

## Generation Z and “Quiet Quitting”: Rethinking onboarding in an era of employee disengagement

### Generación Z y el “abandono silencioso”: repensar la incorporación en una era de desconexión de los empleados

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#### ■ Abstract

Why are Generation Z employees quiet quitting? A potential answer is related to Generation Z disengagement. Quiet quitting is troublesome for companies with growing numbers of young recruits checking out emotionally from work. Literature about aggrieved company cultures discusses quiet quitting, the name Generation Z employees use for a form of disengagement. Nevertheless, there is a lack of empirical research on Generation Z disengagement. Moreover, there is a lack of qualitative research on quiet quitting and disengagement in general with existing recommendations originating from quantitative studies that do not examine the core nature of the phenomenon. The originality of the research stems from studying two inter-related issues: the characteristics of Generation Z disengagement and the characteristics of Generation Z employee integration frameworks that consider their employee lifecycle. This paper discusses quiet quitting as a form of Kahn's (1990) disengagement and a dimension of Generation Z's exit, voice, loyalty, neglect (EVLN) model characteristic. The study follows a qualitative methodology. Firstly, grounded theory is employed to extract data from Generation Z employees and their managers and compare perceptions of the former's disengagement and engagement. The research sample consisted of 75 participants. Secondly, unstructured observation was employed through a cohort longitudinal study of ten Generation Z employees at work over two years. The lifecycle of Generation Z employees is shown to be approximately one year. The research

#### ■ Resumen

¿Por qué los empleados de la Generación Z renuncian silenciosamente? Una posible respuesta está relacionada con la desconexión de la Generación Z. Dejar de fumar silenciosamente es problemático para las empresas con un número creciente de empleados jóvenes que se retiran emocionalmente del trabajo. La renuncia silenciosa, el nombre que utilizan los empleados de la Generación Z como forma de desconexión, se analiza en la literatura sobre las culturas empresariales agravadas. Sin embargo, faltan investigaciones empíricas sobre la desconexión de la Generación Z. Además, faltan investigaciones cualitativas sobre el abandono silencioso y la desconexión en general, con recomendaciones existentes provenientes de estudios cuantitativos que no examinan la naturaleza central del fenómeno. La originalidad de la investigación surge del estudio de dos cuestiones interrelacionadas: las características de la desvinculación de la Generación Z y las características del marco de integración de los empleados de la Generación Z que considera su ciclo de vida. El abandono silencioso se analiza en el artículo como una forma de desconexión de Kahn (1990) y una dimensión de la característica del modelo de Salida, Voz, Lealtad y Negligencia (EVLN) de la Generación Z. El estudio sigue una metodología cualitativa. Primero, se emplea la teoría fundamentada para extraer datos de los empleados de la Generación Z y sus gerentes y comparar las percepciones sobre la desconexión y el compromiso de los primeros. La muestra de la investigación estuvo compuesta por 75 participan-

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illustrates the Generation Z employee lifecycle curve and classifies the Generation Z employee engagement phases. Moreover, the study introduces a framework for integrating Generation Z within companies.

**Keywords:** Generation Z, employee disengagement, employee engagement, quiet quitting, employee retention; onboarding, EVLN

tes. Segundo, se empleó la observación no estructurada por medio de un estudio longitudinal de cohorte de diez empleados de la Generación Z en el trabajo durante dos años. Se ha descubierto que el ciclo de vida de los empleados de la Generación Z es de aproximadamente un año. La investigación ilustra la curva del ciclo de vida de los empleados de la Generación Z y clasifica las fases de compromiso de los empleados de esa generación. Además, el estudio presenta un marco para integrar a la Generación Z en las empresas.

**Palabras clave:** Generación Z, desvinculación de los empleados, compromiso de los empleados, renuncia silenciosa, retención de empleados, incorporación, EVLN.

## ■ Introduction

Generation Z, the youngest in the workforce (Dimock, 2019), is the generational group which is least engaged with their work and most suffering from stress and burnout (Pendell & Vander Helm, 2022). The latest employee trend that Generation Z have ascribed to is quiet quitting - classified in this paper as a form of disengagement. With over 50% of the global workforce being quiet quitters (Smith, 2022), the phenomenon is actively spreading (McGregor, 2022). Yikilmaz (2022) warns against the potential long-term consequences of disengagement that may devastate companies and employees.

Authors such as Hiltzik (2022) claim that quiet quitting is not a novel phenomenon. The paper ascribes to Kahn's (1990) definition of engagement, and consequently, quiet quitting is viewed as a phase of the fluctuating disengagement continuum. The paper circumscribed the generational group of Generation Z employees who utilize the terminology of quiet quitting for a particular moment of disengagement characteristic to their cohort. As such, the paper eschews a discourse on the novelty of the concept but engages with a concept characteristic of the studied cohort. Ultimately, quiet quitting is classified as both a phase of disengagement and is recognised as being aligned with the neglect dimension of the exit, voice, loyalty, neglect (EVLN) model and its two extensions, silence and incivility.

Adding to the pervasiveness of the great resignation, quiet quitting is an alternative to resigning and refers to being less psychologically involved at work and doing solely core tasks (Klotz & Bolino, 2022). Quiet quitters do not work overtime, do not attend non-mandatory meetings, and are not proactive (Klotz & Bolino, 2022). Quiet quitters limit their work effort to maintain personal work-life balance, preserve their well-being, and disconnect from a high-pressure work environment (Hare, 2022). Quiet quitting is a formalised name for workers' unwillingness to place discretionary effort at work (Mahand & Caldwell, 2023). It is often discussed as an organisation's inability to create a meaningful relationship with its employees (Zenger & Folkman, 2022).

In the context of the quiet quitting phenomenon, managers view Generation Z employee engagement as a priority (Fernandez et al., 2023). Nevertheless, managers prefer to work with older rather than younger workers (Munnell et al., 2006; Pitt-Catsoupes et al., 2007). Companies are apprehensive about their abilities to integrate younger generations of employees (Deloitte, 2020). Authors call for companies to redefine traditional practices to manage disengagement better (Klotz & Bolino, 2022; Mahand & Caldwell, 2023).

Quiet quitting appears to be related to the more significant phenomenon of disengagement (Johnson, 2023). Nevertheless, it ought to be remarked that there is a deficiency of empirical

research on employee engagement, which lacks evidence-based scholarship (Shuck & Wollard, 2010). This lacuna fostered a disjointed literature on employee engagement strategies (Shuck & Wollard, 2010) upon which predominant company recommendations were developed.

The study follows a qualitative methodology. Firstly, it uses grounded theory to extract data from Generation Z employees and their managers and compare perceptions of the former's disengagement and engagement. The non-random research sample consisted of 75 participants. This total included 30 Generation Z employees and 45 managers belonging to 42 companies across industries in Romania. Second, unstructured observation was employed through a cohort longitudinal study of ten Generation Z employees at work over two years in several departments of a medical resort.

The results show that Generation Z employees' lifecycle is approximately one year. Further, it classifies Generation Z employee engagement phases in isolates, bystanders, participants, activists, and diehards. It describes the behaviours and attitudes of Generation Z in each phase and illustrates their lifecycle curve. Shifts in Generation Z employee behaviours are noticeable in three-month increments. Specifically, it is argued that quiet quitting occurs between the seventh and eighth months and that managerial interventions cannot notably turn around the effects once the employee enters the quiet quitting phase.

Moreover, the study introduces a framework for integrating Generation Z within companies that is believed to better utilize the efficiency of Generation Z in the first six months and prolong the debut of their entering the quiet quitting phase. The framework has the potential to aid companies in improving employee welfare, rapidly integrating promising professionals through minimizing organizational disengagement.

Accordingly, the study addresses the literature gap on the sample of Generation Z employees, particularly regarding disengagement, and explains the employee lifecycle curve. It furthers the disjointed literature on theories of employee engagement by providing a nexus with the timely

topic of quiet quitting, which is classified as a form of disengagement characteristic to Generation Z employees which is also aligned with the dimensions of neglect of the EVLN model. It uncovers the lifecycle of Generation Z employees and provides knowledge on this understudied cohort at work. The study is limited to Generation Z employees as they work in the context of employee disengagement within their lifecycle. It does not address disengagement in general or more extensive discussions on job satisfaction.

## ■ Employee Engagement

### ▮ Theories of Employee Engagement

Kahn's (1990) ethnographic study focuses on how employees experienced themselves within their work and how work concepts influenced moments of engagement and disengagement. Kahn (1990) also highlights the existence of fluctuations in engagement. Engagement, thus, is not static: "In engagement people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances" (Khan, 1990, p. 694). As remarked by Ochis (2022), the contents of the concept of engagement have not developed since Khan's (1990) study with subsequent authors such as May et al. (2004), Rich et al. (2010), and Brown and Leigh (1996) focusing on quantitative approaches.

Engagement, closely linked with the concept of flow, is described by Csikszentmihalyi (1990) as a holistic sensation experienced when individuals act with complete involvement, blurring the boundaries between self and environment. This flow state involves a heightened focus on specific stimuli, with actions requiring minimal conscious control. Additionally, discussions about engagement often revolve around employee empowerment (Albrecht & Andreetta, 2011; Alagarsamy et al., 2020). Thomas and Velthouse (1990) introduced an empowerment model encompassing four psychological dimensions: meaningfulness, impact, competence, and choice.

In the context of job satisfaction, Hackman and Oldham (1975) posit it as a unidimensional construct resulting from individuals' assessments

of intrinsic and extrinsic factors in their organisational relationship. Research consistently links higher job satisfaction to constructive behaviours like organisational citizenship (Weikamp & Göritz, 2016), while lower job satisfaction tends to precede destructive behaviours (Lowery & Rusbult, 1986; Naus et al., 2007; Lu et al., 2016).

### | The EVLN Model

The exit, voice, loyalty, neglect (EVLN) model, initially conceptualised by Hirschman (1970) and Farrell (1983), serves as a framework for understanding employees' responses to declining job satisfaction. In such scenarios, individuals consciously choose to act with a specific goal: to address the underlying causes of their diminishing job satisfaction (Hirschman, 1970). This model posits four distinct behavioural responses, which are exit (E), voice (V), loyalty (L), and neglect (N). Exit entails quitting, resigning, transferring to another work unit, or contemplating leaving (Todor, 1980; Rusbult et al., 1988; Allen & Tüselmann, 2009). In contrast, voice encompasses employees' efforts to bring about change in an unsatisfactory situation rather than fleeing it, with potential manifestations ranging from formal complaints to constructive problem-solving (Turnley & Feldman, 1999; Allen, 2014; Luchak, 2003). Loyalty represents a passive response from employees who support the organisation by patiently waiting for business improvement (Rusbult et al., 1986; Hirschman, 1970; McShane, 2006). Employees in this category demonstrate allegiance to the organisation and anticipate positive changes over time. Neglect, like exit, constitutes a destructive response (Rusbult et al., 1988) and includes behaviours such as increased absenteeism, lateness, and errors at work, reflecting a disengagement from their roles (Rusbult et al., 1986; Hagedoorn et al., 1999). Naus et al. (2007) contend that if certain behaviours are absent from the EVLN model's suggested alternatives, additional responses can be introduced by extending the original model. For instance, Tucker and Turner (2011) adapt the EVLN model for young workers' safety behaviours, considering patience as an alternative.

### | Generation Z and the World of Work

Generational cohorts, defined by Ryder (1965), provide a valuable framework for comparing data across different groups. The concept of generations is multifaceted in the literature, encompassing life stage, kinship descent, cohort, and historical period (Kertzer, 1983). Work-related preferences, values, and behaviours are believed to be shaped by generational cohort membership and the associated generational experiences (Smola & Stutton, 2002; Meriac et al., 2010; Kupperschmidt, 2000).

Generation Z, born after 1997, is characterised by its tech-savvy nature, preference for immediate rewards, and aversion to discretionary effort (Ochis, 2022). These individuals resist traditional workplace hierarchies and often aspire to be part-time influencers (Tolani & Sao, 2020). Despite their preference for remote work, Generation Z employees exhibit lower productivity in remote settings (Statista Inc., 2023).

Generation Z employees are perceived as lacking the necessary preparation for their roles (Schrotch, 2019). Ochis (2022) identifies positive behaviours among Generation Z employees, including collaboration, expression, freshness, intelligence, and technological orientation. However, they also display negative behaviours such as eagerness, grandiosity, idleness, and aspiration, hindering their organisational progress. This generational cohort seeks fast results while disliking effort, routine, and commitment, creating a paradox (Ochis, 2022). Additionally, Generation Z employees often desire immediate rewards and freedom and have a tendency toward non-commitment, leading to distorted self-images and surprise at their evaluations (Bencsik & Machova, 2016).

Twenge's (2017) research aligns with present findings, highlighting Generation Z's avoidance of conflict and emotional fragility. Twenge (2017) attributes these traits to their primary mode of connection through virtual means. Tolbize (2008) emphasises the need for managers to tailor their approaches to different generational groups, including Generation Z, who prioritise job designs that incorporate safety needs. Such designs should encompass flexible work prac-

tices, reward and recognition systems, compensation, benefits, feedback-seeking behaviour, and volunteering opportunities to positively impact Generation Z employees (Aggarwal et al., 2020). In terms of engagement dimensions, Generation Z places significance on extrinsic and leisure rewards, consistent with findings from Twenge et al. (2010) and Landcaster and Stillman (2002). Regarding extrinsic rewards, financial compensation is essential for Generation Z employees who also desire leisure (Ochis, 2022).

### Generation Z and the Quiet Quitting Phenomenon

Quiet quitting was first formalised by Mark Bolger (Buscaglia, 2022) to describe a type of work commitment that entails minimal effort. It debuted as a trend on social media platforms originating from a Generation Z employee who encouraged quiet quitting from work (Kilpatrick, 2022). It has since become an umbrella term used to call upon companies to change the workplace environment (Ellis & Yang, 2022). There is a discrepancy between sources on the exact definition of quiet quitting, with authors claiming that quiet quitting refers to either doing the bare minimum at work (Hetler, 2022) or not exceeding expectations (Mahand & Caldwell, 2023). Subsequently, some authors posit that quiet quitting is problematic for employees (Yikilmaz, 2022), while others support the set of ideas according to which quiet quitting is a natural response of employees to the ever-expanding workforce demands (Hopke, 2022).

Quiet quitting sparked ample controversy, with the authors warning against the psychological effects of quiet quitting (Hetler, 2022). Meanwhile, economists advocated that the phenomenon regulates itself due to market changes in the following economic cycles (Johnson, 2023). From a macro perspective, the reduction in working hours is perceived as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic circumstances and measures that persisted in subsequent years (Lee et al., 2018). Business and practitioner authors call for companies to modify traditional human resources practices (Klotz & Bolino, 2022) and

establish a psychological contract with employees (Zenger & Folkman, 2022).

Authors tend to agree that there is a relationship of causation between quiet quitting and employers who have not honoured their employees' commitments (Cameron, 2012; Caldwell & Anderson, 2020; Zenger & Folkman, 2022). Survey results indicate that when employees feel underappreciated, they reciprocate with low personal commitment (Meyer, 2014). Managers are considered to have failed to engage, empower, and inspire employees with whom they work (Clifton & Harter, 2019). This evidence is supported by the more considerable literature on employee engagement (Kular et al., 2008; Saks & Gruman, 2014), empowerment (Zimmerman, 2000), and leadership (Burns, 2010; DePree, 2004). The consensus in the literature about quiet quitting appears to be that the phenomenon is not new (Harter, 2022). Quiet quitting echoes more significant discussions on empowerment (Thomas & Velthouse, 1990), organisational conflict and cooperation (Pondy, 1967), and work satisfaction (Mayo, 1947).

In the context of quiet quitting, where employees disengage from their roles while technically remaining part of the organisation, the EVLN model is particularly relevant. Quiet quitting aligns closely with the neglect response of the EVLN model, as it typically involves reducing effort and engagement without formally leaving the job. Quiet quitting is also aligned with two extensions of the EVLN model. Sabino et al. (2019) propose employees' silence as a potential expansion to the EVLN model. As an independent construct, employees' silence represents a deliberate, individual decision to withhold vital organisational information. It is worth noting that the concept of quiet quitting may be perceived under the silence category, as it does not involve voice dimensions. Dolev, Itzkovich, and Fisher-Shalem (2021) expanded the EVLN model with workplace incivility. Their study suggests that the intentionality of reaction is a crucial dimension, with underlying emotional processes playing a significant role in each EVLN response. This insight is relevant to Generation Z quitting because most employees in

this cohort perceive that they are not empowered at work and are even belittled (Ochis, 2022). Lee and Varon (2020) found that the relationship quality between leaders and employees, according to leader-member exchange, impacts how employees respond to situations of injustice in the workplace in the EVLN model. Specifically, they found that employees in high-quality relationships with their leaders are less likely to quit their jobs or engage in neglectful behaviour when faced with a dissatisfying situation. Instead, they are more likely to voice their concerns or remain loyal to the organisation. Further qualitative research is needed to understand quiet quitting and the characteristics of Generation Z, who have promoted the concept. This leads to research question 1: What are the characteristics of Generation Z disengagement?

### Integration and Onboarding

From the early literature on employee integration, two organisational approaches to onboarding have been remarked upon, namely institutionalised and individualised socialisation (Jones, 1986). The former refers to a step-by-step approach, often including orientation and mentorship programmes. In the latter, the new employee is responsible for the knowledge they acquire. Institutionalised programs have been shown to impact the individual employee's success within the organisation (Weinstock, 2015; Lynch & Buckner-Hayden, 2010; Baker & Di Piro, 2019). Organisational integration programs aid new hires in learning about the business, including the daily functions and job responsibilities, but also about the organisation's culture and values (Pike, 2014). The integration of employees usually consists of several stages, such as pre-onboarding, orientation and organisational socialisation, probation period, assimilation, and follow-up (Stein & Christiansen, 2010). Learning about the culture, network development, career development, and strategy are essential to the organisational socialisation process (Stein & Christiansen, 2010). A notable addition in onboarding practices, mainly aimed at the younger generational groups, entails the new hire receiving not only an experienced organi-

sational mentor but also a buddy. This refers to a younger employee at a similar level responsible for aiding the new hire within the organisation (Klinghoffer et al., 2019).

Furthermore, a stream of literature orientated toward younger generational groups considers the influence of gamified integration (Heimbürger et al., 2019; Depura & Garg, 2012; Dale, 2014). Gamification in the workspace enhances non-gaming situations with game elements (Dale, 2014). Technologically integrated workspaces with up-to-date software, mobile applications and gamification appear to improve the success of employee integration (Depura & Garg, 2021). Previous research on the influence of gamified integration on employee engagement indicates that Generations Y and Z prefer gamified onboarding to non-gamified onboarding (Heimbürger et al., 2019).

Scholars and writers in the popular and practitioner space write avidly about Generation Z and Y's alleged lack of motivation and work ethic (Terry, 2022; Dashevsky, 2020). Quiet quitters, for instance, refuse to perform with maximum dedication when their supervisor asks them to work at a high level (Smith, 2022). Business writers advise managers to incorporate the unique needs of employees (Klotz & Bolino, 2022). Yet, practical frameworks for managers to integrate Generation Z employees who are quiet quitters exhibit no prior empirical study. This gap leads to research question 2: What are the characteristics of a Generation Z employee integration framework?

### Research Method

The study follows a qualitative methodology. Firstly, it employs grounded theory to extract data from Generation Z employees and their managers and compare perceptions of the former's disengagement and engagement. The research sample consisted of 75 participants. This total included 30 Generation Z employees and 45 managers belonging to 42 companies across industries in Romania. Secondly, it employs unstructured observation through a cohort longitudinal study of ten Generation Z employees at work over two years in several

departments of a medical resort. The latter phenomenological method was used to discover the Generation Z lifecycle, the quiet quitting curve, and the actions that characterise Generation Z's quiet quitting. The research design included the literature review, questionnaire design and testing, the semi-structured interview process, concomitantly the unstructured observation, triangulation of the data and gap analysis, and the development of the integration framework.

The total sample size for grounded research was 75 employees divided into two groups. The lower-level group consisted of 30 Generation Z employees. The higher-level group consisted of 45 managers. The sample size was achieved through theoretical saturation (Glasser & Strauss, 2017). The sample method was non-random. Both theoretical and exponential non-discriminative snowball sampling were used (Babbie, 1995; Miller & Crabtree, 1992).

The total sample size for the unstructured observation as a cohort longitudinal study was ten Generation Z employees. Participant observation provides a flexible environment where interactions are a natural part of participants' everyday lives (Agar, 1986). The unstructured observation followed an interpretive approach for arriving at thinking descriptions (Geertz, 2000). Structured observation was seen as the best way to understand the behaviour (Bogdewic, 1999) of quiet quitting and the Generation Z employee lifecycle, around which literature is scarce. The observation process was inductive and iterative (O'Reilly, 2009). The recorded content directly relates to engagement and disengagement concepts (Waldner et al., 2021). Data was collected using text-based notes through linear text-structuring and spatial structuring through physical decks and large displays (Waldner et al., 2021).

The phases of data analysis included bracketing and phenomenological reduction, delineating units of meaning, clustering to form units of significance, summarising, validating, modifying, and providing a composite summary (Hycner, 1999; Moustakas, 1994). The content was analysed through axial and selective coding and integrative diagramming through an inductive

and deductive method (Martin, 2001; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

The validity and reliability of the research were ensured following Lincoln and Guba's (1985) trustworthiness categories, namely credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, which were used to verify the validity of qualitative methods. Prolonged engagement with participants (Brown et al., 2002; Jacelon & O'Dell, 2005; Morrow, 2005), triangulation of data from multiple sources (Brown et al., 2002; Jacelon & O'Dell, 2005), thick descriptions of data (Morrow, 2005), respondent validation of interview transcripts (Brown et al., 2002; Jacelon & O'Dell, 2005; Morrow, 2005), participant guidance of inquiry (Cooney, 2010) and use of participant words in the emerging theory (Cooney, 2010) ensured internal research validity.

## ■ Findings

### Engagement Conditions and Determinants

Generation Z participants and managers were queried regarding workplace engagement and disengagement factors. Five thematic categories emerged for Generation Z participants from thirty-two units of meaning, while managers generated six thematic categories from thirty-three units of meaning. Recognised engagement conditions encompassed a positive atmosphere, collegiality, hierarchical transparency, and organised managerial actions, while determinants included personal competence, remuneration, praise, and training.

### Disengagement Conditions and Determinants

Identified disengagement conditions included a stressful work environment, hostile atmosphere, being marginalised, and favouritism of older generational groups. Identified disengagement determinants include low wages, little decision-making power, and lack of support. The study indicates that emergent categories for Generation Z engagement and disengagement are congruent with the existing literature on engagement, which is discussed as personal

engagement, flow, empowerment, enrichment, and burnout.

### Evaluation of Employee Engagement by Managers

Managers were asked to describe how they evaluate employee engagement. From thirty-one units of significance, with the most prominent being results, surveys, and questions employees ask about assigned tasks, four categories were generated: achievement-based, behaviour-based, identity-based, and process-based.

### Process of Integrating a Young Hire

Managers were asked to describe the process of integrating a young hire with little or no prior experience into the workforce. Four categories were generated: process, choice, competence, and meaningfulness from twenty-eight units of significance, with prominent ones being exposure to the workflow and assigning an experienced employee to guide a young employee. The integration system does not appear sufficiently standardised.

### Methods for Empowering Young Employees

Managers were asked to describe how they empower and support young hires. From twenty-seven units of significance, with prominent ones being to give young hires verbal appreciation and decision-making power over their work, five thematical categories were generated: choice, competence, extrinsic rewards, impact, and meaningfulness.

### The Employee Lifecycle Curve

The employee lifecycle, comprising stages such as attraction, recruitment, onboarding, development, retention, and separation (Kwon & Park, 2019), serves as a framework for understanding the phases of an employee's interaction with their employer. Observations of Generation Z employees indicate a significantly shorter employee lifecycle, averaging around one year, in contrast to older generational groups like Boomers, who traditionally remained with their employers until retirement (Fry, 2019). Within

this year, Generation Z employee engagement experiences fluctuations, displaying an overall downward trend leading to quiet quitting and disengagement.

Generation Z employee engagement can be classified into five distinct types, adapted from Kellerman's follower typology (2008): Activists, diehards, participants, bystanders, and isolates. Activists are highly invested and engaged, while diehards exhibit unwavering dedication. Participants are fully engaged with dedication, while bystanders are engaged but deliberately remain neutral. Isolates are entirely disengaged, showing indifference towards their leaders (Kellerman, 2008).

Quiet quitting behaviours in Generation Z employees encompass three strategies: ego-oriented, image-oriented, and achievement-oriented. These strategies parallel those observed in Millennial employees when managing inter-generational tensions with Boomers (Urlick et al., 2017) and align with the extended EVLN model of silence and neglect. Ego-oriented strategies involve withdrawal and the protection of personal needs. Image-oriented strategies entail visibility when the manager is present and selective information management to justify low proactivity. Achievement-oriented strategies encompass proficient performance and adaptability in communication style (Urlick et al., 2017).

Figure 1 illustrates behavioural shifts in Generation Z employees occurring approximately every three months within this one year. Recruits initially start as activists, characterised by enthusiasm but limited job knowledge. As they become more familiar with their roles over the next three months, their dedication peaks, transitioning between activists and participants. By the sixth month, the downward trend continues, moving towards bystander status. The onset of quiet quitting typically happens between the seventh and eighth month, prompting intervention from the employer or manager in the ninth month. However, Generation Z employees are actively seeking alternative employment at this time. By the end of the twelfth month, they often reach the point of isolation, accompanied by requests for a raise to adjust their engage-



**Figure 1.** The employee lifecycle curve

Source: Author's own elaboration.

ment levels for the subsequent period. Despite efforts to address quiet quitting through interventions like workload redistribution, job redesign, bonuses, and flexible work practices, these measures have proven ineffective in significantly altering the employee lifecycle. While they may temporarily delay the shift to bystander status, they do not succeed in converting employees into activists or substantially prolonging their tenure.

### Discussion and Conclusion

This study qualitatively investigates Generation Z employee engagement, revealing a distinct pattern in their employment lifecycle characterised by a markedly shorter tenure, with notable shifts in behaviours occurring in three-month intervals (see Figure 1). The study suggests that quiet quitting manifests between the seventh and eighth months of employment. After entering this phase, managerial interventions are unlikely to reverse its effects. Consequently, a strategic focus on enhancing organisational integration during the activist and diehard phases of Generation Z employees and extending the participant phase is recommended.

The findings regarding research question 1 align with the insights on burnout presented by Maslach et al. (2001), which is considered

an extreme form of disengagement. Burnout is associated with various job withdrawal behaviours, including absenteeism, intention to leave, and turnover, and is characterised by exhaustion, cynicism, detachment from the job, and a sense of ineffectiveness (Maslach et al., 2001). Similarly, employees experiencing quiet quitting tend to influence their colleagues, resulting in clusters of Generation Z employees exhibiting this behaviour.

A noteworthy contribution to the literature is the observation that Generation Z employees in the quiet quitting phase draw inspiration and guidance from social media influencers who promote this disengagement behaviour. This admiration for influencers aligns with previous generational trends of admiring famous individuals (Wyatt, 1993), but Generation Z's preference for influencers, considered more authentic and reliable (Senft, 2013), distinguishes their behaviour. Influencers, often micro-celebrities from social media (Khamis et al., 2016), play a significant role in advocating quiet quitting and job turnover. For instance, the study's observations indicate that Generation Z employees frequently respond to requests for overtime by claiming they can only stay for a brief period, a response recommended by influencers promoting quiet quitting.

Despite the general preference for employee retention in organisations (Cloutier et al., 2015), this study's findings challenge the feasibility of retaining Generation Z employees. Contrary to prior research on high-quality leader-member exchange (LMX) relationships, which suggests reduced exit and neglect behaviours and increased loyalty behaviours (Jessup & Varon, 2020), the results indicate a discrepancy within the Generation Z cohort.

Regarding research question 2, current organisational practices lack a cohesive employee integration system, resulting in disjointed interventions. A proposed integrated approach, detailed in Table 1, combines previous research on employee integration with the present findings and Generation Z engagement dimensions. Managerial efforts to counter the quiet quitting phase have shown limited effectiveness in extending employee tenure. To enhance Gen-

**Table 1.** Generation Z employee integration stages

Stages		Actions	Engagement Dimension
Pre-onboarding	Offer realistic job descriptions; Top management greeting		Intrinsic rewards; Social rewards
Onboarding	Orientation	Receive employee handbook information materials; tour departments; explain expectations; job description; present expectations.	Empowerment; Social rewards
Probation period	Organisational socialisation	Culture, network development, career development, strategy	
	Employee undertakes level-appropriate skills.		Empowerment; Choice; Personal engagement
	Employee partakes in meetings.		
Integration	In-depth training: Employee receives more responsibilities; Similar financial and workload to more experienced employees;		Empowerment; enrichment and external rewards
Evaluation	Reports of managers, self-evaluations; questionnaires, surveys; KPIs; results, evaluation meetings		Competence; Stress levels
Assimilation	Career development; Variation of work; Becoming a buddy for new hire		Enrichment, job design, social rewards
Follow-up	Continuous follow-up, sensemaking, expectations management; periodic check-ins		Empowerment

Source: Author's own elaboration.

eration Z engagement, the study recommends proactively extending the time before this phase and expediting integration processes. A more resource-efficient strategy entails improving onboarding and integration practices to extend the participant phase of Generation Z employees while leveraging their enthusiasm during the activist and diehard phases.

Pre-onboarding involves the period from recruitment to onboarding (Dharmasiri et al., 2014). During this phase, Generation Z employees assess intrinsic rewards and perceived job fit based on realistic job descriptions. Unrealistic descriptions can lead to disillusionment (Dharmasiri et al., 2014). Onboarding encompasses orientation and organisational socialisation (Mroz et al., 2019). Employees receive handbooks and learn about rights, obligations, work expectations, workflow, and company departments. They are paired with experienced mentors and buddies (Klinghoffer et al., 2019), fostering empowerment and social rewards. The probation period allows employees to undertake tasks, contribute to meetings, and exercise choice. Integration continues with in-depth training, more responsibilities, and similar rewards to experienced peers, promoting enrichment and external rewards.

Evaluation reviews progress, intervenes in job descriptions, and adjusts workloads, combining yearly and periodic assessments covering technical skills, company knowledge, and soft skills. Various tools like reports, results, surveys, questionnaires, and performance reviews are employed, with formal and informal methods, such as daily check-ins and participative meetings. Evaluation enhances competence and stress management.

After assimilation, job enrichment offers more variety and autonomy while maintaining mentorship. Assimilated employees may become buddies for newcomers. Engagement dimensions at this stage include job redesign, enrichment, and social rewards. Continuous periodic check-ins ensure clarity for hires.

Overall, the study contributes to knowledge in four main ways. Firstly, it furthers the disjointed literature on theories of employee engagement by providing a nexus with the timely topic of quiet quitting. Secondly, it uncovers the lifecycle of Generation Z employees and provides knowledge on this under studied cohort at work. Thirdly, it attempts to explain the Generation Z employee lifecycle curve. Fourthly, it proposes a

framework for onboarding young recruits considering their tendency towards rapid turnover and provides practical mechanisms for managerial interventions.

Further research is necessary to gain a deeper understanding of employee disengagement among Generation Z. Longitudinal studies that track the engagement levels of Generation Z employees over time could help identify the critical points at which disengagement occurs and inform the development of effective onboarding and integration frameworks. Lastly, research that explores the role of organisational culture and leadership in fostering employee engagement could help managers create a workplace environment that promotes employee well-being and productivity.

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