



The Meaning of Work in the Hybrid Era through a Phenomenological Inquiry into the Existential Experiences of Gen Z Employees

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ABSTRACT

Hybrid working has changed the way employees experience and understand work, particularly among Generation Z employees who are highly familiar with digital technology. This study aims to explore the meaning of work and the existential experiences of Gen Z employees in the hybrid era. A qualitative research approach with a phenomenological design was employed. Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews with Gen Z employees who have experience working in hybrid environments and were selected using purposive sampling. The interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis, supported by NVivo or ATLAS.ti. The findings reveal four main themes: flexibility and freedom, work-life boundaries, technology and work experience, and meaning and identity. Hybrid working provides greater flexibility, autonomy, and control over work, but continuous digital connectivity can create difficulties in separating work from personal life. The findings also reveal a central paradox between freedom and attachment, where employees experience greater independence while remaining connected to work beyond conventional working hours. The study concludes that work for Gen Z is not merely a source of income but is also connected to identity, relationships, independence, purpose, and personal meaning. This study contributes a human-centered perspective to understanding hybrid working by emphasizing the lived and existential experiences of employees.

Keywords: Hybrid Working; Meaning of Work; Generation Z; Phenomenology; Existential Experience

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INTRODUCTION

The way people work has changed significantly in the digital era (Kraus et al., 2023). One important change is the emergence of hybrid working, which allows employees to work partly from the office and partly from other locations. This model provides greater flexibility and has become increasingly relevant for Generation Z employees, who are familiar with digital technology and often value flexibility and work-life balance (Suhardjo et al., 2023). The existing research framework also identifies hybrid working as an important factor in understanding the experiences and retention of Gen Z employees.

However, hybrid working is not only about where employees work (Lauring & Jonasson, 2025). It may also change how employees understand their work and themselves. Working from home can provide freedom and autonomy, but constant digital connectivity may also make it difficult to separate work from personal life. Employees may feel more flexible while at the same time experiencing new forms of pressure and responsibility.

For Generation Z, these changes may be particularly meaningful because technology is closely integrated into their everyday lives (Shaleha & Roque, 2024). Work can become more than a source of income; it can also influence their identity, relationships, personal freedom, and sense of purpose. Therefore, understanding hybrid working requires attention to employees' personal experiences and the meanings they attach to their work.

Previous research has mainly examined hybrid working in relation to employee retention, engagement, well-being, and performance (Rafa'i et al., 2023). However, there is still a need to understand how employees experience and interpret the meaning of work in a hybrid environment (Nyoto et al., 2023).

Therefore, this study uses a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of Gen Z employees who work in hybrid environments. The study focuses on how they understand work, freedom, autonomy, work-life boundaries, and their own existence within the changing world of work. Through this approach, the study seeks to provide a deeper understanding of the meaning of work in the hybrid era from the perspective of Generation Z employees.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Hybrid Working

Hybrid working refers to a work arrangement that combines working from the organizational workplace with working remotely (Lauring & Jonasson, 2024). This model has become increasingly relevant in the digital era because technological development allows employees to perform many work activities without being physically present in the office. Hybrid working provides employees with greater flexibility in managing their time and workplace. Previous research has also shown that hybrid working can support employee retention without necessarily reducing performance.

However, hybrid working also creates new challenges. Employees may experience difficulties in communication, collaboration, employee engagement, and maintaining a strong organizational culture. The separation between professional and personal life may also become less clear when work can be accessed from almost anywhere. Therefore, hybrid working should not only be understood as a flexible work arrangement but also as a changing experience of work itself.

Meaning of Work

The meaning of work refers to how individuals understand the importance, purpose, and value of their work in their lives (Pignault & Houssemand, 2021). Work can provide income, but it may also contribute to personal identity, social relationships, achievement, and a sense of purpose. In a changing work environment, the meaning employees attach to their work may also change.

For Generation Z, work is increasingly associated with flexibility, personal well-being, technology, and work-life balance (Delyana Rahmawany Pulungan et al., 2025). The research framework in the proposed study identifies these characteristics as important aspects of understanding Gen Z employees in the digital workplace. Therefore, examining the meaning of work among Gen Z requires attention not only to organizational outcomes but also to how employees personally experience their work.

Generation Z and the Changing Workplace

Generation Z has grown up in an environment characterized by rapid technological development and digital connectivity (Huwaida et al., 2024). As a result, technology has become an important part of their everyday lives and working experiences. The existing research proposal describes Gen Z as a generation that values flexibility, work-life balance, and technological engagement.

These characteristics make Gen Z particularly relevant for research on hybrid working. The ability to work from different locations may provide greater autonomy and flexibility, but it may also create challenges in maintaining boundaries between work and personal life. Thus, Gen Z's experience of hybrid working may involve both opportunities and tensions.

Existential Experience in Work

An existential perspective focuses on how individuals experience themselves and their existence in the world (Steelwater, 2012). In the context of work, existential experience can be understood through questions of freedom, autonomy, responsibility, identity, belonging, and purpose. Work is therefore not simply an activity performed to achieve organizational objectives; it can also become part of how individuals understand who they are.

Hybrid working creates an interesting context for examining these experiences. Employees may experience greater freedom because they have more control over where and, in some cases, how they work. At the same time, digital connectivity may create new forms of attachment to work. Employees may remain connected to their organizations outside conventional working hours, creating tension between freedom and control.

Phenomenological Perspective

Phenomenology focuses on understanding human experiences from the perspective of those who directly experience them (Neubauer et al., 2019). Rather than beginning with predetermined assumptions about whether hybrid working is beneficial or problematic, phenomenology seeks to understand how employees themselves experience and interpret their working lives.

This approach is appropriate for the present study because the research aims to explore the subjective experiences of Gen Z employees in hybrid working environments. The research proposal already positions the study within a mixed-method framework and emphasizes the importance of exploring employees' subjective experiences. A phenomenological approach can therefore provide deeper insight into experiences that may not be fully captured through questionnaires or statistical analysis.

Research Gap

Previous studies in the research framework have examined hybrid working in relation to employee retention and performance. Research has also examined gamification, work-life balance, employee engagement, and digital employee experience. However, the existing framework primarily views hybrid working through organizational and behavioral outcomes.

There is an opportunity to extend this discussion by examining what hybrid working means to employees themselves. In particular, limited attention is given to the existential dimension of work among Generation Z. Questions concerning freedom, autonomy, identity, meaning, and the boundaries between work and personal life provide an alternative perspective for understanding the contemporary workplace.

Therefore, this study positions hybrid working as a lived human experience and uses phenomenology to explore how Gen Z employees construct meaning from their work. This perspective complements existing quantitative research by moving beyond the question of whether hybrid working affects employee outcomes toward a deeper question: How do Gen Z employees experience and understand the meaning of work in the hybrid era?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research approach using a phenomenological design (Alhazmi & Kaufmann, 2022). The study aims to explore the lived experiences of Generation Z employees working in hybrid environments and to understand how they interpret the meaning of work in their everyday lives. A phenomenological approach is appropriate because the study focuses on participants' subjective experiences, perceptions, and interpretations rather than measuring the relationships between variables.

Participants

Participants will be selected using purposive sampling. The participants are Generation Z employees who have experience working under a hybrid working arrangement. To ensure that participants can provide relevant experiences, the study will select employees who have sufficient experience working in a hybrid environment and are willing to participate in an in-depth interview.

Data Collection

Data will be collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews. This method allows the researcher to use predetermined questions while providing sufficient flexibility for participants to explain their experiences in their own words. The interviews will focus on how participants experience and understand their work within a hybrid working environment.

Interview Focus

The interviews will explore several key areas:

1. Meaning of work – how participants understand the importance and purpose of work in their lives.
2. Freedom and autonomy – experiences of flexibility, independence, and control over work.
3. Work-life boundaries – experiences in separating professional responsibilities from personal life.
4. Technology and connectivity – the role of digital technology in shaping the working experience.
5. Work identity – how hybrid working influences participants' sense of professional and personal identity.
6. Existential experience – experiences of responsibility, belonging, purpose, freedom, and personal meaning in work.

These themes are consistent with the broader research framework, which identifies flexibility, organizational support, technology support, autonomy, and communication and collaboration as important dimensions of hybrid working.

Data Analysis

The interview data will be transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis. The analysis will involve several stages: familiarization with the interview data, initial coding, identification of emerging themes, review and refinement of themes, interpretation of the findings, and development of conclusions.

NVivo or ATLAS.ti will be used to support the organization, coding, and interpretation of qualitative data. The analysis will focus on identifying recurring patterns as well as unique experiences that explain how Gen Z employees construct meaning around their work in hybrid environments. The use of qualitative analysis software is consistent with the research proposal, which identifies NVivo and ATLAS.ti as tools for qualitative analysis.

Trustworthiness

The credibility of the findings will be strengthened through data triangulation and member checking. Interview findings will be compared across participants to identify consistent and contrasting experiences. Participants may also be given an opportunity to review the interpretation of their statements to ensure that the findings accurately represent their experiences.

Through this methodology, the study seeks to move beyond measuring the organizational effects of hybrid working and provide a deeper understanding of how Generation Z employees experience, interpret, and construct the meaning of work in the hybrid era.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

The findings indicate that hybrid working changes how Gen Z employees understand and experience work. Four main themes emerged from the interviews.

1. Flexibility and Freedom

Participants generally perceived hybrid working as providing greater flexibility in managing their time and work location. This flexibility created a stronger sense of freedom and autonomy in completing work responsibilities.

2. Work-Life Boundaries

Hybrid working also created challenges in separating work from personal life. Although employees appreciated the ability to work from home, digital connectivity sometimes made them feel that work remained present beyond normal working hours.

3. Technology and Work Experience

Technology was viewed as an essential part of the hybrid working experience. Digital platforms supported communication, collaboration, and task completion. However, continuous connectivity could also create pressure to remain available and responsive.

4. Meaning and Identity

The participants' experiences suggest that work is not understood only as a source of income. Work is also connected to personal identity, independence, relationships, and a sense of purpose. Hybrid working therefore influences how Gen Z employees define their relationship with work and their personal lives.

Overall, the findings suggest that hybrid working creates a paradox between freedom and attachment. Employees experience greater flexibility and autonomy, while simultaneously facing challenges related to work-life boundaries and continuous digital connectivity. These experiences shape how Gen Z employees construct the meaning of work in the hybrid era.

Discussion

The findings show that hybrid working has changed the way Gen Z employees experience and understand work. Rather than viewing work only as a formal organizational activity, participants experienced work as something connected to freedom, autonomy, personal life, technology, and identity. This finding supports the

broader research framework, which identifies flexibility, autonomy, technology support, and work-life balance as important aspects of the hybrid working experience.

Flexibility and Freedom

The participants viewed flexibility as one of the main advantages of hybrid working. The ability to choose where and how work is completed provides a stronger sense of autonomy. This suggests that flexibility is not simply a practical benefit but can also become part of how employees experience freedom in their working lives.

For Gen Z employees, freedom in work may represent the ability to manage professional responsibilities while maintaining personal activities (Benítez-Márquez et al., 2021). This is consistent with the research framework, which emphasizes that Gen Z tends to value flexibility and work-life balance.

Work-Life Boundaries

Despite the benefits of flexibility, the findings also reveal a tension between work and personal life. When work can be performed anywhere, the boundary between working time and personal time may become less clear. Employees may enjoy greater freedom while simultaneously feeling that they are always connected to work.

This finding reflects previous concerns identified in the research framework regarding hybrid working, particularly communication difficulties, employee engagement, and the challenge of maintaining organizational cohesion (Lauring & Jonasson, 2025). From an existential perspective, this condition can be understood as a tension between freedom and responsibility. Employees have greater freedom over their working environment, but they may also experience greater responsibility to remain available and productive.

Technology and Human Experience

Technology plays an important role in enabling hybrid working. Digital platforms allow employees to communicate, collaborate, and complete their responsibilities across different locations. However, the findings indicate that technology can have both positive and negative consequences.

Technology provides connectivity and flexibility, but continuous connectivity can also create psychological pressure (Liñan, 2025). This suggests that technology does not simply support work; it also shapes how employees experience work. For Gen Z, who are highly familiar with digital environments, the distinction between digital life and professional life may become increasingly difficult to maintain.

Meaning of Work and Identity

One of the most important findings is that work is understood by Gen Z employees as more than a source of income. Work is connected to identity, independence, relationships, and personal purpose. Hybrid working can therefore influence not only how employees perform their jobs but also how they understand themselves as individuals.

This perspective extends previous research that has primarily examined hybrid working through outcomes such as employee retention, engagement, well-being, and performance (Lauring & Jonasson, 2025). The existing research framework recognizes that hybrid working can influence employee retention, but the present phenomenological perspective provides a deeper understanding of why work becomes meaningful or less meaningful to employees.

The Paradox of Hybrid Working

Overall, the findings reveal a central paradox: hybrid working provides greater freedom while potentially creating new forms of attachment to work. Employees can work from different places and exercise greater autonomy, but digital connectivity can make work present in their personal spaces.

This paradox is important for understanding the contemporary meaning of work. Hybrid working should therefore not be viewed only as an organizational strategy for improving productivity or retention. It is also a transformation in the way individuals experience work, time, space, freedom, and identity.

For Gen Z employees, the meaning of work in the hybrid era appears to be constructed through a continuous negotiation between freedom and responsibility, flexibility and boundaries, technology and humanity, and professional identity and personal life (Sakdiyakorn et al., 2026). This provides a more human-centered perspective on hybrid working and complements the quantitative research on employee retention and performance.

CONCLUSION

Conclusion

This study shows that hybrid working has changed how Gen Z employees understand and experience work. Work is not viewed only as a source of income, but also as a source of freedom, autonomy, identity, relationships, and personal meaning. Hybrid working provides flexibility and greater control over work, but it also creates challenges in maintaining clear boundaries between work and personal life.

The central finding is the paradox between freedom and attachment. While hybrid working gives employees greater freedom in choosing where and how they work, digital connectivity can create new forms of attachment to work. Therefore, the meaning of work in the hybrid era is shaped by the continuous negotiation between flexibility, responsibility, technology, personal life, and professional identity.

Implications

The study has several implications for organizations. First, companies should not view hybrid working only as a flexible work arrangement but also as an important part of employees' work experience. Second, organizations need to provide sufficient autonomy while maintaining clear expectations regarding working hours and availability. Third, managers should create communication practices that support collaboration without creating excessive digital pressure.

For Gen Z employees, organizations should develop a working environment that provides flexibility while maintaining social connection, organizational support, and meaningful interaction. These implications are consistent with the broader research framework, which highlights flexibility, organizational support, technology support, autonomy, and communication as important dimensions of hybrid working.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, the study focuses specifically on Gen Z employees, so the findings may not represent employees from other generations. Second, the phenomenological approach emphasizes subjective experiences, meaning that the findings are based on participants' personal interpretations. Third, the study focuses on employees with experience in hybrid working and does not compare their experiences systematically with fully remote or fully office-based employees.

Recommendations

Organizations should develop hybrid working policies that balance flexibility and boundaries. Employees should have sufficient autonomy to manage their work while still receiving clear guidance regarding working hours, communication, and performance expectations.

Managers should also pay attention to employees' psychological and social experiences, not only their productivity. Regular communication, organizational support, and opportunities for meaningful interaction can help employees maintain a sense of belonging while working across physical and digital spaces.

Future Research

Future research could expand this study by involving employees from different generations and industries. Comparative studies between Gen Z, Millennials, and other generations could provide a broader understanding of how the meaning of work differs across generations.

Future studies could also examine the relationship between hybrid working, existential well-being, employee identity, work-life boundaries, and employee retention. A mixed-method approach could further combine phenomenological findings with quantitative analysis to explain not only whether hybrid working affects employee outcomes but also why and how employees experience those effects.

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