Generation Y at Work: The Role of e-HRM in Building Positive Work Attitudes

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Abstract. *Gen-Yers are the new generation of employees; they are talented, self-starting and technology-oriented, but they are also controversial with respect to their employment drivers. Developing effective work arrangements for Gen-Yers is crucial for the future development and sustainability of firm competitive advantage. Adopting the Employee-Organization Relationship framework, we suggest that e-HRM systems facilitate work arrangements that produce positive outcomes; they signal and reinforce the organization's investment in the employee-organization relationship. In this vein, the paper aims to explore the possible strategic role of e-HRM systems in sustaining these relationships. Specifically, we focus on the relationship between e-HRM systems and Gen-Yer work attitudes such as affective commitment, perceived procedural and distributive justice, intent to quit, trust in HR departments and job satisfaction. Our broad survey provides valuable and at times unexpected results particularly for the new and thus far little-known Gen-Yers, serving as the basis for defining some useful guidelines to design strategic e-HR systems - not only for the new Y-Gen - to actually enhance the sustainability of organizational competitive advantage.*

Keywords: electronic-Human Resource Management (e-HRM); Employee-Organization Relationship (EOR); Y Generation; Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM); employee work attitude.

1 Introduction

Modern firms remain competitive if they are able to continually develop distinctive competencies [39], [89], [60], [25], maintaining their agility and efficiency [68]. Accordingly, firms invest in their human capital to generate new knowledge and skills and yet continually search for organizational solutions capable of addressing unpredictable changes. These dynamics have a substantial impact on the organizational structures and operating systems that influence working practices [65], [33], [34]. These new work arrangements have increasingly spread in recent years, affecting work attitude and performance [44].

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All these changes have deeply influenced employee-organization relationships, not only in a juridical way, but – even more significantly – from an organizational perspective [70], [12]. The new employees – and not only new organizations - have become more flexible, more mobile and more technology-oriented, building and choosing their own career paths [4], [45].

These factors have sparked an ongoing debate on how to sustain work relations in the changing socio-economic scenario. Great emphasis is placed on analysing the influence of diverse formal contracts, human resource practices or management styles in shaping the nature of the relationship. However, little attention has been paid to understanding the relevance of information and communication technology (ICT) as a work solution that could influence employee behaviour, especially of those particularly embedded in technological issues, such as the so-called Virtual or Y Gen [62]. From a Human Resource Management perspective, the ICT possibilities are endless: electronic-HRM (e-HRM) systems are a way of implementing HR strategy polices and practices in organizations through the direct support of web-technology-based channels [66].

Our paper aims to explore the possible strategic role of e-HRM systems in sustaining employee-organisation relationships, specifically considering a new group of young people in the work force [74], [62], [2]. They are talented, self-starting and especially technology-oriented, but also controversial with respect to the drivers of their work relationship outcomes [91].

Taking a broader look at the impact of e-HRM: how does it affect the nature and quality of employee performance and their attitudes towards the organization? From an employer perspective, does investing in e-HRM systems prove beneficial in terms of the critical and technology-embedded new work force?

The current study was designed to answer these questions. We collected data from a large sample of Y Generation employees. Our research set its sight on the role of ICT in managing the Gen-Yers relationship, analysing how these employees conceive the wide range of e-HRM systems and the consequences in shaping their work relationships [62], [2].

Our results are particularly relevant from the HRM perspective, since they prove that the e-HRM employment approach can be truly strategic.

2 Theoretical background

Various research streams describe the different employee-organisation relationship arrangements - such as flexible work solutions or management practices oriented to work-life balance - analyzing their effects on a variety of outcomes such as commitment and extra-role behaviours [58], [80], co-worker helping behaviour [8] and organizational performance [37]. Specifically, several studies rooted in transaction cost theory and RBV, focus on the effect of differentiating HR architecture on organizational performance [36]. Other studies, based on work-life balance literature, are more focused on understanding how new work solutions can influence job quality perceptions [32]. Still others, drawing on HR literature, highlight the effect on performance of HR practices orientated to promoting engagement and motivation through flexibility [22], [28].

Notwithstanding the above-mentioned theories, little attention has been devoted to providing a picture of the effects of e-HRM on the employee-organization relationship.

These effects seem particularly crucial and relevant for YGen employees described as technology-oriented [62]. However, the ongoing debate on the validity of the generational approach in explaining the differences in work attitudes does not consider differences arising from personal experiences, age, career or life-cycle stage [43].

Combining the employee-organization relationship framework with the e-HRM research stream allows us to understand the strategic role of e-HRM systems in effectively managing Gen-Yers work attitudes. They are described as resourceful, original and well-suited to innovation challenges; they are also the new Virtual Generation, always connected and having specific learning and relational styles. If these considerations are true, the development of new e-HRM solutions should help companies manage their new young talent.

In the following sections, we first present the concept of e-HRM, within the HRM framework; we then critically illustrate the principal traits and research evidence on the technologically embedded employee generation. Finally, we propose the adoption of the employee-organization relationship framework to better understand the role of e-HRM systems in shaping working relationships. Our assumption is that e-HRM systems produce positive effects on employee work attitudes - such as commitment, job satisfaction, perceived justice and intention to stay, which are crucial antecedents of employee task and contextual performance [27], [55], [31], [67].

2.1 HRM and e-HRM

HRM departments must become actual 'business partners' able to generate and sustain a company's strategic value according to the specific sources of competitive advantages [83], [36]: the ability to design and manage effective work arrangements and HR systems aligned with changing labour force needs, such as time and space flexibility, professionalization and boundary-less careers, is a source of strategic success for many modern organizations that compete in fast, global and continuously pioneering industries.

The rapid development of the Internet in recent years has propelled HR systems towards the new e-HRM approach [76]. New technological opportunities are a bridge that could help connect the two sides of the working relationship; for organizations, e-HRM solutions are a way to support organizational flexibility and knowledge-sharing, while for the new and 'technologically embedded employees', they represent a way of managing their working preferences [28].

E-HRM can be designed with three kinds of goals in mind: improving traditional HRM strategic orientation, improving efficiency and improving client service orientation, thus resulting in three different types of e-HRM: operational - concerning the administrative area (such as payrolls; on-line conference systems); relational - concerning the way to manage the relationship between the organization and employees (such as HR services through the intranet; online firm communities); and finally - transformational, towards the alignment of employees and organizational strategy (such as knowledge management systems; e-recruitment and online employer branding) [66].

Although this research field is still new and results are sometimes controversial and unconsolidated, academic interest in e-HRM has increased [71], [77], [7]. More research is needed to address different user-types and attitudes and to propose e-HRM design and implementation strategic processes. There is some evidence of diverse reactions to e-HRM, including perceptions of attraction, but no evidence focuses

specifically on particular kinds of users (such as the Y-Gen). Moreover, considering the evidence on strategic intent and the consequences of e-HRM on an operational level, efficiency is still controversial; relational and transformational consequences are almost entirely lacking in research findings and the strategic approach has not yet been fully analyzed and defined [76].

2.2 Y Gen

According to Generational Theory [73], YGen designates a cohort of people born between 1982 and 2003 [75]. There are various studies describing Gen-Yers from different perspectives: from a wider sociological point of view [91], [30] to more work-related and managerial approaches [2], [92], [81], [16].

Wilson & Gerber [91] identify seven Gen-Yer distinguishing traits. They are 'special' in terms of their parents' care; 'sheltered' – namely, wrapped in cotton wool; 'confident' – namely, optimistic about their future prospects; 'team-oriented' – i.e., skilled in their collaborative efforts; 'achieving' particularly in respect of their careers, without involvement in idealistic activities; 'pressured', especially by their workaholic parents and 'conventional', namely strongly attached to family even if born in a divorce culture.

Alsop [2], from a managerial perspective, describes Gen-Yers as having a strong sense of entitlement. Their work expectations include high pay, flexible work, fast-track careers and work-life balance. They are multitasking with low power distance attitudes.

Proserpio and Gioia [62], focusing more on the technological side, describe them as the Virtual Generation, familiar with virtual technologies and therefore characterized by virtual cognitive, learning and communication styles, requiring aligned pedagogical teaching and means of interaction: non-linear, autonomous, networked and conceiving learning as fun.

From a generational perspective, they seem to be different from the previous Generation X, but there are still numerous grey areas concerning their work expectations and careers drivers [16]. How to design effective organizational systems to manage them is still an enigma [14], [74], [19], [20].

There is also evidence that not all traits are the same within these generations. Giancola [24] suggests that it cannot be assumed that all members of any given generation will experience the same key socio-cultural or social-economic events in the same way, depending mainly on social class, gender, ethnicity or culture [18]. Nevertheless, some commonalties cross generations. Montana and Lenaghan [50] find that generations X and Y are identical in rating their top six work drivers. Cennamo and Gardner [10] demonstrate that the value of person-organization fit is always crucial to sustain job satisfaction and organizational commitment across all generations. A further methodological problem concerns determining the temporal extraction point at which to segregate the various generations [54].

2.3 Technology Readiness

Aware of the debate on the strength of the generational perspective to identify different groups within the workforce, according to the preceding literature, we presuppose the broad technological orientation of Gen-Yers, but do not take it for granted.

In general, people experience different psychological reactions when faced with technology-based systems [40]. Some feel comfortable, see advantages in using it and

therefore appreciate acting in a technology-injected environment. Others, to the contrary, feel uncomfortable and frustrated [57]. Negative feelings prevail, even if they are aware of the benefits of using ICT, inducing them to avoid it [46]. Concepts such as computer anxiety and technophobia were formed to describe the most acute situations [57]. Technology readiness (TR), defined as people's propensity to embrace and use new technologies to accomplish goals in their home life and at work [57], helps in understanding whether users will appreciate and adopt new technologies.

TR is an important driver of user satisfaction. Moreover, it positively influences favourable behavioural intentions regarding technologies. This means that the more satisfaction customers experience when using technology, the more likely they are to use it again and recommend it to others [41].

The concept of TR has been used in the marketing domain to study customer appreciation of Self Service Technologies. However, further application and greater generalization of the measure in the sphere of other technologies and user categories is required [57].

E-HRM is a recent technology and its role should be further discussed and demonstrated. Although implemented in firms, its positive effects and success also depend on user attitudes and intentions to make use of it. Users in this case are employees, a different category of stakeholder who can directly take advantage of this technology and even find it an interesting aspect of their relationship with their employer. In particular, Gen-Yers should feel comfortable, even relaxed, when interacting through technological systems.

For these reasons, it would appropriate to apply the construct to this different domain and further study the real technological orientation of Gen-Yers and the validity in assessing their appreciation and intention to use e-HRM systems.

2.4 The Employee-Organization Relationship and work attitudes: the research framework

Rousseau & Parks [65] describe employee-organization exchanges as promissory contracts, where commitment of future behaviour is offered in exchange for payment. According to this definition, the employee/employer relation is a social exchange where the two parties develop certain expectations from the contractual content and adapt their behaviours according to their perception of the reciprocal obligation [26], [38].

Research on labour contracts suggests that these obligations are idiosyncratically perceived and understood by individuals [64] confirming that employees look for reciprocity and that work attitude and performance are heavily influenced by their perceptions: the more the relationship is perceived as balanced, the more employees are disposed to contribute and perform, even beyond their called-for duties, in a framework described as a mutual investment approach [1], [79], [84], [12]. This kind of employment relationship is especially appropriate in the context of high environmental uncertainty and rapid change [15]. Analogous systems are so-called high involvement and high performance work systems [5], or Walton's commitment strategy [87], and Arthur's employee commitment system [3]. There are also several earlier conceptual equivalents of this approach, including, among others, Etzioni's normative involvement [21] and Ouchi's clan [56].

Our main hypothesis is that e-HRM systems facilitate employment solutions with a positive outcome on the employee's perception that the organization intends to invest

in, meeting their needs and reinforcing the described mutual investment employee-organization relationship [80]. In other words, e-HRM systems could have a positive impact on shaping and making employee-organization relationships both more explicit and valuable from the employee's point of view; this positive impact can be assessed by measuring the effects on employee working attitudes.

Work attitudes are the employee's perspectives on many aspects of their job, career and organization [67]. There is copious evidence that the mutual investment employment relationship positively influences employee work attitudes, defined as work commitment [90], [59], intention to stay [80], perception of fairness - both procedural and distributive justice [6], trust [49], [63] and job satisfaction [85]. Several studies have proven that positive work attitudes are significant antecedents of both task and contextual work performance [85], [35], [6], [67].

Considering the evidence presented, we postulate that e-HRM systems signal organizational investments in the employee-organization relationship and contribute to clarifying and making the content of the relationship more explicit, reducing possible misunderstandings and, in this way, aligning the employee's and the organization's interpretations: they are signals of respect and transparency.

E-HRM systems oblige organizations to pay 'extra' attention to both defining the criteria that guide the HRM system design (distributive justice) and communicating and structuring them into stable systems (procedural justice). Literature demonstrates that when HRM systems are considered transparent, respectful, explicit and based on stable and shared rules and procedures, they have a positive effect on perceived organizational justice [23], [13].

From these considerations, we assume that e-HRM systems have a positive effect on perceived procedural and distributive justice. For instance, job posting, online succession plan and e-career systems enable the organization to better define, share and clarify the opportunities offered and the underlying decision-making criteria.

From these preliminary considerations, we propose the following hypothesis:

> *Hypothesis 1: Employees who are highly embedded in technology (Gen-Yers) perceive higher distributive and procedural justice the higher the perceived level of organizational adoption of e-HRM systems is.*

Podsakoff and MacKenzie [59] suggest that creating an attractive work environment increases employee commitment and improves employee retention.. Affective commitment can be broadly defined as an attachment characterized by identification with, and involvement in, the target entity [47]; [48].

A presupposition of affective commitment to the organization is the perceived organizational support, which reflects the global beliefs that employees develop on the extent to which their organization values their contribution and cares about them [17]. According to organizational support theory, employees who feel supported by their organization will attempt to repay their debt through affective commitment [69].

In this perspective, e-HRM systems are a signal of organizational support. Especially for employees who are comfortable with technology, in a social exchange framework, e-HRM investments can be considered as an indicator of a long-term approach and attention to their needs. This could be the case of many e-HRM systems, from simple information tools (i.e. online HR information, newsletters) to more sophisticated

development tools (i.e. e-learning and knowledge management systems) and work-life balance arrangements (i.e. teleworking, online handling of bureaucratic matters).

According to the organization-employee relationship approach, we develop the following hypothesis.

> *Hypothesis 2: The affective commitment of employees who are highly embedded in technology (Gen-Yers) will be higher the higher the perceived level of organizational adoption of e-HRM systems is.*

Research frequently considers affective commitment together with turnover intent. There is, however, evidence that they are negatively correlated [86]:

> *Hypothesis 3: Intent to quit is lower for employees who are highly embedded in technology (Gen-Yers) the higher the perceived level of organizational adoption of e-HRM systems is.*

Job satisfaction is defined as a pleasurable or positive emotional state resulting from the appraisal of one's job or job experiences [42]. Steers and Porter [72] suggest that employees are satisfied when they find tasks rewarding and enjoyable and when they perceive working within a promising interpersonal environment.

Employees experiencing a pleasant overall working environment - also in terms of the availability of communications systems – together with support from the firm for their personal wellbeing and good relationships with colleagues, are more likely to be satisfied with their jobs [59], [85]. Positive relationships are significant antecedents of job satisfaction in highly competitive contemporary organizations that frequently downsize and change work processes [78].

In accordance with this research evidence, and considering technology-oriented employees, it is reasonable to suppose that e-HRM systems can contribute to job satisfaction in a number of ways. For employees who are particularly interested in new technological possibilities, e-HRM systems - especially the more advanced (i.e. on-line conferences, e-recruiting) - are considered in themselves a valuable reward; more generally, e-HRM systems can contribute to making work activities more enjoyable (i.e. online communities, e-learning and e-recruiting games and simulations) and to managing the work environment more effectively in terms of interpersonal relations (online firm forum, firm chat), work-life balance opportunities (i.e. mobile-work and distance work arrangements) and effective communication (i.e. intranet, bulletin board, newsletter).

Thus, the following hypothesis emerges.

> *Hypothesis 4: Job satisfaction will be higher for employees who are highly embedded in technology (Gen-Yers) the higher the perceived level of organizational adoption e-HRM systems is.*

Finally, e-HRM systems facilitate a more direct and clearly defined relationship between employees and the HR Department. These are direct communication tools, not supervisory-mediated, that enable employees to better understand the actual HR policies and philosophy. This is the case, for instance, in the development e-HRM systems such as online career management systems and web-based performance evaluation procedures.

Hypothesis 5: Trust in the HR Department will be higher for employees who are highly embedded in technology (Gen-Yers) the higher the perceived level of organizational adoption e-HRM systems is.

Organizational adoption of different e-HRM systems is not exhaustive in predicting the nature of the employee-organization relationship, since it does not reflect the employees' thoughts on perceived value. It could be assumed that the quantity of e-HRM systems is not the only dimension that should produce a positive impact on work attitudes. Consistency between the level of e-HRM perceived utility and their degree of adoption can also contribute to explaining employee attitudes: if perceived utility is high and organizations do not adopt some systems, employees can feel frustrated and disappointed. If perceived utility is lower than the level of adoption, we assume that a negative reaction could also be possible: people can feel overwhelmed and puzzled by technological over-service and they could think that the organization is investing in something that is not relevant to them.

We then assume that there is an interaction effect between the alignment of utility and the level of adoption of the e-HRM systems that impact on the work attitudes considered.

These assumptions are translated into the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 6: The positive relationships in hypotheses 1-5 will be stronger if the perceived utility and level of adoption of e-HRM systems are aligned.

This last hypothesis is relevant since it enables us to broaden our final discussion considering not only Gen-Yers, but also all employees who demonstrate different degrees of technological attitude and high-perceived utility of e-HRM. Moreover, it suggests the relevance of the perceived value and not only the quantity of e-practices within the employee-organization relationship.

3 Methods

A wide and structured survey was used to collect data on workers that are part of the Y Generation.

The sample was drawn from the alumni of two important northern Italian universities and four colleges. People were randomly selected and the sample was composed taking into consideration the proportion of the population of each institution. Only alumni born in or after 1981, with at least a three-month work contract, were eligible to participate. Self-employed and internship workers were excluded.

Data was collected via an e-mail survey (two rounds) sent to 1024 (first round) and 754 (second round) Gen-Yers, yielding a response rate of 21%, i.e. we have thus far obtained 373 valid responses[12]. The respondents included in our analysis fell into four occupational categories and work in ten different industries. All enterprises have over 100 employees, since otherwise their HR systems would not be adequately developed. 12% of the enterprises included have over 500 employees. The average age of all respondents is 25.8 years; 57% are men.

[12] The sample is not yet complete - respondent are still sending their questionnaires back. Considering the actual redemption rate, and to enlarge our sample, we decided to extend the deadline to the 31st of March.

3.1 Measures

To test our hypotheses we designed a four-section questionnaire: perceived adoption and utility of various e-HRM systems; level of technological familiarity; employee work attitudes - job satisfaction, affective commitment, trust in the HR Department, intent to quit; perceived justice; information on personal job conditions and the enterprise.

E-HRM adoption and utility

The level of adoption and perceived utility of e-HRM systems was measured using a broad list of these systems and practices (65 items) developed from the literature review and validated through several in-depth interviews with five HR managers of large companies in the ICT industry noted for having advanced HR practices and technologically based working solutions.

The list was repeated twice. The first time, respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which e-HRM systems are implemented in their firm and actually used by employees. Respondents were provided with a seven-point Likert-type scale, ranging from "not adopted" to "habitually used by all employees". The second time, the focus was on the perceived utility of these systems, regardless of their implementation in the company. In this case, the seven-point Likert-type scale varied from "unknown" to "very desired". We collected information on the employees' work environment with respect to e-HRM adoption, and, on the other hand, employees' overall knowledge of, and positive response to, these systems.

The various e-HRM systems considered were the following - for each system several items were considered:[13] teleworking, online conferences, intranet with generic HR information, online information about health, safety and security, online management of work-time, online staffing plans, HR-practice online help; online training; e-recruiting and recruiting through social networks, online succession planning, online climate surveys, knowledge management systems; online payroll, online career systems, online meeting and event management, job posting, electronic organizer system, online parking management, online firm communities, online company bulletin board, forum, chat, online personal profile management system, online handling of bureaucratic matters, web-based performance record and employee potential evaluation systems, newsletter.

Technological familiarity

To measure the extent to which people feel comfortable with technology and what their individual feelings are when faced with technology-based systems, we used the Technology Readiness Index (TRI) [57].

The TRI consists of a 36-item scale based on four dimensions: Optimism (a positive view of technology and a belief that it offers people increased control, flexibility and efficiency); Innovativeness (a tendency to be technologically pioneering); Discomfort (a perceived lack of control over technology and a feeling of being overwhelmed by it) and Insecurity (distrust of technology and scepticism on its ability to work properly). Of these, optimism and innovativeness are the positive drivers of TR; they encourage users

[13] At this preliminary stage, we decided to consider all the e-HRM practices that emerged during our analysis (literature review and field interviews).

to use technological tools and to have a positive attitude towards technology. Discomfort and insecurity are the negative attitudes; they make users reluctant [41].

Survey participants responded to a seven-point Likert scale anchored at ‘‘strongly agree’’ (7) and ‘‘strongly disagree’’ (1). Scores related to the discomfort and insecurity dimensions were then reversed. From the preliminary analysis (100 records), the internal consistency was adequate (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.83$).

Employee work attitudes

Work attitudes were assessed with a multi-dimensional measure. The first dimension considered employee commitment. The measure was comprised of 11 items adapted from Mowday and colleagues’ [52] OCQ (items 1-8) and from Cook & Wall’s [11] commitment scale (items 9-11). A sample item is, “I am willing to put in a great deal of effort beyond that normally expected in order to help this organization be successful”. From the preliminary analysis the internal consistency was adequate (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.72$).

A second multi-dimensional component was how employees feel they are treated at work and the following dimensions were measured: procedural and distributive justice. Procedural justice was assessed with a nine-item scale adapted from Moorman [51], distributive justice was measured with six items from Price & Mueller [61] covering typical employee reward motives: responsibilities, training, experience, effort, performance, stress and strain. From the preliminary analysis the internal consistency was adequate (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.76$ for procedural justice and 0.71 for distributive justice).

Trust in the HR department was assessed with a seven-item measure adapted from various contributions. Items 1, 2, 3 were taken from Cook & Wall [11], items 4, 5, 6 were adapted from Butler’s Trust Inventory Scale [9] and item 7 was reversed from Cook & Wall [11]. This construct was developed to assess feelings and opinions that YGen employees have towards HR department managers. From the preliminary analysis the internal consistency was adequate (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.78$).

Intent to quit was measured with an item taken from Muchinsky & Tuttle [53]. The item is, “What are your plans for staying with this organization?” Respondents were given a four-point scale where 1= I intend to stay until I retire, 2= I will leave only if an exceptional opportunity turns up, 3= I will leave if something betters turns up, and 4= I intend to leave as soon as possible.

The last dimension considered was job satisfaction, assessed with a seven-item measure derived from Van de Ven & Ferry [83]. Items included, “how satisfied are you with the friendliness and cooperativeness of your *co-workers*?” A 1 to 7 scale was used, where 1 = very unsatisfied, and 7 = very satisfied. From the preliminary analysis the internal consistency was adequate (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.70$).

Control variables

Several additional variables were controlled in order to exclude alternative explanations for our findings. Gender, tenure, department, job title, age and number of employees were considered since they could plausibly influence feelings and experiences about technology and consequently the appreciation of e-HRM systems in managing the work relationship.

3.2 Analysis

At this stage, we analysed 100 records in a preliminary test with two objectives: first, to preliminary verify our hypotheses and, second, to find new suggestions and ways to proceed with the data analysis. The actual findings are encouraging.

We performed an exploratory factor analysis of employee work attitudes and TR Index items (four components). The preliminary analysis confirms the consistency of the measures as stated.

We also performed some descriptive analyses to obtain evidence on the mean and standard deviations of our variables, which enabled us to compare our statistics with previous studies (especially considering the TR Index) (Table 1).

	Employees	Tenure	AGE	TR Index	TR Discomfort (reverse)	TR Innovation	TR Insecurity (reverse)	TR Optimism
N	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Mean	689.3500	3.2000	24.9000	3.5149	4.1710	4.0429	4.6733	4.8611
SD.	1397.38491	1.85320	2.77616	.56304	.58019	.91021	.91935	.72893

Table 1. The analysed sample

To test our hypotheses we performed both correlation and regression analyses with work attitudes as dependent variables (see Appendix).

As reported in the following section, the first findings seem relevant and promising, but the robustness of the model has to be consolidated considering all respondents.

4 Preliminary results

Even in view of the preliminary sample, the analyses seem to confirm part of our hypotheses and suggest some outcomes and future directions to develop the study.

4.1 Are Gen-Yers technological ready?

The analysis shows seemingly average TR Index mean and standard deviations for Gen-Yers (compared with the previously cited research evidence [40]). TR Optimism and Innovativeness are particularly high although standard deviations are also high. Insecurity is even higher, that is to say, it is not true that the Y Generation is highly (on average) and uniformly technology-oriented. Moreover, at this preliminary stage, the TR Index does not seem to be strongly correlated with other variables (see Appendix 1).

These results suggest that there is not only one best way to manage YGen employees, considering their technological attitude: they are optimistic, but they also feel insecure when dealing with technology.

4.2 Are e-HRM systems adopted and useful?

A somewhat unexpected finding was the partial misalignment between perceived e-HRM system adoption and utility. The utility is on average perceived as higher than adoption. Moreover, considering these two dimensions, all four combinations are possible and the mean differences are almost significant.

High levels of both perceived utility and adoption of e-HRM systems were found for: HR intranet arrangement (mean 4.12 adop.; 4.64 utility), on-line payroll (mean 5.33 adop.; 5.35 utility), online performance evaluation (mean 4.56 adop.; 4.57 utility), job posting (mean 4.55 adop.; 4.98 utility), company bulletin (mean 4.78 adop.; 4.74 utility), online working time management (mean 4.59 adop.; 4.99 utility). High levels of adoption and low perceived utility are for online personal profile management systems (mean 4.88 adop.; 3.66 utility), and online staffing plans (mean 4.64 adop.; 3.2 utility). Low levels of both adoption and perceived utility were found for mobile work arrangements (mean 2.29 adop.; 2.62 utility), chat (mean 2.72 adop.; 3.21 utility), and online succession plan systems (mean 3.21 adop.; 3.4 utility). Finally, high perceived utility and relatively low adoption were found for web-based health & wellness programmes (mean 4.34 adop.; 5.6 utility), online surveys (mean 3.75 adop.; 4.58 utility), company forum (mean 2.7 adop.; 3.85 utility), e-recruitment systems (mean 3.09 adop.; 4.74 utility), e-learning (mean 3.82 adop.; 5.03 utility), HR online help (mean 3.17 adop.; 4.38 utility), knowledge management systems (mean 2.91 adop.; 4.20 utility), online bureaucratic matters (mean 3.83 adop.; 5.2 utility), and online company communities (mean 2.56 adop.; 4.04 utility).

At this preliminary stage, it is interesting to note that e-HRM systems on average show a high degree of utility (mean = 4.41; SD = 0.8). Even the adoption degree, although lower, is quite high (mean = 3.79; SD = 0.97). The most evident misalignments are work-life balance and development systems and the most aligned are operational and mainly informative (one-way) systems.

4.3 Do e-HRM systems influence employee work attitudes?

This third section of findings concerns the hypotheses tests. Part of the hypotheses are e verified, but with some annotations.

We can confirm the general positive relevance of the adoption of e-HRM systems in influencing some of the work attitudes considered. Some other interesting tentative results are presented, considering not only the level of e-HRM systems adoption, but also their perceived utility.

E-HRM and justice (Hyp. 1). The hypothesis is partially confirmed by the regression analysis. The relation is positive and significant ($\beta = 0.277$; $R^2 = 0.8$; sig. 0.001) with reference to the procedural justice. The model improves when including TR optimism ($\beta = 0.249$; $R^2 = 0.138$; sig. 0,000).

The relation between e-HRM adoption and distributive justice is not confirmed.

E-HRM, affective commitment and intent to quit (Hyp. 2 and 3). The hypotheses are preliminarily not confirmed by the regression analysis. However, significant correlations were found between the level of adoption of specific e-HRM tools and commitment, which is negatively correlated with the adoption of online recruitment systems (-0.302) as well as Web communities (-0.278). These results suggest the importance of further analysis with a larger sample.

Intention to quit instead is negatively correlated with the alignment between adoption and perceived utility of e-HRM (-0.263).

E-HRM and trust in the HR Department (Hyp. 4). The results of the regression analysis confirmed that the adoption of e-HRM positively influences trust in the HR department ($\beta = 0.4$; $R^2 = 0.16$; sig. 0,000).

Correlations are significantly high with two groups of e-HRM tools, specifically:

- systems that aim at reinforcing and making the relationship between the HR department and employees more direct, i.e. online surveys to measure the degree of employee satisfaction or to make relevant decisions, tools that allow self-managing employee personal profiles, e-learning and training management systems, online help with HR practices, newsletter.
- tools useful to schedule and settle employee bureaucratic and job activities, i.e. electronic organizer and calendar sharing systems, tools used to plan and manage online meetings and events, online forums and tools to manage bureaucratic matters.

E-HRM and job satisfaction (Hyp. 5). The hypothesis is preliminarily not confirmed by the regression analysis. Moreover the results of the correlation analysis evidence that a strong positive and significant relationship exists between job satisfaction on the one side and trust (0.416) and distributive justice (0.645) on the other, with a significant negative relationship between job satisfaction and intention to quit (-0.315). This seems to confirm the theoretical meaning of job satisfaction, i.e. the fact that job satisfaction is a comprehensive concept of the work attitudes previously considered. For these reasons, we decided to analyse this construct further within our research framework.

4.4 Is alignment between e-HRM systems adoption and utility relevant?

Alignment between the level of adoption and the level of perceived utility of e-HRM systems seems to improve the impact of e-HRM on work attitudes (considered the absolute value). A misalignment means that e-HRM system adoption is lower or higher than the perceived need for them; from the employee's point of view, it seems to be a kind of HR Department 'mis-service'.

The preliminary correlation analysis points to a significant relationship between e-HRM practice alignment and intent to quit (negative) and distributive justice (positive) (see Appendix). These results are also confirmed by the regression analysis considering the two aforementioned attitudes as dependent variables (intent to quit as dependent variable: $\beta = 0.26$; $R^2 = 0.07$; sig. 0.009; distributive justice as dependent variable: $\beta = 0.29$; $R^2 = 0.08$; sig. 0.004).

Regression significance is also higher for trust in the HR department when considering alignment (β for alignment = 0,332; $R^2 = 0.23$; sig. 0.000).

Finally, in a preliminary test we also decided to investigate the interaction effect of the perceived e-HRM alignment and level of adoption; the correlation analysis suggests that there is a significant 'combination effect'. These results are confirmed by the regression analysis: for distributive justice $\beta = 0.335$; $R^2 = 0.112$; sig. 0.001; for affective commitment $\beta = 0.25$; $R^2 = 0.06$; sig. 0.012.

5 Discussion

Our research aims to explore the role of e-HRM systems in shaping the employee-organisation relationships of the new workforce of young people known as Generation Y. In particular, we investigate if and eventually what kind of e-HRM systems positively influence the work attitudes and behaviours of these new employees and thus obtaining better performance.

In our preliminary study we first found that not all our pilot sample employees are endowed with high technological readiness, as the literature on Gen-Yers assumes; but interestingly they are on average more technologically optimistic (although more discomforted!) than other employees in previous studies.

This first consideration has both theoretical and managerial implications.

From a theoretical perspective, the results contribute to the debate on the validity of the generational approach. The duality described needs to be better analysed, also in combination with the perceived utility and adoption of e-HRM systems, to try to understand if there are some generational technological traits, or if life-cycle and previous personal experiences are prevalent.

From a managerial perspective, the data shows that there is not one single way to manage new talent, differing in terms of technological orientation and lower sensitivity.

Considering the adoption level of e-HRM systems, our study confirms that this is not homogenously widespread: adoption of the operational systems and one-way informative e-practices is perceived as relatively high but remains relatively low for many two-way e-practices (i.e. e-recruitment, company chat and communities, knowledge management systems). Moreover, our data also demonstrates a misalignment between adoption and the perceived utility of e-HRM practices. On average, higher adoption is requested: this is especially true of all e-HRM systems that sustain work-life balance and development systems; the request is lower for operational systems and an over-service is at times perceived (i.e. online personal profile).

From a theoretical point of view, this suggests the validity of e-HRM classifications from a company perspective [66], but also the need for more detailed studies with a classification from the employee's perspective, perhaps based on 'hygienic' and 'motivational' factors [29].

From a managerial point of view, the results suggest that these new employees are ready for a further technological leap: they request more 'interactive' e-HRM systems, able to satisfy more sophisticated employee needs such as development and wellbeing.

Considering the relationship between e-HRM systems and work attitudes, our results confirm that these generally have a significative impact. This impact in some cases is related to adoption quantity and in other cases to perceived effectiveness with respect to employee needs (alignment).

From a theoretical perspective, according to the E-O Relationship framework, the results suggest that the quantity of e-HRM significantly improves intelligibility of the working relationship (considering its impact on trust and procedural justice); e-HRM perceived utility (in combination with quantity) seems to signal the organization's consideration and concern towards its employees (in terms of the impact on commitment, distributive justice and intent to quit).

From a more practical perspective these results suggest that organizations have to increase their e-HRM investments, but they also have to communicate and introduce them better in order to be consistent not only with the technological optimism of the new employees but also with their technological discomfort.

6 Limits and forthcoming steps

The main limitation of this study is the sample size: only a preliminary analysis has thus far been performed. The next step is the analysis of the entire sample data.

Useful suggestions could also come from closer attention to the combinative approach, since we assume that there are no single types of e-HRM systems to implement and the degree of technology readiness is not entirely good or poor, but there is a variety of possible positive organizational combinations (considering for example desired and implemented e-HRM, degree of technology readiness and eventually significant control variables concurrently). Clusters of users could be formed based on different criteria: i.e. types of e-HRM systems actually adopted and desired, technological readiness and desired e-HRM or e-HRM and control variables that eventually demonstrate a positive influence on work attitudes.

The research could also evolve in a different direction, considering the type of e-HRM endowment that can better support the HR department in performing its activities along with the alternative roles it can carry out, such as, for example, in the Ulrich framework [82]. The assumption is that different combinations of e-HRM systems can better suit the needs of the different aims of HR departments.

Finally, the research framework could also be adopted to study the influence of e-HRM on the work attitudes of all employees (also considering sub groups as a control mechanism), and this would become more relevant especially if e-HRM carries on gaining importance in the ICT endowment of all firms.

Our article would serve as a prelude to the growing body of theory and research seeking to explain the emergence and existence of the e-HRM challenge in shaping the employee-organization relationship.

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Appendix 1. Correlation table

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17
1. TR Index																	
2. TR Discomfort	-.644(**)																
	.000																
3. TR Innovativ.	.745(**)	-.172															
	.000	.088															
4. TR Insecurity	-.675(**)	.568(**)	-.115														
	.000	.000	.255														
5. TR Optimism	.796(**)	-.261(**)	.772(**)	-.227(*)													
	.000	.009	.000	.023													
6. N. of Empl.	-.055	.008	-.039	-.074	-.209(*)												
	.584	.937	.703	.466	.036												
7. Department	.003	.150	.102	.014	.020	.095											
	.974	.139	.313	.893	.845	.350											
8. Work tenure	-.017	.002	-.025	.093	.096	.026	-.029										
	.864	.987	.806	.359	.344	.798	.773										
9. Job title	-.095	-.056	-.085	.112	-.091	.094	.056	-.108									
	.346	.580	.400	.266	.369	.350	.579	.285									
10. Alignment	-.014	.073	-.029	-.056	-.018	.011	.098	-.191	-.049								
	.894	.469	.776	.580	.859	.910	.336	.057	.629								
11. E-HRM utility	.034	-.088	-.041	-.018	.065	.096	.110	-.038	-.029	.320(**)							
	.735	.383	.684	.862	.523	.343	.278	.707	.776	.001							
12.E-HRM adopt.	.045	-.184	-.075	-.005	.080	.063	.006	.183	-.021	-.535(**)	.270(**)						
	.655	.067	.461	.958	.431	.532	.954	.068	.838	.000	.007						
13.Commitment (affect.)	-.089	.279(**)	-.068	-.054	-.036	.008	.088	-.067	-.238(*)	.201(*)	.022	.039					
	.378	.005	.501	.592	.720	.940	.384	.509	.017	.045	.830	.701					
14.Proced. Just.	.191	-.053	.086	-.131	.278(**)	.051	.018	.112	-.203(*)	-.041	-.025	.273(**)	.504(**)				
	.057	.604	.397	.195	.005	.615	.862	.268	.042	.686	.803	.006	.000				
15. Distrib. Justice	-.071	.381(**)	-.004	.034	.132	-.035	.094	-.097	-.080	.276(**)	.026	.005	.590(**)	.487(**)			
	.482	.000	.965	.739	.191	.729	.357	.335	.431	.005	.795	.964	.000	.000			
16.Trust in HR	.127	-.042	.111	-.003	.218(*)	-.078	.068	-.074	-.107	.035	.109	.393(**)	.366(**)	.574(**)	.432(**)		
	.208	.681	.273	.977	.029	.442	.506	.462	.290	.732	.279	.000	.000	.000	.000		
17.Intent to quit	.056	.008	.092	-.031	.026	.008	.001	-.096	-.170	.263(**)	.335(**)	-.074	-.163	-.249(*)	-.262(**)	-.114	
	.580	.935	.365	.757	.797	.938	.995	.344	.091	.008	.001	.464	.104	.012	.008	.258	
18.Satisfaction	-.072	.322(**)	.077	.097	.062	.059	.137	-.115	-.084	.132	-.176	.057	.586(**)	.322(**)	.645(**)	.416(**)	-.315(**)
	.479	.001	.448	.335	.540	.559	.177	.256	.408	.190	.079	.572	.000	.001	.000	.000	.001

Note: (**) = Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed); (*) = Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Appendix 2. Regression analysis

Dependent Variable: TRUST

Model		Non-standardized coefficients	Standardized coefficients	t	Sig.	
		B	Std. error	Beta	B	Std. error
1	(Constant)	3.267	.378		8.648	.000
	E-HRM Adoption	.405	.094	.400	4.302	.000

Dependent Variable: TRUST

Model		Non-standardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. error	Beta	B	Std. error
1	(Constant)	3.267	.378		8.648	.000
	E-HRM Adoption	.405	.094	.400	4.302	.000
2	(Constant)	2.219	.492		4.513	.000
	E-HRM Adoption	.585	.107	.578	5.482	.000
	Alignment	.417	.132	.332	3.149	.002

Dependent Variable: PROCEDURAL JUSTICE

Model		Non-standardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. error	Beta	B	Std. error
1	(Constant)	4.140	.319		12.963	.000
	E-HRM Adoption	.226	.080	.277	2.835	.006
2	(Constant)	2.843	.585		4.857	.000
	E-HRM Adoption	.208	.078	.255	2.683	.009
	TR Optimism	.281	.108	.249	2.614	.010

Dependent Variable: DISTRIBUTIVE JUSTICE

Model		Non-standardized coefficients	Standardized coefficients			
		B	Std. error	Beta	t	Sig.
1	(Constant)	5.054	.082		61.409	.000
	Combination align-ment*adoption	.290	.083	.335	3.497	.001

Dependent Variable: AFFECTIVE COMMITMENT

Model		Non-standardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. error	Beta	B	Std. error
1	(Constant)	5.350	.087		61.260	.000
	Combination align-ment*adoption	.224	.088	.250	2.546	.012

Dependent Variable: INTENT TO QUIT

Model		Non-standardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. error	Beta	B	Std. error
1	(Constant)	2.730	.108		25.275	.000
	Alignment	.249	.093	.263	2.684	.009

Dependent Variable: DISTRIBUTIVE JUSTICE

Model		Non-standardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. error	Beta	B	Std. error
1	(Constant)	4.791	.121		39.576	.000
	Alignment	.307	.104	.288	2.962	.004