

## **Work Engagement Among Generation Z In Malaysian Private Sectors**

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### **Abstract**

In today's rapidly changing environment, having an engaged workforce creates a competitive advantage for any organization. Organizations with excellent work engagement reported high growth in earnings compared to those that reported low work engagement levels. In fact, disengaged employees cost an organization as they become less productive. However, having an engaged workforce is considered the most management challenge facing by the organizations. Many organizations are struggling to determine the most effective approach to effectively engage individuals with their work especially among the young generations such as generation Z. Therefore, this study is conducted with the intention to investigate factors that might influence work engagement among generation Z employees. The study examines the direct relationship between work-life balance, social support, rewards, ethical leadership and work engagement. A total of 217 questionnaire were distributed online using Google form through organization's representative after permission was granted to conduct the study. Response rate was 100%. In this study, hypotheses for direct effect were tested using multiple regression analyses. Results showed that only rewards and ethical leadership were found significantly positively related to work engagement. The findings indicate that work engagement among generation Z employees can be increased if the organization is able to provide with attractive rewards and to have leaders who have high ethical values.

**Keywords:** Work engagement, work life balance, social support, rewards, ethical leadership

### **Introduction**

Having an engaged workforce can give a competitive advantage for any organization. Highly engaged workforce able to help the organization in achieving high growth in earnings, while disengaged employees cost an organization as they become less productive. Employee engagement is the participation of people who are enthusiastic and satisfied with the work that they accomplished. Employees who are passionate about their work feel a strong connection

to the organization and devote lots of energy and attention to it (Robbins & Judge, 2013). This means highly engaged employees are really satisfied with the work that they have been given.

Since high employee engagement is linked to higher productivity, higher levels of citizenship behavior, employee happiness, and ultimately higher performance, many academics and practitioners are interested in studying and exploring into this area (Baker & Albrecht, 2018; Lai et al., 2020; Mone & London, 2018; Saks & Gruman, 2014). This is because work disengagement is not only a contributing factor for the high turnover rate, but it also affects the effectiveness and productivity of the organization. According to the Gallup Blog (2023), less engaged employees leave their jobs more frequently than highly engaged ones. According to the report, disengaged employees are more likely to leave their companies since they often exhibit poor performance or are dissatisfied. The organizations can lose their most brilliant and competent workers as a result.

Gallup Blog (2023) found that 59% of employees fall for “quiet quitting” where they start to disengage with their work and partially willing to thrive at their work. While, 18% of employees were found totally disengaged (loud quitting) with their work.

In one writing, Mustaffa et al. (2022) have highlighted that only 11% of employees participating in engagement activities, 8% not participating, and 81% participating to a lesser extent. Based on Gallup study on employee engagement on 125 organizations, it was found that organizations that invest in employee engagement may predict earnings to grow 2.6 times faster than companies with inadequate employee engagement. Juan and Yao (2017) argued that these low-engagement businesses lead to a 32% reduction in revenue from operations with an 11% decrease in their growth in profits each unit.

Currently, many organizations are facing with the disengagement issue among generation Z employees. According to Segal (2022), generation Z are currently the most influence groups among the 60 million members in the industries in the United States. While in Malaysia, generation Zs are comprising more than 29% of Malaysian working population (Tjiptono et al., 2020). This percentage indicates that Gen Z will be the largest group entering the working industries within 10 to 30 years.

Statistics has proven that generation Z have the highest disengagement rate compared to other generations. According to Gallup’s (2022) study, younger generation such as generation Z and younger millennial are 54% less engaged than other generations and mostly due to stress from the workplace and disconnection from the employer themselves. The survey

showed that 68% of generation Z and younger generation Y were experiencing stress as compared to older generation Y (63%), generation X (56%) and Baby boomers (40%).

Kailash (2023) acknowledged that managing work engagement for generations Z has becoming quite challenging for most organizations. The problems, preferences, and goals that they bring are different from previous generations. Generation Z tend to disconnect with the employers as they are digital native where it is much different than traditional workplace communication system (Gallup 2022). Their communication style will somehow lead to disconnection or miscommunication among the seniors or other employees who prefer the traditional communication system. When they disconnect from the team, they somehow feel that their communication system is not fully accepted by the other employees or seniors leading them to disengaged with their work.

These generation also regards balance work and life and personal well-being a top priority. They cherish hours free for recreational endeavors, and want flexibility in their job schedules. LinkedIn poll stated that 73% of generation Z employees prefer a hybrid work environment that lets them work from home occasionally and at the office. The freedom of remote work and the interpersonal interactions of in-office work are combined to provide the best of both worlds. They may find it challenging to strike a balance between the demands of their professions and their desire for a fulfilling personal life. Due to their awareness of the negative impacts of growing anxiety and exhaustion at work, these younger generations are searching for healthier workplaces (Kailash 2023).

Apart from that, American Psychological Association (2018) found that total reward package contributing to 81% of generation Z stress and this follows by uncertain job market opportunity and career development (71%). Having high level of stress may lead to demotivation and finally disengagement towards work.

Though studies on work engagement have widely been conducted, not many studies have focused on exploring work engagement issues among the generation Z employees especially in the Malaysian context. Existing studies predominantly focus on generation Z in other countries such as in studies conducted by Christopher et al. (2021), and Nhat Che et al. (2023), or focusing on other generations such as including the millennials (Yahya et al., 2018; Sudhashini et al., 2022; Aziz & Al, 2021; Ismail, 2022; Azhar, 2019; and Zainal, 2018). Therefore, this study attempted to test both organizational and individual factors such as work-life balance, social support, rewards, and ethical leadership on work engagement in one study. In the past, these variables are found to be positively related to work engagement. However, it

is not clear which factor are more significant in contributing towards work engagement among generation Z employees. Therefore, this study is conducted with the intention to uncover those questions.

## **Literature Review/Theoretical Basis**

### **Work Engagement and Generation Z**

In the literature, the topic of generation Z's employment engagement has gained attention from researchers and organizations as this generation has entered the labor market. Gaining insight into the work engagement of this current generation is crucial for organizations to effectively attract, retain, and motivate them, given their increasing representation in the labor market. Thus, when comes to managing generation Z employees, organization cannot just rely on the practices and strategies used for prior generations. This is because the newest generation may have distinct demands and expectations that differ from those of earlier generations.

According to Segal (2022), generation Z employees in the United States prefer for challenging job roles. Aso, they place significant importance on their hard work being recognized and valued by their organization, as well as the organization's commitment to their overall well-being and career growth.

In Malaysia, it is imperative for generation Z employees to prioritize work-life balance, with a particular emphasis on healthcare provisions. The declining engagement and increasing turnover among generation Z individuals might be attributed to organizational factors such as neglecting or insufficiently emphasis on work-life balance. According to a study conducted by Randstad in 2022 on how different generations in Malaysia want employers to help improve their work-life balance, 59% of generation Z has highlighted on healthcare benefits. This follows with wellness and mental health support (54%) and salary protection (52%).

Mărginean (2021) in his writing has suggested that organizations to prioritize on the essential insights required by generation Z and consider the distinct characteristics of this demographic group in their planning. These include:

1. offering flexible work schedules and technologically advance work environments as ways to attract the generation Z and enhance their levels of engagement,
2. provide employment opportunities that align with generation Z ethical values and afford them the ability to positively impact the society,

3. provide generation Z with the opportunities for education, personal development, and career advancement,
4. provide generation Z with timely feedback and recognition for their efforts,
5. promote good working atmosphere by actively providing work-life equilibrium and offering adaptable work options,
6. promote collaboration and inclusion as generation Z value collective efforts and working together, and
7. foster innovation, facilitate idea interchange, and promote participation in decision-making.

### **Research Framework and Hypotheses Development**

Figure 1 showed the research framework tested in this study. It shows the relationship between work-life balance, social support, rewards, ethical leadership, and work engagement. In this study, work-life balance, social support, rewards, ethical leadership are the independent variables, while work engagement is the dependent variable.

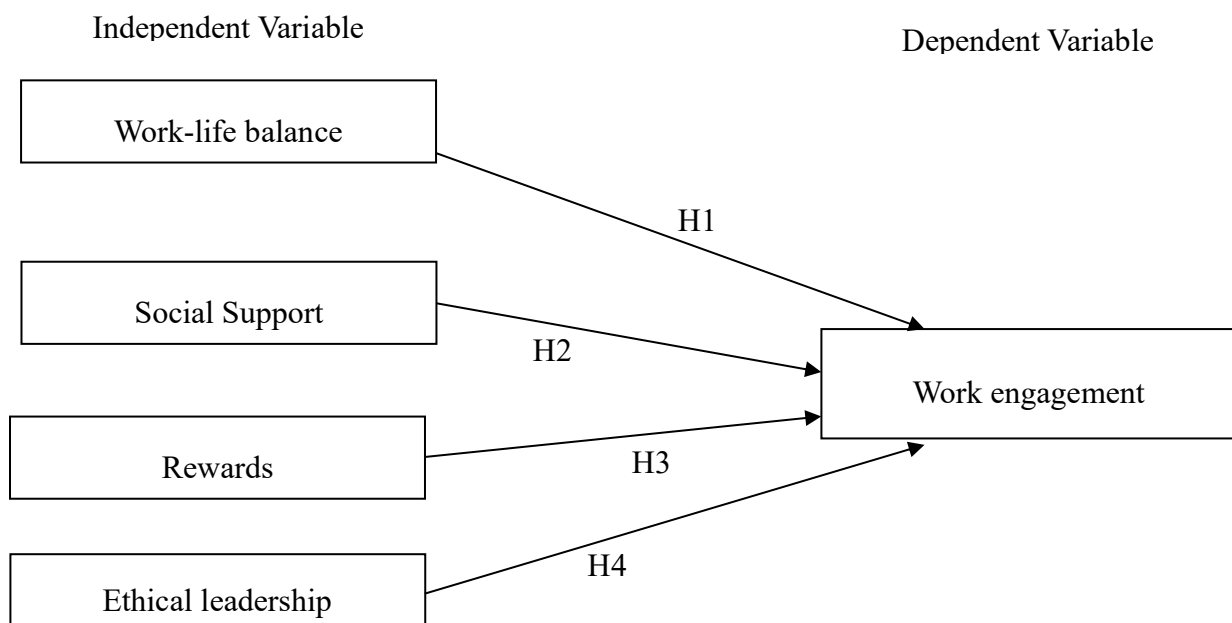


Figure 1. Research Framework

### **Relationship between Work-life Balance and Work Engagement**

Marjolein (2016) asserts that there exists a scarcity of studies examining the relationship between work engagement and work-life balance. These studies have failed to provide sufficient evidence to support the notion that employees who experience favorable

work-life balance will directly influence their level of work engagement. Despite the limited availability of information, research has indicated that there are notable associations between work-life balance and the well-being and quality of life of employees (Greenhaus et al., 2003). It has been demonstrated that individuals who maintain a favorable work-life balance tend to experience lower levels of stress compared to those who do not (Marks & MacDermid, 1996).

In one study, it has been found that employees demonstrate enhanced efficacy in managing their time and exertion in response to the various demands they encounter, hence enhancing their overall state of well-being (Whittington et al., 2011). Moreover, the establishment of a harmonious equilibrium between work and personal life has the potential to enhance employees' commitment and job satisfaction inside an organization (Reindl et al., 2011).

Blau (1964) has proposed Social Exchange Theory (SET), which posits that when organization fulfils the many requirements and ensures the well-being of its employees, individuals will develop a sense of appreciation and motivation, leading them to actively engage in the job or task assigned to them. Therefore, the provision of positive value to employees contributes to the overall benefit of the organization (Aryee et al., 2005), resulting in increased levels of work engagement (Saks, 2006).

According to prior scholarly work, Civian et al. (2008) have asserted that the implementation of measures aimed at fostering a harmonious equilibrium between work and personal life, as well as cultivating a perception of mobility, can have a positive impact on work engagement. Sonnentag's (2003) study demonstrates that the inclusion of rehabilitation as a facet of work-life balance has the potential to enhance employees' levels of engagement in the workplace. Those who have successfully overcome challenges tend to display higher levels of motivation, exert greater effort, and demonstrate increased tenacity compared to those who have not experienced such obstacles. This implies that a period of recuperation has the potential to enhance the energy and well-being of employees. The availability of resources for employees who have recovered can have a significant impact on their level of commitment and dedication to their employment. Ultimately, the process of work engagement culminates in absorption, which can be enhanced by the practice of recovery.

Based on the above discussion, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: There is a significant relationship between work-life balance and work engagement

### **Relationship between Social Support and Work Engagement**

Based on the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory proposed by Hobfoll (1989), Okojie et al. (2023) believed that social support can be a valuable resource for augmenting employee engagement within organizational settings. The COR hypothesis posits that social support serves as a motivational mechanism, driving employees to actively pursue and attain both professional and personal objectives.

Park et al. (2018) found that individuals who regard their social relationships as helpful tend to exhibit greater trust in their choices and reduced levels of anxiety in the workplace. In fact, individuals tend to exhibit increased motivation, leading to heightened effort and greater engagement to attain both personal and organizational objectives (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005).

According to Kahn (1990), the presence of supportive interpersonal relationships and trust within the workplace is positively associated with increased levels of employee engagement. This indicates that the establishment of social support and trust is essential for fostering participation. This is shown in Saks and Gruman (2014) study where a positive relationship between employees' perception of their workplace as helpful, cohesive, and involving, and levels of job satisfaction, dedication, and engagement. Similar findings were also found in Kiema-Junes et al. (2020) and Okojie et al. (2023) study where employees who receive sufficient support from their organization are likely to experience a sense of dedication and enthusiasm, leading to a high level of engagement in their work.

Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2: There is a significant relationship between social support and work engagement

### **Relationship between Reward and Work Engagement**

Rewards system has become one of the important factors that will affect heavily on how the employee will engage in their work. This means that with the right reward system or compensation to the right employees, will improve employee motivation, and engagement to their work. In comparison with work engagement, it shows a daily fluctuation, and are easily affected by the job resources (e.g., rewards or reinforcement). Thus, emphasizes on the right motivation can become one of the factors that makes the employees contribute more to the organization.

As highlighted by Taris et al. (2009), work engagement is usually associated with positive forces (life satisfaction, and good social relationships at work. Thomas (2006) also believed that benefits such as extrinsic reward can motivate employees to do their work.

Example of benefits is the medical fees paid by the company. When the employee receives these benefits, they will be more motivated to work on their job. According to Gorgievski (2013), it is also essential that the benefits can have positive and negative effects on the employee. As such that, when the benefits are right for them, it would a good indicator that leads for work engagement. But if the employee benefits are not what the employees want, it would bring bad effect to the company.

Also, it is important to note that the level of engagement in the workplace is contingent upon individual's perception of their rewards (Kahn, 1990). This perception encompasses various components of rewards, including those derived from external sources such as recognition for achievements, in addition to the intrinsic pleasures associated with the work itself.

Ismail (2022) in his study found that employee engagement and rewards are related indicating that individuals who receive appreciation and recognition are more inclined to be actively involved in their work compared to those who do not. This finding contributes to the establishment of positive organizational relationships with employees. In addition to the aforementioned factors, they exhibit higher levels of productivity, demonstrate satisfactory customer satisfaction, foster positive relationships with colleagues, and have reduced turnover rates. This outcome aligns with the research conducted by White (2013), which emphasizes the significance of acknowledging and aiding employees' endeavors. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed,

H3: There is a significant relationship between rewards and work engagement

### **Relationship between Ethical Leadership and Work Engagement**

Since ethical leadership possess different characteristics of a leader, Engelbrecht (2014) believed that these characteristics can have an impact on employees' work engagement. Ethical leaders provide social support, feedback on performances, autonomy, and learning opportunities which are considered as job resources that help employees to focus on their work while they are working. Studies conducted by Den Hartog and Belschak (2012), and Engelbrecht et al. (2014) have empirically proved that ethical leadership does has a positive impact on work engagement. In other words, employees who perceived their leaders as ethical will demonstrate higher engagement in their work. Similarly, Sugianingra et al. (2014) also found positive and significant relationship between ethical leadership and work engagement. The results indicate that when a leader is fair, shares the decision-making process with his/her

followers, expresses roles clearly, displays a community and people-oriented behavior, has a sense of integrity, guides on ethical issues, and pays attention to sustainability, it will result in high work engagement among the employees. These resources according to Bakker and Demerouti (2008), provide employees with the necessary assistance to be good at their work and play as an intrinsic motivational role that can lead to work engagement. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed,

H4: There is a significant relationship between ethical leadership and work engagement

## **Research Methodology**

### **Study Participants**

A total of 217 participants participated in this survey (133 males, 84 females). Majority of the participants (159 people) were age between 25 to 28 years old. Out of 217 participants, 166 were single. Majority of the participants in this survey (150 people) had a degree. Most of the participants (54 people) had a monthly income between RM2001 and RM3000. In terms of number of years with the organizations, 85 participants had served their organizations between 1 to 3 years. Most of the participants (63 people) are executive and most of them (98 people) had been in their present position between 1 to 3 years.

### **Research Design**

A quantitative approach has been employed in this study as the design aligned with the objective of this study, which is to examine the direct relationship between work-life balance, social support, rewards, ethical leadership, and work engagement. Individual generation Z was taken as the unit of analysis and the primary data for this study were gathered through online survey (Google Form). Researcher's interference was minimal as the study was conducted in a natural environment. The study employed a cross-sectional design where the data was collected at one point of time.

### **Study Instruments**

In this study, work engagement is measured by 17 items adapted from Schaufeli and Bakker (2003). Work-life balance items were adapted from Hayman (2005) and comprises three dimensions namely, work interference with personal life (WIPL) – 7 items, personal life interference with work (PLIW) – 4 items, and work / personal life enhancement (WPLE) – 4 items. Social support was measured by 8-items adapted from Karasek and Theorell (1990).

Rewards were measured by two dimensions - basic salary and bonuses. Basic salary was measured by 4-items developed by Heneman and Shwab (1985). While bonuses were measured by 3-items adapted from Sturman and Short (2000). The ethical leadership was measured using 15 items adapted from Yulk et al. (2013). The items include aspects such as integrity, honesty, fairness, statement of ethical values, altruism and providing ethical guidance. A five-point scale whereby, 1 = strongly disagree, and 5 = strongly agree were used to measure participants degree of agreement with the statements given.

### **Data Collection Procedure**

For this study, the data were collected using Google Form where link to the survey was given to the representatives of each of the three organizations once approval was obtained from the respective organizations. A brief explanation about the study was given to the representatives prior sharing the link to the survey questions. Participation in this study was on a voluntary basis and anonymous where they were allowed to withdraw from the study at any time and not complete the questionnaire.

### **Data Analysis Strategies**

In this study, SPSS (version 29) program for Windows was used to analyze the data collected. Prior to primary analyses, the data were examined for data entry accuracy, outliers, and distributional properties. Descriptive analysis was conducted to help the researcher to summarize the variables of interest and provide a quick summary of the demographic characteristics of respondents participated in this study. The study hypotheses were tested using multiple regression. The purpose of performing a multiple regression in this study is to determine the predictive power of the independent variables (work-life balance, social support, rewards, and ethical leadership) toward the dependent variable (work engagement).

## **Results and Discussion**

As shown in Table 1, 41% ( $R^2 = 0.41$ ,  $F=36.11$ ,  $p<0.01$ ) of the variance in work engagement was significantly explained by work-life balance, social support, rewards, and ethical leadership. In the model, rewards ( $\beta=0.71$ ,  $p<0.01$ ) and ethical leadership ( $\beta=0.19$ ,  $p<0.01$ ) were found significantly positively related to work engagement. While, social support

( $\beta = -0.41, p < 0.01$ ) was found significantly negatively related to work engagement. Therefore, Hypotheses 2, 3 and 4 were supported.

Table 1. Multiple Regression Analysis

Independent Variable	Dependent Variable (Work Engagement) (Standardize coefficient) Beta	t	Significant (p)	Collinearity Statistics	
				Tolerance	VIF
Work-life balance	0.15	2.83	0.05	0.98	1.01
Social support	-0.41	-6.17	0.00**	0.63	1.59
Rewards	0.71	10.45	0.00**	0.60	1.64
Ethical leadership	0.19	3.60	0.00**	0.96	1.04
F Value	36.11				
R <sup>2</sup>	0.41				
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.39				
Durbin Watson	1.42				

Note: \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$

The results suggest that participants' engagement towards work was contributed by rewards and ethical leadership. In this study, rewards are measured in the form of basic salary and bonuses received. As predicted, rewards were found to have a direct relationship with work engagement. In other words, rewards were regard as a motivator factor for generation Z employees to engage with their work. The more rewards they received, the more engage they will be. The current findings provide support for previous studies conducted by Mohd Taufek, et al. (2016) and Ismail (2022) where rewards were found positively related to work engagement. The findings are not surprising as employees tend to be more engaged at work when their work output being recognized either verbally or with a reward. Working hard means opportunity for promotion and promotion relates to monetary rewards. Since the respondents of this study were those generation Z employees, with majority of them age between 25 to 28 years old and earned monthly income between RM2001 and RM3000, monetary rewards such as salary and bonuses were considered attractive and seen as main motivating factors.

Apart from that, ethical leadership was also found to have a direct relationship with work engagement. The findings were in-line with studies conducted by Engelbrecht et al. (2017), and Srivastava (2016). The current findings indicate that having a highly ethical leader encourage employees especially those generation Z to engage in their work. The findings indicate that generation Z put high value on ethics in the organizations especially on their leader, and this become a motivator factor for them to be more engaged with their work. In other words, having leader who possess unethical behaviors such as blaming subordinates for their shortcomings, taking credit of others' work, favoritism, and excessive publicising of ethical leadership failures may demotivate the employees and lower their work engagement. Besides, leader is the one who make decision, and have power to command. Thus, having an ethical leader is seen important especially in addressing work engagement issues.

Interestingly, social support was found related to work engagement but in the negative direction. In this study, social support was measured by helpful social interaction available on the job from co-workers and supervisors. The findings indicate that the more social support received by generation Z employees from their co-workers and supervisors, the less engaged they will be with their works. In previous study conducted by Othman and Nasurdin (2013), they found that supervisor support was positively related to work engagement but co-worker support was found to have no effect on work engagement. In certain cases, receiving unwanted social support was often perceived as an attack on the individual independence and self-determination. In fact, receiving negative interactions such as giving discouraging expression of feeling, making critical remarks, invading other privacy, interfering in other affairs, or failing to provide promised help may discourage others to engage with their work.

Finally, it was predicted that work-life balance would relate to work engagement. Interestingly, unlike in previous studies, the generation Z employees in this study did not perceive work-life balance as a contributing factor on their engagement in works. One of the reasons might be because majority of the respondents in this study age between 25 to 28 years old and still single. Thus, it is not surprising to find why work-life balance was not related directly to their work engagement. Thus, balancing between work and family is not a major issue that can interfere their engagement towards work. They can work long hours if they like as they do not have to worry about spending times with wife and kids.

## **Research Implications**

The current findings have contributed to the current body of knowledge on work engagement in several ways. First, findings from the current study have given new empirical evidence on the relationship between work-life balance, social support, rewards, ethical leadership, and work engagement. Though in the past, all the factors were found to be related to work engagement, in this study only rewards and ethical leadership were found positively significant. In fact, social support was found significant but in negative direction. Interestingly, work-life balance has not been perceived important by the generation Z employees when comes to engagement to work.

Secondly, since not many studies have focused at work engagement among generation Z employees in a Malaysian context, the findings give significant input especially in the private sectors. This is another contribution of this study. Thus, the current findings provide new insights on issues of work engagement among generation Z employees in Malaysia.

In terms of practice, the current research findings have several implications for management of the organization regarding efforts that need to be taken in encouraging generation Z employees to engage in their work. First, the current empirical findings confirmed that providing attractive rewards such as basic salary and bonuses can enhance work engagement among generation Z employees. Compared to other factors, generation Z employees regard monetary rewards are more attractive and acted as push factor to engage with work.

Apart from monetary rewards, generation Z employees also put ethical leadership as one of the factors that motivate them to be more engage with their works. Interestingly, generation Z has highlighted the importance of having ethical leader and not just a leader. Empirically, leaders who are honest, have high integrity, lead with fairness, and hold high ethical principles can directly improve work engagement among generation Z employees.

In summary, the prescriptions discussed above are suggestive of the types of actions that the management can take to encourage generation Z employees to engage with their works. The research results reported in this study suggest the need for attractive rewards and ethical leadership as ways to encourage work engagement especially among generation Z employees.

## **Conclusions**

The aim of this study was to investigate factors that might relate to work engagement among the generation Z. The main concern is the effect of work-life balance, social support,

rewards, and ethical leadership on work engagement. The findings showed that rewards and ethical leadership were significantly positively related to work engagement. The findings indicate that there is a need for better rewards and highly ethical leader as ways of encouraging generation Z to be more engage with their work. Interestingly, social support was found significant but negatively related to work engagement. In other words, the higher the social support received, the lower would be the engagement towards work.

Since this study only focuses on three private organizations, future research can extend the exploration of the influence of work-life balance, social support, rewards, and ethical leadership on other public and private organizations which might offers greater understanding on the issues of work engagement among generation Z. Also, the study only tested four variables which are work-life balance, social support, rewards, and ethical leadership in understanding the issues of work engagement among generation Z. This provides opportunity for future research to test other variables to further extend the understanding of work engagement issues among generation Z

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### **Authors' contributions**

Both authors contributed to the study conception and design. First author responsible for manuscript refinement.

### **Availability of data and material**

Details of data are available upon request.

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