

# Careers in perspective

Gaining perspective –  
Career success and career goals  
White paper 2

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## **Whitepaper 2**

In this white paper (Whitepaper 2) we look at careers from different perspectives on career success and find out what career goals the respondents are pursuing. The white paper is part of the series 'Careers in perspective':

- Setting the scene - Sustainable careers and career mobility in Belgium and the Netherlands
- Gaining perspective - Career success and career goals
- Impacting your career - Proactive career behaviour, career shocks and regrets

**“When I was 5 years old, my mother always told me that happiness was the key to life. When I went to school, they asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up. I wrote down “happy.” They told me I didn’t understand the assignment, and I told them they didn’t understand life.”**

– John Lennon

# 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, a career 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. Meanwhile, we look at careers differently. For more and more people careers 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 made by moving in all directions, not just upwards. 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<sup>2</sup>. The bottom line: *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, wants to further shape their career story or does not yet know what they want in a career.**

2. 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. Career success



A successful career is important to everyone to some extent. We all want to be successful, but the *meaning* of what constitutes success differs from person to person and from circumstance to circumstance. Career success - often defined as the achievement of desired work-related goals in one's career<sup>3</sup> - is therefore important not only for the individual, but also for career advisors and organisations. Only through a good understanding of this concept can they advise people in a targeted way. However, the meaning of career success is not easy to grasp and has been a prominent theme in career research<sup>4</sup> for years. A distinction is made between objective, 'hard' measures of success (e.g. number of promotions and income) and subjective 'soft' measures of success, which usually have to do with personal feelings of achievement and value<sup>5,6</sup>. The meaning of success is related to personal, professional and organisational goals and the extent to which an employee achieves them.

3. Arthur, M. B., Khapova, S. N., & Wilderom, C. P. (2005). Career success in a boundaryless career world. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 26(2), 177-202.
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. 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.
6. Spurk, D., Hirschi, A., & Dries, N. (2019).

### Objective career success

Objective career success is about tangible, externally visible and measurable indicators of success. The most commonly used indicators are salary, salary growth, status and promotion.<sup>7</sup> These indicators reflect the social norms surrounding a successful career and are objective in the sense that they are socially shared. But taking objective career success into account is not enough. Firstly, the hierarchical career with clearly defined steps and easily recognisable positions is no longer the only model. Secondly, salary as an indicator is also debatable, as this indicator is certainly not equally suitable for all jobs and sectors.<sup>8</sup> Finally, objective criteria for career success are often developed for high potential employees, the so-called white-collar positions such as professionals and managers. Objective success criteria related to blue-collar jobs are less well-developed.<sup>9</sup> This category of workers usually has fewer opportunities for advancement as well (see also white paper 1 in this series).

### Subjective career success

Subjective career success is about a person's own evaluation of their career based on criteria that are meaningful to them. Career success is then what the individuals themselves categorises as 'success', which can differ between people, jobs, age groups and cultures.<sup>10</sup> Until recently, it was the norm that subjective career success was also assessed using supposedly universal criteria for success.<sup>11</sup> In recent years, however, there has been a shift towards the development of more refined, nuanced indicators of subjective career success. These include the impact the person has made, how meaningful and socially rich the career is and whether the person is satisfied with the career. In this white paper we also take on subjective career success as a multidimensional concept. Moreover, we look at 'importance' and 'achievement' to determine the extent to which certain dimensions of career success are considered important in relation to the degree to which they have already been achieved. People may be driven by certain aspirations without feeling fulfilled in that area, or they may experience a high degree of achievement in a certain dimension without attaching too much importance to it for their career.<sup>12</sup>

In this section, we will discuss the survey results related to the theme of career success. How successful are the careers of our respondents in Belgium and the Netherlands? What does a successful career mean to them? What dimensions of success do they find important and are they striving for? And to what extent have they already been achieved?

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7. Spurk, D., Hirschi, A., & Dries, N. (2019).
  8. Dette, D. E., Abele, A. E., & Renner, O. (2004). Defining and measuring occupational success. Theoretical considerations and meta-analytic findings on the relation between external and internal measures of occupational success. *Zeitschrift für Personalpsychologie*, 3, 170-183.
  9. Abele, A. E., Spurk, D., & Volmer, J. (2011). The construct of career success: Measurement issues and an empirical example. *Zeitschrift für Arbeitsmarktforschung*, 43(3), 195-206.
  10. Spurk, D., Hirschi, A., & Dries, N. (2019).
  11. Gunz, H. P., & Heslin, P. A. (2005). Reconceptualizing career success. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 105-111.
  12. Briscoe, J. P., Kaše, R., Dries, N., Dysvik, A., Unite, J. A., Adeleye, I., ... & Zikic, J. (2021). Here, there, & everywhere: Development and validation of a cross-culturally representative measure of subjective career success. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 130, 103612.

# Objective career success

In this study, objective career success was measured by:

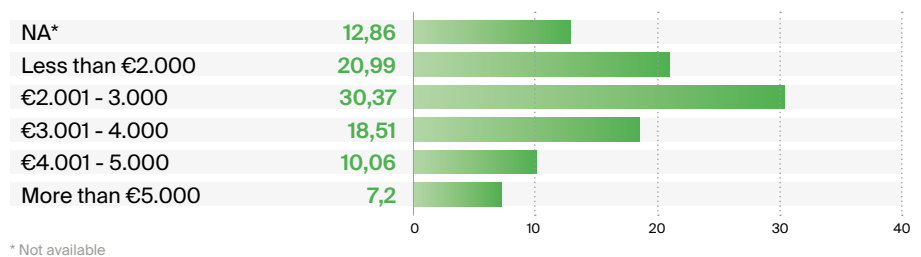
- Salary: the respondent's gross salary
- The number of promotions within the current organisation
- The number of promotions when moving from one organisation to another (over the whole career)
- Hierarchical status: does the respondent currently have a managerial position, project responsibility and/or permission to delegate work?

## Objective career success and salary

Zooming in on the objective career success of the respondents in this study, we see that in terms of salary this is fairly similar to the average findings in Belgium and the Netherlands. The largest group of respondents in this study find themselves in the category of gross salaries from 2,000 euros to 3,000 euros per month (Figure 1). This is lower than the Belgian average gross monthly salary of 3,758 euros (Statbel, 2019), but in terms of the spread it is in line with the salary of the average Belgian employee. Those figures show that 50% of Belgian employees have a gross salary of up to 3,486 euros per month (Statbel, 2019). In the Netherlands, the average gross salary is 2,816 euros (CPB, 2020), excluding holiday allowances. However, we should interpret the salary figures with some caution, given the differences in calculation between the two countries. In addition, the gross salary reported by the respondents in this study was not always applicable for a full-time job.

Figure 1: GROSS SALARY PER MONTH

What is the gross salary of the respondents?  
(in %)



In terms of gender and function, we see some differences in salary. For instance, the male respondents are more present in the higher salary categories compared to the female respondents (Figure 2). In addition, we also see an increase in salary as the position requires more (managerial) responsibility and education (Table 1).

Figure 2: SALARY BY GENDER

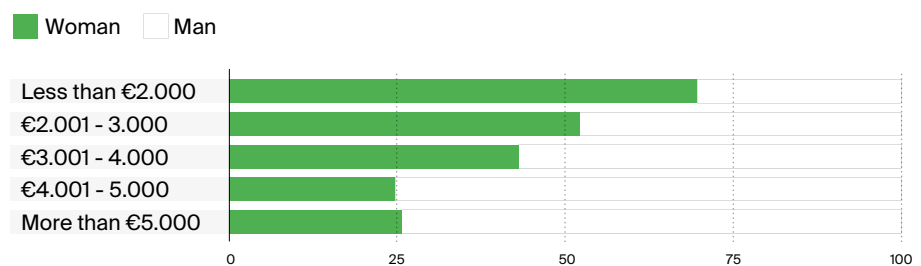


Table 1: SALARY BY FUNCTION

(in %)	Blue-collar worker	Administrative clerk	Middle mgmt / professional	Board / senior management
Less than €2.000	39,69	25,30	12,50	0,00
€2.001 - 3.000	39,43	41,11	26,94	10,00
€3.001 - 4.000	15,93	20,55	27,16	14,00
€4.001 - 5.000	3,66	10,28	17,89	26,00
More than €5.000	1,31	2,77	15,52	50,00

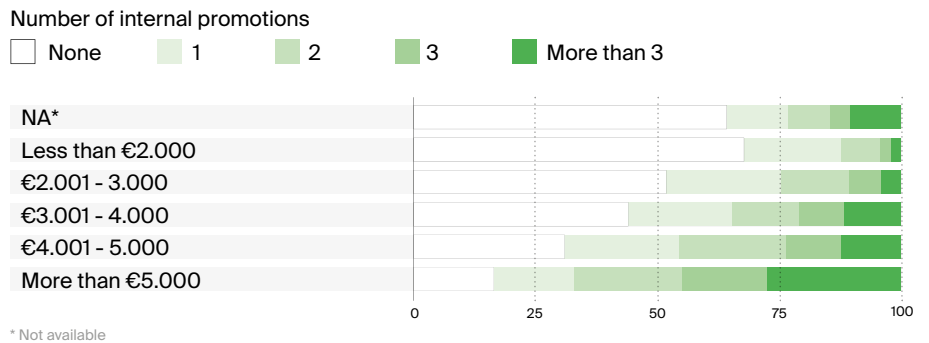


**Objective career success and promotions**

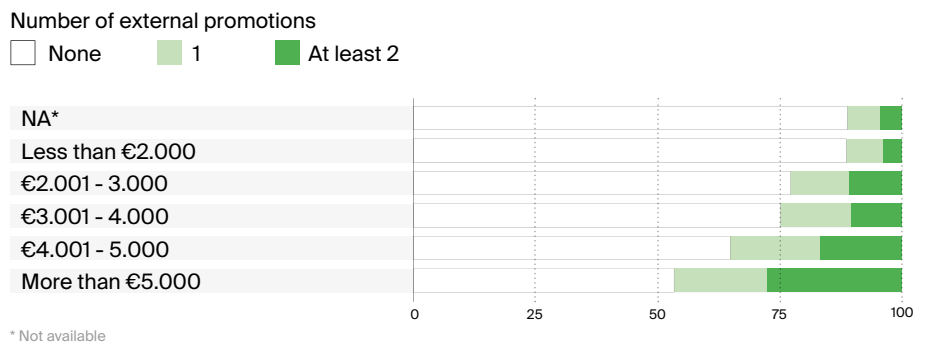
It is striking that the career of the respondents is characterised by *few promotions*. Half of the respondents (50.62%) did not enjoy an internal promotion with their current employer, and no less than 77.7% of the respondents did not have a promotion when moving from one organisation to another, throughout the entirety of their career so far. These findings are strongly linked to the mobility figures in White Paper 1 of this series, in which we reported that 80% of respondents had not changed jobs with their current employer in the past five years.

Upon inspection of the relationship between promotions and salary, this factor has a clear impact. We see a clear correlation between salary and whether a person has been promoted, either internally or externally. *The gross monthly salary increases remarkably when the respondent has had one or more internal or external promotions* (Figures 3 and 4). This effect is greatest for internal promotions. In short: mobility appears to be positively related to the gross salary of the participants.

**Figure 3: CORRELATION GROSS SALARY AND NUMBER OF INTERNAL PROMOTIONS**



**Figure 4: CORRELATION GROSS SALARY AND NUMBER OF EXTERNAL PROMOTIONS**



When we compare the promotions between Belgium and the Netherlands, a difference emerges in the area of external promotions. In the Netherlands, around 30% of the respondents was promoted at least once when moving from one organisation to another, compared to merely 14.5% of the Belgian respondents. This finding is related to what was reported on mobility in the first white paper of this series. We discovered a significant difference in terms of external career mobility and region: the Dutch respondents showed significantly more external mobility compared to the Flemish and Walloon respondents.

It is also noticeable that there are more internal and external promotions when the respondents exercise a higher function (Figures 5 and 6). The same phenomenon recurs when looking at the correlation between promotions and degree (Table 2). It is mainly the respondents with a degree of higher education (bachelor's, master's or PhD) who have been promoted at least once. There is a big difference between internal and external promotions: internal upward mobility is much more common than external upward mobility. These findings are also related to what we reported on mobility in the first white paper of this series. It showed more internal and external career mobility among respondents with a higher position or a higher degree.

Figure 5: CORRELATION INTERNAL PROMOTIONS AND FUNCTION

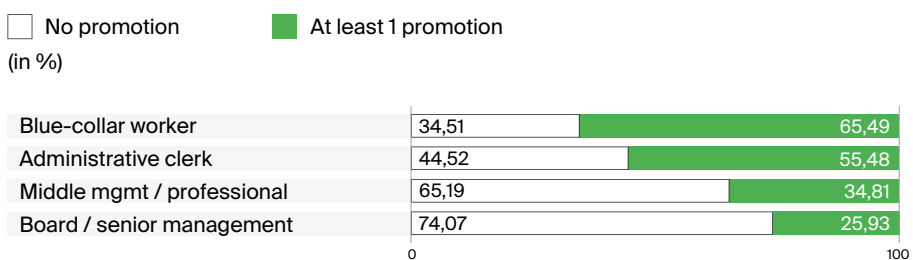


Figure 6: CORRELATION EXTERNAL PROMOTIONS AND FUNCTION

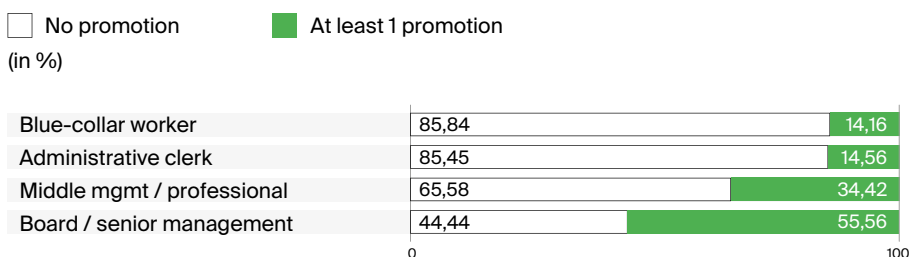


Table 2: CORRELATION INTERNAL/EXTERNEAL PROMOTION AND DEGREE

(in %)	Primary education at most	Secondary education	Bachelor's degree	Master's degree or PhD
At least 1 internal promotion	32,15	42,44	55,44	58,62
At least 1 external promotion	8,93	16,52	25,57	33,33

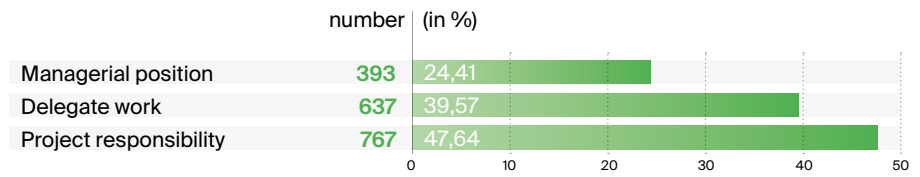
There are no significant differences in terms of promotions and gender. This is remarkable as we do see clear salary differences in salary between men and women. *Women are not less or more often promoted as men, but on average they do have a lower salary.*

Finally, there is also a significant relationship between the number of promotions and the respondents' mental health. If one had more than three internal promotions with the same employer, their mental health is significantly higher than that of respondents who had no or only one internal promotion. So it is once again clear that investing in internal (upward) mobility pays off.

**Objective career success and status**

We analyse the status of a respondent in terms of objective career success on the basis of having project responsibility, permission to delegate work and a managerial position. We see that about half of the respondents (47.64%) have permission to delegate work. Fewer respondents have project responsibility (39.57%) and 24.41% of the respondents have a managerial position (Figure 7).

Figure 7: STATUS OBJECTIVE SUCCESS



In order to further explore the status of objective career success, we created an ‘index’ on this form of objective career success. This status index indicates whether a respondent does not tick any of the indicators (low), one (moderate), two (high) or all three (very high): project responsibility, leadership and the permission to delegate work.

In terms of status, too, we see a correlation between the respondents’ function and their diploma. *The achieved objective career success increases with the occupation of a higher function (Figure 8) and the possession of a higher diploma (Figure 9).* 17% of blue collar workers and 22% of executive white collar workers score high or very high in the status index. For middle managers/professionals and directors/higher management, the figures are 63% and 91%. These findings reflect a classic view on career success, namely the higher one climbs the ‘ladder’, the more successful that person is in their career.

Figure 8: CORRELATION OBJECTIVE CAREER SUCCESS AND FUNCTION

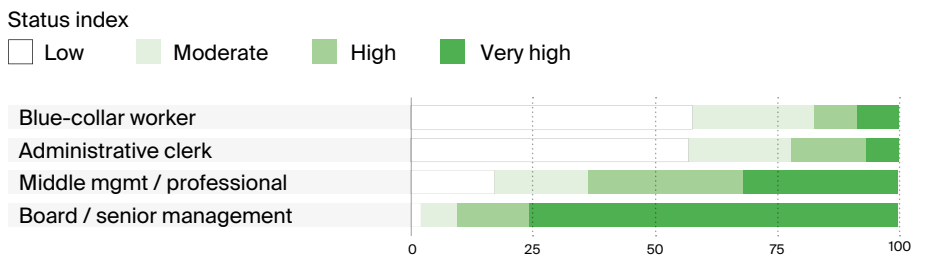
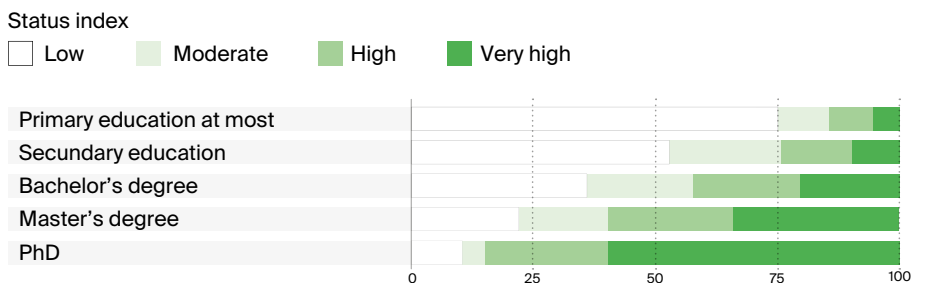
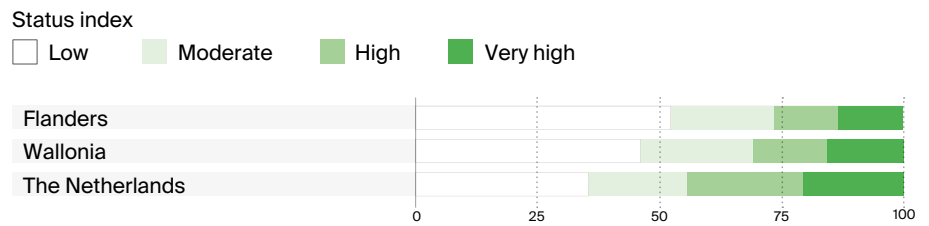


Figure 9: CORRELATION OBJECTIVE CAREER SUCCESS AND DEGREE



The objective career success is notably higher in the Netherlands than in Flanders or Wallonia (Figure 10).

Figure 10: CORRELATION OBJECTIVE CAREER SUCCESS AND REGION



## Subjective career success

In this study, subjective career success was conceived as a multidimensional concept, with ‘importance’ and ‘achievement’ as the different dimensions of career success<sup>13</sup>:

1. Learning and development (learning and taking up challenges in work)
2. Work-life balance (balance between work and non-work)
3. Entrepreneurship (being self-employed and/or running your own business)
4. Positive working relationships (with colleagues and superiors and through positive feedback from these parties)
5. Positive impact (contributing to the development of others)
6. Financial security (ability to meet basic needs and to take care of family)
7. Financial success (steadily earning more money and/or achieving a certain degree of wealth)

Table 3 gives an overview of how the respondents of this study ranked the different dimensions in terms of importance and the level of realisation.

Table 3: RANKING THE SUBJECTIVE DIMENSIONS OF SUCCESS

Ranking	Aspect subjective career success	Level of importance (average score out of 5)	Level of realisation (average score out of 5)
1	Financial security	4.25	3.87
2	Work-life balance	4.14	3.77
3	Positive working relationships	3.84	3.67
4	Learning and development	3.74	3.62
5	Positive impact	3.65	3.61
6	Financial success	3.48	3.23
7	Entrepreneurship	2.73	2.83

13. Briscoe, J. P., Kaše, R., Dries, N., Dysvik, A., Unite, J. A., Adeleye, I., ... & Zikic, J. (2021).

These results support a *differentiated perspective on subjective career success*. Financial security appears to be most important to the respondents. Although this dimension is not always included in research on career success, it appears to be a crucial element for our target group. This is in contrast to the dimension ‘financial success’, which the respondents consider to be less important in terms of career success. The results indicate that achieving financial security, perhaps as a way of satisfying a basic need, is essential to being successful, while extra financial success is considered less important. In addition, great importance is attached to the ‘sustainable’ aspects of a career (see also Whitepaper 1), such as a good work-life balance, positive work relationships and learning and self-development.

It is also striking that the same ranking order was established for the achievement of these subjective success dimensions. There is a *high degree of similarity in what respondents consider important for their career success and to what extent they have already achieved it*. The difference between the level of importance and the level of achievement is very small, with the exception of financial security and work-life balance.

In addition, the order of these dimensions seems universal among the respondents. There are small differences in the level of importance when we look at function, diploma, region, age and work experience, but the ranking order itself does not change. There are no significant differences in terms of gender either. Thus, we see a pattern where women are equally (upwardly) mobile and experience as much subjective career success as men, but earn less (objective success).

On average, the Dutch respondents attach slightly less importance to almost all dimensions of subjective career success than their Belgian colleagues, except for entrepreneurship, which goes the other way around (see Table 4). We also see that the Walloon respondents, compared to their Flemish counterparts, attach more importance to learning and development, having a positive impact and entrepreneurship.

**Table 4: IMPORTANCE OF DIFFERENT ASPECTS OF SUBJECTIVE CAREER SUCCESS BY REGION**

Aspect subjective career success	The overall average	Flanders	Wallonia	The Netherlands
Financial security <sup>14</sup>	4.25	4.34	4.29	4.18
Work-life balance <sup>15</sup>	4.14	4.21	4.22	4.06
Positive working relationships <sup>16</sup>	3.84	3.87	3.98	3.76
Learning & development <sup>17</sup>	3.74	3.76	3.80	3.69
Positive impact <sup>18</sup>	3.65	3.58	3.79	3.62
Financial success <sup>19</sup>	3.48	3.56	3.63	3.37
Entrepreneurship <sup>20</sup>	2.73	2.58	2.82	2.76

14. F= 8.743; p= 0.000; eta= 0.010

15. F= 9.606; p= 0.000; eta= 0.010

16. F= 14.661; p= 0.000; eta= 0.020

17. F= 3.398; p= 0.034; eta= 0.010

18. F= 10.479; p= 0.000; eta= 0.010

19. F= 19.015; p= 0.000; eta= 0.020

20. F= 8.926; p= 0.000; eta= 0.010

When we take a closer look at function, it is striking that there are a number of significant differences between the 'higher' functions on the one hand (middle management, professionals, higher management and directors) and blue-collar and executive white-collar workers on the other. For example, the higher profiles attach significantly more importance to learning and development, a positive impact and entrepreneurship. Executive white collar workers attach a little more importance to financial security than blue collar workers and the higher job profiles. This also applies to the work-life balance. For positive work relations, we see significantly higher average scores among executive employees and higher functions, compared to blue collar workers. It is also remarkable that there are no significant differences between the various job groups in the dimension 'financial success'. This goes against the somewhat stereotypical image that the practically trained worker cares more about money than theoretically trained workers (Table 5).

**Table 5: IMPORTANCE OF DIFFERENT ASPECTS OF SUBJECTIVE CAREER SUCCESS BY FUNCTION**

Aspect subjective career success	The overall average	Blue collar worker	Administrative clerk	Middle mgmt/ professional mgmt & senior mgmt
Financial security <sup>21</sup>	4.25	4.15	4.34	4.16
Work-life balance <sup>22</sup>	4.14	4.02	4.24	4.01
Positive working relationships <sup>23</sup>	3.84	3.71	3.90	3.83
Learning & development <sup>24</sup>	3.74	3.61	3.69	3.85
Positive impact <sup>25</sup>	3.65	3.56	3.63	3.75
Financial success	3.48	3.49	3.50	3.45
Entrepreneurship <sup>26</sup>	2.73	2.83	2.55	2.96

These findings are in line with the differences we found in relation to the respondents' degrees. For example, the importance respondents attach to their work-life balance increases as their education level increases. In addition, the respondents with a bachelor's or master's degree attach, on average, more importance to the learning and development dimension than respondents without a diploma of higher education. Moreover, low-educated respondents (primary education at most) attach significantly less importance to the dimension of financial security.

21. F= 7.592; p= 0.000; eta= 0.010  
 22. F= 11.740; p= 0.000; eta= 0.020  
 23. F= 6.858; p= 0.000; eta= 0.010  
 24. F= 14.199; p= 0.000; eta= 0.020  
 25. F= 6.158; p= 0.000; eta= 0.010  
 26. F= 14.449, p= 0.000; eta= 0.030

Finally, there are some striking findings regarding age and work experience (Table 6). At the end of their career, people attach more importance to financial security (senior & late career). This also applies when looking at the age of the respondents: starting from 46 years old, significantly more importance is attached to financial security, compared to younger respondents. These respondents possibly give more thought to retirement and what compensation they will receive. In the first white paper of this series we also noted that this age group has a more stable career and is less mobile, both internally and externally. The relatively high importance they attach to financial security may hinder this mobility (or vice versa: because they are less inclined to create mobility, they focus more on achieving a financially stable situation). *Financial success, on the other hand, becomes less important the longer a person has been working.* This is also reflected in the distribution by age. People aged 55+ attach significantly less importance to this dimension compared to younger respondents.

Furthermore, compared to early-career respondents, *respondents in the senior career phase attach more importance to positive working relationships.* Also the idea of a balanced work-life balance is more important to them. Entrepreneurship, on the other hand, is accorded less and less importance the more work experience one has: from the age of 36 its importance decreases significantly.

There is hardly any difference between the importance the respondents attach to the dimensions of learning & development and positive impact. However, we do see a difference in the extent to which these dimensions have already been achieved. Both aspects are achieved significantly more by respondents in the late career. Respondents in this phase have of course had more time to work on these dimensions and to achieve them.

**Table 6: IMPORTANCE OF DIFFERENT ASPECTS OF SUBJECTIVE CAREER SUCCESS BY WORK EXPERIENCE**

Aspect subjective career success	The overall average	Entry level (0-2y)	Early career (3-10y)	Mid-career (11-25y)	Senior career (26-35y)	Late career (+36y)
Financial security <sup>27</sup>	4.25	4.06	4.11	4.21	4.38	4.32
Work-life balance <sup>28</sup>	4.14	3.97	3.96	4.07	4.32	4.22
Positive working relationships <sup>29</sup>	3.84	3.84	3.75	3.81	3.92	3.85
Learning & development	3.74	3.60	3.75	3.73	3.72	3.80
Positive impact	3.65	3.61	3.66	3.63	3.62	3.74
Financial success <sup>30</sup>	3.48	3.64	3.54	3.50	3.48	3.34
Entrepreneurship <sup>31</sup>	2.73	3.20	3.01	2.79	2.54	2.48

27. F= 9.282; p= 0.000; eta= 0.020


28. F= 16.442; p= 0.000; eta= 0.040

29. F= 3.158; p= 0.014; eta= 0.010

30. F= 4.421; p= 0.001; eta= 0.010

31. F= 24.715; p= 0.000; eta= 0.060

## Wrap up: Objective and subjective career success



The results on career success yield both expected and surprising results. In line with previous (scientific) research, we see that objective criteria for career success, such as salary, promotions, leadership, delegation and project responsibility, are mainly achieved by white-collar workers. The findings of this study clearly show that white-collar workers score higher on all objective success criteria than blue-collar workers. For example, white-collar workers have more internal and external promotions, which is correlated with a higher salary and even better mental health. So we can say that when we approach career success from an 'objective' perspective, the classic factors still play a role. On the other hand, objective career success factors are less appropriate for blue-collar workers. As a result, they risk ending up in a vicious cycle: because they are generally less (upwardly) mobile in their career, their salary is lower and they are not perceived as 'successful' in their career. This in turn may have a negative impact on further career opportunities.

However, subjective factors of career success, which look at how workers evaluate their careers themselves from a differentiated viewpoint, seems better suited for the target group as a whole. This perspective does more justice to the workers, regardless of position, age or degree, because it does not start from a standardised view. Every worker benefits from this approach.

This study shows that besides financial security, it is mainly sustainable career aspects<sup>32</sup> that are paramount for the respondents: work-life balance, positive working relationships, learning and development and having a positive impact complete the top five of successful career dimensions. Surprisingly, the order of these dimensions was largely consistent across the target group. This seems to contradict existing perceptions, such as the idea that practically-trained people focus more on financial outcomes, while theoretically-trained people are more concerned with meaning.

However, there are still small differences in the importance attached to certain dimensions. White-collar workers attach slightly more importance to learning and development and having a positive impact on others. Blue-collar workers generally find the work-life balance slightly more important. Striking is that towards the end of the career, more importance is attached to financial security and less to financial success. These findings support the distinction between financial security and success: whereas the former was almost unanimously named as the most important indicator of career success, for most respondents achieving 'extra' financial success is one of the least important indicators.

Finally, a small note on gender and career success. This study shows that there is a difference in salary between men and women. The female respondents in this study have a lower average salary, which is in line with previous scientific research and social findings. However, it is striking that there are no differences between men and women when it comes to the number of promotions or the achievement of subjective career success factors. Food for thought!

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



## 2. Career goals



Career success is important to people, but so is the road towards it. Career objectives play a central role in this. For this white paper, we distinguish, among other things, whether people want to focus on the *growth of their responsibilities* and/or the *growth of their expertise*. We also look at three different ways in which people can orientate themselves in their career: the focus on ‘job’, ‘career’ and ‘calling’.<sup>33,34</sup>

People who say they orient their career mainly with ‘*job*’ in mind are primarily interested in the material benefits of work and do not seek any other kind of reward. Work is not an objective in itself, but a way that enables people to acquire the means to enjoy their spare time. Within this orientation, then, work is primarily a transaction - a way of earning money and resources needed to live. Someone’s main interests and ambitions are not reflected in their work when they lean more towards this orientation.

A second career orientation is linked to the search for a ‘*career*’. This focus values a deeper personal investment in work, as well as advancement within the occupational structure. This advancement often entails a higher social status, more power within the scope of one’s profession and a higher self-esteem for the employee. People with a career orientation typically invest a lot in their work and plan their career development by looking for more challenging assignments that can get them “higher up the ladder”. In that sense, this career orientation is thus primarily related to the previously discussed indicators of externally visible, objective career success.

33. Bellah, R. N., Madsen, R., Sullivan, W. M., Swidler, A., & Tipton, S. M. (1985). *Habits of the heart*. New York: Harper & Row.  
34. Schwartz, B. (1994). *The costs of living: How market freedom erodes the best things in life*. New York: Norton.

Thirdly, there is *'calling'* as a possible career orientation. People who lean more towards this orientation go to work not only for financial gain or career advancement, but largely for the fulfilment that the work itself gives them. They identify strongly with the work they do and believe that the work is central to who they are as a person. They derive personal meaning and a sense of identity from their work and see it as an opportunity to make a positive contribution to society.<sup>35,36</sup> So, this orientation is primarily linked to indicators of subjective career success.

An individual's orientation towards work (i.e. focus on job, career, or calling) not only influences the way the work is experienced on a daily basis, but can also affect organisational commitment, organisational civic behaviour, turnover intentions and performance.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, these 'orientations' are not mutually exclusive. People can therefore have different career orientations, at different moments in their careers.

In this section, we discuss the results related to the career goals and orientations of the respondents in this study. Are they mainly looking for more growth in responsibility or expertise? And which dimensions (job, career, calling) have the strongest presence among the respondents?

## Career goals in general

In general, the respondents in this study are more interested in growth in the form of more expertise than in the form of more responsibilities. More than 40% of the respondents say they want to put a lot of effort into gaining expertise in their career (Figure 12), compared to only 22% who want to put a lot of effort into gaining more responsibilities (Figure 11). This is a remarkable result that goes against the expectation that most people want to get 'higher up', which makes a growth in responsibilities essential.

Figure 11: GAINING RESPONSIBILITIES WITHIN THE CAREER

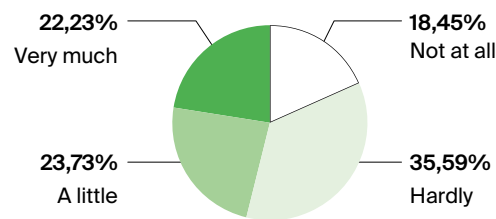
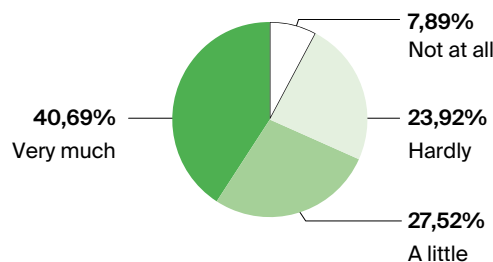


Figure 12: GAINING EXPERTISE WITHIN THE CAREER



35. Wrzesniewski, A., McCauley, C., Rozin, P., & Schwartz, B. (1997). Jobs, careers, and callings: People's relations to their work. *Journal of research in personality*, 31(1), 21-33.

36. Mantler, J., Campbell, B., & Dupré, K. E. (2021). Jobs, careers, and callings: Exploring work orientation at mid-career. *Journal of Career Development*, 08948453211022845.

37. Willner, T., Lipshits-Braziler, Y., & Gati, I. (2020). Construction and initial validation of the Work Orientation Questionnaire. *Journal of Career Assessment*, 28(1), 109-127.

When looking at the three different career orientations (orientation towards job, career or calling), it is striking that the respondents mainly identify with a career that is job-orientated<sup>38</sup>: about 36% of the respondents say they identify with this (Figure 13). 24% of the respondents indicate that they identify strongly or very strongly with a calling-oriented career orientation (Figure 14), and about 19% identify themselves with a career-oriented career orientation (Figure 15). A remarkable result that contradicts the expectation that employees today identify much more with career or calling as their orientation, especially since the impact and satisfaction of a job are highly regarded in today's society, in addition to career advancement as the more traditional form of success.

Figure 13: **JOB AS CAREER ORIENTATION**

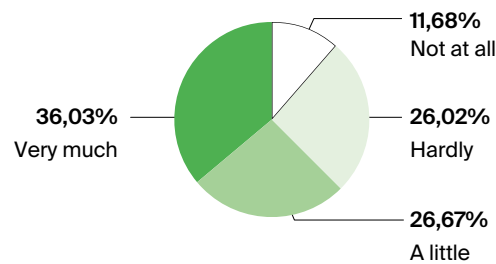


Figure 14: **CALLING AS CAREER ORIENTATION**

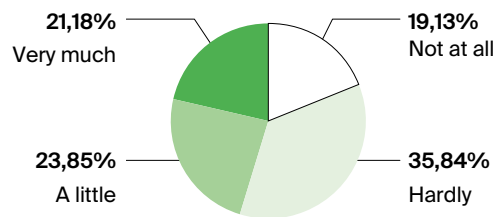
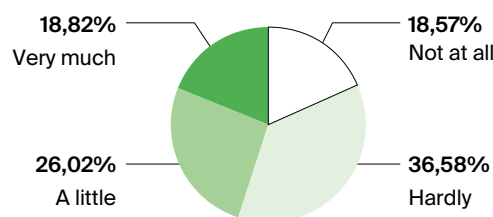


Figure 15: **CAREER AS CAREER ORIENTATION**



38. It is not the case that the respondents can only identify with one of the three orientations, the orientations are not mutually exclusive.





## Career goals and demographic variables

When we take a closer look at the career goals surveyed in this study, it is striking that there are no *significant differences in gender and region*. Both the career orientations (job, career and calling) and the career goals (striving for more responsibility or expertise) are practically equal between men and women and between the Netherlands, Flanders and Wallonia.

In terms of function, on the other hand, *white-collar workers* (middle management, professional, management and higher management) generally look for an *increase in expertise* as well as an *increase in responsibility* (Table 7), compared to blue-collar functions (blue-collar and executive employees). The differences are greatest for the increase in expertise, which is sought by some 67% of executives and senior managers, compared to only 28% of blue-collar workers. The same differences present themselves when taking into account the respondents' degrees.

**Table 7: GAINING EXPERTISE AND RESPONSIBILITIES BY FUNCTION**

(in %)

Gaining...	Blue-collar worker	Administrative clerk	Middle mgmt / professional	Board / senior mgmt
expertise <sup>39</sup>	27,88	35,96	54,42	66,66
responsibilities	16,15	15,58	31,15	59,26

39.

Regarding Gaining expertise and only the categories 'definitely' and 'most definitely' were included in this table.

Furthermore, we also see that there are some differences with respect to career orientations in terms of function (Table 8). On the one hand, blue collar workers are more inclined to have a job-orientated career. On the other hand, employees in higher management and directors focus significantly more on the orientations 'career' and 'calling', compared to the other job types (though those employees surprisingly also mainly follow the job orientation).

**Table 8: CAREER ORIENTATIONS BY FUNCTION**

(in %)	Blue-collar worker	Administrative clerk	Middle mgmt / professional	Board / senior mgmt
Job <sup>40</sup>	42,04	35,05	34,04	37,04
Career	19,25	16,96	19,61	27,78
Calling	21,46	19,18	21,73	35,19

Regarding the age differences of the respondents in this study, it is striking that the *desire to be given more responsibilities decreases with age*. The desire for more expertise increases until the age of 45, after which it declines slightly (Table 9). When examining the career orientations, we notice that *especially the younger age group (18-25 years) scores higher on all three orientations*. Therefore, they focus more on all three than the other age groups do (Table 10). Young people possibly have a more open perspective: they still have a long career ahead of them and therefore want to grow and move up. But it starts to play less of a role as people get older. Young people also seem more willing to work hard. However, it is plausible that the link between young age and career orientation does not mean that they are simply willing to work harder, but rather that there is an expectation to eventually end up in better positions.

**Table 9: GAINING EXPERTISE AND RESPONSIBILITY BY AGE**

(in %)	18-25 y	26-35 y	36-45 y	46-55 y	+55 y
Gaining in... expertise <sup>41</sup>	40,00	42,69	45,88	36,41	39,10
responsibility	33,69	28,37	26,37	15,79	22,23

**Table 10: CAREER ORIENTATIONS BY AGE**

(in %)	18-25 y	26-35 y	36-45 y	46-55 y	+55 y
Job <sup>42</sup>	42,10	34,51	35,99	36,85	34,85
Career	32,63	26,02	21,16	12,50	13,88
Calling	30,53	15,79	25,28	19,30	22,10

40. Regarding career orientations, only the categories 'definitely' and 'most definitely' were included in this table.

41. Regarding both gaining expertise and gaining responsibility, only the categories 'definitely' and 'most definitely' were included in this table.

42. Regarding career orientation, only the categories 'definitely' and 'most definitely' were included in this table.

## Career goals and career success

In addition to the different demographic variables and their relationship with the career goals, some interesting figures stand out when we zoom in on career goals in relation to career success (as discussed in part 1 of this white paper).

Firstly, it is striking that with regard to objective career success, there are few differences among the respondents who are highly focused on a job orientation (Table 11). However, we do see significant differences for the career and calling orientation. Whereas in the other categories, the job orientation clearly emerges as the main group, *we see in the highly successful group of participants that the distribution of orientations is much more even*. In other words, the career and calling orientations are better represented in the group with very high objective career success.

Table 11: CAREER ORIENTATIONS BY STATUS INDEX OBJECTIVE SUCCESS

(in %)	Low	Moderate	High	Very high
Job <sup>43</sup>	37,85	37,47	31,12	35,11
Career	13,55	20,46	18,21	30,14
Calling	16,79	20,75	22,52	30,85

Also, there are a number of remarkable findings with regard to the subjective success dimensions. *The different dimensions of subjective success are related to different career orientations* (Figure 16). Respondents with a high job orientation attach particular importance to financial security<sup>44</sup> and a good work-life balance.<sup>45</sup>

When there is a stronger career orientation, other dimensions of subjective success emerge. Respondents then attach significantly more importance to learning and development<sup>46</sup>, having a positive impact<sup>47</sup>, entrepreneurship<sup>48</sup> and financial success<sup>49</sup>. It is noteworthy that respondents with a strong focus on career have also achieved significantly more financial success<sup>50</sup>.

In case of a high focus on calling as an orientation, we find a combination of the aforementioned elements. Respondents with a clear calling orientation attach particular importance to their work-life balance<sup>51</sup>, having a positive impact<sup>52</sup> and learning and development<sup>53</sup>. This last dimension<sup>54</sup> is also significantly more achieved by this group during their career.

Figure 16: CAREER ORIENTATIONS AND SUBJECTIVE SUCCESS

Job	Career	Calling
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Financial security</li> <li>• Work-life balance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Financial success (reached)</li> <li>• Learning &amp; development</li> <li>• Positive impact</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Work-life balance</li> <li>• Positive impact</li> <li>• Learning &amp; development (reached)</li> </ul>

43. Regarding career orientations, only the categories 'definitely' and 'most definitely' were included in this table.

44. Score= 4.56; F= 21.653; p= 0.000; eta= 0.060

45. Score= 4.49; F= 24.618; p= 0.000; eta= 0.070

46. Score= 4.30; F= 32.877; p= 0.000; eta= 0.090

47. Score= 4.1; F= 22.050; p= 0.000; eta= 0.060

48. Score= 3.37; F= 35.299. p= 0;000; eta= 0.110

49. Score= 4.09; F= 34.704; p= 0.000; eta= 0.110

50. Score= 3.66; F= 19.172; p= 0.000; eta= 0.070

51. Score= 4.25; F= 18.231; p= 0.000; eta= 0.060

52. Score= 4.05; F= 17.024; p= 0.000; eta= 0.060

53. Score= 4.21; F= 19.730; p= 0.000; eta= 0.060

54. Score= 4.02; F= 24.037; p= 0.000; eta= 0.080



## Career goals and sustainable careers

Whitepaper 1 of this series dealt extensively with the concept of ‘sustainable careers’. But what is the relationship between career goals and sustainable careers? To answer this question we take a closer look at the indicators mental health, employability and job satisfaction. In addition, we will also look at general career satisfaction.

*With regard to the respondents’ mental health, we see that it is lower when people identify more with ‘job’ or ‘career’ as their career orientation. On the other hand, respondents who identify very strongly with ‘calling’ as their career orientation generally have a higher mental health (Table 12).*

**Table 12: CAREER ORIENTATIONS AND MENTAL HEALTH**

	Not at all	Hardly	A little	A lot	Very much
Job <sup>55</sup>	3.95	3.51	3.32	3.07	2.75
Career <sup>56</sup>	3.45	3.38	3.25	3.17	2.93
Calling <sup>57</sup>	3.27	3.35	3.39	3.14	3.47

In addition, *work happiness is also significantly lower among respondents who strongly identify with ‘job’ as their career orientation (Table 13). It is higher for respondents who strongly identify with the career-orientation, but respondents who strongly identify with ‘calling’ score the highest on work happiness.*

**Table 13: CAREER ORIENTATIONS AND WORK HAPPINESS**

	Not at all	Hardly	A little	A lot	Very much
Job <sup>58</sup>	3.91	3.58	3.46	3.48	3.13
Career <sup>59</sup>	3.36	3.36	3.56	3.79	3.92
Calling <sup>60</sup>	3.08	3.34	3.67	3.86	4.34

55. F= 37.980; p= 0.00; eta= 0.110 (large effect size)

56. F= 4.489; p= 0.001; eta= 0.020

57. F= 3.699; p= 0.003; eta= 0.010

58. F= 20.014; p= 0.00; eta= 0.070

59. F= 17.369; p= 0.00; eta= 0.050

60. F= 65.741; p= 0.003; eta= 0.180 (large effect size)

There's a similar tendency in employability (Table 14 and 15). *Both internal and external employability are higher among respondents who identify strongly with 'career' or 'calling' as their career orientation.* However, internal employability is significantly lower when respondents strongly identify with 'job' as their career orientation.

**Table 14: CAREER ORIENTATIONS AND INTERNAL EMPLOYABILITY**

	Not at all	Hardly	A little	A lot	Very much
Job <sup>61</sup>	3.11	3.06	3.08	3.14	2.79
Career <sup>62</sup>	2.66	2.93	3.25	3.33	3.46
Calling <sup>63</sup>	2.68	2.97	3.19	3.29	3.60

**Table 15: CAREER ORIENTATIONS AND EXTERNAL EMPLOYABILITY**

	Not at all	Hardly	A little	A lot	Very much
Job <sup>64</sup>	3.40	3.28	3.41	3.44	3.12
Career <sup>65</sup>	3.09	3.20	3.50	3.62	3.65
Calling <sup>66</sup>	3.10	3.23	3.44	3.54	3.83

General career satisfaction is low among respondents who strongly identify with 'job' as their career orientation (Table 16). This is higher among respondents with a stronger focus on 'career' and 'calling', although career satisfaction is not very high for these groups overall. Research also shows that people with a very strong calling sometimes experience difficulties in actually reaching that calling or have too narrow a focus in their career goals, making satisfaction harder to achieve.

**Table 16: CAREER ORIENTATIONS AND CAREER SATISFACTION**

(in %)	Low	Acceptable	High	Very high
Job	47,35	37,87	30,32	30,93
Career	13,71	14,68	21,81	25,90
Calling	10,59	15,11	24,95	36,33

61. F= 3.329; p= 0.006; eta= 0.010  
 62. F=26.824; p= 0.00; eta= 0.080  
 63. F= 19.444; p= 0.000; eta= 0.070  
 64. F= 3.463; p= 0.004; eta= 0.010  
 65. F=13.172; p= 0.00; eta= 0.040  
 66. F= 11.425; p= 0.000; eta= 0.040



## Wrap-up: Career goals

Career goals and orientations play a central role in people's careers and are crucial for experiencing career success. This study shows that the majority of respondents primarily strive for expertise development in their career, while an increase in responsibilities is less desired. This finding seems to be in line with the shifting focus from objective career success (gaining responsibilities as a basis for e.g. promotions and salary growth) to subjective career success (gaining expertise as a basis for e.g. meaningful and impactful work). However, the participants appeared to focus mainly on 'job' as a career orientation. Thus, for the majority of respondents, work is not a goal in itself, but primarily a transaction: a means, for example, to earn the money needed to live. These findings seem contradictory, but a more detailed analysis of the results shows that the different career orientations do not necessarily exclude one another, but that they are able to coexist. Moreover, there were also differences in the type of work and education. In short: here, too, a differentiated picture seems the most representative.

Within this dynamic, we would like to highlight the differences between white-collar and blue-collar workers. When respondents strive for more expertise, this is strongly linked to certain positions and diplomas. White-collar workers apparently strive more for expertise than blue-collar workers. In addition, management and senior managers are also more inclined to orient their careers towards calling and career. These orientations also show a link with a higher degree of objective career success. The blue-collar respondents therefore tend more than the other categories to 'job' as their primary career orientation. However, this has a number of important implications for the sustainability of their careers. It is striking, for instance, that job-orientated respondents' mental health, work satisfaction, internal employability (the three indicators of a sustainable career) and elements of the general career satisfaction are rather low compared to the other two career orientations.

# Take-aways



This second white paper in the series “Careers in Perspective” dealt with career success and career goals. A successful career is important to everyone to some extent, although its meaning varies from person to person and according to circumstances. We therefore made a distinction between objective, ‘hard’ measures of success (e.g. salary and promotions) and subjective, ‘soft’ measures of success (e.g. impact and meaning). In addition, we took a closer look at career goals, which also determine the path to career success. To this end, we looked at career orientations, which not only determine how the respondents experience their daily work, but they also influence organisational commitment, turnover intentions and performance. People can have different career orientations at different moments in their careers.

These are the most important takeaways in terms of career success and career goals:

## **#1: The ‘classic’ career perspective has not disappeared**

Both in regard to objective career success and career orientations, it is striking that traditional thinking about careers is still present. The traditional factors still play a major role in objective career success, with objective success indicators such as promotions and salary being especially high among workers with higher education and positions. In addition, most respondents adhere to a so-called ‘job’ career orientation. For them, work is not an end in itself, but a means to live. This exposes a field of tension between the reality of careers and what is often put forward as an idea about careers in society and the media. Although the dominant narrative is often about proactive behaviour and the possibility of success for all, the results of this study show that the matter is somewhat more nuanced.

## **#2: Subjective dimensions of success are more inclusive**

In contrast to the objective success factors, the subjective success dimensions appear to do better justice to all participants, regardless of position, gender, age or degree. They do not start from a standardised picture and take more account of the personal work situation and values of the workers. Surprisingly, financial security emerged almost unanimously as the most important and the most achieved dimension. Here too, we see that the classic perspective is still strongly present: for many people, financial security is a basic need that is crucial to be able to experience a successful career. In addition to financial security, sustainable career aspects are paramount: the work-life balance, positive working relationships, learning and development and having a positive impact. The order of these dimensions also appears to be universally applicable and it hardly differs for the different demographic characteristics. This confirms scientific research from all over the world showing that these factors are important elements of a successful career.<sup>67</sup>

## **#3: The interplay of objective and subjective factors**

In general, both the classical/objective elements and the modern/subjective elements of career success are relevant to our participants. However, while the objective success factors seem to be especially attainable for higher educated workers, there seem to be hardly any differences when it comes to the subjective elements. This is a fascinating and somewhat surprising discovery, since we often get the impression that blue-collar workers are primarily concerned with money and white-collar workers are focused on meaningful work. This study shows that both groups of workers are concerned with both types of career success, which exposes an area of tension: although all participants, regardless of demographic characteristics and job types, attach importance to the same career success factors, the (socially accepted) classical factors seem not yet so easily accessible to everyone. In our opinion, this poses an important challenge for policymakers, employers, HR-professionals and career coaches to create a closer connection between the objective and subjective career elements.

## **#4: Blue-collars in a precarious position**

This study clearly shows that objective success factors are less well developed for blue-collar workers. For example, blue-collar workers are promoted significantly less, they generally have lower salaries and, as a result, may not be perceived as 'successful' in their careers by themselves and others. In addition, the blue-collar respondents also tend more than the others to 'job' as their career orientation. This puts them at risk of ending up in a vicious cycle, which will undoubtedly have a negative impact on their career development opportunities and their career sustainability. When there is a strong focus on 'job' as a career orientation, mental health, job satisfaction, internal employability and general career satisfaction are rather low. These findings are in line with Whitepaper 1 in this series. Blue-collars may benefit from more career guidance, an extra push to create a sense of urgency. In other words, an inclusive career policy for all job groups on the labour market is necessary, whereby the classic thinking shaped by exclusively objective success factors must be broken.

67. Briscoe, J., Dickmann, M., Hall, T., Parry, E., Mayrhofer, W., & Smale, A. (2018). Career success in different countries: Reflections on the 5C project. In *The management of global careers* (pp. 117-148). Palgrave Macmillan.

#### **#5: The role of gender and career success**

In this study, the role of gender is also striking. The objective success criteria showed that women in this study generally receive a lower salary than the male workers, and they are therefore less successful in that respect. However, it is remarkable that there are no differences in the number of promotions men and women have received or in the achievement of subjective career success factors. Nor do we see any differences in gender concerning career goals and career orientations. This picture is on the one hand hopeful, because we see that women are just as mobile in their careers as men and that they experience the same degree of subjective career success. Thus, in the field of employability and sustainable careers, gender equality seems to be on the rise. However, the picture is also problematic because, despite all similarities, women still report lower salaries. So there is still a way to go to create more equality in that regard as well.





# 4. Sample data

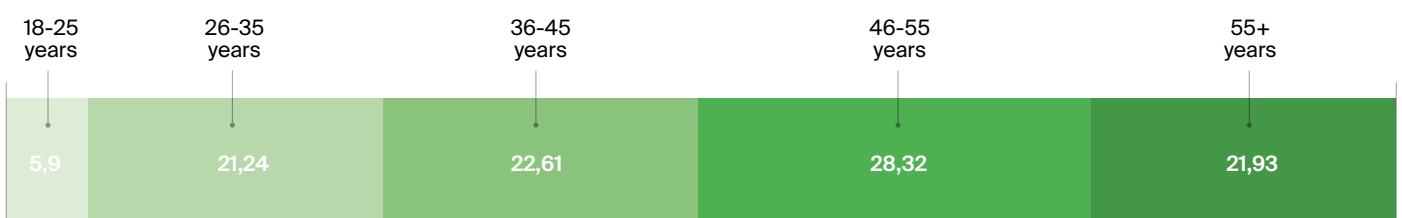


The findings in this report are part of a large-scale employee survey in Belgium and the Netherlands, set up by Antwerp Management School, House of HR & Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. In November 2021, a *representative sample of 1,610 employees* was surveyed in Belgium and the Netherlands. Respondents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

## GENDER (in %)



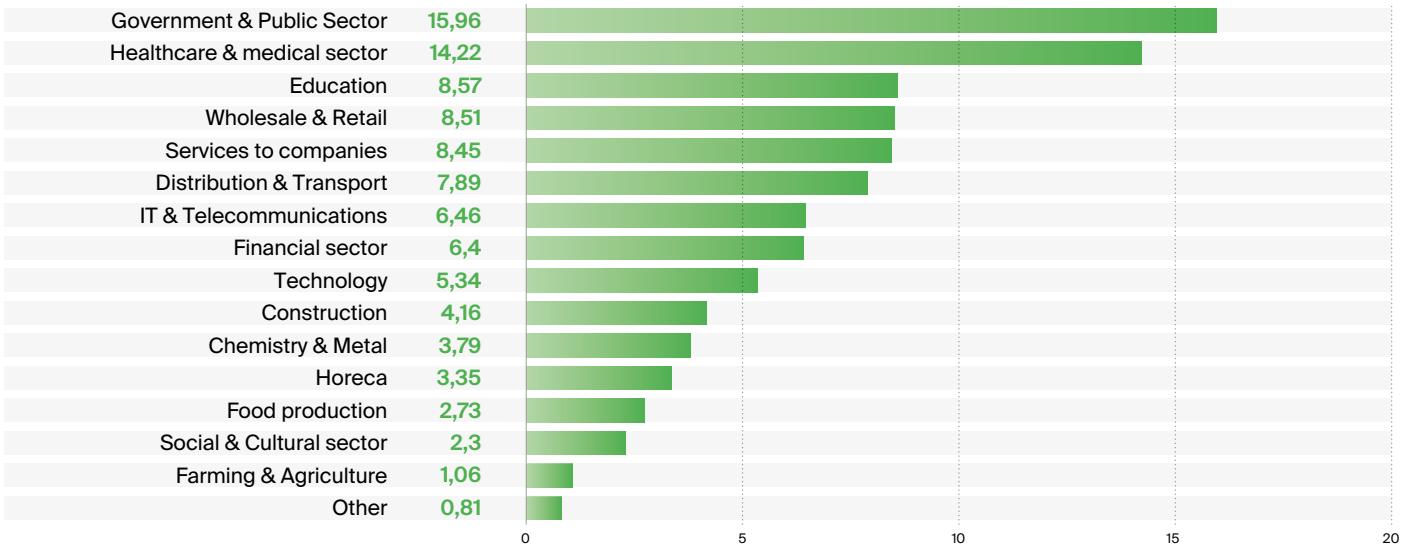
## AGE (in %)



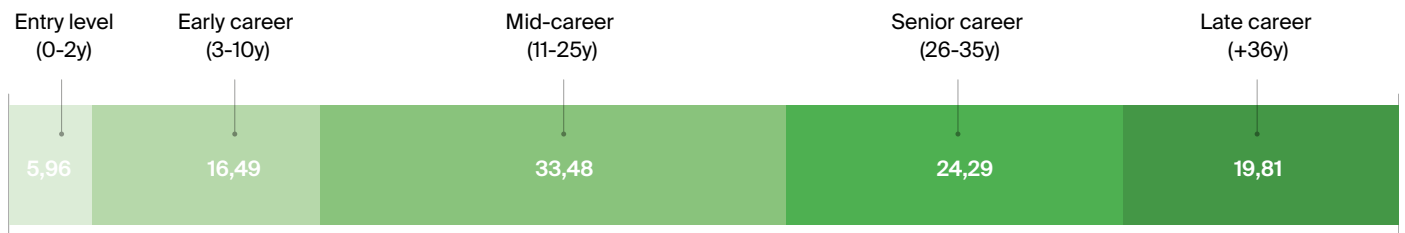
**REGION** (in %)



**SECTOR** (in %)



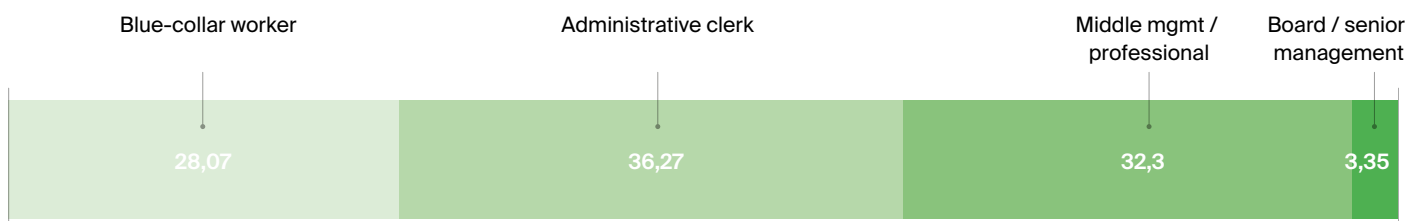
**WORK EXPERIENCE** (in %)



**DIPLOMA** (in %)



**POSITION** (in %)



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