The Economic and Labour Relations Review (2025), 1–20
doi:10.1017/elr.2025.5

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The best time to be young? A retrospective study of graduates' transition to employment in Romania

Maria-Carmen Pantea

Department of Social Work, Universitatea 'Babe -Bolyai', Cluj-Napoca, Romania
Email: Pantea@policy.hu

(Received 28 July 2024; revised 4 December 2024; accepted 7 February 2025)

Abstract

This article explores the subjective experiences of transition to employment in the outsourced/offshored business service sector in Romania. Based on 138 interviews with junior and senior graduates, it maps how different 'tidal economic waves' associated with Romania's economic transition have intersected working biographies since the 1990s. The paper argues that the sector generates many middle-class employment opportunities, legitimising consensus around the idea that 'this is the best time to be young.' Yet, informed by elements of political economy, it challenges the conventional repertoires of optimism. In doing so, it tentatively questions the long-term occupational prospects of those who take up entry-level positions in (arguably) automatable, on-the-move, and standardised jobs with lesser high-end value. The paper communicates using the structure of opportunity theory by highlighting how, alongside location, the concept of time (personal, historical, and company time) is woven into the work biographies of members of an under-researched group.

Keywords: business service sector; Eastern Europe; employment; graduates; outsourcing

Introduction

Romania became a destination for a thriving outsourced business service sector (BSS). This paper starts with an early discovery from a piece of large-scale qualitative research with BSS employees. Both recent and mature graduates argued that 'this is the best time to be young'. Expressions such as 'the lucky generation' and 'first generation not to complain' were frequent. What made our interviewees arrive at this conclusion in a country where all generations have some grounds for self-victimisation and their own narrative of generational injustice? This discovery was hard to unpack, especially in a context where the EU is concerned about a 'lost generation' following COVID-19, as evidence about the impact of underemployment accumulates (Heyes and Tomlinson 2021) and as, across the world, young people's collective emotions appear to be framed by 'social anger' towards entities of power, social institutions, 'systems', or societies (van de Velde 2023).

This paper investigates the subjective experiences of graduates working in Romania's mid-tier BSS. We used the above discovery as an entry point for understanding the structures that frame graduates' employment in a dependent economy shaped by multinational companies relying on offshoring and outsourcing. *How do graduates of different cohorts make sense of the structures that shape their working lives, what kind of subjectivities emerge in this process?* This paper examines young people's grammars of happiness in an attempt to 'sociologise the emotions' (van de Velde 2023) and understand how structures are woven

into personal biographies. Ultimately, the hope is to contribute to a better understanding of Central Eastern European (CEE) graduate careers in multinational companies. While acknowledging the relevance of individual agency, we wanted to trace patterns and structures that enabled larger groups to succeed.

We tentatively propose there were three 'waves' that generated windows of opportunity in Romania's recent history: the fall of communism, EU accession, and, finally, the growth of the outsourcing/offshoring sector before the COVID-19 pandemic. The paper confirms that this thriving sector provides many middle-class employment opportunities. Some jobs are able to lead to respectable white-collar careers unimaginable decades ago. Interviews captured young people's optimism, and even excitement. However, as the sector 'matured,' the possibility for graduates to discern 'the right time and the right place' to make career moves became more obscure and difficult to decrypt. Internal configurations of departments and projects were continuously revised, and as ideas of progression and internal markers of distinction were created, job descriptions were often (deliberately) ambiguous. Given this environment, we argue that young people began to become susceptible to a powerful narrative of 'opportunities,' albeit within a labour market that is confusing to many.

The paper opens up several elements of inquiry that challenge the notion that those entering the labour market are, indeed, in a privileged position. In doing so, it argues that these careers are being reconfigured with a larger share of low- to mid-level jobs and a shrinking top managerial stratum, while the industry's mobility remains contingent on global dynamics and the fulfilment of profit targets elsewhere. Besides, the sector's labour intensive, youthful jobs requiring emotional work call for questions about the long-term prospects for those approaching midlife in these workplaces. Ultimately, the paper tentatively questions the long-term occupational prospects of those who take up entry-level positions in (arguably) automatable and standardised jobs – part of the knowledge economy's 'pseudo-vanguardism' Unger (2019).

Theoretical background

Corporate life has conventionally been associated with upward trajectories. Research indicates that distance (through offshoring) is associated with an increase in the number of *middle*-managerial layers, both at headquarters and subsidiaries (Gumpert et al 2019). However, as the proportions of *top* managerial positions have shrunk, it is questionable if occupational structures have been 'sufficiently upgraded to accommodate the growing number of highly qualified individuals' (Tomlinson 2017, 22). The question of whether graduates are entering a 'knowledge economy,' partaking in the phenomenon of digital Taylorism or the proletarianisation of immaterial labour ('cybertariat' cf. Huws 2003) is increasingly being raised. Dilemmas associated with their subjectivities and occupational identities as 'semi-professionalised' or working class have become pertinent.

Critics argue that companies have shifted from offering internal career paths to 'employability' elsewhere (Tomlinson 2017; Farrugia et al 2024; Mackenzie Davey 2021; Roper et al 2010), deliberately infusing a sense of insecurity and risk, normalising trajectories that involve underemployment and failure (Ho 2009; Winlow and Hall 2013). To Sennett, companies have moved from having an interest in long-term achievement towards celebrating 'potential ability' and 'soft skills' (2006:4). Conversely, anecdotal evidence bring mixed evidence: from occasional confirmations of the 'lazy and entitled' stereotype, to instances of overwork and underpayment.

Careers are not only the product of individual agency but also of the 'interplay between agentic and contextual forces over time' (Gunz and Mayrhofer 2021, 158). These contextual

https://doi.org/10.1017/elr.2025.5 Published online by Cambridge University Press

forces include life stage (personal time) and historical time, geography, social inclusion regimes (Durst and Beremányi 2024) political, economic, and demographic changes, institutional and policy contexts (Gunz and Mayrhofer 2021; Roberts 2009; Tomlinson, 2017; Robertson et al 2021; Deželan et al 2016). Work does not happen in a vacuum but is strongly connected to places that have their own histories, education systems, and political ecosystems (Alexander 2024). These need to be part of the conversation on how careers unfold.

According to the opportunity structure theory (Roberts 1968), young people *do not choose* as much as *adjust* themselves to external conditions based on class, ethnicity, and gender ('who they are,' according to Roberts). Young people do exercise agency, yet, within the confines of reshaped opportunities: 'responsibility for outcomes is personalised (privatised), but outcomes are not simply personal choices' (Roberts 2009, 362).

Although opportunity structure theory was used as a frame for explaining labour market transitions in the developed economies of the West, its application to a dependent market economy was rather contextual, limited, and intuitive. Also, the theory examined the positional dis/advantages of different generations spanning seven decades ('Baby Boomers,' Generation X, and *millennials*). Yet, as this paper will suggest, the economic transformations of the last 30 years are too dynamic to be collected under such single generational umbrellas.

Ultimately, despite its potentially explanatory value for understanding the career advancement of ordinary graduates, opportunity structure theory was mainly used to explain work-related issues either at the very bottom: unemployment, early school leaving, precarious and low-skilled jobs (Bessant 2018; Shildrick et al 2012), or at the very top: the positional advantage of the elites (Holford 2017; Friedman and Laurison 2019). The 'missing middle' was a recent discovery (Roberts 2015; Cairns et al 2014). The latter are largely 'those whose names are neither inscribed on the honors' boards of their schools nor scratched into the desks' (Brown 1987 cf. ,Williamson 2017, 56) or members of 'the "new mainstream" that lies between the lumpen groups at the bottom and the successful new entrepreneurs, technocrats and knowledge economy workers somewhere above' (Winlow and Hall 2009, 104).

Understandably, many groups may claim legitimacy as 'the missing middle'; graduates in the mid-tier business service sector are one such group. To Streib (2023), these are employees doing work that does not require extensive training: 'data entry, processing accounts payable and accounts receivable, monitoring payroll, checking the performance of an ad campaign, creating pivot tables, researching investments, managing projects, talking to clients, organizing events, and selling products' (2023: 152). They work, according to Unger (2019), in the '"Walmarts" of the world'; in 'pseudo-vanguardist' office jobs that create the illusion of the knowledge economy but are merely disappointing proof that the knowledge economy remains insulated and the apanage of the elites.

Nonetheless, the knowledge economy is claimed to be an important driver of gro (Thompson 2020) wth in previously peripheral regions where large companies have externalised or located non-core services. Generally, it includes creating products and services based on symbolic resources and intellectual capabilities rather than based on the traditional factors of production: land, labour, or capital (Powell and Snellman 2004). The knowledge economy was expected to trigger fairness and development for all. Whilst policy agendas prioritise job creation as an indicator of political performativity, it is now that questions about the quality of jobs start being raised (Thompson 2020). It has been argued (Unger 2019) that large innovative firms outsource operations, once they are routinised, towards areas of 'pseudo-vanguardism'. There, work merely entails adoption of digital technologies to manage complex information (Unger 2019). Yet, the vast majority of workers from these economic (semi)-peripheries are seduced into conflating the technical character of their tasks with 'knowledge economy vanguardism' (Unger 2019). Indeed, research has pointed to the practice of casually re-labelling those employed in many

https://doi.org/10.1017/elr.2025.5 Published online by Cambridge University Press

existing and very disparate occupations as knowledge workers, whilst knowledge work is continuously internally differentiated, (re)stratified, and eventually, polarised (Brown et al 2015; Cavaglia and Etheridge 2020; Warhurst and Thompson 2006). Moreover, it may involve few employees (Unger 2019).

Interestingly enough, even the richest countries have been unable to generate a knowledge economy embedded at a large scale, as the research of Unger (2019) and Streib (2023) on the US mid-tier labour market suggests. Streib's graduate interviewees performed rather unexciting back-office work without the level of complexity one would expect. In Europe, as statistics cited in Brophy (2017) show, one out of every three new jobs in the first decade of 2000 in Ireland, was a call-centre position. Whilst the proportion of tertiary-educated individuals almost doubled in Italy, France, and the UK, the share of those doing non-graduate work has risen substantially, well beyond levels that can be explained by recession-driven fluctuations in demand (Purcell and Tzanakou 2016; Cote and Furlong 2016).

From a youth studies perspective, one can see the economic (read: extractive) value of jobs demanding 'youthful' attitudes and emotional work. Despite the policy narrative de-contextualising skills, the latter are always embodied: ingrained in the body and mind. We argue that there is a labour market deliberately interested in the value extraction or commodification of youth (see also Yates 2023a). Previous research has identified the co-optation of 'youthful culture' in late capitalism, as evident in the hospitality industry and the night-time economy (Farrugia et al 2024). This paper will provide support for considering the BSS as one such area, as well.

Historically, social mobility was a consequence of a changed labour structure, not individual effort (Avis 2017). Whilst the shift from agrarian economies to industrial production and the expansion of middle-class jobs in the state sector are handy examples, more recent transformations are also pertinent. The transition to a market economy in the former communist countries, for instance, created jobs in the private sector for those in a position to take such opportunities. Later, the burgeoning service sector and the development of the IT, opened career prospects that were not dependent on the individual effort alone. Outsourced/offshored work can change the labour structure, enabling large cohorts with a working-class background to occupy quasi-middle-class employment. Indeed, in the emerging economies of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), the promise of white-collar jobs for increasing numbers of graduates grew. After restricted access to higher education during communism and shortly after, a cohort of young people - many the first in their families to pursue higher education - have legitimate career expectations. However, it is uncertain whether the BSS operating through outsourcing and offshoring can accommodate their professional aspirations.

Evidence about the types of jobs available through outsourcing/offshoring remains insufficiently explored and, occasionally, it is a contentious issue in both home and host countries (Brannan 2015; Brophy 2017; Samuels 2018). Companies deliberately avoid discussing outsourcing/offshoring in home countries (Samuels 2018), and, we argue, at the receiving end, too. In receiving countries, 'foreign investment' is either celebrated as an indicator of state proficiency, or criticised in emerging, critical, and populist discourses. It is rarely a subject of research in its own right. There is little evidence about how opportunities to climb career ladders (have) unfold(ed) for different cohorts. Moreover, whilst STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) graduates generally seem to have better labour market prospects in knowledge-based economies (Purcell and Tzanakou 2016), we know little about graduates from the social sciences and humanities.

In the US, the examination of the conditions of entry into the mid-tier labour market for business services suggest that luck is the 'great equaliser' (Streib 2023). This research argues that neither advantaged nor disadvantaged graduates have the key to accessing good jobs because the definition of good jobs is shifting, and their content and payment,

https://doi.org/10.1017/elr.2025.5 Published online by Cambridge University Press

deliberately obscured by employers. Jobs are dynamic, career paths are unpredictable, and salaries are unknown prior to taking up employment. In Europe, it has become obvious that many employers 'don't care' what degree their new employees have studied. For instance, in the UK, as many as 86% of recruitment organisations included in a recent sample claim this (Institute of Student Employers 2019). In this context, one may legitimately question the employment prospects of young people in a country from an economic semi-periphery (Ban 2019) caught in a low-skills equilibrium (Târlea 2019).

Romania

Romania has 19.5 million inhabitants, and over 500,000 university students enrol each year, with almost a quarter choosing economics, accounting, and management (ABSL 2020). Alongside other CEE countries, it has become a popular destination for the BSS, notably procurement and supply chain management, finance and accounting, customer operations, and HR.[1] This development has been driven by EU membership and the availability of a sizable pool of recent graduates[2] at lower wages.[3] In 2020, 24.7% of the country's 25–34-year-old population had completed higher education (ISCED 5–8), compared to the EU average of 42% (Eurostat 2024). The average age of BSS employees is 25–34 (Romanian Government 2023).

The country has the characteristics of an economic semi-periphery (Ban 2019) with optimistic growth indicators. As of 2023, GDP per capita expressed in purchasing power standards ranked Romania above Hungary, Croatia, Slovakia, Latvia, Greece, and Bulgaria (Eurostat 2023). However, Romania is also a country with major regional disparities that render university cities attractive to young people from more deprived regions and towns. The BSS, which has developed in the 'magnet' cities, contributed 5.4% to Romania's GDP in 2021, and since 2011, this contribution has consistently been higher than the average contribution of this sector to the European Union's GDP (AGERPRES 2021).

It is uncertain how the opportunity to climb career ladders has unfolded for different cohorts of over recent decades. Romania's post-communist economic trajectory has been rather tortuous because of disproportionately low investment after the 1990s (in comparison with the countries of the region), a focus on low-added value services, a shortage of domestic and foreign capital, and considerable investment in short-term profit-generating activities (Păun and Pînzaru 2019). This has made the country a dependent market economy (Ban 2019) characterised by 'asymmetrical policies' that have made it 'favourable to foreign investment' (Gog 2020) in the overall European context shaped by the weakened position of labour (Heyes et al 2012; Păun and Pînzaru 2019).

Aims and methods

This study draws on the compelling findings of large-scale qualitative research, exploring the reasons people give for deeming the present 'the best time to be young.' The questions that guided the research were the following: *How do the structures of opportunities in a country undergoing economic and political transition intersect graduates' personal transitions to employment? How do graduates of different cohorts make sense of the structures that shape their working lives, what kind of subjectivities emerge in this process, and what can this tell us about the changing nature of work in the global economy?* The article strives to unpack individuals' perceptions of opportunities at the time of entering employment and their understanding of the enabling circumstances available for other cohorts. It maps how different 'tidal waves' have affected Romania's recent history and how they have intersected personal biographies.

https://doi.org/10.1017/elr.2025.5 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The research focused on the perspectives of junior and senior employees with a university background in a non-STEM area at a time when the public imaginary associates technology with success and renders marginal the prospects of those not trained in such subjects. We were aware of the risk of reifying 'graduates' and searched for the usually overlooked accounts of 'mature graduates' as well (Siivonen 2017). The paper is based on 138 in-depth interviews with graduates in their 20s and early 30s, as well as senior employees: HR staff, recruiters, and managers at different levels of seniority. With six exceptions, all interviews were face-to-face and carried out by two small research teams between 2018–2019 and 2022–2023. The duration was between 45 and 130 minutes, with an average of 75 minutes. *Verbatim* manual transcriptions resulted in over 2,500 transcript pages, later coded in NVivo (over 2,000 codes). All data were anonymised.

We used sociological, economic, and political lenses to analyse the structures of opportunities (and constraints) shaping graduates' transition to work in outsourcing/ offshoring companies. The life-narrative interviews allowed people to (re)present themselves, weaving 'the reconstructed past, the perceived present, and the imagined future' (Adler et al 2017, 519). Interviews engaged with the past (for instance, by exploring the careers of mature graduates), yet with the purpose of understanding the present. As we tried not to reify the concept of 'generation,' the paper uses a bottom-up conceptualisation based on interviewees' understanding of this, generally indicated via people sharing a collective conscience about major historical or political events (the 1989 Revolution, European integration, COVID-19, and the like).

The paper also responds to a moral imperative of refusing the seductive power of spectacular and 'memorable' stories in favour of more mundane, pedestrian, and ordinary ones in an attempt to balance extremes: either young people experiencing social disadvantage (those in NEET[4] situations) or the stories of professional success of those at the forefront of Romania's thriving IT sector, in innovation and entrepreneurship. In this process, the paper seeks to inform the wider debate about the changed nature of work in the global economy by examining a sector inherently on the move and a country at the receiving end of the outsourcing/ offshoring processes.

Methodologically, we do *not* deploy a study of structures but one that examines how people retrospectively construct the ways structures influence their working lives and selves. The ambition is not to create a 'true story' but 'plausible accounts of the world' (Silverman 2000), which cherish – and do not dismiss – ambiguity (Alvesson and Spicer 2010). We aim to 'link structural dimensions with graduates' lived experiences' (Tomlinson and Holmes 2017, 28).

But how do we access structures/the 'generative mechanisms' in people's accounts? The paper uses a critical realist stance, which holds there are three layers/ domains of reality: 'the empirical' (which can be observed), 'the actual' ('just below the surface'; accessible through qualitative research) and the 'real' level, where structures, generative mechanisms, and dispositional powers exist, yet are not directly observable (Bhaskar, 1975). The real level ('the bottom of the iceberg') can only be inferred through a process of abduction (theoretical re-description) (Stutchbury 2021).

Critical realism recognises that the knowledge participants have of social structures is inherently subjective, relative, and constructed, and that there are 'unobservable structures'; that is, a reality independent of people's knowledge of it (Bhaskar, 1975; Tikly 2015). The paper employs an abductive approach (a third type of research inquiry besides deduction and induction). It starts with observations from which it seeks to draw 'the simplest and most likely conclusion' (Agterberg 2021; Eco 1983). Whilst induction and deduction are based on *necessary* inferences, abduction provides *the best explanation and generates plausible, indefinite (and insecure) conclusions that do not completely* eliminate uncertainty or doubt. This process carries inherent limitations: it remains necessarily prudent and tentative. Yet, it serves our purpose of making the leap from the empirical

https://doi.org/10.1017/elr.2025.5 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and the 'actual level' of observable data (including interviewees' testimonies) to the 'real' level of structures, generative mechanisms, and dispositional powers.

Findings and interpretation

The next section searches for structures in the interviewees' narratives. It unfolds several major 'waves' that emerged, and critically revises the findings.

Tidal wave I: 'the first lucky generation'

When the few multinationals located services in Romania,[5] they preferred to employ recent graduates who were 'uncontaminated' by communism. Senior interviewees reflected on their positional advantage but also on the highly competitive, close-to-exploitative environments of the time. Being in the right place at the right time meant being a very recent graduate, who was ambitious and located in Bucharest. Those entering the few multinational companies on the market were likely to grow up fast (provided they had enabling circumstances to keep up with the harsh working conditions). Ana, a 52-year-old owner of a recruitment company, recalls her overambitious start as an HR manager at a 6,500-employee Romanian company that was bought by an international group:

> Continuously, the woman from the interview board repeated: '*But you are too young.' Of course, I am young*, I thought. *Haven't you noticed that from my CV? Why did you make me come to Bucharest, then?* I knew they didn't trust the people that worked there previously, they wanted someone new. But I didn't want to accept anything less than [the position of] the HR manager! Imagine! And they finally gave me the job. I had a row of over six interviews, so it was not that they arrived easily at this decision. Then, at the company, I met a more experienced woman, like the one I'd be now. She took me aside and told me: '*Look, girl. You are going to work here with strong men. They will drive you crazy. They'll trick you, and you won't even know what hit you. Be careful!*' And she was so right! I was tough, but I resigned within a year. (Ana, 52, owner of a recruitment firm)

Ana admits such a career leap would be outrageous today. But this event in her professional past does not deter her from criticising the 'unreasonable' expectations of the employees at her own recruitment firm:

> New entrants are now recruiting [employees] for Lidl, and they [the recruiters] complain that their own salaries are lower than those at Lidl. *Well, go and work for Lidl! And then, all you can do is move to another supermarket! An HR expert is not made in a year! You need 4–5 years to start adding value to a company.* (Ana, 52, owner of a recruitment company)

But, to our senior interviewees, the chances that opened up for their generation were far from a 'Romanian story':

> In the 90s, expatriate middle managers sent to Romania were so and so: loosely trained people without careers back home. They were 'outlaws,' to put it that way. Some married in Romania later on. There were 100 expats in [the multinational] alone in the 90s! In 2016, there was one! This was the consolidation stage; it made no sense to pay the foreigners triple salaries. The next change worldwide was the centralisation of senior positions. In 17 years, [the multinational] went from having

https://doi.org/10.1017/elr.2025.5 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> around 100 directors in 100 countries to 24 clusters. Seventy-four director jobs disappeared! The remaining have larger portfolios. It has nothing to do with Romania. This happened everywhere! I was 26, and I had a secretary. Now, I'm 56, I book my reservations, I scan my bills, and I upload them to an outsourced company in Poland. (Marius, 56, corporate board advisor, now living abroad)

The stories above are the very tip of a large iceberg, as there were not many 'winners' in the 1990s and early 2000s. Success was selectively accessible to the class-advantaged. The transition from a planned economy to corporate employment was slow and difficult, with the 1990s being experienced as a harsh time. The selling of state-owned companies, as well as bankruptcy, high inflation, and massive layoffs, caused deep social problems. Older interviewees remembered hearing of as many as 500 applicants for a position in a bank. Overall, employment was largely in the hands of Romanian companies, blamed for poor management, stress, authoritative leadership, the unclear division of tasks, and an overall sense of uncertainty.

Tidal wave II: EU integration and the financial crisis. The arrival of outsourcing/offshoring

Most outsourcing/offshoring companies from the BSS entered the Romanian market in late 2000s. Their decision was a result of EU membership (2007) and the economic crisis that drove companies towards lower-cost regions. But the beginnings were tentative, with small-scale projects 'exported' from the West. Location mattered: some interviewees in Bucharest remembered 'a boom' after 2010, when BSS multinationals came in copycat fashion, while graduates from second and third-tier cities recalled extreme difficulty finding work at the same time. Alex, newly married and stuck in a stressful entry-level position at a bank, wanted another job. Between 2010 and 2013, he submitted around 100 CVs without any response. He even considered, without success, working in mountain resorts within a radius of 100 km.

Company time mattered. Being in the right place at the right time meant moving into a company or a department at the very instant it entered the market. But these were chaotic processes with uncertain ends and many abandoned such early positions, as they involved very hard work, sometimes extending late into the night. George (35) described 'his chance' of moving from a call centre job to a newly established department right when it opened, where he adapted training tools from the US. He soon became team coordinator for over 80 new entrants, all older than him (he was, at the time, a second-year student). Five years later, a PhD candidate employed there was stuck in an operator role.

Gradually, interviewees noticed changes in companies' expectations: from a total disregard ('cruelty') for private life until the mid-2000s ('Take it or leave it; plenty [more people] are lined up for this job') to more humanistic management. As the selection pool dwindled (partly because of outward migration) and as poaching became the norm, new entrants became 'demanding and capricious' (Carmen 45, HR partner). Managers and HR staff focused on crafting internal hierarchies of progression (Pantea 2023) and on making rather repetitive tasks appealing to young people who tended to perceive labour as transactional and the abundance of employment as a given.

Tidal wave III: the time of 'good enough' and the 'therapeutic turn'[6]

After a period when young people were required to have experience, the economic and demographic situation led to a situation when young people were needed in the labour market regardless. The COVID-19 pandemic was, of course, a major landmark in the world of work. However, our interviews suggest that many of the post-COVID-19

https://doi.org/10.1017/elr.2025.5 Published online by Cambridge University Press

transformations involved escalations of previous trends that were visible around 2016. Even before COVID-19, the large migration flows out of Romania brought about a notable labour force crisis at all levels. Recruiters often conveyed a sense of ineffectiveness concerning filling up positions, with young employees often described as 'making the rules of the game.'

Young people's definition of good jobs changed gradually. Although occasional overtime was still a norm in the auditing and accounting professions, generally, work-life balance was paramount. With a reputation for rigid procedures, high-level responsibility, and a sense of pressure, banks needed to undergo repeated cycles of recruitment to meet their staffing needs. In an environment with over-selection and elite employment, banks had to be content with 'good enough' candidates (Streib 2023). Social class, including social networks, were no longer a must for employment. Companies had to promote themselves as places where well-being, authenticity and the respect for personal needs are paramount.

Senior employees displayed mixed feelings about this 'therapeutic turn' (Madsen 2014; Sanchez et al 2022) – notably, graduates' reluctance to work extra time: mainly, condemnation of young people's 'disproportionate' expectations (elaborate 'lazy and entitled' tropes), but also somewhat appreciative stances: 'perhaps this is the right way to go.' Some of our interviewees' insights were a product of previous reflections or inspirational discourses popular in managerial circles. A cross-cutting narrative was that the generations in the first half of the 20th century had focused on survival; those who lived during communism focused on marginal comfort while working hard. By now, the imperative for survival and comfort has been replaced with exploration, self-development, and a search for meaning. Regardless of age, our interviewees valued these emancipatory goals but noted they came without the drive that mobilised previous generations, as 'millennials saw their parents destroyed by work, and they don't want that' (Ovidiu, 45). Often, young people themselves were self-critical, especially when working in HR and recruitment roles:

> There are, categorically, better promotion prospects for the young generation now. But the attitude is different, and it matters! Many don't have the right attitude and the perseverance our parents had to move on. And if we factor this in, it may well be that many of those who would have opportunities and possibilities will actually not advance as they imagine. (Claudia 29, HR)

HR interviewees highlighted young people's expectations of very receptive environments whilst describing them as extremely sensitive, with a low tolerance for emotional discomfort, easily ready to complain, and looking to maximise their individual wellbeing in 'sanitised' environments where the risk of divergence is minimal. Working from home corresponds to their preferences:

> Their comfort zone must not be affected by the commute, it must not be affected by readjusting to another city, to another . . . circle of colleagues, friends. So, it's much more interesting to be young nowadays, but it would be good for them to take advantage of this flexibility. (Otilia, 32, HR partner)

Often, young employees were described as in continuous need of experimentation, picky about tasks, insufficiently 'proactive,' unwilling to take responsibility, and experiencing an 'immobility turn' (see also Cairns and Clemente 2023). Seniors confessed to 'being tired of trying to motivate young people.' A 30-year-old team leader shared his strategy of taking frequent breaks and constantly telling his team, 'This is a routine job that you will not do forever, but it's important to get it done' (Luca, 30, team lead).

https://doi.org/10.1017/elr.2025.5 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Instances of poor work ethic, 'ghosting,' or disproportionate salary expectations were frequent. Explanations referred to a 'spoiled generation,' eager to uphold living standards painstakingly maintained by parents as a compensatory mechanism after experiencing deprivation under communism. The incessant consumption demands that come with urban life play a role, as well as the industry's secrecy about income and its continuous messaging about 'opportunities.'

Low-bar entry jobs, highly routinised and involving in-house training, do create a sense of social mobility for graduates from small towns, often the first in their families to go to college. What Streib (2023) argued is pure luck, several interviewees saw as a sign of social justice. The highly competitive and rare corporate jobs their parents' generation had occupied have been replaced by an abundance of entry-level positions available, regardless of class, to virtually any graduate who meets some basic criteria, notably the possession of 'soft skills' (loosely defined around communication abilities, willingness to learn, and teamwork).

> Our generation is very lucky, maybe the luckiest! We have started having systems that are based on the equality of chances in Romania as well. Systems that are pretty open, where there are entry-level positions almost for everything! And if you are really willing to learn, to grow and to work, you can! [. . .] Our parents raised us with the idea that you cannot get there. But if you have that 'I can do it' attitude, which many of our generation do have, in reality, our systems are conceived in ways that make things possible! (Elena 25, trainer)

There is a permanent reconfiguration of opportunities as companies merge or split, re-arrange departments, bring in new projects, and relocate others, and turnover is high. For instance, Ana, a young woman in a Business Process Outsourcing organisation (BPO) went on maternity leave. Upon return, the BPO had become part of the outsourcing company as a shared service. Whilst her work remained the same, some administrative rearrangements had occurred, with mid-managerial positions being reconfigured. Eugenia ran into a 'dead-end' in the field of data protection. But, as more corporate structures were required to manage the implementation of the European Data Protection Directive, she moved from the company's periphery closer to the centre in a dedicated department that was set up with her as a 'chief data protection officer.' Her progress was more due to changed structures than to personal merit alone. Elsewhere, an interviewee was hired as a customer program manager and paid a reasonable relocation package. He had valuable technical skills and experience. Yet, ten months later, he received another compensation package, this time because the entire project moved to Thailand. This change was, of course, a matter of structures and not attributable to personal merit or deficit. To most graduates, this unpredictability signalled a sense of dynamism in an industry that is changing fast, arguably for the better.

It came as no surprise that many graduates in their early 20s had very complex work trajectories and displayed variegated employment experiences of a kind that were not possible even one decade ago. Irina, a senior procurement specialist of 23, for instance, explained her satisfaction with having a mission in Germany at the mother company, where she had learned a process that she then transferred to her department in Romania. The humanist management approach had paid off – note how Violeta (24) speaks about her generation compared with an indefinite 'past':

> We also have much greater opportunities compared to our parents! Our generation's employers no longer think of us as tools but rather as partners, creating a long-term partnership. (Violeta 24, Onboarding Specialist)

https://doi.org/10.1017/elr.2025.5 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Violeta's account demonstrates how young people working closer to the base of the corporate hierachy actively produce and reproduce an ideology that perpetuates the status quo (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005). However, these over-optimistic accounts may only tell a part of the story. Rarely, ambiguous alternative accounts emerged. This is where we move next.

Beyond the surface: alternative perspectives

This section adds nuance to the above-described positive repertoires of optimism by expanding through abduction some accounts that challenge the idea that 'this is the best time to be young.' We tentatively open up the interpretation to emerging issues likely to provide alternative accounts or add complexity to taken-for-granted interpretations.

Best time for whom?

For whom is it now the best time to be young? And who is doing the labelling, for whom, and how does the power of labelling play a role? One should not be deceived: using the country as the unit of analysis to investigate the implications of outsourcing/offshoring creates a misleading picture when significant regional discrepancies are present, as is the case in Romania. Companies relocated or externalised services, yet they did so in large cities. Small towns and third-tier cities remained depleted by internal and external migration. Our interviewees found it important to live in 'magnet cities,' where there are options available and where spatial transformation contributes to shaping corporate subjectivities.[7] This is a process from which those from rural areas or without a degree are categorically excluded (Geambaşu 2016): the 'lost millennials,' as argued by (Koller et al 2022). Besides, the young people now celebrating abundant entry options into employment are typically without dependents and major economic commitments (higher-education loans are virtually non-existent in Romania).

Interviewees' positive stance on the present was highly dependent on personal histories and local options. For Ana, a 30-year-old woman from a small town who was working in a call centre, the present was bright compared to the nine years she had spent in Italy as a babysitter. To Ramona, previously a waitress, the corporate life as a payroll officer was a blessing. To both, having a salary paid on time and non-abusive management were strong reasons for considering they were in the 'right place.'

Some interviewees, albeit rarely, questioned the implications of defining well-being based on work and income alone. Andrei, 28, shifted his celebratory statements about the present into a broader lament concerning the social losses of 'everybody [being] concerned about making money' at the expense of meaningful social relations. His account incorporated a 'secondary nostalgia' (Velikonja 2009) for an age he had not experienced:

> Capitalism is double-edged – on the one hand . . . yes, you can earn better. But on the other, it's an endless competition . . . everyone thinks only about money, everyone is stressed . . . to make money. I don't know . . . probably it was better back then. I think people were happier. (Andrei, 28, accountant)

Overall, it was rather difficult for the young graduates to reconstruct, retrospectively, a communist past they did not experience. Asked about the chances of their parents' generation, they elusively put together disparate statements mixing stereotypes about industrial work, free housing, and wild tales of entrepreneurship during the 1990s. They seemed to have a reasonable understanding of what the past entailed, but still, their narratives were fractured, as many stories of members of their parents' generation

https://doi.org/10.1017/elr.2025.5 Published online by Cambridge University Press

remained untold. Eventually, our interviewees' perspectives converged to the present. As with the past, unless prompted, they did not engage in examining what the future may hold, either at a personal or collective level.

Low skills equilibrium and the end of the cycle?

It was argued that Romania is entrenched in a low-skills equilibrium shaped by a weakened higher education system (Târlea and Freyberg-Inan 2018) and a labour market interested in 'transferable skills' of medium complexity. Conversely, opportunities for exit towards higher-value work are cut short by an emerging crisis of competencies. According to an interviewee, 'whilst previous decades allowed for journalists and geologists to climb the ladders of corporate life,' some companies need more specialised competencies, which are hard to find. To her, 'soft skills are useful, but are not an end in themselves' (Cristina 47, business advisor). To another, 'the era of mediocrity is about to end' (Alex, 45, manager). Yet, this claim may hold for top-tier employment but less for the mid-tier sector, which – we argue – has an interest in tapping into run-of-the-mill graduates without clear career plans.

To some interviewees, companies are very transactional and potentially on the move if their financial targets are not achieved:

> No company comes here to help you grow. They come with targets and stay as long as it is financially profitable. (Olivia 47, business consultant)
>
> Companies here have the same DNA. They smell profit. (Mihai 24, logistics specialist)
>
> Corporations have this 'convincing pyramid.' They don't need much to brainwash young people. (Angela, 42, manager recruitment agency)

Angela's approach reflects Mazzucato's arguments about corporate decisions on labour utilisation – a rejection of investment in physical and human capital (Mazzucato 2021). To Mihai, a 31-year-old team leader in a BPO, 'Romania is approaching the end of the cycle,' as the increased salaries are likely to render the country less attractive. During his 10-year career, he had noticed a trend towards financialisation, with a gradual reduction of benefits for employees. He had witnessed how free gym subscriptions and high-quality health insurance had disappeared and how companies had moved from holding two team-building events per year to frugal social gatherings. To many seniors, the increase in salaries (and, sometimes, claims for remote work), mean that the chance is high that outsourcing projects will move. Arguably, Romania is not an option for companies interested mainly in cost optimisation. Indeed, more recently, some companies have decided not to locate their offices there after completing a cost–benefit analysis.

Automatable and on the move?

BSS is a sector with a longstanding interest in reducing its 'dependency on people' and – arguably prone to automation. In this area, our research arrived at mixed findings. Some interviewees in their 20s had already had their work automated. Asked about the future of their industry, the interviewed business leaders professed an increased demand for labour force (yet involving different tasks, once many operations become automated). At the lower managerial levels, we were told that labour is still cheap, training is simple, and the opportunity costs of AI conversion are rather high. Besides, as some operations move further east, others arrive.

Young graduates seemed convinced that the BSS was in avid need of more people and tasks and that the risk of automation or relocation was negligible. They acknowledged the

https://doi.org/10.1017/elr.2025.5 Published online by Cambridge University Press

possibility of automation, but as their sense of attachment both to their companies and jobs seemed low, they appeared rather unfazed by such a prospect. Many approached discussions about AI with a sense of self-serving optimism and strategic ignorance. The unsupported belief that, despite all difficulties, *things will turn out right* was a cross-cutting idea.

Marius, 27, a back-office worker, discovered abruptly that his shared service was not receiving documents that had been handed in. He learned that the company had invested in a robot that processed documents automatically. Yet, he remained convinced that 'robots will not take over the world.' The rumour (circulated by the engineers at the mother company) was that the price of this automation had been exorbitant and the return on investment questionable. Left without work, Marius and his colleagues were released to home or 'sat on the bench' for several weeks. Eventually, they found other, 'more provocative' jobs in data analysis, as the previous one was 'dull, anyway.' Marius has been left with an ambivalent feeling: convinced that automation is still too expensive for companies but experiencing technological unemployment firsthand. On another occasion, an automated tool also appeared overnight, with an opaque reaction from the outsourcing company: 'It was made clear to us that our job is to introduce data and not ask questions,' an analyst remembered.

Ultimately, for some, the glamour of corporate jobs may be a thing of the past. While multinationals remain the default choice for graduates (despite high turnover), in large cities, other career options, notably entrepreneurship, are gaining traction, particularly among the class-advantaged who can draw on seed money. To Ovidiu, 30, a 'logistics specialist' in Bucharest, 'office jobs don't have the same hype anymore,' with alternative paths, such as entrepreneurship and freelancing, becoming of interest. Well-positioned in the capital city, he can see that beyond the age of 30, advancement is only very selectively available. His account suggests that young people are developing 'zig-zag careers,' changing companies in search of advancement and salary increases previously available in-house. Elsewhere, HR managers confessed that the best candidates do not apply for corporate jobs anymore. Insights into the politics of promotion in multinational companies from senior employees confirmed that most positions are at the entry level. The higher one goes, the fewer top-level positions are available, and the more tacit and gendered barriers are present.

Where to?

This research was interested in understanding the 'real' level of structures that are not directly observable (Bhaskar 1975). However, our search for understanding larger processes was regularly cut short by a conceptualisation of employment as an individual pursuit. The idea that 'it all depends on the individual' was crosscutting. The question 'What will happen to those employed in the mid-tier business sector of today in 20 years?' remained unanswered and slightly uncomfortable to the majority of our interviewees. It confirms that the 'promise of capitalism' speaks to individuals, not to groups (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005).

It is unclear whether multinational companies can accommodate the professional aspirations of an expanding graduate population in emerging economies like the one in Romania. The promise of upward social mobility may not always hold in a sector that is also known for its low job quality in advanced economies, as well (Yates 2023b). Arguably, the 20th-century model of bureaucratic expertise, coupled with hierarchical educational achievement, is not sustainable in an age of mass higher education (Brown et al 2015). Indeed, companies continuously re-assess their competitive advantages (Bordean and Borza 2017), 'optimise' their management strategies, downsize, and search for 'a high-skilled, low-waged workforce' cf. (Brown et al 2008). Political stability is an increasingly important issue, as well.

https://doi.org/10.1017/elr.2025.5 Published online by Cambridge University Press

In Western countries, there are already 'few guarantees' that children from the middle and professional classes will maintain and, even less, surpass the social positions of their parents (Brown 2003). In Romania, the expansion of higher education for a cohort with a working-class background creates enabling circumstances for social mobility (or its simulacra), yet these are constrained at the base. We argue that although this fuels a sense of accomplishment for a large stratum of young people, one should not dismiss as irrelevant an (even tentative) exploration of other possible futures.

A large part of those now working in BSS experience upward social mobility in relation to their parents who came of age in a time without powerful higher education expansion. Despite a qualitative design, we tend to propose that the relative chances of entering office jobs have changed for individuals from working-class backgrounds compared to their more privileged peers. While in other sectors, class may still emerge as a relevant difference despite individuals achieving the same level of occupation, *for the mid-tier BSS*, we tend to agree with Streib's argument on class differences being cancelled, once the job allocations are based on the secrecy of salary and (often) ambiguous job descriptions. Besides, as Streib (2023) argued companies may have an interest not in selecting middle class new-entrants, but obtaining a diversity of ' "good-enough" candidates, who meet a low bar', thus, rendering class no longer relevant (Streib 2023, 24). In the standardised environments of mid-tier BSS, cultural tastes or professional social networks do not pay off. HR staff themselves come from mixed backgrounds, often employing personal criteria of merit, as 'culture that *doesn't* relate to class creates more cohesion than culture that does' (Lizardo 2006 cf. Streib 2023, 24).

Conclusions

It is always good to be young. However, we searched for important structures that influenced graduates' trajectories. As expected, the major turning points from recent history provided key landmarks: the 1989 Revolution, 2007 EU membership with the subsequent global economic crisis, and the pandemic. But, besides otherwise predictable 'tidal waves' (Trappenburg and van Pelt 2024), the windows of opportunity became more intricate and fuzzier. The more we advance towards the future, the more waves of an unpredictable nature emerged: companies open new offices, merge or split, shift from outsourcing to offshoring, restructure their departments, merge roles, change projects and clients, or make continuous rearrangements that create a sense of vibration around 'opportunities.' These changes confirm that instability and change are powerful engines for reproducing capitalism (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005).

Whilst the idea that 'now is the best time to be young' was common among various cohorts, mature graduates had historical anchors to support their arguments. Recent graduates reconstructed the present based on fractured insights from a past they seemed only remotely interested in. They lacked historical cues and seemed weakly attentive to the broader scheme of things, and only in ways likely to make them more politically informed navigators of the labour market. As the 'unity of the labour process' is broken and the latter perform 'simplified tasks, conceived and controlled elsewhere' (Braverman 1998), employees' capacity to interpret their labour market positioning was structurally limited.

But 'life narratives are not only expressive of identity but also constitutive, as they reflect people's efforts at meaning-making' (McIlveen et al 2021, 317). Seniors' stories about what the new generation *is like* need to be read as constitutive of identity. The former have a story, a rounded narrative that allows them to position their individual

https://doi.org/10.1017/elr.2025.5 Published online by Cambridge University Press

biographies in a wider, historical, social, and political perspective. Younger graduates' capacity to interpret their present is limited. They appropriate structures and corporate narratives whilst 'lacking a solid repertoire to critically engage with them' (Pantea 2023). Our research confirms that each generation experiences its own conditions as 'normal' (Roberts 2009) and is 'habituated into capitalist relations that are conducive to their time' (Braverman 1998, 116). Individuals' ability to analyse 'opportunities' is troubled by a seductive labour market that vibrantly advertises itself. It is only later and retrospectively that they can put together the pieces of the puzzle and see if things unfolded in a coherent manner, as anticipated.

Could young people's positive stance be a product of the performative value of managerial discourses, including HR efforts meant to create a sense of complexity, progression, and, ultimately, a culture of 'happiness at work'? Immersed in discourses that promote corporate employment, where various 'opportunities' are advertised enthusiastically, in vibrant processes of organisational restructuring, and in a broader context of celebrating the corporate sector as 'the creator of value' (at odds with a state sector blamed for many social and political ills),[8] such positive stances might have been inevitable. As Luce Irigaray argued, 'if we continue to speak the same language to each other, we will reproduce the same story' (1980). While we acknowledge the powerful discursive forces shaping the way young people understand work, we contend that there is, indeed, an 'objective reality' behind it.

Contrary to the common belief that business services are outsourced/ offshored in a copy-paste fashion, they are actually evolving and some new services are being developed directly in the outsourced countries. The jobs our interviewees are doing are jobs without history elsewhere. They are not remnants of old occupations but new tasks, albeit part of the knowledge economy 'pseudo-vanguardism': they use information and communication technologies usually associated with the emergent vanguard, yet 'without otherwise mastering and deploying the new, most advanced practice of production' (Unger 2019, 23). Nevertheless, for the 'good enough' graduates, the jobs unfolding in the BSS have a seductive corporate appeal and contain the promise of social mobility, although with prospects of advancement only selectively available beyond a glass ceiling, of which few seem aware.

Importantly, especially in Romania, significant internal geographical disparities shape people's working subjectivities. The BSS exemplifies the 'economics of agglomeration' (Fujita and Thisse 2002), with its concentration in metropolitan areas. Consequently, a fundamental limitation of studying the BSS lies in the exclusion of young people from regional peripheries who have not migrated to magnet cities. This research inevitably reflects a 'metropolitan bias,' insufficiently engaging with the perspectives of those remaining in the 'geographies of discontent' (see De Ruyter et al 2021; Alexander 2022). Any inferences regarding the links between work and civic participation drawn from this research are inherently incomplete, as they are unlikely to fully capture the potential anger and frustration fuelling rising populist movements (Deželan et al 2020; Simões et al 2020; Brett 2018). Incorporating place—particularly the peripheries—into career studies is a distinct but essential undertaking.

This research involved the mid-tier business labour market, which offers abundant employment at the entry-to-mid level. But this thriving sector also tells a story about other economic areas rendered unappealing. Some young interviewees had contemplated careers in teaching, social work, journalism, geology, veterinary medicine, or law. They ended up in outsourced/ offshored offices. Many had the plain conviction that they were in the right place at the right time, yet others had nostalgia about imagined losses. So, the alluring story of the BSS needs to be interpreted within a wider context in which there are few employment options in the academic fields of graduates and/or young people find it

https://doi.org/10.1017/elr.2025.5 Published online by Cambridge University Press

hard to enter these, due to low starting salaries, protected professional boundaries, slow progression, corruption, nepotism, high competition, and uncertain ends.

Previous research has considered time as inseparable from the notion of career and potentially related to age, historical period, and cohort effects (Harding 2009 cf. Robertson et al 2021). This research illustrates the potency of the concept as it discusses how personal time is weaved into historical time and company time in a geopolitical context. We propose that the understanding of structures needs to include, besides History, *local histories* and those of global companies. From this perspective, it is always possible for big or small waves to occur that render the notion of 'structures' very context specific and place-dependent.

Based on a constructivist stance, we avoid making strong claims about when the best time to be young is/was. The implicit question we arrived at is a different one: Is outsourcing/ offshoring good for Romania? As elsewhere, distance and outsourcing create a mid-managerial stratum in Romania, which graduates welcome. However, our young interviewees desired challenging tasks and experimentation or to be creatively engaged in work. Yet, the larger part of the jobs available in the mid-tier BSS are routinised, uncreative, unimaginative, unexciting, and – arguably – without the possibility of mastery, while still embedded in discourses that celebrate innovation, thinking outside the box, and creativity. Young graduates' stories become the unarticulated expression of Braverman's 'nostalgia for an age that has not yet come into being' (1989, 5). 'Unarticulated' because our interviewees tended to compare the present more with the past and less with the future.

However, the focus on young people – pertinent as it may be – conveys only a partial understanding of the implications of outsourcing/offshoring. Whilst a 'youthful labour market' may legitimise the focus on age, we may also ask about other criteria: gender, ethnicity, location, level of competence, and the like. Why not ask if this is the best time to be a woman in Romania? Or a person with disabilities? Or one who identifies as LGBTQIA+? Further, linking 'the best time to be young' to the labour market alone conveys a very partial (and misleading) understanding of young people's lives. It downplays other social phenomena: health, housing, education, the transition to autonomous life, consumption, and lifestyles. In the terms of Irigaray and Burke (1980), we risk reproducing the 'same story' (about young people as a 'labour force,' for instance). When trying to move beyond this tendency, new questions may emerge. One refers to those who fail to meet the standards for inclusion in the 'youthful' BSS. Ultimately, this prompts the question: Is the best time to be young the worst time to be old?

Data availability statement. Data cannot be shared openly but are available on request from authors. The author did not obtain permission for disclosing data and material. Upon reasonable request, anonymised will be made available (in Romanian).

Author contributions. Single author responsible for research design, data collection, interpretation, and data curation.

Funding statement. The research leading to these results received funding from The Executive Agency for Higher Education, Research, Development, and Innovation Funding under Grant Agreement PN-III-P4-PCE2021-0366 and PN-III-P1-1.1-TE-2016-0368.
No material from other sources has been reproduced.

Competing interests. None.

Ethical standards. I confirm that all the research meets ethical guidelines and adheres to the legal requirements of the study country.

- Consent to participate: Freely-given, informed consent to participate in the study must be obtained from participants
- Consent for publication (include appropriate statements): Participants gave consent to publish their data prior to submitting the paper. All data are anonymised.

Notes

1 IT is sometimes included within BSS. Yet due to its very specific character, this paper will not refer to the IT sector.
2 130,000/year cf. Romanian Government (2023).
3 The average gross salary in the BSS (including IT) is reported to be around 2,350 euros (National Institute of Statistics 2023).
4 Not in Education, Employment, or Training (NEET)
5 The transition to a market economy was very slow. In 1996, there were only 11 private enterprises with foreign investors (Romanian Government 2023 cf. Filipescu 2017).
6 J. Streib (2023) uses the concept to describe US graduates doing similar work. The expression 'therapeutic turn' is taken from Madsen (2014).
7 The GDP per capita of the capital city Romania, which is 139% of the EU average, and surpasses that of Athens, Madrid, Berlin, and Budapest (Eurostat 2025); the income of the top 20% of earners in the north-east is 9.5 times as high as the income of the bottom 20% of earners there (Eurostat, 2023).
8 A situation not unique to Romania, as argued in Mazzucato and Collington (2023).

References

ABSL (Association of Business Service Leaders) (2020) *EMEA's Business Services Landscape. A Snapshot of 18 Countries in the Region*. Warsaw: ABSL.
Adler JM, Dunlop WL, Fivush R, Lilgendahl JP, Lodi-Smith J, McAdams DP, McLean KC, Pasupathi M and Syed M (2017) Research methods for studying narrative identity: A primer. *Social Psychological & Personality Science* 8(5), 519–527. https://doi.org/10.1177/1948550617698202
AGERPRES (2021) Industria serviciilor de afaceri a contribuit în 2020 cu 5,4% la realizarea PIB-ului României (studiu). https://www.agerpres.ro/economic-intern/2021/10/07/industria-serviciilor-de-afaceri-a-contribuit-in-2020-cu-5-4-la-realizarea-pib-ului-romaniei-studiu–792541
Agterberg F (2021) Induction, deduction, and abduction. In Daya Sagar B, Cheng Q, McKinley J and Agterberg F (eds) *Encyclopedia of Mathematical Geosciences. Encyclopedia of Earth Sciences Series*. Cham: Springer.
Alexander R (2022) Spatialising careership: Towards a spatio-relational model of career development. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 44(2), 291–311. https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2022.2153647
Alexander R (2024) Career development: a geographical perspective. *Journal of the National Institute for Career Education and Counselling* 52, 82–93.
Alvesson A and Spicer A (2010) *Metaphors We Lead by: Understanding Leadership in the Real World*. New York: Routledge.
Avis J (2017) Vocational Education and Training - the bio-politics of Teachers' Labour. In: 12th JiVET Conference 2017, 7–9 July 2017, Worcester College, Oxford.
Ban C (2019) Dependent development at a crossroads? Romanian capitalism and its contradictions. *West European Politics* 42, 1041–1068.
Bessant J (2018) Young precariat and a new work order? A case for historical sociology. *Journal of Youth Studies* 21, 780–798. https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2017.142164
Bhaskar R (1975) *A Realist Theory of Science*. New York: Routledge.
Boltanski L and Chiapello E (2005). *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. London: Verso.
Brannan MJ (2015) You're not going anywhere: Employee retention, symbolic violence and the structuring of subordination in a UK-based call centre. *The Sociological Review* 63(4), 801–819. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-954X.12312
Braverman H (1998) *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
Brett D (2018) Book review: rural protest groups and populist political parties. *Party Politics* 24, 314–315.
Brophy E (2017) *Language Put to Work: The making of the Global Call Centre Workforce*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
Brown P (1987) *Schooling Ordinary Kids: Inequality, Unemployment and the New Vocationalism*. London: Tavistock.

https://doi.org/10.1017/elr.2025.5 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Brown P (2003) The opportunity trap: Education and employment in a global economy. *European Educational Research Journal* 2(1), 141–179. https://doi.org/10.2304/eerj.2003.2.1

Brown P, Ashton D, Lauder H and Tholen G (2008) *Towards a High-Skilled, Low-Waged Workforce? A Review of Global Trends in Education, Employment and the Labour Market (Publisher's Version)*. Cardiff: ESRC Centre on Skills, Knowledge and Organisational Performance (SKOPE).

Brown P, Lauder H, Sung J, Ball SJ, Darchy-Koechlin B and van Zanten A (2015) Higher education, corporate talent and the stratification of knowledge work in the global labour market. In van Zanten A, Ball SJ and Darchy-Koechlin B (eds) *World Yearbook of Education Elites, Privilege and Excellence : The National and Global Redefinition of Educational Advantage*. New York: Routledge, pp 217–230. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315767307-21

Cairns D and Clemente M (2023) *The Immobility Turn: Mobility, Migration and the COVID-19 Pandemic*. Bristol University Press.

Cairns D, Growiec K and de Almeida Alves N (2014) Another 'missing middle'? The marginalised majority of tertiary-educated youth in Portugal during the economic crisis. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 17(8), 1046–1060. https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2014.901492

Cavaglia C and Etheridge B (2020) Job polarization and the declining quality of knowledge workers: Evidence from the UK and Germany. *Labour Economics* 66, 101885. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.labeco.2020.101885

Cote JE and Furlong A (eds) (2016) *Handbook of the Sociology of Higher Education*. Abingdon: Routledge.

De Ruyter A, Martin R and Tyler P (2021) Geographies of discontent: sources, manifestations and consequences. *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society* 14, 381–393. https://doi.org/10.1093/cjres/rsab025

Deželan T, Laker J and Pavlin S (2016) What determines enterprises' perceptions of future development in higher education – strange bedfellows? *European Journal of Education* 51(1), 107–125. https://doi.org/10.1111/ejed.12169

Deželan T, Laker JA and Sardoč M (2020) *Safeguarding Civic Space for Young People in Europe*. Brussels: European Youth Forum.

Durst J and Beremányi Á (2024) False promises and distinct minority mobility paths: trajectories and costs of the education-driven social mobility of racialised ethnic groups. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education* 54(3), 355–367. https://doi.org/10.1080/03057925.2024.2321862

Eco U (1983) Horns, hooves, and insteps. Some hypotheses on three types of abduction. In Eco U and Sebeok TA (eds), *The Sign of Three: Dupin, Holmes, Peirce*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 198–220.

Eurostat (2023) GDP per capita expressed in purchasing power standards placed Romania above Hungary, Croatia, Slovakia, Latvia, Greece and Bulgaria. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Purchasing_power_parities_and_GDP_per_capita_-_flash_estimate (accessed 17 March 2025).

Eurostat (2023) Romania overtook Hungary and is close to Portugal at the GDP per capita level.

Eurostat (2024) Population by educational attainment level, sex and age (%) - main indicators. Available at https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Educational_attainment_statistics (accessed 17 March 2025).

Eurostat (2025) *Purchasing Power Adjusted GDP per Capita* [Data set]. Eurostat. https://doi.org/10.2908/sdg_10_10

Farrugia D, Coffey J, Gill R, Sharp M and Threadgold S (2024) Youth and hospitality work: Skills, subjectivity and affective labour. *Journal of Sociology*. https://doi.org/10.1177/14407833241252486

Filipescu D (2017) Corpora iile multina ionale din România – Între legendă i real life. Contributors. https://www.contributors.ro/corporatiile-multinationale-din-romania-intre-legenda-si-real-life/ (accessed 14 March 2025).

Friedman S and Laurison D (2019) *The Class Ceiling: Why it Pays to be Privileged* (1st ed.). Bristol: Bristol University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv5zftbj

Fujita M and Thisse JF (2002) *Economics of Agglomeration: Cities, Industrial Location, and Regional Growth*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Geambaşu R (2016) Paths and barriers to the labour market: A comparative view of working and homemaking young adult women in Hungary and Romania. In *Rethinking Gender, Work and Care in a New Europe: Theorizing Markets and Societies in the Post-Postsocialist Era*. UK: Palgrave Macmillan, pp 114–140.

Gog S (2020) Neo-Liberal subjectivities and the emergence of spiritual entrepreneurship: An analysis of spiritual development programs in contemporary Romania. *Social Compass*, 0037768619895168. https://doi.org/10.1177/0037768619895168

Gumpert A, Steimer H and Antoni M (2019) Firm organization with multiple establishments. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 137(2), 1091–1138.

Gunz H and Mayrhofer W (2021) Organisational and managerial careers: A coevolutionary view. In Robertson PJ, Hooley T and McCash P (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Career Development*. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190069704.013.12

Harding DJ (2009) Recent advances in age-period-cohort analysis: A commentary on Dregan and Armstrong, and on Reither, Hauser and Yang. *Social Science & Medicine* 69, 1449–1451. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2009.08.034

Heyes J, Lewis P and Clark I (2012) Varieties of capitalism, neoliberalism and the economic crisis of 2008–? *Industrial Relations Journal* 43(3), 222–241. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2338.2012.00574.x
Heyes J and Tomlinson M (2021) Underemployment and well-being in Europe. *Human Relations* 74(8), 1240–1266. https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726720984785
Ho K (2009) *Liquidated: An Ethnography of Wall Street*. Duke University Press.
Holford AJ (2017) Access to and returns from unpaid graduate internships (IZA Discussion Paper No. 10845). IZA – Institute of Labor Economics. Retrieved from https://www.econstor.eu/handle/10419/162962
Huws U (ed) (2003) *The Making of a Cybertariat: Virtual Work in a Real World*. New York, NY: Monthly Review Press.
Institute of Student Employers (2019) *Annual Student Recruitment Survey 2019*. Institute of Student Employers. Retrieved from https://ise.org.uk/
Irigaray L and Burke C (1980) When our lips speak together. Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society 6(1), 69–79.
Koller K, Wolter S, Tschank J and Vana I (2022) Transnational research report on the situation of 25 NEETs in the EU and in beneficiary countries. Centre for Social Innovation. Lost Millennials – Transnational Research Network for the Evaluation of Initiatives Targeting 25 NEETs.
Lizardo O (2006) How cultural tastes shape personal networks. *American Sociological Review* 71, 778–807. https://doi.org/10.1177/000312240607100504
Mackenzie Davey K (2021) Organizational career development theory: Weaving individuals, organizations, and social structures. In Robertson PJ, Hooley T and McCash P (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Career Development*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp 143–154.
Madsen OJ (2014) *The Therapeutic Turn: How Psychology Altered Western Culture*. New York: Routledge.
Mazzucato M (2021) *Mission Economy: A Moonshot Guide to Changing Capitalism*. London: Penguin UK.
Mazzucato M and Collington R (2023) *The Big Con: How the Consulting Industry Weakens Our Businesses, Infantilizes Our Governments, and Warps Our Economies*. London: Penguin Press.
McIlveen P, Perera HN, Brown J, Healy M and Hammer S (2021) Career assessment. In Robertson PJ, Hooley T and McCash P (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Career Development*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp 313–325. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190069704.013.23
National Institute of Statistics (2023) The Average Gross Earnings on Total Economy. National Institute of Statistics. https://insse.ro/cms/en/tags/press-%20ase-average-earning.pdf
Pantea MC (2023) Crafting professional identities at the bottom of the knowledge economy a critical analysis of managerial discourses. *Globalizations* 21(5), 912–930. https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2023.2297460
Păun C and Pînzaru F (2019) Get it right this time? Leaving the periphery of the European economic development. In Dobrescu P (ed) *Development in Turbulent Times: The Many Faces of Inequality Within Europe*. Berlin: Springer International Publishing, pp 47–58.
Powell WW and Snellman K (2004) The knowledge economy. *Annual Review of Sociology* 30, 199–220. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.30.012703.110652
Purcell K and Tzanakou C (2016) Life after higher education: The diversity of opportunities and obstacles in a changing graduate labour market. In Côté JE and Pickard S (eds), *Handbook of the Sociology of Higher Education*, Abingdon: Routledge, pp 353–367.
Roberts K (1968) The entry into employment: An approach towards a general theory. *The Sociological Review* 16(2), 165–184.
Roberts K (1977) The social conditions, consequences and limitations of career guidance, *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling*, 5, 1–9.
Roberts K (2009) Opportunity structures then and now. *Journal of Education and Work* 22(5), 355–368. https://doi.org/10.1080/13639080903453987
Roberts S (2015) Ordinary working lives and the "missing middle". In Wyn J and Cahill H (eds), *Youth Studies in Handbook of Children and Youth Studies*. Singapore: Springer, pp. 569–581.
Robertson PJ, Hooley T and McCash P (eds) (2021) *The Oxford Handbook of Career Development*. Oxford University Press.
Romanian Government (2023) The average gross earnings on total economy. National Institute of Statistics. https://insse.ro/cms/sites/default/files/com_presa/com_pdf/cs10e23_0.pdf
Roper J, Ganesh S and Inkson K (2010) Neoliberalism and knowledge interests in boundaryless careers discourse. *Work, Employment and Society* 24(4), 661–679. https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017010380630
Samuels R (2018) *Educating Inequality Beyond the Political Myths of Higher Education and the Job Market*. London: Routledge.
Sanchez M, Lamont M and Zilberstein S (2022) How American college students understand social resilience and navigate towards the future during covid and the movement for racial justice. *Social Science & Medicine* 301, 114890. –https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2022.114890

https://doi.org/10.1017/elr.2025.5 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Shildrick T, MacDonald R, Furlong A, Roden J and Crow R (2012) *Are Cultures of Worklessness Passed Down the Generations?* York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.
Siivonen P (2017) Who is to be positioned as employable? Adult graduates' educational and working life pathways. In Tomlinson M and Holmes L (eds), *Graduate Employability in Context: Theory, Research and Debate*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp 237–254.
Silverman D (2000) *Interpreting Qualitative Data: Methods for Analyzing Talk, Text, and Interaction*. SAGE Publications.nce.
Simões F, Rocha R and Mateus C (2020) Beyond the prophecy success: How place attachment and future time perspective shape rural university students' intentions of returning to small islands. *Journal of Youth Studies* 23(7), 909–925.
Streib J (2023) *The Accidental Equalizer: How Luck Determines Pay after College*. Chicago, Illinois: Chicago University Press.
Stutchbury K (2021) Critical realism: an explanatory framework for small-scale qualitative studies or an 'unhelpful edifice'? *International Journal of Research & Method in Education* 45(2), 113–128.
Tarlea S (2019) *Parties, Power and Policy-making: From Higher Education to Multinationals in Post-communist Societies*. London: Routledge.
Tarlea S & Freyberg-Inan A (2018) The education skills trap in a dependent market economy: Romania's case in the 2000s. *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 51(1), 49–61.
Thompson P (2020) Capitalism, technology and work: Interrogating the tipping point thesis. *The Political Quarterly* 91, 299–309. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-923X.12787
Tikly L (2015) What works, for whom, and in what circumstances? Towards a critical realist understanding of learning in international and comparative education. *International Journal of Educational Development* 40, 237–249. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2014.11.008
Tomlinson M (2017) Introduction: Graduate employability in context: Charting a complex, contested and multi-faceted policy and research field In Tomlinson M and Holmes L (eds) *Graduate Employability in Context. Theory, Research and Debate*. London: Palgrave, pp 1–40.
Tomlinson M and Holmes L (2017) *Graduate Employability in Context: Theory, Research and Debate*, Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
Trappenburg M and van Pelt M (2024) Exit, loyalty and focus. Dutch social workers' responses to swing-of-the-pendulum policies. *European Journal of Social Work* 27(4), 855–867.
Unger RM (2019) *The Knowledge Economy*. London: Verso. https://www.versobooks.com/books/2949-the-knowledge-economy
van de Velde C (2023) Invisible Angers. Dynamics of revolt and silence in the life course. British Sociological Association, Annual Conference 2023, University of Manchester, April 12, 2023.
Velikonja M (2009) Lost in transition. Nostalgia for socialism in post-socialist countries. *East European Politics and Societies* 23(4), 535–551.
Warhurst C and Thompson P (2006) Mapping knowledge in work: Proxies or practices? *Work, Employment and Society* 20(4), 787–800.
Williamson H (2017) *Supporting Young People in Europe Looking to the Future*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe.
Winlow S and Hall S (2009) Living for the weekend: youth identities in northeast England. *Ethnography* 10(1), 91–113.
Winlow S and Hall S (2013) *Rethinking Social Exclusion: The End of the Social?* Los Angeles: SAGE.
Yates E (2023a) Work, employment and the material conditions of young people in developed economies: A Marxist political economy of youth perspective. *Journal of Youth Studies* 26(4), 491–506. https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2021.2013459
Yates E (2023b) Developing or degrading young workers? How business strategy and the labour process shape job quality across different industrial sectors in England. *Work, Employment and Society* 37(5), 1186–1205. https://doi.org/10.1177/09500170211070447

Maria-Carmen Pantea is a Professor in Sociology and Social Work at 'Babe -Bolyai' University, Romania. She is a member of the Advisory Group of the Pool of European Youth Researchers (EU-Council of Europe Youth Partnership). She has coordinated three research projects focusing on vocational education and training (VET), overqualification, and graduate careers. Maria-Carmen is the co-editor of the book Higher Education and Work in the Knowledge Economy: Power, Prestige, and Precarity (London: Palgrave). She holds an MA with Merit in Gender Studies from CEU (2002), an MSc in Evidence-Based Social Interventions from Oxford University (2007), and a PhD in Sociology from BBU (2008).

Cite this article: Pantea M-C. The best time to be young? A retrospective study of graduates' transition to employment in Romania. *The Economic and Labour Relations Review*. https://doi.org/10.1017/elr.2025.5