

Generation Z and the transformation of HRM practices in UK luxury hotels

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Abstract

This study explores how Generation Z (GenZ) is transforming recruitment, selection, and retention practices in the UK luxury hotel sector. Drawing on generational theory, employer branding, and the psychological contract framework, the research adopts an interpretivist, multi-actor approach. Seventeen in-depth interviews with HR and General Managers from luxury hotels, complemented by a focus group with five GenZ employees, reveal that the new generation's digital fluency, values-driven career orientation, and emphasis on well-being are reshaping human resource management (HRM) in hospitality. Findings highlight the rise of mobile-first recruitment, the redefinition of candidate evaluation around personality and cultural fit, and the growing demand for authentic employer brands and supportive workplace cultures. Retention strategies increasingly centre on flexibility, inclusivity, and rapid career development, reflecting a shift in the hospitality psychological contract toward short-term, developmental, and lifestyle-oriented employment. The study contributes to HRM and generational research by conceptualising GenZ as a catalyst for workforce transformation in service-intensive industries, while offering actionable insights for hotel leaders navigating multigenerational teams. Implications for sustainable workforce development in hospitality are discussed.

Keywords

Generation Z, human resource management, workforce transformation, luxury hospitality, generational differences

Introduction

Generational research has addressed evolving career needs for different generations in the workplace, and this becomes more crucial when the current workforce comprises of four different generations. Despite some discrepancies in the age brackets for different generations, it is largely agreed that Baby Boomers were born between 1940 and 1959, followed by GenX (1960–1979), GenY or Millennials (1980–1994), and GenZ (1995–2010) (Francis and Hoefel, 2018). The global workforce are experiencing transformative changes when GenZ and GenY are projected to account for 74% of the workforce by 2030 (Hewitt, 2021). These young generations are rejecting traditional rules and outdated structures, less connected to the organisation, and more likely to change jobs, presenting potential recruitment and retention problems (Deloitte, 2025, Indeed, 2025).

GenZ, the largest and fast-growing generation with their distinct behaviours as customers and employees, is driving significant shifts in hospitality industry standards and practices (Borzillo et al., 2025; Seyfi et al.,

2024). Covid has amplified the reliance of the industry on young new hires, particularly GenZ who can offer the industry with a quality pipeline of workers to fill this critical labour shortage in the entry-level positions but exhibit a different set of values compared to previous generations (Baum et al., 2020; Leung et al., 2021).

The luxury hotel sector provides a particularly relevant empirical setting for examining these dynamics. Unlike other segments of hospitality, luxury hotels are characterised by high levels of personalised service, emotional labour, and aesthetic performance, where employee behaviour directly shapes customer experience and brand value (Lam et al., 2022; Najmudin et al., 2026; Wu et al., 2020). These environments are typically underpinned by strong organisational

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cultures, high service expectations, and traditionally hierarchical career structures (Giousmpasogolou and Marinakou, 2024). As such, any misalignment between employee values and organisational practices can have immediate implications for customer experience (Zhang et al., 2024). The entry of GenZ into this context therefore represents not merely a demographic shift, but a potential reconfiguration of the norms and expectations that underpin luxury hotels (Yin et al., 2026).

The majority of generational studies in hospitality focus on work values and motivators or work attitudes and behaviours whereas career patterns and behaviours are the main focus of studies on organisation-related constructs (Sakdiyakorn and Wattanacharoensil, 2018). GenZ has not been included in most generational studies, together with the Millennials, they are changing the world of work, creating the desired working environment for all generations (Baum, 2019; El Hajal and Losekoot, 2025; Self et al., 2019). This highlights the need for organisations to address generational differences and reconsider existing HRM practices including recruitment, selection and retention (Perilus, 2020).

While prior research has extensively examined generational differences in work values, attitudes, and motivations in hospitality, much of this literature remains descriptive and cohort-focused, offering limited insight into how younger generations actively reshape organisational systems and HRM practices. Little attention has been given to the dynamic interaction between managerial strategies and employee expectations. Also, limited research examines these dynamics within service-intensive and high-contact environments such as luxury hospitality.

In response to these gaps, this study makes three key contributions. First, it advances generational research by conceptualising GenZ as an active driver of HRM transformation rather than a passive cohort defined by static characteristics. Second, it extends employer branding and psychological contract theory by demonstrating how these frameworks operate within a digitally mediated, multi-actor environment where both employers and employees co-create organisational practices. Third, it provides contextually grounded insights from the UK luxury hotel sector, illustrating how generational change unfolds within a structurally constrained and service-intensive industry.

Literature review

Employer branding theory

Conceptualised by Backhaus and Tikoo (2004), employer branding integrates principles from the resource-

based view and brand equity theory to position the employer brand as a strategic tool for attracting and retaining talent, presenting values for both managers and scholars. Their model emphasises two core processes: external marketing to enhance employer attractiveness and internal marketing to foster employee engagement and organisational identification. Over the past two decades, employer branding has evolved into a critical component of talent management, with research highlighting its role in shaping organisational reputation and employee experience (Biswas and Suar, 2016).

The dynamic influence of social media and generational differences have shifted to focus from seeking the best brand message to seeking a way to convey the most accurate experience of working for the organisation to prospective candidates (Backhaus, 2016). Researchers have extended the employer branding framework by incorporating with signalling theory and Employee Value Propositions (EVP) to reflect these societal changes, emphasising the role of GenZ in driving transformation in HR functions and talent management practices (Lo et al., 2025; Pandita, 2022).

Generational theory

A generation can be defined as a group of individuals born within the same historical and socio-cultural context which shapes how each generation experiences life and the world (Lyons and Kuron, 2014; Mannheim, 1952). There are two main approaches to understanding generations in social sciences: the social forces and the cohort perspectives. The social forces perspective views generations as inter-related and multi-dimensional social groups, emphasising the dynamic interaction of generations as a mechanism for social change (Mannheim, 1952). The cohort perspective suggests each generation is homogenous enough for researchers to observe common characteristics and measure mean scores on attitudinal or behavioural variables (Ryder, 1965). Most research on generational differences in the workplace has adopted the cohort perspective, focusing on mean differences and measuring work-related variables (Eyoum et al., 2025; Foster, 2013). Researchers tend to begin with the assumption that generational differences exist and close it with a cause-effect relationship based on generational cohort theory (McKercher, 2023).

Nevertheless, Edmunds and Turner (2005) identified the differences between a passive and an active generation, whereby the latter brings about social changes, leading to intergenerational rivalries and conflicts. New generations act as a source of future stability although they are initiated by change and will potentially change societies (Nugin and Kalmus,

2022). Generational differences should be considered as “manifestations of broader trends in society and work”, meaning previous management practices do not guarantee to work in present’s context and current practices cannot be assumed to work in the future (Lyons and Kuron, 2014: 150). Viewing generational differences as a mechanism for social change allows for a more nuanced conceptualisation of the phenomenon.

GenZ are found to have higher expectations for the capabilities and efficiency of service robots, exhibiting higher trust and reliance on these technologies compared to Baby Boomers, GenX and GenY (Horpynich et al., 2025). They prioritise flexible work arrangements, career growth and workplaces aligned with sustainability, diversity and social responsibility (Seyfi et al., 2024). Barhate and Dirani (2022) predict GenZ’s career expectations involve attractive organisational culture, work-life balance, and stability whereas learning, mentorship and growth are emphasised for their career development.

Psychological contract

Psychological contract refers to an individual’s belief in mutual obligations between employee and employer, encompassing both explicit and implicit promises beyond formal agreements (Rousseau, 1995). As GenY entered the workplace, Lub et al. (2012) conducted one of the first studies on psychological contract and generational differences in the hospitality sector, informing the development of management styles and HR policies. The concept has gained substantial attention from tourism and hospitality researchers due to its explanatory and predictive power in employee attitudes and behaviours in such a labour-intensive industry with high staff turnover rate. This becomes even more complicated with multi-generational workforce where the one-size-fits-all approach no longer works in HRM; instead, a more customised approach to evaluating employee performance proves more effective to help them meet their goals and career trajectories (Eyouun et al., 2020).

The study encompasses three theories as a signal – sensemaking – exchange sequence where employer branding investigates the set of expectations about work, culture, rewards and development communicated via recruitment, selection and retention strategies. Generational theory enables the sensemaking process of these expectations, emphasising how GenZ is driving changes in HRM practices. Few studies combine manager and employee perspective on GenZ’s influence on HRM practices, the study fills this gap by including the psychological contract to understand GenZ employees’ perception of these signals and how it could lead to contract fulfilment or breach. The two-

way communication between employee-employer can complete the feedback loop and inform HRM practices (Figure 1).

Methodology

Research design and rationale

The United Kingdom represents a particularly salient context for this study due to the structural and institutional challenges facing its hospitality labour market. The sector has experienced persistent labour shortages, exacerbated by Brexit-related restrictions on the mobility of European workers and a declining domestic interest in hospitality careers (Baum et al., 2023; HOTREC, 2022). Additionally, the industry continues to struggle with a comparatively weak occupational image, often perceived as offering low pay, long hours, and limited career progression, particularly when contrasted with other European contexts (Giousmpasoglou, 2024). These conditions have intensified the sector’s reliance on younger workers, particularly GenZ, making the UK luxury hotel industry a critical site for examining how generational shifts are reshaping HRM practices (Giousmpasoglou and Nguyen, 2025; Walmsley et al., 2020).

Data was collected in two phases: in-depth interviews and focus group interview. In-depth interviews with senior managers were carried out to gain insights into the current HRM practices in UK luxury hotels. To enhance findings through data triangulation, GenZ employees were invited for a focus group interview in the second phase, shedding more light on the key points identified from interviews with senior managers. The combination allowed for a fuller understanding of the

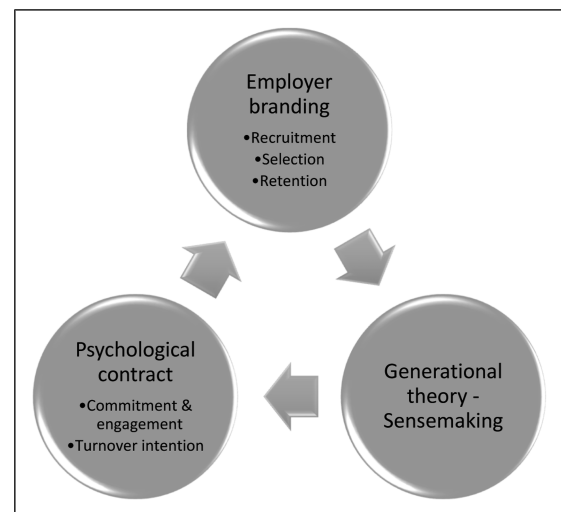


Figure 1. Theoretical underpinning for the study (Authors’ own).

changes from both employer and employee perspectives and enhanced the richness of the findings.

Phase 1: In-depth interviews with senior managers

Purposeful sampling technique was adopted to generate in-depth insights and understanding from information-rich cases (Patton, 2015). In this research, only senior managers who actively make decisions on HRM strategies in four or five-star hotels in the UK were invited for the interviews. Personal networks, LinkedIn profiles and snowball sampling were used as screening tools to identify suitable participants, invitations were sent to 56 General Managers, HR Managers, or Talent Acquisition Managers working at 32 luxury hotels in the UK.

Seventeen in-depth interviews were conducted online with the senior managers from 15 different luxury hotels in the UK. The managerial sample was gender-balanced (53% male, 47% female) and predominantly employed in multinational hotel chains (70%). Participants had an average of 21.40 years of service in the hospitality industry, reflecting high levels of professional experience; notably, 59% of the hotel businesses represented in this study employed more than 1000 staff members.

Data collection took place from February to June 2025 with each interview lasting approximately 45–60 minutes. The interviews focused on challenges and strategies in recruitment and retention amid labour shortages, the impact of generational diversity on workplace dynamics and HR practices, and approaches for attracting and managing GenZ talent in hospitality. Data was collected until it reached saturation.

Phase 2: Focus group interview GenZ employees

Suitable participants were identified as those belong to the GenZ age group and are currently working in UK luxury hotels. These criteria were mentioned again at the beginning of each interview to ensure participants' knowledge and experience are relevant to the study focus (Van Manen, 2014). Potential participants were approached in person during a hospitality student competition held in London in May 2025.

The focus group interview was conducted in-person by the two researchers in June 2025, covering what attracts or discourages candidates in hospitality roles, their motivations, expectations during recruitment, factors influencing job retention or turnover, and perspectives on GenZ's impact, challenges, and generational dynamics in the workplace. The focus group

consisted of three females and two males, with an average age of 22.8 years and an average of 4.6 years of hospitality industry experience. Two participants were home students and three were international students, all pursuing undergraduate degrees in hospitality management and currently working in UK luxury hotels.

Data analysis

Prior to starting the interviews and the focus group, participants were informed of the study's aim and the right to refuse participation or withdraw from the study at any time. The authors confirm that this study adhered to the relevant ethical guidelines for human subjects, and that the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants were maintained throughout the study. This study's procedures were approved by the host university's Research Ethics Committee.

All interviews were conducted simultaneously by the two researchers, allowing for independent sense-making and interpretation of the data (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). Braun and Clarke's (2012) approach to thematic analysis was used to analyse data from the interviews. First, both researchers familiarised themselves with the interview data by reading the transcripts and cross-checking the audio recordings. Initial themes were noted, including recruitment, selection, and retention practices, as well as generational differences highlighted by the senior managers. Next, the researchers focused on practices introduced to meet the needs of younger generations, what worked better for older generations, and what were considered irrelevant or unpopular. They then compared the senior managers' opinions with those reflected by the GenZ employees. Finally, the notion of "generational differences" was clarified. It is noted that participants expressed this concept with caution, implying a need for more mindful HRM practices that promote inclusivity and diversity in the workplace, rather than treating different generations based solely on their age cohort.

Findings

Emerging themes

Five key themes emerged regarding GenZ's influence on recruitment, selection, and retention in the UK luxury hotel sector: (1) Recruitment in the digital age; (2) Evolving approaches to selection; (3) Challenges in engaging GenZ; (4) Retention and the redefinition of commitment; and (5) Gen Z's distinctive work values and behaviours. Across all themes, three overarching factors emerged as critical to attracting and retaining

GenZ talent: a strong and authentic employer brand, the digital transformation of HR practices, and a re-defined psychological contract in which loyalty is replaced by opportunities for development and well-being.

Recruitment in the digital age

Senior managers reported using a mix of conventional and contemporary recruitment approaches. Graduate recruitment was a priority for several participants, supported through partnerships with universities, colleges, and schools, as P6 described “...the relationships we have with XYZ Universities, but also other schools and colleges... doing parental engagement sessions, teacher encounters... it’s that proactive element”. Bringing young people into the industry was seen as a long-term investment, with some hotels offering structured development routes, such as P5’s Emerging Leader programme for college leavers, designed to build confidence and communication skills.

Recruitment also targeted underrepresented groups, including individuals with disabilities, ex-offenders, and those returning from homelessness, often in collaboration with charities and government agencies. Apprenticeships were widely used, offering formal qualifications alongside on-the-job training; P8 noted the additional benefits of National Insurance savings for apprentices. Internal recruitment and cross-training were seen as effective for developing supervisory and management talent, while referral schemes were common. As P4 explained “if you refer someone and they successfully pass their probation, you get £1000... good people know good people”. However, P10 cautioned that some referrals were driven by the bonus rather than candidate suitability.

Social media dominated vacancy advertising, with participants citing Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, and growing interest in TikTok. Storytelling and career-focused contents were used to appeal to younger applicants, with P13 highlighting podcasts, YouTube, and dedicated careers accounts as effective platforms. Online applications, often via one-click functions on platforms such as Indeed, had significantly increased application volumes, though P11 noted this could mean “over 100,000 applications every year... but only 1500 to 2000 hires.”

These findings align with prior research on the rising role of social media in hospitality recruitment (Ladkin and Buhalis, 2016) and the effectiveness of digital channels in attracting GenZ candidates (Zhong et al., 2024). The use of storytelling as an employer branding tool also echoes Roxo’s (2020) argument that compelling narratives can attract candidates while enhancing an organisation’s image.

Evolving approaches to selection

Across all participating hotels, interviews remained the primary selection method, though approaches varied. In response to ongoing skills shortages, several senior managers reported shifting the emphasis from technical expertise to personality and attitude, particularly for entry- and mid-level positions. As P15 put it, “if the personality and the attitude is right then we will take them under our wings and teach them all the technical bits.”

Given the preferences of younger applicants, particularly GenZ, managers stressed the need for a fast and simplified selection process. P1 argued that “you’ve got to make the application process snappy, sharp, quick, no long forms, no big CVs and time-consuming paperwork”. Participants also emphasised the importance of relevant and engaging assessment activities; for example, one GenZ employee (PF1) criticised a group interview as feeling disconnected from the role, preferring job-relevant introductions and workplace tours. Timely and transparent communication was seen as critical, with examples of poor follow-up negatively impacting employer perception. PF5 noted “I have friends that have been waiting for like 2 years to hear from HR”. P5 described improving processes to avoid such situations, while P2 underlined the reputational benefits of personalised responses over generic replies.

The integration of technology and AI into selection generated both enthusiasm and caution. Automation was valued for speed, with P16 noting that “if the initial screening is done by AI...the benefit...is that it’s done within seconds.” However, several participants questioned AI’s ability to assess nuanced qualities, with P11 highlighting the “insight and experience” that only human recruiters can bring. Some tools, such as chatbot applications via WhatsApp, appeared particularly effective for younger applicants. P16 reported that 70% of users were under 22, while older generations preferred direct personal interaction.

Finally, participants stressed that attracting suitable candidates, especially from GenZ, required clearly communicating organisational values and aligning selection with key motivators such as flexibility, career development, mental health, and work-life balance. As P9 explained: “We screamed and shouted so much about the fact of the company values... we talk about them all the way through recruitment, onboarding, [and the] employment journey.”

Challenges in engaging GenZ

Participants identified two broad categories of recruitment and selection challenges: sector-wide issues and those specific to engaging GenZ candidates. From a sector perspective, nearly half of the interviewees cited

the UK hospitality industry's poor public image, contrasting it with European and Asian contexts where hospitality is regarded as a respected, long-term career. P3 noted *"I don't know a parent who would willingly encourage their child to go and work in hospitality in the UK... Whereas, for example, in Europe... people regard working in hospitality in the same way as other professions."* P11 attributed this image problem to a lack of awareness about the breadth of professional roles available beyond front-line service (e.g., in finance, marketing and HRM), with public perception shaped largely by visible roles such as waiters, chefs, and bartenders.

Another major challenge is the persistent skills gap and labour shortage, exacerbated by Brexit and intensified in metropolitan areas like London. Participants described declining skill levels, reduced interest in hospitality careers, and greater competition for talent. Visa requirements and the loss of EU free movement have complicated recruitment, particularly for positions historically filled by experienced European staff. P15 observed: *"The skills level certainly has deteriorated over the years... we are getting less and less people who are interested in hospitality. And the people who are interested... are not skilled"*. These findings mirror prior research highlighting the structural talent shortages in the UK hospitality sector (Baum, 2019; Liu-Lastres et al., 2023; Marinakou and Giousmpasoglou, 2019).

The second group of challenges relates specifically to engaging GenZ. Participants reported that younger candidates tend to favour informal, tech-enabled processes and quick, mobile-friendly applications over traditional CV-based submissions. P16 observed that standard requirements, such as cover letters, can deter GenZ applicants who increasingly apply via mobile devices. In response, some employers have adopted instant messaging platforms to reduce perceived formality; P14, for example, uses WhatsApp to contact candidates during high-demand periods. However, such approaches can also lead to casual attitudes toward professionalism, with P15 describing cases of applicants arriving for interviews looking as if they had *"just got out of bed."*

Attention span and communication style were recurring concerns. P13 remarked that younger applicants are accustomed to fast, swipe-based interactions, making it harder to sustain engagement during longer interviews. *"People are used to doing things quickly, swiping through things... so sometimes it's harder to hold their attention in an interview if it's dragging on too long"* (P13). FP3 suggested that this constant online engagement may reduce the capacity for effective in-person communication, a core value in hospitality, as some GenZ applicants appear more comfortable interacting with chatbots than with managers directly.

Finally, unrealistic career expectations emerged as a consistent challenge. P4 described graduates rejecting structured development programmes because they were unwilling to undertake operational tasks such as polishing cutlery or cleaning rooms before progressing to supervisory roles: *"They have to start with the nitty gritty and then work their way up... but they're not willing to do that"* (P4). P9 and P7 linked this to a desire for rapid promotion and *"instant gratification,"* reinforced by upbringing, which contrasts with hospitality's traditional requirement to start at the bottom and progress through experience (Giousmpasoglou and Marinakou, 2024).

Retention and the redefinition of commitment

Senior managers identified a range of retention strategies, most of which closely aligned with GenZ's expectations. These included fostering inclusive and supportive team environments, promoting mental health, ensuring work-life balance, and providing clear career development pathways. As FP3 summarised, what matters is *"a welcoming and patient team environment, with managers who care about employees' well-being, performance, and skill development."*

Onboarding was viewed as a critical stage, particularly during the first 90 days of employment. P11 linked positive onboarding experiences to improved retention, while P8 described using digital onboarding and mobile-accessible training to make the process more engaging for younger staff. P16 noted *"In the first 2 weeks, people decide whether they're going to stay at the company for a longer period or not."*

Career development was central to retention, with organisations offering structured progression opportunities, internal recruitment, cross-departmental transfers, and international placements. Managers acknowledged GenZ's desire for rapid advancement and designed initiatives such as graduate schemes, management training, and role-specific pathways to address this demand, while also managing expectations that progression remains performance-based.

Well-being, inclusivity and diversity, and mental health support were emphasised across the sample. Initiatives included yoga sessions, healthy food options, mental health helplines, and appreciation events. P9 stressed limiting hours to prevent burnout, *"we don't want them walking around like zombies... We're not going to overwork people"*. Creating a sense of belonging was supported through personalised engagement, recognition programmes, and social events. Examples ranged from annual awards ceremonies and milestone celebrations to themed lunches, volunteering projects, and informal gatherings. P3 explained *"Pizza Night... a little dinner out for*

people to get to know each other... helps with that safe environment and communication.”

Flexibility was another key factor, with participants adopting practices such as fortnightly rotas, “shift pick-up” systems, and, where feasible, hybrid working. However, balancing flexibility with operational needs remained challenging, particularly in a shift-based industry. Pay and benefits were acknowledged as important but no longer the sole retention driver. Managers noted that younger staff often prioritise work–life balance, growth opportunities, and a positive organisational culture over salary alone. Tailored benefits, easily accessible via digital platforms, were seen by GenZ participants as increasing uptake: “If I really want to progress, I also expect my salary increase in some different levels” (FP5).

Finally, continuous communication and feedback were identified as vital for engagement. Many organisations moved from annual appraisals to ongoing feedback, often supported by digital platforms that allowed managers to check in regularly and address issues quickly. P16 described using apps to gather simple, frequent employee satisfaction ratings and to centralise communication: “if they want to request holiday or message their boss, they would do it through one app”.

These findings align with both academic literature (Christensen Hughes and Rog, 2008; Goh and Okumus, 2020) and industry reports (Deloitte, 2025, GrantThornton, 2025, Indeed, 2025), which emphasise the importance of holistic, flexible, and value-driven approaches to employee retention in hospitality.

Gen Z's distinctive work values and behaviours

Both senior managers and GenZ employees observed that GenZ exhibits characteristics that differ markedly from those of older generations, including Millennials.

A recurring theme in the discussion of GenZ characteristics was their distinct communication style and interpersonal skills. Participants consistently observed a preference among GenZ for digital, instant communication channels such as WhatsApp, group chats and social media, over traditional face-to-face or phone conversations. As P6 explained, while older generations “want to have a coffee and a face-to-face conversation,” GenZ tends to favour operating virtually. As FP3 reflected, being “chronically online” has left many in their generation more socially anxious and less confident in face-to-face interactions, making it harder to hold conversations, resolve issues directly, and demonstrate the human connection that lies at the core of hospitality.

In addition, P1 noted that this reliance on technology can create challenges in hospitality roles that require direct guest interaction, sometimes necessitating additional training to build confidence in verbal, in-person communication. Several managers, including P7 and P14, expressed frustration at situations where important matters, such as reporting sickness, were communicated via apps instead of a direct phone call, with P14 adding that face-to-face conversations “seem very scary to them.” At the same time, this comfort with technology offers advantages, as P5 highlighted that younger employees are the first to adopt new apps and digital tools. Interpersonal engagement in group settings can also be more difficult, with P10 describing GenZ as more introverted and less likely to speak up in large gatherings. However, P17 observed that “the new generation don’t talk to each other that much, but when they find someone who listens, they can be really open.”

Entitlement, unrealistic expectations, and mutual perceptions of disrespect between generations emerged in most discussion. Several senior managers expressed concern that some GenZ employees demonstrate a “what can the company do for me” mindset (P15) and are unwilling to go beyond contracted hours without additional incentives (P9, P15). P6 highlighted a lack of basic professional courtesy, such as not showing up for interviews without notice, while P7 contrasted younger staff taking days off when feeling unwell with older staff who “even if they are sick, they are coming to work.” P7 captured this mindset succinctly: “They think, ‘I’ve done the course, I know everything,’ but many haven’t worked a day in a hotel to understand what staff actually do... To be a great manager, you need to know everyone’s job.”

Younger employees described challenges in being taken seriously by older colleagues, with FP3 noting that delegating tasks to older staff can be intimidating, and FP2 adding that in some cases, “elders listen to the young people based on their experience, not the age,” but such reciprocity is not always present. FP5 further suggested that resentment from some older workers may stem from seeing younger colleagues achieve career milestones earlier than they did. These mutual perceptions reveal a generational divide that can affect collaboration, trust, and workplace harmony.

Shifting priorities and a perceived lack of loyalty emerged as recurring themes when discussing GenZ’s work ethic. Several senior managers noted that younger employees appear less willing to make personal sacrifices for work, often prioritising personal time and lifestyle over additional shifts. FP5 explained: “We’d rather take a holiday than an extra shift. It’s my time, and I can do what I want, older generations would just say they’ll come to work”. This sentiment was echoed by others who observed that GenZ’s approach often reflects a

different set of boundaries, where overtime or last-minute demands are weighed against personal well-being and social plans (P15).

Managers also highlighted a more transient attitude towards employment, with younger staff quick to leave roles without discussion if they are dissatisfied (P10, P15), and an overall decline in the sense of organisational loyalty seen in previous generations (P6). In some cases, this difference in attitude is compounded by variations in professional communication and service etiquette, requiring more training on workplace conduct and guest interaction (P1, P14). While some of these behaviours are interpreted as a weaker work ethic, others suggested they reflect a generational shift towards self-care, autonomy, and a redefinition of what constitutes a healthy work-life balance (P17).

Despite the criticisms, participants also highlighted several positive traits associated with GenZ employees, particularly their creativity, adaptability, and technological fluency. Managers observed that they bring “a lot of flair” (P1), are “quite creative” (P5), and frequently suggest innovative ways of doing things, often

leveraging new technologies to improve business performance. Their digital skills and ability to quickly access and process information were seen as a strong asset, with P16 noting that “they’re really smart... really tech savvy... they can easily compare 50 jobs at no time” a capability that also influences how organisations must present themselves to attract talent.

GenZ’s openness to change and willingness to embrace new systems (P12) can help challenge entrenched ways of working and encourage modernisation. From the perspective of GenZ employees themselves, FP5 described their “energy... to just be happy, work and achieve the things that we really want to do” alongside a mindset that “anything can change any time.” This adaptability is also reflected in their career approach, P10 explained: “GenZ doesn’t have any problem moving from one place to another...if they see career progression then they can stay a little bit longer”. Such flexibility and ambition, when effectively channelled, can inject dynamism and fresh perspectives into hospitality organisations. It is fitting to conclude with P6’s reminder about avoiding generational bias: “We’re all guilty of stereotyping differences, and there’s still much work to do in

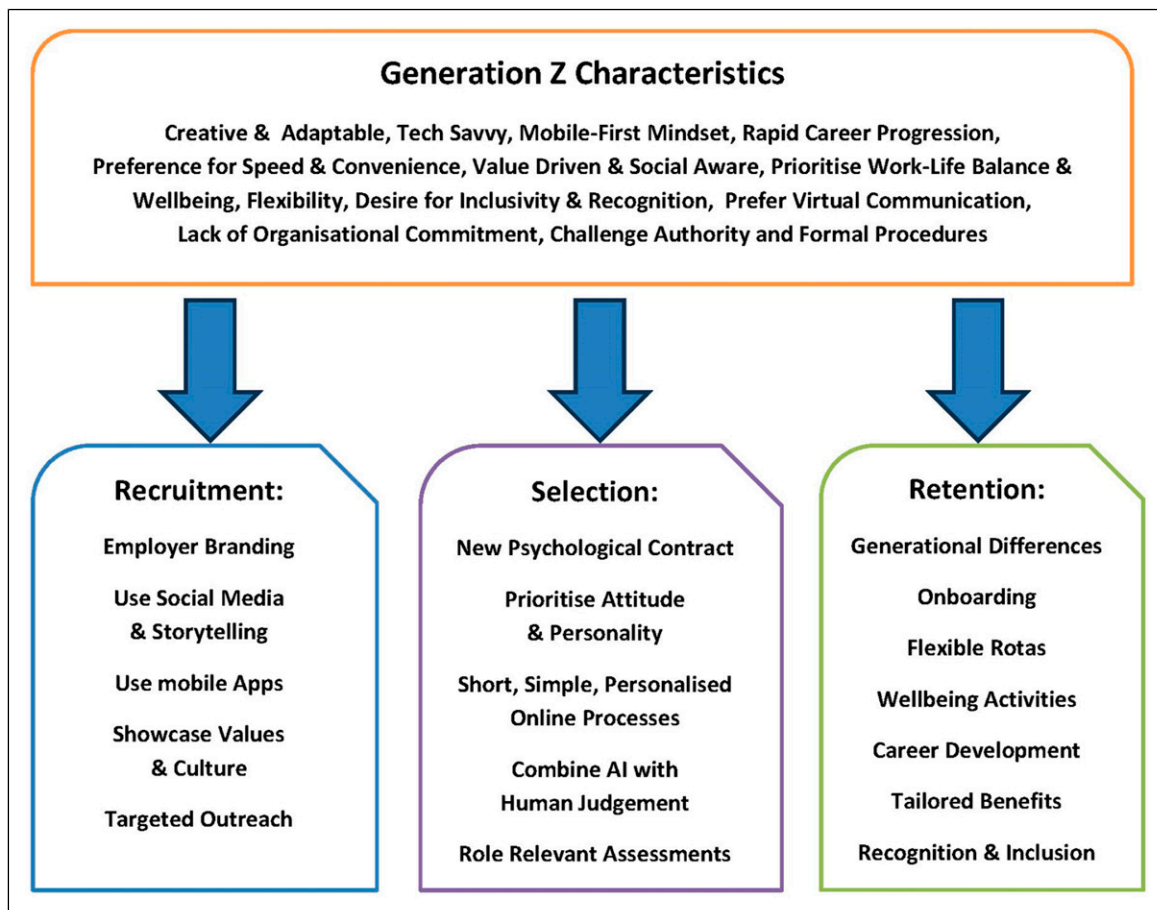


Figure 2. Impact of GenZ in recruitment, selection and retention (Source: Authors’ own).

bringing multigenerational teams together to understand and appreciate those differences.”

Overall, the findings portray Generation Z as value-driven employees who seek authenticity, fairness, and personal growth. Their approach to work reflects a wider societal shift toward autonomy and emotional well-being, values that are redefining professional norms not only within luxury hospitality but across the broader service industries. [Figure 2](#) summarises these key findings.

Discussion

Theoretical implications

This study examined how GenZ employees are transforming recruitment, selection, and retention in the UK luxury hotel sector. Rather than treating GenZ as a homogeneous cohort defined by birth years, the findings support [Mannheim’s \(1952\)](#) notion of generations as agents of social change who reshape institutional structures through evolving values and work orientations. In the context of hospitality, this generational renewal manifests as a redefinition of what constitutes meaningful work, acceptable career progression, and desirable employment relationships.

Participants described a generational shift from loyalty-based employment to career self-management and lifestyle alignment. This transformation challenges long-held assumptions within hospitality about commitment, hierarchy, and paying one’s dues ([Giousmpasoglou and Marinakou, 2024](#)). Managers are increasingly compelled to adapt HR systems, not merely to attract younger workers but to remain socially legitimate employers in an environment where authenticity, flexibility, and inclusivity have become baseline expectations ([Eshete and Birbirssa, 2024](#)). Thus, GenZ should not be viewed as a management problem to be solved, but as a catalyst prompting the luxury hotel sector to modernise its people practices and employment narratives.

Another central finding of this research is the increasing convergence of employer branding and the psychological contract. Employer reputation which is co-constructed through online reviews, social media, and peer networks, has become a key determinant of both application decisions and retention outcomes. GenZ employees interpret digital signals of authenticity, inclusivity, and work–life balance as indicators of organisational integrity. When these digital representations fail to match the lived employee experience, trust and commitment deteriorate rapidly. This extends [Backhaus and Tikoo’s \(2004\)](#) conceptualisation of employer branding as a unidirectional communication process, suggesting instead that branding now

functions as a bidirectional psychological contract mechanism. Through platforms such as Glassdoor or TikTok, current and former employees co-create the employer brand, rendering reputation management as an ongoing, participatory process. For HR leaders, maintaining congruence between digital narratives and workplace realities becomes an ethical and strategic imperative. The authenticity of this alignment determines whether GenZ perceives the organisation as credible and purpose-driven, a key antecedent of engagement and retention in this study.

Furthermore, the data reveal that recruitment and selection processes have become highly digitalised, reflecting GenZ’s fluency with mobile-first applications, one-click submissions, and chatbot-assisted communication. While these technologies improve efficiency and candidate reach, they also require hotels to refine their online EVPs messaging ([Lo et al., 2025](#)). Gen Z’s preference for fast, transparent, and interactive communication reflects a deeper demand for autonomy and immediacy in the employment relationship. This expectation aligns with [Horodyski’s \(2023\)](#) findings that automation in recruitment can enhance perceptions of procedural justice if accompanied by clarity and responsiveness.

However, managers in this study cautioned that over-automation risks depersonalisation, undermining hospitality’s core ethos of human connection. The challenge for luxury hotels lies in striking a balance between technological speed and relational warmth. In line with [Marinakou et al. \(2025\)](#), the study suggests that digital tools should augment, not replace, human judgment particularly in assessing emotional intelligence, attitude, and service orientation. These insights contribute to the broader HRM debate on standardisation versus personalisation ([Boxall and Purcell, 2022](#)). For GenZ, a personalised, seamless recruitment experience signals respect and value alignment. Organisations that manage to humanise technology through responsive communication, storytelling, and realistic job previews, are more likely to attract candidates who perceive the brand as progressive, yet people centred.

Retention emerged as a multidimensional construct shaped by GenZ’s distinctive career logic and attitude towards work. Participants described a generation that prioritises personal growth, work–life balance, and mental health over long-term organisational loyalty. These values are not indicative of disengagement but reflect a reconfigured psychological contract in which employees exchange short-term commitment for continuous learning, supportive leadership, and lifestyle compatibility ([Bulinska-Stangrecka and Naim, 2021](#); [Rousseau, 1998](#)). Managers in this study responded by developing structured onboarding, mentorship, and internal mobility programmes that accelerate career

progression while reinforcing belonging. Such initiatives signify the evolution from a relational contract (based on loyalty and tenure) to a balanced contract, grounded in reciprocity and development opportunities. This mirrors emerging evidence that sustainable employee retention depends less on financial incentives and more on a culture of care, flexibility, and inclusivity (Goh and Okumus, 2020). The findings also indicate that GenZ's focus on work-life balance challenges traditional hospitality scheduling models. Flexible rotas, mental health initiatives, and well-being events are no longer perceived as optional perks but as organisational responsibilities. In this sense, GenZ's expectations are reshaping managerial ethics: the duty of care now extends beyond physical safety to psychological and social well-being.

Synthesising the above themes, this study proposes a generational model of workforce transformation in luxury hospitality (Figure 3). The model conceptualises GenZ's impact along three interrelated dimensions:

HR Digital Mediation: the technological re-configuration of HRM processes and practices through social media, automation, and mobile-first interaction;

Value & Culture Reorientation: the shift from hierarchical to purpose-driven, inclusive organisational cultures;

Contractual Evolution: the transition from long-term loyalty to balanced, development-oriented psychological contracts.

Together, these forces redefine the social fabric of hospitality employment. By integrating generational

(i.e., Mannheim, 1952), employer branding (i.e., Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004), and psychological contract theories (i.e., Rousseau, 1995), the model extends current HRM debates beyond transactional management toward adaptive workforce ecosystems. It suggests that generational change is not episodic but continuous, each cohort requiring renewed dialogue between organisational structures and individual expectations. By framing GenZ as a transformative force rather than a workforce challenge, this study advances understanding of how generational dynamics shape strategic HRM in hospitality. GenZ's digital fluency, ethical awareness, and desire for autonomy are not disruptive outliers but indicators of a broader societal shift in how work is experienced and valued. For the UK luxury hotel sector, adapting to these expectations represents both a necessity and an opportunity to redesign people practices that are technologically enabled yet profoundly human.

Managerial implications

This study provides actionable insights for Human Resources and Talent Acquisition professionals in luxury hotels seeking to attract and retain GenZ talent more effectively. A strong and authentic employer brand has become essential in a highly competitive labour market. Luxury hotels should actively manage their online reputation by monitoring and responding to reviews on platforms such as Glassdoor and TripAdvisor, while sharing real employee stories and career journeys on social media. Digital storytelling should highlight inclusivity, purpose, and development, ensuring that external messages align with the internal employee experience.

Recruitment strategies must also reflect the digital behaviours of younger candidates. Mobile-first applications, instant messaging, and short-form video content are effective channels for reaching GenZ audiences, while partnerships with universities and community organisations can diversify the talent pipeline and reinforce social responsibility. Selection processes should prioritise attitude, cultural fit, and long-term potential over technical expertise. Behavioural interviews and scenario-based assessments can better evaluate service orientation, while workplace tours and realistic job previews foster emotional engagement. Although automation can streamline early screening, final decisions should remain human-centred, with managers focusing on empathy and interpersonal qualities that define luxury hospitality.

Retention requires aligning organisational practices with GenZ's desire for meaning, balance, and progression. Structured learning and leadership programmes, transparent career paths, and international mobility opportunities encourage loyalty and

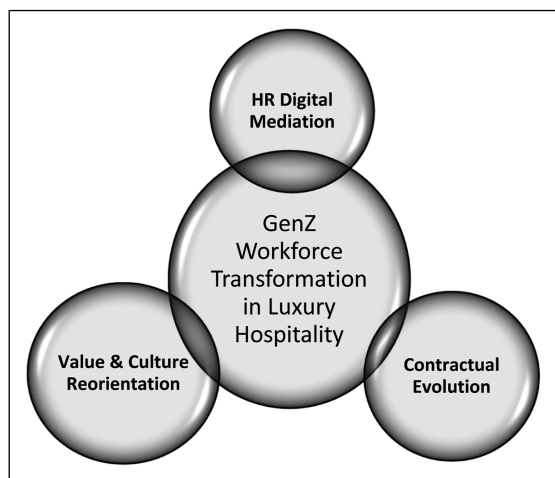


Figure 3. A generational model of workforce transformation in luxury hospitality (Source: Authors' own).

development. At the same time, well-being must be embedded into daily practice through flexible scheduling, mental health support, and inclusive management. Regular personalised recognition such as celebrating milestones or guest feedback, strengthens belonging and motivation.

These strategies also contribute to workforce sustainability and align with the UN Sustainable Development Goal 8 on Decent Work and Economic Growth. By fostering inclusive, developmental, and well-being-oriented workplaces, luxury hotels can move beyond transactional employment relationships toward more purposeful and equitable models of work. GenZ employees are not rejecting hospitality values but redefining them. Organisations that adapt HRM and employer-branding practices to these expectations without compromising service excellence, will be better positioned to attract, engage, and retain this new generation of professionals while building stronger, multigenerational teams.

Limitations and future research

This study is contextually embedded within the UK luxury hotel sector, which is characterised by specific institutional, cultural, and labour market conditions. These include post-Brexit labour constraints, a strong reliance on migrant labour, and a comparatively weak societal perception of hospitality careers. While these features provide a rich and critical context for examining generational workforce transformation, they may also limit the direct transferability of findings to other national settings with different institutional arrangements and cultural norms. At the same time, the UK context can be viewed as a critical case that amplifies broader structural challenges within the global hospitality industry. As such, the insights generated here may offer valuable theoretical and practical implications for other contexts facing similar workforce pressures, particularly in relation to labour shortages, employer branding challenges, and shifting employee expectations.

Future research would benefit from adopting cross-national and comparative designs to explore how these generational dynamics unfold across different cultural and institutional environments. Comparative studies between the UK and other European or international hospitality markets could enhance the generalisability of findings and provide deeper insight into the extent to which observed HRM transformations are context-specific or globally emergent.

Conclusion

This study has explored how GenZ is reshaping recruitment, selection, and retention in the UK luxury

hotel sector. By integrating generational theory, employer branding, and the psychological contract framework, it demonstrates that GenZ acts as a driver of organisational adaptation rather than a disruptive anomaly. Their digital competence, demand for transparency, and value-based approach to work compel luxury hotels to re-examine long-standing assumptions about loyalty, hierarchy, and career progression.

Conceptually, the research contributes to hospitality HRM scholarship by positioning generational change as a dynamic social process that transforms the employer–employee relationship. It extends employer-branding theory to include the co-creation of reputation through digital platforms and re-interprets the psychological contract as a balanced, development-oriented exchange rooted in authenticity and well-being.

Practically, hotel leaders should view workforce transformation as an opportunity to strengthen organisational culture. Authentic employer branding humanised digital recruitment, flexible scheduling, and sustained investment in learning and mental health emerged as critical levers for attracting and retaining young talent. Building intergenerational empathy within management teams will also mitigate bias and enhance collaboration.

Future research could examine how these generational shifts unfold across cultural contexts and over time, particularly as GenZ progresses into leadership roles and interacts with Generation Alpha. Longitudinal and cross-national investigations would deepen understanding of how the hospitality workforce continues to evolve in an increasingly digital and value-driven era.

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Ethical considerations

This study's procedures were approved by Bournemouth University's Research Ethics Committee (Ethics ID: 61486).

Consent to participate

Informed consent to participate was written.

Consent for publication

Informed consent for publication was provided by the participant(s).

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