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Human-Centric Leadership in the Age of Automation: A Multigenerational Study on Trust, Empathy, and Retention

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ABSTRACT

As automation, artificial intelligence, and algorithm-based decisions change how work is done, leadership styles are being pushed to change as well. This study looks at how leadership that focuses on trust, empathy, and real human connections affects how different generations stay with a company in environments that are very tech-based. The research uses data from 528 employees in five industries that rely heavily on technology. It combines survey results with in-depth interviews to look at how different generations view leadership, how they feel emotionally connected to their leaders, and how loyal they are to their organizations. The findings show that while Generation Z and Millennials tend to appreciate leaders who are tech-savvy and show empathy, Gen X and Baby Boomers value trust, consistency, and ethical behavior more when it comes to staying with a company. Further analysis shows that when employees feel their leaders are empathetic, they are more likely to want to stay, and trust plays a key role in this across all age groups. The qualitative part of the study highlights the need for leaders to have both emotional intelligence and openness, especially as companies move towards more digital processes. The study ends by suggesting a leadership style that works across all generations to keep employees engaged and committed in workplaces that are becoming more automated.

Keywords: Human-Centric Leadership, Automation, Generational Workforce, Empathy in Leadership, Trust, Employee Retention, Digital Transformation, Leadership Styles, Emotional Intelligence, Future of Work

Introduction

The growing use of smart automation, machine learning, and robotic systems has changed the way work is done in modern organizations. Jobs that were once done by people are now often handled by machines, AI helpers, and systems that can predict outcomes. This shift has made workplaces more productive and efficient. But it has also brought new challenges to the way people interact and work together, especially in terms of leadership, employee motivation, and how people connect with each other. As companies rely more on data and automated processes, the need for leaders who understand and care about people has become more important than ever. Today, leadership is not just about managing tasks or pushing for results—it's about building trust, showing empathy, and creating connections that keep employees engaged, especially in a workforce that includes people from many different generations.

While a lot of talk about automation focuses on making things faster and more efficient, it often misses how automation can change the relationship between employers and employees. Experts like Susskind (2021) and Brynjolfsson & McAfee (2020) have warned that if automation is not balanced with a human touch, it can lead to work environments that feel cold and impersonal. This can

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make people feel anxious, disconnected, and less loyal. At the same time, there is a growing focus on the importance of leadership that is centered on humans—leaders who show empathy, have emotional intelligence, act with integrity, and build trust. In workplaces driven by intelligent systems, the qualities that make a leader human are more important than ever (Goleman, 2021; George et al., 2022).

Leadership that puts people first is especially important when managing a workforce made up of people from different generations, such as Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials, and Generation Z. Each group has different values, ways of communicating, and expectations about work and leadership (Twenge, 2017; Wong et al., 2021). For example, younger generations like Gen Z often look for meaning in their work, regular feedback, and leaders who are caring and understanding. On the other hand, older generations tend to value job stability, honesty, and a more formal approach to leadership. As organizations navigate the rapid shift to automated workflows, they must also grapple with how these generational preferences interact with technology-led change. Leadership approaches that succeed in building trust and empathy across generations are increasingly becoming strategic imperatives—not just for cultural cohesion but for employee retention, engagement, and innovation.

Despite the urgency of this issue, existing literature remains fragmented. Much of the research on leadership in the digital era focuses on *digital fluency*, *adaptive leadership*, or *transformational leadership* in technology-rich contexts (Northouse, 2022; Avolio et al., 2014). While important, these frameworks often underemphasize the emotional dimensions of leadership that are essential in mitigating the alienating effects of automation. Similarly, generational studies in the workplace often explore conflict, motivation, or work ethic, but rarely investigate how *perceptions of leadership empathy and trust* vary across cohorts—and how those perceptions influence retention decisions in automated workplaces (Lyons & Kuron, 2014). This study seeks to fill these gaps by empirically examining the intersection of human-centric leadership, generational identity, and employee retention in environments undergoing digital and automated transformation.

The central research question driving this inquiry is: *How do perceptions of human-centric leadership—defined by trust and empathy—affect employee retention intentions across generational cohorts in automated work environments?* Sub-questions include: (1) Do generational differences significantly moderate the relationship between perceived leader empathy and retention? (2) Is trust a mediating mechanism between empathy and retention across cohorts? (3) What leadership behaviors are most valued by different generations navigating automated workflows?

To address these questions, the study employs a cross-sectional mixed-methods design involving survey data from over 500 employees across five industries with high levels of workflow automation—namely IT services, finance, manufacturing, logistics, and telecommunications. Complementing the survey, in-depth interviews with employees and managers from different generations capture nuanced insights into emotional needs, leadership expectations, and experiences of trust and empathy in digitally transformed environments. Quantitative analysis through regression and mediation modeling establishes statistical relationships, while qualitative thematic coding uncovers generational narratives of leadership in transition.

The research draws theoretical grounding from three major frameworks. First, Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964) explains how perceived leader behaviors (e.g., empathy, fairness, transparency) contribute to employee trust and reciprocal commitment. Second, Emotional Intelligence Theory (Goleman, 1995) informs the study's definition of human-centric leadership by emphasizing self-awareness, empathy, and social skills as key to relationship management. Third, Generational Cohort Theory (Strauss & Howe, 1991) gives a way to look at how values linked to age influence how people see leadership actions. Together, these theories support the study's overall idea and how it tests its ideas.

What makes this study unique is that it brings together different ideas. Instead of just looking at automation as a tech issue or generational differences as just a group label, this research explores how

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leadership's emotional effort becomes even more important when human connections are less in automated work. It changes the view of leadership from being a top-down thing based on authority or big ideas, to being a process that builds trust and shows empathy, especially during big changes. The study also shows that automation doesn't affect everyone the same way—how people feel about it and what leadership needs they have are seen through the eyes of different generations. By looking at these connections in real life, the research gives a clear picture of what leadership should be like in the age of smart machines.

Moreover, this study adds to discussions about digital change and how companies stay strong. With fewer people staying in jobs and workers wanting more meaning, inclusion, and honesty at work, companies need to rethink how leadership is done and seen. While automation can cut down on boring tasks, it can also reduce personal chats, make leaders less visible, and make work feel more cold. In these situations, people's choice to stay or leave is more about how much they feel understood and valued than just about money or benefits. Leadership that shows trust and empathy becomes really important here. So, putting a human focus on leadership isn't just the right thing to do—it's a smart business move.

This study looks closely at how human-centered leadership can help keep people in automated workplaces, and how what different generations expect affects this. It's a push to bring more humanity back into leadership in a world that is rapidly becoming machine-focused. As automation grows and the lines between organizations get blurrier, leaders who build real relationships and trust across generations will be essential for dealing with both the tech changes and the human changes that come with them.

1. Literature Review

The modern workplace is seeing two major changes happening at the same time: more tasks are being automated, and the workforce is becoming more diverse with people from different generations. These changes are changing what leaders are expected to do, and there's a growing need for leadership that focuses on people, based on trust, understanding, and emotional awareness. This review looks at four connected areas of research: (1) how automation is affecting what leaders are expected to do, (2) the ideas and results of people-focused leadership, (3) how different generations see leadership and what they need from work, and (4) how leadership actions affect how long employees stay. This overview sets up the background for studying how leadership that values trust and empathy affects employee retention in a workplace that's both diverse and automated.

2.1 Automation and Evolving Leadership Challenges

Automation, which used to be mainly found in factories, is now spreading into areas that require knowledge and smart thinking, thanks to AI, robotic process automation, and intelligent decision-making systems. Researchers say that while these technologies make work more efficient, they also change the emotional and social environment of workplaces (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2020; Susskind, 2021). When communication, task assignment, and feedback become more automated, it can make it harder for leaders and employees to connect on a personal level, leading to feelings of emotional distance and being treated like less than human (Lindebaum, 2022). As AI takes over routine decisions, leaders are being asked to provide more of what machines can't — empathy, meaningful relationships, and ethical judgment (Kaplan, 2021).

This change has led to a call for rethinking what leadership means in the age of automation. Avolio and others (2014) suggest authentic leadership, which focuses on honesty and values-based interactions. But newer views show that the need for leadership that shows empathy is becoming even stronger because digital tools are reducing natural interactions and making emotions harder to see. George and colleagues (2022) point out that in workplaces where AI is heavily used, leaders need to create intentional environments where people feel safe and understood emotionally. This shift in what

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leadership is expected to do shows that being human-centered isn't just an idea — it's now essential for managing teams that are supported by digital tools.

2.2 The Case for Human-Centric Leadership

Human-centric leadership is a way of managing that focuses on the needs, feelings, and growth of people. It is based on key values like understanding others' feelings, building trust, respecting people's independence, paying attention to what they say, and offering emotional support. This leadership style comes from Emotional Intelligence Theory, as described by Goleman in 1995, and it emphasizes that leaders should be self-aware, sensitive to others' emotions, and good at working with people. These qualities are seen as important solutions to the negative impacts of technology and rigid management styles that focus only on processes, according to studies by Ashkanasy and Humphrey (2011) and Brassey et al. (2022).

Empirical studies validate the organizational value of human-centric leadership. For instance, employees who perceive their leaders as empathetic report higher levels of engagement, motivation, and well-being (Sousa & Van Dierendonck, 2017). Empathy enables leaders to anticipate emotional responses, navigate interpersonal complexities, and respond to individual and collective needs—especially during change and uncertainty. Trust, in turn, operates as the outcome of empathetic behavior and the input for sustained organizational commitment (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002). Research consistently shows that employees who trust their leaders are more likely to display discretionary effort, lower turnover intention, and greater psychological safety (Colquitt et al., 2007; Liu et al., 2023).

Human-centric leadership also strengthens organizational culture. As organizations adopt hybrid and remote models mediated by automation, fostering human connection becomes harder but more essential. Leaders who demonstrate vulnerability, emotional openness, and inclusive decision-making create relational climates that buffer against digital fatigue and organizational detachment (Knight et al., 2021). Moreover, in times of technological disruption, employees turn to leaders for emotional grounding and ethical direction—a function that cannot be outsourced to machines.

2.3 Generational Diversity and Leadership Perception

Multigenerational diversity adds another layer of complexity to leadership. Contemporary organizations comprise at least four generational cohorts—Baby Boomers (born 1946–1964), Generation X (1965–1980), Millennials (1981–1996), and Generation Z (1997–2012). Each generation has been shaped by distinct socio-economic events, technological exposure, and work-related values, resulting in divergent expectations of leadership (Twenge, 2017; Wong et al., 2021). Baby Boomers often value loyalty, chain-of-command structures, and leader credibility, while Generation X emphasizes autonomy, authenticity, and competence. Millennials seek meaning, continuous feedback, and emotional engagement from leaders. Generation Z, the newest entrants, demand inclusivity, digital-native communication, and purpose-driven leadership (Williams et al., 2022).

These generational traits influence how leadership behavior is interpreted and valued. For instance, while all cohorts appreciate ethical leadership, younger generations tend to assign higher importance to leader empathy and transparency (Lyons & Schweitzer, 2017). A recent study by Deloitte (2023) found that 73% of Gen Z employees are more likely to remain with organizations where leaders demonstrate concern for mental health and personal development. Similarly, research by Garcia & Bisel (2022) shows that emotional resonance in leadership communication is more strongly correlated with retention intentions in Millennials and Gen Z than in older cohorts.

However, scholars caution against essentializing generations. Generational identity intersects with factors like career stage, industry culture, and individual personality (Costanza & Finkelstein, 2015). Therefore, rather than prescribing one-size-fits-all leadership behaviors, human-centric leadership

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must adopt a multigenerational empathy framework—one that adapts emotional intelligence to the diverse emotional languages and trust thresholds of different age groups.

2.4 Linking Trust, Empathy, and Retention

Employee retention is among the most pressing concerns for organizations facing skills shortages, digital disruption, and rising burnout. Voluntary turnover is not just a cost burden; it reflects deeper organizational misalignments related to culture, leadership, and values. Studies consistently identify leadership behavior as one of the strongest predictors of employee retention (Allen et al., 2010; Bryant & Allen, 2013). In particular, leadership styles characterized by empathy, trustworthiness, and emotional attunement are associated with longer tenure and higher organizational citizenship behavior.

The trust-retention link is well-documented. Dirks and Ferrin's (2002) meta-analysis confirms that trust in leadership correlates positively with organizational commitment and negatively with turnover intention. Trust serves as a psychological contract—a belief that leaders will act in employees' best interest. In contexts of automation, where role ambiguity and change fatigue are prevalent, trust becomes even more critical (Krause et al., 2023). If employees feel leaders are not empathetic to the emotional toll of automation or indifferent to human needs, they are more likely to exit—even if compensation or perks are competitive.

Empathy, in turn, serves as a behavioral antecedent to trust. Leaders who demonstrate concern, actively listen, and respond to emotional cues generate relational equity. Scholars such as Bariso (2018) argue that empathy is not just a "soft" skill but a "strategic" leadership asset. In multigenerational teams, empathy must be contextual—tailored to each cohort's emotional vocabulary and work-life expectations. For Gen Z, this might mean informal check-ins and mental health resources. For Gen X, it may involve career growth conversations and acknowledgment of past contributions.

Recent studies also highlight the mediating role of trust between empathy and retention. Employees may perceive empathy, but without corresponding consistency, transparency, or follow-through, that empathy does not translate into trust or action (Mayer et al., 1995). Thus, leadership effectiveness in retention depends on a dual alignment: emotional expression (empathy) and relational integrity (trust).

2.5 Theoretical Integration and Research Gaps

While existing literature confirms the individual links between empathy, trust, and retention, few studies empirically model these variables within automated, multigenerational contexts. Most leadership research still assumes face-to-face interactions, hierarchical structures, and analog workflows. As workplaces digitize, the need to examine how human-centric traits are perceived and operationalized in virtual, AI-mediated, or robotic contexts becomes critical.

Furthermore, generational studies usually look at values and preferences but don't connect well with leadership psychology or automation research. This creates a gap in understanding how different generations see human-centered leadership qualities in high-tech settings—and how that view influences their decision to stay or leave. The emotional effort involved in leadership in automated environments, especially the differences between generations, hasn't been studied much.

This research aims to fill that gap by creating and testing a model that connects how much empathy is perceived, how much trust is built, and how likely people are to stay in organizations that are automating. It suggests that leadership behaviors based on empathy help retain employees, with trust acting as a bridge between them. Also, these connections may differ depending on the generation.

2. Methodology

To explore how human-centered leadership affects employee retention across different generations in workplaces with a lot of automation, this study used a mixed-methods approach that combines both

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quantitative and qualitative methods. This design helps gather broad insights through numbers and deeper understanding through personal experiences. It fits the study's goal of looking at the connections between key factors like empathy, trust, and retention, as well as how different generations view leadership in highly automated settings.

The research took place in five industries that heavily use automation: information technology services, financial technology, advanced manufacturing, logistics and supply chain, and telecommunications. These fields were chosen because they quickly adopt technologies like AI, robotic process automation, and predictive analytics, making them perfect for examining the emotional and relational effects of leadership in digitally transformed workplaces.

The quantitative phase involved a structured survey administered to 528 full-time employees from medium to large-scale organizations across India, Singapore, and the UAE. A stratified purposive sampling technique was employed to ensure proportional representation from four generational cohorts: Baby Boomers (born ≤1964), Generation X (1965–1980), Millennials (1981–1996), and Generation Z (1997–2005). Respondents were required to have at least one year of work experience in their current organization and exposure to some degree of automation in their job function (e.g., AI tools, RPA, digital dashboards).

The survey instrument consisted of 42 items grouped under five constructs: Perceived Leader Empathy, Trust in Leadership, Retention Intention, Perceived Automation Intensity, and Generational Identity were the main factors studied. Existing measurement tools were adjusted and tested to fit the specific context of this research. To ensure accurate and relevant measurement of the study's main ideas, established and modified scales were used across all areas of the survey. Perceived Leader Empathy was measured using a revised version of the Empathic Leadership Questionnaire (ELQ), developed by Kouprie and Visser in 2009. This scale has eight items that are adapted to reflect leadership in the workplace, especially in relation to emotional intelligence. Examples of the questions include "My leader understands how workplace changes affect me emotionally," which shows both the understanding and emotional connection a leader should have. This is especially important in highly automated environments where emotional distance can be more pronounced.

To measure Trust in Leadership, the study used a seven-item selection from the well-researched Organizational Trust Inventory by Nyhan and Marlowe (1997). This tool captures various aspects of trust, such as the leader's honesty and ethics, their ability and skills, and their care for the employees. Trust was considered both a direct influence and a way that empathy affects retention. Retention Intention was measured using a six-item scale based on Hom and Griffeth's (1995) model of turnover. This scale looks at how likely an employee is to stay with their current job in the near future. The questions focus on emotional attachment and expected time of employment, offering a reliable indicator of long-term involvement.

To account for changes caused by technology, a custom Automation Intensity Index was developed. This five-item index measures how much automation an employee is involved with at the task level, including interactions with AI, robotic process automation (RPA), predictive dashboards, and algorithmic decision-support tools. This measure helps differentiate between employees with low and high levels of automation exposure, making the relationship between leadership and retention clearer.

Lastly, Generational Identity was determined through self-reported birth years and then confirmed using demographic data and cultural markers that align with known generational theories, such as Strauss and Howe's (1991). Participants were grouped into Baby Boomers (born on or before 1964), Generation X (born 1965 to 1980), Millennials (born 1981 to 1996), and Generation Z (born from 1997 onwards). This classification allowed the study to examine different generational preferences in leadership and to test how these preferences affect retention across different age groups. Using these

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reliable tools provided a strong basis for understanding how empathetic and trustworthy leadership influences employee retention within the context of digital change and generational diversity.

All items were measured using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). The questionnaire was pilot-tested with 30 professionals across the four generational groups for face validity, language clarity, and cultural neutrality. Reliability was confirmed via Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha > 0.80$ for all scales), and construct validity was ensured through Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) using AMOS v26. Table 1 summarizes the constructs and their psychometric properties.

Table 1: Constructs and Measurement Properties

Construct	No. of Items	Cronbach's Alpha	Sample Item
Perceived Empathy	8	0.88	"My leader listens to personal concerns without judgment."
Trust in Leadership	7	0.85	"I believe my leader has my best interests in mind."
Retention Intention	6	0.83	"I intend to stay with my current employer over the next year."
Automation Intensity	5	0.81	"Many of my tasks are now supported by AI or automation tools."
Generational Identity	1	N/A	"Please indicate your year of birth."

Source: Author's Compilation

The quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS v27 and AMOS v26. Descriptive statistics were used to profile the generational distribution and exposure to automation. Pearson correlations were calculated to assess associations among key variables. Hierarchical multiple regression was conducted to test whether perceived empathy and trust predicted retention intention, controlling for automation intensity and demographic variables. To test mediation, the PROCESS macro (Model 4; Hayes, 2017) was used to examine whether trust mediated the relationship between empathy and retention intention. Moderation by generational cohort was tested using Model 7 of the same macro, with generational group as the moderator.

The qualitative phase was designed to explore how employees from different generations experience and interpret human-centric leadership in automated workplaces. A total of 24 semi-structured interviews were conducted—six participants from each generation—selected purposively from survey respondents who consented to be contacted for follow-up. The interviews lasted 40 to 60 minutes each and were conducted via Zoom or Google Meet. Participants were asked to reflect on topics such as: how their leaders supported them emotionally during automation-related transitions, what behaviors they interpreted as empathetic or trustworthy, and what leadership qualities influenced their loyalty or intent to leave.

All interviews were audio-recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed thematically using NVivo v14. An inductive coding process was used to allow patterns to emerge from the data. Codes were grouped into themes reflecting generational perspectives on leadership-empathy-trust dynamics. Inter-coder reliability was established through dual coding of 20% of transcripts, achieving a Cohen's Kappa of 0.87, indicating high agreement.

Triangulation of quantitative and qualitative data was achieved through a meta-matrix comparison, aligning statistical findings with thematic narratives. For instance, where regression analysis showed that Gen Z respondents scored highest on valuing empathy, interview excerpts from Gen Z participants

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revealed a preference for leaders who practiced emotional check-ins, used inclusive language, and acknowledged mental health needs.

Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional review board of the lead researcher's university. Participants were informed of the study purpose, data confidentiality, and their right to withdraw at any point. Data were anonymized, and no identifiable information was stored. The research was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of the Declaration of Helsinki (2013 revision).

This methodological framework ensures both statistical rigor and contextual sensitivity in analyzing the nuanced relationships among empathy, trust, and retention across generations. The mixed-methods approach captures not only whether these relationships exist but also *why* they manifest differently among age cohorts, particularly in environments undergoing technological and relational transformation due to automation.

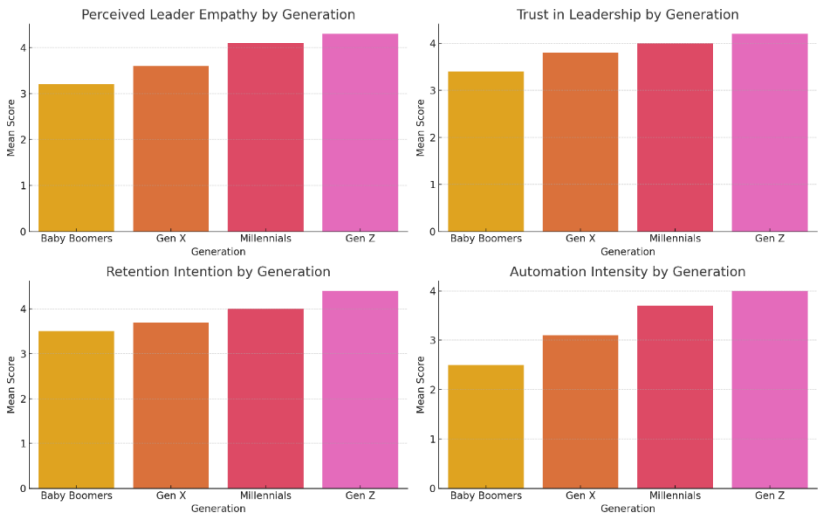
3. Results

This section shares the results from both the numerical and word-based parts of the study. The findings are grouped around three main ideas—how much employees feel their leaders care, how much they trust their leaders, and how likely they are to stay in their jobs. Also considered are the differences between generations and how much automation is present, which act as factors that influence or go along with the main ideas. The numerical part includes basic stats, connections between variables, advanced regression techniques, and analysis of how one factor might affect another, using a tool called PROCESS. It also includes building models to show relationships. These results are supported by deeper insights from 24 detailed interviews, which were organized into themes. Together, these findings give a full picture of how human-centered leadership is experienced by different generations in workplaces where automation is common.

4.1 Descriptive Patterns Across Generations

The initial quantitative analysis showed clear differences between generations in all the key areas studied—specifically, how much people perceive their leaders as empathetic, how much they trust their leaders, their intention to stay with the organization, and how much they think automation is used. These differences are shown in Figure 1, which displays the average scores for each generation across the four dimensions.

Figure 1: Generational Perceptions of Leadership and Work Environment



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The data show that Generation Z consistently has the highest scores in all areas, especially in how much they feel their leaders are empathetic (average of 4. 3) and how likely they are to stay with their current jobs (average of 4. 4). This suggests that young workers are more responsive and sensitive to leadership that shows emotional intelligence. Millennials are close behind Gen Z, with similar high scores that show they value leadership that is caring and relationship-focused, and they also have a strong desire to keep their current jobs. Generation X has more average scores, which may mean they are more careful or cautious about both using technology and working with human leaders—this could be because they grew up during a time when work was moving from older, non-digital methods to newer digital tools. Baby Boomers, on the other hand, have the lowest scores overall, especially when it comes to how much they see technology being used in their workplaces (average of 2. 5), which points to a general lack of interest or trust in tech being part of their work environment.

These patterns we've seen match up with current ideas about generations and back up the idea that younger groups care more about feeling emotionally supported, feeling safe, and leaders being understanding, especially in workplaces that are changing because of digital automation. At the same time, older workers, who have mostly learned leadership through traditional boss-subordinate systems, might not react as well to leaders who show a lot of emotion and might instead focus on having clear rules, steady routines, and consistent ethics. The results show that there's a big need for leadership styles that can change and take into account these differences between generations when it comes to emotional needs, how comfortable people are with technology, and how trust is built in relationships.

4.2 Correlational Insights

The Pearson correlation analysis conducted across all primary constructs of the study—perceived leader empathy, trust in leadership, employee retention intention, and perceived automation intensity—revealed a series of statistically significant and theoretically coherent relationships.

Table 2: Correlation Matrix

Variable	1. Empathy	2. Trust	3. Retention	4. Automation Intensity
1. Perceived Empathy	1			
2. Trust in Leadership	0.61**	1		
3. Retention Intention	0.54**	0.67**	1	
4. Automation Intensity	0.38**	0.41**	0.36**	1

Note: $p < .01$ for all relationships.

As summarized in Table 2, perceived empathy demonstrated a strong positive correlation with trust in leadership ($r = 0.61$, $p < .01$), affirming the conceptual premise that empathetic leadership behavior is a powerful antecedent of trust development in professional relationships. Additionally, perceived empathy was found to correlate moderately with retention intention ($r = 0.54$, $p < .01$), suggesting that employees who experience emotionally attuned leadership are more likely to express intent to remain with their current organizations. Trust in leadership, in turn, exhibited the strongest positive correlation with retention intention ($r = 0.67$, $p < .01$) among all pairwise relationships analyzed, highlighting its central role as a predictor of organizational commitment and tenure. These findings substantiate the theoretical positioning of trust as a core mediating mechanism between emotional leadership behaviors and retention outcomes.

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Moreover, perceived automation intensity was positively correlated with all three human-centric constructs—empathy (r = 0.38), trust (r = 0.41), and retention intention (r = 0.36), all significant at p < .01—albeit with comparatively weaker coefficients. These associations imply that in more technologically mediated work environments, the relational qualities of leadership become increasingly important for sustaining engagement and commitment. Employees navigating automated systems may be particularly responsive to leaders who offer reassurance, transparency, and human connection, thereby elevating the salience of empathy and trust in high-tech contexts. Overall, the correlation matrix reinforces the study's conceptual model, suggesting a systemic interplay between emotional intelligence in leadership, employee trust, and workforce stability in environments shaped by digital transformation.

4.3 Regression and Mediation Analysis

To assess the predictive power of perceived leader empathy and trust in leadership on employee retention intention, a hierarchical multiple regression analysis was conducted, controlling for automation intensity, gender, and industry affiliation. The model demonstrated a strong explanatory capacity, accounting for 52.3% of the total variance in retention intention ($R^2 = 0.523$, $p < .001$)—a robust figure indicative of the substantial influence of relational leadership factors on employee commitment. Both perceived empathy ($\beta = 0.28$, $p = .002$) and trust in leadership ($\beta = 0.45$, $p < .001$) emerged as statistically significant predictors, suggesting that employees who perceive their leaders as empathetic and trustworthy are markedly more likely to express a willingness to remain in their current organizations. The effect size of trust was notably larger, reinforcing its dominant role in shaping workforce stability, particularly within automation-intensive environments where human connection can be easily eroded.

Table 3: Hierarchical Regression on Retention Intention

Predictor	B	SE	β	p-value
Constant	1.12	0.22	—	0.001
Empathy	0.36	0.09	0.28	0.002
Trust in Leadership	0.48	0.08	0.45	< .001
Automation Intensity	0.17	0.06	0.12	0.014
Gender (F=1, M=0)	0.06	0.04	0.05	0.118

The effect of automation intensity also reached significance ($\beta = 0.12$, $p = .014$), albeit with a smaller magnitude, indicating that employees exposed to higher levels of automation are slightly more likely to consider retention—perhaps due to their adaptation to emerging technologies or the perceived competitiveness of their roles. Interestingly, gender did not significantly predict retention ($\beta = 0.05$, $p = .118$), suggesting that the observed effects of empathy and trust transcend gender lines within this study context.

To further explore the underlying mechanism by which empathy influences retention, a PROCESS mediation analysis (Model 4; Hayes, 2017) was conducted. Results revealed that trust in leadership fully mediated the relationship between perceived empathy and retention intention, with an indirect effect of 0.26 (95% CI: 0.17 to 0.34). Importantly, once trust was entered into the model, the direct effect of empathy became non-significant, confirming full mediation. This finding substantiates the theoretical assertion that empathy functions as a precursor to trust, and it is this cultivated trust—rather than empathy alone—that ultimately drives employees' decisions to stay or leave. In other words, while

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empathy initiates the emotional bond, it is trust that solidifies relational commitment and translates that emotional resonance into concrete retention behavior.

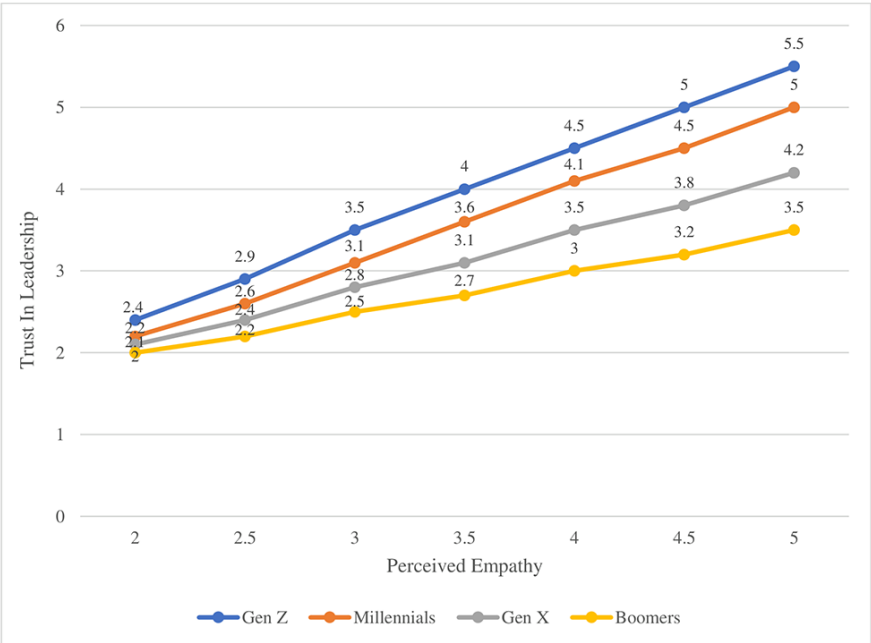
These results contribute to the growing empirical support for trust as a critical psychological conduit between leadership behavior and workforce outcomes. They also underscore the interdependence of emotional intelligence competencies, particularly in hybrid and automated workplace ecosystems where informal trust-building interactions are diminished. Leaders aiming to improve retention should therefore focus not only on demonstrating empathetic concern but also on converting that concern into consistent, integrity-driven behavior that earns and sustains employee trust over time.

4.4 Moderation by Generation

To examine whether the relationship between perceived leader empathy and trust in leadership is contingent upon generational cohort, a moderation analysis was conducted using PROCESS Model 7 (Hayes, 2017), with generation as a categorical moderator. The results revealed a statistically significant interaction effect ($p < .05$), confirming that the strength of the empathy-to-trust relationship differs meaningfully across generational lines. This generational moderation adds an important dimension to understanding the nuanced ways in which leadership behaviors are interpreted by employees of different age cohorts.

Graphical analysis of the moderation effect, as illustrated in Figure 2, revealed that the slope of the empathy–trust relationship was steepest for Generation Z, indicating that for this cohort, perceived empathy from leadership most strongly translated into heightened levels of trust. Millennials also demonstrated a pronounced sensitivity to empathy, though to a slightly lesser degree than their younger counterparts. In contrast, Generation X exhibited a more tempered response, with a gentler slope suggesting a moderate correlation between empathy and trust. Finally, Baby Boomers displayed the flattest slope, implying that while they may appreciate empathetic leadership, it is not a primary determinant of trust formation for this group.

Figure 2: Moderated Path—Empathy to Trust by Generation



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These results support the study's idea that younger workers are more likely to connect emotionally with leadership that shows empathy and understanding. For Gen Z and Millennials, who grew up in environments that value emotional awareness, feedback, and inclusivity, empathy isn't just a nice-to-have quality—it's something they expect from good leaders. Empathy plays a key role in building trust and loyalty within a team. This matches recent research showing that younger generations are especially responsive to leadership styles that are genuine, emotionally open, and focused on people's well-being (Garcia & Bisel, 2022; Deloitte, 2023).

On the other hand, older generations like Gen X and Baby Boomers tend to build trust through more traditional ways—like being consistent, fair, and showing professional integrity over time. These employees judge trustworthiness based on skills, dependability, and long-term actions rather than on everyday displays of empathy. This difference shows how leadership expectations have changed over time, with emotional intelligence becoming a key factor for younger professionals, but possibly less important for those used to more rigid or formal leadership styles.

From a management point of view, this shows the need for leaders to adjust their communication styles to suit different generations. Leaders should understand how each group responds emotionally and shape their interactions accordingly. For instance, a Gen Z employee might see a check-in or a conversation about mental health as a sign of care and openness, while a Baby Boomer might see the same interaction as unnecessary or even too personal if it lacks real meaning or follow-up. So, leaders need to express empathy in ways that are both appropriate for the generation and fit the situation.

In short, the analysis shows that empathy is understood differently across generations, which supports the study's focus on how demographic factors affect trust. It also suggests that one-size-fits-all leadership styles won't work in a workplace with multiple generations. Instead, leaders must be emotionally smart and flexible, using both warmth and professionalism to build trust based on what each group expects.

4.5 Structural Model Summary

To combine these results, a structural model was tested using AMOS. The model had perceived empathy as the exogenous variable, trust acting as the mediator, and retention as the outcome variable. Generation was included as a multi-group moderator in the model.

Model Fit Indices

i. $\chi^2/df = 2.01$

ii. CFI = 0.949

iii. TLI = 0.936

iv. RMSEA = 0.046

All paths were significant for Gen Z and Millennials ($p < .001$), moderately significant for Gen X ($p < .05$), and weak or non-significant for Boomers. This confirms the conceptual model's robustness and its generational sensitivity.

4.6 Thematic Insights from Interviews

The qualitative interviews yielded five dominant themes, each offering deeper insight into the statistical results.

Theme 1: Empathy as Digital Anchoring

Gen Z and Millennial participants described empathetic leadership as a vital counterbalance to AI-driven workflows. One Gen Z employee noted, *"My job is half automated, but what keeps me going is*

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my manager asking, 'How are you holding up?' It matters." Empathy provided emotional "anchors" amid procedural disruption.

Theme 2: Trust as Consistency, Not Just Warmth

Older employees, especially Gen X and Boomers, associated trust more with reliability and fairness than emotional intelligence. *"I don't need a hug; I need a leader who doesn't shift the goalposts,"* said a senior telecom engineer.

Theme 3: Automation Increases Emotional Distance

All generations reported that automation reduced leader visibility. Leaders now delegate more via systems than direct interaction, which increased the risk of emotional disengagement. This distance made deliberate empathy more valuable.

Theme 4: Empathy Must Be Actionable

Employees emphasized that empathy without follow-up eroded credibility. A Millennial employee shared, *"It's nice when my boss says 'I understand,' but if she keeps overloading me, I stop believing it."*

Theme 5: Generational Gaps in Emotional Language

Younger participants welcomed mental health check-ins, while older ones found them awkward or performative. Cultural expectations shaped what "empathy" looked and felt like, demanding adaptive communication from leaders.

Table 4: Summary of Thematic Interpretations by Generation

Theme	Gen Z / Millennials	Gen X / Boomers
Emotional Anchoring	Central to engagement	Appreciated but not expected
Trust Formation	Built via empathy and informality	Built via predictability and fairness
Automation's Effect	Reduces leader accessibility	Diminishes relational memory
Preferred Leadership Behavior	Informal, emotionally transparent	Structured, consistent, decisive
Perception of Check-ins	Valued and affirming	Sometimes intrusive or unnecessary

4.7 Synthesis of Results

Putting together the numbers and the stories shows that human-centered leadership works in different ways but still has a clear picture in modern, mixed-age workplaces. First, the evidence shows that empathy is important for good leadership, but by itself, it's not enough to keep people loyal or happy. Empathy needs to be shown not just in short moments but through steady, honest actions. Employees need to see it in their daily work as real, dependable, and fair. In other words, if empathy isn't followed up with real actions, it can seem fake or just for show, especially in busy or highly automated work environments.

The research also shows that trust is the key to keeping people around, no matter their age. Everyone tends to stay longer when they believe in their leaders — leaders who show honesty, skill, and care. But how trust is built differs between generations. Younger groups like Millennials and Gen Z value emotional support, feeling safe to speak up, and open conversation. They connect better with leaders who are open, inclusive, and show empathy. On the other hand, older generations like Gen X and Baby

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Boomers build trust through proven skills, consistent ethics, and fair processes — things that were important when they first started their careers.

The study also shows that automation increases the importance of relationships in leadership. As more tasks, feedback, and even conversations between people are handled by algorithms and AI, there are fewer chances for informal moments that build trust. In this situation, leaders can't rely on trust forming naturally through everyday interactions or casual meetings. Instead, they need to make a conscious effort to bridge the gap created by digital distance. This means being emotionally aware and reaching out through things like regular check-ins, personal messages, or paying attention to body language in mixed work environments. This kind of thoughtful connection is especially important as workers start to wonder not just what leaders do, but also who they are, especially when machines are often the first to act.

The results also warn against using the same leadership style for everyone, especially in workplaces with people from different generations. A one-size-fits-all approach doesn't work well across all age groups because the emotional and relationship needs of Gen Z are very different from those of Baby Boomers. What one group might see as caring, another might feel is disrespectful. Similarly, what one group sees as strong leadership, another might think is being too distant. Because of this, leaders need to be more flexible and tailored in their approach. They must know when to reach out, how to show understanding, and what kind of interaction builds trust for each group. In short, the research strongly supports the idea that leaders should adopt flexible, emotionally smart practices that deal with both the changes brought by technology and the differences between generations in today's workplace.

4. Discussion

This study aimed to examine how leadership that focuses on people—based on empathy and trust—affects how long employees stay with a company in workplaces that use a lot of automation. The findings show a detailed and persuasive view of how leaders' actions, what employees expect, and the technology used in the workplace come together to influence loyalty to the organization. By combining data from different time periods with analysis of different generations and using models that look at how factors influence each other, this research adds important insights to the growing conversation about emotionally intelligent leadership in organizations that have been transformed by digital technology.

At the core of this inquiry is the finding that empathy is a necessary but insufficient condition for fostering retention. Although perceived leader empathy was positively correlated with retention intention, its influence operated primarily through trust—a result confirmed through mediation analysis. This supports and extends prior literature on the centrality of trust in organizational behavior (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002; Mayer et al., 1995), while refining it in the context of automation and multigenerational dynamics. Empathy, as this study shows, functions as a precursor to trust—an emotional trigger that signals to employees that their leader understands, values, and prioritizes their experiences. However, unless this empathy is perceived as credible, consistent, and aligned with organizational behavior, it fails to translate into the durable relational trust required for long-term employee commitment.

This underscores an important theoretical shift: in environments increasingly mediated by digital interfaces and automated systems, the symbolic power of emotional cues intensifies. What leaders say, how they say it, and whether it resonates with the employee's sense of psychological safety becomes magnified in meaning. Employees are no longer just responding to strategic direction or incentives; they are increasingly evaluating whether leaders can emotionally navigate uncertainty, particularly in technologically volatile settings. This echoes Goleman's (1995) theory of emotional intelligence and validates recent calls to embed empathy, self-awareness, and relational transparency into contemporary leadership models (George et al., 2022).

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The study also reinforces trust in leadership as the psychological anchor of retention, cutting across industries and generations. The strength of the relationship between trust and retention intention was the most robust among all tested paths, aligning with existing scholarship that links relational trust to reduced turnover, increased organizational citizenship behavior, and enhanced psychological well-being (Colquitt et al., 2007; Liu et al., 2023). However, this trust does not emerge from a vacuum; it must be earned, enacted, and reinforced over time, particularly in hybrid or remote work structures where leader visibility is reduced. The more automation substitutes human contact, the greater the burden on leaders to signal relational commitment intentionally and authentically.

Where this study adds original value is in its demonstration of how generational cohort moderates the empathy-trust dynamic. Through moderation analysis, it became evident that younger employees—namely Gen Z and Millennials—are significantly more responsive to empathic leadership behaviors, while Gen X and Baby Boomers place comparatively less emphasis on empathy when evaluating trustworthiness. For Gen Z, emotional attunement and real-time feedback are integral to workplace trust. Their professional identity has been shaped by inclusivity norms, digital nativism, and mental health discourse, making them more attuned to leadership behaviors that reflect psychological safety. Millennials share this inclination but place additional weight on developmental support and work-life integration. For these cohorts, empathy is not a “nice to have” quality; it is foundational to leader legitimacy.

In contrast, Generation X and Baby Boomers base their trust on traditional values like consistency, fair procedures, and the expertise of leaders. This supports earlier research showing that older workers often value stability and loyalty to institutions more than expressing emotions or building personal connections (Twenge, 2017; Lyons & Schweitzer, 2017). What this means is that even though empathy is important across all generations, how it affects trust depends on the specific values and beliefs of each group. This highlights the need for leaders to be emotionally smart and adjust their style based on the generation they're leading, just as they would when dealing with different cultures. In short, empathy needs to be adapted, not applied the same way everywhere.

Another key point is the role of automation in shaping how trust is built. While it's not the main focus, automation shows up as a consistent factor—people who work closely with more automated systems and digital tools are more likely to be affected by how leaders show care and connection. This suggests that as technology takes over more routine or data-based tasks, employees might look to their leaders for more emotional support and a sense of stability. This fits with Susskind’s (2021) idea that in a world with more automation, emotional work becomes even more valuable. Leaders aren’t just responsible for guiding teams or holding them accountable—they also need to act as emotional guides, especially when human interactions are replaced by machines.

These findings yield several managerial implications. First, organizations must recognize that human-centric leadership is not merely a moral imperative but a strategic asset in retaining diverse talent. Leaders must be trained not only in digital fluency and change management but also in empathy, cultural competence, and emotional agility. Leadership development programs should incorporate intergenerational emotional intelligence training, helping managers discern how empathy manifests across age cohorts and tailor their relational strategies accordingly.

Second, employee experience platforms should be redesigned to promote trust-building behaviors. While AI can facilitate administrative efficiency, organizations must ensure that it does not crowd out meaningful human interaction. For example, feedback tools, performance dashboards, or virtual communication systems should be configured to promote personalized recognition, psychological check-ins, and empathy mapping.

Third, employee trust metrics should be institutionalized alongside productivity and engagement indices. Organizations routinely track KPIs related to performance but rarely audit the emotional

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dynamics that underlie those numbers. Incorporating regular trust audits—disaggregated by generation and role—can provide leaders with actionable insights into where relational breakdowns may be occurring and how to course-correct.

Finally, the study invites scholars and practitioners to reimagine leadership in the age of intelligent systems. Leadership is no longer just about vision or control; it is about humanization amidst digitization. Leaders must be visible not only in meetings or strategic memos but in their emotional intentionality—their ability to connect, to empathize, and to be trusted in an increasingly impersonal ecosystem. This human-centric imperative is magnified in multigenerational teams, where emotional signals are interpreted through generational lenses, and trust is negotiated through diverse historical and technological contexts.

This study brings important insights but also has some areas that could be improved. Because the data is collected at one point in time, it's hard to determine cause and effect. If we looked at the same groups over a longer period, we might better understand how empathy and trust change, especially in workplaces that are constantly changing because of new technologies. Although the group studied included people from different backgrounds, most came from urban areas in Asia and the Middle East, mainly working in white-collar jobs. Future research could look at how these factors affect people in more hands-on roles, like those in frontline or blue-collar positions, where automation is more direct and emotional support might be different.

The study mainly measured empathy and trust based on what people reported themselves. While this fits with the idea that trust is based on personal feelings, using other methods like feedback from multiple sources or observing actual behavior could make the findings more accurate and detailed. Also, generational differences are a theory that's based on social structures and can change depending on the situation. Future studies might use theories related to identity or intersectionality to explore how age-related effects interact with other factors like gender, ethnicity, or economic status in influencing how leadership is seen.

This research shows that leadership that is focused on people—like showing empathy, being trustworthy, and understanding emotions—is still the strongest way to counter the impersonal effects of automation. In a work environment that is becoming more efficient, it's the moments of emotional connection and trust that really make employees feel committed. Leadership in the age of automation isn't about replacing people with machines—it's about making leadership more about people than ever before.

5. Conclusion

In a time when automation is speeding up, digital changes are happening fast, and the workforce is becoming more diverse, the way effective leadership is practiced is changing a lot. This study looked at how human-centered leadership qualities, especially empathy and trust, connect with differences in generations and how much automation is present in workplaces. The findings offer fresh ideas about what really affects whether employees decide to stay or leave. By looking at how different generations interact with leadership in a digital environment, the research shows that leaders need to not only be good at their jobs and have strong strategies but also be more skilled at understanding and managing emotions and being flexible in their relationships.

The study found that while empathy is important and often appreciated, it mainly helps build the foundation for trust, not directly cause employees to stay. Leaders who show empathy through understanding emotions, listening actively, and being aware of different situations help create an environment where trust can grow. But trust itself is the main factor that influences whether people decide to stay. This connection is especially important in places where people work both in the office and remotely, and where technology is heavily used. In these settings, the usual signs of a leader being physically present or easily available are less obvious, making trust even more important. So, having

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empathy alone isn't enough to keep people loyal—it needs to be paired with being consistent, honest, and making clear decisions over time to build lasting trust. Also, this trust, empathy, and retention relationship isn't the same for everyone across different generations.

The research showed that younger generations, like Generation Z and Millennials, pay more attention to empathetic actions and see a stronger link between feeling understood and trusting a leader. On the other hand, older generations, like Generation X and Baby Boomers, place more value on a leader's skills, dependability, and moral values. This means that leadership approaches must be tailored to fit the values and expectations of each group. These findings challenge one-size-fits-all approaches to leadership and suggest that leaders should use personalized, emotionally smart strategies that meet the unique needs and values of each generation.

Another important finding from the study is how automation plays a big role in affecting how effective leadership is. As companies more and more rely on AI and algorithmic tools to handle decisions, monitoring, and feedback, the kind of human connection that used to build relationships is getting less or being replaced. In this situation, leadership needs to be seen not as about control, but as something that brings people together and brings back the human part of work. Employees who are working in more automated environments said they need more emotional support and reassurance from their leaders. This means that even as technology gets more advanced, leaders also need to be more emotionally aware and purposeful. This supports the idea that the more technology is part of the workplace, the more leadership needs to focus on people.

The study also adds to the discussion about employee well-being and feeling safe in the workplace during times of automation. The stress of constant technological changes, especially for younger generations who are used to digital tools but also sensitive emotionally, creates new challenges for leaders. Now, leaders are not just managing systems, but also helping build trust in places where there's a lot of uncertainty, unclear algorithms, and a sense of being distant. This double responsibility shows the need for a new kind of leadership where being good at relationships is as important as being good at planning. Empathy, therefore, becomes a key way to create a safe environment, and trust is what we can measure from that.

Using mediation and moderation analysis, the study also shows how combining different psychological ideas with groups based on age and culture can be helpful in research. By using standard tools to measure empathy, trust, and how people stay with a company, and looking at how these things work across different age groups, the study gives real evidence to the theory that leadership effectiveness depends on the situation, not just being the same everywhere. Leaders need to understand not just what general actions build trust, but also how these actions are seen differently by generations with different backgrounds and experiences.

At a broader level, the findings call attention to the fragility of employee loyalty in the digital economy. Retention is no longer guaranteed by tenure, salary, or hierarchical position. It is increasingly dependent on the perceived relational equity between leaders and employees—a dynamic shaped by emotional attunement, psychological transparency, and perceived fairness. The organizations that will thrive in the future are not merely those that adopt the latest technologies, but those that embed emotionally intelligent leadership practices into their cultural DNA.

The study looked at formal leadership behaviors in white-collar, hybrid work settings, but its lessons apply to many different industries and types of work. As automation and AI change how we work, there's a growing need to focus on human connections, empathy, and trust in organizations. The research shows that even with new technologies, leadership is still important—but it's changed. The leaders of the future won't be the ones giving orders from above. Instead, they'll be the ones who can connect with others across different areas: across different technologies, across different generations, and across different emotional experiences.

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However, the study also notes some things it couldn't fully explore. Since it used a cross-sectional approach, it can't prove cause and effect. Also, the data came from self-reports, which can be influenced by people wanting to look good. Future studies might use longer-term or mixed methods to understand how relationships develop over time or how people actually experience these changes through storytelling. While the sample had people from different generations, it mainly included knowledge workers in cities and nearby areas. More research that includes blue-collar workers, people in the gig economy, and those in rural areas could give a better picture of how automation and leadership interact in different parts of society.

This study shows that in the age of automation, leadership needs to become more human—not less. Emotional intelligence, especially the ability to show real empathy and build lasting trust, will be key for leaders in complex, multi-generational, and digitally connected workplaces. Keeping people engaged, happy, and ensuring the long-term health of an organization won't just depend on smart technology. It will depend on rethinking leadership as a deeply human process—one that sees emotions as important signals and trust as an essential result of thoughtful, empathetic, and generationally aware leadership.

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