ON JOB SATISFACTION AND SUCCESS:

how Dutch and Belgian employees write new career chapters

PART 3

PROACTIVE CAREER BEHAVIOR, GOALS AND REGRETS

HOUSE OF HR

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PREFACE

YOUR CAREER?

It is completely unique. Unlike fifty or sixty years ago, it's a road that winds and twists at random. It takes us down all sorts of side paths we never suspected existed. And the great thing about it is this: it's possible to co-write the itinerary.

But that takes effort. And it requires the right insights. Insight into exactly how careers function, what opportunities there are, and what the pitfalls and points of interest are. Hence this series of research papers, for which we questioned employees in Belgium and the Netherlands about their experiences, motivations, and expectations.

With the results, we can give targeted advice to anyone looking for a job, or for a foothold and balance on that unpredictable career path. Or to anyone looking for inspiration for new chapters in that yet-to-be-written career story.

In this third part of 'On job satisfaction and success', we focus on proactive career behavior. What can you do to steer your career in the right direction, and does it effectively make you happier? How do you deal with disruptive events at work, and why do employees with somewhat predictable careers have fewer regrets when they look back on them?

1 FROM REFLECTION TO CONSTRUCTION: HOW TO SELF-MANAGE YOUR CAREER

As careers have become increasingly complex and dynamic, their success has long since ceased to depend on one big decision you make in your twenties - i.e. choosing one employer with whom you'll stick around for the rest of your life. No, that type of lifetime employment is an echo from the distant past. Anyone who wants a successful career today must constantly learn and try new things. But above all: you shouldn't wait for things to come your way, but take matters into your own hands.

A good person-career fit - in other words, a dynamic balance between who you are and what you do in your career - is the goal. Thanks to research, we now know what competencies you need to successfully navigate your career, but also what you need to proactively do by yourself.

In this research paper, we focus on career crafting, a form of proactive behavior in which people self-manage their careers to achieve that optimal person-career fit, and thus increase the chances of success. Career crafting has two components: reflection and construction.

Reflection

If you want to personally shape your career, you need to reflect deeply on it. And not just once, but regularly. More specifically, you have to zoom out completely and explore and evaluate your career-related motivations, values and goals. And answer these crucial questions: what drives you in your daily work, for example, and what about your skills?
In short, proactive career reflection is thinking actively about the ways in which you can build your career.

CONSTRUCTION

It's okay to think about your career, but don't forget to put your findings into practice. You can do this, for example, by creating a roadmap, by approaching people in your network to explore career opportunities, or by profiling yourself on social media. So, proactive career construction is effectively building your career.

But who actually does that, actively working on their career? In this first chapter, we lift a corner of the veil. What dimensions of proactive career behavior do we see among employees in Belgium and the Netherlands? What is the impact on career sustainability? And how does it relate to career success?

Our research shows that people 'sometimes' or 'regularly' work on their careers. And that the emphasis is still mainly on reflection: they mainly explore and evaluate their motivations, values and goals.

PROACTIVE CAREER BEHAVIOR AND DEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLES

Gender & region

Just as there were no differences between genders in terms of success and sustainability, there are no differences in terms of proactive career behavior: **men and women** work equally hard on their careers.

Career mobility in the Netherlands, Flanders and Wallonia dared to fluctuate, but proactive career behavior in the three regions is almost the same: everyone is putting the same amount of work into shaping their careers.

Age & work experience

Younger workers pay more attention to proactive career behavior than older ones. Especially from the age of 46, people put less effort into it.

Less experienced workers are also more likely to work actively on their careers. This makes sense, since people have to work harder when starting out.

Still, older and more experienced workers shouldn't remain blind to the benefits of career crafting: after all, it ensures that they remain employable, and as mentioned, that is important throughout their careers.

Diploma & position

Clearly, the higher their degree, the more firmly people take control of their careers. Holders of a master's degree or Ph.D. score higher on proactive career reflection and construction than those with at most a secondary school diploma. (Table 3) White-collar workers also put significantly more effort into proactive career behavior than blue-collar workers. (Table 4)

Again, an echo from the previous two research papers: those who are practically educated and work blue-collar jobs are less likely to reflect on their own career behaviors and related goals.

Table 3: PROACTIVE CAREER BEHAVIOUR BY DEGREE

	Average	Primary education at most	Secondary education	Bachelor's degree	Master's degree or Ph.D.
Proactive career reflection	**3,75**	**3,39**	**3,62**	**3,84**	**3,97**
Proactive career construction	**3,61**	**3,35**	**3,50**	**3,69**	**3,81**

Table 4: PROACTIVE CAREER BEHAVIOUR BY FUNCTION

	Average	Blue-collar worker	Administra-tive clerk	Middle mgmt	Board/senior management
Proactive career reflection	**3,75**	**3,65**	**3,61**	**3,96**	**4,00**
Proactive career construction	**3,61**	**3,55**	**3,47**	**3,78**	**4,02**

Proactive career behavior and career success

Objective success and proactive career behavior are strongly related, both in terms of reflection and construction. (Table 5) No real surprise to anyone at home in the scientific research around this topic.

Although we cannot prove any causality on the basis of our numbers, career crafting seems to contribute to objective career success. And that, in turn, is in line with what we concluded in research paper 1, namely that internal and external career mobility increases as people occupy higher positions or hold higher degrees.

For subjective success, we see the same trend. (Table 6) The more people are committed to reflection and construction, the more satisfied they are.

Even when we examine the different facets of subjective career success (see research paper 2), we see a positive relationship with career crafting. Moreover, it is most strongly related to financial success, positive impact, and positive working relationships.

Table 5: PROACTIVE CAREER BEHAVIOUR AND OBJECTIVE SUCCESS

	Average	Low	Moderate	High	Very high
Proactive career reflection	**3,75**	**3,43**	**3,81**	**3,99**	**4,19**
Proactive career construction	**3,61**	**3,29**	**3,65**	**3,81**	**4,12**

Table 6: PROACTIVE CAREER BEHAVIOUR AND SUBJECTIVE SUCCESS

	Average	Low	Moderate	High	Very high
Proactive career reflection	**3,75**	**3,36**	**3,59**	**3,85**	**4,28**
Proactive career construction	**3,61**	**3,16**	**3,48**	**3,73**	**4,14**

Proactive career behavior and career goals

All workers who report 'job' as a career orientation (see research paper 2) exhibit about the same degree of proactive career behavior. (Table 7) It is completely different for those pursuing a career, or working from a certain vocation: because those workers consciously want to progress in their careers, or simply because they are very consciously working on it, they reflect on it more and also build on it more actively. (Tables 8 and 9)

Table 7: PROACTIVE CAREER BEHAVIOUR AND IDENTIFICATION WITH 'JOB'

	Average	Not at all	Hardly	A little	A lot	Very much
Proactive career reflection	**3,75**	**3,80**	**3,69**	**3,70**	**3,85**	**3,76**
Proactive career construction	**3,61**	**3,55**	**3,59**	**3,58**	**3,73**	**3,59**

Table 8: PROACTIVE CAREER BEHAVIOUR AND IDENTIFICATION WITH 'CAREER'

	Average	Not at all	Hardly	A little	A lot	Very much
Proactive career reflection	**3,75**	**3,22**	**3,52**	**3,93**	**4,26**	**4,84**
Proactive career construction	**3,61**	**2,96**	**3,41**	**3,80**	**4,24**	**4,73**

Table 9: PROACTIVE CAREER BEHAVIOUR AND IDENTIFICATION WITH 'CALLING'

	Average	Not at all	Hardly	A little	A lot	Very much
Proactive career reflection	**3,75**	**3,23**	**3,59**	**3,91**	**4,17**	**4,74**
Proactive career construction	**3,61**	**3,02**	**3,48**	**3,78**	**4,07**	**4,51**

Proactive career behavior and sustainable careers

In part 1 of 'On job satisfaction and success', we discussed sustainable careers in detail. Here we ask the question: can you make your career more sustainable by proactively working on it? In other words: can it make you happier, healthier and more productive?

To answer that question, we first link the balance between the indicators job satisfaction, mental health and employability - if these are right, a sustainable career is just around the corner - to the figures on proactive career behavior.
What emerges: those who work more proactively on their careers experience a better balance between job happiness, health and productivity, too. (Table 10)

Table 10: PROACTIVE CAREER BEHAVIOR AND BALANCE

	Average	Imbalance or limited balance	Somewhat balanced	Balanced
Proactive career reflection	**3,75**	**3,32**	**3,48**	**3,77**
Proactive career construction	**3,61**	**3,57**	**3,58**	**3,89**

Table 11: PROACTIVE CAREER BEHAVIOUR AND THE IMPORTANCE OF LONG-TERM WORK HAPPINESS

	Average	Score 1-6	Score 7-8	Score 9-10
Proactive career reflection	**3,75**	**3,31**	**3,68**	**3,93**
Proactive career construction	**3,61**	**3,31**	**3,59**	**3,72**

Table 12: PROACTIVE CAREER BEHAVIOUR AND THE IMPORTANCE OF LONG-TERM PRODUCTIVITY

	Average	Score 1-6	Score 7-8	Score 9-10
Proactive career reflection	**3,75**	**3,38**	**3,72**	**4,20**
Proactive career construction	**3,61**	**3,24**	**3,59**	**4,06**

Zooming in on the individual indicators, the positive correlation with career crafting is particularly striking (table 11-12): workers who exhibit more proactive career behavior also place more importance on their happiness, health and productivity in the future.

The effect is the greatest for the productivity indicator. Those who find staying employable (internally and externally) important are more likely to engage in active career behavior.

Those who have changed jobs internally are also more likely to actively contribute to the story of their career. (Table 14) Workers who changed jobs once score 4/5 on reflection and 3.87/5 on construction. Not really surprising either, since in research paper 1, internal mobility was found to have a beneficial effect on career sustainability.

In short, motivating employees to reflect on their careers, and turn those reflections and ideas into practice, does wonders for internal mobility.

Table 14: PROACTIVE CAREER BEHAVIOUR AND INTERNAL MOBILITY

	Average	Never	Once	Twice or more
Proactive career reflection	**3,75**	**3,68**	**4,00**	**4,04**
Proactive career construction	**3,61**	**3,55**	**3,87**	**3,90**

And what about external mobility? There, we only see an effect with proactive career reflection. (Table 15) Meaning: those who reflect more on motivations and skills also changed employers more often over the past five years.

For those who network more actively and highlight themselves as a professional force, the effect is not visible.

Table 15: PROACTIVE CAREER BEHAVIOUR AND EXTERNAL MOBILITY

	Average	Never	Once	Twice
Proactive career reflection	**3,75**	**3,69**	**3,91**	**3,95**
Proactive career construction	**3,61**	**3,57**	**3,73**	**3,76**

A QUICK RECAP

Cycling through your career as a happy, healthy and productive individual is what you do thanks to an optimal person-career-fit. And you achieve this through proactive career behavior. On the one hand, you have to actively explore and evaluate your motivations, values and goals regarding your career (career reflection); on the other hand, you have to network in a targeted way, do self-profiling and pursue specific goals (career construction).
Three results stood out here.

1. Career crafting pays off

Employees who report more proactive career behavior also experience more career success. Turning it around, employees who score lower in terms of objective and subjective success are less likely to take control. Funny, because you would expect them to put more effort into proactive behavior to improve their situation. Maybe they're not so sure how to get started.

In any case, our results point to polarization. Proactive career behavior and success reinforce each other and thus form a so-called gain cycle. But if these factors were wrong to begin with, they can also weaken each other. In this case, we speak of a loss cycle. It's an important concern for HR departments and anyone who supports careers: give less proactive and successful employees a boost, so they can turn the tide.

2. Actively building your career remains a must

Older (+46 years old) and more experienced (+10 years) workers put less effort into proactive career behavior, probably because they feel less of a need to still hammer away at their careers. And this is not without danger, as they are becoming less and less employable and mobile in the ever-fluctuating labor market. Moreover, the importance of a good fit between who you are and what you do does not diminish with age: it remains vital. To grow hierarchically, of course, but also to give meaning and balance to your career.

Hence: continue to encourage older and more experienced workers to actively build their careers.

3. Sustainable careers: not for blue-collar workers

Not only does our story become a little tedious, but it is also slightly disturbing: in terms of proactive career behavior, blue-collar workers are also lagging far behind. They score low on sustainability and mobility and do less to increase their opportunities. And then, in the long run, sustainability is just a distant dream.
So there is real work to be done, both for policymakers and for those doing career support.

2 FROM "WHAT HAPPENS TO ME NOW?" TO "IF ONLY I HAD ...": ON CAREER SHOCKS AND REGRETS

ABOUT CAREER SHOCKS

These days, people do not passively wait for a new job to fall out of the sky, or a promotion at their current employer. No, they increasingly ask themselves whether they are happy with what they do and have today, and actively lobby and network to achieve higher pay or better conditions, for example. Or to increase their job happiness. So they are actively building the sustainability of their careers.

But that does not mean that they are always in perfect control of their careers. After all, there are too many factors are beyond your control as an individual. Small coincidences can push your professional life in a different direction, but also larger disruptive events over which you have little or no control, and which make you think more deeply than usual about your career: the so-called career shocks.

One career shock is not the other

Career shocks are the combination of an external event and an internal reflection process.

And they are relative: what is a mere trifle for one employee may turn another's world completely upside down. Take the corona pandemic: for those who worked in the hospitality industry, this was an unseen situation with a huge impact. Overnight the entire industry went on lockdown, and no one knew how long it would last. In contrast, those who worked in the service sector on a fixed contract could often continue their jobs from home, with hardly a single interruption.

But the impact of such a career shock can also differ for the same worker in the short versus long term.

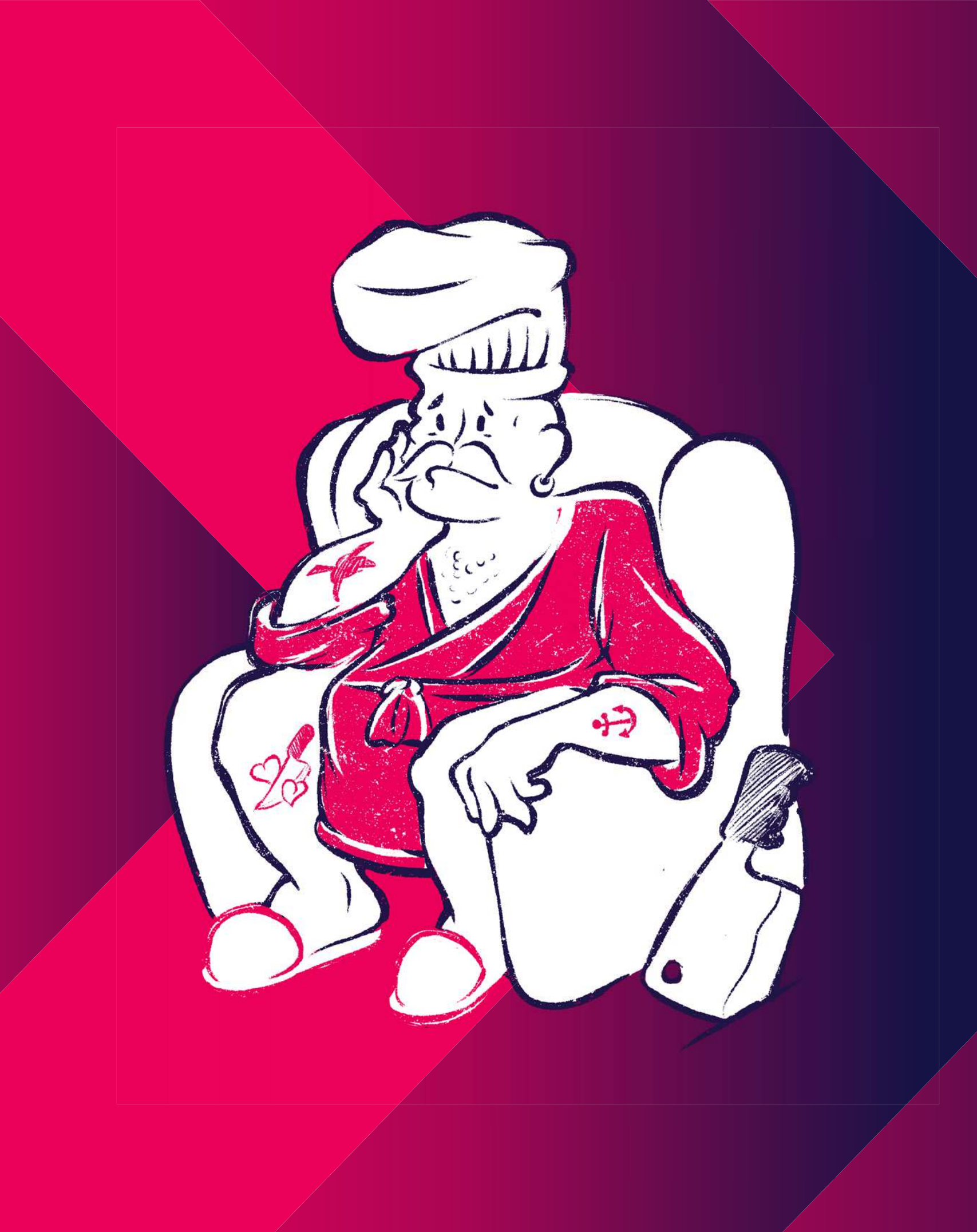
If corona was initially a gigantic shock for workers in the tourism sector, the effect is a lot less today, as people are once again hitting the road and employment is increasing. In other sectors, it may be the other way around: if initially the inconvenience for workers was limited to working from home permanently, today it may be much greater, for example, because their company still has to restructure and lay off workers due to the loss of government support.

Moreover, the impact is strongly related to the career stage you are in. Young people, for example, may carry the effects of a career shock longer.

Career shocks can have positive and negative effects. It all depends on the context. Hospitality staff sat through corona twiddling their fingers for months, but software developers and gardeners often couldn't keep up with the work. And those who worked more at home didn't waste time commuting and could spend more time with roommates or family.

Still, a seemingly positive event can also turn out negatively: those who get promoted but were not actually ready for it, along with their responsibilities, also see their workload increase, and perhaps even to the extent that burnout lurks around the corner.

How much a career shock changes your (professional) life depends, of course, on a whole range of factors. On your own competencies, for example. Or on your resilience, your belief in your own abilities, your optimism, and hope. Because those who feel they are in control of their own career will be better able to deal with shocks than those who experience them as something that merely ‘happens’ to them.



About career regret

Career shocks are disruptive and can completely turn your life upside down for a while. But sometimes employees also effectively experience career regret. And that feeling of 'I wish my path had been completely different' never even goes away. It continues to gnaw because people are unable to straighten out the lopsided situation, or just don't want to. Research shows that this chronic regret inhibits commitment at work, and also directly affects job performance and mental well-being.

In the second chapter of this research paper, we zoom in on the results of career shocks and regret.

Which shocks did people in Belgium and the Netherlands already face? What impact did they have on the sustainability of their careers? And do they perhaps also regret how that erratic path turned out for them?

THE 4 MOST IMPORTANT CAREER SHOCKS

In this study, we asked employees about these career shocks:

- a mentor or colleague leaving the organization
- a major negative development in the organization: a cutback, bankruptcy, or major ethical scandal
- a new job or a project that poses a major challenge is turned into a success
- getting a promotion, more salary, or responsibilities sooner than expected.

We assumed that people typically perceive the first two shocks as negative, and the other two as positive. Of course, they can have the opposite effect in the long run.

We explicitly asked employees about the impact of these events and how they had prompted them to reflect.

More positive than negative shocks

Research often suggests that most people experience regular career shocks that affect their careers profoundly, but our results nuance that picture. In fact, about half of our respondents have never experienced such a career shock. And of those who did, only a small minority experienced a major impact. (Figure 1)

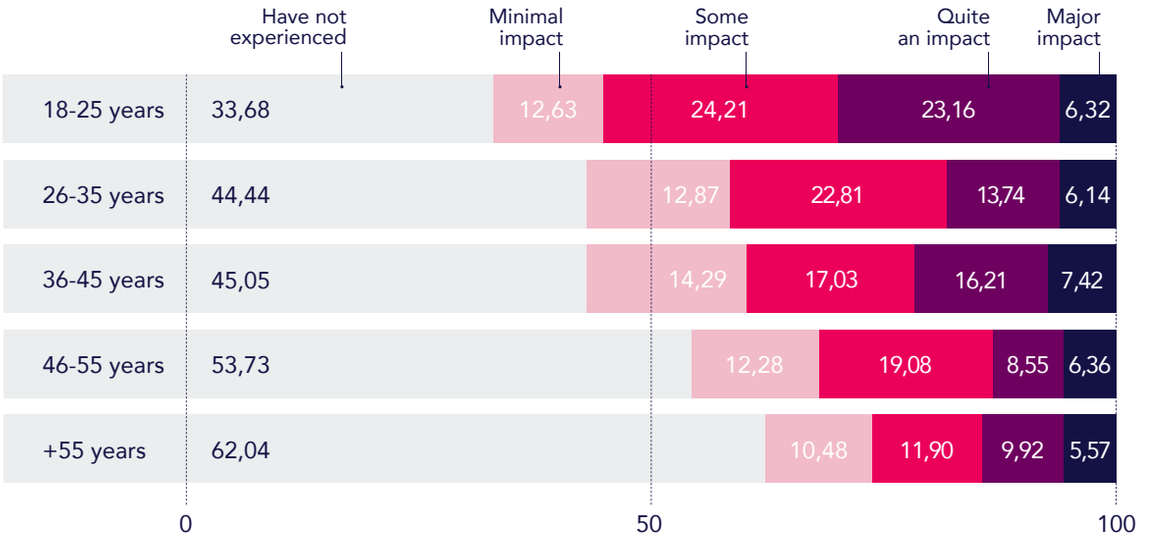
It is striking that people experienced positive shocks slightly more often (56 and 49%) than negative shocks (52 and 49%). The shock that hit hardest was that of a new job or project.

Figure 1: CAREER SHOCKS

Shocks and demographics

If we look at gender, region, experience, degree and position, there are few differences: everyone experiences career shocks more or less the same way. Only in terms of age is there a difference: younger people have more difficulty with a sudden negative development in the organization. (Figure 2)

Figure 2: SHOCK: NEGATIVE DEVELOPMENT IN THE ORGANISATION BY AGE



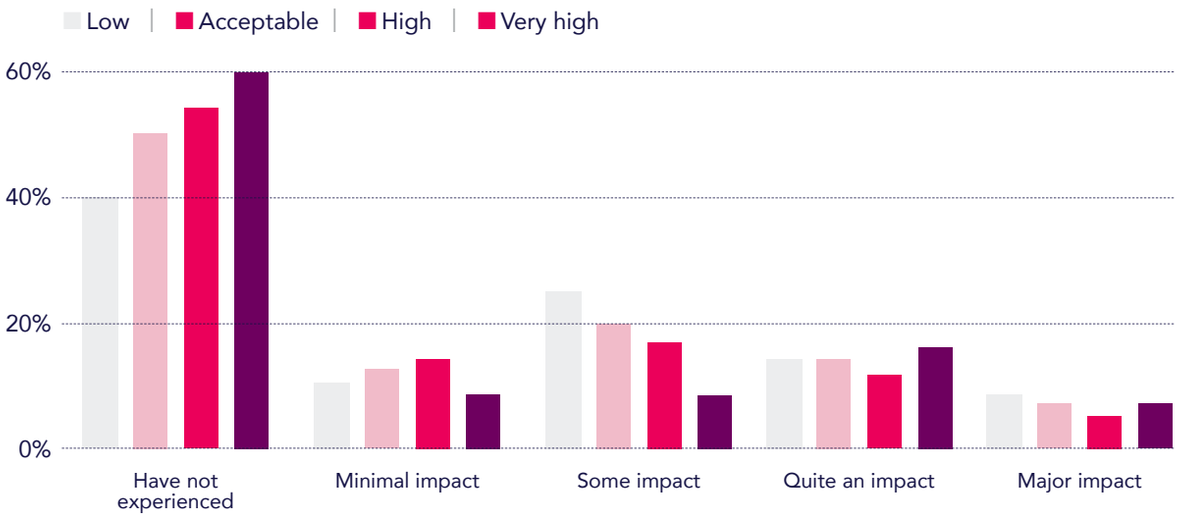
Shocks and success

Employees who experience a greater impact from shocks also tend to have more objective career success. No big surprise there: when, say, someone's colleague or mentor leaves, it opens doors for (hierarchical) growth. And an unexpected growth in salary or responsibilities often comes in the form of a promotion, which is an indicator of objective career success.

The effects of career shocks can be complex, but when it comes to career success, the conclusion is childishly simple: more positive shocks have a positive impact on objective success, and negative ones have a negative impact.

Those who, say, fall into bankruptcy or see their favorite inspiring team lead leave, tend to be less satisfied with their career. (Figure 6)

Figure 6: SHOCK: NEGATIVE SHIFTS IN THE ORGANISATION AND SUBJECTIVE SUCCESS



For those who unexpectedly get a promotion or get a difficult project on track, their satisfaction increases dramatically. (Figures 7 and 8)

Figure 7: SHOCK: THE SUCCESSFUL COMPLETION OF A NEW JOB/PROJECT AND SUBJECTIVE SUCCESS

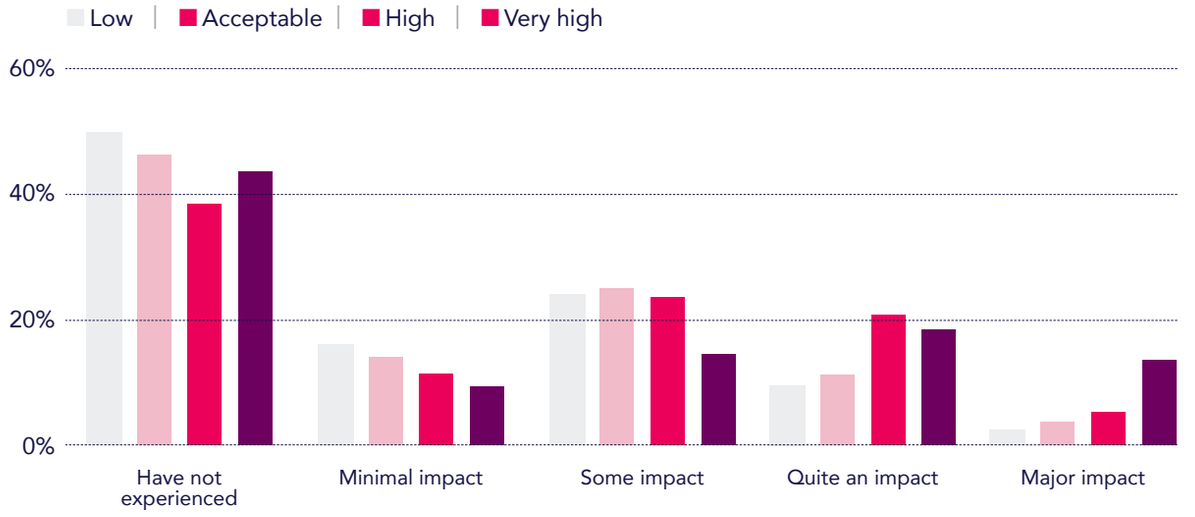
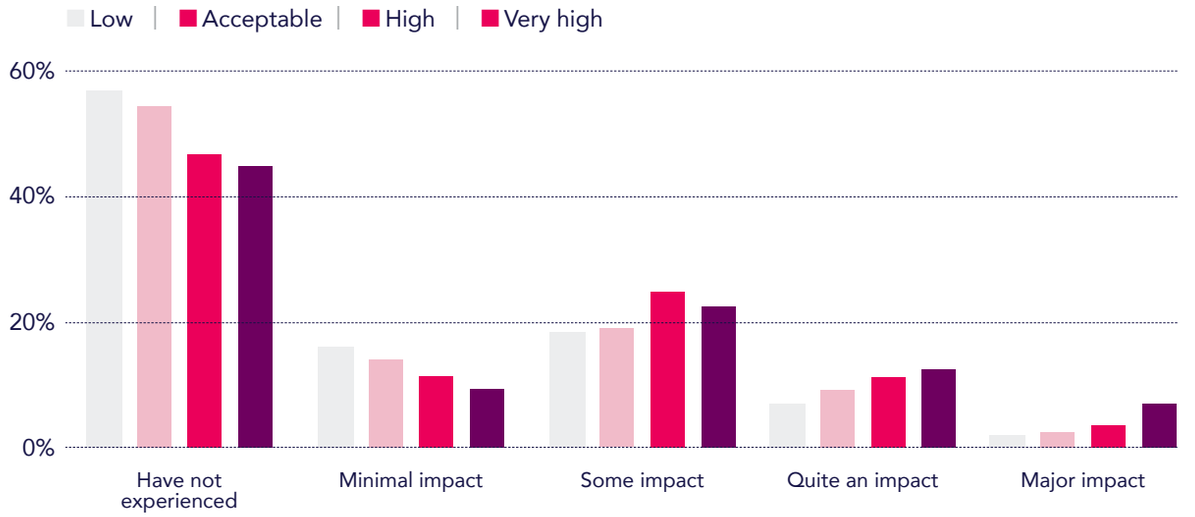


Figure 8: SHOCK: AN UNEXPECTED INCREASE IN SALARY, RESPONSIBILITIES OR PROMOTION AND SUBJECTIVE SUCCESS



Shocks and sustainable careers

What impact do various shocks have on the sustainability of careers? To what extent do they affect job happiness, mental health, and internal and external employability (productivity) of workers?

No big surprises here: workers who experience the so-called positive shocks report being happier with their jobs (table 16); workers who see a colleague or mentor leave or experience a negative development in their company score lower in terms of mental health. (Table 17)

Yet there is one striking detail: workers who experienced an unexpected growth in salary or responsibility or were promoted, score lower on mental health. It is possible that this sudden increase in responsibilities caused them more stress, which in turn negatively impacted their career sustainability. If we wrote earlier that the impact of a shock is not always unequivocal, this is a textbook example.

Table 16: CAREER SHOCKS AND WORK HAPPINESS

	Have not experienced	Minimal impact	Some impact	Quite an impact	Major impact
Successful execution of a new job/project	**3,41**	**3,39**	**3,45**	**3,75**	**4,10**
Unexpected increase in salary, responsibilities or promotion	**3,41**	**3,42**	**3,56**	**3,74**	**4,08**

Table 17: CAREER SHOCKS AND MENTAL HEALTH

	Have not experienced	Minimal impact	Some impact	Quite an impact	Major impact
Colleague/mentor who left	**3,35**	**3,38**	**3,14**	**2,82**	**2,68**
Negative development in the organisation	**3,57**	**3,32**	**3,07**	**2,93**	**2,67**
Unexpected increase in salary, responsibilities or promotion	**3,43**	**3,37**	**3,26**	**2,93**	**2,72**

And what about employability? Previous scientific research showed that career shocks can give her a hefty boost, and indeed that is no different here. For our workers, shocks had a positive impact on both internal and external employability. (Tables 18 and 19) Even leaving colleagues or mentors made them feel more employable in the future. Possibly they saw their chances for another position in their own organization increase, or they suddenly became more acutely aware of their own competencies - say: they suddenly realized 'hey, I can do this too!'

Table 18: CAREER SHOCKS AND INTERNAL EMPLOYABILITY

	Have not experienced	Minimal impact	Some impact	Quite an impact	Major impact
Colleague/mentor who left	**2,90**	**3,07**	**3,23**	**3,31**	**3,12**
Negative development in the organisation	**2,83**	**2,96**	**3,20**	**3,40**	**3,59**
Unexpected increase in salary, responsibilities or promotion	**2,84**	**3,10**	**3,28**	**3,38**	**3,80**

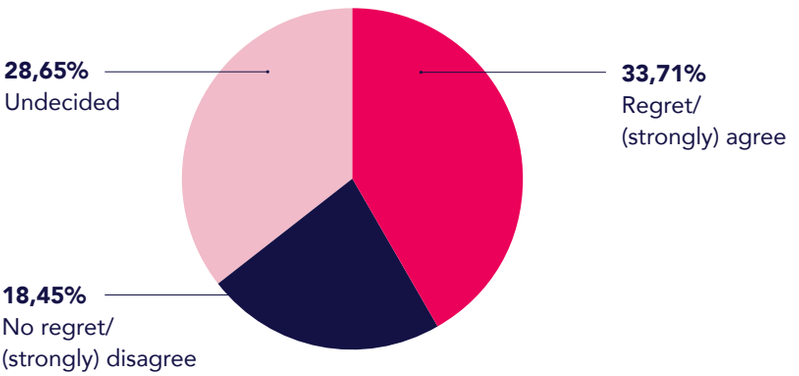
Table 19: CAREER SHOCKS AND EXTERNAL EMPLOYABILITY

	Have not experienced	Minimal impact	Some impact	Quite an impact	Major impact
Colleague/mentor who left	**3,26**	**3,33**	**3,42**	**3,47**	**3,55**
Negative development in the organisation	**3,20**	**3,22**	**3,46**	**3,54**	**3,86**
Unexpected increase in salary, responsibilities or promotion	**3,22**	**3,32**	**3,49**	**3,52**	**3,95**

FROM 'IF ONLY I HAD …' TO 'HAPPY WITH MY CHOICE': ABOUT CAREER REGRET

Employees can actively work on their careers, and no one will stop them from trying their luck with another employer. Still, one in three experience some form of regret when looking back. Then again, 37% have no regrets at all, and 28% do not know. (Figure 9)

Figure 9: CAREER REGRET AND FUNCTION



In this survey, we asked employees whether they:

- wish they had chosen a different profession when they started their careers
- feel that they had made a mistake in choosing this particular career
- think they would be more satisfied if they had chosen a different career
- definitely chose the right career.

If we classify the figures according to demographic differences, it is noticeable that ...

- executive white-collar and middle-management workers experience less career regret than blue-collar workers (table 20)
- workers aged 46 and over and with more experience feel significantly less career regret than their younger colleagues. (Tables 21 and 22) Did the older ones perhaps resign themselves to how their professional lives turned out? Or were young people's expectations at the start of their careers so unrealistically high that they soon got a rude awakening? Either way: a slightly surprising result, since career regret is usually seen as something people experience only at the end of their working lives.

Table 20: CAREER REGRET AND FUNCTION

	Blue-collar worker	Administrative clerk	Middle mgmt	Board/senior management
Career regret	**2,91**	**2,76**	**2,75**	**2,84**

Table 21: CAREER REGRET AND AGE

	18-25 years	26-35 years	36-45 years	46-55 years	+55 years
Career regret	**3,05**	**2,93**	**2,86**	**2,77**	**2,61**

Table 22: CAREER REGRET AND WORK EXPERIENCE

	Entry level (0-2y)	Early career (3-10y)	Mid-career (11-25y)	Senior career (26-35y)	Late career (+35y)
Career regret	**2,99**	**2,93**	**2,86**	**2,76**	**2,61**

As for subjective career success, the conclusion is obvious.

Those who are generally satisfied with their careers, experience fewer regrets about the decisions made. (Table 23) Similarly, those with a good balance between job happiness, health and employability experience fewer regrets. (Table 24)

Table 23: CAREER REGRET AND CAREER SATISFACTON

Subjective success	Low	Acceptable	High	Very high
Career regret	**2,91**	**2,76**	**2,75**	**2,84**

Table 24: CAREER REGRET AND SUSTAINABLE CAREER BALANCE

Sustainable balance	Imbalance or limited balance	Somewhat balanced	Balanced
Career regret	**3,06**	**2,89**	**2,68**

Finally, it is notable that those who did not experience any shocks in their career have fewer regrets. (Table 25) For those who did, the greater the impact of the shock, the more career regret - even if the shocks were positive, such as getting a new job or position, an unexpected promotion, or more pay or responsibility.

The impact on career regret is greatest among employees who experience a negative development in their organization. The proof: those who report that some drastic downsizing, bankruptcy or major scandal had 'quite an impact' or 'great impact' give a score of 3.06 and 3.11, respectively, to the regret factor - the highest marks in the entire table.

Predictability appears to be the closing factor. After all, as long as your career progresses somewhat predictably, without drastic shocks, there is little to regret. If more unexpected events come your way, your career path is more erratic and has more possible scenarios: regret, therefore, easily lurks around the corner.

Table 25: CAREER REGRET AND CAREER SHOCKS

	Have not experienced	Minimal impact	Some impact	Quite an impact	Major impact
Colleague/mentor who left	**2,68**	**2,79**	**2,96**	**3,02**	**2,91**
Negative development in the organisation	**2,64**	**2,79**	**2,99**	**3,06**	**3,11**
Successful execution of a new job/project	**2,74**	**2,80**	**2,90**	**2,87**	**2,83**
Unexpected increase in salary, responsibilities or promotion	**2,74**	**2,81**	**2,84**	**3,01**	**2,98**

A QUICK RECAP:

About shocks and regrets, four things stand out.

1. One in two never experiences a career shock

Scientific research has shown that almost everyone experiences disruptive events that affect their careers at some point, but our results say otherwise: one in two employees never experienced a shock, or they were unaware of it.

There are two possible explanations for this anomalous trend:

- The corona pandemic was so profound that it pushed the other shocks into the background.
- In this study, we focused exclusively on work-related events. That said, other events in a person's life, such as losing a family member, or an illness, can also affect a career profoundly.

Nevertheless, it should be remembered that the shocks experienced by employees in this study were slightly more often positive than negative.

2. Shock effects are unpredictable

Those who receive an unexpected promotion experience more (objective and subjective) career success and job happiness: no big surprise. But that same shock also causes a dip in mental health. So the effects of career shocks are hard to predict. And that's why it's important to do more in-depth research on this, so we can better educate people on how to guard against it.

3. Shocks increase employability

Workers who experience positive shocks consider themselves more employable, both internally and externally. But so do people who saw a colleague or mentor leave. Perhaps they saw new opportunities in their organization, or they suddenly realized that they had competencies with which they could easily work elsewhere.

4. One in three regrets past choices

A third of all employees regret that they ever chose their specific profession, or that their career went the way it did. Furthermore, all those who describe their careers as ‘sustainable’ have significantly fewer regrets. The same goes for those who never saw a real career shock pass by. A career that predictably goes in one direction will never branch off into alternative routes that in turn can give rise to regrets.

CONCLUSION: HOW DO WE ENSURE MORE PROACTIVITY AND FEWER REGRETS?

What do workers do to get their careers on the right track? And what shocks do they face on that erratic path? What decisions would they rather have made differently? We have processed these answers in this final part of our research paper series 'On job satisfaction and success: how Dutch and Belgian employees write new career chapters'. And we give three final recommendations.

#1: Encourage proactive career behavior and dealing with shocks

Employees who take control and exhibit proactive career behavior score higher in terms of job satisfaction, health, and productivity. If the balance is right, they have fewer regrets about their career decisions. And they cope better with career shocks.

So policymakers and employers have everything to gain by encouraging employees to proactively manage their own careers and teaching them how to deal with shocks. The more sustainable our careers, the better for the entire workforce.

#2: Put extra focus on blue-collar workers

Blue-collar workers not only have less sustainable careers (see research paper 1) and lower levels of objective and subjective career success (research paper 2), they also exhibit less proactive career behavior. And that makes them especially vulnerable. So teach them how to actively engage in their own careers.

#3: Give (everyone) comprehensive career advice

Older (46 years and older) and more experienced (+10 years) employees have fewer regrets about their careers so far, but they invest less in proactive career behavior. As a result, there is a danger that they will get stuck in their current jobs, with all the consequences this entails for their employability and career success. So it doesn't hurt to emphasize that they should continue to actively work on their careers.

Of course, the same goes for young people. Funnily enough, they also often show regrets about their careers, possibly because their expectations were very high, or because they have an unrealistic view of the job market in general. So for them, provide comprehensive career advice, and more time to explore the many options before they actually have to make hard choices. All of this will contribute to a more realistic job outlook, and probably to less career regret.

We further recommend that young people be well-informed about the broader importance of a sustainable career. After all, it is not just about performance, but also about being happy and healthy.

At the end of 2021, Antwerp Management School, House of HR and the VU University Amsterdam conducted a large-scale survey among employees in Belgium and the Netherlands. Via an online panel we surveyed a representative sample of 1,610 employees about sustainable careers, career mobility, success, goals, proactive career behavior and shocks.

"I CAN'T CHANGE THE DIRECTION OF THE WIND, BUT I CAN ADJUST MY SAILS TO ALWAYS REACH MY DESTINATION."

- Jimmy Dean

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