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How Gen Z Constructs Professional Paths Beyond Linear Career Trajectories

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# Abstract

This thesis explores the factors that drive Gen Z to construct careers that are non-linear. Drawing from qualitative data from semi-structured interviews with Gen Z professionals, the study explores how they approach career building and non-linear careers. While prior research has often focused on Gen Z's workplace preferences or HR adaptation strategies, few studies have examined the lived experiences behind Gen Z's career choices. The results show that continuous learning is a primary driver in Gen Z's career approach, and it is not only seen as a benefit of career progression, but also as a goal in itself. Internal values such as authenticity, purpose and personal-growth, along with external pressures like labour market changes and intense competition influence career decisions. These insights point to a broader generational shift in how individuals approach their careers as they value and expect work-life balance and take responsibility for their career progression through various tools. To interpret these shifts, the study draws on Boundaryless and Protean Career theories, which help explain how Gen Z professionals construct careers across roles and industries while being guided by their values. The study underscores the need for a better understanding of Gen Z's career expectations and success motivators as they continue to become a more prominent part of the labour-force.

**Keywords:** *Gen Z careers, Gen Z, Boundaryless Career, Protean Career, Personal Branding, Sweden*

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Milena & Verona, May 2025

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Background

Many things move fast today, and careers and jobs are no exception. Macroeconomic factors such as globalisation and hypercompetition have affected the complexity of the career environment (Alcover et al., 2017) and people have adapted to this uncertainty by being more flexible to changes (Hirschi, 2018). The labour force's newest entries are Generation Z (Gen Z) and they arrive with a career approach prioritising working for a number of organisations and staying flexible over long-term loyalty to a single employer (Arar & Öneren, 2018). There has been a growing emphasis by Gen Z on a more relaxed view on career tenures, and a preference for work-life balance and flexibility (Barharte & Dirani, 2021). This understanding of Gen Z's more flexible view emerges as today's workforce states:

*“ We have less trust in the stock market because it crashed. And I think that a lot of us are worried that it is going to happen again. We are either putting off big life moments and keeping money in our savings [accounts], or we're saying, 'You know what? It could fall apart again tomorrow. Let's travel the world' (p. 1). (Deloitte, 2019 through Barharte & Dirani, 2021).*

Taken together, this uncertainty has shaped and influenced how the new cohort of workers view their careers and make choices. Gen Z shows a strong rejection to linear career paths (Bohdziewicz, 2016) and prefers non-linear career development rather than linear ones as it is perceived as allowing for greater flexibility and personal growth (Greenhaus et al., 2008). This shift to non-linear careers is not only a reflection of individual preference but it indicates there is a larger transformation in how careers are pursued and assessed by Gen Z.

As the workforce is increasingly made up of more Gen Z workers, their career preferences will become more influential in organisational norms. According to Forbes (2024) by 2030, Gen Z may comprise around 30% of the global workforce. Additionally, over time Gen Z individuals will also lead and shape workplace cultures, making it important to understand their motivations and expectations of a career.

## 1.2 Research Gap

In attempts to understand Gen Z better and their career expectations and values, much of the existing literature has focused on workplace preference, performance conditions and talent management strategies that are adapted to Gen Z. For example, Barhate & Dirani (2021) conducted a systemic literature review highlighting that Gen Z professionals value career paths that align with personal interests and offer flexibility. Bohdziewicz (2016) investigates Gen Z's dominant career anchors and found a strong preference for lifestyle over hierarchical progression, focusing on a quantitative approach towards their ideal preferences rather than practice. Waworuntu et al. (2021) explore how work-life balance and job satisfaction influence Gen Z performance, and they position workplace structure and employer offerings as the key engagement drivers for Gen Z. According to Karakus (2021) the definition of career success has shifted, and it is increasingly viewed as subjective and based on personal values, standards, and goals. However, Karakus (2021) does not define what these values, standards and goals might be.

Arar and Öneren (2018) emphasise the role of talent management in retaining Gen Z employees, considering their increasingly boundless approach. This echoes the early arguments by Arthur and Rousseau (1997) for a more boundaryless and self-directed career approach. Racolța and Irini (2021) similarly analyse HR perspectives on Gen Z retention, often framing this cohort as difficult to manage. Mavhungu et al. 2024 build on this by investigating how Gen Z's pursuit of purpose-driven work is influenced by changing labour markets and call for HR strategies to adapt.

While these studies provide important insight into the organisational responses to Gen Z's entry into the workforce and their values, the studies focus on employer strategies, HR practices and Gen Z preferences rather than their approach reflecting on previous career choices as well. There is a need for more studies that investigate how Gen Z professionals navigate their own careers in real-life contexts, and particularly in how they construct non-linear career paths. This distinction matters because Gen Z are not only reacting to organisational conditions, but they are also actively shaping careers in ways that challenge linear career paths. Thus, the current literature lacks a deep, qualitative understanding of the lived experiences of Gen Z professionals who pursue or prefer non-linear career advancement.

### 1.3 Purpose

The purpose of this study is to explore what factors drive Gen Z professionals to pursue careers characterized by non-linear advancements rather than linear ones.

Rather than focusing solely on career outcomes, the study aims to understand the drivers that shape Gen Z's approach to building non-linear careers. The aim is to offer insights on the career behaviours of the new cohort of workers. This study might also offer insights into a contemporary issue of retaining Gen Z in an organization, as they move into less linear trajectories and many companies struggle to keep them (Forbes, 2024; Grant Thornton, 2023; Racołta & Irini, 2021).

### 1.4 Research Question

The overarching question that this paper aims to answer is:

*What factors drive Gen Z to build professional career paths that are non-linear?*

In investigating this question, this thesis draws in insights from real-life experiences of Gen Z professionals and their perspective on careers beyond linear trajectories. By using semi-structured interviews to gauge Gen Z insights, the study aims to understand patterns and logics behind Gen Z career choices.

### 1.5 Delimitations & Scope

To effectively address the research question, several delimitations have been set. This helps narrow the focus to ensure a thorough analysis.

While highly relevant, broader socio-economic aspects such as access to education, institutional inequalities and theories of social capital are deliberately not included. It is acknowledged that these factors can influence individuals' career choices; however, capturing these factors falls outside the immediate research objective. This study focuses on individuals with higher university education which inherently shapes the career trajectories and opportunities discussed. As such, the findings primarily reflect the experiences of university educated individuals and are not necessarily generalisable to those with different educational backgrounds. The decision to focus on Sweden is pragmatic, based on the researchers' location

and access to respondents. As a result, the findings may reflect the specific context of Sweden and may not be directly transferable to other settings.

## 1.6 Disposition

This thesis is structured to guide the reader from the broader context of the research topic to the specific findings and conclusions. The introduction provides the background of the shift from linear to non-linear career paths, its relevance amongst a Gen Z context, the research gap, purpose and research question framing the structure of this study. The theoretical framework brings together literature on Boundaryless and Protean Career theory. The different frameworks and concepts build a foundation for understanding Gen Z's approach to career-building. This section sets up the theoretical groundwork for interpreting respondent narratives and connects their behaviours. The methodology chapter details the qualitative research design, including semi-structured interviews and the use of the Gioia Methodology (Gioia et al., 2013) for analysis. Following this, the findings highlight the main themes drawn from Gen Z interviews on their career approaches. The discussion chapter analyses the interview findings of what factors drive Gen Z individuals to pursue non-linear careers in relation to the theoretical framework. Managerial implications explore how the findings can help guide organisations in understanding Gen Z's evolving career values and expectations. The conclusion summarises the study's main contributions and offers suggestions for future research.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

This thesis has chosen to focus on two prominent theories used in career management theory: the Boundaryless theory by Arthur & Rousseau (1996) and the Protean career theory by Hall (1996). These theories are two of the more prominent ones and they have been the basis of most research about this topic and have been applied both in tandem, and separately, by previous research to investigate career orientations and attitudes (Mazzetti et al., 2024; Guan et al., 2019; Wiernik & Costal, 2019; Greenhaus et al., 2008). As described by Wiernik & Costal (2019) the interplay between these two concepts can be conceptualised as: *“The protean/boundaryless career concepts refer to people becoming more self-directed and flexible in managing their careers in response to societal shifts in work arrangements.”* (Wiernik & Costal, 2019).

### 2.1 Boundaryless Career Theory

This theory proposes that modern careers are no longer confined to one organization or sector and a key dimension of this theory is inter-firm mobility, which positions career development as happening through movement between roles and organisations rather than through an internal working ladder (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996).

*“Careers are increasingly boundaryless, disconnected from a single employment setting and untethered from traditional organizational career arrangements (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996).”* (Greenhaus et al., 2008).

However, research has yet to unanimously agree on a single definition of the concept. In the original definition of Boundaryless career, as developed by Arthur & Rousseau (1996), it was described as the: Independent career, i.e. the opposite of “organizational career”.

As mentioned by Greenhaus (1996), the theory also encompasses tangent aspects and is not limited solely to inter-firm mobility. Some suggest that an individual’s boundaryless career orientation is shaped by accumulated learnings and personal identity rather than formal job titles and roles (Arthur et al., 1999; Baker & Aldridge, 1996; DeFillippi and Arthur, 1994). Other scholars add to this, for instance, Robinson & Miner (1996) view Boundaryless careers to not only allow mobility between organisations but also challenge typical rules and paths inside an organization.

While some scholars contribute with additional dimensions, inter-firm mobility emerges as a defining feature of Boundaryless career (Briscoe, 2006; Briscoe and Hall, 2006; Eby, 2001; DeFillippi and Arthur, 1994). Greenhaus et al. (2008) states: *“In sum, boundaryless careers are seen as a counterpoint to traditional organizational careers that assume continuous, linear mobility within a single employment setting in which an employee’s identity, social capital, and future career possibilities are anchored to the current organization”*.

## 2.2 Protean Career

*“The career of the 21st century will be Protean, a career that is driven by the person, not the organization, and that will be reinvented by the person from time to time, as the person and the environment change”* (Hall, 1996).

A Protean career is an approach where an individual's personal values are centred and used as a way to build their career path (Hall, 1996). The definition is twofold (Greenhaus et al., 2008). First, a protean career is proactively self-directed, and protean employees take accountability, and they initiate exploration of careers as well as options on the market. Second, the driver is value congruence, meaning that the decisions this individual makes should correspond to a feeling of psychological alignment in terms of values and goals (Greenhaus et al., 2008). Individuals having a protean attitude shape their career according to their values and beliefs and pursue paths guided by personally defined goals (Volmer & Spurk, 2011). *“People with a protean career attitude use their personal identity as a guide for career decisions.”* (Volmer & Spurk, 2011).

This reflects a shift from external validation and taking organisational values to heart towards subjective criteria shaped by an individual’s meaning and growth. Looking at the literature around Protean career it is best described as an orientation or approach (Briscoe & Hall, 2006). Using the theoretical concept of Protean career (Hall, 1996), this study can explore underlying reasons behind Arthur & Rousseau’s (1996) Boundaryless theory. A Protean career encompasses a *“person's own personal career choices and search for self-fulfillment”* Gubler et al., (2013) cited from Hall.

### 3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach with an exploratory lens, aiming to understand the underlying factors driving Gen Z professionals to build multidimensional careers. Through semi-structured interviews the participants described their lived experiences of their own careers and perceptions of it. The interview method was selected for its ability to capture complex complexities and unexpected issues (Bell, Bryman & Harley 2019, pp. 35, 168).

#### 3.1 Data Collection

The semi-structured interview format, consisting of a set of predetermined themes and open-ended questions allowed respondents to articulate their values, dilemmas, and strategies in their own words, which was important for identifying emergent themes around identity work, personal branding and career intentionality. The exploratory approach also allowed the research to remain flexible to novel and unexpected respondent insights about their career approaches. When the goal is to understand unique perspectives rather than forming a generalized understanding of a phenomena, semi-structured interviews are the preferred data gathering method (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). This means that by using semi-structured interviews it allows in-depth responses rather than brief affirmative or negative answers (Ilovan & Doroftei, 2017). This was particularly important as the research did not seek to validate preconceived ideas about career flexibility, but rather to explore how respondents themselves articulated and made sense of their career paths.

#### 3.2 Respondent selection

The respondents consist of eleven young professionals within the Gen Z age bracket in Sweden (Table 1). Both Swedish nationals and international individuals are represented, many of whom have studied in Sweden and acquired work experience both domestically and abroad, ranging from work experience of 3-8 years. Respondents were selected using snowball sampling, starting with individuals engaged in active career exploration or digital personal branding, who then referred others with similar profiles. This method is one of the most popular methods of

respondent sampling in qualitative research, the central idea is utilizing networking and referrals to get the desired sample size and composition (Parker et al., 2019).

The selection criteria for respondents were guided by the research question and all respondents met the core criteria of having at least some years of exposure to the labour market. This criterion was important to ensure that respondents could meaningfully reflect on real-life career considerations where they were exposed to making career choices to some degree and not just speak on the matter hypothetically.

To ensure a diverse and reliable range of perspectives, the following selection parameters were used:

- Variation in academic background to avoid discipline-specific bias
- University affiliation to capture a range of institutional cultures
- Types of professional experience both formal and informal to reflect varying degrees of career exposure
- Gender representation to avoid gendered assumptions about career preferences or access

Several individuals maintain an active presence on LinkedIn, using the platform to shape their professional identity and engage with career-switching behaviour to assess whether non-linear, multidimensional career trajectories are a widespread characteristic among Gen Z professionals. Respondent's engagement on LinkedIn became apparent during interviews and it was often mentioned by respondents. However, considering the snowball sampling method, this research acknowledges that further respondent referrals might have considered other individuals who appreciate the relevance of the platform.

A total of eleven respondents were included in the final study. Although additional interviews had been scheduled, data collection was concluded once thematic saturation was observed multiple times by the researchers. Respondents were consistently identifying similar themes and perspectives which indicated that further interviews were unlikely to generate new insights. Saturation, as a guiding principle in qualitative research supports the decision to end data collection when additional data no longer contribute to the development of new categories or depth of understanding, as seen in Guest et al. (2006).

| <b>Respondent</b> | <b>Sex (Female, Male, N/A)</b> | <b>Interview Duration</b> | <b>Years of working experience</b> |
|-------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------------|------------------------------------|
| 1                 | Female                         | 30 min                    | 8                                  |
| 2                 | Male                           | 25 min                    | 5                                  |
| 3                 | Female                         | 22 min                    | 6                                  |
| 4                 | Female                         | 26 min                    | 4                                  |
| 5                 | Female                         | 28 min                    | 5                                  |
| 6                 | Female                         | 28 min                    | 3                                  |
| 7                 | Male                           | 25 min                    | 8                                  |
| 8                 | Female                         | 32 min                    | 6                                  |
| 9                 | Male                           | 30 min                    | 4                                  |
| 10                | Female                         | 20 min                    | 5                                  |
| 11                | Female                         | 35 min                    | 7                                  |

Table 1.0

The eleven interviews were conducted via audio meetings on Microsoft Teams, a secure platform to ensure anonymity. All interviews were recorded with the consent of respondents and subsequently transcribed through the platforms AI and then revised by researchers manually. Anonymity was ensured by removing any identifying information from transcripts. Interview duration ranged from approximately 20-35 minutes; all interviews were conducted between March-April 2025. The time frame was intentionally kept flexible. For many respondents, this was their first time reflecting on their careers through the lens of specific concepts this research introduced. than imposing fixed frameworks, the interviews were designed to give respondents room to explore and articulate on the labour market and their own career experiences. The 15-minute variation in length reflects differences in how individuals chose to share. Some respondents expressed particularly strong views or offered illustrative stories. In several cases, the final open-ended question was used by some respondents to offer

additional reflections. In all interviews, protocol remained consistent, ensuring each respondent was given equal opportunity to engage with the key themes of the study.

### 3.3 Interviews

An interview guide was developed to ensure alignment with the study's research question (Appendix 8.1), covering themes such as career motivations, perceptions of job switching, and definitions of success. This format allowed for consistency in topics discussed, while still offering flexibility for respondents.

In academia the words Boundaryless and Protean have been most prominent when describing 21<sup>st</sup> century career trajectories and how Gen Z view career paths, however in the preparation of interviews consideration of what words to use was carefully evaluated to avoid bias and misunderstandings. To ensure clarity and comfort for respondents, particular care was taken in how interview questions were framed. Although academic concepts such as “Protean” and “Boundaryless Careers” informed the study design, these terms were intentionally omitted or simplified in the interview context to avoid jargon or leading questions. Instead, language such as “career flexibility”, “non-linear paths” and “switching between roles” were used to foster open-ended responses.

The interview guide was piloted with two individuals from the target demographic to refine phrasing of questions, probes, and ensure thematic clarity. Questions were structured to move from broad career reflections to more focused topics such as job transitions, personal branding and digital presence.

Following the pilot interviews several adjustments were made to the interview guide. For example, in question 3, respondents independently raised macro-environmental influences as key factors shaping Gen Z’s career approach. In response, a follow-up question was added to invite further elaboration on these themes, including factors not previously considered by the researchers. Similarly, when respondents discussed personal branding, they frequently referenced LinkedIn unprompted. In other cases when terms such as “career hopping” or “fluid career paths” in interview questions prompted requests for clarification, definitions were offered but only after allowing respondents to first share their own interpretations, in line with the exploratory lens. Additional follow up questions were also introduced to better understand

the motivations and emotional dimensions behind career-switching behaviours. These adaptations reflect the appropriateness of the semi-structured format, enabling the interview process to prioritise respondent experiences.

### 3.4 Data Analysis

The primary analytical framework employed was the Gioia Methodology due to its widespread use in qualitative research in fields of organisational behaviour and identity construction (Gioia et al., 2013).

The Gioia approach consists of three analytical stages (see Figure 1):

1. First-order coding: Here direct quotes are grouped into first-hand initial thematic concepts that stay close to the data.
2. Second-order themes: In this stage the first-hand thematic concepts are interpreted through a theoretical lens of previous research to identify broader patterns and meanings.
3. Aggregate dimensions: In the final stage related themes are grouped together into aggregate dimensions that reflect overarching, higher-order ideas emerging from the initial data.

This method enables a structured yet inductive approach to building theory from respondent insights.

To support the analysis process, NVivo 15 was used due to its ability to manage large volumes of qualitative data, which also ensured transparency and traceability of analytical decisions. NVivo's tools were beneficial in identifying overlapping concepts and visualising connections between themes, which in turn supported the final Gioia data structure with its encompassing themes and aggregate dimensions (Figure 1). This diagram visually represents how first-hand respondent data evolved through conceptual grouping into higher-order theoretical themes. It shows the analytical journey from data to concluding categories and supports the credibility of the interpretations made. This approach was especially appropriate given the emergent nature of multidimensional career identities among a generation that is still shaping its professional

norms. Being reflective was a key part of the methodological process as the interviewer had to remain attentive to their own position, as it could influence the depth and direction of interviews.

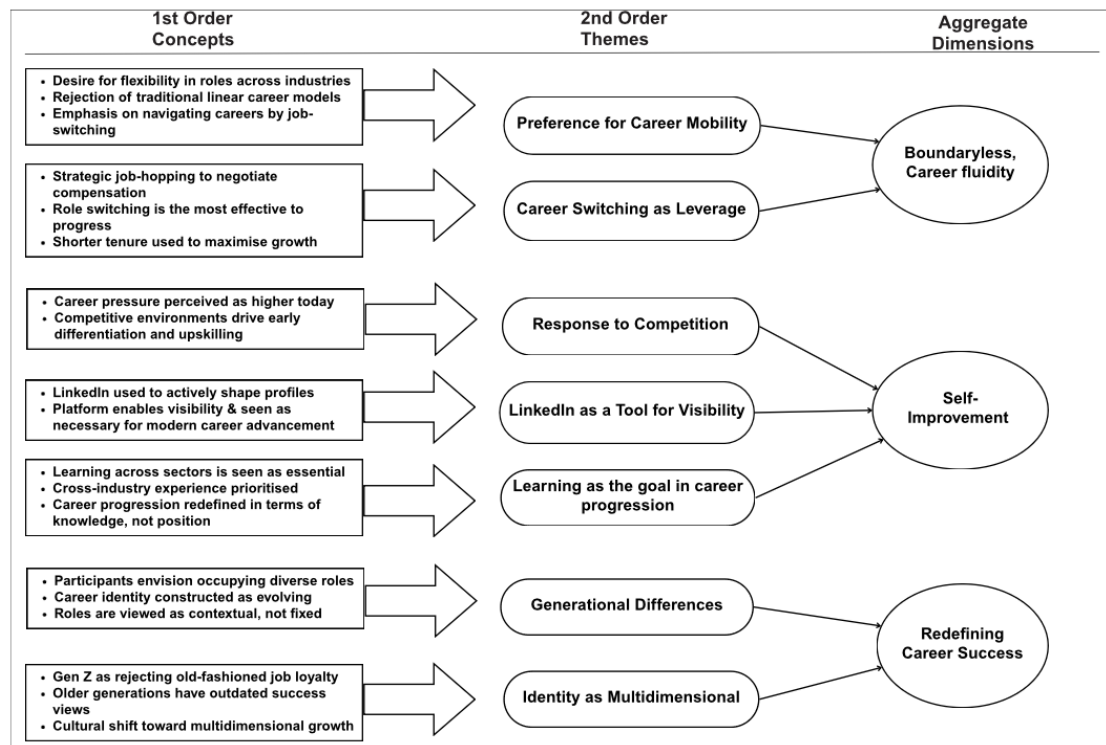


Fig 1.

### 3.5 Reliability, Validity & Generalisability

To ensure the reliability, active measures were taken into consideration when collecting data and conducting the interviews. Interview transcriptions were reviewed and cleaned to ensure precision and exclusion unnecessary filler words. The chosen qualitative method provides concrete, context-specific insights into the researched subject (Bell, Bryman & Harley 2019, p. 65). Data analysis continued until empirical saturation was reached, thereby ensuring validity within the results (Bell, Bryman & Harley 2019, pp. 46-47). The sample and study did not restrict industry or years of professional experience, as the goal was to find and investigate broader patterns. This approach was chosen to ensure that the findings would reflect broader theoretical insights (Bell, Bryman & Harley 2019, p. 375).

### 3.6 Ethical considerations

This study was designed with careful attention to established ethical principles in qualitative research. Prior to each interview, respondents were given a consent form explaining the study's aims and their rights to withdraw. This form was developed in line with ethical procedures upheld by the Stockholm School of Economics. To maintain confidentiality, all identifying details were removed from interview transcripts and are not included in the thesis. Respondents were also notified during the meetings that Microsoft Teams was transcribing and recording the interview. These tools were used for practical support. Audio files and other sensitive material will be erased once this thesis process is complete. These measures were taken to ensure a fair and secure environment for all respondents.

## 4. Empirical Results

This section presents the central themes that emerged from the eleven semi-structured interviews and presents the empirical findings of the study. The findings are categorised into the three following overarching themes 1. *Boundaryless Career* 2. *Redefining Career Success* and 3. *Self-Improvement*. These themes then cover sub-sections that were derived from the second order themes analysed through the Gioia Method.

### 4.1 Boundaryless Career

The respondents were asked to describe their current career path and reflect on their perceptions of career identity, particularly in relation to Gen Z values and the traditional career norms of remaining with one organisation for an extended period.

#### 4.1.1 Preference for Career Mobility

Initial analysis indicated that respondents largely perceived long-term employment at a single company as an outdated approach, misaligned with Gen Z's career preferences. While definitions of "long-term" employment varied among respondents, ranging from two to three years to a decade, there was a shared understanding that prolonged tenure within a single organisation was no longer considered essential for career advancement, or the desired approach.

*"I think this new generation changes jobs more frequently, usually within three years and that suits me better as well, I like variation, I like to meet different people, to be in different contexts and really just increase my impact (...) really maximise a shorter period rather than being there for a long time...it would be quite boring and under-stimulating"- (Respondent 8)*

Traditional career loyalty was often associated with previous generations and was at times perceived as a potential barrier to early career development, rather than a facilitator of professional growth.

A key second-order theme that emerged in respondents' responses was career switching as a deliberate strategy. This theme reflects respondents' preference for career paths that are responsive to individual growth rather than linear trajectories.

*“A fluid career development would kind of give me the opportunity to see what's out there and then after I've seen that decide what is best for me. Then maybe I stop with that and go for a more linear approach or when I find a company that I really enjoy.” - (Respondent 1)*

This statement illustrates the strategic approach of exploring various professional opportunities before settling into a more defined career path. Fluidity, in this sense, serves as an intentional period of exploration, where individuals prioritise exposure to diverse roles and industries to deepen their understanding of what aligns best with their professional goals. It is not about forgoing structure altogether but instead about exercising the flexibility to pivot and adjust based on experiences accumulated over time.

Many respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the traditional model of long-term employment at a single organisation because they believe it could hold them back from exploring careers. Career fluidity was seen as a career asset rather than liability. When asked about attitudes towards the traditional career trajectory respondents viewed it as archaic and not representative of their current environment.

*“That is a very old-fashioned mindset. I feel like in today's society the market has changed (...) working for a company for such a long number of years, it's not as efficient.”*  
- (Respondent 4)

Respondents also expressed that the traditional career advancement model did not align with their personal career ideology.

*“I don't live in line with that motto, and I think that this new generation doesn't like it. I think many people change jobs more frequently, usually within three years and that suits me better as well.” - (Respondent 5)*

#### 4.1.2 Career Switching as Leverage

Respondents frequently described job-switching as a deliberate tactical move to gain career advantages, particularly when it came to compensation and advancement.

*“It’s of course known that if you do change jobs more frequently, you will have leverage to negotiate a higher salary versus if you stay at the same company for a longer period of time.” - (Respondent 5)*

*“The new generation really values variation and in many professions, the best way to get salary increases is by switching jobs.” - (Respondent 8)*

These interview responses suggest that for the respondents, job switching is seen as a practical and effective means of securing higher salaries. Rather than choosing company loyalty, these individuals view career mobility to maximize their earning potential. While not a universal truth, this approach reflects the perspectives of those interviewed, illustrating how job switching is being utilized to leverage salary increases in specific career contexts.

Moreover, respondents also expressed leveraging their previous experiences to advance in their career, especially pursuing this when they feel stagnant at their current company.

*“I do know quite a few people (...) who already have plans of switching to something completely different. Maybe even leveraging some of the experiences and knowledge they have from this industry” - (Respondent 10)*

*“If I see that there’s no more growth both personally and professionally, then I prefer to move on.” - (Respondent 10)*

Additionally, it is worth noting that Gen Z respondents seem to still nurture their previous relationships with employers. One respondent emphasised that if they felt value congruence with their previous employer, they made active efforts to stay in contact and promote them in new circles.

*“Even though I quit the job, I always continue to stay loyal to that employer. I’ve still helped with recruitment and references, and they still reach out to me. (...) I still send them startups that I find interesting, and I do this with all the companies because I really like the people. So even though I’m not employed anymore, I don’t get paid anymore, I still always have them in mind” - (Respondent 8)*

## 4.2 Redefining Career Success

### 4.2.1 Perception of Generational Differences

An important factor contributing to the fluidity in career paths is the perceived reduction in barriers to job switching for Gen Z compared to older generations. Respondents noted several factors that they believe has made career transitions smoother and more accessible in the modern job market. A key point raised by a respondent illustrates the increasing transparency and availability of job opportunities.

*“I think you're exposed to more opportunities now and you can also see where other people are going. Thinking of previous generations (...) they didn't have LinkedIn posts or like job teasers or platforms (...) I think, we are seeing a lot more today than ever before, which is also an indication of transparency” - (Respondent 7)*

Moreover, another respondent further emphasized the ease of switching between industries, noting that the interconnection of various sectors makes it easier to apply a diverse skill set in different roles.

*“The world we're living in today is more interlinked, so all the different industries and sectors come together. It's much easier for you now to apply your different skill sets at different firms in different industries because the same roles are needed, so I think it's easier today to switch between industries.” - (Respondent 8)*

As industries converge and overlap, professionals are no longer confined to traditional career paths within one sector, allowing for careers today to be more mobile. Respondents identified a growing prominence of prioritising work-life balance compared to previous generations. What was once considered inappropriate or unprofessional now appears to be an accepted norm among Gen Z professionals.

*“10 years ago, I don't think it was like nowadays when I hear people talking about what they want in a job, everyone prioritises work-life balance, and earlier I think that would have been sort of unacceptable to say, especially to an employer” - (Respondent 9)*

In addition to shifting expectations around work-life balance, another respondent emphasized a changing view of the purpose of a career. They are increasingly seen as tools for personal fulfilment, an outlook that supports a more non-linear and flexible career path.

*“I think there’s like a greater emphasis on personal fulfilment and happiness and that a career is a means of achieving that, and then it’s easier to hop between different careers”*

- (Respondent 9)

Another theme that emerged across several interviews was the unique influence of social media on Gen Z’s perception of career success. Unlike previous generations, Gen Z is continuously exposed to online narratives at formative career stages and respondents felt it was significant in shaping their outlook.

*“If we’re talking about Gen Z, I think social media could be something interesting in how it affects our perception of what is a good career and what is not. (...) [peers] around me who were always on TikTok would be like “Oh yeah I need to break out of the matrix and be an entrepreneur””* - (Respondent 6)

Respondents also pointed to job-switching being posted and celebrated on social media, pointing towards a switched mindset around career changes.

*“The majority of the posts that you’re seeing on social media is actually people job hopping and actually changing their careers(...) so I think that changes the mindset and those external factors definitely play a very important role”* - (Respondent 2)

The frequency and visibility of these posts reinforce a sense of normalcy around career experimentation, concepts that are central to the Boundaryless and Protean Career model. Importantly, these insights were not prompted directly by the researcher but emerged organically to demonstrate the relevance of social media in Gen Z’s career logic.

Furthermore, respondents also pointed to cultural and generational differences in how career stability is perceived.

*“I have family in other countries, and they’ve worked for the same company for a long time. But in Sweden, and I think amongst our generation, it’s more common to work somewhere for one year or like half a year and then move on” - (Respondent 9)*

This mindset is shaped, and points towards broader societal conditions. As one respondent noted, the presence of safety nets in Western Europe reduces pressure to conform to organizational career advancements and allows greater freedom to explore different professional paths.

*“In a Western European context there is a safety net and an opportunity to pursue happiness in whichever form you find it. So, there is less expectations and room for you to explore what you find interesting” - (Respondent 9)*

In addition to social policy, one respondent noted how globalization and increased exposure to other ways of living have contributed to a more flexible approach to career building among Gen Z. Compared to older generations these younger professionals are more willing to change jobs and relocate in pursuit of personal fulfilment and professional opportunities.

*“Globalisation and being more open to seeing the world (...) and the uncertainty in the world right now allow you to be more risk-taking. I think that creates an environment where Gen Z is more open to changing careers, relocating somewhere (...) while for the generation of my parents (...) it was more of: you find an employer, they pay you a stable salary and you just stay with them for your entire career” - (Respondent 11)*

#### 4.2.2 Identity as Multidimensional

Multidimensionality follows the perspective of noting that Boundaryless and Protean Careers are linked to a broader cultural shift towards individuals’ wanting to pursue careers that encompass many different aspects congruent with their priorities.

*“I would say it's multiple dimensions (...) if we look at LinkedIn or other digital platforms, people label themselves as so many things and (...) people don't really use conventional labels as much anymore. Today I feel like I could decide what my label would be and that could be*

*encompassing the industry or what I do or who I inspire. It could be so many things. It's something that I interpret myself.” - (Respondent 1)*

Furthermore, today people are more concerned with their own growth and goals rather than following the advancement paths defined by their employers, ultimately shaping a multidimensional career.

*“People are more focused on their personal interests and development rather than the company wide development (...) people are more interested in making sure that they maximise their growth and their benefits and if there are good opportunities out there that might help.” - (Respondent 2)*

In this new environment labels seem to not be permanent. Hence, making people more comfortable exploring multidimensionality and deviating from what they intentionally had in mind when pursuing a career or studies.

*“I would say yes because I do know people who might have a degree in engineering, but then they're working essentially within marketing, which is not at all what they had in mind when they were pursuing their studies, so in that sense, definitely a lot of people are changing careers into industries where they feel it's more fun” - (Respondent 5)*

## 4.3 Self-Improvement

### 4.3.1 Response to Competition

Many respondents brought up concern for increasing competition in the job market, especially since recruitment now takes place globally and talent is sourced from a larger pool. Respondents mentioned that uniqueness is important to stand out.

*“Your brand name is very important (...) because there is a lot of competition, so you need to stand out in a certain way either by having a lot of experience in work or experiences that relate to your profession, which in sense builds your identity” - (Respondent 7)*

*“I mean, possibly you have higher competition now with the jobs that everyone wants because you can apply from anywhere in the world. So, per definition, there'll be more people competing*

*against you. You must find some kind of uniqueness. Otherwise, everyone will just be the same.” - (Respondent 3)*

Respondents also mention that the global and digital exposure allows individuals to gain more insights into what other people are doing, and what opportunities exist.

*“I think you're exposed to more opportunities now and you can also see where other people are doing.” - (Respondent 7)*

This sentiment is also supported by other respondents that mention wanting to gain exposure and experience to learn about different industries to navigate the increased competition.

*“What I'm trying to do is to gain as much exposure and as much experience as possible towards the different things that come across my table. So that I can learn as much as possible about different careers and industries.” - (Respondent 2)*

Following this, competition is not only encompassing getting a job, but also how to stay competitive from within an organization. Several respondents argued that gaining exposure from different industries gave them leverage to negotiate a higher salary.

*“It's of course known that if you do change jobs more frequently, you will have leverage to negotiate a higher salary versus if you stay at the same company for a longer period of time.” - (Respondent 4)*

*“Today, the new generation really values variation and in many professions the best way to get salary increases is by switching jobs.” - (Respondent 6)*

#### 4.3.2 Online Personal Branding as a Tool for Visibility

Following the questions that explored respondents' rejection of traditional career paths, they were asked how they navigate and steer their careers forward. Topics such as personal branding through online platforms like LinkedIn were introduced by the interviewer but also emerged organically from respondents themselves. This reflects the increasing salience of digital self-presentation as part of career-building among Gen Z. Notably, personal branding appeared to

be especially emphasized among those pursuing non-traditional career trajectories, suggesting its perceived importance in signalling direction and identity in the absence of conventional structures.

*“To be honest if you want to have a traditional career path and grow within a larger organisation or if you want to be a part of a career like a continuous wheel of just doing the same thing then I don't think branding matters that much.” - (Respondent 8)*

This sentiment reflects the broader theoretical insight that personal branding functions as a navigational tool in Boundaryless Career models, where credibility must be earned and communicated across transitions. Respondents pointed out that LinkedIn was used to mitigate competition by showcasing capabilities that set them apart from other candidates.

*“There's a higher pressure now compared to how it was before when it comes to finding a job, the market is tougher, the economy is down. So, it is very important to have a clear brand of what I give people, a material brand of yourself and make sure they understand my capabilities.” - (Respondent 2)*

Several respondents expressed ambivalence toward highly curated content on LinkedIn, highlighting Gen Z's sensitivity to perceived inauthenticity in digital self-presentation. This adds nuance to how Gen Z navigates what feels appropriate and sincere in a professional context.

*“I don't use [LinkedIn] as frequently as many people do (...) because for me it comes kind off as cringe. - (Respondent 3)*

Another respondent explained that they approached personal branding not as self-promotion, but to project consistency in their values and public perception.

*“I think that's sort of the personal branding of mine where I try to be someone that's really reliable (...) being very friendly, open and a genuine person that's not fake.” - (Respondent 2)*

Several respondents also emphasised intentional impression management, a form of identity work which was used to shape how recruiters and professional peers perceive them online and that it has been very helpful in advancing their opportunities.

*“I definitely think that the recruiters look at posts. It helps the recruiter get a very clear picture of you, who you are and what kind of opportunities you seek and what you're already good at and what your strengths are.” - (Respondent 4)*

*“I get a headhunted quite often because of my presence on LinkedIn and I think my image is quite good like many people perceive me as an ambitious, hardworking individual (...) I think it's helped me with my image to showcase my network what I'm doing” - (Respondent 8)*

### 4.3.3 Learning as the Goal in Career Progression

As mentioned in the conceptual framework Gen Z is undertaking many different activities that broadens their professional identity. This aligns with what we found about learning and improving in the conducted interviews when asking respondents on their outlook on a traditional career path.

*“I don't really go with [the traditional] career model (...) it doesn't let you broaden your knowledge.” - (Respondent 1)*

Respondents viewed exposure to new knowledge as essential to remaining competitive and adaptable to the changing job market. This orientation reflects a shift in what constitutes “career security”. For these respondents, security did not come from loyalty but from continuous expansion of transferable skills, and changing jobs was framed not as instability but as proactive learning practice.

*“I like variation, I like to meet different people to be in different contexts and to really just increase my impact and maximise a shorter period than being there for a long time.” - (Respondent 6)*

Respondents conceptualised their careers as projects of self-development, not fixed trajectories. The idea of “career” was framed as a journey of exploration, aligning with the concept of identity work where individuals actively shape their sense of self through career decisions.

*“I would prefer to be rather flexible with my position because I enjoy a challenge and I would prefer not to stay within one place, if I see that there's no more growth, both personally and professionally.” - (Respondent 10)*

Moreover, the idea of engaging in “detours” was identified by a respondent as an important element of fluid career paths.

*“Any detours engagement, I feel, was beneficial for me as a person to grow that might also benefit me professionally.” - (Respondent 2)*

This comment suggests respondents view career deviations or non-linear experiences as valuable opportunities to grow and learn, exploiting the fact that they can leverage moving across and within industries. The notion that prolonged “attachment” to a single company may limit professional growth was subtly but consistently articulated by respondents. Rather than framing long-term employment as outright unwanted, respondents expressed a view that it risked narrowing their exposure.

*“I feel like it's not beneficial to be attached to a company for too long (...) It's really important to learn from different industries, from what I see from my peers” - (Respondent 1)*

## 5. Discussion

This section discusses the empirical findings in relation to the theoretical framework, examining the factors that drive Gen Z to build non-linear career paths.

Our findings confirm previous research on how Gen Z express an inclination for working for several companies (Arar & Öneren, 2018). Additionally, the preference for a Boundaryless career was perceived to be a defining feature of their Gen Z peers. This was especially pronounced when respondents themselves compared the trend to previous generations. Since many respondents responded to the idea of a linear career path by associating it with past generations, it indicates that they do not see themselves identified in this linear traditional career progression and this shows that Gen Z sees the non-linear career trend as specific to their generation. This is in line with previous research about Gen Z and their career preferences (Barharte & Dirani, 2021).

Building on this generational shift in how careers are viewed, a potential disconnect emerged between how Gen Z respondents define long-term commitment compared to what they believed to be HR practitioners' expectations. Several respondents referred to two to three years in a role as significant tenure, a time span that to them reflects meaningful contribution and growth. However, such durations may still be interpreted by organisations as indicators of low retention considering that the median job tenure lasts more than three years (American Bureau of Labor, n.d.). This misalignment may generate friction as companies hesitate to invest in development for employees that are perceived as transient, while Gen Z workers grow disengaged if they sense their progression is conditional on outdated timelines.

This leads to the finding that many Gen Z respondents see learning as the goal in career progression, not only a desirable characteristic of their trajectory. Respondents valued environments where continuous learning and exploration were normalised, and learning in itself was seen as a success of its own. This made the pursuit for learning a key driver in their career approach. The Protean career and the Boundaryless career, acknowledge that learning is an important factor when being boundaryless. Other studies like Arar & Öneren (2018) also emphasise that the boundless career adopted by Gen Z is "*learning oriented*" but do not make it a central driving factor in Gen Z's career approach. The empirical findings of this study suggests that learning has become increasingly important which is in line with previous

research stating that a Boundaryless career is more about accumulated learnings rather than formal job titles. Continuous learning is seen as a tool to respond to competition as well, and this search for knowledge makes people more comfortable exploring non-linearity and deviating from what they intentionally had in mind when pursuing a career or studies. However, when conditions for learning were missing, leaving a role was not seen as disloyal but as a way to self-improve and explore other paths for Gen Z respondents.

While Barhate & Dirani (2021) discuss how Gen Z increasingly prioritises personal values and work-life balance in career decision making, our interview findings extend these preferences as respondents described work-life balance as an expectation rather than a benefit. Many respondents viewed their careers as enablers of personal growth and fulfilment, consistent with the characteristics of a Protean mindset. This highlights how self-improvement is seen as a personal responsibility for respondents in this study, with individuals in this study feeling they need to continuously develop skills to reach their own version of success. This mindset is also visible in how respondents in this study spoke about career planning as many expressed a desire for clear, purpose-driven paths, yet their actual experiences pointed to a more fluid, adaptive approach. For some in this study this approach reflected a conscious rejection of rigid career-planning and for others it was a coping strategy for navigating uncertainty in today's labour market.

The findings revealed that some Gen Z respondents do not appear to reject loyalty to a company completely but instead redefine it through value congruence. As mentioned previously, a Protean career is an approach where an individual's personal values are centred and used as a way to build their career path, i.e. value congruence (Hall, 1996). Rather than associating loyalty with long-term tenure at a single company, loyalty is expressed when individuals perceive alignment between their personal values and those of the employer. In these instances, respondents described maintaining relationships by promoting former employers within their networks or continuing to engage with the company's mission even after departing. This reflects a shift from institutional towards more ideological loyalty, where the commitment is more grounded in purpose. Within boundaryless career contexts, this reframing offers an explanation for how professionals keep meaningful connections across transitions.

Notably, two distinct approaches to personal branding emerged from interviews. First, several respondents adopted a highly intentional strategy, using LinkedIn to create narratives and

position themselves in competitive job markets. Additionally, these individuals often reported tangible outcomes such as job offers or networking opportunities and mentioned they knew HR practitioners and head-hunters do look at respondent's LinkedIn profiles. Second, the others displayed a more emergent and unstructured use of the platform, where personal branding was more of a byproduct of experimentation rather than a deliberate act. In both cases however, respondents recognised that personal branding through digital platforms served as a mechanism for managing career development. This expands Arar and Öneren's (2018) discussion of Gen Z's career development within boundaryless career contexts by showing how digital personal branding has become a central practice for expanding opportunities and building visibility for Gen Z. Moreover, this distinction contributes to the literature by highlighting that personal branding exists along a spectrum ranging from deliberate curation towards more retrospective construction.

While personal branding was widely recognised as useful, several respondents expressed critical and ambivalent views towards the culture on digital platforms such as LinkedIn. Posts that appeared overly curated or self-promotional were often described as ingenuine or "cringe". This suggests a discomfort from Gen Z with the perceived trade-off between being genuine and gaining visibility. Therefore, Gen Z's construction of their personal branding is not only driven by its usefulness, but it is also shaped by concerns around authenticity and alignment with personal values. This emerges as a significant factor in Gen Z's approach to constructing non-linear careers.

Another key theme relates to the complex relationship between intentionality and circumstance in career development. Some respondents described their career choices as strategic and values-driven, and others noted that some of the choices were shaped by external factors such as competitive pressures. In several cases, respondents reframed previous decisions as intentional, but only retrospectively. This suggests that self-direction in Gen Z's career can serve as a tool for sense-making, not only planning. This challenges the existing understanding of the Protean career by showing that self-direction often occurs within external factors, instead of being in complete autonomy. These insights point to a layered set of factors driving Gen Z's non-linear career building.

## 5.1 Managerial Implications

The findings of this thesis and its interviews raise important considerations for HR professionals and organisations with a workforce that is increasingly shaped by non-linear careers. As Gen Z continues to grow in the labour market, the previous understandings about loyalty, career development and value congruence need to be revisited. It raises questions on how organisations can rethink how they assess loyalty and support employee learnings.

One of the implications is the way Gen Z'ers in this study highlights learning as central to career development. The Gen Z respondents in this thesis tend to see it as a continuous and self-directed process that can even be a professional goal. The managerial implication for employers is that learning has to be embedded into the culture and metrics of an organisation, as a way to align and retain Gen Z employees.

Another managerial implication is the shifting understanding of loyalty as Gen Z respondent's saw their loyalty grounded in shared values with a company. Loyalty can be reframed from being about tenure to be more about identifying with a company's mission. This can lead to employees remaining active in the network as they move along an inter-firm mobile career.

This study also brings attention to how personal branding, particularly through digital platforms, has become an important part of how Gen Z builds and navigates non-linear careers. As Gen Z respondents in this study expressed ambivalence towards an overly curated profile, it suggests that organisations must consider how they showcase themselves online on platforms such as LinkedIn. Encouraging authenticity may help build a more value congruent environment for Gen Z and employers alike. Additionally, organisations can consider how they can support employees in building strong and meaningful digital presences as it has become important, as revealed by this thesis.

Overall, the managerial implications of this study suggests non-linear careers are a broader generational shift. Companies that evaluate careers through long-tenure and vertical linear advancement risk misinterpreting Gen Z's motivations and direction. Companies need to develop a value congruent and learning-oriented approach that accommodates Gen Z's understanding of personal growth and success. This will become increasingly important as Gen Z continues to enter the workforce and shape the industries from leadership positions.

## 6. Conclusion

In closing, *what factors drive Gen Z to intentionally build professional strategies to support a multi-dimensional career trajectory?* This study shows that Gen Z professionals are driven by a combination of internal values such as personal growth, purpose and authenticity, as well as external pressures which include the competitive and uncertain labour market. Continuous learning emerged as a central driver shaping non-linear career decisions. Learning is not only valued but pursued as a goal in itself and it guides career choices and how to define career success.

Rather than viewing loyalty through the lens of tenure, respondents viewed it more through value congruence. This shows the commitment to organisations that align with their beliefs, even after moving to a different company in the boundaryless career. In a competitive job market where digital platforms increasingly play a role, personal branding has become more important and it has been used consciously and organically to expand opportunities and facilitate inter-firm mobility, though there is an ambivalence toward an overly curated self-presentation.

The findings show that Gen Z's careers paths are purposefully constructed to maximise personal growth, and they have taken career progression into their own responsibility, using the tools they perceive as helpful to achieve this. While planning of careers is present, adaptability and learning take precedence, and this allows Gen Z to approach a non-linear career path with intention.

## 7. Future Research

By understanding the complexity of how individuals move and choose paths we expect organisations and managers to better adapt to this generational shift. Several studies have begun to explore the HR implications of Gen Z's evolving career approach (Arar & Öneren, 2018; Racolța & Irini, 2021; Mavhungu et al., 2024), but more research is needed to understand how this shift plays out in specific industries. Future studies could investigate how specific sectors and their advancements shape Gen Z's career decisions and how organisations can adapt.

Additionally, this thesis has touched on how digital platforms have an increasing importance as a tool career management tool for Gen Z and future research could take a deeper look at how social media shapes Gen Z's career approach. Respondents in this study describe platforms like LinkedIn not only as tools for personal branding but as a space that influences their job-switching behaviour and perceptions of success. Further research could examine how social media interacts with values that are important to Gen Z, such as authenticity, and. How this could ultimately shape career decisions. Finally, future research could bridge the gap between employee career narratives and employer retention strategies. As organisations increasingly face the challenge of supporting non-linear and learning-oriented career paths, studies comparing how Gen Z professionals define success with how HR practitioners define success, and loyalty could offer valuable insights.

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## 9. Appendix

### 9.1 Interview Guide & Questions

#### **General Introductory Questions**

1. Can you briefly describe your current career path
  - a. How would you define your professional identity?
2. How do you feel about traditional career models that emphasise long-term loyalty to one company?
3. In your opinion, how is the concept of career identity changing for Gen Z professionals? (If respondents mention macro-economic influences, ask them to expand on it by how they think it has influenced Gen Z)

#### **Gen Z and Personal Branding**

4. How do you approach building your personal brand?
  - a. What role does it play in your career development?
5. **(If they answer it is important):** In what ways do you think personal branding is becoming more important for career advancement today, particularly for Gen Z?
6. How do you use social media and digital platforms to shape and promote your personal brand? (If respondents mention LinkedIn before, interviewer can refer to it)

#### **Fluid Career Trajectories**

7. Do you think the idea of “career hopping” or moving across industries is becoming more common for your generation? (If respondents ask for clarification: Career hopping involves often relocating companies).
8. Do you see your career path as fluid and if so, what factors have influenced this fluidity? (If respondents ask for clarification: fluid career paths meaning non-linear, non-traditional approach of staying in a company long-term).
9. Have you switched industries or roles, or do you see yourself doing so in the future?
  - a. What motivates you to explore such changes?

#### **Evolving Notions of Career Loyalty**

10. How do you perceive loyalty in the context of your career- is it loyalty to a company, to a role, or to your personal values and growth?
11. What would make you stay with a company for a long period of time?

### **Career Identity as Multi-dimensional**

12. How do you think of your career identity, do you see it as a single label or as something that encompasses multiple dimensions?

### **Final Reflections**

13. Looking ahead, how do you envision your career evolving in the next five years?
  - a. What would be your ideal professional trajectory in the far future? (If respondents feel unprepared for this question, reassure them there is no need for prepared or “right” answers)
14. Are there any other insights or experiences you think are important to share when discussing how younger generations are redefining careers?
  1. How do you feel about this type of career path?

## **9.2 AI Disclosure**

- We have used the AI from Microsoft Teams to transcribe the interviews we have conducted. All the interviews have been recorded on the same platform and then analysed and corrected by the researchers; also making it clearer by removing transcriptions i.e. “mhm mhm”
- When identifying themes, we used ChatGPT to find different ways of phrasing/ naming certain words. For instance, “job switching” to “career hopping” as they were broader terms that helped capture the essence of our respondent’s points.
- After we finalised our interview questions, we asked ChatGPT for advice on what could be certain blind-spots, biases that we should consider and important guidelines we should have when conducting the interviews. It highlighted that respondents may not have thought about certain terms like “professional identity” or “career fluidity” so we should also explain them and consider how we nudge respondents. Then when conducting pilot interviews this was confirmed by the pilot respondents who indeed had questions on this.

- The AI in Grammarly has also been used to aid the formation of this thesis. We have used it solely to check for spelling mistakes, which worked as a complement to the built-in text corrector in Microsoft Word. It was also used to ensure correct and coherent usage of U.K. English.