecture, career design, and the governance of attention itself – toward a model better aligned with the psychological contract that a digitally native, economically cautious generation, and quite possibly the generations that follow it, will continue to bring to work.

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