

Labor Expectations in the Fractal Era and their Intergenerational Tensions

Expectativas laborales en la era fractal y sus tensiones intergeneracionales

  María Elena Alarcón Aragón¹

  Alejandro Iborra Cuéllar²

¹ Centro de Investigación Adaptativa y Evolución Estratégica DäxaNexus, Postdoctorado en Educación, Producción y Gestión del Conocimiento en Educación: Complejidad, Innovación y Políticas Públicas, Universidad de Alcalá de Henares, España

² Departamento de Ciencias de la Educación, Postdoctorado en Educación, Producción y Gestión del Conocimiento en Educación: Complejidad, Innovación y Políticas Públicas, Universidad de Alcalá de Henares, España

Fecha de recepción: 11.11.2025

Fecha de revisión: 22.12.2025

Fecha de aprobación: 31.01.2026

Cómo citar: Alarcón Aragón, M., & Iborra Cuéllar, A. (2026). Labor Expectations in the Fractal Era and their Intergenerational Tensions. *Espergesia*, 13(1), e130101. <https://doi.org/10.18050/rev.espergesia.v12i1.4305>

Autor de correspondencia: María Elena Alarcón Aragón

Abstract

The objective of this article was to examine the structural tensions that arose between the job expectations of new generations (late Millennials and Generation Z) and the operational needs of contemporary organizations. A qualitative methodology was employed, applying 32 interviews to students, graduates, middle managers, teachers, consultants, and executives from various sectors. The results revealed a profound civilizational mismatch, where young people's view of work characterized by flexibility, contrasts with rigid, hierarchical structures. This friction was intensified by the accelerated pace of the environment, leading to non-linear patterns of labor conflict. Among the main tensions identified were the struggle between flexibility and discipline, the contrast between the accelerated growth sought by young people and slow-moving structures, and the disconnection between university education and the competencies required. It was also noted that emotional well-being, digital literacy, and epistemic justice played a key role in the sustainability of youth employment. The fractal interpretation explained why conflicts recur at multiple levels of the workplace ecosystem and how they can become drivers of innovation and antifragility. In conclusion, it was determined that youth talent served as an early indicator (barometer) of the future of employment and that organizations that adopted adaptive and dialogical models were better prepared to thrive in uncertain environments.

Key words: The fractal age, liquid modernity, intergenerational tensions, meta-competencies, organizational antifragility.

Resumen

El objetivo de este artículo se centró en examinar las tensiones estructurales que surgieron entre las expectativas laborales de las nuevas generaciones (Millennials tardíos y Generación Z) y las necesidades operativas de las organizaciones contemporáneas. Se utilizó una metodología cualitativa, aplicando 32 entrevistas a estudiantes, egresados, mandos medios, docentes, consultores y directivos de diversos sectores. Los resultados revelaron un profundo desajuste civilizatorio, donde la visión flexible del trabajo propio de los jóvenes, marcada por la flexibilidad, contrasta con las estructuras rígidas y jerárquicas. Esta fricción se intensificó por el ritmo acelerado del entorno, lo que produjo patrones no lineales de conflicto laboral. Entre las principales tensiones identificadas estuvieron la pugna entre flexibilidad y disciplina, el contraste entre el crecimiento acelerado buscado por los jóvenes y las estructuras lentas, y la desconexión entre la formación universitaria y las competencias requeridas. Se observó, además, que la salud emocional, la alfabetización digital y la justicia epistémica tuvieron un rol central en la sostenibilidad laboral juvenil. La interpretación fractal explicó por qué los conflictos se repiten en múltiples niveles del ecosistema laboral y cómo puede transformarse en motores de innovación y antifragilidad. En conclusión, se determinó que el talento juvenil constituyó una señal anticipada (barómetro) del futuro del trabajo y que las organizaciones que adoptaron modelos adaptativos y dialógicos estuvieron mejor preparadas para prosperar en entornos de incertidumbre.

Palabras clave: Era fractal, modernidad líquida, tensiones intergeneracionales, metacompetencias, antifragilidad organizacional.

INTRODUCCIÓN

The relationship between employees and organizations is undergoing a profound transformation. This is not an incremental change or a minor adjustment within traditional management models; we are facing an epistemological shift that is reshaping the very nature of work (Sennett, 2006), its social significance, and the ways in which institutions are organized. Phenomena such as accelerated digitization, automation (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2014), new professional subjectivities, identity fragmentation, labor market volatility (Rosa, 2016; Barnett, 2015), and the dislocation of classical hierarchical models have radically altered the way in which work is produced, collaboration occurs, and learning takes place within organizations.

However, reducing the problem to generational conflicts would be classified as doxa. The conflict between solid structures and fluid subjectivities is inscribed within a larger sociocultural framework: the liquid modernity described by Bauman (2003), where institutions lose rigidity, professional trajectories become discontinuous, and the working subject is constantly reinvented. This highlights the importance of continuing education, institutional cooperation, and organizational adaptation in the face of accelerated advances in artificial intelligence (AI) (Meza *et al.*, 2024).

These phenomena are neither linear nor isolated, but rather fractal patterns that emerge across multiple scales, from personal experience to institutional dynamics (Holland, 1995). Within this framework, liquid modernity describes an environment where the social and the labor sphere become fluid and accelerated, as proposed by Bauman (2003), and that fluidity is intensified by the symbolic instability inherent in contemporary hyper-acceleration (Kondratova, 2024). This scenario calls for a balanced assessment of the effects of AI, as while it generates new opportunities, it also deepens inequalities, skill gaps, and training needs. Empirical evidence confirms that automation and AI-assisted decision-making are directly associated with job displacement and the reconfiguration of work (Meza *et al.*, 2024).

In fractal logic, these tensions do not stem solely from organizational practices, but from environments where temporal density and

hyperreality generate intergenerational clashes (Kondratova, 2024; Aranda, 2020; Guillén Subirán, 2021); that is, they are not individual failures or resistances, but fractal manifestations of organizational structures in transition. Organizations can transform themselves by adopting adaptive and dialogic models capable of integrating complexity, uncertainty, and cognitive diversity (Snowden, 2021). The integration of frameworks and models that incorporate antifragility, action research, and the epistemology of risk enables the development of more robust strategies for talent management in the Fractal Era.

Literature Review

Contemporary labor relations are undergoing a profound transformation driven by three major simultaneous transitions: digital, ecological, and demographic (Fernández-Villarino *et al.*, 2025). These transitions are altering the nature of employment, the organization of production, the skills required, and the ways in which workers interact.

In this context, the concept of the fractal era (Kondratova, 2024; Alarcón, 2025) becomes relevant for understanding phenomena such as the acceleration of time, event density, the simultaneity of processes, reputational fragility, and emotional (Bruno & Iborra Cuéllar, 2023) and cognitive overload. According to this perspective, the fractal era is characterized by high temporal density, accelerated events, and conditions of hyperreality that exceed the control capacity of organizational actors. Fractal phenomena generate nonlinear patterns (Morin, 2011; Holland, 1995) that affect organizational decisions more than the actions of individuals, as this approach proposes.

Organizations are facing increasingly complex, nonlinear, and recursive systems (Morin, 2011), where traditional management and leadership frameworks are losing their effectiveness (Snowden, 2021; Alarcón, 2024; Fernández-Villarino *et al.*, 2025). The direct consequence is the emergence of new requirements in the workforce, including complex thinking and adaptability (Barnett, 2015; Morin, 2001), advanced digital skills, continuous learning, emotional management, and resilience.

Various studies agree that several generations converge in today's labor market (Aranda, 2020; Guillén Subirán, 2021). Among them are: Baby

Boomers, characterized by their orientation toward stability, hierarchy, discipline, and institutionalism; Generation X, which stands out for its autonomy, pragmatism, balance, and experience;) Generation Y (Millennials, who prioritize flexibility, purpose, well-being, and recognition; and Generation Z, associated with immediacy, digital autonomy, mobility, and authenticity.

Generation Z, as an emerging force, demonstrates a high level of basic digital literacy, but gaps in advanced software and digital collaboration (Juca-Maldonado *et al.*, 2025). Additionally, they are characterized by a high intolerance for frustration and a need for frequent feedback (Marzano Sosa *et al.*, 2023), with career priorities centered on emotional well-being, flexibility, immediate growth, institutional support, and ethical values. These characteristics clash with hierarchical, rigid, or poorly digitized organizational models.

Digital transformation requires new technological skills, but these are unevenly distributed across generations (Santa Cruz Soria & Toro Álava, 2025). Baby Boomers and some members of Generation X face challenges in digital proficiency, resistance to technological change, and a lack of institutional training. Meanwhile, Generation Z demonstrates strong but superficial digital literacy, without full mastery of advanced tools (Juca-Maldonado *et al.*, 2025). The intergenerational gap creates tensions in productivity, differences in learning speed, challenges in communication and collaboration, and limitations in the adoption of educational or corporate technologies. This compels organizations to design strategies for differentiated training, intergenerational mentoring, and continuous development.

Contemporary literature about work, subjectivity, and generational transition agrees that emotional well-being has become a structural component of workplace sustainability. In many professions—particularly those focused on service, support, or cultural assessment—high levels of stress, anxiety, burnout, and anxiety-depressive symptoms are observed, stemming from conditions of high emotional exposure. Among the identified factors are emotional overload, role ambiguity, time pressure, lack of recognition, and conflicting demands that create highly vulnerable work contexts (Bruno & Iborra Cuéllar, 2023).

These conditions affect performance, gradually eroding the ability to sustain professional practice over the long term, which transforms emotional health—traditionally relegated to the “personal” sphere—into a critical factor for productivity, retention, and employability. In light of these scenarios, generic emotional interventions, based solely on theoretical content or universalized techniques, are insufficient to produce sustainable change (Bruno & Iborra Cuéllar, 2023). Kondratova (2024) warns that contemporary emotional burdens are intensified by hyperreality and the acceleration of time, factors characteristic of the fractal era.

In contrast, Bruno & Iborra Cuéllar (2023) provide empirical evidence of the effectiveness of ad hoc programs designed specifically for the conditions, pressures, and needs of each professional group. Their study, based on constructivist, experiential, and socio-emotional approaches, shows significant improvements in indicators such as emotional intelligence, self-awareness, stress management, problem-solving, and adaptive empathy, as well as a decrease in burnout parameters in the contexts of interpreting and social work.

These findings suggest that emotional management at work cannot be separated from the socio-occupational context, as the stressors faced by workers are not homogeneous. In environments marked by relational complexity, user vulnerability, and institutional pressure, interventions must address processes of meaning, professional identities, power relations, and collective dynamics, rather than merely offering standardized psychological tools (Bruno & Iborra Cuéllar, 2023).

Understanding emotional well-being in the workplace takes on additional nuances when analyzing young workers, particularly Generation Z, whose emotional repertoires are shaped in highly digitalized environments. Marzano Sosa *et al.* (2023) demonstrate that digital natives experience an increase in self-esteem while using technology, but at the same time show a significant increase in anxiety, frustration intolerance, and emotional reactivity (Marzano Sosa *et al.*, 2023).

This paradox of high digital self-efficacy but low tolerance for delay, error, or complexity explains emerging patterns (Morin, 2011; Holland, 1995) in work environments, such as: quiet quitting

(Aranda, 2020; Guillén Subirán, 2021) in the face of difficulties or stress, cognitive or emotional blocks when confronted with demanding tasks, a constant need for feedback and support (Marzano Sosa *et al.*, 2023), and difficulty sustaining long-term or highly ambiguous projects. These behaviors are not individual anomalies, but adaptive responses to ecosystems of immediacy, where accelerated temporality, simultaneous multitasking, and hyperstimulation become normal life experiences. Therefore, emotional vulnerability is the result of a subjectivity shaped by intensive digital logics.

An analysis of youth employability requires moving beyond the individual perspective and placing it within a broader sociological framework. The study by Giannola *et al.* (2025) on the NEET phenomenon in Italy makes a key contribution to understanding how young NEETs with legitimate aspirations face structures that block their access to employment and educational opportunities (Taleb, 2013). Among the most relevant findings are low educational attainment (only 14.9% complete university studies), persistent economic precariousness, structural family dependence (73.4% still reside in the parental home), and the stigma associated with the NEET label (Giannola *et al.*, 2025).

The evidence shows that youth inactivity cannot be explained by reductionist interpretations focused on individual failings. Rather, it stems from structural inequalities and a growing disconnection between rigid educational systems, traditional labor intermediation mechanisms, and a labor market rapidly transformed by AI (Aranda, 2020; Guillén Subirán, 2021; Fernández-Villarino *et al.*, 2025). Various international organizations have documented that these mismatches disproportionately affect young people in the educational-to-labor transition, particularly in contexts where institutions fail to adapt to the pace of technological change (OECD, 2024; UNESCO, 2024).

Recent OECD data, based on the LinkedIn Economic Graph, show that the uptake of artificial intelligence skills, transitions into AI-related occupations, and associated hiring are progressing unevenly across countries and sectors, creating significant gaps between those who manage to adapt their skills and those who are excluded from new labor markets (OECD, 2024). This dynamic confirms that access to employment no longer depends exclusively on

formal educational attainment, but rather on the institutional capacity to absorb, translate, and scale emerging technologies through policies on continuing education, professional retraining, and the governance of technological change (OECD, 2024).

However, both educational systems and traditional intermediaries—including employment agencies—are struggling to fulfill this role of bridging the gap between technological innovation and meaningful work. Automation and AI are leading to increasingly discontinuous career paths, undermining traditional entry mechanisms and increasing the vulnerability of young people during the transition from education to employment (Fernández-Villarino *et al.*, 2025).

In this context, new generations of young people, who have grown up as digital natives, develop expectations of rapid learning, experimentation, flexibility, and purpose that clash with educational and workplace structures designed for stable, pre-digital environments (Hinojosa López *et al.*, 2024). Youth inactivity emerges as a systemic symptom of the mismatch between technological acceleration and institutional rigidity, a phenomenon widely recognized by international organizations and comparative studies on education, employment, and digital transformation (OECD, 2024; UNESCO, 2024).

Thus, young people find themselves caught between high aspirations and limited opportunities, leading to paths of vulnerability where individual efforts are constrained by inflexible institutional structures. Furthermore, the emergence of new student subjectivities shaped by fully digitized environments—in which young people have grown up as digital natives, multi-screen users, and individuals heavily influenced by every day, hyper-digital technological interactions—is transforming young people's expectations, rhythms, and modes of participation in educational systems (Hinojosa López *et al.*, 2024).

On the other hand, traditional leadership based on direct supervision, vertical hierarchy, and control is incompatible with today's work environments. The coexistence of multiple generations, the adoption of hybrid models, and the digitization of processes require leadership styles capable of managing diversity, complexity, and uncertainty (Snowden, 2021). New leadership models must incorporate competencies such as: cognitive

and relational flexibility, active emotional accompaniment, intergenerational management, strategic use of digital tools, multicultural sensitivity, and systemic and multilayered thinking.

A review of contemporary studies reveals a profound and structural mismatch between what organizations expect from their employees and what younger generations—particularly late Millennials and Generation Z—value, prioritize, and are willing to offer. This mismatch is recurrent and constitutes one of the most significant phenomena for understanding job instability, organizational tensions, and new forms of subjective distress at work. The coexistence of these two systems—one institutional and the other generational—produces evident organizational tensions.

This mismatch manifests itself in dynamics such as accelerated turnover, intergenerational tension, quiet quitting, low emotional commitment (Aranda, 2020; Guillén Subirán, 2021), institutional frustration, and conflicts between expectations and organizational resources (Juca-Maldonado *et al.*, 2025). In a global labor market characterized by economic instability, young people develop self-preservation practices that manifest as strategies of gradual disengagement, resistance to rigid hierarchical structures, or a search for environments that prioritize emotional well-being.

In this way, it is analytically inappropriate to interpret these expressions of youth discontent as indicators of “individual fragility” or a lack of commitment. On the contrary, this unease is not fragility but rather a structural misalignment between organizational cultures designed for a stable labor market and emerging subjectivities shaped within a digital ecosystem (Juca-Maldonado *et al.*, 2025) marked by complexity, digital immediacy, and constant uncertainty (Snowden, 2021). Contemporary youth subjectivity is adaptive, and its demands are not dysfunctional but consistent with structural conditions that require cognitive flexibility, emotional literacy, purpose, and less vertical management models (Guillén Subirán, 2021; Juca-Maldonado *et al.*, 2025).

Understanding this misalignment is essential for moving toward organizational policies capable of integrating generational diversity and building emotionally sustainable workplace cultures. In this vein, the literature agrees that the solution does

not lie in demanding that young people “adapt” to obsolete models, but rather in the institutional capacity to review, transform, and update leadership models, management practices, and organizational cultures to align with contemporary sociotechnological transformations (Aranda, 2020; Guillén Subirán, 2021).

The overall goal of this study was to explore and analyze the alignments and mismatches between what organizations currently require and what the new generation of employees (late Millennials and Generation Z) demand, focusing on key expectations regarding complexity, liquid modernity, and the fractal era. To achieve this, the study set out to identify the key expectations of the new generations regarding work and corporate organizational culture, recognize patterns of tension between these two logics, and interpret these findings based on the emerging paradigm. Therefore, the overarching question guiding the research focused on precisely defining where the work expectations of the new generations align with the operational needs of organizations and where they diverge from.

METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted using a qualitative, interpretive approach grounded in a hermeneutic-phenomenological epistemological framework (Ayala Carabajo, 2017). This approach assumes that knowledge is constructed through the interaction between the researcher and the participants, with the goal of understanding the meanings that people attribute to their work experience (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2019). Consistent with this hermeneutic stance, interpretation is a reflective process aimed at accessing the world of experience as it is lived and narrated by the subjects.

The methodological design was structured in accordance with the concept of the qualitative interview as a systematic practice of knowledge production proposed by Brinkmann and Kvale (2019), who describe a process comprising the following phases: thematization, design, interviewing, transcription, analysis, validation, and reporting. This sequence provided logical coherence to the study and ensured its methodological rigor.

Thirty-two open-ended, adaptive semi-structured interviews (Morse, 1994) were conducted with participants from the education, manufacturing, mining, technology, services, and entrepreneurship sectors. This semi-structured format allowed for a common thematic framework while simultaneously preserving the openness necessary to explore work narratives in depth, in line with the phenomenological perspective (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2019). All interviews were recorded with prior informed consent, ensuring confidentiality through the use of pseudonyms and reminding participants of their right to withdraw at any time. Ethics was understood as a process that cut across all phases of the research.

The interview guide was organized into four analytical categories derived from the theoretical framework on organizational complexity, adaptive leadership, and innovation in VUCA environments. The first category, understanding the organizational environment, examined how participants characterize the context in which they operate, considering dimensions such as volatility, uncertainty, and complexity, as well as their perception of recent changes and emerging challenges. The second category, capacity for change and innovation, addressed the actual possibilities for organizational transformation, structural and cultural barriers, the presence of micro-changes, and transdisciplinary participation in innovation processes.

The third category, decision-making in complex contexts, explored the mechanisms for triggering organizational alerts, the use of current and prospective information, decision-making criteria, and strategies for managing uncertainty. The fourth category, development of meta-competencies and adaptive leadership, analyzed organizational learning processes, the construction of professional identity, commitment management, and resistance to change. These categories served as flexible guiding axes and were adjusted during the analysis as new meanings emerged, until theoretical saturation was reached. The instrument was validated through expert judgment. The research director evaluated the coherence between objectives and categories, the theoretical consistency of the conceptual framework, and the methodological and ethical adequacy of the procedure. Additionally, an interview was conducted to refine the formulation of questions and optimize the thematic sequence prior to the final application.

The principle of epistemic ethics (Fricker, 2007) was explicitly incorporated, understood as the responsibility to avoid testimonial and hermeneutic injustices that might distort the interpretation of the participants' voices. This criterion guided the listening, analysis, and representation of the discourses, paying special attention to possible asymmetries of organizational power and to preserving the narrative credibility of the participants.

The analysis was conducted using reflective thematic coding (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which is compatible with interpretive approaches and focuses on the iterative identification of patterns of meaning. The process was not linear but recursive, integrating in-depth reading, code generation, theme construction, and interpretive review. Complementarily, a reading based on recursive patterns was incorporated, inspired by complex systems theory, micro-narratives, and interpretive matrices (Holland, 1995; Snowden, 2021), which allowed for the observation of the repetition of semantic structures across different narrative levels—individual, group, and institutional—and enriched the understanding of organizational dynamics.

Methodological rigor was ensured through sustained reflexivity throughout the process (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2019), systematic documentation of analytical decisions and interpretive traceability (Miles et al., 1994), as well as constant comparison between interviews and thematic matrices. Taken together, the combination of semi-structured interviews, reflective thematic analysis, the identification of complex patterns, and an epistemic ethics approach enabled the generation of dense, contextualized, and theoretically grounded interpretations consistent with contemporary standards of rigorous qualitative research.

RESULTS

The study's findings reveal a workplace ecosystem undergoing profound change, where the emerging aspirations of new generations converge with organizational structures that continue to operate according to outdated principles of stability, rigidity, and hierarchy. The 32 interviews analyzed form a mosaic of experiences that, when interpreted, reveal

repetitive (Holland, 1995), multi-scalar, and deeply symbolic patterns. Below is a thematic reconstruction of the phenomenon, organized into nine analytical axes derived from the preliminary analysis.

1. Diversity of actors and matrices of the phenomenon: The inclusion of actors from different levels of the labor ecosystem constitutes a central epistemological strength of the study, as it allows the phenomenon to be observed as a multi-scale pattern that consistently reproduces itself at different organizational levels—a characteristic feature of complex and nonlinear systems (Morin, 2011; Holland, 1995). This diversity of voices makes it possible to identify structural regularities beyond individual positions, reinforcing the interpretive validity of the analysis.

1.1. Students and recent graduates: The narratives of students and recent graduates reflect a combination of initial enthusiasm and growing disillusionment, marked by a search for flexibility, meaning, and continuous learning. These aspirations are rooted in the subjectivities, characteristic of liquid modernity, where career trajectories are conceived as dynamic, open-ended, and in constant redefinition (Bauman, 2003; Barnett, 2015). This disillusionment is not due to a lack of willingness to work, but rather to the clash with labor structures designed for stable, hierarchical, and linear career paths, which no longer correspond to the contemporary conditions of accelerated and fragmented employment (Rosa, 2016).

The lack of clear induction and support processes exacerbates this fracture. This group centrally introduces the subjective and experiential dimension of the work-expectations mismatch, demonstrating that the conflict is not attitudinal but epistemological and structural, stemming from organizational models rooted in obsolete temporal logics (Bauman, 2003; Rosa, 2016; Barnett, 2015; Hinojosa López *et al.*, 2024).

1.2. Middle managers and human resources managers (7 interviews). This group provides the operational perspective on the system. Their accounts reveal the daily tension between the need to recruit and retain talent and the constraints inherent in critical operations, such as maintaining production continuity, rigid

schedules, or on-site work requirements. They report difficulties in finding suitable candidates, early turnover, and challenges in balancing flexibility with organizational efficiency. They also note that the retention of young talent depends largely on role clarity, feedback, and mentoring, shifting the narrative from a supposed lack of individual perseverance to structural deficits in support.

This perspective avoids a one-sided interpretation focused exclusively on young people and strengthens analytical triangulation by highlighting the real limitations of the organizational system in the face of complex and changing environments (Snowden, 2021; Guillén Subirán, 2021; Aranda, 2020).

1.3. Owners and executives (5 interviews). From a strategic perspective, owners and executives view the conflict as a strategic issue. Their focus is on productivity, operational continuity, and risk management, incorporating a rationale tied to organizational sustainability. From one perspective, the fluidity of the younger generations is perceived as a potential threat to quality standards and process control. However, these same stakeholders recognize that a lack of adaptability compromises competitiveness in the medium term, revealing an internal tension between control and transformation.

This view anchors the analysis in strategic decision-making, typical of organizations formed under the principles of solid modernity (Bauman, 2003; Sennett, 2006), but today faced with contexts of acceleration, wear and overload (Han, 2014) where the capacity to adapt becomes a key antifragile factor (Taleb, 2013).

Faculty members and consultants (3 interviews) reveal a critical aspect of the phenomenon: the misalignment between university curricula and the actual demands of the labor market. They serve as pivotal actors, bridging expectations between the educational and organizational worlds, and helping to make sense of the transition from school to the workplace. Their contribution helps connect higher education, employability, and the development of meta-competencies, underscoring the need to update methodologies and content to respond to environments characterized by complexity, uncertainty, and rapid change (Barnett, 2015; Morin, 2011; UNESCO, 2024).

All in all, the diversity of actors does not serve a merely descriptive function. On the contrary, it allows us to empirically demonstrate the multiscale and fractal nature of the phenomenon, which manifests itself consistently at all levels of the labor ecosystem. This convergence reinforces the study's alignment with the Emerging Hermeneutic Paradigm by demonstrating that the observed conflict is neither contingent nor individual, but rather structural, recurrent, and systemic.

The findings show that tensions between young workers and traditional organizational structures do not stem from superficial age differences, but rather from the coexistence of two civilizational logics within the same workplace. On the one hand, young people identify with the working conditions of liquid modernity (Bauman, 2003)—flexible career paths, a search for purpose, and a desire for autonomy—as the author notes. On the other hand, organizations continue to operate according to the principles of solid modernity (Sennett, 2006), where permanence, discipline, and procedural obedience remain indicators of professionalism.

This collision of temporalities creates a profound disconnect that should not be interpreted as a “lack of commitment,” but rather as a structural clash between emerging values (Morin, 2011) and inherited models. The evidence gathered in the interviews reveals a narrative sequence that repeats itself as a fractal pattern: expectation, clash, negotiation, and resolution. This pattern, visible across multiple profiles, functions as an attractor within complex systems (Holland, 1995). The tension is not necessarily destructive. These patterns are interpreted in fractal terms as the results of nonlinear sequences (Morin, 2011; Holland, 1995) that emerge under conditions of symbolic and temporal saturation (Kondratova, 2024).

From the perspective of antifragility, Taleb (2013) argues that systems can grow stronger through conflict if they develop mechanisms for adaptation, feedback, and learning (Taleb, 2013). This aligns with accounts in which guided tolerance for error, constant feedback, and cross-mentoring facilitate generational integration and improve retention and productivity. When organizations manage tension with openness, innovation occurs; when they suppress it, defensiveness, early turnover, and demotivation emerge. As Kondratova (2024) points out, the ability to anticipate and act in

fractal and chaotic environments (Snowden, 2021) requires reading hyperreality and simulations before reputational collapse.

The interviews also reveal structural gaps that explain why the tension persists. The flexibility gap arises because, for young people, autonomy is linked to emotional well-being, whereas for organizations in hard sectors, it represents operational risk. The pace gap reflects the disconnect between expectations of accelerated growth and the linear promotion systems characteristic of solid modernity (Han, 2014; Sennett, 2006). And the educational gap confirms what Barnett (2015) calls the crisis of curricular relevance: universities prepare students for stable scenarios that no longer exist, leaving out complex thinking (Morin, 2011), emotional self-management, and the ability to navigate uncertainty (Snowden, 2021).

In this context, the meta-competencies (Barnett, 2015)—such as resilience, complex thinking, intercultural communication, and emotional ethics—are becoming the new standard in the employment contract. However, they only thrive in organizational environments that value dialogue, adaptability, and the legitimization of subjective experience. When institutions invalidate the voices of young people, what Fricker calls epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007) is reproduced: the systematic delegitimization of certain groups as valid sources of knowledge. This explains why comments directed at young people, such as calling them “unengaged” or “emotionally fragile,” are not only inaccurate but also inhibit learning processes and organizational cohesion (Taleb, 2013).

Amid these tensions, the figure of the leader-translator emerges strongly (Kegan et al., 2016), consistent with the authors' proposals on leadership in deliberately developed organizations. These leaders do more than just manage tasks: they facilitate conversations, translate rationales, legitimize emotions, and build bridges across dissimilar perspectives. From a fractal perspective, they act as a node that distributes meaning and coherence throughout the system (Kegan et al., 2016).

Finally, the analysis suggests that the most promising direction for organizations is to move toward fractal forms of organization (Kondratova, 2024), characterized by decision-making through short feedback loops, distributed leadership,

the integration of generational diversity without imposing homogeneity, and the use of conflict as a driver of innovation (Snowden, 2021). These organizations do not cling to rigid structures, nor do they dissolve into extreme flexibility; they achieve a dynamic balance between freedom and control, purpose and productivity, subjectivity and structure. Leadership must manage the operational complexity and symbolic overload of the environment (Kondratova, 2024).

CONCLUSIONS

An analysis of 32 interviews with stakeholders from various sectors reveals a consistent structural pattern: there is a structural tension between traditional organizations—which prioritize stability, continuity, discipline, and quantifiable productivity—and the emerging expectations of younger generations, who value flexibility, purpose, well-being, autonomy, recognition, and ethical integrity. This tension cannot be reduced to a superficial generational gap; rather, it reflects a profound transformation of cultural frameworks and the very conception of work.

The findings suggest that the mismatch between organizational structures and generational expectations is neither an individual problem nor a lack of commitment, but rather an expression of structural change in production systems and contemporary work-related subjectivities. Overcoming this mismatch requires moving beyond simplistic explanations—such as the supposed fragility or lack of discipline among a particular generation—and adopting a systemic approach that interprets these demands as early indicators of organizational transformation. Young talent does not pose a threat to productivity; rather, it is an early sign of the future of work.

The organizations that achieve the best results combine regulatory stability with operational flexibility; they blend mentoring with performance-based evaluation; and they align financial compensation with symbolic recognition and a sense of purpose. This balance enables a transition toward more adaptive organizational models, capable of identifying emerging risks before they materialize and of strengthening their ability to respond to uncertainty, thereby maintaining order without sacrificing adaptability.

This capacity for integration strengthens organizational adaptability, facilitates the early detection of emerging risks, and broadens the strategic response to uncertainty. Organizations recognize these as signs of systemic evolution and incorporate them into their institutional architecture. By articulating flexibility with rules, mentoring with results-oriented metrics, and economic understanding with recognition and a sense of purpose, they transform complexity into a source of continuous learning and fractal-like structural strengthening, where each level of the system consistently reproduces the principles of adaptation, coherence, and sustainability.

Contribution to knowledge

This study contributes to knowledge by reconfiguring the so-called generational conflict as a structural and not behavioral phenomenon, integrating it into a theoretical framework of organizational complexity and paradigmatic transformation of work. On a theoretical level, it shifts the focus away from psychologizing interpretations toward a systemic approach that integrates productive rationality, organizational culture, and the social construction of knowledge, demonstrating that the disconnect between traditional organizations and new generations stems from an epistemological tension between linear management models and adaptive, relational, and multiscale logics. Methodologically, it combines semi-structured interviews with reflective thematic analysis and the reading of recurring structural patterns from a fractal perspective, which allows the identification of transversal configurations beyond individual cases and offers a replicable interpretive framework for analyzing organizational tensions in contexts of uncertainty. In this way, the research describes and proposes a conceptual shift: viewing young talent as an early indicator of systemic transformation, thereby contributing to the evolution of management models toward approaches that are better suited to complex and dynamic environments.

Limitations

The limitations of this study must be understood in coherence with its hermeneutic and gnoseological foundations. As this is an interpretive qualitative study aimed at understanding situated meanings, it does not seek statistical representativeness or nomothetic generalization, but rather comprehensive density and internal coherence. The thirty-two conducted interviews allow for the

identification of structural patterns of meaning, but these emerge from specific organizational contexts and are therefore shaped by particular sociocultural and historical frameworks. Furthermore, the cross-sectional nature of the study design prevents the observation of longitudinal evolutionary dynamics, such as the identification of tension-filled configurations and emerging patterns. As this is interpretive research, the findings are mediated by the researchers' gnoseological horizon, which requires understanding them as coherent analytical constructions within an explicit epistemological framework.

Statement on the Use of AI

Artificial intelligence tools were used exclusively to provide technical support in the form of grammar, spelling and academic style checks, and to translate the title, abstract and keywords. AI played no role whatsoever in the conceptual formulation, analysis, interpretation of results, or construction of scientific arguments — these are the sole responsibility of the authors.

Authors' contribution:

María Elena Alarcón Aragón: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Research, Methodology, Project management, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review and editing.

Alejandro Iborra Cuéllar: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Research, Methodology, Project management, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – first draft, Writing – revision and editing.

Declaration of conflict of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest associated with the publication of this manuscript.

REFERENCES

- Alarcón, M.E. (2025, 7 de noviembre). *Complejidad, Antifragilidad y Justicia Epistémica: El Modelo DPA como arquitectura de innovación en la modernidad líquida*. Conferencia Magistral en el Congreso II Congreso Internacional ARMACE, FES Aragón de la UNAM. Cd. de México, México.
- Aranda, I. (2020). El fenómeno intergeneracional. *Capital Humano: revista para la integración y desarrollo de los recursos humanos*, 351, 21–26. <https://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/articulo?codigo=7477902>
- Ayala Carabajo, R. (2017). La relación pedagógica: en las fuentes de la experiencia educativa con van Manen. *Revista Complutense de Educación*, 29(1), 27–41. <https://doi.org/10.5209/RCED.51925>
- Barnett, R. (2015). *Understanding the university: Institution, idea, possibilities*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315678245>
- Bauman, Z. (2003). *Modernidad líquida*. Fondo de Cultura Económica.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Brinkmann, S., & Kvale, S. (2019). *Doing interviews*. SAGE Publications Ltd, <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781529716665>
- Bruno, L., & Iborra Cuéllar, A. (2023). Programa de intervención *ad hoc* para la regulación emocional en un grupo de trabajadores sociales españoles. *Social Work Education*, 43(6), 1746–1765. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2023.2217832>
- Brynjolfsson, E., & McAfee, A. (2014). *The second machine age: Work, progress, and prosperity in a time of brilliant technologies*. W. W. Norton & Company. <http://digamo.free.fr/brynmcafee2.pdf>
- Fernández-Villarino, R., Galán García, A., & Climent Rodríguez, J. A. (2025). Nuevas políticas para el empleo ante una nueva caracterización de las relaciones laborales. *Trabajo, Persona, Derecho, Mercado*, (10), 117–141. <https://doi.org/10.12795/TPDM.2025.i10.04>

- Fricker, M. (2007). *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*. Oxford University Press.
- Giannola, A., Olivares-García, M. de los A., & García Segura, S. (2025). NEET en Italia: abordando obstáculos formativos y laborales en una sociedad dinámica e incierta. *European Public & Social Innovation Review*, 11, 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.31637/epsir-2026-2115>
- Guillén Subirán, C. (2021). Coexistencia generacional en los entornos de trabajo: Cómo conseguir que las diferentes generaciones integren en sus valores la prevención de riesgos laborales. *Gestión Práctica de Riesgos Laborales*, (196), 28–36. <https://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/articulo?codigo=8093693>
- Han, B. C. (2014). *La sociedad del cansancio*. Herder. <https://es.scribd.com/document/744157322/La-Sociedad-Del-Cansancio>
- Hinojosa López, J. I., Salas Rubio, M. I., & Meraz Acevedo, G. . (2024). Expectativas laborales ¿Qué busca la generación Z?. *EDUCIENCIA*, 9(1), 45–59. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/381832828_Expectativas_laborales_Que_busca_la_generacion_Z
- Holland, J. H. (1995). *Hidden order: How adaptation builds complexity*. Addison-Wesley. <https://es.scribd.com/document/709051175/John-H-Holland-El-Orden-Oculto-de-Como-La-Adaptacion-Crea-La-Complejidad>
- Juca-Maldonado, A. X., García-Vera, J. S., Juca-Maldonado, F., & Carrión-González, J. T. (2025). Competencias tecnológicas de la Generación Z. Una evaluación cuantitativa de las habilidades frente a la percepción de los nativos digitales. *Revista Transdisciplinaria De Estudios Sociales Y Tecnológicos*, 5(2), 16–24. <https://doi.org/10.58594/rtest.v5i2.160>
- Kegan, R., Lahey, L., Fleming, A., Miller, M., Fleming, A., & Helsing, D. (2016). *An Everyone Culture: Becoming a Deliberately Developmental Organization*. Harvard Business Review Press. <https://edelweiss-assets.abovethetree.com/BXBC/supplemental/Kegan%20Lahey%20reading%20material%20-%20TOC%20Intro%20Ch%201.pdf>
- Kondratova, Y. (2024). Main causes of problems with business reputation as a consequence of the fractal era. *Vilnius University, Management and Economy*, 25(2), 38–52. https://cs.journal-mirbis.ru/-/S53mTCKmoC_R1grWiGhBdg/sv/document/1f/d1/97/521295/1612/206%E2%80%9338VM-2024_2-25.pdf?1721988513
- Marzano Sosa, R., Marzano Sosa, F., Castillon Hinojosa, C. (2023). Influencia en su autoestima e intolerancia a la frustración de “nativos digitales” en entornos tecnológicos. (2023). *Qantu Yachay*, 3(1), 103–115. <https://doi.org/10.54942/qantuyachay.v3i1.48>
- Meza, S. M., Estrella, C. E. y Sánchez, A. (2024). Impacto de la inteligencia en el desplazamiento laboral: Retos y oportunidades en el futuro del trabajo. *Rev. Horizonte Empresarial*, 11(2), 23–35. <https://doi.org/10.26495/ff1t7r60>
- Miles, M. B., Huberman, M., Saldaña. J. (1994). *Análisis de datos cualitativos: Un libro de consulta ampliado* (3ra. ed.). Sage Publications, Inc. https://ia803100.us.archive.org/0/items/spradleyanalisisdatakualitatifmodeletnografi/Matthew_Miles%2C_Michael_Hberman%2C_Johnny_Sdana-Qualitative_Data_Analysis_A_Methods_Sourcebook-Sage_%282014%29-5B1%5D.pdf
- Morin, E. (2011). *La Vía para el futuro de la humanidad*. Paidós. https://www.uv.mx/veracruz/cosustentaver/files/2015/09/20.la_via_para_el_futuro_de_la_humanidad.pdf
- Morse, J. (1994). Designing Funded Qualitative Research. In N. K. Denzin, & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (pp. 220–235). Sage Publications, Inc. <https://www.scirp.org/reference/referencespapers?referenceid=3515531>
- OECD (2024). *Education in multicultural societies: Challenges and policy responses*. OECD Publishing. <https://www.oecd.org/en/topics/digital-transformation.html>
- Rosa, H., Dávila, E., & Ibargüen, M. A. (2016). *Alienación y aceleración: Hacia una teoría crítica de la temporalidad en la modernidad tardía* (1st ed.). Katz Editores. <https://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/libro?codigo=707403>

Santa Cruz Soria, J. V., & Toro Álava, W. J. (2025). Competencias laborales y los desafíos tecnológicos del personal docente y administrativo en las Generaciones X y Boomer en UPSE. *Revista Social Fronteriza*, 5(1), e-602. [https://doi.org/10.59814/resofro.2025.5\(1\)602](https://doi.org/10.59814/resofro.2025.5(1)602)

Sennett, R. (2006). *La cultura del nuevo capitalismo*. Anagrama. <https://colegiodehistoria.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/sennettrichardla-cultura-del-nuevo-capitalismo.pdf>

Snowden, D. (2021). *Managing complexity (and chaos) in times of crisis*. Cognitive Edge. <https://docs.adaptdev.info/lib/7Q84XPB2>

Taleb, N. N. (2013). *Antifrágil: Las cosas que se benefician del desorden*. Paidós Contextos. https://proassetspdlcom.cdnstatics2.com/usuarios/libros_contenido/arxius/56/55290_Antifragil.pdf

UNESCO (2024). *Informe de seguimiento de la Educación en el Mundo de la UNESCO 2024: Liderazgo en la educación: liderar para el aprendizaje*. UNESCO. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000391758_spa