

# Exploring the Association between Perceived Career Crisis, Discrepancy of Career Expectations, and Wellbeing among Hungarian Employees

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## Abstract

The study aims to extend knowledge of how Discrepancy of Career Expectations, Perceived Career Crisis, and Wellbeing relate to each other, and thereby contribute to the theory and application of targeted wellbeing positive psychology interventions, with a special focus on Hungarian employees. Cross-sectional research was conducted to analyse whether there is a relationship between the level of Perceived Career Crisis and the Discrepancy between Current and Ideal Career Stages, the relationship between Perceived Career Crisis and Wellbeing, and which Wellbeing components seem to be overarching in the case of Perceived Career Crisis and Discrepancy. In the case of Discrepancy, there is a significant difference between distinct levels of Perceived Career Crisis. Our findings suggest that Autonomy, Optimism, and Empathy seem to be overarching Wellbeing components that might serve to reduce the potential negative outcomes of Discrepancy of Career Expectations and Perceived Career Crisis. Although further research is needed, these findings may help practitioners to further develop customised wellbeing and career management programmes, as well as to apply targeted interventions – as opposed to general solutions – to increase employees' career satisfaction.

## Keywords

positive psychology, work psychology, wellbeing, crisis, career

## 1 Introduction

Work can be a positive asset in one's life by increasing satisfaction and the sense of belonging (Nordstrom and Tulibaski, 2020). However, European employees have the lowest regional percentage of engaged employees (13%) (Nordstrom and Tulibaski, 2020:p.30.) and experience a significant level of stress during their working day (39%). In Hungary, the numbers look better, with 21% of engaged employees and a lower ratio of daily stress: 35%, according to the Global Workplace 2023 Report (Gallup, 2023).

Stress can be a helpful experience in our everyday life, depending on what type it is and how it affects us. The reaction to the stressor also depends on the extent to which individuals can adapt to the current situation (Freire et al., 2019).

Why is it – or should it be – crucial for organisations to improve employees' mental health? Since employees spend a significant amount of their lives at work (Korošec et al., 2022), employers should ensure, or at least support, working conditions (environment, social relations, devices, etc.) that are not harmful to employees' mental health.

This paper aims to highlight the importance of the connection between Perceived Career Crisis and wellbeing, and possible adverse outcomes caused by the discrepancy between expected and actual career stages. A large number of publications are available on a Hungarian sample, focusing either on employees (e.g., Czifra et al., 2024; Erős and Szabó, 2020; Major et al., 2022, etc.) or on positive psychology (e.g., Kádi et al, 2020; Nagy, 2019; Szabó et al., 2019, etc). However, the number of studies addressing psychological wellbeing specifically in the work context is comparatively lower (e.g., Kun and Gadancz, 2022; Molnár et al., 2024, etc.). Our intention is to contribute both to theory and application of wellbeing at work and Perceived Career Crisis, paying particular regard to the Hungarian workforce.

## 2 Theoretical background

According to the APA Dictionary, a crisis is "a situation (e.g., a traumatic change) that produces significant cognitive or emotional stress in those involved in it." (APA Dictionary, 2018a). Several areas of psychology deal with

the issue of crisis. Erikson defines crisis as the trigger of personality development in his psychosocial development theory (Knight, 2017; Super, 1980) and describes nine roles and four theatres, certain combinations of which result in positions – but in some cases role conflict can also arise. In a work context, Kulcsár et al. (2020) describe career-related decisions as challenging situations. However, these are also some of the most important decisions in one's life (Bimrose and Mulvey, 2015), and have an impact on career satisfaction (Gati et al., 2006) and wellbeing (Creed et al., 2006).

Our life has changed and so has the occurrence of career crisis, according to Bhatia and Saluja (2023), as it can happen at any stage of career, even several times. These authors advocate taking a proactive approach and raising self-awareness to eliminate the possible negative outcomes of career crisis (Bhatia and Saluja, 2023; Preventza, 2024).

How successful a career is, is the result of an evaluation based on objective (e.g., status in the hierarchy, responsibilities, salary: Gunz and Heslin (2005)) as well as subjective (e.g., career satisfaction: Ng et al. (2005)) aspects. Although Gunz and Heslin (2005) emphasise that both perspectives are important, Spurk et al. (2019) argue that nowadays, there is a shift toward subjective measurements. Lin and Chen (2017) also highlights the potential risks of career plateaus (both hierarchical and job content) in terms of the effect they may have on career commitment. Considering that career decision-making can be associated with a high degree of ambiguity (Xu and Tracey, 2014), the importance of career assessment based on an individual's own experience and perception (Briscoe et al., 2021) becomes even more critical. Individuals may assess their career success from different aspects: an evaluation based on the comparison between norms defined by society (e.g., salary, promotions, etc.) or based on the achievement of one's desired career outcomes. The first is defined as objective career success (OCS) while the second is subjective career success (SCS) (Spurk et al., 2019).

In this paper, we use the terms Current Career Stage and Ideal Career Stage to describe certain aspects of career expectations. The Current Career Stage refers to the point in the career where one thinks they are currently, while the Ideal Career Stage is the point in the career where one thinks they should be. The difference of these variables results in a discrepancy which is based on the individual's subjective career evaluation. This evaluation simultaneously contains objective and subjective aspects (Spurk et al., 2019). Understanding

one's career expectations and the individual background of this discrepancy is crucial to providing proper counselling service (Briscoe et al., 2021) or to turning dissatisfaction caused by discrepancy into proactive work behaviour such as job crafting, according to Wang et al. (2020).

Work and career building play significant roles in people's lives, such as in one's wellbeing (Rath and Harter, 2010). Higher level of discrepancy might lead to dissatisfaction with one's career, resulting in lower work engagement and decreased wellbeing (Joo and Lee, 2017).

For many years, psychology has been considered a field that "repairs" mental illnesses, and only a few initiatives have been about cultivating mental health (MacKie, 2016). However, when, in 1998, Martin Seligman became the President of the American Psychological Association (APA), he highlighted the importance of happiness and the optimal functioning of human beings (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Seligman et al. (2005) claim that positive psychology – which is considered an umbrella term for theory and research of positive domains of life, e.g., positive emotions and character traits, etc. – intends to better understand both the "dark" and "bright" sides of human behaviour, emotions, and cognition.

Mental health is defined by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2018) as a state of wellbeing in which one can discover one's abilities, can cope with the normal level of stress, is productive at work, and adds value to their community. Thus, wellbeing is set to become a vital factor in our lives as one of the most critical aspects of mental health, and organisations are working on developing a working environment that supports the enhancement of wellbeing.

Despite the lack of a standard definition of wellbeing, the basic assumption is that wellbeing is not the absence of, or a low level of, negative factors (e.g., depression, anxiety, sleep disturbance) (Bartels et al., 2019; Butler and Kern, 2016; Kun and Gadanecz, 2022). Seligman (2011) states in his theory on the subject that wellbeing is not a "thing" to be experienced – rather it is a construct whose elements can be measured individually; however, none of them can singly define wellbeing when taken in isolation. Rath and Harter (2010) define wellbeing as the combined interplay of various factors – enjoying daily tasks, the quality of relationships, financial background, physical health, and community contribution – which are interdependent. Since these domains are connected and are in interaction, people may experience actual wholeness when they care about all of the elements.

Modern theories mostly present multidimensional wellbeing models as there is general agreement among researchers that both hedonic and eudaimonic perspectives are equally important in the case of workplace wellbeing (Bartels et al., 2019) – some well-known, relevant models are briefly described below.

Deci and Ryan (2000) identified in their Self-Determination Theory (SDT) three main components that can fulfil human needs: competence, autonomy, and relatedness.

Seligman (2011) highlighted the importance of flourishing and developed a five-component model of how to reach this state of living. His PERMA model (Seligman, 2011) includes positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment. Flourishing is a concept closely related to wellbeing. Seligman (2011) describes this state as a result of developing and cultivating wellbeing.

Ryff and Keyes (1995) defined six components of wellbeing in her psychological wellbeing theory: positive relationships, autonomy, personal growth, self-acceptance, purpose in life, and environmental mastery.

Marsh et al. (2020) developed a multidimensional concept – building on previous theories – including work-related aspects. They describe fifteen factors: competence, clear thinking, emotional stability, engagement, meaning, optimism, positive emotions, positive relations, resilience, self-esteem, vitality, self-acceptance, autonomy, empathy, and prosocial behaviour (Marsh et al., 2020). These factors used in the Wellbeing Profile (WB-Pro) showed a significant, mostly high level of correlation with Seligman's (2011) PERMA factors (Marsh et al., 2020). Throughout the paper, we use the term wellbeing to refer to the concept of Marsh et al. (2020) since this approach explains the complexity of wellbeing components and allows us to examine the special context of the workplace (Bartels et al., 2019).

Despite the fact that there seems to be no general definition of wellbeing and many researchers have developed models to describe the dimensions of wellbeing (Goodman et al., 2018), the role of distinct components tends to be significant concerning wellbeing: relationships, meaning or purpose, positive emotions, engagement, autonomy, and competence (Butler and Kern, 2016; Deci and Ryan, 2000; Huppert and So, 2013; Marsh et al., 2020; Ryff and Keyes, 1995; Seligman, 2011). Career decisions (Xu and Tracey, 2014), the perception and evaluation of career success (Spurk et al., 2019) are crucial in employees' lives (Briscoe et al., 2021). The degree of autonomy in work and job-related decisions strongly relates to the level of exhaustion and wellbeing. Therefore, this might serve as

a protective factor against burnout (Sandmeier et al, 2022), while contributing to job satisfaction (Gati et al., 2006).

Since Donaldson et al. (2021) claim that employee wellbeing interventions are among the most successful positive organisational psychology interventions, we feel the urge to extend our knowledge regarding the unique characteristics of employee wellbeing (Kun and Gadanecz, 2022) and provide new aspects concerning the relationship between career and wellbeing.

We assume that:

1. There is a positive relationship between the level of Perceived Career Crisis and the Discrepancy between Current and Ideal Career Stages – based on the literature background that was previously presented.
2. Additionally, we expect to see a negative relationship between Perceived Career Crisis and Wellbeing.
3. Our further intention is to examine which Wellbeing components seem to be overarching in the case of career crisis and discrepancy.

### 3 Method

#### 3.1 Participants and procedure

Participants were 457 Hungarian adults, who were active employees when participating in the research. However, three participants were identified as outliers and excluded from the analysis, so the final sample size is 454 (26% men, 74% women) The mean age of the sample was 40.26 (Standard Deviation (SD) = 10.746). The sample covered government (38%), competitive (51%) and non-profit (11%).

We used cross-sectional and convenience sampling to collect data by using an online survey package. Working with cross-sectioning was a conscious decision from our side to test whether the assumed relationships exist before starting a longitudinal research. Inclusion criteria were being minimum 18- and maximum 65-year-old Hungarian employee and working actively when filling in the survey. We informed participants about the goal of the research: to investigate challenging situations at work, the level of Wellbeing, and the type of coping strategies to be found among Hungarian working adults. The survey package contained various surveys to collect data about wellbeing, career expectations, and Perceived Career Crisis. Since the participants could join the research individually, we did not ask any exact organisations to participate.

#### 3.2 Instruments

We asked participants to tell us about the challenges they experience at their workplace by filling in the online

survey. We used Wellbeing Profile (Marsh et al., 2020) to measure Wellbeing. Some demographic questions were also part of the package.

15-item version of Wellbeing Profile (WB-Pro) (Marsh et al., 2020) was used with a 5-point Likert scale answer format (from 1 = "Not at all" to 5 = "Totally") to measure participants' actual sense of Wellbeing. The multidimensional questionnaire is based on Huppert and So's (2013) systematic approach – they originally identified 10 factors which were extended with further 5 factors by Marsh et al. (2020). Each item of the Wellbeing Profile describes a Wellbeing factor, without reverse items.

Participants could indicate the degree in which the statements apply to them. They needed to consider the following factors: autonomy, clear thinking, competence, emotional stability, empathy, engagement, meaning, optimism, positive emotions, positive relations, prosocial behaviour, resilience, self-accept, self-esteem, and vitality. The scale was translated into Hungarian – following the translation-back-translation process – whose reliability is very good (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.812$ ), and testing validity is in progress.

Own measures contained questions about participants' expectations regarding their career. Participants indicated the state of their Current – refers to the stage where they think they are currently on the scale in their career – and Ideal Career Stages – refers to the stage where they think they should be currently on the scale in their career – on an 11-point scale (from  $-5 =$  "Negative experiences, being unsuccessful" to  $5 =$  "Positive experiences, being successful", and  $0 =$  "Neutral") and how they feel about experiencing career crisis on a 7-point scale (from 1 = "Not at all" to 7 = "Totally"). In the case of the Current and Ideal career stage scales we used a visual scale for both items that looks like a ladder (referring to the career ladder). Zero point (Neutral) was marked in the middle of the ladder, Positive experiences from 1 to 5 in the upper part of the ladder, and Negative experiences from 1- to  $-5$  in the lower part of the ladder. We decided to use similar scaling like 5-point scales but aimed to admit that a career might be dissatisfying.

### 3.3 Results

In order to reduce any potential bias, we used Harman's one-factor test for common method bias. The total variance extracted by one factor is 19.307% that is less than the recommended threshold of 50%, so there is no problem with common method bias in our data. To analyse data we used SPSS, version 26 (SPSS, Inc.). We tested the normality of the sample with Shapiro-Wilk test (Yap and Sim, 2011). Since the sample does not follow the normal

distribution in the case of the tested variables, robust methods were used during the data analysis.

To test our hypotheses, we created a new variable named Discrepancy: Extracting the value of Current Career Stage from Ideal Career Stage serves as the Discrepancy variable. Furthermore, we defined standardised values based on the variables and recoded into three variables by using the cutting points  $-1$  and  $+1$ . With this, we defined three categories:

1. low level of Perceived Career Crisis: standardised value lower than  $-1$ ;
2. moderate level of Perceived Career Crisis: standardised value between  $-1$  and  $1$ ;
3. high level of Perceived Career Crisis: standardised value above  $1$ .

Since none of the three groups follows the normal distribution, we used the Kruskal-Wallis test to examine whether a higher level of Discrepancy coincides with a higher level of Perceived Career Crisis.

#### 3.3.1 Perceived Career Crisis and career expectations

First, we analysed descriptive statistics (number (N) = 454) to examine the characteristics of career crisis (mean (M) = 3.46, SD = 1.87, median (Mdn) = 3) and career expectations: Current Career Stage (M = 1.51, SD = 2.47, Mdn = 2), Ideal Career Stage (M = 3.88, SD = 1.22, Mdn = 4), and Discrepancy (M = 2.37, SD = 2.44, modus (Mo) = 2.00, Mdn = 2).

The results of Kruskal-Wallis test showed significant difference in the case of Discrepancy between the three levels of Perceived Career Crisis,  $\chi^2(2, N = 457) = 86.52$ ,  $p < 0.001$ :

1. low level and moderate level of Perceived Career Crisis (Mdn = 1,  $p < 0.001$ );
2. low and high level of Perceived Career Crisis (Mdn = 2;  $p < 0.001$ );
3. moderate and high level of Perceived Career Crisis (Mdn = 4,  $p < 0.001$ ).

A negative moderate correlation was found between Current Career Stage and Perceived Career Crisis ( $r = -0.508$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ), and a positive weak correlation with Ideal Career Stage ( $r = 0.370$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). Both correlations are significant. However, there is no significant relation between Perceived Career Crisis and Ideal Career Stage ( $r = -0.082$ ,  $p = 0.080$ ).

Furthermore, there is a moderate positive significant correlation between Perceived Career Crisis and Discrepancy ( $r = 0.506$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

### 3.3.2 The relations between Perceived Career Crisis, Discrepancy of career expectations, and Wellbeing

First, we analysed the descriptive statistics of Wellbeing components (Table 1).

As second step, correlations between Wellbeing components and Perceived Career Crisis, and Discrepancy were analysed (Table 2).

We also tested how Wellbeing contributes to Perceived Career Crisis and Discrepancy. To examine this, based on the significant correlations, linear regression analysis with stepwise method was used.

**Table 1** Descriptive statistics of Wellbeing components

Wellbeing	Mean	Std. deviation
Autonomy	3.37	1.18
Clear thinking	4.12	0.95
Competence	4.19	0.75
Emotional stability	3.03	1.61
Empathy	3.45	1.20
Engagement	3.89	1.07
Meaning	3.82	1.24
Optimism	3.33	1.23
Positive emotions	3.65	1.08
Positive relations	4.46	0.92
Prosocial behavior	4.51	0.69
Resilience	3.34	1.11
Self-acceptance	3.91	0.98
Self-esteem	4.09	1.02
Vitality	3.61	1.14

**Table 2** Correlations of Wellbeing components and Perceived Career Crisis and Discrepancy

Wellbeing components	Perceived Career Crisis	Discrepancy
Autonomy	-0.400**	-0.385**
Clear thinking	-0.196**	-0.164**
Competence	-0.138**	-0.186**
Emotional stability	-0.198**	-0.240**
Empathy	0.158**	0.171**
Engagement	-0.205**	-0.298**
Meaning	-0.107**	-0.276**
Optimism	-0.335**	-0.438**
Positive emotions	-0.316**	-0.426**
Positive relations	-0.133**	-0.150**
Prosocial behavior	-0.022**	-0.052
Resilience	-0.178**	-0.198**
Self-acceptance	-0.011**	-0.075
Self-esteem	-0.113**	-0.200**
Vitality	-0.232**	-0.281**

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

In the first model, all wellbeing factors of WB Pro (Marsh et al., 2020) were included. Besides Perceived Career Crisis, six Wellbeing factors – Positive emotions, Autonomy, Emotional stability, Optimism, Empathy, and Engagement – are part of the final regression model (Table 3) which explains 35.2% variance of the dependent variable, Perceived Career Crisis ( $F = (7, 446) = 36.20, p = < 0.001$ ). Excluded variables are Clear thinking, Competence, Meaning, Positive relations, Prosocial behaviour, Resilience, Self-acceptance, Self-esteem, and Vitality. Although all variables in the model are significant, Perceived Career Crisis ( $\beta = 0.289, p = < 0.001$ ) has higher explanatory power than the others and shows positive relation with Discrepancy.

In the regression model presented above our approach was to identify which variables describe Discrepancy, and to what extent. However, we decided to analyse the other perspective as well and to describe the characteristics of how and to what extent Discrepancy and certain Wellbeing components explain Perceived Career Crisis.

Besides Discrepancy, three Wellbeing factors – Autonomy, Optimism, and Empathy – are part of the final regression model (Table 4) which explains 30.3%

**Table 3** Regression model of how Wellbeing components and Perceived Career Crisis explain the variance of Discrepancy

	Unstand. B	Standardized Coeff. Beta	t	Sig.
Perceived Career Crisis	0.377	0.289	6.637	< 0.001
Positive emotions	-0.305	-0.135	-2.564	0.011
Autonomy	-0.253	-0.122	-2.805	0.005
Emotional stability	-0.197	-0.093	-2.334	0.020
Optimism	-0.260	-0.131	-2.515	0.012
Empathy	0.188	0.092	2.368	0.018
Engagement	-0.226	-0.099	-2.323	0.021
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>		0.352		
Sig.		< 0.001		

**Table 4** Regression model of how Wellbeing components and Discrepancy explain the variance of Perceived Career Crisis

	Unstand. B	Standardized Coeff. Beta	t	Sig.
Discrepancy	0.250	0.327	7.210	< 0.001
Autonomy	-0.380	-0.240	-5.562	< 0.001
Optimism	-0.180	-0.118	-2.688	0.007
Empathy	0.148	0.095	2.392	0.017
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>		0.303		
Sig.		< 0.001		

variance of the dependent variable, Perceived Career Crisis ( $F = (4, 449) = 50.27, p = < 0.001$ ). Excluded variables are Clear thinking, Competence, Emotional stability, Engagement, Meaning, Positive emotions, Positive relations, Prosocial behaviour, Resilience, Self-acceptance, Self-esteem, and Vitality. Although all variables in the model are significant, Discrepancy ( $\beta = 0.327, p = < 0.001$ ) has higher explanatory power than the others and shows positive relation with Perceived Career Crisis.

#### 4 Discussion

Our paper sheds new light on the opportunities of integrating work and positive psychology. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to examine the connection between perceived crisis and wellbeing in a work context on a Hungarian sample, meaning that it contributes significantly to the field of Hungarian employees' psychological Wellbeing at work. Since the workplace is a unique environment and context (Bartels et al., 2019), while career decisions are tough (Kulcsár et al., 2020) but important events (Bimrose and Mulvey, 2015) in one's life, it is crucial to examine and understand the characteristics of employee wellbeing. We presented an approach to consider enhancing wellbeing at work to reduce the negative effects of work-related Perceived Career Crisis and the Discrepancy of Career Expectations. For this purpose, we conducted cross-sectional research and analysed how career expectations (Current Career Stage and Ideal Career Stage), their Discrepancy, Perceived Career Crisis, and Wellbeing relate to each other.

First, we assumed a positive relationship between the level of Perceived Career Crisis and the Discrepancy between Current and Ideal Career Stages. The hypothesis was confirmed: There is a moderate positive significant correlation between Perceived Career Crisis and Discrepancy. Furthermore, a negative moderate correlation was found between Current career stage and Perceived Career Crisis, and a positive weak correlation of Perceived Career Crisis with Ideal career stage. Both correlations are significant. However, there is no significant relation between Perceived Career Crisis and Ideal Career Stage. These results suggest that those who see themselves at a lower point in their career have lower expectations regarding their ideal career stage, while those who already excelled in their career aim for a higher career stage. On the other hand, the higher employees see themselves on their career ladder, the lower level of career crisis they experience. Furthermore, a lower level

of Perceived Career Crisis is associated with a lower level of Discrepancy, while a higher level of Perceived Career Crisis is associated with a higher level of Discrepancy.

The results of the Kruskal-Wallis test showed significant differences in the case of Discrepancy between the three levels of Perceived Career Crisis:

1. low level and moderate level of Perceived Career Crisis;
2. low and high level of Perceived Career Crisis;
3. moderate and high level of Perceived Career Crisis.

This suggests that a higher level of Perceived Career Crisis is associated with a higher level of Discrepancy. This high level of Discrepancy means that there is a considerable difference between the Current and the Ideal Career Stages. Briscoe et al. (2021) suggest that at the individual level, employees might think about why they experience the discrepancy, and with organisational support (e.g., employee assistance programmes or career counselling), they may find several solutions to reduce the discrepancy. Our results are consistent with previous findings that highlight the importance of career assessment based on an individual's own experience and perception (Briscoe et al., 2021), and the possible negative outcomes of career evaluation (Spurk et al., 2019) and career-related decisions such as the increased level of uncertainty (Xu and Tracey, 2014). Personal perception plays a vital role in the case of career evaluation (Briscoe et al., 2021). Therefore, organisations should consider offering various career opportunities (e.g., vertical and horizontal) to satisfy employee aspirations and reduce the level of employee turnover (Steindórsdóttir et al., 2023).

Second, we expected a negative significant relationship between Perceived Career Crisis and Wellbeing. Our hypothesis was partially confirmed. Except for Empathy, all components show a negative, in most cases rather weak correlations with Perceived Career Crisis. However, the relationship with Autonomy is moderately negative.

We also tested the relations between Discrepancy and Wellbeing and had similar results: Empathy shows a positive correlation, and besides Autonomy, Positive emotions and Optimism have moderate negative relation with Discrepancy, while other Wellbeing components are only weak negative.

At the individual (employee) level, the importance of developing and cultivating wellbeing is essential, as well as optimising the level of Perceived Career Crisis to help lower the ambiguity caused by career decisions (Xu and Tracey, 2014). It is crucial to understand the importance of

Autonomy in the case of mental health (Ryan and Deci, 2001) and wellbeing (Deci and Ryan, 2000; Marsh et al., 2020).

Empathy is a complex construct that both has inter- and intrapersonal sides (Marsh et al., 2020; McKinnon, 2018; Riess, 2017) as well as cognitive and affective components (Main et al., 2017; Marcysiak et al., 2014; Wieck et al., 2021). This emotional component may be the basis of our observation that there is a positive relationship between Empathy and Discrepancy and Perceived Career Crisis, as higher levels of empathy imply higher levels of social sensitivity and emotional exposure, which may increase the risk of stress, which is in line with the previous results of (Riess, 2017). Furthermore, the cognitive component is responsible for the employee's evaluation of job satisfaction and work engagement which may contribute to the level of Discrepancy between career expectations and the Current and Ideal Career Stages (Marcysiak et al., 2014). However, these cognitive attributes might also add to the interpersonal side, as understanding, communication, and prosocial attitude contribute to enhancing positive relationships among co-workers. Therefore, it helps prevent increased stress and burnout (Ferri et al., 2015; Marcysiak et al., 2014; Riess, 2017; Vioulac et al., 2016), and it improves both wellbeing (Bourgault et al., 2015; Pérez-Fuentes et al., 2019; Salvarani et al., 2019) and engagement (Martos Martínez et al., 2021).

Considering that employees spend a significant (Bartels et al., 2019; Korošec et al., 2022) – and increasing – amount of time at work, which affects job satisfaction negatively (Dong et al., 2023), organisations must take care of their employees' wellbeing, as career decisions themselves are associated with increased uncertainty (Xu and Tracey, 2014), which can further increase stress and Perceived Career Crisis and decrease satisfaction (Gati et al., 2006).

However, what can practitioners do on the organisational (employer) side to increase employee satisfaction and engagement, and thus contribute to workforce retention? To answer this question, we developed regression models to examine how much of the variance of the output variable is explained by the predictors. The first model examined the components explaining the Discrepancy of career expectations. Besides Perceived Career Crisis, six Wellbeing factors – Positive emotions, Autonomy, Emotional stability, Optimism, Empathy, and Engagement – are part of the final regression model, which explains 35.2% variance of Discrepancy.

The second model examined the components explaining Perceived Career Crisis. Besides Discrepancy, three

Wellbeing factors – Autonomy, Optimism, and Empathy – are part of the final regression model which explains 30.3% variance of Perceived Career Crisis.

Since Discrepancy and Perceived Career Crisis are closely related constructs, it is not surprising that they appear in each other's models and show the strongest individual positive effect among the components. Furthermore, the models show that only certain wellbeing components – Positive emotions, Autonomy, Emotional stability, Optimism, Empathy, and Engagement – have a significant effect on the dependent variables, thus may be sufficient to improve these components to decrease Discrepancy and Perceived Career Crisis.

Based on a review of the relevant literature (Butler and Kern, 2016; Deci and Ryan, 2000; Huppert and So, 2013; Marsh et al., 2020; Ryff and Keyes, 1995; Seligman, 2011), we assumed that several components of wellbeing would play a prominent role, such as Autonomy, Engagement, and Positive emotions. In contrast to our expectations, Positive relations, Meaning, and Competence did not appear in any of the models. Optimism and Emotional stability were also included in the models, although we did not necessarily expect these components to appear.

Engagement is an interesting concept since it appears as a Wellbeing component (Huppert and Ruggeri, 2018; Marsh et al., 2020; Seligman, 2011), as engagement towards the organisation, as well as engagement towards distinct tasks, or even towards long-term goals. Each perspective gives a slightly different aspect of engagement, while all of them are valuable in a work context. Cultivating activities that require involvement and attention might lead to the experience of flow (Csíkszentmihályi, 2010) which is "a state of optimal experience arising from intense involvement in an activity that is enjoyable" (APA Dictionary, 2018b). Engagement may lead to higher job satisfaction and performance (Lisbona et al., 2018; Patrick and Mukherjee, 2018) and increased wellbeing and flourishing (Seligman, 2011). A unique form of engagement is grit; when individuals are committed to long-term goals and with passion and perseverance, they can outperform those who are considered as genuinely talented (Duckworth, 2017). Increased performance comes with the joy of success, leading to higher creativity (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005) and further positive emotions.

Although Positive emotions seem to be not an overarching component, it is essential to note that positive emotions play a vital role in wellbeing (Seligman, 2011). Therefore, they have beneficial advantages on work attitude as researchers state that happiness has an impact on work performance

(Huppert and Ruggeri, 2018; Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). Kjerulf (2016) also mentions other assets resulting from positive emotions, such as higher productivity, less stress and burnout, and a higher level of creativity and innovative ideas. Moreover, positive emotions may lead to better adaptation skills (Kjerulf, 2016) and improved coping mechanisms (Fredrickson and Joiner, 2002). There are several ways to enhance wellbeing, such as cultivating positive emotions and positive affectivity. Seligman (2011) emphasises the importance of positive emotions in his PERMA model. According to Lyubomirsky et al. (2005), happy people are physically healthier, more engaged with their social relations, and more successful. Furthermore, advanced coping strategies result from positive emotions (Fredrickson and Joiner, 2002) and prevent setbacks (Fava and Ruini, 2003).

Our results suggest that Autonomy, Optimism, and Empathy Wellbeing components emerge as prominent factors in the case of Discrepancy and Perceived Career Crisis and may be considered overarching in this interpretation. As Autonomy is a component of several Wellbeing models (Deci and Ryan, 2000; Huppert and So, 2013; Kun et al., 2017; Ryff and Keyes, 1995), and Optimism also belongs to Luthans and Broad (2022) Psychological Capital model, our findings are parallel with the suggestion of Donaldson et al. (2021), who describe interventions that aim to develop employee wellbeing and psychological capital as one of the most successful positive organisational psychology interventions. Job autonomy is a complex idea that involves three distinct aspects (Dong et al., 2023):

1. autonomy in time management and scheduling work tasks;
2. decision-making about tasks;
3. who the individual wants to deal with tasks and what kind of work methods one will apply (Kubicek et al., 2015; Morgeson and Humphrey, 2006).

These are similar to the dimensions of job crafting (Wrzesniewski and Dutton, 2001) that is considered as a successful intervention (Donaldson et al., 2021) and support the elimination of negative outcomes of career-related decisions (Briscoe et al., 2021; Xu and Tracey, 2014). Thus, for healthy functioning and preventing mental issues or burnout, an optimal level of Autonomy is essential (Marsh et al., 2020; Sandmeier et al., 2022).

Optimism functions not only as a Wellbeing component (Huppert and Ruggeri, 2018) but also as a Psychological Capital (PsyCap) element (Luthans and Broad, 2022). Optimism involves conscious monitoring and evaluation

of the situation and circumstances, which in this way can be related to career expectations ("Where I am and where I should be.") but cultivating Optimism may support the mitigation of Discrepancy by acting as an internal resource and protective factor to increase one's confidence in oneself and in achieving one's goals. This aspiration may contribute to the development of resilience, which is part of PsyCap and is also represented in certain Wellbeing models (Huppert and So, 2013; Marsh et al., 2020), and which may contribute to the reduction of Discrepancy and Crisis. Moreover, Optimism and Social Connectedness – are also a prominent Wellbeing factor (Butler and Kern, 2016; Deci and Ryan, 2000; Marsh et al., 2020; Ryff and Keyes, 1995; Seligman, 2011) – enhance resilience and help cope with stress (Yıldırım et al., 2021).

Besides the aspects we explained above, the development of the cognitive component of empathy might improve job satisfaction and engagement and contribute to the development of better job relationships (Ferri et al., 2015; Marcysiak et al., 2014; Riess, 2017; Vioulac et al., 2016), which are also significant in terms of developing wellbeing (Butler and Kern, 2016; Deci and Ryan, 2000; Huppert and So, 2013; Kun et al., 2017; Marsh et al., 2020; Ryff and Keyes, 1995; Seligman, 2011) and at the same time help to satisfy a basic human need, the need of relatedness (Deci and Ryan, 2000). To reduce the negative effects of the outcomes of the emotional component (increased stress), improving impulse and emotion control may be helpful (Mogyorósy-Révész, 2021), such as self-compassion (Bluth and Neff, 2018), which is practicing Empathy and Acceptance towards oneself, thus contributing to the acceptance of the Current Career Stage, hence reducing Discrepancy and perceived stress (Briscoe et al., 2021).

Learned optimism, a narrative style described by Seligman (2006), can also be used to develop Empathy and Self-compassion and help reduce feelings of self-blame and helplessness, which might be amplified by career expectations (Discrepancy), leading to uncertainty and increased crisis (Xu and Tracey, 2014).

#### 4.1 Research contributions and future directions

This study is a next step towards enhancing our understanding of characteristics of Perceived Career Crisis, Discrepancy of career expectations, and Wellbeing.

Our results suggest a meaningful link between Discrepancy of career expectations, Perceived Career Crisis, and components of Wellbeing such as Autonomy – which, according to Deci and Ryan (2000) SDT is one



of the basic human needs that is also the root of job crafting (Donaldson et al., 2021). Job crafting is also connected with another Wellbeing component: Meaning. Since meaningful jobs are the central concept of job crafting (Wrzesniewski and Dutton, 2001), this kind of intervention in the future could improve employee wellbeing and eliminate the negative side of career-related thoughts at the same time (Briscoe et al., 2021). Based on the above, our results support Donaldson et al. (2021) findings on why enhancing employee wellbeing is a crucial task in the life of organisations to support employees.

One potential future direction of our approach would be longitudinal research. We are currently investigating a positive psychology interventions-based career-wellbeing programme that aims to develop wellbeing, to lower the negative consequences of challenging situations at work, and to increase the effective use of coping strategies – in a personalised, employee and strength-centred way. We hope that further work will prove our approach.

Optimism, as part of the Psychological Capital model (Luthans and Broad, 2022), interventions that support improving optimistic thinking might be helpful in developing strategies that support keeping stress at a lower level.

A further important implication is to raise the awareness of organisations and leaders that employee wellbeing should be at the top of their list when considering business decisions. Although there is room for further research, these suggestions might be helpful for practitioners and organisations when planning career development, wellbeing programmes, or interventions.

Since coping with ambiguity helps to improve career decisions (Xu and Tracey, 2014), it would also be interesting to investigate how coping strategies relate to Discrepancy, Perceived Career Crisis, and Wellbeing components and how Wellbeing components and coping strategies explain the variance of Discrepancy and Perceived Career Crisis (Mayordomo-Rodríguez et al., 2015; Meng and D'Arcy, 2016). These findings could serve as the basis of tailored interventions that help lower career-related stress and Perceived Career Crisis, while improving resilience and wellbeing (Huppert and Ruggeri, 2018).

These findings suggest that if an organisation supports its employees in enhancing their Wellbeing, they will possibly be more balanced with their Current Career Stage and might experience a lower level of crisis. Results also indicate that defining and accepting the actual career stage is probably more important than how far workers are from their expectations from the aspect of Perceived Career Crisis; however, this idea needs further investigation.

## 4.2 Limitations

We are aware that our research has some limitations. Both the cross-sectional nature of our data and the lack of representativeness of the sample could be considered as limiting factors.

Although, Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of the 15-item version of WB Pro (Marsh et al., 2020) is very good, the instrument contains only one item per factor, therefore, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was not carried out. To increase the validity of the research, we consider to use the original version of the instrument and conduct CFA.

In the case of the regression models we gained knowledge about how much of the variance of the output variable is explained by the predictors; however we still need to understand how the variables relate to each other. Unfortunately, the current sample does not follow the normal distribution in the case of the examined variables, therefore, a SEM was not carried out to analyse the quality of the relationships between the variables included in our final regression models.

Although we used Harman's one-factor test for common method bias and our data did not show significant biases in responses, we would use well-defined control variables in the future to reduce the possibility of common method bias and enhance the homogeneity of our sample in distinct aspects.

## 4.3 Conclusion

The present study investigated the relationship between Perceived Career Crisis, the Discrepancy of Career Expectations, and Psychological Wellbeing among Hungarian employees.

The connections presented in this paper may provide guidance for organisations and professionals who support them on why and how to develop employee wellbeing in an organisational context.

Applying positive psychological interventions targeting the distinct wellbeing components may reduce the level of Discrepancy and Perceived Career Crisis, thus contributing to a decline in the level of work stress and ambiguity while increasing job satisfaction and engagement. Based on our findings we recommend to put Autonomy, Optimism, and Empathy in the focus, while adding further interventions concerning Positive emotions, Emotional stability, and Engagement. Considering the interdependence of Wellbeing components (Rath and Harter, 2010; Seligman, 2011), we suggest implementing positive psychology interventions on the above-presented components in parallel, as Lyubomirsky (2008) describes the positive effect of the shotgun method.

Changes at the individual level determine important indicators for organisations, such as engagement, job satisfaction, and productivity (Huppert and Ruggeri, 2018). Organisations should support their employees with evidence-based interventions to achieve real, sustainable, positive changes in wellbeing. Work not only consumes

a significant amount of time (Bartels et al., 2019; Korošec et al., 2022), but also determines general wellbeing (Rath and Harter, 2010; Seligman, 2011). Enhancing wellbeing is a relatively simple and cost-conscious step to take to increase employee engagement and thus increase employee retention – an issue that is relevant to all organisations.

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