

Adaptation Strategies of Gen Z Employees in Maintaining Quality of Work Life and Motivation Under High Work Pressure: An Interpretive Phenomenology Study

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Abstract: This study explores the adaptation strategies developed by Generation Z employees to maintain a high quality of work life and motivation to achieve optimal performance under high work pressure. Using a qualitative, interpretive phenomenological design, this study involved 12 Generation Z participants aged 22–26 years from various employment sectors in Indonesia. Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews and analyzed using six-phase thematic analysis. The findings identified three domains of adaptation strategies, including cognitive strategies characterized by cognitive reframing, meaning-making, and future self-projection; behavioral strategies reflected in digital time management, help-seeking, flexible boundary management, and job crafting; and relational strategies involving the mobilization of digital and physical social support as well as negotiation with supervisors. The main contribution of this study is the development of a Hybrid-Technological Adaptation model that represents the distinctive characteristics of Generation Z, including comfort with digital technology as an extension of self, preference for flexible yet clear work boundaries, strong values of autonomy and transparency, and the capacity to reframe crises as opportunities for personal development. The novelty of this research lies in the finding that Generation Z does not strictly separate digital and non-digital adaptation strategies, but instead integrates both seamlessly into daily practices. These findings enrich Conservation of Resources theory and the Job Demands-Resources model by incorporating the perspective of the digital native generation. Practically, organizations need to design adaptation interventions that accommodate Generation Z's technological preferences without sacrificing humanistic and relational aspects.

Keywords: *Adaptation strategies, Gen Z, quality of work life, work motivation, high work pressure, interpretive phenomenology*

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INTRODUCTION

Generation Z (Gen Z)—those born between 1997 and 2012—has now entered the workforce en masse. Statistics Indonesia (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2024) reported that approximately 27.5% of Indonesia's workforce in 2024 consisted of Gen Z and young millennials, a trend that continues to grow annually. The unique characteristics of this generation, who grew up as digital natives with unlimited access to information technology, have significant consequences for organizational dynamics, particularly in

how they respond to increasingly complex work pressures in the post-pandemic era and to the acceleration of digital transformation.

Generation Z, often referred to as iGen or true digital natives, has characteristics that are fundamentally different from those of previous generations. Twenge (2023), in a cross-generational longitudinal study, identified that Gen Z grew up in an era of unlimited internet access, social media, and global economic uncertainty following the 2008 crisis. Consequently, this generation is more realistic, risk-averse, and has higher levels of anxiety about the future compared to millennials at the same age. In the workplace, Gen Z demonstrates strong preferences for work flexibility (including remote work and non-rigid working hours), transparency in communication and decision-making, fast and specific feedback, non-negotiable work-life balance, and meaning and social impact from their work (Chillakuri & Mahanandia, 2024). These values often clash with traditional work cultures that are hierarchical and oriented toward physical presence, creating potential for intergenerational conflict that can become an additional source of pressure.

High work pressure has become an unavoidable reality across various industrial sectors. Research by Gartner (2023) found that the average corporate employee experiences 10 planned organizational changes over a given period, a drastic increase from 2 in 2016. This escalation has created a condition known as change fatigue—a state of apathy or passive acceptance of repeated changes that can erode productivity and company profitability (Guan et al., 2024). In this context, employees' adaptive capacity becomes a crucial determinant distinguishing mere survival from truly thriving under pressure.

The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model developed by Bakker and Demerouti is a dominant framework for understanding work pressure. This model categorizes job characteristics into job demands—job aspects that require sustained effort—and job resources—job aspects that help achieve work goals. Research by Collins et al. (2025) applied the JD-R model to work motivation and found that job resources (such as autonomy-supportive leadership) positively predict self-determined motivation. The Conservation of Resources (COR) theory from Hobfoll offers a complementary perspective. COR theory is based on the premise that individuals are motivated to protect existing resources and acquire new resources. Guan et al. (2024) integrated COR theory with career construction theory and found that future work self moderates the relationship between work stress and career adaptability. Employees with a clear future projection can transform stressors into motivation—a mechanism Liu and Su (2025) call the gain paradox.

However, how does the generation known to have higher levels of anxiety about future uncertainty—referred to in the literature as the anxious generation—respond to work pressure? Do their digital native characteristics become an additional burden or an adaptive asset? These questions become highly relevant given the Global Talent Trends (2024) report, which shows that Gen Z has the highest turnover intention among generations, with 65% stating they would look for a new job within the next 12 months if job demands do not meet their expectations.

Quality of work life (QWL) as a multidimensional construct reflecting employees' perceptions of physical, psychological, and social well-being in the workplace (Galić, 2025) becomes highly relevant to study in Gen Z. The SUPERB model introduced by Galić (2025) identifies six core dimensions of QWL: Safety, Upgrading, Purpose, Empowerment, Relationships, and Balance. In Gen Z, the Balance and Empowerment dimensions (especially autonomy) are thought to carry greater weight than in previous generations.

Research on QWL in the context of hybrid and remote work has identified new variables, including work intensity, digital infrastructure, and psychosocial outcomes (Topic Modeling Framework, 2025).

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) by Deci and Ryan distinguishes between autonomous motivation (consistent with self-values) and controlled motivation (under external pressure). The fulfillment of three basic psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—is a prerequisite for autonomous motivation. Research by Collins et al. (2025) found that even autonomous motivation, if not holistically balanced, can deplete resources and cause emotional exhaustion. Research by Liu and Su (2025) showed that cognitive job crafting—including reframing the meaning of work—has a stronger effect on employees with high levels of job insecurity, a phenomenon they call the gain paradox.

Job crafting—bottom-up practices in which employees modify their tasks, relationships, and the meanings of work—has been identified as a promising adaptation strategy. Liu and Su (2025) distinguished three methods of cognitive job crafting: expanding perceptions (broadening perspectives), focusing perceptions (focusing on positive aspects), and linking perceptions (connecting work to personal values). Their main finding was that the positive effect of cognitive job crafting is actually stronger under conditions of high job insecurity.

The research gap that serves as the foundation of this study is the limited qualitative understanding of Gen Z's specific adaptation strategies in maintaining quality of work life (QWL) and motivation under pressure. The majority of research on employee adaptation continues to use quantitative methods with cross-generational samples, thereby failing to capture the distinctiveness of Gen Z's experiences, values, and preferences. In fact, cross-cultural and cross-generational research shows that responses to work stress are strongly influenced by generational values formed during specific socio-economic development periods (Twenge, 2023). Based on the literature review, it can be identified that the majority of adaptation research uses quantitative cross-generational approaches, research on Gen Z in the workplace is still limited to surveys of preferences and values rather than actual adaptation strategies, integration of QWL, motivation, and adaptation in a generation-specific framework remains very limited, and qualitative phenomenological approaches on Gen Z in Indonesia in the context of work pressure have never been conducted. This study fills these gaps.

Based on the above description, this study aims to explore in depth the adaptation strategies developed by Gen Z employees to maintain QWL and motivation, thereby enabling optimal performance under high work pressure. Specifically, this study seeks to examine how Gen Z employees perceive high work pressure, the adaptation strategies they develop, how they maintain motivation and QWL, and the factors that facilitate or hinder their adaptation.

The novelty of this research lies in several aspects. It provides an exclusive focus on Gen Z as research subjects, employs interpretive phenomenology to capture subjective experiences in depth, integrates three domains (QWL, motivation, and performance) within a generation-specific adaptation framework, and identifies a Hybrid-Technological Adaptation model that represents seamless integration between digital and non-digital strategies.

RESEARCH METHODS



This study uses a qualitative approach with an interpretive phenomenology design. This design was chosen for its ability to capture in depth the subjective lived experiences of participants—in this case, Gen Z employees developing adaptation strategies under high work pressure. Interpretive phenomenology (hermeneutic phenomenology) acknowledges that understanding is always interpretive and cannot be free from the researcher's pre-understandings (Ash, 2025).

Participants in this study were 12 Gen Z employees (aged 22-26 years) working in various sectors in Indonesia. Inclusion criteria included: (1) born between 1998 and 2002 (age range of Gen Z who have worked for at least 1 year); (2) employed as permanent employees with a minimum of 1 year of work experience; (3) subjectively reported experiencing high work pressure; (4) willing to participate voluntarily. Recruitment was conducted through purposive sampling with a snowball approach through professional networks and social media. Table 1 presents the participant characteristics.

Table 1. Characteristics of Research Participants

Code	Age	Gender	Employment Sector	Work Duration	Education
GZ1	22	Female	Technology Startup	1.5 years	Bachelor's
GZ2	24	Male	Banking	2 years	Bachelor's
GZ3	23	Female	Consulting	1 years	Bachelor's
GZ4	25	Male	E-commerce	3 years	Bachelor's
GZ5	24	Female	Healthcare	2 years	Diploma
GZ6	26	Male	Manufacturing	4 years	Bachelor's
GZ7	23	Male	Education	1 years	Bachelor's
GZ8	25	Female	Digital Media	3 years	Bachelor's
GZ9	22	Female	Banking	1 years	Diploma
GZ10	24	Male	Financial Technology	2 years	Bachelor's
GZ11	26	Female	Non-profit Organization	4 years	Master's
GZ12	25	Male	Logistics	3 years	Bachelor's

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews from January to March 2026. Interviews were conducted face-to-face (60%) and via video conference (40% for participants outside Java Island), with an average duration of 75 minutes. The interview guide was developed based on the operationalization of concepts from the literature review but was flexible to accommodate emergent themes. All interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using NVivo 14 software.

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic approach: (1) familiarization with data, (2) initial coding (open coding), (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) report writing. Analysis was conducted simultaneously with data collection, allowing the researcher to adjust interview focus based on initial findings. To ensure trustworthiness, this study employed member checking, source triangulation, peer debriefing, and reflexive journaling.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Meaning of High Work Pressure for Gen Z

Gen Z participants perceived high work pressure differently from previous generations. For them, pressure was not merely a burden but was often felt as unrealistic expectations stemming from unclear role expectations. GZ2, a banking employee, stated:

I am comfortable working overtime if the goals are clear. What stresses me out is when my boss gives sudden assignments without clear priorities, then asks the next day, 'Why isn't it finished?' Even though I also have to collaborate with other teams

who have their own schedules. Expectations do not match reality on the ground. (GZ2, interview, January 15, 2026)

This quote indicates that for Gen Z, ambiguity and inconsistency (role ambiguity) are more significant sources of pressure than objective workload alone. This finding confirms research by Nabila (2024), which found that work pressure does not always correlate linearly with performance—employees with clear role expectations showed higher performance even with the same objective workload.

GZ8, a digital media employee, added another aspect:

The media world is 24/7; it never sleeps. When breaking news happens at 11 PM, our team has to respond. At first, I was really stressed, feeling 'when can I rest?' However, after a year, I learned that this is not about 'eliminating pressure' but 'managing my own expectations.' Now I have an informal shift system with the team, and we back each other up. (GZ8, interview, January 22, 2026)

GZ8's statement shows that Gen Z has the capacity to transform the meaning of pressure—from threat to challenge that can be collectively managed. This represents an early form of the gain spiral identified in COR theory (Guan et al., 2024).

Gen Z's Cognitive Adaptation Strategies

Data-Driven Cognitive Reframing

Uniquely, cognitive reframing in Gen Z is often not abstract-philosophical but concrete-data-driven. GZ5, a healthcare worker, explained:

During the COVID-19 pandemic, I was really stressed because the number of patients kept increasing. However, I started recording: how many patients we managed to save, how many families could go home with smiles. I displayed that data on my phone. Every time I felt stressed, I looked at that data again. That reminded me that my work is meaningful. (GZ5, interview, January 18, 2026)

This Data-driven reframing approach represents the thinking style of Gen Z, who are accustomed to metrics, tracking, and visualizing progress—habits formed through using health, finance, and productivity applications since adolescence.

Realistic Future Self Projection

Unlike millennials, who tend to be optimistic and visionary, Gen Z engages in future self-projection in a more realistic, even pessimistic, manner—yet this is actually adaptive. GZ10, a financial technology worker, stated:

I do not expect my current salary to allow me to buy a house in the next five years. However, I have a more manageable target: within 3 years, I must have skills that make me 'secure' anywhere—whether in this company or elsewhere. So I consider current pressure as a tough but important 'bootcamp' for my future. (GZ10, interview, February 5, 2026)

This finding modifies the findings of Guan et al. (2024)—future work self in Gen Z does not take the form of an optimistic ideal career image but rather a safety net in the form of a portable competency portfolio. Their future projections are more oriented toward resilience than toward achievement.

Gen Z's Behavioral Adaptation Strategies

Digital-Native Time Management

All participants (100%) used digital applications for time management, but with patterns that differed from those of previous generations. GZ4, an e-commerce employee, described:

I use Notion to organize all tasks—personal and work in one dashboard. I also use screen-time-limiting apps for Instagram and TikTok because I realize digital distraction is real. Ironically, I have to use technology to fight the negative effects of other technology. However, I accept that as part of digital life. (GZ4, interview, January 17, 2026)

The paradox of using technology to fight technology is a unique characteristic of Gen Z adaptation—they do not see technology as an external tool but as an extension of self that must be managed just like thoughts and emotions.

Flexible yet Firm Boundary Management

Gen Z demonstrates a boundary-management approach that this researcher calls 'flexible firmness'. GZ11, a non-profit worker, explained:

I have a firm rule: 8 PM to 8 AM is my time. No work chat, no email. However, outside those hours, I am flexible. For example, if there is an international donor who can only meet at 9 PM due to time differences, I will attend. I will start work later the next day. I have communicated this to my supervisor and team. (GZ11, interview, February 3, 2026)

Flexible firmness differs from previous generations' approaches, which tended to be either rigid (rigid boundary management) or boundary-free (work-life integration). Gen Z can negotiate boundaries situationally while still maintaining non-negotiable principles at the core of their personal time.

Help-Seeking Behavior Without Stigma

Unlike older generations who tend to view help-seeking as a sign of weakness, Gen Z demonstrates proactive help-seeking behavior without psychological burden. GZ1, a technology startup employee, stated:

Back in college, we were used to asking seniors or looking up YouTube tutorials when we did not understand something. Now at the office, I do the same thing. When stuck, I directly ask the leader or check the internal company wiki. There is no embarrassment or fear of being considered stupid. I see my peers doing the same thing. This is normal. (GZ1, interview, January 12, 2026)

This finding indicates that a help-seeking culture has been internalized in Gen Z as normal practice, not an exception. The implication is that organizations seeking to maximize Gen Z's adaptation potential should create easily accessible knowledge management systems and a psychological culture that supports questioning without fear of judgment.

Gen Z's Relational Adaptation Strategies

Social Support in Two Worlds: Digital and Physical

Gen Z uniquely mobilizes social support from two worlds in parallel. GZ3, a consultant, described:

I have support systems in two places. In the real world, I have 3 office friends who are 'work besties'—we often have lunch together and share our feelings. However, equally important, I have an online community on Discord—members from various cities and even abroad, all in the same consulting profession. There, we share problem-solving and encourage each other. Sometimes confiding on Discord is more effective because they understand the professional context without being limited by time and place. (GZ3, interview, January 16, 2026)

The integration of digital and physical social support creates a broader and multi-layered resilience network. When physical world support is unavailable (for example, at night or when working remotely), digital support remains accessible.

Negotiation with Supervisors: Transactional-Transparent Approach

Gen Z negotiates with supervisors in a more transactional and transparent manner. GZ7, an educator, explained:

At the beginning of each month, I request a 15-minute meeting with the school principal. I communicate: 'These are the targets I want to achieve this month. These are the resources I need. These are the obstacles I might face.' I also explicitly ask for their expectations. So there is no miscommunication. If there are additional tasks in the middle of the month, I will say: 'With this additional task, which priority should I reduce?' This open communication actually makes collaboration healthier. (GZ7, interview, January 20, 2026)

This transactional-transparent approach reflects Gen Z's preference for clarity and fairness. They are uncomfortable with indirect communication or small talk, which they consider inefficient.

Job Crafting as a Superior Adaptation Strategy

Cognitive Job Crafting: Collective Reframing

Uniquely among Gen Z, cognitive job crafting is often done collectively rather than individually. GZ6, a manufacturing employee, recounted:

In our factory, the night shift is the hardest. Quiet, cold, and lots of monotonous work. However, we have a special night shift chat group. Every time it is 2 AM—the sleepest time—we send each other funny memes or random stories. Sometimes we also create 'mini challenges,' for example, who can finish fastest with the best quality. That is how we 'bring to life' the dead work. The reframing is collective, not individual. (GZ6, interview, January 25, 2026)

This finding extends the concept of cognitive job crafting beyond Liu and Su's (2025) focus on individual processes. Gen Z demonstrates that reframing can be a social practice that strengthens team cohesion while collectively increasing the meaning of work.

Technology-Assisted Task Crafting

Gen Z actively seeks and adopts technology to redesign their tasks. GZ12, a logistics worker, explained:

Previously, the package delivery tracking process was manual and took 2 hours per day. I learned automation using Zapier and Google Apps Script. Now, 80% of that process is automated. The 2 hours I used to spend on administrative work, I now use for problem-solving with customers. My supervisor is happy because complaint resolution increased by 30%. (GZ12, interview, February 7, 2026)

This initiative of technology-based task crafting shows that Gen Z does not merely use technology provided by the organization but proactively seeks and implements new technological solutions—a form of innovative behavior under high pressure.

Dynamics of Gen Z Motivation under Pressure

Meaning as the Primary Source of Motivation

Unlike previous generations who might be motivated by salary or promotion, Gen Z is strongly driven by purpose. GZ9, a banking employee who falls into the sandwich generation (supporting parents and siblings), revealed:

I work at a bank, not because I like banking. However, I can help my parents pay off debts and pay for my sibling's education. Every time I feel tired and want to resign, I look at my mother's photo at home. That is enough to remind me why I am here.

My meaning does not come from the work itself, but from what that work enables me to do for my family. (GZ9, interview, January 28, 2026)

This quote is important because it shows that meaning for Gen Z can be extrinsically relational (helping family) rather than only intrinsic (enjoying work). Motivation theory needs to expand the concept of meaningfulness to accommodate the realities of the sandwich generation prevalent in Indonesia (Pebrianti, 2025).

Feedback as Motivation Fuel

Gen Z has a very strong need for fast, specific feedback. GZ4 stated emphatically: I am sick of being told to work but not being told the results. Is my work good? Bad? What needs improvement? My Gen X supervisor often says, 'You have done your best' without evidence. That is not enough for me. I need data, I need concrete examples. Without actionable feedback, I am working in a vacuum. (GZ4, interview, January 17, 2026)

This need for fast feedback is also reflected in Gen Z's preference for digital platforms that provide instant feedback (likes, view counts, progress bars). Organizations that wish to maintain Gen Z's motivation need to design performance management systems that are more real-time, not just annual or semester-based.

Gen Z's Hybrid-Technological Adaptation Model

Based on the above findings, this study proposes a Hybrid-Technological Adaptation model that specifically represents Gen Z's adaptation strategies. This model has five main characteristics: 1) Seamless integration between the digital and physical worlds. Gen Z does not distinguish between digital adaptation strategies (such as applications and online platforms) and non-digital strategies (such as face-to-face interaction and physical journaling). Both are used simultaneously and reinforce each other. 2) Data-driven reframing. Unlike previous generations whose reframing was philosophical or value-based, Gen Z uses concrete data (metrics, tracking) to change the meaning of pressure. 3) Boundary management with flexible firmness. Work-life boundaries are situational, but they are underpinned by core principles that cannot be negotiated. 4) Stigma-free help-seeking supported by digital culture (forums, online communities, knowledge bases). 5) Purpose as the primary source of motivation, including both intrinsic meaning (enjoyment of work) and extrinsic-relational meaning (helping family, social impact).

Discussion

Confirmation and Expansion of Theoretical Models

The findings of this study make significant contributions to three main theoretical frameworks. 1) To the JD-R model (Collins et al., 2025), this study shows that for Gen Z, job demands are not only quantity-based (how much) but also quality-based (how clear). Role ambiguity and expectation inconsistency are the most resource-depleting job demands, even more than objective workload. This finding enriches the JD-R model by incorporating role clarity as an important dimension of job demands for digital native generations. 2) To COR theory (Guan et al., 2024), this study provides empirical evidence about the gain spiral mechanism in Gen Z. Uniquely, the gain spiral in Gen Z does not always originate from individual success but often from collective practices (collective reframing, digital support groups). This expands the scope of COR theory, which has tended to be individualistic. 3) To the SUPERB QWL model (Galić, 2025), this study shows that the Empowerment and Balance dimensions have higher weight in Gen Z compared to other dimensions, while Safety (physical safety) is relatively less dominant. This finding indicates that QWL instruments need to be adjusted generationally.

The finding about stigma-free help-seeking among Gen Z is consistent with research by Chillakuri and Mahanandia (2024), which found that Gen Z has a collaborative mindset and does not view dependence on others as a weakness. However, this study goes beyond those findings by showing that help-seeking in Gen Z extends to the digital realm—they do not only seek help from humans but also from technology (online tutorials, AI chatbots, knowledge bases).

The finding about flexible firmness in boundary management expands the research by Hommelhoff, Weseler, and Niessen (2021) on cognitive job crafting. While previous research focused on internal (cognitive) reframing, this study shows that adaptive boundary management is a form of behavioral job crafting that is very important for Gen Z.

The main novelty of this research is the development of a Hybrid-Technological Adaptation model that specifically represents the unique characteristics of Gen Z that have not been accommodated in existing organizational adaptation literature. This model differs from generic adaptation models in three aspects: 1) Seamless integration between digital and non-digital strategies. Existing literature tends to treat online and offline social support as separate constructs. This study shows that, for Gen Z, both are inseparable. 2) Data-driven reframing versus philosophical reframing. Gen Z cannot be convinced by abstract narratives about the meaning of struggle—they need concrete data about their progress, impact, and contribution. 3) Extrinsic-relational meaning as a source of motivation. Motivation literature tends to sharply distinguish between intrinsic motivation (because the work is enjoyable) and extrinsic motivation (because of external incentives). This study identifies a third category: meaning derived from the positive consequences of work for loved ones—a form of motivation highly relevant to the sandwich generation phenomenon in Indonesia.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study successfully explored the adaptation strategies of Gen Z employees for maintaining a high quality of work life and motivation under high work pressure. The main findings show that Gen Z develops three domains of adaptation strategies—cognitive, behavioral, and relational—that are seamlessly integrated with digital technology. The resulting Hybrid-Technological Adaptation model has five characteristics: digital-physical integration, data-driven reframing, flexible boundary management of firmness, stigma-free help-seeking, and purpose as the primary source of motivation. The novelty of this research lies in the finding that Gen Z does not separate digital and non-digital adaptation strategies, as well as the discovery of extrinsic-relational meaning as a source of motivation not yet accounted for in the existing literature.

This study has several limitations. First, the sample is limited to 12 Gen Z participants in Indonesia, with a majority having bachelor's degree backgrounds, thus not representing Gen Z with lower educational levels. Second, this study relied only on employee perspectives without triangulation from supervisors or coworkers. Third, the cross-sectional design does not allow for tracking changes in adaptation strategies over the long term. Fourth, the collectivist Indonesian cultural context, with its sandwich generation phenomenon, may limit transferability to individualistic cultural contexts.

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