

Career Management in a VUCA World – An Ongoing Debate between Threats and Opportunities under the Technological Imperative

Laura BENCHEA *

Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Bucharest, Romania

**Corresponding author, laura.benchea@rei.ase.ro*

Camelia CANDIDATU

Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Bucharest, Romania

camelia.candidatu@rei.ase.ro

Anca Gabriela ILIE

Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Bucharest, Romania

anca.ilie@rei.ase.ro

Dan DUMITRIU

Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Bucharest, Romania

dan.dumitriu@rei.ase.ro

Abstract. *In today's VUCA world (acronym which stands for Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous), building up and managing a career can be extremely challenging, since society undergoes fundamental and irreversible transformations driven by the new technological wave. Technological developments have impacted all areas of an organization and all phases of a business process, from basic operations to sales to financial management and human resource management. In this framework, where new industries emerge, new skills are required and new professional roles are designed, career management is a syntagm which can no longer be viewed just as a social construct of personal significance, but rather as an active endeavor to grasp the future of professions, adapt to the new reality, and capitalize on the opportunities in order to thrive in the long run. The aim of this paper is to address career management within the VUCA world shaped by technological advancements, and the ongoing discussion surrounding the dual nature of technology as both a threat and an opportunity. Drawing on statistical data, we highlight the need for of a different and more effective approach to career management in the current complex and unpredictable times, and a more alert and purposefully designed work-life balance. As a qualitative study, the paper involved the collection and selection of the relevant literature in the field, the analytical inquiry and interpretation, as well as the use of statistical data and their analysis to defend the argument and conclude the results.*

Keywords: career management, VUCA world, technology, skills, work-life balance.

Introduction

“Surviving in a hostile world seems to have been the Zeitgeist” (Gelderloos, in Nandram & Bindlish, 2017, p.vii) to such an extent that scholars even coined out the syntagm *VUCA world* to describe the 21st century's high dynamism and complexity under the technological disruption, and its underlying social, economic, cultural and organizational impact. The constant transformations the world faces today have profound consequences on the world of work, adding unpredictability,

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uncertainty, complexity, and intense competition to peoples' lives, therefore understanding and working proactively on these issues, might mitigate the risk of failure and poor career management (Greenhaus, Callanan & Godshalk, 2010). Some scholars (Cukier, Mccalum, Egbunonu, and Bates cited, 2021 cited by Achoki, 2023) highlight that there will never be a return to “normal”, while others (Frankiewicz and Chamorro-Premuzic, 2020 cited by Achoki, 2023) stress the need to focus on upskilling and reskilling so that people thrive amidst constant technological advancements.

While the benefits of the new technologies are highly valued (access to information, enhanced efficiency and productivity, increased innovation, cost reduction and profit boost etc.), they also carry significant challenges that lead to ongoing debates on the “existential threat” posed mainly by the Artificial Intelligence (AI), and highlight risks such as “the creation of new weapons of mass destruction, or catastrophe through accidental misuse” (Gill, 2016). In his study on “existential risk”, Bostrom (2013) asserts that AI might be the most apocalyptic technology of all and, due to its intellectual powers beyond human understanding, it could effortlessly enslave or destroy Homo Sapiens (Bostrom cited by Gill, 2016).

In this regard, the purpose of this paper is to explore the subject of career management in a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) environment influenced by technological progress, while recognizing the ongoing discourse regarding technology's dual role as a threat and an opportunity. In addition, by analyzing statistical data, we emphasize the necessity for a revised and more efficient strategy for career development in today's complex and uncertain landscape, as well as a heightened awareness and purposeful pursuit of work-life balance.

The research paper comprises several key sections. In the first segment, the literature review delves into career management concepts and the description of the “VUCA world”. Following this, the methodology section outlines the research approach and methods employed. Subsequently, the third section presents the results and discussion, examining work-life balance in career management, particularly focusing on OECD countries and navigating a career in the VUCA world. Finally, the paper concludes by summarizing key findings and insights drawn from the study.

The significance of this paper resides in its contribution to the literature on career management in a complex and dynamic business environment, under the impact of the technological revolution. The findings of this paper could be of interest to students, researchers, as well as to specialists in the human resource management and business field.

The research question that underpins this study reflects a number of individual and organizational concerns raised by the current wave of technological developments and their impact on career management: How do employees develop skills and a work-life balance in order to navigate successful career paths in a VUCA world shaped by new technologies, with their intrinsic opportunities and challenges?

Literature review

Career management

Career management represents a significant challenge for individuals, regardless of the socio-economic setting, political landscape, or other factors that can impact one's life. In today's highly competitive professional world, it is crucial to precisely plan the steps needed to enter the job market successfully. Personal career aspirations and organizational demands should align to ensure mutual satisfaction and success. In the job market, individuals strive to secure positions in companies that support their professional growth, while organizations must assist employees in

mapping out their career paths to meet the needs of both parties. As noted by Hurtado (2011), career management involves various stages, including aligning personal values, goals, education, skills, and qualities, with market requirements, managing challenges, risks, and evaluating progress to develop an action plan. Efficient career management within a company or organization mandates attention to key aspects such as performance evaluation, goal setting, performance assessment, acknowledgment of employee achievements, anticipation of future career needs, and implementing programs for career planning and development.

In career management, one must take into account the professional background, a person's contribution to the workplace and the social implications of the company/organization in which he/she works; the context in which a person works, the quality of work, legislation, and more. In addition, career management nowadays requires paying attention to some essential aspects (Ilies and On, 2012), such as:

- assessment of personal performance and transmission of information to the employer
- setting goals
- the evaluation of the employee's performance by the employer
- acceptance of the results and identifying future career needs
- performance management and career development
- coordination of programs regarding the definition, development and career management.

Long-term stability in the workplace, whether in the public or private sector, during stable or crisis periods, is an ideal scenario for every individual. This stability should not hinder flexibility and adaptability to address new situations and challenges arising from the socio-economic, technological, and political environment (Ilies, 2011).

What does VUCA world mean?

The acronym VUCA is used to define situations or contexts characterized by volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity. The term VUCA was used for the first time in military literature by the US Army in order to reflect the “dynamic, unpredictable and unfavorable environment” after the Cold War (Achoki, 2023). The multilateral world has become more volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous in comparison with the old bipolar world (Shina & Shina, 2020).

In the economic and business area, the term VUCA is used to describe a situation or scenario in which individuals or companies are forced to make efforts to adapt to continuous changes that affect strategic programs and professional routine (APD, 2022). Individuals and companies should be able to make the appropriate distinction between the four VUCA elements in order to effectively allocate resources (time, financial resources), to preserve and capitalize on advantages and achieve greater performances (Bennett & Lemoine, 2014), and to better adapt to the labour market (Table 1).

Table 1. The VUCA framework – a general approach

	Meaning	Example	Risks	How to effectively address it
Volatility	things are rapidly changing, generating instability	- prices for goods and services can become very volatile in times of crisis (financial crisis, oil crisis, war, natural disasters etc.). Consequently,	- obsolete information - slow responses (reactions) - risk aversion	- agility and flexibility: resources should be effectively oriented towards this type of response

	Meaning	Example	Risks	How to effectively address it
		the inflation index is subject to fluctuation, affecting companies, individuals, families and the society as a whole		
Uncertainty	the future is uncertain, and it is impossible to predict what will happen	- unforeseen actions by competitors, terrorist attacks, geopolitical conflicts, climate change, the impact of technological advancements on society	- incomplete or lack of information	- assimilation of relevant information might be the key to address uncertainty; past experience is important (what worked in similar conditions)
Complexity	a situation or context in which numerous independent variables interplay	- expanding into foreign markets could be challenging due to complex regulatory systems, different tariffs, or logistics that must be navigated	- addressing the effects, not the causes - too much focus on short-term issues, at the expense of medium and long-term actions	- cause-effect analysis - it is important to react, restructure, and adapt to new situations on the short, medium, and long run, to ensure success in a changing environment
Ambiguity	confusion related to cause-effect relation because it not properly understood, or there is no precedent; the novelty of the situation can be the source of this ambiguity	- expansion on emerging markets - transition from print (tangible) to digital media.	- lack of comprehension regarding the proper interpretation of events - not taking the right decision	- smart trial and error are essential for reducing ambiguity - agility, the ability to react quickly to the unpredictable

Source: Realized by authors with input from: Sinha & Sinha (2020); Achoki (2023); Bennett & Lemoine (2014)

Methodology

This article is an exploratory research, based on investigative techniques which imply the critical analysis of the relevant literature in the field of career management, with a focus on the impact of new technologies on career development in the VUCA world. As a qualitative study, the paper involves the collection and selection of the relevant literature in the field (scientific journals, documents, online resources, databases), their analytical inquiry and interpretation. The aim was to understand and explain the theoretical framework, and to use statistical data in order to defend the argument and conclude the results.

Results and discussions

Threats and Opportunities – an ongoing debate under the technological imperative

The concerns related to new technologies, mainly the potential risks of Artificial Intelligence, are highly debated in the literature, as its intellectual capabilities surpass human understanding. While the benefits of these technologies that influence human lives are significant (*for people*: improved health care and transportation systems, access to information, education and training, safer workplaces where robots are used for dangerous jobs etc.; *for businesses*: increased production of higher quality output, improved customer service, enhanced productivity etc.) (European Parliament, 2023), there are ongoing debates about the “existential” threats they may pose, including the creation of new weapons of mass destruction or catastrophic outcomes through accidental misuse (Gill, 2016). Technological disruption in the world of work mainly refers to AI taking over, thus posing a significant threat or “creative disruption” (the business approach) to humankind and the future of professions. In this context, while some jobs are at risk to be replaced by machines, others are being transformed, but also new job opportunities emerge.

Contemporary debates identify two main analytical perspectives with regard to the technological impact for human labor and mass unemployment (Boyd & Holton, 2018):

1. the **“no-real-challenge”** approach, advanced by economists Gordon (2014) and Cowen (2011) cited by Boyd & Holton (2018) who used this syntagm mainly in respect with the impact of technological developments on productivity, and who concluded that these new technologies do not have such a profound impact on productivity as steam, electricity, or internal combustion engine had. Nonetheless, these comparisons must be treated carefully, because these technologies had a revolutionary impact only when they became “general-purpose platforms” (Nye, 2007 cited by Boyd & Holton, 2018). But what the impact of AI or robots would be, for example, once they become such a platform, and how far can they go?

2. the **“very real transformation”** perspective gathers the majority of standpoints who share the belief that society is radically changed by the technological disruption, and this process is irreversible.

The impact of technology on professions in the digital era can be included in two main categories: automation and innovation. “*Automation* is the comfort zone of technological change for most professionals”: it focuses on optimizing and cost-saving in administrative work, without completely discarding the old methods (Susskind and Susskind, 2015). As automation inevitably eliminates human work in manual business processes, it requires leaders to equip employees with the skill set for long-term retention, and generate active engagement through reskilling initiatives (Tyagarajan, 2021). When it comes to *innovation*, it impacts the professional work in two ways: on the one hand, it can lead to cost-effective products and services of higher quality. On the other hand, it may introduce new services that do not replace the existing ones, but they provide access to expertise previously unavailable. (Susskind and Susskind, 2015).

The impact of technology on careers, mainly the concerns regarding the displacement of human beings or regrets about the abandonment of some specific aspects of the traditional professions (Susskind and Susskind, 2015) raises entitled reactions about the future of work and how to effectively manage a career in this unpredictable environment. Irrespective of the approach, evidence show that the technological trend is irreversible, and its impact reshapes the landscape of work and requires adaptation to stay relevant in this rapidly changing world.

Career Management in a VUCA World

Work-Life balance in career management

Professional career development involves gaining experience, delivering high performance, and achieving personal as well as workplace-related goals. It is important to note that one's career does not exist in isolation from other aspects of life (Ilies, 2011). Career management aims to achieve a work-life balance by navigating potential conflicts such as increased job responsibilities and time-consuming tasks at work, alongside growing personal responsibilities at home, including managing family relationships and caring for family members (Sanfilippo, 2024). Maintaining this balance requires effective management across some key areas: self-management (understanding available resources and time required for actions); time management (utilizing time and resources effectively to achieve goals); stress management (coping with the complexities of modern society and challenges at work); change management (adapting to societal and workplace changes); technology management (balancing the benefits and risks of technology use); and leisure management (ensuring a balance between professional and personal life by managing time effectively outside of work hours).

For example, a study carried out by Aviva in 2022 revealed that 41% of employees prioritized work-life balance, while 36% emphasized salary (Wedgwood, 2022). Organizations like Mental Health America (MHA) advocate for strategies to balance work and personal life, including setting manageable goals, efficient time management, seeking flexibility, and reducing stress both at work and at home (MHA, 2014). Employers, as suggested by the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety (CCOHS, 2024), can promote work-life balance by retaining experienced employees, hiring additional staff, fostering diverse skill sets among employees, upholding ethical values, reducing injuries and illnesses, enhancing relationships between colleagues, encouraging initiatives within teams, improving productivity while enhancing employee satisfaction, and mitigating stress and burnout among employees.

Work-Life balance in the OECD countries

It is obvious that for workers and their families the balance between work and life is essential for well-being, happiness, health, safety and stress avoidance. In order to build up statistics that reflect the way in which this balance is achieved, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) takes into account a series of specific indicators, such as the time devoted to leisure (time dedicated to the family or friends, hobbies, cultural activities, games, use of TV or computer etc.) and personal care (eating, sleeping etc.) and employees working overtime. OECD statistics highlight that around 10% of employees in OECD member countries work 50 hours or more per week, with a higher percentage of male employees working long hours compared to female employees.

The OECD states with the highest percentage of people that work overtime are Mexico (with 27% of employees; rank 41/41), Turkey (with approximately 25%; rank 40/41) and Colombia (with roughly 24 %; rank 39/41). On the opposite side, the first positions are occupied by the following countries: Russian Federation (0,1 %), Netherlands (0,3%) and Switzerland (0,4%).

A worker with full-time program in OECD allocates around 63% of the day (about 15 hours) to personal care and leisure: in Italy 16,5 hours (rank 1/41), in France 16,2 hours (rank 2/41) and in Spain 15,7 hours (rank 3/41), compared to Mexico (~13,5 hours; rank 39/41), (Costa Rica (~13,5 hours; rank 40/41) and Colombia (~13,3 hours, rank 41/41). See the Table 2 and Figures 1 and 2, for more details.

Table 2. Work – Life balance by Country in OECD countries in 2020

Country	Employees working overtime		Time devoted to leisure and personal care	
	%	Rank	Hours	Rank
Australia	12.5 %	32 / 41	14.4 h	34 / 41
Austria	5.3%	23/41	14.5 h	32/41
Belgium	4.3%	19/41	15.5h	7/41
Brazil	5.6%	26/41	~ 14.6 h	27/41
Canada	3.3%	14/41	14.6h	30/41
Colombia	23,7%	39/41	~ 13,3 h	41/41
Costa Rica	22%	38/41	~ 13,5 h	40/41
Chile	7.7%	28/41	~ 14 h	38/41
Czechia	4.5%	21/41	~ 15.1h	17/41
Denmark	1.1 %	6/41	~ 15.7h	4/41
Estonia	2.2%	10/41	15h	22/41
Finland	3.6%	15/41	15.2h	10/41
France	7.7%	27/41	16.2h	2/41
Germany	3.9%	16/41	15.6h	6/41
Greece	4.5%	20/41	15h	19/41
Hungary	1.5%	8/41	15.1h	13/41
Iceland	11.7%	31/41	~ 14.5h	33/41
Ireland	4.7%	22/41	14.5h	31/41
Israel	14.1%	34/41	~ 14.3 h	35/41
Italy	3.3%	13/41	16.5h	1/41
Japan	~15.7%	36/41	14.1h	37/41
South Korea	~19.7%	37/41	14.8h	25/41
Latvia	1.6%	9/41	~ 15.1h	14/41
Lithuania	1%	5/41	~ 15.1h	12/41
Luxembourg	2.8%	12/41	~ 15.1h	11/41
Mexico	27%	41/41	~ 13.5 h	39/41
Netherlands	0.3%	3/41	15.4h	8/41
New Zealand	14%	33/41	14.9h	24/41
Norway	1.4%	7/41	15.7h	5/41
Poland	4.2%	18/41	14.7h	26/41
Portugal	5.6%	25/41	~ 15h	21/41
Russian Federation	0.1%	1/41	~ 15.1h	16/41
Slovak Republic	4.2%	17/41	~ 15.1h	15/41
Slovenia	5.6%	24/41	~ 15h	20/41
South Africa	15.4%	35/41	~ 14.2 h	36/41
Spain	2.5%	11/41	15.7h	3/41
Sweden	0.9%	4/41	~ 15.3h	9/41
Switzerland	0.4%	2/41	~ 15h	18/41
Türkiye	25%	40/41	14.6h	28/41
UK	10.8%	30/41	14.9h	23/41
USA	10.4%	29/41	14.6h	29/41

Source: Realized by authors using data from: OECD,
Work – Life Balance: <https://www.oecdbetterlifeindex.org/topics/work-life-balance/>

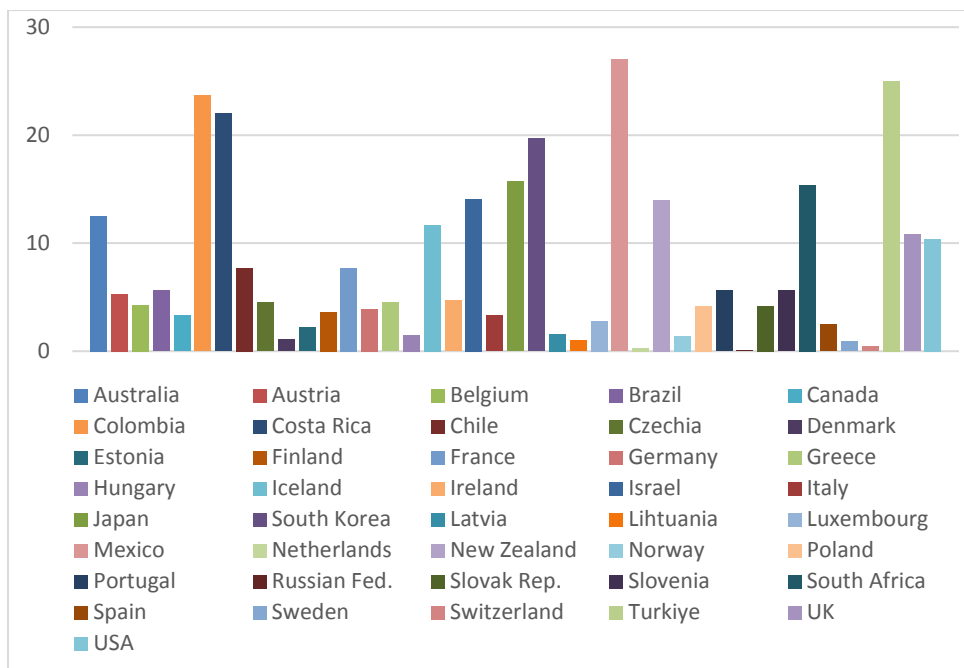


Figure 1. Employees working overtime (%) in 2020

Source: Realized by authors using data from: OECD,
Work – Life Balance: <https://www.oecdbetterlifeindex.org/topics/work-life-balance/>

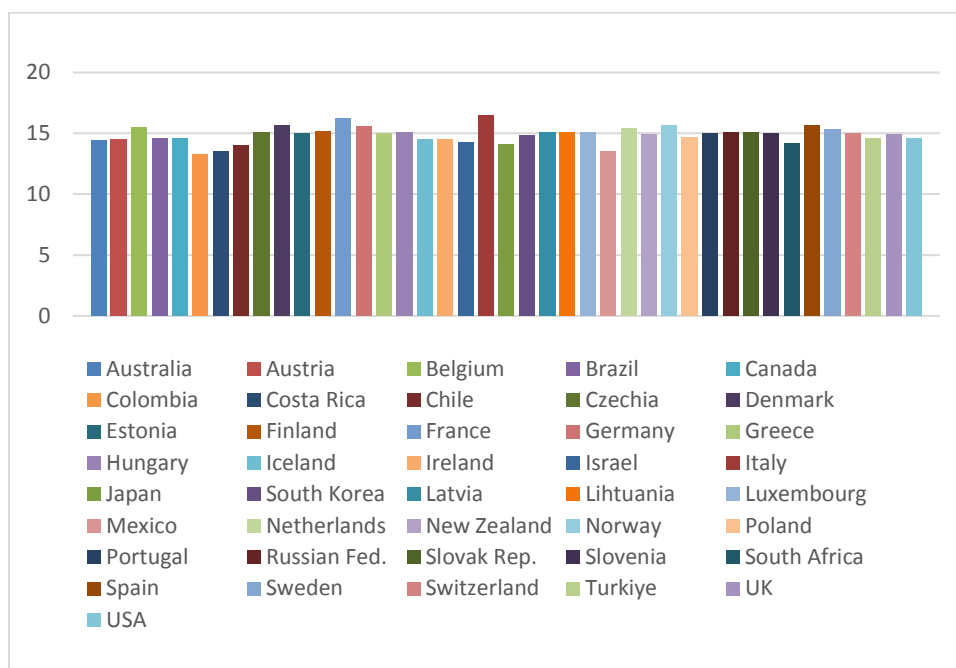


Figure 2. Time devoted to leisure and personal care (hours per day)

Source: Realized by authors using data from: OECD,
Work – Life Balance: <https://www.oecdbetterlifeindex.org/topics/work-life-balance/>

Managing a career in the VUCA world

The VUCA environment has become a common challenge for many sectors, from industry to services to the banking sector or technological field, where technological advances or specific market fluctuations determine the inclusion of individuals or companies in this type of environment (framework). (APD, 2022)

In many countries there is disconnection between the professional profile and the needs or requirements of the companies. Demographic changes and brain drain have generated additional challenges on the labor market. Within the VUCA world, there are three main challenges that can impact the career management: defining a strategy, a domestic or international career planning, and adapting to the changes on the labour market (IESE – Business School in Navarra, 2024).

So, how to approach career management in a VUCA world? The answers are summarized and presented in the table below:

Table 3. How to face career management challenges in the VUCA framework

INDIVIDUAL approach:	ORGANIZATIONAL approach:
- focus on the skills, abilities, qualities	- focus on extraordinary/exceptionally management skills
- select the right company in the right field of activity, the right spouses, friends, doctors etc.	- select the right people for the company: the right employees, the right peers, managers, lawyers etc.
- work efficiently and balance the time between work and personal life	- for the company's success, take into account the next elements: curiosity, motivation, engagement and determination
- ensure your comfort, stability and priorities (personal or professional ones) and when necessary be flexible in order to manage risks related to your career or related to your personal life	- people are determined to keep their jobs rather than to look for new opportunities. But they can also rapidly adapt to new situations or opportunities, if their lives are under different personal (existential) demands or pressures
-correctly define your career goal	- find the employees' career purposes. Use financial and other type of rewards
- refine the professional profile. Your CV must indicate your achievements and your personal values related to the career and personal life	- pay attention to the details in the CVs of the company's current employees or the prospective ones

Source: Realized by authors using data from: IESE – Business School in Navarra, Managing career in VUCA world: <https://www.iese.edu/standout/managing-career-vuca-world>.

In the current times characterized by rapid transformations and uncertainties, the concept of work-life balance plays a significant role in effective career management. Since the two most crucial aspects for a working individual are job and family (Greenhaus et al., 2003 cited by Malik, 2023), preserving a healthy work-life balance enables individuals to better cope with the challenges of the VUCA world, conducting to improved overall well-being, job satisfaction, productivity, creativity and performance. Creating an equilibrium between work and personal life may help individuals manage stressful situations, prevent burnout, and maintain physical and mental health. This awareness and well-being are essential for navigating the fast-changing and unpredictable nature of the modern workplace. According to research, employees who have a healthy work-life balance are more satisfied with their jobs and work significantly better (Malik, 2023).

On the other hand, organizations that promote work-life balance demonstrate a commitment to employee well-being and retention. While individuals need to prioritize their well-being and set boundaries, organizations have a significant role in fostering a supportive work environment that prioritizes work-life balance and provides the resources and policies needed for employees achieve

it (Malik, 2023). By offering flexible work arrangements, wellness programs, and supportive policies, organizations can attract top talent, boost morale, and foster a positive work culture. This, in turn, leads to higher employee satisfaction, lower turnover rates, and increased productivity.

In addition, an effective career management within the VUCA framework at both individual and organizational level requires adaptability and resilience. Individuals can develop their skills through continuous learning, networking, and remaining agile in response to rapid transformations. Even more, embracing uncertainty, developing a growth mindset, and understanding emotional intelligence are essential for personal growth and career progress. On the organizational side, fostering a culture of innovation, providing opportunities for upskilling and reskilling, and promoting a flexible work environment can help employees thrive in turbulent times. Collaboration, effective communication, and strategic planning are essential for organizations to remain competitive and support their workforce in navigating the complexities of the VUCA framework. By aligning individual strategies with organizational objectives, one can effectively approach career management issues and seize opportunities for growth and development.

It is clear that achieving a satisfactory work-life balance requires a joint effort between employees and organizations. In this context, the link between work-life balance and career management in the VUCA world is obvious: prioritizing work-life balance not only benefits individuals by contributing to long-term career success, but also to organizational performance and resilience in the face of uncertainty and unpredictability.

Conclusions

In today's rapidly changing world, the VUCA framework has become a common challenge across numerous sectors, including industry, services, finance or banking, that are all shaped by the technological advancement, which can result in unpredictable situations and unforeseen risks. In such a dynamic environment, effective career management becomes increasingly important. Navigating the dynamic VUCA landscape and the developing technological environment calls for a paradigm shift in career management strategies. Therefore, embracing technology as both a challenge and a tool for advancement offers opportunities for growth and innovation. To thrive in this environment, individuals need to adopt a proactive and agile approach to career development, while prioritizing a well-crafted work-life balance to sustain long-term success and well-being. By analyzing statistical data (with a focus on OECD countries), we emphasized the necessity for a revised and more effective strategy for career development in today's complex and uncertain landscape, as well as a heightened awareness and purposeful pursuit of work-life balance.

Results show that career management under the technological imperative refers to the need for professionals to adapt and develop their skills in response to advancements in technology. In today's rapidly changing world, it's important for individuals to stay updated with technological trends, and continuously upskill or reskill to remain competitive in the job market. This may involve learning new technologies, acquiring digital skills, and being open to embracing new tools and platforms in their field. Even though constant upskilling or reskilling are essential in a technology-driven world, it is equally important to create an effective work-life balance in order to adapt and thrive in "the new normal".

In exploring the topic of career management within the VUCA world, it is essential to acknowledge several limitations of this study. The dynamic nature of the VUCA environment poses challenges in predicting career trends and outcomes accurately. In addition, the focus on work-life balance within career management, particularly in OECD countries, may overlook the unique

cultural and socio-economic factors influencing individual experiences. Future research could delve deeper into the intersectionality of work-life balance and career paths across diverse regions or specific industries. Furthermore, as technological advancements continuously reconfigure professions, understanding their impact (both positive and negative) on career trajectories and skill requirements is crucial. Research should further investigate how individuals can navigate evolving job markets and seize opportunities presented by technological advancements in the VUCA world, or to explore the interplay of technological developments and career resilience in the VUCA work environment.

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