
Red Flags at Work: A Qualitative Study on Gen Z's Workplace Turn-Offs

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Abstract

As Generation Z enters the workforce, their expectations regarding authenticity, equality and psychological safety are shaping new benchmarks for organisational culture. While global literature has begun to explore these shifts, there are limited empirical evidence on what constitutes workplace "red flags" for Gen Z in South Asia, particularly Sri Lanka. This study investigated the organisational behaviours and environments perceived as red flags by Sri Lankan Gen Z employees. An inductive qualitative approach was adopted analysing approximately 69 anonymised responses from three Reddit threads posted in 2022, 2024 and 2025. Thematic analysis revealed six core themes: performative culture and corporate hypocrisy; lack of psychological safety and respect; exploitation and burnout norms; unfair HR practices and compensation systems; favouritism, discrimination, and lack of inclusion and organisational dishonesty. Differences were observed across sectors, with IT professionals emphasising overwork, rigid processes, and stagnant roles, while non-IT participants raised concerns about ethical breaches, gender-based microaggressions and superficial wellness initiatives. These themes were consistently evident across all three posts suggesting deeply held generational expectations. The study concludes that for Gen Z in Sri Lanka, alignment between stated organisational values and actual practices is essential.

Keywords: Gen Z, organizational culture, employee retention, Sri Lanka

Introduction

The entry of Generation Z into the workforce has introduced a distinctive set of expectations, values and behaviours that set them apart from prior generations. Influenced by digital connectivity, social consciousness and evolving work paradigms, Gen Z places a high expectation on inclusivity, ethical leadership, transparency, flexibility and purpose led work, often prioritising these over traditional indicators such as job security or organisational prestige (Zahra et al., 2025). As their presence in the workforce grows, it becomes increasingly critical for employers to understand the "red flags" Gen Z associates with toxic or unacceptable workplace environments. These perceived warning signs signal early disengagement while strongly influencing decisions on the acceptance or the rejection of employer brands.

Existing academic literature and industry reports have emphasized the need to adapt to these generational shifts. Research has shown that Gen Z workers exhibit low tolerance for poor communication, rigid hierarchies, limited growth opportunities and unethical practices (Schroth, 2019; Pichler et al., 2021). Their decision-making is closely tied to values of fairness, purpose, and psychological safety which function as filters through which potential employers are assessed (Sakdiyakorn et al., 2021). Majority of this literature is based on structured surveys and Western centric models. In contrast, the generational behaviour observed within the Sri Lankan workforce in sectors like IT, banking, and hospitality remain under-researched despite Gen Z's growing representation.

The Sri Lankan organisational landscape presents unique cultural, economic, and institutional factors that may shape how Gen Z professionals evaluate their work environments. Long standing hierarchical practices, collectivist orientations, and post-pandemic economic disruptions all contribute to shaping employment experiences in ways that differ from global trends. Existing studies have yet to adequately capture how young professionals in Sri Lanka interpret "red flags" in this background and how these perceptions might differ across industries. Furthermore, traditional methods of data collection often miss the unfiltered and spontaneous nature of Gen Z's expressions particularly those shared in digital public forums such as Reddit where anonymity and peer interaction foster candid reflections on workplace issues.

Although some frameworks such as the DITTO model (Pichler et al., 2021), have attempted to systematise Gen Z's work-related values, little is known about the specific organisational attributes or behaviours that provoke aversion among this group. A recent scoping review by Zahra et al. (2025) identified the need for more inductive and culturally nuanced studies in underrepresented regions like South Asia. Moreover, the conceptual frameworks that dominate the discourse tend to highlight attraction factors including what Gen Z wants while largely ignoring the "deal breakers" what drives them away. This gap between attraction focused research and aversion focused lived experience necessitates a deeper, bottom up inquiry into the workplace conditions that repel Gen Z professionals.

To address these theoretical and practical gaps, this study adopts an inductive, qualitative approach to examine the red flags identified by Sri Lankan Gen Z individuals across industries. It draws on thematic analysis of Reddit discussions posted over a period of 30 months exploring a data source that captures authentic, unsolicited reflections. The study aims to explore the types of employer behaviours and workplace characteristics that Gen Z in Sri Lanka perceives as "red flags" to identify any industry specific patterns in these perceptions and to propose organisational strategies that can mitigate these concerns and support long-term retention.

Materials and methods

This study employed a qualitative, inductive research design grounded in an interpretivist philosophy to explore workplace "red flags" as perceived by the Sri Lankan Gen Z. The aim was to capture subjective meanings assigned to negative organisational practices without relying on predefined theories. Data were collected from three public Reddit discussions posted in 2022, 2024, and 2025 on the r/SriLanka subreddit which were selected as their titles contained the keywords of "employer red flags", "workplace red flags" and "toxic workplace" explicitly prompting users to share their workplace experiences. Using purposive sampling, only comments that reflected Gen Z identity, addressed specific workplace concerns and demonstrated evaluative depth were included. In total, 69 unique user responses were analysed with each comment anonymised and tagged by year.

The data were examined through Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phase thematic analysis, involving open coding, theme development and iterative refinement. ChatGPT was used to support code organisation and clustering but all interpretive decisions were made by the researchers. Ethical guidelines

from the British Psychological Society (2021) for internet mediated research were followed ensuring anonymity, avoiding user interaction, and paraphrasing quotes to prevent traceability.

Results

Sample analysis

The dataset comprised 69 unique responses from 60 respondents extracted from three Reddit discussions on the r/SriLanka subreddit (2022, 2024, and 2025) where participants shared personal accounts of workplace “red flags.” Each unique Reddit username was treated as a single respondent to ensure analytical integrity and avoid duplication. Overall, around 70% of respondents were from IT or tech-related fields, with the remaining 30% from non-IT sectors like retail, health services, and NGOs. This distribution enabled a comparative analysis of red flag perceptions across and within industries, providing insight into the broader workplace climate experienced by Gen Z in Sri Lanka.

Thematic findings

Performative culture and organisational hypocrisy

A pervasive theme across the dataset was the sense of inauthenticity within organisational culture. Many participants reported a disconnect between how companies presented themselves to the public and how they operated internally. Employer branding tools such as workplace awards and certifications were frequently referenced in a sarcastic tone with several respondents indicating that such recognitions held little meaning when day-to-day experiences contradicted them. This dissonance was further reinforced by the use of emotionally charged slogans intended to foster loyalty and unity. Phrases such as “*We are a family*,” “*Work hard, play hard*,” and “*We expect loyalty*” were consistently cited as red flags. Rather than creating a sense of inclusion, these slogans were interpreted as signs of blurred professional boundaries, exploitation, or coercive emotional manipulation.

Lack of psychological safety and respect

Another dominant concern was the absence of psychological safety and mutual respect in workplace environments. Respondents described scenarios in which emotional distress or mental health challenges were trivialised, dismissed, or penalised. In some cases, individuals who expressed stress or burnout were told to maintain positivity or were excluded from the team dynamic for “*disrupting the vibe*.” These experiences were especially troubling when organisations had outwardly promoted mental health awareness but failed to provide meaningful support in practice. Participants also reported exposure to verbally aggressive management styles and blame cultures. These included experiences of being shouted at, unfairly criticised, or used as scapegoats for systemic problems. In such environments, junior employees were particularly vulnerable, and the absence of clear reporting pathways further compounded feelings of helplessness.

Exploitation and burnout norms

Exploitation and the normalisation of burnout emerged as a recurring theme across both IT and non-IT contexts. Respondents frequently described being expected to work beyond standard hours without

additional compensation or formal recognition. Many recounted receiving work calls on weekends and public holidays or being pressured to attend mandatory after hours events framed as “team-building” activities. In these cases, refusal to comply was often interpreted by management as a lack of dedication or poor team spirit. Beyond the issue of hours, participants also voiced frustration about being confined to repetitive, low-growth tasks that failed to align with their job descriptions. Several described stagnation in roles with little opportunity to develop new skills or contribute creatively. Others shared concerns that innovation was discouraged with senior staff often rejecting new ideas or protecting traditional hierarchies.

Unfair HR practices and compensation systems

A critical area of concern involved organisational practices around human resources and compensation. Participants repeatedly described HR departments as lacking credibility, transparency, or impartiality. Several respondents shared experiences of salaries being delayed, revised downward after job acceptance or withheld under vague circumstances. In such cases, financial instability and poor communication amplified feelings of exploitation. Performance review systems were also commonly viewed as disingenuous. Many participants described scenarios in which they received praise or symbolic rewards such as staff outings or public recognition only to be told that budgetary constraints prevented any meaningful salary adjustments. Others noted that raises or promotions were only granted after an employee received a competing offer from another company. These practices led respondents to question the legitimacy of organisational feedback systems and fostered the belief that loyalty and performance were undervalued.

Favoritism, discrimination, and lack of inclusion

Issues of inequity and exclusion were prevalent in both IT and non-IT sectors. Respondents described experiences of favouritism and nepotism where promotions, workload allocations and access to opportunities were determined by personal affiliations such as school background or social relationships with management. This perception of unfairness significantly undermined morale and organisational trust. In addition to favouritism, several respondents reported experiencing or witnessing gender-based discrimination including inappropriate comments, microaggressions and unsafe working environments. Such incidents were particularly evident in non-IT sectors including mental health NGOs, service industries, and development organisations. These accounts suggest that despite growing discourse around diversity and inclusion, many workplaces continue to fall short of creating environments where all employees feel respected and safe.

Organisational dishonesty and poor ethics

The final theme relates to concerns about organisational integrity and ethical standards. Participants highlighted cases in which companies misrepresented their capabilities to clients or fabricated internal crises to justify withholding raises and benefits. Others described being assigned responsibilities outside their job descriptions without clear communication leading to role confusion and feelings of manipulation. The absence of formal job descriptions or consistent expectations was perceived as a deliberate strategy to increase control over employees and avoid accountability. For Gen Z respondents, such behaviours signalled deeper ethical concerns about the organisation’s culture and long-term viability. This theme underscores the importance that younger workers place on honesty, role clarity and ethical leadership in shaping their decisions to remain in or resign.

Industry specific theme comparison

The analysis revealed both common and sector-specific workplace red flags among Sri Lankan Gen Z respondents. Shared concerns included distrust in performative culture, poor psychological safety, opaque HR practices, and problematic slogans like “We are a family.” The IT sector was marked by issues such as unpaid overtime, rigid processes, role misalignment, and superficial DEI initiatives. IT respondents often felt overworked, underutilized, and frustrated by the lack of flexibility and innovation. In contrast, non-IT respondents highlighted concerns related to interpersonal treatment and ethical practices. These included gender-based microaggressions, misuse of mental health branding, nepotism, and coercive participation in unpaid social events. While overtime and burnout were more prominent in IT, non-IT workers more frequently reported deficiencies in mental health support and fair treatment. The findings suggest that although some issues are sector-specific, many reflect broader systemic challenges faced by Gen Z in the Sri Lankan workplace.

Discussion

The study examined the workplace red flags perceived by Sri Lankan Generation Z employees extracting data from three Reddit threads posted over a 30-month period. The thematic analysis revealed six recurring concerns as performative culture, lack of psychological safety, exploitation and burnout, unfair HR practices, favouritism and discrimination, and organisational dishonesty. These red flags reflect a broader generational standard for what is considered acceptable in the workplace.

The findings align with existing research that describes Generation Z as valuing authenticity, fairness and psychological well-being (Zahra et al., 2025; Pichler et al., 2021). Distrust in branding strategies and slogans such as “We are a family” mirrored previous studies that identified symbolic culture as ineffective when not grounded in genuine employee experience (Sakdiyakorn et al., 2021). Participants expressed particular sensitivity to mismatch between external image and internal practice.

Psychological safety emerged as a core expectation. Respondents reported that emotional distress and mental health concerns were frequently minimised or ignored in environments that promote positivity without structural support. These observations affirm Zahra et al.'s (2025) claim that Gen Z expects respect for emotional boundaries as a basic workplace norm.

Exploitation and burnout in the form of unpaid overtime, poor role clarity, and limited learning opportunities were dominant among IT sector respondents. These concerns reflect the “expectation-reality gap” outlined by Osorio and Madero (2024), where unmet promises lead to disengagement. HR systems were viewed as unreliable, and performance appraisals as manipulative when not linked to transparent outcomes confirming Nakash's (2024) findings.

The emphasis on fairness and ethical conduct was particularly strong among non-IT workers who frequently reported favouritism, gender-based microaggressions and inconsistent treatment. Dishonesty in compensation and job role definitions further affected the trust. These insights collectively suggest that Gen Z perceives authenticity, equity, and psychological safety not as optional perks but as foundational workplace standards.

The study is limited by its reliance on self-selected, anonymous Reddit contributors which may over represent negative experiences. Demographic verification was not possible and the tone of online discourse presented interpretive challenges. Nevertheless, the recurrence and consistency of themes across time and industries point to shared generational expectations.

Future research could expand on these findings by incorporating mixed method approaches, demographic profiling, and comparative studies across different cultural or economic contexts.

Quantitative work could also assess the organisational impact of red-flag perceptions on turnover and engagement.

Conclusion

This study identified six core organisational red flags that influence Gen Z employees' willingness to join or remain in Sri Lankan workplaces. These findings reveal a generation that places high value on authenticity, fairness, mental well-being and ethical consistency. Employers who fail to meet these expectations risk alienating a key segment of the emerging workforce. According to the findings, organisations that align internal practices with external messaging, support psychological safety, ensure fair HR processes and provide genuine developmental opportunities are better positioned to attract and retain Gen Z talent.

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