

Careers in perspective

Setting the scene – Sustainable careers and
career mobility in Belgium and the Netherlands
White paper 1

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**“The career is dead,
long live the career!”**

– D.T. Hall

Preface

Looking back on previous centuries, careers have undergone some major shifts. In the 19th century, most people worked in agriculture, and instead of 'jobs', people did chores. Later, urbanisation and rapid technological change created assembly-line jobs in factories. People flocked to the cities in search of a job. The economic boom after WWII created the middle class, suburbs and bureaucracy. Companies were born and the industrial assembly line moved up the corporate ladder. The word 'career' came into the picture. For most, it used to mean a lifelong relationship with a company. You give 30 years, the company takes care of you and gives you a pension.

In other words, we used to look at a career as something linear, quite predictable too. If you ask people to draw a picture of a career, they often draw a ladder. Why? It is explicitly linear and only goes up. A ladder is also predictable, with fixed steps you take to reach a clear goal.

Today, we look at careers differently. For more and more people they are no longer linear and predictable. They have become more complex and dynamic as a result of evolutions in society and the job market. The idea of lifetime employment with a singular employer is increasingly replaced by lifetime employability, often characterised by multiple transitions between jobs and employers. The loss of this predictable career makes it difficult to plan for the future, but also provides opportunities to change direction. Instead of a rigid corporate ladder, we now speak more often of a career path, which is created by not just moving upwards, but in all directions. It is a new necessity for people to take on more responsibility and become more flexible in preparing for career changes and adapting to them. For organisations and anyone working in the field of recruitment, this also presents the necessary challenges. Now, a successful career often does not depend on one big decision in your twenties, but on continuous learning and trying new things. The bottom line¹: today, people figure out their own story, rather than following a set script.

With this white paper series, we want to unravel careers in Belgium and the Netherlands and give expression to the different career stories of employees. No two people have exactly the same career experiences, which is why putting careers into perspective is so important. Gaining insight into the various existing career paths and possibilities is the basis for giving targeted advice to anyone who is looking for a job, who wants to further shape their career story or does not yet know what they want in a career.

This white paper (White Paper 1) sets out the framework in which we can understand careers today, namely within a context of sustainable careers. This is about dynamically managing changes within a career, with attention to growth, workability and employability in both the short and long term.

1. De Vos, A., Akkermans, J., & Van Der Heijden, B. I. J. M. (2019). From occupational choice to career crafting. The Routledge companion to career studies, 128-142.

About this study

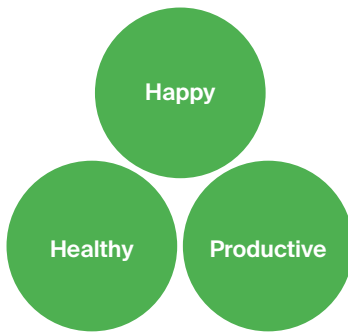
The findings in this report are part of a large-scale survey of employees in Belgium and the Netherlands, set up by Antwerp Management School, House of HR & Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. Respondents were sampled based on region, age, gender, degree and job and approached through an online panel. More information on the different sample characteristics and the distribution of the sample can be found at the end of this report. In addition to the demographic and contextual variables, the questionnaire included the following topics: sustainable careers, career mobility, career success, career goals, proactive career behaviour (career crafting) and career shocks.

1. Sustainable careers



Sustainable careers are defined as a sequence of career experiences – jobs, but also other relevant experiences – over a period of time, crossing different social spaces. This sequence is characterised by individual agency, which makes the career meaningful for the individual. So it is about the actions of individuals, but always in a context². Individual ownership and self-management are important here. After all, you are responsible for your own career and cannot expect someone else shape your career. Apart from the individual, time also has an impact on the sustainability of a career. How committed someone is at a given moment, says little about what that motivation will look like at a later point in their career. And: no career is fully planned. It is partly brought about by unexpected events over which individuals have no control. The third factor that determines the sustainability of a career is their context. There are many contextual factors that can have an impact on the sustainability of a person's career (think of the organisation, the sector, the culture, the private circumstances): they are not snapshots, but factors that continue to have an impact and play a role over time. Ultimately, a sustainable career is about the interplay between these three elements: what the individual does, how they relate to the context and how that situation develops over time.

2. De Vos, A., Van der Heijden, B. I., & Akkermans, J. (2020). Sustainable careers: Towards a conceptual model. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 117, 103196.



Furthermore, a sustainable career is characterised by three central elements: being happy, healthy and productive³. The most important aspect is the interaction between these elements. Because you have to be productive to keep your job, you have to be healthy to keep doing the work and you have to be happy to want to keep doing it. All three (happy, productivity and healthy) do not always have to be at their peak, but together they form some crucial indicators of sustainability. On the other hand, it remains a dynamic process, a constantly changing balance of the three elements. Small events – for example, the train to work is delayed by an hour – but also bigger evolutions, such as robotisation, can have an impact on the sustainability of a career in the short or the long term. In the end, it is always about finding a ‘person-career fit’: over time people try to create an environment that suits them and adapt to the changes that take place.

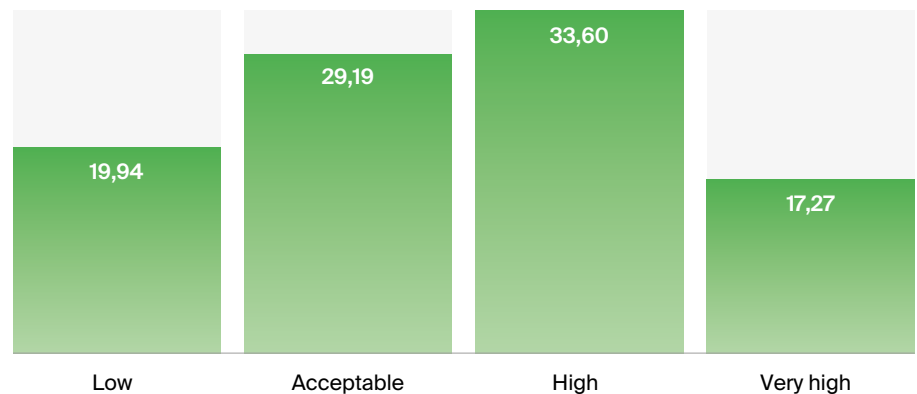
In this section, we discuss the survey results related to the theme of sustainable careers. How sustainable are careers in today’s Belgium and the Netherlands? Do people consider themselves employable in a different job? Can employees find a balance between being happy, healthy and productive? And how important do they find these elements?

Career satisfaction

Before looking at sustainable careers in detail, we will first look at the general career satisfaction of the respondents. This is an important theme in career research, as subjective feelings of satisfaction are linked to different facets of work behaviour, productivity and well-being⁴. Respondents were asked how satisfied they are with their careers so far (Figure 1). On average, they gave their satisfaction a score of 7.37 (out of 10). About 50% of the respondents indicated that they were satisfied or even very satisfied with their careers. On the other hand, just under 30% find their career so far only ‘acceptable’, and about 20% are not satisfied.

Figure 1: **GENERAL CAREER SATISFACTION**⁵

(in %)



The career satisfaction differs remarkably between respondents depending on their work experience, age, position and region.

As the age of an employee increases, so does the level of career satisfaction (Figure 2). 28% of 18-25 year olds experience low career satisfaction, and this then drops to 20% of 36-45 year olds and 13% of 55+ year olds. The same applies when we take a closer look at the years of work experience. The more work experience, the more satisfied the respondents are with their careers. During the first two years

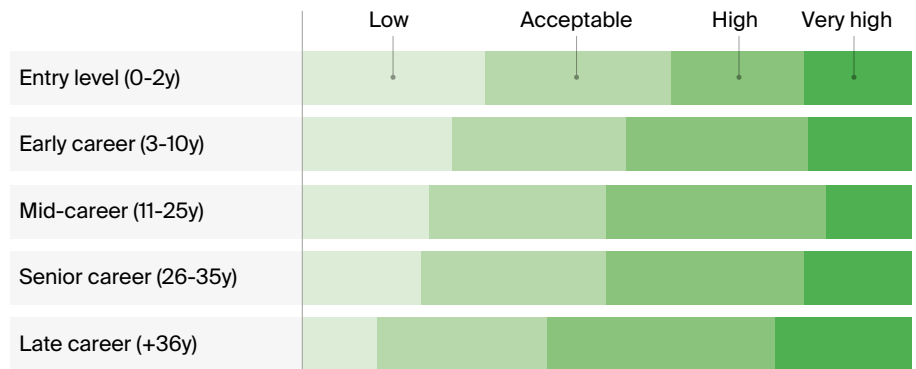
3. De Vos, A., Van der Heijden, B. I., & Akkermans, J. (2020). Sustainable careers: Towards a conceptual model. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 117, 103196.

4. Spurk, D., Hirschi, A., & Dries, N. (2019). Antecedents and outcomes of objective versus subjective career success: Competing perspectives and future directions. *Journal of Management*, 45(1), 35-69.

5. Laag (score 1-6); acceptabel (score 7); hoog (score 8); zeer hoog (score 9)

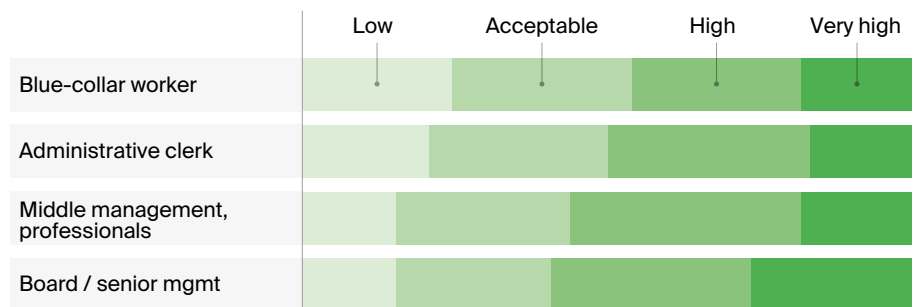
(entry level), just under 40% of the respondents indicate a high to very high degree of career satisfaction⁶. This figure rises further to about 60% of the respondents at the end of their career (late career). Overall, the trend is therefore positive and there seems to be an increase in career satisfaction as the working years progress. However, this result is surprising since previous research could not establish this positive relationship between age and career satisfaction. Has the ‘new generation’ become more demanding? Are young people perhaps even less satisfied because of the corona pandemic? In any case, this is an interesting topic to explore in further research.

Figure 2: CAREER SATISFACTION BY WORK EXPERIENCE



The position also appears to be important (Figure 3). In terms of career satisfaction, there is a clear division between the executive positions (blue collar and administrative clerks) and managerial positions such as middle management, professionals and board members. Around 22.5% of blue collar and administrative workers indicate a low level of satisfaction with their current career. For managerial positions this is only 15.3%. Of the latter categories, an average of 58% indicates a high or very high degree of satisfaction with their careers, as opposed to an average of 48% of blue-collar and administrative workers. The difference can possibly be explained by the fact that practically trained people often have fewer career opportunities and organisations invest less in their career development⁷. They are generally not referred to as ‘high potentials’. This stresses the importance of an inclusive career policy.

Figure 3: CAREER SATISFACTION BY POSITION



6. Ng, T. W., Eby, L. T., Sorensen, K. L., & Feldman, D. C. (2005). Predictors of objective and subjective career success: A meta-analysis. *Personnel Psychology*, 58(2), 367-408.

7. Hennequin, E. (2007). What “career success” means to blue-collar workers. *Career Development International*, 12(6), 565-581.

Some regional differences also stand out (Table 1). On average, career satisfaction is slightly higher in the Netherlands than in Belgium. We also notice that the share of respondents with low career satisfaction is significantly higher in Wallonia (26.18%) than in Flanders (18.91%) and the Netherlands (17.52%).

Table 1: CAREER SATISFACTION BY REGION

Career satisfaction (in %)

	Flanders	Wallonia	Belgium	Netherlands
Low	18,91	26,18	22,55	17,52
Acceptable	32,39	26,96	29,67	28,57
High to very high	48,70	48,86	47,78	53,92

A balanced career

Although career satisfaction can be a relevant indicator of career sustainability, it is necessary to look beyond satisfaction alone. For a sustainable career, it is essential that people find a certain balance between their happiness, health and productivity. Therefore, we will now zoom in on that balance in Belgium and the Netherlands.

Slightly more than half of the respondents (55.4%) said that their career was in balance during the past year. For 27.76% of the respondents, the career was somewhat balanced, while 16.83% of the respondents experienced no balance at all.

Respondents also attach importance to this balance in their careers in the future. Interestingly, work happiness and mental health are considered more important than productivity. For example, 55.6% of respondents consider mental health to be very important. 45.8% feel the same about happiness at work, compared to 24.8% of respondents who feel productivity is very important for the future. These findings are in line with scientific research that shows how subjective elements of career success are becoming increasingly important to people throughout their careers⁸.

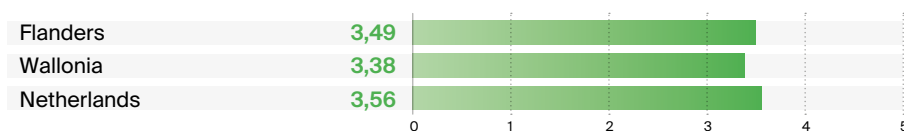
The happy employee

The respondents give their happiness at work an average score of 70%, which is quite a mark. There are no significant differences for this variable in terms of gender, age, work experience or degree, but there are differences in terms of region and function.

For instance, the average job satisfaction of the Dutch respondents differs significantly from that of the Walloon respondents (Table 2). Dutch employees report a remarkably higher degree of job satisfaction than Walloon employees. Their difference with Flanders was less significant. In addition, the position of the employee also has an influence (Table 3). Both blue-collar and administrative workers score significantly lower in terms of job satisfaction than professionals, middle management, management and higher management.

Table 2: JOB HAPPINESS BY REGION

Average job happiness score⁹ (out of 5)

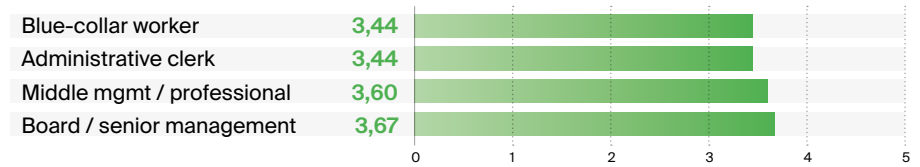


8. Akkermans, J., & Kubasch, S. (2017). # Trending topics in careers: a review and future research agenda. *Career Development International*, 22(6), 586-627.

9. $p = 0.002$; $F = 6.541$; $\eta^2 = 0.010$ / Average job happiness = 3.5

Table 3: WORK HAPPINESS BY FUNCTION

Average job happiness score¹⁰ (out of 5)



The healthy employee

As with job happiness, the position and region also have an influence on the mental health of the respondents. Following the findings on job happiness, Walloon employees score significantly lower on mental health than Flemish and Dutch employees (Table 4).

When we look at the influence of the position, it is striking that blue collar workers score significantly lower on mental health compared to the other job categories (Table 5).

Table 4: HEALTH BY REGION

Average health score¹¹ (out of 5)

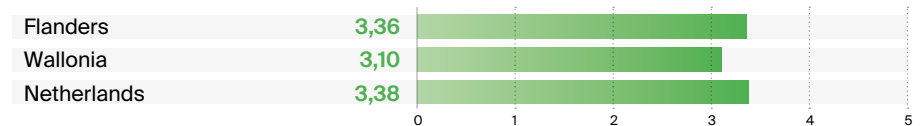
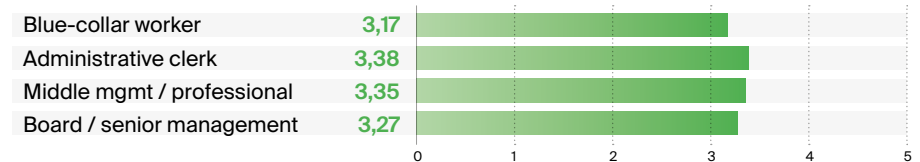


Table 5: HEALTH BY POSITION

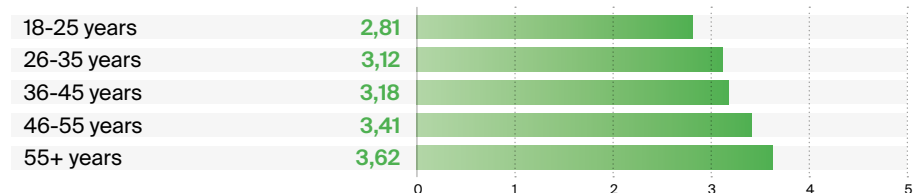
Average health score¹² (out of 5)



We also see differences as the career advances. The mental health of the employees in this study increases significantly with age and the years of work experience (Table 6 & 7). The fact that the mental health of young employees and starters is significantly lower is consistent with other research. For example, the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) concluded in their survey that young employees are most often mentally tired because of their work¹³.

Table 6: HEALTH BY AGE CATEGORY

Average health score¹⁴ (out of 5)



10. $p=0.001$; $F=5.961$; $Eta=0.010$ / Average job happiness = 3.5

11. $p=0.000$; $F=11.462$; $Eta=0.010$ / Average health = 3.31

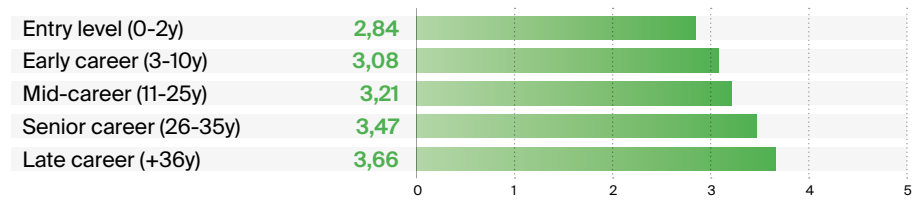
12. $p=0.003$; $F=4.564$; $Eta=0.010$ / Average health = 3.31

13. <https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/nieuws/2018/46/meer-psychische-vermoeidheid-ervaren-door-werk>

14. $p=0.000$; $F=21.936$; $Eta=0.050$ / Average health = 3.31

Table 7: HEALTH BY WORK EXPERIENCE

Average health score¹⁵ (out of 5)



The employable employee

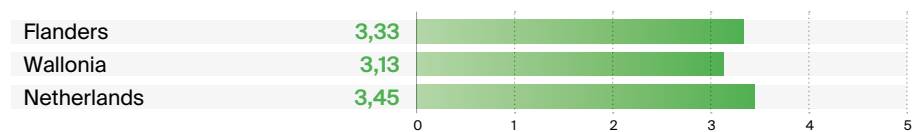
Within the concept of sustainable careers, employability of employees is a crucial theme. As careers are no longer so linear and predictable, the idea of lifetime employment with one employer is increasingly being replaced by lifetime employability, characterized by multiple transitions between jobs and employers. This is partly supported by recent research showing that 97% of employees and managers expect even more changes in the way of working in the next five years. 42% even expect a strong to complete change¹⁶. This means that employees must remain employable in the short and long term.

In this study the perceived internal and external employability was questioned. Perceived external employability is the employee's estimated chance of finding another job with another employer. Perceived internal employability is the employee's estimated chance of finding another job with the current employer¹⁷.

For external employability, there is a significant difference between Wallonia on the one hand and Flanders and the Netherlands on the other (Table 8). Walloon respondents consider themselves less employable in another organization than respondents from Flanders or the Netherlands.

Table 8: EXTERNAL EMPLOYABILITY BY REGION

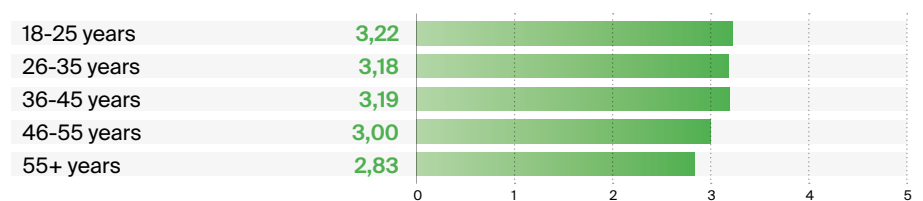
Average external employability score¹⁸ (out of 5)



Most striking, however, are the differences in terms of age, education and position for both external and internal employability. For example, internal and external employability decrease with age. Many previous studies also confirm this strong negative relationship between age and perceived employability¹⁹. In this study, a significant negative correlation was found from the age of 45 (Table 9 & 10) for both internal and external employability.

Table 9: INTERNAL EMPLOYABILITY BY AGE CATEGORY

Average internal employability score²⁰ (out of 5)



15. $p=0.000$; $F=22.443$; $Eta=0.050$ / Average health = 3.31

16. Research (February 2020) of Antwerp Management School, SD Worx, De Tijd/L'Echo & BPact/Indiville. More info: Desmet, S., & De Vos, A. (2020). De impact van (technologische) veranderingen op werk, competenties en inzetbaarheid. OverWerk. Magazine of Steunpunt Werk, 30(2), 69-75. Steunpunt Werk / Publishing house Acco.

17. Fugate, M., Van der Heijden, B., De Vos, A., Forrier, A., & De Cuyper, N. (2021). Is what's past prologue? A review and agenda for contemporary employability research. *Academy of Management Annals*, 15(1), 266-298.

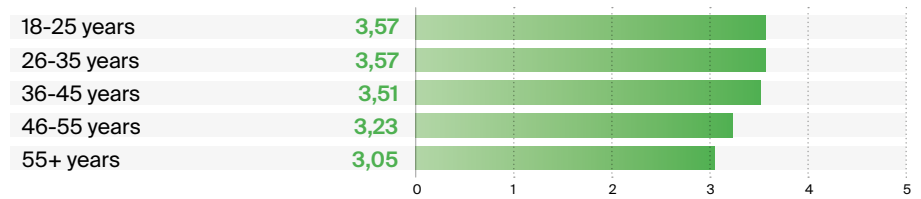
18. $p=0.000$; $F=14.949$; $Eta=0.020$ / Average external employability = 3.34

19. De Lange, A. H., Van der Heijden, B., Van Vuuren, T., Furunes, T., De Lange, C., & Dijkers, J. (2021). Employable as we age? A systematic review of relationships between age conceptualizations and employability. *Frontiers in psychology*, 11, 3969.

20. $p=0.000$; $F=9.354$; $Eta=0.020$ / Average internal employability= 3.06

Table 10: EXTERNAL EMPLOYABILITY BY AGE CATEGORY

Average external employability score²¹ (out of 5)



Between the different courses, it is striking that higher studies lead to higher perceived internal and external employability. The internal employability rises significantly as soon as one obtains a Master's degree or PhD compared to a diploma of secondary education (Table 11). The perception of external employability increases from the first distinction: respondents with a diploma of secondary education feel more employable externally than respondents with at most a diploma of primary education, etc. (Table 12). Only between respondents with a bachelor's or master's degree is there hardly any difference.

Table 11: INTERNAL EMPLOYABILITY BY EDUCATION

Average internal employability score²² (out of 5)

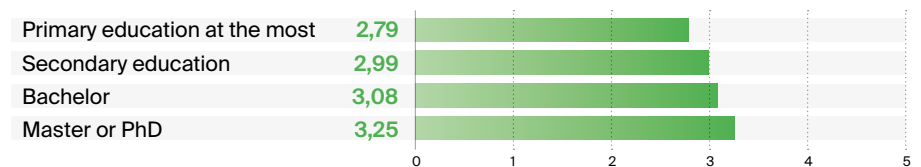
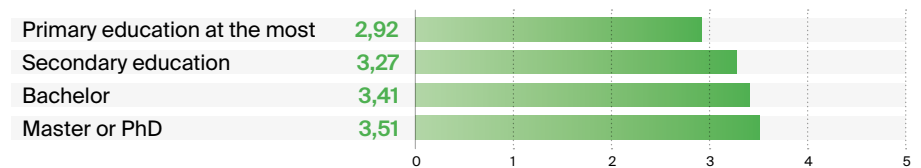


Table 12: EXTERNAL EMPLOYABILITY BY EDUCATION

Average external employability score²³ (out of 5)



These findings are closely related to the results according to position. The higher one is on the job ladder, the more they consider themselves to be internally and externally employable. There is a significant difference between blue-collar and administrative workers on the one hand, and professionals and managerial positions on the other (Table 13 & 14).

Table 13: INTERNAL EMPLOYABILITY BY POSITION

Average internal employability score²⁴ (out of 5)

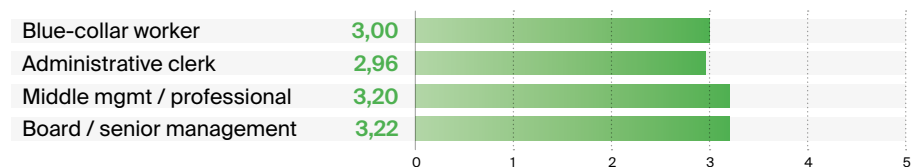


Table 14: EXTERNAL EMPLOYABILITY BY POSITION

Average external employability score²⁵ (out of 5)



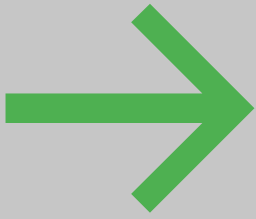
21. $p=0.000$; $F=18.245$; $Eta=0.050$ / Average external employability = 3.34

22. $p=0.001$; $F=6.117$; $Eta=0.010$ / Average internal employability = 3.06

23. $p=0.000$; $F=8.790$; $Eta=0.020$ / Average external employability = 3.34

24. $p=0.000$; $F=7.260$; $Eta=0.010$ / Average internal employability = 3.06

25. $p=0.000$; $F=16.783$; $Eta=0.030$ / Average external employability = 3.34



Wrap-up: Sustainable careers in Belgium and the Netherlands

The findings on sustainable careers yield both expected and surprising results. In line with previous research, our results show that especially the practically trained score somewhat lower on the sustainability of their careers across the board. For instance, they rate their own employability and satisfaction lower and they also score lower on happiness and health. This once again confirms the importance of an inclusive career policy that offers opportunities to every employee. In this way, we can counteract the (growing) inequality on the labour market. Moreover, employers can distinguish themselves by also offering opportunities to practically trained professionals, for instance through their employer branding.

The role of age and the career stage is less obvious. As in previous research, we find that perceptions of internal and external employability decrease with age. This effect mainly occurs from the age of 45 onwards. At the same time, our results show that happiness, health and career satisfaction actually increase with age: the older people are, the more positive these sustainability indicators get. Mental health is especially low among the youngest employees. This may have something to do with the corona crisis, although mental well-being among young professionals has been a point of concern for a while now, especially in the Netherlands. A sustainable career policy requires customisation, whereby a focus on health and happiness is of great importance for younger employees, while employability can be a focus for older employees. This effect can be used, for example, in recruitment, but also for the internal advancement of employees.

It is striking that Wallonia scores significantly lower on sustainability indicators than Flanders and the Netherlands, while these last two hardly differ at all. A deeper look is needed here to find out where these differences come from.

Finally, it is remarkable that employees in Belgium and the Netherlands generally consider their happiness and health more important than their productivity. As a balance is crucial here, our findings suggest that for a recruitment and talent development policy, it is therefore essential to highlight and identify these issues. This is in line with scientific research that shows that perceived fit with an employer is the strongest predictor of attraction to that employer²⁶ and that symbolic values are crucial in employer branding activities²⁷.

26. Uggerslev, K. L., Fassina, N. E., & Kraichy, D. (2012). Recruiting through the stages: A meta-analytic test of predictors of applicant attraction at different stages of the recruiting process. *Personnel psychology*, 65(3), 597-660.

27. Lievens, F., & Slaughter, J. E. (2016). Employer image and employer branding: What we know and what we need to know. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, 3, 407-440.

2. Career mobility



A career basically means ‘movement’. Especially according to the concept of ‘sustainable careers’, career mobility is essential²⁸: it stimulates, among other things, employability and career security of workers and forms a lever for a dynamic labour market. It is important to introduce this dynamism into careers, because career mobility and employability are closely linked²⁹. By gaining experience, employees develop new skills and gain insight into what they like doing, what gives them energy and how they would like to grow. And this in turn promotes future employability. Those who do the same thing day in, day out, miss out on opportunities to be stimulated and risk ending up in a job that, in time, may no longer fit with what they enjoy doing or are good at³⁰.

The unpredictable and rapidly changing context makes a flexible labour market more important today than ever. The corona crisis, for example, showed that flexibility was needed to keep employees employed and organisations running³¹. Changes that had been underway for some time, such as digitalisation, also accelerated. Dealing with change and flexibility were already on top of the list of competences for the future before the pandemic broke out. Moreover, sustainable employability, talent development and internal mobility are in the top 5 of the biggest challenges for the labour market in the coming years³².

28. De Vos, A., Akkermans, J., & Van Der Heijden, B. I. J. M. (2019). From occupational choice to career crafting. *The Routledge companion to career studies*, 128-142.

29. De Vos, A., Jacobs, S., & Verbruggen, M. (2021). Career transitions and employability. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 126, 103475.

30. De Vos, A. (2021). De wetenschap over loopbaanmobiliteit. *HRMagazine*, 30 juni 2021.

31. Van Gronsveld, K., & De Vos, A. (2021). Impact COVID-19 op menselijk kapitaal in organisaties. White paper Antwerp Management School.

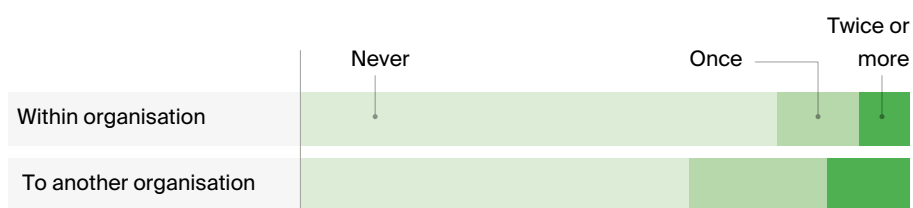
32. SD Worx (2021). Why workforce management and why now? E-book.

Despite the importance of job-to-job transitions for careers and organisations, career mobility remains rather limited. In the Flemish Region, this is reflected in the figures of the average job seniority in the age category 15-64 years. In the period from 1992 to 2020, this figure remained largely stable: it always fluctuated around 11 years³³. The job mobility rate in the Flemish Region – or the percentage of workers who find another job after one year – decreased from 6.2% in 2006 to 5.0% in 2020 for workers between 20 and 64 years old^{34,35}. In the Netherlands, however, job mobility is slightly higher. According to a 2018 study on labour market transitions by the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS), 12% of Dutch workers made a job-to-job transition.

In this section, we discuss the findings on career mobility. To what extent are employees mobile in their careers with their own employer or between employers? Does this change according to age or level of education? Are there regional differences? And what is the relationship between the elements of a sustainable career and job mobility?

The respondents in our study have been working for their current employer for an average of 12.24 years. Up to now, they have worked for an average of 3.7 organisations during their career. About 80% indicated that they had not changed jobs within the organisation of their current employer. 13.35% changed jobs within the organisation once and 6.52% changed jobs within the organisation twice or more. There are slightly more respondents who transferred to another organisation over the past five years (Figure 4): 18.26% transferred once and 8.07% transferred twice or more. These figures show that stability is still a priority for our respondents. This indicates a field of tension between a rapidly changing labour market that requires flexibility and people who are still mainly looking for a stable career.

Figure 4: CHANGING JOBS WITHIN OR OUTSIDE OF THE ORGANISATION IN THE LAST FIVE YEARS



In addition, 12.05% of the respondents have a secondary job and 35.65% of the respondents have had a break of more than one month at some point in their career. It is striking that 40.85% of the female respondents have interrupted their career, compared to 30.33% of the male respondents. However, the reasons are different. Of this group of women, 45.37% interrupted their careers for parental leave and only 5.86% of men did so for that reason. 51.05% of the male respondents highlighted unemployment as the reason for an interruption in their career, compared to 34.63% of female respondents.

33. Statbel EAK, Eurostat LFS (Bewerking Steunpunt Werk), 2021

34. Statbel EAK, (Bewerking Steunpunt Werk), 2021

35. Jacobs, S., De Vos, A., Desmet, S., Clercx, R., & Geluk, E. (2021). Werk-naar-werk transitie. Mobiliteit vanuit een institutioneel perspectief: knelpunten, belemmeringen en opportuniteiten van loopbaaninstrumenten. Onderzoeksrapport in het kader van het Viona-onderzoeksprogramma, Vlaamse Overheid, WSE.



Regional differences in mobility

If we take a closer look at the different regions surveyed, we see clear differences in terms of career mobility. The Dutch respondents have changed jobs more often over the past five years (both within their current organisation and to another organisation) compared to the Belgian respondents. For example, 24.35% of Dutch respondents changed jobs within their current organisation at least once in the past five years, compared to 15.38% of Belgian respondents (Table 15). There was also more mobility to another employer. 30.94% of Dutch respondents changed employers at least once, compared to 21.7% of Belgian respondents (Table 16).

Table 15: **INTERNAL MOBILITY BY REGION**

Changed jobs within the same organisation in the past five years (in %)

	Flanders	Wallonia	Belgium	Netherlands
Never	84,16	85,08	84,62	75,65
Once	9,69	9,16	9,43	17,27
Twice or more	6,15	5,76	5,96	7,08

Table 16: **EXTERNAL MOBILITY BY REGION**

Changed jobs to another organisation in the past five years (in %)

	Flanders	Wallonia	Belgium	Netherlands
Never	77,78	78,80	78,29	69,07
Once	15,84	14,40	15,12	21,37
Twice or more	6,38	6,81	6,60	9,57

We also see that slightly more Dutch respondents have a secondary job, namely 15.28%, compared to 8.75% of Belgian respondents.

Also in terms of career breaks, there are some striking differences between the two countries. Only 20.57% of the Flemish employees in our study ever had a career break longer than a month, in contrast to 41.88% of the Walloon employees and 40.62% of the Dutch employees in this study. The reason for this career interruption also differs strongly per region. Of the Flemish employees who interrupt their careers, the majority (44.83%) mentions parental leave as the reason. For the majority of Walloon employees, it is a break due to illness (46.25%) and in the Netherlands, unemployment is the biggest reason, with 51.07%. This unemployment is probably much broader and can be an indication of making more transitions and having a more flexible labour market. Further research is necessary to make these cultural differences more understandable.

Table 17: CAREER BREAKS BY REGION

Top 3 reasons for career breaks of at least one month (in %)

Flanders		Wallonia		Netherlands	
1. Parental leave	44,83	1. Illness	46,25	1. Unemployment	51,07
2. Illness	33,33	2. Parental leave	36,88	2. Illness	25,99
3. Unemployment	28,74	3. Unemployment	28,75	3. Parental leave	20,8

Mobility by age and work experience

This study shows similar differences in career mobility when age and work experience are taken into account. The general trend says that the older someone gets, the less they change jobs within or outside the organisation. The older the employee, the more stable their work situation. For example, 54.73% of 18-25 year olds and 40.93% of 26-35 year olds have changed jobs at least once in the past five years. When we look at job changes within the organisation of the current employer, we also see that 29.47% of the youths (18-25 years) have changed jobs at least once. Among the respondents over 46, this is only 16.66% (Table 18). The fact that there are more external job switches than internal job switches among the younger age groups indicates that respondents are more inclined to experiment and look for new (learning) experiences at the start of their career.

Table 18: INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL MOBILITY BY AGE CATEGORY

Mobility by age in the last five years (in %)

	18-25 years		26-35 years		36-45 years		46-55 years		+55 years	
	internally	externally	internally	externally	internally	externally	internally	externally	internally	externally
Never	70,53	45,26	74,56	59,06	76,37	71,70	83,33	83,77	87,82	84,42
At least once	29,47	54,73	25,44	40,93	23,63	28,30	16,66	16,23	12,18	26,26

If we then focus on the number of years of work experience, we also see a decreasing trend in mobility to another organisation as the work experience increases. A higher number of entry-level employees and early-career employees have changed employers in the past five years. Mobility within the current organisation paints a slightly different picture. More early-career employees, as well as mid-career employees, have changed jobs within their own organisation at least once in the past five years. Given the limited work experience of entry-level employees, it is not surprising that they are less inclined to change jobs internally (Table 19).

Table 19: INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL MOBILITY BY WORK EXPERIENCE

Mobility by work experience in the past five years (in %)

	Entry level (0-2y)		Early career (3-10y)		Mid-career (11-25y)		Senior career (26-35y)		Late career (+36j)	
	internally	externally	internally	externally	internally	externally	internally	externally	internally	externally
Never	80,21	53,12	72,08	55,47	77,18	72,54	83,12	82,86	89,22	85,50
At least once	19,79	46,88	27,92	44,52	22,82	27,46	89,22	17,13	10,78	14,50

Mobility by degree and function

Finally, we also notice some influence of the obtained diploma and the respondents' position on the job mobility of the employees in this study. As far as their degree is concerned, we only see a difference in external mobility. Employees with a degree of higher education are slightly more inclined to move to another organisation than employees without such a diploma (Table 20).

Table 20: **EXTERNAL MOBILITY BY DIPLOMA**

Mobility to another organisation in the past five years (in %)

	Primary education at most	Secondary education	Bachelor	Master or PhD
Never	75,00	76,47	73,75	65,52
At least once	25,00	23,53	26,26	34,48

The position, on the other hand, does influence mobility within the current organisation. Respondents in managerial positions changed jobs within the organisation more quickly over the past five years (Table 21). As far as mobility to another organisation is concerned, there are very few differences.

Table 21: **INTERNAL MOBILITY BY POSITION**

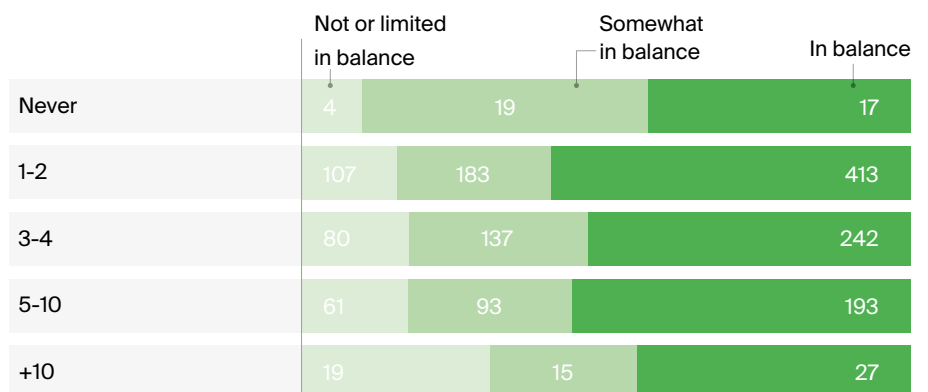
Mobility within the same organisation in the past five years (in %)

	Blue-collar worker	Administrative clerk	Middle mgmt / professional	Board / senior mgmt
Never	86,06	85,79	70,00	66,67
At least once	13,94	14,22	30,00	33,33

Sustainable careers and mobility

Finally, it is interesting to examine the extent to which the various elements of a sustainable career are related to career mobility. If we first dissect the balance between job happiness, health and productivity, it is striking that these elements are more in balance the more times someone has changed organisations during their career so far. However, these job changes are not without risk. Too much mobility, i.e. changing organisations more than ten times, is not good for the balance between job happiness, health and productivity. A high degree of mobility increases the number of respondents with an unbalanced career (figure 5).

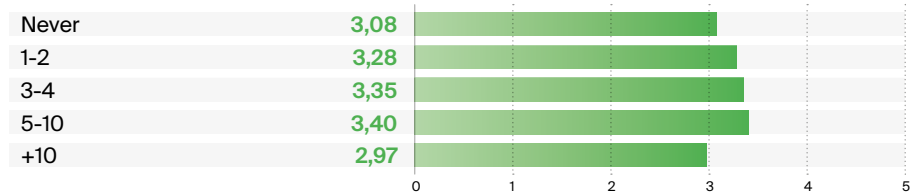
Figure 5: **CORRELATION BETWEEN MOBILITY AND CAREER BALANCE**



When zooming in on mental health, we see the same trend emerge. Mental health increases with the degree of mobility in the past career. But this also has a limit. The average mental health is significantly lower when a respondent has worked in more than ten organisations during their career (Table 22).

Table 22: MENTAL HEALTH AND MOBILITY

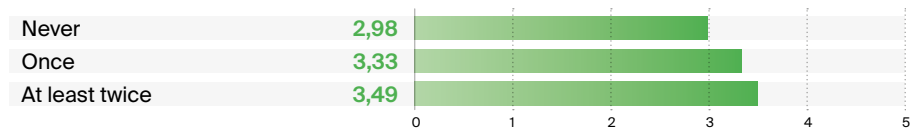
Average mental health score³⁶ (out of 5)



As far as employability is concerned, it is striking that the perceived internal and external employability is also influenced by the degree of career mobility. Perceived internal employability increases when people have changed jobs within their own organisation at least once or twice in the past five years (Table 23). If people have already made an internal change, they also see more opportunities to make further changes. A one-time internal job change also has a significant influence on the extent to which people consider themselves externally employable.

Table 23: INTERNAL EMPLOYABILITY AND MOBILITY

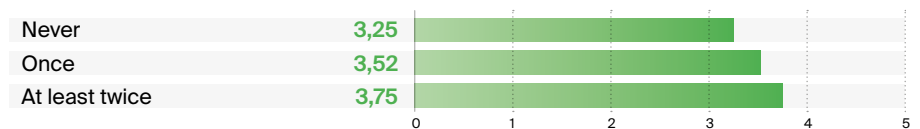
Average internal employability score³⁷ (out of 5)



Similarly, we see that the perceived external employability increases the more employees have changed organisations over the past five years (Table 24).

Table 24: EXTERNAL EMPLOYABILITY AND MOBILITY

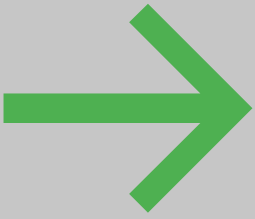
Average external employability score³⁸ (out of 5)



36. $p=0.007$; $F=22.443$; $\text{Eta}=0.010$ / Average health = 3.31

37. $p=0.000$; $F=24.946$; $\text{Eta}=0.030$ / Average internal employability = 3.06

38. $p=0.000$; $F=22.468$; $\text{Eta}=0.030$ / Average internal employability = 3.34

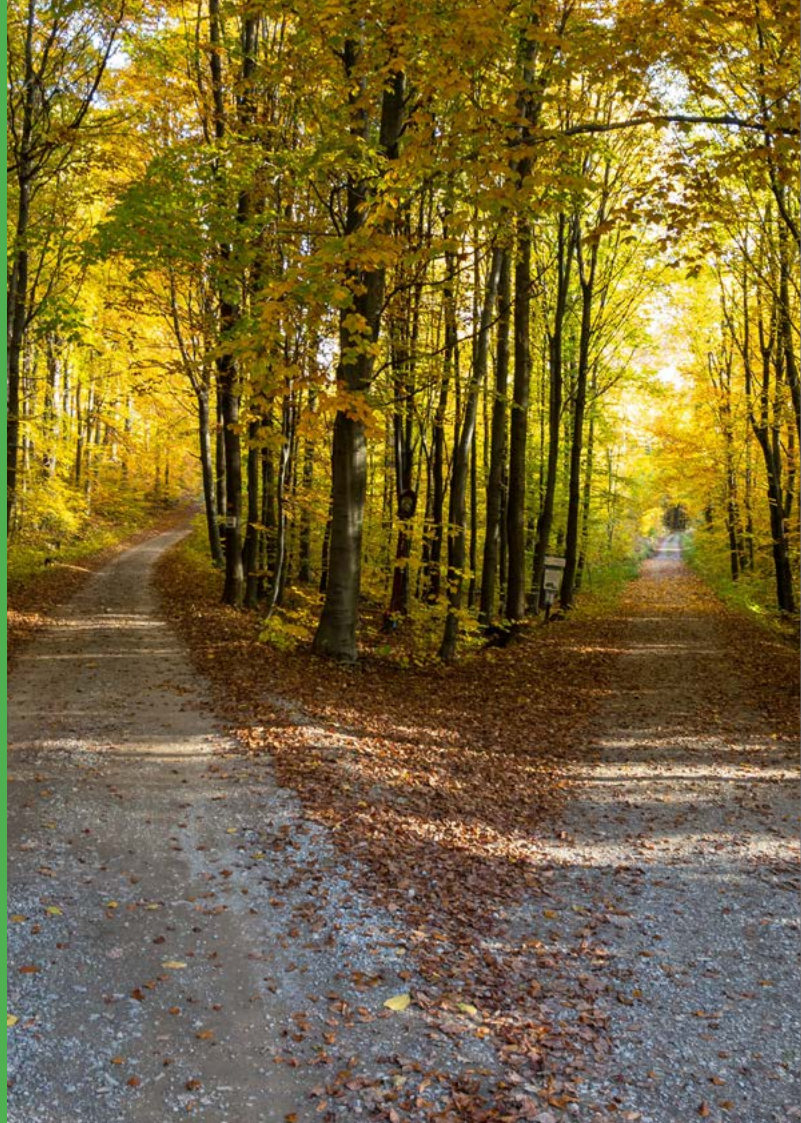


Wrap-up: Career mobility in Belgium and the Netherlands

The findings on career mobility in Belgium and the Netherlands highlight two important issues. Firstly, once someone becomes mobile, their employability also increases. This implies that career policies should mainly focus on stimulating mobility, because it can have a reinforcing effect on future transitions. Secondly, it also exposes a possible source of growing inequality, a so-called “Matthew effect”²³: there is a risk that differences in employability (and thus in the sustainability of careers) will increase over time. In other words, those who are initially successful (i.e. more mobile and employable) become increasingly so, while those who may have initially lagged behind will fall behind even more. An inclusive career policy with opportunities for all can counteract this.

39. Forrier, A., De Cuyper, N., & Akkermans, J. (2018). The winner takes it all, the loser has to fall: Provoking the agency perspective in employability research. *Human Resource Management Journal*, 28(4), 511-523.

3. Takeaways



This first white paper set out the framework within which we can understand careers today, namely a context of sustainable careers. It is about dynamically managing change within the career, with attention to growth, workability and employability in both the short and long term. Ultimately, it is always about finding a ‘person-career fit’: people seek to create an environment that suits them and they adapt to the changes that take place. The results in this paper provide the context and a first chapter to support employees in writing their own career stories.

These are the most important takeaways for sustainable careers and career mobility:

#1: The happy & healthy worker

Mental health and happiness at work appear to be enormously important to employees for their future careers. These are clearly considered more important than productivity. Within the framework of lifetime employability and sustainable careers, it is nevertheless essential to monitor the balance between these three elements. Investing in symbolic values such as happiness and health will therefore be crucial for employer branding activities, for example. On the other hand, it is recommended that organisations with regard to recruitment and career development include happiness, health and productivity in their story and continue to bring this to the attention of employees and job seekers.

#2: Consciously choosing mobility

This study highlights an area of tension between reality and the desire for more mobility. Although in reality the degree of mobility is rather low, our findings show that both internal and external mobility have a positive effect on the sustainability of a career. With the exception of continuous job changes – then this excessive mobility limits the sustainability of a career. The message is therefore to make conscious choices in terms of internal and external mobility and to look for a balance that safeguards personal equilibrium.

#3: Tailor-made solutions for the younger and older generation

In this study, the role of age and the career stage also demand attention. Especially the younger generation scores lower on mental health and is clearly still searching for what they want in a career, given their higher degree of external mobility. The transition from education to the workplace creates fundamental changes in the lives of young people that can cause stress and a ‘reality shock’. As a starter on the labour market, the right coaching is therefore an important point of attention.

In addition, perceptions of internal and external employability decrease with age. At the same time, our results show that happiness, health and career satisfaction actually increase with age: the older people get, the more positive they rate these career sustainability indicators. The older generation seems to be doing quite well, although we need to keep an eye on their agility and mobility.

These findings imply that a sustainable career policy needs customisation, whereby a focus on health and happiness prevails for young employees, whereas employability can be a focus for older employees. This can already be anticipated during recruitment, but is also a tool to promote the internal growth of employees.

#4: Extra attention for vulnerable job groups in the labour market

Both blue collar and administrative workers emerge as vulnerable job groups in this study. They score worse on all basic conditions for a sustainable career and are also less mobile within and outside the organisation. This shows a possible source of growing inequality, as a result of which these vulnerable groups risk ending up in a vicious circle. There is a risk that the differences in employability (and thus in the sustainability of careers) will increase over time, with those who are initially successful (i.e., more mobile and more employable) subsequently becoming more so, while those who may have initially lagged behind will find themselves lagging all the more behind. They may therefore need more guidance - an extra push to create a sense of urgency. An inclusive career policy with opportunities for everyone is needed, so that all groups on the labour market remain on the radar.

4. Sample data

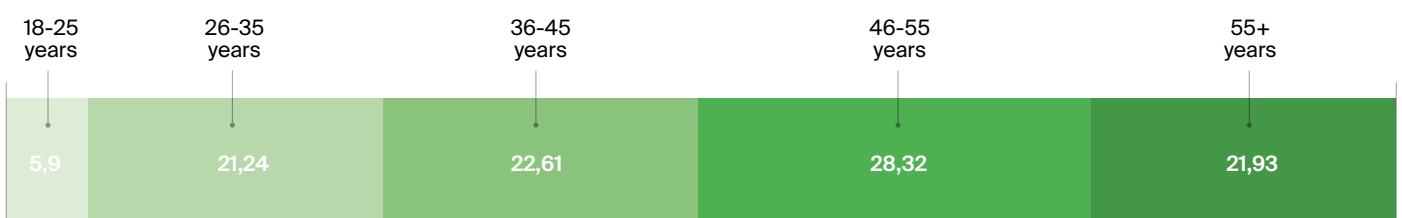


The findings in this report are part of a large-scale employee survey in Belgium and the Netherlands, set up by Antwerp Management School, House of HR & Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. In November 2021, a representative sample of 1,610 employees was surveyed in Belgium and the Netherlands. Respondents were approached by means of an online panel. Below is an overview of the most important demographic and contextual variables.

GENDER (in %)



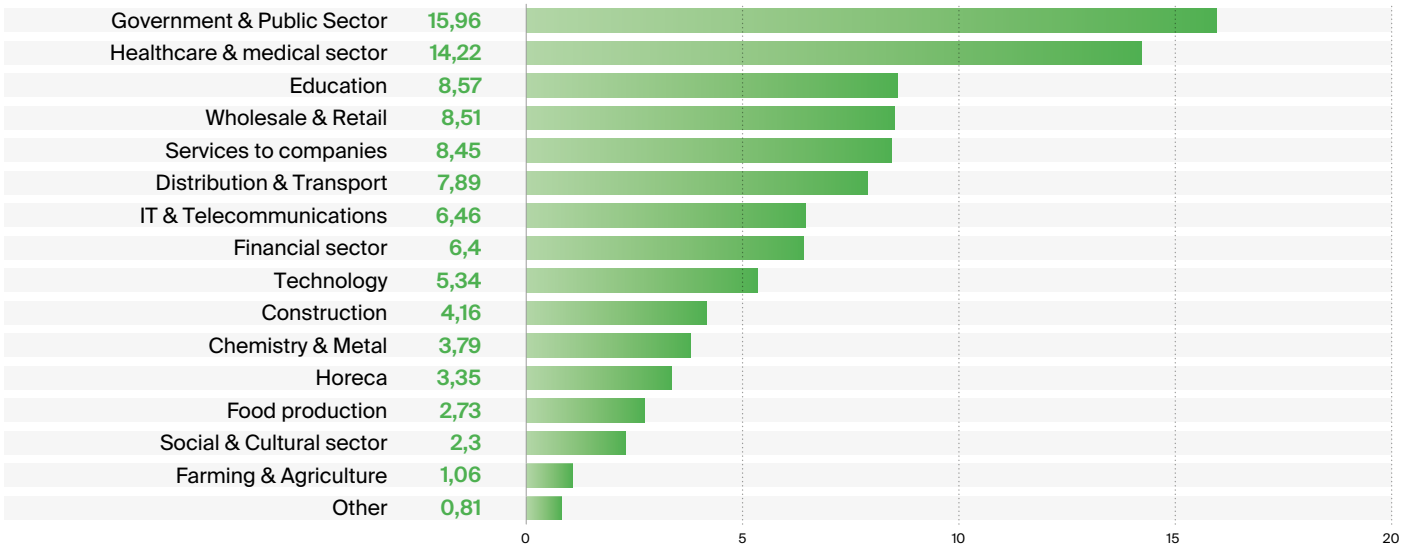
AGE (in %)



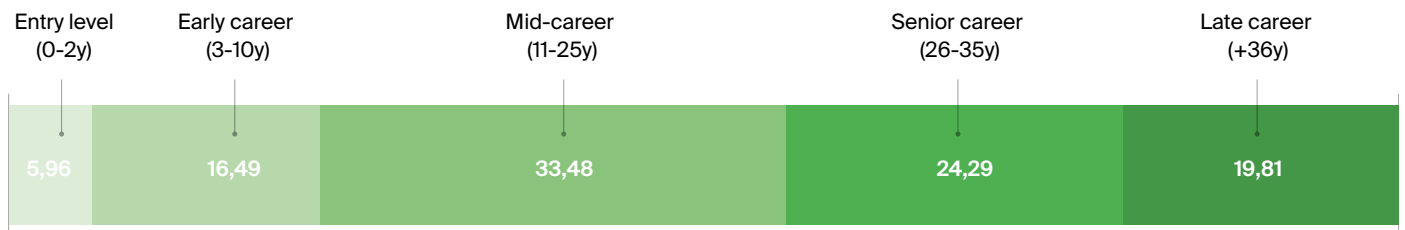
REGION (in %)



SECTOR (in %)



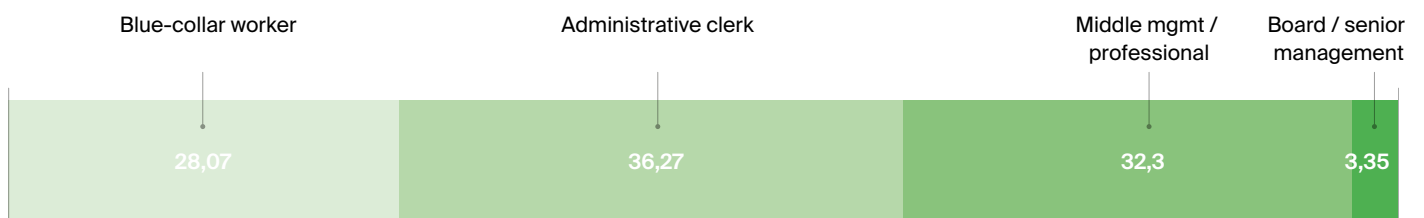
WORK EXPERIENCE (in %)



DIPLOMA (in %)



POSITION (in %)



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