FROM SUPERVISION TO DIGITAL TRUST: REDESIGNING MANAGEMENT STYLES FOR THE HYBRID WORKFORCE

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Abstract
In the evolving landscape of hybrid and digitally mediated work, traditional models of supervision – centered on control, visibility, and proximity – are increasingly misaligned with the expectations and values of younger generations. Recent studies show that digital trust has become a central factor for engagement and retention in hybrid workplaces (Wang et al., 2023). This paper explores how Generation Z employees experience supervision in modern work environments and how managerial reliance on traditional oversight methods may hinder trust, motivation, and retention. Drawing on qualitative interviews with Generation Z employees and Generation X/Y managers, the study reveals a generational divide in perceptions of effective supervision. While many managers emphasize the need for direct monitoring to ensure accountability and productivity, younger employees interpret this approach as a lack of trust (Stiglbauer et al. 2022). For them, autonomy, flexibility, and purpose-driven work are key motivators, and excessive supervision is often perceived as intrusive and demotivating. The findings underscore the need to shift from supervision rooted in control to models based on trust, transparent expectations, and measurable outcomes. This includes redefining accountability frameworks, encouraging self-directed performance tracking, and fostering communication that emphasizes guidance over surveillance. Such models not only align with the intrinsic motivations of Generation Z but also support broader organizational goals related to innovation, agility, and employee engagement (Carnevale and Hatak 2020). This paper contributes to ongoing discussions about the future of management in digitally enabled organizations and offers practical recommendations for adapting leadership strategies to build trust without sacrificing accountability.
Keywords: *hybrid workforce; digital trust; generation z; leadership; employee autonomy*
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1. INTRODUCTION

The rapid spread of hybrid and digitally mediated work environments has challenged traditional approaches to management. Supervision practices that relied on visibility, proximity, and direct control appear increasingly difficult to sustain when employees divide their time between physical and virtual spaces. At the same time, younger generations entering the workforce, particularly Generation Z, often articulate different expectations regarding autonomy, flexibility, and purpose in their work (Stiglbauer *et al.,* 2022).

This paper draws on a small-scale qualitative study to explore how supervision is perceived by managers from Generations X and Y compared with employees from Generation Z. Through interviews with 20 participants, the study offers an exploratory perspective on how differences in expectations may influence the relationship between supervision, trust, and motivation. While the findings cannot be generalized, they provide insights that contribute to ongoing discussions about management in digitally enabled organizations.

Preliminary results suggest that several interviewed managers continue to emphasize direct monitoring as a mechanism to ensure accountability. Some younger employees, however, interpret this approach as a lack of trust, describing it as intrusive or demotivating – an interpretation that echoes themes raised in prior studies on generational differences (Wang *et al.,* 2023). These observations point to the potential value of leadership models that balance accountability with trust, transparent communication, and measurable outcomes.

Research aims and contribution

This study seeks to explore how managers from Generations X and Y, and employees from Generation Z, experience supervision within hybrid workplaces. The aim is not to produce generalizable results but to generate exploratory insights into how generational differences may shape the meaning of supervision and trust. The paper contributes by highlighting potential areas of tension and adjustment in management practices, while also suggesting directions for further, larger-scale research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on supervision, trust, and generational differences provides an important background for interpreting the findings of this study. Existing research emphasizes that management practices developed in traditional, face-to-face contexts often struggle to adapt to hybrid and digitally enabled environments. At the same time, studies highlight that generational shifts in values and expectations may further complicate this transition (Stiglbauer *et al.,* 2022).

2.1. Supervision and control in traditional management

Classical management approaches positioned supervision as a tool for control and accountability, with managers expected to monitor performance closely to ensure compliance and productivity. This model was effective in environments where visibility and proximity were possible and often necessary. However, hybrid work settings limit physical oversight, requiring alternative mechanisms to sustain performance and accountability (Wang *et al.,* 2023).

2.2. Trust in hybrid and digital workplaces

Trust has been identified as a critical factor in remote and hybrid teams. Employees often interpret visible monitoring as a lack of trust, which can reduce motivation and weaken engagement. Scholars argue that digital trust – defined as confidence in colleagues, systems, and leadership in digitally mediated environments – has become central to sustaining performance in flexible work arrangements (Carnevale and Hatak 2020). Trust-based leadership emphasizes transparency, clear expectations, and empowerment rather than surveillance.

2.3. Generational perspectives on work and supervision

Generational theory suggests that different age cohorts bring distinct values and expectations into the workplace. For example, employees from Generations X and Y often adapted to management models emphasizing presence and accountability, while Generation Z tends to prioritize autonomy, flexibility, and meaningful work (Stiglbauer *et al.,* 2022). These differences can create tensions when managerial reliance on control is perceived by younger employees as restrictive or misaligned with their motivations. The literature also indicates that bridging these perspectives requires new approaches that balance accountability with empowerment.

2.4. Brief analysis of findings

The reviewed literature highlights persistent tensions between supervision rooted in control and emerging expectations for autonomy and trust in hybrid environments. While prior studies emphasize the importance of digital trust and generational differences (Carnevale and Hatak 2020; Stiglbauer *et al.,* 2022; Wang *et al.,* 2023), less is known about how these dynamics are experienced in practice across different generations in specific workplace contexts. This study addresses that gap through a small-scale qualitative exploration. The findings suggest that managers from Generations X and Y often associate accountability with visible monitoring, while Generation Z employees more frequently interpret supervision as a signal of mistrust. These insights, discussed in the following sections, illustrate the need to reconsider leadership practices in digitally mediated work settings.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative design in order to explore how supervision is experienced differently by managers from Generations X and Y and employees from Generation Z. The aim is not to produce generalizable conclusions but rather to capture insights and tendencies that can inform future research and practical discussions on leadership in hybrid environments.

3.1. Research design

A qualitative, exploratory design was selected as the most suitable approach for investigating perceptions and experiences of supervision. Such a design allows the researcher to capture how participants describe and interpret their own workplace realities. The study follows the principles of thematic analysis, which provides a systematic method for identifying, coding, and grouping recurring ideas into themes.

3.2. Data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with a total of 20 participants. The sample included 10 managers from Generations X and Y and 10 employees from Generation Z. Participants were recruited from diverse organizational contexts to allow for variation in experiences. Each interview lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and was conducted either face-to-face or online, depending on availability and participant preference. The interview guide focused on topics such as supervision practices, trust, motivation, and the role of digital tools in hybrid work.

3.3. Data analysis

The interviews were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis. Initial coding was applied to identify key concepts mentioned by participants, such as supervision, autonomy, and trust. These codes were then grouped into broader categories and themes, which are presented in the findings section. The analysis emphasized patterns across the two groups of participants while remaining sensitive to individual variations. To enhance credibility, the coding process was reviewed multiple times and compared with relevant literature.

4. FINDINGS

The analysis of the 20 interviews revealed several recurring themes that highlight generational differences in how supervision is understood and experienced. While the sample is small and exploratory in nature, the patterns observed across participants offer useful insights into tensions between traditional approaches to supervision and the expectations of younger employees in hybrid environments.

4.1. Supervision and control

Several interviewed managers emphasized the need for direct monitoring as a way of ensuring accountability and productivity. This perspective reflected a continued reliance on visibility and presence. By contrast, many employees from Generation Z described such monitoring as excessive or intrusive, interpreting it as a signal of mistrust. One employee noted: *"When my manager constantly checks on me, it feels like they don't believe I can handle my work independently."*

4.2. Motivation and work values

Managers often associated motivation with discipline and accountability, expecting employees to demonstrate reliability through consistent presence and reporting. Employees, however, spoke more frequently about motivation in terms of autonomy, flexibility, and purpose. As one Generation Z participant explained: *"I'm motivated when I understand the bigger picture of why my work matters, not just when someone checks if I'm online."*

4.3. Trust and technology

Trust emerged as a critical theme across both groups but was interpreted differently. Managers described trust as something that develops gradually through consistent oversight and reporting, while employees expected trust to be given upfront and strengthened through transparency and open communication. Technology played a mediating role: for managers, digital tools provided mechanisms to track performance, whereas employees valued these tools for enabling collaboration and self-management.

Table 1. Main themes identified from interviews with managers and employees

Theme	Managers (Gen X/Y) perspective	Employees (Gen Z) perspective
Supervision & Control	Several managers stressed direct monitoring as essential for accountability and productivity. *"If I don't check in regularly, how can I be sure the work is actually getting done?"*	Many employees described supervision as excessive and interpreted it as a sign of mistrust. *"When my manager messages me every hour, it feels like they don't trust me."*
Motivation	Motivation is often linked to visibility of effort, measurable presence, and accountability. *"Accountability is what keeps people motivated; they know I am watching."*	Motivation is described as driven by autonomy, flexibility, and purpose in tasks. *"I'm motivated when I'm given space to work in my own way, not when someone tracks me."*

Theme	Managers (Gen X/Y) perspective	Employees (Gen Z) perspective
Trust	Trust is seen as conditional and built through ongoing oversight and regular reporting. *"Trust builds over time, after I've seen consistent performance."*	Trust expected as the starting point, strengthened by transparent goals and open communication. *"Trust should be the starting point – otherwise it feels like I have to prove myself all the time."*
Technology Use	Digital tools are used mainly to monitor work progress and outputs. *"We use the system to track who logs in and how many hours they spend online."*	Digital tools valued when enabling collaboration, self-tracking, and flexibility. *"I like tools that help me track my progress, not tools that just track me."*
Work Values	Emphasis on accountability and discipline to maintain productivity. *"Discipline and presence are the foundations of productivity."*	Emphasis on meaningful work and balance between freedom and responsibility. *"Meaningful work matters more to me than just showing I'm online."*

Source: author's qualitative interview data (2025)

5. DISCUSSION

The findings of this exploratory study highlight tensions between traditional supervision practices and the expectations of younger employees in hybrid environments. While managers from Generations X and Y frequently described monitoring and visibility as central to accountability, Generation Z employees more often interpreted these same practices as intrusive and misaligned with their values. This suggests a generational shift in how supervision is understood, echoing earlier research on differences in work attitudes across cohorts (Stiglbauer *et al.,* 2022).

5.1. Generational perspectives and work values

Generational Theory proposes that formative experiences shape distinctive values and expectations in the workplace. The managers in this study, primarily from Generations X and Y, emphasized presence, discipline, and accountability, reflecting values consistent with earlier career models that linked supervision closely to control. By contrast, Generation Z employees described motivation in terms of autonomy, purpose, and flexibility, aligning with recent research suggesting that younger cohorts place greater importance on meaningful work and empowerment (Carnevale and Hatak, 2020). These differences may lead to

misinterpretations, where practices intended by managers as supportive oversight are perceived by employees as restrictive.

5.2. Motivation and Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory

The contrast between supervision as control and supervision as guidance can also be considered through Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory (Herzberg *et al.,* 1959). For managers, supervision appears tied to hygiene factors – structures that prevent failure but do not necessarily motivate. For employees, however, supervision intersects with motivators: autonomy, recognition, and meaningful work. Excessive oversight may therefore reduce motivation by undermining these drivers, whereas trust-based approaches may reinforce them.

5.3. Trust, social exchange, and digital tools

The findings also point to the importance of trust in shaping workplace relationships. Social Exchange Theory emphasizes reciprocity: when employees perceive trust, they are more likely to respond with commitment and effort. In contrast, when supervision is interpreted as mistrust, employees may disengage. Hybrid environments amplify these dynamics, as digital tools can function either as mechanisms of surveillance or as enablers of transparency and collaboration. This duality was reflected in the interviews, with managers often describing technology as a monitoring tool, while employees valued it as a means of self-management and cooperation.

5.4. Implications for leadership in hybrid work

Taken together, these insights suggest that leadership models in hybrid settings may need to shift from control-oriented supervision toward trust-based accountability. Such a shift would not eliminate the need for oversight but would reposition it within a framework that emphasizes clear expectations, outcome-focused measures, and guidance rather than surveillance. While the present study is limited in scope, its exploratory findings reinforce arguments in the literature that digital trust is central to sustaining motivation, innovation, and engagement in hybrid workplaces (Wang *et al.,* 2023).

6.   CONCLUSIONS

This study explored how supervision is perceived by managers from Generations X and Y compared with employees from Generation Z in hybrid work environments. The findings indicate that while managers often associate accountability with visible monitoring, younger employees tend to interpret such practices as signals of mistrust. These differences underline the role of generational perspectives in shaping workplace experiences and highlight the tensions between control-oriented and trust-oriented models of supervision. Although the study is based on a small qualitative sample and cannot be

generalized, it offers exploratory insights that contribute to ongoing discussions about leadership and employee relations in digitally mediated organizations.

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