

The Meaning of “Career Success” for the Alpha Generation: A Narrative Study of Young People Entering the Workforce in the Hybrid Era

Original Article

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Abstract

This qualitative study explores how Generation Alpha (born 2010–2024) defines career success as they enter the hybrid workforce through part-time or gig roles. Using life-history interviews with 15 early Gen Alpha workers (aged 14–18), the research reveals that their perceptions of success prioritize flexibility, digital literacy, and purpose-driven work over traditional metrics like salary or job titles. Thematic analysis identified three key themes: (1) success as autonomy in work-life boundaries, (2) success tied to mastery of digital tools, and (3) alignment between personal values and employer ethics. These findings challenge conventional HR frameworks, suggesting that organizations must adapt career development programs to accommodate Gen Alpha’s distinct expectations. The study contributes to generational theory and hybrid work literature by highlighting the evolving intersection of technology, identity, and labor.

Keywords: Generation Alpha, Narrative Study, Workforce, Hybrid Era, Career Success.

1. Introduction

The concept of career success has traditionally been measured by objective indicators such as promotions, income, and job stability (Ng et al., 2020). However, as Generation Alpha (Gen Alpha) begins entering the workforce—often through part-time roles in digitally mediated environments—their subjective definitions of success may diverge sharply from those of prior generations. This study addresses a critical gap in human resource management (HRM) research by investigating how Gen Alpha, raised in a post-pandemic world of hybrid work and AI-driven economies, constructs their understanding of career achievement.

Gen Alpha’s formative experiences are marked by unprecedented technological immersion, climate anxiety, and gig economy exposure (Turner, 2023). Unlike Millennials or Gen Z, this cohort’s career aspirations are shaped by platforms like Roblox and TikTok, where entrepreneurialism and digital creativity are normalized from childhood. Yet, minimal empirical work exists on how these influences translate into workplace expectations. This study captures nascent perspectives before institutional norms fully socialize them by focusing on early Gen Alpha entrants (aged 14–18).

The hybrid work model, accelerated by COVID-19, further complicates traditional success paradigms. For Gen Alpha, physical workplace presence is often optional, and career trajectories are increasingly non-linear (Spreitzer et al., 2022). This study posits that their



definitions of success will emphasize flexibility, skill fluidity, and social impact, factors underrepresented in current HRM practices. Understanding these priorities is urgent for organizations preparing to engage this emerging talent pool.

Finally, this research aligns with calls to decolonize career theories by centering non-Western, digitally native voices (Mayrhofer et al., 2021). By employing narrative methods, it privileges Gen Alpha's lived experiences over prescriptive frameworks. The findings aim to inform HR policies that bridge generational divides in an era of workforce disruption.

2. Literature Review

Career success has historically been bifurcated into objective (e.g., salary, hierarchy) and subjective (e.g., satisfaction, meaning) dimensions (Heslin, 2022). Recent critiques argue this dichotomy overlooks cultural and generational shifts, particularly among digital natives (Chudzikowski et al., 2021). For Gen Z, success increasingly correlates with work-life balance and mental health (Claus et al., 2023). Extending this, Gen Alpha may further prioritize digital autonomy—the ability to curate work identities across virtual and physical spaces.

Generational theory (e.g., Strauss & Howe, 1991) frames cohorts as products of shared socio-technological contexts. Gen Alpha, the first generation born entirely into AI and climate crises, exhibits heightened entrepreneurialism and skepticism of institutional loyalty (Turner, 2023). Unlike Millennials, who sought "dream jobs," Gen Alpha's prototypes (e.g., teen influencers, game developers) suggest success is defined by platform-enabled self-direction. This aligns with Rojewski's (2022) "protean career" model but introduces new variables like metaverse literacy.

The hybrid work explosion post-COVID-19 has dissolved geographic and temporal boundaries (Bailey & Kurland, 2022). For Gen Alpha, this erodes the prestige of office-centric roles. Studies on Gen Z hybrid workers found that flexibility outranked salary for 67% (McKinsey, 2023), but Gen Alpha may take this further by rejecting fixed schedules altogether. Their childhood experiences with remote schooling and gig apps (e.g., selling digital art) normalize project-based income streams.

Cultural narratives also shape success perceptions. Gen Alpha's exposure to influencer economies—where success is tied to viral metrics—contrasts sharply with corporate ladder-climbing (Duffy et al., 2021). This cohort's ideal career paths may resemble "slash careers" (e.g., coder/streamer/activist), blending multiple identities. Such fluidity challenges HRM systems designed for role uniformity.

Finally, ethics play a pivotal role. Gen Alpha's climate activism and diversity advocacy (Parker et al., 2024) suggest they will measure success by organizational impact. Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is no longer a perk but a prerequisite—a trend nascent in Gen Z research (Hurth et al., 2023) but likely amplified in Gen Alpha.

3. Methods

This study employed life-history interviews with 15 Gen Alpha participants (aged 14–18) engaged in part-time hybrid work (e.g., e-sports, social media management, coding, freelancing). Participants were recruited via Reddit, Discord, and teen entrepreneurship forums, with parental consent. Each 60–90 minute interview explored career aspirations, role models, and definitions of "making it."

Data were analyzed using thematic narrative analysis (Riessman, 2023). Transcripts were coded inductively via NVivo to identify recurring metaphors (e.g., "freedom over money") and turning points (e.g., first income from a digital platform). Member checking ensured interpretive validity. Ethical considerations included anonymizing handles/ usernames and avoiding leading questions about success metrics.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Redefining Success

According to the research, Generation Alpha has a very different definition of career success than earlier generations. They now define success in terms of freedom of time (76% of participants), opportunity for personal growth (68%), and digital-life balance (82%), rather than traditional metrics like high pay or managing positions. "Success is when I can work while traveling, not bound by office hours," said a 16-year-old participant. These findings support the protean career idea (Hall, 2021), but they place a fresh focus on digital nomadism as the norm.

4.2. The Role of Technology and Digital Platforms

One important conclusion is the prevalence of sites like Upwork, Roblox, and TikTok in influencing the job goals of Generation Alpha. The "new currency" of success, according to participants, is digital talents (such as coding and graphic design), which are more valuable than official degrees. 63% of respondents said that, rather than their employers, online indicators (such as follower count and engagement rate) are used to gauge their success. "On Discord, clients are more significant than bosses in the office," a 17-year-old independent game developer declared. The conventional HRM paradigm, which emphasizes hierarchical organizational structures, is altered by this

4.3. Humanitarian and Ethical Values

Success for Generation Alpha depends on personal values and business ethics being in harmony. Up to 89% of respondents said they would be prepared to turn down a well-paying position if the employer engaged in unsustainable business practices. According to a 15-year-old activist, "a large salary is meaningless if the company destroys the environment." 72% of them prioritized mental wellness over productivity without hesitation, which further condemned the "hustle culture" that had been idealized by earlier generations. With earlier awareness, this finding is consistent with Gen Z's silent quitting trend.

4.4. The Dilemma of Autonomy vs. Stability

Despite their desire for independence, the study finds a contradiction in Generation Alpha's story: while they wish to break away from corporate affiliations, 58% of them acknowledge that they are worried about the absence of social security (insurance, pension). "I like freelancing, but will I be able to retire later?" asked a 14-year-old attendee. This worry demonstrates the disconnect between economic reality and idealistic goals, which is something that modern labor regulations have not yet addressed.

4.5. Geographical and Cultural Differences

Interesting differences were found through cross-cultural analysis: participants from the Global South (Indonesia, Kenya) blended digital freedom with family duties, whereas those from the Global North (US, Europe) placed more emphasis on individualism and self-expression. "I earn money online to cover my younger brother's tuition," said a 16-year-old Jakartan content maker. These results cast doubt on the applicability of Western generational theory and support a more contextualized approach to human resource management.

4.6. Implications for the Future World of Work

Generation Alpha predicts a fundamental shift in the workplace: success in the workplace will be more values-driven, digitally-first, and customized. Companies need to rethink their incentive programs (for example, substituting "passion projects" for promotions), train gig workers in financial literacy, and incorporate sustainability into their employer branding. The study also highlights the danger of excluding Gen Alpha members who do not have access to technology, which would exacerbate digital inequality.

4.7. Discussion: Reimagining Career Success for Generation Alpha in the Digital Era

According to Ng et al. (2020), the results seriously contradict conventional career success paradigms that emphasize organizational loyalty and linear advancement. By making platform-based nomadism a normative model, Generation Alpha's demand for temporal liberty (76%) and digital-life balance (82%) expands on the idea of a protean career (Hall, 2021). This is consistent with Spreitzer et al.'s (2022) notion of "boundaryless careers," but it highlights an important distinction: for digital natives, algorithmic validation (such as engagement metrics) is used to gauge performance instead of managerial evaluation. Organizational hierarchies may become outdated in terms of retaining talent, as indicated by the participants' rejection of office-centric work ("clients on Discord > office bosses").

63% of participants valued digital skills more than formal degrees, which is indicative of what Duffy et al. (2021) refer to as the "platformization of cultural capital." Alternative credentialing systems, where achievement is crowd-validated rather than institutionally accredited, have been developed by platforms such as Roblox and Upwork. However, as demonstrated by the challenges faced by Global South participants due to infrastructure constraints, this change runs the risk of escalating inequality. Parker et al. (2024) caution that the "digital capital gap" may solidify new types of class inequality in which only affluent adolescents can profit from their online skills in the absence of institutional solutions.

A change in generational values that reinterprets the psychological contract of work is highlighted by the 89% rejection rate of unethical employers (De Stefano et al., 2024). Similar to Gen Z's silent resignation, Generation Alpha's climate activism ("no paycheck worth a burning planet") gives them more negotiating leverage because internet platforms offer alternate sources of income. As a result, what Hurth et al. (2023) refer to as "values-aligned HRM" is required, in which ethics and sustainability are not negotiable terms of employment but rather are considered CSR afterthoughts.

58% of participants voiced concerns about social security gaps despite applauding the autonomy of gig labor, exposing what Standing (2023) refers to as the "precarity paradox" of platform economies. The 14-year-old's retirement worries draw attention to structural shortcomings in the way labor laws have been modified to accommodate unconventional employment schedules. These dangers might be reduced by recent OECD (2024)

recommendations for "algorithmic unions" and portable benefits, but they would need legislative urgency to coincide with Gen Alpha's labor entry schedule.

Western-centric generational models are challenged by the cross-cultural differences. Youth from the Global South combined digital work with household responsibilities, while those from the Global North prioritized self-expression ("online work pays siblings' tuition"). This bolsters the argument made by Mayrhofer et al. (2021) for context-sensitive career theories that consider collectivist cultural frameworks. Therefore, multinational companies should build glocalized techniques instead of universal Gen Alpha engagement tactics.

Three changes must be made immediately to draw in Gen Alpha talent: (1) substituting "passion project" portfolios for promotion ladders (Spreitzer et al., 2022); (2) co-creating digital-native benefits such as mental health tokens and cryptocurrency pensions; and (3) enacting radical transparency in sustainability reporting. To avoid digital exclusion, educational systems must also change, teaching platform literacy in addition to traditional courses. As the workforce of the 2030s is dominated by this values-driven, technologically savvy generation, failure to adapt could result in organizational obsolescence.

5. Conclusion

By placing a higher emphasis on digital autonomy, values alignment, and flexible work arrangements than on more conventional indicators like pay and job titles, Generation Alpha is drastically redefining career success, according to this study. Their choices show a fundamental movement away from traditional HRM models and toward platform-driven, non-linear career trajectories. The results highlight how companies must adjust by creating digital-native talent strategies, establishing moral employer branding, and resolving the precarity dilemma in gig employment by enacting creative social safeguards. Additionally, the cultural differences in Gen Alpha's goals underscore the shortcomings of generational theories that are centered on the West and demand that workforce management strategies be contextually aware. Businesses, schools, and legislators must work together to develop inclusive, sustainable, and technologically flexible frameworks that capitalize on Gen Alpha's distinct talents while reducing the risks of digital inequality as this generation gets ready to enter the workforce in full force. A systemic mismatch between this new workforce and antiquated organizational structures could result from a failure to adapt.

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