

EARLY IN CAREER WELLBEING

SUPPORTING THE TRANSITION TO WORK FOR GRADUATES AND YOUNG WORKERS

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CONTENTS

Introduction.....	2
Who are early career workers?	4
Why is early career a vulnerable time?	5
What does Transition Theory tell us about early career?	8
What is known about the experience of early career workers?	9
What individual skills and abilities appear to influence early career success?	10
What can organisations do to create a mentally healthy workplace for young workers?	13
What is the specific role of leaders?	15
What promotes the mental wellbeing of early career workers?	17
Where to now?.....	19
Conclusion	20



Investing in Australian workplace mental health has shown positive returns, ranging from \$1.30 to \$4.

Productivity Commission, 2020, cited in Batyr, 2023



INTRODUCTION

The transition to work is a significant life event for young people in a changing global economic environment.

Workplaces are crucial in safeguarding work-life wellbeing during career transitions, especially for graduates and early career professionals entering the workforce. There is a growing consensus that organisations bear ethical and legal responsibilities to support mental health. Many are exploring ways to create environments that nurture young workers, fostering the foundations for a sustainable career while aligning with organisational goals for retention and performance.

Amidst the mental health challenges faced by Millennials and Gen Z, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, younger workers are particularly affected, reporting increased difficulties in employment, education, finances, and relationships (*Headspace, 2020*). In response, organisations are witnessing a shift in the priorities of graduates beyond remuneration and development opportunities.

Transitioning Well, supporting early career professionals since 2018, has identified the evolving needs and expectations of graduates.

In our ongoing commitment to guiding professionals through successful career transitions, we set out to gather comprehensive insights by combining feedback from our graduate program, including input from key personnel in their organisations, with an extensive literature review.

“

Work-life balance and relationships at work are also strongly valued by younger workers.

Ernst & Young, 2018



KEY QUESTIONS

Seeking clarity, we used our expertise in transitions to review the literature, posing the following key questions:

- Who are early career workers?
- Why is early career a vulnerable time and how has COVID-19 impacted young workers?
- What does Transition Theory tell us about early career?
- What is known about the experiences and expectations of current cohorts of graduates and early career workers?
- What individual skills and abilities appear to influence early career success?
- What can organisations do to create a mentally healthy workplace for young workers?
- What is the specific role of leaders?
- What factors contribute to the thriving and sustainability of early career workers' mentally healthy careers?
- And finally, where are the knowledge gaps when it comes to supporting and enhancing the early career experience?

This investigation began with Australian academic research and grey literature findings, and then broadened to access relevant and recent findings globally.

The available information, and gaps identified therein, will form a foundation for future research into how organisations can create targeted support and training for graduates and early career workers during this important transition and beyond.

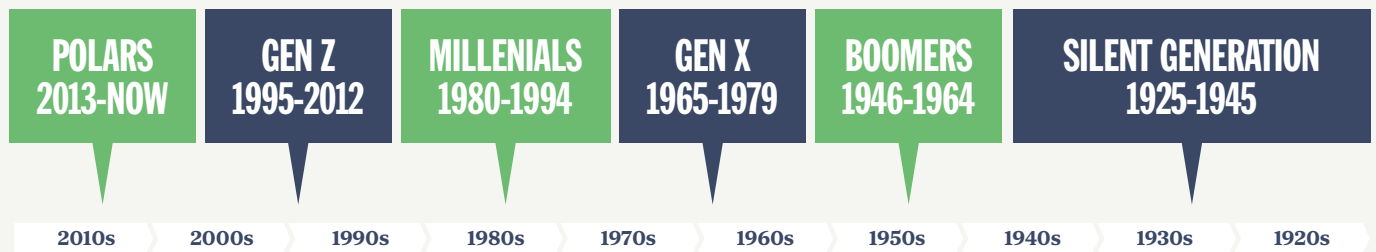
SEARCH TERMS

To examine the questions above, an analysis of literature using the PsycInfo database and ABI/INFORM ProQuest Collection was conducted.

APA PsycInfo was utilised for containing an extensive range of peer-reviewed behavioural mental health sciences literature and ABI/INFORM ProQuest Collection was chosen as it provides thousands of peer-reviewed journals, trade publications and other business sources. Inclusion criteria included; peer-reviewed, scholarly journals, full-text journal articles, from 2016-2023, English language.

To supplement academic research on early career worker, a search of grey literature was also conducted. Search terms across all sources included 'young workers', 'graduate', 'Gen z', 'Gen y', 'Millennials', 'workplace', 'graduate transition', 'support', 'wellbeing', 'mental health', 'thriving', 'engagement', 'productivity', 'intervention', 'development'.

THE GENERATIONS



WHO ARE EARLY CAREER WORKERS?

Young workers can be defined as those aged 18-30 years old entering the workforce.

They undertake a range of roles including casual 'first jobs', apprenticeships and traineeships, graduate roles, internships, full-time career roles and increasingly, gig work and side hustles. The length of the early career phase varies but is generally accepted to be the first eight years of formal employment.

Currently, young workers can be further narrowed into two categories, 'Generation Y' (also known as Millennials) who were born between 1980 and 1994 and 'Generation Z' who were born between 1995-2012 and known as the 'digital native' generation (Lanier, 2017).

Compared with older cohorts, young workers are more familiar with new technology, seek variety, are more educated, ambitious, and possess strong technical skills and language knowledge (Bielen & Kubiczek, 2020).

They are said to be more idealistic and motivated by values than previous generations, valuing learning opportunities and self-fulfilment over financial factors, and often seek meaning in their work and organisations where they feel alignment with mission and purpose (Gallup, 2016; Kuzior et al., 2022).

As with all workers, young workers are affected by societal and cultural changes that shape them as learners and employees.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic dramatically changed the landscape, work and nonwork roles were already increasingly blurred and overlapping, or 'boundaryless'.

"The proliferation of mobile communication devices (laptops, tablets, smart phones) and social media are transforming work and nonwork relationships. These changes have not only made work more portable, diffusing into more hours of the day, but have also made it easier to work during personal time and space, such as while commuting, when in 'third places' such as restaurants, and during vacations. Globalised work systems have also expanded the boundarylessness of work by increasing the times when many workers are available for work over a 24-7 period, leading to more schedule variability and dispersion of work hours." (Kossek, 2016)

Overall, young workers today, will experience more change over a lifetime of work than previous generations. Advances in technology, the global movement of people and ideas across borders, and labour market changes over the last 20 years have made employment systems more flexible and roles less secure for early-career workers (Rydzik & Bal, 2023). Young people risk entering a cycle of unemployment – underemployment, with a reduction in the range and availability of full-time entry-level job opportunities available to them (Cuervo & Chesters, 2019). An unstable labour market has negatively affected youth transitions to adulthood, as many are unable to gain financial independence and housing stability (Cebulla & Whetton, 2018; Furlong et al., 2017) and many report feeling uncertain and powerless about their future, due to the detrimental effects on personal relationships, wellbeing, and the ability to plan for the future (Cuervo & Chesters, 2019).

These findings are consistent with Arnett's (2000) model of Emerging Adulthood, that suggests individuals enter a distinct period of human development where they tend to consider themselves too old to be adolescents, but not yet adults, with distinguishing features, including identity exploration, feeling unstable, focusing on 'self', and believing they have a range of possibilities ahead of them (Arnett, 2015).



3 MILLION

Australians hold over \$74 billion in outstanding **student loan debt.**

Parliament of Australia, 2023

Labour changes and high debt have contributed to

61%

of young people under 35 years being worried about their finances, job security and failure to meet their career goals.

Bain & Company, 2022



WHY IS EARLY CAREER A VULNERABLE TIME?

AND HOW HAS COVID-19 IMPACTED YOUNG WORKERS?

Younger people entering the workforce experience unique demands from a mental health and wellbeing perspective.

Entering the workforce is a new experience, and is often characterised by a series of short-term, unrelated, low-status and stressful 'survival jobs' (Heinz, 2009; International Labour Office, 2016; Patton et al., 2016). Unstable working conditions make young workers more vulnerable to exposure to psychosocial risk factors, which are defined as factors in the design or management of work that increase the risk of psychosocial harm for workers (Safe Work Australia, 2023).

It's known that poor employment conditions impact the mental health of young workers (VicHealth, 2019). For example, apprenticeships are a key pathway for young people making the transition from education to employment, with almost 200,000 apprentices working in Australia. Despite the importance of apprenticeships, a recent review showed that almost half of young people who commence an apprenticeship will not finish, with reasons attributed to the impact a young person's mental health including (but not limited to) long hours, poor pay, job insecurity, unrealistic expectations and bullying (Boyle, 2021).

Young workers are also at a specific life stage. The typical age of transition from education to work coincides with the typical age of first onset of mental illness. Overall, the global onset of the first mental disorder occurs before age 14 in one-third of individuals, age 18 in almost half (48.4%), and before age 25 in half (62.5%) (Solmi, M., Radua, J., Olivola, M. et al., 2022). For university graduates, there is also significant financial strain and worry due to high student loans, with 3 million Australians in 2023 holding over \$74 billion in outstanding student loan debt (Parliament of Australia, 2023). Labour changes and high debt have also contributed to 61 percent of young people under 35 years old being worried about their finances, job security and failure to meet their career goals (Bain & Company, 2022). In addition, young people are less likely to ever own their own home than previous generations, with the average age of first-home buyers now 36 years (as opposed to 27 only a generation ago; Haqqi, 2020). Recent Australian survey data including 200 people under 24, and just over 1,000 people aged 25-34 confirmed that younger workers carry a disproportionate burden of psychological distress (Cham et al., 2023).

Research is clear that psychosocial risk factors are related to poor mental health outcomes and include anxiety, depression, burnout and fatigue in young workers (Sessoms-Penny et al., 2023). A 2021 UK-based LawCare study found that lawyers aged between 26 and 35 reported high work intensity, low levels of work autonomy and the highest levels of burnout of any age group surveyed. Psychosocial risks, such as sexual harassment, low job control and poor job quality have been linked to deteriorations in young workers' mental health (Shields et al., 2021). Low wages, low decision latitude, job insecurity, unsafe working conditions, poor management, lack of benefits, overwork, and other stressors at work can also cause young workers to exhibit heightened anger and cynicism towards organisations (Woods et al., 2023).

Young people are less likely to ever own their own home than previous generations, with **the average age of first-home buyers now 36 years.**

Haqqi, 2020



A recent Australian survey of young people confirmed that **younger workers carry a disproportionate burden of psychological distress.**

Cham et al., 2023



Such exposure is prevalent, with Milner and colleagues (2017) reporting that 42% of young workers were exposed to at least one psychosocial job stressor. Compared with older workers, young workers also experience higher levels of job strain (i.e. lower levels of job control, with higher demands) and insecure work (i.e. temporary and casual employment) (ABS, 2021; LaMontagne & Keegel, 2012; Louie et al., 2007). Similarly, young workers also report a lack of organisational justice, imbalances in effort and reward, as well as exposure to bullying and harassment (Bonsaksen et al., 2019; Feijó et al., 2019; Hanvold et al., 2019). Given their lack of experience, they are also more vulnerable to the effects of inadequate supervision and training, as young workers do not yet have skills or knowledge about workplace health and safety developed from experience in the workforce.

“It can also be common to hear of new graduates entering competitive workforces who are required to meet high expectations to remain in the program or be accepted as a permanent employee. Expectations and behaviours that normalise extremely high workloads and overtime result in a reduction in sleep or healthy eating, a lack of socialising or investing in personal relationships, and an overall reduction in the quality of a person’s life... Extreme levels of pressure over an extended period of time can increase the likelihood of mental ill-health, creating ripple effects into a person’s life, and the lives of those around them”. (Batyr, 2023).

The Corporate Mental Health Alliance Australia (CMHAA) Early in Career report (2021) summarised interviews from 36 early career employees investigating mental health and wellbeing at work. Here too we find commentary from young workers relating to role clarity and a need for reasonable job demands, especially as they settle into new roles:

“Participants highlighted the need for clarity of role expectations, responsibilities and accountabilities...and the reality that it may take them longer to complete tasks relative to their peers. It takes time to process what is expected of them when starting a career in an organisation – the reins need to be slowly removed from the more structured environments of school and university as early in career employees transition into professional roles.” (CMHAA, 2021).

The UK counterpart of the CMHAA, the City Mental Health Alliance (CMHA), summarised survey data from 1,014 adults aged 20-26 in their Time to Act report (2021), commenting on the phenomenon of imposter syndrome.

“As well as causing stress, unhealthy perfectionism impacts on behaviour at work – 30% say they regularly put off starting work/projects because they are worried they won’t do it well. One third of respondents (33%) said that they had worked for longer hours than they needed to get something absolutely perfect. Related to unhealthy perfectionism, 40% of respondents experience imposter syndrome – a feeling that they are not good enough – all the time or often, with a further 25% say they experience it sometimes.” (CMHA, 2021).



On the positive side, there is evidence that addressing psychosocial risk factors for young workers and providing positive early workplace experiences can help develop resilience and the ability to adapt to challenges at work, prevent deterioration and improve longer-term mental health and wellbeing outcomes (Escartin, 2016; Liu & Cheng, 2018; Woods et al., 2023).

Addressing psychosocial risk factors can also improve engagement levels, retention of staff and sustainability of one’s career (Shields et al., 2021) and prevent lost productivity, economic and social costs (VicHealth, 2019).

15%

of young Australian workers under 25 years of age report **high levels of psychological distress**, with this rate doubling after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2021

ONE IN THREE

young adults report **loneliness** and one-third report themselves to be at risk of **high social isolation** from limited contact with family and friends.

Lim et al., 2019, Lim et al., 2023; Wright & Silard, 2022



Recent contextual factors also play a significant role.

External events, particularly the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, and the possibility of a recession have all contributed to and exacerbated poor mental health outcomes for young workers (Cianconi et al., 2020; Littleton & Campbell, 2022).

Fifteen percent of young Australian workers under 25 years of age report high levels of psychological distress, with this rate doubling after the COVID-19 pandemic (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2021). One in three young adults report loneliness and one-third report themselves to be at risk of high social isolation from limited contact with family and friends (Lim et al., 2019, Lim et al., 2023; Wright & Silard, 2022).

Loneliness may also arise from the automation of work, which generates conditions for less meaningful connections and sense of unity with others, while performing tasks that require less human contact in the workplace (Wright & Silard, 2022). Those who are lonelier are at an increased risk of poorer mental health outcomes (Lim et al., 2019).

Considering the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, industries where young workers are concentrated, such as tourism, retail and hospitality, were disproportionately affected by job losses, reduced hours, and uncertain business futures (Littleton & Campbell, 2022).

Risk factors associated with COVID-19 included social isolation, limited social interaction, unemployment, housing and income uncertainties, financial instability and work-related stress, contributing to greater mental health challenges for young adults (Carbone, 2020; Glowacz & Schmits, 2020; Graupensperger et al., 2022).

For those who were working during the peak of the pandemic, social distancing and isolation requirements such as hybrid or study/work from home arrangements early in their career journeys has also led to isolated working experiences for some young workers (Martyniuk et al., 2021). Isolated work restricts the development and growth of professional networks for many young workers, compared with incidental learning opportunities gained via interpersonal interactions in face-to-face environments.

While most younger workers prefer hybrid schedules, there are concerns that working remotely can lead to inequity in relation to learning and career progression (Deloitte, 2023). It remains to be seen how young workers and organisations will share the responsibility for this issue as hybrid work practices are refined.

More broadly, recent Australian research into workplace wellbeing highlighted reports that **60% of Gen Z say they are merely surviving or are struggling, with consequent impacts on the retention of young workers**: one survey suggests that 68% of Millennials, and 81% of Gen Z left roles for mental health reasons in 2021 (Greenwood & Anas, 2021, and Microsoft, 2021, cited in Batyr, 2023).



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of Gen Z say they are **merely surviving** or are **struggling** with consequent impacts on the retention of young workers.

Greenwood & Anas, 2021, and Microsoft, 2021, cited in Batyr, 2023

WHAT DOES **TRANSITION THEORY** TELL US ABOUT EARLY CAREER?

When we consider transitions as a life event, the school-to-work transition can be defined as “... a process during which individuals navigate a physical and psychological movement when leaving education and starting to integrate into the labour market.” (Blokker et al., 2023, p. 245)

This life stage is associated with a range of norms within Western society. As noted, young adulthood has been characterised by transitioning social roles in various life domains including career development, establishing financial independence, and building social and romantic relationships, all of which can place additional pressure on workers (Roisman et al., 2004) particularly if they feel that they are yet to attain these life roles.



For more information in the Australian context, see National Mental Health Commission Career Transition Series [here](#) >

Recent research highlights key capabilities crucial for aiding graduates in their transition from education to the workforce. Blokker and colleagues (2023) conducted a global literature review on the school-to-work transition, finding that personal, contextual, and time-related factors (such as events and ‘shocks’) shape transitions. They identified key mechanisms: attitudes (e.g. self-efficacy), competencies (e.g. career adaptability), and behaviours (e.g. career exploration) that contribute to successful transitions, impacting the wellbeing and productivity of young workers.

Vu and colleagues (2022) applied Anderson et al.’s (2022) seminal transition framework, focusing on the individual’s Situation, Self, Support, and Strategies (4S). They identified essential workplace adaptation strategies, emphasising the current (university) and future (work) systems.

The study recommends sharing this model with students to help them navigate challenges and opportunities during the transition to work, facilitating assertive communication skill development through role play.

For example, vital skills such as who is best placed to answer graduate’s questions about work, how to ask them, and when.

ADDITIONAL **FREE** RESOURCES

Research commissioned by the National Mental Health Commission reaffirms the significance of employing the transition theory lens to support young workers. To read more, take a look at the following two resources:

- ➔ [Career transition series: Entering the workforce and young workers.](#) National Mental Health Commission (NMHC 2023a).
- ➔ [Career transition points: Exploring the challenges and opportunities of career transitions and mental health and wellbeing.](#) (NMHC 2022).





WHAT IS **KNOWN** ABOUT THE EXPERIENCE OF EARLY CAREER WORKERS?

Julie Hare, Education Editor at the Australian Financial Review's Top 100 Graduate Employers 2023, recently described current graduate cohorts as:

"... newly emboldened. No longer satisfied with taking the first job on offer, they are taking their time to mull over remuneration packages, while also taking into consideration whether a potential employer aligns with their personal values; whether the company's environmental, social and governance policies are up to scratch; whether flexibility and working from home is part of the deal; and whether they will feel a sense of belonging in the broader corporate culture." (Hare, 2023)

More broadly, in the same review, were calls by young employees to limit what are seen as 'tokenistic' wellbeing initiatives:

"Tokenistic staff wellbeing initiatives are 'one off events' that are 'short term' and 'superficial'. They are mental health-related emails with 'no follow-up discussion', 'policies that are never actioned' or plans that are 'never implemented'. They are just a 'box tick'...They happen when leadership is 'not on board' and are 'not leading by example'. They do not address 'systemic' issues' like 'increasing workloads', and they 'recommend actions that are incompatible with the requirements of the job'. They are not given proper 'time' or 'resources'. And they occur when 'stigma [is still] present in the workplace'.

[In contrast]...meaningful staff wellbeing initiatives are 'authentic', show 'genuine care' and are 'built within the culture of the workplace'. They are 'consistent', 'ongoing' and involve 'follow through'. They 'take time [and] resources' and are accessible to everyone. They involve 'regular mental health check-ins' built on 'meaningful relationships' that show help is there 'when you need it'. They require 'participation from all levels', including senior people 'leading by example' and showing 'vulnerability and openness from the top down'. And they are backed by 'systemic change'." (Baty, 2023)

Research indicates that younger employees, compared to other demographics, express unique preferences. Coetzee (2017) suggests that Generation Y is particularly motivated to define the meaning of work, explore diverse career paths, and eschew a 'one size fits all' perspective. Younger workers often exhibit clearer career preferences, are strongly influenced by values, and show robust motivational drivers (Coetzee, 2017).

Similarly, findings from a recent EY report combining data from employees of large organisations (EY, 2022) suggests that 39% of millennials say company culture had a 'great deal of impact' on their intent to stay. More than three quarters of millennials said they would leave an employer if Diversity, Equity and Inclusion initiatives were not offered, while almost half (49% each) of Gen Z and Millennial workers said that corporate positions on social issues played a significant impact on their decision to stay with an employer. In terms of flexibility, all workforce generations agree on the importance of flexibility, with 35% percent of millennials intending to leave their jobs in the next year saying that hybrid/work-from home options would entice them to stay.

Other research reported millennial job satisfaction was linked with their perception of the effectiveness of the agency's service delivery (i.e. its value in the public eye, and its perceived efficacy) (Choi, 2021). Importantly, Kossek, Perrigio & Lautsch (2023) highlighted the lack of consistent terminology around the terms 'hybrid flexibility' and 'work-life flexibility'. More research is needed into the post-COVID-19 world of work-life boundary management before firm conclusions can be drawn, particularly for our youngest workers.

39% OF MILLENNIALS

say **company culture** had a 'great deal of impact' on their intent to stay.

EY, 2022



More than

75% OF MILLENNIALS

said they would leave an employer if **diversity, equity and inclusion** initiatives were not offered.



When it comes to learning on the job, early career employees, particularly Gen Z digital generation, are said to prioritise ‘just-in-time learning’ where training is provided as the learning need arises.

Younger workers often prefer quick online access to practical, bite-sized pieces of information (Bieleń & Kubiczek, 2020; Deloitte Digital, 2023), which can lead to assumptions that it is possible to ‘know everything immediately’ (Bieleń & Kubiczek, 2020). In the UAE, Gen Z individuals preferred interactive e-learning more than past generations, however, also valued just-in-time learning and collaborative learning (Khan & Al-Shibami, 2019).

Importantly, younger workers are also reporting a preference for social learning opportunities (e.g. learning directly from team members and managers) and are more likely to learn and thrive at work when given projects or tasks that link to existing areas of curiosity or passion (Deloitte Digital, 2023).

WHAT INDIVIDUAL SKILLS AND ABILITIES APPEAR TO INFLUENCE EARLY CAREER SUCCESS?

Early career success results from a blend of individual and organisational factors.

Besides understanding the challenges and preferences of young workers, organisations play a crucial role in fostering mentally healthy workplaces and acknowledging the drivers of younger employees. Coetzee (2014) asserts that integrating employees’ career capacities into strategic talent retention leads to positive outcomes, including increased work engagement, high-performance organisational culture, lifelong learning skills, career competencies, coping strategies, and retention.



What skills and abilities contribute to a successful transition into the workplace and early career?

Key factors include self-efficacy, career adaptability, emotional intelligence, networking skills, and effective work-life boundary management.

Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy is widely researched in the organisational psychology space.

Self-efficacy can be defined as the ‘belief in one’s own capabilities to organise and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments’. (Bandura, 1997, p. 3)

Multiple recent studies have examined the relationship between self-efficacy and wellbeing outcomes for young workers (Bui et al., 2019; Grosemans et al., 2020; Schéle et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2018). A study by Schéle et al. (2021) explored the impact of psychological factors (self-efficacy, psychological flexibility, and basic psychological needs satisfaction) on health, wellbeing, and intention to leave an organisation.

High self-efficacy, psychological flexibility, and satisfied psychological needs were associated with better health, well-being, and lower intentions to leave among early career employees. Bui (2019) suggested that workplace factors like leadership role modelling, feedback, and positive emotional experiences contribute to the development and enhancement of self-efficacy in early-career workers.

Want to read more?

Head to page 18 to see how [self-efficacy is further linked to flourishing in young workers through the PsyCap model.](#)





Career adaptability

The ability to adapt to predictable and unexpected workplace demands while preparing for and participating in the workplace is important for young workers to develop (Savickas, 1997).

With current dynamic work environments characterised by constant changes, organisations need to recognise the importance of employees' ability to adapt their careers.



Career Adaptability reflects a person's readiness to deploy four adaptive strategies: concern, control, curiosity, and confidence. (Savickas, 2005)

Career Adaptability has been related to positive wellbeing outcomes for young individuals transitioning from study to work (Magnano et al., 2021; Ramos & Lopez, 2018). Courage has also been identified as a marker of Career Adaptability across multiple studies.

Defined as the 'ability to persist and perpetuate efforts despite a subjective feeling of fear', courage was found to mediate the relationship between Career Adaptability and outcomes for young workers (Norton & Weiss, 2009).

Coetzee et al. (2017) discovered that both Career Adaptability and psychological career resources have a positive influence on employee engagement. Additionally, Van der Horst et al. (2021) illustrated the advantages of training young workers in Career Adaptability through a validated intervention, which included online assessments and workshops.

This intervention not only improved career adaptive responses and overall Career Adaptability but also led to increased career growth and satisfaction among young workers. These findings highlight the positive impact of Career Adaptability training on the employment outcomes of young workers.

Emotional intelligence

Emotional Intelligence (EI) or what is otherwise known as EQ, is another ability that has been widely researched since its inception in the mid-1990s and is often part of graduate orientation and wider workplace learning and development.

Broadly, the term relates to our abilities to understand our own emotions and the emotions of others.

EI involves internal thought processes where emotions influence actions through four components (Wong & Law, 2002):

- 01** Self-emotional appraisal
- 02** Others' emotional appraisal
- 03** Use of emotion
- 04** Regulation of emotions

Aydogmus (2019) discovered that EI training can guide workers in using values and independence for self-directed career management, preventing career drifting or floundering. This research also found that higher EI in millennial workers correlates with increased subjective career success.



Networking skills

Building and maintaining networks is a key workplace skill across many industries.

For example, research looking at junior lawyers identified a need for lawyers to be trained in interpersonal and personal coping skills to better manage relationships with clients, including fostering empathy and emotional intelligence to provide better client support (*Jagot, 2023*).

Junior lawyers in another study expressed a desire to acquire and improve communication and networking skills that included negotiation, lobbying, peaceful settlement of disputes, managing difficult personalities, level of personal involvement and an ability to express boundaries (*Banović, 2022*).

Work-life boundaries



Kossek (2016) defines **boundary control** as the “... degree to which we control the boundaries between our non-work and work roles”.

Work-life boundary management early in one’s career can set the foundation for long-term success and wellbeing at work. As noted, a more balanced approach to work-life integration is a key expectation of early career workers who are more likely to leave an organisation if flexibility needs are not met (*EY, 2022*).

These preferences are further explained by research reports that flexibility helps to achieve more sustainable working lives (*Barhate & Dirani, 2022; Ernst & Young, 2018; Fuchs et al., 2021; Wen et al., 2018; Yap & Zainal Badri, 2020*), and providing work-life balance improves wellbeing (*Nabawanuka & Ekmekcioglu, 2022*).

According to research by Clark et al. (2016), individuals who effectively manage their work-life boundaries experience lower levels of burnout and are more likely to maintain a high level of job engagement.

Survey data from 500 German Gen Z employees (*Deloitte, 2022*) showed that the youngest workers value flexible work because it helps them save money, frees up time to do other things they care about, and allows them to spend more time with family.



Individuals who effectively manage their work-life boundaries experience **lower levels of burnout** and are more likely to maintain a **high level of job engagement**.

Clark et al. (2016)

WHAT CAN ORGANISATIONS DO TO CREATE A MENTALLY HEALTHY WORKPLACE FOR YOUNG WORKERS?

Based on the identified factors above, we can see that there are actions that organisations can take to improve and support the mental health and wellbeing of young workers.

This is consistent with arguments for the development of **mentally healthy workplaces, defined as “... one that actively minimises risks to mental health, promotes positive mental health and wellbeing, is free of stigma and discrimination, and supports the recovery of workers with mental health conditions, for the benefit of the individual, organisation and community”** (Heads Up, 2022).

Different frameworks to create a mentally healthy workplace exist. In the Australian context, the National Mental Health Commission (2023) information, training and support can be used to guide the development of mentally healthy workplaces.

The following sections outline organisational strategies cited in the literature that create a mentally healthy workplace specifically for young workers.

Provide high-quality work and resources



Young workers need to be provided with high-quality work, autonomy, and more resources to support them with the demands and uncertainty that they face (Sessoms-Penny et al., 2023).

The Framework of Organisational Socialisation, which outlines crucial resources for new professionals entering a role (Bauer et al., 2007), discovered that workers provided with more role clarity, task mastery, social acceptance, and resources experienced significantly lower stress and strain in the initial 13 weeks and reduced burnout symptoms after nine months (Frögéli et al., 2022).

Additionally, studies show that adequate pay influences the sector-switching intentions of young workers, particularly those with higher education levels (Johnson & Ng, 2016). These individuals also value transparency, especially regarding decisions about their careers, compensation, and rewards.

Build a culture that proactively supports mental health and wellbeing



Young workers are increasingly seeking workplaces that focus on positive mental health and wellbeing, with literature indicating that early career workers value a workplace culture that encourages conversations about wellbeing and support for mental health concerns rather than being in a culture of ‘build your own resilience’ (Victorian Legal Services Board and Commissioner, 2023).

Mental health literacy among employers, young workers, and their colleagues about psychosocial risk factors can also help young workers choose good work, leave bad work before it becomes harmful, recognise the influence of working conditions on their mental health, advocate for their rights and fair treatment at work, seek help when needed, and look after their mental health and wellbeing. (VicHealth, 2019).

Young workers also tend to seek competent and engaged mentors and supervisors who provide psychologically safe environments to make mistakes, with supervisor support found to enhance young workers’ wellbeing (Nabawanuka & Ekmekcioglu, 2022).

Ensure that work-life boundary management is actively supported



Actively supporting younger workers to manage work-life boundaries is essential to worker wellbeing and a mentally healthy workplace. Alongside opportunities to enact greater autonomy, we have seen that work-life balance contributes to job satisfaction in millennials (Wen et al., 2018). Additional sources have found more balanced work-life integration had a significant positive effect on work motivation in millennial generation employees’ work performance (Wolor et al., 2020).

“Leaders and managers in general, play a critical role in championing work-life boundaries as role models by how they manage themselves, by how they manage the work-life diversity of others and by fostering an organizational culture of wellbeing and workforce sustainability.” (Kossek, 2016, p. 259).

Managers have a role to play in encouraging a work-life balance for young workers, with one study finding managerial work-life support serves as a key job resource to increase the engagement of younger workers (Xu, Cao, & Lu, 2023).



Deliver ongoing learning and development opportunities



Young workers, who are still establishing their careers and finding areas of both strength and opportunity, may be motivated by professional development opportunities, such as training courses and higher education benefits (*Ernst & Young, 2018*). For example, early career lawyers have been found to emphasise the desire to engage in lifelong learning, the ability for flexibility and autonomy, being compensated appropriately (e.g. for doing more online work) and opportunities to upgrade skills and competences throughout their whole career (*Banović, 2022*).

Studies have also shown that providing adequate learning and development opportunities and meeting the learning needs of young workers increases young workers' intention to stay at an organisation (*Othman et al., 2020*). Further, perceived organisational support, where young workers perceive that a company values their wellbeing and contributions, may act as a mediator between training needs and intention to stay (*Othman et al., 2020*).

Young workers are reported to be attracted to informal learning methods, which are both autonomous (i.e. set at the pace of the younger worker) and cooperative (i.e. collaborating with other team members), alongside the potential to learn through networking and from their leaders (*Barhate & Dirani, 2022*).

Provide practical experience and a supportive line manager



The Time to Act report (*CMHA, 2021*) indicated that line managers play a critical role in wellbeing support. For example, almost one in five (18%) young employees said their line manager always or often prioritised delivery of work at the expense of mental health and on the flip side, 79% indicated having a supportive and approachable line manager would have a positive impact on their mental health.

While evaluation literature of graduate or early career programs is sparse, one notable Australian study followed three intakes of a public sector graduate development programme to assess the extent to which the programme supported the shift to employability (*Clarke, 2017*).

Three factors were found to enhance employability outcomes:

- 01 Job placement and workload
- 02 Support through training and development
- 03 Support from line managers

Job placements helped graduates adjust to a new environment and the structured activities helped them to share their experiences of the program and build social capital. The support network created a framework for comparing and evaluating individual experiences, sharing information 'on job' search strategies and learning how to navigate the public sector environment. Finally, the line manager critically shaped a graduate's perception of employment and integration into their role. Effective line managers were reported to be welcoming, took time to orient the graduate to the area, and provided specific projects appropriate to the graduate.

Line managers who took a proactive mentoring approach helped graduates find developmental opportunities and offered 'stretch work' designed to push the graduate beyond their comfort zone (e.g. writing cabinet submissions, taking on challenging project roles, or representing their unit at departmental meetings).

However, program limitations were also noted, with new graduates reporting a mismatch between their role expectations and the reality of the graduate role, a potential lack of alignment between the graduate's field of study and their organisational placement, and pressure to find an ongoing position in a work environment with a limited number of positions available, which created a competing tension against the time required to build knowledge and skills.

18%

of young employees said their line manager **often prioritised delivery of work at the expense of mental health.**

CMHA, 2021

79%

of young employees indicated having a **supportive and approachable line manager** would have a positive impact on their mental health.

CMHA, 2021

Young workers seek interpersonal connections that are

IN PERSON

rather than virtual to reduce feelings of isolation.

Becker, 2022



Identify the full range of social supports and build social connections



Consistent with many studies reinforcing the value of social support and connections, a review conducted by VicHealth (2019) identified that young job seekers and workers benefit from social support provided by parents, teachers, and others, with support to be directed and skills-based, but also aim to provide emotional support and encouragement. Further, young workers seek interpersonal connections that are in person rather than virtual to reduce feelings of isolation (Becker, 2022), which may be a challenge in hybrid or largely remote-work contexts.

Building social connectedness with colleagues has been found to help young workers diffuse information and knowledge to help them improve their practice, overcome challenges and achieve career-related goals (Lane & Sweeney, 2018). This interpersonal working environment is a key influence in other research investigating millennial employees' job satisfaction, where good relationships between colleagues and co-workers and satisfaction with general supervision were both significant contributors.

WHAT IS THE SPECIFIC ROLE OF LEADERS?

While many studies look at overall organisational factors, there is clearly a key role played by those who support and lead young workers.

Transformational leadership describes leaders who take the initiative to provide opportunities for growth to employees by determining how their needs align with the business's needs (Bass, 1985).

Various models of leadership have been considered this space, with a particular focus on the value of transformational leadership.

Transformational leadership has been found to be effective in supporting young workers (Sessoms-Penny et al., 2023; Yap & Zainal Badri, 2020). More specifically, there is evidence that leaders are valued when they provide coaching, talk regularly about focusing on strengths, take accountability for their actions, set clear expectations, adequately share information, are caring, and engage workers in decision-making (Gallup, 2016; Valenti, 2019).

Looking at young workers specifically, a recent US-based study (Sessoms-Penny et al., 2023) interviewed 22 managers and found that effective management strategies for this cohort included: **providing managerial flexibility** (e.g. giving employees leeway in how they do tasks and where they work); **providing additional managerial support** (e.g. checking in on the employee's wellbeing) and **encouraging creativity**; (e.g. giving employees the space to think, grow and be themselves).

Organisations in this study were encouraged to redesign job descriptions to recognise work-life balance preferences for employees, and to increase the type and frequency of the employee recognition and feedback process to encourage employee engagement and motivation. Managers articulated the ongoing need to provide training for both millennials and managers to help them highlight the connection between individual contribution and the corporate vision and enhances the sense of belonging. As noted, managers directly influence the culture of work-life balance, which increases the engagement of younger workers (Xu, Cao, & Lu, 2023).

“

When people cannot speak up easily – for example, to offer ideas or test assumptions – **preventable failures are likely and innovation suffers.**

Edmonson & Bransby, 2023



Results from large Deloitte survey data (2023) indicates that 21% of the 44,000 Gen Z and millennial sample “... prefer hybrid work models in which their employer has set requirements for how often they need to be on-site. This could be because set requirements would provide structure and ensure that in-person time is coordinated so that employees are not going into an empty office ... and some in person collaboration is important.” (p.16)

Leaders also play a key role in the development and maintenance of psychologically safe environments, where team members feel free to speak up, admit mistakes and take risks without risk of humiliation or punishment.

“When people cannot speak up easily—for example, to offer ideas or test assumptions—preventable failures are likely and innovation suffers.”
(Edmonson & Bransby, 2023)

During our search, much of the psychological safety data was found via grey literature sources or in research studies that centre on graduates in the healthcare industry. An academic study in the Korean corporate environment (Moake et al., 2019, cited in Edmonson & Bransby, 2023) showed that strong team psychological safety encouraged younger team members to engage in innovation-related behaviours despite norms that suggest this should be the role of older team members.

Recent corporate sector research focusing on the experience of early career employees in corporate Australia echoes earlier findings relating to the types of leadership that appeals to younger workers:

“Showing vulnerability is an important leadership trait for early in career employees, who appreciate seeing the more ‘human’ side of their managers. This helps to create a culture of psychological safety for early in career employees and the benefits that follow.” (CMHAA, 2021)

In addition to leadership, mentoring opportunities have a role in early career success

Mentoring has been shown to be distinct from learning relationships with leaders, providing career-related support as well as personal and professional growth (Kram, 1985, cited in Eby & Robertson, 2020).

There have been small to moderate effect sizes that speak to a positive influence of mentor-mentee relationships (see Eby & Robertson, 2020). Young workers report a desire for mentoring whereby they can refer to, and model, successful people’s behaviour, with many young workers choosing to work for a supervisor with leadership and mentoring capabilities (Banović, 2022; Barhate & Dirani, 2022). Supervised practice was also deemed beneficial, with 60% of early career lawyers reporting this as helpful (Jagot, 2023).

Mentoring has also been shown to support apprentices to complete traineeships (Buchanan et al., 2016). Although research in this area is limited, a recent meta-analysis showed promising outcomes for apprentices when mentors were involved, particularly when mentors had previous experience with helping experiences or roles, and training was provided to volunteer mentors (Raposa, 2016, cited in Raposa, 2019).

Although there is a lack of academic research into buddy programs, they are popular for onboarding graduates and new employees. A pilot study by Microsoft in 2018 reported the more contact a buddy had with the new staff member, the greater the latter’s perception of how quickly their productivity increased. The program also ensured buddies and new employees reported to the same manager, to ensure the buddy could “... share specific role-related sources; share best practices, tips [and] tricks; and help answer specific questions related to a new hire’s role and team.” (Klinghoffer et al, 2019). A guiding structure and resources were important as was keeping an eye on engaging in ways that met the needs of the youngest generation.



Recent exploration has identified three key indicators of a sustainable career: **health, happiness, and productivity.**

De Vos, Van der Heijden & Akkermans, 2020



WHAT PROMOTES THE MENTAL WELLBEING OF EARLY CAREER WORKERS?

Beyond merely reducing risks, proactive measures are essential to support the wellbeing of young workers.

A sustainable career, as outlined by Greehaus and Kossek (*cited in De Vos & Van der Heijden, 2015*), is one that aligns with an individual's core and career values, successfully integrating with personal and family life. More recent exploration has identified three key indicators of a sustainable career: health, happiness, and productivity (*De Vos, Van der Heijden & Akkermans, 2020*). Such a career provides a sense of security for economic needs and wellbeing, characterised by flexibility to adapt to changing needs, renewability through regular opportunities for rejuvenation, and overall growth over time.

While reducing risks of physical and psychological harm and preventing these risks are well established in models of occupational wellbeing, we are also seeing the language of positive psychology extend into the workplace with an equally important component of 'promoting the positive' (*LaMontagne & Keegel, 2012*). This essential component of workplace wellbeing takes us towards a focus on programs and actions that are designed to take wellbeing to the next level, and support people to 'thrive' and 'flourish' at work.

A **thriving organisation** goes beyond focusing on reducing poor mental health and provides workers the opportunity to recognise and harness their potential for innovation and performance (*Cham et al., 2023*). Thriving is essential to consider in addition to the more widely known construct of resilience. "Whereas resilience refers to behavioural capacities that allow one to bounce back from untoward events, thriving focuses on the positive psychological experience of increased learning and vitality to develop oneself and grow at work" (*Spreitzer et al., 2005, cited in Wulumbwa et al., 2018*). Recent meta-analyses provide a growing evidence base in the area (*Kleine et al., 2019; Liu et al., 2021*). One study found different factors, including: **Contextual factors** such as autonomy and trust; **resources** like authentic leadership; **personal traits** included self-efficacy and optimism; and **individual work behaviours** included exploration and task focus were found to influence thriving at work (*Liu et al., 2021*).

However, while there is interest in this space, at present there is limited research examining the effectiveness of interventions in assisting early career workers to thrive at work. A promising move is suggested by recent Australian research that includes young people (*Batyr, 2023; Cham et al., 2023*), and which is contributing to frameworks that workplaces can adopt to support thriving in the workplace.

From this work, common themes include:

- **Promoting purpose and growth** through leadership development and career development opportunities in general.
- **Promoting connection** so there is high-quality interactions and relationships between workers within a culture of authenticity, support and collaboration. It has become more important than ever to provide an office space that encourages people to come in through connections between team members, activities and/or an inviting environment.
- **Increasing personal resources** for thriving, including positive psychology coaching programs with a concomitant focus on worker strengths and interests.



Psychological Capital (PsyCap) refers to an individual's strengths and positive capacities that increases the likelihood of success in the face of adversity.

Psychological Capital

It is worth noting that Psychological Capital or 'PsyCap', while at an early stage of research with early career workers, has also been implicated in successfully navigating challenge around the time of transition to work.

PsyCap is a multi-dimensional construct based in positive psychology, consisting of four dimensions: self-efficacy, optimism, hope and resilience (Luthans & Broad, 2022). The concept of psychological capital refers to an individual's strengths and positive capacities that increases the likelihood of success in the face of adversity.

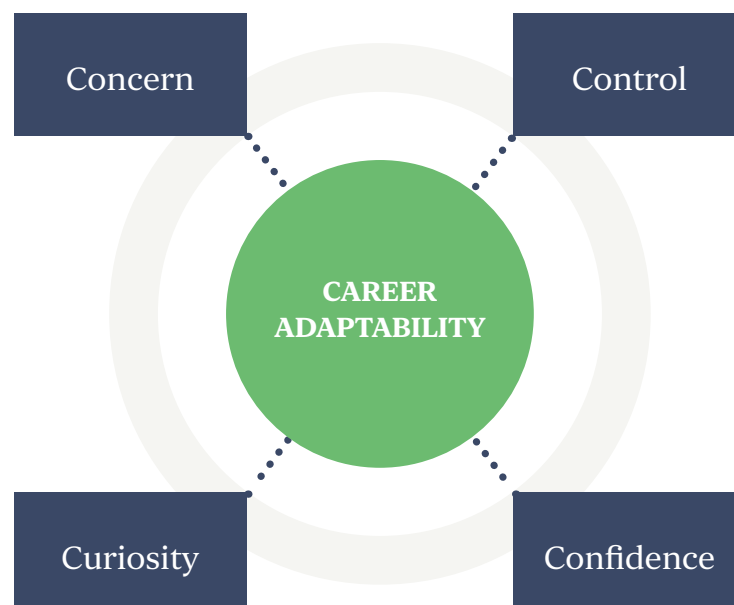
Tomlinson's (2017) Graduate Capital Model proposes that psychological capital increases an individual's capacity to handle difficult situations and solve problems; it also facilitates interpreting facts and circumstances, self-awareness, critical thinking and personal adaptability.

As noted earlier, courage of young workers also appears to mediate adaptability skills while also being linked to flourishing, defined in this context as "... an adaptive behaviour to cope with career development tasks and changing work and career conditions and for promoting life satisfaction." (Ginevra et al., 2020, p. 459).

Magnano and colleagues (2021) found courage mediated the relationship between **career transition readiness** and **Career Adaptability**. Three of the Career Adaptability subscales (i.e. concern, control and confidence) and career transition readiness were related to life satisfaction and flourishing through the mediation of courage.

Bringing together and reinforcing many themes identified in this review is work by Yap and colleagues (2020) who explored factors that relate to millennial employee happiness in the workplace.

Finding work autonomy, work-life balance, meaning at work, transformational leadership and workplace friendship were significant predictors of workplace happiness of millennial workers who had worked full-time for at least one year or more.



Savickas & Porfeli, 2012



WHERE TO NOW?

Knowledge gaps

There are several key gaps in the knowledge available in this area, reflecting both systematic bias and methodological limitations.

- Much of the academic research identified in this review focused on assessing risk factors of early-career workers in healthcare, education, and academia. These industries are more likely to be large, publicly funded, and have a larger proportion of female workers, all of which may impact the workplace contexts. More research is needed to assess risk factors and resources to support workers in other professions, including law, finance, commerce, engineering and other commercial environments.
- Most research focused on students or existing young/early career workers, with a bias towards graduates from professional degrees, rather than specifically examining the transition from student to worker/apprentice.
- Some studies had small sample sizes and applied findings to only one industry and profession. Future studies are needed to examine the effectiveness of programs to support early career workers using bigger samples across different professions.
- There is minimal academic research into career boundaries for the youngest workers and the structure and outcomes of buddy programs.
- In addition, most research in this area is cross-sectional in nature, without experimental or even quasi-experimental designs, which limits examination of causation to determine what works, for whom, and in what conditions.

Future research

Based on the identified research gaps, the following are key areas for future research.

- More evaluation and experimental research is needed to examine the effect of early career transition interventions on early career employee outcomes. An examination of differences between interventions (i.e. training, coaching, mentoring) on employee outcomes would be beneficial to shape future intervention development. Additionally, given how common buddy systems are in graduate programs, research into how frameworks and tools to improve outcomes would be beneficial.
- There is a need to examine risk factors affecting workers by profession/industry alongside investigation of strategies to increase the wellbeing and engagement.
- Longitudinal studies of career transitioners will be necessary to identify stable and fluctuating features of their adaptations and to examine mean-level changes in Career Adaptability and well-being over time.
- Similarly, studies are urgently needed into ways younger workers and organisations can 'meet in the middle' when it comes to navigating the learning, social and work-life boundary preferences of young workers in the hybrid environment.
- The existing organisational literature on early career transitions inadequately addresses intersectionality. Specifically, there is a lack of attention to the complexities faced by individuals with multiple minority identities. It is crucial to recognise and address these complexities to foster greater diversity and equity within organisations.



Specifically, we see a clear need to evaluate graduate and early career transition programs

- The effectiveness of existing graduate transition programs is largely unknown. The available research provides very limited research evaluating what specific training programs and interventions best support graduates transition to the workplace.
- It appears that workers and organisations agree that early career workers need face-to-face time in the workplace for social, professional and development purposes. When it comes to learning and development, younger workers prefer to learn via multiple modalities. While research has identified e-training as beneficial to increasing early career workers productivity and motivation, how e-training fits with other learning processes in the hybrid environment is unclear and yet to be assessed.
- We are unaware of academic transition-based research that examines research examining the outcomes related to alternative evidence-based interventions (e.g. coaching) that may support early career workers' transition to the workplace.

Using the data and analysis from this white paper, we have redesigned our Graduate Transitioning Program to offer more tailored support for early career professionals. With a focus on knowledge, practical strategies, and the tools to navigate the opportunities and challenges young workers face in the modern workplace.



You can find out more about supporting early in career and graduate workers on [Transitioning Well's website](#) or by downloading the [Graduate Transition Program Flyer](#).

CONCLUSION

In summary, the transition to work represents a pivotal life event for young individuals in the ever-changing economic landscape.

As societal attitudes and legislation continue to evolve, organisations are embracing their ethical and legal responsibilities and laying the foundation for a workplace culture that prioritises the careers and mental health of their people.

The ongoing commitment to understanding the unique challenges faced by early career professionals, as evidenced by this paper's insights, is a promising stride towards fostering environments that not only provide immediate support but also nurture sustainable and fulfilling career paths.

With a focus on adaptability and sustainability, organisations stand poised to reap the rewards of increased staff retention, reduced absenteeism, and heightened overall performance.

As we navigate the post-pandemic landscape, dedication to creating supportive workplaces is not just a strategic imperative but a catalyst for positive societal change. This collective effort ensures that the transition to work becomes a springboard for success, wellbeing, and lasting fulfilment in the working lives of our emerging workforce.

We encourage you to share this freely with your networks to increase support in this much needed area of transition.

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