

WORKPLACE DESIGN AND GEN Z RETENTION: A SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY PERSPECTIVE IN SRI LANKA

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ABSTRACT

The Sri Lankan corporate sector is currently grappling with a significant talent retention crisis, particularly among Generation Z (Gen Z) employees who increasingly prioritize the quality of their physical work environment over traditional incentives. While workplace design is frequently evaluated for space efficiency and productivity, its role as a driver of "Social Sustainability" specifically through human capital retention remains under-investigated in the built environment literature. In this context, Job Embeddedness, which explains why employees remain in organizations through their perceived fit with the job, social links within the workplace, and the sacrifices associated with leaving, provides a useful theoretical lens for understanding employee retention. This paper proposed a conceptual framework to addressing the relationship between Workplace Design and Turnover Intention mediated by Job Embeddedness (JE) in gen Z employees working in Sri Lanka. The paper combines the Generational Cohort Theory and the JE Theory to come up with such important design dimensions as flexibility design, biophilic integration, relaxation areas design and technological resilience which creates such psychological aspects of the organization as "fit", "Link" and "sacrifice". The expected outcomes are anticipated to equip facility managers, architects and corporate stakeholders with evidence-based design strategies to convert office spaces into social anchors. Finally, the study will play a role in the development of built environments that can enhance the social sustainability and long-term stability of Sri Lankan workforce within the unstable economic environment.

Keywords: Built Environment; Generation Z; Job Embeddedness; Turnover Intention; Workplace Design.

1. INTRODUCTION

Retention of employees has become an extreme issue in modern organizations, especially when it comes to a multigenerational workforce (Chiwisa & Mpundu, 2024). In today's multigenerational workforce including generations of Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials and Gen Z differences in values, expectations and work orientations offer both opportunities as well as complexities in management (Dwivedula et al., 2019). Among these groups, Gen Z (born 1995-2012) is becoming increasingly prominent due

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to the influence of technological, economic instability, globalization, and political concerns (Magano et al., 2020; Seemiller & Grace, 2017). Gen Z prioritizes meaningful work, autonomy, flexibility, value congruence, and psychological well-being (Ali et al., 2024), which have a major impact on their turnover intentions expressed as the active desire to leave an organization (Makhdoom & Jamali, 2025). A high turnover intention is associated with real turnover, which has a number of adverse organizational consequences, particularly in competitive labor markets (Shoaib & Pathan, 2022). As a possible solution to these issues, the concept of social sustainability has attracted interest, with the well-being of the employees, employee engagement, and employee retention as key components of organizational resilience (Malik & Singh, 2024).

The JE theory, with dimensions of fit, links, and sacrifice provides a framework of studying employee retention (Yang et al., 2011). JE can mediate the positive correlation between workplace design factors and turnover intention in the case of Gen Z, in which workplace flexibility is the determining factors of retention (Kiazad et al., 2024). Although prior studies indicate relationships between workplace design, job embeddedness, and turnover intention, there is a limited integrated conceptual understanding of how these variables interact, particularly in the Sri Lankan context. This study addresses this gap by developing a conceptual framework to guide future empirical research. Therefore, the primary objective of this study is to develop a conceptual framework linking workplace design features, JE, and turnover intention among Gen Z employees working in corporate offices in Sri Lanka.

2. METHODOLOGY

The study explores the effects of the Workplace Design Features on Turnover Intention among Gen Z corporate office employees in Sri Lanka, with a focus on the mediating role of JE. Based on a narrative literature review, it will incorporate multidisciplinary insights of organizational behaviour, workplace design, and sustainability studies, filling in the gap of the intersectional nature of corporate built environments and the JE theory in this demographic. The methodology involved secondary data where the researcher has to gather data through peer-reviewed academic sources to obtain not only the recent relevance but also the theoretical basis. The synthesis exposes gaps in theory, discrepancies in current research and puts forward a specific conceptual model related to the corporate context in Sri Lanka. Finally, the research places workplace design as an instrument of social sustainability targeted at boosting the retention of Gen Z employees.

The process of literature selection to be used in the present study was systematic as demonstrated in Figure 1 and involved identification, screening, and inclusion phases. The relevant studies have been searched in the first stage in major academic databases, including ScienceDirect, ResearchGate, Emerald Insight, and Google Scholar, to find the required studies. The search was conducted using a combination of keywords such as “Workplace Design”, “Gen Z”, “Turnover Intention”, “Job Embeddedness”, “Flexible Work Arrangements”, and “Work-Life Balance”. The search string used was: (‘Workplace Design’ OR ‘Office Design’) AND (‘Generation Z’ OR ‘Gen Z’) AND (‘Turnover Intention’) AND (‘Job Embeddedness’) AND (‘Flexible Work’ OR ‘Work-Life Balance’). Initially, 120 publications were identified. After removing duplicates (11), irrelevant studies (20), and those lacking sufficient information (17), 72 publications remained for abstract screening. Following this, 68 studies were selected for full-text review, and finally, 65 articles were included in the analysis. Figure 1 presents the

PRISMA flow diagram detailing the study selection process from initial search to final inclusion.

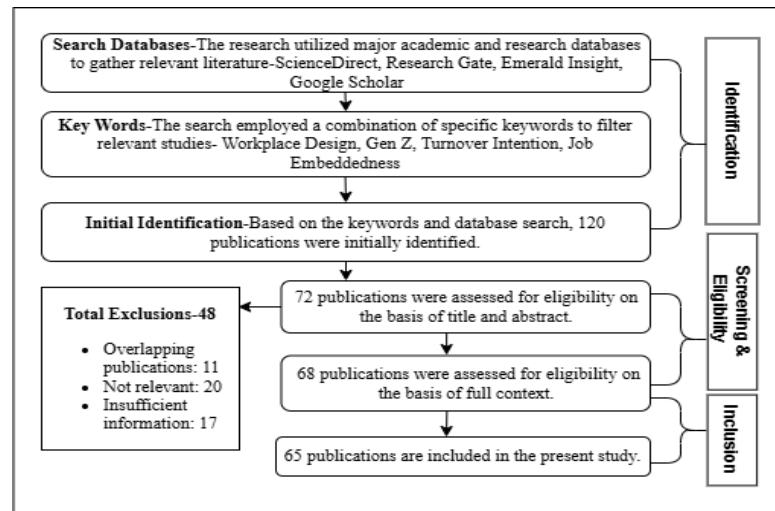


Figure 1: PRISMA flow diagram of the literature selection process

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

3.1.1 Generational Cohort Theory (GCT)

Generational Cohort Theory (GCT) provides a framework for analysing generational differences in organizational behaviour, arguing that individuals born during the same socio-historical period develop diverse attitudes, values, and behaviours (D'Amato & Baruch, 2020). This theory proposes that such generational cohorts are shaped by distinct historical events, influencing work-related attitudes and behaviours in adulthood (D'Amato & Baruch, 2020). Notably, GCT enables the identification of both actual and perceived differences among generational cohorts in aspects like work values and job satisfaction (Lester et al., 2012). Specifically, Gen Z's need for diversity, innovation, and social responsibility stems from their cultural experiences and inspirations (Fernando & Umamaheswari, 2025). The theory explains the importance of accommodating Gen Z's preferences for diversity and personal growth in workplace design, emphasizing that organizational practices must align with their generational identity to enhance job satisfaction and reduce turnover (Zahra et al., 2025).

3.1.2 Gen Z and Turnover Intention

Gen Z, defined as people born between the mid-1990s to early 2010s (1997-2012), are digital natives who have constant access to social media and technology. They are distinguished by their digital savviness, adaptability, acceptance of diversity and individualism, as well as their analytical nature and desire to challenge societal norms (Naci Çoklar & Tatli, 2021). Furthermore, they are better educated, career-oriented, and prefer technology-enabled, authentic experiences compared to previous generations (Jayatissa, 2023). Organizations that foster inclusivity and provide offer flexible work arrangements have an upper hand in attracting and retaining Gen Z talent (Febriana & Mujib, 2024).

Turnover Intention (TI) refers to a worker's purposeful willingness to leave their organization, which differs from actual turnover since it can be influenced by external factors (Gaan & Shin, 2023). High TI can lead to increased recruitment and training costs, loss of institutional expertise, and disruption of team cohesion (Chen et al., 2023), which has detrimental impacts on service quality and business performance, especially as Gen Z becomes a major workforce segment in fields (Lee & Shin, 2025). To reduce TI, organizations can implement flexible work arrangements design, decent work conditions, and supportive leadership, all of which improve job satisfaction and self-efficacy (Berber et al., 2022). This is especially the case in Sri Lankan corporations where it is getting harder to retain young professionals. In Sri Lankan organizations brain drain and economic migration trends after the financial crisis have amplified Gen Z's turnover intentions (Jayakody et al., 2025). This suggests that life goals and work-life balance are important factors contributing to Sri Lankan Gen Z's high turnover, especially in the financial and IT industries (De Silva & Dhammika, 2022). Overall, TI in Gen Z is a sensitive indicator of organizational health, necessitating tailored retention strategies to address their unique needs and expectations (Wan & Duffy, 2022).

3.1.3 Job Embeddedness Theory (JE)

JE theory, introduced by (Mitchell et al., 2001), has evolved as a critical framework for understanding why employees stay with their organizations, diverging from traditional turnover models that mostly focus on job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Kiazad et al., 2024). This theory includes three essential dimensions- Links, Fit and Sacrifice, which can influence an employee's decision to stay or leave both on and off the job (Malalage & Perera, 2025).

The first dimension, "Fit" emphasizes the alignment between an employee's beliefs, career goals, and skills with the organizational culture and job requirements. This congruence fosters a sense of belonging, particularly among younger employees, like Gen Z, who prioritize meaningful work (Clinton et al., 2012). The second dimension, "Links" pertains to the relationships that employees develop within their organization and the surrounding community (Yang et al., 2011). The third dimension, "Sacrifice" refers to the estimated costs of leaving a job or community, including the loss of benefits, working conditions, and social networks (Setthakorn et al., 2024). Employee dissatisfaction can discourage those anticipating significant personal or professional losses from resigning. Sacrifice encompasses both tangible and intangible aspects (Yu et al., 2020).

When people are embedded in their job and community, JE helps them stay, but studies reveal a dark side when people feel trapped in poor conditions. When employees have high "Sacrifice" or "Links" but poor working conditions, JE reduces quitting but it is linked to worsening physical health, emotional exhaustion and sleep quality, meaning that employees do stay but suffer from these issues (Porter et al., 2024). Highly embedded employees in stressful or remote workplaces can face greater strain and exhaustion if these jobs are highly constrained or remote, demonstrating that JE is not a universal remedy for well-being (Schmidbauer et al., 2025). The inclusion of design features in this study's framework is specifically intended to mitigate these risks, ensuring that Gen Z employees are embedded through positive engagement rather than perceived constraints, thereby upholding the principles of long-term social sustainability. Table 1 presents the key dimensions of JE fit, links and sacrifice, which are the most important and the impact they make on TI. These dimensions describe the effects of the fit of employees to their

job, social relationships in the workplace, and the perceived cost of losing on organizational attachment to enhance the chances of staying longer in the organization.

Table 1: JE dimensions and their impact on TI

Dimension	Definition	Key Findings on Turnover Intention	Citations
Links	Formal/informal connections to people, teams, and community	Stronger links reduce turnover intention via increased belonging	(Clinton et al., 2012)
Fit	Perceived compatibility with job, organization, and community	High fit lowers turnover intention by enhancing value congruence	(Yang et al., 2011)
Sacrifice	Perceived costs (tangible/intangible) of leaving job or community	Greater sacrifice most strongly predicts lower turnover intention	(Yu et al., 2020)

3.2 WORKPLACE DESIGN AND EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCE

3.2.1 Workplace Design as a Stakeholder-Centred Strategy

A revolution in the design of a workplace towards a stakeholder-oriented approach highlights the experiences, needs, and expectations of the employees and shifts towards a place of focus on buildings and furniture (Shuaibu & Saleh, 2025). This type of strategic design improves the well-being, productivity, and retention of employees as well as showing respect to them (Van Simaey et al., 2025). Including knowledge work, shows that involving employees in workplace design significantly improves satisfaction, work-life balance, and productivity, reinforcing the effectiveness of co-produced design solutions (Srivastava et al., 2024).

3.2.2 Relationship Between Physical Space and Employee Behavior

The connection between physical space and employee experience is massive and affects wellness, satisfaction, and organizational performance as indicated by studies (Dumitriu et al., 2025). Effective design spaces may contribute to better comfort and cognitive processes, and poorly designed spaces may cause dissatisfaction and health problems (Subarno et al., 2025). As an example, more partitions in open-plan offices can make people feel safer and minimize distractions, whereas such aesthetics as curved lines and biophilic design can make people pay more attention (Gath-Morad et al., 2024). In addition, physical environmental satisfaction is a strong predictor of job satisfaction and influences the connection between employee wellness and organizational commitment (Agha-Hosseini et al., 2013).

3.2.3 Key Workplace Design Features Valued by Gen Z

Sustainability and eco-friendly design, particularly those including biophilic elements, have become pivotal in the workplace preferences of Gen Z, impacting their intentions to stay in the corporate setting (Wolf & Kluge, 2022). In part, this tendency is explained by the increased environmental consciousness of Gen Z that was promoted by the global climate discussion and access to information on the internet (Raman et al., 2024). Unlike earlier generations, Gen Z prefers employers who share their ideals of sustainability and

social responsibility values (Anjum, 2024). Exposure to social media has popularized green workplace trends, making environmentally friendly office designs desirable among young professionals (Tass & Malik, 2025). Organizations lacking sustainable design aspects risk being perceived as outdated, leading to increased turnover (Palomo et al., 2023). Flexible workspaces, incorporating collaborative zones (Mateescu et al., 2025), quiet areas (Kalmanovich-Cohen & Stanton, 2024), and breakout spaces (Davis et al., 2020), are increasingly essential for attracting and retaining Gen Z employees. The generation is more independent and flexible in their workplaces, and the space design has a significant impact on their work satisfaction and retention (Dieguez & Loureiro, 2025).

Relaxation areas, such as lounge spaces (Larsson et al., 2022), nap pods (Anand et al., 2025), on-site gyms and yoga studios (Singh et al., 2024), are essential in workplace design for retaining Gen Z employees, who prioritize work-life balance and well-being (Zivkovic et al., 2025). These areas promote a less stressful environment, reduce burnout, and enhance job satisfaction, fostering a sense of community and emotional support (Lazuardi et al., 2025). The implementation of advanced technology is essential for Gen Z, who view it as a basic expectation in the workplace (Pichler et al., 2021). Access to modern equipment, reliable wireless connectivity, and smart office setups significantly enhances job satisfaction and retention among Gen Z workers, as it supports their need for efficiency, autonomy, and innovation (Gupta et al., 2025). Studies in Sri Lanka indicate that flexible work arrangements are the most important human resource factor that increases job satisfaction and reduces turnover intention among Gen Z in industries such as telecommunication (Kodithuwakku et al., 2018). They also seek a workplace to support well-being and work-life balance, and a positive work environment has been found to enhance Gen Z productivity in other Asian studies (Hendratmoko & Mutiarawati, 2024). As illustrated in Figure 2, flexibility, technology integration, well-being focus, and sustainability represent the key workplace design features influencing Gen Z employees.

3.3 LINKING WORKPLACE DESIGN TO JOB EMBEDDEDNESS

An effective work environment is a major driver of JE particularly among Gen Z employees, since it enhances fit, link, and sacrifice each of which has a different effect in lowering turnover intention (Mitchell et al., 2001). The office design that combines lounge areas with small pods assists Gen Z employees achieve their desired balance between focused and collaborative work, fostering a sense of belonging (Berber et al., 2022). Incorporating sustainability features aligns with Gen Z's environmental beliefs and increases corporate attachment (Sengupta et al., 2024).

A well-designed workplace increases well-being by providing shared gyms, relaxation areas, and informal fostering of stronger social bonds among colleagues (Yu et al., 2020). Collaborative zones and community spaces are strategically created to encourage to promote good interactions and help develop professional networks, which is especially crucial for Gen Z in both social and career contexts (Davidescu et al., 2020). Technology integration and well-being amenities in the workplace raise the perceived cost of turnover for Gen Z employees, as they risk losing access to advanced tools, wellness centers, and premium lifestyle options (Rani & Suneja, 2025). As shown in Figure 2, workplace design features contribute to strengthening JE within organizations.

3.4 JOB EMBEDDEDNESS AND GEN Z RETENTION

To retain Gen Z employees, corporate offices must understand the importance of JE, which links workplace design to retention outcomes. Meta-analytic and cross-industry studies attest to the fact that a higher JE is a negative predictor of turnover intention among Gen Z (Setthakorn et al., 2024). For example, JE in both small and large corporate workplaces has a strong detrimental impact on turnover intention (Abdullah et al., 2025). Implementing flexible arrangements enhances JE and decreases TI (Larsson et al., 2022). In developing countries, Gen Z retention has become increasingly challenging, with a growing turnover intention driven by unmet expectations around the lack of flexibility, work-life balance, and meaningfulness. JE is important in this regard, as it lowers the intent to turnover of Gen Z employees (Rosita et al., 2024). Figure 2 further indicates that higher levels of JE reduce Gen Z employees' TI.

Table 2: Key workplace features for Gen Z retention

Workplace Feature	Impact on Gen Z Embeddedness	Effect on TI	Citations
Flexible Work Arrangements	Increases fit and links	Reduces turnover	(Haapakangas et al., 2018)
Work-Life Balance	Enhances fit and sacrifice	Reduces turnover	(Tanoto & Tami, 2024)
Technology-Driven Workplaces	Increases fit	Reduces turnover	(Rani & Suneja, 2025)

Table 2 presents the key workplace design features that influence Gen Z employee retention. It highlights how specific workplace features contribute to strengthening JE among Gen Z employees and subsequently affect their TI within corporate organizations.

3.5 JOB EMBEDDEDNESS AS A MEDIATING MECHANISM

The study underlines the significant influence of workplace design on turnover intention, particularly among Gen Z employees. It identifies JE as an important mediating factor. Switching to a mediating mechanism, high-quality workplace design makes JE stronger. Specifically, the “fit” dimension is strengthened when the design meets Gen Z’s values, while “links” are promoted through communal and wellness spaces that build social ties (Yang et al., 2011). The “sacrifice” dimension is heightened by distinctive amenities and advanced technology, making the prospect of leaving cost-intensive for employees (Shah et al., 2020). As a result, firms that prioritize these designs can expect reduced turnover intentions, supported by a culture that promotes work-life balance and employee engagement. Figure 2 illustrates how JE mediates the interaction between workplace design.

3.6 IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY

According to (Kazlauskaitė et al., 2023) JE is vital for keeping Gen Z employees and improving social sustainability in the built environment, since it connects organizational ties to favorable conditions for long-term wellbeing. Flexibility, supportive relationships, alignment with long-term sustainable human resource management that promotes employee well-being are key variables (Sypniewska et al., 2023). Office design has a substantial impact on social sustainability by improving comfort and health, resulting in

increased organizational attachment and reduced turnover (Dumitriu et al., 2025). Flexible work arrangements improve work-life balance and job satisfaction, appealing to Gen Z's preference for technology-driven flexibility (Davidescu et al., 2020). In Sri Lanka, green workplace adoption remains limited, with awareness, stakeholder pressure, and environmental commitment driving change. Strengthening these factors can support social sustainability and improve employee retention (Polgampola & Gunawardana, 2021). Investing in such surroundings can attract and retain Gen Z while advancing long-term health and sustainable employment relationships.

4. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework given in Figure 2 is based on the effects of the features of workplace design on turnover intention among Gen Z employees, mediated by JE. The framework is based on the Generational Cohort Theory (GCT) and recognizes the individual workplace requirements of Gen Z, because they were raised in a digital environment and place importance on flexibility, well-being, and sustainability.

The key dimensions in this case are JE, Fit, Links and Sacrifice dimensions. The workplace that is built well promotes a powerful Fit with employee preferences, professional Links, and perceived Sacrifice in leaving, and thus leads to the improvement of JE and decrease of turnover intention. Finally, the framework makes JE a mediator, which means that workplace design has a key impact on turnover intention because it increases the embeddedness of employees in the organization by improving social sustainability and resulting in the provision of better retention, satisfaction, and engagement in corporate environments.

The novelty in this framework's theory is that it breaks away from conventional workplace models that emphasize physical comfort and ergonomic design. While earlier models have emphasized environmental comfort as a prime psychological factor for Job Embeddedness (JE), this framework uniquely considers Sustainability arrangement, flexible and well-being working areas, and Technology Integration as integral psychological factors impacting JE for Gen Z employees. Unlike previous studies in Facilities Management that view the office environment as a passive backdrop for work, this study highlights the built environment as a strategic element that supports "Links," "Fit" and "Sacrifice" to embed employees within an organization. Moreover, by situating the variables within the Sri Lankan corporate landscape, the model provides a niche approach to how social sustainability and the physical office are pillars of talent retention in a recovering economy a perspective largely absent from existing Western-centric literature. Through the connection of workplace variables and the psychological processes of JE, this research offers multi-disciplinary approach that integrates the built environment and organizational behavior

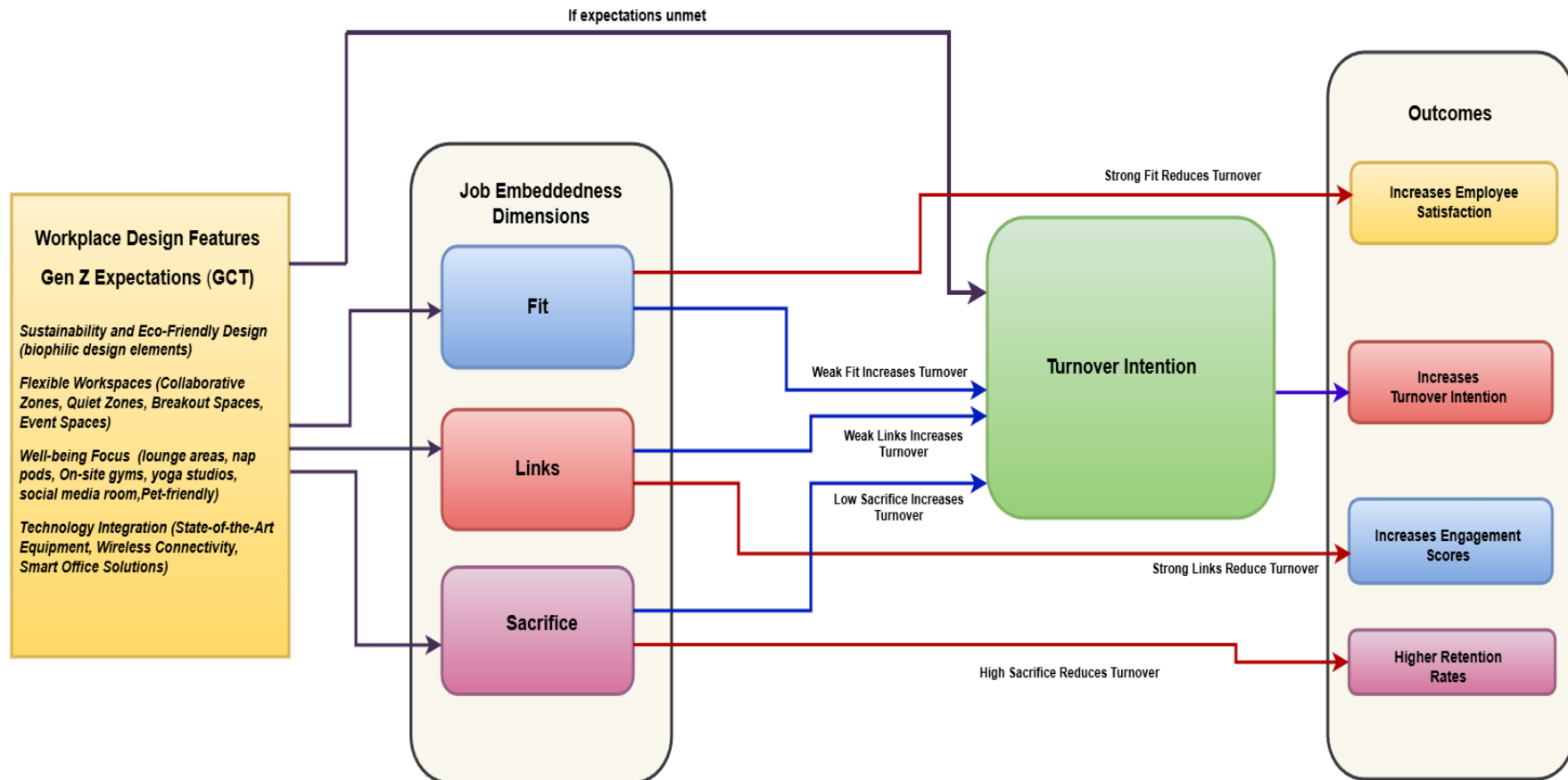


Figure 2: Conceptual framework

5. CONCLUSION

5.1 THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

This study contributes to the existing literature by proposing a conceptual model that connects workplace design elements to turnover intention via JE in the context of Sri Lankan workplaces. It connects the field of facilities management and organizational psychology by establishing workplace design as a precursor of JE. Moreover, the research enhances Generational Cohort Theory by placing Generation Z's expectations with a particular emphasis on their preference for sustainability and digitisation in the socio-economic context of Sri Lanka. This study adds a layer of complexity to previous studies that highlight the direct relationship between workplace design and retention, by suggesting that workplace design contributes to retention indirectly by physically and psychologically embedding employees into the organisation. In doing so, it highlights workplace design as a strategic factor for enhancing social sustainability through effective human capital retention.

5.2 PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

This framework necessitates a strategic shift in the Sri Lankan Built Environment from passive asset management to active workplace experience design. Organizations must prioritize flexible, tech-enabled, and well-being-oriented spaces to strengthen the "Fit" and "Links" of Job Embeddedness, effectively reducing Gen Z turnover. Professionals should reframe sustainability and well-being as a retention strategy rather than an operational cost, leading to an increased "Sacrifice" when employees consider leaving their jobs. In Sri Lanka's brain drain challenges, the office design takes on the vital role as a tool for Contextual Office Branding and local talent grounding. Ultimately, workplace investment must be viewed not as mere capital expenditure, but as a national strategy for workforce stability, transforming the office into a stakeholder-centred mechanism for sustaining the local talent pool.

5.3 FUTURE RESEARCH

Being a conceptual paper, one of the limitations is the lack of empirical evidence. Therefore, future research should test the proposed model using quantitative approaches, such as Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), to confirm the mediating effect of Job Embeddedness in the relationship between workplace design features and turnover intention. Future research could also undertake comparative studies between corporate workplaces in Sri Lanka and other South Asian countries to explore the role of workplace design factors in shaping Gen Z employees' perceptions of workplace fit.

Finally, this research positions the physical workplace as a key element in employee retention. For the Built Environment sector, the office needs to be transformed from a utilitarian solution to a 'Socially Sustainable' hub with digital connectivity and environmental considerations. Through these, employers provide the psychological and physical environment to embed Gen Z employees into the corporate structure. In the competitive Sri Lankan corporate landscape, this framework serves as a strategic blueprint for transforming office design into a powerful mechanism for long-term talent loyalty and organizational stability.

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