

Career aspirations of generation Z: a systematic literature review

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to explore the career aspirations of individuals belonging to the Gen Z cohort, i.e. born between 1995 and 2012.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper is a systematic review of the literature. The authors accessed four databases to collect literature for review. The databases included were Academic Search Ultimate, Business Source Ultimate, ERIC and Google Scholar. Keywords used to conduct the search process were as follows: career development, career aspiration, generation Z, Gen Z and iGen. The authors imported all articles to RefWorks, read article abstracts and decided on whether to include or exclude the article in the review.

Findings – Based on this systematic review, the authors found that intrinsic and extrinsic factors determine Gen Z's career aspirations. Further, based on past studies' predictions, the authors concluded that Gen Z has well-defined career expectations and career development plans.

Research limitations/implications – Gen Z is the newest generation to enter the workforce. With limited research on this cohort, this study synthesized the existing knowledge of Gen Z students' career aspirations and their future employers' expectations. All research around Gen Z is currently focused on students, and hence, it is challenging to predict their workplace behavior. In this work, the authors provided organizations and practitioners guidelines to be prepared with Gen Z's expectations as they enter the workplace.

Originality/value – This systematic literature review synthesizes empirical research from around the world on career aspirations related to Gen Z.

Keywords Students, Career development, Career aspirations, Generation Z, Gen Z, Post millennials

Paper type Literature review

People born in the same chronological, social and historical timeframe are collectively called a generation (Twenge *et al.*, 2010). Further, generation theory claims that people born in the same generation share similar characteristics and basic behavioral profiles (Twenge *et al.*, 2010). Generational research has generalized and highlighted evolving career needs for different generation groups currently in the workforce – baby boomers (born between 1946 and 1964), generation X (born between 1965 and 1980) and millennials or generation Y (born between 1981 and 1995). For instance, careers were central to baby boomers' identity, making them feel distinct from others and loyal to the organization (Smola and Sutton, 2002). Generation X perceived promotions more critical than an increase in pay, inspiring loyalty towards the organization (Smola and Sutton, 2002), whereas millennials easily switch jobs for an increase in pay and promotions (Smola and Sutton, 2002).



Generation Z or Gen Z or iGen or post-millennials (born between 1995 and 2012) is the latest generation to join the workforce in 2017. In this literature review, we investigated theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches informing current empirical research about Gen Z and their career aspirations. Their career is an emerging research field and thus we also reviewed prevalent industrial reports capturing Gen Z's career aspirations. In addition, we explored Gen Z's characteristics impacting their career aspirations and expectations. Lastly, we provide a baseline for future researchers and practitioners to advance Gen Z specific career development research, theory and practice.

With Gen Z as the newest participants in the workplace, organizations are experiencing an amalgamation of four generations at the same time. With four different generations in the workplace, organizations are experiencing a rising work-value conflict and differences in preferences in learning styles, beliefs and communication styles (Lyons and Kuron, 2014; Solaja and Ogunola, 2016). Older generations such as baby boomers, generation X and millennials have been studied exhaustively by researchers in the human resource development (HRD) field (Callahan and Greenhaus, 2008; Chaudhuri and Ghosh, 2012; Ng *et al.*, 2010). With Gen Z entering the workplace dynamic, it has become pertinent for organizations to understand this newest generation in the workforce to meet all employee's workplace needs (Perilus, 2020).

Preliminary research in the fields of education and marketing has studied Gen Z and their educational preferences and how to advertise products to them, respectively. Gen Z-related research in education and marketing has characterized Gen Z as digital natives (Barnes and Noble College Insights, 2018; Twenge, 2017), highly achievement-oriented (Barna Group, 2018), seeking interesting and meaningful work (Schroth, 2019) and disengaged in absence of challenging work (Bresman and Rao, 2017). With lack of literature in HRD and organizational research on Gen Z and their career-related aspirations, organizations are underprepared to host this new incoming generation into the workforce.

In HRD research, generation-based research has important implications to talent development, career development, career mobility and engagement (Callahan and Greenhaus, 2008; Lyons *et al.*, 2014; Ng *et al.*, 2010). HRD impacts organization's ability to stay competitive by attracting and retaining talented workers (Eversole *et al.*, 2012). With Gen Z entering the workforce, HRD must focus its attention to first understand what motivates the newest generation in the workforce and how to adjust the work environment to retain Gen Z.

Thus, it is essential to explore Gen Z's career aspirations and expectations to understand attraction and retention strategies for Gen Z employees and prepare organizations for this incoming generation into the workforce and meet Gen Z's career aspirations. The following three research questions guided this review:

- RQ1. What theoretical perspectives were used to inform empirical studies and industrial reports about Gen Z's career aspirations?
- RQ2. What methodological approaches were used in empirical studies and industrial reports to inform Gen Z's career aspirations?
- RQ3. How are Gen Z's career aspirations characterized in reviewed empirical studies and industrial reports?

To answer the research questions, we first describe our systematic literature review (SLR) methodology, followed by a summary and discussion of the findings. We then conclude the article with implications for future Gen Z research, theory and practice.

Methodology

The purpose of SLR is to have researchers report a systematic search process, selection, inclusion and exclusion criteria for review (Briner and Denyer, 2012). Using the SLR methodology, researchers can avoid biases by providing a systematic trail of decision-making to include studies in the review (Denyer and Tranfield, 2009). Four major steps highlight the SLR methodology, and they are described in the following sections: identify clear research questions, illustrate a clear search protocol, provide critical reasoning to include studies for review and synthesize findings to contribute new knowledge in the research area (Briner and Denyer, 2012; Denyer and Tranfield, 2009).

Search process

First, we identified the overarching bodies of literature relevant to our topic to focus our literature search: career aspirations, career development and generational research specific to generation Z. We searched six databases – Academic Search Ultimate, Business Source Ultimate, ERIC and Google Scholar. The following keywords with variations of Boolean connectors (“AND” and “OR”) assisted our literature search: “career,” “career development,” “career aspirations,” “job,” “employment,” “vocation,” “Generation Z,” “gen Z,” “iGen,” “post-millennials” and “career aspirations.” Our search engine allowed us to eliminate duplicates from appearing in our search results leading to 154 unique results. As Gen Z is a new research area, limited publications were available across databases; however, there might be more empirical studies not captured through the search process because they were beyond this review’s scope.

Screening

We screened the 154 publications produced during the initial search process to shortlist articles further. Considering that Gen Z is a new research area, many newspaper articles, periodicals, blogs, infographics and non-research-intensive material published after 2016 showed up in our search. We further applied two search filters to yield peer-reviewed articles published in English, leading to 33 search results. We further assessed the 33 articles to include articles in our data pool with relevance to our research questions using the inclusion and exclusion criteria described below.

Inclusion criteria

To include studies in our final data pool, we applied the following inclusion criteria:

- (1) The article’s abstract included keywords related to Gen Z to ensure we select articles with Gen Z and their careers as the central phenomenon.
- (2) The article must be empirical in nature. Based on our research questions, we wanted to review evidence-based research to provide recommendations and implications for future research, theory building and practice.
- (3) The article must be peer-reviewed. Gen Z is a young research area; we also included peer-reviewed articles published in conference proceedings.

Guided by the inclusion criteria listed above, we recorded 24 articles in our data pool using RefWorks. We used Garrard’s (2013) matrix system to note the essential features of articles in our data pool. To include more articles in the literature review, we reviewed the reference list of all 24 shortlisted articles and noticed some industrial reports cited across the articles repeatedly. As the objective of this systematic review is to gather emerging knowledge and

provide a comprehensive review of Gen Z's career aspirations, we decided to include eleven industrial reports by applying the following criteria:

- (4) Standalone industrial reports.
- (5) Industrial reports with an empirical research design.

Exclusion criteria

Of the 24 empirical articles and nine industrial reports, we excluded some articles and reports by applying the following exclusion criteria:

- Article's central focus was not on Gen Z's career aspirations. Some articles only fleetingly mentioned Gen Z and focused on other generations in the workforce, especially millennials or Gen Y. We excluded two articles using this criterion.
- Articles did not clearly distinguish between Gen Z and other generations in the workforce. Some articles used Gen Z as an umbrella term for both Gen Z and Gen Y. We excluded them as data presented in these articles did not clearly describe Gen Z-related findings. We excluded three more articles using this criterion.
- Articles did not present any empirical evidence of their findings. These articles were literature reviews, editorial and books, which infiltrated our inclusion criteria but excluded during this second stage of article selection. We further excluded five articles using this criterion.
- Industrial reports did not present comprehensive evidence of data collection and analysis. Some reports focused solely on Gen Z as students and how education systems must improve to engage these students with no reference to their careers. We excluded three reports as we could not link the report to Gen Z and their careers.

After eliminating ten articles and six industrial reports, we had 14 articles and 5 industrial reports for the final review (total 19 studies). [Figure 1](#) gives an overview of the SLR process.

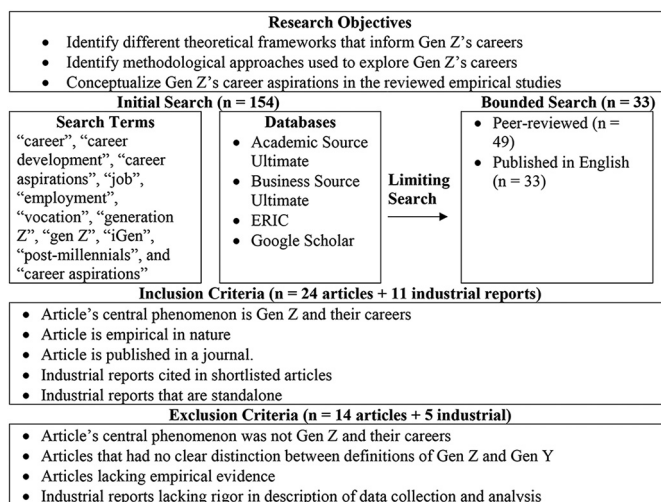
Data management

Using [Garrard's \(2013\)](#) matrix to organize articles from our initial search, we recorded key articles features including title, year of publication, authors, the purpose of the study, research design, participant description and methods. Using the matrix, we decided whether to select the article in the final review. The first column in the matrix recorded our final decision as "yes" or "no" based on the exclusion criteria listed above.

Data analysis

We moved the final 19 studies to a new matrix for analysis and report our findings and answer the research questions. We added the columns: country of origin, theoretical framework, Gen Z characteristics and key findings describing Gen Z's career aspirations. Seven columns from our [Garrard's \(2013\)](#) matrix thus became themes for data analysis. We coded and cataloged each article individually and extracted specific theme-based ideas, keywords and phrases deductively ([Creswell and Creswell, 2017](#)) in [Garrard's \(2013\)](#) matrix. The column for the theoretical framework informed the first research question in this study. The column's research design, participant selection and methods informed the second research question.

For the last research question, we identified commonalities across all 19 studies through a second round of thematic analysis focused on the article's findings and discussion



Source: Adapted from Makarem and Wang (2020)

Figure 1.
SLR process

sections. We analyzed each article separately to ensure rigor in our data analysis. The first round of emic coding led to 142 codes representing a broad range of Gen Z's characteristics and attitudes towards their career. Emic codes allowed us to tag the text in the article's findings and discussion sections, which we combined to reveal broader themes relating to Gen Z's career aspiration characteristics. Some emic codes were: persevering, hard-working, innovative, which resulted in a broader theme of Gen Z's characteristics. Another example was: technology, stability, reputation, which resulted in a broad theme representing Gen Z's career expectations.

After grouping all like codes, we formed themes describing Gen Z's characteristics and career aspirations. In case we were unable to categorize a code, we referred to academic literature in HRD on career development and developed suitable themes. All reviewed literature collected data from Gen Z students as they are the youngest generation with only some in the workforce. We thus categorized the following sub-themes under the broader career aspirations theme:

- intrinsic factors shaping career aspirations;
- extrinsic factors shaping career aspirations;
- career expectations; and
- perceived career development.

Findings

In this section, we first provide an overview of the theoretical frameworks used to study Gen Z and their careers in the past, followed by the study's methodological approaches. Last, we conceptualize Gen Z and their career aspirations through four broad themes: intrinsic and extrinsic factors shaping Gen Z's career aspirations, Gen Z's career expectations and perceived career development.

Guiding frameworks

Out of the 19 studies reviewed, 6 used distinctive theoretical frameworks resulting in disparate views of Gen Z and their career aspirations. Despite the diversity, all six theories are rooted in explaining personal and organizational factors governing Gen Z's career aspiration.

Boundless careers

[Arar and Önerenb \(2018\)](#) defined boundless careers as career growth across several organizations. However, Arar and Önerenb 's (2018) research revealed that Gen Z aspires to grow in their career within one single organization. Gen Z's perception of boundless careers is thus to grow laterally across the organization by exploring multiple roles across the organizational system. [Arar and Önerenb \(2018\)](#) call on HR managers to update their talent management systems to increase career development and growth opportunities to retain Gen Z employees.

Career anchors

[Bohdziewicz \(2016\)](#) used the career anchors' conceptual framework proposed by [Schein \(2006\)](#). [Schein \(2006\)](#) provided a framework of three career anchors for all individuals and suggested that these anchors help individuals make career-related decisions: talent-based, needs-based and values-based. [Bohdziewicz \(2016\)](#) indicates that Gen Z highly desires the lifestyle career anchor, which falls under the needs-based career anchor. As a result, Gen Z asserts the need for a psychological contract with the organization to maintain a work-life balance. In addition, [Bohdziewicz's \(2016\)](#) study suggests Gen Z expect freedom and flexibility at work to meet their personal and family needs.

Theory of planned behavior

[Goh and Lee \(2017\)](#) investigated Gen Z's planned behavior by studying their attitudes, subjective norms and perceived difficulties (p. 22). [Goh and Lee \(2017\)](#) found that Gen Z is attracted to a career, which requires them to work with people. At the same time, a lower salary was the more commonly perceived barrier, which will govern their workplace choice.

Career theory

[Maloni et al. \(2019\)](#) emphasized that individual values must match their organization's culture or environment. Similarly, [Vogel and Feldman \(2009\)](#) introduced the person–environment fit framework, which explained high turnover rates in organizations. The individual and the organization are expected to have a psychological contract to meet each other's needs ([Vogel and Feldman, 2009](#)). The current organizational environment and values are calibrated by boomers and Gen X generations. [Maloni et al. \(2019\)](#) illustrated that Gen Z's work values are much different from the older generations raising the need to adjust the organizational work environment to accommodate Gen Z's needs.

Social capital theory

[Grow and Yang \(2018\)](#) explored Gen Z's perception of career success using Lin's (2001) social capital theory, which focuses on building relationship networks contributing to an individual's career success. Grow and Yang (2019) claimed that men would be more successful in their careers than women in leveraging social capital. This study confirmed the hypothesis and concluded that even Gen Z would experience gender discrimination in the workplace, as men are more successful in leveraging their social capital than women.

Personal branding

Vişelaru (2019) conceptualized “personal branding” to highlight Gen Z is using technology uniquely to “create an online reputation for future jobs and careers” (p. 266). Gen Z is disseminating their career aspirations to future employers by investing in their social media posts and build a positive online brand (Vişelaru, 2019). Gen Z then uses the online brand as a virtual resume to assert their personal values to the hiring organizations (Vişelaru, 2019).

Methodological approaches

This section discusses the methodological approaches by highlighting the research design, participants and context of the reviewed study (Table 1).

Methods

Among the 19 reviewed studies, 15 studies were quantitative and exclusively relied on web-based surveys to collect data. Barnes and Noble College Insights (2018), Bohdziewicz (2016), Deloitte (2019), Dell (2018), Ernst and Young (2018), Grow and Yang (2018), Šafránková and Šikýř (2017), Silinevica and Meirule (2019) and Vişelaru (2019) stated they used online surveys with no further description of the questionnaire or tools used. Maloni *et al.* (2019) stated they used Qualtrics; Puiu (2017) used Google Forms by administering the survey through social media, and Hampton and Welsh (2019) administered Lyons Work Value Survey to elucidate Gen Z nurses’ work values.

Of the 19 studies, 4 were qualitative, using distinct data collection methods. Arar and Önerenb (2018) used a case study approach to explore talent management practices in one organization to evaluate organizational readiness to hire and retain Gen Z employees. Arar and Önerenb (2018) conducted semi-structured interviews with the organization’s HR manager. They also conducted observations and document review of company reports,

Author(s)	Methodology	Methods	Participants
<i>Empirical Research</i>			
Arar and Öneren (2018)	Qualitative	Case Study	HR Managers
Bohdziewicz (2016)	Quantitative	Survey	108 Students
Cseh-Papp <i>et al.</i> (2017)	Quantitative	Survey	112 Students
Fodor and Jäckel (2018)	Qualitative	Focus Groups	180 Students
Fodor <i>et al.</i> (2018)	Mixed	Focus Groups	180 Students
		Survey	1,178 Students
Goh and Lee (2017)	Qualitative	Interviews	71 Students
Grow and Yang (2018)	Quantitative	Survey	98 Students
Hampton and Welsh (2019)	Quantitative	Survey	103 Students
Iorgulescu (2016)	Quantitative	Survey	156 Students
Maloni <i>et al.</i> (2019).	Quantitative	Survey	1,537 Students
Puiu (2017)	Quantitative	Survey	111 (Students or Employees)
Šafránková and Šikýř (2017)	Quantitative	Survey	484 Students
Silinevica and Meirule (2019)	Quantitative	Survey	115 Students
Vişelaru (2019)	Quantitative	Survey	100 (Students or Employees)
<i>Industrial Reports</i>			
Barnes and Noble College Insights (2018)	Quantitative	Survey	1,300 Students
Dell (2018)	Quantitative	Survey	12,086 Students
Deloitte (2019)	Quantitative	Survey	3,009 Students
Ernst and Young (2020)	Quantitative	Survey	2,054 Students
Glassdoor	Quantitative	Content Analysis	304,192 Gen Z Job applications

Table 1.
Methodological approaches in reviewed empirical studies and industrial reports

survey data and the company's official website to collect comprehensive data to meet their research goal. [Goh and Lee \(2017\)](#) employed face-to-face interviews, and [Fodor and Jäckel \(2018\)](#) used focus groups to understand Gen Z's personal and organizational career expectations. Lastly, [Glassdoor \(2019\)](#) applied content analysis to review documents to assess whether technology-based jobs attract Gen Z. They used Glassdoor's job application portal to access Gen Z applicants' database, who created job applications over four months (between October 2018 and January 2019). [Fodor et al. \(2018\)](#) aimed to identify Gen Z's career and workplace expectations using a mixed-methods approach. They used focus groups followed by a survey questionnaire to illustrate Gen Z's attraction to teamwork, high income, an opportunity for promotions and exposure to various job-related tasks.

Participants

As observed in [Table 1](#), 17 studies in this review exclusively studied Gen Z students. All studies explored Gen Z's perceived career aspirations by collecting data from college campuses. Gen Z students on college and school campuses responded to surveys, participated in interviews and focus groups to identify factors shaping Gen Z's career aspirations. [Šafránková and Šikýř \(2017\)](#) reported that some students in their sample had work experiences through internships. Other studies did not provide specific information on Gen Z's work experience. As these studies included data from education campuses, it is safe to assume students reported no prior organizational work experience other than internships. [Arar and Önerenb \(2018\)](#) interviewed HR managers to understand their perception of Gen Z's response to their organization's current talent management processes. [Puiu \(2017\)](#) and [Vițelar \(2019\)](#) referred to their participants as individuals and did not indicate whether they collected data from students or employees.

Data presented by all studies provided an insight into Gen Z's career aspiration variables: opportunity to work with people, satisfaction, stability, competitive pay, respect, safety, autonomy in tasks, feel challenged and self-fulfillment. Data also presented Gen Z's institutional career aspiration variables: travel opportunity, colleagues' diversity, technology availability, work-life balance, flex work opportunities, engaging work culture, proximity to family, career development and personal development.

Context

Although most studies targeted students, it is interesting to note that the reviewed studies provided a global perspectives on Gen Z's career aspiration. [Deloitte \(2019\)](#) and [Dell \(2018\)](#) conducted global studies across ten and seventeen countries, respectively. A total of 12 studies originated in Australia, Europe and the UK ([Table 2](#)), whereas the remaining six studies originated in the USA ([Barnes and Noble College Insights, 2018](#); [Ernst and Young, 2020](#); [Glassdoor, 2019](#); [Grow and Yang, 2018](#); [Maloni et al., 2019](#)). [Barnes and Noble College Insights \(2018\)](#), and [Ernst and Young \(2020\)](#) surveyed Gen Z students to highlight their career expectations. [Glassdoor \(2019\)](#) reviewed Gen Z applications on its website and revealed that Gen Z is most attracted to software-related jobs. [Grow and Yang \(2019\)](#) emphasized that Gen Z men and women perceive careers differently, with women expecting gender-based discrimination at the workplace. [Maloni et al. \(2019\)](#) studied students in the business school and identified their work values. In [Table 2](#), we present the context and purpose of other international studies.

Findings on gen Z's career aspirations

This section expands our understanding of Gen Z's career aspirations through four main themes:

Author(s)	Country	Context	Purpose
Goh and Lee (2017)	Australia	Hospitality	Positive and negative attitudes among Gen Z students towards career in hospitality
Šafránková and Šikýř (2017)	Czech Republic	Labor market	Characteristics and potential employability of Gen Z in Czech labor market
Fodor <i>et al.</i> (2018),	Hungary	Career Choice	Factors influencing Gen Z's career and workplace choice
Fodor and Jäckel (2018)	Hungary	Career Expectations	Characteristics of Gen Z influencing their workplace expectations
Cseh-Papp <i>et al.</i> (2017)	Hungary	Career Expectations	Career expectations of Gen Z
Silinevica and Meirule (2019)	Latvia	Labor market	Characteristics of Gen Z and differences among generations in contrast to Gen Z in Latvian labor market
Bohdziewicz (2016)	Poland	Career Anchors	Gen Z' preferred career anchors
Iorgulescu (2016)	Romania	Career Expectations	Characteristics of Gen Z and career development expectations from organizations
Vițelar (2019)	Romania	Personal Branding	Benefits of personal branding for career advancement of Gen Z
Puiu (2017)	Romania	Career Expectations	Characteristics of Gen Z and their work expectations
Arar and Öneren (2018)	Turkey	Talent Management	Advantages of talent management to develop Gen Z careers
Hampton and Welsh (2019)	United Kingdom	Nursing	Determine work-values of Gen Z nursing students

Table 2.
International contexts and purpose for gen Z studies

- intrinsic factors shaping career aspirations;
- extrinsic factors shaping career aspirations;
- career expectations; and
- perceived career development (Table 3 presents sub-themes and codes from thematic analysis).

Intrinsic factors

As demonstrated in Table 3, we subsumed several codes to generate three main intrinsic factors shaping Gen Z's career aspirations: attitudes, relationships and motivations.

Attitudes. Iorgulescu (2016) described Gen Z as self-confident with a strong perception and understanding of themselves. Research suggests that Gen Z has technology readily available to them aiding in their knowledge for success as entrepreneurs (Silinevica and Meirule, 2019). Through a self-directed approach to gain and practice knowledge, Gen Z develops high self-confidence and tenacity (Cseh-Papp *et al.*, 2017). Their tenacity further helps them acquire a positive and self-assured attitude required for success as entrepreneurs and attain financial goals (Cseh-Papp *et al.*, 2017; Goh and Lee, 2017).

Self-perception. Gen Z exhibits confidence and a self-assured attitude making them comfortable to rely on their self-abilities and thus do not rely on their entire team to achieve goals (Silinevica and Meirule, 2019; Vițelar, 2019). Arar and Önerenb (2018) reported that

Table 3.
Gen Z and their
characteristics

Theme	Sub-Theme	Codes
Intrinsic Factors	Attitudes Relationships Self-perception Motivation	confident, tenacious, entrepreneurial network, co-workers, personal, team self-assured, self-reliant recognition, purpose, feeling valued
Extrinsic Factors	Environmental Familial Organizational	technology, world events parenting, responsibility values, reputation, brand, size
Career Expectations	Organizational culture Work-life balance Stability	activities, communication, diversity flex work, friendships at work, travel benefits, security, safety, salary
Career Development	Learning Mentoring Growth	skills, facilitator, medium to learn supporting manager, informal support change roles, promotions

Gen Z suffers from being a team member, especially when the team is ineffective and not achieving its goals at a pace satisfactory to Gen Z. However, all studies confirm that Gen Z wants social contact with their co-workers to expand their network and expand relationships at work. This indicates that Gen Z may prefer to work alone and rely on self to achieve goals but still crave teamwork and social contact to achieve holistic professional goals.

Relationships. Relationships at work are essential to Gen Z, and they aspire for a good working relationship with their co-workers (Fodor *et al.*, 2018; Grow and Yang, 2019; Hampton and Welsh, 2019). Gen Z wants to have social contact with their co-workers to extend their network and form a professional relationship (Hampton and Welsh, 2019). Grow and Yang (2019) emphasized that Gen Z characterizes a supportive work environment as a close-knit environment with respect and loyalty for their co-workers. Some articles reported Gen Z's preference for a friendly team (Šafránková and Šikýř, 2017), team spirit (Goh and Lee, 2017), a good team (Fodor and Jäckel, 2018; Fodor *et al.*, 2018), a cheerful team (Cseh-Papp *et al.*, 2017) and need to work in a large team (Iorgulescu, 2016) as a top priority. They believe their team is their family and would assist each other in performing their tasks. They also believe teamwork leads to productive work and ultimately meeting organizational goals. Gen Z expects to be friends with all their co-workers and would prefer to collaborate to meet both organizational and personal goals. On the other hand, some studies report Gen Z's discomfort with working in a team and preference to work alone, relying on themselves (Puiu, 2017; Silinevica and Meirule, 2019; Vițelar, 2019). These contradictory findings about Gen Z's relationship preferences further suggests their ability and inclination to create personal relationships at work separate from professional relationships.

Motivation. Silinevica and Meirule (2019) found more than three-quarters of their participants' perceived achievements and self-realization as motivating factors to set and achieve high career goals. As a result, their career orientation motivates them to pursue their values and serve a meaningful purpose for humanity (Bohdziewicz, 2016). This heightened sense of purpose comes from the awareness of their capability, which further drives more robust career goals (Cseh-Papp *et al.*, 2017; Grow and Yang, 2019). Gen Z's motivation to perform in organizations would grow more potent after recognizing an alignment between their personal and organizational values (Bohdziewicz, 2016). Besides, Gen Z is intrinsically motivated when their team and, more importantly, their supervisor recognize their contributions and implement their ideas (Fodor *et al.*, 2018; Hampton and Welsh, 2019;

Silinevica and Meirule, 2019). Deloitte (2019) reported that Gen Z would need instant gratification for a job well done through promotions and career advancement opportunities. This suggests that expectations of rewards may keep Gen Z motivated and engaged in the workplace making it an effective retention strategy for organizations.

Extrinsic factors

Gen Z has evolved as a generation because of societal and cultural changes, which indirectly affected Gen Z's career outlook. In this section, we describe the impact of changes in Gen Z's closest environment, family and organizations on their perception of careers.

Environmental. Gen Z is alternatively termed as digital natives in all 19 global studies reviewed in this article resulting from Gen Z' access to, and use of, technology. Gen Z uses technology to learn (Barnes and Noble College Insights, 2018; Cseh-Papp *et al.*, 2017; Maloni *et al.*, 2019; Silinevica and Meirule, 2019), socialize (Puiu, 2017; Vițelar, 2019) and work (Arar and Önerenb, 2018; Bohdziewicz, 2016; Goh and Lee, 2017; Šafránková and Šikýř, 2017; Silinevica and Meirule, 2019). It is thus not surprising to find that Gen Z expects to work with technology at their jobs (Deloitte, 2019) and many also aspire to work in a technology field (Glassdoor, 2019).

In six studies conducted in the US context, another event defining Gen Z as a generation, apart from technological innovation, is the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001 (popularly known as the 9/11 attacks). Gen Z learned about 9/11 through their parents, social media and history books in school (Goh and Lee, 2017). They remember experiencing major political and social upheavals post this terrorist attack (Barnes and Noble College Insights, 2018; Deloitte, 2019; Goh and Lee, 2017). Some other events in the USA that shaped Gen Z's outlook towards life include recession, terrorism, malevolent companies, corporate scandals and corporate indifference to increasing climate change (Deloitte, 2019). The instability in their environment may have led Gen Z to expect instability in their careers, too (Deloitte, 2019).

Familial. Gen Z has witnessed career resilient parents in the middle of an economic and political crisis (Deloitte, 2019; Ernst and Young, 2018). Deloitte (2019) highlighted a response from one participant that may explain why Gen Z have more relaxed career attitudes compared to older generations:

We have less trust in employers because so many of our parents did lose their jobs, and they had been loyal to companies. We have less trust in the stock market because it crashed. And I think that a lot of us are worried that it is going to happen again. We are either putting off big life moments and keeping money in our savings [accounts], or we're saying, 'You know what? It could fall apart again tomorrow. Let's travel the world' (p. 1).

Further, Goh and Lee (2017) categorized the family under a "subjective norm" governing Gen Z's career aspiration. "Generation Z acknowledged that the role of family members posed a dominant influence over the individual's decision of joining the hospitality workforce" (Goh and Lee, 2017, p. 25). Gen Z is concerned with how their family perceives their chosen career (Barnes and Noble College Insights, 2018; Cseh-Papp *et al.*, 2017). Bohdziewicz (2016) provided another view of the family's influence on career choice and stated that even if Gen Z honors family values; they will not let values interfere with their career choice. In addition, Grow and Yang (2019) explained Gen Z's desire to start their own families by age 33 and aspire to have a settled career to support their future family. Puiu (2017) highlighted that most participants in his study expected to receive a generous salary to fulfill their ambitions and support a family.

Organizational. Two studies highlighted Gen Z's aspirations to work in technology-intensive organizations (Dell, 2019; [Glassdoor, 2019](#)). Dell (2019) reported that 80% of surveyed respondents aspired to work with cutting-edge technology. Companies such as IBM, Google, Amazon, Microsoft and Deloitte are five of the most aspiring places to work for because of the independent work culture promised by them ([Glassdoor, 2019](#)). They used terms such as "work environment," "flexible hours" and "good pay" to justify their choice ([Glassdoor, 2019](#)). Roles such as software engineers and software developers attracted one out of five Gen Z applicants over three months across all industries, such as IT, retail, manufacturing and finance ([Glassdoor, 2019](#)).

[Iorgulescu \(2016\)](#) and [Cseh-Papp et al. \(2017\)](#) brought forward other organizational features that attract Gen Z employees, such as size. For example, nearly half of [Iorgulescu's \(2016\)](#) sample expressed that they wanted to work in a large international corporation. Nearly a quarter of the participants wanted to work in a mid-sized company. [Maloni et al. \(2019\)](#) emphasized that Gen Z's needs to align their personal values with its value. [Maloni et al. \(2019\)](#) based their findings on Gen Z's responsibility to find employment in organizations they believe in so they can derive personal satisfaction from their jobs. [Hampton and Welsh \(2019\)](#) emphasized Gen Z's beliefs when their personal values align with organizational values; they can produce better results for themselves and the organization.

Career expectations

We coded and generated themes from studies that describe Gen Z's career expectations. This section describes the impact of expectations rooted in organizational culture, the need for work-life balance and stability on Gen Z's career aspirations.

Organizational culture

Educational institutions sometimes expect students to perform a mandatory internship as part of their curriculum, which is their only exposure to organizational culture ([Cseh-Papp et al., 2017](#)). Studies by [Cseh-Papp et al. \(2017\)](#), [Goh and Lee \(2017\)](#) and [Puiu \(2017\)](#) studied interns to explore students who are attracted to professionalism, communication, activity-based engagement, career growth opportunities, the opportunity to build personal relationships, no discrimination and diverse colleagues. In earlier sections, we demonstrate Gen Z's inclination to build relationships, which is actively facilitated through open style workplaces. [Iorgulescu \(2018\)](#) stated that half of their participants aspired to work in large teams that sit close to each other in an open-space office layout. In contrast, only one out of ten participants wanted a closed-door office. Clearly, an attractive organizational culture helps attract and retain Gen Z employees ([Arar and Önerenb, 2018](#)).

Work-life balance

[Ernst and Young \(2020\)](#) reported irrespective of gender; Gen Z expected to have work-life balance when they start work. Men and women in [Ernst and Young's \(2020\)](#) data reported almost equal expectations: flexible hours (men: 63%; women: 65%), taking time off to fulfill personal interests (men: 58%; women: 58%) and remote work options (men: 53%, women: 49%). [Deloitte \(2019\)](#) and [Puiu \(2017\)](#) both reported that half their participants want work-life balance and expect to choose their work hours. [Arar and Önerenb \(2018\)](#), [Fodor and Jäckel \(2018\)](#), [Hampton and Welsh \(2019\)](#) and [Bohdziewicz \(2016\)](#) also found Gen Z's preference to have a work-life balance in their future careers. Further, [Bohdziewicz \(2016\)](#) warned Gen Z might exert pressure on organizations to facilitate work-life balance. [Fodor](#)

and Jäckel (2018) indicated organizations that promote and promise work–life balance are more likely to attract and retain Gen Z employees.

Stability

For Gen Z, stability in careers is achieved through personal fulfillment (Grow and Yang, 2019), benefits at work such as health plans (Hampton and Welsh, 2019; Maloni *et al.*, 2019), paid family leave (Grow and Yang, 2019), retirement fund (Maloni *et al.*, 2019), job security (Bohdziewicz, 2016; Cseh-Papp *et al.*, 2017; Puiu, 2017; Šafránková and Šikýř, 2017), feeling safe at work (Goh and Lee, 2017) and a competitive salary (Cseh-Papp *et al.*, 2017; Fodor *et al.*, 2018; Hampton and Welsh, 2019; Puiu, 2017). Bohdziewicz (2016) reported participants' aspiration for career stability by choosing this anchor as the second most crucial career anchor. Studies found salary, although important, was not the driving factor for Gen Z to attain stability in a career (Cseh-Papp *et al.*, 2017; Fodor *et al.*, 2018; Hampton and Welsh, 2019; Puiu, 2017). These studies state, Gen Z's self-confident attitude, perception of self-worth and clear expectations from a career would help them negotiate desirable salaries. For example, Cseh-Papp *et al.* (2017) reported their participant's expectation of a salary between 300–400 thousand HUF (Hungarian currency), where the average salary is 250,000 HUF. Puiu (2017) stated that three-quarters of their participants expect a net salary between 1000 to 2000 lei (Romanian currency), where the average salary is 925 lei.

Career advancement

Iorgulescu (2016) found that nearly all Gen Z individuals considered career advancement opportunities in an organization as their top priority. Studies reviewed in this article highlight that Gen Z is confident that they can attain career development through learning, mentoring and growth.

Learning

Articles reviewed showcase Gen Z's attraction to informal learning methods, which are both autonomous and cooperative. Autonomous learning occurs at a pace decided by Gen Z outside a traditional learning environment (Cseh-Papp *et al.*, 2017). Simultaneously, cooperative learning occurs in collaboration through team member interactions (Goh and Lee, 2017). This combination of autonomy and cooperation explains Gen Z's attraction to organizations that will allow learning through networking, as Grow and Yang (2019) illustrated. Iorgulescu (2016) found that Gen Z expects to continually learn something new to successfully advance their careers. Further, Maloni *et al.* (2019) ascertain Gen Z's anticipated technology use for learning in organizations to fulfill career development needs. Gen Z also expects to learn from their leaders and thus ranked it as the fourth important factor to choose an organization (Iorgulescu, 2016).

Mentoring

Gen Z expressed their desire to refer to successful people and emulate their behavior (Fodor *et al.*, 2018). Usually, Gen Z finds these successful people in their immediate environments, such as a family member (Fodor *et al.*, 2018) or a teacher (Maloni *et al.*, 2019). These successful people are mentors, role models, reference persons (Fodor *et al.*, 2018). Further, Maloni *et al.* (2019) emphasize the faculty's role as mentors to motivate students to emulate successful career practices. Iorgulescu (2016), Puiu (2017) also demonstrated Gen Z's need for mentorship. Puiu (2017) further revealed that nearly half of their participants would choose to work for a supervisor who has leadership and mentoring abilities.

Growth

Gen Z mainly perceived growth as career growth by acquiring professional competencies (Bohdziewicz, 2016). Bohdziewicz (2016) further demonstrated Gen Z's preference for lateral career growth instead of hierarchical growth. Gen Z would rather fully develop their potential and grow professionally by learning new competencies (Bohdziewicz, 2016). Gen Z aspires to become functionally competent and technically strong in their chosen career (Bohdziewicz, 2016; Šafránková and Šikýř, 2017). Opportunity for growth also drives Gen Z's loyalty towards the organization (Iorgulescu, 2016).

Discussion and implications

Through our analysis of 14 articles and 5 industrial reports, we uncovered a more in-depth understanding of Gen Z's career aspirations by categorizing them into four different influencing factors – intrinsic, extrinsic, career expectations and perceived career development. Intrinsically, Gen Z aspires to have careers based on their attitudes, self-perception, relationships and motivations. Although relationships at work are essential to Gen Z, it is unclear from our findings whether they prefer to work in teams. Some studies highlight Gen Z's preference to work in teams, whereas other studies state that Gen Z is more self-reliant and individualistic when they want to achieve goals. We also found, extrinsically Gen Z base their aspirations on their environment, family and organization.

Gen Z's career expectations also include an attractive organizational culture, work-life balance and stability. It is especially noteworthy that Gen Z did not consider salary as an attributing factor to stability, which may result from their young age. Later with age, increased familial and personal responsibility, salary may become a priority for them. Further, it is not clear from the reviewed studies how Gen Z develops career-related expectations. We propose that their parents may have played a role. Gen X parents have mainly raised Gen Z (Chawla *et al.*, 2017), which may have shaped their ideas, understanding and philosophy of careers. Past research has explored Gen X's aspiration to achieve career satisfaction through meaningful work, providing them work-life balance (Arthur *et al.*, 2005; Feldman and Ng, 2007; Hall, 2002). We found similarities between Gen Z and Gen X's career-related expectations through the articles reviewed in this paper.

Lastly, we found, Gen Z is motivated and assertive about their career development in the organization. They expect organizations to support career development by considering Gen Z's needs for learning, mentorship and growth. It is noteworthy that Gen Z expects their supervisors to be provide them with leadership skills, influence their learning and support their career growth through meaningful mentorship. Gen Z's expectations of having meaningful relationships at work extend to their relationship with their supervisor, who is expected to play a mentoring role in Gen Z's career development.

Technology plays a significant role in overall human development and has already put Gen Z ahead of the curve. All participants in the reviewed studies expressed their need for technology to fulfill their learning, development and career needs. Although the studies included in this review belong to several different countries and contexts, all studies refer to technology's impact on Gen Z's career aspirations. With the technology available widely, this generation has seamlessly incorporated it the same in their everyday lives.

Although past research sheds light on Gen Z's career aspirations, they were not adequate to understand how Gen Z will behave in the workplace. All empirical research in this review was done using students as the participants (see Table 1). Some students from the participant pool indicated they have work experience as interns and thus have exposure to the workplace and its practices. As observed by Cseh-Papp *et al.* (2017) and Šafránková and Šikýř (2017); Gen Z has little to no-exposure to the current labor market and thus as an

active member of the workplace, their perceptions may change. This indicates a gap in the literature as Gen Z's workplace behaviors are unexamined.

Implications for theory development

McDonald and Hite (2008) claim that newer generations present a challenge to organizations as they move towards protean and boundaryless careers. In this review, seminal career development theories are utilized to study Gen Z and their career orientations: boundless careers (Arar and Önerenb, 2018), career anchors (Bohdziewicz, 2016), social capital theory (Grow and Yang, 2018), theory of planned behavior (Goh and Lee, 2017) career anchors (Maloni *et al.*, 2019) and personal branding (Vițelar, 2019). Each research found Gen Z deviating from their older generations, and each of these researches called for theory development specific to Gen Z. Through this literature review, we would emphasize the need for specific theories to incorporate Gen Z's characteristics unique to their generation.

Many comparative studies between Gen Z and other generations have taken place in the past. It is crucial to focus more on testing existing career-related models and theories and check their validity against Gen z's career aspirations. This will provide HRD scholars with theories that better explain Gen Z's approach to meaning of work and career paths. This will also provide HRD practitioners and organizational leaders with tools to guide/support Gen Z's with their career development, whether being successful employees and/or future leaders. For example, scholars and practitioner would benefit from using digitization as a strategy to clarify/redefine organizational purpose and value and as a practical anchor to successfully attract, manage and develop talent from Gen Z their career development.

Existing seminal career theories such as social cognitive career theory (Lent *et al.*, 1994) and work experience theory (Tesluk and Jacobs, 1998) focus on explaining the individual's career decisions. However, even these seminal do not explore how the individual's preferences change based on the overall change in nature of careers. Future studies will need to focus on making the connections between Gen Z's vocational decision making and career behaviors to explain the relationship between the intrinsic and extrinsic factors motivating their career aspirations. Through this literature review, we would emphasize the need for specific theories to incorporate Gen Z's characteristics unique to their generation. Many comparative studies between Gen Z and other generations have taken place in the past. It is crucial to focus more on testing the existing career-related theories, especially using technology as an anchor to assess how Gen Z utilizes technology for career development.

Implications for future research

This study provided a bedrock for what we know about Gen Z and the workplace.

It also showed a gap in the literature, whether in scarcity of empirical research or in terms of methodology implemented. Empirical research is needed to help organizations explore how to motivate, engage and develop Gen Z as employees. In addition, there is ample opportunity for scholars to explore how the new cultural norms with digitization, diversity and awareness that are integral components of Gen Z might affect leadership and organizational practices. Also, scholars are invited to study norms and behaviors of Gen Z individuals and understand if they retain their current characteristics as their careers transition from anticipation stage to encounter stage.

Research using qualitative methodology

Current reviewed literature highlights various factors affecting Gen Z careers, including their personal and work-related characteristics. However, almost all studies are quantitative in nature. All past studies predicted students' behavior in the workplace, and thus, more

qualitative research is needed to identify concepts using Gen Z employees as their participants.

For future studies, we suggest that researchers' study not only university students but also Gen Z in the workplace where they can have in-depth observations in order to understand Gen Z's work experiences. This study provides a set of characteristics that researchers can use as a starting point to explore new behaviors and characteristics not predicted in this research. Quantitative studies can develop instruments to measure and validate concepts and frameworks emerging from qualitative studies.

Research on Gen Z's career persistence

Based on the studies reviewed in this literature review, it would suggest that members of Gen Z plan for careers in the software industry. However, the software industry has identified a "job-hopping" phenomenon (Naresh and Rathnam, 2015). Individuals change their jobs frequently to advance their careers and explore other career opportunities. The new career opportunity may be in a completely different area than the individual's past career experience. It would be interesting to note if Gen Z follow the existing "job-hopping" phenomenon persistent in the software culture or will they stand true to their characteristic nature found in this literature review. In addition, through qualitative studies, researchers can establish other Gen Z specific phenomenon for organizations to base their practices and policies. Organizations must cater to all employees' needs irrespective of their race, ethnicity and gender; understanding generational characteristics is an added complexity level. Knowing that Gen Z individuals seek self-efficacy in their careers can help predict their career adaptability (Bocciardi *et al.*, 2017). Organizations can thus prepare to attract Gen Z and retain, engage and contribute to their career development.

Implications for practice

Organizations are still unclear on how to meet Gen Z's career aspirations based on the characteristics known about them (Fratricova and Kirchmayer, 2018). Gen Z already accounts for 20% of the global workforce (ManpowerGroup, 2019), making it essential for HRD scholars to learn about them to make practical recommendations to organizations in the future. While most organizations have accessibility to technology, Gen Z may have other unmet career expectations because organizations are not necessarily prepared to host this new generation. HRD practitioners as well as organizational leaders need to strategically impress Gen Z. the need to consistently demonstrate how they can attract and retain their new workforce. Based on the findings of this article, practitioners can do so by defining what their organization stands for, by being "smart" communicators, being transparent and being flexible. organizational leaders need to take into account Gen z's expectations around meaningful work and flexible working and adapt to the new realities of work.

Gen Z in the workplace expect to have close relationships with their leaders and co-workers. They expect to work in productive teams. At the same time, they expect a work-life balance to focus on their personal lives outside work and raise their own family much sooner than other generational cohorts. This implies, direct supervisors and managers are perceived to have a significant influence on Gen Z careers and lives because Gen Z expects to merge their work and life. Direct supervisors and managers may need to equip themselves to mentor Gen Z employees and adjust their attitude towards interpersonal relationships at work

Learning plays a vital role in Gen Z's career aspirations, and they expect to grow their knowledge, which will help them develop laterally through the organization as opposed to vertically. Thus, leaders and HRD directors need to provide formal and informal learning

opportunities, as well as mentoring and coaching programs that fit the ambitions of the new generation. This would increase Gen Z's loyalty to their organizations. Findings in this study also supported the notion that Gen Z would move to other organizations not for a hike in salary but because of more learning opportunities. Therefore, pairing Gen Z employees with older generations in the workplace promotes learning and mentoring opportunities (Wong and Rasdi, 2018) and creates learning opportunities that can become a purposeful retention strategy for Gen Z.

Conclusion

Identification of a collective impact of environment, family and work exposure on Gen Z's career aspirations was a meaningful effort made by this article. We also conclude that Gen Z's career aspirations must be studied deeply by using Gen Z employees as participants. A variation in contexts and methods is also required to advance career development theories, practice and research specific to Gen Z. Our findings focus on students whose career aspirations may change as they grow older and gain more experience in their careers. Future studies can further elaborate on Gen Z characteristics and their career aspirations by studying Gen Z employees in the workplace.

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Further reading

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