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CAREER ANCHORS REIMAGINED: EXPERTISE, STABILITY AND RECOGNITION IN STRUCTURED ORGANIZATIONAL FIELDS

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ABSTRACT. This article explores how professionals in a multinational IT company construct career identities that intertwine ambition, recognition, and stability—challenging dominant models that equate ambition with autonomy and instability. Drawing on a sequential exploratory mixed-methods design—48 qualitative interviews and a survey of 764 employees—it identifies "expertise" as a distinct career anchor defined not merely by technical skill, but by internal recognition, symbolic legitimacy, and trusted authority. Quantitative validation through factor analysis confirmed a revised nine-anchor model, with widespread hybrid identities (e.g., expertise + lifestyle, expertise + security) emerging as normative, not transitional. The article reframes security not as passivity but as an entitlement earned through excellence. Interpreted through a career field and habitus lens, these findings reposition career anchors as relational identity positions shaped by organizational recognition regimes, symbolic capital, and contextual fit. The study contributes a grounded critique of protean and boundaryless career models, proposing an alternative understanding of stability, ambition, and growth in contemporary structured work environments.

Keywords: career identity, career anchors, expertise, protean careers, stability

Introduction

In contemporary career theory, the ideal worker is frequently portrayed as autonomous, flexible, and entrepreneurial—attributes epitomized by the protean (Hall, 1996) and boundaryless (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996) career models.

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Within these frameworks, values such as security, stability, and long-term organizational commitment are often framed as outdated, misaligned with the innovation-driven demands of modern work. Yet, these assumptions remain largely untested in structured, high-performance environments, where ambition, legitimacy, and organizational embeddedness coexist in complex ways.

This article challenges the presumed incompatibility between professional ambition and career security. Drawing on a sequential exploratory mixed-methods study conducted in the Romanian subsidiary of a multinational IT organization, it explores how employees construct career identities within a field defined by formal evaluation systems, internal mobility, and symbolic recognition. The study investigates how employees articulate and combine career values such as expertise, ambition, and stability, and whether existing career anchor frameworks can adequately account for these expressions—or require conceptual revision.

The first, inductive phase of qualitative interviews revealed the salience of a previously under-theorized identity anchor: *expertise*, defined not merely by technical proficiency, but by internal legitimacy, trusted authority, and symbolic value within the organization. Employees frequently described a desire not just to "do well," but to "be known" as experts—to be recognized and valued by peers and managers. These narratives also foregrounded security as a valued outcome—not in terms of risk aversion, but as a reward for sustained excellence and accumulated capital.

The quantitative phase validated these insights, yielding a revised nine-anchor model that confirmed expertise as a distinct construct and revealed the prevalence of hybrid anchor configurations—particularly combinations like expertise + lifestyle or expertise + security. These patterns suggest that hybrid identities are not transitional or incoherent, but structured and normatively supported positions within the organizational field. Career anchors, in this context, are not fixed personality traits but symbolic identity positions, co-constructed through the interplay of individual biography, institutional recognition systems, and contextual fit.

Deploying career anchor theory heuristically and interpreting the findings through the lens of career field and habitus (Mayrhofer et al., 2004), this article reframes anchors as relational stances embedded in structured environments. It challenges the traditional assumptions of singular anchor dominance and context-free career motivations, offering instead a recognition-based, institutionally situated model of career identity. The following sections outline the theoretical foundations, methodological approach, and key findings, and discuss how this case contributes to rethinking the meaning of ambition, legitimacy, and stability in contemporary organizational careers.

Theoretical background

Over the past two decades, research on careers has been shaped by the rise of the protean (Hall, 1996; Hall & Mirvis, 1995; Briscoe & Hall, 2006) and boundaryless (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Sullivan & Arthur, 2006) career models. These paradigms shifted attention away from externally defined, organizationally bound career paths toward self-directed, mobile, and value-driven trajectories, emphasizing psychological success over hierarchical advancement. Central to both is the idea that autonomy, flexibility, and personal adaptability are the core competencies for navigating unstable labor markets (Arthur et al., 2005; Baruch, 2004).

Within this discourse, values such as stability, predictability, or organizational loyalty are often associated with stagnation or passivity. Mobility is not only framed as desirable but frequently equated with ambition itself. While these models have captured important structural changes—such as the decline of internal labor markets and the rise of project-based work—they have also come under increasing critique. Scholars argue that they promote a narrow, individualistic conception of agency and overlook the continued influence of organizational structures, institutional norms, and sectoral logics on career development (Inkson et al., 2012; Rodrigues & Guest, 2010; Mayrhofer et al., 2005; Tomlinson et al., 2018; Caza, Vough & Puranik, 2018).

Moreover, assumptions about universal preferences for mobility have been challenged by research showing that career orientations are mediated by gender, class, life stage, and national context (Tams & Arthur, 2010; O'Neil et al., 2008). At stake in these debates is the status of values like stability and internal legitimacy, which are often positioned as regressive or outdated, but may in fact represent meaningful, recognition-based expressions of career success.

Despite this growing critique, the concept of career security remains under-theorized. While some workers continue to express a desire for predictability and long-term engagement, such preferences are often treated as defensive or incompatible with "successful" career behavior. High-performance environments—particularly multinational firms, IT sectors, and professional services—have rarely been examined for how stability can be positively integrated into aspirational career identities (Tomlinson, Baird, Berg & Cooper, 2018; De Vos & Van der Heijden, 2015).

Parallel to these developments, career anchor theory, originally developed by Schein (1978, 1990), has offered a durable typology for understanding career motivations. Schein's model identifies several "anchors"—such as technical competence, autonomy, managerial ambition, service, and security—around which individuals stabilize over time. However, this framework has come under sustained critique. It assumes that career orientations are internal, consistent, and

singular, with little room for contextual or organizational variation (Feldman & Bolino, 1996). In practice, studies have repeatedly found evidence of multiple coexisting values and shifting anchor dominance across the life course (Ramakrishna & Potosky, 2003; Wils et al., 2014).

Recent empirical studies have responded to these critiques by revisiting and revising Schein's original typology, often through quantitative methods designed to test its structural robustness. For instance, Danziger, Rachman-Moore, and Valency (2008) used confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to test whether Schein's eight-anchor framework accurately captured the career motivations of Israeli MBA students. Their findings supported a modified nine-factor model, with an additional anchor related to work-life balance emerging independently—an early signal of how new configurations can arise from changing labor norms.

Similarly, Costigan, Donahue, and Danziger (2016) applied CFA to a diverse sample of working adults in the U.S., again validating a nine-anchor structure. Their model retained the core of Schein's framework but revealed shifts in the salience and internal coherence of several anchors, including autonomy and technical competence. Notably, they found that anchors such as "service" and "lifestyle" clustered more tightly among respondents working in knowledge-intensive sectors, suggesting that the sociocultural and occupational context significantly shapes how anchor preferences are expressed and experienced.

Other scholars have moved beyond CFA to explore anchor hybridity and fluidity across time. Wils et al. (2014), in a longitudinal study of engineers, examined how career anchors evolve as individuals progress through different life and work stages. Their findings not only confirmed that most individuals exhibit multiple coexisting anchors, but also that the dominant anchor can shift over time in response to personal development or organizational change. This evidence challenges the original premise that career anchors stabilize early and remain fixed.

In parallel, newer studies—such as Cabot and Gagnon (2021)—have turned their attention to how digital transformation reshapes the content of existing anchors. Their research on IT professionals showed that in project-based and knowledge-heavy environments, identity is constructed less through fixed roles and more through recognition, embedded expertise, and visibility within the organizational network. These symbolic forms of career capital are not well captured by traditional anchor categories, pushing the field toward more relational and context-sensitive models.

Together, these studies point toward a growing consensus: while Schein's typology retains heuristic value, the empirical reality of career motivations is more dynamic, composite, and field-dependent than originally assumed. This expanding body of evidence provides a strong foundation for reimagining

career anchors not as fixed psychological predispositions, but as evolving identity positions shaped by institutional structures, cultural logics, and changing norms of recognition.

This evolving view aligns with broader efforts to theorize careers as socially embedded (Granrose & Portwood, 1987; Inkson, 2004). One particularly fruitful approach is the career field and habitus perspective developed by Mayrhofer et al. (2004), drawing on Bourdieu's framework to reposition career orientations as symbolic positions within structured fields of power and meaning. In this model, the career field encompasses the institutional and organizational context that defines which forms of capital—expertise, visibility, loyalty—are valued and rewarded. The *career habitus* refers to the internalized dispositions, expectations, and preferences individuals develop in relation to these structural forces. Career capital, meanwhile, captures the technical, social, and symbolic resources individuals accumulate through their professional trajectories (Mayrhofer et al., 2005; Iellatchitch, Mayrhofer & Meyer, 2003).

This lens challenges the rigid structure–agency binary that underlies many traditional career models. It views career motivations as co-constructed through institutional affordances, cultural norms, and personal biography. Within this framework, values such as security and stability are not merely psychological preferences or signs of risk aversion—they are legitimated identity claims made within specific organizational fields. In high-status environments, for instance, stability may serve as a reward for accumulated symbolic capital, particularly that associated with expertise and institutional trust.

This article contributes to this evolving conversation by offering a contextually grounded reinterpretation of anchors as symbolic identity positions shaped by internal recognition, organizational discourse, and structured field dynamics. Rather than treating stability, expertise, or internal legitimacy as static traits or individual preferences, this study explores how they are institutionally produced, symbolically encoded, and strategically mobilized within a structured corporate setting.

Methods

This study investigates how contemporary professionals understand and position their careers within a structured, performance-oriented organizational context. It asks how employees construct career identities and values in response to institutional recognition regimes, role expectations, and broader discourses around flexibility and ambition—particularly those embedded in the protean and boundaryless career paradigms. The central research question guiding the study is:

How do professionals construct and position their career identities within a structured, performance-oriented multinational organization that emphasizes innovation, recognition, and internal development?

This question is examined through a case study of a multinational company operating in Romania, which combines high-value innovation work with business process outsourcing (BPO). Within this hybrid setting, the study explores what motivates employees, how they define ambition and success, and how they reconcile career security with professional growth.

Schein's career anchor framework was used heuristically—as a conceptual device to guide both exploration and interpretation. In the qualitative phase, the framework informed the design of the interview guide by highlighting relevant career domains (such as autonomy, security, service, and recognition) without being presented directly to participants. In the quantitative phase, the unmodified Career Orientation Inventory (COI) was used to assess whether the framework could statistically capture career orientation patterns across the organization.

The study pursued three core objectives: (1) to explore how employees articulate their career values and aspirations; (2) to assess the extent to which these value configurations align with or exceed Schein's anchor model; and (3) to test the empirical structure of career orientations and hybrid identities at scale.

The study employed a sequential exploratory mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011), combining semi-structured interviews with a follow-up survey. The qualitative phase was inductive and exploratory, while the quantitative phase tested the robustness and generalizability of the patterns identified. The anchor framework was applied only after value constellations had emerged from the data, serving to structure, but not determine, interpretation.

Fieldwork took place within the Romanian offices of a multinational firm in the technology and professional services sector. The company operates with formalized career systems, including internal job levels, performance evaluations, and mobility structures. In 2021, a total of 48 semi-structured interviews were conducted with employees across the three business units operating in Romania. Interviews were carried out by three researchers using a shared interview guide, ensuring consistency across conversations. Participants were selected to reflect variation in gender, tenure, and hierarchical level. Interviews were conducted online in Romanian or Hungarian, lasted between 45 and 75 minutes, and were transcribed and analyzed in their original language. All the quotes presented in the article were translated by the author.

Participants were recruited through an internal call circulated by the HR department. As such, the sample likely reflects employees with more favorable

views of the organization. However, the aim was not to audit the firm but to understand how employees frame their careers and values. While some frustrations were voiced, the interviews focused largely on self-reflection rather than critique.

The interview guide was designed to surface values and orientations associated with career anchor theory while allowing new themes to emerge. Anchors were used as a background map to guide question design—covering areas such as personal growth, recognition, ambition, and stability—but participants were free to define their own terms. This approach allowed both alignment with and divergence from established categories to emerge naturally.

Analysis followed grounded theory principles, with codes generated inductively around recurring themes and tensions. The research team identified several interpretive clusters, including the centrality of expertise as a source of professional identity, the reinterpretation of security as a form of institutional legitimacy, and the prevalence of hybrid orientations. These observations informed the design and expectations of the survey phase.

The second phase involved the administration of the Career Orientation Inventory (COI), used in its original form. The survey was distributed online to employees across the same three business units, yielding 764 valid responses. The sample included a cross-section of early- and mid-career professionals working within a structured, performance-based system.

Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted using principal axis factoring with oblique (Oblimin) rotation. The eight-anchor structure originally proposed by Schein did not fit the data well. Instead, a nine-factor solution emerged as more robust and interpretable. Among the findings were the fragmentation of the traditional “technical/functional competence” anchor, the emergence of a distinct “expertise” factor centered on internal recognition and symbolic legitimacy, and high levels of hybrid orientation patterns across the sample.

Descriptive statistics and cross-tabulations were used to explore the frequency and distribution of anchor combinations, particularly the co-occurrence of expertise with stability or lifestyle values.

Insights from the two phases were integrated iteratively. The qualitative interviews shaped the survey's interpretive lens, while the factor structure clarified the empirical landscape of orientations across the organization. The analysis focused not on confirming fixed types but on understanding how career identities are expressed, negotiated, and made meaningful within a particular institutional setting.

Qualitative Findings: Careers as Situated Identity Work

The following section describes the qualitative research results and is followed by the quantitative section. However, at this point, the two sources are intertwined in the interpretation.

While dominant career models emphasize autonomy, flexibility, and individual agency, the interviews conducted for this study reveal a more situated and relational understanding of career values. Employees within the organization did not speak of their careers as projects to be optimized or managed, but as embedded trajectories shaped by recognition, legitimacy, and institutional belonging. The interview phase aimed to understand how individuals articulate what matters to them professionally—and how these articulations reflect both personal aspirations and organizational affordances.

The Career as Recognition: Expertise and Symbolic Value

Across all three business units, participants described a deep desire not simply to "perform" well, but to be recognized as trustworthy, skilled, and indispensable. Expertise, in this sense, emerged as a valued identity—distinct from technical competence. It was about being a reference point for others, being sought out, and being acknowledged internally as someone who "knows what they're doing."

> I want people to come to me for advice, not because I shout the loudest but because they know I can fix things. That's what success looks like. (F, mid-career)
> Recognition is not just the bonus or the rating. It's when my manager trusts me with something difficult without even asking. That means I've proven myself.
> (M, junior level)

This emphasis on symbolic expertise reveals a departure from the boundaryless ideal of the self-moving professional. For these employees, internal visibility, peer validation, and managerial trust were central to constructing a sense of worth. Expertise functioned not just as a skillset, but as a career identity anchor that was collectively recognized within the field.

Security as Entitlement, Not Retreat

Stability and security—understood not as comfort or inertia but as a foundation for trust, long-term contribution, and professional legitimacy—were a recurring theme in participants' narratives. Rather than contrasting with ambition or reflecting risk-aversion, participants often described stability

as a sign of organizational credibility, managerial competence, and professional pride. While many referenced the company's response to the COVID-19 pandemic—emphasizing its ability to retain staff and maintain operations during global uncertainty—this appreciation extended beyond the crisis itself. The pandemic simply made more visible a value the participants already held: that a solid, well-managed company enables serious work, long-term trust, and professional identification.

For many, the firm's perceived institutional strength was part of what made it attractive and meaningful as a workplace. Stability was not just protective; it was a precondition for doing meaningful, large-scale work.

> You can't do major global projects if your company feels shaky. I need to know that what I'm building is part of something stable.
> (M, senior level)

Security was also described in relational and positional terms. The same participants who spoke of ambition, innovation, or problem-solving often emphasized that they valued continuity—not as comfort, but as earned legitimacy. It was common to hear that remaining with the company allowed them to leverage internal credibility they had built over time.

> I don't want to job-hop. I've built something here. It took years to get to a place where my work speaks for itself.
> (F, senior level)
> Stability is not being stuck. It's being trusted. I know I can move internally if I want to, but I don't need to prove myself again from scratch.
> (F, mid-career)

This orientation was especially pronounced among employees who had taken on mentorship roles, internal mobility paths, or cross-functional collaborations. Staying in place was not seen as inertia, but as a way of consolidating symbolic capital: trust, visibility, and long-term value. The organization's formalized pathways and regular evaluation cycles reinforced this logic, framing continued internal presence as a sign of growth, not its absence.

Hybrid Orientations as Lived Configurations

A striking feature of the interviews was the frequency with which participants expressed multiple career values simultaneously. Rather than articulating a singular driver of motivation or success, employees described work in terms that combined professionalism with personal wellbeing, ambition with flexibility, and growth with recognition. These orientations were not presented

as contradictions. Instead, they formed coherent and practical frameworks through which individuals navigated their roles.

For many, the ability to grow professionally was closely linked to having the space to manage life outside work. Several interviewees spoke positively about the organization's approach to flexible work arrangements. One mid-career employee noted, "Weekends are weekends—except during the pandemic, when those boundaries blurred a bit." Others emphasized that overtime was rare and usually voluntary: "I have a healthy separation between work and personal life." Several participants mentioned using flexible hours to attend to family needs during the day and catch up later. One woman remarked, "My managers are understanding and open when I want to try something new. There's no pressure to stay late."

At the same time, learning and advancement remained salient. Employees frequently mentioned onboarding processes, mentorship, and project-based learning. "This project is helping me grow," said one participant, "by the end of it, I'll be a better professional." Others highlighted the accessibility of internal training and the sense that development was embedded in everyday work: "Even after the internship, I kept learning. There were free courses and helpful presentations."

Recognition also featured prominently, often linked to both personal development and organizational trust. Several employees described feeling motivated by positive feedback or being assigned more complex tasks. "They gave me harder assignments and trusted me with them," said one analyst. "That showed me I was making progress." Others saw recognition through internal mobility or role clarity: "I applied for a team lead role on a project I know well—it gave me confidence because I already understand the procedures."

Taken together, these reflections reveal a key limitation of the original anchor framework: its presumption of stable, singular orientations. While some participants clearly leaned toward particular values—such as expertise, balance, or growth—these orientations were almost always embedded in broader constellations of meaning. Employees rarely spoke of one career driver to the exclusion of others. Instead, they constructed lived anchor configurations—contextual, relational, and adaptive expressions of what mattered to them professionally.

In this sense, career values were not psychological traits to be "discovered," but positionings that reflected individuals' roles within a structured and evaluative environment. This insight pointed toward two analytical needs in the quantitative phase: first, to test whether the anchor model itself held empirically in this organizational setting; and second, to explore whether co-occurring anchor pairings—especially combinations involving expertise, stability, and lifestyle—could be identified as meaningful identity structures in their own right.

Quantitative Research Findings

Survey Design and Participant Overview

The quantitative phase of the study was conducted via an online survey distributed to employees within three business lines of a multinational company operating in Romania, yielding 764 valid responses. Participants were diverse in terms of job level, gender, and sub-team affiliation, with most situated in early or mid-career stages and employed within performance-driven systems characterized by structured evaluations and clear role progression. The instrument included Schein's Career Orientation Inventory (COI), comprising 40 items designed to capture individual orientations toward career success and fulfillment, to which several other questions about job satisfaction and organizational culture were added.

The Factor Structure of Career Anchors

To explore how Schein's anchors were expressed in this context, an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted using principal axis factoring with oblique rotation (Oblimin), appropriate given the theoretical expectation that career motivations are interrelated. The analysis yielded a nine-factor solution, closely aligned with Schein's original typology but also revealing meaningful divergences. The Pattern Matrix appears in Appendix 1.

Most of the classic anchors—including General Managerial, Autonomy, Lifestyle, Service, Security, Entrepreneurial Creativity, and Pure Challenge—emerged as coherent and interpretable factors. However, the Technical/Functional Competence anchor did not appear as a unified construct. Instead, its items were dispersed across several factors, suggesting a fragmentation of this traditional category. In contrast, one particular item—"I dream of being so good at what I do that my expert advice will be sought continually" (item 1)—loaded consistently and strongly onto a distinct factor, independent from the technical, managerial, or autonomy-related constructs. This factor was interpreted as representing a unique form of 'Expertise'—one centered not on job content per se, but on the pursuit of recognized mastery, trusted authority, and professional legitimacy.

The table in Appendix 2 summarizes the correspondence between Schein's original anchors and the empirical structure that emerged. This empirical structure suggests that while Schein's framework remains largely robust, the language and logic of career identity in this setting may be undergoing subtle transformation. Specifically, recognition as an expert appears to operate as a distinct and central aspiration—one no longer embedded solely in functional mastery, but tied to visibility, esteem, and internal legitimacy.

Anchor Distribution and Patterns of Dominance

To examine how these anchors were distributed at the level of individual respondents, both mean scores per anchor and dominant anchor patterns were analyzed.

Across the sample, the highest average score was recorded for the Expertise anchor (M = 4.94, SD = 0.68), followed by Lifestyle/Balance (M = 4.58), Service to a Cause (M = 4.39), and Security/Stability (M = 4.38). Anchors traditionally associated with advancement or self-direction—such as Entrepreneurial Creativity and General Managerial—received notably lower average scores.

When considering each respondent's highest-scoring anchor, 53.2% identified Expertise as their dominant orientation, followed by Lifestyle (20.7%) and Service (13.1%). Only a small minority were primarily anchored in Entrepreneurial Creativity (2.4%) or General Managerial ambition (2.6%).

These trends held when examining respondents' top two anchors. Expertise remained the most frequently cited (66.4%), typically combined with either Lifestyle (43.6%), Security (33.9%), or Service (30.3%). These pairings reflect how the pursuit of mastery is often situated within broader commitments to stability, personal boundaries, and contribution.

Interpreting the Quantitative Results

Taken together, the quantitative findings affirm the continued relevance of Schein's model while also pointing to shifts in how career meaning is constructed. The fragmentation of the Technical/Functional anchor and the emergence of a separate "Expertise" dimension suggest that mastery is now perceived less in terms of job-specific skill and more in terms of recognized trustworthiness, autonomy within constraint, and internal authority. These observations echo and enrich insights from the qualitative phase, which highlighted how internal validation and perceived value to the organization often underpin participants' career narratives.

In sum, the data supports a model in which hybrid anchor configurations are not exceptions but norms. Career orientation appears to be built through the dynamic interplay between aspirations for competence, contribution, stability, and self-alignment—rather than through exclusive identification with one anchor alone.

Discussion

This study set out to explore how employees in a multinational technology firm construct their career values within the constraints and possibilities of a structured organizational environment. From the outset, the qualitative phase revealed a recurring tension in participants' narratives—between the aspiration to be recognized as competent, trusted professionals, and the desire for stability and long-term clarity. What became apparent, however, was that this tension did not produce conflict. Instead, these two orientations—expertise and security—were often seen as complementary, even mutually reinforcing. Employees did not experience a need to choose between ambition and stability; many described the latter as something they had earned through sustained contribution and institutional trust.

These insights provided the groundwork for the quantitative phase, which tested the extent to which such patterns were consistent across the organization. The factor analysis supported a revised nine-anchor model. Crucially, it confirmed that "expertise," understood not simply as technical competence but as recognized authority and symbolic legitimacy, formed an empirically distinct dimension of career orientation. It also showed that hybrid identities—most notably combinations of expertise with security or lifestyle anchors—were widespread and not experienced as ambivalent or transitional. On the contrary, they appeared to represent coherent, situated identities that aligned well with the organization's internal logic and evaluation systems.

This interplay between empirical findings and conceptual framing invites a reconsideration of how career anchors are understood. Rather than viewing them as stable personality traits, the evidence here suggests that anchors are symbolic positions—constructed over time through individuals' engagement with institutional narratives, reward structures, and recognition practices. The emphasis participants placed on being "known," "trusted," or "called upon" speaks to a logic of career legitimacy that is less about market mobility or individual autonomy, and more about embedded value and internal validation. These meanings do not emerge in a vacuum but are shaped by the specific structures and cultures of the workplace. Career orientations, in this sense, are not just chosen—they are cultivated, made possible, and made meaningful by the institutional contexts in which people work.

One of the clearest contributions of this study is the reframing of security—not as an expression of inertia or risk aversion, but as a legitimate and earned position. Participants frequently described their sense of stability as something accumulated over time, made possible by competence, trust, and

continuity within the organization. Rather than representing a retreat from ambition, security was often narrated as its reward. This challenges the widely held assumption in protean and boundaryless career models that flexibility and self-direction are the primary markers of success, while stability is a defensive fallback. Instead, what emerges here is a view in which security and initiative are not opposed but intertwined—where predictability enables focus, and depth of presence facilitates professional growth.

These insights are particularly well captured by the career field and habitus framework. By drawing on this perspective, we can understand anchors such as expertise and security not simply as preferences, but as symbolic capital—positions that are valued and legitimized within a particular field. Recognition, in this context, is not merely interpersonal; it is institutional. It matters not just that someone is good at what they do, but that their work is visible, trusted, and situated within a broader structure of meaning. In this framework, security becomes a status marker: it signals that one's contributions are not only consistent, but significant enough to justify continued investment and clarity of trajectory.

This also calls into question the often-invoked tradeoff between autonomy and stability. For the employees in this study, there was little sense of contradiction between being ambitious and seeking structure. Many explicitly rejected the idea that mobility or constant change was necessary for growth. Instead, they described success as deepening their role within the organization, gaining recognition, and being able to move internally without having to restart their professional identity. Internal mobility, relational continuity, and access to learning opportunities were all understood as elements of a strong and ambitious career—not alternatives to it.

The mixed-methods design of this study allowed for a productive interplay between inductive exploration and deductive testing. The discovery of "expertise" as a distinct anchor in the qualitative phase was not based on theoretical expectations but emerged from the ways employees spoke about their professional identity. This category was then confirmed in the survey as both statistically robust and widely held. Similarly, the prominence of hybrid anchor profiles—particularly those combining expertise with stability—was first noted in narrative accounts and then reflected in the quantitative distribution. This movement from meaning-making to measurement reinforces the validity of the findings while keeping them grounded in the lived experience of participants.

Overall, this study does not propose a wholesale revision of career anchor theory, nor does it aim to dismantle the protean or boundaryless models entirely. Rather, it suggests that within structured, high-performance organizations, values like stability and recognition continue to hold considerable meaning—and do

so not in opposition to ambition, but alongside it. Employees construct career identities that are shaped not only by individual aspirations but by how institutions define success, reward contribution, and enable continuity. Future research might examine how these dynamics play out in other organizational contexts, or how structural factors such as industry norms and national labor markets shape what career orientations are seen as legitimate and desirable.

By returning to the empirical texture of how people speak about their work, and by anchoring these narratives in both quantitative structure and theoretical insight, this study offers a modest but important contribution: a more relational, situated, and recognition-based understanding of career identity—one in which security is not something to be explained away, but something to be explained well.

Contributions and Conclusion

This article began with a simple question: how do professionals make sense of their careers in a structured, high-performance organizational environment? More specifically, it asked whether the values of ambition and stability—so often portrayed as incompatible in contemporary career theory—might in fact be integrated, and how such integration is reflected in everyday narratives and organizational structures. Through a sequential mixed-methods design, these questions were explored by combining qualitative interviews with a large-scale survey, using Schein's career anchor framework as a heuristic device rather than a fixed model.

The findings suggest that many employees do not experience a tension between striving for recognition and seeking stability. Rather, they view the two as closely linked. The desire to be seen as a trusted expert—someone whose work carries symbolic legitimacy—was a central thread across the data. At the same time, participants expressed appreciation for predictability, long-term perspective, and a sense of continuity in their roles. Far from being markers of passivity, these were described as outcomes earned through contribution and consistency.

One of the key contributions of the study lies in reframing security—not as a fallback for the risk-averse, but as a legitimate career orientation that emerges within certain institutional contexts. In the case examined here, security was often narrated as something that follows from achievement, not something that prevents it. This challenges some of the foundational assumptions in the protean and boundaryless models, where autonomy and instability are often treated as necessary conditions for professional growth.

The analysis also adds nuance to the concept of career anchors by showing how they function not as fixed personality types but as symbolic identity positions, shaped through recognition, institutional structures, and career habitus. The emergence of "expertise" as an empirically distinct anchor, and the prevalence of hybrid profiles—particularly those that combine expertise with security or lifestyle—point to the ways in which individuals assemble their orientations in response to both personal meaning and organizational discourse.

Methodologically, the study highlights the value of combining inductive and deductive phases in career research. The qualitative insights provided the conceptual grounding for the survey, while the quantitative findings helped establish the broader relevance of themes that first appeared in narrative form. This approach enabled a more nuanced understanding of how people describe and structure their careers—without reducing them to static categories or individual choices alone.

While the study focuses on a single organization, its implications may extend to other structured and high-performance work settings. It offers a reminder that stability, recognition, and embedded growth remain central to how many professionals define success—even when career theory tends to emphasize movement, flexibility, and reinvention. Future research might explore how these dynamics vary across sectors, career stages, or cultural contexts, and how organizations can better align recognition systems with the values their employees actually hold.

What this study ultimately proposes is not a new model of careers, but a shift in attention: toward the ways in which meaning is made within institutional contexts, and how career identities are built through sustained interaction with organizational structures, expectations, and symbolic economies. In doing so, it offers a modest contribution to the broader effort of understanding how people seek to be both excellent and anchored—visible, valued, and able to stay.

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Appendix 1

Table 1. Pattern Matrix[a] of Exploratory Factor Analysis for Career Orientation Inventory (COI) Items. Principal Axis Factoring with Oblimin Rotation (N = 764)

	Factor								
	1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**	**8**	**9**
23. I have been most fulfilled in my career when I have solved seemingly unsolvable problems or won out over seemingly impossible odds.	.732	-.022	.114	.022	.035	.045	.023	-.008	-.032
15. I will feel successful in my career only if I face and overcome very difficult challenges	.659	-.002	.003	.034	.050	.154	.028	.095	.073
31. I seek out work opportunities that strongly challenge my problem solving and/or competitive skills.	.622	-.012	.044	-.089	-.033	.114	.125	.120	-.006
7. I dream of a career in which I can solve problems or win out in situations that are extremely challenging.	.554	-.028	-.032	-.033	.025	.118	.128	.308	.029
39. Working on problems that are almost unsolvable is more important to me than achieving a high-level managerial position.	.503	-.081	-.092	-.045	.025	-.124	.155	-.078	.386
21. I am most fulfilled in my career when I have been able to build something that is entirely the result of my own ideas and efforts.	.499	-.119	-.082	.226	-.233	-.028	.145	-.315	-.064

	Factor								
	1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**	**8**	**9**
33. I am most fulfilled in my work when I have been able to use my special skills and talents.	.495	.129	.227	.033	-.041	-.011	.224	-.076	-.057
9. I will feel successful in my career only if I can develop my technical or functional skills to a very high level of competence.	.413	-.096	.091	.124	-.027	-.015	-.084	.153	.092
29. I will feel successful in my career only if I have succeeded in creating or building something that is entirely my own product or idea.	.387	-.245	-.075	.102	-.214	.145	.100	-.285	.017
5. I am always on the lookout for ideas that would permit me to start my own enterprise.	-.013	-.888	-.006	.043	-.012	.012	.028	.102	-.055
37. I dream of starting up and running my own business.	.042	-.837	.064	-.037	-.033	.018	.000	-.015	-.126
13. Building my own business is more important to me than achieving a high-level managerial position in someone else's organisation.	-.024	-.684	.045	-.017	-.034	.046	.033	-.154	.176
24. I feel successful in life only if I have been able to balance my personal, family and career requirements.	.052	.023	.757	.073	.044	.018	.048	.033	-.178

	Factor								
	1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**	**8**	**9**
8. I would rather leave my organisation than to be put into a job that would compromise my ability to pursue personal and family concerns.	.008	-.093	.597	-.074	-.053	-.043	-.055	.043	.151
16. I dream of a career that will permit me to integrate my personal, family and work needs.	.057	.022	.581	.061	-.151	-.011	.026	.068	-.112
32. Balancing the demands of personal and professional life is more important to me than achieving a high-level managerial position.	.039	-.041	.559	.065	.041	-.183	.173	-.173	.071
40. I have always sought out work opportunities that would minimise interference with home or family concerns.	-.028	-.055	.468	.090	.045	.091	.035	.017	.096
36. I dream of having a career that will allow me to feel a sense of security and stability.	-.009	.086	.069	.750	-.065	-.024	.117	-.043	-.037
20. I seek jobs in organisations that will give me a sense of security and stability.	-.072	-.019	.074	.737	-.032	.024	.072	-.017	-.043
28. I am most fulfilled in my work when I feel that I have complete financial and employment security.	.104	-.006	.102	.571	-.107	.036	-.073	-.034	-.058
4. Security and stability are more important to me than freedom and autonomy.	-.015	-.055	-.076	.505	.265	.067	.011	.131	.124

	Factor								
	1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**	**8**	**9**
12. I would rather leave my organisation altogether than accept an assignment that would jeopardise my security in that organisation.	-.030	-.033	.230	.253	-.078	.051	-.019	-.050	.182
11. I am most fulfilled in my work when I am completely free to define my own tasks, schedules and procedures.	.042	-.079	-.002	.052	-.667	.045	-.028	.145	.102
19. I will feel successful in my career only if I achieve complete autonomy and freedom.	.055	-.062	.044	.011	-.594	.212	.004	-.087	.011
3. I dream of having a career that will allow me the freedom to do a job my own way and on my own schedule.	-.098	-.202	.085	-.001	-.534	-.068	.091	.163	-.072
35. I would rather leave my organisation than accept a job that would reduce my autonomy and freedom.	-.129	.012	.180	-.041	-.389	.192	.113	-.103	.282
27. The chance to do a job my own way, free of rules and constraints, is more important to me than financial or employment security.	.024	-.217	.001	-.204	-.332	.212	.144	-.109	.226
18. I will feel successful in my career only if I become a general manager in some organisation.	.084	.003	-.025	.101	-.047	.804	-.087	.028	-.033

	Factor								
	1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**	**8**	**9**
26. Becoming a general manager is more attractive to me than becoming a functional manager in my current area of expertise.	.062	-.083	-.033	.002	-.019	.772	.038	-.018	-.133
13.34. I would rather leave my organisation than accept a job that would take me away from the general managerial track.	-.070	-.104	.031	.018	-.018	.688	.020	-.027	.204
10. I dream of being in charge of a complex organisation and making decisions that affect many people.	.213	-.093	-.041	.014	-.084	.472	-.028	.390	-.051
30. I dream of having a career that makes a real contribution to humanity and society.	.079	-.041	.092	-.051	-.018	.009	.750	.031	-.090
22. Using my skills to make the world a better place to live and work is more important to me than achieving a high-level managerial position.	.045	.009	.075	.126	.010	-.118	.637	-.141	.063
6. I will feel successful in my career only if I have a feeling of having made a real contribution to the welfare of society.	-.030	-.200	-.046	.053	-.019	.076	.621	.239	.010
14. I am most fulfilled in my career when I have been able to use my talents in the service of others.	.217	.098	.071	.117	-.049	-.037	.350	.137	.082

	Factor								
	1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**	**8**	**9**
2. I am most fulfilled in my work when I have been able to integrate and manage the efforts of others.	.101	.035	.068	.074	-.115	.095	.183	.478	-.024
1. I dream of being so good at what I do that my expert advice will be sought continually.	.271	.096	.000	.141	-.219	-.027	.023	.422	-.004
38. I would rather leave my organisation than accept an assignment that would undermine my ability to be of service to others.	.006	-.007	.034	-.022	-.040	.235	.286	-.058	.425
17. Becoming a functional manager in my area of expertise is more attractive to me than becoming a general manager.	.165	.003	.086	.141	-.159	-.117	-.062	.140	.401
25. I would rather leave my organisation than accept a rotational assignment that would take me out of my area of expertise.	.052	-.135	.155	-.020	.028	.177	.022	-.175	.339

Extraction Method: Principal Axis Factoring.
Rotation Method: Oblimin with Kaiser Normalization.

a. Rotation converged in 18 iterations.

Appendix 2

Table 2. Correspondence Between Schein's Career Anchors and Empirically Derived Factors. Thematic Mapping of COI Items to Revised Anchor Structure

Anchor	**Questionnaire item**	**Empirical Factor(s)**	**Interpretation**
Technical/ Functional	I dream of being so good at what I do that my expert advice will be sought continually I will feel successful in my career only if I can develop my technical or functional skills to a very high level of competence. Becoming a functional manager in my area of expertise is more attractive to me than becoming a general manager I would rather leave my organisation than accept a rotational assignment that would take me out of my area of expertise. I am most fulfilled in my work when I have been able to use my special skills and talents.	1, 8, 9	Fragmented; no cohesive factor emerged
General Managerial	I dream of being in charge of a complex organisation and making decisions that affect many people. I will feel successful in my career only if I become a general manager in some organization. Becoming a general manager is more attractive to me than becoming a functional manager in my current area of expertise I would rather leave my organisation than accept a job that would take me away from the general managerial track.	6	Confirmed as distinct factor
Autonomy/ Independence	I dream of having a career that will allow me the freedom to do a job my own way and on my own schedule. I am most fulfilled in my work when I am completely free to define my own tasks, schedules and procedures. I will feel successful in my career only if I achieve complete autonomy and freedom. The chance to do a job my own way, free of rules and constraints, is more important to me than financial or employment security.	5	Confirmed as distinct factor

Anchor	Questionnaire item	Empirical Factor(s)	Interpretation
	I would rather leave my organisation than accept a job that would reduce my autonomy and freedom.		
Security/ Stability	Security and stability are more important to me than freedom and autonomy. I would rather leave my organisation altogether than accept an assignment that would jeopardise my security in that organisation. I seek jobs in organisations that will give me a sense of security and stability. I am most fulfilled in my work when I feel that I have complete financial and employment security. I dream of having a career that will allow me to feel a sense of security and stability.	4	Confirmed as distinct factor
Entrepre-neurial Creativity	I am always on the lookout for ideas that would permit me to start my own enterprise. Building my own business is more important to me than achieving a high-level managerial position in someone else's organisation. I dream of starting up and running my own business.	2	Confirmed as distinct factor
Service/ Dedication	I will feel successful in my career only if I have a feeling of having made a real contribution to the welfare of society. I am most fulfilled in my career when I have been able to use my talents in the service of others. Using my skills to make the world a better place to live and work is more important to me than achieving a high-level managerial position. I dream of having a career that makes a real contribution to humanity and society.	7	Confirmed as distinct factor
Pure Challenge	I dream of a career in which I can solve problems or win out in situations that are extremely challenging. I will feel successful in my career only if I face and overcome very difficult challenges.	1	Confirmed as distinct factor

Anchor	**Questionnaire item**	**Empirical Factor(s)**	**Interpretation**
	I have been most fulfilled in my career when I have solved seemingly unsolvable problems or won out over seemingly impossible odds. I seek out work opportunities that strongly challenge my problem solving and/or competitive skills. Working on problems that are almost unsolvable is more important to me than achieving a high-level managerial position.		
Lifestyle	I would rather leave my organisation than to be put into a job that would compromise my ability to pursue personal and family concerns. I dream of a career that will permit me to integrate my personal, family and work needs. I feel successful in life only if I have been able to balance my personal, family and career requirements. Balancing the demands of personal and professional life is more important to me than achieving a high-level managerial position. I have always sought out work opportunities that would minimise interference with home or family concerns.	3	Confirmed as distinct factor
Expertise (new factor)	I dream of being so good at what I do that my expert advice will be sought continually.	8	Emerged independently from other anchors