

### Understanding Employer Attractiveness for Generation Z in the IT Industry: Insights and Implications for Future Recruitment Strategies

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# Understanding Employer Attractiveness for Generation Z in the IT Industry

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**Purpose:** This research delves into understanding the selection criteria of Generation Z, specifically those with an IT education background, in choosing potential employers. The study aims to bridge the gap in knowledge regarding employer attractiveness from the perspective of this emerging workforce cohort.

**Design/Method/Approach:** A quantitative approach was employed, utilizing a survey method to gather data. The study predominantly targeted students from an Austrian business school, resulting in a sample size of 156 respondents. The survey included a Conjoint Analysis to evaluate various employer attributes.

**Findings:** The findings highlight the significance of workplace flexibility, Work-Life Balance, and meaningful, varied job tasks for Generation Z. Salary emerged as a crucial factor influencing their choice of an attractive employer. While symbolic attributes were slightly more critical than instrumental ones, no significant impact of professional experience on the perceived relevance of symbolic attributes was found.

**Theoretical Implications:** The study enriches the Instrumental-Symbolic Framework by validating the importance of symbolic attributes for Generation Z.

**Practical Implications:** Practitioners can leverage these insights to tailor their Employer Branding strategies to attract Generation Z, focusing on flexible work arrangements, meaningful work, and competitive salaries.

**Originality/Value:** This research provides new insights into the preferences of Generation Z in the IT sector, highlighting the nuanced differences in their employer selection criteria compared to previous generations.

**Research Limitations/Future Research:** The study's limitations include its focus on two specific educational institutions and the lack of rural-urban differentiation among respondents. Future research could explore these criteria across diverse geographic and institutional contexts.

**Paper Type:** Empirical

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## Розуміння привабливості роботодавця для покоління Z в ІТ-індустрії

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**Мета роботи:** Це дослідження заглиблюється в розуміння критеріїв відбору покоління Z, зокрема тих, хто має ІТ-освіту, при виборі потенційних роботодавців. Дослідження має на меті заповнити прогалину в знаннях про привабливість роботодавців з точки зору цієї нової когорти робочої сили.

**Дизайн / Метод / Підхід дослідження:** Для збору даних було застосовано кількісний підхід з використанням методу опитування. Дослідження було орієнтоване переважно на студентів австрійських бізнес-школ, в результаті чого вибірка складала 156 респондентів. Опитування включало спільний аналіз для оцінки різних атрибутів роботодавця.

**Результати дослідження:** Результати дослідження підкреслюють важливість гнучкості робочого місця, балансу між роботою та особистим життям, а також змістовних і різноманітних робочих завдань для покоління Z. Зарплата виявилася вирішальним фактором, що впливає на їх вибір привабливого роботодавця. Хоча символічні атрибути були дещо важливішими, ніж інструментальні, не було виявлено значного впливу професійного досвіду на сприйняття релевантності символічних атрибутів.

**Теоретична цінність дослідження:** Дослідження збагачує інструментально-символічну структуру, підтверджуючи важливість символічних атрибутів для покоління Z.

**Практична цінність дослідження:** Фахівці-практики можуть використовувати ці знання для адаптації своїх стратегій брендингу роботодавця для залучення покоління Z, зосереджуючись на гнучкому графіку роботи, змістовній роботі та конкурентоспроможній заробітній платі.

**Оригінальність / Цінність дослідження:** Це дослідження дає нове розуміння вподобань покоління Z в ІТ-секторі, висвітлюючи нюанси відмінностей у критеріях вибору роботодавця порівняно з попередніми поколіннями.

**Обмеження дослідження / Майбутні дослідження:** Обмеженнями дослідження є зосередженість на двох конкретних навчальних закладах та відсутність диференціації респондентів за містом та селом. Майбутні дослідження можуть вивчити ці критерії в різних географічних та інституційних контекстах.

**Тип статті:** Емпіричний

**Ключові слова:** покоління Z, трудові ресурси ІТ, стратегія брендингу роботодавця, спільний аналіз, управління людськими ресурсами, рекрутинг.

## 1. Introduction

With digitization and the easy accessibility of information about employers, it has become more challenging to stand out from the crowd and establish oneself as an attractive company for potential employees.

Organizations are facing challenges in hiring due to strong competition for talent, especially with the rapid digitalization of companies and their relationships with customers, suppliers, and business partners (Kolding et al., 2018). Consequently, there has been a shift in the skill set required of employees, especially notable in the information technology (IT) sector, where organizations depend on a restricted pool of highly skilled workers (Dabirian et al., 2019). The shortage of qualified IT professionals does not decline, but seems to increase (Oehlhorn et al., 2019). To address this, companies are implementing strategies to manage scarce human resources and highly skilled employees, focusing on factors such as wages, psychological development, and work-life balance (Radant et al., 2016; Finnie et al., 2018).

To recruit so-called high potentials and thus ensure technical know-how, competence, and innovation in the company, businesses need to differentiate themselves more from their competition than before (Sommer et al., 2017). The demographic development and the decline in the birth rate are leading to an increase in the shortage of qualified professionals. The job market is turning into a buyer's market, and job seekers are applying less to potential employers. Instead, companies must present themselves as attractive employers and apply in reverse to desired candidates, leaving a good impression (Mrozek, 2009). Often, there is talk of the 'War of Talents,' first mentioned by name in 1998 in the business journal McKinsey Quarterly. This refers to the competition for the most qualified individuals in the job market. The fight for the best employees becomes an ongoing issue that companies must deal with now and in the future (Chambers et al., 1998).

As individuals from Generation Z begin their careers, many are entering the workforce with varying levels of professional experience. This generation, characterized by distinct expectations, experiences, preferences, and values, necessitates closer examination to effectively address their unique needs (Reis & Braga, 2016; Grow & Yang, 2018; Acheampong, 2021; Mostafa, 2022). Research into Generation Z's characteristics and traits is expanding, yet a consensus on their prioritized factors remains elusive (Dwivedula et al., 2019). Bencsik et al. (2016) offer insights into the distinctions among different generations, highlighting the necessity for further investigation into Generation Z.

There are already several studies addressing differences between generations in the job market. Different generations have different requirements for their employers, and their preferences vary. In this regard, it becomes clear that differences between various generations must be addressed to establish oneself as an attractive company in the job market (Benson & Brown, 2011; Costanza et al., 2012). Generation Z is the youngest generation in the job market, so compared to other generations, fewer studies and research are focusing on the decisive influencing factors in choosing a preferred company as an employer. Numerous studies and literature deal with employer branding (EB) and potential personnel recruitment opportunities. In her paper, Pandita (2022) deals with measures in EB with which companies can win over Generation Z. This cohort, having grown up entirely with new technologies, social media, and the internet, exhibits different behavioral patterns, making a more precise examination of relevant influencing factors in their choice of employer beneficial (Pandita, 2022).

## 2. Theoretical Background

This work's theoretical foundation is employer attractiveness, which is more precisely defined in this section. The engagement with existing literature aims to provide readers with a foundational understanding of the terms and models

used and to gain insights into the attractiveness traits influencing the choice of an attractive employer, particularly for Generation Z.

### 2.1. Employer Attractiveness

Berthon et al. (2005) define employer attractiveness as the benefits potential employees perceive in a specific company. It is increasingly crucial to attract skilled workers to stand out.

Traditionally, only external customers were an organization's focus, but the concept of internal marketing views employees as internal customers. Thus, jobs must be made attractive to motivate employees and help both staff and the company develop. The ideal situation is to meet staff needs while achieving company goals (Becker et al., 1992; Berthon et al., 2005).

Investigating employer attractiveness assesses why potential employees choose a company. Employers aim to gain a competitive advantage by attracting and retaining high-quality, educated personnel (Osborn-Jones, 2001). The concept of the Employer of Choice is about being a voluntarily chosen and preferred employer (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Stotz & Wedel, 2013). Employer attractiveness has been discussed in various fields like psychology, marketing, and professional behavior research (Berthon et al., 2005).

It is often mentioned alongside Employer Branding (EB), where an attractive employer results from successful EB (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Berthon et al., 2005).

Lievens and Highhouse's (2003) concept differentiates between symbolic and instrumental attributes of employers. Instrumental factors, or "hard" factors, include job security, salary, career opportunities, etc., focusing on material benefits. Symbolic attributes, or "soft" factors, relate to the company's values, culture, reputation, and social and emotional workplace aspects (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003).

Research indicates that symbolic factors can influence employer attractiveness more than instrumental ones. Ambler and Barrow (1996) divide employer attractiveness into functional, psychological, and economic dimensions. The functional level includes tangible job aspects like salary and working conditions. The psychological level encompasses intangible aspects like job satisfaction and corporate culture. The economic dimension focuses on financial aspects like stability and compensation (Ambler & Barrow, 1996).

Berthon et al. (2005) build on Ambler and Barrow's model, developing a Five-Factor Model of employer attractiveness based on a study of 683 students. They identified factors like Interest value (work environment and innovativeness), Social value (work atmosphere and collegiality), Economic value (salary and benefits), Development value (career experiences), and Application value (applying and sharing knowledge) as key to employer attractiveness (Ambler & Barrow, 1996; Berthon et al., 2005).

Mostafa (2022) analyzed 32 studies and the findings demonstrate the impact of Generation Z's background and life experiences on shaping their work values and reward preferences. It highlights how they prioritize rewards when making employment decisions. Moreover, gender also plays a role in influencing the significance that Generation Z places on specific rewards (Mostafa, 2022).

### 2.2. Generation Z's Expectations Regarding Their Workplace

The term 'generation' varies in definition and research. Karl Mannheim, an Austro-Hungarian sociologist, sees a generation as a social construct of people of a similar age shaped by shared historical, cultural, and social events (Mannheim, 1928). Kopperschmidt (2000) identifies a generation as a group sharing the same birth period and critical life events during crucial developmental phases.

Ryder (1965) views generations as individuals who experience the same events within a specific timeframe. In summary, a generation is a group of similarly aged individuals shaped by the same historical occurrences during significant life stages like late childhood and adolescence. The term 'cohort' is often used interchangeably with 'generation' in literature (Ryder, 1965; Costanza et al., 2012).

Generation Z, following Generations X and Y, is defined by Gabriellova and Buchko (2021) as individuals born between 1995 and 2012. This classification is retained for this work and its empirical research. Generation Z, also known as iGen or Digital Natives, is characterized by growing up with the internet and digital technologies from childhood (Prensky, 2001; Gabriellova & Buchko, 2021). Meeting Generation Z's expectations is challenging for many companies. They seek varied and meaningful tasks and immediate acceptance of ideas by leaders (Schroth, 2019). Tasks are seen as mundane if not personally engaging. Supervisors need to communicate the relevance of tasks to motivate. Meaningful tasks and collaborative work positively impact employees, fostering creativity and problem-solving (Pradhan & Jena, 2019). Understanding the purpose behind tasks helps employees take company goals seriously. As Digital Natives, Generation Z prefers to automate redundant tasks to focus on essential activities, valuing meaningful work that impacts the company and customers (Chillakuri, 2020).

Generation Z highly values regular and immediate feedback (Lanier, 2017; Chillakuri, 2018). They seek constructive, open feedback from supervisors, believing it enhances workplace performance and offers continuous improvement opportunities (Chillakuri, 2018). Positive performance appreciation and open communication about mistakes are essential for Generation Z, providing opportunities to address weaknesses and improve future work (Chillakuri, 2020). Generation Z significantly emphasizes a balanced work-life balance and flexible work arrangements. They are inclined towards jobs that offer average salaries complemented by work-life balance benefits, believing that workplace flexibility enhances efficiency and productivity (Firfiray & Mayo, 2017; Berge & Berge, 2019; Dwivedula et al., 2019). Generation Z appreciates flexible work scheduling, recognizing that productivity varies with different times of the day (Lanier, 2017; Chillakuri, 2020).

Five hypotheses are formulated below to verify whether the existing literature matches the research findings. This approach aids in testing existing assumptions and theories and contributes to a well-founded conclusion. Stewart et al. (2017), Uppal et al. (2017), and Pandita (2022), among other researchers, agree that the work environment plays a crucial role in employer attractiveness. Especially Generation Z values high flexibility and a balanced work-life balance. They believe it is the employer's responsibility and obligation to ensure flexibility, and in their opinion, a flexible workplace increases efficiency and productivity in the company (Chillakuri & Mahanandia, 2018). From this, the following first hypothesis is derived:

**H1:** *There is a correlation between flexible working hours and the importance of work-life balance.*

High flexibility also includes working at a location other than the office. Remote work is essential for Gen Z in deciding for or against a company. The American "Center for Generational Kinetics" reports in their research study on Gen Z that 47% of the respondents prefer a physical presence in the office and working from home. 25% would like to work exclusively from home. A survey by Deloitte also confirms the increasing demand for hybrid workplaces. 63% of Austrian Generation Z people desire a hybrid workplace, and 11% prefer to work only remotely. Based on this information, the following second hypothesis is derived:

**H2:** *There is a correlation between the importance of home office and the desired number of home office days per week.*

Lievens and Highhouse (2003) differentiate between symbolic and instrumental attributes in their Instrumental-Symbolic Framework.

According to them, soft factors are more relevant in choosing a potential employer than hard ones (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003). However, a study by Cable and Turban (2001) examine the influence of work experience on the relevance of symbolic and instrumental attributes. The results show that individuals with work experience see more relevance in instrumental attributes, while students without work experience find symbolic attributes more critical. The third hypothesis in this work aims to verify if this is also the case for Generation Z:

**H3:** *There is a correlation between work experience and the importance of symbolic attributes.*

The success of children in terms of their educational background is strongly dependent on the socio-economic background of their parents. Literature finds a close relationship between parents' educational attainment and their children (Seifert, 2005). Therefore, it is assumed that parents' higher educational qualifications (A-levels) make opportunities for development an essential attribute in choosing an employer. The fourth hypothesis tests these theoretical assumptions for Generation Z:

**H4:** *A correlation exists between parents' higher education and the importance of development opportunities in employer choice.*

Some studies identify gender as a vital influencing factor in connection with employer attractiveness. Tanwar and Prasad (2016) find that men place more value on a company's reputation and training and development opportunities. Conversely, women find work-life balance, corporate social responsibility (CSR), and company culture important when choosing an attractive employer (Tanwar & Prasad, 2016).

To determine if there is a difference in the choice of attractive employer attributes between genders in Gen Z, the fifth hypothesis is defined as follows:

**H5:** *There is a difference between genders in the choice of attractive employer attributes.*

### 3. Research Questions

As the job market evolves, understanding emerging generations' specific needs and preferences becomes crucial for effective talent acquisition, particularly in the IT sector. Generation Z, known for their unique values and tech-savviness, are entering the workforce, bringing new challenges and expectations for potential employers. This context leads to the pivotal research question: 'What selection criteria are important for Generation Z individuals with a focus on education in the IT sector when choosing a potential employer?'

### 4. Data and Methods

After having defined the research question with the related hypotheses, the data collection and analysis plan are defined as follows:

- **Questionnaire:** The aim of the empirical survey is to collect primary data using a questionnaire. The questions are based on a thorough literature review to derive the most important items possibly influencing employer attractiveness for the conjoint analysis.
- **Pre-test:** To ensure the understandability of the questions, a pre-test has to be conducted to confirm that the questions are lucid, free of ambiguity, and appropriately aligned with the research question.
- **Target group:** The target group are people from Generation Z. A definition of the target group for this work can be found above. This definition represents the inclusion and exclusion criteria of participants.
- **Quality check:** Before the analysis of the collected primary data, a quality check was executed to ensure the reliability and validity of the data. This quality check includes a completeness check (are all questions answered), a mono answer check (how often a respondent selects the same option), an answer

consistency check (check the consistency of the answers of a single participant), and a speed check (check if the amount of time realistic to answer the questions seriously). Data that do not pass this quality check were eliminated from the further analysis.

– **Statistical analysis:** The remaining data were analysed with descriptive statistics and a conjoint analysis. Finally, the hypotheses were evaluated.

A pre-test with six individuals was conducted before distributing the questionnaire to the target group. They independently completed the survey on various devices. Among these, four were from Generation Z, while the remaining two, being older, provided objective feedback and error correction. The pre-test identified and allowed for the quick rectification of errors in the questionnaire's presentation and execution. One respondent raised concerns about the length of the conjoint analysis section, but no other participants noted this issue. Following consultation regarding the task duration, the consensus was that the workload and duration were appropriate, leading to the retention of the original conjoint analysis design.

The questionnaire was created using a web-based survey tool capable of conducting conjoint analyses. It was accessible to the target audience through a web link and could be completed on any device. The introduction briefly outlined the study's topic and defined the target group. It also emphasized the anonymity of the survey, assuring that personal identification is impossible and that the data will be used solely for this study and its statistical analysis.

The questionnaire was structured into two distinct parts to comprehensively assess employer attractiveness from multiple perspectives. Initially, respondents engaged in a conjoint analysis over ten rounds, where they selected their preferred employer profile from three varying options in each round. This part integrated attributes like job security, salary, working hours, CSR engagement, and work-life balance, which were combined into different profiles, as commonly employed in conjoint studies.

Following the conjoint analysis, the questionnaire transitioned to a direct query of various employment attributes. The first block focused on instrumental or 'hard' factors such as job security, company size, salary, diverse work tasks, fringe benefits, and accessibility, which participants rated on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (Unimportant) to 5 (Important). This approach aligns with the framework of *Lievens & Highhouse (2003)*. The subsequent block examined aspects related to work time arrangement, including free vacation scheduling and flexible time management. The third block explored symbolic or 'soft' factors such as diversity, company image, feedback culture, and innovation, again utilizing a five-point scale for assessment. These blocks allowed for a detailed exploration of both tangible and intangible factors influencing employer attractiveness for Generation Z.

The questionnaire concluded with a demographic data section, comprising seven questions. This part also included a text field for respondents to offer additional comments or personal opinions, providing richer qualitative insights.

The quantitative research targeted students and alumni of IT programs, predominantly from two Austrian business schools. Most of these respondents are part of Generation Z, the primary focus of the research. The study also includes individuals currently in or who have completed IT training and belong to Generation Z. This approach aims to gather insights into their needs, requirements, and preferences, which can guide employers in creating work environments and offerings that effectively appeal to this demographic.

## 5. Results

The questionnaire link was circulated in June 2023, receiving 589 hits. Of these, 245 individuals initiated the survey, with 158 completing it, resulting in a completion rate of 64.5%. This rate is derived from the ratio of completed questionnaires to the

total number of starts. If a respondent discontinued the survey, 51% did so after proceeding from the introduction to the conjoint analysis section. Another 47% dropped off during the conjoint analysis, and 2% ended the survey in the demographic section when asked about their birth year. The average time to complete the entire questionnaire was approximately 11 minutes. The respondents were selected through a convenience sampling method, which may influence the representativeness of the results. Out of 158 complete responses, the evaluation excluded two entries that did not match Generation Z's birth years, leading to analyses based on 156 datasets.

The majority of respondents, categorized as Generation Z, were born between 1995 and 2006, with 84.6% born in 2001 or earlier. The median birth year of participants is 1999. 65.4% of the responses are from female participants, while the remaining 34.6% are male. None selected the 'diverse' option for gender. Over half indicate completing A-levels, with a third holding a Bachelor's degree. 7.7% have a Master's degree, 3.8% each completed compulsory school and apprenticeship, and 1.9% have other forms of education. When queried about their parents' education level exceeding A-levels, 55.1% responded 'No,' 31.4% indicated at least one parent with higher education, and 13.5% reported both parents having higher than A-levels. Due to the survey being available only in German, nationality options included Austria, Germany, Italy, or other. Italy was included due to its proximity to Austria and the high number of South Tyrolean students in Innsbruck. Switzerland was not listed, as the author notes no significant presence of Swiss students in the area. 75% of respondents are Austrian, about 17% are German, roughly 5% are Italian, and just over 3% are other nationalities. The high number of Austrian participants precludes a comparison of preferences across the three countries due to the potential for skewed results from smaller German and Italian samples. Regarding job application intentions, about 38% already have a job, approximately 26% plan to apply within six months, just under 11% within the next year, and 15% within two years. 7% do not intend to apply soon, and 2.6% are undecided. Regarding work experience, 43% have one to two years of experience, 18% less than a year, 18.6% three to five years, and 18% more than five years. About 2.5% have no work experience.

### 5.1 Conjoint Analysis

The Conjoint Analysis (CA), forming the initial part of the questionnaire, was conducted using the analysis tool of an online survey software. The method employed is the Choice-Based Conjoint Analysis (CBC), based on *McFadden's Discrete Choice Analysis* from 1974. CBC is a choice-focused version of CA, where survey participants are presented with various stimuli. In this case, participants evaluated three employer profiles per round over ten consecutive rounds, each profile featuring five attribute variations. This CBC method is termed 'forced choice' as respondents must choose an option to proceed with the survey. The analysis did not include a 'non-choice' option for selection (*Kaltenborn et al., 2017*). CA simulates the real-life decision-making process when choosing among various stimuli, thus providing more valid data than single attribute queries (*Green & Srinivasan, 1978*). CA is ideal for situations where individuals must compare multiple stimuli to decide. It's commonly used in consumer research for product comparison and applies to exploring employer attractiveness, focusing on the relevance of selected attributes (*Montgomery & Ramus, 2011*).

The CBC comprised employer profiles with five characteristics, each with at least two variations, randomly generated by the software. The first characteristic, job security, ranged from low (high fluctuation) to high (long-term employment prospects). Salary, the second attribute, was classified as below-average, standard, or above-average. The third characteristic, working hours, was divided into fixed or flexible (such as flextime). The fourth feature was CSR engagement, defined as a company's socially, ecologically, and economically responsible actions, with low, medium, and high variations. Lastly, Work-Life Balance (WLB) was categorized as inseparable work and private life (constant

availability), occasional overlap, or clear separation (non-availability outside work hours). Attributes were weighted based on their relevance. This comparison helped identify which attributes were most important to participants and which specific variations offered the highest utility. Table 1 shows the relative importance of each employer attribute, with 'Salary' having the most significant impact on company profile choice at nearly 40%. WLB, with almost 26% importance, is critical; the inability to separate work and private life is a decisive factor against a company profile. Job security is third in importance at about 14%, where low security is a negative factor. The fourth-ranked attribute is working hours, accounting for roughly 10% of the decision-making relevance. CSR engagement ranks last, influencing less than 10% of profile choices, with low CSR engagement being slightly more negatively perceived than fixed working hours.

**Table 1:** Relative Importance of Attributes in Conjoint Analysis

Attribute	Calculation	Relative Importance
Job Security	(0,99/6,93)*100	14,29%
Salary	(2,74/6,93)*100	39,54%
Working Hours	(0,72/6,93)*100	10,39%
CSR Engagement	(0,69/6,93)*100	9,96%

Source: Research Data, 2023

In summary, salary is the most crucial attribute, considered four times more important than working hours and CSR engagement. WLB is the second most important, about twice as influential as job security. The most attractive company profile for Generation Z would ensure high job security, above-average salary, flexible working hours, high CSR engagement, and a clear work-life separation. It's understood that almost no company can meet all criteria, and compromises on specific attributes may be necessary when seeking a future workplace. It's important to note that the relevance of these attributes is only about others used in the analysis. The CA results do not allow comparing importance with attributes outside this analysis.

## 5.2 Analysis of Hypotheses

To test **H1**, a linear regression test was conducted. The attribute 'Work-Life Balance' is seen as a dependent variable of 'Flexible Working Hours.' The conducted F-test shows that the regression model is significant ( $p < 0.001$ ); thus, the analysis can be continued. The regression coefficients are checked using a t-test. The t-test results indicate that the coefficient and the constant are significant, with  $p < 0.001$ . If the importance of flexible working hours increases by one unit, the importance of work-life balance increases by 0.318 units. Thus, it can be said there is a relationship between work-life balance and flexible working hours. If work-life balance is considered more important, the relevance of flexible working hours also increases. The model's goodness is described with the R-Square value, indicating how much of the total variance in 'Work-Life Balance' can be explained by 'Flexible Working Hours.' An R-Square value of 0.112 indicates that flexible working hours can explain 11.2% of the variance in work-life balance. According to Cohen (1992), the effect size is 0.36, indicating a medium effect size. The results allow us to confirm **H1**, confirming a relationship between flexible working hours and the importance of work-life balance.

To test the **H2**, a linear regression was conducted. The hypothesis investigates whether the number of desired home office days in a regular 5-day week correlates with the perceived importance of home office as an attractive attribute. The F-test yielded a significance of  $p < 0.001$ . The regression coefficients with  $p < 0.001$  are verified using a t-test. Interpreting the regression coefficient B for 'Home Office Option,' the following assertion can be made: For each additional unit in the importance of home office, the desired number of weekly home office days increases by 0.499, approximately half a day. The model summary in SPSS for R-Square is 0.310. Regarding the importance of home office, the total variance can be explained by the desired number of home office days per week in 31% of cases. The effect size is calculated again

according to Cohen (1992). The calculated effect size of  $f = 0.67$  represents a strong effect. Therefore, a relationship between the importance of home office and the desired number of weekly home office days can be established. Consequently, the **H2** can be confirmed.

To test **H3**, using Spearman's correlation, we investigated whether a relationship exists between professional experience and the attractive perception of symbolic attributes. The two-sided significance yields a value of 0.819, indicating that the relationship is not statistically significant. The correlation coefficient suggests that as professional experience increases, the average importance of symbolic attributes decreases by 0.018, which can be interpreted as a decrease in the importance of symbolic factors. A Spearman correlation was also conducted for the average of instrumental attributes and professional experience. This correlation, with a p-value of 0.408, is also not significant. The negative coefficient of -0.067 indicates that the importance of instrumental attributes decreases with increasing professional experience. No significant relationship can be proven through the statistical evaluation applied; hence, the null hypothesis is retained. The available data sets do not show a statistical correlation between professional experience and the importance of symbolic attributes.

To test **H4**, the two ordinal-scaled variables 'Higher Education of Parents' and 'Importance of Development Opportunities' were tested for correlation using the Chi-Square test. This aims to determine whether people from Gen Z, whose parents finished at least A-levels, see high relevance in the development opportunities a potential employer offers. As several cells have an expected frequency of less than five, Fisher's exact test was used instead of the Chi-Square value. This yields the same two-sided significance of 0.904. The statistical evaluation indicates no correlation among the surveyed Gen Z individuals between the desire or importance of development opportunities and higher parental education. Therefore, **H4** is rejected.

To test **H5**, a Mann-Whitney U test was conducted to determine if there is a difference between genders in choosing attractive employer attributes. All attributes mentioned in the questionnaire were tested, and significant differences between genders were found for some attributes. The analysis of the mean ranks, calculated in SPSS, reveals that salary is more important for men than women. The same applies to technology and tools at the workplace and working in an international environment. For women, public transport accessibility, work-life balance, an inclusive work environment, equal opportunities, and corporate social responsibility are significantly more critical than for men. The effect size, shown in Table 10, indicates the degree of difference in the mean values between genders. Cohen's (1992) classification is used to assess the magnitude of the effect, especially when there is a significant disparity in group sizes, as is the case with the distribution of men and women in this study. The attributes mentioned all have at least a weak effect, with corporate social responsibility showing a moderate effect and equal opportunities, achieving a medium to solid influence of 0.46. This study does not confirm Tanwar and Prasad's (2016) observation regarding the higher relevance of company image and training opportunities for men. Regarding the attributes that Tanwar and Prasad found to be more important to women, the evaluation confirms that female respondents value work-life balance and CSR more highly. The statistical evaluation indicates differences between men and women in choosing attractive employer attributes, confirming **H5**.

## 5.3 Further Evaluation

Salary ranks first in the CA with a relevance of 40%. In the descriptive evaluation, salary is sixth, behind work-life balance, which occupies the fourth place. In the CA, the importance of work-life balance ranks second with an attribute relevance of 26%. There are already discrepancies between the individual attribute query and the CA since work-life balance is seen as less relevant than salary in the CA. In contrast,

the opposite is true in the descriptive evaluation. Looking further into the CA, job security (14%) is more relevant than working hours and CSR engagement (both approximately 10%). The ranking of CSR engagement aligns with the descriptive evaluation, where it also ranks among the least important attributes. Examining the relevance of job security and working hours reveals further discrepancies between the CA and descriptive statistics. In the descriptive evaluation, job security ranks 20th out of 24, while flexible working hours rank eighth, significantly higher in importance. This again shows a deviation between the CA and descriptive statistics when comparing job security and working hours. The discrepancies suggest a difference in outcomes when employer attributes must be weighed against each other, as in the CA. As previously mentioned, it is not feasible to query all attributes in the CA, as it would lead to a loss of clarity and negatively impact the meaningfulness of the data if too many attributes are compared simultaneously.

## 6. Discussion and Conclusion

This study has provided valuable insights into Generation Z's preferences, especially those with an IT education, in choosing a potential employer. Our key findings about the importance of workplace flexibility and work-life balance are in line with researchers like *Chillakuri & Mahanandia (2018)* and *Lanier (2017)*. The study underscores the rising importance of salary for Generation Z, influenced by recent global events like the pandemic.

In terms of theoretical implications, our findings offer a unique perspective within the frameworks of *Lievens and Highhouse (2003)* and *Berthon et al. (2005)*. Contrary to the Instrumental-Symbolic Framework, which posits symbolic attributes as generally more critical, our study found no substantial correlation between professional experience and the prioritization of these attributes. This observation invites further exploration into the evolving preferences of Generation Z. Gender differences in employer preferences were evident, corroborating with findings by *Tanwar and Prasad (2016)*, and *Lassleben and Hofmann (2023)*, where women valued work-life balance and CSR more than men. This might imply a need for tailored recruitment strategies, also in terms of gender differences.

Methodologically, the study faced limitations due to its focus on specific Austrian institutions and the use of a convenience sample, which might not fully represent the broader Generation Z population in the IT sector. The relatively small sample size limits the generalizability of our findings, suggesting caution when extrapolating these results to the entire Generation Z population. The high dropout rate during the conjoint analysis section suggests a need for more concise and clear survey design in future research.

Practically, our findings provide actionable insights for companies. To attract and retain Generation Z talent, employers must understand and cater to their unique preferences, particularly regarding flexibility, meaningful work, and salary considerations. Implementing strategies that align with these preferences can significantly enhance a company's employer branding efforts.

Future research could benefit from exploring the impact of cultural diversity on employer attractiveness and employing qualitative interviews to gain a more comprehensive perspective on Generation Z's preferences. Additionally, investigating the use of regression models in future studies could provide further insights into the relationships between various employer attributes and Generation Z's preferences. Investigating other attributes using conjoint analysis could offer a more nuanced understanding of their employer preferences.

Overall, this research contributes to the understanding of Generation Z's criteria for employer attractiveness, providing a foundation for future studies and practical applications in employer branding and talent acquisition strategies.

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## 8. Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

## Contributions of Authors

Hofer T. – methodology, writing – review & editing;  
 Spiess T. – conceptualization, methodology, writing – review & editing, project administration, supervision;  
 Ploder C. – conceptualization, methodology, writing – review & editing, project administration, supervision;  
 Bernsteiner R. – conceptualization, methodology, writing – review & editing, project administration, supervision.

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