

How Do You Imagine a Future You've Never Seen?

**A qualitative study on how university students perceive remote work and
imagine their future careers through career orientations.**

25912 Fariza Balganirova

25752 Diana Kazachenko

Abstract

Remote work has become a standard feature of professional life, but little is known about how students approaching graduation interpret it and how these interpretations shape their early-career plans. This thesis examines how students from European business and economics universities perceive remote and hybrid work, and how these perceptions influence the careers they imagine for themselves. Drawing on Career Orientation and Career Imagination, the study explores how students connect remote work to their learning needs, identity aspirations, and expectations of professional development. Based on fourteen semi-structured interviews, the findings show that students value flexibility but see full remote work as risky during the first years of employment. Remote work is often perceived as reducing informal learning, mentorship, and belonging especially in prestige-driven industries, leading students to prioritize on-site or hybrid arrangements early in their careers. At the same time, students imagine remote or hybrid work as more desirable later on, when they expect greater autonomy and confidence. The study concludes that perceptions of remote work significantly shape how students construct future career paths, particularly by influencing when and under what conditions flexibility is viewed as compatible with early-career success.

Keywords:

Remote work, Hybrid work, University students, Career orientation, Career imagination

Authors:

Fariza Balganirova 25912, Diana Kazachenko 25752

Supervisor:

Jonathan Schunnesson, Department of Management and Organization

Examiner:

Laurence Romani, Department of Management and Organization

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Definitions

Remote work	Refers to performing one's job duties outside of a traditional office environment, typically from home or another off-site location, using digital communication and collaboration tools.
Hybrid work	Refers to a type of remote work arrangement that combines time spent in a traditional office with time working remotely.
University students	Refers to students in their final year of study at economics and business universities in Europe.
Perceptions	Individuals' interpretations and evaluations of remote work, including how they view its benefits (e.g., flexibility, autonomy) and drawbacks (e.g., isolation, limited learning). These are shaped by personal experience and social context.
Career orientation	The values, preferences, and motivational tendencies that guide how individuals navigate and regulate their careers such as their desire for autonomy, structure, mobility, or stability (Hirschi & Koen, 2021).
Career imagination	The interpretive process through which individuals envision what kinds of careers are possible, desirable, or legitimate for them, shaped by both personal agency and structural factors.
Bachelor	Refers to a Bachelor degree, which is an undergraduate level academic program.
Master	Refers to a Master degree, which is a graduate level academic program.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Remote work has become one of the most significant developments in organizational management in recent years, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of flexible work practices (Kaushik & Guleria, 2020). What was once considered a privilege or an exception is now a central component of many companies' work arrangements (Chan et al., 2023). What was once a niche practice has now become a stable component of many organizations' job designs (Ardi et al., 2024). These changes fundamentally reshape how organizations manage people, learning, and work arrangements. The topic is closely connected to contemporary management research, particularly debates around organizational design, people management, and early-career development (Barrero et al. 2023).

For contemporary university students, this transformation is particularly relevant. Many have encountered remote or hybrid formats during their studies, internships, or remote work-integrated learning experiences (Pretti et al., n.d.; Aldea et al., 2025). These experiences have shaped their expectations regarding autonomy, digital communication and what everyday professional life might look like in modern organizations (Zivkovic et al., 2025). At the same time, research suggests that young people's career expectations are strongly influenced by cultural narratives about flexibility, wellbeing and meaningful work, making remote work not only a logistical arrangement but also a lens through which students interpret legitimacy, identity, and what early professional life should look like (James et al., 2021; Chertkovskaya et al., 2020).

These shifts raise new questions about how flexible and digitally mediated work practices influence what students consider attractive, feasible or desirable in their early career steps.

1.2 Problem Area and Research Gap

Research on remote work has primarily addressed outcomes such as productivity, managerial control, and employee well-being (Ardi et al., 2024). However, its influence on career formation and planning among university students remains insufficiently understood. Most studies adopt the employer's perspective, focusing on how to manage, motivate, or attract remote workers, whereas little is known about how students, especially those preparing to enter professional roles for the first time, interpret remote work and incorporate these interpretations into their early-career thinking.

Existing studies on business and economics students show that institutional norms, peer expectations and industry narratives strongly shape how these students imagine “appropriate” early-career paths (Binder et al., 2016). Remote work may expand or disrupt these established pathways by altering what feels legitimate or strategically advantageous for building experience. However, it remains unclear whether students see remote work as an opportunity offering autonomy, mobility, and work-life balance, or as a risk, reducing informal learning, mentorship, and a sense of belonging (Issakainen, 2025; Chertkovskaya et al., 2020).

This study therefore seeks to address the gap between evolving work arrangements and how students make sense of remote and hybrid work arrangements and how these perceptions influence their imagined early-career trajectories.

1.3 Purpose and Research Question

The purpose of this thesis is to examine how university students in business and economics programs interpret remote work and how these interpretations influence the ways they envision their future careers. As remote work becomes increasingly embedded in organizational practice, students must assess how flexibility, digital collaboration and reduced physical presence align with their expectations for learning, development and long-term progression (Zivkovic et al., 2025).

By focusing on students' own meaning-making, this study aims to understand how they interpret the opportunities and limitations of remote work when imagining their early professional identities, career sequences and preferred work environments.

In light of this purpose, the study seeks to answer the following research question:

How do students' perceptions of remote work shape the ways they envision their future careers?

1.4 Scope

This thesis focuses on final-year business and economics students at European universities. This population is meaningful for two reasons.

First, business and economics students often enter industries such as finance, consulting, technology and multinational corporate roles, where debates about remote and hybrid work are especially salient. These sectors rely heavily on tacit learning, client interaction, mentorship and workplace visibility, making work modality potentially consequential for early-career development (Binder et al., 2016; Rivera, 2011).

Second, focusing on students in their final year is appropriate because they are actively making decisions about internships, graduate roles and industry preferences. Their interpretations of remote work therefore influence imminent choices rather than abstract preferences (James et al., 2021; Handley, 2018). Final-year students have typically gained enough academic or internship exposure to form concrete expectations, but not yet enough full-time experience to rely on hindsight, making anticipatory career thinking highly relevant (Chertkovskaya et al., 2020).

This study focuses on students' perspectives to explore how they view remote work in relation to their early career plans. The goal isn't to generalize but to offer a deeper understanding of how business and economics students see remote work within their career journeys.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Evolution of Remote Work

The widespread adoption of remote work first came as a direct response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Kaushik & Guleria, 2020; Chan et al., 2023). The global health crisis forced firms and workers to shift abruptly from traditional office arrangements to home-based setups. This large-scale transition represented an unprecedented social experiment in teleworking, especially for knowledge-intensive occupations (Bartik et al., 2025).

Early reactions to this shift were mixed: while employers initially feared losses in productivity and collaboration, later surveys revealed positive outcomes once organizations and employees adapted to digital workflows. Bartik et al. (2025) found that by 2021, most business owners reported stable or improved productivity levels, while Barrero et al. (2023) observed that many employees were “pleasantly surprised” by their ability to work effectively from home.

At the same time, the meaning of remote work has evolved beyond a temporary emergency solution. It has become embedded in professional norms and labor-market expectations. Scholars such as Ardi et al. (2024) argue that flexible work has transitioned from a managerial privilege to a strategic component of job design, enabled by advances in digital communication and changing employee values.

However, the expanding adoption of remote work has also brought increased scholarly attention to its drawbacks, especially concerning career development, wellbeing, and equity. Research indicates that remote work can intensify feelings of isolation, reduce informal social interaction, and weaken employees’ sense of belonging (Issakainen, 2025). These dynamics are especially problematic for early-career employees who rely heavily on observation and spontaneous exchange to build competence. Remote work has also been shown to blur work-life boundaries, increasing the risk of burnout and constant availability (Kossek, 2016).

Remote work has thus shifted from a technological or logistical innovation to a social and psychological phenomenon that affects how individuals define and pursue career success. This transformation calls for research that considers how such flexibility influences early-career decision-making, especially among students entering the workforce for the first time.

2.2 Remote Work and Early Career Development

The early stages of a career are often shaped by opportunities for learning, mentorship, and professional socialization (Issakainen, 2025). Traditional office environments have long been seen as critical spaces for such development, providing informal exchanges and networking opportunities that support newcomers' integration. Remote work challenges these assumptions by reducing physical proximity and spontaneous interaction, potentially altering how young professionals acquire skills and envision advancement.

Existing research offers a nuanced view of these dynamics. On one hand, remote work can enhance autonomy and self-directed learning, factors closely linked to motivation and early performance (Boyraz & Gilbert, 2024; Deci & Ryan, 2000). It allows individuals to manage their schedules and environments in ways that suit their preferences. On the other hand, scholars such as Issakainen (2025) and Gagné & Deci (2005) caution that the same flexibility can hinder professional growth when it limits exposure to mentors, feedback, and tacit learning opportunities.

This tension suggests that the effect of remote work on early career development depends on the balance between independence and social connection. For instance, hybrid work models may mitigate some of these challenges by combining flexibility with in-person learning contexts (Ardi et al., 2024). However, much of the existing literature still focuses on established employees rather than on students who have yet to enter the labor market. Consequently, the career-shaping role of remote work at the transition point between education and employment remains underexplored.

2.3 Anticipatory Career Thinking

Anticipatory career thinking refers to how students construct expectations about working life before entering the labor market. This process is central to understanding their perceptions of remote work. Students evaluate remote work not from experience but through the lens of what they believe early careers should provide learning, visibility, legitimacy, and upward mobility (Mosier & Fischer, 2011).

Research shows that these expectations are shaped by identity pressures. James et al. (2021) argue that students navigate strong cultural norms around authenticity and self-realisation when imagining their futures. As a result, remote work is interpreted in relation to whether it aligns with their desired professional identity: for some, remote work symbolises autonomy and wellbeing; for others, it conflicts with their imagined pathway toward becoming a “legitimate” professional.

At the same time, anticipatory thinking is influenced by pre-employment socialisation. Handley (2018) demonstrates how employer branding and graduate recruitment materials shape students’ ideas about what an “employable” young professional should value, which is adaptability, self-direction, and continuous development. These messages frame remote work either as a marker of maturity and digital competence or as a setting requiring caution due to reduced visibility.

Finally, students’ anticipatory expectations are shaped by symbolic representations of work on campus. Chertkovskaya et al. (2020) show that universities are saturated with idealised images of corporate work, which students often internalise. Remote work is therefore evaluated against these symbolic norms: if it is imagined as lacking exposure or networking, it may be viewed as misaligned with desirable early-career trajectories.

Overall, anticipatory career thinking provides a useful lens for this study because it explains why students’ perceptions of remote work are shaped not only by practical considerations, but by deeper expectations and imaginaries about what early careers should look like. This allows the analysis to examine how remote work is incorporated or excluded from students’ envisioned future careers.

3. Theoretical Framework

Understanding how students translate their perceptions of remote work into their thinking about future careers requires a framework that captures both the motivational drivers behind career behavior and the interpretive processes through which individuals imagine their future working lives. To do so, this thesis draws on two complementary theoretical lenses: Career Orientation, which explains how individuals regulate their careers through values-driven and self-directed attitudes, and Career Imagination, which explains how students interpret what kinds of careers are possible, desirable, and legitimate within their social and institutional context. Bringing these perspectives together enables a more dynamic understanding of how perceptions of remote work influence students' emerging ideas, expectations, and preferences regarding their future professional trajectories.

These theories were selected because they allow us to trace the full interpretive chain through which students make sense of remote work. Career Orientation identifies the values and motivational standards that guide how students first evaluate remote and hybrid arrangements. Career Imagination then explains how these evaluations are incorporated into future-oriented thinking about career possibilities through constraints, time, and identities. Together, they therefore offer a coherent lens for understanding how perceptions of remote work shape imagined career trajectories.

3.1 Career Orientation

Career Orientation refers to the system of values, attitudes, and preferences through which individuals guide their career behavior in a labor market characterised by uncertainty, flexibility, and self-directed paths (Hirschi & Koen, 2021). Contemporary research conceptualises these orientations as part of a broader process of career self-regulation, in which individuals set goals, map resources, act on opportunities, and process feedback across their careers. This model highlights that orientations are not fixed traits, but dynamic cognitive-motivational structures that shape, and are shaped by, individuals' experiences and environments.

The most influential approaches: the protean and boundaryless career models frame the individual as the primary agent of their career. Protean orientations emphasize autonomy and value alignment (Hall, 2004), while boundaryless orientations emphasize mobility across organizations, sectors, or geographies (Crocitto et al., 1998). Hirschi & Koen's (2021) integrated review shows that these orientations function as motivational standards that guide goal setting, information seeking, career decisions, and behavioral action. They therefore influence how individuals engage with opportunities such as remote work whether as a tool for autonomy and mobility, or as a threat to visibility, learning, and progression.

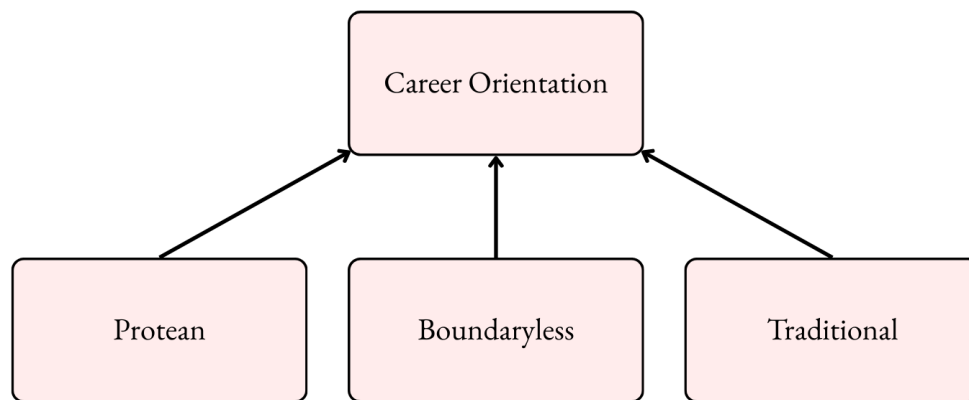


Figure 1: Overview of Career Orientation Types

However, it is also important to recognise that Career Orientations are not fixed traits that come only from within the individual. Research on career self-regulation shows that orientations change over time through feedback from real experiences. Depending on what people encounter in their work environments, certain orientations can become stronger or weaker. For instance, if someone has positive experiences with autonomy, their protean orientation may grow, while in settings where visibility and physical presence are rewarded, more traditional, organization-bound orientations are reinforced. This dynamic view is essential for this thesis: students' perceptions of remote work provide signals and expectations that influence how useful different orientations seem to them at this stage in their careers. For the purpose of this paper, Career Orientation is treated as the starting point in the

meaning-making process. It shapes what students pay attention to when encountering remote work, and how they judge its value in relation to their early-career priorities.

3.1.1 Limitations of Career Orientation

Despite its relevance, the Career Orientation framework has notable limitations. First, scholars disagree on the distinctiveness and validity of protean and boundaryless orientations; meta-analytic evidence suggests that their components often overlap or load onto a single general factor (Wiernik & Kostal, 2019). Second, their predictive validity remains inconsistent across contexts, raising questions about how reliably these orientations explain actual career outcomes (Wiernik & Wille, 2018). Finally, Career Orientation research is only weakly connected to broader models of career development, limiting its ability to account for structural and contextual influences on early career decision-making (Wiernik & Kostal, 2019). As a result, while useful for explaining individual differences, the framework may oversimplify the structural constraints shaping students' decisions.

3.2 Career Imagination

While Career Orientation explains how individuals regulate their careers, Career Imagination explains how they make sense of what kinds of careers are possible, appropriate, or desirable. Cohen and Duberley (2021) conceptualise Career Imagination as the interpretive process through which individuals understand their working lives, situated at the intersection of personal agency and structural conditions. It is not merely about predicting the future but about framing what counts as a viable and meaningful way of participating in working life.

Career Imagination consists of three key dimensions.

First, enablement and constraint captures how institutional, cultural, and economic structures shape what individuals perceive as achievable. In business university contexts, where norms of prestige, competitiveness, and visibility are strong, remote work can be imagined either as expanding opportunities (e.g., global mobility) or constraining them (e.g., reduced access to informal learning).^a

Second, the temporal dimension concerns how individuals imagine the unfolding of their career over

time, expectations about the “right” sequence of learning, progression, and autonomy.

Third, identity reflects how individuals connect career choices to their sense of self and desired lifestyle.

Crucially, Career Imagination is highly responsive to social changes. As remote work becomes normalised, it reshapes what students consider legitimate early-career behavior, what forms of belonging they expect, and which work modes feel compatible with their imagined professional identity. In this thesis, Career Imagination captures how students’ interpretations of remote work are transformed into longer-term ideas about what kinds of careers feel possible and desirable.

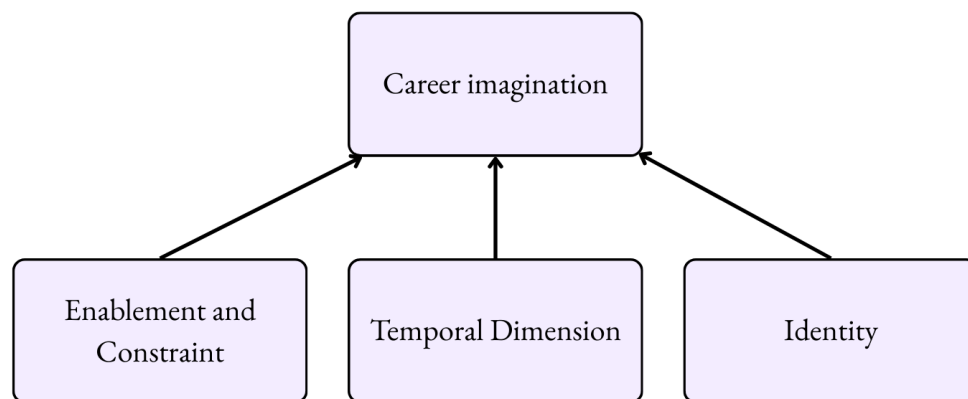


Figure 2: Overview of Career Imagination

3.2.1 Limitation of Career Imagination

While Career Imagination offers a useful lens for understanding how individuals interpret possible career paths, it also has limitations. First, the framework remains broad and does not specify which structural factors matter most in shaping imagination, making it difficult to apply precisely across different industries or student groups. Second, since the framework is built on retrospective career stories, it does not fully explain how students with little work experience construct their imagination using assumptions and signals from their environment.

3.3 Theory Discussion

Bringing the two frameworks together shows that students' perceptions of remote work do not emerge in isolation, but are shaped through a sequence of meaning-making processes in which career orientations guide how remote work is interpreted, and these interpretations then feed into how students imagine their future careers.

Career Orientation offers the starting point. Students' underlying values and motivational standards, whether protean, boundaryless, or more traditional, shape what they pay attention to when evaluating remote work. Those with boundaryless or protean orientations tend to perceive remote work as supportive of independence or cross-border options, while students with traditional, structure-seeking orientations interpret remote work through concerns about legitimacy, visibility, and early learning. Orientation therefore acts as the first filter through which the benefits and risks of remote work are made meaningful.

These orientation-shaped evaluations then become the basis of students' perceptions. For some, remote work is understood as a tool providing flexibility or global reach; for others it appears as a barrier to competence development or belonging. This middle step, the perception of remote work, is where students translate abstract values into concrete judgments about what remote work would mean for them in practice. At this point, perceptions reflect early assumptions about learning, identity development, and the norms of the industries they aim for.

Finally, Career Imagination explains how these perceptions are transformed into future-oriented narratives about what kinds of career paths feel possible, desirable, or legitimate (Cohen & Duberley, 2021). Through its three dimensions: enablement/constraint, time, and identity, students situate remote work within larger stories about who they want to become and how careers "should" unfold. A perception of remote work as hindering early learning, for example, leads students to imagine early-career stages as necessarily office-based. Conversely, perceiving remote work as enabling autonomy

leads others to imagine cross-border, flexible, or nonlinear trajectories. In this way, imagination is the end point where perceptions are translated into long-term possibilities and constraints.

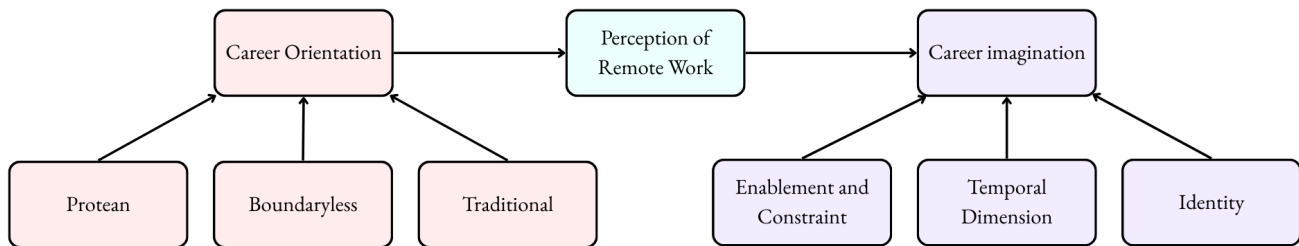


Figure 3. Overview of the Orientation–Perception–Imagination Process

The sequential logic (Figure 3) also clarifies why students aiming for the same industries imagine their futures differently even when exposed to similar remote work conditions. It is not the remote work arrangement itself that shapes how they envision their future careers, but how students' orientations guide their interpretation of it, and how those interpretations are incorporated into their imagined trajectories. This dynamic relationship aligns with Cohen and Duberley's (2021) argument that career imagination sits at the intersection of agency and structure, mediating between personal values and institutional expectations.

Taken together, this theoretical integration provides a clear mechanism for answering the research question. Students' perceptions of remote work matter because they sit between what students value (orientation) and what they believe is structurally possible (imagination). This framework therefore forms the analytical basis for understanding variation between students and across industries in an environment where remote and hybrid work arrangements are increasingly normalized.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Stance

This study adopts an interpretivist stance, which is appropriate for research seeking to understand how individuals construct meaning around remote work and career imagination. Interpretivism assumes that reality is shaped by subjective perceptions and social context (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Creswell, 2013), making it suitable for exploring how students interpret career development.

The study also draws on social constructionism, which views concepts such as “remote work,” “career expectations,” and “career success” as socially constructed rather than fixed. This stance acknowledges that students’ meanings are influenced by institutional norms, cultural expectations, and personal experiences. It further implies that the researchers’ own interpretations form part of the analytical process.

4.2 Research Methodology

A qualitative methodology was chosen because it better captures the subjective and nuanced ways students perceive remote work. Since the research question is about interpretation, expectation, and meaning-making and not about measurement or prediction, the appropriate method will be qualitative interviews.

This study is designed with abductive logic. Whereas the theoretical framework informed the early structure of the interviews, the analysis also allowed for empirical insights to nurture and refine theoretical interpretation. This iterative movement between theory and data aligns with exploratory research and supports a deeper understanding of how students make sense of remote work within their imagined career paths.

The sample consists of fourteen in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted with students from some of the top-ranked European universities, according to the Financial Times, QS, and THE

rankings. This sample provides insight into a group that is often considered highly employable and therefore particularly relevant for understanding how remote work influences competitive early-career decision-making.

4.3 Research Design

Given the qualitative nature of this study, a semi-structured interview design was used. This approach allows participants to freely express their opinions and experiences while keeping the discussion focused on key themes related to remote work and students' career aspirations. As Bryman and Bell (2015) note, semi-structured interviews help respondents highlight what they find most important, which suits the purpose of exploring personal perceptions.

The study uses a cross-sectional design. Data were collected during a specific period and represent students' perceptions at that point in time. Because the aim is to explore current interpretations of remote work rather than track changes over time, a cross-sectional approach is appropriate. Interviewing students from multiple highly ranked universities further allowed for a broad view of emerging patterns across different institutional contexts.

4.4 Data Collection

4.4.1 Interview Sample

The interview guide was semi-structured and organized around themes derived from the research purpose and theoretical framework, specifically Career Orientation and Career Imagination. Questions explored students' views on remote work, their career priorities, their expectations for learning and development, and how flexibility shapes their imagined professional futures.

Throughout the interviews, probing questions were used to explore specific themes more deeply and to encourage reflection on potentially contradictory statements. In designing the interview guide, questions that could be perceived as leading or prescriptive were excluded. The sequence of the interview was carefully structured: broad and open-ended questions were asked at the beginning to

build rapport, followed by more focused and theory-based questions toward the end. However, the guide remained flexible, allowing the interviewer to adapt questions based on participants' responses to maintain a natural and conversational flow.

A semi-structured format can lead to differences in how much participants share, which may affect how easily interviews can be compared. Using theory-based questions might also have subtly influenced some responses, despite efforts to avoid leading prompts.

4.4.2 Interview Design

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Throughout the interviews, probing questions were used to explore specific themes more deeply and to encourage reflection on potentially contradictory statements. In designing the interview guide, questions that could be perceived as leading or prescriptive were excluded. The sequence of the interview was also carefully structured: broad and open-ended questions were posed at the beginning to build rapport, followed by more focused and theory-linked questions toward the end.

However, a semi-structured format also introduces variation in how deeply different participants elaborate on certain themes, which may affect comparability across interviews. Additionally, relying on theory-informed questions may have unintentionally guided some participants toward particular aspects of remote work, even though efforts were made to minimize leading prompts.

4.4.3 Interview Setting

All interviews were conducted online using Google Meet, which made the organization easy and enabled students to participate both from and outside Stockholm. In their turn, the remote character of the interviews added convenience for the respondents, while the researchers managed to recruit a

more extensive and more varied sample. Even though in virtual format, this online setting supported the depth, openness, and conversational quality required in qualitative interviews.

4.4.4 Interview Transcription

The interviews were transcribed by hand from audio recordings recorded on a mobile device. In all interviews, one author conducted and recorded the session. Later, another author listened to the recording in order to complete and verify the transcription. This two-step process made it more accurate and ensured that the expressions, nuances, and contextual details were captured consistently.

All interviews were conducted in English, therefore no translation was necessary. Which reduces the chance of distortion of meanings. Immediately following each interview, the authors reviewed and expanded the notes to capture emphasis, tone, and contextual details that supported later interpretation.

The real identity of the interviewees is not used within the study to protect their privacy. In ensuring there is complete anonymity for the participants, each participant has been assigned a randomly selected pseudonym and these have been used throughout the study when referring to their responses for ease of use and the sake of the reader.

4.5 Research Quality

In order to ensure rigor and trustworthiness in this qualitative study, one has referred to the following criteria, as suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985): credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. These criteria lie at the heart of the interpretivist approach and serve as an alternative to traditional validity and reliability measures (Bryman & Bell, 2015).

Credibility is the truthfulness of the findings, in which confidence can be placed. The usage of semi-structured interviews, allowing participants to express their perceptions in their own words, strengthened credibility. Each interview was audio-recorded and then transcribed, both authors then re-read the transcripts for accuracy. Partial researcher triangulation occurred with both authors

reviewing the material and discussing interpretations throughout the analytic process (Creswell, 2013). This iterative dialogue served to reduce individual bias and ensured that the themes were grounded in participants' accounts.

Transferability relates to the issue of whether findings are applicable to similar contexts. Given that a sample has not been statistically representative, institutional settings and interview context have been provided allowing readers to make judgments regarding whether insights may apply to similar populations, particularly students in competitive European university environments (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Dependability concerns the stability and transparency of the research process. In order to enhance dependability, all methodological decisions (sampling, interviewing, and interpretation) were supported through noted documentation. The abductive approach, which calls for movements back and forth between theory and data, followed the systematic procedures suggested in qualitative research (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). This ensures that the analytic process is traceable and can thus be evaluated.

Confirmability refers to whether findings pertain to the participants rather than the personal assumptions of the researchers. To heighten confirmability, reflexive notes were kept by both authors throughout the research process, taking into account their positions as students who may hold views either in support of remote work or regarding career planning. Such reflections tend to surface biases and inform more critical interpretations. Direct quotations are provided in the empirical section for transparency between raw data and analytic claims, following Braun and Clarke (2006).

4.6 Ethical considerations

Ethical concerns were taken into great consideration during the study to protect the rights of the participants and maintain the integrity of the research process. Informed written information about the purpose of the study was given to all interviewees, the voluntariness of participation in the study, and how their data would be treated according to the General Data Protection Regulation directives

given by the Stockholm School of Economics. This was done through email in advance of the actual interview and also orally at the beginning of each interview. Participants were allowed to ask clarifying questions. Only those who had provided written and oral consent could proceed with the interview with a reminder that they could choose not to answer a question or even withdraw from the interview at any time with no consequences. All personal information from the participants was anonymized for privacy protection. Pseudonyms were given to each participant in transcripts, and potentially identifiable information such as nationality, university cohort, or type of jobs taken was kept secret by omitting the information from transcription. Audio recordings, notes, and transcripts were kept on password-protected devices, to which only the authors had access, and will be deleted permanently after the completion of the thesis.

4.7 Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI)

AI, specifically ChatGPT, was used only after the analysis was completed to improve grammar, clarity, and academic tone. AI tools were applied only after the analytical work had been completed, it did not influence the content, findings, or interpretations. All analysis was done independently by the authors, and academic integrity was fully maintained.

5. Empirical Results

This section presents the key findings from 14 semi-structured interviews conducted with students from leading European universities. The findings show how students describe remote work, what they perceive as its advantages and drawbacks, and how these perceptions shape their thinking about early-career steps.

	Pseudonym	Study level	Study field	Sector of interest
1	Anthony	Bachelor	Business Administration	Finance
2	Bryce	Master	Mathematics in Business and Economics	Academic research
3	Charles	Bachelor	Industrial Engineering	Finance
4	Devon	Master	Industrial Engineering	Management
5	Enzo	Master	International Business	Technology
6	Francis	Bachelor	Business & Economics	Technology
7	Georgina	Bachelor	Business & Economics	Finance
8	Harry	Master	Economics	Technology
9	Isla	Bachelor	International Economics	Finance/Consulting
10	James	Bachelor	Economics	Finance
11	Kevin	Master	Economics	Consulting
12	Laura	Bachelor	Economics	Finance/Consulting
13	Max	Bachelor	Economics	Finance
14	Olivia	Bachelor	Economics	Marketing

Figure 4: Interview sample.

5.1 Flexibility and Autonomy as Central Attractors

Flexibility was one of the most valued aspects of remote or hybrid work. Students linked it to better control over their time, personal goals, and daily routines. One student even said it directly influenced how appealing an employer seemed.

“Flexibility first because it affects my everyday life and also the time I need for preparing myself for a PhD. Then career progression and training. Then company culture and reputation. And salary after that. Salary is important but I feel like flexibility impacts me more directly.” – Bryce.

Others linked the appeal of flexibility to anticipated future responsibilities:

“But flexibility is also something that I think about when choosing an employer. In the future I’m planning on starting my own family, having my own kids. And you have to be there for your big family.” – Charles.

Students who valued autonomy tended to highlight increased focus, fewer distractions, and the option to tailor working hours. At the same time, very few expressed interest in fully remote work at the start of their careers. Instead, flexibility was most often associated with hybrid arrangements, where autonomy is combined with regular in-person contact.

5.2 Perceived Impact on Learning and Competence Development.

A dominant theme across interviews was the belief that remote work makes early-career learning more difficult. Students described in-person settings as important for “picking things up,” asking spontaneous questions, and observing experienced colleagues. Participants frequently emphasized the value of informal learning:

“You can’t learn from a Zoom call. In office you hear things, you ask dumb questions, you see how people talk. Remotely you’re basically alone with your laptop and your dying motivation. And in general I think remote is bad for beginners.” – Anthony.

“If it’s a place where you only work remotely, I think learning it will probably be a challenge. Like seeking guidance, because you can’t do it in the like more casual manner. You really have to plan a meeting to talk about it.” – Harry.

This concern was shared by both bachelor and master students, though expressed more strongly by those entering finance and consulting. Students with limited work experience also interpreted physical presence as a way to gain confidence and understand expectations more quickly. Overall, remote work was seen as reducing access to mentorship and slowing down early development, especially during the first one to two years of a career.

5.3 Social Connection and Belonging in Hybrid and Remote Settings.

Students also highlighted social connection as an essential part of their first job. Many described in-person interaction as central not only to feeling part of a team but also to understanding workplace culture and establishing professional relationships.

Remote work was often described as isolating:

“I like having some choice in when I work and where I work but I do not want fully remote. That feels too isolated for me.” – Isla.

Several participants explained that spontaneous interactions, which they consider key to belonging, occur mainly in office settings:

"When you're physically in the office, you meet people by the coffee machine and your chit-chat and you have knowledge transfers, and you make plans and you plan to go to after-works together... [these never happen] when you are remote." – Harry.

Students described social belonging as linked to job satisfaction, motivation, and gaining confidence in their early careers. Consequently, many preferred hybrid arrangements that ensure regular opportunities for in-person connection.

5.4 Prioritization of Remote Work in Career Decisions.

Although students valued flexibility, it was rarely described as the decisive factor when comparing job offers. When asked about trade-offs, most students ranked prestige, learning opportunities, and long-term progression above remote work options, particularly in competitive fields.

Participants in finance repeatedly emphasized reputation:

"Reputation of the firms is very important for the first few internships, but once you gain some experience, other factors get more relevant." – Max.

For some students, flexibility acted as a tiebreaker when comparing similar offers:

"If I had multiple offers that are good, then yeah, choosing a place to has hybrid would be the most important factor." – Francis.

Some students talked about how the option of remote arrangements opens opportunities internationally.

“I definitely think that that would be a big plus for me because first of all, something I’ve noticed is quite often. A lot of opportunities that I’ve seen that have been very nice, have been in cities other than the city that I live in.” – Olivia.

Unlike other participants, a student spoke out about how having stability is more important to geographical flexibility:

“Like, my offers are all in Sweden, so stability is actually the biggest concern for me. Because non-Europeans have this whole visa situation, first 2 years working visa, then 4 years in the same position... like, mostly 4. So yeah, geographical flexibility is nice but stability matters more.” – Enzo.

A student has also shared how visibility and sense of identity impact his career decisions:

“Between two identical employees, one remote, one on-site I’d promote the on-site one every time. I think that taking on a full-time on-site job is almost like a measure of maturity. Being in the office signals readiness and professionalism to employers, I think.” – James.

Taken together, the interviews show that students rarely rejected an attractive opportunity because of limited flexibility. Instead, they tended to imagine prioritising remote work later in their careers, after building a foundation of skills, credibility, and experience.

5.5 Remote Work as Trust

Students often understand remote work as an indication that employers believe they can self-manage. Trust is seen as the foundation for granting flexibility.

“The assumption I make is that the management gives the employee a lot of responsibility and has trust in the employee.” – Max.

“It shows that they’re open to change and innovation because remote work was popularised during COVID, so it is a relatively new thing. They are open to like new modern management practices.” – Laura.

Remote work signals modernity and adaptability in organizational culture. Students view companies offering it as progressive and forward-thinking.

“Remote work shows you that the company trusts you.” – Devon.

“They believe that you are an adult and that you can accomplish your work without your supervisor looking at you.” – Harry.

“The option to work remotely kind of shows that they care about their employees and that they kind of value their work and their skills more than they value their ability to show up every single day in person.”
– Olivia.

Remote work is associated with autonomy and maturity. Students feel respected when employers assume they can work independently. They also see remote work as a show of care and respect. They interpret it as valuing output and competence rather than physical presence.

5.6 Industry-Specific Remote Work Norms and Requirements

5.6.1 Finance & Consulting.

Students aiming for finance see office presence as a requirement built into the industry. They associate in-person work with collaboration, speed, and meeting expectations.

"In investment banking, on-site work is the norm because it's demanding and collaborative." – James.

"Now since I wanna go into finance, I want the real environment. The office. The stress. The vibe. I guess I changed from 'remote is cool' to 'get me into a building with glass walls asap.'" – Anthony.

The prestige-driven culture of finance shapes students' preferences. Remote work becomes less appealing when they believe success depends on being physically present.

I always want to be there [in the office] to show myself to talk with them and get a good relationship." – Devon.

5.6.2 Technology

Tech is perceived as more flexible and less hierarchical compared to finance or consulting. Students drawn to tech appreciate cultures that allow autonomy.

"I don't do too well in those types of organizations, such as those that are within finance or consulting, where it's very, very rigid." – Francis.

Later in the interview he has also stated:

"[In my field, Product Management] one reason is that they are very flexible. not too hierarchical, and I don't do too well in those types of organizations." – Francis.

Tech work is associated with fast-paced innovation. Efficiency is a major attractor to remote work for tech-oriented students. They see online communication as streamlined and productive. Students feel that this environment aligns well with digital or remote modes of working.

"I think that it [the sector] offers a very good opportunity to do things rapidly. You can develop new and cool things quite quickly. And I think that's cool." – Harry.

"But I think communication online can be much more efficient sometimes, like straight to the point. Also we don't have to waste time in the meetings, yeah I like efficiency." – Enzo.

5.6.3 Creative fields & Research

Students in research or creative paths value autonomy and uninterrupted focus. Remote and hybrid arrangements support their productivity and long-term goals.

"Yeah probably. I would choose the one offering remote or hybrid. It gives me more freedom for everything I want to do. I am more productive at home. Fewer distractions and I kinda pace the day how I want, and I have more time to apply for grad school." – Bryce.

“To me, that’s why I was saying that I would kind of prefer a hybrid schedule rather than a remote one, because to me, I personally wouldn’t enjoy being remote all the time because I kind of prefer a more structured environment and I like having somewhere to go every day. So the great thing about hybrid is that I have the time to work on my tasks without constant oversight. At the same time it is more comfortable to work with colleagues in person if we are working on a large project.” – Olivia.

Hybrid work is seen as the best balance between independence and structure. Students in creative roles appreciate both focus time and occasional in-person collaboration.

6. Analysis

This chapter examines how students interpret remote and hybrid work and how these interpretations shape the way they imagine their early careers. The analysis follows the logic of the theoretical model guiding the study. First, Career Orientation helps explain how students evaluate remote work and what they prioritise when thinking about it. These evaluations constitute their perceptions. Second, Career Imagination helps explain how these perceptions become part of the career paths students picture for themselves. By connecting the two frameworks, the chapter shows how students' values, assumptions about learning, and expectations about different industries guide the ways they imagine entering the labor market.

6.1 From Career Orientation to Perceptions of Remote Work

Students did not assess remote work merely in terms of digital versus physical presence. Their perceptions were shaped by developmental concerns related to learning, belonging, recognition, autonomy and mobility, each of which carried different weight depending on their underlying values, study level, and intended career field. These interpretations reflect anticipatory career thinking: students relied on assumptions about what early careers should provide rather than on extensive personal experience (James et al., 2021; Handley, 2018; Chertkovskaya et al., 2020). Their Career Orientations further filtered these evaluations. Students with traditional orientations emphasized stability, structure, supervision, and visibility (Hirschi & Koen, 2021), while those with protean or boundaryless orientations emphasized autonomy, mobility, and self-direction (Hall, 2004; Crocitto et al., 1998). These orientations shaped which aspects of remote work students noticed first, whether opportunities for flexibility or risks to early-career development.

6.1.1 Orientations as Interpretive Filters

Career Orientation provides an important entry point for understanding variation in how students evaluated remote work. Students with more traditional or structure-seeking orientations consistently

highlighted the importance of clear hierarchies, visible effort, and step-by-step progression. For these students, remote work raised concerns about receiving less support, being less visible, and having fewer opportunities to demonstrate commitment. These interpretations align with findings that traditional, prestige-oriented career paths remain dominant in elite university environments, where students are funneled towards structured and institutionally valid careers (Binder, Davis & Bloom, 2015).

This pattern was especially evident among bachelor students targeting finance and consulting, who repeatedly emphasized on-site presence as central to credibility, mentoring, and integration. Students such as Anthony and James described the office as indispensable for learning how to function in competitive settings and for demonstrating motivation. They did not associate remote work with organizational trust; rather, it felt like a distancing from the core of professional life.

Students with more protean or boundaryless orientations evaluated remote work differently. They were more attentive to the autonomy and mobility that remote work could offer, including structuring their own day, working from different places, or accommodating personal projects. Bryce (master), for example, described flexibility as essential for aligning work with his long-term plans and daily routines. For such students, flexibility was not a secondary benefit but a defining feature of the kind of career they wanted to build. Nevertheless, even autonomy-oriented students evaluated remote work through anticipatory assumptions about what constitutes a serious early career, an understanding shaped by peer norms, prestige narratives and sector expectations (Binder, 2016; Chertkovskaya et al., 2020). Students across orientations therefore shared the belief that early-career stages demand heightened structure and support.

6.1.2 Learning and Informal Exposure as Foundational Conditions

Learning emerged as one of the most significant developmental concerns. Students described early-career learning as highly dependent on spontaneous interaction, informal observation and proximity to experienced colleagues. They emphasized the value of quick questions, overheard conversations and witnessing how colleagues approach problems. These elements were seen as crucial for gaining competence and confidence.

bachelor students, especially those with limited full-time experience, stressed the need for steady in-person contact to learn effectively. Anthony (bachelor) captured this sentiment directly, explaining that “you can’t learn from a Zoom call.” Students aiming for finance and consulting expressed this view especially strongly, linking effective learning almost entirely to physical immersion.

master students also valued in-person guidance but were generally more open to hybrid arrangements, particularly in fields such as technology and analytics. Students including Enzo and Harry believed that hybrid learning was possible if tasks were clearly defined and if some on-site interaction complemented digital tools.

Many students viewed remote work as constraining learning because online interactions felt more planned, formal and topic-specific. This perception aligns with research demonstrating that remote arrangements can reduce tacit learning, informal mentoring and socialisation (Issakainen, 2025; Gagné & Deci, 2005) and weaken informal networks (Ardi et al., 2024; Barrero et al., 2023). Overall, students treated early-career learning as largely incompatible with fully remote work, although hybrid arrangements were seen as more negotiable.

6.1.3 Sense of Belonging and Social Life

Belonging was another important aspect shaping perceptions. Many students saw the office as a place where relationships form naturally, where identification with team norms is strengthened, and where they feel part of an organization. Remote work, in contrast, was often associated with isolation. Isla (bachelor), for instance, noted that although she appreciates flexibility, fully remote work “feels too isolating.”

This concern was most pronounced among bachelor students preparing for their first full-time roles, reflecting more traditional orientations. For them, belonging was not just a matter of comfort but a prerequisite for feeling professionally integrated.

master students expressed more varied perspectives. Those entering fields such as technology or research did not rely as heavily on physical presence for belonging. They believed that structured

meetings, collaborative projects and occasional office days were sufficient to maintain social connection. These students typically had more protean or boundaryless orientations and understood belonging in terms of shared goals rather than shared physical space.

6.1.4 Recognition and Visibility

Recognition and visibility formed a distinct concern connected to perceptions of legitimacy. Students targeting high-prestige sectors such as finance, consulting or corporate strategy imagined the office as the main setting where professional identities are seen and validated. They feared that remote work would reduce opportunities for managers to notice their contributions or include them in important tasks.

James (bachelor) emphasized that being in the office “signals readiness and professionalism,” a position echoed by others preparing for competitive pathways. This aligns with research describing elite fields as heavily visibility-driven (Binder et al., 2016; Rivera, 2011).

Conversely, master students entering technology or analytics believed recognition depended primarily on output quality rather than physical visibility. Students like Francis and Enzo considered digital communication tools effective for demonstrating competence. These students tended to have more autonomy-oriented orientations and therefore saw symbolic visibility as less critical.

6.1.5 Autonomy Interpreted Through Orientation

Although students generally valued autonomy, they did not consider it essential at the very beginning of their careers. Most framed autonomy as something that becomes meaningful once foundational skills, credibility and trust have been established. Traditional-oriented bachelor students saw high levels of autonomy early on as potentially overwhelming. They preferred environments with clear structure and supervision to provide a sense of security. Autonomy-oriented master students, including Harry and Enzo, appreciated the efficiency and freedom that hybrid and remote arrangements could offer. Even so, they tended to view autonomy as something best introduced gradually.

Several participants, such as Max (bachelor) and Devon (master), interpreted remote work as a sign of organizational trust. This interpretation was especially common among students with protean orientations, who associated self-management with professional maturity.

6.1.6 Mobility Imagined as Opportunity or Instability

Remote work was strongly connected to mobility. Internationally oriented students, particularly in technology and creative fields, saw remote work as supporting ambitions for cross-border careers. It enabled involvement in global teams, project-based work and geographic flexibility, reflecting boundaryless career ideals. Olivia (bachelor) explained that hybrid arrangements would allow her to pursue opportunities abroad without being tied to a single location.

For some students, mobility was not imagined as a straightforward opportunity but rather as a potential source of instability. Enzo (master), an international student, explained that his career decisions are strongly shaped by visa requirements and the need to maintain stable employment in Sweden. While he recognised the appeal of geographic flexibility, he noted that changing locations or roles too early could jeopardise his long term residency prospects. In this sense, remote work and cross border mobility were imagined less as opportunities for exploration and more as risks that might disrupt the continuity needed at the start of his career. This shows how individual circumstances, such as migration status, can transform the meaning of mobility within students' imagined trajectories.

6.1.7 Variations by Study Level and Field

Differences in study level and intended field further shaped perceptions of remote work. Bachelor students, particularly those targeting finance and consulting, consistently expressed strong preferences for in-person work. Their limited experience made structure, visibility and informal learning feel indispensable, and their orientations tended to be more traditional.

master students displayed greater variation. Some shared similar concerns as bachelor students, but others felt more confident integrating hybrid arrangements earlier, drawing on internships, work

experience or familiarity with digital work environments. These students tended to have more protean or boundaryless orientations, which broadened the range of work formats they viewed as acceptable.

Field differences played a similar role. Finance and consulting were consistently perceived as sectors where physical presence is necessary for legitimacy. Technology, analytics and research were viewed as more flexible, making hybrid or remote arrangements feel more realistic or appropriate.

6.2 From Perceptions to Imagined Early-Career Trajectories

Students did not limit themselves to evaluating remote work in the present. They also used their perceptions to construct narratives about how their early careers should unfold. This section examines how these perceptions were transformed into imagined futures through the lens of Career Imagination (Cohen & Duberley, 2021). While the previous section focused on present-oriented evaluations, this one focuses on future-oriented projections. Students relied on their interpretations of learning, belonging, recognition, autonomy and mobility to determine which early-career environments felt legitimate or desirable.

6.2.1 Imagining Early Careers Through Perceived Enablement and Constraint

Students used their perceptions of learning and visibility to set imaginative boundaries for what the first years of a career should include. Because remote work was perceived as limiting informal learning and tacit knowledge (see 6.1.2), it was typically excluded from what they considered appropriate first roles. The office was imagined as enabling competence development, whereas remote work was imagined as constraining it. Students entering competitive industries described on-site immersion as essential for learning how their field operates and for demonstrating seriousness. While hybrid arrangements were acceptable in some cases, fully remote roles rarely appeared in imagined entry routes. Even students who appreciated flexibility often imagined that starting remotely would slow their development or make it harder to show commitment. This did not mean they rejected remote work as such, but that it felt unsuitable for the point in time when they expected to learn the most.

6.2.2 Autonomy Sequenced as a Later-Stage Resource

Although students appreciated autonomy, they rarely imagined it as part of the first phase of their career. Instead, they placed autonomy and flexibility later in their timelines, once they envisioned themselves as skilled, trusted and confident enough to manage responsibilities independently. This reflects the temporal dimension of Career Imagination, where early years are associated with learning and socialisation and later years with increased freedom. Master students were somewhat more open to earlier hybrid arrangements than bachelor students, often because they already had internship experience or felt more secure in their abilities. Still, most imagined a gradual transition toward autonomy rather than beginning with it, showing that perceptions shaped not only whether remote work felt appropriate but also when it felt appropriate.

6.2.3 Imagined Professional Identities

Students also evaluated remote work in relation to the professional identities they hoped to develop. Prior research suggests that physical and spatial workplace symbols function as crucial identity scaffolds; their absence in fully remote work can therefore conflict with established professional identity scripts (Pratt & Rafaeli, 2001). Those aspiring to high-pressure corporate careers imagined themselves in dynamic office environments that symbolise intensity, collaboration and commitment. Here, student perceptions shaped the symbolic meanings students attached to each work mode. In contrast, students imagining careers as independent knowledge workers, digital professionals or globally mobile individuals saw remote or hybrid setups as consistent with their desired identities. Identity therefore acted as an important mechanism linking perceptions from 6.1 to the imagined futures described in this section.

6.2.4 Expectations Aligned with Perceived Industry Norms

Perceived industry norms played a major role in shaping imagined trajectories. Students entering finance or consulting believed these fields required strong in-person presence and therefore excluded remote roles from the early years of their career. Students entering technology, analytics or research

expected their fields to accommodate flexible arrangements, making hybrid or remote work seem realistic even at entry level. Students' imagined paths thus differed not only because of individual values but also because of structural cues from their intended sectors.

7. Discussion

7.1 Answer to the research question

7.1.1 Findings overview

Across the interviews, students consistently linked remote work to deeper expectations about early professional life. They evaluated remote work through concerns about learning, visibility, belonging, and identity formation, and not solely through its practical benefits. Although flexible work was appreciated, it was rarely imagined as the most suitable at the very beginning of a career. Instead, students placed greater importance on in person learning, structured guidance, and opportunities for recognition. The extent to which remote work was incorporated into career planning varied according to individual career orientations and the institutional norms associated with each field.

7.1.2 Learning and early-career development

Students' perceptions of learning played a central role in shaping how they envisioned their early careers. Remote work was widely perceived as limiting the spontaneous interactions that support tacit knowledge acquisition, informal feedback, and the small observations that help newcomers understand workplace expectations. These perceptions were especially pronounced among students entering finance and consulting, where the office environment was understood as a site of intensive learning and rapid socialisation into professional norms. As a consequence, students imagined early career stages as periods in which physical presence would be essential for building competence and confidence.

7.1.3 Sense of belonging and connection

A strong desire for belonging influenced many students' evaluations of remote work. They imagined the first job as a time when relationships, team identity, and informal cultural learning hold particular importance. Remote work was often associated with isolation and reduced opportunities to form meaningful social ties. Students stressed that belonging contributes to motivation, confidence, and a sense of legitimacy as a newcomer.

7.1.4 Long Term Lifestyle Goals & Autonomy

Another way that perceptions shape career imagination has to do with autonomy and lifestyle preferences. Some students see remote or hybrid work as a tool for fitting their careers with personal goals. For example, they link flexibility to long term projects like preparing for a PhD, working on creative interests, or planning for future family responsibilities. Because of this, many students imagine moving toward more flexible work only after they have built a stable skill base. In their long term plans, remote or hybrid work becomes more desirable, but it is rarely imagined as ideal at the very beginning.

7.1.5 Career orientation and industry

Those patterns also depend on students' career orientations and the norms of the sectors they are aiming for. Students with protean or boundaryless orientations tend to see hybrid or remote work as fitting their desire for independence, mobility and experimentation. They often align their imagined trajectories with fields like technology, research, or international project work, where remote structures are more normal and do not threaten career development. In contrast, students with more traditional orientations imagine careers that rely on in person learning and steady progression inside structured organizations. They tend to remain in office based roles because it matches the expectations of fields like finance or consulting and gives them the visibility they believe is required to advance. There are also differences between bachelor and master students, with master students showing more strategic thinking about when flexibility fits into their timeline.

7.1.6 Prioritization of remote work in job search

Although flexibility was valued across the sample, it rarely served as the primary criterion when students imagined choosing between job opportunities. Prestige, learning potential, and perceived long term progression were consistently prioritised, particularly in competitive industries. Flexible work arrangements became relevant mainly when comparing similar offers, functioning as a secondary deciding factor rather than a foundational requirement.

7.1.7 Conclusion

Overall, students' perceptions of remote work shape their imagined careers by influencing how they assess early learning environments, belonging, identity formation, and long term aspirations. Remote work becomes a tool through which students evaluate whether an employer can support their development and how well a role aligns with who they want to become. The findings show that remote work is integrated into students' imagined trajectories not as an immediate preference, but as an option increasingly considered once early career foundations have been established. These interpretations confirm the central mechanism of the Orientation, Perception, and Imagination model, demonstrating how career orientations shape students' perceptions of remote work and how these perceptions, in turn, structure their imagined professional futures.

7.2 Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the interpretivist and social constructionist stance means that both the participants' accounts and the authors' interpretations shape the findings. Although this aligns with the research paradigm, it introduces subjectivity into the selection, coding, and presentation of empirical material.

Second, the interview design may have influenced responses. Because the guide was partly theory driven, certain themes such as flexibility, autonomy, and learning received more attention, which may have reinforced the assumptions the study aimed to explore. The presence and style of the interviewer may also have affected what participants chose to emphasize.

Third, the sample is limited to 14 students from European business and economics schools. While this focus was intentional, it restricts transferability. Students from other regions, institutions, or disciplines may interpret remote work differently, particularly those whose career paths rely less on prestige or in person visibility.

Moreover, the cross sectional design captures perceptions at a single moment in time. Students' views may change significantly as they enter the workforce and gain real experience with hybrid or remote work, which this study cannot observe.

7.2.1 Future study suggestion

These limitations open up several avenues for future research. Studies with broader and more diverse samples, including students from other disciplines such as engineering, medicine or creative fields, as well as those from non-elite universities and different regions, would help clarify which patterns are specific to elite business and economics students and which are more general. Comparative studies across countries with different labor market institutions, cultural expectations and remote work norms could shed light on how context shapes the role of flexibility in career planning. Finally, future research could include employers' perspectives, exploring how organizations design hybrid models for early-career employees and how they interpret the expectations of incoming students regarding remote and hybrid work.

7.3 Contribution

First, the study contributes to remote work literature by showing that students' perceptions are shaped less by the practical realities of remote work and more by uncertainty about learning, belonging, and early career visibility. While previous research has focused on employees' productivity and wellbeing (Ardi et al., 2024), this study demonstrates that for students on the threshold of entering full-time work, remote work primarily triggers concerns about developmental and relational losses. This reveals a gap between organizational narratives of flexibility and students' own meaning-making processes.

Second, the findings extend research on Career Orientation. While earlier work shows that individuals differ in their preferences for autonomy, structure, and mobility (Hirschi & Koen, 2021), this study shows how these orientations shape how remote work is interpreted: structured, security-driven orientations tend to see remote work as risky, while protean or boundaryless orientations interpret it more positively. Thus, Career Orientation not only predicts career preferences but also filters how

young people evaluate new work arrangements, forming part of an orientation–perception–imagination process that shapes how they envision their future careers.

Third, the study advances Career Imagination scholarship by illustrating how remote work functions as a constraint or enabler in how students picture possible careers. Existing work highlights how imagination is situated at the intersection of personal agency and structural conditions (Cohen & Duberley, 2021). This study shows that remote work becomes one such structural condition: it narrows imagined opportunities for some (due to fears of invisibility, weaker belonging, or reduced informal learning) while expanding possibilities for others (through autonomy, location-independence, and perceived control). In this way, remote work actively shapes what students consider thinkable or desirable futures.

7.4 Implication for practical use

The findings of this study do not only contribute to the academic understanding of how students interpret remote work. They also have practical relevance for organizations, HR teams and university career services that interact with students and design early career environments. Since students' perceptions of remote and hybrid work influence the choices they make, the expectations they form and the kinds of employers they find attractive, it is important to translate the results into concrete implications. The following sections outline how different actors can use these insights to better support young professionals and create work structures that match how students imagine their early careers.

7.4.1 For Employers

The findings show that students prefer hybrid work rather than fully remote arrangements during the early stages of their careers. They want flexibility and autonomy, but they also feel that being on-site supports learning, social belonging, and smoother integration into professional life. Remote or flexible options still signal that an employer is modern and trusting, but students expect these options to be combined with clear structures that help them grow. Employers therefore need to provide organized

mentorship, accessible learning opportunities, and intentional efforts to support social integration. This can include events, chances to shadow experienced colleagues, and regular in-office days. More on-site time at the beginning of a graduate's career appears especially important. Overall, for organizations that target students from highly ranked universities, hybrid work is much more attractive than a fully remote model because it offers the right balance between autonomy and developmental support.

7.4.2 For HR/Talent attraction

For HR teams and those responsible for talent attraction, the study shows that offering flexible work alone is not enough to attract students. Students also pay close attention to prestige, opportunities for progression, and whether the company can offer a meaningful career narrative. Because of this, employer branding should not simply state that remote work is allowed. Instead, it should explain how hybrid work actually functions inside the organization. Students want to know how often teams meet in person, how visibility is maintained, and what kinds of training, feedback and development opportunities will be available. In competitive, prestige driven environments, these factors remain central, and flexibility is interpreted as just one part of a wider value proposition rather than the main attraction.

7.4.3 Career coaches/university career services

Universities and career advisors can use these findings to help students prepare for the transition into the labor market. One useful approach is to encourage students to reflect on their own career orientation and how it fits with the expectations and norms of their chosen field. Supporting them in understanding these differences may lead to more realistic decision making. Advisors can also help students think through the trade offs involved in choosing roles with different levels of flexibility, especially when early career learning and visibility might be more important than autonomy. Finally, career services can guide students to view remote work as one resource among many rather than the

main factor when evaluating job opportunities, and to consider how flexibility can be used strategically at different points in their career journeys.

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9. Appendices

9.1 Appendix 1: Interview sample

	Pseudonym	Study level	Study field	Sector of interest
1	Anthony	Bachelor	Business Administration	Finance
2	Bryce	Master	Mathematics in Business and Economics	Academic research
3	Charles	Bachelor	Industrial Engineering	Finance
4	Devon	Master	Industrial Engineering	Management
5	Enzo	Master	International Business	Technology
6	Francis	Bachelor	Business & Economics	Technology
7	Georgina	Bachelor	Business & Economics	Finance
8	Harry	Master	Economics	Technology
9	Isla	Bachelor	International Economics	Finance/Consulting
10	James	Bachelor	Economics	Finance
11	Kevin	Master	Economics	Consulting
12	Laura	Bachelor	Economics	Finance
13	Max	Bachelor	Economics	Finance
14	Olivia	Bachelor	Economics	Marketing

9.2 Appendix 2: Interview questions*

1. When you think of an “attractive employer,” what comes to mind?
2. What factors make an employer attractive to you when applying for jobs?
3. How would you rank these factors in terms of importance? Why?
4. How important is flexibility in when and where you work when choosing an employer?
5. How does remote work compare in importance to other factors like salary, prestige, or international opportunities?
6. What do you know about remote and hybrid work, what is your experience with it?
7. Do you think offering remote work could be a decisive factor when choosing between two otherwise similar employers?
8. Have your views on what makes an employer attractive changed over the course of your studies? If so, how?
9. What does the option to work remotely tell you about a company’s culture?
10. Can you tell me a bit about your career goals after graduation?
11. When you see that a company supports remote work, what assumptions do you make about its leadership and management practices?
12. Do you see remote or hybrid work as giving you more control over how you manage your tasks and schedule? Why or why not?
13. Can you imagine situations where too much flexibility might feel overwhelming rather than motivating?
14. How do you think remote work might affect your ability to learn from colleagues, mentors, or supervisors?
15. If you were working remotely, what kinds of support (training, feedback, resources) would you need to feel you are growing and performing well?
16. How important is it for you to feel socially connected to colleagues in your first job?
17. Do you think remote or hybrid work would make it harder or easier to build meaningful professional relationships?
18. What would employers need to do to help you feel a sense of belonging if you were working remotely most of the time?
19. How do you personally prefer to manage the boundary between your work (or studies) and your personal life?
20. Do you see remote work as supporting or making it harder to manage these boundaries? In what way?
21. What are some tasks and skills you would want to use on a day-to-day basis?
22. What are your career plans for the next 5 years? What sector are you interested in working in?

*To maintain a natural flow of conversation, interview questions did not always follow the same order.