

# Preferences and Expectations About Work Among Young People in the Metropolitan Area of Bucaramanga (Colombia), After the COVID-19 Pandemic

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## Abstract

The economic crisis generated by the COVID-19 pandemic destroyed hundreds of millions of jobs worldwide, making the employment scenario even more precarious for young people. It also represented an opportunity to appreciate the benefits of teleworking, including flexibility and autonomy at work. This shared experience may contribute to shaping young people's career preferences and expectations when they begin their careers. This article aimed to test hypotheses to provide knowledge regarding these possible reconfigurations.

Based on cluster analysis, among other methods, of a cross-sectional survey involving 300 young people, a study was conducted on the significance of work among young people in the Colombian metropolis of Bucaramanga. The main findings suggest that the majority sector gives their current job a good rating, values work as central to their lives, and prefers a job based on pay and stability. The contrasts with other studies, which show a decline in the centrality of work in people's lives and a clear preference for meaningful jobs with greater flexibility and autonomy.

**Keywords:** Meaning of work; Youth; COVID-19; Post-pandemic.

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# Preferencias y expectativas laborales de jóvenes en el área metropolitana de Bucaramanga (Colombia), después de la pandemia por COVID-19

## Resumen

La crisis económica generada por la pandemia de COVID-19 destruyó cientos de millones de empleos a nivel mundial, precarizando todavía más el escenario laboral de las y los jóvenes. También representó una oportunidad para valorar la oportunidad del teletrabajo, la flexibilidad y la autonomía en el trabajo. Esta experiencia compartida podría contribuir a la configuración de las preferencias y expectativas laborales de jóvenes que inician su trayectoria laboral. El objetivo de este artículo fue contrastar hipótesis para aportar conocimiento en relación con estas posibles reconfiguraciones.

A partir de análisis de clústeres, entre otros análisis, de una encuesta transversal con una participación de 300 jóvenes, se realizó un estudio de la significación del trabajo entre jóvenes de la metrópolis colombiana de Bucaramanga. Los hallazgos principales permiten concluir que hay un sector mayoritario que califica positivamente su empleo actual, valora el trabajo como algo central en sus vidas, y prefiere un empleo en función de la paga y la estabilidad, lo que contrasta con otros estudios que muestran una caída en la centralidad del trabajo en la vida de las personas, y una preferencia mayor por los empleos con propósito y con más flexibilidad y autonomía.

**Palabras clave:** Significación del trabajo; Jóvenes; COVID-19; Postpandemia.

**Summary:** 1. Introduction, 2. Methodology, 3. Findings, 4. Conclusions, 5. Bibliographical references.

## 1. Introduction

Due to the increased awareness of human rights nowadays, it seems shocking that, for centuries, most people have gone from childhood to working age without any transition. In the words of Sartre (1971), "It would seem that youth, rather than a life stage, is a class phenomenon [...] as workers pass from adolescence to manhood without any transition" (p. 9<sup>1</sup>). Even today, child labor is still a reality for millions of children in many countries. This means many people start working as early as possible (and stop working when they can no longer work). It was not until the nineteenth or early twentieth century, according to some authors (Arrango, 2006 and Margulis & Urresti, 1998, cited by Satizábal-Reyes *et al.*, 2023, p. 4), or perhaps earlier, according to others (Van-Zanden, 2016), that the "social moratorium was created: one is young to the extent that one postpones economic and family responsibilities" (Margulis & Urresti, 1998, cited by Satizábal-Reyes *et al.*, 2023, p. 4). This postponement allows for human capital accumulation (Van-Zanden, 2016).

Youth is not (only) a biological category but a socio-historical one. "Youth is not presented as a homogeneous category, but rather as conditioned by social class, gender, urban or rural origin, and institutional infrastructure, among other factors, which end up configuring a diverse and unequally constituted youth population" (Satizábal-Reyes *et al.*, 2023, p. 4).

A similar phenomenon occurs with our understanding and perception of work. Preferences and expectations about work are shaped early, perhaps in childhood and adolescence (Loughlin & Barling, 2001; Super, 1980, cited by Manuti *et al.*, 2018) and "influenced by their parents' employment and economic circumstances" (Dickinson & Emler, 1992, cited by Loughlin & Barling, 2001, p. 545). "Children's perceptions of parental work attitudes and experiences shape the development of their own beliefs and attitudes" (Barling *et al.*, 1998, cited by Loughlin & Barling, 2001, p. 545). Of particular importance in these processes are the first experiences of work, our first contacts with the world of work during the "impressionable years (18 to 25 years)" (Krosnick & Alwin, 1989, cited by Loughlin & Barling, 2001, p. 544). The meaning of work is indeed socially constructed. However, objective material conditions also act as a social shutter, reproducing patterns of inequality, as Satizábal-Reyes *et al.* (2023) and Delajara *et al.* (2018) point out.

The meaning of work is influenced by "life events and the socialization of the times" (Smola & Sutton, 2002, p. 378). Several authors write about generational cohorts whose specific characteristics include the meaning of work (Acosta-Piñeros, 2017; Carnegie, 2023; Cuesta *et al.*, 2009; De Hauw & De Vos, 2010; England, 1991; Maca-Urbano *et al.*, 2023; Manuti *et al.*, 2018; Pendell & Vander-Helm, 2022; Smola & Sutton, 2002; Twenge, 2010). Some mention *significant generational events* (Cuesta *et al.*, 2009, p. 129).

<sup>1</sup> The author of this article translated the quotations taken from the texts whose original version is not in English.

The importance of work relative to other dimensions of life - that is, the *centrality of work* (Manuti *et al.*, 2018) - has been declining from generation to generation. The work ethic has opened space for a greater appreciation of rest and family time (Twenge, 2010). The so-called *Millennials* (born between the early 1980s and mid-1990s) seem to prefer friendly, collaborative work environments that allow a better balance between work and personal-family dimensions (Acosta-Piñeros, 2017; Manuti *et al.*, 2018; Pendell & Vander-Helm, 2022); they are “true to themselves; they go from one job to another without giving too many explanations” (Cuesta *et al.*, 2009, p. 126). They experienced how the world of work treated their parents (job cuts, wage restraint, union busting), so their disposition is reciprocal (England, 1991; Jurkiewicz, 2000; Maccoby, 1995 and Zemke *et al.*, 2000, cited by Loughlin & Barling, 2001; Smola & Sutton, 2002). “While companies may still talk about family and loyalty to employees, many organizations treat their employees as a means to an end. [...] Employee commitment to the organization requires an organizational commitment to the employee” (Smola & Sutton, 2002, p. 379).

In contrast, England (1991) also finds that the centrality of work has declined in both absolute and relative terms. However, he warns that the emphasis on work goals has shifted from “*comfort* goals (convenient working hours, good physical working conditions)” to “*economic* goals (good pay, good job security, good opportunity for advancement or promotion)” (England, 1991, p. 115). “In difficult economic times, comfort work goals or values seem to be relatively easier to give up than economic work goals” (England, 1991, p. 116). Cotofan *et al.* (2023) suggest a very similar hypothesis:

People who experience relatively bad macroeconomic conditions between ages 18 and 25 give a higher priority to income for the rest of their careers. Conversely, people who experience relatively good macroeconomic conditions between ages 18 and 25 rank meaning of work higher for the rest of their careers. (p. 467)

De Hauw & De Vos (2010) qualify this by saying that:

[D] During recessions, Millennials lower their expectations regarding work-life balance and social atmosphere. However, their expectations regarding job content, training, career development, and financial rewards remain high, suggesting that these expectations are essentially embedded within the generation. (p. 293)

Cotofan *et al.* (2023) argue that “in most of the literature, the classification by generations is to a large extent arbitrary” (p. 467). Their “alternative approach is that of individuals whose preferences are based on *shared macroeconomic experiences*” (Cotofan *et al.*, 2023, p. 467). The COVID-19 pandemic qualifies as a shared macroeconomic experience. Still, as Satizábal-Reyes *et al.* (2023) rightly point out, what is not shared is the level of income and subsidies, the quality and stability of employment, whether it is formal or informal, and the objective probabilities of social mobility. In other words, we have a segment of young people between the ages of 18 and 25, an *impressionable age* (Krosnick & Alwin, 1989, cited by Cotofan *et al.*, 2023, p. 467), who shared the

harsh experience of “the largest economic crisis of a generation” according to data from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (World Bank, 2020, 2021 and International Monetary Fund, 2020, cited by Cotofan *et al.*, 2021, p. 155); but who did not share it under the same conditions in terms of the socioeconomic dynamics of their households, their socioeconomic status and that of their cities, regions, and countries.

One should ask, as Cuesta *et al.* (2009) do, “What are the events that ‘shape’ the construction of the values and paradigms of the new generation” (p. 129)? Or, with the nuance added by Cotofan *et al.* (2023), how is the most significant economic crisis in recent memory affecting young people of *impressionable age*? Cotofan *et al.* (2021) put it this way: “There is an intriguing possibility that young people who come of age during this crisis may be more likely to prioritize financial security than job meaning or purpose as they enter the workforce” (p. 177). They hypothesize: “The pandemic’s impact on this generation of young people may result in a shifting landscape of work values and expectations in the years to come” (Cotofan *et al.*, 2021, p. 183). This research aims to answer these questions.

The British Broadcasting Corporation’s (BBC) news report on Generation Z, based on a global survey by Cigna International Health (Carnegie, 2023) tells the story of a generation burdened by stress, anxiety, loneliness, and job burnout, finding it difficult to relate to others at work and lacking the confidence to speak up; with no hope of owning a home in the future; worried about job stability and the future; and at the same time intending to leave their current jobs. It seems reasonable that they would want something different from work.

According to a survey conducted by *Indeed*, Generation Z Mexicans want a job with a home office but with personal interaction, where they can express their opinions without reprisal, in a competitive environment, with opportunities for advancement, and ultimately allowing them to be entrepreneurial (Hernández, 2022). Another newspaper clip states that 36% of Mexicans would refuse a promotion due to mental health (Hernández, 2023a).

“Today, we have a completely different employee than we were used to years ago. The pandemic has catapulted the focus on well-being and work-life balance, and people have realized that there are more important things than just thinking about work,” says Arleth Leal, CEO of *Tutorel* and HR specialist. (Hernández, 2023a, para. 3)

In contrast, another newspaper piece states that “72% of the population looking for work online prioritize salary” (Hernández, 2023b, para. 2).

Faced with job insecurity, young people take the available jobs. Perhaps this is why one study documented that “young people from low socioeconomic strata working in a call center in Colombia accepted the flexible and precarious conditions of their work without much criticism” (Castaño & Álvarez, 2017, as cited by Satizábal-Reyes *et al.*, 2023, p. 3). Compared to other regions

of the world, “in Latin America and the Caribbean, salary and financial compensation and growth and career advancement topped the chart for young women and young men alike, but greater proportions of women chose a sense of purpose and impact on society and flexibility as of importance” (Gardiner & Goedhuys, 2020, p. 23). This finding is consistent with that documented by Satizábal-Reyes *et al.* (2023).

Colombia has an overall unemployment rate of about 10%, but it is almost double that for the young population (15-28 years old). Informality is around 56% (Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística [DANE], 2024a; 2024b). In this context of unemployment, precariousness, and informality, aggravated by the economic crisis represented by the pandemic, one might think that the tendency to opt for wages and stability (the economic goals, in terms of England, 1991) rather than for flexible working hours, teleworking opportunities or opportunities for growth and training would prevail. One might also think that, given the scarcity of jobs, especially formal jobs, and despite the trend toward a decline in the centrality of work in our lives, a work ethic that sees work as central, that values work opportunities, even if they are precarious and informal, might prevail.

The opposite hypothesis is that due to Generation Z’s main features (mentioned above), and given that people, especially young people, experienced the pandemic as a time to value flexibility, teleworking, and work-life balance, preferences, and expectations would have shifted toward comfort goals (England, 1991) and less work-centricity. The research, the results of which are presented below, tested both hypotheses.

The study by Satizábal-Reyes *et al.*<sup>2</sup> (2023; see also Maca-Urbano *et al.*, 2023) provides the most immediate empirical background for this research. They conducted a census of 461 eighth-semester students at a private university in southwestern Colombia. Almost 36% prefer to be entrepreneurs, more men (42.4%) than women (35.4%) (Satizábal-Reyes *et al.*, 2023); they prefer unstable jobs and volatile income, but flexible jobs that allow them to innovate and be creative (57.7%); with average salaries, but with enough free time (58%), more women (59.9%), than men (39.7%); not to stay too long in their jobs, more women (59.9%), than men (39.7%); not staying too long in the same job: men between one and three years (44.4%), women between four and six years (52.8%); slightly less than 15% prefer a competitive environment, compared to 85.2% who prefer a collaborative work environment. The most important reasons for preferring one job over another were: first, that it allows them to develop their professional knowledge and skills (32%); second, the work-life balance (24%); and, finally, that it is an exciting job with a creative atmosphere (15%) (Maca-Urbano *et al.*, 2023). In England’s (1991) terms, they preferred *comfort goals*.

<sup>2</sup> The author would like to thank the researchers Melania Satizabal, Viviam Stella Unás, and Deidi Yolima Maca for the opportunity to discuss their findings prior to his research stay in Bucaramanga. Comments and suggestions from two anonymous reviewers of an earlier version of this article are gratefully acknowledged.



Next, the research methodology is described, including issues related to the population and sample and the measures included in the questionnaire. The third section presents the main findings regarding the work preferences and expectations of the young people who participated in the study. The final section presents the conclusions.

## 2. Methodology

Quantitative research was carried out to explore the questions and hypotheses formulated above as part of a research stay at the Universidad Industrial de Santander (UIS) during the first semester of 2024. During this period, a cross-sectional survey was conducted, the characteristics and results of which are described below. In addition, five semi-structured interviews were conducted with undergraduate (three, two male and one female) and postgraduate (one male and one female) economics students to provide clues for understanding and interpreting the results.

The ethics committee approved the research protocol after reviewing compliance with the principles of respect for autonomy, non-maleficence, beneficence, and justice. Young people were informed of the purpose of the study when they took part in the survey, and their informed consent was obtained.

### Population and sample

The study population consisted of young people, preferably in their most *impressionable years* (between 18 and 25). Based on estimates from the National Statistics Administration (DANE), the total population of the Bucaramanga metropolitan area in 2023 was estimated to be just under 150,000 young people between 18 and 24 (Telencuestas, n.d.). The study focused mainly, but not exclusively, on the university population. As it was primarily young people from a public university, it contrasted with the study by Satizábal-Reyes *et al.* (2023).

Since the study's primary sector of interest was young university students, the method to collect data was through university professors and students from the UIS, the Universidad Autónoma de Bucaramanga (UNAB), the Universidad Cooperativa de Colombia-sede Bucaramanga (UCC) and the Servicio Nacional de Aprendizaje (SENA)<sup>3</sup>, who were contacted during the first three months of the research stay, mainly by visiting classrooms and inviting students to participate. These initial contacts - teachers and students - were also asked to help promote participation through their digital social media contacts. Responses to the questionnaire were collected between February 16 and April 11.

<sup>3</sup> The author is grateful for the generous collaboration of Luis Alejandro Palacio and Silvia Mantilla, Giovanna Rodríguez, Diego Vásquez, and Diego Riaño, teachers at UIS, UNAB, UCC, and SENA, respectively. Special thanks go to Juan Pablo Uribe for reviewing the questionnaire and for his support in collecting answers for the survey.

With a confidence level of 95% and a margin of error of 6%, the suggested sample size, using the QuestionPro (n.d.) calculator, would be 268. The study sample is made up of 300 responses to the questionnaire; it has some intentional biases (the young university population is over-represented) and some unintentional biases since, given the method of collection (through contacts mainly in the areas of Humanities, languages, and behavioral sciences, Medicine and health sciences, Economics-administrative-accounting and Engineering at UIS, UNAB and UCC), there is an over-representation of some areas of study among the participants in the sample.

## Measures

A questionnaire was developed based on the references consulted (Acosta-Piñeros, 2017; Cassar & Meier, 2018; England, 1991; Gardiner & Goedhuys, 2020; Harpaz & Fu, 2002; Loughlin & Barling, 2001; Maca-Urbano *et al.*, 2023; Maestas *et al.*, 2018; Manuti, 2012; Manuti *et al.*, 2018; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Smola & Sutton, 2002). The primary reference was the *Meaning of Work* (MOW) construct (Meaning of Work, MOW), which has much consensus in the English literature and, incidentally, is hardly used in the literature in Spanish (MOW Team, 1987, cited by Manuti *et al.*, 2018, p. 275) and, incidentally, is hardly used in the literature in Spanish (González-Lorente & Martínez-Clares, 2016; Tapia & Weiss, 2013; Torres-López *et al.*, 2017). One of the contributions of this article is to provide a bridge between the two bodies of research.

The MOW construct groups three types of variables:

Conditional variables encompass one's personal and family situation, present job and career history, and socioeconomic environment. Core variables are the key MOW factors: work centrality, work goals, societal norms about work, work role identification, and work outcomes. Finally, consequences are conceived as subjective expectations about future working situations and objective outcomes of working. (Manuti *et al.*, 2018, p. 276)

After informing the participants about the purpose of the questionnaire and validating their informed consent, socio-demographic and socioeconomic information was requested.

Next, if employed, participants were asked to rate their current job or occupation on several items (Maestas *et al.*, 2018). They were then asked whether they preferred 1) a job with a high level of personal interaction, a good boss and team, but little opportunity for a home office, or a job with flexibility and home office, but little personal interaction; 2) owning their own business, but that might involve risks or income instability, or a stable job as an employee; 3) moving up and having a better income, but that might affect work-life balance, or having a good work-life balance while keeping the same income and the same job (Acosta-Piñeros, 2017; England, 1991; Gardiner & Goedhuys, 2020; Maca-Urbano *et al.*, 2023; Maestas *et al.*, 2018; Ryan & Deci, 2000).



The person was asked to prioritize what is most important in a job: salary and benefits, stability, flexibility in working hours and organization of work and working time, opportunities to apply knowledge, learn and innovate, the opportunity to grow and advance, a pleasant working environment, sufficient time off and holidays (Acosta-Piñeros, 2017; England, 1991; Gardiner & Goedhuys, 2020; Loughlin & Barling, 2001; Maca-Urbano *et al.*, 2023; Maestas *et al.*, 2018; Manuti, 2012; Manuti *et al.*, 2018; Smola & Sutton, 2002).

This was followed by a question to assess the centrality of work (England, 1991; Manuti, 2012; Manuti *et al.*, 2018, p. 280). According to Manuti *et al.* (2018), "This is the most important indicator when studying the meaning of work (MOW) among young people" (pp. 283–284). Finally, questions about *social norms about work* were taken from the MOW construct (England, 1991; Manuti, 2012; Manuti *et al.*, 2018).

Three independent researchers reviewed the questionnaire, providing feedback to make the questions more straightforward to understand and to achieve a user-friendly version that would facilitate interaction. The questionnaire was then piloted with an initial group of participants, and minor form adjustments were made.

Results were analyzed using STATA and the *Statistical Package for the Social Sciences* (SPSS). Contingency tables with measures of association, followed by principal component analysis, cluster analysis, discriminant analysis, and binomial logistic regression, were used to identify determinants of current job skills, preferences, work priorities, work centrality, and social norms about work and to identify participant profiles.

### 3. Findings

Fifteen of the sample participants are 17 years old, and thirty people are over 25 and up to 30 years old, i.e., 15% of the sample is outside the desired age range (18 to 25), though not too far below or above that range. 44% of the participants are male; almost 56% are female; one person is of another gender

Almost a quarter of the participants live in the neighborhoods immediately surrounding the main campus of the Universidad Industrial de Santander. The remaining participants live in the metropolitan area of Bucaramanga, mainly in one of the neighborhoods of Bucaramanga.

58% of respondents had completed secondary or technical education, 19% had already completed an undergraduate degree, 2% had completed a postgraduate degree, and only 20% had completed basic education as their last level of education.

Most are single (96%), with only 11% married or living with a partner. Two hundred ninety-four participants have no children; four have one child; two have two children; none have more than two children.

The average household size was 3.57 people; the mode was four people (32.6%), followed by three (25.7%) and then five (16.7%).

48.6% of respondents' fathers are over 50; 20% are between 46 and 50; 15% are between 41 and 45; and 6% are between 36 and 40. 9.7% of respondents said they did not know their father's age, or it was complicated/they preferred not to answer. 37% of respondents' mothers are over 50; 29.7% are between 46 and 50; 20.3% are between 41 and 45; 10% are between 36 and 40; 1.7% are 35 years old or younger. 1.3% of respondents said they did not know their mother's age, or it was complicated/they preferred not to answer.

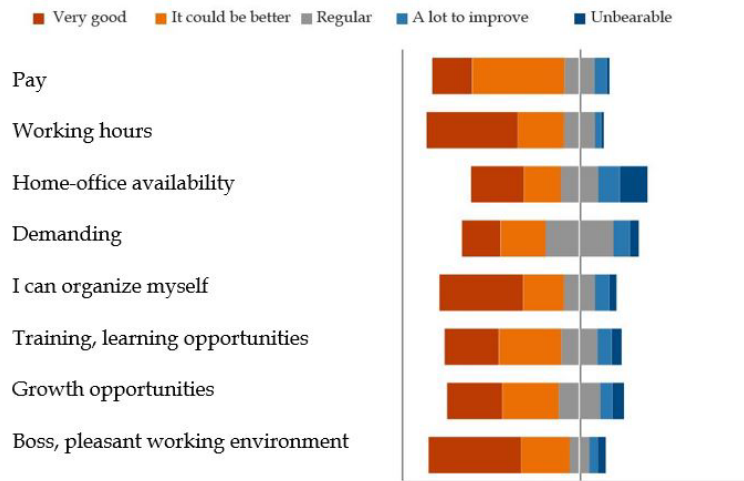
29% of parents had completed secondary or technical education; 25% had completed basic education; 14% had completed undergraduate education; 13% had completed postgraduate education; 8% had completed early childhood or preschool education; 9% preferred not to answer or did not know. 37% of mothers had completed secondary or technical education; 21% had completed primary education; 18% had completed undergraduate education; 17% had completed postgraduate education; 2% had completed early childhood or preschool education; 2% preferred not to answer or did not know.

28% have never worked. 8% worked before the age of 15, 6% worked at the age of 15, and the rest had their first job between the ages of 16 and their current age. 54% are not currently working. 21% are employed in the private sector, 9% in the public sector, 10% are self-employed, and 5% are employers or entrepreneurs.

Figure 1 shows how employed people who participated in the survey rated their current employment:

**Figure 1. Evaluation of their current job.**

How would you rate your current job in terms of...? (in case an option does not apply, please select regular):



**Source:** author (2024), based on England (1991), Gardiner and Goedhuys (2020), and Maestas *et al.* (2018).

As can be seen, young people gave their current job good or even excellent ratings, except for how demanding it is and the availability of working from home. We will return to this in the Conclusions section.

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52% preferred a job with lots of personal interaction, a good boss, and a team but few opportunities to work from home; 48% preferred a job with flexibility and a home office but little personal interaction.

63% preferred owning their own business, even if it meant risk or unstable income; 37% preferred a stable job as an employee. One variable that marked the contrast between those who preferred entrepreneurship and those who preferred a stable job was the level of education. The preference for entrepreneurship was lower among people with an undergraduate or a graduate degree, perhaps because some prefer a stable job or because there is a specific social mandate to seek stability. Some of the interviewees mentioned this:

I have had several jobs, which are sacrifices to achieve the project I want: to live from what I study [work in your profession]. (...) [Do you want to become an entrepreneur?] To have my own business? If I already have a stable job as a teacher and do not depend on the income from my own business, would I risk making it my main source of income? I do not think so. (Student 1, personal communication, February 15, 2024)

I wanted to work at ... [company name] but did not get in. I took courses, I was interviewed... Moreover, although I have had other jobs, there is pressure. It is a cultural issue: 'You must have a stable job, support yourself, and work in the area you majored in.' (Student 2, personal communication, March 12, 2024)

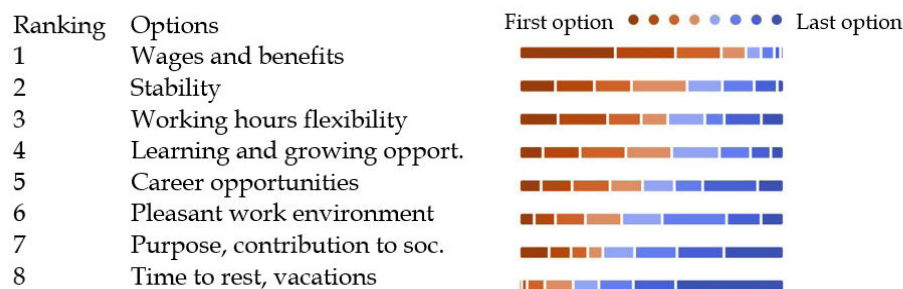
55% preferred to move up the career ladder and earn a better income, even if it meant compromising their work-life balance; 44% preferred a good work-life balance while keeping the same income and job.

Figure 2 shows the order of priorities in a job. The first three choices were wages and benefits, stability, flexibility of hours, location, and organization of hours; the last three were a pleasant work environment, doing something meaningful or impactful, and having enough time off and vacation.

**Figure 2. Working conditions priorities<sup>4</sup>.**

What is most important to you in a job (rank the following list, putting the most important at the top, then the second most important, then the least important at the bottom)?

300 answers



**Source:** author (2024), based on England (1991), Gardiner and Goedhuys (2020), and Maestas *et al.* (2018).

The question is posed in a hypothetical scenario where socioeconomic and other constraints seem to be suspended. However, the young people were realistic: At the end of the day, they must do what is best for their families.

As I see it, work is a way of consolidating my life project, which gives me stability and allows me to contribute to society. The life project comes first, but everything depends on what my family needs from me (Student 3, personal communication, May 10, 2024)

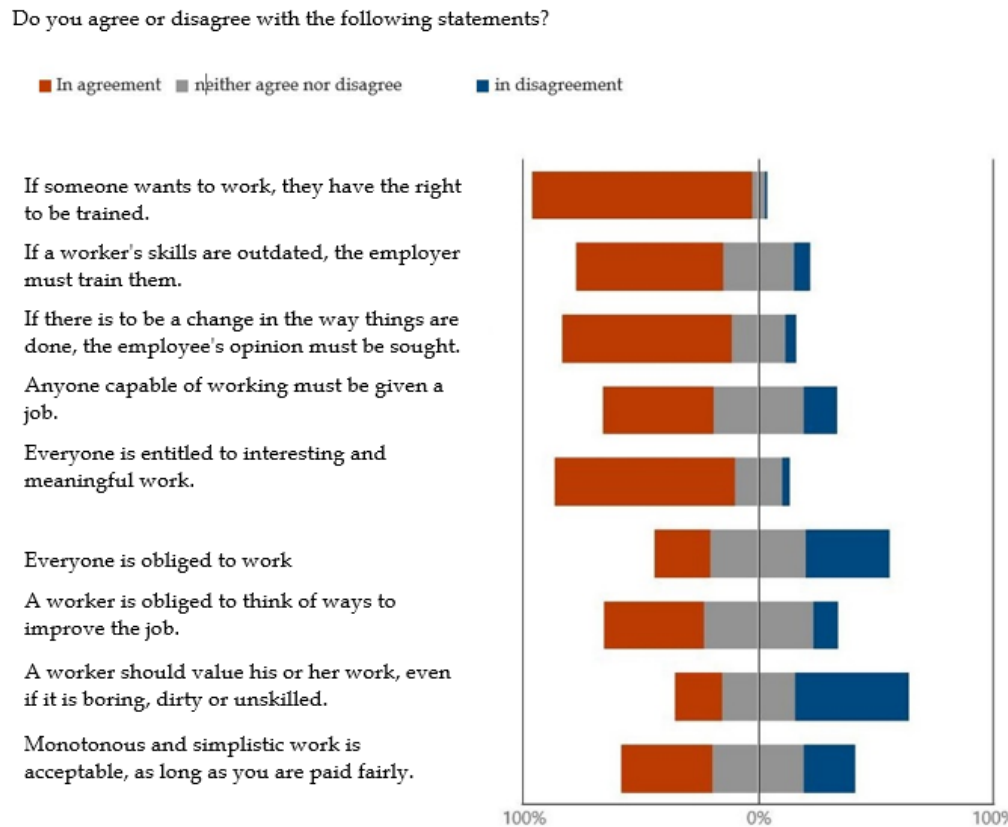
On a scale of 1 to 5, respondents gave an average rating of 3.7 for how important the “work” dimension is in their lives compared to other dimensions (family, community, religion, leisure, or other).

Figure 3 shows the responses to social norms about work. The first five statements relate to entitlements, and the last four relate to obligations. There was generally a higher level of

<sup>4</sup> The size of the bar indicates the percentage of respondents who selected that option. For example, about one-third of respondents ranked *wages and benefits* first, while about 40% ranked *adequate time off and vacation days* last.

agreement with the entitlement statements than with the obligation statements.<sup>5</sup> The most significant contrast is between “If someone wants to work, he has the right to be trained” and “A worker should value his job even if it is boring, dirty or unskilled.” We will get back to this data in the Conclusions section.

**Figure 3. Social norms about work.**



Source: author (2024), based on England (1991).

Exploration using contingency tables with measures of association made it possible to identify some variables that could determine the responses. With these clues, an analysis was conducted (Janssens *et al.*, 2008; Okeke & Okeke, 2015). This allowed us to extract three principal components with a cumulative percentage of 75.67% of the variance. As shown in Table 1, the father's and mother's age variables are highly correlated with the first component, the set of rights at work (the first five statements in Figure 3), and the second component, the variables entrepreneur or employee.<sup>6</sup> The centrality of work is correlated with the third component.

<sup>5</sup> More women than men agreed with statements about job responsibilities.

<sup>6</sup> Refers to the question, “(Which option would you prefer:) to have your own business, even if that might involve risks or income instability or a stable job as an employee?”

**Table 1. Component matrix.**  
**Components**

	1	2	3
Father's age	.876	.029	.196
Mother's age	.896	-.044	.038
Employer-employee	-.224	-.390	.742
Centrality of work	-.067	.569	.658
Rights at work	-.045	.802	-.111

Extraction method: principal component analysis.

Source: author (2024).

The components were used as variables in the cluster analysis to identify clusters of participants (Janssens *et al.*, 2008; Okeke y Okeke, 2015), using a hierarchical clustering technique (Ward's linkage) followed by a non-hierarchical clustering technique (k-means), which in turn were used for the subsequent discriminant analysis. Two functions were identified in the discriminant analysis (Pozo-Díaz y Carrasco, 2005), the first explaining 60.3% of the total variance and the second the rest. Both had canonical correlation coefficients close to 1 (0.824 and 0.763, respectively) and function test values closer to 0 than 1 (0.134, sign. <0.001 and 0.418, sign. <0.001, respectively). The variables' standardized canonical discriminant function coefficients ranged from 0.579 to 0.877. In summary, these two functions and these five variables have good discriminant power.

The structure matrix (see Table 2) shows the correlation between the coefficients of the discriminant variables and the standardized canonical discriminant functions:

**Tabla 2. Structure matrix**  
**Function**

	1	2
Mother's age	.737*	.105
Father's age	.722*	.271
Centrality of work	-.135	.643*
Rights at work	-.115	.299*
Employer-employee	-.083	.289*

\*The highest absolute correlation between each variable and any discriminant function.

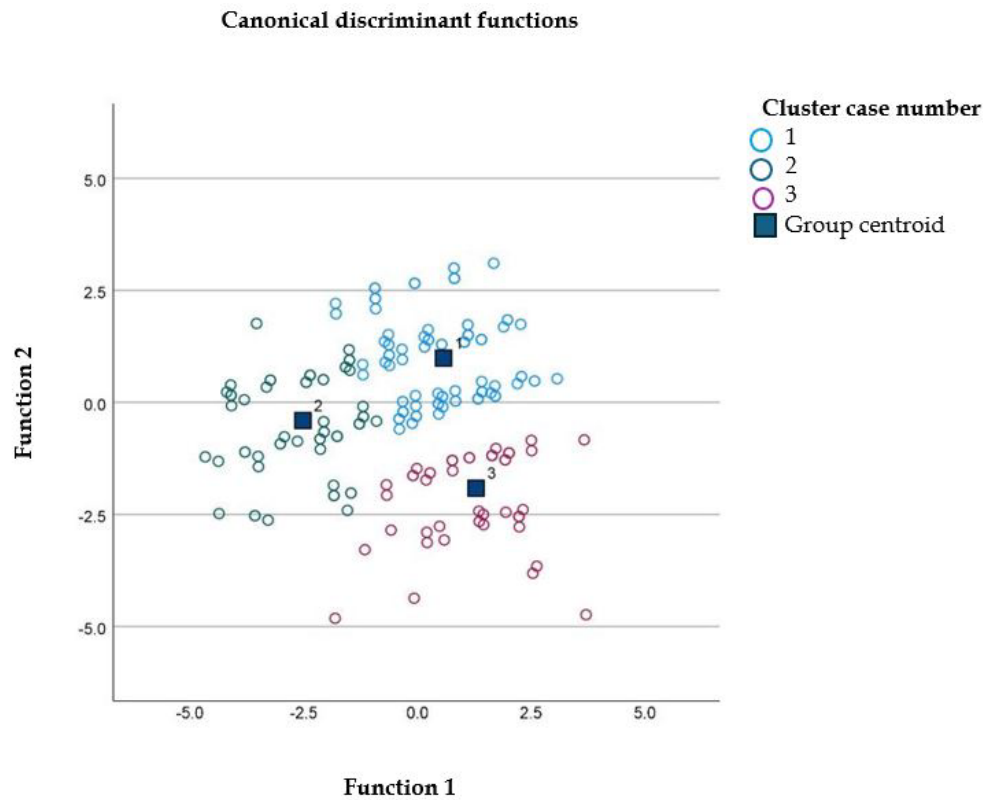
Source: author (2024).



As can be seen, the variables mother's age (0.737) and father's age (0.722) have a higher correlation with function 1, and the variables centrality at work (0.643), rights at work (0.299) and employer/employee (0.289) with function 2.

Figure 4. Shows case distribution by cluster along the canonical discriminant functions:

**Figure 4. Case distribution by cluster.**



Source: author (2024)

Group 1 comprises 160 cases, group 2 73 cases, and group 3 67 cases. Groups 1 and 3 have older parents (over 46 years old) than those in group 2 (between 36 and 45 years old). The members of group 1 were more likely to say that they would prefer to have their own business, even if it meant risks or instability of income or a stable job as an employee (although it should be noted that this variable had less discriminating power); this group (1) also scored higher on work centrality (4.18, against 3.85 for group 2 and only 2.82 for group 3).

The exercise was repeated only with people of an impressionable age (18 to 25 years). The main differences are the following: In the discriminant analysis, both functions had a relatively equal weight in explaining the variance (56.1% for the first function and 43.9% for the second). According to its standardized canonical discriminant function coefficient, the

employer/employee variable had no discriminant power. There were changes in the structural matrix, as shown in Table 3:

**Table 3. Structure matrix.**  
**Function.**

	1	2
Mother's age	.698*	.035
Father's age	.790*	.113
Centrality of work	-.070	.393*
Rights at work	-.078	.744*
Employer-employee	-.002	.059*

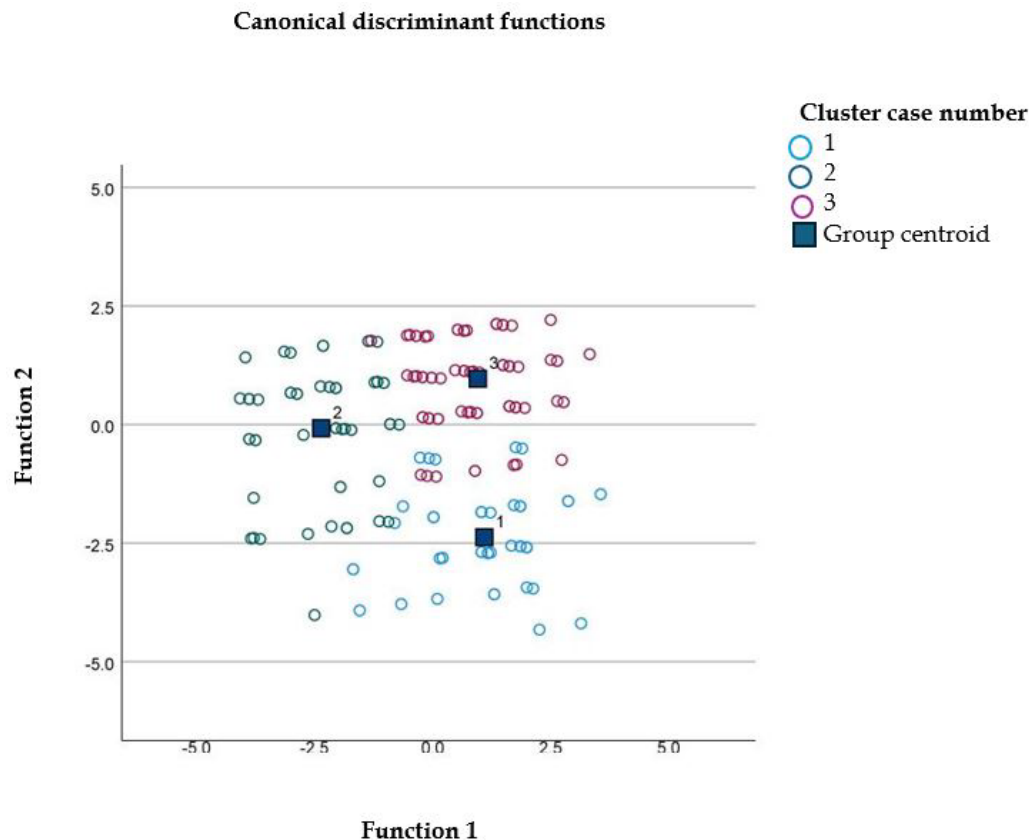
\*The highest absolute correlation between each variable and any discriminant function.

**Source:** author (2024).

The variables' correlation with function 2 changed: the highest correlation was now with the variable rights at work, while the coefficients of the remaining variables were weak or irrelevant.

Three clusters were obtained: cluster 1, consisting of 53 cases; cluster 2, comprising 66 cases; cluster 3, comprising 136 cases, shown in Figure 5. The main contrast in the clustering is around function two and, in particular, the variable rights at work: Cluster 3 (136 cases) recorded a value close to 1 (that is, its members agree with the five statements that serve as indicators for this variable in a more determined way than in the previous exercise, which included older participants.). In comparison, cluster 1 (53 cases) recorded a value close to 0 (its members disagree with these statements).

**Figure 5. Case distribution by cluster.**



Source: author (2024).

A logistic regression was conducted to determine the effects of the job centrality variable on how participants rated their employment. The logistic regression model was statistically significant ( $\chi^2(3) = 26.43, p < 0.000$ ) and explained 23.54% of the variance. Those who attach more (5/5) centrality to work have only a 5.2% chance of rating their job positively ( $p = 0.092$ ).

## 4. Conclusions

### Satisfactory evaluation of the current job

The young people who participated in the study rated their current jobs well. At first glance, this may seem counterintuitive, given that only one in five working people worldwide are happy in their jobs (Gallup, 2024, p. 35); this holds for Colombia, where 45% of working people are looking for another job. Paradoxical as it may seem, other studies show that workers - in the United States of America - have a favorable view of their jobs, and older workers more so than younger ones (Horowitz & Parker, 2023). This good rating of current jobs could be associated with an economic context of unemployment, underemployment, and informality. Nevertheless, we did not obtain robust elements to confirm this. The logistic regression analysis will only enable

us to affirm that those who value the work dimension in their lives more highly are more critical of their current job. This could mean they expect to get more out of their job, given that work is a relevant dimension of their lives. Another clue is provided by the two items where the rating was not as good: availability of work from home and how demanding the current job is. It might be expected that more flexible and less demanding jobs would be desired, and the latter might be influenced by the need to combine study and work.<sup>7</sup> (see, for example, Loughlin & Barling, 2001).

## Centrality of work

Considering that England (1991, p. 117) reported an average response of 5.41/7 (equivalent to 3.86/5) to the question “How important and significant is work in your overall life?” (on a scale of 1 to 7) in a 1989 U.S. sample (p. 117) and that Twenge (2010) found a downward trend in the centrality of work from generation to generation, we can say that the value of 3.7 in the average response of the sample in this study indicates a population for whom work is central to their lives. The importance of this variable in the study sample is also evident in the statistical analysis presented above: work centrality is one of the variables that contributed most to differentiating the groups in the sample: one with a very high valuation of work (4.18/5, consisting of 160 people) and another, smaller pole (67 people) with a contrasting valuation of only 2.8 (note the points at the bottom of the Y axis or function 2 in Figure 4). Both groups have slightly older parents than the third group in question, with a centrality of work rating close to the average (3.85).

## Economic goals or comfort goals?

When asked about their priorities in a job, most respondents chose salary and benefits, followed by stability; only in third place did we find a comfort goal: flexibility in working hours, workplace, and organization of the workday. These results contrast with those of Satizábal-Reyes *et al.* (2023), perhaps because their study was conducted among students at a private university. The two populations are relatively similar in their preference for entrepreneurship, even at the cost of income instability or risk-taking. Overall, it could be argued that the population in our study was more inclined to pursue economic goals than comfort goals.

## Rights at work

Most young people who participated in the study agreed more with the statements on rights at work than those on duties at work. In particular, there is a contrast between valuing the right to receive training and having an enjoyable and meaningful job and disliking boring, dirty,

<sup>7</sup> The survey data do not allow us to distinguish three subgroups: only working, working and studying, and only studying (nor a fourth: currently not working or studying). The question was asked if one was currently working but not if one was currently studying. This limitation of the present research should be considered in future studies.

monotonous, and easy jobs (see Figure 3 above). This variable was relevant while analyzing the prime age population (18-25 years), as reported in the findings section. It is worth noting this shift in the relevance of the variables as discriminants of the groups: when analyzing the entire sample, the *centrality of work* had greater importance, which then ceded to the variable *rights at work* when analyzing only the younger participants. This could point to a movement along the hypothesis advocating the weight of *significant generational events* (Cuesta *et al.*, 2009).

## Overall interpretation of the findings

Overall, this is a young population, the majority of whom value work as central to their lives, rate their current employment favorably, and are more inclined toward economic goals (pay, stability, advancement, opportunity for entrepreneurship) than comfort goals (flexibility, home-working, meaning of work). This research confirms the importance of the economic environment and households in shaping young people's work preferences and expectations. However, the population being studied is more likely to value rights than obligations at work, which leads us to believe that De Hauw and De Vos (2010) may be right: it is not that this generation is putting aside the expectation of a decent job, but that they are waiting for a better time. This is an aspect that will have to be monitored in the coming years to see if there is a "shift in the landscape of work values and expectations," as might be suggested by Cotofan *et al.* (2021, p. 183) hypothesis and by the fact that there are other participants in the study - a minority - for whom work is not so central, who are more critical of their current employment and who are more inclined towards the comfort goals at work.

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The study presented here is limited in terms of the generalizability of its results. However, it provides an insight into the preferences and expectations regarding work among the young population of a medium-sized Colombian city, with a sample that comes mainly from a public university. In this sense, it provides a contrast and complement to the study by Satizábal-Reyes *et al.* (2023). Similar studies should be carried out in other Latin American cities to have a more complete picture of young people's job preferences and expectations today.

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## Author Contribution statement

David Foust-Rodríguez: Conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, resource acquisition, research, methodology, project management, writing (original draft), writing (draft review and revision/editing).

## Conflicts of interest

The author declares that he has no conflict of interest in the writing or publication of this article.

## Ethical implications

The author has no ethical implications to declare in the writing and publication of this article.

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