"Working hard or hardly working?" The moral career of young employees

Ana Ioan[1]

Abstract

This study examines how young individuals who were born between 1996 and 2000 navigate the moral career stages in their professional life and how they come to terms with the significance of their own work. The study employs a qualitative methodology with the objective of presenting the views, discourses, and behaviours unique to the group under analysis, as well as the subjective experiences of highly educated workers in various roles. The ten respondents—seven of them women and three of them men—come from various backgrounds and occupations in Bucharest, including NGOs, small businesses, multinational organizations, and veterinary clinics. Semi-structured interviews were employed to align with the study's exploratory and descriptive methodology. The primary findings indicate that young workers experience learning and anxiety in the first stage of a moral career at work, self-confidence, and social relationships in the second stage, and routine and self-confidence in the third stage. Young employees negotiate the meaning of their own work using three different approaches: the first group views work as having intrinsic value, the second group views work as providing opportunities for learning, and the third group defines work as adding value for clients and beneficiaries.

Keywords
Moral career; Identity; Belonging group; Youth; Employees;

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[1] Faculty of Sociology and Social Work, University of Bucharest, Romania, ana.sophia.ioan@gmail.com.

Introduction

Discussions concerning young employees seem to come up frequently in public arenas. Newspapers provide a wide range of articles on the professional status of the so-called Generation Z (those born between 1996 and 2012). Frequently, the public portrayal shows a negative view of this group of people.

A recent study captures young people's dissatisfaction with their jobs: 64% of Romanians in this generation feel that their pay is insufficient given their degree of expertise (Crăciun, 2023). At the same time, 52% of respondents declare that their workplace is stressful, 34% declare that their bosses demand too much of them, and 27% declare that they are overloaded with tasks and responsibilities (Idem).

A comparable survey was carried out by BestJobs in 2019 (Redacția Știrilor ProTV, 2019), and the findings show a similar picture. More than half of employers (65%) declared that the generation born between 1996 and 2012 had the lowest productivity at work, with members being the least resilient to stress and pressure (68%), as well as the worst communicators (45%). In 2022, a well-known Romanian news website stated that young people are difficult to hire, with recruitment parties needed to attract them, and that "entrepreneurs almost begged young people to be hired, for salaries between 2500 and 3500 lei" (Marin, 2022). However, in April 2023, 20% of all job searchers were performed by people between the ages of 18 and 24 (Redacția Ziarului Curierul Național, 2023). This is not surprising, as the share of young people aged between 15 and 24 years old who were unemployed for one year or more of the total unemployed was 52.3%, while 11% were unemployed for 6 months or more in 2021 (National Institute of Statistics – Romania, 2022).

At the same time, numerous articles present solutions on how companies can become more attractive to people born between 1996 and 2012, in the hope of recruiting the youngest segment of the workforce. Tulgan, in a Forbes article, encourages employers to focus on short-term benefits and rewards, find out what matters to these young people, and try to offer those things (Tulgan, 2023). Sometimes these young people may be undecided about what they really want to do in the future, going to work just to spend time with friends, or staying employed for only a very short period of time where they work hard for a substantial reward.

A study conducted by two sociologists shows, however, that the most important aspects when choosing or keeping a job are, in descending order, an honest and competent manager, open and clear communication with the superior, a boss who appreciates the employee's merits, a happy work environment, a boss who constantly motivates his team, and a good relationship with coworkers (Bărbulescu & Vasiluță-Ștefănescu, 2021).

The material mentioned above can appear to be rather contradictory, in my opinion. On the one hand, we observe that young people are not considered to perform well in their jobs, at least not in comparison with the older generations. On the other hand, we observe that employers and recruiters go to comparatively large lengths to find them. The fact that employers' efforts to hire young people are high may lead us to believe that the generation under analysis is well integrated into the labour market. However, we quickly learn that Generation Z represents the largest share of the unemployed. As a result, we might think

that young people would be willing to take on jobs in less-than-ideal conditions, but we find that they either refuse low wages or are unhappy with the wages they receive in relation to their work experience.

In order to try to better understand how these events can coexist, I aim to approach this situation from a sociological perspective. Specifically, I decided that there is a pressing need to understand how young people negotiate their careers, their job satisfaction, their happiness with their jobs, the meaning of their work, and the moral career stages they go through. As a young researcher, it is my responsibility to find interesting subjects and do innovative, unbiased research on them. This paper aims to provide new insights and directions to approach the professional situation of Generation Z. Moreover, the study aims to bring more clarity to a seemingly contradictory social phenomenon, for both employers and young people. Thus, the present paper is also an attempt to bring new ideas to an area relevant to the general public in contemporary society.

By taking into account the above-mentioned context and by using a sociological methodology, I aim to investigate the reasons why this phenomenon manifests in apparently contradictory ways: on the one hand, it seems that young people are not yet well integrated into the labour market since they would like to earn more or have better jobs; on the other hand, employers fail to recruit or retain these candidates.

Given the current nature of the topic and the extensive public discourse surrounding it, I believe it is important and relevant from a sociological point of view to comprehend and characterize the trajectory that young people take in their first jobs, along with the reasons behind their decisions to accept an offer, remain in one position, or look for another. At the same time, it is important to identify not only how young people find happiness or satisfaction in a job, but also how they negotiate their less satisfying professional events.

Starting from the premise that work does not have an inherent meaning, but that its meaning is subjective, differs from individual to individual, and is constantly negotiated and modified, I propose to analyse the ways in which young people negotiate the meaning of professional work, and what is subjectively important and valuable for young employees.

At the same time another aim of the paper is to identify and describe the moral career that young people go through at their workplaces, understanding the moral career not as a set of objective events and transitions they go through, but as the subjective experience of change and modification of employee identities, as Strauss explains (1959). Accordingly, the research topic of this study is to identify, describe and analyse how young employees negotiate the meaning of their own work in present and past jobs by using 'moral career' and 'social identity' as main guiding concepts. The first research question starts from the concept of 'social identity': how do young people negotiate their meaning of work? The second research question deals with the concept of 'moral career': what stages do young people go through in the workplace?

The research method used in this study is the sociological interview. I set out to accurately and carefully describe the issues observed and identified during the data collection process. I have opted for a qualitative methodology using the semi-structured

interview technique. For the same purpose, to describe as comprehensively as possible the reality encountered during the actual data collection process, the approach I used is an exploratory one, which allows me to go in depth on the subject.

Theoretical framework

The concept of identity work, as defined by Schwalbe and Mason-Shrock (1996), is a central notion in this paper. It refers to how an individual's identity is structured, how it influences their behaviour, and what it means to them. In a similar manner, Beech, MacIntosh, and McInnes (2008) define identity as a personal attribute that is malleable and dynamic over time and is not determined by events in the person's life; rather, identity is the attempt made by the person to create a biographical narrative that, in theory, should be as cohesive and meaningful as possible.

Identity creation is a process that involves weaving together the different minor identity projects that an individual has undertaken, as identity is dynamic and can sometimes seem contradictory. This point of view, in my opinion, is pertinent to the current discussion, especially when analysing the moral careers of young workers. Essentially, individuals are performing identity work when they reconcile the thrill of landing their first job with the decision to leave it. These are two opposing identity projects that they must redefine and negotiate in order to create a cohesive biographical narrative.

The aforementioned idea calls for a constructivist methodology. According to the social constructionist theory, people reframe and collectively negotiate the meaning of realty as a result of socialization (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009). For this reason, it is critical that biographical narratives are cohesive, for instance. To put it simply, social constructionism can be defined as the process by which people jointly create meaning. With this in mind, it is easy to see how both identities and biographical narratives are social constructs, because socialization shapes and rewrites their meanings through the power of social norms.

The moral career, which Erving Goffman established in 1959 with relation to mental patients, is another significant topic in this paper (Goffman, 1959). It is strongly related to the two concepts previously discussed. An individual must pass through a number of phases in order to identify and develop a sense of self, all of which are facilitated by interactions with other people (Scott & Hardie-Bick, 2022). They are able to modify their place and positioning in relation to others in a number of ways through social relationships. Throughout this process of self-transformation, their acts will be evaluated by society according to a hierarchy of values. According to Lindesmith, Alfred, and Normann (1999), "career others" are those who watch over the person and help them through this process. They stand for those people who have a big say in the person's life and have the power to determine whether the person will take a certain route or not. They have the power to facilitate or obstruct the person's advancement.

Three stages comprised the moral career that was initially investigated in whole facilities for psychiatric patients, as stated by Scott and Hardie-Bick (2022): pre-patient, patient, and ex-patient. I shall try to apply this concept to organizations because Goffman (1959) claims that it might be duplicated and recognized in any other institution. Moral

careers, and consequently the phases people go through to join an organization, can have a lasting impact on people's sense of self and social identity. Accordingly, the patient stage, or its equivalent, is crucial for redefining the self because it is during this period that the person becomes deeply ingrained in the institution's culture and actively participates in the process of both finding their own purpose or role within it as well as fulfilling their role within it (Scott & Hardie-Bick, 2022).

In this paper, I also aim to examine job satisfaction. According to Campione (2015), job satisfaction and employee retention are highly correlated, and job dissatisfaction has a detrimental impact on motivation and absenteeism. According to Freeman's 1978 argument, job satisfaction is a key determinant of labour market mobility (Freeman, 1978). Using data from the generation born between 1981 and 1996, Campione (2015) contends that while work's importance has decreased in younger generations, the intrinsic values of work and the desire to achieve fulfilment and interest in one's work remain constant throughout generations. What may have changed, however, is the ability to find meaning or interest in work.

Park (2018) conducted an empirical study to identify predictors of career satisfaction, which he defines as the actor's assessment of the professional environment. The research indicates that having an open-minded perspective and seeking outside assistance are positively correlated with job happiness.

However, Mittal and Kaur (2020) found that the importance or purpose of work is another crucial component of job happiness. Employees perform better and are more successful in reaching organizational goals when they believe their work is more useful or significant. They also experience higher levels of satisfaction from their employment. Following the same logic, Greene and Barends (2022) corroborate the substantial correlation between job satisfaction and meaning found in work, contending that when workers discover meaning in their work, they may be more engaged, dedicated, and content with their positions.

In their 2020 study on the influence of social relationships on the meaning of work, Robertson, O'Reilly, and Hannah (2020) identified two prerequisites that must be met for employees to feel that their work is meaningful. Firstly, at least one project must be personally meaningful and relevant to them; these projects typically involve pursuing significant career goals, feeling a part of a cohesive team, and being able to assist others. Secondly, finding meaning in one's work requires a goal that have personal significance. According to the same authors, there are many different methods for workers to derive meaning from their work, including reaching professional objectives, developing close emotional bonds with coworkers, and having a significant societal influence. Relationships people have at work can influence whether or not they participate in activities that have a meaningful outcome (Robertson, O'Reilly, & Hannah, 2020).

In discussing the same subject, Blankenship (1973) draws on symbolic interactionism to remind us that "the organization is nothing more than the interactions of its members in a collectively perceived space as an organizational situation" (Blankenship, 1973). According to Blankenship, in the same study, career negotiation is the most significant social process involved in the social construction of organizations. As previously

stated, career negotiation, like any other identity, can only take place through socialization, understanding, assimilation, and learning of individual roles and social norms.

According to Blankenship (1973), the moral career of work is the main career in society, preceding only marriage, parenthood, and citizenship. Labor shapes an individual's identity, and it has a significant impact on their self-concept. Therefore, changing careers might cause defensive reactions since they redefine the nature of the self.

By considering that a professional career is one of a person's most significant roles, Lee (2016) lists several different ways though which people refer to their work as meaningful, including "job, career, or calling," and discusses how different relationships to work can elicit distinct ways of approaching and performing work. This study's conclusion was that knowledge sharing among coworkers can support the idea that one's profession is a calling.

Hipp and colleagues (2017) conducted a case study on how residents find meaning in their work. One of the intriguing findings is related to what I mentioned above: when residents were asked what kind of environment they would like to work in, five themes came up. The first is connected with interpersonal interactions at work and can be practically translated into spending more time talking to patients by their bedsides. Other themes include team cohesion, less time spent on administrative tasks, collegial and supportive work environment, and a workplace that allows sharing of experience and knowledge.

According to the theory that work is a significant source of identity and meaning for people and that their quest for this meaning never ends, Scott (2019) concentrated on analysing narratives about work as there is a need for a persistent biographical narrative. Scott considers that creating stories or biographies about the professional experience is one way people to find purpose in their work. Similar to my perspective, Scott shows that analysing how people describe various life events can reveal the meaning they attach to their profession.

According to Maloni, Hiatt, and Campbell (2019), the most inexperienced workers take longer than usual to find a job that suits them, are more likely to find a job that they don't like and are more likely to be unemployed. These findings support the public image. However, because younger workers tend to leave the workforce sooner than older workers, younger employees have lower retention rates than older generations. The authors discovered that a sense of unfairness is the main reason why young people exhibit this behaviour.

Iorgulescu (2016) also studied how this generation views the workplace and discovered that 64% of young people would prefer to work for a multinational or medium-sized business since they would have more opportunities for quick promotion. Moreover, 48% of respondents said they would prefer to work in an open environment with a big team, demonstrating the significance of interpersonal relationships in raising job satisfaction. Young people also want positive ties with their superiors and the chance to receive guidance from them. According to Iorgulescu's research, 85% of young people born after 1996 think they will have to work harder than earlier generations, which is consistent with the viewpoint on intergenerational disparity that young people face.

Methodology

As described above, this paper has two main general objectives. First, I aim to analyse young people's professional trajectories from a moral career perspective, and how they experience events at work. At the same time, I also analyse the ways in which young people find and negotiate the meaning of their work. Thus, the main specific objective is to identify the moral careers of young employees. This specific objective allows me to combine both general objectives and aids in overviewing these young people's identities.

The research questions that form the basis of this study have been carefully formulated to align with the paper's main objectives. The paper aims to offer an understanding of the moral careers of young people in the workplace by addressing and responding to some research questions. The main research questions are: what are the stages young people go through at work, and how precisely do young people of the 1996–2001 generation negotiate their meaning at work?

The qualitative research approach is the most appropriate to study the above-mentioned topic. The qualitative methodology was chosen as it allows a more complex, deeper and better understanding of the respondents' experiences, attitudes and opinions, while also allowing for personal self-expression. I have used an exploratory strategy and a descriptive method to explain, comprehend, and examine the phenomena observed during the data collection process, rather than focusing on a research procedure employed to test hypotheses.

Specifically, I employed a semi-structured interviewing technique. In this manner, I was able to get a vast amount of information and a range of complex answers because I was able to spontaneously formulate additional questions when the subject brought up new topics for discussion. Therefore, I was also able to add clarifying or probing questions when the occasion asked for it. This type of interview allowed me more flexibility and openness in interacting with people (Chelcea, 2001).

In order to carry out this study, I conducted online interviews with 10 people, ages 22 to 27, who were both women and men. The discussion was open because of the casual atmosphere and my close age difference with the interviewees. I chose the respondents by asking friends and coworkers, as well as getting referrals from people who are close to me.

Because I employed convenience sampling, which is determined by the researcher's accessibility to the respondents, the sample was non-probabilistic (Etikan, 2016). In the context of the current study, the selection criteria included age, availability of respondents, speaking Romanian language, internet connection, and employment status in an organization. It was crucial that respondents be born between 1996 and 2012. I chose employees of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), as well as individuals from medium-sized businesses (11–50 employees), and multinational corporations. Respondents came from a variety of industries like manufacturing, consulting, veterinary medicine, aviation, and market research.

There were 3 men and 7 women who participated in the interview, and their confidentiality was assured from the beginning. Respondents were always given the

option of not answering specific questions or terminating the interview at any time they wished, without being asked for explanations or justifications of any kind. Still, this never happened during the data collection process. In addition, respondents were informed from the outset of the researcher's identity and the real purpose of the study, and responses were given completely voluntarily. So, respondents were not put in offensive or uncomfortable situations. I did not offer any type of reward for completing the interview and no respondent asked for any material or other benefit. However, I assured respondents that I will grant them access to the completed research report upon request. Respondents were informed about and gave their consent for voice recording the interviews. Names are changed in order to ensure confidentiality and anonymity.

The present work also has a number of limitations, given both the technique and the sampling procedures used in the data collection process. There is one major drawback associated with interviews, which is that they take a lot of time for important processes like selecting respondents, conducting the actual interviews (which lasted an hour on average), transcribing the interviews, and scheduling and rescheduling the interviews. The process of gathering data was delayed by all of this. Furthermore, the interview technique does not allow for generalizability of findings to the whole population.

The sampling method's drawbacks include: (1) not offering the complete population equal chances to be included in the sample; and (2) restricting the research to respondents who are accessible to me as a researcher in terms of availability, geography, and language proficiency. The researcher's presence itself constitute another disadvantage, as the interviewer has the potential to influence responses through question phrasing, question ordering, which can cause respondents to adapt their discourse to the perceived situation.

The moral career of young people at work

Following the logic proposed by Goffman (1959), I have identified three stages in the moral career of young employees, which I will describe in the next three sub-chapters. All three stages identified in the interviews are differentiated by duration, by feelings and perceptions, but also by different relation to other important actors in the individuals' career. The stages are: the first stage, of adaptation and learning, characterized by feelings of anxiety and a large accumulation of new information; the second stage, of gaining confidence in one's own abilities and closeness to colleagues, characterized by emotions such as a sense of security and bonding social relationships; and the third stage, of habituation, routine, self-confidence, sometimes marked by the occurrence of burnout, but also by feelings such as a sense of duty, self-confidence and close relationships with colleagues.

By comparison with the stages identified by Goffman (1959) in the study of young employees, I was unable to find a pre-employee stage that was comparable to the pre-patient stage. Although I attempted to address this theme with my interview subjects, I did not observe a recurring theme or similar experience among the respondents, as the pre-engaged stages differ substantially.

For some young people, their first job offer came as a result of good relationships with their university professors or as a result of the mandatory internship period taken during college: "*I was invited to get a job by a Uni professor. When we reconnected during the master's program, he told me to visit the NGO office following the second course, though he didn't explain why. I had a suspicion about that, and I wouldn't have allowed myself to believe he wanted to hire me. However, that is exactly how it happened. During the course, he said to me, «Virgil, come to my office». He then gave me the address. I should also mention that I got an invitation at the same time from a different professor I had met while pursuing my master's. I remained where I am now despite having to choose between them*" (Virgil, 24 years old). For others, finding their first job was a long and tiring process - "*It was a long journey finding my first job. I had already been looking for a job for about two or three months, nothing seemed to be ok, and finally I found this internship, applied and after about a month and a half or two I was hired*" (Simona, 25 years old). Given the major differences in this experience of finding a job, I was unable to find any references to the pre-employment stage.

At the same time, I haven't come across a definitive point where young individuals switch careers. I anticipated seeing a moral career stage that represented quitting a job along with a number of interviews for other companies, but this motif was absent from all of the interviews I gathered. This leads me to believe that young people do not always distinguish between the final phase of their moral career in the workplace and the future-ex-employee stage during which they focus their efforts on obtaining a superior position.

The first stage of a moral career at work - learning and anxiety

The first stage of a young employee's moral career usually lasts for between 2 weeks and 3 months after being hired, depending on the perceived complexity of the employee's duties, but also on the willingness of colleagues to help new recruits. I have noticed that this first phase tends to be longer in the first job than in subsequent jobs, because it also overlaps with getting used to the new pace of life.

In other words, for first-time jobseekers, this stage usually lasts around 3 months, during which time young people also internalise a number of rules of conduct in addition to job-specific skills. By rules of conduct I mean, for example, getting used to the new work schedule, adjusting personal hours to fit in with the hours spent at work or learning and internalising the language appropriate for a professional setting.

While there are a number of rules of conduct to be learned at this stage, such as what is appropriate to discuss with colleagues, where it is appropriate to eat lunch, how to address colleagues, and the like, for those who are not at their first job, the things to be learned and internalized at this first stage of their moral career are more about job-specific skills or integration into the new social group. Respondents often stated that this initial phase lasts little longer than a month for those who are not in their first job.

Respondents described this initial stage as the period "*when you are scared, when you are disoriented, because you are bombarded with information*" (Luana, 25 years old) or "*When I started, I was very closed in, I know I was also very willing to learn to do things and*

start as soon as possible to work on things, and I was very, very anxious" (Simona, 25 years old). Those who were not in their first job consider the onboarding process to be easier, less stressful, and with less emotional impact. Here the focus is on learning job-specific skills as quickly as possible, in order to achieve a certain independence from the manager or the person in charge of training new recruits as quickly as possible: "*The training part, well, the second job was a bit more on the go. I'm a fan of the approach, I mean it seems to me that it can be the approach that gets you to the point I mentioned before the quickest*" (Dragoș, 24 years old).

Social interactions are another crucial factor that employers consider when starting a new training phase. This applies especially for employees who have changed jobs: "*after the first 2 weeks, in general, you have to meet each person and say clearly what your ambition is. After that, I think the first month you have to go to the office every day, even if you have the possibility to be flexible, in order for you to integrate into the team*" (Alin, 24 years old).

Although the more experienced concentrate, in the first weeks, on socialising and internalising the new way of working as quickly as possible, this first stage does not stop being stressful: "*It was difficult, at least the first week was very difficult, especially because the two jobs I had were absolutely nothing alike and I found it very exhausting to adapt to a new way of working, to new people*" (Simona, 25 years old).

The moment when the first stage ends is described in a very interesting way by one of my respondents: "*It seems to me that this stage ends the moment your boss says: send that email without me in CC, don't put me on, that's fine. Then I feel that you are already a functional part of the team and you can do things on your own, and it's a very, very important point*" (Dragoș, 24 years old). Another respondent described the completion of the first stage as the moment when her hierarchical superior gave her more responsibility: "*Let's say that the first stage was this pure learning, then I started to have much more responsibility and my manager was no longer watching me*" (Ileana, 25 years old).

These responses have made me understand that, in order to successfully complete the first stage, the new employee must, among other things, be able to overcome feelings of anxiety, nervousness, and constant fear of making mistakes; additionally, they must be able to assume a higher degree of responsibility while taking on more responsibilities.

At this point, new employees also learn who their "career others" are—important individuals in their profession—with whom they will attempt to interact as often as possible and, in later phases, form closer bonds: [Author's note: the most significant individual] "*is the manager, since he is the one who assesses you and determines your career path within the organization, but I also think it's important to have a good relationship with colleagues because it's both personal and professional*" (Luana, 25-years old).

In summary, the initial phase of a young worker's ethical career may last anywhere from two weeks to three months, contingent upon the worker's background and the intricacy of the task at hand. This stage is distinguished by a socialization-based learning process. In addition to learning the job-specific skills and regulations, new employees must also start building social connections with other employees who hold significance in their lives and who have the potential to impact their career path (also known as "career others"). Anxiety, dread of making a mistake, and occasionally even imposter syndrome

are characteristics of this period. As one respondent put it, [author's note: first day of work] "was horrible. I had a huge impostor syndrome, because I thought that I had applied somewhere I shouldn't have and that I was in completely the wrong place" (Alin, 24). When the new employees feel sufficiently equipped to take on a task and the manager starts to show confidence in them, the employees reach the end of this phase.

The second stage of a moral career at work - confidence in one's own abilities and social relations

The second stage of the moral career lasts about 2 years. This stage takes place between the first and the third anniversary with the respective company. The second stage is still characterized by the desire to learn new things and deal with unforeseen situations, but there is also a focus on impressing superiors or colleagues. At first, at this stage, the desire to learn and optimism reach the highest levels, continuing then into a feeling of security and relative monotony, as described by one respondent "*After, I was in a period of learning, of excitement that I was learning new things, that I was seeing all kinds of cases and that I could manage them*" (Julia, 23 years old).

As one of my respondents described the second stage of a moral career in the workplace is marked by the desire to impress, in order to prove professional worthiness: "*it's one of those motivational periods, that you can do more, and you want to see more. Then you realize that you know more, and you want others to see that, and you are in a race with yourself with... let's learn, but let's also show that I know, because I have to prove that I deserve to be here*" (Luana, 25 years old). Although the employees have already gained some more responsibility and knowledge by the end of the first stage of the moral career, this second stage overlaps with the development of the employee as an independent person on their own projects, and this needs to be noticed by those around them, thus marking their own progress and individuality: "*Then, there also comes a period where you want to show that you're no longer in the settling-in period and that you're starting to catch on and that you want to evolve, to feel like you're doing something by yourself and that you're doing well and that you're on your own feet. Basically, you want to impress yourself and impress others*" (Alexandra, 26 years old).

The focus on others is not only about demonstrating their own abilities, but also about establishing social relationships. During this period, the employees fulfil a role - to become part of the team - in two distinct ways: on the one hand, they acquire and demonstrate their new skills, and on the other hand, they build social relationships with team members to secure membership to a group that they will continue to belong throughout the third stage of their moral career. Respondents described this process as follows: "*I think it becomes important to see your colleagues outside of work too, to have a coffee. You know how it is, gossip starts outside of working hours and gossip builds real relationships, I think.*" (Alin, 24 years old) or "*I realized that it's ok to participate in conversations and talk and share stuff like that - let's say what I did during the weekend - somewhat personal stuff*" (Simona, 25 years old).

This stage ends when the employees feel that they have demonstrated, in every way possible, that they deserve to be in the job, integrating into the team and managing to overcome unforeseen and more complex situations with their knowledge and skills. By the end of this stage of their moral career, employees are already familiar with and have internalised the way their work is done, are able to use their creativity and skills to deal with situations out of the ordinary, and have also formed social relationships with their colleagues. Also at this stage, young employees will also try to set a number of boundaries, such as not working after hours or being offended by colleagues: "*By then, I already knew who I got along with, I knew who I got along with less, I knew what topics to avoid, I knew what worked and what didn't, I knew how far to push a joke. I allowed myself to say: look, I don't have time to do today and I don't want to stay overtime, I'll deal with it tomorrow*" (Virgil, 24 years old).

In summary, the development of relationships with fellow team members and the acquisition of secondary skills in the workplace are the main objectives of the second stage of the moral career. This phase, which lasts for one to three years, comes to an end when the employee has successfully developed positive working connections with at least one coworker and is aware of his or her position on the team. During this stage, the employee should be encouraged to value their position and, ideally, the manager should verbalize the progress they have made. This is a time when they should be feeling more confident in their abilities and more enthusiastic about learning.

From discussions with my respondents, I noticed that some individuals leave the company very soon after completing this stage. This is a key stage in their moral career. It is therefore important that, during this second stage, employees are aware of their capabilities and are well integrated into the team. It is important to them not to sense that they cannot develop further in the company. Lack of encouragement or an inability to find their place in the team during this stage can have negative effects on the employee's journey in that job, as it is the case with the feeling that things will continue to be just monotonous in the future.

At this point, employees anticipate pay raises and career advancement as well, even if such things come with more responsibilities. Nevertheless, it's still critical that employee feel secure in their workplace and have the ability to set their own limits. In order to stay motivated to occupy the same position, it is also important for the employee to believe that they can continue to pick up new tasks or abilities within the organization.

The third stage of the moral career at work - routine, burn-out and sense of self-confidence

The last stage of a young employee's moral career usually starts around their third year within the company and lasts until they leave the company, unless, of course, the individual changes teams or positions within the same company, in which case they will enter the first stage again. This last stage will be passed through by an employee who is already familiar with both the team and the way of working and can correctly assess the situations that arise. The employee in the third stage of their moral career will already have many

responsibilities and duties, sometimes even mentoring newcomers: "*then I had the stage where I am at the moment, where I started to have even more responsibility and I also have three people under my wing*" (Ileana, 25 years old).

When asked to characterize this last phase of their moral career, respondents compared it to regular work, where tasks are predictable and easy to handle. The employees' sense of confidence in their abilities, both personally and in relation to coworkers, is another characteristic that defines the third period: "*And then it comes this period, about 3-4 years later, when most of the colleagues know you, know that you are good at something, know that they can trust you*" (Luana, 25 years old).

Even though the work may become repetitive during this last stage, the employees are faced with a greater number of responsibilities. This situation makes the standards to which they are evaluated become even higher than before. Given the responsibility they have acquired, especially if they have also taken on the duty of training new recruits, the workload has also increased. In some cases, this has led, at least initially, to burnout, the phenomenon of exacerbated exhaustion following clinical overwork (Redacția Medicover, 2022).

The onset of this state of chronic fatigue came as a surprise to the respondents: Ileana (25 years old) points out: "*The biggest difficulty I had was this burnout, which I honestly did not expect to have at such a young age. Generally, you hear of people going into burn-out after 30 or so. It was a very bleak time for me, because I wasn't motivated at all, and I was barely getting on with what I was supposed to be doing.*" In this case, Ileana believes that burnout has not yet completely disappeared, but has been reduced by bringing new members into the team. Another respondent, Cristina (23 years old), has completely changed the field she works in, thus "*I don't feel that tiredness anymore, the stress of office work, I don't feel the frustrations I had before, that I was tired, that I was working extra hours*". Also, to describe her first job, this respondent used the following phrase: "*I would describe it as learning, I would describe it as nice colleagues and chronic fatigue, definitely.*" (Cristina, 23 years old).

If the young employee has not succeeded in the second stage of their moral career in setting limits on their working hours as desired, the third stage will be characterized by relatively frequent episodes of overtime work. All of the respondents I spoke with for this study had gone through this, and they all felt that their manager should take the blame since they put too much pressure on them. They did acknowledge, though, that occasionally their own bad time management was the issue. A few of the respondents even go so far as to say that they changed careers to shield themselves from the potential burnout that comes with working long hours: "*Finding a work-life balance was the most important thing when I was looking for a new job, because the details of our work are quite time-oriented and if you don't manage this problem very well, you can very easily get into burn-outs*" (Dragoş, 24 years old).

In summary, the third stage of the moral career begins approximately three years after the employee first starts working for the company and ends when the employee changes jobs and goes through the same phases at the new position. Greater responsibility, a stronger feeling of duty, and a full sense of belonging to a team are the

hallmarks of the third stage of the moral career. At this point, the employee has confidence in his or her own abilities, as do the rest of the colleagues. Due to the increasing workload and responsibilities, an employee may occasionally develop burnout at this point, particularly if they have also received the task of training new recruits.

Additionally, at this point, if the employee did not establish positive boundaries in the second stage, they could have to put in extra time at work—this is a recurrent theme that emerged in the interviews.

However, the most defining characteristic of the third stage is the routine, repetitive nature of the work, and confidence in one's own skills. Respondents defined this stage primarily by referring to the routine aspect of work, such as "*this period where it was total monotony*" (Julia, 23 years old), "*then comes a period when monotony comes, when you do the same thing every day, and you feel like a little robot*" (Alexandra, 26 years old) or "*a routine comes in, nothing seems to be unimaginable or unrealistic*" (Cristina, 23 years old).

At this point, employees may choose to leave and hunt for a better job, particularly if they believe they have nothing more to learn or are treated unfairly. Respondents informed me that they made the decision to quit when they reached this third stage. The reasons they gave for leaving included unpaid overtime, constant fatigue, monotony, or a better financial offer: "*I would like this gratitude to be shown in a financial way*" Ileana (25 years old). Contrary to the press articles cited in the introduction, respondents only discussed financial compensation during the third stage of their moral career. Furthermore, they framed their salary expectations as a desire rather than a prerequisite, saying things like, "[author's note: my first job] *brought me money, well, not much money either, but it brought me a lot of new acquaintances, and that's what I wanted, actually*" (Dragoș, 24 years old).

The meaning of work for young employees

In an attempt to understand how young employees negotiate the meaning of their own work, I asked respondents to rate how meaningful they perceive the work they do as well as the work they did in their previous jobs. Using a dedicated set of questions, I was able to identify three ways in which young people find meaning in their work, regardless of their field of work.

Firstly, some respondents consider work to be meaningful in itself. They use a principle according to which an individual's worth should be measured by considering both the success of the work and the effort put into it. Work, for them, is meaningful because it gives direction, purpose, and occupation. This group of respondents does not necessarily see a difference between the meaning of one job compared to another, although they have changed jobs, positions, and industries by this point in their careers. At times, this group may also see the meaning of their own work through the added value it brings to the employer or company they work for: "*I feel that my work is equally valuable* [author's note: at any job]. *I find that any work is valuable, both to you and to the employer. Why? Because you make an effort for the money you get and then you can grow and so can the employer*" (Cristina, 23 years old). Through this quote I note, on the one hand, that for the respondent

the work is valuable in itself, but the secondary theme in this fragment refers to the financial outcome brought by the employee both for themselves and for the company. Therefore, for this group, financial reward is a factor that helps negotiate the meaning of their own work.

However, some people in this group believe that work itself is meaningful and does not necessarily matter what contributions employees can make to the organization: "*For me work is very important, it has always been important, and I always see it that way, no matter where I work. I think every role has its importance and value I couldn't compare. It's important to do my tasks well, for example to write clearly, because that's the role of my job*" (Alexandra, 26 years old).

Secondly, employees negotiate the meaning of their work in terms of learning opportunities. The opportunity to learn new skills and the possibility to accumulate information are key aspects in the decision to keep a job, as described in the second and the third stage of the moral career. For those employees who define their job meaning in terms of learning opportunities, the point at which they decide to leave their job corresponds to the point at which they feel they can no longer acquire new knowledge, or they can no longer progress up the career ladder in that job. This is the point when they look for jobs in the same field but in which they can learn new skills. The situation is described by one of the respondents as follows: "*I felt that what I was doing was no longer of any value, because I had already learned the ropes and I felt that I had effectively nothing new to learn. The new job is more valuable for me as a student, for my knowledge, because the things I do now are completely different from what I did before*" (Julia, 23 years old).

Another respondent from this group told me that when he decided to change jobs, he received two job offers, one of which was very similar to the work he had been doing up to that point, the second of which had only peripheral links to the work he had been doing until then. The material and non-material benefits were almost identical, but he decided to go to the company where his job would be different from what he had been doing up by then. This respondent explained his decision as follows: "*I chose this one because I most wanted to meet different people and learn as much as possible about all these parts of research*" (Dragoș, 24 years old), a response from which I note that the focus for this category lays always on the opportunity for self-development.

The third way in which young employees negotiate the meaning of their work is by reference to the importance that their work brings to the final beneficiary, whether that be a client for those working in corporations or companies, a patient for doctors, or a community for those working in NGOs. This group of young employees negotiates the significance of their work based on how others view it. One respondent working in the non-profit field described this by referring to the opportunity to put herself at the service of the community: '*I feel fulfilled, I always wanted to do something, to give back to the community and I feel that we do this through our projects*' (Ioana, 23 years old). For those who work in for-profit companies the situation is similar. Alin (24 years old) finds his current job more meaningful than his previous one, because here he has the opportunity to interact directly with the client and see his efforts as useful: "*The current job is more valuable. You have a*

client, so it's all very measurable. When you're not working for a client, you don't know if what you're doing is important or not" (Alin, 24 years old).

However, some of those who represent this group may change their minds about how meaningful their work is for the final beneficiaries: "*If at the beginning I thought that what I was doing was meaningful and would bring value to clients, now I don't feel that way anymore. I've reached a point where it doesn't seem to matter much what I do anymore. It doesn't feel like it has real value to customers*" Ileana (25 years old). As it might have been anticipated, this respondent decided to leave that job when she felt that her work had no longer a sense of direction and fulfilment.

In conclusion, young employees can be divided into three groups based on the three ways they negotiate the meaning of their work: First, there is a group of people that considers work valuable in itself. They may have a tendency to switch careers and use this kind of method to find purpose in their work. Sometimes these employees may also find meaning in their work through their own financial returns or through the financial returns they bring to the company. Second, I have identified a group that defines the meaning of work by considering either the opportunity to acquire new knowledge or the ability to learn. Employees of this kind usually stay in the same field of work, but still, they change companies to ensure that they can gain as much insight into the industry as possible. The third way in which young employees negotiate the meaning of their work is by considering the importance of their work to the final beneficiary, regardless of their field of work. Some employees are motivated by direct interaction.

It's also important to note that these strategies for negotiating the meaning of work can occasionally be combined and that they may vary depending on the moral career level of the employee.

Conclusions

Based on the analysis of the ten interviews conducted with respondents in the age range of 21 to 26, I have tentatively identified three stages in the moral careers of young employees in the workplace, as well as the ways in which they negotiate the meaning of their work, I found that the young people interviewed use 3 ways in which they negotiate the meaning of their work: the first group considers work inherently meaningful, and these individuals tend to change their work more often than others. Sometimes the meaning of work, for this group, is also given by the financial gains they bring to employers through the work they do. The second way in which young people negotiate the meaning of their work is through the opportunity to acquire new information. This group is usually populated by young people who are more likely to leave the job if they feel they have learned all they could. The third group uses a method of negotiating the meaning of work in terms of the added value brought to the final beneficiaries and to society as a whole. In other words, these young employees negotiate the value of their work in terms of how significant their own work is to clients, patients, communities, etc.

Moreover, I have identified 3 stages characterizing the moral career of young employees. The first stage, lasting for about 3 months, is marked by the desire to learn the

skills needed for the job, but also the social norms. This is a stage in which feelings of anxiety may arise. The second stage, lasting between 1 and 3 years, is when young people become more confident in their knowledge, when they face and solve unforeseen and more complex situations, when they set boundaries in relation to others and when they establish social relationships with other employees, managing to become part of one group. The last stage is characterised by routine, relative monotony, but also higher skills and responsibilities. This stage lasts until the job change, when the employee will follow these stages again in the new job. This last stage can sometimes be characterised by working overtime or burnout.

This paper supports the results of previous similar studies and shows that individuals need to negotiate the meaning of their own work, but also that young employees go through specific moral career stages in their jobs.

As a recommendation for further research, I think it would be interesting to explore whether the three stages of the moral career identified in the paper apply to other generations or professions. At the same time, it would be interesting to observe whether the ways of negotiating the meaning of work, especially the one focused on learning opportunities, are also found as ways of negotiating meaning for employees of other ages.

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Ana Ioan is a first year PhD student at the University of Bucharest, Faculty of Sociology and Social Work, at which she completed her bachelor's degree in Sociology and her master's degree in Advanced Sociological Research. Aside from her academic experience, Ana has been part of the business environment, having worked for major market research companies in Romania for the past 3 years, with a focus on quantitative research. She is interested in observing and analysing consumer trends, the processes of identity work and the fast-growing industry of social media.