

From Digitalization to Sustainability: Understanding Workplace Expectations of Generation Z

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[Abstract] Generation Z (Gen Z) has unique personalities and values influenced by the digital age. This generation expects that the employers should adopt their ways of working in order to attract engagement and retain them. The purpose of this study is to comprehend their expectations and perspectives about digital transformations in the workplace with a focus on employee engagement, work-life balance, and training & development. As Gen Z possesses a special consciousness towards the environment, this study also examines how technology can impact sustainability. The study conducted a survey using a close-ended questionnaire. Data is collected from IT sector employees who belong to Gen Z using purposive sampling. Structural equation modelling is applied using Smart PLS 4 software on a sample of 256 respondents. Findings showed that Gen Z has high expectations about workplace digitalization and its impact on sustainability. Additionally, it is found that there are significant and positive impacts of digitalization of employee engagement, work-life balance, and training & development on sustainability. The study offers great insights into designing workforce strategies by incorporating a unique viewpoint of Gen Z on technological improvements to support sustainability in the workplace along with its economic implications. The study attempts to bring together technology and sustainability in one frame which are the most discussed issues in today's business environment and found that both are positively related.

[keywords] generation Z, digitalization, sustainability, workplace expectations

Introduction

Generation Z (Gen Z), individuals born from 1997 to 2012, is taking up the world of work from past few years (Dimock, 2018). Members of this generation are also referred to as digital natives because they have grown up with constant access to digital technology and the internet (NASSCOM, 2022). Schwieger and Ladwig (2018) asserted that this generation has never encountered a time when instant connectivity and access to information were not available, rendering them incapable of understanding a time before the internet. In contrast to earlier generations, they are at ease with technology, and consequently they anticipate the use of digital technology in their workplace (Gen Z in the workplace, 2023). Gen Z accepted that technology helps them make the most of their limited time, facilitates productive work, and multitasking abilities (Gomez et al., 2018). This generation has an exceptional familiarity in navigating the world of technology and indicated a strong preference for digital tools that enable remote work, skill development, and teamwork (Deloitte, 2022). According to them, digital transformation is necessary to increase engagement and thereby productivity (Unily, 2023).

Digital transformation describes how digital technology is incorporated into every aspect of business, altering how companies' function and provide value to their clients through automation, remote labor, and artificial intelligence (Schwarz Müller et al., 2018). The advantages of digital transformation are widely established and comprise of heightened employee engagement, improved decision-making skills, and increased productivity (Fenech et al., 2019). It

facilitates effective communication, coordination, and cooperation among employees by providing the necessary collaboration tools (Cijan et al., 2019). With technology, employees may access any device and be productive from anywhere at any time. Digitalization is not merely a buzzword, it is a term that has a rapid and significant impact on work (Bresciani et al., 2021). The drive for digital transformation is fueled by the conviction that new technologies possess immense potential to stimulate innovation, enhance efficiency, and competitive advantage (Ballestar et al., 2021). Major multinational corporations (MNCs) like Google, Facebook, Uber, and Air BnB have experienced an unparalleled surge in growth, mostly fueled by digital technologies and concept of a platform business ecosystem (Hein et al., 2020; Solberg et al., 2020).

Simultaneously, Gen Z is very concerned about sustainability, and many of them stress how important it is to work for companies that genuinely care about social and environmental issues (Davidescu et al., 2020). The necessity of incorporating sustainable practices into the main business plan rather than treating them as an afterthought is crucial to attract Gen Z (Gomez et al., 2018). Financial metrics are no longer the sole criterion used to assess the success of a firm; organizations must integrate sustainability practices into their business operations to line with the sustainability goals (Prakash et al., 2023). As a result of significant demand from different stakeholders, companies are becoming more aware of the environmental, social, governance, and ethical difficulties that their enterprises encounter. Adopting strategies that support social responsibility, environmental stewardship, and long-term economic health is what sustainability entails (Enhert, 2009). Initiatives including lowering carbon footprints, encouraging work-life balance, and developing a culture of ongoing learning are frequently included in HRM for supporting sustainability (Karman, 2019).

Work-life balance and development are the most important factors for keeping the Gen Z with an organization (Deloitte, 2022; Robert Half, 2023). Both of these factors contribute towards employee engagement and thus, not only directly increase an employee's intention to stay in a current job but indirectly as well (Gurchiek, 2022; Unily, 2023). Again, Gen Z is highly skilled in technology and supports the incorporation of technology into the talent management process by using advanced methods for ensuring work-life balance, training, and feedback (Nichols & Wright, 2018). In fact, the use of digital tools for different aspects of HRM promotes engagement among Gen Z (Parmelee, 2023). Hence, based on the above discussion it can be inferred that Gen Z has a strong inclination for digitalized workplace and assigns equal importance to sustainability. Digitalization can be a significant way of fulfilling the desire of employees regarding opportunities for work-life balance, development, and engagement.

This study aims to identify the expectations of Gen Z regarding digitalization of the workplace with special reference to aspects related to work-life balance, development, and engagement of employees. Additionally, the relation between sustainability and HRM has been a topic of discussion for an extended period. Hence, the study also explores the impact of digitalization of different facets of HRM on perception of sustainability. The study would thus contribute not only towards the individual disciplines of digitalization of workplace and sustainability but will also enhance our understanding of how technology can aid in attaining sustainability. Relevant literature is presented at the beginning followed by a research methodology section. Then, data analysis and findings of the study are given along with discussion section. Towards the end, the implications of the study together with limitations and future research suggestions are provided.

Literature Review and Hypotheses Formulation

This section throws light on the extant literature about the use of technology for managing human resources and Gen Z views regarding the same. After thorough understanding hypotheses of the study are proposed at the end of this section.

Employee Engagement (EE)

With technology now playing a major part in every facet of HR operations and in order to satisfy the demands and expectations of Gen Z, organizations must modify their methods to employee engagement (Gen Z in the workplace, 2023). When a person is emotionally attached to the organization, it leads to extra effort and a willingness to go above and beyond in normal work, which is known as employee engagement. Employee engagement contributes to the success of the company, as employees have a strong sense of purpose and belonging, and are enthusiastic about their work (Gallup, 2022). An organization's overall productivity is enhanced when engaged employees proactively share their knowledge, suggestions, and criticism via digital channels (Anderson, 2019). For an organization to succeed, employee engagement is essential because it fosters creativity, productivity, and talent retention. Engaging these employees is even more important for maintaining connections, fostering collaboration, and making sure that employees feel connected to their teams and the organization despite physical distance because remote work opportunities common these days (Unily, 2023). Moreover, Gen Z strive for virtual collaboration platforms, such as Microsoft Teams and Zoom, can be employed for deriving engagement at workplace (ETCIO, 2020). Therefore, the use of technology is crucial for engaging young employees.

Work-life Balance (WLB)

The impact of digital transformation on human resource development, talent management, and performance management has been acknowledged as a beneficial aspect (Betchoo, 2016). According to Schwarzmuller et al. (2018), work-life balance is an important component that has undergone significant change due to digitalization. There are multiple interpretations of "work-life balance," encompassing both familial and non-familial pursuits (Kalliath & Brough, 2009). Research has shown that maintaining a healthy work-life balance leads to improved performance and greater job satisfaction (Gigauri, 2020). Remote work is a highly advantageous component of digitalized growth. Messenger and Gschwind (2016) assert that emerging technology is fostering a novel professional culture centered at remote work. Remote working allows individuals to attain a balance between their professional and personal life, leading to higher job satisfaction (Kossek et al., 2015; Ninaus et al., 2015). When it is about Gen Z, it has high expectations for digitalization of work options where they can form their comfort zones. A survey by NASSCOM (2022) found that 85 percent of respondents showed an interest in fully remote or hybrid work option while only 15 percent wanted to work from a company location emphasizing the importance of workplace digitalization.

Training and Development (TD)

While studying the benefits of digitalization, it is evident that companies that adopt digital practices are more inclined to invest a greater amount of resources in staff training (Effendi, 2014). These organizations possess a distinct advantage in terms of training and equipping their workers to aid the clients. Moreover, the use of new digital tools necessitates further training, which might lead to the demand for ongoing learning (Nokelainen, 2018). These tools provide advantages such as the ability to enhance time flexibility for organizing work, which can result in job satisfaction

among employees (Seyda, 2018). It is proposed that businesses that operate entirely digital or hybrid have a unique advantage in the contemporary global economy as online learning greatly impacts the development of new abilities for employees. Areiqat and Al-Doori (2018) determined that the use of digital-training using technological equipment such as the internet and computerized websites, has a higher capacity to enhance employees' competences in knowledge and skills by offering more current information. Furthermore, all participants have unanimously acknowledged that e-training is a superior technique of training compared to traditional training, and it is also more economically efficient. Gen Z specifically advocates for the use digital learning tools that can support self-paced and personalized learning system (Gomez et al., 2018). Use of platforms like LinkedIn Learning, Udemy, and Coursera can provide access to a wide range of courses, tutorials, and resources on topics ranging from technical skills to leadership development (Parmelee, 2023) while meeting the development needs of Gen Z.

Impact of Digitalization of HRM Practices on Sustainability

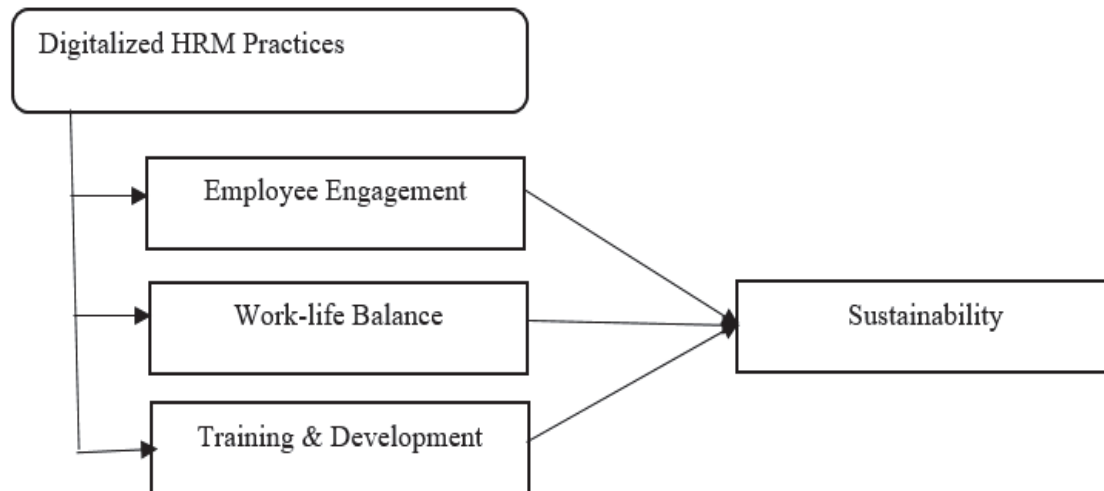
Earlier research highlighted that digitalization of HRM can contribute to the establishment of sustainable organizations as it facilitates the cultivation of skills and talents of each employee, keeping in mind their personal well-being (Kuzior et al., 2021). While sustainability has long been a topic of research and contemplation in management, the connection between sustainability and HRM has recently garnered interest from scholars (Aust et al., 2020). Sustainable HRM prioritizes essential procedures such as training, development, equitable compensation, engagement, and personal well-being of employees (Kramar, 2022). It contributes to the achievement of a triple bottom line, which encompasses environmental integrity, social equality, and economic development (Ehnert, 2012). Sustainable HRM can enhance the organization's and its workforce's adaptability in the process of digitalization (Aust et al., 2020). It offers several advantages, such as minimizing the negative effects of downsizing activities, promoting talent management, fostering an improved climate, and reducing the negative impact of work.

Connecting sustainability to Human Resource Management through the process of digitalization, Bresciani et al. (2021) argue that HRM plays a crucial role in facilitating digital transformation by effectively managing the interests of both the organization and its employees. Digitalization directly contributes to sustainability by reducing requirement of employees to travel to the workplace or reduced paperwork while indirectly contribute through increased employees' efficiency due to better work-life balance (Kunkel& Matthes, 2020). Therefore, it can be natural to state that digitalization of HRM has a positive impact on sustainability as shown in Figure 1. Based on the above discussion following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: Use of technology for employee engagement has a positive impact on sustainability.

H2: Use of technology for facilitating remote work has a positive impact on sustainability.

H3: Use of technology for training and development has a positive impact on sustainability.

Figure 1*Conceptual Model of the Study*

Research Methods

Using quantitative surveys of Gen Z employees working in the IT industry, this study uses a descriptive approach. The survey used items developed based on existing studies (Benson et al., 2002; Gomez et al., 2018, Robert Half, 2023; Selimović et al., 2021; Stephan et al., 2024) to capture the opinions regarding workplace digitization and sustainability. Expectation regarding incorporating technology for employee engagement (EE) (5 items), for work-life balance (WLB) (5 items), and for training & development (TD) (5 items) is measured on a five-point scale, ranging from “not at all” to “to a great extent”. Perception about the impact of digitalization on sustainability (S) is also measured on a five-point scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree consisting of seven items developed from the research conducted by Kunkel and Matthes (2020). All the statements are given in Appendix 1.

In total 300 questionnaires were distributed using purposive sampling to get responses from those employees who understand the meaning of workplace digitalization. A total of 270 questionnaires were received back. On scrutiny 14 responses were removed due to missing data and only 256 responses were found usable. However, Hair et al. (2009) supported that a sample of 150 is sufficient when there are five or less constructs with outer loading more than .5, hence, 256 responses are considered appropriate for final analysis. The demographic details of respondents asked about only age and gender because the study is primarily focused on getting insights from the Gen Z. respondents’ profile showed that age of respondents ranged from 21 to 27 years with almost equal representation of males (52%) and females (48%).

Results and Interpretation

First of all, the mean values of all the constructs is calculated and then, Structural Equation Modelling is applied for analyzing the data by using Smart PLS 4 Software.

Descriptive Statistics of Constructs

The mean values reflected that employees have moderate to high expectations that organization

should incorporate technology for employee engagement, work-life balance, and training & development. Perception about impact of digitalization on sustainability is found very high as shown in Table 1.

Table 1*Mean Values*

| Construct | Mean | Standard Deviation |
|-----------------------------|-------------|---------------------------|
| Employee Engagement (EE) | 4.32 | .59 |
| Work-life Balance (WLB) | 4.49 | .56 |
| Training & Development (TD) | 4.49 | .61 |
| Sustainability (S) | 4.56 | .50 |

Measurement Model Assessment

For measurement model first of all Cronbach's Alpha is considered which should be greater than 0.7 (Shiva et al., 2020) and for present model the criteria are met. Also, the values of composite reliability and average variance extracted are examined that exceeded the minimum accepted values of 0.7 and 0.5 respectively (Hair et al., 2019). Outer loadings for all items exceeded the value of 0.7 except for EE2 and EE5 but as CR and AVE are satisfactory these loadings are considered appropriate. Table 2 presents all these values. Discriminate validity is checked through HTMT criteria which is also within the required limits i.e. less than .90 as shown in Table 3.

Table 2*Results of Measurement Model*

| | Item | Loading | Alpha | CR | AVE |
|------------|-------------|----------------|--------------|-----------|------------|
| EE | EE1 | 0.717 | 0.76 | 0.763 | 0.511 |
| | EE2 | 0.664 | | | |
| | EE3 | 0.741 | | | |
| | EE4 | 0.757 | | | |
| | EE5 | 0.693 | | | |
| WLB | WLB1 | 0.813 | 0.855 | 0.86 | 0.632 |
| | WLB2 | 0.767 | | | |
| | WLB3 | 0.795 | | | |
| | WLB4 | 0.808 | | | |
| | WLB5 | 0.791 | | | |
| TD | TD1 | 0.778 | 0.845 | 0.851 | 0.617 |
| | TD2 | 0.759 | | | |
| | TD3 | 0.827 | | | |
| | TD4 | 0.824 | | | |
| | TD5 | 0.734 | | | |
| S | S1 | 0.772 | 0.876 | 0.879 | 0.576 |
| | S2 | 0.718 | | | |
| | S3 | 0.825 | | | |

| | |
|----|-------|
| S4 | 0.8 |
| S5 | 0.787 |
| S6 | 0.645 |
| S7 | 0.751 |

Table 3*HTMT Table*

| | EE | S | TD | WLB |
|-----|-------|-------|------|-----|
| EE | | | | |
| S | 0.705 | | | |
| TD | 0.574 | 0.764 | | |
| WLB | 0.693 | 0.80 | 0.63 | |

Structural Model Assessment

Bootstrapping process is followed using 5000 sub-samples to arrive at the structural model results. All the exogenous constructs including employee engagement, work-life balance, and training & development explained 62.5 percent of variance (R^2) of the endogenous construct, i.e., sustainability as shown in Table 5 and in case of social science this value is very high (Shiva et al., 2020). The structural model is presented in figure 2. Further, the model fit is checked through SRMR (standardized root mean square residual) which was less than the threshold value 0.08. It is found that expectations about digitalization of employee engagement, work-life balance, and training & development, each has a significant and positive impact on employee's perception of sustainability. To be specific, work-life balance has the strongest impact on sustainability ($b=0.398$, $p\text{-value}<0.01$), followed by training & development ($b=0.362$, $p\text{-value}<0.01$) and employee engagement ($b=0.183$, $p\text{-value}<0.05$).

All these results of structural model assessment are shown in Table 4. Results revealed moderate effect size (f^2) for WLB (.246) and TD (.232) towards, while low effect size for EE (.058) to S (Hair et al., 2019). For determining the predictive relevance of the model, Q^2 is calculated through PLS Predict. Value more than zero indicates the predictive power of model. Table 5 presents the results of Q^2 , where the model has high predictive relevance.

Figure 2
Structural Model of the Study

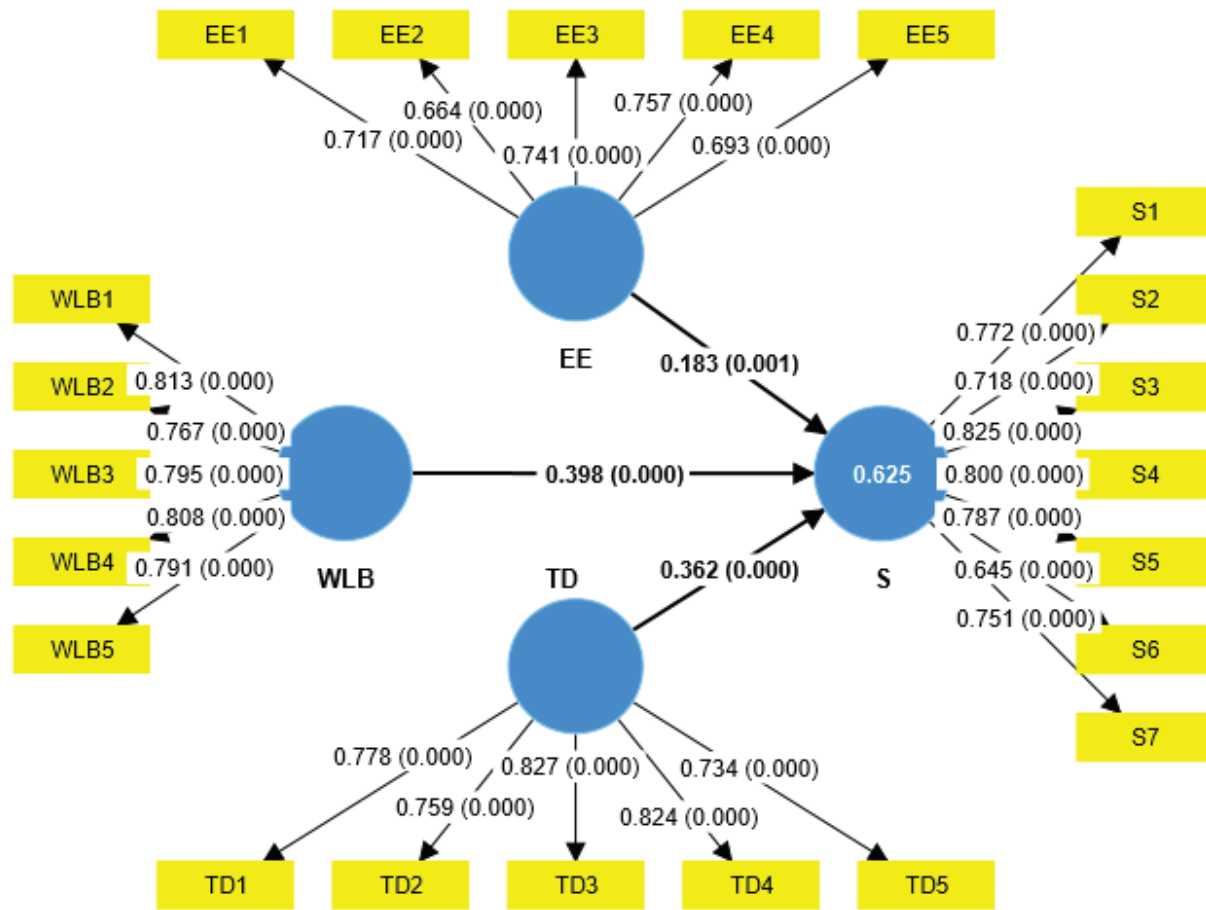


Table 4
Results of Structural Model Assessment

| Hypothesis | Path Relationship | Std. Beta | Sample mean | T-statistics | P-values | Results |
|------------|-------------------|-----------|-------------|--------------|----------|-----------|
| H1 | EE > S | 0.183 | 0.186 | 3.236 | 0.001 | Supported |
| H2 | WLB > S | 0.398 | 0.398 | 4.991 | 0.000 | Supported |
| H3 | TD > S | 0.362 | 0.362 | 4.689 | 0.000 | Supported |

Table 5
Values of R^2 and Q^2

| | R^2 | Q^2 predict |
|---|-------|---------------|
| S | 0.625 | 0.598 |

Discussion and Implications

The research examines the employees' expectations from organizations to make use of digital tools and its potential to foster sustainability for managing digitization in the workplace. From the results it is evident that participants from Generation Z indicated a strong preference for employing digital tools at the workplace (Anderson, 2019). The online tools help in building networks with colleagues and supervisors and thus foster better communication and collaboration among employees. They feel connected to the team and can easily participate in the discussions held at organizational level. The organization is suggested to incorporate digital tools to meet the engagement-related expectations of employees as engaged workers are more satisfied with the job and that would lower turnover intentions. Hence, the costs associated with employee departure can be minimized.

Technology that enables remote work is highly favored by Gen Z as they strive for achieving work-life balance (Robert Half, 2023). Online platforms can help them to manage their personal and professional lives in a better way and help in performing the job efficiently by giving access to all the necessary resources. Not only that, but the online wellness programs are also viewed as crucial measures to reduce work-related stress. Organizations can provide remote work opportunities on a large scale as per the choices of employees through online platforms. This will allow the employees to emphasize self-care, create boundaries around their work, and maintain a good balance between their personal and professional life which will enhance workforce productivity (Brassey et al., 2021).

Gen Z is labelled as a career driven generation who always look for opportunities to acquire new skills and career progression. The digital platforms offer double benefits by providing personalized learning programs along with self-paced features. So, the employees can easily access the learning system according to their time and convenience. These systems provide diverse training programs and promote continuous learning which can contribute to the long-term growth of the organization. Digital learning platforms are not useful only in IT sector, but these tools can enhance the productivity of workforce across various sectors such as in manufacturing automation training can help streamline the common operations. In the healthcare sector telemedicine and remote patient monitoring adaptation aid the medical staff to balance their work-life in a better way as they can save time from medical visits. In the same way, AI-driven analytics system ensures compliance with labor law in terms of pay, diversity & inclusion along with social responsibility initiatives improving ethical HRM and corporate governance.

Organizations should focus on integrating digital tools into their HR practice along with broader corporate strategies for enhanced employee engagement. It would further aid in talent retention and increased productivity in a competitive global market. Organizations investing in digital tools and sustainability initiatives can position themselves as attractive employees for Gen Z, improving employer branding and reducing hiring costs. Multinational companies can specifically leverage digital platforms for managing their global workforce, catering to the needs of employees from different cultures, and improving operational efficiency across diverse geographical locations. Use of digital collaboration platforms by global firms can further facilitate

cross-border teamwork, ensure quick sharing of knowledge, along with creating a unified corporate culture despite geographic distances. Additionally, tools powered by AI can predict workforce trends for optimized hiring strategies and improved employee engagement through personalized career development plans.

Additionally, Gen Z is very concerned about sustainability, and many of them stress how important it is to work for companies that genuinely care about social and environmental issues (Deloitte, 2022). Companies complying with sustainability requirements can build a reputation in the market and thus attract more customers and possess large market share. Digitalization can serve as a foundation for fostering sustainable workplace practices through HRM. Organizations can gradually adopt environmentally friendly human resources practices, including online recruitment, AI-driven remote working systems, and e-learning programs, to diminish corporate carbon footprints while improving operational efficiency (Kunkel & Matthess, 2020). Remote work models address Generation Z's demand for flexibility while significantly contributing to climate neutrality by decreasing office energy consumption and minimizing emissions from transportation. Furthermore, organizations can enhance sustainable leadership development by utilizing digital mentorship initiatives and AI-enhanced leadership training, cultivating a new cohort of corporate executives dedicated to sustainability-oriented decision-making.

Conclusion

Organizations trying to manage digital transformation can learn a lot from Generation Z's distinct viewpoint on the relationship between sustainability and technology. Digital transformation is necessary to increase productivity and job satisfaction for today's youth. The results imply that Gen Z's views of workplace digitalization are shaped by their more general beliefs about sustainability. Talent from Generation Z is likely to be drawn to and retained by companies that integrate digital transformation initiatives with sustainable practices. Businesses may establish a work climate that aligns with the ideals of Generation Z and promote sustained success by giving priority to sustainable practices and utilizing digital tools. Implementing a digitalized approach to HRM can effectively enhance the balance between economic, social, and environmental performance promoting sustainability through HRM. Therefore, organizations can invest in digital tools to meet the expectations of current Gen Z employees and support the global efforts to achieve sustainability as well. Additionally, organizations can establish themselves as an employer of choice by highlighting these elements in recruitment campaigns for attracting talent.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Although the study significantly contributes to the field of digitalization and sustainability but there are some limitations. Firstly, the sample consisted of only IT sector employees and hence, findings cannot be generalized to the whole population of Gen Z employees. This research investigated expectations regarding only three aspects of HRM while digitalization of workplace is a broad concept. Finally, digitalization also poses some challenges which are not considered in this study such as spillovers in case of remote working. Future studies should examine how these technologies affect employee wellbeing and organizational performance over the long run.

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Appendix 1.*Statements Used in Questionnaire*

| Expectations about workplace digitalization | |
|--|--|
| | I expect that my employer should provide: |
| EE1 | The digital communication platforms to facilitate open and effective communication with my colleagues and supervisors. |
| EE2 | Digital recognition programs make me feel recognized for my contributions. |
| EE3 | Digital engagement tools with interactive features make me feel more connected to my team. |
| EE4 | Online platforms through which I can regularly participate in organization-wide discussions. |
| EE5 | Technology to improve my overall engagement with the organization's mission and values. |
| WLB1 | Technology allows me to effectively manage my work-life balance. |
| WLB2 | The remote work tools that enable me to complete my tasks efficiently from home. |
| WLB3 | The digital wellness programs help me reduce work-related stress. |
| WLB4 | The flexible work hours, supported by technology to help me balance my personal and professional responsibilities. |
| WLB5 | Access to all necessary resources remotely to perform my job effectively. |
| TD1 | The e-learning platforms offer a variety of training programs to meet my professional development needs. |
| TD2 | The online learning management system is easy to use. |
| TD3 | The personalized learning paths help me develop skills relevant to my career goals. |
| TD4 | Regular organization of virtual workshops to support my career progression. |
| TD5 | The digital development tools to keep updated with the latest industry trends. |
| Impact of digitalization on Sustainability | |
| | I believe that: |
| S1 | The use of remote work technologies will reduce the need for commuting, contributing to lower carbon emissions. |
| S2 | Digital collaboration tools will decrease reliance on paper documents, supporting sustainable practices. |
| S3 | Virtual meeting platforms will reduce the need for business travel, supporting sustainability goals. |
| S4 | The technology used for employee engagement initiatives will support efforts to minimize environmental impact. |
| S5 | The e-learning platforms will reduce the need for printed training materials, supporting environmental sustainability. |
| S6 | Technology tools for professional development will help in efficient resource management and reduce waste. |
| S7 | An organization's investment in digital development tools reflects its commitment to environmental sustainability. |