

## **The Fears Perceived by Young Romanian People Entering an Increasingly Unstable Labor Market in a Post-Pandemic Society**

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### **Abstract**

The COVID-19 pandemic has created unprecedented challenges for the labor market and young people entering the job market in Romania may face unique fears and uncertainties. Some of these fears may include: uncertainty about employment opportunities, remote work challenges, health and safety issues, digital skills requirements, economic instability, mental health. This study aims to explore the fears perceived by Romanian youth entering an increasingly unstable labor market in a post-pandemic society. In this article we use a qualitative research method, in-depth interviews, to obtain information about the specific concerns and anxieties of young people entering the labor market after the COVID-19 pandemic, in order to understand their consumer behavior in the labor market. The findings of this study will help us understand the experiences of young people in the labor market in Romania and will help policymakers and businesses find ways to support their transition to the labor market. Also, this study will highlight the need for strategies adapted to the challenges of a post-pandemic society, such as digitization and sustainability. Young people will discover some opportunities to develop the skills and competencies necessary to use the new technologies. In conclusion, this study will serve as a valuable resource for educators, employers and policy makers who wish to promote a more sustainable and inclusive labor market in Romania.

**Keywords:** Consumer behavior, post-pandemic society, labor market, new technologies, sustainability.

**JEL classification:** J20, J28.

### **Introduction**

Analyzing the labor market in 2023, we can observe the following trends: the hybrid program will replace the remote one; the number of employees with two jobs will increase; employers will have to resort more and more to the import of personnel. The adoption of the hybrid work schedule to the detriment of the remote one, along with the fact that more and more employees will be tempted to take a second job to supplement their income in the long

term, represent the main directions on the labor market this year according to a report of eJobs commented by Bogdan Badea CEO of eJobs Romania. The young people who enter the labor market must be very prepared for this reality that suffered great changes in the 2 years of Covid-19 pandemic. This labor market brings with it the need for innovation at every step.

Although there has been a long series of challenges at an international level, the desires of employees are basically the same, whether they are part of Generation Z, whether they are Millennials or any other generation. All these generations have three great expectations regarding the job: to have transparent communication with superiors and colleagues, stability and empathy (the need to feel understood and included). Brilliant ideas are not enough to achieve exceptional results. People are needed to share them, support them and turn them into concrete actions (Sinek, 2014). In addition to these values, the criteria well established by each employee or candidate when applying for a new job are added. Next, salary and schedule are two important criteria when it comes to career. But in recent years, along with generation Z, modern employees value the benefits provided by the company. The attitude of young employees will change the labor market, they will not be willing to easily make concessions such as overtime to complete pressing projects.

In Romania, according to the National Institute of Statistics (INS), in the third quarter of 2022, the unemployment rate reached 23.9% among young people (15-24 years), compared to the general rate of 5.4%. Young people's skills and implicitly, their performance on the labor market depend on the ability of education and training systems to meet the demands of employers. It is essential that educational programs are adapted to economic changes and the demands of the labor market in order to facilitate the integration of young people into the professional field. In Romania, although the overall unemployment rate is low, there is a significant gap between the young population and the general population in terms of employment. This indicates that young people have difficulties in finding jobs or meeting the expectations and requirements of employers. Progress in the integration of young people on the labor market in Romania has been modest in the last decade, which highlights the need to implement effective educational policies adapted to the current very rapid economic transformations.

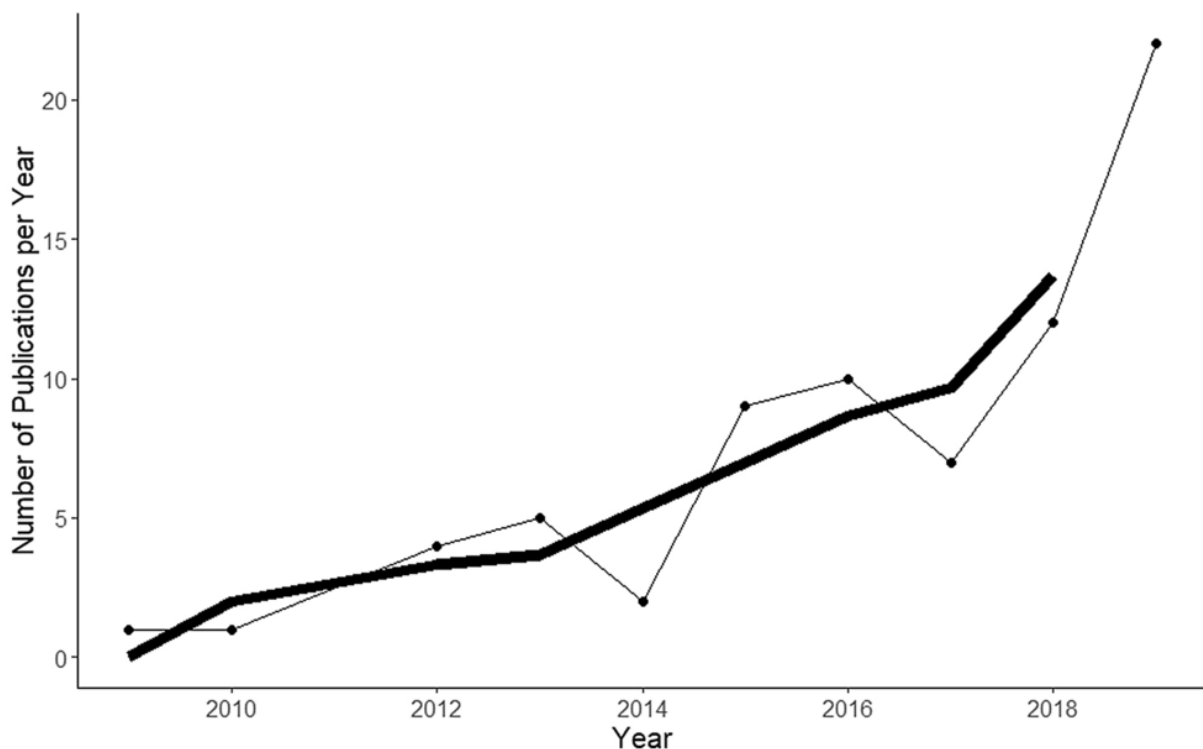
It is important that the education system provides the necessary skills to meet the demands of employers and facilitate the transition of young people from education to the labor market. The world is in urgent need of competent professionals to contribute to societal transformations towards sustainability (Gordon et al. 2019), and educational institutions ought to prepare students for these roles (Barth 2016; Franco et al. 2019). It is also crucial to promote collaboration between educational institutions, the private sector and public policies to identify labor market needs and develop appropriate training and education programs. Thus, young people will have more opportunities to develop their skills and improve their chances of employment in a constantly changing economic environment. The subject of work enters the discussion as one of the most important aspects to consider with regard to a sustainable future (ILO, 2018). This coordinated approach is essential to ensure young people develop the necessary skills and appropriate opportunities to build a successful career.

In the report "Why the world needs to upskill young people to enable the net zero transition", carried out by PwC, UNICEF and Generation Unlimited (2023), it is shown that over 60% of young people between the ages of 15 and 24 globally (830 of millions of people) will not have the necessary skills for the labor market in 2030, including those for the transition to the green economy. Dinu Bumbăcea, Country Managing Partner, PwC Romania cites this report and says that estimates show that the transition to a green economy will create 8.4 million jobs for young people by 2030. An analysis carried out by PwC UK reveals that, for every "green" job created, another 1.4 new jobs can be attributed to it and the multiplier is even higher

in sectors such as energy, utilities and manufacturing. The more sustainable the world, the more new challenges and opportunities arise in the business environment (Magomedov, 2020).

Quoting from the report made by PwC, UNICEF and Generation Unlimited (2023) we find that "the transition to a green economy requires a change in the types of jobs and a transformation in the way people work. Managing this change requires qualification, re-skilling and improvement, which will have a triple impact: they will contribute to reducing carbon emissions, reducing inequality and managing the youth unemployment crisis. The pressure to develop skills in the green economy is felt even more in the context where the pace of reducing carbon emissions must increase 11 times compared to the global average achieved in the early 2000s in order to reach the Paris climate goals. Therefore, the demand for some jobs will increase (eg in construction), it will change the nature of others (eg the maintenance of electric vehicles is different of gasoline cars), will create new jobs (eg more sustainability experts) and even eliminate some existing ones". Thus, companies have begun to think not only about making a profit, but also about implementing marketing strategies that require them to consider what is in the interest of society, in the short term, but especially on the long term (Muşetescu, 2017).

Research on assessment in sustainability (science) education appears to likely be in its emergent growth phase, trailing the pattern of research growth in sustainability science by about 15 years (Fang et al. 2018).



**Figure 1. Publications on sustainability competencies assessments per year in final sample (solid line is rolling 3-year average)**

Source: Current practice of assessing students' sustainability competencies: a review of tools

In this post-Covid-19 pandemic context, companies are redefining their purpose and proposing to get involved for the community in which they operate, for their employees and proposing to have a sustainable economy. Thus, they propose to get involved at the community level, then at the level of the country where they operate, they propose to initiate projects for a

sustainable economy in which the Millennials generation (born between 1981 - 1996) and Generation Z (born between 1997 - 2012) can be found, they being those conscious consumers, willing to know the whole process of the products from the raw material to the product on the shelf.

The current working model, regardless of whether it is on-site, hybrid or remote (telework), strongly demands a culture of trust, a culture of transparency, of communication, in which the leaders have on the list of objectives the development of the people in the team, on a background where they are permanently connected to the market and the need for innovation. Observing all these changes produced on the labor market in Romania in the post-pandemic Covid-19 climate, we set out to research the fears and threats perceived by young people entering this market. We set out to find out this information by carrying out a qualitative research in the framework of which we would obtain valuable information from specialists in fields of interest for our research topic.

## 1. Methodology

The methodology of qualitative research regarding the threats perceived by young Romanians when entering the labor market, from the perspective of specialists, is based on notions that aim at meaningful interpretative and naturalistic realistic aspects, with the aim of exploring and understanding in depth the topic of interest (Cătoiu et al, 2009).

The role of this qualitative research is to combine the advantages offered by the previously mentioned theoretical concepts and to transpose them in the research context, in order to identify from the analysis of the specialists' opinions, the fears and threats perceived by young people when entering the labor market in Romania in the post- Covid-19 pandemic. The qualitative analysis regarding the perceptions of the labor market from the perspective of local specialists can identify the current local situation regarding the ratio between the changes produced by the Covid-19 pandemic at the international level and the changes produced by this pandemic at the national level (Romania). We can also obtain valuable information about the efficiency with which sustainable development methods are put into practice on the labor market in Romania and new directions for the development of strategies for the efficient adaptation of young people to the fast-paced labor market can be established.

We have established the following objectives for the qualitative research that we are conducting:

**Objective 1:** Knowing the level of information of specialists about the major threats to the career prospects of young people entering the labor market.

**Objective 2:** Identifying the interest shown by specialists in the field regarding the importance of adaptability in the career under the pressure of emerging technologies.

**Objective 3:** Determining the opinion of specialists about the major changes brought by the Covid-19 pandemic on the labor market.

**Objective 4:** Evaluation of the degree of familiarity of the specialists with the terms specific to the concept of sustainability on the labor market.

As methods of gathering information, we chose to use a selection questionnaire and an interview guide. The invitation to participate, the recruitment of participants and the gathering of information was done online by means of a selection questionnaire. The interview guide was designed on four topics specific to marketing research, each with the role of achieving the previously established objectives.

**Topic 1:** Specialists' opinion regarding the major threats to the career prospects of young people entering the labor market (comprises 6 questions).

**Topic 2:** Specialists' opinion regarding the importance of career adaptability considering the impact of emerging technologies (includes 3 questions)

**Topic 3:** Specialists' opinion regarding the role of the Covid-19 pandemic and the changes brought to the labor market, with an emphasis on the obstacles related to entering the labor market post-pandemic Covid-19 (comprises 9 questions).

**Topic 4:** Specialists' opinion regarding the understanding of the concept of sustainability on the post-Covid-19 pandemic labor market (comprises 3 questions).

In order to achieve the established objectives, the chosen method of gathering information was the undirected in-depth interview with the aim of obtaining numerous and highly accurate information (Cătoiu et al, 2009, p. 216). In the creation of the sample and the recruitment of the participants, we applied the type of traditional pre-established sampling (before the data collection), non-probabilistic and oriented towards relevant people from the point of view of the subject, in order to fulfill the objectives based on the analysis of the collective structure (Cătoiu et al, 2009, p. 526). The participants were chosen based on the competences acquired through experience and skills reflected by the status they acquired in the professional field in which they activate, so that their answers can provide us with the most relevant information.

The qualitative research on the fears and threats perceived by young Romanians when entering the labor market focuses on the statements of 11 specialists with experience between 7 and 30 years, who occupy different positions within the companies they represent, such as be: managing director and owner, human resources manager, administrator, sustainability specialist (Table 1).

*Table 1. The status and number of specialists participating in the qualitative research*

Indicators				
<b>The position within the organization</b>	Managing Director & Owner	Human Resources Manager	Administrator	Sustainability Specialist
<b>Number of specialists</b>	3	3	3	2

The collection of qualitative research information was carried out by means of the selection questionnaire and the interview guide administered both face to face and by telephone, between February 1 and May 31, 2023. This method of administering the interview guides presented the advantage of offering the participants in this research the temporal availability, allowing them to answer the questions in the available time interval, at the time of their choice.

## 2. Research findings and conclusions

The conclusions of the qualitative research regarding the understanding of the concept of sustainability and the concerns related to the post-Covid-19 pandemic labor market can be presented as follows.

For 2023, experts expect the trends that will shape professional environments to continue to emphasize adaptability, agility and versatility. Thus, the fears of young candidates for a job can be related to the inability to adapt in time to changes in the labor market, to the inability to intuit the direction of evolution of new jobs. In 2023, the labor market for employees and candidates mainly means the need for self-knowledge. They must be prepared to see what skills they have, what they know and what they don't know, where they have defined their limits and what is holding them back, when the need for learning in the market is great. As the companies are on the move, along with them the candidates will develop a series of skills, in close

correlation with the industry and the role they have. But for this it is necessary to clarify the following 3 aspects: what is the trend and the need in the market - what skills are required; what level he is at; to be aware of what resources he allocates (time, money, etc.) to increase his competitiveness on the labor market, now but also for the future.

According to experts, there are 3 directions that companies should take into account in 2023. The first is *remote work*. The opportunity to work from home is at the top of the preferences of the majority of employees. Employees who work remotely enjoy, first of all, the lack of time spent daily in traffic. Full remote or hybrid system work denotes flexibility from the company, which most employees appreciate and look for, being one of the reasons why they decide to accept or refuse a job. The threats reside in the large reduction of direct professional connections and the resilience of employees. The second direction is represented by a *sustainable work style*. Professional stress, which leads to the phenomenon of burnout, has become increasingly common among workers, which has led to a change in the approach to work style (Broman et al., 2017). As a result, many companies have begun to redesign the way they work to promote active rest and prevent physical and mental burnout of employees. These strategies include implementing no-meeting days, adopting four-day work weeks, increasing the number of vacation days and creating attractive recreation areas. More and more people today attach importance to the balance between personal and professional life. Achieving a good harmony between these two aspects becomes a priority for many employees. Companies that manage to develop effective strategies in this direction will benefit from a large number of loyal employees.

The use of the term "sustainability" is mostly motivated by marketing considerations towards the building of a corporate image so that companies can improve their financial performance (Kemper et al., 2019). The threat is represented by the fact that the implementation of this sustainable work style is done at a rather slow pace and not many companies are willing to adopt it yet. Research about strategically integrating sustainability into business is still mainly theoretical or addresses specific aspects of corporate sustainability (Engert et al., 2016). The third direction is *financial stability*. The high level of inflation leads to a much more expensive lifestyle, even when it comes to the minimum required. Thus, it is easy to understand why employers must continue to take into account the salary package offered. In addition to the monthly salary, extra-salary benefits such as private medical insurance, life insurance, holiday and vacation premiums are important elements that can attract quality employees and that will keep the existing ones loyal. The threat for new candidates on the labor market resides in the desire of companies to pay the lower cost with the retraining or specialization of current employees than to bear the higher costs of recruiting and hiring a new one.

Most specialists showed moderate to high familiarity with the concept of sustainability in the context of the post-Covid-19 pandemic labor market. They understood that sustainability refers to the ecological, economic and social approach to work activities and decisions in a sustainable, long-term way (Redman, 2020). Participants highlighted the importance of integrating sustainability into organizations' strategies and practices and into individual career decisions.

Research participants expressed varying levels of concern about perceived threats to entering the labor market in the post-Covid-19 pandemic society. Threats identified included: lack of employment opportunities, economic instability, fierce competition in the labor market, rapid technological change and negative impact on the environment and sustainability.

The experts interviewed provided concrete examples and arguments to support their concerns such as rising unemployment, reduced investment in the economic sector, increasing demand for digital skills and environmental degradation. The results showed that the threats perceived as the most significant for young people entering the labor market in the post-Covid-

19 pandemic society are: fierce competition on the labor market, lack of employment opportunities, negative impact on the environment and sustainability, rapid technological changes and economic instability.

All the interviewed specialists were of the opinion that it is of great importance in the actual climate on Romanian labor market to be able to adapt to changes and technological innovations, such as artificial intelligence and automation which are gaining ground in certain fields. Regarding the sustainability aspect, Romanian labor market is striving to keep up the pace with the demands of the moment. There is a great demand for sustainability specialists, companies must adapt and integrate sustainability in their business plans therefore there is a great need for communicating these plans to their employees through trainings and well coordinated programs.

In this post-pandemic context, Romanian companies are putting together a series of marketing decisions to support young people entering the labor market, such as: *internship programs* (young people get the opportunity to gain practical experience in their field of interest), *mentoring and coaching* (young employees receive guidance and support from more experienced professionals in the organization; this can be an effective way to develop skills and stimulate the professional growth of young employees), *providing learning and development resources* (online courses, seminars, conferences and other learning tools for young employees to improve their knowledge and skills in a flexible way, adapted to their needs), *building an inclusive organizational culture* (policies and practices that support diversity, equity and inclusion, as well as promoting collaboration and active participation), *collaboration with educational institutions* (partnerships with educational institutions, such as universities and vocational schools, to provide learning opportunities and internships to young people during their studies, to facilitate their transition from the academic to the professional environment), *use of technology and digital platforms* (companies can use technology and digital platforms to reach young people and provide them with information about available career opportunities, as well as to facilitate recruitment and selection processes).

There are several limitations associated with qualitative research conducted with a group of 11 specialists: generalization of the results (the opinions and perspectives expressed by the 11 specialists may be relevant and useful, but cannot be considered representative of the entire population), subjectivity and interpretation (specialists' opinions and interpretations may be influenced by their individual experiences and perceptions, which may introduce a certain degree of subjectivity into the research results), potential communication barriers (communication with a small group of specialists can be influenced by various barriers, such as language, differences in perspective and difficulties in mutual understanding), potential for important concerns to be missed (due to the small sample size and limitations in communication, it is possible that certain concerns or perspectives of young people are not covered or are under-represented in the research), lack of diversity and representativeness (the small pool of management professionals may be homogenous in terms of demographics, experiences and perspectives. This can limit the representativeness of the research and lead to the omission of important perspectives, such as those of young people from different socioeconomic or cultural backgrounds). In order to obtain a more comprehensive and representative understanding of the fears of young Romanian people entering the labor market in the post-pandemic context, it is recommended to combine qualitative research with quantitative methods, to expand the sample and to take into account the diversity of perspectives and experiences.

### 3.1. Originality

Analyzing specialized literature, researches conducted to determine the perceptions of fear and threats felt by young people entering the labor market, especially in post-pandemic context in Romania, is rarely encountered.

### 3.2. Future research

A close observation of the evolution of labor market of the last 2 years demonstrates that many abrupt changes have occurred and many more are yet to come in this unstable post-pandemic climate. That is why we consider of great interest for future research to investigate young people's perceptions towards entering the labor market by conducting a quantitative research or by means of a neuromarketing experiment using as tool the electroencephalography (EEG) that can provide more complex and valuable insights.

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