

## Decoding Gen Z Engagement: A Phenomenological Study of Retention Strategies in the High-Pressure Startup Ecosystem.

Ghina Nabilah<sup>1</sup>, Hanif Mutiara Rohmah<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup> Universitas Islam Balitar

Email: [rginabilaahh@gmail.com](mailto:rginabilaahh@gmail.com)<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract:

This study examines retention strategies for Generation Z employees within the high-pressure startup ecosystem in Indonesia. The rapid growth of startups has created highly dynamic, competitive, and demanding work environments, making employee retention a critical issue, particularly for younger workers who tend to value meaningful work, flexibility, supportive leadership, and opportunities for growth. This research aims to explore how Generation Z employees interpret retention strategies implemented by startups and how such strategies shape their willingness to remain in the organization. Using a qualitative approach with a case study design, this study collected data through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation involving Generation Z employees working in Indonesian startups. The data were analyzed through data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. The findings reveal that retention strategies in high-pressure startup settings are not primarily determined by financial incentives alone, but by the quality of employees' daily work experiences. Open communication, supervisor support, work flexibility, recognition, and learning opportunities emerged as the most influential factors shaping employees' decisions to stay. The study further shows that high work pressure does not necessarily lead to turnover intention when the organization provides meaningful support and creates a psychologically safe and developmental work environment. Theoretically, this study contributes to the literature on employee retention by emphasizing a relational and experience-based perspective, especially in the context of Generation Z and startup organizations. Practically, the study suggests that startup managers should design retention strategies that integrate performance demands with employee well-being, supportive leadership, and career development. This study is limited to the context of Indonesian startups and Generation Z employees; therefore, future studies are encouraged to examine other sectors, compare different generations, and employ mixed-method approaches for broader generalization.

**Keywords:** *Generation Z; employee retention; startup ecosystem; high-pressure work environment*

### Abstrak:

Studi ini meneliti strategi retensi karyawan Generasi Z dalam ekosistem startup yang penuh tekanan di Indonesia. Pertumbuhan startup yang pesat telah menciptakan lingkungan kerja yang sangat dinamis, kompetitif, dan menuntut, menjadikan retensi

karyawan sebagai isu kritis, khususnya bagi pekerja muda yang cenderung menghargai pekerjaan yang bermakna, fleksibilitas, kepemimpinan yang suportif, dan peluang untuk berkembang. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi bagaimana karyawan Generasi Z menafsirkan strategi retensi yang diterapkan oleh startup dan bagaimana strategi tersebut membentuk keinginan mereka untuk tetap berada di organisasi. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain studi kasus, penelitian ini mengumpulkan data melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi, dan dokumentasi yang melibatkan karyawan Generasi Z yang bekerja di startup Indonesia. Data dianalisis melalui kondensasi data, tampilan data, dan penarikan kesimpulan/verifikasi. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa strategi retensi dalam lingkungan startup yang penuh tekanan tidak terutama ditentukan oleh insentif finansial saja, tetapi oleh kualitas pengalaman kerja sehari-hari karyawan. Komunikasi terbuka, dukungan supervisor, fleksibilitas kerja, pengakuan, dan peluang belajar muncul sebagai faktor paling berpengaruh yang membentuk keputusan karyawan untuk tetap bertahan. Studi ini lebih lanjut menunjukkan bahwa tekanan kerja yang tinggi tidak selalu menyebabkan niat untuk berhenti kerja ketika organisasi memberikan dukungan yang berarti dan menciptakan lingkungan kerja yang aman secara psikologis dan mendukung perkembangan. Secara teoritis, studi ini berkontribusi pada literatur tentang retensi karyawan dengan menekankan perspektif relasional dan berbasis pengalaman, terutama dalam konteks Generasi Z dan organisasi startup. Secara praktis, studi ini menyarankan agar manajer startup merancang strategi retensi yang mengintegrasikan tuntutan kinerja dengan kesejahteraan karyawan, kepemimpinan yang suportif, dan pengembangan karier. Studi ini terbatas pada konteks startup Indonesia dan karyawan Generasi Z; oleh karena itu, studi masa depan didorong untuk meneliti sektor lain, membandingkan generasi yang berbeda, dan menggunakan pendekatan metode campuran untuk generalisasi yang lebih luas.

**Kata Kunci:** *Generasi Z; retensi karyawan; ekosistem startup; lingkungan kerja bertekanan tinggi*

## INTRODUCTION

Amidst the digital economic transformation, company success is no longer solely determined by capital, technology, or product innovation, but also by the organization's ability to maintain human resources relevant to the demands of the times (Abourobah, et al., 2023). In this context, Generation Z is becoming an increasingly dominant workforce, especially in startup companies, which are synonymous with fast-paced work, high pressure, and demands for continuous adaptation (Agarwal, et al., 2022). Research on Generation Z's work engagement is crucial for the wider community because the quality of this generation's work experience will impact organizational productivity, the psychological health of young workers, and the sustainability of the national digital economy (Ahmić, & Ćosić, 2025). If companies fail to understand how to build meaningful engagement, the risk of turnover, burnout, and organizational instability will increase (Alexandro, 2025). Therefore, this research is important not only for startup companies but also for society as it concerns the future of the world of work, the well-being of the younger generation, and the quality of Indonesia's employment ecosystem more broadly (Allioui, & Mourdi, 2023).

One of the main issues facing today's workforce is the growing mismatch between the younger generation's expectations of the meaning of work and the highly demanding realities of organizations (Alqarni, et al., 2023). Generation Z tends to desire a work environment that is flexible, supportive, authentic, has

clear goals, and provides space for personal development (Appio, et al., 2024). However, many organizations, especially startups, operate in a fast-paced, competitive, and uncertain environment, often focusing more on achieving short-term goals than on building a healthy and sustainable work experience (Asif, et al., 2024). This situation creates both social and managerial problems, namely increased turnover intentions, decreased loyalty, and the emergence of emotional exhaustion among young workers (Atobishi, et al., 2024). If left unchecked, this problem will lead to a recurring cycle of employee turnover, reducing organizational efficiency, and more broadly hindering the creation of a productive, humane, and competitive work ecosystem in Indonesia (Awad, & Martín-Rojas, 2024).

Fieldwork shows that many startups in Indonesia face serious challenges in retaining Generation Z employees, even though they have successfully recruited young, adaptable, and tech-savvy talent (Bhattacharyya, & Thakre, 2021). While the dynamic startup environment offers rapid learning, opportunities for innovation, and a work culture considered modern, it also presents long working hours, often poorly defined roles, high achievement pressure, and career uncertainty (Chaniago, 2023). In many cases, Generation Z employees evaluate their jobs not only by salary or title, but also by the extent to which they feel valued, heard, and emotionally connected to the organization (David-West, et al., 2018). When these experiences are not met, disengagement and the decision to quickly move on emerge (Egala, et al., 2024). This phenomenon demonstrates that startup retention strategies can no longer be generalized but must understand the life experiences and meaning of work of Generation Z more deeply (Georgescu, et al., 2024).

Several previous studies have discussed employee engagement, turnover intention, and employee retention strategies in various organizational contexts (Harinurdin, et al., 2025). These studies generally indicate that engagement is influenced by leadership, compensation, organizational culture, career development opportunities, and work-life balance (He, et al., 2023). Meanwhile, studies on Generation Z have begun to develop, highlighting their characteristics, which place a higher value on flexibility, rapid feedback, diversity, and meaningful work (Hokmabadi, et al., 2024). On the other hand, research on startups has focused more on innovation, agility, and the demands of fast-paced organizations (Inceoglu, et al., 2024). However, most of these studies still tend to use quantitative approaches that focus on relationships between variables and measuring the level of influence (Jackson, & Dunn-Jensen, 2021). While this approach is important, it fails to fully explain how Generation Z interprets engagement and how their subjective experiences in the high-pressure startup environment shape their decisions to stay or leave an organization (Jackson, & Schuler, 1990).

Another weakness of previous research is the limited number of studies specifically linking Generation Z engagement to retention strategies in the context of Indonesian startups, a unique work ecosystem (Kaftan, et al., 2023). Many studies view Generation Z as a homogeneous group, yet their experiences can vary depending on organizational culture, leadership style,

work rhythm, and the level of stress they face (Khalil, et al., 2022). Furthermore, previous studies often position retention as the end result of management policies, rather than as an experience shaped through daily interactions between workers and the work environment (Liu, et al., 2024). Consequently, there has been little in-depth explanation of how Generation Z perceives engagement, burnout, belonging, and their personal reasons for remaining at startups (Marek, et al., 2020). This is where this research gap lies: the need for a phenomenological understanding that explores the meaning of Generation Z's lived experiences so that retention strategies are not merely administrative but also psychologically and contextually relevant (Mishrif, & Khan., 2023).

The novelty of this research lies in the use of a phenomenological approach to decode the work engagement experiences of Generation Z and directly link them to retention strategies in Indonesia's high-pressure startup ecosystem. Unlike previous studies that tend to measure engagement through structured indicators, this study seeks to understand the subjective experiences of Generation Z employees as lived experiences, namely how they perceive pressure, interpret organizational support, assess relationships with superiors, and shape their decisions to stay. This state-of-the-art research is also evident in its contextual focus, namely Indonesian startups with their growth dynamics, business uncertainty, and unique work culture. Thus, this research not only offers a new theoretical perspective in HRM studies but also provides a deeper practical understanding for startup managers to design retention strategies that are more humane, adaptive, and in line with the characteristics of today's young generation.

Based on this description, this research problem focuses on how Generation Z interprets employee engagement in a high-pressure startup environment, and how this meaning relates to the effectiveness of retention strategies implemented by startup companies in Indonesia. The tentative argument in this study is that the success of Generation Z retention is not only determined by formal incentives such as salary, promotion, or work facilities, but is more deeply influenced by their psychological and social experiences in the workplace, such as a sense of appreciation, emotional support, clarity of work meaning, and opportunities for authentic growth. In other words, retention strategies will be more effective when built on an understanding of employees' lived experiences, rather than solely on general managerial assumptions. This research is expected to contribute to the development of experience-based engagement and retention theories, as well as provide practical input for startups in developing HR policies that are more contextual, sustainable, and relevant to Generation Z.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This research employed a qualitative approach with a case study design (Obrenovic, et al., 2020). This approach was chosen because the research aimed to deeply understand the experiences of Generation Z employees regarding employee engagement and retention strategies in a high-pressure startup environment (Paula, et al., 2024). The case study design was deemed

appropriate because it allowed researchers to examine the phenomenon holistically and contextually within a specific setting, namely startup companies in Indonesia (Putritamara, et al., 2023). The research location was purposively selected at a technology-based startup company in Indonesia that employs Generation Z as a significant part of its workforce (Schiuma, et al., 2024). This location was chosen based on the consideration that startups in Indonesia are characterized by dynamic, fast-paced, flexible, and high-pressure work environments, making it relevant for examining the engagement and retention experiences of young employees (Shan, & Wang., 2024).

Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation (Szalavetz., 2020). In-depth interviews were used as the primary technique to explore the experiences, perceptions, and meanings of informants regarding work engagement, work pressure, organizational support, and their reasons for remaining at the company (Teece., 2014). Informants were purposively selected: Generation Z employees working at startup companies and possessing experience relevant to the research focus (Trenerry, et al., 2021). Observations were conducted to directly understand work situations, interaction patterns, and organizational culture (Trieu, et al., 2024). Documentation was used to supplement the data through reviewing relevant documents, such as human resource policies, employee engagement programs, and company regulations (Umair, & Dilanchiev., 2022).

Data analysis was conducted interactively through the stages of data condensation, data display, and data verification (Vahdat., 2022). In the data condensation stage, researchers selected, simplified, and focused data from interviews, observations, and documentation into themes relevant to the research (Valdez-Juárez, et al., 2024). Next, the data was presented in narrative form, a matrix, or thematic categorization to facilitate understanding of the relationships between findings (Wu, & Kao., 2022). The final stage was data verification, which involved continuously drawing and testing conclusions to ensure the research results remained consistent with the field data (Yang, et al., 2025). To ensure data validity, this study utilized source triangulation, technical triangulation, member checking, and observational diligence, ensuring the findings were more credible and scientifically sound (Zhang, & Chen., 2025).

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### FINDINGS

#### Operational Definition of Field Sub-Findings

The sub-finding of Retention Strategies in the High-Pressure Startup Ecosystem in this study refers to various efforts undertaken by startup companies to retain Generation Z employees amidst high work pressure, fast-paced work rhythms, dynamic targets, and constant demands for adaptation. In the field, retention strategies are not only understood as formal policies such as providing incentives, bonuses, or job promotions, but also include interpersonal support, work flexibility, communication space with superiors, recognition of employee contributions, and opportunities for self-development. The findings indicate that for Generation Z employees, the decision to stay in an organization is strongly influenced by their daily work experiences that they experience

directly. Thus, retention strategies in the startup context are not singular and administrative, but rather exist as a combination of organizational policies and relational experiences that create a sense of comfort, appreciation, and a desire to remain part of the company.

One informant who works as a digital marketing staff revealed that the main reason he remained at the company was not solely because of financial compensation, but also because of the open communication with his superiors and flexibility in completing work. The informant stated, "*Here the pressure is high, targets are fast, revisions are often sudden, but I stay because my superiors still listen to the team's condition. So even though I'm tired, I don't feel alone. As long as there is still good communication and I am given the trust to manage the work method, I can still continue.*" This statement shows that retention in the startup context is not only influenced by workload, but by how that pressure is mediated through supportive working relationships. Researchers interpret that open communication and trust from superiors are important forms of non-material retention, because they provide Generation Z employees with a sense of psychological security in the face of intense work pressure.

Another informant, a product associate, emphasized that he tends to stay when the company offers opportunities for learning and career development, even though work conditions often change rapidly and require high levels of preparedness. The informant said, "*Startups are tiring, yes, because sometimes job descriptions can change at any time. But I still stay because I learn a lot here, use my skills, and I feel like I'm developing. For me, if the workplace allows me to grow, the pressure is still tolerable.*" This data shows that Generation Z does not always interpret work pressure as a negative factor that automatically drives them to leave the organization. Researchers interpret that as long as the pressure is accompanied by opportunities for growth, competency improvement, and real learning experiences, employees still see the organization as a place worth retaining. In this context, an effective retention strategy is not simply about reducing pressure, but transforming work pressure into a meaningful development experience.

Observations indicate that the startup's work environment is highly active, characterized by a fast-paced meeting schedule, flexible task transfers between teams, short deadlines, and ongoing work communication through digital platforms. Amidst this, researchers also observed informal practices that serve as retention strategies, such as informal discussions between superiors and team members after meetings, direct feedback, flexible working hours under certain circumstances, and verbal recognition of employee contributions in team forums. These observations suggest that even though startups operate under high pressure, companies strive to foster a supportive work environment to prevent employees from feeling isolated. Researchers interpret this as a key factor in startup retention strategies, driven more by employees' daily experiences than by written policies. Therefore, relational and cultural aspects of work are crucial for retaining Generation Z.

### Restatement / general interpretation of the researcher's research results

Overall, the data from this study shows that retention strategies in the high-pressure startup ecosystem cannot be understood simply as an organization's attempt to keep employees from leaving. Rather, retention strategies are defined as a company's ability to create a work experience that remains tolerable, meaningful, and positively experienced by Generation Z, despite the high pressure. Employees tend to stay when they perceive healthy communication, superior support, work flexibility, and opportunities for growth. In other words, the factors that make employees stay are more psychological, relational, and contextual than purely material. These findings confirm that in startups, retention is not just a matter of formal policies, but is strongly influenced by the quality of work experiences individuals experience directly in the daily life of the organization.

### Description / patterns that emerge from the data

The patterns emerging from the data suggest that the most influential retention strategies for Generation Z employees in startups are not rigid and administrative ones, but rather ones that provide a sense of being heard, trusted, and developed. There is a tendency for informants to remain not because of low work pressure, but because the company provides buffering mechanisms against that pressure, such as open communication, flexibility, recognition, and learning opportunities. This pattern suggests that in the startup ecosystem, work pressure is not always a trigger for turnover if the organization is able to provide support relevant to the psychological needs of Generation Z. Thus, retention is formed through a balance between high work demands and meaningful work experiences. These findings also indicate that the stronger the relational support and development opportunities employees perceive, the more likely they are to maintain their commitment to the organization.

**Table 1. The Influence of Ideal Retention Strategies on Generation Z Employees in Startups**

<b>Informant Position</b>	<b>Interview Excerpt</b>	<b>Indicator</b>
Staff Digital Marketing	“The pressure was high, the targets were fast, but I persisted because my superiors were willing to listen to the team's condition and I was given the trust to work.”	Open communication, superior support, work trust
Product Associate	“I'm still here because I'm learning a lot, my skills are developing, and the work pressure feels commensurate with the experience I'm gaining.”	Learning opportunities, self-development, meaning of growth
HR Officer	“Gen Z kids typically aren't held back by a salary alone. They need a supportive environment and a boss they can talk to.”	Supportive environment, interpersonal relationships, psychological needs
Team Leader	“If teams are only given targets without appreciation and room to talk, they usually get bored quickly and start looking elsewhere.”	Appreciation, participation, voice opportunity

### **In-depth interpretation of the table**

The table above shows that the ideal retention strategy for Generation Z employees in startups relies on a combination of structural support and positive psychological experiences. From the employee perspective, interview excerpts indicate that they consider not only formal aspects such as workload or compensation, but also place greater emphasis on how the organization treats them in their daily work processes. Open communication with superiors, trust, and room for growth emerged as dominant indicators influencing their decision to stay. This indicates that effective retention strategies for Generation Z tend to be human-centered, oriented toward the need for recognition, social connection, and personal growth.

On the other hand, the perspectives of HR Officers and Team Leaders reinforce that companies recognize the limitations of a retention approach that relies solely on material incentives. Indicators such as a supportive environment, appreciation, and opportunities to express themselves suggest that companies need to build more dialogic working relationships to retain young talent. More deeply, this table illustrates that retention in startups is shaped by mutual perceptions between the organization and employees: the company provides support, while employees respond with a commitment to stay. Thus, the ideal retention strategy rests not on a single policy, but rather on the integration of responsive leadership, an open work culture, and meaningful work experiences for Generation Z.

### **Description of the pattern of the data above**

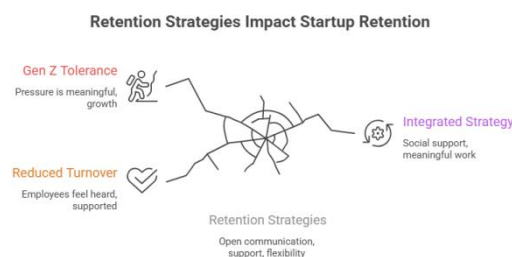
Based on interview data, observations, and the findings table, a consistent pattern emerges that the most powerful retention strategy is not reducing work pressure, but rather the presence of counterbalancing factors. These counterbalancing factors include superior support, flexibility, recognition, communication space, and growth opportunities. Generation Z employees appear more able to tolerate the high pace of startup work as long as they feel valued as individuals and have a personal reason to stay.

Another prominent pattern is that retention is built on meaningful work experiences, not just work perks. Informants indicated a tendency to stay when they find learning, personal development, and healthy work relationships. Thus, the data confirms that in the high-pressure startup ecosystem, retention success is largely determined by the organization's ability to transform pressure into a valuable experience for employees.

## **DISCUSSION**

The results of this study indicate that retention strategies in the high-pressure startup ecosystem operate primarily through open communication, supervisor support, work flexibility, recognition for contributions, and opportunities for personal development (Zhang, et al., 2024). These findings align with the literature that positions organizational and supervisor support as important explanatory factors for employee retention intentions, as when

workers feel heard and supported, the likelihood of leaving decreases (Li, 2024). Research on retention strategies also shows that practices from the initial days of employment and throughout the tenure influence turnover intentions through perceptions of organizational and supervisor support (Indrawati, & Kuncoro., 2021). In the startup context, the relevance of these findings is further strengthened because startups tend to experience high work pressure, role uncertainty, and demands for rapid adaptation, making relational factors a key buffer against such work intensity (DiBella, et al., 2023). Thus, these research findings reinforce the view that retention is not solely the result of formal incentives, but rather the quality of the work experience that organizations build on a daily basis.



**Figure 1 : Retention Strategies Impact Startup Retention**

Furthermore, the finding that Generation Z can tolerate work pressure as long as the job provides space for learning, growth, and personal meaning is also consistent with recent studies on Generation Z work preferences (Kochan, & Dyer., 1993). The literature shows that this generation tends to evaluate workplaces through a combination of flexibility, continuous feedback, development opportunities, work-life balance, and meaningful work, rather than just financial compensation. In this study, informants did not reject startup work pressure outright; they instead interpreted pressure as something that is still acceptable as long as it is accompanied by interpersonal support and growth opportunities (Mohamed, et al., 2022). At this point, the research findings extend previous literature by showing that for Generation Z, the sustainability of work relationships is determined more by “whether the pressure is meaningful” rather than simply “how high the pressure is.” This means that organizations that fail to translate work demands into valuable learning experiences will more easily lose young talent, even if they offer a modern work image.

However, the results of this study also demonstrate certain differences compared to some retention literature, which still places compensation, employer branding, and formal benefits as the primary levers for employee retention (Konno, & Schillaci., 2021). Several studies have indeed found that a healthy work environment, training and development, and compensation and benefits significantly influence retention in high-tech startups. However, this study's data confirms that for Generation Z workers in Indonesian startups, material aspects appear to function more as basic requirements, while the decision to stay is more influenced by psychological experiences such as feeling

appreciated, having a voice, and the quality of relationships with superiors (Lichtenstein., 2000). This distinction is important because it demonstrates that the effectiveness of retention strategies is highly contextual: in the highly dynamic startup environment, formal policies may not be sufficient if they do not translate into a supportive work experience. In other words, this study's results do not reject the importance of compensation, but rather position it as part of a retention package that must be complemented by social support and meaningful work.

Theoretically, this study implies that discussions about retention among Generation Z in startups need to shift from an overly administrative approach to a more relational and experience-based one (Kılıç, & Atilla., 2024). The research findings support the framework of social exchange and perceived organizational support, but also demonstrate that in the startup context, this support operates through everyday micro-experiences such as access to communication, direct recognition, flexibility, and learning opportunities (Nematollahi, et al., 2024). This study also contributes to the literature on young ventures by demonstrating that increasing turnover intention over time in young companies is influenced not only by venture characteristics but also by the organization's ability to strike a balance between high demands and employee well-being (Aldianto, et al., 2021). Therefore, this study enriches the discourse on employee retention by positioning retention as the result of ongoing negotiations between job demands and job resources in a volatile work context. This contribution is important because it helps explain why retention strategies that are effective in established companies may not automatically be effective in startups.

Practically, the results of this study suggest that startup management in Indonesia needs to design a more integrated retention strategy, not just focusing on performance targets and incentives (Kulkov, et al., 2024). Companies need to strengthen the role of direct superiors as sources of psychological support, establish regular two-way feedback mechanisms, provide measurable work flexibility, and ensure that work pressure is always accompanied by a clear learning and career development path (Huang, & Farboudi., 2021). Onboarding programs, coaching, recognition practices, and team communication forums are important because they have been proven in the literature to strengthen engagement and retention intentions. Furthermore, startups need to understand that for Generation Z, effective retention occurs when organizations are able to provide a humane work experience amidst high pressure. Thus, the main implication of this study is that startup retention strategies should be designed as strategies for meaningful work and relational support, not simply turnover control strategies.

## CONCLUSION

The conclusion of this study indicates that retention strategies in the high-pressure startup ecosystem are not primarily determined by material

factors, but rather by the quality of the work experience experienced directly by Generation Z employees. The most important finding of this study is that Generation Z employees tend to stay when they experience open communication, superior support, work flexibility, recognition for contributions, and opportunities for learning and development. Therefore, the main lesson learned from this study is that work pressure does not always lead to turnover intentions, as long as the organization can provide balancing factors that are relational, psychological, and meaningful. From a scientific perspective, this study is strong because it enriches the study of human resource management, particularly employee retention, by placing the subjective experiences of Generation Z at the center of analysis in the context of Indonesian startups. This study also contributes to demonstrating that retention needs to be understood not simply as the result of administrative policies, but as a process shaped by the daily interactions between individuals, superiors, and organizational culture.

However, this study has several limitations. First, the study's focus solely on the context of startups in Indonesia makes the results not broadly generalizable to all types of organizations or other industry sectors. Second, this study focused on the experiences of Generation Z, thus not making a more in-depth comparison with other generations of workers who may have different perceptions of work pressure and retention strategies. Third, the qualitative case study nature of the research provides analytical depth but at the same time limits the scope of the variety of organizational contexts studied. Therefore, future research is recommended to expand the context to various industry sectors, compare across generations, and combine qualitative and quantitative approaches to gain a more comprehensive understanding of employee retention strategies in dynamic work environments. Furthermore, future research could also examine the role of other variables, such as psychological well-being, leadership style, and digital organizational culture, to deepen explanations of retention in the contemporary work era.

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