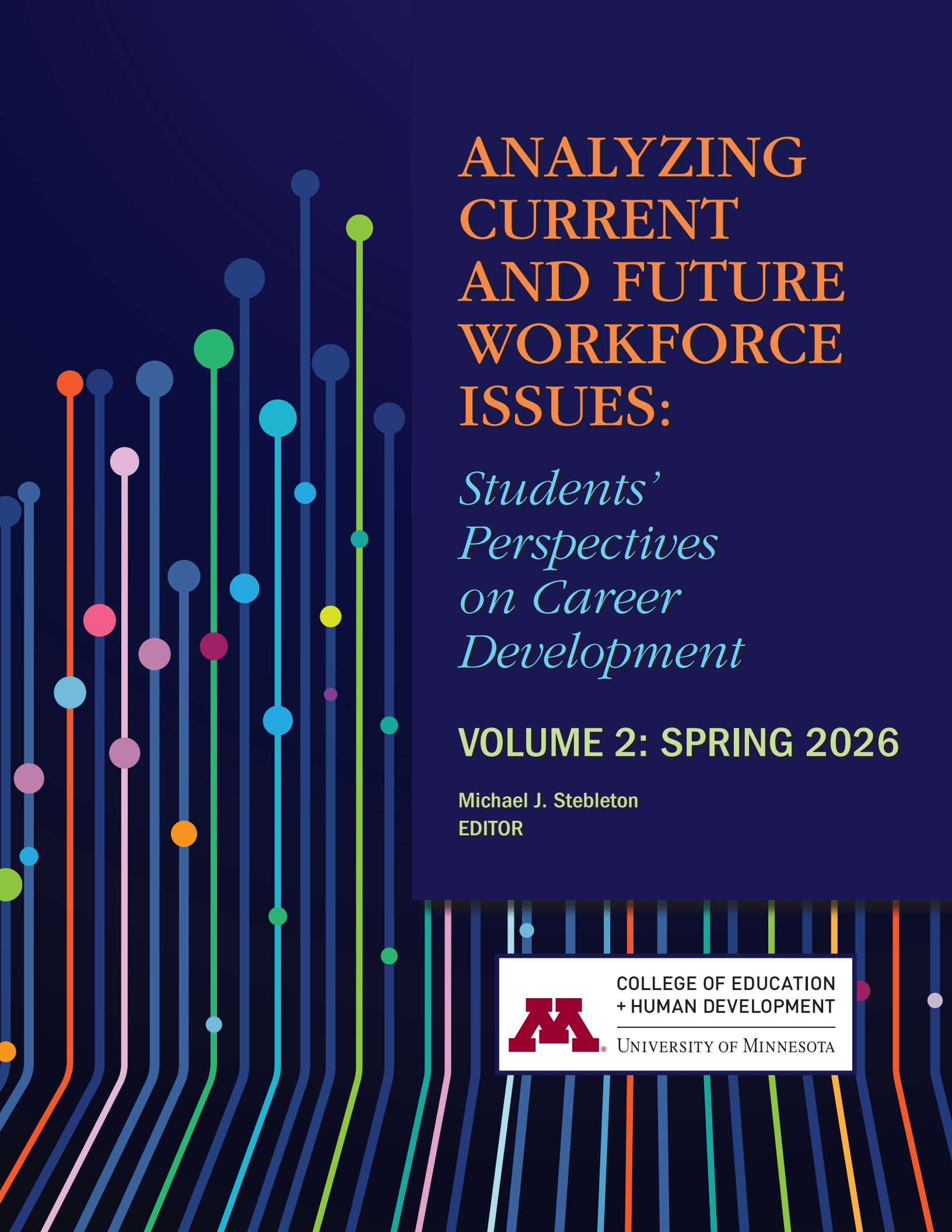




ANALYZING CURRENT AND FUTURE WORKFORCE ISSUES:

*Students'
Perspectives
on Career
Development*

VOLUME 2: SPRING 2026

Michael J. Stebleton
EDITOR



COLLEGE OF EDUCATION
+ HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

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PREFACE

CAREER LONGEVITY: PREPARING FOR MORE CAREER SHOCKS AND SQUIGGLY TRAJECTORIES

Michael J. Stebleton

In the first volume of the monograph, *Analyzing Current and Future Workforce Issues*, I stated that there is a need for engaging in more career conversations, for students, clients, and career development educators (Stebleton, 2025). I remain steadfast in my claim that the future of work will continue to shift significantly. For example, the average 5-year-old may live to be over 100 years old. Tomorrow's graduates will have between 20-30 different jobs across multiple industries (McGowan & Shipley, 2020). Career longevity, in this emerging longevity economy (Scott, 2021), will become both an opportunity and challenge with tomorrow's graduates living and working longer, perhaps 70-plus years across one's lifespan (Beagley et al., 2024). Career development educators, within higher education and other contexts, play important roles as they support both new and more experienced workers, especially around issues of purpose and meaning (Kantor, 2026; Rath, 2026).

How individuals envision and experience a new work-life landscape, filled with transitions, will be altered significantly in the coming years (Carstensen, 2022). Life-career will take on a more integrated approach, with many workers taking on extended non-paid roles, such as caregiving tasks (Hansen, 2011). Overall, we can continue to expect more change and transition as life-career trajectories become "squigglier" and holistic rather than linear (Tupper & Ellis, 2022). Trajectories are often punctuated by frequent career shocks and jolts, and the chapters included in this monograph reflect these significant changes. Committing to engagement in regular career conversations

is one way that the career development field can prepare for these fast-paced transitions that impact both individuals and organizations (Stebleton & Ho, 2023).

Career Shocks, Jolts, and Squiggly Pathways:

In addition to longer life-career chapters, students and educators will need to prepare for more transitions in their lives. Although many younger workers tend to crave a sense of security and balance in their work lives, there is reason to believe that workers will need to continue to be mobile and be prepared for ongoing change (Rattanaburi et al., 2026). Some of these transitions will be anticipated and others will not be expected. Akkermans and colleagues (2021) referred to these transitions and changes as career shocks. Akkermans and Donald (2026) defined career shocks as "a disruptive event that triggers deliberate reflection about one's career and may, though not always, lead to career change" (p. 1).

Depending on the context, career shocks can be perceived as positive or negative. For most of us, Covid-19 was an unanticipated career shock that altered our life-career in unique ways. Other examples of career shocks could occur at individual and organizational levels. At the organizational level, shocks might include job cuts due to artificial intelligence (AI) and related technologies, re-structuring, expanding to new markets, or abrupt closures that eliminate most if not all positions. Individual shocks might include promotion, death of a loved one, divorce, empty nest transitions, and illness. In most situations, there is transition that results and support is often needed. On a

personal note, having our first-born go off to college recently was more of a life-career shock than we anticipated; it was a shift in family dynamics that was mostly positive, yet involved time to adjust to new circumstances.

Anthony Klotz (2026) described a similar concept called jolts. Klotz is frequently recognized as the scholar who coined the term, “The Great Resignation” at the start of the pandemic in 2020. According to Klotz, the big jolt was the global pandemic. He explores jolts within the context of deciding to stay or leave a particular job or organization. Jolts are like shocks in that they are not necessarily negative. Klotz explained:

Jolts aren’t good or bad. They can be treasures, spurring us to make career changes that place us on the path to the good life. Or they can lead us astray and cause us to make decisions that harm our careers and our happiness. Like quitting when we should have stayed. Or staying when we should leap (p. 6)

I share the work of career shocks and jolts in this introduction for two primary reasons: 1) Students, clients, and educators will be dealing with ongoing change (both anticipated and unanticipated) regularly throughout their lives; 2) The contributions and issues raised by students in the monograph relate directly or often indirectly to satisfaction with work – and their experiences in the workplace (e.g., lack of support from a supervisor, feeling marginalized based on one’s identity, issues of job engagement, and the impact of AI on entry-level workers, among others). Career development practitioners occupy important roles to support their clients and students through these transitions, while also being mindful that they are managing their own life-career transitions.

Some career educators, including me, like to use career metaphors to better conceptualize career decision-making and movement (Inkson, 2007). Career pathways are no longer like a train, starting at one station and getting off at the end; rather they are often messy and are more likely to resemble an off-road adventure or whitewater excursion (Tupper & Ellis, 2022). Donald (2022) introduced the weather career metaphor (WCM), and I believe the conditions

that he outlined in WCM make sense for the changes and transitions that lie ahead.

Several of the ten weather conditions he describes include sun (engagement), fog (uncertainty), and rainbows and tornadoes (positive and negative outcomes, respectively, of career shocks as described previously). Like Minnesota winter and spring seasons, weather patterns can be unpredictable—and being prepared for ongoing change is an apt recommendation.

It is my contention that all of us need to be more mindful of these transitions and changes in the workplace and how these factors will influence both individuals and organizations. Furthermore, educators need to hold regular life-career conversations with students and each other. As I noted in the first edition of this monograph, “for career development educators, the fact that the way employees currently work has changed over recent years is not entirely a novel concept. That said, new students of career development and theory are learning how to best prepare for these changes” (Stebbleton, 2025, p. vii).

Purpose and Overview

After some reflection after the first volume was published in the spring semester of 2025, I decided to reengage with the project again in spring 2026 with 16 students who enrolled in *OLPD 5033: Foundations of Individual and Organizational Career Development*. For this second volume, I wanted to describe again the objective and context for this project. It should be noted that much of this text below was presented almost verbatim in the first edition. The purpose of the course is to learn and examine career development theory and practice from both an individual and organizational perspective.

Additionally, we explored workplace trends, demographics, and current topics related to the students’ experiences. The 3-credit course is open to graduate students and advanced undergraduate students. This course is taught in the College of Education and Human

Development (CEHD) at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities. The course is an elective and attracts students from a range of programs and colleges including Higher Education, Adult

Education, Human Resource Development, and Human Resources/Industrial Relations through the Minnesota Carlson business school.

In the past, the course has offered opportunities for self-assessment and ongoing reflection through writing. For example, students write a self-narrative for their project where they are asked to reflect on early childhood experiences about work and the meaning of success, however that might be defined. Students completed their own Super Strong Interest Inventory and the leadership work values questionnaire and applied their own results. Again, in spring 2026, I sought to add another component to the writing process. I wanted the students to have the opportunity to write to a larger audience, a public one that would be able to read students' ideas and evaluations.

So often students author a final paper, upload it to the instructor, and move on to the next semester, often without reflecting on the process (and sometimes maybe not even taking the time to read the instructor's comments). My goal was to create a new learning experience where students would get feedback from editors – and then take those suggestions and feedback to keep revising and resubmitting until “accepted.” In many ways, I hope to simulate a professional manuscript writing experience (without the dreaded reviewer #2 dismissive comments).

Some context for the project is needed here. In the fall of 2024 prior to the new semester, I approached Melissa Venable, an editor at the National Career Development Association, about this project idea. Fortunately, she was up for the task. What you are currently reading is the outcome of that initial conversation. This monograph, volume 2, is a collection of 16 student contributions that resulted from their final project in OLPD 5033 during spring term 2026. The topics address a range of timely issues and topics yet fall under two main categories: The first section explores current issues impacting work and career development. The second section will focus on applying career development theories and models to support specific populations of interest.

The Students

There were 16 students enrolled in the course from diverse backgrounds, including academic disciplines, including Human Resource Development, Higher Education, and

Adult Education. There were two advanced undergraduate students who enrolled in the course. The other students were primarily MA or PhD students completing this elective for their graduate programs. It should be noted that this career development course is not intended for counseling educators (i.e., enrolled students are not looking to becoming career counselors or guidance counselors in most cases).

Much to the students' relief, we do not spend a great deal of time engaging in student-client role plays. Instead, the goal for the class is to become more aware of issues impacting career and work, to encourage students to become more familiar with the language and theory of career, and to ultimately feel more comfortable having these career conversations in the future. Some of the students may work in higher education and adult education contexts; others will work in for-profit or non-profit organizations, often in HRD or HR roles. It should be noted that students came to this project with a range of writing experiences. For some students, this was the first time that they drafted a professional paper that required APA format.

During the semester, we held two “Fun with APA” writing workshops that prepared students to write in this professional format.

The Project

The final project was introduced earlier in the semester, but we did not begin to focus on it until around week #7. A couple of students have remarked that we might have started the project in earnest earlier in the term. I share the objectives and guidelines that the students received in their instructions for the project. The draft of the project, including the structure and organization of the monograph, was shared and revised multiple times with Melissa Venable before sharing it with the students:

INSTRUCTIONS TO STUDENTS

Final Project: Writing for Publication

DIRECTIONS:

We will be working together to each submit a chapter for a group publication. The publication will be a monograph that will only include this course's student contributions. The publisher will be the National Career Development Association (NCDA). NCDA will make our work available for anyone to read (i.e., you will be a published author at the end of this project).

OBJECTIVES:

1) To explore a topic of your choice and to learn more about the varying perspectives on this issue as it relates to work and career development, 2) to apply career development (CD) concepts to a specific population, and 3) to have a polished piece of writing that will be published by a professional organization.

TOPICS:

There will be two main sections to the monograph. I) Exploring Workplace Issues and Career Development, and II) Supporting Specific Populations Using Career Development. The overall theme(s) for the monograph will focus on the integration of career development theory with a specific issue or problem impacting the workplace and/or the future of work; and to apply CD concepts to supporting support populations. Each of us will have the opportunity to integrate career development theory with applied practice. You will opt to add your piece of writing to section one or section two. We discussed and negotiated different topics as a class – and finally reached 16 different topics. Although not scripted, we ended up with eight students who selected topics under section one and eight students under section two.

INTENDED AUDIENCE AND OBJECTIVES:

It is our shared hope that these topics will be of interest to career development audiences at all levels and represent different contexts. Students were encouraged to integrate at least 2-3 different career development theories or frameworks and consider how these theories might be put into practice. Several students opted to include more traditional theories (e.g., Super, Parsons, Holland), while others gravitated to the emerging theories such as narrative approaches and non-western models to understanding career (e.g., chaos theory, decent work, and career construction theory).

For the Reader

We hope that you will learn more about these timely and relevant topics impacting work and life-career development. These current issues are still evolving, such as supporting Gen Z in the workplace, the rise of microcredentials, and returning to office mandates. Other chapters explore specific populations and how to address pressing concerns about work-related issue, such as queer identity in the workplace, supporting neuro-diverse students, and engaging military veterans. All the chapters are significant in that they align to current issues impacting the field of career development. The project parallels NCDA's commitment to supporting and promoting

greater involvement in graduate education and graduate resources for NCDA.

I would personally like to thank our editors Melissa Venable, Melanie Reinersman, and former NCDA President Marty Apodaca for their ongoing support of this project. These colleagues have championed and contributed to this project in numerous ways. Finally, I would like to thank and acknowledge the students and their diligent work. At the conclusion of the semester, students commented on the amount of work needed to complete this project and the many skills they gained from it. To my 16 dedicated students, I wish all of you the best as you move forward in your own squiggly career pathways.

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EXPLORING CURRENT ISSUES IN CAREER DEVELOPMENT

MICROCREDENTIALS AND WORKFORCE READINESS – BRIDGING THE SKILLS GAP

Danielle Rintala

Overview and Rationale

There is a persistent and well-documented gap that exists between the competencies that college graduates develop from their higher education programs and the skills that employers need in the current workforce and for the future. While the technical and disciplinary knowledge remain key, the competencies that employers are looking for in a today's digital age include data literacy, analytics, artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning, digital literacy, creativity and innovation, emotional intelligence, adaptability, resilience, critical thinking, complex problem solving, leadership, cultural competence, and environmental sustainability awareness, amongst others (St. John's University, 2025). While these skills may be a part of a current degree program, that does not solve the gap that students may have as they enter a quickly evolving workforce. This chapter examines the use of microcredentials as a workforce readiness strategy, examines the competing perspectives on their efficacy, and integrates Savickas's (2020) Career Construction Theory to contextualize how microcredentials can be integrated into career development for students preparing for the workforce, as well as for people who find themselves transitioning out of one job and re-entering the job search process as the workforce evolves. The implications of microcredentials for higher education (HE), human resource development (HRD), and adult education are outlined, as well as recommendations for future practice and policy.

The Skills Gap and Microcredentials as a Solution

Microcredentials have emerged as critical issues in career development to address a growing "skills gap" that has been caused by the rapid advancement of automation and artificial intelligence (AI; Gamage & Dehideniya, 2025; Trumbore, 2021). A microcredential can loosely be defined as a short, focused certification that validates a discrete, verifiable competency or skill cluster, although the type of learning for a skill and it's intended outcomes often vary (Oliver, 2019). Microcredentials provide an opportunity to develop flexible, short-term qualifications that demonstrate proficiency in specific, high-demand areas, such as project management, data analysis, or cybersecurity (Perry-Miller, 2024). As job markets refine their respective required competencies, employees must learn new skills multiple times throughout their working lives to remain competitive (Gamage & Dehideniya, 2025; Trumbore, 2021). Higher education may prepare students for the workforce initially, but professional and family responsibilities make it difficult to go back to school in the traditional learning environment.

Coursera, which started as a massive open online course provider (MOOC), is now a for profit online university that is built on microcredential courses, estimates that as high as 90% of employers are willing to offer higher starting salaries to candidates with recognized microcredentials, and that 96% of employers say that microcredentials strengthen the applications of candidates applying at their companies (2025). In a more recent study that engaged community participants

to enhance their digital literacy skills through a microcredential program, including a train-the-trainer add on, the researchers were able to demonstrate that microcredentials can reach beyond the walls of traditional higher education settings to support the evolving workforce needs and help people obtain work (Kerrick & Cumberland, 2026). The community impact of digital literacy initiative demonstrated significant multiplier effect, with trained community trainers reaching more than 600 additional participants, particularly in underserved districts, thereby strengthening the local workforce and supporting small business competitiveness (Kerrick & Cumberland, 2026).

It is obvious that preparing people with all the fundamental skills to hit the ground running in a job is beneficial both for them and the organization. Students coming out of traditional degree programs also often lack soft skill development from their program education (such as communication, interpersonal skills, and leadership skills), and the rapid shifts in technology, particularly automation and AI, justify the use of microcredentials to fill the gap (Gamage & Dehideniya, 2025; Trumbore, 2021). It is worth exploring avenues to help fill the skills gap, and microcredentials appear to be well-poised to help close the gap.

Literature Review

There is a persistent and well-documented skills gap that exists between the competencies that graduates develop in their higher education program, and the skills employers need. While technical and disciplinary knowledge are still vital, the evolving workforce requires digital literacy, interpersonal skills, intrapersonal skills, critical thinking, and cultural and environmental awareness (St. John's University, 2025). Microcredentials and microlearning have been increasingly used in higher education and the work force to provide a means to round out the needs of employers in a technology-driven world. Microlearning refers to an instructional design approach that underlies these credentials and has been popularized in higher education and the work environment, in which learning is delivered in short, targeted modules designed for active, applied engagement (Romanenko et al., 2023). These models of learning are popular for

exploration to develop workplace readiness and evolve current workers skills.

Automation and generative AI have created a technical challenge for students around both relevance in their field of study and workplace readiness, creating a “skills gap”, which is a mismatch between the employee capabilities and the needs of the business (Coursera, 2025; Gamage & Dehideniya, 2025; Ha et al., 2025; Trumbore, 2021). The rise of microcredentials has quickly become a means for providing concise, focused proficiency in a targeted skill (Gamage & Dehideniya, 2025; Oliver, 2019; Perry-Miller, 2024). There are several factors driving the shift to microcredentials. The first is accessibility and flexibility.

Microcredentials allow learners, not only students, but also mature workers to tailor learning to schedules that work for them (Chadwick, 2024; Oliver, 2019; Perry-Miller, 2024). The second factor that drives the shift to microcredentials is cost-effectiveness. The short form of microcredentials can reduce debt burden and the time that must be invested in traditional higher education, which is particularly impactful for mature workers (Gamage & Dehideniya, 2025; Weissman, 2024). Generation Z is increasingly turning to microcredentials to afford training without the high price-tag of higher education (Weissman, 2024). As college costs soar, there appears to be an increasing trend in Generation Z students seeking out cheaper and faster credentials to kickstart their careers, which microcredentials can help do (Weissman, 2024). A third factor driving the shift is industry responsiveness. As employers see emerging skill gaps, they are increasingly utilizing microcredentials to quickly fill that gap, which traditional education may not be able to address fast enough for their quickly evolving needs (Gamage & Dehideniya, 2025; Oliver, 2019).

The bite size microlearning is not just being driven by accessibility, flexibility, cost effectiveness, and industry, it is also making a big impact on skill development, which in turn is driving a greater level of employability for people entering the workforce and those wanting to stay competitive in the job market (Coursera, 2025). Microlearning delivers content in small segments and has been well-studied in education to enhance student engagement

and knowledge retention by reducing cognitive overload (Romanenko et al., 2023; Silva & Ekanayake, 2025). Additional research has indicated that microlearning is particularly effective for development of soft skills, such as communication, leadership, and emotional intelligence, which employers highly value but are often left out of the standard curriculum of a two or four-year degree program (Ha et al., 2025; Romanenko et al., 2023). While employers tend to focus on human capital, or the valuation of microcredentials as evidence of job-ready skills that reduce the burden of first-year training costs, students view microcredentials to build identity capital on their resumes as they prepare for the job market (Coursera, 2025; Ha et al., 2025).

The limitations of microcredentials

All that glitters is not gold when it comes to the explosion of microcredentials. There is confusion around the actual value and what the standards should be for microcredentials. Critics point to the lack of standardization, given there is no universal definition or quality framework, which makes it difficult for employers to determine the equivalency of these credentials to traditional degree programs (Gamage & Dehideniya, 2025; Oliver, 2019). Additionally, digital badges and certificates being awarded without the same level of rigorous assessment can be risky. Questions arise about credibility and how the lack of rigorous assessment could threaten the legitimacy of the very product and skill trying to be delivered (Gamage & Dehideniya, 2025; Oliver, 2019; Perry-Miller, 2024). There are also concerns about what it means for qualifications in a field. Instead of a rounded education, narrowing down to job tasks could lead to fragmentation (Ha et al., 2025). Beverley Oliver (2019), an emeritus professor at Deakin University, called out the necessity for national credit frameworks, implementation of lifelong learning accounts, and using transparent critical information summaries that demonstrate high quality, rigorous learning experiences.

As noted from the literature, the lack of quality control and standardization leaves concerns with the actual value and credibility of microcredentials (Oliver, 2019; Perry-Miller, 2024). Companies built on the premise of

delivering these microcredentials are also an industry in themselves, profiting from the employers who want to train employees and employees desperate to maintain relevance in their evolving fields. For a higher education institution to incorporate microcredentials as opportunities for expanding learning, they must develop their own standards and expectations for what these should look like, the content they deliver, and pay for instructors to teach these learning experiences. At the very least, institutions should expect that their microcredential offerings are as rigorous and developed as the courses that comprise each degree that they currently offer and make them stackable so ambitious students can build their soft skills and AI skill development. Higher education institutions may not have the financial means to even build in these ambitious and ever-changing microlearning opportunities for students, and furthermore, the very premise of how they will get paid for leaves additional questions. In the US, the cost of higher education continues to rise, and certainly it will not resonate positively with students if they are asked to pay additional fees to develop skills that are now widely expected across all job sectors on top of their typical tuition rates.

Microcredentials as catalysts for employability and industry alignment

Microcredentials have become an asset to companies because they provide a verifiable means for evidence of specific, job-ready skills that match their immediate needs (Chadwick, 2024; Coursera, 2025; Trumbore, 2021). Automation and AI are here to stay, and there must be a means to keep people relevant in their fields. The half-lives of degrees are shrinking before students even hit the job market, and when skills in AI, project management, and communication are not part of their curriculum, they may have the technical acumen necessary to understand their job field functions, but they entirely lack what the future workforce now requires. For example, ChatGPT was released in late 2022. Since then, dozens of large language models (LLMs) have hit the market. Workplaces have implemented the use of AI in many ways.

Currently, higher education instruction continues to push it away from the classroom, rather than embracing it as a tool for deeper thinking and learning. Higher education cannot ignore the evolving needs of the workforce in an era when the value of a degree is under so much scrutiny and criticism. While there is concern that AI will shrink the workforce, it may really be that the workforce demands rapid evolution of its employees to leverage LLMs in the workplace. Another degree is not going to change that the skills necessary for a future-forward workforce must happen now and be a continuous part of lifelong learning. Integration of these opportunities for skill development supplemental to undergraduate programs will help prepare students for the rapidly changing global workforce.

Career development models as they relate to the implementation of microcredentials

Social Cognitive Career Theory and Microcredentials

Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) focuses on self-efficacy (can I do this?), outcome expectations (if I do this, what happens?), and personal goals (Lent, 2020; Lent et al., 1994). Microcredentials serve as microlearning experiences that build self-efficacy through mastering a skill through the microcredential learning experience and demonstrate their capability of performing the skill, which can build confidence. Each microcredential can serve as a stackable win, reinforcing their confidence in those skills learned. Self-efficacy is task-specific, so microcredentials are a straightforward way to build self-efficacy in discrete competencies relevant to the individual's career interests. In the workplace, this would help shift the narrative from “I don’t know how to do this” to “can I do this” to “I can do this” when it comes to leveraging AI or automating tasks to free up time for innovation or ideas to implement in the workplace.

The ability to stack microcredentials and share them in places like LinkedIn helps shape expectations. Additionally, employers are increasingly recognizing microcredentials, thereby leveraging students and workers pivoting in the workforce to have a more concrete and realistic outcome expectation

that earning a microcredential will help them get an interview. According to SCCT, inaccurate outcome expectations can derail career development (Lent, 2020; Lent et al., 1994). Students from underrepresented backgrounds and/ or first-generation students may underestimate what they can achieve, so microcredentials can become a means to connect their learning to the workforce. When students see a clear path from the credential to a specific career outcome, this may expand their own imagination as to what they could do in their career, considering roles that they previously did not see as an option.

SCCT distinguishes between interest (“I’d like to do this”) and choice (“I intend to do this”) goals (Lent, 2020; Lent et al., 1994). Microcredentials facilitate movement from a passive interest to a deliberate action by reducing barriers to commitment, since they are bite-sized educational opportunities that are more approachable than a four or even 2-year program. They also create scaffolding to stack toward longer-term career aspirations. Students may even see the visible progress of the badges earned and skills stacked and be more apt to persist in obtaining their goals. This becomes particularly important for learners who may be juggling work, family, and personal demands.

The supports and barriers that shape whether efficacy and positive outcome expectations translate to actual career choices remain central to SCCT (Lent, 2020). When employers recognize microcredentials, stackable pathways, and institutional partnerships, they can be strong supports to increase the ability and efficacy of first-generation students, working adults, and career changers alike. However, if the microcredentials are not recognized by employers, lack quality assurance, or become inaccessible due to costs or time, they become additional barriers rather than support, which is a concern in developing these credentials.

Career Construction Theory

Career construction theory (CCT), developed by Mark Savickas (2020) is a contemporary career development framework that envisions workplace development through framing career development as an ongoing act of meaning-making through vocational personality, career adaptability, and life themes. Savickas (2020)

draws heavily from Holland's (1997) work through emphasis on traits being shaped through experience, versus being fixed. Microcredentials engage vocational personality by providing low-stake exploration, aligning with CCT's view that interest develops through engagement (Savickas, 2020). Microcredentials give students concrete artifacts of their learning, such as digital badges or certificates that can help them articulate their abilities and values to themselves and to employers. Through the lens of CCT, this supports the construction of a more coherent vocational self-concept. For the non traditional students or those changing careers, a microcredential is the first step in claiming a new professional identity (Savickas, 2020).

Career adaptability is at the core of CCT, defined through concern, control, curiosity, and confidence (the 4 Cs) that individuals draw on to navigate career transitions and challenges (Savickas, 2020). Microcredentials foster concern, or the orientation toward one's vocational future as something they can plan and is worth attending to, by making the future feel more concrete (Savickas, 2020). For students from disadvantaged backgrounds or situations where long-range planning felt unobtainable, the stacking of microcredentials could provide steppingstones to future orientation of their careers. Control, the belief that one is responsible for and capable of constructing one's own career, connects well to the self-directed nature of many microcredential programs in reinforcing agency and authorship in career development. Fostering a curiosity of self and environment can be fostered by the low commitment and high specificity of micro-credentials that allow students and those considering a career change to evaluate hypotheses about themselves. They can then map what the possibilities may be for themselves by making previously distant careers more tangible, which is central to CCT (Savickas, 2020). Lastly, building confidence can be achieved through mastering single skills through micro credentials, a trait that entire courses may not always foster. CCT links confidence not just to task performance, but also to the courage to make career choices and commit to them (Savickas, 2020). A student who completes multiple microcredentials may

feel more ready to make decisions about their career.

Savickas's career story interview (CSI) asks clients to reflect on their role models, favorite stories, mottoes, and early memories. What if microcredential programs did the same? What if the shift were to move the idea of microcredentials from being transactional skills to authoring meaningful vocational identities? Consider how CCT pays particular attention to students whose life narratives have been shaped by systemic disruption (Savickas, 2020). For these students, traditional carry narratives may feel inaccessible, but microcredentials could help them feel empowered. CCT affirms that microcredentials should be embedded as part of meaning-making but not be the substitute for it.

Microcredentials shaping the future of work

A shift from traditional degree-based education to also offering a flexible, skills-oriented approach aligns educational outcomes with labor market demands and improves access to training and employment opportunities for diverse community members (Kerrick & Cumberland, 2026). Programs must be designed to genuinely build self-efficacy, set realistic outcome expectations, and remove contextual barriers if aligned with implementation through an SCCT framework (Lent, 2020).

On their own, microcredentials do not fit at all into CCT's concept of life themes. However, this is where higher education practitioners play a key role. When microcredential choices are paired with advising, structured reflection, and narrative prompts to help shape what students want and need, students can connect what they are learning to who they are becoming. Career advisors and faculty can use microcredential decisions as prompts, such as "Why did you choose this microcredential?" or "What does it say about what matters to you"? Prompting students to consider what problems they most want to solve may also help shape their choices in microcredentials. This pivots microcredentials from being a list on a resume to genuine acts of career construction. That said, higher education institutions must be careful not to fall into the trap of using microcredentials as workforce sorting mechanisms that place too much focus

on first-generation or low-income students. This outcome could inadvertently constrain rather than expand their narrative possibilities.

Next steps

Higher education institutions should be making the pivot, if they have not already, to increase their offerings of microcredentials as part of the educational experience for all learners, including their employees. Addressing the skills gap in the workforce is quickly becoming a contentious topic when discussing the affordability and viability of a degree, and rather than creating condensed programs or implementing new degrees to address high-impact areas, such as AI, these should become embedded learning experiences for everyone. Simultaneously, employers should invest in providing opportunities for skill development to employees to maintain relevancy and professional development, which in turn could increase retention in the workplace. While I currently reside in a research office, I have an interest in providing educational opportunities that could be obtained through digital badging and certificates to develop skills in the ethical conduct of research. Authorship, research misconduct, and data integrity are areas that could all benefit from providing continuous bite-size training opportunities that could help researchers from undergraduate researchers to principal investigators and everyone in-between better engage in ethical decision-making in research. I believe most higher education and industry benefit from microlearning opportunities to continuously develop people and support an ever-changing work environment. The key is to develop learning in a way that is tangible, accessible, inclusive, and scaffolded to create learning experiences that can shape, transform, and enhance the meaning of and the purpose of work.

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RETURN TO OFFICE MANDATES: HOW THEY HARM WOMEN IN THE WORKFORCE

Julie Olson Rand

In the post-pandemic workplace, many industries have continued operating under hybrid or remote work arrangements. These arrangements reduce costs for employers by allowing the consolidation of office space, and some organizations use remote work as a bargaining chip for recruitment, rather than increasing salaries (Seattle University, 2023; The University of Scranton, 2025). Likewise, employees benefit from hybrid and remote work, as these arrangements offer options to live in lower cost-of-living locales and to save on travel expenditures like public transit, gas, and parking (Albers Schools of Business and Economics, 2023; The University of Scranton, 2025).

Even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, researchers were studying remote work and noticed gendered differences in preference for working from home (Mas & Pallais, 2017; Zapier, 2019). In 2010, the Council of Economic Advisers (2010) brought recommendations to the White House to support remote work for work-life balance (Mas & Pallais, 2017). Mas and Pallais' and Zapier's findings suggested that women valued remote work options.

Many organizations are instituting full-time return to office (RTO) mandates, which have disparate impacts on several groups, including women and people of color (Henderson, 2022). In this chapter, I will focus on the impact of RTOs on women. I will also provide two career theories, which career development and human resources development (HRD) practitioners can use to support the career trajectories of their clients. I will close with recommendations for organizations considering RTOs.

Return to Office Mandates

Since 2022, over 50 corporations have enacted either partial (e.g., 3 or 4 days in-person per week) or full-time RTO mandates (Teter, 2026). Pew Research Center data from 2024 suggested that 75% of U.S. workers have returned to the office regularly (Sharma, 2025). Today, "more than half of Fortune 100 companies now have a full-time office requirement" (Reuter, 2025, para. 9). Bremen (2025) stated fewer than 5% of companies banned remote work, and most hybrid workplaces reported requiring employees to be on site between one and four days per week. Over half of organizations had no set rules for coming into the office in-person (Bremen, 2025).

Many suspect that RTO mandates are simply "layoffs in disguise" (Coacci, 2025; Dungan, 2025, para. 3; Reuter, 2025). Reuter called the approach cheap as it allowed organizations to reap the "benefits" of layoffs (e.g. reduced headcount) without the requirement of paying for unemployment benefits for departing employees, as their departures were "voluntary." Using this loophole, employers dodge accountability for their employees, leading to distrust between retained employees and employers (Dungan, 2025). Fayard and Weeks (2025) believed that RTO mandates provided an example of a breach of psychological contracts, a concept they define as the "implicit understanding that employees have about what they owe a company and what the company owes them" (para. 5). Coacci (2025) reported that 93% of CEOs adopted flexible work arrangements for themselves, even if their employers had instituted a full time

RTO mandate. One in five workers ignored company-wide RTO mandates, as well (Coacci, 2025).

Warzel and Peterson (2021) stated that until recently, “‘flexibility’ has been a code word for a company’s ability to rapidly hire and lay off employees as needed” (p. 14). Thus, organizations relied upon the benefits of the gig economy, depending on freelancers, contractors and adjuncts for their labor. Mas and Pallais called this growth in the gig economy the “‘Uberization’ of the workplace” (p. 3723). Today, flexibility refers to the options extended to employees by organizations, (e.g., hybrid/remote work, flexible start- and end-times, compressed workweeks, job sharing, flexible time off, and customized benefits; Korn Ferry, n.d.). Warzel and Peterson emphasized that bestowing flexibility upon employees requires respecting employees’ boundaries, ensuring work does not extend beyond the work week.

In September of 2024, Amazon announced a full-time RTO which began in January of 2025, the first big tech company to do so (Traded, 2024). This RTO was phased from three days per week in-person to five days in-person; it was dubbed “RTO5” by insiders (Zhang, 2025). In interviews with Amazon employees after RTO5, Zhang found that most interviewees were dissatisfied with the new work arrangement. Staff experienced tensions between work- and home-life, caregiving demands (including children, disabled spouses and aging parents), long commutes, and stigma when using disability accommodations to work remotely (Zhang, 2025). Not every employee Zhang spoke with expressed dissatisfaction. A few employees preferred the in-person arrangement and felt the benefits of working in the office full-time (e.g., more interaction with colleagues, greater information sharing across silos) were worthwhile given the minor tradeoffs (e.g., arranging after school care for children or having to commute). After Amazon’s RTO5, 30,000 employees signed a petition to reverse their mandate, and 1,800 planned a walk-out (Dungan, 2025). Dissatisfied, employees began rage applying to other jobs (Dungan, 2025). Since then, the job market has shifted to a “low hire, low fire” economy (Jona & Barnard, 2026). Consequently, the

act of “job-hugging” -- or planning to stay in one’s role-- is becoming more common (Crist, 2025; Kaplan, 2025). Those who are currently unemployed face a “jobless boom” in which low unemployment and slow hiring make for grueling job searches (Rugaber, 2025).

The Chronicle of Higher Education (2023) found that in the higher education sector, faculty reported working mostly hybrid (51%) or fully in-person (46%), with a small number working fully remotely (3%). Higher education administrators reported that their units were working mostly hybrid (63%), but 36% worked fully in-person, with a small group working fully remotely (1%; The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2023). While some concerns arose around building connections between colleagues, hybrid work was viewed as necessary to recruit new talent (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2023).

The Impact of RTOs on Women

Research from Slack found that women and people of color were most likely to desire remote or hybrid workplaces (Henderson, 2022). Large percentages of working mothers (82%), Hispanic workers (81%), and Black workers (79%) wanted flexibility in their work. During COVID-19, remote work offered a level of flexibility to working parents that many preferred not to give up.

Workers who were most likely to work in-person were White men, and executives. When proximity biases prevail, those who are most visible in the office may be most likely to be promoted (Henderson, 2022). The proximity bias suggests that women must “lean in” and utilize masculine techniques to successfully navigate careers (Asare, 2026). This leads to the perpetuation of what Warzel and Peterson (2021) call the office monoculture, a homogeneous staff. Henderson argued that proximity biases could widen the pay gaps between women and people of color and their White male peers.

There have been several recent shifts in women’s participation in the workforce since the COVID-19 pandemic. Barner (2023) said, “the labor force participation rate of working mothers went from around 70% before the pandemic to about 55%” (15:41). In 2024, mothers’ participation in the workforce

recovered, exceeding pre-pandemic levels (71.7%), but continued to lag behind fathers' workforce participation (92%; George, 2024). A report by Catalyst (2026) showed that 455,000 women left the workforce between January and August 2025. Of those who voluntarily quit, 42% stated that childcare costs and caregiving responsibilities led to their decision to leave their jobs (Catalyst, 2026). When women deprioritize moving up the ranks at work, it is often interpreted as loss of ambition (Duarte & Kaplowitz, 2026). Duarte and Kaplowitz said, "the real pressure point is caregiving strain" (para. 2), which they describe as the "cognitive, emotional, and logistical burden of coordinating care for children, parents and other dependents" (para. 2). In their study of 690 employees in the U.S., women (83%) experienced more caregiving strain than men (72%), potentially leading to burnout and ultimately leaving their roles (Durante & Kaplowitz, 2026).

Miller and Riley (2021) studied the conflict between work and home domains of 141 higher education faculty (134 mothers and 7 fathers). Miller and Riley found that during the COVID-19 pandemic, mothers experienced significant conflict between work and home domains, whereas fathers experienced conflict mostly within the work domain. These findings suggest that fathers navigated their work-lives without interruptions due to caregiving or household responsibilities, whereas mothers felt they fell short from fulfilling expectations—both at work and at home.

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, children's mental health has taken a hit. Mothers often carry the mental load of coordinating the care for their families (Knight, 2023). The uptick in demands on parents during the pandemic had significant effects on parents' mental health. A study from The Ohio State University (2022) found that 66% of parents reported being burned out. Burnout often appears in tandem with mental health conditions like anxiety or depression (The Ohio State University, 2022). Allowing employees to tend to their own mental health and that of their children often requires time away from work. When it comes to mental health, flexibility is not simply a "nice to have;" it is a necessity.

While motherhood contributes to demands on women's limited time, motherhood is often framed as a drawback. However, scholars have identified skills that mothers bring to their workplaces, which bring significant value to their organizations, for example resilience, prioritization, relational intelligence (Dillard & Cavallo, 2026). Recognizing the skills women bring to the table warrants the flexibility necessary to make balancing their home- and work-lives possible.

As previously stated, flexibility can take many forms, and remote or hybrid work arrangements offer one option. Remote and hybrid work arrangements have been found by and large to satisfy women's desires for flexibility, allowing them to focus and prioritize their personal lives, without trading their ambitions (McKinsey & Company, 2023). Low (2025) suggested that women do not demand remote work or flexibility, per se—they need boundaries and workplaces that respect them. Low held up the nursing field as an example, in-person work with schedules set well in advance and little or no work required outside of work time. The Women in the Workplace 2025 Report lamented, "... programs beneficial to women, such as remote work, formal sponsorship, and targeted career development..." (McKinsey & Company, 2025, para. 3) have been scaled back by many organizations. McKinsey and Company urged businesses, "2026 should be the year of recommitting to women in the workplace" (para. 4).

Recommitting to women in the workplace will require intentional conversations about women's lives—seeking to understand the various demands on their time and energy and identifying career paths that meet their unique needs. Two career theories aid in this process, Kaleidoscope Career Model (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2005, 2006) and Integrative Life Planning (Hansen, 1997, 2011). I will discuss these theories in the following section.

Kaleidoscope Career Model

Kaleidoscope Career Model (KCM) was developed by Mainiero and Sullivan (2005, 2006) in response to the opt-out revolution. The opt-out revolution was given its name by Belkin (2003) to describe women who

opted out of working to become stay-at-home mothers. Baruch and Sullivan (2022) described KCM as a career model that takes a concerted look at the ways in which three career parameters interact during an individual's career, including: authenticity, balance, and challenge. Baruch and Sullivan described that in KCM, authenticity refers to how career decisions align with an individual's values, balance refers to equilibrium between work and personal life, and challenge refers to advancement. One of these three parameters becomes the priority for a given time, but throughout life, these priorities change (Hite & McDonald, 2023; Mainiero & Sullivan, 2006). Studies of KCM suggested that people followed either a traditional or "discontinuous" career path (Baruch & Sullivan, 2022). By discontinuous, Baruch and Sullivan specified that individuals may transition out of the workforce to become entrepreneurs or to care for their families.

Sullivan and Mainiero (2007) found that men tended to follow a career path in which challenge is the focus for their early career, followed by authenticity in mid-career, and balance in late career. Researchers referred to this pattern as the alpha career pattern (Hite & McDonald, 2022; Sullivan & Mainiero, 2007). Sullivan and Mainiero found that women tended to focus on challenge in early career, balance during mid-career, and authenticity in later career. This career pattern researchers called the beta career pattern. Hite and McDonald cautioned that the alpha and beta patterns were not consistent across cultures. However, career development and HRD practitioners may benefit by keeping these patterns in mind when working with their clients, bringing greater sensitivity to their clients' holistic lives.

Integrative Life Planning

Integrative Life Planning (ILP) was developed in the 1990s by Hansen (1997, 2011). Using the metaphor of quilting, ILP borrows from the play, *Quilters*, by Newman and Damashek (1995) in which each patch represented a different aspect of the quilters' lives. In ILP, work consists of a single patch, but is surrounded by many others, which help constitute a "meaningful life" (Hansen, 2011).

Hansen (2011) suggested, "we are all quilters—not only in our own lives but in those of our children and our families" (p. 168).

ILP highlights the importance of six life tasks, see Figure 1. ILP has been successful in applying to upper-level undergraduate students' career planning. Hansen found that many of her students who were women felt ILP was more expansive than previous person-environment (PE) fit models of career development. In addition, ILP has been used effectively in non-Western contexts. Due to the holistic nature of ILP, it is conducive to inform both men and women's career paths.

Figure 1. ILP Six Critical Life Tasks

- Finding work that needs doing in changing global contexts
- Attending to our health: physical, mental, and emotional
- Connecting family and work
- Valuing pluralism and inclusivity
- Spiritual and life purpose
- Managing personal transitions and organizational change

Note: These life tasks come from Hansen (2011).

Career development and HRD professionals can use ILP to assist clients to frame their careers as one component of their meaningful life quilt. Applying ILP to client's lives works to identify which life tasks are out of balance, thus guiding the intervention.

Applying Theory to RTO Mandates

Both KCM and ILP offer career development and HRD professionals options to assist individuals in weighing the cost-benefit of flexibility in the workplace, and to identify priorities for clients' home- and work-lives. Again, flexibility comes in many forms, including hybrid or remote work, flexible working hours, compressed workweeks, job sharing, flexible time-off, customized benefits (Korn Ferry, n.d.). Clients facing RTO mandates will need to analyze their unique circumstances, as well as their career goals to determine whether working in a fully in person environment will be compatible with their personal and professional goals.

Organizations will benefit from considering whether in-person work is truly the answer

to their organizational goals, as turnover commonly results from RTO mandates. Because RTO mandates negatively impact psychological contracts, organizations should consider the repercussions on staff morale, engagement, and retention within the organization (Fayard & Weeks, 2025). Women and people of color show greater preference for remote and hybrid work environments (Henderson, 2022). RTO mandates disproportionately impact these groups, which could lead to turnover. High performing organizations outshine their competitors on several factors, including flexible work, manager training, career development among others (McKinsey & Company, 2023), suggesting their retention of women and people of color contributes to their success. Staff turnover, whether an unfortunate side effect or the planned result of RTOs, may lead to more homogenized workplaces centering White men, thus negatively impacting performance results. Organizations seeking to reduce headcount might consider hiring freezes, buyouts or early retirement options, and/or temporary furloughs in lieu of layoffs or RTO mandates (Tong, 2023).

Recommendations for retaining talent:

- Consider offering rewards for in-person work (Altcheck, 2026)
- Apply principles of KLM and ILP in acknowledging employees' holistic lives and earning-making– and the potential need for flexibility
- Offer multiple forms of flexibility, for example, remote/hybrid work, flexible start- and end-times, compressed workweeks, job sharing, flexible time off, and customized benefits (Korn Ferry, n.d.)

Conclusion

RTO mandates disrupt the flexibility afforded to many employees since the COVID-19 pandemic. Not only do RTO mandates disproportionately harm women, especially those with caregiving responsibilities, they also consist of veiled attempts to reduce headcount by avoiding layoffs (Coacci, 2025; Duarte & Kaplowitz, 2026; Dungan, 2025; Reuter, 2025). Women experience tensions in balancing their work- and home-lives. Limitations to flexibility in the workplace

may lead women to leave their jobs to focus on their families. These decisions can have unintended long-term consequences when attempting to return to the workforce amidst a difficult job market (Rugaber, 2025). Two career models, KCM and ILP offer compelling options to support the career development of working women, as both consider individuals' holistic lives (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2006; Hansen, 2011). These career models take into consideration an individual's life stage and/or life tasks to address their most pressing career concerns (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2006; Hansen, 2011). Organizations must think twice before instituting RTO mandates, as they may have unintended consequences, harming women along the way.

Biography

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ALONE ON THE LADDER: REMOTE WORK AS AN EARLY-CAREER PROFESSIONAL

OVERVIEW OF REMOTE WORK AND EARLY-CAREER PROFESSIONALS

Brian Wray

The COVID-19 pandemic will no doubt go down as one of the most impactful periods of the 21st century. It affected nearly every aspect of our lives and its continued impact is still felt even today, especially when it comes to how we look at work. The pandemic created a revolution within the working world, as it fundamentally reshaped expectations about where and how work could be done (de Lucas Ancillo et al., 2023). Prior to the pandemic, the idea of fully remote work, or even hybrid positions being an option, was for the most part a dream scenario as only 7% of working professionals worked remotely in 2019 (Barrero et al., 2023). But now those work environments are not just simply temporary situations due to the pandemic, but have actually been normalized and have become the preference of many in the professional world. In fact, as of the 2024 Household Pulse Survey, about 37% of all workers are fully remote while only 22% of workers are fully in-person, leaving roughly 41% of positions in some kind of hybrid role (He et al., 2026). This shift has been allowed by advances in technological capabilities and organizational practices along with worker priorities shifting to an emphasis on flexibility and work-life balance have made this all possible (Barrero et al., 2023). However, while the benefits of this new found flexibility and autonomy such as reduced stress, work-life balance and wide ranging geographical work options have been well discussed and will be touched on later in this chapter, the potential issues that could impact workers, especially early in their careers, are often overlooked (Ferreira et al., 2021; Chandan, 2024, Andrade & Andrade, 2023; Gajendran et al., 2024).

Early-career professionals (ECPs), defined as individuals within the first five years of their careers after completing formal education, represent a critical population for understanding how remote work shapes early developmental experiences. Being only 6 years removed from the start of the pandemic means that pretty much everyone who categorized as an ECP either experienced high school and/or college during the pandemic, requiring remote work within their schooling. This is a developmental context surrounding this younger generation of workers that is often overlooked when it comes to career development and one that scholars are only now beginning to understand the impacts for this generation of ECPs. Being forced to participate in academics remotely disrupted key opportunities for social interaction and identity development for this group (Fivush, 2025). Research indicates that youth engaged in remote learning reported reduced social connectedness, increased loneliness and higher levels of stress compared to those learning in in-person environments (Nandlall et al., 2022). These disruptions occurred during a critical developmental period in which peer relationships and informal social learning play a key role in building communication skills and identity (Fivush, 2025). As a result, some from this population will enter the workforce with less experience navigating in-person social dynamics which can make it more difficult to build relationships, seek mentorship and adapt to organizational norms (Becker, 2022). This means that ECPs are at an interesting intersection of entering the workforce that has dramatically changed in some ways due to the

pandemic (remote work, increased autonomy). While still being the exact same in many ways (organizational structures and expectations). Which leads to both opportunities and constraints for them. On one hand, remote work is offered more freely and it provides amazing flexibility and a huge improvement to work-life balance (Ferreira et al., 2021). On the other hand, that same flexibility can limit access to resources essential for career development (Yarberry & Sims, 2021).

Fortunately, we are actually seeing that ECPs are coming from a generation of workers who recognize some of the pitfalls that may come from fully remote work and are not actually seeking it out in large numbers. A 2025 Gallup poll actually shows that of all generations in the workforce, Gen Z, the youngest generation and those that encompass ECPs, are seeking out remote work at the lowest percentage with only 23% preferring fully remote work and vast majority, 71%, actually seeking out hybrid work, with only 6% wanting to work completely in-person (Pendell & Agrawal, 2025). So while those possible negatives of remote work may not be as large of concern for someone established in their field, they can definitely be an issue for ECPs who are still working in environments that require those relationship building opportunities to navigate workplace norms and advance within their fields (Golden & Eddleston, 2020). I plan to look at remote work for ECPs by peering through a theoretical lens and addressing it with both the Systems Theory Framework and the concept of Decent Work. This will allow us to start to see how remote work may disproportionately shape the career development experiences of ECPs. While we recognize the important benefits that remote work provides, it is also vital to address how it can disrupt this key developmental period and lead to less talked about consequences.

Analysis of the Issue Around Remote Work and ECPs

This analysis is by no means meant to belittle this younger generation of workers or imply that remote work is impossible for this group, as ECPs are strengthening the modern workforce in a number of ways. This generation of ECPs are adaptable and

digitally fluent, with strong skills in virtual communication (Osorio & Madero, 2025). They have also experienced remote or hybrid learning environments during their academic careers and thus are comfortable navigating online spaces (Benítez-Márquez et al., 2022). These assets put them in a position to succeed in flexible work arrangements and contribute effectively to teams working together while at a distance. And this meshes well with the fact that the overall consensus within the academic literature is that remote work is generally viewed as a positive development. According to the research, key benefits include increased flexibility and autonomy, allowing employees greater control over their schedules (Ferreira et al., 2021). Remote work is also associated with improved work-life balance and reduced stress, particularly due to the elimination of commuting (Chandan, 2024). Additionally, it expands access to employment opportunities by removing geographic barriers (Andrade & Andrade, 2023). From this viewpoint, remote work enhances both employee well-being and access to career opportunities and should be an option for all ages of workers.

However, a growing body of research highlights less visible challenges resulting from remote work, such as increasing feelings of isolation while also negatively impacting well-being and engagement (Becker et al., 2022). This isolation can also negatively impact mental health, where there has been a linked increase to the risk of loneliness in those working remotely 3-5 days a week (He et al., 2026). Remote work also limits access to informal mentorship and informal interactions that support learning, social development and professional growth (Hughes et al., 2025). These are the relationships that can help employees understand workplace norms, develop confidence, and refine their skills. In remote environments, these opportunities are less frequent, requiring more intentional effort to seek guidance, support a sense of belonging and which may impact professional identity development (Yarberry & Sims, 2021). Instead, communication in remote environments tends to be more task-focused, reducing opportunities for relationship-building and developmental support (Jämsen et al., 2022). Finally, ECPs working remotely have reduced

visibility which may hinder recognition and advancement. This can impact performance evaluations, access to important projects and ultimately advancement opportunities, all important resources and support critical for career progression (Golden & Eddleston, 2020); Gajendran et al., 2024).

Overall, the literature reveals a key tension: remote work offers meaningful benefits but may also reduce essential developmental experiences (Gajendran et al., 2024). These tradeoffs are particularly significant for ECPs, who may be more vulnerable to its less visible downsides. So while we need to acknowledge the benefits that remote work can provide, recognizing that they are not evenly experienced within the workforce and may depend on employer provided resources as well as individual circumstances is vital. For ECPs, the balance between these opportunities and challenges is particularly critical, as these early experiences can have lasting impacts on career trajectories.

Integration of Career Development Theories

Systems Theory Framework

To better understand how remote work can shape the experiences of ECPs, it is best to look through a theoretical lens that captures both individual development and the larger systems in which careers develop. The Systems Theory Framework (STF) provides a strong foundation by conceptualizing career development as the result of dynamic and interconnected influences across individual, social and environmental systems (McMahon & Patton, 2018). Rather than viewing career results as solely the product of individual choice or skill, STF emphasizes that careers are shaped through ongoing interactions between personal characteristics, relationships, organizational contexts and broader societal conditions (McMahon & Patton, 2018).

While looking at remote work through the lens of STF, we can see the rise in opportunities to work from outside an office setting represents a significant shift within the workplace system. This shift has led to impacts around the social dynamics of the workplace. For ECPs, social systems, including relationships

with supervisors, mentors and peers play a critical role in facilitating learning, feedback and professional identity development. Remote work can lessen these connections by reducing the opportunities for informal interactions, mentorship and interpersonal communication (Hughes et al., 2025; Jämsen et al., 2022; Yarberry & Sims, 2021). This trend may result in ECPs experiencing fewer opportunities to engage in the kinds of interactions that support their skill development as well as learning how to function within an organization (Yarberry & Sims, 2021). To add to that, STF emphasizes the importance of temporal and contextual influences, which means that entering the workforce during this period of widespread remote work and labor market restrictions may have lasting implications on a person's career trajectories (Barrero et al., 2023). So these overlapping systems of remote work structures, limited job mobility due to a tough labor market and being in the beginning of your career development can interact in ways that increase challenges for ECPs.

Decent Work Framework

The concept of Decent Work deepens this analysis by offering a framework for evaluating work experiences beyond surface-level benefits such as flexibility and autonomy, instead emphasizing development and meaning. Decent and meaningful work incorporates not only access to employment, but also conditions that support psychological well-being, dignity, connection and opportunities for growth (Blustein et al., 2023). Viewing remote work through this lens is especially important due to the fact that it is often framed as the desirable option because of its flexibility and autonomy (Ferreira et al., 2021). However, this does not fully capture whether remote work environments support long-term career development or meaningful engagement with your work. For ECPs, access to resources vital to development such as mentorship, visibility and advancement opportunities, is central to experiencing work as both “decent” and “meaningful.” Because remote work environments are less likely to outwardly offer these resources, they may undermine career sustainability even if offering the short-term advantages of convenience and

reduced stress (Gajendran et al., 2024). This tension reflects a wider distinction between job satisfaction and career development; a role may feel manageable or flexible in the present while still limiting long-term growth. Some research on remote work supports this contrast, suggesting that while remote arrangements can enhance autonomy, they may simultaneously reduce access to the social and organizational resources necessary for advancement (Hughes et al., 2025). But other commenters take it further like NYU professor Scott Galloway who believes that all remote work is detrimental to young professionals and that they “should never be at home,” suggesting that remote work may hinder both career success and relationship building (Taylor, 2023). While that particular perspective may be overstated, it underscores an important concern regarding developmental limitations of fully remote work environments. Rather than suggesting that remote work should be avoided altogether, these perspectives collectively point to the importance in finding balance between flexibility and opportunities for connection (Becker, 2022). For ECPs, achieving this balance may be essential to accessing truly decent and meaningful work.

Together, the Systems Theory Framework and the concept of Decent and Meaningful Work highlight that remote work is not simply a neutral or universally beneficial shift in how work is organized. Instead, it represents a structural change that reshapes access to critical developmental systems and raises important questions about the quality and sustainability of early-career experiences. For ECPs, whose development depends heavily on relational and contextual supports, these shifts may have disproportionate and lasting impacts on both career progression and overall well-being.

Application of STF and Decent Work Framework to Support ECPs

The implications around remote work for ECPs are important to consider in the contexts of both the higher education and human resources fields. Applying the STF highlights that early-career outcomes are shaped not only by individual choices, but also by the interaction of social relationships, organizational structures and broader labor

market conditions (McMahon & Patton, 2018). Similarly, the concept of Decent Work emphasizes that access to employment alone is insufficient; work must also provide opportunities for growth, connection, and meaningful engagement. This aligns with research within the Psychology of Working Framework where the idea of “decent work” comes from, which highlights that individuals derive meaning from their work through contributing to others and experiencing a sense of purpose, rather than simply holding employment (Allan et al., 2014). Together, these frameworks suggest that supporting early-career professionals requires intentional efforts to strengthen the systems that facilitate development, particularly within remote or hybrid environments.

In higher education, students should be encouraged to think more critically about workplace structures. The concept of Decent Work means we should have students evaluating what in-person, hybrid and remote roles offer not just when it comes to flexibility, but also in relation to mentorship, visibility and proper interactions that will limit isolation as this can lead to meaningful opportunities for growth and advancement as well as a sense of fulfillment (Golden & Eddleston, 2020; Hughes et al., 2022; Yarberry & Sims, 2021). From an STF perspective, encouraging students to consider how various systems such as workplace culture, supervisory relationships and labor market conditions will shape their career trajectories is vital (McMahon & Patton, 2018). Career centers and academic programs can support this by working with students on early-career strategy, emphasizing the importance of workplace culture, supervision quality and developmental opportunities (Garis, 2014). Continued emphasis on experiential learning such as internships and practicums will be essential to students gaining structured experiences in in-person settings that will allow them professional socialization and relationship building (Zehr & Korte, 2020).

When it comes to organizational contexts, employers and HRD professionals play a significant role in mitigating gaps in development that come with remote work. Applying STF through an organization means implementing things like structured

onboarding, formal mentorship programs and early-career development pathways, which can help avoid some of the pitfalls that can come up in remote settings (Bauer & Erdogan, 2011; Gajendran et al., 2024). From a Decent Work perspective, organizations providing clear pathways for advancement, regular feedback and opportunities for meaningful engagement are needed (Becker, 2022). Programs designed for ECPs such as hybrid models with purposefully planned in-person interaction have shown promise in supporting both connection and development (Mazzei et al., 2023).

ECPs should strongly consider prioritizing roles that offer a robust workplace culture, mentorship programs and opportunities for in-person engagement, even if this means avoiding the flexibility of fully remote positions initially. Through the lens of STF, this reflects an understanding that early career development is deeply influenced by access to strong social and organizational systems. Similarly, from a Decent Work perspective, roles that support learning, connection and advancement are more likely to provide meaningful and sustainable career pathways. While remote work offers clear benefits, I think working in these settings may be more advantageous later in careers, once foundational skills and professional networks have been established.

In my current role within higher education, I see an opportunity to apply these insights by helping students more critically evaluate their career choices. By guiding students to consider not only what a job offers in terms of flexibility, but also how it supports their development within larger career systems, I can hopefully influence more intentional decision-making. Ultimately, supporting ECPs requires a shift in how remote work is understood, not as a universally beneficial option, but as a complex option that must be navigated thoughtfully to ensure access to truly meaningful and developmentally supportive work.

Conclusion

The rise of remote work represents a transition in how work will forever be structured. The meaningful benefits in flexibility, autonomy and access to opportunity cannot be overstated, however, as this

chapter has shown, these benefits are not experienced equally across all stages of career development. For ECPs, whose growth depends on mentorship, interpersonal connection and visibility and whose mental health can be negatively impacted at a key point in their career, fully remote environments may limit access to the very systems that support their long-term success. By applying the Systems Theory Framework and the concept of Decent Work, it becomes clear that remote work is not simply a neutral or universally beneficial arrangement, but one that must be evaluated in relation to developmental needs and broader career systems. Rather than rejecting remote work altogether, a more balanced approach like starting your career working more heavily in an office setting or finding the correct hybrid models may better support both immediate well-being and sustained career growth. Ultimately, supporting ECPs requires a shift in perspective; not just asking where work happens, but whether it provides the conditions necessary for meaningful, connected and developmentally supportive careers.

Biography

Brian Wray (he/him) is a higher education professional dedicated to supporting student and staff well-being. Working as the Senior Housing Administrator within Housing & Residential Life at the University of Minnesota, he brings a thoughtful, systems-oriented approach to his work. His

interests include college student mental health, organizational leadership and creating environments where students feel seen, supported and connected. A proud alumnus of the University of Minnesota–Twin Cities, Brian is currently pursuing his master's degree in Higher Education.

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SECOND HAND STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH CASES INFLUENCING ON UNIVERSITY STUDENT AFFAIRS STAFF: CONNECTING CAREER DEVELOPMENT THEORIES WITH EXISTING WORKPLACE TRENDS

William Ver Mulm

Introduction

Everyone is aware of second hand smoking and its implications. However, have all of us accounted for the student mental health hardships, such as anxiety and depression, on the second hand level and perhaps sufficient to argue also first hand participants? This scholarly chapter will focus on the second hand nature of student mental health cases influencing postsecondary collegiate student affairs professionals (SAPs) who have taken on roles of a traditional counselor, whether it is through informal hallway interactions or through advising sessions. The “second hand” derives from the notion of second hand smoke. Connecting to second hand smoking or as passive smoking coined by Fritz Lickint (Gourd, 2014), impacting the health of those exposed to it (SAPs), mental health carries the same or similar level of meaning in the sense that it affects work performance and life roles of SAPs who provide mental health care and advising sessions to university students. The author has sort of applied the second hand concept to mental health as he thinks it is relevant within the context of SAPs. This particular trend within higher education institutions is one of his research interests, not only as he has lived professional experience, but most importantly because he considers scholarly work written for SAPs in general to be limited, and he wants to contribute to the effort in adding and expanding the voices of SAPs and/or campus staff in general in the scholarly works.

The book chapter will provide an analysis of the current trend of second hand student mental health cases on SAPs, the integration of career theories into such phenomena, and the development of practical strategies to support and improve the existing student mental health cases influencing SAPs.

Analysis

To start, I want to disclose and share my lived experience with second hand student mental health cases, which influenced me as a SAP, specifically in my last role as an International Student Coordinator. This was my first job out of undergrad before pursuing my master’s degree. For the sake of confidentiality and simplicity, we will call this student Jay. As I toggled and opened the email, the photo disseminated first. At that moment, I just saw an arm without fully comprehending what happened to Jay. I was fortunate to have my direct supervisor and experienced student affairs colleagues just down the hall. They went further on disclosing to me that it was an attempt of suicide. Without hesitation, they give me directives on how to approach this “crisis.” I continue to be grateful that Jay’s condition improved. In hindsight, not only was I unprepared for the incident, but this was a lived personal testimony of experiencing an attempt of suicide as second handly influencing my perception of SAPs work and my emotional wellbeing, which also served as a birth bed for this project, as this resembles with other colleagues.

Despite scholarly work and research upon this particular workplace trend being limited, there remains emerging scholarship that is devoted to this topic. One relevant scholarly work that supports my topic is Mistretta and DuBois (2021) in the book "Creating Sustainable Careers in Student Affairs," which highlights the concept of compassion fatigue among SAPs. Should the second handed traumatic stress not be mitigated early on, compassion fatigue may develop, which entails the emotional exhaustion felt by the staff who have been exposed to the traumatic experience and who have a hard time coping with it while in their professional role (Mistretta and DuBois, 2021). Behaviorally, compassion fatigue manifests as irritability, impatience, moodiness, and sleep disturbances. Emotionally, such fatigue creates the feeling of powerlessness, anxiousness, guilt, anger, numbness, fearfulness, sadness, depression, emotional depletion, and hypersensitivity. The third dimension is cognitive, as the staff develops reduced concentration and self-esteem. Additionally, it will construct the rigidity of thought processes. In the relational dimension, the appearance of compassion fatigue manifests as withdrawal from the social public and a lack of intimacy. Physically, the staff can feel breathing difficulties, and, in severe cases, this can result in an impaired immune system. Spiritually, the individual can question the sense of purpose. Last but not least, in the professional dimension, compassion fatigue can inform diminished work performance, lower morale/motivation, task avoidance, negativity toward the work to be done, absenteeism, and exhaustion.

Career Theories and Framework

Within the academic landscape of career and vocational development, there have been many theories and frameworks developed and continue to be emerging for supporting the career-related topics. Since the inception of the vocational development tracking back to the early 20th century until the present day, the theoretical field has split into two camps: modern career development (e.g., Parsons' Person Environment Theory) and the postmodern (e.g., Happenstance Theory) career development theories and framework

(McDonald & Hite, 2023). Given the scope of this paper, the integration of career theories and frameworks will center upon the System Theory Framework and the Career Construction Theory. Acknowledging the limited research and scholarly work on this area, the theories utilized here are designed to only portray how it has the potential to worsen or complicate the ongoing second hand mental health cases influencing SAP life roles.

Integration of Second Hand Mental Health Cases with System Theory

The System Theory Framework in career developed by Wendy Patton and Mary McMahon (2018) suggests that career does not develop and is informed by one thing. There are many parts of life that interact with each other (e.g., family, school, person, society, culture, and economy). These influences are dynamic. It is not an exclusive list, but here are just two aspects that shape careers for SAPs and can complicate the implications of second hand student mental health on SAPs: university and cultural norms.

In the STF, the profession of SAPs is informed by the contextual factor, particularly the workplace: the university. Within this neoliberal collegiate context, students have been treated more as consumers and universities as service providers (Jayman et al., 2021; Mintz, 2021). A couple of common shifts are building and expanding auxiliary services and constructing supportive mechanisms to satisfy the needs of students. Despite the good intention of a surge in executing programming to tackle the mental health challenges, it positions the established institutional counseling offices overworking, resulting in a high turnover rate, and forces them to adapt to models and systems (e.g., triage model, outsourcing counseling related works) as it has been examined and studied by multiple scholars (Gorman et al., 2024; Walls, 2023). With the consequences of the shift in counseling models, the demands of counseling services construct a spillover ramification to SAPs, whether that appears in places such as direct interaction with students in the office, down the hall, or through advising a student-led club/organization. This additional workload is not merely just as simple as an additional task one does, but it also brings

unwanted stressors and burnout for many who hitherto have stacked plates full of professional responsibilities awaiting to be tackled.

Grounded in system theory, the second aspect is that aspects that inform student affairs professionals lie within the cultural norm. SAPs are unique in their own camp, consistently interacting, supporting, and advising students and coupled with the socialization of ideal worker norms (Mistretta & Dubois, 2021). Buying into these norms indicates SAPs have to always be available, emotionless, totally competent, and able to help everyone. This norm puts SAPs into boxes at the expense of their life roles beyond work and personal emotions tolls collected from engaging with second hand student mental health cases.

Integration of Second Hand Mental Health Cases with Career Construction Theory

Career Construction Theory, developed by Mark Savickas, holds that people can build their careers by giving meaning to their personal life experiences (Brown et al., 2020). In a nutshell, agency is given to the individual, allowing one to have the space to actively create and explain meaning in one's career. The following two paragraphs will dive into the aspects SAPs currently struggle with in their career meaning-making.

Student affairs professionals are not immune to mental health. With growing attention directed to students in the scope of collegiate mental health topics, there has been limited attention invested toward understanding the mental health narratives of the SAPs. However, one study has found that the prevalence of mental health challenges is similar among students, faculty, and staff (Meeks et al., 2023). Additional research on examining the mental health, service utilization, and related topics for collegiate faculty and staff derives from Healthy Minds Study since the winter of 2021. For the academic year of 2023-2024, it had released a report indicating the following significant trends: 43% of faculty and staff fallen under the lifetime diagnosis of mental disorders, 42% confirmed perceived public stigma, 35% had taken psychiatric medication past year, 32% had undergone mental health therapy/counseling in the past year, 16% for moderate

or severe depressive symptoms, and 15% for moderate or severe anxiety symptoms (Healthy Minds Network, 2024). Arguably, based on these, it can be concluded that SAPs are not emotionless, which circles back to the notion of the ideal worker norm. They struggle with making meaning in and beyond their career roles, which affirms the complication or worsening of the second hand mental health cases influencing them.

Within the Career Construction Theory, SAPs struggle to make meaning through emotion management. Arlie Russel Hochschild coined the term "emotional labor," which refers to the management of feelings (Steinberg and Figart, 1999). Scholarly work emerged as it went on elaborating that emotional labor is performed by means of three mechanisms: surface acting, deep acting, and natural expression (Lynch et al., 2021). The latter mechanism (natural expression) involves SAPs genuinely expressing their emotions. Their inner emotions match their external display. Surface acting involves adjusting one's outer emotional appearance without adjusting the internal experience of emotions. For SAPs, this reflects when one experiences emotional ups and downs with and from second hand student mental health cases and has to display calmness and a smile during and post-engagement with the incident. Deep acting, on the other hand, refers to moments when one alters one's inner feelings to outwardly display a certain emotion. This reflects when a SAP seeks mechanisms such as breathing techniques to display a positive outer appearance. Despite the utilization of such a mechanism for emotional labor depending on many factors, generally, university staff, which includes SAPs, fall under the surface acting and deep acting as the ideal norm and practices that perpetuate ongoing trends in the student affairs sectors (Lynch et al., 2021). The outcome of continuous surface acting and deep acting will result in difficulties in making meaning, labor burnout, additional stressors, and in the severe case can construct vulnerability to or in some level worsen/complicate the negative effects of second hand student mental health cases such as compassion fatigue that will influence SAPs' life roles (Lynch et al., 2021).

Practical Strategies/Intervention

Firstly, there is a need for additional academic scholars and researchers to (re)examine the effects of engaging students with mental health cases for student affairs professionals. In this academic work, many peer-reviewed articles and research papers focus on mental health, counseling service utilization, and related topics for students. There is only a limited amount of work focused on staff who engage with mental health. The limited topic in the public discourse centers upon ways to support student mental health, including topics like access to training, building relationships with students, mental health clubs and campus affinity groups, encouraging religious and spiritual practices, and modeling positive health and wellness behavior to students. This paper serves as an additional voice on expanding the current research topic, particularly for SAPs, and calls for greater attention within academia to examine, research, and support SAPs in their work roles and beyond, as they engage with students who have mental health needs.

Secondly, intervention(s) should be considered and carefully implemented from the top down. Right out of the bat, university policy and practices should consider dismantling the ideal worker norm that has, more or less, informed the work of SAPs. Acknowledging that changes do not happen so rapidly and it should never be that way, the initial step from the leadership is to establish acknowledgment that student affairs professionals are not immune to mental health; they have life roles that are beyond the university work; they are not emotionless; they are stressed, burned out, and can develop compassion fatigue after engaging with students who have mental health issues. Collins (2020), in her doctoral dissertation, incorporated Brenda Kucirka's framework for navigating the relationship between faculty and students with mental health issues to address faculty's experiences in engaging with mental health cases. Such a framework can provide valuable insights applicable to the context of SAPs. The framework laid out four dimensions: noticing, responding, experiencing, and reflecting (Collins, 2020). Many current practices enforce and stop at the stages of noticing and responding, with no reflection

of any stages of experiencing and reflecting. As a leadership team, when planning policy, benefits, and supports, it is very vital to take into account all four stages of the relationship between SAPs and students with mental health needs. Additionally, as leaders, examining the needs of their campus is important, as no two universities are the same. Some of the current institutional policies, support, and benefits that merit reexamination include but are not limited to sick leave policy, employee assistance program, on/off campus counseling services, pay scales, and workload transparency and dispersion.

The last intervention(s) derive from sharing with the SAPs, considering from the bottom up. Student affairs professionals have the agency to resist and challenge the current university culture, norms, and practices that (un)intentionally harm their work and roles beyond work. It is totally acceptable to have emotions as a staff, and that is what makes us human. When at a point of compassion fatigue, one should consider seeking counseling support, whether that is provided on campus or elsewhere.

Conclusion:

Second hand student mental health cases influence student affairs professionals. SAPs have attracted trivial attention from the scholarly work, resulting in such an effect being underrepresented in the scholarly work of mental health and inattentive from the public discourse. This scholarly paper aims to fill that gap, along with a limited number of emerging scholars who have devoted themselves to making the voices of SAPs louder within academia. As documented within the paper, if such second hand traumatic experiences are not mitigated early on, SAPs will develop compassion fatigue, which greatly impacts one's role(s) in work and beyond work. Via the lens of System Theory and Career Construction Theory, this provides factors such as university, ideal cultural norm, mental health condition of SAPs, and management of emotions that, more or less, if not worsen but complicate the implications of second hand student mental health cases on the roles of SAPs. To address the present need of SAPs, actions required should derive from the research to offer

insights, university leadership to implement thoughtful policies, supports, and benefits, and student affairs professionals from the bottom up as agents who voice their genuine needs. Attrition for SAP remains a headache topic for universities (Marshall et al., 2016), and perhaps by means of reexamining the second hand student mental health cases have a negative impact on SAPs collectively as scholars, universities, and SAPs, if not fully create a solution for such, but certainly can offer ways to lower such rate.

Biography

William Ver Mulm is the writer of this monograph chapter. Will is a master's student at the University of Minnesota in the Department of Organizational Leadership, Policy, and Development, majoring in the Higher Education track. He has a heart and interest in both professional and research-related areas in college-level student affairs, international students, and study abroad programs. This chapter shares his research on student affairs professionals.

He is both an insider and an outsider on this topic.

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ENHANCING EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT IN THE WORKPLACES

Emery Rwandanga

Introduction

In 2026, the global employee engagement decreased to 20% from 2025, and had its lowest level since 2020, which cost the world economy an estimated \$10 trillion in lost productivity (Gallup, 2026b). Employee engagement has been defined as an active, positive psychological state, operationalized as the direction of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral energy towards role performance in the presence of meaningfulness, availability, and safety (Hameduddin & Lee, 2021; Kwon et al., 2024; Shuck et al., 2016). This chapter examines how different career development frameworks can be applied to employee engagement and to dive deeper into how career professionals can advance employee engagement in the workplace.

Since 2022-2023, employee engagement in South Asia had the largest decline of 5% and no region of the world increased in engagement in the past year (Gallup, 2026a). Recently, the workplace has been going through continuous unknown changes, especially influenced by the advancement of new technologies and the new ways of working (Kwon et al., 2024). Employees are now expected to reskill and advance their expertise to save their career goals and employability in the fast changing labor market (Khan & Jin, 2024). As a result, career professionals must understand the constituents of the career, career development, and their relationship to the employee engagement in the workplace to enhance workforce engagement and adaptability to the changing market. A career is the continuous unfolding of a person's personal experiences over a period of time through promotions

or transfers to positions that demand more responsibility during one's working life (Suherman et al., 2023). To put it another way, the employee's expectation is based on what they do. Moreover, employees in the specific career want to be provided a wide range of opportunities in different positions and promotions that they see fit their dreams, which employee engagement would benefit.

Career success is composed of two main categories, subjective career and objective career. A subjective career is defined as the employee's internal apprehension and evaluation of their career across different dimensions that are important to the individual (Arthur et al., 2005). Employees have different career aspirations and values varying from factors such as income, status, the locations of the job, advancement opportunities, access to development opportunities, their work-life time management (Suherman et al., 2023). Objective career success is an employee's external factors involving occupation, mobility, family situation, task attributes, job level, and income. The objective career considers social roles and their influence based on shared social understanding, rather than individual aspirations. Therefore, these two sided-career success can co-exist on one's career trajectory, which is an important challenge for one's career identification and career success.

In addition to career success, it is important to understand career development as a driving mechanism of career success and employee engagement (Khan & Jin, 2024). Career development (CD) is one's process carried out by organization or career professionals to provide opportunities that show workforce

engagement and good performance for the employees to advance in higher positions or responsibilities (Suherman et al., 2023). Career development emphasizes the improvement of one's work abilities or skills to advance in a desired career position (Khan & Jin, 2024). A recent study showed that career development practices significantly aligned the organizational commitment and employee aspirations; which in turn, positively influenced employee engagement (Afrianty et al., 2025).

In the next section, we will explore how frameworks can help career professionals understand the issues of complex career development such as the intrapersonal system of the employee, employee-organizational relationship, and the environmental social system.

Theoretical Frameworks

Systems Thinking Framework (STF)

Systems Thinking Framework (STF) is defined as a complex of variables through which in interaction and in exchanges with their environment becomes a living or open system (McMahon & Patton, 2018). STF is composed of various key interrelated systems, such as the intrapersonal system of the employee, the social system, and the environmental social system within the period of time. And this could mean communications among employees, conflict management, decision making, knowledge transfer, and mentorship opportunities. Critics of STF point to its inability to correspond for other than Western middle-class populations, its lack of attention to social justice, and diverse populations that could hinder employee engagement for organizations that operate on the global scale (Šviráková & Bianchi, 2018).

To further illustrate, the Systematic Thinking Framework presented many contemporary career dynamics which considered the contexts in which individuals make sense of the continuous change of the job market (Brown et al., 2020). For example, the U.S. federal government had established efforts in CD practices to understand the changes and causal relationship between the workforce trends, skills assessment, recruitment processes, and organizational performance expectation (Hameduddin & Lee, 2021). Careers evolve

through interactions between individual, social, and environmental systems that employees explore to make meaning of their career trajectory. This framework emphasizes nonlinearity, recursiveness, and the broader social and labor market conditions that shape opportunities of productive employee's engagement and development. Also, Dost (2024) reinforced this framework by showing that employees leave jobs not only due to dissatisfaction but also when roles fail to support meaningful progress, reflecting the systemic forces shaping career decisions.

Social Exchange Theory (SET)

A second theory to explore employee engagement is Social Exchange Theory (SET). SET is a larger conceptual paradigm that considers the variation of different numbers of social scientific disciplines such as management, social psychology, and anthropology (Cropanzano et al., 2017). And, Cropanzano et al. (2017) also stated how the social scientific disciplines are composed by the process of reciprocal relationship, whereby an organization tends to repay the good (or sometimes bad) behavior or performance of its employees. If organizations were to establish career development programs, as we have explored the meaning of career development above, would it help employees shape good behaviors that would influence good performance at work? Employee engagement becomes a key mechanism that explains the relationship between organizational learning behaviors and employees proactively through knowledge sharing, adaptive and creativity (Eldor & Harpaz, 2016). SET also has positive and negative perspectives. Positive social initiative actions include activities such as providing organizational support or justice (Cropanzano et al, 2017). Negative social actions involve abusive supervision such as exclusivity based on gender or ethnic background (Cropanzano et al., 2017). These behaviors become the reciprocating responses between an organization and its employee.

How do career development initiatives influence employee engagement in the workplace for individuals and organizations? The next section explores how individuals, organizations, and external systems influence

the idea of employee engagement in the workplaces.

Literature Review

Individual Career Development

Individual career choices are mostly influenced by different factors; such as personal and cultural background, family background, and career aspirations (Suherman et al., 2023). In an employee's career development to reach a high level, the employee must prepare themselves through the career path that has been prepared by the organization where the employee works. The individual system is composed of different intrapersonal factors such as age, gender, self-concept, ability, disability, physical attributes, beliefs, values, personality, sexual orientation, aptitudes, and ethnicity (McMahon & Patton, 2018). For instance, the individual CD is a product of STF due to its complexity and nonlinearity as the individual makes meaning of it; organizations' career development initiatives often provide tools and training that provide opportunities to understand individual intrapersonal factors as a subjective career dimension to align individual aspiration to their objectives more effectively. An individual career is, therefore, part of one's subjective career and organization's way to enhance employment engagement.

Individual career development needs organizational structure changes. In one study, the implementation of CD programs in organizational structure led to individual career needs being adjusted to organizational expectations, such as a self-concept of motives, talents, abilities, attitudes, and values that were tailored to the needs of the organization (Afrianty et al., 2025). Individual career success varied from individual beliefs about their abilities in a specific environment, expected results on their behavior, and the engagement in behavior to improve the expected organizational objectives (Suherman et al., 2023). And, the degree an employee experienced defined conditions of meaningfulness, safety, and availability, the employee was more likely to experience higher levels of personal engagement (Shuck et al., 2016).

Organizational Career Development

Organizational career development initiatives are generally intended to enhance and advance employees' career abilities to meet the organizational needs as competent employees. Given the competitiveness, rapid improvement, and continuous change that have come to the current market, the emphasis has shifted from employees' proficiency to their ability to adapt to the current organizational challenges (Eldor & Harpaz, 2016). To close the gap of these employees who need to upskill to the changing trends, organizations carried out career development programs so that employees can still have high morale and performance (Afrianty et al., 2025; Suherman et al., 2023). Systems thinking became a lens through which to conceptualize constructs and understand fundamentals to career development such as employee's work, learning, and career identity (McMahon & Patton, 2018).

Effective organizational career development policies enhance the employees' attachment to the organization by aligning the personal career aspirations, subjective career, to the organizational goals. Organizations that seek to enhance employment engagement because of employment participation could lead to responsible work behavior that could promote organizational success (Suherman et al., 2023). This is supported by the SET framework, whereby organizations that need reciprocal relationship from their employee, needs to invest in its employee's career or expertise development to upskill to the expectations of the organization's goal. According to Afrianty et al. (2025), employee performance commitment was improved when they saw that an organization was invested in their professional development. Most effective models in organizational behavior shared few common features such as: organizational treatment towards its employees, an employee's reciprocal responses (both attitudinal and behavior) to the organizational action, and the relationship formation between the organization and its employee (Cropanzano et al., 2017). Another study recommended that the organizations should consider enhancing their learning initiatives, which could lead to more engaged employees, to make sure its employees were capable of continuous organizational changes (Eldor & Harpaz, 2016).

External Systems Perspective

SET is one theoretical framework that can be used to analyse the external career influences to the employees as they develop attitudes and behaviour. This theory offered a way to which an organization's CD program helped its employees interact with their environments, and how they defined their career based on their aspirations or organization expectations (Hameduddin & Lee, 2021). The influences representing the content of the social environment included peers, family, community, teams, workplaces, and educational institutions. Moreover, the environmental-social influences included political decisions, globalization, historical trends, socioeconomic status, geographical location, and employment market (McMahon & Patton, 2018). The process of these environments were explained in response to the interaction within and between these systems, and the change over time (Eldor & Harpaz, 2016). System thinking, on the other hand, enhances the thinking and analysis process in the whole dynamic rather than some parts for the employee's self-efficient. Last but not the least, social exchanges tended to be open ended and included different possibilities within the above social environment that could involve higher trust and flexibility between the organization and its employees (Cropanzano et al., 2017).

The constantly fast-paced changing environment of modern work is also challenging the relationship of the organization and its employees, particularly regarding the expectation from the employees and the desire to achieve organizational goals. The trends toward globalization and decentralization in workplaces had made it harder for supervisors to oversee their employees' performance, especially in desirable but hard to achieve areas such as proactivity and creativity (Eldor & Harpaz, 2016). As well, the employee engagement has caught the interest of policy-makers to find new ways of enhancing high levels of performance. As a result, large numbers of consultancy firms offered services such as employee engagement surveys; and the presence of widely cited case studies aimed to show how employee engagement could lead to the organizational profitability and competitiveness (Bailey et al., 2017). Thus,

promoting career development at workplaces was a more effective approach for managers and organization, one that focuses less on performance management and more on performance facilitation (Eldor & Harpaz, 2016).

Application to Employee Engagement

Recently, employee engagement in the workplace has been happening on a continuous basis and involves a wide range of career development activities, including training workshops, job experiences, self-directed learning, and social interactions with the people inside and outside the organization (Kwon et al., 2024). In fact, social exchange theory predicted that, in a positive career development outcome, the employees would tend to respond in kind by engaging in more positive reciprocating responses and/or fewer negative reciprocating responses (Cropanzano et al., 2017). And these responses can be explained into two types, relational and behavioral responses.

Also, career development policies provide opportunities for professional advancement and skill development that are significant motivators for employee engagement. Employees who understood that organization invested in their career development were more likely to feel valued and motivated, leading to a higher engagement level (Afrianty et al., 2025). For example, the same study found that employees were more engaged when they had a greater sense of psychological safety and remained dormant when they felt unsafe. And, the system theory framework becomes a complex and dynamic tool that helps to analyse the relevance of employee-organizational relationships in a similarly complex and dynamic society. However, its application through systemic thinking might not provide quick or easy results (McMahon & Patton, 2018). Thus, organizations or Human Resource Development (HRD) professionals should advocate for sustainable resources in the CD initiatives that could lead to employee engagement.

In contrast to career development positive effects to employee engagement, some scholars have argued that very little is known about employee engagement that is associated with desirable and extra-role behaviors such as proactivity, knowledge sharing, creativity

and adaptivity. There was still little about engagement results associated with any degree of certainty, and they did not really know what engagement meant, how to measure it, what its outcomes were, or what led to high levels of engagement (Bailey et al., 2017). The scholars also argued that the majority of organizational employees lacked appropriate positionality such as status, power, and credibility to influence their experience. Then, employees became disengaged by no real fault of their own but by the uncontrollable condition of work and the discriminatory exercise of power (Shuck et al., 2016).

Implications for HRD / Leadership

Human Resource Development (HRD) professionals should consider enhancing their training development programs, which could lead to more engaged employees, to make sure its employees are capable of continuous organizational changes (Eldor & Harpaz, 2016). In a current competitive job market, creative employees often have the flexibility to explore different opportunities and transition to other organizations seamlessly. The competitive job market, however, also increases the challenges for organizations aiming to retain its talented employees. The research findings had highlighted the critical role of managers and HRD professionals in recognizing and addressing the need to retain creative employees for organizational performance (Dost, 2025). HRD professionals could use STF's practical applications in career counseling and career assessment. For this reason, the significance of STF could help HRD professionals to apply CD with the help of feedback loops and systems thinking to understand the interrelationships and the process of recurring interactions of employees within and between its systems and sub-systems of the organization (McMahon & Patton, 2018). Therefore, HRD professionals need to enhance CD initiatives that considers the needs and aspirations of their employees, improving an individual and organization learning systems, and sustaining a human-centered competitive advantage.

A critical stance from HRD should aim to transform organizations into just and equitable workplaces. By using SET framework,

organizations or career professionals such as HRD can fully leverage the CD initiatives to assist employees in learning, adapting and thriving in these fast paced working environments using needs assessment, data-driven decisions, mentorship, coaching and succession planning. The research highlighted the need to encourage those in positions of influence to reflect on and explore the unique conditions of employee diversity within their workplace and how it can be turned into an organizational competitive advantage (Shuck et al., 2016). Thus, the HRD professionals should establish Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) program opportunities for diverse employees to feel invested in and belonging in the fast changing organizational environment.

Conclusion

In today's competitive and fast changing job market, creative employees often have many opportunities to explore and join other organisations that offer better prospects and favourable working conditions. From different perspectives, career development could be considered as a bridge between the organizational objectives and its employee competitive advantage to achieve its goals and retain its creative employee (Dost, 2025). By providing two key fulfilling needs, employee's well-being and motivation, employee engagement broadened our view of the meaning of the employee-organizational relationship (Eldor & Harpaz, 2016). Most importantly, systemic thinking could also be learned and the Systems Theory Framework might provide a map for doing so (McMahon & Patton, 2018). Thus, the topic of employee engagement continues to significantly promise an area for research and practice.

Biography

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GENERATION Z TRANSITIONING FROM COLLEGE TO THE WORKPLACE

Allison Maus

Entering the workforce for the first time has always been a time of uncertainty, but is especially now for Generation Z college students with heightened competition and technological changes that lead to unclear career growth (World Economic Forum, 2025). Generation Z includes those born between 1997 and 2012, often known for growing up with technology, as well as increasing social activism and authenticity (Popa, 2024). The current U.S. job market is one of the worst in the last few years for college graduates, with global entry-level job postings down by 29% in 2025 (World Economic Forum, 2025). The job market further pressures students handling personal stressors and concern about artificial intelligence (AI) impacting their future role. The job search and application process is stressful and often disheartening, and to add to that, education requirements have increased. Twenty five years ago, a young adult would be offered only 25% of today's sets of occupations requiring a Bachelor's degree (Grinstead, 2024). Generation Z needs experience for employment, but are not getting hired to have the necessary experience, as postings labeled as entry-level require three to five years of experience (Cuevas, 2026). As of March 2026, the average unemployment rate for U.S. citizens between the ages of 16 and 24 is 10.32%, well over double that of all ages 16 and over being 4.3% (U.S. *Bureau of Labor Statistics*, 2026). With all of these obstacles, the main objective of this chapter is to propose recommendations that colleges and workplaces can implement to better prepare and/or support Generation Z graduating students for this transition, as well as themselves. This chapter is inspired through

personal experience, as well as observing the experiences of others in Generation Z and wanting better outcomes for all stakeholders.

Mental Health Statistics

Generation Z are currently between the ages of 14 and 29, with most going through a critical stage of development with psychosocial and biological changes, all while navigating increasing autonomy, identity formation, and developing life skills (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2024). Now imagine experiencing these transitions at a time of constant exposures to social media, as well as a global pandemic. Social isolation, which has been intensified by the pandemic and limitations with face-to-face interactions, increases the symptoms of depression among youth (Popa, 2024). A 2022 survey conducted by the American Psychological Association (APA) found about 25% of Generation Z reported having more "bad" days than "good" days in a month. *Within this group*, 90% disclosed that they suffer from anxiety and 80% struggle with depression, suggesting these conditions are most common among this generation and have high impact on daily well-being (Popa, 2024). Some contributing factors to worsen the anxiety most Generation Z face are "...economic uncertainties, educational pressures, and the fear of building a career in an unpredictable professional environment" (Popa, 2024, pp. 25). Social media can also heighten this anxiety with the pressure of social comparison, questions surrounding when an individual can disconnect, and feelings of self-doubt or loneliness.

Social Media Facade

In this day and age, we are connected at all times through technology, which may seem positive. However, it can create tensions pertaining to when we can actually disconnect. Many organizations use apps that can be found on different devices, from the laptop you bring to work, the phone you carry in your pocket, and to the watch you wear on your wrist. When can we really turn off the work or comparison noise when we are always surrounded by it (DePetris & Tang, 2022)? Consistent exposure to technology can lead to anxiety and feelings of inadequacy, especially through frequent social comparisons (Popa, 2024). Generation Z is accustomed to sharing their lives online, particularly their successes. As of 2024, CNBC found that 57% of Generation Z want to be social media influencers, who often post about days in their lives and can only grow through likes and views from others (Malinsky, 2024). Mental health can be harmed when someone views the highlight reel of others, seeing their peers accept job offers on LinkedIn, while they are struggling to hear back for an interview. Other experiences, like career success or benefits of a job can be posted, but the reality and hardships of getting to that position may be ignored. Even if social media is not a concern, AI may be for graduating students whose entry-level roles could be replaced or redesigned.

Threats and Uncertainties of AI

Generation Z must stay up to date with AI and how it is involved in everything from job applications to integration in the everyday workplace. Although all generations must navigate how AI can impact their roles, Generation Z are the ones who are entering the workforce at this time of uncertainty. They do not have the experience older generations do with years under their belt to help make them a more desirable applicant. Although 32% of young people think that AI is positive for humanity, 64% of young people believe that the misuse of AI could result in substantial risk to humanity (Seifert et al., 2025). Young people want guidance about how to use AI appropriately, especially at a time where their instructors in college may have different

opinions about it and they have become used to having no set guidelines (Seifert et al., 2025).

AI creates fears about job insecurity and can lead to increased isolation with continued reliance on technology for connection and answers (Muruga et al., 2025). The National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) found that 66% of employers discuss AI in relation to tasks or functions within jobs and 18% of employers discuss AI in relation to redesigning roles (Gatta, 2026). With increased dependence on technology, employees experience digital fatigue without an escape from the screen. They may also experience surveillance stress for those whose employers monitor their productivity constantly with screen management or algorithmic checks (Muruga et al., 2025). There is a work-life imbalance, as employees always have their phones connected (Muruga et al., 2025). These concerns beg the question of how to allow for a work-life balance and wellbeing as desired for Generation Z.

Chaos Theory

The following frameworks can support Generation Z students in navigating this time of uncertainty and stress. The Chaos Theory of Careers (CTC) views reality to be complex and inherently uncertain, challenging individuals to see benefits of uncertainty and/or failure (Pryor & Bright, 2012). Students face a lot of unpredictability about the future with the current job market and rapid technological advancements, needing to stay adaptable to new demands and requirements (Popa, 2024). With constant shifts in what is required of Generation Z, they face constant pressure, which may be a factor in high cases of anxiety and depression. These students need reassurance in their time of transition, learning that uncertainty is not always a bad thing.

Career counselors can present this time as an opportunity to learn about oneself, experience personal development, and normalize rejections with CTC. In counseling sessions, counselors can identify where hardships may be for Generation Z students, whether it is within the job application process or something more personal, like experiencing loneliness. Benefits of the job exploration phase can come from informational interviews, discovering what

organizations or types of jobs that interest them, or even taking the time to thoroughly think about what career would be meaningful and fulfilling.

Cognitive Information Processing Theory

Self-reflection can be a powerful tool throughout this transition. Cognitive Information Processing Theory (CIP) works as an approach to career problem solving and decision-making, often used by career counselors (Osborn et al., 2018). Career counselors can assist students in meeting different domains of the Pyramid of Information Processing Domains (meta cognitions, CASVE, self knowledge, options knowledge). These domains align with the development of Generation Z, as they are experiencing a time of new self knowledge, looking into career options, working through the problem solving process with CASVE, and meta cognitions which involve understanding oneself. Breaking it down, the pyramid starts with self knowledge, which is about interests, skills, values, personality, employment preferences, and cultural experiences that can be used to align an individual with the right organization. Next is options knowledge, addressing what a person knows about the occupational, educational, and training options they are considering. This is where a career counselor can share their experiences, connect individuals in their network to students, and encourage informational interviews that give specific insights.

Organizations can clarify these expectations from the job post to the onboarding process. CASVE supports decision-making, including the process or styles an individual may have like emotional or rational thinking. Meta cognition involves self-talk, self awareness, and control. Looking more specifically into the CASVE cycle is important to help students make decisions during this time.

The CASVE cycle includes five steps from identifying an issue to implementing a solution: communication, analysis, synthesis, valuing, and execution (Osborn et al., 2018). Career counselors can use this cycle, locating where the student falls in it and determining how ready a client is to engage in career decision

making. For students who have an end goal of landing a job, students in their last year of school can work with their advisors to get through each stage. The CASVE cycle begins with communication, identifying a gap between oneself and their ideal career decision. Secondly is analysis, exploring and organizing options as they build upon their current knowledge. Synthesis entails options increasing as one explores, then narrowing them down with increased knowledge and self-understanding. Valuing involves a cost-benefit analysis of options compared to a variety of values. Lastly with execution, an option is tested. A career counselor can work with the student where they are at, for example in the communication step they can see what skills or education are needed to reach their ideal career and in the synthesis step they can narrow down options based on benefits or location of a job.

Student Support Background

In an attempt to promote student retention and prevent mental health issues, psychiatrist Frankwood Williams helped to implement university mental health programs (DePetrìs & Tang, 2022). Mental health programs expanded to involve psychologists, include social workers, and provide multidisciplinary services with counseling on socioemotional concerns, as well as vocational options as student bodies diversified (DePetrìs & Tang, 2022; Riba et al., 2015). As student needs changed, the American College Health Association (ACHA) was instrumental in standardizing and benchmarking college health services in 1961 (Riba et al., 2015). There has been a gradual increase in students seeking services, but also an increase in self-reported mental health issues (DePetrìs & Tang, 2022). Colleges should continue to explore this, as it may be difficult to support an increasing number of students with a consistent amount of student support staff. Undergraduate students at the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Studies (CAMS) program at New York University (NYU) state that their knowledge of youth mental health improves their quality of life and influences their vocational decisions (Riba et al., 2015).

This begs the question of how education can influence their students with specific

programs. The University of Minnesota (UMN), among other colleges, have required career courses in different colleges. For example, the UMN Carlson School of Management requires first-year students to enroll in a Design Your Life course for self-exploration, then a Design Your Career course to navigate the job search process. This course not only prepares students for networking and finding appropriate resources, but also teaches them how to leverage generative AI with brainstorming (Minnesota Carlson, 2024). One past student is quoted as saying, “This course gave me the tools to succeed” (Minnesota Carlson, 2024). As the job market continues to shift and technology advances, higher education entities must consistently ask themselves how to ensure their students have the tools to succeed and use them.

Recommendations for Colleges

With such a diverse generation, higher education professionals can try to make their career services more accessible and individualized through virtual and hybrid centers to serve students who are becoming more accustomed to online resources (DePetrus & Tang, 2022).

Career services can also partner with mental health services for more individualized support with resource sharing in case one service may better align to a certain situation (DePetrus & Tang, 2022).

Higher education professionals can act as “career influencers” in order to initiate and normalize more conversation about career possibilities (Ho & Stebelton, 2023). Outside of scheduled one-on-one meetings, these professionals can advance or create required courses for first-year students to consider their career early, as well as reflect on their skills like the UMN Carlson School of Management offers. Where they could improve, however, is integrating wellbeing practices into the course and discussing how the social environment may impact them.

By integrating these ideas into students’ heads early, these professionals can use chaos theory in normalizing exploring career options, building confidence with networking skills, or practicing self-advocacy in what they need.

Changing Priorities in the Workplace

Wellbeing is a priority for Generation Z, as 75% have left a job due to mental health (DePetrus & Tang, 2022). Generation Z desires integrated mental health services at work and more transparency. This desire conflicts with past generations prioritizing work over everything. Because of this shift in values, workplaces should find ways to center work-life balance.

Generation Z do not share the hustle culture that their predecessors do. NACE revealed that entry-level jobs requiring AI skills went from 13.1% in the Fall of 2025, to 35% in the Spring of 2026 (Gatta, 2026). With this increasing desire for AI literacy, clarity about expectations of AI is crucial.

Recommendations for Employers

Generation Z wants transparency, mental health and wellbeing included in the workplace (DePetrus & Tang, 2022). One way to improve wellbeing is fostering a culture of belonging, implementing peer support and mentorship programs (DePetrus & Tang, 2022). Mentees generally perform better in their programs after graduation than students without mentors, as mentors can expand mentee networks, give support and confidence, and provide insights of how to be more involved (Smith, 2014). Peer support can be a great bridge for newer employees to ask questions to people in their generation or similar role, as it may be intimidating with a senior colleague or supervisor at first.

While training a new employee, employers should ensure they are properly onboarding for the first time and do not assume experience. Too little support or moving too fast with onboarding can harm the organization in the future if the employees feels as though they should know new software they do not or cannot rely on others for clarification.

For employers using AI, they must be transparent with their uses and should involve employees in decisions on how to use it (Muruga et al., 2025). Employers who are redesigning roles or tasks due to AI need to be clear about changes and why they are occurring (Gatta, 2026). With heightened use of AI in job screening, 91% of employers in a survey with 900 U.S. hiring professionals, it is

critical to ensure fairness (Spencer, 2025). AI can have biases, so organizations that use it to make decisions about who to hire and are promoted should be monitored and still involve a human touch. Chaos theory can be utilized with these discussions, reassuring employees about their roles even if AI does redesign them and seeing changes as a way to grow AI literacy or learn new skills.

Recommendations for Generation Z Students

There has been a shift in necessary skills, like digital fluency and flexibility. Because of this, students need to be adaptable in growing their competencies and being open to new experiences (DePetrus & Tang, 2022). AI is a large example, where students can use the CASVE cycle to identify possible gaps with experience they could fill. For example, they can look at job postings in fields of interests to know what experiences are desired. After identifying the gap, they can look for workshops, webinars, or credentials to gain and become more competitive.

Students should be aware of the impact of their social media use, considering when they may go to social media for comfort or fall into an endless scroll. Not all social media is negative; it can be a great tool for communicating with friends or viewing new ideas. Students can use social media for a sense of belonging with virtual support groups or mental health apps, but should still find ways to be present, like going on a walk or finding a hobby that does not involve a screen (Popa, 2024). Taking the time to discover new activities can involve self knowledge from the Pyramid of Information Processing Domains, trying new projects or being in new settings to better understand oneself and how a workplace may align with those qualities, like having secure benefits or values in social justice.

Although it may seem obvious, students should access their career services team, meet with advisors at least once per semester, and use other resources available on campus before graduating. Many students regret not using their resources, as 31% of students from a 3,000 person survey have never interacted with career services at their university (Flaherty, 2023).

There are many benefits to using these resources. For example, graduating seniors who used at least one career service received an average of 1.24 job offers and every additional service used increased it by 0.05, with only a 1.0 average job offer from graduating seniors who used no services (VanDerziel, 2022). Not only are there career services available, but students should be aware of mental health services or academic success services like peer tutoring. While dealing with this transition, students should stop to take a breath, looking at what they have accomplished and taking time for themselves. There is no one solution for easing this transition, but if all stakeholders move towards prioritizing wellbeing, authenticity, and balance, it will become smoother.

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THE ENTRY-LEVEL CRISIS: WHY ORGANIZATIONS MUST REINVEST IN EARLY-CAREER TALENT

Alivia Perna

After putting in an ample amount of time, effort, expenses, and dedication into getting a degree, new graduates are prepared to enter the workforce. However, the labor market that recent graduates are entering is far from receptive to the new skills and perspectives they can bring.

Postings for roles requiring 0-2 years of experience have dropped 29% since 2024 (Randstad, 2025). A reason for this decline can be attributed to the rise of Artificial Intelligence (AI) popularity. AI is now performing routine tasks that were traditionally used to train early-career professionals (World Economic Forum, 2026). This puts Gen Z in a state of uncertainty, without true entry-level roles, graduates face first job precarity (Xu et al., 2024). This describes a situation where recent graduates' entry into the workforce is defined by instability, low pay, and a lack of legal or social protections (Kreshpaj et al., 2020). This is becoming all too common for early professionals entering the workforce. This moves beyond just having a “bad first job” to a real systemic issue where the entry-level points of a career are truly broken or even missing entirely (Xu et al., 2024). The purpose of this chapter is to explore the limited entry-level labor market and propose Structured Early Career Programs (ECPs) as a vital organizational intervention. This paper aims to demonstrate that investing in the early career pipeline is not only a policy necessity for organizational sustainability, but it is also a critical occupational health strategy to prevent professional withdrawal and burnout.

Issues With The Current Entry-Level Job Market

The current state of the entry-level job market is diminishing as we know it, as “entry-level” roles are now requiring years of experience or disappearing completely. When entry-level roles diminish or demand that the candidate needs years of experience, this creates a structural barrier that prevents the individual from entering the workforce (Lent et al., 1994).

These roles should provide the experience needed for later career advancement, but when the market starts demanding years of previous experience for the very roles that are supposed to provide such experience, this leads to serious barriers and negative health outcomes. Failing to find a job immediately after graduating isn't just a financial problem, but it can also permanently change one's career trajectory. Xu et al. (2024) found that entering the labor market with precarious employment has a long-lasting scarring effect on future income, job satisfaction, and even fringe benefits. This gives new graduates the risk of a lifetime of lower psychological and financial well-being due to the current market contraction.

The long-term effects aren't the only concern, as the immediate effects of the daily reality of the job search in a scarce market can be a form of chronic stress. Suleman and Carvalho's (2023) study examined recent graduates during the pandemic, which mirrors the current market shifts we are seeing, and found that unanswered applications and cancelled internships leave graduates in a state

of limbo. This led to deep suffering manifested through anxiety, fear, and disappointment. New graduates are in a constant state of stress as they try to navigate the scarce market, facing constant rejection or not hearing back at all. This state of limbo can also create a perfect environment for Learned Helplessness (Seligman & Maier, 1967). When graduates are constantly putting an extensive amount of time and energy into applying to job after job, and consistently lack an output of an interview or hearing back at all, the brain begins to believe that the situation is uncontrollable and begins to believe that no matter how hard they try, their actions cannot influence their environment. This loss of agency is a critical health concern as it ties back to the anxiety, fear, and disappointment Suleman and Carvalho (2023) found, as it serves as a foundational element of clinical depression and professional withdrawal.

Impact On New Grads

New graduates are entering a new phase of life and are in a period of major transition.

Although this time period has always been a time of uncertainty for new graduates and can be a challenging transition, the current labor market introduces structural barriers through the growing scarcity of entry-level opportunities. Starcic et al. (2017) explained how this age group of emerging adulthood heavily uses work to help build their new professional identity during this time of transition. When they face a scarce job market and are unable to find employment, or employment that isn't in their desired career fields, this can lead to their identity being fragmented. According to Topa et al. (2022), new graduates entering a scarce labor market often experience a psychological contract breach. This occurs when graduates feel as if the "social contract" is broken when their degree doesn't directly lead to a professional role, which can result in bitterness and low commitment. This can ultimately lead to underemployment, with nearly 42.5% of graduates confined to a role below their skill level to make ends meet (Federal Reserve Bank of New York, 2025). Working in underemployment roles can be extremely disheartening for individuals, as they have

spent so much time and effort acquiring the educational background to succeed in their fields, and the market leaves them no choice but to take roles below their qualifications. Lee et al. (2021) conveyed how underemployment on mental health can be just as bad as being unemployed. These effects can continue well beyond the initial underemployment role, as early set experiences of underemployment can contribute to long-term scarring effects such as diminished career advancement opportunities, reduced earnings trajectories, and sustained job dissatisfaction (Xu et al., 2024). Even when new grads do get jobs, if their working environment is ruthlessly competitive or precarious, their ability to learn and grow from this experience is stunted by fear caused by the environment (Akkermans et al., 2013). Because the transition into a scarce market so clearly affects not only professional identity but also mental health outcomes, addressing this gap is essential for both the economic stability of the workforce and the long-term health of emerging adults.

Different Perspectives

In the current 2026 economy, companies view hiring and onboarding new employees as a high-risk expense that they are not willing to take on early-career professionals (IMF, 2026). It takes valuable time and effort to hire and train new staff, and in this ever-changing technological development and economic climate, hiring true entry-level employees can lead to immediate burnout for senior mentors and a drop in project quality (WEF, 2026). Not only are senior employees working endlessly to keep up with their own task duties, but the addition of entry-level workers that they are responsible for just adds to the never-ending stress. This can be why we are seeing companies move towards hiring candidates with more experience, as they require less "hand-holding" than early career professionals. By doing so, companies are actually working towards preventing burnout in their existing teams and senior employees by hiring individuals who can work independently, rather quickly. Research suggests that in high-pressure industries, the overwhelming demands placed on staff can lead to burnout, making experienced hires a protective measure for the organization (Franz et al., 2023). By prioritizing

such independent workers, companies lessen the risk of burnout for both their senior mentors and the early-career professionals who would otherwise be entering an overwhelming and undersupportive environment.

On the other hand, refusing to hire entry-level roles, companies are creating a ticking time bomb. By never hiring junior staff, the senior employees will never have the opportunity to mentor and develop the new generation of staff, which creates exponential issues when it is time for the senior staff to retire. Hiring only experienced hires can be a fix in the short term for immediate productivity; however, in the long term, it will be more expensive for the company because it will not be building its own pipeline of talent. Graham (2009) suggested that investing in early-career staff is a policy necessity for organizational sustainability. Relying solely on the external market to “buy” talent (hire experience) is significantly more expensive than “building” talent internally with early career professionals. By failing to invest in their own pipeline of future talent, companies will have to heavily rely on and be vulnerable to external markets that can often fluctuate. Companies lose the opportunity to create and foster loyalty from the ground up.

Career Development Frameworks

Organizational Framework: Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model

According to the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model, professional well-being is a result of balance between environmental pressures and supportive assets (Salmela-Aro & Upadyaya, 2018). One's health is negatively impacted when the demands are high and resources are low, as this can lead to exhaustion and burnout. On the other hand, employees are more motivated when there is a high amount of resources available to them, leading to higher engagement and productivity. For current early-career professionals, the scarcity of entry-level roles represents a significant “demand” that is initiating negative health outcomes before formal employment even begins. This approach specifically addresses the entry-level crisis by reframing the job search from an individual failing into a

systemic imbalance of demands. Without the needed organizational resources, such as the structured mentorship found in Early Career Programs, this energy depletion caused by a scarce market leads to a health impairment process that begins during the job search (Suleman & Carvalho, 2023) and then predicts high levels of emotional exhaustion once the individual eventually enters the workforce (Franz et al., 2023).

Structured Early Career Programs (ECPs) are formalized organizational initiatives designed to support the transition from education to full-time work. These programs can include components such as structured mentorship from senior staff, rotational positions, skills training, and structured feedback. ECPs differ from traditional onboarding as they provide sustained developmental support, allowing early-career professionals to build competence and confidence in a lower-risk environment. ECPs not only aid the transition into full time work, they also show the early career individual how committed the organization is to their long-term success.

Early Career Programs (ECPs) serve as a critical organizational resource within the JD-R framework, specifically designed to bridge the gap between academic theory and professional practice. Organizations must shift their focus to understand the investment in early-career staff as human capital. These individuals are the next generation of leaders and decision makers, and are key to an organization's long-term success (Graham, 2009). It is the organization's responsibility to understand the long-term importance of providing the foundation for a future leadership pipeline. Structured support isn't hand-holding, but rather a necessary business strategy designed to ensure long-term organizational resilience.

Individual Frameworks: Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) and Planned Happenstance

Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) (Lent et al., 1994) explains how individuals develop their career interests and make choices on self-efficacy, which is one's confidence in their ability to do the tasks, and outcome expectations, if their efforts will lead to success within their work. In a market with limited

entry-level roles, new graduates are facing a unique challenge of negative environmental feedback. When one applies to 100 jobs and hears virtually nothing back, their self-efficacy drops. This leads new graduates to believe that they are not career-ready, and can lead to learned helplessness (Seligman & Maier, 1967), as mentioned earlier. In SCCT, barriers are often divided into Distal, long-term, and Proximal, immediate barriers. The current state of the job market, with limited entry-level roles, acts as a proximal barrier that prevents graduates from turning their career choice goals of wanting a job into the choice actions of starting a career. This effectively stalls the transition into the workforce. Over time, the mental health effects and burnout resulting from this tumultuous entry can solidify into a distal barrier, potentially hindering their career development for years to come (Thern et al., 2023).

To navigate the structural barriers of the 2026 market, early career professionals can adopt the framework of Planned Happenstance (Krumboltz et al., 1999). This framework moves away from the more traditional “linear” career path and shifts focus towards non-linear exploration. It looks at taking unplanned events and transforming them into career opportunities. This is especially relevant for new graduates entering a limited entry-level job market, as they can view the rejection as redirection. This framework stresses the importance of being open-minded and flexible to new experiences and taking chances whenever possible. Krumboltz (1999) identifies five skills that turn chance encounters into career opportunities, and these can be great skills for new graduates to have while navigating the job market. These skills include: Curiosity, Persistence, Flexibility, Optimism, and Risk-Taking.

Implications for Individuals

New graduate individuals who are entering this scarce market can use Planned Happenstance and Krumboltz's (1999) five skills to help leverage themselves in a competitive market. The first skill is Curiosity, and this can help new graduates keep an open mind to explore different opportunities that may have been outside of their original path. Curiosity encourages graduates to explore

adjacent industries and how their skills may be applied to different, but similar, fields to help broaden the horizons of opportunities available to them. The second skill is Persistence, and this can be directly useful to help address the effects of learned helplessness (Seligman & Maier, 1967). Having persistence within this framework means continuing to network and put yourself out there, even when applications are being ignored or not getting a response. Persistence can help move a “no” as a personal failure to understanding that it is time to try something else, and they are one step closer to the finish line. The third is Flexibility, and this can help one be more fluid to freelance opportunities, job shadowings, and internships, to actively look for ways to extract professional skills from such opportunities. The fourth is Optimism, and this can help with viewing the current market contraction just as a transition period rather than a permanent end. This can work as a psychological shield against the scarring effect (Xu et al., 2024). Lastly, Risk-Taking is reaching out to companies, individuals, attending events, and actively putting themselves out there to increase their chances of a chance opportunity and meeting individuals who can help them on their career journey. By cultivating these skills, graduates can transform this state of limbo described by Suleman & Carvalho (2023) into a period of active exploration. Individuals can use networking and digital identity construction to create chance opportunities, effectively reclaiming the agency lost to learned helplessness.

Implications For Higher Education

Practices that Higher Education institutions can implement to help better prepare their students to be career-ready, even in a limited entry-level job market, are to implement more experiential learning in the curriculum. Of course, internships are a great way to acquire entry-level skills, but for actual coursework, classes should include project-based learning (PBL) that is developed with the college and local industries to create a curriculum to give students experience to solve real-world problems and learn basic skills needed in the roles to be a part of credit-bearing courses. PBL functions as a form of action learning, where

the curriculum is designed to solve real-world problems and develop competencies demanded by the current labor market (Federal Reserve Bank of New York, 2025; World Economic Forum, 2026). Curriculum can also be centered around ensuring job skills are being shown through job shadowing events or having guest speakers from the industry in the classrooms to talk to students about what is needed for success in their field. Having this alignment between academia and industry ensures that students are actively building the skills and experiences necessary to overcome structural entry barriers (Graham, 2009). This not only helps students gain the experience demanded by entry-level roles but also builds their confidence and self-efficacy to do the work and interview well (Lent et al., 1994).

Implication for Organizations

Implications for HR/HRD and Organizations can be practiced by implementing and understanding the importance of Structured Early Career Programs. Within the framework of the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model, Structured Early Career Programs (ECPs) provide the “resources” that are missing from the current state of many new professionals' working experiences. While the market provides the “demand” of uncertainty and high competition, ECPs provide the counteractive force. Akkermans et al. (2013) found that such career competencies can act as personal resources that allow employees to effectively navigate high job demands while still maintaining engagement and help prevent negative health outcomes. Lee et al. (2024) found that participation in early-career leadership programs has led to increased confidence in leadership potential and improved leadership skills. The findings also included greater alignment between well-being and leading. This suggests that an ECP is not only a tool for long-term career success, but a primary intervention for actively protecting workers' mental health during a vulnerable transition period. The consequences of failing to provide such resources are measurable and severe. If an ECP is not present, the result is the burnout that is observed throughout the modern workforce. Early-career professionals are at the highest risk for the cynicism

and emotional exhaustion dimensions of burnout (Franz et al. 2023). By failing to implement structured resources, organizations inadvertently accelerate this health-impairment process.

Given this, ECPs serve a dual purpose: it acts as a strategic program for talent development and work as an occupational health intervention that prevents premature professional withdrawal. From an organizational viewpoint, implementing ECPs allows organizations to build talent internally at a lower cost rather than “buying” experienced professionals from an increasingly expensive and volatile external market. By investing in the early stages of the career pipeline, organizations are building their next generation of future talent without needing to have long-term recruitment expenditures and minimizing the premium costs associated with mid-to-senior level headhunting. ECPs can also serve as a critical bridge for knowledge transfer. This helps ensure that skills from senior staff are passed down before they reach retirement age, building internal mobility and a strong connection and loyalty to its early career employees (Graham, 2009).

Conclusion

Moving forward, it is important to keep advocating for the best practices in higher education to continue to make their students as career-ready as possible within an ever-changing environment. It is also important to advocate for organizations to understand the importance and adapt Structured Early Career Programs. Organizations must realize that building talent is a policy necessary for their own survival (Graham, 2009). There also needs to be a commitment to integrating mental health awareness into career coaching and early career development. By utilizing frameworks such as Job Demands-Resources (JD-R), Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT), and Planned Happenstance, individuals and organizations together can work to dismantle internal distal barriers that new graduates develop after facing a scarce market. We cannot expect the next generation to be career-ready if the industry refuses to provide the readiness phase. We must repair the psychological contract to ensure that the transition into the

workforce is a point of growth, rather than a point of trauma (Topa et al., 2022).

Biography

Alivia Perna is currently pursuing a Master's degree in Human Resources Development at the University of Minnesota, where she also works in HR for the university. She is deeply passionate about the intersection of higher education and human resources, focusing on how organizational support systems can foster growth and success.

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COLLEGE GRADUATES' JOB TENURE FROM A SKILLS MISMATCH PERSPECTIVE

Yerbol Moldakassimov

Job tenure, or the time an individual spends in one position (Dawis, 1980; Ng & Feldman, 2013), is an important factor in college graduates' school-to-work transition and early career development (Deming, 2025; Gebel, 2010). According to Deming (2025), a substantial share of wage growth among college-educated workers occurs within jobs rather than through job-to-job mobility, particularly when graduates sort into professional, nonroutine occupations. By contrast, temporary employment, as the opposite of stable tenure, may be associated with initial wage penalties and repeated cycles of temporary work among labor market entrants (Gebel, 2010). Underemployment among U.S. college graduates, with almost half of graduates entering jobs that do not require a college degree (Burning Glass Institute & Strada Institute for the Future of Work, 2024), further underscores the importance of job tenure in qualified employment. In other words, sustained tenure in qualified employment may be one important condition through which college graduates realize stronger wage growth and return on their degree, especially when they enter occupations that make meaningful use of their education and skills.

In the career development field, job tenure is a central concept in the Theory of Work Adjustment (TWA). Dawis (1980) argues that tenure requires both minimal satisfaction and minimal satisfactoriness. On the one hand, employees need to experience at least a minimum level of job satisfaction, which relates to whether their needs are met in the workplace. This focus on needs connects TWA to the concepts of decent work and

meaningful work. Decent work refers to baseline workplace conditions, including “the promotion of rights at work; employment; social protection; and social dialogue” (Blustein et al., 2023, p. 290). Decent work can also be understood as a precondition for meaningful work, which Rosso et al. (2010) describe as work that is both significant and positive in value.

On the other hand, employees must demonstrate at least minimal satisfactoriness from the employer's perspective. From this perspective, satisfactoriness does not require perfect skill alignment; rather, it requires a sufficient level of correspondence between the worker's abilities and the employer's performance expectations. However, since perfect skill alignment is often difficult to achieve in practice (Carvalho et al., 2026), it is more realistic to expect some degree of skills mismatch, defined as a discrepancy between the skills workers possess and the skills employers need (International Labor Organization, 2020). This raises an important question for career development and higher education professionals: how do skills mismatches relate to job tenure, and how do different types of skills mismatches affect employee satisfaction, employer-perceived satisfactoriness, or both?

This chapter argues that different forms of skills mismatch shape early-career tenure differently because they influence either the employee's satisfaction, the employer's assessment of satisfactoriness, or both. Using the Theory of Work Adjustment, together with decent work and meaningful work perspectives, the chapter examines how

various forms of skills mismatch may affect the conditions under which early-career graduates remain in or leave their jobs. The discussion may inform the work of career development and higher education professionals as they support college students, recent graduates, and early-career workers navigating the transition from education to employment.

Employee Satisfaction and Satisfactoriness Across the Typology of Skills Mismatch

The typology of skills mismatch discussed in McGuinness et al. (2018) and McGuinness et al. (2025) provides a useful starting point to examine how skills mismatch relates to employee satisfaction and employer-perceived satisfactoriness. In this chapter, skills mismatch serves primarily as a condition that can influence satisfaction and satisfactoriness, which in turn shape job tenure. Namely, the focus is on the pathway from skills mismatch to satisfaction and satisfactoriness, and then to tenure. Three groups of skills mismatches are considered next.

Vertical Skills Mismatch

The first group includes vertical skills mismatches, such as overeducation, undereducation, overskilling, and underskilling. Overeducation and undereducation occur at the degree level, while overskilling and underskilling happen at the skill level.

Overeducation refers to a situation in which an employee has educational qualifications higher than those required by the job (McGuinness et al., 2025). Overeducation is negatively associated with job satisfaction, either directly (Sam, 2020) or indirectly through wage penalties (Chuang & Liang, 2022; Sun & Kim, 2022). This connection is important from a decent work perspective because adequate pay is one of the conditions that may support early-career graduates' satisfaction and well-being (Blustein et al., 2023).

The relationship between overeducation and employer-perceived satisfactoriness is more complex. Although many studies do not use the term satisfactoriness directly, their findings can be interpreted as relevant to employer-side evaluations of worker adequacy, productivity, and retention risk. Employers may view overeducated workers negatively if they perceive them as likely to

leave for better opportunities. However, this depends on worker motivation and context. For instance, Kulkarni et al. (2015) suggest that some overeducated workers may be “intentional misfits” who knowingly choose jobs below their formal qualification level. In such cases, overeducation may not necessarily signal poor fitness or low commitment. Moreover, hiring overeducated workers may raise firm productivity in some contexts, particularly in high-tech industries where higher educational attainment may contribute to stronger performance (Kampelmann et al., 2020; Vermeulen & Waroquier, 2021). Thus, overeducation may negatively affect satisfaction, but its relationship to satisfactoriness may vary depending on the job, sector, worker motivation, and employer expectations.

Undereducation refers to a situation in which an employee has educational qualifications lower than those required by the job (McGuinness et al., 2025).

Undereducation may be positively associated with employee satisfaction when workers receive wage premiums or experience upward mobility despite lacking the formal credentials typically associated with the role (McGuinness et al., 2025). In this sense, undereducation may support satisfaction when the job provides access to adequate pay, advancement, and recognition. However, undereducation may also create challenges for employer-perceived satisfactoriness. For example, undereducated workers may contribute less to firm productivity in some contexts (Kampelmann & Rycx, 2012), suggesting that employers may perceive a gap between formal educational requirements and worker performance.

Overskilling refers to a situation in which a worker possesses more skills than are required for the job (McGuinness et al., 2025). Its relationship to job satisfaction is often similar to that of overeducation, as workers may feel their abilities are underused, which can reduce motivation, engagement, and perceived job quality (McGuinness et al., 2018). From a TWA perspective, overskilling may weaken satisfaction because the work environment does not adequately reinforce the worker's abilities, interests, or aspirations. However, the relationship between overskilling and employer-perceived satisfactoriness currently

remains underexplored (McGuinness et al., 2025).

Underskilling refers to a situation in which a worker has fewer skills than are required by the job (McGuinness et al., 2025). Underskilling may negatively affect employee satisfaction. Rafferty (2020), for example, shows that workers with lower levels of qualification may report discriminatory treatment, which can be understood as a violation of the rights-based conditions associated with decent work (Blustein et al., 2023). Underskilling may also create challenges for employer-perceived satisfactoriness if the worker is unable to meet expected performance standards.

Horizontal Skills Mismatch

A horizontal skills mismatch, also known as a field-of-study mismatch, occurs when a worker is employed in a job unrelated to their main field of study (McGuinness et al., 2025). Like overeducation, horizontal mismatch is often negatively associated with job satisfaction. Workers may feel that their career path is disconnected from their field of preparation, or that their employment outcomes do not justify their educational investment. Horizontal mismatch may also reduce satisfaction through wage penalties (Somers et al., 2019), especially when combined with overeducation (Montt, 2017). From a decent work perspective, these wage effects matter because inadequate or lower-than-expected pay may weaken workers' perception that they have corresponding economic returns.

Other Types of Skills Mismatches

Other types of skills mismatches include skills shortages, skills gaps, and skills obsolescence (McGuinness et al., 2025). These mismatches do not fit neatly into vertical or horizontal categories and may occur at either the individual or organizational level.

Skills shortages refer to a shortage of suitably qualified or skilled external candidates, often reflected in hard-to-fill vacancies (McGuinness et al., 2025). At the organizational level, skills shortages may negatively affect firm productivity (Brunello & Wruuck, 2021; Haskel & Martin, 2001). However, their relationship with employee satisfactoriness may be more nuanced. Unlike some forms of mismatch that indicate a worker's poor fit with a specific

job, skills shortages reflect a broader labor market condition in which employers may struggle to find ideal candidates. In such contexts, employers may be more willing to hire approximate matches, especially when missing skills are developable through on-the-job training. This assumption is consistent with research showing that firm-sponsored training can occur when employers expect productivity gains from developing workers' skills (Acemoglu & Pischke, 1999). It is also consistent with evidence that employers may adjust hiring standards in response to labor market conditions; when qualified workers are scarce, employers may reduce education or experience requirements to fill positions (Modestino et al., 2016). From a TWA perspective, this means that the threshold for minimal satisfactoriness may shift depending on the labor market context. However, more research is needed to examine how skills shortages affect employer evaluations of satisfactoriness across industries and economic conditions.

Skills gaps are often described as an aggregate expression of undereducation and underskilling from the employer's perspective (McGuinness et al., 2018). In practical terms, skills gaps occur when workers or job applicants lack the skills employers believe are necessary for effective performance. However, the literature on skills gaps remains underdeveloped compared with research on overeducation, undereducation, and field-of-study mismatch (McGuinness et al., 2018). From a TWA perspective, skills gaps may undermine employee satisfactoriness when workers cannot meet minimum performance expectations. At the same time, skills gaps may be reduced through training, mentoring, job redesign, or clearer communication of expectations.

Skills obsolescence occurs when a worker's skills lose value over time. This may happen due to aging and physical changes, technological or economic transformations, or the underuse of skills, leading to skill atrophy (McGuinness et al., 2025). The relationship between skills obsolescence and satisfaction may vary by field. In STEM occupations, for example, higher starting salaries may compensate for rapid technological change and the risk of skill obsolescence, even when wage

growth later becomes flatter (Deming & Noray, 2020). Skills obsolescence may also affect labor market re-entry after unemployment. For example, long-term unemployment can reduce the likelihood of receiving a job interview and re-entering employment (Apergis & Apergis, 2020), suggesting that employers may interpret skill deterioration or employment gaps as signals of reduced satisfactoriness from a TWA perspective.

Across these different types of skill mismatches, a common theme is that mismatches matter for tenure not simply because a worker is “matched” or “mismatched,” but because each type of mismatch affects employee satisfaction, employer-perceived satisfactoriness, or both. Therefore, the most important question for career development and higher education professionals is not only whether a mismatch exists, but which side of the satisfaction–satisfactoriness relationship it affects, how, and whether the mismatch can be reduced over time through learning, adjustment, or job redesign.

Potential recommendations and implications for career development and higher education professionals

The findings above suggest that skills mismatch should not be treated as a single problem with a single solution. Rather, different forms of mismatch may threaten job tenure through different pathways. From the perspective of the Theory of Work Adjustment, career development and higher education professionals should therefore ask not only whether a mismatch exists, but whether it affects satisfaction, satisfactoriness, or both. This distinction is important because mismatches that weaken both sides of the satisfaction–satisfactoriness relationship are likely to be especially critical for job tenure. In contrast, mismatches affecting only one side may be more manageable if workers, employers, and institutions can provide adjustment, training, or job redesign. This section builds on previous insights to suggest a way forward for career development and higher education professionals.

Career development

For career development professionals, the first implication is the need to move from general employability support toward more mismatch-sensitive career guidance. Akkermans and Kubasch (2017) identified employability as one of the major trending topics in career research, but more recent work suggests that employability support should become more individualized. For example, Blokker et al. (2025) found that career competency profiles developed during the final year of education predicted employment status, perceived employability, underemployment, and transition satisfaction one year after graduation. This idea is relevant because underemployment and transition satisfaction are closely connected to mismatch and early-career tenure. Career counselors could therefore assess not only whether graduates have “employability skills” in general, but also whether they have the specific career competencies needed to identify mismatches, communicate their value to employers, and decide whether to stay, adjust, or move to a better-fitting job.

A second implication is that career development practice should distinguish between mismatches that mainly threaten satisfaction and those that mainly threaten satisfactoriness. When graduates experience overeducation, overskilling, or horizontal mismatch, counseling may need to focus on meaning, identity, expectations, and strategic mobility. Career practitioners can help clients evaluate whether the mismatch is temporary, whether job crafting or internal mobility is possible, and whether the current job can serve as a stepping stone toward better-matched work. By contrast, when graduates experience underskilling, skills gaps, or skills obsolescence, counseling should focus more directly on skill

development, performance expectations, feedback seeking, mentoring, and employer-supported learning. Recent career adaptability research offers helpful insights into how it can help individuals cope with changing work requirements and career insecurity. Spurk et al. (2025), for example, found in a time-lagged study that career adaptability was negatively related to later career insecurity and exhaustion, suggesting that adaptability may support more sustainable career adjustment under conditions of uncertainty.

Higher education

In higher education, the main implication is that employability work should be more intentionally embedded in the curriculum, advising, and employer partnerships. Recent higher education research shows growing interest in employability-building activities, curriculum-based employability development, and other areas. For example, Jackson (2024) examined student participation in employability-building activities and their contribution to graduate outcomes, while Jackson and O'Connor (2024) focused on curriculum approaches to strengthening employability and improving graduate outcomes in science, technology, and mathematics disciplines. These studies are relevant to job tenure because they suggest that employability should not be treated as an optional career services activity separate from academic learning. Instead, programs can help students develop clearer evidence of their skills, understand field-specific expectations, and reduce the likelihood of both horizontal and skill-level mismatches after graduation. Recent evidence also indicates that project-based learning can improve problem-solving skills and that problem-solving skills and career adaptability predict employability, supporting the value of applied learning models (Lee & Lee, 2024). However, more research is needed to connect these practices to longer-term outcomes such as field matches, satisfaction, supervisor-rated satisfactoriness, retention, and wage growth. This would help higher education professionals move beyond the question of whether graduates get jobs and toward the more career-development-oriented question of whether graduates enter jobs in which they can stay, grow, and experience work as both decent and meaningful.

Biography

Second-year PhD student in Organizational Leadership and Policy Development at the University of Minnesota. 15-year work experience in Kazakhstan as a policy analyst of higher education, technical and vocational education, workforce needs forecasting as part of the Education and Science Ministry, the corporate sector, and as a national expert on international education and workforce development projects commissioned by the OECD, the UNDP, the World Bank, and Boston Consulting Group.

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APPLYING CAREER
DEVELOPMENT
MODELS TO
SUPPORT SPECIFIC
POPULATIONS

SUPPORTING PHD GRADUATES NOT ENTERING TENURE-TRACK CAREERS

Luke Feuling Porter

While doctoral programs may prepare students to enter tenure-track positions in academia, the reality is that most PhD graduates do not enter tenure-track positions after graduating. Globally, 50% of PhD graduates do not stay in academia (McAlpine & Amundsen, 2019). In the US, only 23% of PhD graduates in the life and health sciences enter tenure-track positions (Langin, 2019). In the humanities and social sciences, only about 15% of U.S. PhD graduates enter tenure-track positions (Etmanski et al., 2017). In terms of competitiveness for PhD graduates seeking tenure-track careers, just 20% of all U.S. doctoral-granting institutions supply 80% of all U.S. tenure-track faculty, so students may be disadvantaged solely based on their program (Flaherty, 2022). In terms of available jobs, only one-third of higher education institutions currently have full-time teaching jobs available (Linder et al., 2020). The tenure-track job market has essentially disappeared for individuals earning doctoral degrees (Skinnell, 2023). This trend has become so prevalent that the term alternative academic (alt-ac) has been coined for individuals who have trained to become faculty but must pivot to some other career option due to lack of available tenure-track positions (Linder et al., 2020). This problem is not new, as researchers have been studying the challenges PhD students have experienced securing jobs since the 1990s (Morettini et al., 2019). If decades of research have made it clear that most PhD earners do not enter tenure-track faculty positions, PhD programs must embrace their responsibility to provide increased career support to PhD students planning on careers outside of tenure-

track pathways. This chapter will take a deeper look at the purpose of PhD programs, apply career theory to contextualize the current job realities for PhD graduates, and provide advice to PhD program faculty and staff on how to support their PhD students.

My Connection to Supporting PhD Students

I have served doctoral students for multiple years as a student affairs professional at a R1 university, and I am concerned about the career support available to my doctoral students. In my role as a Graduate Program Coordinator, I manage student support from matriculation to graduation for 130 PhD students. In my role, I am confident in my ability to guide students through program requirements to earn their degree; however, when fielding questions related to post-graduation career support, I struggle. I can direct students to faculty who understand the requirements to professionally enter academia. I can direct students to campus events that teach students how to professionally network or present their research. I can also direct students to career services offices, whose services primarily focus on undergraduate students. However, these resources are designed for individuals who plan for a career in academia or are designed with undergraduate students in mind. When I have conversations with students who express career goals other than becoming a faculty member, I struggle to support them.

What is the Purpose of a PhD Program?

Some might argue PhD programs are designed to develop research skills in students and support the research goals of a university, not necessarily ensure job placement of

graduates; this view would explain the absence of resources dedicated to PhD students planning on alt-ac careers. McAlpine and Castelló (2024) indicated that PhD programs are broadly designed to advance research, and development of research-related skills is the expected outcome of PhD programs, not necessarily the career a student begins after graduation. Furthermore, universities depend on doctoral students to carry out research labor and support an institution's research output; this leads to the incentive of continuing to admit new doctoral students each year (McAlpine & Amundsen, 2019). Over the last few decades, the number of students entering and graduating from PhD programs has nearly quadrupled (Mcalpin et al., 2020; Linder et al., 2020).

This continued supply of PhD students in training fulfills a university need of continued ongoing research support, as graduate students are primarily assigned to entry-level tasks on research projects. Furthermore, for those that hone their research skills and successfully enter academia, it might be in a less stable adjunct role, as adjuncts comprise 40% of the overall faculty workforce (Johnson & Fuesting, 2026). With increasing numbers of PhD graduates emerging under the current system, it seems likely that PhD students will continue to be propelled towards academic careers that do not exist, especially if a university's research needs are currently met with the current student training model (Grothoff, 2018). Undergraduate liberal arts programs are now expected to communicate and prove their post-graduate career worth; so why are doctoral programs also not expected to do the same (Cassuto & Weisbuch, 2022)?

Analysis of PhD Student Population

To better understand PhD graduates and their career trajectories, it would be helpful to clarify who is graduating with doctoral degrees. Prestianni (2023) compiled a list of demographic data on U.S. doctoral graduates. Women earn approximately 55% of conferred doctorate degrees. The median age of a doctoral degree recipient is 35 years old. On average, students take over seven years to complete a doctorate degree. International students earn 12% of doctoral degrees but earn

46% of STEM-related degrees. Regarding racial demographics, doctoral degree recipients are 63% White, 13% Asian and Pacific Islander, 10% Black, 10% Hispanic, and 3% other racially identified. Based on Prestianni (2023)'s data one can envision a typical PhD student as an adult in their 30s, who has spent upwards of seven years honing research skills.

Furthermore, this duration of time spent in a program might make career planning challenging, as a PhD student may be gaining skills and preparing for a job that is years away.

When PhD students do finally enter the workforce, often in non-academic environments, they may experience organizational culture shock. Skakni et al. (2022) describe organizational culture shock as the feeling of distress an individual might experience when their understanding of norms of behaviors, perspectives, and the work environment does not actually align with the organization's expectations and understanding of these norms. For example, a PhD graduate who is used to work expectations as a teaching or research assistant in academia may feel distress when the same schemas they used to navigate their professional experiences in their PhD do not translate into a non-academic work environment. Skakni et al. (2022) interviewed 32 PhD graduates from both STEM and humanities programs working in non-academic careers and discovered that almost half of these individuals experienced some form of organizational culture shock upon entering the workforce after graduating. This organizational culture shock emerged in response to task performance expectations and time management, understanding employers' values and expected commitment to the organization, and navigating hierarchical structures often not tied to an individual's expertise. Based on this data, Skakni et al. (2022) conjectured that doctoral programs might be more limited in their ability to adequately prepare graduates to enter professional non-academic work environments. It seems plausible that PhD programs may not be adequately preparing students for the realities of the careers they are going into.

Applying the Career Theory of Meaningful Work

In realizing that most PhD graduates enter careers outside of academia and knowing that many of these graduates may experience some initial form of culture shock when entering non-academic work environments, I am curious to know how graduates outside of academia assign purpose and meaning to their postgraduate career experiences. Blustein et al. (2023)'s meaningful work concept from the Psychology of Working Theory framework serves as one possible model to contextualize this situation. Meaningful work relates to the aspirational state an individual feels if they identify significance and positive meaning to the work they are accomplishing (Blustein et al., 2023). In using meaningful work as a framework to assess PhD graduates, my initial hunch was that PhD graduates working in non-academic environments would feel that their work is less meaningful than those working in academia. My reason for this belief is that meaningful work is often tied to feeling a sense of belonging and alignment between an individual's personal values and the values of the organization they are working for (Blustein et al., 2023). Based on PhD graduates often experiencing culture shock in non-academic environments, I anticipated they often find their work unfulfilling and unmeaningful.

However, my conjecture was inaccurate. Lawson and Lopes-Bento (2024) studied the outcomes of 482 PhD graduates and examined how job satisfaction compared between individuals in academia versus those in non-academic work environments. Their data indicated that individuals in non-academic jobs do not necessarily have lower job satisfaction than those in academic jobs. In their study, current PhD students cited a higher preference to work in academia versus non-academia, but going into non-academic roles did not necessarily lead to lower job satisfaction. Much to my surprise, data from this study indicated that individuals working in non-academic jobs in the public sector had the highest overall job satisfaction, and I originally anticipated that PhD graduates would find non-academic jobs unmeaningful after spending years in a program designed for someone to enter a faculty role. What more commonly impacted

job satisfaction instead of non-academic versus academic work environment was when an individual's role or tasks did not align with their skills, which felt like job mismatch or underutilization of skills (Lawson & Lopes-Bento, 2024). While skill alignment tied to job satisfaction makes sense, perhaps another career theory could be useful in understanding why academic vs non-academic career roles have less of an impact on PhD graduates' job satisfaction.

Applying Career Construction Theory

Career Construction Theory may explain why PhD graduates working in non-academic roles might not necessarily have lower job satisfaction than those working in academia. Savickas (2020)'s Career Construction Theory (CCT) provides a framework to describe how individuals make meaning in their careers by socially constructing and interpreting their career experiences, often narratively, in a way that makes sense of reality. Often, CCT involves an individual adapting to and interpreting their environment to make their own personal meaning of experiences. CCT allows individuals to self-author their career story and career identity, essentially deciding what is meaningful or not meaningful in a career journey. It seems reasonable that PhD graduates may be adept at this, as the PhD journey is long and arduous, requiring an individual to narratively create a dissertation that culminates years of research into a meaningful story. Furthermore, the research training model of PhD programs instills resilience, as performing research can involve adapting to numerous obstacles and setbacks. PhD graduates likely approach their career trajectory with a certain level of instilled environmental adaptation and resilience, which may explain the still high levels of satisfaction PhD graduates may experience in non-academic or non-tenure track roles.

Options for PhD Programs to Provide Better Career Education

If PhD graduates find meaning in their non-academic and non-tenure-track careers, what responsibility do PhD programs have in supporting their students' career development?

Centering CCT, PhD programs could better educate doctoral students on how their

developed research skills might translate into non-academic work environments; this would better allow students to better narratively describe their career experience through the PhD program and how their skills are useful to employers outside of academia. Furthermore, universities could do more to encourage their students to embrace resilience and adaptability through the research process, as these skills will be useful to deal with possible culture shock experienced in non-academic work environments. Finally, universities could do more to expose students to the non-academic career options many graduates will be selecting.

Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis is an example of how an institution approaches exposure to non-academic career options. Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis created a paid internship opportunity that allowed graduate students to substitute a traditional teaching assistant opportunity with an internship opportunity at an external organization (Cassuto & Weisbuch, 2022). In this internship, graduate students collaborated with the external organization to gather research data that would be used in their dissertation, meaning graduate students would complete a paid internship and simultaneously make progress on their dissertation while gaining experience in a non-academic career environment. Making non-academic career exposure tied to degree completion ensured that students would graduate with some understanding of non-academic career options.

While not every institution has funds to support paid internships as part of a degree requirement, extracurricular options are still a potential consideration. For example, my R1 institution leads a semester-long Careers Beyond the Academy Workshop Series (College of Liberal Arts Career Services, n.d.). This workshop series had PhD students meet once a month to discuss relevant career topics related to jobs outside of academia. The workshop series featured topics related to self-exploration and values, networking and job market exploration, and developing resumes and cover letters. These types of experience allow students to make meaning of their PhD career

journey and consider how their skills could be adapted to non-academic careers.

Simple Next Steps for PhD Program Faculty and Staff

When I think about suggestions for institutions to implement paid internships or semester-long workshop series, this can be a challenging request for PhD programs based on financial and staff constraints. If constrained, I instead recommend that PhD program faculty and staff lean into career influencing in their regular day-to-day work. Career influencing is simply engaging in ongoing career conversations with students, regardless of the position one has in the university (Ho & Stebleton, 2023). Program faculty and staff do not have to be experts in non-academic career routes for PhD graduates to be successful career influencers; they just must be willing to engage in career conversations with students (Ho & Stebleton, 2023). If faculty and staff are unsure of how to engage in these conversations, I recommend they take time sharing their own career journeys and experiences. Personal career stories can resonate broadly, even when an individual's journey does not perfectly align with a student's journey, as many career best practices transcend industries. Furthermore, program faculty and staff have the power to ask supportive career-related questions to students; if faculty and staff are not asking career-related questions, it is unlikely anyone else is. Small acts from program faculty and staff can effectively influence PhD students regardless of their post-graduation career goals.

Directly related to the PhD job market, developing a basic understanding of the non-tenure-track jobs past graduates have entered will help career influencers have more genuine conversations with students. If faculty and staff are not sure where their past alums have gone after graduation, they can begin gathering non-university email addresses from students prior to their graduation and checking in six months to one year after graduation. I have found it works well to gather non-university email addresses on graduation celebration RSVPs when students are feeling most proud of their accomplishments. If programs reach out to alumni with genuine interest in their career outcomes and success, alumni will more likely

feel connected to their program and interested in sharing their career story with current PhD students. Alumni will better educate current PhD students on the realities of non-academic career options better than any faculty or staff can.

Biography

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WHAT CAN I BE WHEN I GROW UP: SUPPORTING NEURODIVERSE HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS IN CAREER EXPLORATION AND COUNSELING

Sammy Loeks-Davis

Overview of Community Concern and Rationale

As we look at the global community and workforce, experts believe 15-20% of the world's population is diagnosed or identifies as neurodivergent (Lynch, 2024). Neurodivergent individuals view and interact with the world and people around them uniquely with different ways of “thinking, learning, and behaving” (Lynch, 2024). Neurodivergent individuals bring skills and insights important to a diverse workforce, yet are more likely to be underemployed or unemployed compared to neurotypical peers (Wehman et al., 2016). Neurodivergent individuals are also more likely to experience homelessness or rely on government services (Lynch, 2024). Because neurodivergent individuals comprise an increasing share of the population and are disproportionately affected by negative career experiences, I argue in this chapter the importance of initiating career development conversations and counseling for neurodiverse high school students before they enter the workforce (Timmons et al., 2026). Along with early intervention and counseling, I will argue for the importance of educating career consultants and counselors as well as human relations professionals about supporting neurodiverse high school students.

Finally, I will argue how building hiring processes within businesses and organizations can reflect more inclusive hiring and onboarding practices (Davies et al., 2023).

As an educator, I have mentored hundreds of young people in middle and high school. Informal career counseling has always been part of my role, as these young people consider

post-secondary options and how to navigate building their adult futures. Many of my students faced systemic barriers that led to self-doubt. Much of this doubt was tied to negative societal biases based on their identities. Outside of my professional roles, I am a parent to a neurodivergent young person. I witness my son's gifts and challenges every day, and I experience how people understand and judge his behaviors. Because of my experiences, I have witnessed how early intervention has helped shape my son's ability to communicate, create relationships, and build confidence.

What does it mean to be neurodivergent?

Generally, neurodivergent individuals have various and sometimes more pronounced responses to external stimuli. This can include increased sensitivities to light and sound, difficulties with emotional regulation, and challenges with social interactions (Wang, 2017). For example, neurodivergent individuals may ask for headphones to mediate noise intake, or have difficulty understanding body language or other more nuanced social cues (Wang, 2017). These behaviors and interactions are “differences are not deficits” (NIH, 2026). Because neurodiverse people have a variety of conditions and displays of behaviors, neurodiverse diagnoses are broad and intersectional (NIH, 2026). Neurodivergent individuals may or may not identify as one or any neurological or diagnosable condition, but disorders can include autism spectrum disorder (ASD), sensory processing disorders, attention deficit disorder (ADD), or learning disabilities such as dyslexia and dyspraxia (NIH, 2026).

Although diagnosing neurodivergent disorders can empower individuals and

medical providers in providing treatment and accommodations, it is important to continue viewing these conditions as “differences”, not “deficits.” For example, individuals identifying as autistic are often honest and are highly aware of their senses and surroundings (NIH, 2026). Studies show companies that have embraced this mentality and implemented accommodation plans or increased “inclusivity initiatives” have 30% higher rates of productivity, “boosted morale, and improved innovation” (Lynch, 2024).

Supportive Career Development Theories

Neurodivergent career counseling can benefit from utilizing Lent and Brown’s (2020) social cognitive theory and Blustein et al.’s (2022) theory of connecting decent work and meaningful work when developing career and life counseling models. These theories, combined with early career counseling and intervention methods in high school, such as community service and job shadowing (Timmons et al., 2026) and implementation of eomapping and family timelines (Test et al., 2014), create better possibilities for positive career outcomes. A UK study indicated that for autistic individuals, it is important to have career counseling specific to a person’s autistic identity and to receive inclusive practices during the hiring and interviewing process. This included options such as organizations requesting accommodation plans, particularly around sensory concerns (Davies et al., 2023).

Theories of Approach: Social Cognitive Career Theory

Social cognitive career theory (SCCT) encompasses multiple aspects influencing a person’s career development, including “personal attributes (e.g., interests, abilities, values), learning and socialization experiences, and the resources, opportunities, and barriers afforded by their environments” (Lent, 2020, p. 129). Considering these factors is critical when working with neurodiverse communities, as their differences are more clearly defined when considering the context of upbringing, identity, and societal systems. A barrier neurodivergent individuals face is lowered expectations of their abilities and stereotypes of what being neurodivergent looks and sounds like (Atobatele, 2021, p. 1531; Lynch,

2024). This creates “internalized doubts” within neurodivergent individuals and lowered self-concept, leading to a diminished understanding of their self-efficacy (p. 1531).

Providing early intervention career counseling, particularly within the SCCT framework, leads to “a supportive space” allowing students to develop their “skills and strengths” and build confidence and understanding when interacting with varying systems and environments (p. 1531). SCCT focuses on self-efficacy, particularly Bandura’s work, highlighting the belief that all people, to varying degrees, possess self-agency. Bandura describes three factors impacting a person’s agency and autonomy: “self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and personal goals” (Lent, 2020, p. 132). SCCT identifies that “societal attitudes and perceptions” influence the “choice and beliefs” individuals experience (Atobatele, 2021, p. 1532). Because of this outside influence, neurodivergent students are less likely to possess Bandura’s proposed factors and, therefore, are less likely to believe in their abilities to set and achieve goals (Atobatele, 2021).

Schools and educators have an important role in increasing opportunities and tackling barriers to educational attainment for all students, particularly those from marginalized communities (Appling et al., 2022). Appling et al. (2022) also noted that students with disabilities were almost 10% less likely to apply and matriculate to college. Helping children understand their capacity for success, set and achieve sustainable goals, and visualize their own idealized futures builds self-efficacy. For secondary educators counseling neurodivergent youth, training and development of executive functioning skills is critical.

In partnership with building self-efficacy, the SCCT model focuses on the concept of self-management. Appling et al. (2022) argued, “self-management model of SCCT highlights adaptive behaviors people exert such as decision-making, managing one’s identity, and career exploration,” which enables individuals to identify goals and create action plans to attain their goals (p. 6). Building self-management skills supports a neurodivergent student’s confidence, which allows them to create sustainable futures and to self-

advocate when faced with systemic challenges, discrimination, and adversity (Appling et al., 2022). Neurodivergent youth should be taught early that there are possibilities for their futures, and they should be equipped with the tools and resources to actualize their goals.

Theories of Approach: Decent and Meaningful Work

While a relatively new work theory, the definition of decent work defines “baseline attributes of work” (Blustein et al., 2022, p. 290). Four components define decent work: “the promotion of rights at work; employment; social protection; and social dialogue” (p. 290). This outlines that individuals maintain human rights when at their place of employment, including the rights to safety, to speak on their behalf, and to maintain employment if they can complete job requirements with appropriate accommodations. Meaningful work is defined in a separate context and refers to work that is connected to a person’s value system that encompasses a deeper personal connection and meaning (Blustein et al., 2022). Blustein argues that although decent work underscores the bare minimum of employee rights, incorporating intrinsic motivation, value systems, and experiencing “purpose” leads to employees being “engaged at work (vigor, dedication, and absorption), feel more voice in the workplace, and have higher intrinsic work motivation” (pp. 294-295).

When viewing decent and meaningful work for neurodivergent individuals, both employees and their organization need to be involved. Neurodivergent individuals have the right to adequate and timely accommodations and the right to request these without fear of retaliation (Atobatele, 2021, p. 1531). It is important to begin counseling neurodivergent young people to understand their rights as employees and how to build advocacy skills. Career counseling professionals can work with organizations to “influence the narrative, address misconceptions, and advocate for inclusive practices” for neurodivergent students as they enter the workforce (Lynch, 2024). For example, advocating for organizations to consider how they organize onboarding processes to include a “day in the life” document. This helps neurodivergent

employees, particularly autistic individuals who often appreciate high structure, in understanding their job requirements (Kraemer et al., 2023). It is also important for career counselors to educate students regarding policy work, such as the Americans with Disabilities Act, as well as advocate for reforms and the “importance of creating an inclusive job market” (Atobatele, 2021, p. 1531). By counseling young people to understand their rights as workers and empowering them to develop a strong self-concept and self-efficacy, they can experience equitable and inclusive work environments, all while feeling a sense of belonging and connection to their work.

How to Help Neurodivergent Youth

Decent and meaningful work and social cognitive career theories can be applied in career counseling with neurodivergent youth. Studies suggest one element to incorporate is family engagement in counseling sessions (Test et al., 2014). Including families in the counseling process can “provide education and support for parents, emphasize positivity and problem solving” and “share relevant resources and referrals” (Test et al., 2014). The Center on Secondary Education for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (CSESA) researched how engaging families in secondary transition planning with their young person and with school leaders helped increase a student’s confidence in their ability to set goals and create independent career pathways, and connected families and counseled young people to community resources and support networks (Test et al., 2014). Parent and guardian involvement is highly influential in their young person’s career development. Dr. Keller from the University of Washington (2025) conducted a survey study with 300 middle school families and students to understand the influence of families on a young person’s career development trajectory. Keller (2025) concluded that students coming from “basic loving and supportive parent behaviors, (such as parents telling adolescents they are interested in their opinions) seem to be more important for middle school students than specific career-related action behaviors” (Keller, 2025). Similar to SCCT practice, building a young person’s belief in self begins with families allowing

students autonomy to explore career pathways, nurturing this independent exploration, and providing positive feedback and praise.

Neurodivergent young people benefit from hands-on experiences such as job shadowing or community service opportunities (Wehman et al., 2016). These opportunities can help young people “gain skills, explore careers, and develop networks that can lead to meaningful employment” (Timmons, et al., 2026). The program, Service Works for Youth with Autism, is a three-year program partnering with local non-profit volunteer organizations and schools to bring authentic job experience opportunities to autistic youth (Timmons et al., 2026). The comprehensive job shadow model incorporated holistic support measures such as transition planning, ecomapping, and reflection opportunities for students and supervising staff (Timmons et al., 2026). These immersive experiences also give neurodivergent youth direct contact with career environments, job tasks, and requirements, which lessen the possibilities for confusion or misinterpretation of various career fields (Wehman et al., 2016). Timmons et al. (2026) “research-to-practice” toolkit also promotes the concept of community mapping. This mapping practice guides neurodivergent youth to ecomap their environments and day-to-day tasks (Timmons et al., 2026). Because young people are building skills and making connections in their communities, they have more opportunities to understand and access decent and meaningful work.

While young people are preparing to transition from high school to the workforce, a comprehensive and sequential transition plan helps prioritize the young person’s goals and gives them the tools they need to meet them. Kraemer et al. (2023) developed a transition plan model for high school career counselors and family members of neurodivergent students. This plan is outlined in a flowchart, including opportunities for skill and post-secondary assessments, “written and measurable post-secondary goals,” correspondence and outreach plans with “transition services” supporting individuals with disabilities in the workplace (Kramer et al., 2023, p 48). This format of transitioning planning helps youth build the SCCT

framework components of self-management with a documented process outlining steps to goals. This also allows youth to connect their interests and values to career and high school transition planning, helping build opportunities for attaining decent and meaningful work.

Conclusion

The medical field often discusses the importance of early intervention and support when treating health conditions. The same early intervention should be applied when working with young people, particularly neurodivergent youth, when exploring life and career development. Because of increased awareness of neurodivergent identities across the globe, it is imperative to support this population's strengths and unique characteristics. Neurodivergent young people have access to school and community services, which can help close opportunity gaps in the workforce, such as underemployment and unemployment, and help create self-confidence despite stereotypes and biased generalizations about their capabilities. Young people have a community of stakeholders inherent in their lives that adults do not, allowing the potential for many positive influences to shape their well-being before venturing into post-secondary experiences. Leveraging this support and resources can assist in strengthening a young person’s life trajectory and influence policy and culture regarding employability and the community importance of neurodivergent individuals' contributions to society.

Biography

Sammy (she/her) has worked in K-12 education and non profit organizations for over 15 years. She holds an undergraduate degree in teaching secondary English education, and recently received her master's degree from the University of Minnesota in educational leadership. She is currently employed as the youth safety and compliance manager at the University of Minnesota, supporting youth safety and youth program development across five U of MN campuses. Sammy serves as the board treasurer of the non-profit after-school advocacy group, Ignite After School, and volunteers in her Minneapolis community.

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EXAMINING THE CAREER DEVELOPMENT OF INTERNATIONAL FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS

Shadrack Kipsang

U.S. higher institutions have long been premier destinations for many international students (Batalova, 2025; Institute of International Education, 2025). The perceived quality of academic programs and the potential to grow one's career are often cited as primary motivations for choosing to study in the United States (Bound et al., 2021; Loo, 2016; Park & Shimada, 2022). However, the recent changes in immigration policies have disrupted this trend. Recent reports indicate that the number of international students enrolled in U.S. higher institutions declined by 17% in the Fall of 2025, and is expected to fall even further (Andrews & Shaffer, 2025; Baer & Ekin, 2025; NAFSA & JB International, 2025). As international student enrollment declines, higher education professionals and career counselors are increasingly becoming interested in understanding their career development experiences and how they can effectively support them (Balin et al., 2016; Faidley, 2025). Recent scholarship has examined systemic, contextual, and personal factors that impact international students' career development (Arthur, 2025; Balin et al., 2016; Li et al., 2025; Loo, 2016; Song & Kim, 2022; Weiner & Ghazarian, 2024). This body of research has identified evolving immigration policies, acculturation stress, a complex labor market, limited English proficiency, and work-related racial discrimination as significantly impacting international students' career development (Arthur, 2025; Batalova, 2025; Song & Kim, 2022; Weiner & Ghazarian, 2024).

Although these studies have helped illuminate the challenges faced by international students in their career development,

surprisingly few of them focus on the career development of international first-generation college students (Gesing & Glass, 2018; Zhou, 2024). This is partly because there is inconsistent data collected on international first-generation college students, and the assumption that the resources designed for international students are equally effective for first-generation students (Mihut & Helms, 2019; Suárez-Orozco, 2023). This paper addresses this gap by examining the career development of IFGCS through the theoretical lenses of the Psychology of Working Theory and Chaos Theory of Careers. Specifically, it explores how the current political climate shapes their career decision-making processes. The analysis is expected to inform policies and practices in higher education.

Why Higher Education Should Care

Higher education institutions have a vital responsibility to serve historically underrepresented populations (Stebbleton et al., 2020). This responsibility extends beyond providing access to quality education to ensuring that their education translates to economic opportunity and social mobility (Glass et al., 2017). To meet this goal, all higher education professionals, whether career counselors, student affairs professionals, faculty, or administrators, need to take responsibility in preparing this population for future careers (Stebbleton & Ho, 2023). The benefits of preparing this growing student population for future work goes beyond individual students and institutions. Currently, one in three international students in US higher institutions are first-generation (Glass et al., 2017). Because this population will form part of a significant

workforce in the future, supporting them is not only essential for higher education institutions but also for future workplaces (Gesing & Glass, 2018).

Definition of Terms

Definitions of ‘first-generation college students’ vary in higher education literature (Toutkoushian et al., 2018). For this paper, the following definitions will be adopted. To maintain consistency, the terms ‘first-generation college student’ and ‘first-in-family student’ are used interchangeably.

- First-generation college student – A student who is the first member of his or her family to go to college or an individual both of whose parents did not complete a baccalaureate degree (Lomotey, 2010; Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013)
- First-in-family student – A student who is the first out of their immediate family, comprising siblings, parents, main caregivers, life partners and children, to attend university (O’Shea et al., 2017)
- First-generation immigrant student – A student who was born outside the United States, but is now a naturalized citizen, lawful permanent resident, or holds some form of temporary visa (Stebbleton et al., 2020).

Positionality Statement

The motivation to write on this topic stemmed from my experiences and identity as an international first-generation college student. This interest was further strengthened by listening to the experiences of other IFGCS whose career developments were disrupted during the pandemic and continue to be shaped by today’s shifting immigration policies. As an emerging scholar, my research interests are grounded in social justice, with a particular focus on understanding social issues affecting historically underserved populations in postsecondary institutions. Because of this interest, I only reported on IFGCS experiences documented in previous studies and interpreted the findings using selected career development theories.

Background to International First-Generation College Students (IFGCS)

Much of the literature on first-generation college students and international students treats the two as separate entities (Mihut & Helms, 2019; Zhou, 2024). For this reason, scholarships often focus on either international students or first-generation college students when examining their experiences. The problem with this dichotomy is that it fails to acknowledge students who belong to both categories (Zhou, 2024). As both international and first-generation college students, this population often experiences unique complexities in career development, as they navigate unfamiliar academic and professional landscapes without the established social capital or familial guidance typically available to their domestic and international, continuing-generation peers (Gesing & Glass, 2018; Glass et al., 2017; Zhou, 2024). Thus, this paper calls for examining IFGCS as a unique population, an approach that is likely to illuminate their specific career development challenges.

Existing studies on IFGCS show that they are less likely to attend research-intensive universities and tend to earn less after graduation compared to their non-first-generation counterparts (Gesing & Glass, 2018). This population has also been shown to spend more time navigating their career paths and face more barriers in climbing the social ladder (Balin et al., 2016; Zhou, 2024). With the new immigration policies further limiting access to post-graduation job opportunities, this group is more likely to face more challenges during their studies in the U.S and in the transition to work (ACE & Green, & Spiegel, 2026; Park & Shimada, 2022).

Examining these challenges, particularly how they make career decisions during periods of political uncertainty, might offer insights into how institutions and career professionals can better support them.

In the following sections, I examine career development challenges faced by IFGCS using selected theories. I then offer practical strategies that individuals and institutions can adopt to better serve international first-generation college students.

Theoretical Frameworks and Their Application to IFGCS's Career Decision-Making Processes

The Psychology of Working Theory

The Psychology of Working Theory provides a framework for understanding how access to decent work is shaped by an individual's social status and economic conditions (Blustein, 2006; Duffy et al., 2016). The theory highlights four primary predictors of decent work: economic constraints, marginalization experiences, work volition, and career adaptability. These four elements are interconnected in the sense that the fulfillment of one satisfies the other. For example, individuals who are economically constrained and marginalized have less access to decent work because they have less choices in their career decision-making and have fewer resources to pivot, learn new skills, and stay resilient when the economy changes (Duffy et al., 2016). For this reason, the theory conceptualizes economic constraints and systemic marginalization based on race, ethnicity, social class, and/or gender, function as lifetime constructs that directly limit an individual's access to decent work (Blustein et al., 2023; Duffy et al., 2016). The application of these dynamics to IFGCS career development is provided in a subsequent section.

Chaos Theory of Careers

Chaos Theory of Careers (CTC) conceptualizes career development as a dynamical system characterized by complexity, interconnectedness, and changeability (Pryor, 2010; Pryor & Bright, 2012). The theory recognizes that both individuals and the systems are complex and dynamic and can affect each other (Pryor, 2010). Thus, within the system, any change, whether initiated by an individual or by the system itself, is nonlinear, iterative and unpredictable, which makes it uncertain and hard to control (Pryor, 2010; Pryor & Bright, 2012). The non-linearity of careers makes it difficult for IFGCS to plan and predict their careers. The full account of how this theory can be applied to IFGCS is presented in a later section.

To understand the career development of IFGCS, one needs to understand the influence of immigration policies on their career choices.

Prior research has shown that immigration regulations have negative effects on career outcome expectations of international students (Song & Kim, 2022). For this reason, the introduction of new immigration rules, such as the elimination of automatic extensions of employment authorization, Optional Practical Training, and a new H-1B fee (ACE & Green & Spiegel, 2026; Batalova, 2025), is expected to significantly shape how international students make career decisions moving forward.

By applying the Psychology of Working Theory to the career development of IFGCS, one can understand how they navigate careers in the current political climate. Because IFGCS act as economic anchors to their families, their choice of careers may be influenced by their economic needs as well as those of their families. In PWT terms, this can be understood by examining the survival needs and self-determination needs of an IFGCS. According to PWT, working for most people does not function to enhance their self-esteem or provide an outlet for interests and values, but are means of accessing survival and power (Duffy et al., 2016). This is true of IFGCS, who may be under pressure to choose careers that guarantee them employment rather than those that are meaningful or align with their passion (Duffy et al., 2016). This also means that IFGCS will start prioritizing careers that sponsor visas over those that are consistent with their skills, interests and passion. While this may offer a temporary relief, pursuing jobs that sponsor visas rather than those that support interests is more likely to push them into indecent work, where they may be forced to stay in toxic, high-stress environments or underpaid roles because their employer holds their visa over their head. Thus, when devising ways to help them, career counselors need to recognize the impact of marginalization experience and economic constraints on such decisions. IFGCS are subjected to systemic marginalization, where they are excluded from job opportunities because of their status. This marginalization is systemic and limits their mobility and work volition (their ability to choose). PWT explains this by acknowledging that for an IFGCS, accessing decent work is a luxury that the government's restrictive policies have made harder to secure. For this

reason, the career choices of IFGCS are rarely governed by interest and skills alone. Their decisions are often filtered through financial pressure, migration risk, uncertain legal status, family obligation, and limited access to insider knowledge about career systems.

Applying CTC to the career development of IFGCS, on the other hand, provides a better understanding of how environmental conditions shape their career aspirations. For an IFGCS, careers unfold within a complex and unstable system, characterized by personal aspirations, family expectations, university and immigration policies, labor-market conditions, and the political climate. Even small changes within any of these systems will negatively impact their career trajectories. For example, the recent changes in immigration policies may force them to abandon their careers, avoid certain majors, or consider careers outside the U.S. From a CTC perspective, such behavior is expected because the system is interconnected. The theory also helps us to understand that when such changes in behavior are observed, it should not be interpreted as a lack of motivation on IFGCS's part, but as adaptive behavior intended to keep them in an unstable system.

The theory also offers guidance for educators and counselors on how to help clients in uncertain contexts. It encourages them to consider equipping their clients with the skills needed to navigate both planned and unplanned changes. They can do this by modifying career services to suit clients' needs, and encouraging students to go beyond rigid career planning, and embracing adaptability and resilience. Being flexible in this context involves being comfortable with uncertainty and viewing the changes in the system, not as failures or threats, but as opportunities for learning and growth (Mitchell et al., 1999). In the end, CTC predicts that stable patterns will emerge from the operation of complex and chaotic systems.

Recommendation for individual IFGCS

Recognize that struggles are systemic, not personal failures – Everyone's career is affected by events that could not have been predicted (McDonald & Hite, 2023; Mitchell et al., 1999). For IFGCS, this could

be changes in immigration policies affecting their employability. Because these changes are beyond their control (Horwitz, 2025), IFGCS need to understand that they still have agency in their career development. For example, they can improve their agency by keeping their knowledge, skills, and critical attributes up to date (Stebbleton & Ho, 2023). This also involves exerting effort despite setbacks, changing attitudes and circumstances surrounding us, and engaging in activities that increase the probability of being exposed to unexpected opportunities (Mitchell et al., 1999). With this kind of mindset, IFGCS can increase their competitiveness in the job market despite the setbacks.

Recommendations for higher education

- **Adapt career theories to meet the needs of IFGCS.** Career theories used to examine career development for international students and first-generation college students may not fully capture the experiences of IFGCS. As such, career counselors may need to adapt advising models to integrate IFGCS's unique challenges. This does entail developing new models but modifying existing models to suit their unique needs.
- **Initiate conversations about careers outside the United States.** Career counselors and educators need to initiate candid conversations with IFGCS about their immediate and future career possibilities. Such conversations need to acknowledge the reality that, for some students, pursuing a career in the U.S. may not be feasible after graduation. Accordingly, counselors should consider extending their career advising to include opportunities in IFGCS's home countries and in other countries outside the United States (Arthur, 2025; Loo, 2016).
- **Proactively reach out to IFGCS.** Studies show that international first-generation college students often do not fully understand the purpose of office and career advising hours, and when they do, are hesitant to meet with professors and career professionals to discuss their career plans (Glass et al., 2017). For this reason, career counselors may need to proactively reach out to IFGCS and offer

their counselling services (Chen & Li, 2024).

- **Develop targeted career services for international first-generation students.** When offering career development services to international students, Balin et al. (2016) caution against adopting a ‘one size fits all’ approach. As discussed earlier, IFGCS face unique problems compared to domestic and international continuing generation students (Glass et al., 2017; Zhou, 2024). For this reason, career professionals must tailor career resources to the unique needs of this population (Zhou, 2024). One way career professionals can increase their competence in supporting IFGCS is by deepening their knowledge of systemic issues faced by international first-generation college students in the job search process (Balin et al., 2016; Sim & Zhou, 2025). This includes increased awareness of workplace challenges facing this population, actively teaching them job search skills, explicit explanation of U.S. networking norms, visa-informed job-search coaching, and guidance on building globally portable skills. They can also strengthen their career services to IFGCS by adopting culturally engaged career advising (Streufert et al., 2023; Weiner & Ghazarian, 2024).

Biography

Shadrack Kipsang is a doctoral student at the University of Minnesota–Twin Cities. He holds a bachelor’s degree from the University of Nairobi, Kenya, and two master’s degrees from the University of Iowa and the University of Nairobi. He was a Fulbright Scholar at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. His research interests center on social justice, and he is committed to advancing scholarship that informs policies promoting equity in higher education institutions and workplaces.

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THE IMPACT OF SYSTEMIC BARRIERS ON BLACK WOMEN ACHIEVING TEACHER LICENSURE

Zoe Ann Boynton

Black women, specifically in the United States, have been met with a multitude of systemic barriers in having the ability to create and achieve careers in education that both value and compensate them at the same time. (Farinde-Wu, 2019). This chapter will examine the roles Black women have had, those they have been kept from, and those they continue to fight to have. Malcolm X (1962) says “The most disrespected person in America is the Black woman. The most unprotected person in America is the Black woman. The most neglected person in America is the Black woman” (X, 1962). How does the most disrespected, unprotected, and neglected person in America navigate these barriers that are systemically implemented to hold them back? How do we support Black women to give them the life careers they deserve? To understand why this predicament is present, we will go through the journey of the brutal enslavement of Africans which is the gravest crime (UN, 2026), the Civil War and Jim Crow that legally prevented advancement and prosperity of life of Black people in America, and post segregation America. (Fenwick, 2022). This chapter will take a deep examination of how purposeful systemic barriers against Black people in America has led to history repeating itself. More specifically it will bring to light how it directly impacted the career lives of Black women in K-12 education, and what next steps need to be taken through the inclusion of career development models that best support them in transforming their teaching journeys: PWT decent work versus meaningful work (Blustein, et al., 2023), Integrative Life Planning approach (Hansen, 2011), and the systems

theory framework. (McMahon & Patton, 2018).

Black women disproportionately make up the majority of non-licensed teaching roles compared to White women who make up most fully licensed roles currently, due to systemic barriers within education and in the inner workings of America and American society. (Stevenson, 2024). This disparity illustrates the inequities in teacher licensing and the struggle of career advancement opportunities for Black women despite their significant contributions to and employment within educational systems. Education as we know it is a field that strongly faces inequities both systemically and the teachers within it. (Stevenson, 2024). We will look at how the debate of Black women as the most discriminated against individual, and how they navigate the harsh realities, beliefs, and system barriers of being professionals in K-12 education and the limits put onto them.

Going Down Memory Lane: Enslavement

The enslavement of Africans in America is an atrocity which created the success of numerous nations in Europe, Central and South America, the Caribbean, and America off of the backs of Africans stolen from their homeland and forced to endure inhumane free labor through brutality and the stripping of culture and identity. I refer to slavery as enslavement to show Africans were not “slaves” but were taken and enslaved. It is important to note African Americans and Black people are descendants of their ancestors who were forced to be slaves.

Enslavement took place from the early 1600’s to 1865 when the last enslaved Africans were freed. It is important to note there was no set in stone date that all Africans in other countries

were freed. Enslavement of Africans is believed to have gone all the way to the 1880's in some South American countries spanning over 400 years. (Yale's Ties to Slavery, n.d.).

Understanding what enslavement is and making enslavement known is important to understand the long path of systemic oppression that Black people have had to face leading into them entering the teaching profession. It directly impacts the lives of Black people due to how traumatic and grave this period was. (Cross Jr, 2024). Enslavement was the first pivotal mark in holding Black folks back. Enslavement education was specifically used for the intentional stifling of African Americans from gaining freedom and the ability to have careers outside of being enslaved. Enslaved Africans were not able to learn how to read; it was outlawed, and they would be punished physically or by death for doing so. Yet they persisted and taught/learned through it all, but also there were unfortunately those who had to struggle through lack of access which was lack of freedom. (Cross Jr, 2024). Imagine: you want to be successful. You want to have a life of freedom, but you are never granted that due to the country (that you were forced to be in) has created laws stating you must be enslaved, forever. For 246 years, until the establishment of the 13th amendment, you were not able to have any establishment of self or success. The founding of America wasn't meant for the Black woman to begin with.

Jim Crow & Segregated Schools

Jim Crow was a set of rules, regulations, and laws by many states in America that were established to ensure the continuation of non-success of Black Americans since slavery ended. "The new south that emerged needed segregation, and other Jim Crow strictures in order to hang onto vestiges of slavery, a practice that had brutalized integrated Blacks for centuries by reifying absurd and dangerous beliefs, that Black is spoiled whiteness, and white culture, and added nothing to civilization and society." (Fenwick, 2022, p. 6-7). This is the second biggest systemic barrier we'll examine that kept Black individuals from career, freedom, and autonomy. Career creates autonomy and freedom. How are you supposed to reach that when businesses,

institutions, and organizations would not hire you plainly because of the color of your skin? This set of laws was created by American states to ensure Black individuals would not be able to achieve successful careers and overall decent lives. It was the direct set of laws and ultimately societal structure which kept Black people from excelling.

Black people during this time of segregation had the opportunity to become teachers since schools were segregated. Segregated schools meant you had schools of separated White students and Black or non-White students. America ran into a problem: someone needed to teach the Black children, thus African Americans were able to become teachers!

Integration & Mass Exodus

The 14th Amendment states "No State shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws." (US. Const. Amend. XIV, 1868) But Jim Crow laws established from the 1870's all the way to 1965 were made in numerous states against that constitutional right. Therefore, the Supreme Court Case of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) came into play, granting African Americans Constitutional rights with more protection and the end of segregation. It states that "Segregation of white and Negro children in the public schools of a State solely on the basis of race, pursuant to state laws permitting or requiring such segregation, denies to Negro children the equal protection of the laws guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment." (*Brown v. Board of Education*, 1954). The Civil Rights Act (1964) set in stone that segregation was an illegal and unjust system in America.

What did this mean for Black professionals? Integration was a key moment in the equal rights for African Americans, but there were ways that those who disagreed with Black people receiving constitutional rights perpetuated the disintegration of African Americans. The continuation of of Jim Crow laws through lack of Federal oversight and de facto Jim Crow was a huge way American

society kept Black people out of creating careers. (Fenwick, 2022).

According to Fenwick “Most Black principals were demoted, fired, or dismissed, while the ranks of white principals swallowed exponentially. A minuscule number of black principals remained. They were uniformly appointed to predominantly Black schools, almost never to predominantly, White or integrated schools.” (Fenwick, 2022, p. 9) This is the Mass Exodus. Around 38,000 Black teachers and administrators were left without jobs, dismissed, and laid off. (Oakley, et al., 2013, p. 2). You take a population of people, you strip them of all culture and identity, you then allow them to be successful and then say “nevermind” and leave them without freedom again.

How does this impact their lives forever? In McMahon and Patton’s systems theory, this entire structure of dismantling education career lives goes against what systems theory is about: integrating and allowing all the parts of a person into their work, and allowing them to express it. (McMahon & Patton, 2018).

The Gap In Licensed Teachers

According to recent reports 79% of the hired teachers in public schools are White (NCES, 2020) and 77% of all teachers are women in public schools (NCES, 2023). The United States transitioned from a diverse teacher pool to a homogenous teacher pool. Black women currently face large disparities in being able to achieve career goals due to this long line of systemic inequity and barriers, and the statistics show an illustration of the direct wall built by these inequities. The number of Black teachers and administrators has gone from almost half the population to just around seven percent in 2017 (NCES, 2020). We can see there were highly educated Black teachers and administrators that are able to be teachers, but were then told they can’t and prevented from excelling in their careers, thus leaving this gap of attaining generational wealth and attaining legacy. Black people, and more specifically Black women, were not able to even get degrees anymore in education. The modern day Black woman was struck with the harsh reality from the gutting reality of their families not being able to gather generational wealth

from barrier after barrier, and are left with nothing.

Presently there is a gap in Black women trying to become licensed teachers compared to White women who make up a majority of licensed teachers. (NCES, 2020). A gap that didn’t exist before integration. A missive lay off (the Mass Exodus) has now created a situation where Black people do not have the opportunity to succeed in these fields due to the issues in the educational and societal systems America has built off of discrimination.

Why Black Teachers Diminished In the Ranks

Teacher assistant positions or support roles in education have allowed people of color to enter the field of education, with 40% entering through an alternative route (Farinde-Wu, 2019, p. 4). It is important to note that anyone who works in an education setting tends to succeed and feel more prepared through student teaching and a four to five years teacher education program. (Farinde-Wu, 2019). Black women who are career teachers currently even see themselves being pigeon holed into assistant positions despite having a license. This is decent work, getting your roles and you have a job, but you are not fulfilling your true purpose. (Blustein, et al., 2023). In a personal account and study, Sharena Stevenson in “Black Female Educator: Underappreciated, Overworked, and the Indelible Quest for Agency Within the Educational System” says “I was also taking care of things that would normally be the responsibility of the librarians, secretaries, or the IT department.” (Stevenson, 2024, p. 10). Stereotypes perpetuated beliefs of White administrators and those in power at schools that pushed Black people in education into the “not worthy of this position” mentality that took place after integration. Simply put: there were no opportunities for licensed teachers, they were devalued and denied from licensed teaching roles, and they were pigeon holed into only underserved areas or alternate roles. (Oakley, et al., 2013). In the Psychology of Working Theory, decent work is essential for all individuals but meaningful work is when workers are valued. (Blustein, et al., 2023) and in this case Black women were denied this.

Systemic Barriers that Black Women Endure

Now, we are examining Black teachers as a whole, so now let's talk specifically about the experiences of Black women, the most neglected, the most forgotten, the most disrespected. (X, 1962). White teachers dominate the education profession with Black females making up about five percent of US teachers (Farinde-Wu, 2019). Through the intentional mass lay-offs or mass exodus of Black teachers and administrators caused this percentage gap we now have numerous challenges. When you restrict a population from gaining the benefits of a stable career it floats through continued family generations, thus stifling things like legacy, nepotism, and generational wealth. Black women also face barriers like micro-aggressions and workplace discrimination that directly attacks their communities, identities, and degrades their feeling of purpose and value. (Stevenson, 2024).

Licensure Exams

Teacher licensing is something high effort and high stakes. Teachers go through training preferably a four year degree and student teaching in order to obtain their certifications. The two most popular teacher licensure exams/processes are the educative teacher performance assessment (edTPA) and the PRAXIS which is the main teacher licensure test divided by subjects. Black teachers tend to struggle the most in passing these exams due to "(1) the Absence of an ethnically representative critical mass, and (2) less effective teacher preparation for Black students." (Farinde-Wu, 2019, p. 2). It is hard to excel in something when you are not included in that cultural landscape. A study done by Michael Leroy Taylor found that Professors are blatantly failing their students who are trying to become teachers (Taylor, 2013). This has occurred for example through culturally irrelevant course work and the enforcement of western and White centered perspectives. (Farinde-Wu, 2019).

There is also an emotional aspect of it all where Black students can "experience psychosomatic reactions to the testing situation before or during the test that hinder their ability

to perform well." (Taylor, 2013, p. 160). In many cases, students are acutely aware of their weaknesses associated with their academic abilities, which manifest themselves in the form of diminished self-esteem and self-confidence." (Taylor, 2013, p. 160). These are feelings and experiences found in a study that directly comes from certain stereotypes and how Black people have to assimilate and pressure themselves. "Black female educators lack respect and acceptance, face barriers because of their race and gender, and often feel lonely in their roles as educators ." (Stevenson, 2024, p. 9).

Financial Barriers

Financial barriers from systemic barriers impact Black teachers due to the lack of generational wealth and family job stability. Financial barriers don't make it easy for Black teachers to step into the field. Between unpaid student teaching, expensive licensure exams, and all the materials needed for the education programs at different universities there is a list of things that are increasingly difficult or impossible without financial gain and generational wealth. This is why meaningful work in the PWT framework is hard to attain, but necessary for underserved groups. It addresses the inequities of decent work (Blustein, et al., 2023), and financial barriers on Black women perpetuate these struggles to achieve meaningful work.

Lack of Culturally Relevant Instruction and Representation

Teacher education programs are taught from a Western or White perspective with "the absence of an ethnically representative critical mass." (Farinde-Wu, 2019, p. 2). Teacher education programs as a whole make it difficult for Black teachers to pass licensure exams and classes with non-relevant course work, lack of preparation for engaging with students of color, and other structural challenges. (Farinde-Wu, 2019). When you engage in materials, especially those that are training you and educating you, you are less likely to advance and connect with materials if you are not represented.

Career Theories That Apply

Looking at the Psychology of Working Theory (PWT) and the difference between decent work and meaningful work, it is important to note decent work only satisfies basic needs. (Blustein, et al., 2023). This theory was chosen for this report because it addresses the inequities in people's lives and brings forth a framework (PWT) that illustrates how systemic barriers impact work. (Blustein, et al., 2023). Black women striving to become teachers need to have the opportunity to have meaningful work so they can accomplish more than being a support staff in school. Meaningful work is work that affords people meaning, purpose, affirmation, and growth. It is more than just your everyday rights as a worker, it's work that satisfies all aspects of a person. (Blustein, et al., 2023). Black women should have the resources and equitable options to enter and complete their teacher licensure to achieve meaningful work. Only having the opportunity of unlicensed roles in schools like TA's stifles them into decent work. Meaningful work overall improves the lives of employees and employers. (Blustein, et al., 2023). In this case Black women who can take licensure exams and have career support would improve schools in various ways: schools would have better outcomes, and overall there would be positive changes to multiple systems within school communities and communities that Black women are in, due to them naturally taking on the roles of mentors in schools (Taylor, 2013). This is a huge bonus on their already huge contribution to education as a whole, and this provides them the opportunity for meaningful work.

The Integrative Life Planning's holistic approach to career development also fits because the entire approach is about integrating people's entire lives. (Hansen, 2011). This is important for Black women because they've had a long time struggle with being affirmed as entire beings. Once careers were ripped away, they needed affirmation and situations which allowed them to holistically go about getting their degrees. This will ensure all aspects of Black women's lives that have previously been demeaned and discriminated against will be considered in their career lives and aid in their success in getting their teacher

licenses. (Stevenson, 2024). In this theory of career development students are encouraged to integrate all aspects of life like family, mental health, and all aspects of their being. (Hansen, 2011). Black women need schools to represent them in instruction and teaching to ensure that they can become licensed and work towards the licensed teaching roles they strive so hard for.

Lastly, systems theory can be applied in this case as it looks into the various systems that impact someone's career. (McMahon & Patton, 2018). These systems make up an entire individual. Black women have numerous systems as do others, but society doesn't support them. These systems include systemic norms in communities, and structures that Black women don't fit within that impact career advancement. Aspects like ethnicity, gender and ability beliefs within gender, and other internal factors like community and attributes that impact outward interactions and situations within the systems theory (McMahon & Patton, 2018). Looking at career development for Black women trying to get licensed it is important to look at the entire systems that impact their lives. Systemic barriers also impact how Black women show up in their systems. Just like we've examined the socioeconomic issues, systemic barriers, and emotional trauma Black women endure over time, we must consider these in their efforts in order to best support them and truly care for them in their licensure experiences.

Solutions

There is not just one way to solve this entire problem of generations of systemic barriers, but there are major approaches that could remedy what has taken place. These remedies will aim to give Black women equitable access to starting their educational careers. First thing is altering teacher education programs to have culturally relevant pedagogy. Not just for instruction of the courses taken by students, but to better equip Black women as they approach licensure exams.

Partnerships with Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) are great as well. HBCUs are institutions that have a mission of making education possible for Black students.

(Hooper, 2025). Having licensed supporters through these organizations would help Black women feel represented and comfortable. Classes like edTPA guidance or PRAXIS prep that are conducted using culturally relevant pedagogy would help raise the passing rate of teacher licensure exams for Black educators as a whole. Applying the systems theory (McMahon & Patton, 2018) to approaching licensure equity for Black women involves addressing the systems that impact Black women and integrating that into the process of licensure. Looking at gender, ethnicity, and community structures and how the lack of integration and understanding of these inhibits career growth and goals (McMahon & Patton, 2018), in this case it makes licensure a difficult process, and has resulted in Black folks wanting to enter education to not pass their licensure exams.

The first remedy is to create four year degree programs with financial support. Degree models where they extend student teaching and integrate culturally relevant course work (Farinde-Wu, 2019) including financial supports with observations and practicum hours is the key. (Hooper, 2025). This allows Black women to have an income stream while learning the material to be prepared by licensed teachers. This leads to paid student teaching. In transitional four year degrees, student teachers are normally not paid. Having paid student teachers helps in retaining these teachers, especially Black women who have the lowest retention rate currently. (Hooper, 2025). Also, another support for support staff like teachers assistants (TA's) tuition assistance for these programs is beneficial in order to make gaining a college degree financially acceptable. Allowing other staff in the school to get assistance in their college degrees helps get more licensed teachers who know the school system already and gather more teachers who are in it, for the long run. These models create equitable pathways that serve different situations of Black women and directly take inspiration in their frameworks from the systems theory: making career achievement equitable throughout the different systems impacting people. (McMahon & Patton, 2018).

Mentorship programs are jumpstarting at various districts around the United States

as well. Connecting Black educators with Black mentor teachers, especially in their first year is crucial. HBCUs can connect teachers and graduating first year teachers (and even education majors) with each other to form strong communities and help them get through different programs.

Conclusion

To close, Black women achieving their degrees in education requires a wide web of support to ensure the process is equitable. After generations of systemic barriers, this report has examined how these barriers have made licensure for Black women challenging. Through three defining career theories they provide frameworks for the necessities Black women need to achieve their career goals, while tackling systemic barriers. The psychology of working theory (decent work versus meaningful work) supports a clear explanation that all individuals, especially those who are minorities or disadvantaged in some way need more than just their basic rights to feel purpose and meaning in work. (Blustein, et al., 2023). Integrative Life Planning has a holistic approach addressing how work involves the whole individual and encouraging environments where individuals can include all aspects of their identity to have great career outcomes and environments. (Hansen, 2011). Black women have been denied this and must have this to achieve equitable licensure outcomes. Lastly, systems theory provides a framework on all the systems that make up individuals and how these systems impact career. (McMahon & Patton, 2018). For institutions to support Black women, they must understand the systems that impact them.

Biography

Zoe Ann Boynton is a current Pre-school teacher in the Twin Cities. She graduated from Drexel University in 2025 earning her Bachelors of Science in Elementary Education. During her time at Drexel she focused on urban education and culturally responsive pedagogy. She was a teacher resident for Head Start in West Philadelphia and in 3rd grade at Albert M. Greenfield School. Currently she teaches as a Preschool teacher in the heart of Saint Paul, Minnesota's historically Black

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CHAOS IN AND OUT OF THE CLOSET: QUEER IDENTITY IN THE WORKPLACE

Matt Loosbrock

Discrimination and prejudice exist in the workplace in various forms (Kelly, et al., 2021). These biases pervade individual identity and growth in a person's career and serve only to disrupt potential for advancement and progress in the workplace. A recent poll from the Public Region Research Institute shows that 28% of Gen Z adults identify as LGBTQ+. Compared to other generations (Millennials at 16%, Gen X at 7%, and Boomers at 4%), evidence suggests queer identity is increasing with each passing generation (Pappy, 2024) and work organizations need to be prepared to accommodate LGBTQ+ needs and address the experienced barriers. LGBTQ+ individuals are a community affected by such impediments which stifle the ability to cultivate a strong work ethic. In the case of sexual identity there is another aspect to consider: disclosure. Revealing sexual preference, or "coming out" as it is often referred to (Kelly et al., 2021), is unique among queer individuals. Sexual identity is not always observed based on appearance and many LGBTQ+ individuals face a choice in their workplace - to reveal their identity, or remain silent (Benozzo et al., 2015). This report will explore this topic and how it influences career progression through the lens of career development theory. In lieu of the LGBTQ+ acronyms, the term "queer" will be used to encompass identities outside heterosexuality. Queer individuals will continue to be part of the United States work force in all matters of career paths, whether it be blue or white collar. How workplaces can adapt and assist queer workers will be examined, along with steps to ensure comfort and stability.

A History of Queer Work

Queer identity protections in the workplace are somewhat new in the U.S. The Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 served to create safer working conditions, like the 40 hour work week, and the creation of minimum wage, but the concept of identity protections did not happen until 1964 with the Civil Rights Act, which outlawed discrimination based on race, color, religion, gender, or national origin within the nation's workplace (Civil rights act, 2022). While considered a victory for human rights in U.S. history, the act did not explicitly include the rights of queer workers. The country was not far removed from the Lavender Scare of the 1950s, in which individuals suspected of homosexuality were removed from their jobs as "potential security risks" (Canaday, 2023) and sexual attraction toward someone of the same gender would not be stricken from the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders until 1974 (King et al., 2008). Efforts to provide protections for queer individuals remained hopeful however, with demonstrations at Stonewall paving the way to labor representation to be established for queer protections. This led to the creation of Pride at Work, a summation of queer labor unions, in 1997 (Olsen, 2023). Despite these efforts, worker protections varied from state to state or organization to organization. In 2014, a report from the Movement Advancement Project and the Center for American Progress estimated between 8 and 17 percent of queer workers were denied employment or advancement opportunities. For transgender individuals, numbers rose to 13 - 47 percent (Gruberg, et

al., 2020). It was not until June 15, 2020, in a landmark U.S. Supreme Court decision to affirm the prohibition of sex discrimination in Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, extending protections specifically to individuals based on sexual and gender identity (Olsen, 2023).

While these rulings and laws serve to protect queer people in the workplace, discrimination is still ongoing. Cisnormativity and heteronormativity, the perceptions that cisgendered and heterosexual individuals are the only “normal” gender and sexual identities (Kelly et al., 2020), remain the conventional outlook in U.S. culture. In turn,

U.S. workplace culture where social interactions, legal standings and cultural norms are predominantly heterosexual. This viewpoint creates barriers for queer people to navigate in terms of how they identify at work. Individual perspectives on sexual identity can be positive or negative; a colleague may be accepting of a queer person’s identity, but there is the potential of negativity based on religious beliefs, cultural viewpoints, or beliefs taught during childhood (Lee, 2022). There is risk in exposing queer identity, presenting an internal struggle for queer workers to reveal their sexual identity or keep it hidden (Baer, 2024).

The Closet Conundrum

The term “coming out” stems from the phrase “coming out of the closet,” wherein the closet acts as a metaphor to describe whether a queer person chooses to self disclose their sexual identity and “come out” from hiding figuratively, or choose to conceal their queer identity, and “stay in” (Kaplan, 2014). To be clear, there is no wrong or right choice in choosing to come out in the workplace. The decision is made individually and influenced by a number of factors including workplace culture, self values, mental health struggles, or attitudes from workplace colleagues (Kelly, 2021).

Despite the fear of discrimination, there are benefits to disclosing queer identity. Individuals can have an authentic sense of self (King et al., 2008) whether at work or in a personal setting, without the struggle of engaging in different masks, or performative identities, throughout daily life. Out workers may also experience identity acceptance and pride, where positive

attitudes regarding identity develop from within and establish confidence in workplace career goals (Gedro & Tyler, 2014). Queer workers in leadership roles, such as management or as educators, have the opportunity to mentor younger people who may be experiencing struggles with their own identity, leading to poor sense of belonging and well being (Lee, 2022). This guidance can help establish supportive attitudes toward queer communities and workplace culture, leading to more favorable outcomes in future workplace settings. Revealing sexual identity can also help strengthen workplace connections with co-workers, managers, and other leadership, as honesty is a foundation in healthy relationships, and can help an individual seek accommodations regarding their identity, via workplace resources and colleagues (King et al., 2008).

There are adverse and hostile threats to revealing queer identity, however.

Work-life balance can be threatened due to queer workers’ unique experiences with non-traditional families as opposed to heterosexual households (Roberson et al., 2024). Organizations may have leaders with bias against queer workers, and may submit negative evaluations, enforce gendered dress codes, or prioritize heterosexual employees with better work opportunities. These actions can result in negative consequences, including decreased job satisfaction and increased stress (King et al., 2008). These negative actions can occur in workplaces which appear queer-friendly as well. A person may be judged on their identity and being defined as The Queer Employee, rather than merits (Kaplan, 2014). In these instances, someone may consider practicing the act of “passing,” which is to change information about one’s identity to appear and present themselves as heterosexual (Tatum, 2018).

The choice of coming out in the workplace is not a single event, but a performative act required by queer people to repeat each when beginning at a new workplace (Benozzo et al., 2015). When meeting a new team, supervisor, manager, or a co-worker, the consideration of coming out has to be deliberated based on previous experiences and what is known about the current situation. The

assessment and considerations of whether or not to self disclose identity is a neverending decision in whether or not to disrupt cis and heteronormative culture (Lee, 2022). This self assessment process anchors the social divide and inequality between queer and non-queer communities (Benozzo et al., 2015), which can become burdensome to queer people who face this reality repeatedly. To further complicate matters, there are queer individuals who do not have a choice in coming out. Prejudicial perceptions from work teams can assume a person's identity based on appearance, mannerisms, and behavior. These assumptions are often based on stereotypes, exoticisation, or previous experiences, which shape attitudes toward queer colleagues, and have an impact on interactions which may be harmful even if intentions are good willed (Maji et al., 2024).

Social Cognitive Career Theory

When considering the challenges queer people face in the workplace and how they can be guided on a successful career path, providing context using career theories is a helpful tool in charting a pathway for success and safety. While many theories can be examined with diverse frameworks, Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) is compatible when considering queer populations, as it is often used as an aid to take diverse people into account (Hite & McDonald, 2023). Environmental factors, such as social interactions, economic conditions, and family structure, have an impact on how an individual may view their work, either positively or negatively (Hite & McDonald, 2023). SCCT encourages people to use adaptive behaviors in the workplace, which is essential for queer people to decide if and when they come out, and the goals and actions in order to do so (Tatum et al., 2017). Considering the act of coming out, SCCT can highlight the importance of climate and factors in regards to disclosing identity (Tatum, 2018). Through SCCT, two primary types of these beliefs are examined, along with external factors impacting a queer person's workplace self values.

The first of these beliefs is self-efficacy, described as how an individual understands their behaviors and ability to produce work tasks or achieve goals (Hite & McDonald, 2023). Queer people may conceal identity

due to negative self-efficacy based on societal beliefs and stereotypes which play a factor in queer decision making due to the perceived anxiety (Tatum, et al., 2017). For example, queer men may be presumed to be less masculine and find more discrimination in roles such as law enforcement, leading to homophobic microaggressions. Therefore a queer male may veer away from this vocation, even though it interests them (Collins, 2015). In general workplace settings, similar instances may occur, such as clothing a queer person considering how to dress, choosing friends and acquaintances in work groups, and what type of activities to participate in outside the workplace with colleagues.

Outcome expectations is the second SCCT belief which has an influence on queer individuals' chosen pathways. Many individuals feel "different" than heterosexual co-workers and may try to mask this feeling by participating or engaging in activities expected of them based on gender, which leads to the act of passing (Tatum, 2018).

This self-management system may benefit the employee short-term, but likely comes with less work satisfaction (Tatum, 2018). Environment has a major implication on queer people's ability to thrive in work environments, and in a positive context it allows development of goals based on interests without shame or fear of stepping outside of cultural norms.

In a supportive environment, goals can become actionable items queer individuals choose to engage at work, with identity affirmation leading to a reinforcement of occupational engagement (Gedro & Tyler, 2014). In order to support this ideology, workplaces must establish positive environments for queer populations, and reduce negative viewpoints overshadowing queer employees' skills based on identity and not ability (Hite & McDonald, 2023). Professional services staff can become role models to younger employees, student workers, and those most vulnerable to external influences on a person's self-efficacy (Lee, 2022). Having support from a person of authority who can speak to the challenges from a queer perspective and call out negative behavior is a powerful ally in self acceptance. SCCT's model provides

a framework in examining the relationship between a sexual minority's workplace climate and work satisfaction; if a queer individual feels supported by coworkers, overall work satisfaction is shown to increase (Tatum, 2018).

From a Human Resource Development (HRD) context, professionals must educate themselves to be aware of the challenges queer populations face in the workplace (Gedro & Tyler, 2014), as empathy and awareness assists in understanding the types of protections and policies that need to be set in place. Mental health should also be advocated for, in addition to minimizing stressors for queer employees (Tatum, 2018). Organizational practices should include anti-discrimination programs, and recognize queer identities when speaking about marriage or dating partners outside of heterosexual contexts (Kelly et al., 2021). These practices can bring stability to the workplace, and help establish belief in queer work practices. These habits can create short and long term goals with positive sexual identity behaviors in a professional work setting. Practices before an employee is hired, such as job interviews, can also be impacted on whether or not queer individuals see themselves working in certain settings, as queer individuals may drop hints regarding identity to see how interviewers react, choosing to accept a job based on those reactions (King et al., 2008). Research correlates queer supported policies and practices with positive work attitudes, job performance, and commitment to an organization (Roberson et al., 2024), which leads to higher retention rates and productivity. These practices can be benchmarked on effectiveness based on recommendations from the Human Rights Campaign Equality Index (Kaplan, 2013) in order to see if practices are being implemented effectively, efficiently, and support the career development of queer populations.

Career Narrative Methods

Another approach to career growth and advancement helpful to queer populations are self narrative methods. Narratives not only tell the story of reality and life events, but provide individuals the ability to reflect upon and give meaning to experiences (Kaliris, 2022). Considering environmental factors outside

the control of queer identity, this ideology is an effective method for individuals to shape career goals, as it asks to address stressors associated with heterosexual normativity (Dispenza, 2025). Narrative approaches allow for exploration of politics, sexual identity, ethnicity and other forms of oppression a person has or will face in their lifetime (Chope et al., n.d.) This inquiry permits opportunity for reflection and anticipation of hurdles a person will meet head on. Queer workers can focus on several elements to assist with their narrative, including addressing strengths and competencies, establishing relationships with colleagues, making meaning from socially constructed discourses, and using self narrative to deconstruct and revise life plots that are empowering (Dispenza, 2025).

Specific narrative models to consider in this context include Systems Theory Framework and Career Construction Theory.

Systems Theory Framework

Systems Theory Framework (STF) encompasses a broad array of content and process influences, including intrapersonal factors (interests, sexual orientation, gender, age), and environmental, societal influences (political viewpoints, economic and/or historical factors), and social factors (personal beliefs and values, attitudes, membership among peers, family and friends) to capture the reality of work decisions and complexity of its influences (Kaliris, 2022; Lovasz, 2020). STF can provide guidance in examining career development practices and needs of queer people and communities (Chan, 2019). The marginalization of gender and sexuality can impact individual wellness and health, creating challenges across life transitions (Lovasz, 2020). Seeing as how discrimination affects queer workers' confidence and mental state, the correlation between work events can be applied to STF through a queer lens, allowing individuals to create a framework of internal and external influences on career development.

In order to use STF and assist queer individuals to positive career pathways, a groundwork can be laid for an interpretation of influences and possibilities to inform their next career steps. Career assessment tools include career genograms, role and

cultural atoms, career social dramas, and career systems interviews with a counselor (Lovasz, 2020). Allowing queer workers to craft a story and serve as a “central vehicle to capture key influences on career development and capacities for agency, change, and empowerment” in order to provide a form of empowerment and resilience for queer narratives (Chan, 2019, pp. 13).

Career Construction Theory

Career Construction Theory (CCT) is an approach using narrative to help individuals explore and reconstruct stories from previous experiences, with the notion to empower and take an active role in shaping future career pathways (Cardello et al., 2024). The process is an involved method designed to allow workers to frame life stories through construction (finding themes in previous work), deconstruction (examining restrictive themes), reconstruction (creating alternate stories), co-construction (testing new narrative with others) and action, which turns the previous elements into concrete career steps (Kilic, 2025).

For queer employees, CCT offers an importance to narrative which assists with work-related trauma. Queer workers accept authorship of career and life stories, become more comfortable in sexual and gender identity, and engage in the world more adaptively (Maree, 2013). Individuals in a recent study exhibited higher degrees of self acceptance and expression, along with positive orientations regarding occupational aspirations (Kilic, 2025). CCT can be further explored with a career counselor using exercises such as simulation/role play, life story interviews, and designing a career story workbook to engage in self reflection (Cardello et al., 2024).

Conclusion

Queer individuals in the workplace face discrimination and adversity, but this does not mean it should define their journey. The U.S. has federal protections in place and organizations must use those to implement work policies with zero tolerance for harassment and bullying, as well as enforcing rules to deter situations which make queer people uncomfortable and question self identity. If an employee chooses to disclose sexual or gender identity with work colleagues,

it should be through personal volition, and leadership must validate their identity with acceptance and vindication.

Using career theories such as SCCT, STF, and CCT, queer workers can view the past, present, and future of their career pathways to reframe experiences and shape how to move forward. Work organizations can assist by allowing meetings with career counselors to guide queer employees in making the next steps toward circumstances to lead to success.

Everyone has the right to be safe and prosperous in their work role. It is time to stop considering if marginalized people need help, and instead choose how. Through empathy and understanding, queer workers can be lifted up by those able to lend a hand. The chaos of self identity and choosing a career path is already a challenging aspect of life, how to earn a living should not be a privileged consideration placed on marginalized communities, but a deserved way to equally exist.

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CAREER DEVELOPMENT IN RECOVERY: SUPPORTING CAREER PATHWAYS FOR INDIVIDUALS WITH SUBSTANCE USE HISTORIES

William Patten

Representation for minority groups matters in career development. Much of my coursework and DEI learning has focused on supporting minority groups and ensuring fair access to jobs, resources, and opportunities. Brown (2016) defines a minority as “any group or member of a group whose social identity is underrepresented in the workplace, especially relative to its general population”. Since little attention is given to people in recovery within career development discussions, I selected this population because of this gap and because of my experience working with people in recovery. The purpose of this chapter is to look at individuals in recovery as an underrepresented population in career development, and explore how stigma, disrupted career paths, and traditional career development models can limit access to employment and workforce re-entry.

Early career development can often be viewed as a linear path. For individuals in early recovery, career paths are often shaped by disruption, employment gaps, and stigma. This makes career development very important for people in recovery, yet career development practices rarely account for these life experiences. Baldwin et al. (2010) expressed the negative stigma carried into the workplace by employers to employees with a history of substance abuse stating how, “employers may be afraid to hire unemployed persons with former substance use disorders for fear of relapse”. As well as this, employers who chose to retain “workers with former substance use disorders may treat them differently than other workers, even after recovery” (Baldwin et al, 2010, p. 1).

This topic is important to explore because many individuals in recovery want to gain meaningful employment, but do not have the guidance or support to do so, and constantly face negative stigma, or lack of trust by employers. Most career development practices remain “applicable to upper- or middle-class and privileged individuals pursuing traditional career paths and possessing the necessary resources to develop and execute their career plans” (Maynes & Grant, 2024), leaving a lot of people in recovery from substance abuse underserved.

Reframing Career Development for Recovery

This minority group is important to explore within the context of career development because career development can serve as a means of providing structured support to individuals who have experienced workplace discrimination and can equip them with the skills needed to thrive in an evolving workforce (Hite & McDonald, n.d.). From this perspective, career development is not only an individual responsibility but also a system-wide one. Bates (2022) expands on this responsibility by describing efforts to design hiring and professional development practices that intentionally value the identities, lived experiences, and talents of BIPOC populations. Career development for individuals in recovery requires a similar shift in perspective.

Exploring career development for individuals in recovery is timely and important, as a new generation begins to enter the workforce in a professional manner. Generation Z is the second youngest generation, shaped by the digital age, shifting financial landscape, and

COVID-19. They also believe in establishing greater equity for all, asking for more purpose and accountability, and the creation of more opportunities for people of underrepresented backgrounds. (McKinsey & Company, 2024). Bates (2022) notes that Generation Z has had “a huge impact on how we shape our societal structures and communities” and brings “power to influence hiring and employment practices” as this generation enters the workforce (p. 60). This generational shift could support individuals with substance use disorders in entering the workforce through increased structure and support, paralleling the advocacy efforts used to improve workforce equity for BIPOC groups. Due to their life experiences and what individuals needed to overcome to get through to recovery, this group of people bring resilience, adaptability, and valuable lived experience that can positively influence organizational culture and performance.

Researching this topic showed me a lot of research that focuses on the role of stable employment and how it directly supports sobriety. Research also sheds light on the significant barriers individuals with substance use disorders face when attempting to secure sustainable employment. A scoping review by Maynes and Grant (2024) examined 939 articles addressing the career trajectories and outcomes of individuals in recovery and found that “most of the research conducted has been done with men, with a particular sub-focus on men in the criminal justice system” (p. 517). This narrow emphasis suggests a need for broader research examining career development among individuals in recovery across diverse populations.

A different perspective to look at when thinking about career development for individuals in recovery is the belief that career readiness is a matter of personal responsibility. From this viewpoint, readiness is seen as dependent on individual preparedness rather than systemic or institutional support. Practitioners and career development models may expect individuals to demonstrate stability and self-sufficiency before engaging in the workforce.

A counterpoint to this perspective is that employment itself supports recovery, and denying access to work can do more harm than

good. Laudet (2012) notes that “employment has both economic and noneconomic benefits for recovering individuals; in addition to its legitimate income-producing potential, work provides structure, an opportunity for social connections and socialization with nonsubstance users who can function as role models, and a valued and respected role in society” (p. 288). Laudet’s study further explained how a lack of employment can negatively affect individuals with a history of substance use. Stating that “challenges to securing employment for dually diagnosed individuals may include stigma leading to low self-expectations and low self-efficacy so that challenges are avoided, as well as the entitlement system itself: Receiving entitlements affects one’s sense of self and the rules may provide a strong disincentive to being employed” (p. 296). Another perspective to consider when thinking about career development for individuals in recovery is that employment can often be viewed as a milestone, or achievement rather than an ongoing developmental process. Securing consistent employment is an important milestone, however the process does not end once a job is acquired.

When employment is treated as an endpoint, opportunities for long-term growth, skill development, and career satisfaction may be overlooked. Career development practitioners should encourage individuals in recovery to view employment as one stage within an evolving career journey. Thomsen and Hooley (2025) emphasize that individuals “experience highs and lows in our careers, and this is normal, but just because you are in a valley right now does not mean you will not be back on a mountain summit next year” (p. 63). Approaching a career, knowing that it evolves through experience and time, helps individuals recognize the value of continuous learning and personal development beyond initial employment. Supporting this perspective, Maggio et al. (2021) highlighted the importance of vocational rehabilitation interventions that emphasize building abilities and strengths to “help people develop skills and competences useful for designing a satisfying life free from drugs” (p. 215). Recognizing the positive influence a career can have on developing

skills, supporting recovery, and continuous growth is important for practitioners to emphasize when working with people from this population group.

Career Development Barriers Faced by Individuals in Recovery

The scope of substance abuse is important to understand when looking at the barriers individuals in recovery face. Maggio et al. (2021) stated how an estimated 5% of the global adult population have used drugs, and about 29.5 million of those drug users, are affected by a history of substance abuse (p. 214). These numbers represent individuals in our country who could benefit from tailored career development support. This population is reported to encounter individual barriers, “such as a lack of work experience, underdeveloped career goals, limited self-esteem, limited problem-solving skills, low levels of social skills, and the tendency to make nonadaptive decisions” (p. 214). Without support, these individual challenges can make re-entry into the workforce increasingly difficult and prevent long term career development if not addressed.

A scoping review by Maynes and Grant (2024), further highlighted the importance of the workplace and its role in recovery. In their review, they found that “the workplace emerged as a critical element in the support of individuals in recovery, including via interactions with employers and co-workers. Individuals in recovery reported a need for community, workplace, and household support” (p. 517). As well as this, their review also found that “a supportive work environment played a major role in sustaining recovery” and that “employers were reported to not understand the demands related to recovery” (p. 511). On top of all this, it was found that individuals who have dealt with this “reported that they felt under pressure from their employers once they returned from treatment and had to face their employers and co-workers who knew or suspected why they had taken time off from work, some even choosing to hide their treatment from their family, friends, and employers” (p. 511).

Research shows that individuals struggle to find employment that aligns with both workplace expectations and the requirements

necessary to maintain sobriety. With respect to treatment program success, failure has occurred due to the lack of employer flexibility needed to meet program requirements. Laudet et al. (2009) found that one of the largest factors for individuals leaving substance abuse treatment was due to needing greater scheduling flexibility because program attendance interfered with work requirements (p. 186). This makes workforce reentry very difficult, as individuals must balance recovery needs with employer demands and expectations. Gorvine et al. (2021) emphasized that the early stages of recovery require an “intensive amount of effort to maintain sobriety and avoid relapse” (p. 28). In their study with women in recovery, they found that individuals “sought jobs based on what would allow them to attend daily NA/AA meetings, which in some cases meant 2 part-time jobs” (p. 28). This barrier is difficult to overcome because finding work that accommodates recovery-related commitments is difficult within many workplaces, creating pressure for individuals to sacrifice treatment attendance in order to maintain employment. This would not be an issue if employers provided more flexibility in the first place.

It is clear that individuals in recovery face systemic barriers, limited workplace support, and discrimination. Managing the demands of sobriety while navigating employment expectations creates personal strain, especially in environments that lack flexibility or understanding. Research has found that substance use disorder has negative effects on the labor market, including economic losses and reduced economic productivity. The physical and mental health of workers, increased absence of work, and psychosocial conflicts can be caused. (Nolte-Troha et al., 2023). Current systemic barriers can make finding employment difficult for this population, due to the negative stigma surrounding their personal lives. These barriers highlight ongoing challenges for individuals in recovery and the need for tailored career development support.

Career Theories Supporting Individuals in Recovery

The sustainable career approach introduced by Hite and McDonald (2023) highlights

attributes such as continuous learning, employment security, and the impact of work across the lifespan, all of which reflect key themes in the benefits of employment for people in recovery. They further explain that this approach can “provide practitioners engaged in career development with varied tools and perspectives that will help them be better equipped to assist others” (p. 18). Viewing career development through a long-term lens enables practitioners to help individuals in recovery understand that employment is not a milestone to reach, but a longer process that can shape multiple areas of their lives. The sustainable career approach is relevant for individuals who struggle with future planning due to past disruption, because it allows career development to be viewed as a flexible tool that evolves rather than being fixed or linear much like recovery.

This approach emphasizes the interconnectedness of personal life and work with surrounding circumstances that can impact individual careers (McDonald & Hite, 2023, p. 24). Because of the interconnectedness and viewpoints across all aspects of one’s life, this perspective helps prevent past experiences from overshadowing future capabilities and recognizes that careers develop within personal, social, and environmental contexts. Maggio et al. (2021) explain that people with a history of substance abuse are “at high risk for not being able to plan for their own future life, thus exacerbating difficulties in obtaining employment or being socially included” (p. 214). This emphasizes how supporting individuals in designing a meaningful future through the sustainable career approach, is effective because it prioritizes ongoing development, adaptability, and long-term well-being as valued outcomes rather than focusing solely on gaining employment.

A second career theory that could address the needs of individuals with a history of substance abuse is the systems theory framework. McMahon and Patton (2018) describe this framework as emphasizing the interaction of multiple influences and how they function together as a whole, rather than examining individual factors in isolation. Within this framework, the individual system, social system, and environmental–societal system are

all considered in relation to one another. This framework aligns closely with how recovery is experienced and managed. At the individual level, factors such as health and relapse risk play a role. Social influences include stigma, support systems, and relationships with coworkers, while environmental–societal factors involve issues such as employer practices, access to treatment and resources, and the implications of disclosing gaps in employment.

Applying the systems theory framework to career development in recovery allows practitioners to consider how intrapersonal influences such as age, self-concept, health, beliefs, skills, values, and work knowledge interact with broader social and environmental influences (McMahon & Patton, 2018, p. 231). At the individual level, factors such as health, relapse risk, and mental health barriers shape how individuals from this population approach employment and future planning. As individuals navigate social systems, support networks, employer practices, and access to recovery resources, these external influences further affect career-related decision making. Recognizing how these influences interact, the systems theory framework highlights that career challenges in recovery can occur through the interaction between the person and their environment. By viewing all these systems and how they affect one another, career development practitioners can better tailor their approaches, explain barriers, and support individuals in a realistic and individualized way.

Practical Career Development Strategies for Individuals in Recovery

A practical strategy for career development educators in adult education contexts is the adoption of recovery-informed models that integrate career education, employer partnerships, and ongoing support. This approach is currently reflected in second chance employment initiatives, where organizations create structured, in-house support systems to address the needs of individuals in recovery whom they aim to support.

The United States Department of Labor (2026) defines second chance hiring and employment as follows:

“Second chance hiring refers to the hiring of people who are in early recovery (e.g., are in or recently completed treatment) or who have a positive pre-employment toxicology test result. The law provides protections against civil liability for negligent hiring stemming from harmful or negligent actions by the employees for businesses that agree to adopt recovery-ready workplace policies, including second chance hiring and second chance employment. This means giving employees with positive drug tests or substance use disorder an opportunity to seek help or take corrective action to maintain their employment.”

A model that has been shown to work well for this population is Individual Placement and Support (IPS), an evidence-based approach to supported employment that helps individuals living who have a history of substance abuse find and maintain jobs of their choosing within the labor market (United States Department of Labor, 2026). This model supports individuals in recovery by recognizing that work can be therapeutic and by assisting individuals in finding employment that fits their current needs. It also helps match individuals with employers who value transferable skills that might otherwise be overlooked due to life circumstances related to recovery.

An example of a small business that practices second chance hiring is DV8, located in Lexington, Kentucky. Their vision highlights that “people in the early stages of substance abuse recovery often find it difficult to find employers willing to take a chance on them” (DV8, 2026). DV8 offers vocational training, bi-weekly workshops, and collaborates with recovery homes to provide individuals in early recovery with a structured environment. This approach allows individuals to earn a living while developing vocational skills across industries through targeted workshops and structured employment support.

Another current organization that aims to shed light on this population and inform employers and practitioners is within the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Their health and wellbeing division are actively promoting the education and training of employers and career development practitioners to have the tools necessary to aid people in recovery, hire

this population, and help create supportive workplace environments. The recovery-friendly workplaces in Wisconsin “is an initiative for local employers to better understand policies and practices that can help make a work environment supportive for recovering individuals” (The University of Wisconsin–Madison, 2026).

Conclusion

Continuing to encourage workplaces to give people a second chance, along with the United States Department of Labor providing resources for businesses to engage with this population, represents an important step forward. Local businesses taking initiative to hire individuals in recovery, such as DV8 Kitchen (2026) in Lexington, Kentucky, as well as large-scale universities supporting these efforts through targeted programs like the University of Wisconsin–Madison Health and Wellbeing Division (2026), which promotes education and training for employers and career development practitioners, show that employers have support to help individuals with a history of substance use. However, my research indicates that negative stigma remains a significant barrier and often makes businesses hesitant to hire individuals from this population.

Moving forward, addressing stigma, continuing to provide support, and ensuring career development practitioners are prepared to navigate the unique life circumstances of individuals in recovery is important, and ensures this minority group is represented in career development conversations. When practitioners know how to respond thoughtfully and in a flexible manner, especially if a client chooses to disclose this information, they can better connect individuals to larger organizations willing to support vocational rehabilitation, offer second-chance employment, and provide tailored approaches to work and work environments that align with recovery-focused lifestyles.

Biography

William Patten is pursuing a master’s degree in human resource development at the University of Minnesota. He works in training and development within Facilities Management, and is passionate about staff development,

meeting training needs, and strengthening organizational effectiveness across all levels to support organizations through inclusive, strategic learning initiatives.

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RETURNING TO WORK AFTER MILITARY TRAINING OR DEPLOYMENT: CHALLENGES, REINTEGRATION, AND ORGANIZATIONAL SUPPORT

Michelle McIntosh

When returning to civilian employment and life after military service, everything seems to change. This involves challenges that affect both individual and professional aspects of life. It often takes time to adapt, as it involves changes in identity, routines, leadership roles, and overall mindset. While military experience teaches valuable skills such as discipline, leadership, adaptability, and teamwork, returning to civilian or organizational settings can still present difficulties and can be very hard on the brain and the soul. Communication differences can pose the biggest challenge, but workplace expectations and stress are also major factors.

From a human resource development (HRD) and adult learning perspective, this transition is not merely returning to a previous job; it is a learning and adjustment process. Theories such as the systems theory framework (STF) and experiential learning, can help explain how individuals make sense of these experiences and adapt over time. This paper explores the challenges service members face when returning to work after military training or deployment, as well as the role organizations play in supporting that transition.

I will discuss the issues regarding reentry into civilian life after the military, various career development theories, and unique aspects facing military members who navigate both civilian careers alongside their military service.

Challenges of Returning to Work After Military Service

One of the biggest challenges for returning service members is psychological adjustment.

According to an article on Health.mil, from 2020 through 2024, a total of 560,035 U.S. active

component service members were diagnosed with at least 1 mental health disorder. Military environments are often highly structured, fast-paced, and high-stress, with clear expectations and defined roles. Civilian workplaces, by contrast, can feel less structured and not have defined expectations. This shift alone can cause stress or frustration. In some cases, individuals may also experience symptoms of post-traumatic stress, anxiety, or depression, which can affect both job performance and workplace relationships (Adler, 2009). Even without trauma, the difference in pace and structure can seem too much at first.

Another challenge is the shift in identity and role. Military service is often a major part of self concept. Returning to civilian work can sometimes feel like a step back in responsibility or purpose. This aligns with Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory, which explains how role changes can affect a person's sense of identity. For those who held leadership roles in the military, returning to a less authoritative role can be especially difficult.

Communication and cultural differences also play a role. Military communication tends to be direct, clear, and hierarchical. Civilian workplaces may be more collaborative and less structured, which can lead to misunderstandings. Coworkers may not fully understand military experiences, leaving returning service members feeling disconnected or isolated (Hall, 2011).

Translating military skills into civilian job language can be challenging. Although service members develop strong leadership, problem-solving, and teamwork skills, these skills are not always recognized or easily

explained in civilian terms. This can lead to underemployment or difficulty advancing in a career (Clemens & Milsom, 2008).

Adult Learning Theories and Reintegration

Although many organizations have become more adept at recruiting a diverse workforce, they often struggle to retain those new recruits or know how to use that diversity to strengthen the organization. This dilemma has prompted an interest in engaging diversity at different levels, as systems recognize that just having diverse representation in an organization does not ensure an inclusive culture that uses varied perspectives to enhance the system's performance (Bristol & Tisdell, 2010). Bernstein, et al. (2020) reinforced that idea by noting that organizations become more inclusive by looking beyond the composition of the workforce to concentrate on how well non-majority group members are incorporated into the culture and by addressing system level inequities that limit career opportunities for those employees.

One theory I used was the Systems Theory Framework (STF), which offers a great look into the delicate process of transitioning back to civilian life and employment after military training or deployment. By applying systemic thinking, it becomes clear that reintegration is not a straight-line event but a complex interaction involving the individual, their social environment, and larger societal factors. (McMahon & Patton, 2018)

Experiential learning also plays a role. According to Kolb (1984), learning happens through experience, reflection, and application. Service members naturally go through this process as they reflect on what they learned in the military and apply it to new environments.

Organizational Support for Reintegration

Organizations play a major role in the success of this transition. Strong onboarding programs can make a significant difference. These programs should go beyond basic orientation and focus on helping returning service members understand expectations, connect their experiences to their roles, and ease back into their responsibilities.

Leadership is also critical. Managers who communicate clearly, show understanding, and take time to learn about their employees' experiences can create a more supportive environment. When employees feel understood and supported, they are more likely to adjust successfully and stay engaged.

Mentorship and peer support can also help. Having someone to turn to for guidance or simply to relate to can make the transition feel less isolating. These relationships foster shared experiences and learning, supporting both personal and professional growth.

An important but sometimes overlooked factor is the role of legal protections under the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act (USERRA). This law requires employers to reemploy service members in the position they would have held if they had not been absent, including promotions and benefits (U.S. Department of Labor, n.d.). While this is critical for fairness, it can sometimes create workplace tension. Employees who remain may not fully understand these protections and may view the advancement as unfair. From my own experience, I have seen how this can create frustration and even animosity among coworkers.

This highlights the importance of communication and education within organizations so that everyone understands the purpose behind these policies.

Retention in the Military

Retention poses a significant challenge, particularly within the National Guard and Reserves, where factors such as the demanding balance between civilian and military commitments, the psychological toll of dual roles, and the unique pressures of military life contribute to retention difficulties. For individuals who join after working in civilian careers, the transition to military life can be difficult in a different way. They are often accustomed to greater flexibility and control over their schedules, and adjusting to the military's strict structure and expectations can be challenging. One of the biggest differences is the level of commitment required. In the military, there is an understanding that an individual may be asked to risk their life for

their country, which is very different from civilian jobs, where that expectation likely does not exist. Balancing a civilian career, personal life, and military responsibilities can create stress and internal conflict. Over time, this can affect motivation and make it harder for individuals to continue their service. Understanding these challenges is important for both military leadership and civilian employers so they can better support individuals who are balancing both roles.

In addition, balancing military obligations with civilian careers can create ongoing strain, contributing to retention challenges. Many Guard and Reserve members must manage competing expectations from their civilian employers, families, and military leadership, which can lead to burnout over time. Drill schedules, extended training periods, and potential deployments can disrupt both professional and personal stability, making long-term commitment more difficult.

For individuals who have already established careers outside of the military, these competing demands can feel overwhelming and unsustainable. As a result, some individuals ultimately choose to leave military service in order to prioritize their civilian careers and personal lives. This further highlights the importance of support systems, flexibility, and understanding from both military leadership and civilian employers in improving retention outcomes. According to Lieutenant General John P. Healy, Chief of Air Force Reserve, while exact numbers specifically attributed to "dual-role strain" are not always publicly broken down, high demand and the resulting conflict between civilian and military duties are major factors in reserve attrition. Approximately 30% of reserve members who leave the service do so voluntarily, and in some components, up to 50% of reservists cite family and work/life balance issues, often linked to high operational tempo, as their reason for separating.

Conclusion

Returning to work after military training or deployment is not a simple transition; it is a complex process that requires both personal adjustment and organizational support. While service members bring valuable skills and experience, they also face issues pertaining

to identity, communication, and workplace expectations. By addressing these challenges and applying career development theories, organizations can better support returning service members and help them succeed. With the right support systems in place, individuals can reintegrate successfully and continue to provide significant contributions in both their civilian careers and military service.

Drawing from my own experiences as a current member of the Army Reserve, I have navigated many of these challenges firsthand, underscoring the important need for intentional support systems that facilitate successful reintegration and empower service members to thrive in both civilian and military spheres.

Biography

My name is Michelle McIntosh. I am from Oklahoma City and in my first year of my master's program. I earned my bachelor's degree from Oklahoma State University and was on the dance team. I went on to dance professionally for the NBA and now reside in Wisconsin, where I teach dance and serve as a competition choreographer.

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NON-APPARENT DISABILITIES IN THE WORKPLACE: AN ANALYSIS OF DISCLOSURE GAPS IN THE WHITE-COLLAR WORKFORCE

Maddigan DeBoth

A new study published by the Center for Talent Innovation (CTI) finds that 30% of college-educated employees in white-collar jobs in the U.S. report having a disability (Marte, 2017). Despite this, employees often fail to name at least one co-worker who has a disability, which may be due to the prevalence of non-apparent disabilities (Abney et al., 2022).

Non-apparent disabilities encompass a range of symptoms, such as: debilitating pain, fatigue, dizziness, cognitive dysfunctions, brain injuries, learning differences, mental health disorders, and hearing and vision impairments (National Institute of Health, n.d.). These symptoms are not obvious to others but impact a person's movements, senses, activities and day-to-day life, therefore making them invisible or non-apparent.

Of all disabled white-collar employees in the U.S., 62% have non-apparent disabilities (Marte, 2017). Employees in this group report feelings of negative bias, stalls in career, and a prolonged feeling of invisibility. From an employer perspective, only 21% of employees with disabilities disclose them to their respective human resources departments.

This paper aims to analyze the gap between non-apparent disability disclosure and employer-led inclusive leadership; that is, understanding why individuals with disabilities choose not to disclose disability in relation to policies, practices and attitudes around disabilities in the white-collar workforce, or “messages” received by the discloser. The paper also aims to understand the unique barriers and attitudes employees with non-apparent disabilities experience through the

lens of Social-Cognitive Theory and Career Construction Theory. Finally, it will analyze inclusive leadership practices (or lack thereof) from an employer perspective to address possible solutions and implementations to closing the disclosure gap and fostering psychological safety and trust within organizations.

Barriers in the Workplace: Social Stigmas of Disability

Individuals with non-apparent disabilities have more autonomy in whether or not they choose to disclose a disability, as it's not “visible” on the surface, unlike the use of mobility aids or limb amputations (Kulkarni, 2021). With that autonomy, however, comes decreased disclosures and requests for accommodations, likely due to the negative social stigmas surrounding disabilities (Santuzzi & Keating, 2020). It's important to understand that disclosing a disability is not always a choice; rather, it's a perceived sense of fear, judgement or failure due to one's negative lived experiences and past troubles with microaggressions, ignorance, lack of awareness and understanding, and other factors. White-collar workforces are especially prone to these negative interactions, making it increasingly difficult for individuals with disabilities to feel comfortable disclosing and requesting accommodations (Santuzzi & Keating, 2020).

Individuals who choose not to disclose their disability become ineligible for benefits or accommodations, have less of a sense of belonging, are less productive, and have worse career development outcomes. Research shows that concealing one's disability decreases self-esteem (Santuzzi & Keating,

2020) and increases burnout and feelings of anxiety. Individuals with non-apparent disabilities struggle with the “clearness” of their symptoms, often questioning themselves and their legitimacy to receiving accommodations. There is an abundant sense of negativity surrounding non-apparent disabilities, and these underlying attitudes are found to be one of the overarching reasons employees choose not to disclose.

Understanding Career Choices of Non-Apparent Disabled Individuals: Social-Cognitive Theory (SCCT)

In the context of work, Social-Cognitive Theory aims to address how an individual's thoughts, actions, and life experiences either positively or negatively impact career planning and development, while recognizing the role of environment in influencing career choices (Hite & McDonald, n.d.). For individuals with non-apparent disabilities, choices of work are often shaped by contextual factors, such as: messages surrounding abilities and limitations, dismissal from doctors or health professionals due to a disability's inability to appear externally, feelings of resilience and determination, and unique problem-solving.

One major component of SCCT is the idea of self-efficacy: one's belief in their ability to perform tasks or activities to a desired level (Hite & McDonald, n.d.). Oftentimes, self-efficacy decreases through ableist microaggressions, socioeconomic factors, and internalized, negative self-talk about perceived hopelessness. A study aimed to understand the lived experiences of individuals with invisible disabilities (Mastrella et al., 2026). The study found that oftentimes, people were overeducating others while undermining their symptoms. Persons with invisible disabilities constantly straddle between relief of validation for their disability while also strongly disliking the label of “disability” due to its prolonged negative connotation. Needless to say, the lived experiences of individuals with non-apparent disabilities are complex, confusing, and often contradictory, where individuals find themselves grappling between acknowledgment and dismissal both internally and externally.

When understanding career development choices, self-efficacy, and SCT, an individual who has a non-apparent disability who has overcome the barriers to enter a white-collar workforce is arguably an individual with high problem solving skills, determination, and perseverance. This individual may or may not have had reasonable accommodations throughout post-secondary school, was able to find help from doctors, mentors, or counselors, or may have come from a background that was supportive, affluent, and able to provide extra care and attention to the disability. Regardless of the contextual factors present, it's important to acknowledge that on the contrary, if an individual in what was most likely a traditional K-12 education model could not receive said support, resources and awareness, that individual is less likely to pursue school-or-work-related opportunities after high school graduation (Appling et al., 2022).

In the white-collar workforce, for-profit companies more likely than not have the resources necessary to foster inclusive leadership. The issue of systemic barriers to outcomes in self-efficacy become irrelevant, yet more often than not, companies fail to lead in a way that is inclusive of non-apparent disabilities, whether it's human resources, middle-to-upper management, or executive leadership.

Understanding Career Choices of Non-Apparent Disabled Individuals: Career Construction Theory (CCT)

Career Construction Theory views one's career as a story, explaining how individuals make meaning of their careers (Savikas, 2019). Career Construction Theory (CCT), in the context of non-apparent disabled individuals in the workforce, focuses on how people adapt to their environments and author their own identities in traditional spaces that may not have been built for them. In other words, a person's interpretation of lived experiences ultimately guides career decision making (Kwon, 2017).

For individuals with a disability, it is common to attach more meaning to work, as it is a means of participating and integrating into society (Kwon, 2017). Individuals with learning disabilities, such as Attention Deficit

Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Dyslexia, or others may feel drawn towards some careers and not others. It's possible that once-called "problem learners" feel an overwhelming sense of determination to disprove that harmful label, and gravitate towards high-burnout, stressful careers in law, medicine, or business. Individuals with chronic illnesses or autoimmune disorders may also do the same, due to strong tendencies to "push through" and "persevere" no matter the cost, or on the flipside, struggle to make meaning in career due to fatigue, withdrawal, and depression.

In the white-collar workforce, a disclosure gap likely wouldn't exist if individuals with disabilities (apparent or hidden) positively interpreted their lived experiences. Therefore, it begs the question, what is the role of the organization, particularly in human resources, in fostering inclusive leadership that positively reframes the lived experiences of disabled individuals in a way that increases disclosure and reasonable requests for accommodations?

Inclusive Leadership: The Snowball Effect

Research shows that many disabled individuals choose not to disclose their disability due to general, negative experiences due to social stigmas, lack of awareness, or low emotional intelligence, especially in white-collar environments (Santuzzi & Keating, 2020). If fewer employees are disclosing disabilities than the actual reflective population, how will an organization ever know an accurate amount of resources needed to provide support? What if 10 employees at a mid-size company disclose a disability, but 100 employees are disabled in some capacity? Regardless, the company will invest in an adequate amount of resources for 10 employees. This creates a "snowball effect" where the issue continues to perpetuate itself without any party choosing to change course. Employees aren't empowered enough to "be bold" about their disability, while companies are choosing to remain passive under the broader umbrella of guiding values, core beliefs, and mission statements, all of which often emphasize their value of "diversity" in some capacity.

Addressing the Disclosure Gap: The Role of Human Resources

Whether or not social stigmas surrounding disabilities are internal (anxiety, fear of judgement) or external (microaggressions, ignorance), the overall negative connotation of a disability is the main reason employees choose not to self-label as a disabled individual (Santuzzi & Keating, 2020). With this in mind, organizations, particularly in human resources, can take ownership of fostering an inclusive workplace. Strategically thinking, companies should move beyond putting diversity in their core values as a buzz word to instead be overbearing in providing resources, organization-wide communications, and visibility to the invisible. A study found that although HR professionals support the idea of hiring individuals with non-apparent disabilities, they lack the infrastructure (formal procedures and policies) to institutionalize the change needed to be inclusive as a core business model (Markou & Papakonstantinou, 2025). Employees with disabilities will not be able to grasp an employer's overarching attitudes on disabilities unless employers are vocal, overbearing, and incredibly clear, and these messages should be present at every moment in the onboarding process, including: new hire training videos, onboarding pamphlets, company websites, and through dedicated human resources professionals that serve as contact points for new employees. Over time, the "snowball effect" may begin to turn into a healthy, respectful relationship that strengthens the psychological contract, increases productivity, and elevates career development outcomes for disabled individuals.

With this in mind, the following recommendations aim to mitigate prejudice, discrimination, or stalled career outcomes for employees with disabilities (Markou & Papakonstantinou, 2025):

- Provide official, institutionalized training programs on disability awareness.
- Enact policies that allow HR professionals to handle common symptoms of non-apparent disabilities, such as: stress, fatigue, brain fog, or poor performance.
- Encourage open communication between the employer and employee to increase the odds of disability disclosure,

therefore gaining a better understanding of the support systems needed to aid employees.

- Embed disability awareness in the full onboarding ecosystem, ensuring that new employees feel encouraged and psychologically safe to disclose, if need be.

Conclusion

The disclosure gap in the white-collar workforce regarding employees with non-apparent disabilities is a natural human instinct, where employees feel a grave sense of fear regarding potential discrimination, lack of understanding, and social stigmas surrounding labels. Arguably, the best way to diminish that fear is to reassure employees through various communication channels, platforms, and points of contact. A company cannot claim to value employees' well-being while simultaneously choosing to be passive about disability disclosure. It's time companies begin to think critically about the underlying messages and attitudes they bring forward as early as onboarding, as this creates a rigid tone that is difficult to disrupt later on.

Biography

Maddigan DeBoth is a third-year undergraduate student at the University of Minnesota studying Human Resource Development and Strategic Management and Talent Development and Inclusion intern at Piper Sandler. Maddigan's research is inspired by understanding how individuals with non-apparent disabilities, often coupled with childhood trauma, complex familial roles, and other environmental factors shape career decisions and career outcomes for disabled individuals.

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