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THE TRANSFORMATION OF YOUTH VALUES AND ITS IMPACT ON THE NATURE OF CAREER PATHS

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Abstract

The rapid global changes of recent years, particularly the COVID-19 pandemic, have significantly reshaped the values and career expectations of youth. This research aims to explore the transformation of youth values and its influence on career path formation in the Baltic states, emphasizing Latvia. Using sociological analysis and labor market studies, the paper identifies significant trends such as increased flexibility, a shift towards meaningful and remote employment, and emerging preferences for work-life balance among young people. Findings suggest strategic adjustments for employers and policymakers are essential to accommodate the evolving aspirations of the younger generation.

Keywords: youth values, career paths, post-pandemic trends, Baltic states

1 Introduction

Over recent decades, the Baltic states, particularly Latvia, have experienced significant socio-economic transformations, deeply influencing the values and career aspirations of their youth. Shaped by historical changes, economic fluctuations, and rapid globalization, today's generation faces unique challenges such as increasing digitalization, labor market instability, and the necessity of adapting to rapidly changing environments. The COVID-19 pandemic, starting in 2020, further intensified these transformations, compelling young people to reconsider their priorities and approaches toward career development and professional identity.

Previous research highlights a notable shift in youth career preferences and values, emphasizing aspects such as flexibility, meaningful employment, and personal autonomy. The concept of career stability has gradually given way to career agility, with young people more frequently exploring non-linear career paths, remote employment opportunities, and entrepreneurship. This value realignment reflects broader global trends influenced by digitalization and changing societal norms, now evident in the Baltic region as well.

In 2023, our own empirical study conducted among Latvian youth (aged 18–29, n=120) demonstrated these emerging trends clearly. The findings revealed that 82% of respondents considered flexibility in working conditions, including the opportunity for remote or hybrid employment, as essential for their career choices. Additionally, 74% prioritized work-life balance over traditionally high-paying jobs that require substantial personal sacrifices. An important discovery was the increased focus on socially responsible and meaningful employment, with 68% of respondents expressing a desire to work for companies that demonstrate clear social and environmental responsibility.

Understanding the transformation of youth values and its influence on career path formation is thus essential for developing responsive strategies in education, employment, and youth policy sectors. This research addresses the urgent need for adaptation to the new realities and expectations of the younger generation in a post-pandemic world, providing critical insights for policymakers, educators, and employers in Latvia and beyond.

Overview

Recent research underscores significant changes in youth values and employment trends in Latvia and other Baltic countries following the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the comprehensive Baltic Youth Study by Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (2022), young people increasingly prioritize employment that provides personal meaning, flexibility, and opportunities for self-development rather than focusing solely on traditional career benefits such as salary or social status [1]. These new value orientations have emerged largely as a response to both global digitalization trends and pandemic-induced shifts in work patterns.

Further supporting these observations, qualitative research by Kaprāns (2021) identifies the formation of a distinct "Corona generation" in the Baltic states, characterized by enhanced resilience and adaptability, alongside an increased awareness of mental health and well-being [2]. Youth perceptions of employment have notably evolved towards favoring positions that enable remote work and greater autonomy, reflecting the necessity to adjust quickly to new realities during pandemic restrictions.

An academic analysis conducted by Leino et al. (2023) emphasizes ongoing migration trends among Baltic youth, driven by aspirations to improve quality of life and career opportunities abroad. Despite these movements, the research highlights the potential to retain and attract young talent locally through improvements in employment conditions and the promotion of sustainable, meaningful career opportunities [3].

Finally, the work of Grinevica et al. (2022) offers crucial insights into rural employment challenges intensified by COVID-19, noting significant reductions in job opportunities for young people in rural Latvia. This has increased urbanization pressures, highlighting the importance of policy measures aimed at regional employment sustainability and support for rural entrepreneurship, particularly among young educated women [4].

Decision

This research employed a mixed-method approach, combining quantitative analysis and qualitative semi-structured interviews to understand evolving youth values and career choices in Latvia. Data collection took place in 2023, targeting a representative sample of 120 respondents aged 18 to 29 across urban and rural regions.

Key hypotheses guiding this study were derived from recent literature (as discussed in section 2). Specifically, it was hypothesized that post-pandemic youth increasingly value:

- Flexibility and autonomy in employment.

- Opportunities for meaningful work and personal growth.

- Work-life balance over traditional measures like high salary and job security.

- Social and environmental responsibility in employer practices.

The quantitative findings strongly supported these hypotheses:

Flexibility: 82% of respondents indicated that remote or hybrid working conditions were crucial when considering career opportunities, aligning with the broader shift toward flexibility and autonomy reported by Kaprāns (2021) [2].

Work-life balance: 74% of youth prioritized balancing work with personal life and leisure, confirming the trends identified by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (2022) [1].

Meaningful employment: 68% of respondents expressed strong preferences for socially responsible employment opportunities, validating the emergence of new value orientations towards meaningful work highlighted in previous research [1].

Additionally, qualitative analysis from interviews emphasized increased entrepreneurship aspirations among youth, particularly in rural areas. This supports Grinevica et al. (2022), highlighting entrepreneurship as an emerging solution to declining rural employment opportunities [4].

Thus, results confirm and extend previous findings, demonstrating how youth career decisions and values have evolved significantly, shaped by recent global events and shifting societal expectations.

Conclusion

The transformation in youth values observed in Latvia significantly reshapes career path formation among young people. Today's youth show clear preferences for flexible, meaningful, and socially responsible employment, prioritizing personal autonomy and quality of life over traditional indicators of career success. These findings align closely with recent Baltic-wide research and underline critical shifts influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic, digitalization, and evolving societal norms.

Given these changes, employers, educators and policy makers need to respond effectively. Practical recommendations include promoting flexible employment models, facilitating remote and mixed work opportunities, supporting youth entrepreneurship – especially in rural areas – and incorporating clear social and environmental responsibilities into organisational strategies. The implementation of these measures will increase the sustainability of youth employment and the socio-economic stability of the region, which will ultimately strengthen Latvia's ability to retain and develop young talent in a rapidly changing labour market.

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