



GENERATION Z EMPLOYEES' PERSPECTIVES
ON EMPLOYER BRANDING
IN HIGH-TECH SECTORS:
A Q-METHODOLOGY STUDY

Master Thesis

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Generation Z Employees' Perspectives on Employer Branding in High-Tech Sectors: A Q-Methodology Study

by

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Summary

This thesis investigates Generation Z's perceptions of employer branding in the high-tech sectors, where persistent talent shortages intensify competition for skilled professionals. Gen Z enters the workforce with distinct expectations regarding career growth, purpose, inclusion, and authenticity. While prior research highlights these themes, much of it relies on student samples and often portrays Gen Z as a homogeneous group. This study addresses these gaps by focusing on young professionals already employed in high-tech industries, examining how they interpret employer branding signals and form expectations of employers.

Using Q-methodology, 31 Gen Z employees in the Netherlands sorted statements based on the EmpAt model dimensions (development, social, economic, interest, and application value). Six distinct factors emerged, capturing diverse patterns of employer attractiveness. Across all six, participants consistently valued growth opportunities and transferable skills. Notably, participants who strongly loaded on a social value-centered factor all identified as male, an unexpected outcome. Nearly a quarter of the sample prioritized economic value, emphasizing financial stability and job security. Following the Q-sort, a post-survey asked participants whether and how they felt their workplace expectations had been met, providing further insight into how branding signals align with lived experiences.

These findings underscore that Gen Z is far from uniform in its workplace expectations. Rather than conforming to a single generational narrative, individuals construct personalized psychological contracts shaped by their values, experiences, and career priorities. The study also identifies a clear distinction between trusted signals (e.g., opportunities for development and empowerment) and distrusted signals (e.g., prestige claims, vague innovation narratives).

The thesis contributes theoretically by integrating the EmpAt framework with signaling and psychological contract perspectives, showing how employer branding cues shape perceptions of organizational attractiveness and fit. Practically, it demonstrates that one-size-fits-all employer branding strategies are insufficient. Employers seeking to attract and retain Gen Z talent must craft segmented, authentic messages that reflect generational diversity while ensuring alignment between external promises and internal practices.

Limitations include the small sample size (31 participants) and its restriction to the Netherlands, which constrains generalizability. The study also had limited demographic diversity: relatively few women participated, and few respondents were born after 2002, leaving the youngest segment of Gen Z underrepresented. Future research should test these insights in larger, more diverse, and cross-cultural samples, ideally using longitudinal and mixed-method designs to examine how expectations evolve across career stages.

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background and Context

Generation Z (Gen Z), born between 1996 and 2012, is reshaping workplace dynamics as it enters the global labor market in growing numbers. Representing 22% of the world's population and about 27% of the workforce (McCrandle, 2023), this cohort brings distinct expectations and values that challenge traditional employer–employee relationships. Gen Z is the first generation to grow up fully immersed in digital technologies and constant connectivity. They are not only the most digitally native but also the most racially and ethnically diverse generation to date (Pew Research Center, 2018). In the United States, nearly half identify as racial or ethnic minorities, underscoring the increasing importance of diversity, equity, and inclusion in workplace practices (Deloitte, 2024).

Unlike older cohorts who emphasized stability and linear career paths, Gen Z evaluates potential employers through the lens of identity and value alignment. Flexibility, technological integration, and meaningful work consistently emerge as top priorities (Deloitte, 2024). Beyond salary and benefits, they pay close attention to organizational ethics, sustainability, and diversity commitments. Employment decisions are therefore closely tied to personal purpose and values.

Gen Z also navigates the labor market with heightened scrutiny. Raised in a transparent digital environment, they assess employers much like consumer brands. Corporate claims about inclusivity or innovation are rarely accepted at face value. Instead, they rely on peer-to-peer channels, such as Glassdoor, LinkedIn, and social media, to verify authenticity. Reviews and authentic employee storytelling increasingly influence perceptions of organizational credibility. As a result, employer branding has become co-created rather than top-down: organizations cannot fully control their image but must manage it through lived employee experiences.

1.1.1 Talent Shortages in High-Tech Industries

The rise of Gen Z coincides with a severe talent shortage in high-tech and engineering sectors. In Europe, and particularly in the Netherlands, demand for STEM professionals has outpaced supply, threatening innovation and competitiveness. The Netherlands plays a central role in global semiconductor production, microchip design, and advanced manufacturing, yet firms face increasing challenges in attracting and retaining skilled talent (Bart, 2024). To address this, the Dutch government has invested in education pipelines and reskilling initiatives across key regions.

Talent shortages extend beyond semiconductors. Energy, IT, and sustainability-related engineering sectors also struggle to recruit, particularly as the low-carbon transition drives

demand for green skills (IMF European Department, 2024). Employers across these industries compete for a limited pool of professionals, heightening the need to differentiate themselves in ways that resonate with Gen Z.

In this context, employer branding has evolved from a marketing accessory to a strategic necessity. Compensation alone no longer suffices; organizations must design compelling employer value propositions (EVPs) that emphasize career development, meaningful impact, and authentic values. High-tech firms in particular face the dual challenge of signaling cutting-edge innovation while fostering inclusive, flexible, and supportive workplaces.

1.1.2 Generation Z's Expectations and Workplace Tensions

Understanding Gen Z's expectations is critical in industries where competition for talent is intense. Research highlights consistent preferences: flexibility in work arrangements, rapid career growth, and alignment with personal values (Deloitte, 2024; Ali et al., 2024). Gen Z expects continuous learning opportunities, early responsibility, and structured feedback.

Yet their transition from education to work is not always seamless. Employers frequently note a perceived skills gap, particularly around interpersonal competencies such as communication, teamwork, and professionalism. A survey of 1,344 managers (ResumeBuilder.com, 2023) reported that 74% considered Gen Z harder to work with than older cohorts, citing challenges with adaptability.

However, such criticisms often overlook generational shifts. Gen Z is less deferential to hierarchy, more likely to question authority, and quick to verify organizational claims. They also emphasize mental health, work-life balance, and boundary-setting, challenging traditional expectations of loyalty and “always-on” availability. In some cases, this has fueled “revenge quitting” (Travers, 2025), where employees exit misaligned roles as a form of agency and self-protection.

These dynamics highlight a central tension: while Gen Z is ambitious and eager to contribute, they also expect reciprocal investment in authentic development opportunities, purpose-driven work, and transparent leadership. Organizations that fail to meet these expectations risk disengagement and higher turnover, particularly in industries already constrained by talent scarcity.

1.2 Problem Statement

Despite receiving growing attention in both research and practice, it remains unclear how Gen Z employees evaluate and prioritize different aspects of what employers offer, and whether these expectations are reflected in their workplace experiences. The challenge is not only to identify

what Gen Z finds most important, but also to understand how they judge the alignment between organizational claims, such as opportunities for growth, inclusivity, and purpose, and everyday reality. When such alignment is lacking, trust and commitment can weaken, increasing turnover intention. Much of the existing research is based on surveys of students or early-career professionals in general sectors, leaving limited insight into how Gen Z in high-tech industries rank employer branding attributes and assess their consistency with lived experiences.

1.3 Research Objective

This study aims to identify the shared perspectives held by Generation Z employees in the high-tech sector regarding what makes an employer attractive and how these expectations correspond with their workplace reality. It examines how Gen Z employees prioritize different employer branding attributes, the combinations they find most compelling, and the extent to which their lived experiences align with these expectations. By uncovering both priorities and perceived alignment, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of Gen Z's evaluations of employer attractiveness in a talent-scarce industry context

1.4 Research Questions

Perceptions of employer attractiveness often shape the expectations that candidates bring into their roles. This study investigates both what Gen Z professionals in the high-tech sector find attractive in an employer and how these impressions align with their workplace experiences.

Main Research Question:

What shared perspectives do Gen Z high-tech sector employees hold regarding what makes an employer attractive?

Sub-questions:

Which employer branding attributes are most influential in shaping these shared perspectives?

How do the perspectives uncovered relate to existing insights from the employer branding and Gen Z literature?

How do the perspectives uncovered correspond with participants' background characteristics?

1.5 Research Relevance

The convergence of these dynamics represents a pressing social problem. On the one hand, high-tech and engineering sectors face acute talent shortages that threaten innovation and economic

competitiveness. On the other, Gen Z, now entering the workforce in large numbers, expects authenticity, value alignment, and meaningful opportunities. When employer branding does not meet these expectations, or when signals are misinterpreted, organizations risk disengagement, reputational decline, and increased turnover. For industries that are central to digitalization and the green transition, failure to attract and retain Gen Z talent has consequences that extend beyond individual companies, affecting broader societal and economic progress.

While existing studies have identified Gen Z's workplace preferences, much of this research relies on survey data from students or early-career professionals across general sectors, often overlooking how these preferences are shaped by real or anticipated workplace dynamics in high-tech industries.

1.6 Research Approach

To address this gap, this study applies Q-methodology to explore how Gen Z employees interpret and prioritize employer branding signals in high-tech contexts. This method is particularly suited for capturing subjective viewpoints and revealing shared perspectives, offering insight into how authenticity, value alignment, and branding-practice consistency influence perceptions of employer attractiveness and retention.

1.7 Report Structure

This thesis is organized into six main chapters, followed by references and appendices.

Chapter 1 introduces the research problem, outlines the objectives, and presents the guiding research questions.

Chapter 2 provides a comprehensive literature review, drawing on generational cohort theory, the resource-based view, signaling theory, psychological contract theory, and the EmpAt model to establish the theoretical foundation.

Chapter 3 explains the methodology, focusing on the use of Q-methodology, the development of the statement set, and the data collection process.

Chapter 4 presents the findings, describing the six factors that capture distinct Gen Z perspectives on employer attractiveness.

Chapter 5 discusses these findings in relation to existing literature, highlighting both theoretical contributions and practical implications.

Chapter 6 concludes the thesis by summarizing the key insights, reflecting on their broader significance, and pointing to avenues for future research.

2 Literature Review

This chapter provides the theoretical foundations for understanding how Generation Z perceives employer attractiveness in the context of high-tech industries. Drawing on Generational Cohort Theory and the Resource-Based View (RBV) as broad contextual lenses, the review positions employer branding as the central concept for linking organizational strategy with generational expectations. To analyze how employer branding operates in this context, the chapter applies two main theoretical perspectives: Signaling Theory, which explains how branding messages shape perceptions, and Psychological Contract Theory, which explores how such messages form expectations of the employment relationship. In addition, the EmpAt model is used to structure the dimensions of employer attractiveness and to review prior studies that have employed this framework.

2.1 Generational Cohort Theory

Generational Cohort Theory, first articulated by Mannheim (1952) suggests that individuals born in the same historical period share certain values, attitudes, and behaviors shaped by the social, cultural, and economic events of their formative years. These shared experiences create a generational “value profile” that influences how people approach work. More recent scholarship applies this framework to workplace settings, emphasizing how Generation Z’s formative experiences influence their expectations as employees (Okros, 2020).

Generation Z, typically defined as those born between the mid-1990s and early 2010s, came of age in a context of digitalization, social media, economic uncertainty, and heightened awareness of climate change, diversity, and mental health. As a result, they are often characterized by a stronger emphasis on authenticity, flexibility, well-being, and purpose-driven work compared to older cohorts.

This perspective does not imply homogeneity, differences exist within every generation, but it provides a useful lens for understanding common expectations that distinguish Gen Z from other cohorts. For employer branding research, generational cohort theory highlights why this group may evaluate organizational signals differently and place distinctive weight on aspects such as values, development opportunities, and social legitimacy.

2.2 Resource-Based View (RBV)

The Resource-Based View (RBV) provides a strategic rationale for employer branding by framing talent as a critical resource. According to RBV, firms achieve sustained competitive advantage when they possess resources that are valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (Barney, 2001). While early applications emphasized physical or financial assets, later work highlighted the strategic value of human capital, employees’ skills, knowledge, and commitment, as a resource that competitors cannot easily replicate.

Employer branding contributes to this advantage by shaping how organizations attract, engage, and retain talent. A credible and appealing employer brand not only increases the quality of applicants but also fosters engagement and retention among existing employees (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). This is particularly relevant in high-tech industries, where innovation depends on scarce, specialized talent and where organizational success is tied to sustaining an engaged and loyal workforce.

Thus, RBV explains why employer branding matters at the organizational level: it positions talent as a strategic resource whose attraction and retention can generate lasting competitive advantage. When employees leave, organizations risk losing not only capacity but also tacit knowledge that is difficult to replace, compounding the strategic importance of employer branding.

2.3 Employer Branding Foundations

Employer branding has become a central theme in organizational strategy and human resource management over the past three decades. In competitive labor markets, particularly in high-tech industries, an organization's ability to attract and retain talent increasingly depends not only on compensation or career opportunities but also on how it is perceived as a place to work. Employer branding captures these perceptions by framing employment itself as a value proposition that can be communicated, marketed, and differentiated in much the same way as consumer products.

The concept was first formalized by Ambler and Barrow (1996), who defined the employer brand as "the package of functional, economic, and psychological benefits provided by employment and identified with the employing company." This formulation, adapted from consumer brand theory (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993), established the idea that the employment relationship includes both tangible and intangible benefits that influence how people evaluate potential employers. Together, these benefits form the employer value proposition (EVP), the implicit "deal" between employer and employee that outlines what the organization provides in exchange for talent, commitment, and performance.

Over time, the scope of employer branding has expanded. Early work focused mainly on recruitment and differentiation in crowded labor markets, but subsequent scholarship has emphasized its dual relevance for both external attraction and internal engagement. Employer branding is generally defined as a firm's deliberate efforts to influence how it is perceived as a workplace, among both potential applicants and current employees (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Moroko & Uncles, 2008). It is not merely a marketing exercise but a strategic process that integrates organizational behavior, communication, and identity management.

2.3.1 Fragility of Employer Brand Equity

Research highlights four interrelated functions of employer branding. First, it acts as a signal to job seekers about organizational attributes such as culture, values, or development opportunities

(Cable & Turban, 2001). Second, it shapes the psychological contract by establishing expectations even before an employment relationship formally begins (Rousseau, 1995). Third, it supports organizational identity, allowing employees to derive pride and meaning from their affiliation with the company (Edwards, 2009). Finally, consistency in employer branding has been linked to positive outcomes such as stronger commitment, reduced turnover, and improved performance (Lievens & Slaughter, 2016). Together, these functions show that employer branding is not only about attracting new hires but also about sustaining long-term relationships with employees.

Despite its potential, employer brand equity is fragile. Candidates and employees no longer passively consume organizational messaging; instead, they verify claims through external sources such as online reviews and peer networks. Platforms like Glassdoor amplify unfiltered voices, shifting reputational control away from organizations.

This heightened transparency places a premium on authenticity. Brand promises of innovation, inclusivity, or purpose quickly lose credibility if they are not substantiated internally. When expectations are unmet, trust erodes and attractiveness declines; when communication and practice align, credibility strengthens both recruitment and retention.

In today's digital environment, authenticity is tested continuously, through onboarding, leadership behavior, and everyday employee experience. Failures in these touchpoints are rapidly exposed and widely shared, making consistency between external messaging and internal reality central to sustaining employer brand equity.

2.3.2 Employer Branding and Generational Shifts

The relevance of employer branding has grown further with the entry of younger generations into the workforce. Generation Z, in particular, approaches employment through the lens of value alignment and purpose. Having grown up in an era of digital transparency and heightened concern for sustainability and diversity, they scrutinize employer claims more critically than previous cohorts. For this group, employer brand signals extend beyond salary or promotion prospects to include organizational ethics and social legitimacy (Deloitte, 2024).

Such scrutiny magnifies the consequences of inconsistency between communicated values and lived experience. Organizations that emphasize inclusivity or innovation but fail to demonstrate them in practice risk reputational harm and disengagement. At the same time, misalignment can be mutual: Schroth (2019) argues that some members of Gen Z enter the workforce with expectations for rapid progression and immediate impact, which can prove difficult to realize in practice, leading to frustration and higher turnover.

Moreover, Gen Z is not a monolithic group. Lašáková (2023) found that women in this cohort tend to prioritize stability and inclusivity, while men emphasize autonomy and advancement. This underscores the need for nuanced employer branding strategies that account for subgroup-specific preferences rather than treating generational cohorts as homogeneous.

Finally, social media amplifies these dynamics by providing platforms where employees and candidates co-construct employer brands. Peer-generated content, such as “day-in-the-life” videos, testimonials, or viral critiques, often resonates more strongly than official campaigns, further reducing organizational control over reputation.

2.3.3 Employer Branding Practices

Employer branding is not only a theoretical construct but also a set of practices that determine how organizations are experienced by employees and perceived by potential candidates. These practices unfold along two interconnected dimensions: internally, through organizational culture and the lived employee experience, and externally, through communication with the broader labor market. The credibility of an employer brand ultimately depends on the degree of alignment between these dimensions.

2.3.3.1 Internal Components

Internal employer branding practices are the mechanisms through which organizations translate their brand promise into reality for employees. They include onboarding, leadership behavior, employee development, well-being initiatives, diversity policies, and internal communication systems, each shaping how employees interpret organizational values and identity.

Onboarding and cultural socialization are among the earliest and most decisive touchpoints. Employees form initial impressions of whether the organization lives up to its recruitment promises. Structured onboarding that integrates mentoring, storytelling, and value-based messaging reinforces belonging and commitment (Süveges & Kurucz, 2024). In contrast, poorly designed onboarding, or contradictory signals, such as promising autonomy but enforcing rigid controls, can cause early dissonance that weakens trust and increases turnover risk (Schroth, 2019).

Leadership behavior also plays a critical role. Leaders act as brand ambassadors through their communication, decisions, and everyday conduct. When leadership visibly embodies organizational values such as inclusion, innovation, or transparency, they validate external branding claims and strengthen credibility (Burmann & Zeplin, 2005). Conversely, leadership hypocrisy, promoting flexibility while penalizing remote work, for example, undermines authenticity and damages both internal trust and external reputation.

Employee development is frequently positioned at the heart of the EVP, yet it is also one of the most scrutinized areas by younger workers. Promises of growth, learning, and mobility require concrete initiatives such as mentorship programs, training opportunities, and recognition systems. Ali et al. (2024) show that developmental HRM practices are decisive in retaining Gen Z employees in China, as unmet expectations of growth often lead to rapid turnover. While their findings highlight the importance of tangible developmental pathways, their national context suggests some caution when applying them to European high-tech sectors. Similarly, Goštaitaitė et al. (2023), studying medical professionals, demonstrate that opportunities for development

reduce the risk of self-initiated expatriation. Though from a different industry, their results reinforce the broader point that career opportunities serve not only to attract young professionals but also to prevent talent drain. Taken together, these studies indicate that employee development is more than an HR function: it is a credibility test for employer branding.

Well-being, diversity, and flexibility policies further illustrate how branding promises are interpreted in practice. For younger generations, especially Gen Z, these initiatives are central indicators of whether employers genuinely prioritize people. Communicating commitments to inclusion, work-life balance, or psychological safety without embedding them into practice fosters disillusionment. For instance, a “people-first” culture that coexists with inequitable workloads or underdeveloped diversity policies risks being dismissed as symbolic rather than substantive.

Finally, internal communication systems connect organizational strategy with day-to-day employee experience. Transparent, consistent communication enables employees to understand how their roles contribute to broader goals, reinforcing trust and belonging. In hybrid and digital workplaces, where employees depend heavily on mediated communication, this consistency becomes especially critical. Fragmented or contradictory messaging not only erodes satisfaction but also exposes organizations to reputational risks when discrepancies are publicly voiced.

2.3.3.2 External Components

Taken together, internal practices determine whether employer branding signals hold weight. They move employer branding beyond symbolic marketing by grounding it in everyday experience. However, evidence across industries also suggests that while strong internal practices reinforce credibility, gaps between promise and delivery quickly undermine both attraction and retention. For organizations in talent-scarce sectors, this underscores the need to treat internal practices not merely as HRM activities, but as central to sustaining an authentic and competitive employer brand.

External employer branding practices encompass the signals organizations send to potential talent and the wider labor market. These include recruitment marketing, social media activity, corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives, employer review platforms, employer awards, and public relations campaigns. The aim is to articulate a compelling EVP that resonates with target audiences, particularly critical in industries where specialized talent is scarce.

Recruitment marketing often provides candidates’ first exposure to an employer brand. Campaigns typically highlight culture, growth opportunities, benefits, and purpose. Lievens and Slaughter (2016) note that symbolic attributes such as innovation, prestige, and social impact frequently carry more weight than purely instrumental benefits like salary or location, provided they are communicated authentically and supported by evidence.

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has become a powerful branding signal. Sustainability initiatives, ethical labor practices, or community engagement strengthen employer identity (Kim

et al., 2010). Gen Z in particular seeks employers whose social performance aligns with their values (Deloitte, 2024). However, CSR communication must be genuine. Superficial or opportunistic efforts, often termed “woke-washing,” can backfire when stakeholders perceive a gap between message and reality (Fernando & Lawrence, 2014).

Employer awards, such as “Top Employer or Employer of the Year”, also function as external endorsements that can increase attractiveness and expand applicant pools. Überschaer and Baum (2019) caution, however, that these awards may act as heuristic cues, drawing in larger numbers of applicants while reducing careful self-selection. This can result in a broader but less suitable candidate pool, making awards a double-edged sword that requires careful management.

Social media has reshaped employer branding by shifting influence toward peer-generated content. Platforms like Instagram, and TikTok provide unfiltered views of organizational culture. Employee testimonials, day-in-the-life videos, and organic team content often resonate more strongly than corporate campaigns. Employer review platforms such as Glassdoor and Indeed further strengthen candidate reliance on peer accounts (Dabirian et al., 2016). Organizations can no longer fully control their reputations; instead, they must engage constructively with reviews, respond transparently to criticism, and demonstrate improvement. Even negative reviews, when handled well, can enhance credibility by signaling openness and accountability.

Brand activism, where organizations publicly take stances on social or political issues, has also emerged as a differentiator. For values-driven candidates, such activism reinforces employer attractiveness. Yet risks are high: if activism is unsupported by consistent policies, organizations risk being perceived as opportunistic, damaging trust (Vredenburg et al., 2020). External branding must therefore be anchored in genuine commitments.

The interplay between internal and external practices underscores the importance of alignment. Strong campaigns may attract candidates in the short term, but if internal practices fail to deliver, disengagement and reputational decline follow. Conversely, when culture and communication reinforce one another, organizations build resilient employer brands that attract, engage, and retain talent.

The examination of internal and external practices shows how employer branding is enacted in organizations. To deepen this understanding, the next sections turn to the theoretical perspectives and frameworks that explain how such practices are interpreted and how employer attractiveness can be assessed.

Because job seekers cannot directly observe organizational realities, they rely on signals embedded in these practices to form judgments about potential employers. Signaling Theory therefore provides the first lens for examining how employer branding messages are communicated and interpreted.

2.4 Signaling Theory

Signaling Theory, first introduced by Michael Spence (1973), originates in labor economics and was initially developed to explain how job applicants convey their potential value to employers in the presence of information asymmetry. In these scenarios, one party (e.g., an employer) cannot directly observe another party's (e.g., a job applicant's) true characteristics, such as competence, motivation, or reliability. To overcome this uncertainty, individuals use observable signals, like educational credentials or previous job experience, to indicate their unobservable traits. Over time, this theory has been extended beyond individual actors to organizations, where it helps explain how firms use various communication strategies to convey their own qualities and intentions to external audiences.

In the context of employer branding, signaling theory has been adapted to examine how organizations attempt to shape perceptions through the deliberate dissemination of messages. These messages, ranging from corporate websites and recruitment campaigns to public mission statements and branded social media content, are designed to signal desirable attributes such as innovation, inclusivity, flexibility, and ethical integrity (Cable & Turban, 2004; Connelly et al., 2010). These are referred to as intentional signals, and they are typically constructed to attract talent and differentiate the employer in a competitive labor market. At the same time, unintentional signals, such as reviews on Glassdoor, reports of employee treatment, or observable internal behaviors, can either reinforce or undermine these carefully crafted images.

The effectiveness of these signals depends not only on their content but also on their credibility, clarity, and consistency. Signals that are vague, overly polished, or perceived as insincere can lead to skepticism and distrust. Connelly et al. (2010) argue that recipients assess signal strength based on both the signaler's perceived honesty and the observable alignment between the message and reality. If inconsistencies emerge, such as public claims of diversity that are not supported by leadership representation, then the signals lose persuasive power. This issue is particularly acute in cases where job candidates or employees lack direct access to verify organizational realities and must rely solely on external messaging.

Employer branding, therefore, becomes a form of strategic signaling that is not just about visibility, but about managing perception under conditions of information asymmetry. Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) frame employer branding as a long-term investment in shaping the organization's image in the eyes of both current and potential employees. The brand promise, as communicated through employer branding channels, sets expectations about what it means to work for the organization. This includes both tangible aspects (e.g., salary, benefits, office amenities) and intangible ones (e.g., mission, culture, sense of purpose).

Moreover, the signaling process plays a particularly important role in industries with high competition for talent, such as engineering, IT, and other high-tech sectors. In these environments, where potential recruits are often highly skilled but have limited inside access to company realities, the signals transmitted through external branding take on greater importance.

Strong, consistent signaling not only attracts candidates but also shapes the initial psychological frameworks with which they evaluate the organization, even before formal employment begins.

2.5 Psychological Contract Theory

Psychological Contract Theory, introduced by Rousseau (1989), refers to the set of unwritten, subjective beliefs that individuals hold regarding the mutual obligations between themselves and their employer. Unlike formal contracts, which define legally enforceable terms of employment, psychological contracts are formed through implicit understandings and perceived promises that emerge through recruitment messaging, onboarding experiences, informal conversations, and everyday interactions. These perceived obligations may include expectations about job security, career progression, support, feedback, fairness, or organizational values. The psychological contract thus plays a central role in shaping an employee's attitude, engagement, and behavior at work.

Historically, psychological contracts have been categorized into two broad types: relational contracts and transactional contracts. Relational contracts are long-term, emotionally grounded, and based on mutual trust and loyalty. These contracts often include expectations of job stability, development, and employer care for the employee's well-being. In contrast, transactional contracts are short-term, calculative, and primarily focused on economic exchange, such as payment for services rendered, without deeper emotional involvement or long-term commitments. Over time, especially in dynamic labor markets, the psychological contract has evolved beyond this binary distinction. Alcover et al. (2016) propose a balanced contract as a more contemporary model, which includes both developmental and reciprocal elements, allowing for mutual investment in learning, flexibility, and performance in exchange for career opportunities and autonomy.

The formation of psychological contracts begins well before employment officially starts. Employer branding, through recruitment advertisements, websites, mission statements, or social responsibility messaging, plays a foundational role in shaping the expectations that job seekers develop about what it will be like to work in a given organization. These brand messages often serve as informal promises. For example, when an organization promotes itself as a place that values diversity, offers mentorship, or supports well-being, candidates may incorporate these claims into their psychological contracts. If the reality fails to match these expectations, the individual may perceive that a promise has been broken.

This phenomenon is referred to as psychological contract breach, which occurs when employees believe that the organization has failed to fulfill one or more of the obligations they expected based on the relationship. According to Morrison and Robinson (1997), breaches of the psychological contract can evoke strong emotional responses, including betrayal, disappointment, or anger. These feelings are not merely emotional reactions, they can result in tangible outcomes such as reduced job satisfaction, lower engagement, withdrawal behaviors, and increased turnover intention.

The risk of contract breach is particularly high in environments where employer branding is heavily emphasized, especially when the external messaging paints an idealized picture of the workplace. In such cases, even small misalignments between promise and practice may feel amplified, as they challenge the employee's belief in the employer's credibility and integrity. This makes the accuracy of branding communications a central issue. As organizations increasingly use branding to attract talent, especially in competitive sectors, the need for truthful and internally aligned messaging becomes a matter not only of reputation but also of psychological contract maintenance.

Therefore, Psychological Contract Theory provides a critical lens for examining how employer branding messages become internalized expectations, and how the (mis)alignment between message and experience can influence employee attitudes and behaviors over time.

2.6 Employer Attractiveness (EmpAt) Model

The Employer Attractiveness (EmpAt) Model, introduced by Berthon, Ewing, and Hah (2005), provides a structured framework for understanding what makes an organization appealing to potential and current employees. The model identifies five core dimensions of attractiveness that contribute to how individuals perceive the desirability of an employer. These dimensions include Interest Value, Social Value, Economic Value, Development Value, and Application Value. The EmpAt model has become a widely used conceptual tool in employer branding research and practice, offering a holistic view of organizational appeal beyond monetary compensation.

Interest Value refers to the degree to which an organization is seen as offering a stimulating work environment, innovative projects, and a culture of creativity. This dimension emphasizes the intrinsic satisfaction derived from engaging in challenging and meaningful work. It reflects how employees evaluate the organization's ability to provide professional excitement and personal enrichment.

Social Value encompasses the interpersonal and relational aspects of the workplace. It includes factors such as collegiality, inclusion, teamwork, and a supportive culture. Organizations that are perceived to promote positive social interactions, diversity, and a sense of belonging tend to score highly on this dimension. The internal atmosphere and quality of workplace relationships are central here.

Economic Value captures traditional incentives such as salary, job security, financial benefits, and performance-related rewards. While monetary compensation is not the sole determinant of employer attractiveness, it remains an important and foundational factor for many job seekers. This dimension represents the more transactional side of the employment relationship.

Development Value refers to opportunities for personal and professional growth. It includes training programs, mentorship, performance feedback, and career advancement pathways. Employers that invest in employee development tend to be perceived as long-term partners in their employees' career journeys, enhancing both retention and motivation.

Application Value relates to the opportunity for employees to apply their knowledge, skills, and values in a meaningful way. It reflects the perception that one's work contributes to something valuable or impactful. This includes the alignment between personal identity and organizational mission, as well as the ability to make a tangible difference through one's role.

Each of these five dimensions captures a different aspect of what people consider when evaluating an employer. Collectively, they provide a multidimensional understanding of organizational attractiveness that goes beyond superficial branding or reputational cues. The EmpAt model has been employed in a variety of industries and cultural contexts and has been validated through both qualitative and quantitative research. It is particularly useful for developing measurement instruments, including surveys that aim to explore how individuals prioritize different workplace values.

EmpAt model allows the assessment of employer branding that is both comprehensive and balanced. Rather than focusing solely on prestige or compensation, the model encourages attention to interpersonal, developmental, and value-driven elements that are increasingly significant in competitive labor markets. As such, the EmpAt framework plays a central role in aligning branding strategies with the diverse preferences and expectations of modern employees.

2.6.1 Generational Preferences and EmpAt Scale

While generational cohort theory suggests that different age groups hold distinct workplace values, some research calls this assumption into question. According to Krommendijk (2020), who applied the EmpAt framework to a Dutch sample of community college employees, there was little variation across generations in how employer attractiveness dimensions were ranked. The only significant difference found was that Millennials rated Development Value slightly higher than Baby Boomers. Other dimensions, such as Economic, Social, and Application Value, did not differ meaningfully across cohorts. This study suggests that organizational context, sector, or national culture may influence employee preferences just as much, if not more, than generational identity.

However, contrasting findings emerge from other international studies. Reis and Braga (2016), studying 937 professionals in Brazil, found clear generational differences using the same EmpAt model. Baby Boomers prioritized Interest, Development, and Social Value, while Generation X placed equal weight on Development and Economic Value. Millennials stood out by ranking Economic Value highest, suggesting a stronger emphasis on financial stability and transactional rewards. Similarly, Hofer et al. (2024) surveyed 156 Gen Z IT students in Austria and found that workplace flexibility, work-life balance, and meaningful tasks were most important to them, indicating a preference for symbolic and purpose-driven attributes over traditional incentives.

These comparisons underline the importance of contextualizing generational patterns. While some local studies suggest minimal differences, broader or industry-specific research often

shows clear trends. Employer branding strategies should therefore combine generational insights with attention to sector and cultural context to avoid oversimplified assumptions.

The following table summarizes the generational preferences found in the Reis & Braga (2016) and Hofer et al. (2024) studies:

Generation	Top EmpAt Priorities
Baby Boomers	Interest, Development, Social > Economic, Application
Gen X	Development = Economic > Social & Interest > Application
Millennials	Economic > Development > Social > Interest > Application
Generation Z	Social & Application > Economic

Table 1. EmpAt Priorities Ranked by Different Generations

2.6.2 Theoretical Potential Respondent Profiles

To contextualize the factors identified in this study, five stylized respondent profiles are outlined below. These are theoretical profiles, not statistical generalizations, but they illustrate how Gen Z perspectives on employer attractiveness can be understood when interpreted through the EmpAt framework and existing literature. The profiles draw on insights from Reis & Braga (2016) and Hofer et al. (2024), with the former's Millennial findings adapted to reflect generational shifts toward authenticity, mental health awareness, and flexibility, as suggested by cohort theory. In addition, the Dutch start-up landscape, particularly the rise of green technology and AI-driven ventures, was considered as a contextual influence shaping these profiles.

The first profile centers primarily on *economic value*, representing individuals who prioritize salary, benefits, and financial security above other job attributes. Reis & Braga (2016) found Millennials to emphasize economic value, and it is reasonable to assume that some Gen Z professionals may share this orientation, especially in a high-cost, competitive labor market.

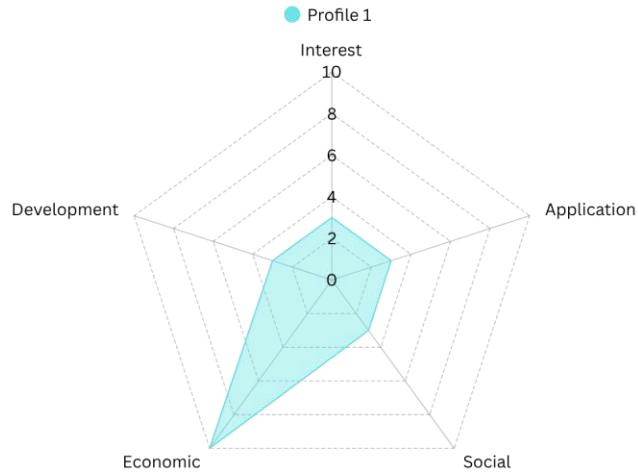


Figure 1. Respondent profile 1: Focused on Economic value.

Within the second profile, the emphasis is placed on *application value*, with respondents seeking autonomy, meaningful contributions, and personal impact. This profile often pairs application with secondary *interest* and *social* needs, reflecting individuals who want both independence and collaborative validation. It aligns with Dutch mid-sized or established firms, where technological application and structured implementation are emphasized.

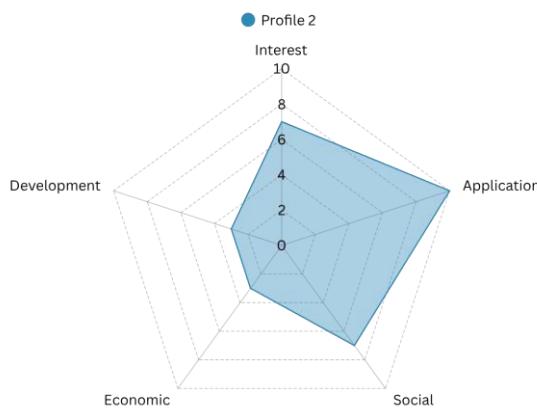


Figure 2. Respondent profile 2: Focused on Application, Interest, and Social values.

Profile number 3 combines *social* and *application value*, describing those who thrive in collaborative, supportive team environments and want their work to contribute to a larger purpose. Hofer et al. (2024) describe Gen Z as valuing both belonging and practical impact, which resonates strongly here. This perspective positions Gen Z less as individualistic job-hoppers and more as pragmatic team players.

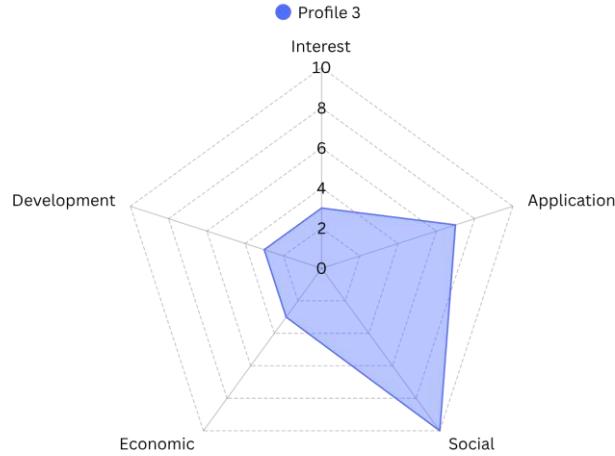


Figure 3. Respondent profile 3: Focused on Social and Application values.

The group 4 is motivated by *development value*, structured career growth, learning opportunities, and feedback, paired with secondary emphases on compensation and application relevance. While career progression was a central priority for Millennials, Gen Z may frame this less in terms of long-term loyalty and more in terms of continuous growth and mobility.

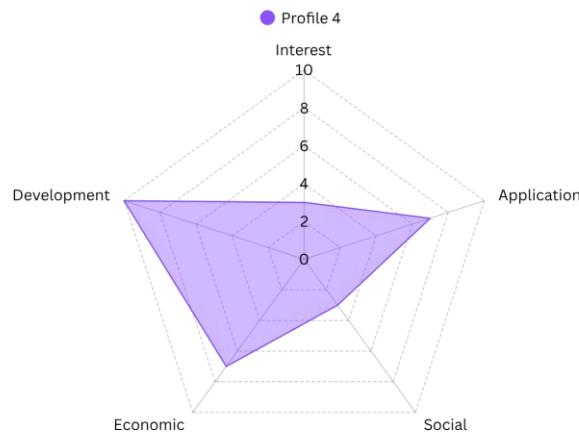


Figure 4. Respondent profile 4: Focused on Development, Economic, and Application values.

The final profile highlights *interest value*, representing those motivated by novelty, creativity, and opportunities to challenge the status quo. This often coexists with *application* and *social* considerations, reflecting individuals who seek innovation but also want to see their work applied in tangible ways and validated in a collaborative setting. Such profiles are especially characteristic of employees attracted to start-ups, where experimentation and new technologies (e.g., green or AI-based solutions) are central.

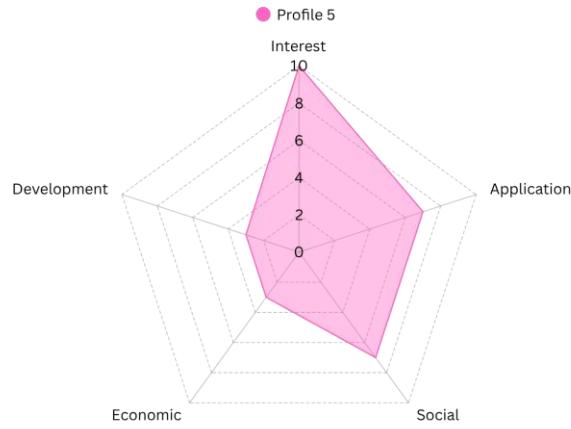


Figure 5. Respondent profile 5: Focused on Interest, Application, and Social values.

Together, these five profiles illustrate the multidimensional and context-dependent nature of Gen Z's expectations. They reflect a combination of intergenerational influences (e.g., overlap with Millennials, values transmitted from Gen X parents), organizational context (start-ups vs. established firms), and cohort-specific characteristics (social orientation and authenticity-seeking noted in Hofer, 2024). Rather than one unified "Gen Z profile," the findings suggest a spectrum of orientations toward employer attractiveness, shaped by both individual values and structural context.

3 Methodology

This study uses an exploratory research design based on Q-methodology to investigate how Generation Z employees in the high-tech sector perceive employer attractiveness, and to what extent they believe these expectations are met in practice. Q-methodology is a useful approach for studying people's personal opinions in a structured way. It combines elements of both qualitative and quantitative research, helping researchers uncover patterns in how different individuals think about a topic. In this study, participants are asked to sort a set of carefully developed statements (the Q-sample) reflecting different dimensions of employer attractiveness and organizational practices. The sorting process required participants to rank the statements along a continuum from least to most important or relevant, thereby producing a holistic snapshot of their viewpoint. By comparing these sorts across participants, Q-methodology makes it possible to identify clusters of shared perspectives on employer attractiveness and, in a second step, to explore whether participants perceive alignment or misalignment between employer branding signals and workplace realities.

The following sections outline the development of the Q-sample (statement selection), the criteria for participant selection (P-set), and the procedures for Q-sorting and data analysis.

3.1 Data Collection

The data collection process in this study follows a two-stage structure. The first stage involves the development of a concourse, a comprehensive collection of statements that reflect the range of viewpoints and language used in discussions of gen Z individuals when it comes to employer attractiveness. In the second stage, the finalized set of statements derived from the concourse is used to design a survey, which is then administered to the selected participant group.

3.1.1 Building the Survey

First, qualitative data are gathered to construct the concourse, which forms the foundation for the Q-sort statement set. The concourse for this study was created to reflect the widest possible range of views that Generation Z employees may hold about employer branding in high-tech and engineering sectors. Its structure was based on the five dimensions of the Employer Attractiveness (EmpAt) framework, Interest Value, Social Value, Economic Value, Development Value, and Application Value, to ensure that all major areas of employer attractiveness were covered. The initial concourse of 120 statements was built from several sources. Academic literature provided the theoretical basis, drawing on Signaling Theory, Psychological Contract Theory, to highlight ideas such as employer authenticity, transparency, and alignment between brand promises and workplace reality. Practitioner sources, including the Deloitte 2024 Gen Z and Millennial Survey, added recent findings on topics such as diversity, sustainability, work-life balance, and pay transparency.

The concourse development process also took into account current trends in young people's employment, as reported in recent surveys, professional network reports, and industry discussions. These included workplace behaviours such as quiet quitting, reducing work effort when expectations are not met, and public resignations, where employees make their departure visible to highlight dissatisfaction. Other themes were the growing awareness of burnout, stronger boundaries to prevent unpaid overtime and after-hours work, and a preference for genuine communication. Other issues were also noted, including the posting of non-genuine job advertisements, lack of follow-up with candidates after applications or interviews, overly long and demanding recruitment processes, and job offers that do not match the advertised terms. Shifts in career priorities were another trend, including the appeal of portfolio careers, leaving jobs quickly when they do not meet expectations, seeking climate-positive employers, and wanting more control over personal learning and development.

Although these trend-based ideas were useful for understanding the current employment context, they were not used as explicit statements in the final Q-set. This was because certain experiences, such as public resignations or encountering non-genuine job advertisements, would not apply to all participants, and including them could make the Q-sort less relevant for some respondents. Instead, the insights from these trends helped guide the wording and scope of the final statements, ensuring they remained clear, inclusive, and applicable to a wide range of participants.

Full list of the statements is in Appendix A. The final Q-set of 40 statements was created through a reduction process. First, duplicate or overlapping statements were removed. Multi-idea statements were rephrased. Each statement was reviewed to ensure clarity, neutrality, and accessibility for participants from different backgrounds. Equal coverage of the five EmpAt dimensions was maintained, and both positive and critical perspectives were kept so that different viewpoints could be expressed. The resulting Q-set is balanced, theoretically grounded, and relevant, designed to encourage a range of perspectives during the sorting exercise.

3.1.2 Conducting the Survey

Second, the structured Q-sort is administered among selected Gen Z participants using the EQ Web Sort platform created by Banasick (2024), an open-source tool designed for conducting Q-sorts digitally. Hosted via Netlify, the platform enables participants to complete the sorting activity remotely and securely. Participants are presented with a set of 40 carefully curated statements related to employer attractiveness, expectation formation, and perceptions of alignment between branding and workplace experience. They are asked to rank these statements along a forced quasi-normal distribution (see Figure 6), ranging from -4 (least agree) to +4 (most agree), according to their personal views. This sorting process captures how Gen Z professionals in the high-tech sector subjectively evaluate the factors that shape their initial employer expectations and how those expectations correspond with real or anticipated workplace realities.

Following the Q-sort, participants complete a short post-sort questionnaire. This includes open-ended questions asking them to justify their most extreme rankings, specifically the statements placed at +4 and -4, providing qualitative depth to the quantitative sorting exercise. In addition, several demographic and background variables are collected: gender, year of birth, work experience, current industry, type of organization (e.g., start-up, or large corporation), and job title. Finally, participants are asked to indicate the degree to which their workplace expectations have been met on a four-point scale (1 = completely met, 4 = not at all met) and justify their choice in an open text box. Together, these responses enable a richer interpretation of the factors by linking individual sorts to personal characteristics and contextual experiences.

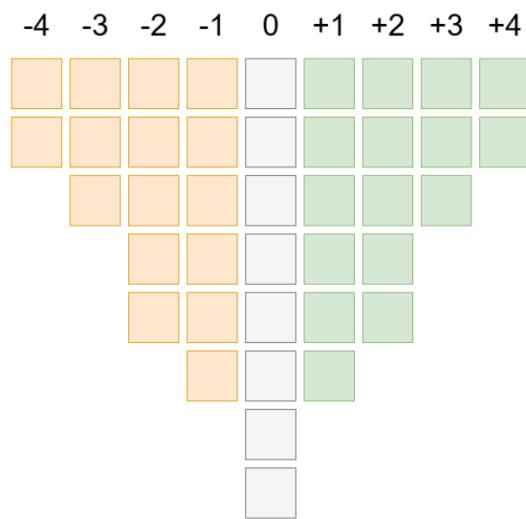


Figure 6. Forced Quasi-normal Distribution of the Q-sort Statements

Prior to the sorting task, participants receive detailed instructions, provide informed consent, and are assigned a unique, anonymous identifier. To protect participant privacy and ensure data security, EQ Web Sort adheres to strict data protection standards. As an open-source tool, EQ Web Sort does not collect or retain any user data, nor does it create web cookies. When connected to a database service, such as, Netlify EQ Web Sort transmits only the results of the Q-sort and any optional questionnaire responses, as determined by the research designer. This ensures that only relevant data is stored, with no personal identifiers or behavioral tracking involved. Full survey can be found in Appendix C.

3.2 Sampling Strategy

This study employs a strategic sampling strategy to recruit Generation Z participants working in high-tech related positions. The aim is to gather a diverse range of viewpoints by including individuals across various industries and organizations of different sizes, from startups to large multinational corporations. Participants are identified and invited through a combination of professional and personal networks, including academic contacts, and LinkedIn connections.

This approach allows access to respondents with relevant experience or interest in employer branding while remaining pragmatic within the time and resource constraints of the study. Although strategic sampling does not allow for statistical generalization, it is well-suited for Q-methodology, where the goal is to capture diversity in subjective perspectives rather than representativeness of the broader population.

3.3 Data Analysis

The Q-sorts will be analyzed using Ken-Q Analysis Desktop Edition (KADE), a dedicated software platform for Q-methodological research, created by Banasick (2019). The analysis begins with the construction of a correlation matrix, which reveals the degree of similarity between participants' Q-sorts. This matrix serves as the foundation for principal component analysis (PCA), the factor extraction technique selected for this study.

PCA is used for its ability to maximize the explained variance in participants' sorts and to reduce the complexity of the dataset by identifying clusters of participants who sorted the 40 statements in similar ways. These clusters, known as factors, represent shared subjective perspectives on employer attractiveness, expectation formation, and the perceived alignment between branding messages and workplace experiences. PCA is particularly appropriate in this context because it supports the goal of uncovering underlying patterns of interpretation without assuming prior knowledge of the number or nature of the viewpoints.

The factor extraction process, and the final number of factors kept and analyzed is supported by inspection of eigenvalues and the cumulative percentage of variance explained by each factor. Only factors with eigenvalues greater than 1.00 will be considered for rotation, with attention to both statistical robustness and theoretical interpretability.

After extraction, a varimax rotation will be applied to maximize the differentiation between factors and improve clarity in interpretation. The defining Q-sorts for each factor will then be used to create a composite (factor array), representing the ideal-typical sorting pattern for each viewpoint. Automatic flagging will be used to determine which Q-sorts define each factor; no manual flagging will be performed.

Interpretation will focus on statements placed at the extremes of the distribution (i.e., -4 and +4), as these represent the most salient opinions within each viewpoint. Distinguishing statements, which differentiate one factor from others, and consensus statements, ranked similarly across all factors, will also be analyzed. In addition, qualitative comments provided by participants during the sorting process will be incorporated to add depth and context to the factor interpretations.

Finally, the resulting factor profiles will be compared to the theoretical respondent profiles developed earlier, allowing for reflection on how expected value orientations align, or diverge, from the actual patterns of meaning expressed by participants. Basic demographic and employment background data will also be examined to explore how individual differences may influence the formation of perspectives.

4 Results

This chapter presents the findings of the study, which explored how Generation Z employees perceive employer branding alignment within high-tech sectors. The results are organized into two main parts. The first part provides an overview of the demographic characteristics of the respondents, offering context for interpreting the findings. The second part presents the results of the Q-methodology analysis, including the identification and interpretation of the six emergent factors that represent distinct patterns of perception among participants.

It is important to note that some participants provided no response for certain questionnaire items. Before conducting the survey, approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) was obtained. As part of this process, the survey was designed to be anonymous and voluntary, allowing participants to choose whether to answer each question. Consequently, a number of “no response” entries appear in the dataset, reflecting participants’ right to withhold personal information in accordance with ethical research standards.

4.1 Background Characteristics of the Respondents

The demographic characteristics of the study’s respondents, visualized across four figures.

Figure 7 illustrates the gender distribution, showing that 71% (n=22) of participants identify as male, while 29% (n=9) identify as female.

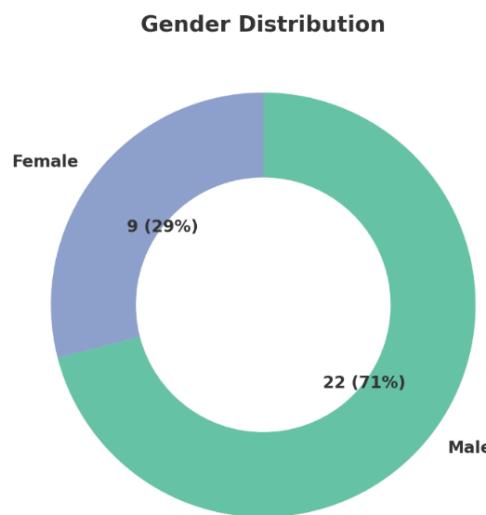


Figure 7. Gender Distribution Among the Participants.

Figure 8 depicts the age distribution, which is concentrated between 26-28 years old, representing the majority of respondents (74%).

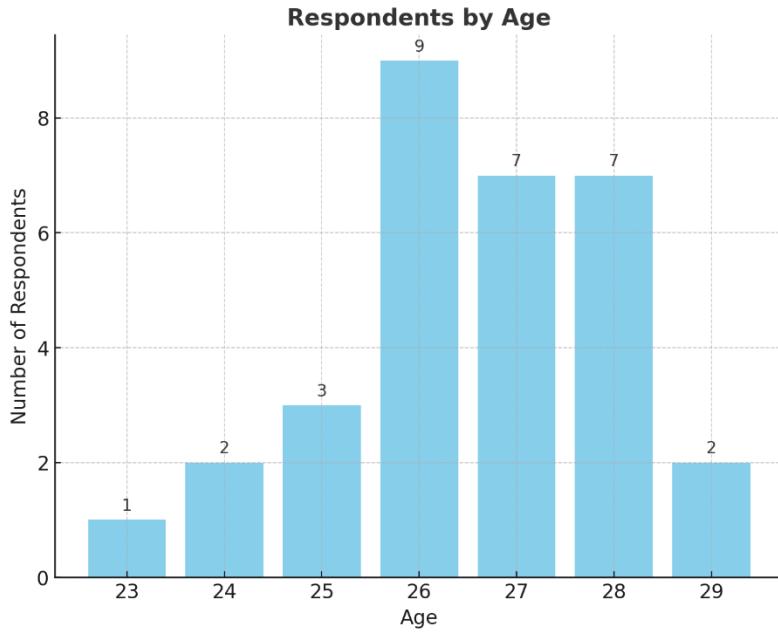


Figure 8. Age Distribution Among the Participants.

Figure 9 summarizes the industries in which respondents are employed. The largest groups come from IT and manufacturing (5 participants each), followed by software development (3), semiconductors (3), and automation (3). Smaller clusters are seen in energy (2), research (2), and consulting (2), with aviation represented by a single respondent. This distribution reflects the study's focus on participants working across high-tech sectors.

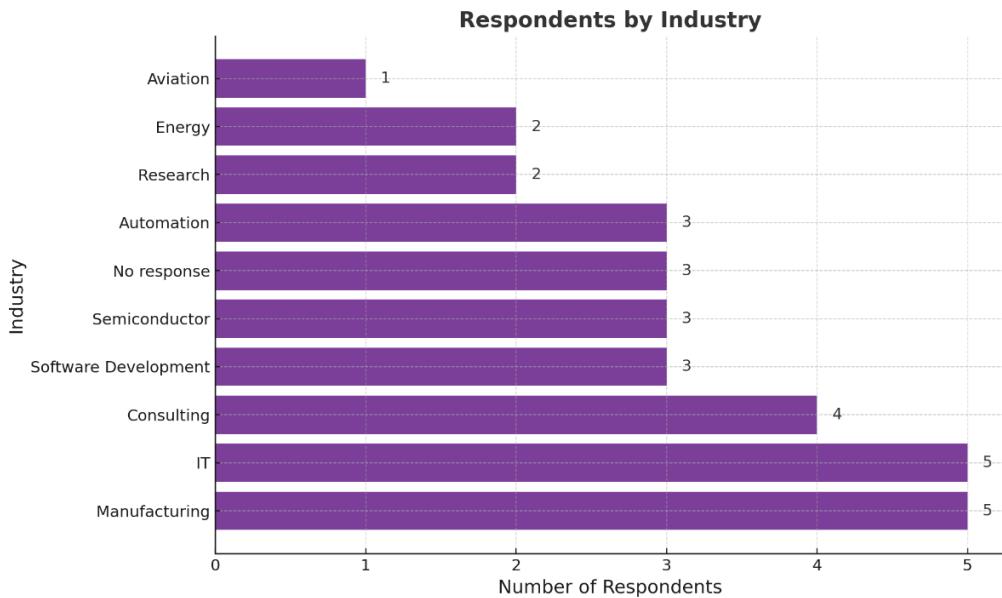


Figure 9. Industry Distribution Among the Participants.

Finally, Figure 10 provides an overview of respondents' professional experience levels, highlighting a diverse sample that includes both early-career professionals and those in more advanced roles.

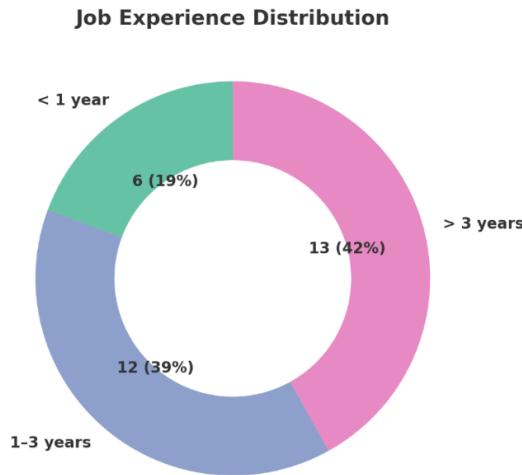


Figure 10. Gender Distribution Among the Participants.

4.2 Factor Extraction

To determine the appropriate number of factors to retain for further analysis, eigenvalues and the scree plot were examined. Table 2 presents the eigenvalues and corresponding percentages of explained variance for the first eight factors.

Eigenvalues	7.02	3.38	2.36	2.15	1.9	1.79	1.42	1.31
Explained Variance, %	23	11	8	7	6	6	5	4
Cumulative Expl. Var., %	23	34	42	49	55	61	67	71

Table 2. Eigen Values and Corresponding Percentages of Explained Variance

According to the Kaiser criterion (eigenvalues > 1), the first eight factors could theoretically be retained, as they each have eigenvalues greater than one. However, together they explain only 71% of the cumulative variance, which suggests that a more parsimonious solution is preferable.

The scree plot (Figure 11) supports this decision by revealing a clear “elbow” after the fourth factor, where the slope of the curve begins to flatten.

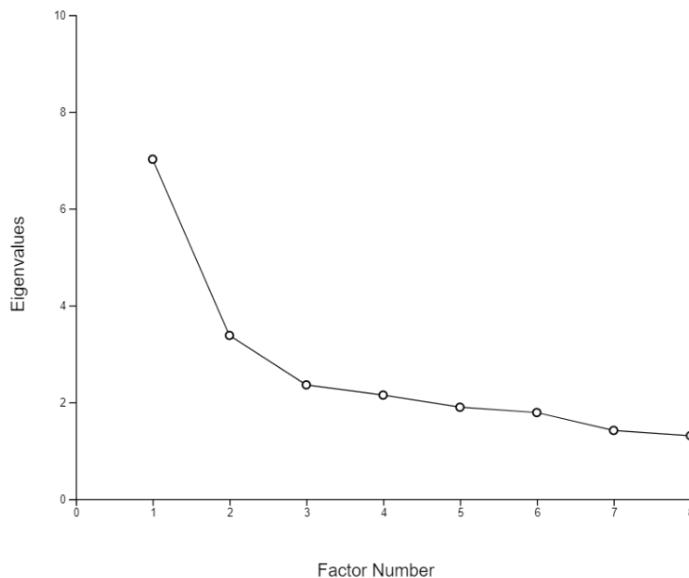


Figure 11. Scree Plot.

This indicates that the first few factors account for the most substantial variance, while additional factors contribute relatively little explanatory power.

Based on the eigenvalues and scree plot, several factor solutions were explored to determine the most appropriate structure for the analysis. To ensure a more robust representation, based on explained variance, participant loadings, and alignment with the theoretical framework, we experimented with four-, five-, six-, seven-, and eight-factor solutions.

Although the four-factor solution seemed appealing due to the “elbow” in the scree plot, these four factors together explained only 49% of the total variance, which was insufficient to adequately represent the diversity of viewpoints and capture the five EmpAt dimensions underlying the study.

In the five-factor solution, cumulative explained variance improved, but interpretation became problematic: four participants showed moderate loadings on multiple factors, making it difficult to assign them confidently to a single viewpoint. Additionally, this solution revealed a higher number of negative loadings, indicating opposing viewpoints but complicating the overall interpretability of the results.

The seven- and eight-factor solutions presented further challenges. While they slightly increased explained variance, these configurations produced factors with one or no participants loading significantly. Since a minimum of two participants per factor is generally recommended for stable interpretation, these solutions were deemed unreliable. Furthermore, extracting so many factors resulted in too many fragmented viewpoints, which made it difficult to provide meaningful explanations and reduced the clarity of the findings.

Ultimately, the six-factor solution offered the best balance between statistical adequacy and conceptual interpretability. This model explained 61% of the cumulative variance and allowed for a clear mapping of participant viewpoints while maintaining coherence with the five EmpAt dimensions.

The table 3 shows all 6 factors and their loadings. Factor loadings above ± 0.40 were considered significant based on the number of statements (40) and a confidence level of $p < 0.01$.

Nr.	Factor Group	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4	Factor 5	Factor 6
5	F1-1	0,7568	0,2957	0,0472	0,1424	-0,1075	-0,0383
1	F1-2	0,7517	-0,2975	0,2626	0,0861	0,188	-0,0749
18	F1-3	0,4738	0,426	-0,1039	0,3751	0,1183	-0,0949
29	F2-1	0,0056	0,8235	0,0209	-0,0202	0,0066	-0,1224
30	F2-2	-0,1768	0,7665	0,0864	0,1099	0,1893	0,0347
19	F2-3	-0,0127	0,7317	0,2232	0,0278	-0,3453	0,0194
25	F2-4	0,1318	0,6677	-0,0464	-0,0923	0,1177	0,1172
13	F2-5	0,297	0,6239	0,2298	0,1082	0,26	-0,3306
20	F2-6	0,3242	0,5533	0,271	0,0672	0,3128	0,1158
7	F2-7	0,4068	0,4556	-0,0789	-0,1516	0,1615	0,4448
3	F3-1	0,1595	0,1767	0,7057	0,2966	0,1572	-0,2482
10	F3-2	0,3309	-0,064	0,6349	-0,1176	0,1886	0,0721
24	F3-3	0,1684	0,3261	0,6238	-0,1086	-0,1572	0,1397
9	F3-4	0,2607	-0,0726	0,5921	0,2812	0,141	-0,1878
17	F3-5	-0,044	-0,1037	0,5525	-0,0718	0,1684	0,4243
4	F3-6	-0,2343	0,0565	0,5033	0,0796	0,0711	0,0355
26	F3-7	-0,1996	0,31	0,4395	-0,0131	-0,0354	0,3529
31	F3-8	0,3176	0,1222	0,3972	0,2698	0,3061	0,2375
23	F4-1	0,0037	-0,1031	0,08	0,8185	0,0277	0,169
14	F4-2	0,3088	-0,0115	-0,0018	0,6717	-0,0673	0,0043
8	F4-3	0,1009	0,2597	-0,0385	0,656	0,0842	0,0628
2	F4-4	0,0212	0,3562	0,0798	0,4441	0,4039	-0,3059
16	F4-5	0,4009	0,2016	0,3347	0,4106	0,1585	0,0844
6	F4-6	-0,0935	-0,2323	0,1587	0,408	-0,0694	0,042
12	F5-1	0,1541	0,01	0,1554	-0,1571	0,7332	-0,2086
27	F5-2	-0,2703	0,0842	0,2478	0,2103	0,7124	0,1069
28	F5-3	0,1502	0,3504	0,0787	-0,0864	0,6737	0,1679
22	F5-4	0,4975	-0,1125	-0,0373	0,3038	0,598	0,2059
15	F6-1	-0,2214	0,4367	0,0276	0,2654	0,1675	0,6145
11	F6-2	0,0536	-0,2342	0,0579	0,1649	-0,0859	0,5799
21	F6-3	0,4302	0,4158	0,2669	0,1417	0,2132	0,476

Table 3. Participants and Their Loadings on 6 Factors

Factor 1 includes three participants (5, 1, 18) with strong loadings for participants 5 (0.76) and 1 (0.75), suggesting a clearly shared viewpoint, while participant 18 shows a weaker but still

interpretable loading (0.47). Factor 2 represents the largest cluster with eight participants (29, 30, 19, 25, 13, 20, 7) and consistently strong loadings (>0.66), particularly participants 29 (0.82), 30 (0.77), and 19 (0.73), indicating a well-defined shared perspective. Factor 3 comprises ten participants (3, 10, 24, 9, 17, 4, 26, 31) with loadings ranging from 0.70 (participant 3) down to 0.39 (participant 31). Although some participants sit closer to the threshold, the factor remains interpretable, though tail loadings suggest partial alignment with other viewpoints. Factor 4 includes six participants (23, 14, 8, 2, 16, 6), anchored by two very strong loadings (participant 23 = 0.82; participant 14 = 0.67), while others fall within the moderate range (0.41–0.65), suggesting slightly more within-factor variability. Factor 5 comprises four participants (12, 27, 28, 22), all with loadings above 0.59, which makes it a small but coherent factor. Factor 6 involves three participants (15, 11, 21), with loadings above 0.47, making it interpretable but weaker relative to Factors 2 and 5.

Overall, participants with strong loadings (>0.70), such as 5, 1, 29, 30, 19, 3, 23, and 12, serve as “defining sorts” for their respective factors. Participants with moderate loadings (0.45–0.70), especially in Factors 3 and 4, reflect partial alignment with alternative perspectives, while a few participants with weaker loadings (<0.45), including 18, 31, 26, 16, and 6, remain interpretable but less distinctive. Participant 31 was not considered in further analysis, as their loading on a single factor is less than 0.40.

Participants							
Factor 1	5	1	18				
Factor 2	29	30	19	25	13	20	7
Factor 3	3	10	24	9	17	4	26
Factor 4	23	14	8	2	16	6	
Factor 5	12	27	28	22			
Factor 6	15	11	21				

Table 4. Final List of Participants and Factors

The factor correlation matrix in Table 5 demonstrates how strongly the six retained factors relate to each other and provides insights into their discriminant validity.

	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4	Factor 5	Factor 6
Factor 1	1	0.1702	0.344	0.3375	0.2213	0.0581
Factor 2	0.1702	1	0.2887	0.1081	0.229	0.2784
Factor 3	0.344	0.2887	1	0.2626	0.3553	0.3052
Factor 4	0.3375	0.1081	0.2626	1	0.1809	0.3317
Factor 5	0.2213	0.229	0.3553	0.1809	1	0.1882
Factor 6	0.0581	0.2784	0.3052	0.3317	0.1882	1

Table 5. Factor Correlation Matrix

Most inter-factor correlations are low to moderate, ranging between 0.05 and 0.35, indicating that the factors are largely independent and capture distinct viewpoints. For example, Factor 1 and Factor 6 correlate very weakly ($r = 0.06$), suggesting almost complete independence between these perspectives. Some pairs of factors show moderate overlaps, such as Factor 3 and Factor 5 ($r = 0.36$), Factor 3 and Factor 6 ($r = 0.31$), and Factor 4 and Factor 6 ($r = 0.33$). These moderate relationships imply some shared conceptual elements, where participants defining these factors may prioritize similar statements, but the correlations remain well below the typical 0.70 threshold that would indicate redundancy. Since none of the inter-factor correlations exceed 0.40, there is strong evidence of discriminant validity, meaning each factor represents a distinct underlying viewpoint. For instance, the low correlation between Factors 1 and 2 ($r = 0.17$) reinforces that participants associated with these factors hold meaningfully different perspectives. Overall, these findings justify retaining six factors: while some shared variance exists, particularly between Factors 3, 5, and 6, the overall structure remains interpretable and well-separated, supporting the theoretical soundness of the solution. For each factor, the analysis details the statements ranked highest and lowest, capturing the unique priorities and trade-offs within each viewpoint. In addition, the findings highlighted distinguishing statements - those ranked in a way that set one factor apart from the others, and consensus statements, where participants across multiple factors aligned in their perceptions.

Factor 1 – Growth & Development-Oriented Pragmatists

Participants defining this factor prioritize structured career progression, continuous learning, and skill development as the core drivers of their career choices.

Factor 1		
Number	Statement	Z-score
25	I expect clear growth opportunities when I join a company (DV-1)	2.261
31	I value roles where I can collaborate across teams and departments to grow and learn. (DV-7)	1.832
23	Even if a job is meaningful, I still need it to support my financial goals (EV-7)	1.312
28	I want a manager who supports my development, not just my output (DV-4)	1.309
29	I want a job that builds skills I can carry with me throughout my career, even if I change employers (DV-5)	1.146
17	No matter how great the culture is, I won't accept a job that underpays me (EV-1)	1.14
27	Regular feedback and coaching are non-negotiable for my career satisfaction (DV-3)	1.131
26	If I'm not learning or developing, I feel like I'm wasting time (DV-2)	1.062
37	Having autonomy in how I apply my skills is important to me (AV-5)	-1.046
19	Job security is a key factor in whether I consider a company worth working for (EV-3)	-1.121
7	Prestige only matters to me if it's backed by real innovation (IV-7)	-1.133
12	A friendly and uplifting team is one of the most important factors in choosing a job (SV-4)	-1.143
13	A good employer gives back through genuine efforts that address social or environmental issues. (SV-5)	-1.306
6	If a company is leading in tech, I assume the job will be exciting (IV-6)	-1.325
14	Work-life balance is essential for me to feel satisfied at work. (SV-6)	-1.825

Table 6. Factor 1 and the Statements with the Highest Z-score Absolute Value

They view work primarily as a vehicle for personal growth and long-term financial security, placing less value on symbolic or cultural aspects of the workplace. For example, Participant 5

emphasized the importance of clear advancement pathways at the start of a career, stating that “especially at the beginning of a career, it is very important to have many realistic growth opportunities” (DV-1). They also highlighted the value of employers investing in their employees’ development (DV-4), viewing such efforts as a sign of organizational commitment to retaining talent. Similarly, Participant 18 connected skill-building directly to upward mobility: “improvement of skillset is important for my growth as I can pursue better financial incentives” (DV-5, EV-1), underscoring how opportunities for development and financial progression are tightly intertwined for this group.

This factor also reflects a pragmatic indifference toward prestige and symbolic recognition. Participant 18 explained that “prestige is an abstract concept... I have no feelings towards it” (IV-7), indicating that external status alone holds little weight unless it aligns with personal growth. At the same time, these participants approach career expectations realistically. While Participant 5 assumed that roles in leading tech companies (IV-6) might promise innovation and excitement, they cautioned that “leading tech companies also have many boring routine tasks,” highlighting a grounded view of workplace realities.

Importantly, team culture and workplace climate are deprioritized compared to growth. As Participant 5 reflected, “it is important, but I would not name it as one of the most important things” when discussing having a friendly and uplifting team (SV-4). This reinforces the idea that while social aspects are appreciated, they are secondary to development opportunities, transferable skills, and financial security.

Overall, Factor 1 represents pragmatic professionals who seek clear pathways for growth (DV-1), supportive development environments (DV-4), and skills that secure long-term mobility (DV-5). They are less concerned with prestige (IV-7), symbolic benefits, or cultural “extras,” focusing instead on workplaces that empower them to learn, progress, and achieve financial stability.

Factor 2 – Security & Stability Seekers

This group values security, fairness, and reliability above all.

Factor 2		
Number	Statement	Z-score
23	Even if a job is meaningful. I still need it to support my financial goals (EV-7)	1.972
14	Work-life balance is essential for me to feel satisfied at work. (SV-6)	1.749
18	Financial stability is a top priority when I evaluate employers (EV-2)	1.427
21	I evaluate job offers based on real benefits. not superficial perks like snacks or office games. (EV-5)	1.416
17	No matter how great the culture is. I won't accept a job that underpays me (EV-1)	1.402
19	Job security is a key factor in whether I consider a company worth working for (EV-3)	1.195
35	Being able to apply my unique strengths keeps me motivated (AV-3)	1.175
28	I want a manager who supports my development. not just my output (DV-4)	1.163
24	I expect companies to fairly compensate junior employees. not just executives. (EV-8)	1.037
34	A job that lets me make a real impact is more attractive than one that just pays well (AV-2)	-1.036
4	A company's reputation for innovation influences how much I want to work there (IV-4)	-1.134
40	I'm drawn to companies where employees are empowered to solve real problems (AV-8)	-1.446
15	The company's success is driven by how well it serves its customers. (SV-7)	-1.546
3	I'm drawn to companies that challenge the status quo in their industry (IV-3)	-1.741
6	If a company is leading in tech. I assume the job will be exciting (IV-6)	-1.933

Table 7. Factor 2 and the Statements with the Highest Z-score Absolute Value

They emphasize the importance of jobs that support financial goals (EV-7) , as Participant 30 explained: “I work to live, not vice-versa... if a job cannot provide financial compensation proportional to my output... I do not care how meaningful or important it is”. Participant 20 was even more pragmatic: “I work for financial reasons. Otherwise I'd be doing art or a PhD”.

Work-life balance is seen as equally critical (SV-6). For participant 30, “without having my own time, work is meaningless... regular overtime is not a show of dedication, it is simply a lack of proper management”. Participant 19 voiced a similar frustration: “I do quiet quitting as of now because I feel that most employers do not give as much back as they demand”.

Financial stability (EV-2) and job security (EV-3) stand out as core expectations. As Participant 13 put it, “being able to be financially independent in the current uncertain economy is paramount to me when I evaluate a role or employer”, also stressing that “is not just how much a position pays, but also if they will continue to pay me in the long run”. Compensation fairness (EV-8) was another recurring theme. Participant 20 commented that “many consulting firms pay starting employees hardly above minimum wage. For 5–8 years of education, I think this is unacceptable”.

What they push back against are the more uncertain promises of innovation and novelty. Several dismissed the assumption that tech leaders offer exciting work (IV-6): “high-tech firms have as boring routine jobs as any other large corporation” (Participant 20), while Participant 19 added that “innovators are the worst employers... much is expected of you and little is returned”. The idea of firms “challenging the status quo” (IV-3) was also criticized, since according to

Participant 13, startups often overwork and underpay, while large corporations “see employees as another human resource that is expendable when they feel you are not ‘useful’ anymore”.

For these participants, a “good job” is defined not by prestige, innovation, or novelty but by predictability, fairness, and long-term stability.

Factor 3 – Purpose & Autonomy-Driven Innovators

Participants in this factor are motivated by purpose and autonomy.

Factor 3		
Number	Statement	Z-score
38	I'm more motivated when I understand how my work contributes to something larger. (AV-6)	1.745
40	I'm drawn to companies where employees are empowered to solve real problems (AV-8)	1.715
8	I prefer employers who give employees freedom to experiment with new ideas (IV-8)	1.471
29	I want a job that builds skills I can carry with me throughout my career, even if I change employers (DV-5)	1.224
1	I want to work for a company that does cutting-edge work (IV-1)	-1.09
7	Prestige only matters to me if it's backed by real innovation (IV-7)	-1.204
6	If a company is leading in tech. I assume the job will be exciting (IV-6)	-1.226
13	A good employer gives back through genuine efforts that address social or environmental issues. (SV-5)	-1.407
36	I want a job where my academic or technical training actually matters (AV-4)	-1.427
5	Routine or repetitive work is a dealbreaker for me (IV-5)	-1.688
26	If I'm not learning or developing. I feel like I'm wasting time (DV-2)	-1.709
30	Being stuck in the same role too long is a red flag for me (DV-6)	-2.025

Table 8. Factor 3 and the Statements with the Highest Z-score Absolute Value

They want to see how their work contributes to something larger (AV-6) and to be empowered to solve real problems (AV-8). Freedom to experiment with new ideas (IV-8), is important, as Participant 24 emphasized, “especially when there will be little evolution in tasks, employees should be allowed (and encouraged) to experiment and innovate in different ways to further streamline said tasks”. This highlights that innovation, for them, is not about prestige or status but about finding new ways to add real value. They also prioritize personal growth and the accumulation of transferable skills. Participant 3 explained this vividly: “all jobs should help your personal growth, fill your backpack with knowledge, not only build the company” (DV-5).

Unlike some other groups, Factor 3 participants show tolerance toward conditions often framed as negative, such as routine work or longer tenure in the same role. Participant 17 noted that “sometimes I have to do routine work, which is not a dealbreaker at all. From time to time this is important to understand the process” (IV-5). Similarly, Participant 9 argued that “in some roles you need to be ‘stuck’ to learn enough to be valuable” (DV-6), while Participant 26 added that staying in a role can be acceptable “if the employer gives a raise” or the position remains interesting (DV-6). These views reveal a pragmatic acceptance that not every stage of a career needs to be dynamic, as long as there is eventual value or fair recognition.

Development, too, is not viewed in absolute terms. Participant 4 reflected that “some jobs are just to support yourself financially, and it is okay if for a while one is not being developed as

there are other priorities in place" (DV-2). This suggests that while growth and learning are important, they are not treated as non-negotiables, life circumstances can justify periods of stability. Likewise, alignment between academic training and work is not seen as critical. Participant 24, who had already secured a "forever job," remarked that they "could not care less" about how the role fits their academic history, even though in other contexts it might matter (AV-4).

Taken together, Factor 3 participants balance a strong desire for purpose, autonomy, and problem-solving with a realistic acceptance of work's practicalities. They want opportunities to innovate and grow, but they also recognize that repetition, stability, or temporary misalignment with one's studies can be part of a meaningful career path.

Factor 4 – Learning & Experimentation Enthusiasts

This factor represents participants who are deeply motivated by continuous growth, experimentation, and making a meaningful contribution. For them, a good job is one where they can learn constantly, apply their strengths, and innovate freely rather than simply follow established routines.

Factor 4		
Number	Statement	Z-score
38	I'm more motivated when I understand how my work contributes to something larger. (AV-6)	2.368
8	I prefer employers who give employees freedom to experiment with new ideas (IV-8)	1.9
26	If I'm not learning or developing, I feel like I'm wasting time (DV-2)	1.635
35	Being able to apply my unique strengths keeps me motivated (AV-3)	1.569
29	I want a job that builds skills I can carry with me throughout my career, even if I change employers (DV-5)	1.179
40	I'm drawn to companies where employees are empowered to solve real problems (AV-8)	1.02
16	I'm more motivated in workplaces that are fun and energizing. (SV-8)	-1.275
13	A good employer gives back through genuine efforts that address social or environmental issues. (SV-5)	-1.318
6	If a company is leading in tech, I assume the job will be exciting (IV-6)	-1.466
12	A friendly and uplifting team is one of the most important factors in choosing a job (SV-4)	-1.612
10	Workplace culture matters more to me than job title or status (SV-2)	-1.678
5	Routine or repetitive work is a dealbreaker for me (IV-5)	-1.779

Table 9. Factor 4 and the Statements with the Highest Z-score Absolute Value

A recurring theme among these participants is the desire to see how their work contributes to the bigger picture (AV-6). Participant 6 reflected that "the meaning of life lies in contributing to larger society or technologies that last in time," showing how strongly they value connecting their personal efforts to lasting impact. Participant 23 echoed this, emphasizing the sense of accomplishment gained when their work makes a real difference: "It's much easier to stay motivated when you can see how your efforts fit into the bigger picture and make a difference."

Learning and experimentation are central drivers. Participant 16 highlighted how important it is for them to have "the freedom to brainstorm, be creative, and experiment with new ideas,"

framing autonomy as essential to both personality and job satisfaction (IV-8). Similarly, Participant 8 associated tech-driven innovation with excitement and fulfillment, valuing environments where experimentation is encouraged. Participant 14 provided another perspective, stating that if opportunities for continuous learning are lacking, they would “seek out new opportunities elsewhere to get this learning faster” (DV-2).

Interestingly, while this group is highly focused on personal mastery and growth, they tend to downplay social and cultural aspects of the workplace. For instance, Participant 23 noted that having a friendly and uplifting team “is just a bonus, not a deciding factor” when evaluating jobs. Likewise, broader company culture or perks are viewed as secondary compared to opportunities for skill-building, autonomy, and meaningful impact.

Overall, Factor 4 captures a mindset where personal development, innovation, and long-term contribution outweigh social connectedness or organizational prestige. These individuals thrive when they are empowered to experiment, learn continuously, and directly influence outcomes that matter on a broader scale.

Factor 5 – Relational & Supportive Environment Seekers

This factor represents individuals who view meaningful work as deeply intertwined with belonging, collaboration, and supportive relationships at work.

Factor 5		
Number	Statement	Z-score
38	I'm more motivated when I understand how my work contributes to something larger. (AV-6)	1.993
12	A friendly and uplifting team is one of the most important factors in choosing a job (SV-4)	1.673
9	I'm more likely to stay in a job where I feel genuinely accepted and included (SV-1)	1.372
31	I value roles where I can collaborate across teams and departments to grow and learn. (DV-7)	1.286
28	I want a manager who supports my development, not just my output (DV-4)	1.275
19	Job security is a key factor in whether I consider a company worth working for (EV-3)	1.244
29	I want a job that builds skills I can carry with me throughout my career, even if I change employers (DV-5)	1.235
40	I'm drawn to companies where employees are empowered to solve real problems (AV-8)	-1.058
20	I expect employers to be transparent about salary ranges and raises (EV-4)	-1.22
4	A company's reputation for innovation influences how much I want to work there (IV-4)	-1.426
11	If I can't be open about my identity or ask for support at work, it's not the right place for me (SV-3)	-1.787
7	Prestige only matters to me if it's backed by real innovation (IV-7)	-2.064
22	I associate high compensation with respect and recognition (EV-6)	-2.096

Table 10. Factor 5 and the Statements with the Highest Z-score Absolute Value

While they value growth and skill-building, they seek environments where they feel included, supported, and connected to others. They are motivated by understanding how their work contributes to a larger purpose (AV-6), but unlike more autonomy-driven factors, their satisfaction comes from combining personal development with relational stability.

For example, Participant 12 described their career perspective as “job is learn and earn. life is long term. I want jobs where I could contribute and learn skills so that I can use it for the long

term, even when environment changes dynamically, more sustainable journey.” They also drew a clear line between compensation and value, explaining that “high compensation does not mean respect and recognition… it can also mean that we have a certain amount of money in the price tag to just get things done. Work is not family.” At the same time, they preferred privacy around pay, stating, “salary and raises are private, I don’t want people to know, neither I want to know about how others are doing.”

Similarly, Participant 22 echoed the desire for adaptability and transferable skills, agreeing that the market is constantly evolving and that “as young professionals we want general skills in order to fit in the job market.” While they acknowledged the role of high pay, they framed it pragmatically: “high compensation correlates with how productive and useful you are for a company” rather than viewing it as a marker of status or personal worth.

Participant 28 added another layer, expressing appreciation for internal mobility and “the fresh new perspective of a new role without giving up the whole rigamarole of a job change.” They placed high value on cross-team collaboration and learning opportunities (DV-7) while also rejecting superficial prestige: “Prestige… is a hollow front for jobs which are unnecessarily demanding and cut-throat competitive, such as front-office investment banking.” For them, prestige only matters “if it’s backed by real innovation.” Furthermore, they emphasized autonomy and problem-solving, stating, “I am not necessarily drawn to solving real-world problems… I consider coaching and space given to me to solve any problem more important than the problem itself.”

Overall, Factor 5 reflects a preference for inclusive, empowering, and relational workplaces. Participants want to grow and build long-term skills, but their motivation is tied to collaboration, belonging, and purpose rather than symbolic rewards like prestige or high salaries. They seek environments where innovation is practical, relationships are genuine, and personal development happens naturally through teamwork and shared goals.

Factor 6 – Balanced Growth & Real-World Problem-Solvers

Participants in this factor seek balance between growth, meaningful problem-solving, and well-being. They want to be empowered to solve real problems (AV-8), have opportunities for continuous learning (DV-2), freedom to experiment (IV-8), and career skills that carry across employers (DV-5). Work-life balance (SV-6) and autonomy in applying their skills (AV-5) are also important. They value practical benefits (EV-5), a friendly team (SV-4), and recognition of their academic or technical expertise (AV-4). What they reject are symbolic signals of prestige (IV-7), innovation claims without substance (IV-2, IV-6), and CSR initiatives (SV-5). In essence, this factor represents individuals who want meaningful and practical work that allows them to grow, while also maintaining balance and avoiding empty signaling.

Factor 6		
Number	Statement	Z-score
40	I'm drawn to companies where employees are empowered to solve real problems (AV-8)	1.645
26	If I'm not learning or developing, I feel like I'm wasting time (DV-2)	1.544
8	I prefer employers who give employees freedom to experiment with new ideas (IV-8)	1.439
29	I want a job that builds skills I can carry with me throughout my career, even if I change employers (DV-5)	1.308
14	Work-life balance is essential for me to feel satisfied at work. (SV-6)	1.304
5	Routine or repetitive work is a dealbreaker for me (IV-5)	1.242
37	Having autonomy in how I apply my skills is important to me (AV-5)	1.234
21	I evaluate job offers based on real benefits, not superficial perks like snacks or office games. (EV-5)	1.133
12	A friendly and uplifting team is one of the most important factors in choosing a job (SV-4)	1.064
36	I want a job where my academic or technical training actually matters (AV-4)	1.006
15	The company's success is driven by how well it serves its customers. (SV-7)	-1.072
16	I'm more motivated in workplaces that are fun and energizing. (SV-8)	-1.164
19	Job security is a key factor in whether I consider a company worth working for (EV-3)	-1.177
25	I expect clear growth opportunities when I join a company (DV-1)	-1.242
2	The company demonstrates innovation through its actual products and services, not just in marketing. (IV-2)	-1.3
33	Continuous learning matters more to me than having all the answers (AV-1)	-1.439
7	Prestige only matters to me if it's backed by real innovation (IV-7)	-1.672
13	A good employer gives back through genuine efforts that address social or environmental issues. (SV-5)	-1.733
6	If a company is leading in tech, I assume the job will be exciting (IV-6)	-1.842

Table 11. Factor 6 and the Statements with the Highest Z-score Absolute Value

Participants in this factor value a balance between personal development, meaningful contribution, and well-being. Participant 11 seeks companies with a sense of shared purpose, explaining that “a company that is ambitious and idealistic is a place where your time is well spent, what you do matters, and everyone has a collective vision.”

Autonomy and trust emerge as equally important themes. Participant 15 emphasized, “I’m hired for my skills, so why not give me the autonomy and freedom to do the actual work? If there is no trust, there is no reason for me to work there.” Alongside autonomy, work-life balance plays a strong role for this group, with the same participant adding that work should not dominate life to the detriment of mental health.

Practical security also matters. While Participant 11 acknowledged that it’s often possible to find new jobs quickly if the candidate knows how to represent themselves, they still highlighted that job security remains a deciding factor when considering an employer.

Participants also display skepticism toward superficial signals. Participant 21 dismissed prestige unless it reflects genuine achievement, while Participant 15 noted that many corporate social initiatives feel like “window dressing” rather than meaningful impact.

Overall, Factor 6 represents individuals who want to grow continuously, solve meaningful problems, and work autonomously, but also expect authenticity and balance. They thrive in environments where learning is prioritized, their contributions have purpose, and they can maintain personal well-being, while rejecting empty prestige or performative corporate values.

4.3 Distinct and Consensus Statements Across Factors

The distinguishing statements presented in the table reveal where the six factors diverge most strongly in priorities and values.

Distinguishing statements for each factor				
Factor 1				
Nr	Statement	Q-SV	Z-score	
25	I expect clear growth opportunities when I join a company (DV-1)	4	2.26	
14	Work-life balance is essential for me to feel satisfied at work. (SV-6)	-4	-1.83	
Factor 2				
Nr	Statement	Q-SV	Z-score	
23	Even if a job is meaningful, I still need it to support my financial goals (EV-7)	4	1.97	
18	Financial stability is a top priority when I evaluate employers (EV-2)	3	1.43	
3	I'm drawn to companies that challenge the status quo in their industry (IV-3)	-4	-1.74	
Factor 3				
Nr	Statement	Q-SV	Z-score	
26	If I'm not learning or developing, I feel like I'm wasting time (DV-2)	-4	-1.71	
30	Being stuck in the same role too long is a red flag for me (DV-6)	-4	-2.03	
Factor 4				
Nr	Statement	Q-SV	Z-score	
10	Workplace culture matters more to me than job title or status (SV-2)	-4	-1.68	
Factor 5				
Nr	Statement	Q-SV	Z-score	
20	I expect employers to be transparent about salary ranges and raises (EV-4)	-3	-1.22	
11	If I can't be open about my identity or ask for support at work, it's not the right place for me (SV-3)	-3	-1.79	
22	I associate high compensation with respect and recognition (EV-6)	-4	-2.1	
Factor 6				
Nr	Statement	Q-SV	Z-score	
5	Routine or repetitive work is a dealbreaker for me (IV-5)	2	1.24	
25	I expect clear growth opportunities when I join a company (DV-1)	-2	-1.24	
33	Continuous learning matters more to me than having all the answers (AV-1)	-3	-1.44	

Table 12. Distinguishing Statements for Each Factor

For example, Factor 1 is set apart by its strong emphasis on clear growth opportunities (statement 25, DV-1, Q-SV = +4) and its rejection of work-life balance as a central concern (statement 14, SV-6, Q-SV = -4). Factor 2 distinguishes itself by prioritizing financial stability and compensation (statements 23 and 18, EV-7 and EV-2, both ranked highly) while ranking innovation-driven companies (statement 3, IV-3) much lower than other groups. Factor 3 is characterized by its strong preference for continuous learning and mobility; statements 26 (DV-2) and 30 (DV-6) are both highly negative, showing participants are averse to stagnation and repetitive roles. Factor 4 diverges by rejecting the importance of workplace culture (statement 10, SV-2, Q-SV = -4), while Factor 5 stands out for its lower prioritization of salary transparency, high compensation, and identity-related openness (statements 20, 11, and 22). Finally, Factor 6 differentiates itself by ranking routine work (statement 5, IV-5) as a dealbreaker and expressing less concern for clear growth paths (statement 25, DV-1, Q-SV = -2).

Beyond these distinctions, certain patterns of consensus and divergence emerge across statements:

Consensus on transferable skills (statement 29, DV-5): Ranked highly by all factors except Factor 2, this highlights a shared motivation among most participants to build portable skills that support long-term career mobility. In contrast, Factor 2 places less weight on this, reflecting its preference for financial security and predictability over adaptability.

Consensus Statement			
	Factor 1	Q-SV	3
29. I want a job that builds skills I can carry with me throughout my career, even if I change employers (DV-5)		Z-score	1.146
	Factor 2	Q-SV	1
		Z-score	0.65
	Factor 3	Q-SV	3
		Z-score	1.22
	Factor 4	Q-SV	3
		Z-score	1.179
	Factor 5	Q-SV	2
		Z-score	1.235
	Factor 6	Q-SV	3
		Z-score	1.31

Table 13. Statement 29 (DV-5) Ranking Across all 6 Factors

Shared value of meaningful impact (statement 38, AV-6): Factors 3, 4, and 5 rank this statement highest, revealing a common drive to connect personal work to broader, meaningful outcomes. This suggests these groups are motivated by purpose and contribution rather than purely transactional rewards.

Consensus Statement			
	Factor 3	Q-SV	4
38. I'm more motivated when I understand how my work contributes to something larger. (AV-6)		Z-score	1.745
	Factor 4	Q-SV	4
		Z-score	2.368
	Factor 5	Q-SV	4
		Z-score	1.993

Table 14. Statement 38 (AV-6) Ranking Across Factors 3, 4, and 5

Solving real problems as a differentiator (statement 40, AV-8): Factors 3 and 6 rank this highest, signaling that these participants seek empowerment and autonomy to address practical, impactful challenges. Other factors value this less, showing a split between those prioritizing innovation and agency and those motivated more by stability or financial considerations.

Consensus Statement			
	Factor 3	Q-SV	4
40. I'm drawn to companies where employees are empowered to solve real problems (AV-8)		Z-score	1.715
	Factor 4	Q-SV	2
		Z-score	1.02
	Factor 6	Q-SV	4
		Z-score	1.645
	Factor 5	Q-SV	-2
		Z-score	-1.058

Table 15. Statement 40, AV-8 Ranking Across Factors 3, 4, 5, and 6

Rejection of innovation assumptions (statement 6, IV-6): Factors 1, 2, and 6 rank this lowest, indicating skepticism toward equating a company's technological leadership with an exciting job. This contrasts with factors that do not view tech leadership as strongly tied to job satisfaction, revealing nuanced differences in how participants evaluate employer branding signals.

Consensus Statement			
6. If a company is leading in tech, I assume the job will be exciting (IV-6)	Factor 1	Q-SV	-4
		Z-score	-1.325
	Factor 2	Q-SV	-4
		Z-score	-1.933
	Factor 6	Q-SV	-4
		Z-score	-1.842

Table 16. Statement 6, IV-6 Ranking Across Factors 1,2, and 6

Overall, the analysis shows that while participants share common ground on developing transferable skills and, for some, seeking meaning and autonomy, there are clear divergences in how they prioritize financial stability, innovation, workplace culture, and growth pathways.

4.4 Expectations vs. Reality in the Workplace

When asked how well their current roles matched their expectations before joining, most respondents reported positive alignment. Out of the 31 participants, 3 indicated that their expectations were fully met, 22 said they were mostly met, and 6 described them as only partially met. Notably, no respondent reported a complete mismatch. For example, Participant 3 highlighted that their role offered many challenges and new opportunities, though they noted that quieter periods sometimes led to less engaging tasks. Similarly, Participant 7 felt that their expectations around freedom and autonomy were met but expressed disappointment with limited growth opportunities and lower-than-expected pay. Several participants highlighted positive surprises in their roles. For example, Participant 17 described their experience as “freedom, collaboration, and a good environment,” exceeding what they had anticipated. Participant 20 also found their colleagues friendlier and the work more exciting than expected, while Participant 16 reported having greater influence and better secondary benefits than initially imagined. However, a recurring theme among unmet expectations involved career development, organizational structure, and workload balance. For instance, Participant 15 noted that while they enjoy meaningful work and autonomy, career progression remains unclear. Participant 18 expected a more intense, number-crunching analytics role, only to find a slower-paced, less demanding environment. Similarly, Participant 4 felt that while their benefits and role matched expectations, the organization was less structured than anticipated. Furthermore, others encountered unexpected challenges tied to broader organizational and industry contexts. Participant 11 valued the multidisciplinary nature of their role but found the larger energy transition context insufficiently analyzed. Participant 30 appreciated a collaborative and knowledge-driven culture but expressed concerns that corporate-driven funding pressures could threaten curiosity-driven

research. Participant 28 said their development tasks aligned well, but they had anticipated more managerial and client-facing responsibilities.

Overall, while most participants found their roles to generally align with their expectations, their elaborations reveal nuanced realities shaped by factors such as growth opportunities, organizational decision-making, workload intensity, and bureaucracy.

5 Discussion and Theoretical Implications

This study explored how Generation Z professionals in high-tech sectors perceive employer branding signals and how these perceptions cluster into six distinct viewpoints. The findings provide nuanced insights into how different groups within Gen Z prioritize development, purpose, social belonging, and financial stability, and how these relate to broader employer branding theories, including the EmpAt model, Signaling Theory, and the Psychological Contract.

5.1 Employer Attractiveness (EmpAt) Dimensions

The EmpAt model (Berthon et al., 2005) provided a useful framework for understanding which dimensions of employer attractiveness resonate most strongly with Generation Z participants in this study, and the findings reveal significant divergences across the six identified factors.

Development Value (DV) emerged as the strongest differentiator. Factors 1, 3, 4, 5, and 6 placed a high emphasis on clear growth opportunities (DV-1) and the development of transferable skills (DV-5), seeing these as central to a desirable workplace. In contrast, Factor 2 deprioritized development, instead focusing on financial stability and job security, suggesting that not all Gen Z professionals are driven by rapid advancement and that employer branding should therefore segment development-related messaging. While growth opportunities are persuasive for most Gen Z talent, they may hold less relevance for stability-oriented subgroups.

Application Value (AV), reflecting the role of purpose and impact, also produced clear distinctions. Factors 3, 4, and 6 ranked AV-6 (understanding how one's work contributes to something larger) and AV-8 (empowerment to solve real problems) among their highest priorities, underscoring the importance of meaningful, purpose-driven work. In contrast, Factors 1 and 2 assigned these statements lower importance, indicating that purpose-driven messaging resonates selectively within the Gen Z workforce.

Economic Value (EV) proved to be the most polarizing dimension across participant viewpoints. As expected from a generation that has largely grown up in an era of relative economic abundance, marked by rising per capita spending and expectations of future wealth transfer, Gen Z tends to place less emphasis on immediate financial rewards compared to previous cohorts. A recent Deloitte report reinforces this pattern, finding that although salary remains important, Gen Z values it less than earlier generations do, even when faced with a choice between better pay and more engaging work, they were just as likely to pick the latter.

Despite this trend, Factor 2, which prioritized financial stability (EV-2, EV-7) and job security, accounts for 7 out of the 31 participants in our study, representing a substantial subgroup. This reflects the persistence of a pragmatic and security-oriented segment within Gen Z that does place economic value front and center. By contrast, Factors 3, 4, and 6 deprioritized

compensation, treating salary as less central to workplace evaluation. This contrast highlights that while Gen Z as a whole may lean toward intrinsic motivations such as meaningful work or learning, salary-focused employer branding remains vitally important to a significant minority.

Interest Value (IV), particularly prestige and leading innovation claims (IV-6, IV-7), was consistently deprioritized by Factors 1, 2, and 6. This points to a broader skepticism among Gen Z professionals toward symbolic branding: they are less influenced by status-oriented narratives and expect tangible evidence of innovation rather than abstract claims.

Finally, Social Value (SV) revealed some of the most striking divergences. Factor 5 placed strong importance on inclusive cultures, friendly teams, and a sense of belonging, seeing these relational aspects as central to a “good job.” In contrast, Factors 3 and 4 downplayed social connectedness and fun workplace environments, instead prioritizing autonomy, mastery, and personal development. These results highlight that social messaging is highly segment-specific and cannot be assumed to attract all Gen Z candidates equally.

5.2 Linking Theoretical Profiles to Empirical Factors

The six factors identified in this study can be meaningfully interpreted through the lens of the five theoretical profiles developed earlier. This comparison highlights both overlap with prior literature and context-specific nuances emerging from the Dutch high-tech sector.

Profile 1 is most clearly reflected in Factor 2, which prioritized job security and financial stability above all else. Although Gen Z is often characterized as less financially driven than previous cohorts, the presence of this subgroup, comprising seven participants, underscores the persistence of pragmatic, security-oriented priorities. This resonates with Reis & Braga’s (2016) findings for Millennials and suggests continuity across generational lines.

The desire for autonomy, personal impact, and meaningful contributions displayed in Profile 2 maps closely onto Factors 3 and 6. Both emphasized purpose-driven work and empowerment to solve real problems, aligning with application value as central. This suggests that for a significant subset of Gen Z professionals, employer attractiveness is defined less by external benefits and more by opportunities to make a tangible difference.

Profile 3 orientation is captured in Factor 5, which emphasized inclusivity, belonging, and supportive team dynamics. Interestingly, all members of this factor were male, a finding that contrasts with Lašáková et al. (2023), who reported women as more likely to emphasize inclusivity. This unexpected pattern suggests that social value may resonate across genders in ways that challenge traditional assumptions, and that team orientation is not a strictly “feminine-coded” preference.

A strong emphasis on structured career growth, transferable skills, and progression pathways was evident both in Profile 4 and in Factors 1, 3, 4, 5, and 6, confirming development value as the

most consistent driver across the sample. While the theoretical profile drew on Millennial data suggesting career advancement as central, the Gen Z participants expressed a more dynamic interpretation, seeking growth opportunities not for long-term loyalty but as portable assets for career mobility.

The expected interest-value profile 5, characterized by attraction to creativity, novelty, and cutting-edge technologies, was only weakly represented in the data. Factor 4 gave some weight to interest value in combination with development, but prestige and abstract innovation claims were largely deprioritized across the sample (Factors 1, 2, and 6 especially). This may reflect Gen Z's broader skepticism toward symbolic branding and a demand for tangible, demonstrable innovation rather than rhetorical appeals.

Taken together, the mapping of theoretical profiles onto empirical factors shows both convergence and divergence. Development and application value consistently emerged as central, echoing prior studies such as Hofer et al. (2024). Social value appeared in a more gender-diverse and context-specific form than expected, while economic value remained salient for a minority subgroup despite broader generational narratives of intrinsic motivation. Interest value, although theorized as important in start-up cultures, was weaker in practice, suggesting that symbolic prestige plays a limited role in shaping employer attractiveness for this cohort.

This comparison also helps explain why six distinct factors emerged in this study rather than neatly aligning with the five EmpAt dimensions or the five theoretical profiles. Importantly, the factors are shaped not only by the attributes respondents strongly endorsed but also by those they actively rejected. For example, prestige- and status-oriented attributes (interest value) were consistently downplayed, suggesting that Gen Z professionals in this sample resist symbolic branding in favor of more tangible forms of value. Similarly, while social connectedness was central to Factor 5, other factors deliberately deprioritized fun or team-oriented environments, signaling that autonomy and individual mastery were considered more important than group belonging by some subgroups.

These dynamics show that Gen Z viewpoints cannot be reduced to simple rankings of "most important" attributes. Instead, distinctive combinations of acceptance and rejection emerge, producing hybrid value orientations that go beyond the neat profiles suggested by theory. Factors 3 and 6, for instance, fused application and development values into coherent but distinct orientations, while Factor 2 represented a pragmatic cluster that elevated financial security and stability while rejecting rapid development. The result is a more nuanced picture: real-world perspectives among Gen Z employees are fluid and context-dependent, constructed through the interplay of what they prioritize and what they explicitly push back against.

5.3 Linking Empirical Factors to Respondent Background Data

An analysis of demographic and background variables revealed no systematic overlap with the six identified factors. With the exception of Factor 5, which consisted exclusively of male respondents, all other factors included a mix of both male and female participants. Age did not differentiate the factors either: younger and older members of Generation Z were represented across all groups. Likewise, no consistent patterns emerged when comparing participants' industry sectors, professional titles, or years of experience, each factor contained respondents from varied contexts. Furthermore, whether participants felt that their expectations of employers had been met or unmet did not align with any particular factor. These findings suggest that the perspectives identified through the Q-sort process are not primarily determined by demographic or occupational attributes but instead reflect deeper attitudinal orientations toward employer attractiveness.

5.4 Signaling Theory: Trusted vs. Distrusted Branding Cues

From a signaling theory perspective (Spence, 1973), employer branding functions as a collection of observable cues that job seekers interpret to assess organizational fit and desirability. The findings of this study reveal which signals Generation Z participants perceive as credible and which they approach with skepticism, highlighting the importance of aligning branding claims with authentic workplace practices.

Trusted signals revolve around opportunities for professional growth, empowerment, and meaningful contributions. Many participants emphasized the importance of working environments where they can develop new skills, continue learning, and see the impact of their work. For example, one participant described finding "happiness and meaning" through continuous knowledge growth, while another highlighted the motivation derived from "seeing [their] efforts contribute to something larger." These priorities were repeatedly linked to feelings of purpose, engagement, and long-term fulfillment, making development- and impact-related claims highly persuasive components of employer branding. These signals are credible because they are easily verifiable once hired, if an employer promises skill-building, autonomy, or impactful work but fails to deliver, the discrepancy is immediately apparent.

In contrast, several distrusted signals emerged. Prestige-related claims and generic narratives about "leading innovation" were consistently met with skepticism. One participant, for instance, dismissed prestige as "an abstract concept" that felt hollow without substance, while another associated large, cutting-edge companies with "boring routine tasks," challenging assumptions about excitement in renowned firms. Similarly, corporate social responsibility (CSR) and sustainability messaging often triggered distrust. As one participant noted, such initiatives frequently appear as "window dressing" aimed at securing ESG scores rather than reflecting genuine impact. Unless employers demonstrate tangible actions behind these claims, participants perceive them as empty and manipulative.

The results also highlight the need for segmented signaling strategies rather than a one-size-fits-all approach. Some participants, particularly those represented by Factors 3, 4, and 6, respond strongly to purpose-driven branding, valuing empowerment, personal growth, and opportunities to make a difference. Others, especially in Factor 2, are more persuaded by signals of stability, security, and financial predictability, viewing these as essential prerequisites for employment. Meanwhile, Factor 5 participants resonate most with inclusive and relational cues, prioritizing collaboration, belonging, and supportive team environments. These differences suggest that employers aiming to attract and retain Gen Z talent must move beyond generic claims and tailor their branding messages to the diverse priorities within this generation.

5.5 Individual Psychological Contract Formation

One of the most striking insights from this study is that Gen Z employees do not share a single, uniform psychological contract; instead, each subgroup forms its own implicit “deal” with employers based on personal priorities, values, and workplace expectations. Unlike older generations, whose contracts were often shaped by collective norms, such as job security, hierarchical loyalty, or linear career paths, Gen Z appears to construct highly individualized agreements informed by digital transparency, personal values, and lifestyle aspirations.

For example, participants represented by Factors 3, 4, and 6 expect an autonomy- and purpose-based contract: they anticipate working on meaningful problems, contributing to a greater purpose, and continuously developing their skills. A breach here is not about compensation but about failing to provide opportunities for impact or freedom to innovate. In contrast, participants in Factor 2 hold a security-anchored contract, prioritizing predictable income, job stability, and fairness. For them, unmet promises about financial stability would represent a much deeper violation than limited learning opportunities. Meanwhile, participants aligned with Factor 5 emphasize relational and inclusion-based contracts, expecting belonging, psychological safety, and supportive managers. Breaches occur when organizational culture undermines inclusion or creates alienating environments.

This diversity highlights a key shift: Gen Z personalizes the psychological contract to a greater degree than previous generations. While millennials also sought value alignment, research suggests Gen Z’s upbringing in an era of abundance, technological transparency, and constant choice has amplified their expectation for tailored employment experiences (Deloitte, 2024; Twenge, 2017). In practical terms, this means employers face multiple “contracts” to manage simultaneously within the same workforce, increasing the complexity of aligning promises and delivery.

Crucially, these differentiated contracts mean that the same branding message can create trust in one subgroup and skepticism in another. For instance, a purpose-driven narrative may inspire candidates seeking impact but leave stability-oriented employees unconvincing or even alienated. Similarly, a strong CSR campaign may reassure inclusion-focused individuals while triggering distrust among those wary of “window dressing.”

This reframing offers a more nuanced implication: Gen Z's psychological contracts are highly segmented and deeply personal. Employers can no longer rely on generic EVP promises to build trust. Instead, effective strategies require understanding and addressing these distinct expectation clusters, ensuring that the reality of work matches what each subgroup values most.

6 Practical Implications

The findings of this study offer several actionable insights for organizations, managers, and policymakers seeking to attract and retain Generation Z talent in high-tech sectors.

Segment employer branding strategies. Gen Z is not a homogeneous group. Some employees prioritize purpose and autonomy, others stability and financial security, while others value inclusion and social belonging. Employers should therefore avoid one-size-fits-all campaigns. Instead, they should segment their branding strategies: emphasize development and impact for purpose-driven groups, highlight financial security and fairness for stability-oriented candidates, and showcase team cohesion and inclusivity for those seeking relational environments.

Anchor promises in verifiable practices. Branding messages around development, empowerment, and purpose are highly persuasive but also highly testable once employment begins. Employers must ensure that promises about mentorship, autonomy, or impactful work are substantiated in practice. Otherwise, they risk rapid disillusionment, breaches of the psychological contract, and high turnover. Embedding employee development pathways and visible opportunities for impact into day-to-day operations is therefore essential.

Move beyond symbolic cues. Prestige, generic innovation claims, and superficial CSR campaigns were met with skepticism in this study. Organizations should shift from symbolic messaging to demonstrable action. For example, instead of promoting themselves as “innovators,” firms could showcase specific projects, patents, or employee-led initiatives. In the realm of sustainability or diversity, measurable outcomes and transparent reporting will be more credible than generic slogans.

Invest in internal–external alignment. Employer branding is co-constructed through employee voice, social media, and review platforms. This makes alignment between internal practices and external promises critical. Leaders and HR teams should ensure that workplace culture reflects branding claims and encourage employees to act as authentic brand ambassadors. Failure to achieve alignment will quickly surface in online reviews and peer-to-peer channels, undermining reputation.

Adapt recruitment and retention practices. Recruitment processes should be streamlined, transparent, and respectful of candidate time, issues repeatedly flagged in the concourse development phase. Employers should also monitor early-career touchpoints such as onboarding, mentorship, and first projects, as these strongly influence whether Gen Z employees perceive their psychological contract as upheld or breached. For policymakers, this points to the

importance of labor regulations and guidelines that support fair recruitment and early-career development practices.

Address underrepresentation and inclusivity. The study revealed subgroup preferences around inclusivity and belonging, particularly valued by women participants. Given the persistent underrepresentation of women in high-tech, organizations should integrate diversity and inclusion not only into branding but into career development systems, leadership pipelines, and everyday practices. Policymakers could incentivize these efforts through funding or recognition schemes tied to measurable diversity outcomes.

Plan for long-term retention and tacit knowledge preservation. Turnover among Gen Z is often accelerated by unmet expectations. Beyond immediate recruitment, employers should recognize the strategic cost of losing young professionals, including tacit knowledge and industry-specific expertise. Retention policies that focus on authentic development opportunities and sustained engagement will therefore contribute to long-term competitiveness.

7 Limitations and Future Research

7.1 Limitations

While this study provides valuable insights into Generation Z's perceptions of employer branding in the Dutch high-tech sector, several limitations shape how the findings should be interpreted and point toward avenues for future research.

The choice of Q-methodology is both a strength and a constraint. The approach is well-suited for uncovering the structure of subjective viewpoints and making sense of complex, often tacit preferences. However, it relies on small, purposive samples and prioritizes depth over generalizability. With 31 participants, the study identifies distinct factors that capture dominant ways of thinking about employer attractiveness but does not claim statistical representativeness. These factors should therefore be understood as illustrative typologies of meaning rather than definitive statements about the entire Gen Z workforce.

The design of the concourse and the Q-set also shaped the range of perspectives participants could express. The statements were derived from academic research, practitioner surveys, and exploratory interviews, which ensured both theoretical relevance and practical grounding. Yet the reduction of a broad concourse to a final set of 40 statements inevitably excluded some nuances, particularly those reflecting marginalized or niche perspectives. This limitation is inherent to Q-methodology but worth acknowledging, as it constrains the interpretive space available to participants.

Interpretation of the factors introduces another limitation. Making sense of the composite viewpoints that emerge from analysis always involves researcher judgment. Although the interpretation was guided by theoretical frameworks and systematic coding, it remains partly

subjective, and alternative readings are possible. The factor solution also produced six perspectives, slightly exceeding the five categories defined in the EmpAt model. While this added richness and improved resonance with participant narratives, it also introduced interpretive complexity and reduced alignment with the theoretical framework.

The demographic composition of the sample requires particular attention. Only nine participants identified as women, mirroring the broader underrepresentation of women in high-tech and engineering but limiting the gender balance in this study. This imbalance may have influenced how strongly certain dimensions, such as developmental or social value, were represented. An unexpected finding was that the factor emphasizing social value was composed entirely of men, counter to earlier findings suggesting women are more likely to prioritize inclusivity and stability (Lašáková et al., 2023). This result complicates existing assumptions and highlights the need for further research into how gender interacts with perceptions of employer attractiveness.

Cultural diversity in the Dutch labor market is another critical consideration. Although all participants worked in the Netherlands, the survey was anonymous, and no information on nationality or ethnicity was collected. Many respondents may have been raised in different cultural contexts, bringing with them values and expectations “inherited” from those environments. Belonging to minority groups can similarly shape how individuals evaluate employers; one participant explicitly mentioned that being part of a minority influenced what they valued most in the workplace. The Netherlands itself actively promotes the migration of highly skilled workers to address talent shortages, creating a structurally diverse workforce. As such, the sample cannot be treated as monocultural, and cross-cultural and minority perspectives should be considered part of the interpretive frame.

Expectations around sustainability and corporate social responsibility (CSR) illustrate another limitation. Based on the Dutch context, where environmental debates on nitrogen reduction, CO₂ emissions, and climate adaptation feature prominently, it was anticipated that Gen Z respondents would place stronger emphasis on sustainability and CSR. Yet this did not emerge strongly in the findings. Some participants expressed skepticism about whether companies genuinely contribute to sustainability, while others argued that firms should take greater responsibility rather than shifting the burden to consumers. One respondent emphasized that personal contributions mattered more than organizational ones. This suggests a possible disconnect between national discourse and individual workplace preferences, as well as the need to disentangle how CSR (broader social and ethical responsibilities) and sustainability (environmental action) are differently valued.

Age distribution within the sample also deserves reflection. The study included relatively few younger members of Gen Z (born after 2002), many of whom are still in education and have not yet begun actively evaluating potential employers. Their perspectives may diverge from those of older Gen Z participants already embedded in the workforce, but capturing these views remains a challenge given their limited work experience.

Practical constraints further shaped the study. Gen Z is a mobile-first generation, yet the Q-sorting tool was not mobile-friendly. Participants were required to complete the exercise on a laptop, which reduced convenience and may have discouraged engagement. Some potential respondents who expressed interest, postponed participation until later and ultimately did not complete the survey. Despite targeted outreach, including 80 personalized LinkedIn messages and follow-ups with three companies, only 31 individuals participated. It is plausible that a mobile-optimized tool would have increased participation, though this remains speculative. Because the study design did not track incomplete responses, the extent of non-completion is unknown.

Methodological perceptions also played a role. One participant noted that the forced distribution felt restrictive, as they had to make compromises when ranking statements. While this is an intentional feature of Q-methodology, it forces participants to articulate priorities rather than endorse everything as equally important, it may also shape how individuals experience the sorting process.

The temporal design presents another limitation. The study provides a snapshot of perceptions at one moment in time. A longitudinal design could reveal how expectations evolve with career stages, industry changes, or organizational transitions. However, anonymity made follow-up with participants impossible, as responses could not be linked back to individuals with certainty.

Finally, the focus on Gen Z alone means that the findings cannot be compared across generations. This exclusivity was aligned with the research objective but limited the broader interpretive scope. Including other generations in future research could clarify whether certain factors are unique to Gen Z or whether they resonate more widely across the workforce. Comparative designs could test whether generational distinctions are as sharp as the literature often suggests, or whether commonalities across cohorts outweigh differences.

Taken together, these limitations do not diminish the value of the findings but instead highlight the interpretive boundaries of the study. They point to opportunities for future research, particularly more diverse and comparative sampling, longitudinal designs, and mobile-friendly methodological tools, to deepen understanding of how employer branding is perceived by different groups across contexts.

7.2 Future Research

This study offers a foundation for understanding how Generation Z perceives employer branding through the lens of signaling theory, psychological contracts, and branding-practice alignment. However, several avenues for future research could deepen and expand these insights.

First, future studies could benefit from a larger and more diverse sample, allowing for both replication and statistical generalization. While Q-methodology is designed for identifying shared patterns of thought rather than measuring their prevalence, follow-up studies using quantitative methods (e.g., surveys or experimental designs) could test the relative importance of

the identified employer brand dimensions across broader Gen Z populations and across national or cultural contexts.

Second, the gender imbalance in the current sample suggests the need for more gender-sensitive research, particularly in high-tech and male-dominated industries. Future studies could explore how gender influences employer value preferences and perceived employer attractiveness, ideally using stratified sampling or intersectional frameworks that account for both gender and other identity variables such as race, socioeconomic status, or educational background.

Third, the age range within Generation Z deserves further investigation. The younger subset of Gen Z, those born after 2002, was underrepresented in this study due to their limited labor market exposure. Future research might adopt a longitudinal approach or focus specifically on pre-employment expectations among students and early job seekers. This would allow researchers to trace how employer brand perceptions evolve over time and across different career stages.

Fourth, future studies could enrich the analysis by including organizational perspectives alongside job-seeker perceptions. For instance, comparative research could analyze how companies construct their employer brand (e.g., through recruitment campaigns or corporate social responsibility initiatives) and how those efforts are received by different segments of Gen Z. This would provide a more holistic view of branding-practice alignment, including where and why breakdowns in credibility occur.

Fifth, the EmpAt model, while useful for categorizing employer attractiveness dimensions, may benefit from revision or expansion to better reflect emerging values among Gen Z, such as environmental sustainability, diversity and inclusion, and workplace mental health. Future research could explore whether additional dimensions should be integrated into existing models or whether a new generationally-relevant framework is needed to capture the evolving employer-employee value exchange.

Finally, methodological innovation could advance this line of inquiry. Future researchers might combine Q-methodology with digital ethnography, analyzing online forums, LinkedIn discussions, or TikTok content where Gen Z workers share real-time reactions to employer branding efforts. Such approaches would bring further ecological validity to the study of how employer branding is interpreted and internalized in the digital age.

8 Conclusion

This study examined how Generation Z employees in the Dutch high-tech sector perceive employer attractiveness and interpret employer branding signals. Through Q-methodology, six distinct factors were identified, showing that Gen Z is not a uniform group but a cohort with highly diverse and sometimes conflicting priorities.

Development opportunities stood out as the strongest and most consistent driver of employer attractiveness. Yet beyond this shared emphasis, the analysis revealed sharp contrasts: some participants valued purpose and impact above all, others placed stability and security at the center, while another group emphasized belonging and social connectedness. These divergent profiles show that Gen Z does not conform to a single “purpose-driven” or “socially conscious” stereotype.

The findings also highlight how carefully Gen Z evaluates branding messages. Concrete and verifiable signals, such as access to mentorship or meaningful projects, were widely trusted, while abstract claims of prestige, innovation, or responsibility were often rejected when not backed by evidence. This indicates that employer brand equity depends less on polished messaging and more on the authenticity and credibility of what organizations deliver.

By combining signaling theory, psychological contract theory, and the EmpAt framework, this study demonstrates how branding promises are filtered into expectations and how mismatches shape perceptions of trust and attractiveness. The six factors identified here offer a typology of how Gen Z makes sense of employer branding, providing a structured way to understand the diversity within this cohort.

In sum, there is no single formula for attracting Gen Z talent. The strength of an employer brand lies not in projecting universal messages but in segmenting approaches, grounding them in authentic practice, and recognizing that expectations differ even within one generation. For high-tech organizations competing in a tight labor market, aligning branding with lived experience is not optional, it is central to retaining talent and safeguarding the tacit knowledge that underpins innovation.

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Appendix A

The Q-set of 40 statements used in this study was constructed by adapting items from the Employer Attractiveness Scale (EmpAt) developed by Berthon et al. (2005) and supplementing them with statements reflecting contemporary Gen Z concerns identified in the literature. The bolded statements were selected for the final list for the sorting task. In the Table A1 below, the original, EmpAt study by Berthon et al. (2005) items are marked [O], and newly developed items are marked [ND]. Statements numbered 121 and higher reflect the current trends about employment; however, those statements were used for context and were not selected for the final Q-set.

Interest Value

1. I want to work for a company that does cutting-edge work.	[O]
2. The company demonstrates innovation through its actual products and services, not just in marketing.	[O]
3. I'm drawn to companies that challenge the status quo in their industry.	[ND]
4. A company's reputation for innovation influences how much I want to work there.	[ND]
5. Routine or repetitive work is a dealbreaker for me.	[ND]
6. If a company is leading in tech, I assume the job will be exciting.	[O]
7. Prestige only matters to me if it's backed by real innovation.	[ND]
8. I prefer employers who give employees freedom to experiment with new ideas.	[O]
9. Start-ups feel more innovative than big corporations.	
10. Buzzwords like “AI” and “blockchain” don’t impress me unless they’re applied in real products.	
11. Legacy companies can be just as innovative as start-ups if they invest properly.	
12. Innovation without clear benefits for people or society feels empty.	
13. Companies that file many patents appear more attractive to me.	
14. Working on groundbreaking projects motivates me more than a higher salary.	
15. A company that is slow to adopt new technologies is a red flag for me.	
16. High-tech employers should give employees a chance to influence R&D.	
17. Companies that use flashy recruitment campaigns often overpromise on innovation.	
18. I value organizations that take calculated risks in developing new ideas.	
19. Innovation means nothing if day-to-day work is boring.	
20. I distrust companies that label everything as “innovative.”	
21. The ability to test new tools and methods is a sign of a strong employer.	
22. Innovation is only meaningful if it leads to real improvements for customers.	

- 23. I'd rather join a challenger brand than a traditional market leader.
- 24. Access to the latest technology at work is essential for me.

Social Value

- 25. **I'm more likely to stay in a job where I feel genuinely accepted and included.** [ND]
- 26. **Workplace culture matters more to me than job title or status.** [ND]
- 27. **If I can't be open about my identity or ask for support at work, it's not the right place for me.** [ND]
- 28. **A friendly and uplifting team is one of the most important factors in choosing a job.** [O]
- 29. **A good employer gives back through genuine efforts that address social or environmental issues.** [O]
- 30. **Work-life balance is essential for me to feel satisfied at work.** [ND]
- 31. **The company's success is driven by how well it serves its customers.** [O]
- 32. **I'm more motivated in workplaces that are fun and energizing.** [O]
- 33. Diversity statements in branding feel empty without evidence.
- 34. Seeing real employees in branding builds trust.
- 35. I distrust companies that talk about sustainability but show no proof.
- 36. A flashy recruitment video doesn't guarantee a good workplace.
- 37. A company's sustainability efforts only matter if I see concrete actions.
- 38. Social media influences how I perceive a company's culture.
- 39. A supportive community at work makes me more engaged.
- 40. Remote and flexible work policies are a sign that a company cares about employees.
- 41. Employers should take mental health as seriously as physical health.
- 42. Volunteering programs feel more meaningful if employees choose the causes.
- 43. Companies that prioritize customer well-being earn my trust.
- 44. I value leaders who speak out on social issues.
- 45. Employers who ignore diversity and equity lose credibility.
- 46. A positive team environment matters more than free perks.
- 47. Employers who act sustainably are more attractive to me.
- 48. Companies that hide behind CSR slogans feel fake.

Economic Value

- 49. **No matter how great the culture is, I won't accept a job that underpays me.** [ND]
- 50. **Financial stability is a top priority when I evaluate employers.** [O]
- 51. **Job security is a key factor in whether I consider a company worth working for.** [O]
- 52. **I expect employers to be transparent about salary ranges and raises.** [ND]

53. **I evaluate job offers based on real benefits, not superficial perks like snacks or office games.** [ND]

54. **I associate high compensation with respect and recognition.** [O]

55. **Even if a job is meaningful, I still need it to support my financial goals.** [ND]

56. **I expect companies to fairly compensate junior employees, not just executives.** [O]

57. I'd accept lower pay for a job that gives me strong development opportunities.

58. Free office perks don't make up for poor pay.

59. Stock options and profit-sharing make an employer more attractive.

60. Employers who delay promotions create distrust.

61. I expect salary growth to keep pace with inflation.

62. Being paid fairly compared to peers matters more than absolute salary.

63. Financial rewards are the best way to retain talent.

64. I value companies that provide strong retirement and health benefits.

65. Bonuses feel more motivating when linked to clear results.

66. Job offers without transparent benefits make me skeptical.

67. Pay secrecy undermines trust in leadership.

68. For me, financial stability is non-negotiable.

69. I see compensation as a signal of how much a company values employees.

70. Companies that underpay young workers signal poor culture.

71. I prefer stable income over risky high-commission jobs.

72. Economic insecurity is the fastest way to make me leave a job.

Development Value

73. **I expect clear growth opportunities when I join a company.** [O]

74. **If I'm not learning or developing, I feel like I'm wasting time.** [O]

75. **Regular feedback and coaching are non-negotiable for my career satisfaction.** [O]

76. **I want a manager who supports my development, not just my output.** [ND]

77. **I want a job that builds skills I can carry with me throughout my career, even if I change employers.** [O]

78. **Being stuck in the same role too long is a red flag for me.** [ND]

79. **I value roles where I can collaborate across teams and departments to grow and learn.** [O]

80. **Sharing my expertise and mentoring others is an important part of how I grow at work.** [O]

81. Structured graduate programs help me succeed in early career stages.

82. Mentorship is more important to me than formal training.

83. Rotating between roles keeps me engaged.

84. Employers who provide certifications are more attractive.
85. Clear career paths make me more committed to a company.
86. Development is a stronger motivator than prestige.
87. Training budgets signal how much a company invests in employees.
88. I'm loyal to companies that invest in my growth.
89. A lack of training opportunities makes me disengaged.
90. Development opportunities outweigh salary in my decision-making.
91. I prefer hands-on learning over classroom-style training.
92. Career stagnation is a dealbreaker for me.
93. Coaching from senior leaders builds my confidence.
94. Employers who ignore development risk losing talent.
95. Development is about transferable skills, not just promotions.
96. Learning opportunities are essential to my job satisfaction.

Application Value

97. Continuous learning matters more to me than having all the answers.	[ND]
98. A job that lets me make a real impact is more attractive than one that just pays well.	[O]
99. Being able to apply my unique strengths keeps me motivated.	[ND]
100 I want a job where my academic or technical training actually matters.	[O]
101 Having autonomy in how I apply my skills is important to me.	[ND]
102 I'm more motivated when I understand how my work contributes to something larger.	[ND]
103 Purpose-driven work helps me stay focused and committed.	[ND]
104 I'm drawn to companies where employees are empowered to solve real problems.	[ND]
105 My degree should be relevant to the work I do.	
106 Using my skills in creative ways keeps me engaged.	
107 I want a job where problem-solving is valued.	
108 Autonomy in my work makes me more productive.	
109 I need to feel that my work contributes to society.	
110 I'm more motivated by purpose than prestige.	
111 Companies that empower employees attract me more than hierarchical ones.	
112 Titles matter less to me than meaningful tasks.	
113 Applying my strengths is the best use of my time.	
114 Jobs that waste my skills make me disengaged.	

115 I want to work for companies that let me see the results of my effort.

116 If my skills aren't used, I'll look for another job.

117 Impactful work builds stronger commitment.

118 I need autonomy to feel trusted as a professional.

119 My work **should** align with my personal values.

120 Purpose matters as much as salary in choosing an employer.

Statements Reflecting Current Employment Trends Among Young People

121 Job advertisements should describe the role accurately.

122 Posting non-genuine job ads damages an employer's reputation.

123 I avoid companies with long and complicated hiring processes.

124 I lose trust in employers who fail to follow up after interviews.

125 I expect recruitment tasks to be paid if they require significant work.

126 Job offers should match the salary and benefits advertised.

127 I avoid employers who expect unpaid overtime.

128 I avoid jobs that require answering work messages after hours.

129 I want employers to respect boundaries between work and personal life.

130 I pay close attention to burnout risks when considering a job.

131 Mental health policies are an important factor when I choose an employer.

132 Leaders should model healthy work-life boundaries.

133 I reduce my effort if my expectations at work are not met. (quiet quitting)

134 I believe it is acceptable to leave a job publicly to make a point. (public or "loud" quitting)

135 I am willing to leave a job quickly if it does not meet my expectations. (*rapid job-switching*)

136 I am interested in building a career that combines multiple roles or side projects. (*portfolio career*)

137 I want to work for companies that make a positive environmental impact.

138 I avoid employers who exaggerate or misrepresent their sustainability practices. (*anti-greenwashing*)

139 I prefer to choose my own learning and development opportunities. (*upskilling autonomy*)

140 I value employers who support career breaks without penalty.

Table A1. Concourse of 140 Statements Collected for Q-study

Appendix B

Supporting Tables for Data Analysis

Participants	Statements																																								
	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	S7	S8	S9	S10	S11	S12	S13	S14	S15	S16	S17	S18	S19	S20	S21	S22	S23	S24	S25	S26	S27	S28	S29	S30	S31	S32	S33	S34	S35	S36	S37	S38	S39	S40	
1	1	1	0	-2	0	0	-3	4	-2	0	-2	0	-3	-4	3	1	2	0	-2	-1	-4	-2	2	-1	4	0	2	1	1	0	3	3	2	-1	-1	-3	-1	1	-1	2	
2	-3	1	0	0	-2	-4	1	2	-1	-3	-2	-1	-1	0	2	-2	0	0	4	2	1	-4	2	1	-2	1	2	0	3	0	3	-2	-1	-1	4	0	1	3	-3	-1	
3	-3	1	-4	-2	-3	-2	0	1	2	1	-1	0	-1	2	0	0	-1	-2	-2	3	0	-1	2	-1	2	-4	0	0	4	-2	3	0	1	-1	1	-3	2	4	1	3	
4	0	1	2	0	-2	1	-2	0	4	-1	4	0	-3	3	-2	1	-3	-1	-1	1	-1	-1	0	3	0	-4	0	2	1	1	2	-2	-3	-4	0	-2	3	2	-1	2	
5	-3	-1	-1	-2	-2	-4	0	0	0	1	-1	-4	-1	-2	-2	1	1	1	-3	1	0	1	2	3	4	3	2	4	2	2	3	0	2	-2	-1	-1	-3	0	0	0	
6	4	3	0	1	-1	0	-1	0	1	2	0	-2	-1	0	-2	-3	-3	-2	-1	-3	1	2	-2	-4	3	1	-2	2	2	-4	-1	0	-1	3	2	0	0	4	1	1	
7	-3	-1	-4	-2	4	-2	-4	0	1	-1	2	1	0	3	-2	-1	2	1	-3	-1	2	0	2	0	-1	3	1	4	1	1	2	0	0	-1	3	-2	-2	-3	0	0	
8	-1	-1	-4	-1	-3	-4	-2	1	2	-3	0	0	-3	-1	1	0	-2	-2	3	0	1	2	4	-1	2	3	1	0	0	1	-1	0	-2	0	1	4	-2	2	2	3	
9	-1	0	-3	-2	-2	0	-3	0	1	1	1	0	-1	-2	0	-1	1	-3	-1	2	-1	-4	1	0	2	-2	2	0	4	-4	3	-1	2	4	3	-2	1	2	0	3	
10	-2	2	2	0	-1	-3	0	3	-2	0	-4	3	-3	1	-1	4	1	2	-3	2	-2	-1	-1	0	0	-2	1	4	1	-4	1	0	0	-1	-2	-1	3	1	2		
11	-2	0	2	1	3	-3	-2	2	-2	0	1	-1	0	1	-2	1	-1	-1	-4	0	0	-3	-4	2	-3	4	-1	0	3	1	-1	-1	-2	3	1	2	0	0	2	4	
12	-2	2	-2	-2	1	0	-3	-1	1	1	-3	3	3	-1	1	0	0	2	1	-4	0	-4	0	-1	0	-3	0	2	4	0	2	-2	2	-1	1	-1	4	3	-2		
13	-2	1	-4	1	-2	-3	-1	0	0	-2	-2	0	-4	-1	1	-1	3	4	4	1	2	0	3	3	-1	-1	1	2	2	-2	2	0	0	-3	1	-3	-1	2	0	0	
14	2	0	0	-3	-1	0	1	3	1	-3	-4	-3	-4	-1	-2	-2	0	-2	-1	2	-1	1	0	-1	3	4	0	1	0	2	-2	0	3	-1	2	-2	2	4	1	1	
15	1	-3	1	-2	2	-3	-2	3	2	-1	-1	3	-4	4	-1	-4	1	0	1	-2	3	0	2	0	-2	1	-1	0	1	0	-1	0	-3	-2	0	2	4	-1	0	2	
16	-2	0	-4	-3	-1	-4	-2	4	0	-1	0	0	-1	-2	-1	1	-2	1	-3	3	0	-1	2	0	2	2	2	1	2	3	1	1	-2	-1	1	-3	4	3	0	0	
17	0	-1	0	0	-4	-1	-3	4	1	3	1	2	0	2	-2	1	-1	3	-3	-3	-4	-1	0	0	-2	-2	2	1	-2	-2	1	4	0	-1	0	2	3	1	-1	2	
18	-2	0	-1	1	-4	-3	-4	-1	-2	0	-1	-1	-3	-3	0	-2	4	1	2	-2	2	2	3	0	2	3	1	0	4	2	3	0	-1	-2	1	1	0	1	-1	0	
19	-4	0	-3	-3	-2	-4	2	1	1	3	0	-2	-1	4	-3	1	1	-1	1	2	3	4	2	3	2	0	-2	2	0	-1	-2	-1	-1	0	0	0	1	-1	0	-2	
20	0	-1	-1	-2	-2	-4	-1	1	-1	1	-4	2	-3	2	-3	0	3	3	0	-2	0	-3	4	4	1	1	-2	2	1	0	3	-2	0	0	2	-1	0	2	1	-1	
21	-1	-3	-2	-3	0	-2	-4	1	2	0	-1	3	-4	0	-2	-2	4	1	-3	1	2	-1	4	-1	0	2	1	3	2	-2	2	3	-1	0	-1	0	1	0	0	1	
22	0	1	1	-2	-1	-2	-3	0	3	-1	-3	2	-2	0	0	0	-1	0	-1	-3	-1	-4	1	-4	3	4	1	2	4	2	1	3	2	-2	0	-1	-2	2	0	1	
23	2	-3	0	1	-4	-2	-1	4	2	-3	-1	-4	-1	-2	0	-3	-1	-1	-2	-1	0	0	0	0	-2	2	0	-2	3	0	1	1	1	3	3	1	4	2	2		
24	-1	1	-2	-2	-2	-3	-3	4	0	4	3	1	-4	0	0	1	3	2	2	-1	0	1	2	2	-1	-2	-1	1	0	-3	-2	0	-1	2	-1	4	0	0	1	3	
25	-2	0	0	-4	1	-3	2	0	0	-1	-1	-2	4	-3	1	2	3	2	0	2	-1	3	0	-2	1	-4	1	3	-1	0	1	4	-3	2	-1	0	-2	1	-2		
26	-2	-4	-1	-1	-2	0	1	0	0	0	2	0	-2	4	-2	1	2	1	-1	-3	-1	1	3	0	-3	0	2	1	3	-4	0	-2	-1	3	-3	1	4	2	2	-1	
27	0	-1	-1	-2	-3	-2	-3	2	3	-2	-4	4	0	3	2	-3	1	4	2	0	-4	-2	-1	-1	0	1	2	0	0	1	0	-2	1	-1	3	1	1	-1			
28	-1	-2	-3	-3	1	-2	-4	0	2	1	-1	1	0	3	-1	2	0	1	3	-3	2	-1	0	-1	0	1	4	2	0	0	4	2	-2	-2	0	-2	-1	3	1	-4	
29	0	0	-4	0	-2	-3	-1	-1	0	0	-2	0	0	2	-4	-3	4	4	4	3	2	2	3	3	1	1	-2	-1	2	1	1	-2	-1	3	-1	1	-4				
30	-1	0	-2	-3	-3	-2	0	0	2	2	1	1	-1	4	-1	-4	0	1	2	2	3	-2	4	1	-2	2	-1	1	0	-1	0	0	-3	3	-2	3	-1	1	-4		
31	-1	-2	1	-2	-1	-4	-4	3	2	-1	-3	-1	0	2	-2	-2	2	4	-2	0	1	1	-2	0	1	0	1	3	-1	0	-3	1	3	0	0	2	-3	-1	4	0	2

Table B1. Overview of Participant Q-Sort Rankings for All Statements

Correlations between Q sorts																																
Nr.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	
1	100	8	26	-5	36	-1	4	6	39	40	-12	19	21	32	-13	38	24	29	-32	21	34	52	11	25	-12	-18	-4	11	-22	-26	32	
2	8	100	32	10	15	-16	5	28	29	15	5	21	56	16	18	36	-11	42	7	38	10	17	32	-2	25	2	35	20	24	38	32	
3	26	32	100	39	26	16	9	21	67	40	-9	33	36	23	2	52	18	13	31	27	32	24	21	28	16	21	23	18	14	27	38	
4	-5	10	39	100	2	2	3	-1	15	16	2	-1	11	1	21	24	29	-7	9	8	5	2	1	16	-5	14	19	10	-3	18	7	
5	36	15	26	2	100	-12	37	24	15	24	5	4	34	31	-18	46	-3	48	39	41	34	34	12	8	24	0	-13	22	21	8	26	
6	-1	-16	16	2	-12	100	-14	14	24	4	9	8	-18	29	1	-5	4	2	-1	-7	-2	22	32	5	-19	2	-2	-4	-5	-8	1	
7	4	5	9	3	37	-14	100	12	12	1	24	18	24	-5	30	31	2	22	24	31	56	25	-12	16	39	11	-5	45	31	35	23	
8	6	28	21	-1	24	14	12	100	13	-8	-1	-7	31	29	28	35	-4	46	24	15	29	29	42	16	-2	6	32	19	16	12	20	
9	39	29	67	15	15	24	12	13	100	22	8	32	21	13	-12	32	11	17	-4	21	35	21	26	30	-9	17	11	6	-2	8	40	
10	40	15	40	16	24	4	1	-8	22	100	20	22	31	12	-2	26	34	-3	8	40	29	24	-6	35	13	18	32	10	-1	-14	42	
11	-12	5	-9	2	5	9	24	-1	8	20	100	-7	-28	-1	18	15	7	-8	-7	5	5	6	28	2	-3	8	4	-16	-34	-22	18	
12	19	21	33	-1	4	8	18	-7	32	22	-7	100	28	-12	-9	12	5	14	-18	36	10	43	-5	3	16	4	35	46	5	9	11	
13	21	56	36	11	34	-18	24	31	21	31	-28	28	100	8	15	29	-5	56	25	54	38	12	7	43	38	11	18	35	56	39	31	
14	32	16	23	1	31	29	-5	29	13	12	-1	-12	8	100	13	43	-13	14	9	19	17	38	46	-8	15	-11	6	-6	-5	9	30	
15	-13	18	2	21	-18	1	30	28	-12	-2	18	-9	15	13	100	15	20	19	19	34	54	16	22	24	31	31	27	21	28	43	21	
16	38	36	52	24	46	-5	31	35	32	26	15	12	29	43	15	100	20	30	24	31	44	34	26	21	6	6	27	31	12	27	34	
17	24	-11	18	29	-3	4	2	-4	11	34	7	5	-5	-13	20	20	20	100	-5	-6	18	28	15	21	33	-9	32	27	19	1	6	26
18	29	42	13	-7	48	2	22	46	17	-3	-8	14	56	14	19	30	-5	100	14	42	42	34	29	18	13	8	-5	25	44	18	20	
19	-32	7	31	9	39	-1	24	24	-4	8	-7	-18	25	9	19	24	-6	14	100	33	19	-23	-15	38	46	29	2	16	55	50	14	
20	21	38	27	8	41	-7	31	15	21	40	5	36	54	19	34	31	18	42	33	100	49	29	11	35	49	28	28	36	48	44	38	
21	34	10	32	5	34	-2	56	29	35	29	5	10	38	17	54	44	28	42	19	49	100	43	16	36	28	36	21	39	37	36	46	
22	52	17	24	2	34	22	25	29	21	24	6	43	12	38	16	34	15	34	-23	29	43	100	22	-7	19	-11	34	39	-15	6	34	
23	11	32	21	1	12	32	-12	42	26	-6	28	-5	7	46	22	26	21	29	-15	11	16	22	100	-7	-6	15	13	-8	-8	1	32	
24	25	-2	28	16	8	5	16	16	30	35	2	3	43	-8	24	21	33	18	38	35	36	-7	-7	100	16	31	2	13	22	22	30	
25	-12	25	16	-5	24	-19	39	-2	-9	13	-3	16	38	15	31	6	-9	13	46	49	28	19	-6	16	100	20	4	21	43	57	17	
26	-18	2	21	14	0	2	11	6	17	18	8	4	11	-11	31	6	32	8	29	28	36	-11	15	31	20	100	12	21	16	21	12	
27	-4	35	23	19	-13	-2	-5	32	11	32	4	35	18	6	27	27	27	-5	2	28	21	34	13	2	4	12	100	49	10	22	34	
28	11	20	18	10	22	-4	45	19	6	10	-16	46	35	-6	21	31	19	25	16	36	39	39	-8	13	21	21	49	100	25	34	46	
29	-22	24	14	-3	21	-5	31	16	-2	-1	-34	5	56	-5	28	12	1	44	55	48	37	-15	-8	22	43	16	10	25	100	53	8	
30	-26	38	27	18	8	-8	35	12	8	-14	-22	9	39	9	43	27	6	18	50	44	36	6	1	22	57	21	22	34	53	100	13	
31	32	32	38	7	26	1	23	20	40	42	18	11	31	30	21	34	26	20	14	38	46	34	32	30	17	12	34	46	8	13	100	

Table B2. Correlation Table Between Participants' Q-sorts

Nr.	Statement	Factor Loadings and Rankings											
		Factor 1		Factor 2		Factor 3		Factor 4		Factor 5		Factor 6	
		Z-score	Rank	Z-score	Rank	Z-score	Rank	Z-score	Rank	Z-score	Rank	Z-score	Rank
1	I want to work for a company that does cutting-edge work (IV-1)	-0.71	27	-0.97	34	-1.09	33	0.59	11	-0.54	29	-0.37	29
2	The company demonstrates innovation through its actual products and services, not just in marketing. (IV-2)	-0.01	20	-0.02	21	0.14	22	-0.7	29	0.02	21	-1.3	36
3	I'm drawn to companies that challenge the status quo in their industry (IV-3)	-0.35	24	-1.74	39	-0.78	30	-0.7	30	-0.91	33	0.41	14
4	A company's reputation for innovation influences how much I want to work there (IV-4)	-0.95	32	-1.13	36	-0.9	31	-0.36	26	-1.43	37	-0.8	30
5	Routine or repetitive work is a dealbreaker for me (IV-5)	-0.89	30	-0.94	33	-1.69	38	-1.78	40	-0.3	27	1.24	6
6	If a company is leading in tech, I assume the job will be exciting (IV-6)	-1.33	39	-1.93	40	-1.23	35	-1.47	37	-0.89	32	-1.84	40
7	Prestige only matters to me if it's backed by real innovation (IV-7)	-1.13	36	-0.08	22	-1.2	34	-0.48	28	-2.06	39	-1.67	38
8	I prefer employers who give employees freedom to experiment with new ideas (IV-8)	0.94	10	-0.01	19	1.47	3	1.9	2	0.16	18	1.44	3
9	I'm more likely to stay in a job where I feel genuinely accepted and included (SV-1)	-0.7	26	0.34	15	0.67	12	0.9	7	1.37	3	0.39	15
10	Workplace culture matters more to me than job title or status (SV-2)	0.26	18	0.37	14	0.85	8	-1.68	39	-0.12	24	-0.27	25
11	If I can't be open about my identity or ask for support at work, it's not the right place for me (SV-3)	-0.87	29	-0.58	27	0.16	20	-0.9	34	-1.79	38	-0.2	24
12	A friendly and uplifting team is one of the most important factors in choosing a job (SV-4)	-1.14	37	-0.02	20	0.59	14	-1.61	38	1.67	2	1.06	9
13	A good employer gives back through genuine efforts that address social or environmental issues. (SV-5)	-1.31	38	-0.83	30	-1.41	36	-1.32	36	0.36	13	-1.73	39
14	Work-life balance is essential for me to feel satisfied at work. (SV-6)	-1.83	40	1.75	2	0.97	5	-0.89	33	0.79	10	1.3	5
15	The company's success is driven by how well it serves its customers. (SV-7)	0.24	19	-1.55	38	-0.67	27	-0.18	23	0.04	19	-1.07	32
16	I'm more motivated in workplaces that are fun and energizing. (SV-8)	0.34	17	-0.94	32	0.81	10	-1.27	35	0.66	12	-1.16	33
17	No matter how great the culture is, I won't accept a job that underpays me (EV-1)	1.14	6	1.4	5	0.42	16	-0.77	31	-0.65	31	0.7	11
18	Financial stability is a top priority when I evaluate employers (EV-2)	0.35	15	1.43	3	-0.01	25	-0.82	32	0.72	11	-0.07	21
19	Job security is a key factor in whether I consider a company worth working for (EV-3)	-1.12	35	1.2	6	-0.94	32	-0.27	25	1.24	6	-1.18	34
20	I expect employers to be transparent about salary ranges and raises (EV-4)	-0.18	22	0.73	10	0.47	15	0.12	20	-1.22	36	-0.37	28
21	I evaluate job offers based on real benefits, not superficial perks like snacks or office games. (EV-5)	-0.85	28	1.42	4	-0.77	29	0.1	21	0.19	16	1.13	8
22	I associate high compensation with respect and recognition (EV-6)	-0.07	21	0.45	13	-0.77	28	0.19	18	-2.1	40	-0.88	31
23	Even if a job is meaningful, I still need it to support my financial goals (EV-7)	1.31	3	1.97	1	0.7	11	0.61	10	-0.24	25	0.26	18
24	I expect companies to fairly compensate junior employees, not just executives. (EV-8)	0.53	13	1.04	9	0.35	17	-0.4	27	-0.98	34	0.31	16
25	I expect clear growth opportunities when I join a company (DV-1)	2.26	1	-0.08	23	0.04	24	0.25	14	0.17	17	-1.24	35
26	If I'm not learning or developing, I feel like I'm wasting time (DV-2)	1.06	8	0.09	17	-1.71	39	1.64	3	0.03	20	1.54	2
27	Regular feedback and coaching are non-negotiable for my career satisfaction (DV-3)	1.13	7	-0.83	31	0.66	13	0.24	15	0.9	9	-0.34	27
28	I want a manager who supports my development, not just my output (DV-4)	1.31	4	1.16	8	0.83	9	-0.24	24	1.27	5	0.5	12
29	I want a job that builds skills I can carry with me throughout my career, even if I change employers (DV-5)	1.15	5	0.65	11	1.22	4	1.18	5	1.24	7	1.31	4
30	Being stuck in the same role too long is a red flag for me (DV-6)	0.71	12	-0.58	28	-2.03	40	0.33	13	0.23	15	-0.1	22
31	I value roles where I can collaborate across teams and departments to grow and learn. (DV-7)	1.83	2	0.34	16	0.95	7	0.06	22	1.29	4	-0.17	23
32	Sharing my expertise and mentoring others is an important part of how I grow at work (DV-8)	0.77	11	-0.13	25	0.14	23	0.2	16	0.26	14	0.26	17
33	Continuous learning matters more to me than having all the answers (AV-1)	0.95	9	-0.13	24	-0.04	26	0.19	17	-0.04	23	-1.44	37
34	A job that lets me make a real impact is more attractive than one that just pays well (AV-2)	-0.96	33	-1.04	35	0.27	19	0.18	19	-0.55	30	0.18	19
35	Being able to apply my unique strengths keeps me motivated (AV-3)	-0.43	25	1.18	7	0.15	21	1.57	4	0.02	22	0.07	20
36	I want a job where my academic or technical training actually matters (AV-4)	-0.94	31	-0.5	26	-1.43	37	0.87	8	-0.26	26	1.01	10
37	Having autonomy in how I apply my skills is important to me (AV-5)	-1.05	34	0.51	12	0.97	6	0.55	12	-0.4	28	1.23	7
38	I'm more motivated when I understand how my work contributes to something larger. (AV-6)	0.35	16	-0.61	29	1.75	1	2.37	1	1.99	1	-0.27	26
39	Purpose-driven work helps me stay focused and committed. (AV-7)	-0.35	23	0.09	18	0.34	18	0.78	9	0.91	8	0.47	13
40	I'm drawn to companies where employees are empowered to solve real problems (AV-8)	0.51	14	-1.45	37	1.72	2	1.02	6	-1.06	35	1.65	1

Table B3. Rankings and Z-scores of 40 Statements Across 6 Factors

Appendix C

The complete survey, distributed to the respondents, including the consent form, the final list of Q-sort task statements, and the post-sort questionnaire, can be found below.

Participant Information and Consent

You are being invited to participate in a research study titled “Gen Z Perceptions of Employer Branding in High-Tech Industries.” This study is being conducted by Simona Barkauskaite, a Master’s student at TU Delft, Faculty of Technology, Policy and Management.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research is to study how Gen Z professionals in high-tech fields perceive employer branding attributes. The data will be used to contribute to a Master’s thesis to complete the Management of Technology program at TU Delft.

What You Will Be Asked to Do

You will be asked to complete a short Q-sort activity, which involves ranking 40 statements about employer attributes according to how much you agree or disagree with them. There will be a couple of open questions where you can explain why you made certain choices while ranking the statements. Also, there will be some questions about your professional career and demographics.

The survey will take approximately 15 minutes. To stay anonymous, please do not disclose your name or the company you work for while answering the open-ended questions. Please use a computer to complete this survey, as mobile devices do not support comfortable sorting of the statements.

Confidentiality and Data Protection

As with any online activity, the risk of a breach is always possible. To the best of our ability, your answers in this study will remain confidential. We will minimize any risks by making the survey anonymous. No personally identifying information (e.g., name, email, IP address) will be collected.

Demographic information such as age, gender, and work experience will be requested in general terms and will be anonymized. Your responses will be stored securely and accessed only by the researcher.

Voluntary Participation

Participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw at any time before submitting the form. Because the survey is anonymous, once submitted, your responses cannot be withdrawn.

Consent

By proceeding with the activity, you acknowledge that you have read this information and consent to participate in the study.

Final List Q-Sort Statements

1. I want to work for a company that does cutting-edge work (IV-1)
2. The company demonstrates innovation through its actual products and services, not just in marketing. (IV-2)
3. I'm drawn to companies that challenge the status quo in their industry (IV-3)
4. A company's reputation for innovation influences how much I want to work there (IV-4)
5. Routine or repetitive work is a dealbreaker for me (IV-5)
6. If a company is leading in tech, I assume the job will be exciting (IV-6)
7. Prestige only matters to me if it's backed by real innovation (IV-7)
8. I prefer employers who give employees freedom to experiment with new ideas (IV-8)
9. I'm more likely to stay in a job where I feel genuinely accepted and included (SV-1)
10. Workplace culture matters more to me than job title or status (SV-2)
11. If I can't be open about my identity or ask for support at work, it's not the right place for me (SV-3)
12. A friendly and uplifting team is one of the most important factors in choosing a job (SV-4)
13. A good employer gives back through genuine efforts that address social or environmental issues. (SV-5)
14. Work-life balance is essential for me to feel satisfied at work. (SV-6)
15. The company's success is driven by how well it serves its customers. (SV-7)
16. I'm more motivated in workplaces that are fun and energizing. (SV-8)
17. No matter how great the culture is, I won't accept a job that underpays me (EV-1)
18. Financial stability is a top priority when I evaluate employers (EV-2)

19. Job security is a key factor in whether I consider a company worth working for (EV-3)
20. I expect employers to be transparent about salary ranges and raises (EV-4)
21. I evaluate job offers based on real benefits, not superficial perks like snacks or office games. (EV-5)
22. I associate high compensation with respect and recognition (EV-6)
23. Even if a job is meaningful, I still need it to support my financial goals (EV-7)
24. I expect companies to fairly compensate junior employees, not just executives. (EV-8)
25. I expect clear growth opportunities when I join a company (DV-1)
26. If I'm not learning or developing, I feel like I'm wasting time (DV-2)
27. Regular feedback and coaching are non-negotiable for my career satisfaction (DV-3)
28. I want a manager who supports my development, not just my output (DV-4)
29. I want a job that builds skills I can carry with me throughout my career, even if I change employers (DV-5)
30. Being stuck in the same role too long is a red flag for me (DV-6)
31. I value roles where I can collaborate across teams and departments to grow and learn. (DV-7)
32. Sharing my expertise and mentoring others is an important part of how I grow at work (DV-8).
33. Continuous learning matters more to me than having all the answers (AV-1)
34. A job that lets me make a real impact is more attractive than one that just pays well (AV-2)
35. Being able to apply my unique strengths keeps me motivated (AV-3)
36. I want a job where my academic or technical training actually matters (AV-4)
37. Having autonomy in how I apply my skills is important to me (AV-5)
38. I'm more motivated when I understand how my work contributes to something larger. (AV-6)
39. Purpose-driven work helps me stay focused and committed. (AV-7)
40. I'm drawn to companies where employees are empowered to solve real problems (AV-8)

Post-sort questionnaire

- Please describe your thoughts about these statements in more detail.

[In 4 open text boxes, the respondent described why they agreed the most and the least with 2 particular statements each]

- Please enter your year of birth (YYYY, eg. 1997).
- Please select the gender you identify with:
 - M
 - F
 - Other
 - Prefer not to say
- What is your total work experience in years:
 - Less than 1 year
 - Between 1 and 3 years
 - More than 3 years
- Which industry do you currently work in?

For example: AI, Cybersecurity, Semiconductor, Offshore, Automation, Renewable Energy, Aerospace, Software development, IT

[Here, the respondent could use the following examples, or write an answer in their own words in an open text box]

- What kind of organization are you currently part of?
(You can select more than one option)
 - Startup / scale-up
 - Large corporate company
 - Government / public institution
 - University / research institute
 - Consultancy
 - Freelance / contract-based
 - Remote-first / hybrid team
 - NGO / mission-driven organization
 - Not sure / Other

- If you chose “Not sure / Other” in the previous question, what do you think best describes your current organization?

[Open text response]

- What is your current role?

[Open text response]

- To what extent does your experience in your current organization match what you expected before starting?

- Completely met
- Mostly met
- Partially met
- Not at all met

- Can you briefly explain where your expectations were met, or not met?

[Open text response]

- Thanks so much for your input! If there's anything else on your mind about employer branding, company culture, or your own expectations that didn't get asked - feel free to share it here.

[Open text response]