

## INVISIBLE TALENT: RECOGNITION AND PROMOTION BIAS IN THE HYBRID WORKPLACE

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### **Abstract**

*The growing adoption of hybrid and remote work models has reshaped how employees contribute to organizational success, yet recognition and promotion practices have not evolved at the same pace. This paper investigates how reliance on physical presence as a marker of commitment and value disproportionately affects Generation Z employees, who increasingly prioritize results, autonomy, and digital efficiency over traditional visibility. Based on a qualitative study involving 20 in-depth interviews with Generation X and Y managers and Generation Z employees, the research reveals a persistent presence-based bias in how performance and promotability are assessed. While many managers associate physical attendance with loyalty, initiative, and readiness for advancement, younger employees report frustration at being overlooked despite delivering high-impact outcomes through flexible work methods. These findings point to a growing disconnect between generational values in the workplace and outdated recognition frameworks. The study argues for a shift toward outcome-based, transparent, and inclusive recognition systems that reflect the realities of contemporary work environments. By exposing how traditional evaluation norms may unintentionally disadvantage a new generation of workers, this paper contributes to the ongoing dialogue about managing generational diversity in the digital age and ensuring that recognition systems are both equitable and future ready.*

**Keywords:** hybrid work; recognition; promotion bias; generation z; workplace visibility

**JEL Classification:** M12; M54; J24.

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

The rapid adoption of hybrid and remote work has transformed how employees contribute to organizational outcomes. However, recognition and promotion practices continue to rely heavily on physical presence and visibility as markers of commitment. This creates a potential bias in how talent is

identified and rewarded, particularly in hybrid environments where contributions are not always visible in traditional ways.

### **1.1. Background and Context**

Research has shown that visibility at work often influences career advancement and recognition, sometimes more than actual performance outcomes (Ng and Parry, 2021). For younger generations, especially Generation Z, this reliance on presence may conflict with their preference for autonomy, efficiency, and results-oriented work.

### **1.2. Aim of the Study**

This article presents findings from a small-scale qualitative study of 20 interviews with Generation X and Y managers and Generation Z employees. The study provides exploratory insights into how presence-based recognition bias is experienced across generations. Managers tended to associate attendance with loyalty and promotability, while employees described frustration at being overlooked despite achieving meaningful results through digital and flexible work methods.

### **1.3. Contribution**

While limited in scope, this study contributes to the discussion on generational differences in evaluation and advancement practices, and on the need to understand how recognition frameworks adapt, or fail to adapt, to hybrid contexts (Choudhury, 2022).

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

Recognition and promotion systems have long been studied in organizational research, but the shift to hybrid and remote work introduces fresh challenges, particularly around visibility and bias. The following subsections review research on recognition and promotion in organizations, the dynamics of visibility/proximity bias, and generational perspectives relevant to your topic.

### **2.1. Recognition and Promotion in Organizational Research**

Recognition is broadly understood as acknowledgment of employee contributions, which can influence motivation, engagement, and performance (Yang *et al.*, 2022). In their study of 256 employees across leader-member dyads, Yang *et al.* found that recognition is positively associated with task performance and organizational citizenship behaviour, mediated by pride (Yang *et al.*, 2022). At the same time, fairness in recognition practices is critical – inequitable recognition or perceived bias undermines trust and may fuel dissatisfaction (Brun and Dugas, 2008).

In promotion studies, biases related to favouritism, information asymmetry, and connection effects have been documented. For instance, Bramoullé and

Huremović (2017) examine how promotion decisions may reflect both favouritism and informational advantages from connections. Their work underscores how subjective aspects and network ties can influence promotion beyond merit.

## **2.2. Visibility, Proximity Bias, and Recognition in Hybrid Work**

One challenge in hybrid contexts is that “out of sight” often translates into “out of mind.” Proximity bias refers to favouring those who are physically present or close to leadership, regardless of actual performance (SHRM article, 2022). Many managers unconsciously overvalue in-office employees, affecting performance evaluations, development opportunities, and promotion decisions (Tsipursky, 2022).

The notion of visibility and “hypervisibility,” showing how employees may strive to be seen to be recognized, but such efforts can backfire or lead to distortions in how contribution is judged (Settles *et al.*, 2019). More recently, Mehrvarz *et al.* (2025) examine how remote knowledge workers engage in visibility practices – self-presentation, reporting, communication strategies – to counter invisibility (Mehrvarz *et al.*, 2025).

## **2.3. Generational Differences in Work Values and Recognition**

Generational theory suggests that cohorts shaped by distinct socio-historical contexts hold different values and expectations in work. Generation Z, having grown up with digital tools and flexibility, tends to emphasize autonomy, efficiency, and outcomes over traditional markers of commitment like presence. In hybrid settings, this may bring them into conflict with legacy recognition systems.

Further, survey data shows that many hybrid or remote workers (especially younger ones) believe they have been overlooked for advancement because of their remote status (People Management, 2024) (People Management, 2024). Such perceptions reflect a disconnect between older managerial frameworks and contemporary workforce expectations.

## **3. METHODOLOGY**

This study adopts a qualitative approach to explore how recognition and promotion are experienced differently by managers and employees in hybrid workplaces. The objective is not to generate generalizable findings but to capture insights into how presence-based evaluation frameworks may shape perceptions across generations.

### **3.1. Research Design**

An exploratory qualitative design was chosen to capture the subjective experiences of both managers and employees. Semi-structured interviews were conducted, allowing participants to describe their views on recognition,

promotion, and workplace visibility in their own words. This design supports the identification of themes and tensions that may not be easily captured through quantitative methods.

### **3.2. Data Collection**

A total of 20 interviews were carried out, including 10 managers from Generations X and Y and 10 employees from Generation Z. Participants were recruited from diverse organizational settings to ensure variation in perspectives. 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 included questions about recognition practices, promotion experiences, and perceptions of fairness in hybrid work.

### **3.3. Data Analysis**

The interviews were transcribed and analysed thematically. Initial codes were generated to capture recurring concepts such as presence, visibility, bias, trust, and outcomes. These codes were then grouped into broader themes, which form the basis of the findings presented in the next section. To enhance credibility, the analysis was cross-checked against the existing literature on recognition, visibility, and generational differences.

## **4. FINDINGS**

The thematic analysis of the 20 interviews revealed recurring patterns that illustrate how recognition and promotion are shaped by presence-based bias in hybrid workplaces. Although the findings are exploratory, they highlight consistent differences between managers' and employees' perspectives.

### **4.1. Presence as a Marker of Commitment**

Several managers emphasized physical presence as an indicator of loyalty and promotability. For them, attendance was linked with initiative and readiness for advancement. By contrast, many employees – particularly from Generation Z – felt that presence was overvalued compared with actual outcomes. As one participant explained: “I deliver results, but if I’m not in the office, it feels like my work doesn’t count as much.”

### **4.2. Recognition and Frustration among Younger Employees**

While managers often described visibility as proof of reliability, younger employees expressed frustration at being overlooked despite high performance. A Generation Z employee noted: “It’s demotivating when showing up matters more than what you actually achieve.” This reflects a disconnect between performance outcomes and the criteria used for recognition and promotion.

### 4.3. Generational Differences in Expectations

Generational contrasts were evident in how recognition was understood. Managers, largely from Generations X and Y, tended to equate recognition with demonstrated loyalty through attendance. Employees from Generation Z described recognition as acknowledgment of results, creativity, and efficiency, regardless of where the work was performed.

**Table 1. Main themes identified from interviews on recognition and promotion**

Theme	Managers (Gen X/Y)	Employees (Gen Z)
<b>Presence as commitment</b>	Attendance signals loyalty and promotability. <i>“Being in the office shows me who is really committed to the organization.”</i>	Presence overvalued; outcomes overlooked. <i>“I deliver results, but if I’m not in the office, it feels like my work doesn’t count as much.”</i>
<b>Recognition</b>	Visibility is seen as proof of reliability.  <i>“It’s easier to recognize those I see working hard in front of me every day.”</i>	Recognition expected for results, creativity, and efficiency. <i>“It’s demotivating when showing up matters more than what you actually achieve.”</i>
<b>Promotion criteria</b>	Linked to initiative and discipline, shown through presence. <i>“It’s demotivating when showing up matters more than what you actually achieve.”</i>	Promotion should reflect impact, not attendance. <i>“Promotion should be about the impact you make, not about being seen at a desk.”</i>
<b>Emotional response</b>	Presence reinforces fairness and accountability.  <i>“When people are present, it feels fair to reward them because they demonstrate effort.”</i>	Frustration at being overlooked despite delivering strong results. <i>“It’s frustrating to be overlooked just because I’m not physically there all the time.”</i>

Source: Author’s qualitative interview data (2025)

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

This study explored how recognition and promotion are understood across generations in hybrid work environments. The findings suggest that managers from Generations X and Y often equate physical presence with commitment and promotability, while Generation Z employees emphasize outcomes, creativity, and efficiency. This presence-based bias was perceived by younger employees as a source of frustration and as a barrier to fair recognition.

Although limited in scope, with only 20 qualitative interviews, the study offers exploratory insights into how traditional recognition frameworks may be

misaligned with the expectations of digitally fluent employees. By documenting these generational contrasts, the paper contributes to the broader discussion of evaluation and advancement practices in hybrid workplaces.

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