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Systematic Literature Review: The Mediating Role of Meaningful Work Perception in the Emotional Intelligence-Job Satisfaction-Retention Nexus: A Gen Z Hospitality Industry Study

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Abstract

This systematic literature review synthesizes recent evidence on the relationships among emotional intelligence (EI), job satisfaction (JS), meaningful work perception (MWP), and employee retention in the hospitality industry, with particular attention to Generation Z employees. Hospitality organizations face persistent retention challenges because service work involves high emotional labor, irregular schedules, and limited perceived career security. At the same time, Gen Z employees increasingly evaluate employment through purpose, flexibility, values alignment, psychological wellbeing, and opportunities for authentic contribution. Following PRISMA-oriented procedures, the review summarizes 40 empirical and conceptual studies published between 2021 and 2026 across Scopus, Web of Science, Emerald Insight, and Google Scholar. The synthesis shows that EI generally strengthens job satisfaction by helping employees regulate emotional labor, build service relationships, and cope with workplace demands. Meaningful work perception appears as a central psychological mechanism: employees who can connect emotional skills to service purpose and social contribution report stronger satisfaction and lower turnover intention. The review integrates Social Exchange Theory, Self-Determination Theory, and the Job Demands-Resources framework to propose a sequential pathway in which HRM practices and leadership support develop EI, foster meaningful work, enhance job satisfaction, and strengthen retention. Practical

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recommendations emphasize EI development, values-based leadership, meaningful job design, and flexible HRM systems for Gen Z hospitality talent.

Keywords: emotional intelligence, job satisfaction, meaningful work, employee retention, Generation Z, hospitality industry, HRM practices, organizational behavior

INTRODUCTION

The hospitality industry has entered a period in which employee retention is no longer only an operational issue but also a strategic human resource challenge. Hotels, restaurants, tourism firms, and service organizations compete for workers who are able to deliver emotionally engaging customer experiences while maintaining psychological resilience. The post-pandemic labor market has made this challenge more visible. Younger employees, particularly those classified as Generation Z, tend to question whether an organization offers work that is meaningful, flexible, supportive, and aligned with personal values. In this context, retention cannot be explained adequately by pay, tenure, or job security alone.

Generation Z employees, commonly defined as those born between the late 1990s and early 2010s, are becoming a significant part of the service workforce. Their employment expectations differ from traditional assumptions used in retention models. Prior literature in the reviewed manuscript indicates that this group places strong emphasis on purpose-driven work, psychological wellbeing, fair leadership, development opportunities, and work-life integration (Rohayati et al., 2023; Westover, 2024; Anggapradja & Marianti, 2024). These expectations are particularly relevant in hospitality, where work is customer facing, emotionally demanding, and often structured around long or irregular hours.

Emotional intelligence is central to this issue because hospitality employees must continuously identify, understand, regulate, and express emotions in ways that support service quality. Emotional intelligence has been associated with better emotional labor management, stronger customer orientation, teamwork, and satisfaction (Sukhragchaa et al., 2021; Traymbak et al., 2022; Lama & Karki, 2025). However, the relationship between EI and retention is not always direct. Some employees may possess emotional skills yet still leave if they do not experience fairness, belonging, growth, or meaning in their work.

Job satisfaction remains one of the most established predictors of retention and turnover intention. In hospitality, satisfaction is shaped by supervisory support,

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compensation, workload, organizational culture, development opportunities, and work-life balance. Yet satisfaction among Gen Z appears to depend not only on material or structural conditions but also on whether employees perceive their work as valuable and connected to a wider purpose. Meaningful work perception therefore becomes an important missing link between emotional competencies and retention outcomes.

Meaningful work perception refers to the extent to which employees believe their work has purpose, expresses personal values, and contributes positively to others. In service contexts, meaning may emerge from helping guests, supporting team members, participating in an organization with social responsibility, or building a career identity in hospitality. Studies on Gen Z and meaningful work suggest that this perception can reduce withdrawal behavior and turnover intention while increasing engagement and organizational commitment (Rurkkhum & Detnakarin, 2024; Hardi & Satrya, 2025; Sihite & Damanik, 2025).

The literature reviewed in the original article reveals several research gaps. First, emotional intelligence and hospitality retention studies are often separated across disciplinary silos. Second, many studies employ cross-sectional survey designs, which limit causal interpretation. Third, evidence remains biased toward developed economies and customer-facing jobs, while emerging markets and behind-the-scenes hospitality roles receive less attention. Fourth, Generation Z is often treated as a descriptive demographic category rather than a theoretically important group with distinctive values and psychological expectations. Finally, meaningful work is frequently examined in isolation rather than as a mediator in the EI-JS-retention pathway.

Therefore, this condensed article focuses on the question: how does meaningful work perception help explain the relationship between emotional intelligence, job satisfaction, and employee retention among Generation Z hospitality employees? The objective is to synthesize publication patterns, methodological tendencies, theoretical frameworks, direct relationships, mediation mechanisms, and practical implications. The contribution lies in integrating Social Exchange Theory, Self-Determination Theory, and the Job Demands-Resources framework into a concise sequential model suitable for future empirical testing and HRM intervention design.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Emotional Intelligence

Emotional intelligence refers to the ability to perceive, understand, regulate, and use emotions constructively. The reviewed studies frequently rely on the Wong and Law

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Emotional Intelligence Scale, which includes self-emotional appraisal, others' emotional appraisal, regulation of emotion, and use of emotions (Traymbak et al., 2022). In hospitality, these dimensions are not abstract personality traits; they influence how employees respond to complaints, coordinate with colleagues, manage stress, and sustain service quality during emotionally demanding interactions.

The importance of EI is amplified by emotional labor. Hospitality employees are often expected to display warmth, patience, and professionalism regardless of their actual emotional state. When employees possess stronger emotional regulation and interpersonal awareness, they are better able to manage these display rules without excessive emotional exhaustion. As a result, EI can function as a personal resource that supports satisfaction and performance (Miao et al., 2021; Verma & Agrawal, 2025).

Job Satisfaction

Job satisfaction is a multidimensional evaluation of employment experience. It includes affective satisfaction, such as feeling happy or valued at work; cognitive satisfaction, such as judging that work conditions are fair; and behavioral implications, such as willingness to remain. In hospitality, satisfaction may arise from supportive supervisors, manageable workloads, adequate compensation, recognition, learning opportunities, and work-life balance. The reviewed evidence suggests that job satisfaction consistently reduces turnover intention and strengthens loyalty, especially when supported by leadership and development opportunities (Guslina et al., 2025; Lazuardi et al., 2025; Patadungan et al., 2026).

Meaningful Work Perception

Meaningful work perception is the sense that work is purposeful, personally significant, and socially valuable. It includes positive meaning, meaning-making through work experiences, and greater-good motivation. In hospitality, meaningful work may be developed when employees see that their service creates comfort, safety, enjoyment, or memorable experiences for guests. Meaningful work also emerges when employees believe that their organization respects employees, contributes to society, and allows individual values to be expressed.

For Generation Z employees, meaningful work is especially important because employment is often interpreted as part of personal identity and life purpose. Westover (2024) describes values-aligned leadership as a response to conscious quitting, while Rohayati et al. (2023) connect meaningful work, positive organizational culture, and job

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satisfaction to lower turnover intention among Gen Z. This indicates that meaningful work should not be treated as a secondary outcome; it can be a core mechanism through which HRM practices affect retention.

Retention and Turnover Intention

Retention refers to employees' continued employment and psychological willingness to stay. In research, it is often measured indirectly through turnover intention, organizational commitment, loyalty, or intention to stay. Hospitality organizations commonly experience higher turnover because work can be physically and emotionally demanding, career paths may be unclear, and employees often perceive alternative jobs as more flexible. For Gen Z, retention is more likely when employees experience development, fairness, supportive leadership, flexibility, and meaningful contribution (Aspasya et al., 2026; Novanantha & Febriansyah, 2025).

Integrated Theoretical Lenses

Social Exchange Theory explains retention through reciprocity. When organizations invest in employees through EI training, supportive leadership, and humane HRM practices, employees interpret these actions as organizational support and may reciprocate with stronger commitment and lower turnover intention (Ghosh & Pakira, 2025; Woime & Shato, 2025). However, reciprocity is strongest when organizational investments match employee values. For Gen Z employees, development initiatives that ignore meaning, wellbeing, or flexibility may fail to generate commitment.

Self-Determination Theory adds a motivational explanation. Employees develop intrinsic motivation when work satisfies autonomy, competence, and relatedness. EI development can strengthen competence in emotional regulation; meaningful job design can enhance autonomy by allowing authentic contribution; and supportive service cultures can increase relatedness. These mechanisms help explain why meaningful work perception can mediate the relationship between EI and job satisfaction.

The Job Demands-Resources framework explains how employees remain engaged when resources outweigh demands. Hospitality demands include emotional labor, customer pressure, shift work, workload, and conflict. Resources include EI, meaningful work, supervisor support, flexibility, recognition, and training. When EI and meaningful work act as resources, employees are better able to interpret service work positively and maintain satisfaction despite high demands (E et al., 2025; Amani, 2025).

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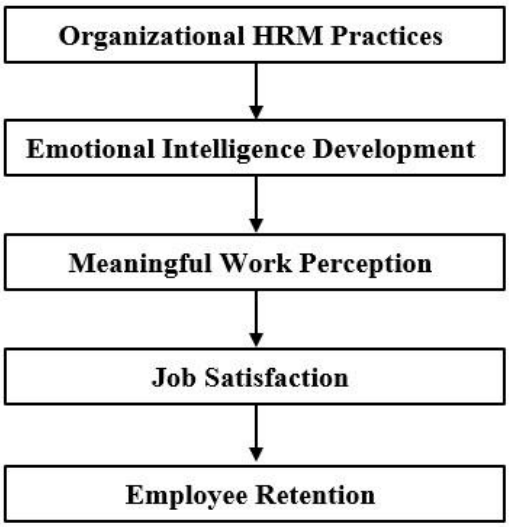


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of the Study

METHODOLOGY

Review Design

The original review follows a systematic literature review design guided by PRISMA 2020 principles and supported by elements of SPAR-4-SLR. The review process consisted of scope definition, search and screening, data extraction and quality assessment, and narrative-thematic synthesis. The objective was not only to count studies but also to integrate evidence on psychological mechanisms linking EI, meaningful work, job satisfaction, and retention.

The search focused on peer-reviewed empirical and conceptual studies published between 2021 and 2026. Four databases were used: Scopus, Web of Science, Emerald Insight, and Google Scholar. The search strategy combined keywords related to emotional intelligence, job satisfaction, employee retention, meaningful work, Generation Z, hospitality, service industries, and HRM practices. Boolean operators were used to connect core concepts and broaden results within each concept cluster.

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Table 1. Search Strategy and Information Sources

Element	Description
Databases	Scopus, Web of Science, Emerald Insight, and Google Scholar.
Search period	Publications from 2021-2026, with earlier foundational theories used only for conceptual grounding.
Core search clusters	"emotional intelligence" OR "EI"; "job satisfaction"; "employee retention" OR "turnover intention"; "meaningful work" OR "work meaning"; "Generation Z" OR "Gen Z"; "hospitality" OR "hotel" OR "restaurant" OR "tourism".
Supplementary searches	HRM practices, talent management, leadership, work-life balance, organizational culture, and employee engagement in service sectors.
Screening outcome	487 records identified; 412 after duplicates; 124 full-text articles assessed; 40 studies included in qualitative synthesis; 35 studies included in quantitative-oriented synthesis.

Inclusion, Exclusion, and Quality Assessment

Studies were included when they examined at least two relevant constructs among EI, job satisfaction, meaningful work, employee retention, turnover intention, organizational commitment, or related HRM variables. Hospitality and service sector studies were prioritized, while multi-sector studies were retained when their findings were generalizable to hospitality or relevant to Gen Z retention. English-language peer-reviewed work was prioritized, and empirical studies were expected to provide sufficient methodological clarity, sample information, and statistical or thematic evidence.

Quality appraisal was adapted from the Joanna Briggs Institute approach for analytical cross-sectional studies and organizational research. Criteria included clarity of inclusion and exclusion procedures, sample description, measurement validity, reliability reporting, response rate adequacy, treatment of confounding variables, and completeness of statistical reporting. Papers scoring at least 0.70 were retained, while those above 0.80 were considered high quality. The original review reports a mean quality score of 0.76, with 28 papers rated high quality.

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Table 2. Condensed Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Dimension	Inclusion	Exclusion
Variables	Studies examining at least two of EI, JS, MWP, retention, turnover intention, organizational commitment, or HRM support.	Studies examining a single unrelated outcome or lacking relationship analysis.
Population	Hospitality, tourism, hotel, restaurant, or service-sector employees; Gen Z and young worker studies prioritized.	Purely clinical, educational, or non-service samples with no hospitality relevance.
Method	Quantitative, qualitative, mixed-method, or conceptual studies with clear research contribution.	Commentary without evidence, unclear method, or insufficient sample information.
Period and language	2021-2026 and English-language publication; foundational theories retained when needed.	Pre-2021 non-theoretical articles and non-English publications.
Quality	Peer-reviewed work with adequate validity, reliability, and reporting quality.	Poor methodological clarity or severe reporting limitations.

Data Extraction and Synthesis

Data extraction covered bibliographic information, publication year, country, industry, research design, sample size, response rate, variables, measurement scales, theoretical framework, direct effects, mediation effects, moderation effects, and quality indicators. The extraction form was piloted on five studies and refined to improve consistency. The review used thematic synthesis, tabular synthesis, vote counting for directional evidence, and narrative integration across theoretical lenses. This approach is appropriate because the included studies vary in industry context, research design, measurement instrument, and statistical method.

RESULTS

Profile of Included Studies

The final sample consisted of 40 studies. Most studies were empirical and quantitative, relying on surveys, regression, structural equation modeling, or mediation

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analysis. The average sample size reported in the original review was approximately 280 respondents, although study sizes varied substantially. Cross-sectional research dominated the evidence base, while longitudinal, quasi-experimental, and qualitative designs were less common. This pattern indicates that the field has accumulated broad correlational evidence but still requires stronger causal and process-oriented designs.

The evidence base also shows disciplinary and geographic concentration. Hospitality-specific studies accounted for a smaller portion of the full sample than broader service or multi-sector studies. Asia-Pacific studies were prominent, including Indonesia, China, Vietnam, the Philippines, and related emerging markets, but developed economy evidence remained influential. Only 15 of the 40 studies explicitly focused on Generation Z, despite the importance of this workforce cohort for future hospitality staffing.

Table 3. Summary Profile of the 40 Included Studies

Characteristic	Main Pattern	Interpretation
Research design	29 cross-sectional studies; 6 longitudinal; 2 quasi-experimental; 3 qualitative or mixed-method.	Evidence is rich but causal inference remains limited.
Methodology	34 quantitative studies; 3 qualitative; 3 mixed-method.	Statistical testing dominates, while worker narratives remain underdeveloped.
Theoretical frameworks	Social Exchange Theory, Self-Determination Theory, Job Demands-Resources Theory, and Conservation of Resources Theory recur across studies.	The field is moving toward integrated models rather than single-theory explanations.
Industry focus	Hospitality-specific, multi-sector service, IT, banking, and healthcare studies.	Hospitality evidence is supported by adjacent service-sector findings.
Gen Z focus	15 of 40 studies explicitly examine Gen Z.	More generation-specific hospitality research is needed.
Quality rating	28 studies rated high quality based on the adapted appraisal criteria.	The evidence base is usable but methodologically uneven.

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Emotional Intelligence and Job Satisfaction

The strongest and most consistent relationship in the review is the positive association between emotional intelligence and job satisfaction. Studies in hospitality and service contexts indicate that employees with higher EI are better able to manage emotional labor, understand customer and coworker emotions, and regulate stress during service delivery. These abilities help employees experience more control, competence, and positive affect in their work roles (Sukhragchaa et al., 2021; Traymbak et al., 2022; Gupta & Kumar, 2025).

EI contributes to satisfaction through both intrapersonal and interpersonal mechanisms. Intrapersonally, employees who can regulate emotions are less likely to experience overwhelming stress or burnout. Interpersonally, employees who can read others' emotions and respond appropriately are more likely to build constructive relationships with customers, supervisors, and team members. In hospitality, where customer experience is central, these social-emotional competencies become directly tied to work success and satisfaction.

However, the review does not support a simplistic view that EI alone guarantees retention. Emotionally intelligent employees may still leave if the organization fails to provide fair leadership, values alignment, meaningful roles, or career development. Thus, EI should be understood as a necessary resource that must be activated through supportive organizational contexts.

Meaningful Work as a Mediating Mechanism

The reviewed studies position meaningful work perception as a crucial mediator in the EI-JS-retention nexus. Employees with higher EI may be better able to recognize the emotional and social significance of service work. They can interpret customer appreciation, teamwork, and organizational contribution as indicators that their work matters. This interpretation transforms emotional labor from a burden into a source of purpose and identity. Meaningful work thereby helps explain why EI can influence satisfaction and retention beyond direct emotional regulation.

For Gen Z employees, the mediating role of meaning appears especially important. Studies on work meaning, justice, engagement, and turnover intention suggest that young employees are more likely to stay when work aligns with personal values and offers perceived contribution (Rohayati et al., 2023; Hardi & Satrya, 2025; Sihite & Damanik, 2025). In hospitality, meaningful work can be strengthened by communicating the social

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value of service, recognizing emotional labor, involving employees in decision-making, and designing roles that permit autonomy and development.

The synthesis suggests a sequential mechanism: EI helps employees process and manage workplace emotions; this emotional competence enables them to perceive meaning in service interactions; meaningful work enhances job satisfaction; and satisfaction strengthens retention. Although the available evidence is largely cross-sectional, the logic is consistent with Social Exchange Theory, Self-Determination Theory, and the Job Demands-Resources framework.

Job Satisfaction and Employee Retention

Job satisfaction remains the most immediate predictor of retention in the reviewed literature. Studies consistently indicate that employees with higher satisfaction report lower turnover intention and stronger commitment. For Gen Z, satisfaction is influenced by leadership style, career development, flexibility, rewards, work-life balance, and organizational culture (Jasmine & Utomo, 2024; Guslina et al., 2025; Lazuardi et al., 2025; Rohmanulloh et al., 2026).

The hospitality context complicates this relationship because employees may remain for functional reasons, such as limited alternatives, or for affective reasons, such as commitment and values alignment. The review emphasizes that affective retention is more desirable because it is linked to engagement, service quality, and lower withdrawal behavior. Meaningful work helps shift retention from functional dependence to affective commitment.

Leadership, HRM Practices, and Organizational Culture

Leadership and HRM practices appear as important contextual conditions. Transformational, authentic, empowering, strategic, and values-based leadership styles are associated with better learning outcomes, job satisfaction, and commitment among younger employees (Shehawy, 2021; Doan & Wu, 2025; Kimonyo, 2025). Leaders shape meaningful work by explaining purpose, recognizing employee contribution, allowing voice, and aligning everyday work with organizational values.

HRM practices contribute through training, development, flexible scheduling, fair rewards, mentoring, and psychological support. EI development programs can help employees cope with emotional labor, but their effectiveness depends on implementation quality. If organizations present EI training as a requirement to tolerate poor working conditions, employees may perceive it as manipulative. If EI development is paired with

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fair workloads, supportive supervisors, and meaningful job design, employees are more likely to interpret it as organizational investment.

Organizational culture also matters. Cultures emphasizing dignity, inclusion, sustainability, and social responsibility are more likely to activate meaningful work perception. This is especially important for Gen Z, who often evaluate employers based on value congruence and ethical image. Therefore, retention strategies should combine emotional competence development with broader cultural and structural support.

Table 4. Evidence Synthesis by Core Relationship

Relationship	Main finding	Key implication
EI → Job Satisfaction	Generally positive; EI supports emotional labor regulation, service relationships, and coping.	Recruitment and training should include emotional competence development.
EI → Meaningful Work	EI helps employees interpret service interactions as purposeful and socially valuable.	Meaning should be built into training, reflection, and feedback systems.
Meaningful Work → Job Satisfaction	Positive meaning strengthens intrinsic satisfaction and reduces emotional exhaustion.	Job design should emphasize purpose, autonomy, and contribution.
Job Satisfaction → Retention	Higher satisfaction reduces turnover intention and strengthens commitment.	Retention cannot be separated from daily work experience.
Gen Z as moderator	Values alignment, flexibility, growth, and authenticity strengthen the pathways.	Standard retention packages should be adapted to generational expectations.

Thematic Synthesis of the Literature

A cross-study reading of the included literature reveals four thematic clusters. The first cluster concerns emotional labor and service performance. Hospitality workers are expected to manage visible emotions while interacting with guests, supervisors, and coworkers. Studies in this cluster argue that EI reduces the psychological cost of emotional display because employees are more capable of recognizing emotional cues,

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reframing conflict, and regulating negative feelings. This cluster supports the view that EI is both a personal capacity and an organizational resource when strengthened through training and coaching.

The second cluster concerns work meaning, engagement, and organizational commitment. Here, the reviewed studies suggest that employees are more willing to remain when they can interpret work as personally valuable and socially useful. Meaningful work does not remove difficult conditions, but it changes how employees evaluate those conditions. A demanding shift may be accepted more positively when workers believe that their role contributes to guest wellbeing, team reliability, or professional growth. This is why meaningful work can mediate the relationship between emotional competence and satisfaction.

The third cluster concerns Gen Z expectations. Studies focusing on younger workers emphasize flexibility, learning, values alignment, psychological safety, and authentic leadership. These expectations do not mean that compensation is unimportant. Rather, compensation is interpreted together with fairness, respect, development, and purpose. Gen Z employees may leave when they perceive a gap between organizational promises and actual treatment. In this cluster, retention is not only an economic decision but also an identity and values decision.

The fourth cluster concerns HRM systems and leadership. Retention is stronger when organizations integrate recruitment, training, career pathways, recognition, scheduling, and leadership behavior into a coherent employee experience. EI training alone is insufficient if supervisors ignore employee voice or if workloads are chronically excessive. Likewise, purpose statements are insufficient if employees do not experience dignity in daily interactions. Effective retention therefore requires alignment among emotional development, meaningful work design, leadership, and working conditions.

Methodological and Theoretical Patterns

Methodologically, the reviewed field is still developing. The large number of quantitative surveys allows researchers to identify common relationships, but it also creates dependence on self-reported turnover intention. This is important because intentions can change quickly and may not always lead to actual resignation. Longitudinal and archival data are needed to verify whether meaningful work and job satisfaction predict actual retention across months or years. Qualitative research is also needed because the experience of meaning is subjective and may vary across culture, role, and career stage.

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Theoretically, the field shows movement from isolated variable testing toward integrated models. Earlier work often examined EI, job satisfaction, or turnover intention separately. More recent studies increasingly combine leadership, engagement, meaningful work, work-life balance, and generational identity. This shift is important because retention decisions are complex. Employees do not stay only because one variable is favorable; they stay when multiple signals indicate that the organization supports competence, autonomy, relatedness, fairness, and future growth.

The proposed serial model should therefore be understood as a flexible framework rather than a rigid formula. In some organizations, leadership support may directly enhance meaningful work even before EI development occurs. In other cases, work-life balance or rewards may moderate the effect of satisfaction on retention. The model is most useful because it identifies the psychological chain that HR managers can intentionally strengthen: emotional capability, perceived purpose, positive work evaluation, and willingness to stay.

Table 5. Practical HRM Action Matrix for Gen Z Hospitality Retention

Retention lever	Example action	Expected psychological effect
EI development	Provide training on emotional awareness, guest conflict, empathy, and stress regulation; reinforce through coaching.	Improves competence and reduces emotional exhaustion.
Meaningful work design	Share guest impact stories, explain service purpose, recognize invisible labor, and connect tasks to organizational mission.	Strengthens purpose, identity, and value alignment.
Leadership support	Train supervisors in authentic communication, fairness, feedback, and psychological safety.	Increases perceived organizational support and trust.
Flexibility and wellbeing	Use fair scheduling, reasonable workload planning, rest protection, and work-life balance initiatives.	Reduces job demands and supports autonomy.

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Career development	Offer mentoring, skill pathways, internal mobility, and transparent promotion criteria.	Signals future growth and strengthens commitment.
Retention monitoring	Use stay interviews, pulse surveys, burnout indicators, and turnover-risk dashboards.	Detects declining satisfaction before employees resign.

DISCUSSION

Integration of Findings

The findings suggest that employee retention in Gen Z hospitality contexts is best understood as a psychological and relational process rather than a simple response to compensation. Emotional intelligence equips employees with the personal resource needed to manage emotional labor. Meaningful work perception translates that resource into purpose and identity. Job satisfaction reflects the positive evaluation of work conditions and psychological fulfillment. Retention emerges when employees believe that staying in the organization supports their values, growth, and wellbeing.

This sequence clarifies inconsistencies in previous EI-retention research. When EI is tested as a direct predictor of retention, findings may vary because EI requires mediating conditions to influence stay decisions. A highly emotionally intelligent employee may handle conflict well but still leave if work lacks meaning or if leadership violates values. Conversely, employees with developing EI may remain engaged when supervisors provide support, purpose, and opportunities to learn. The proposed model therefore emphasizes mediation and context.

The model also helps explain why meaningful work is a force multiplier. Meaningful work strengthens the emotional and motivational value of other HRM practices. Training becomes meaningful when employees understand how it improves guest experiences. Flexible schedules become meaningful when they show respect for wellbeing. Leadership becomes meaningful when it links daily service to organizational mission. In this way, MWP connects individual emotion, job experience, and organizational retention strategy.

Theoretical Contributions

First, the review contributes by integrating Social Exchange Theory, Self-Determination Theory, and the Job Demands-Resources framework. SET explains why organizational investment creates reciprocity; SDT explains why autonomy, competence, and relatedness shape motivation; and JD-R explains why emotional and meaningful

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resources buffer work demands. Together, these theories provide a more complete explanation of retention than any single framework.

Second, the review positions Generation Z as a theoretically meaningful population. Gen Z is not merely a demographic label. The reviewed studies suggest that values, flexibility, wellbeing, identity, and purpose may change the strength of traditional retention mechanisms. As a result, future models should test generational differences directly rather than assuming that older retention theories apply equally across cohorts.

Third, the review advances meaningful work perception as a mediating construct between emotional intelligence and job outcomes. This is important because meaningful work bridges individual capability and organizational context. It explains how emotional skills become motivational resources that increase satisfaction and retention.

Practical Implications

For hospitality HR managers, the findings suggest that retention strategies should be integrated rather than isolated. Pay and scheduling remain important, but they are insufficient if employees feel disconnected from purpose or unsupported by leaders. Organizations should develop EI training that includes emotion recognition, conflict management, empathy, stress regulation, and reflective service learning. Training should be followed by coaching and supervisor reinforcement so that skills are applied in daily work.

Second, organizations should cultivate meaningful work by helping employees understand the value of their roles. Managers can share guest feedback, recognize invisible emotional labor, connect tasks to service outcomes, and invite employees to participate in improvement decisions. For back-of-house roles, meaning can be strengthened by showing how operational excellence contributes to safety, guest comfort, and team success.

Third, leadership development should focus on authenticity, fairness, communication, and values alignment. Gen Z employees are likely to notice gaps between organizational slogans and daily treatment. Leaders must therefore demonstrate respect, provide feedback, support flexibility where possible, and create psychologically safe environments. Such leadership turns HRM practices into credible signals of organizational support.

Fourth, retention should be monitored through early indicators such as satisfaction, perceived meaning, engagement, burnout, and turnover intention. Organizations can use

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pulse surveys, exit interviews, stay interviews, and team-level dashboards to identify when employees are losing meaning or satisfaction before they decide to leave.

Boundary Conditions and Moderating Factors

The strength of the proposed pathway is likely to depend on several boundary conditions. The first is leadership credibility. Meaningful work is difficult to sustain when leaders communicate inspiring values but tolerate unfair schedules, disrespectful supervision, or excessive emotional demands. Under these conditions, employees may interpret meaningful work language as symbolic rather than genuine. Therefore, the effect of meaningful work on satisfaction is expected to be stronger when leadership behavior is consistent with organizational values.

The second boundary condition is role type. Front-office employees, servers, receptionists, and guest-facing workers may experience meaning directly through customer interaction. By contrast, kitchen, housekeeping, maintenance, and administrative employees may need different forms of meaning-making because their contribution is less visible to guests. Future hospitality research should therefore test whether the same EI-MWP-JS-retention pathway operates similarly across front-of-house and back-of-house roles.

The third boundary condition is labor market mobility. When alternative jobs are plentiful, even satisfied employees may leave for better flexibility or career development. When alternatives are limited, dissatisfied employees may remain but show withdrawal behavior. This distinction is important for interpreting retention because staying does not always mean commitment. Researchers and practitioners should differentiate affective retention from forced or functional retention.

The fourth boundary condition is national and organizational culture. The meaning of autonomy, relatedness, hierarchy, service, and loyalty may differ across cultures. In collectivist settings, meaningful work may be tied strongly to family contribution, social harmony, or community reputation. In individualist settings, it may be tied more strongly to personal growth and self-expression. Cross-cultural studies are needed so that retention models do not assume a single universal expression of meaningful work.

Overall, these moderators show that the proposed model should be applied diagnostically. Organizations should first identify where the retention chain is weakest: emotional capability, perceived meaning, satisfaction, or stay intention. Interventions should then be targeted to that weak point rather than copied from generic retention

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templates. This diagnostic use makes the model practical for hospitality managers facing different organizational sizes, service formats, and workforce compositions.

CONCLUSION

This condensed systematic literature review shows that emotional intelligence, meaningful work perception, job satisfaction, and employee retention are interrelated components of a broader psychological process in the hospitality industry. EI helps employees manage emotional labor and develop better workplace relationships. Meaningful work perception transforms those emotional capabilities into purpose, identity, and intrinsic motivation. Job satisfaction reflects the positive evaluation of work that follows from competence, support, and meaning. Retention becomes stronger when employees believe that staying with the organization supports their values, wellbeing, and future growth.

The proposed sequential mediation model offers a useful framework for understanding Gen Z hospitality retention. It suggests that organizations should not rely on isolated retention incentives. Instead, they should combine EI development, meaningful work cultivation, supportive leadership, fair HRM practices, and flexible work systems. Such an integrated approach aligns with the expectations of younger workers and responds to the emotional demands of hospitality service work.

The review also highlights a need for stronger research designs. Existing evidence is promising but still dominated by cross-sectional studies and varied measurement approaches. Future research should test causal pathways, examine actual turnover outcomes, and evaluate field interventions. For practice, the message is clear: retaining Gen Z hospitality talent requires organizations to care not only about what employees do, but also about how they feel, what their work means, and why staying matters.

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