

A Comparative Analysis of Career Development Across Generations

Individual Coursework Career Management in a Digital Age

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Introduction

Career development has shifted significantly across generations, moving from structurally determined pathways shaped by family networks and local industries toward individually managed careers emphasising mobility, education and personal choice. This assignment examines this shift by comparing two careers across generations and evaluating how effectively established career management theories explain career development in different cultural and economic contexts.

The late twentieth century in India was marked by an environment in which family businesses and long-term working relationships were central to working life. Applying Western-derived career development theories ([Super and Jordaan, 1973](#); [Schein, 1990](#)) to this context serves to illustrate both the applicability and limitations of these models. The careers are compared and analysed in terms of key theoretical factors such as career anchors, psychological contracts, and structural and individual factors.

Career Background of the Interviewee

Mr. S.K.S was born in 1954 in Kolkata, India, when it was a norm to take up jobs at a very young age through family and social networks. The region was primarily dependent on manufacturing and exporting industries such as jute cultivation (Allen, 2021). It was a region with a specific type of labour market in which career paths were primarily defined according to the availability of local industries and social networks. As Mr. S.K.S reflected during the interview, “whether you call it networks or relationships, the reputation our family had in the business community brought us benefits” (translated from Hindi). This statement again indicates how deeply career paths in that region were embedded in family and social networks.

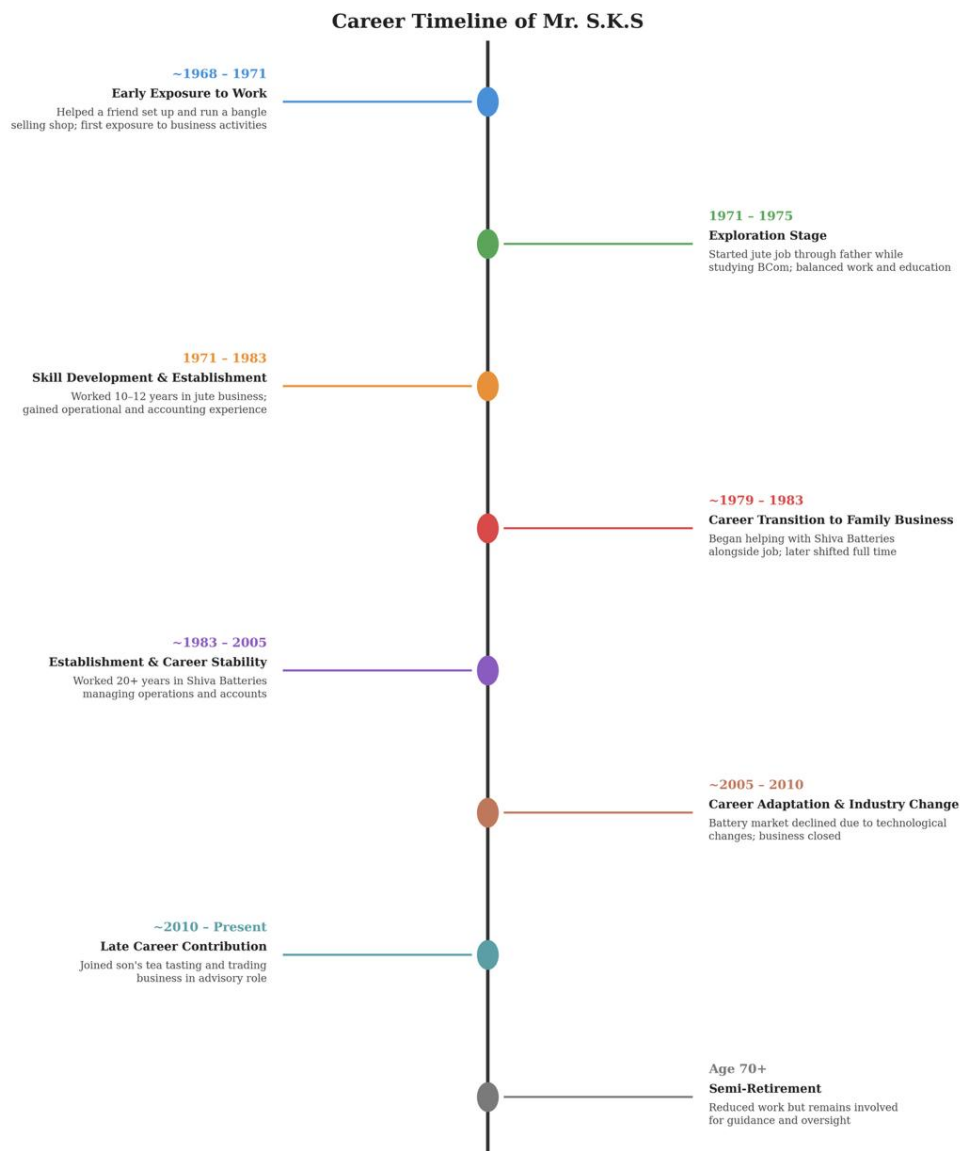


Figure 1: Career timeline of the interviewee.

Using Figure 1 as a reference, the following section outlines the key stages and background of Mr. S.K.S's career development.

Before Mr. S.K.S joined the workforce, around 1970, he assisted a friend in setting up a bangle shop. While [Krumboltz \(2009\)](#) Planned Happenstance Theory frames such unplanned experiences as individual learning opportunities, in Mr. S.K.S's context, this reflected the communal economic structures of 1970s Kolkata, where informal work among friends and family was a common entry into economic life.

Around 1971, at seventeen, he began his first job in the jute industry while pursuing a Bachelor of Commerce degree. The opportunity arose through his father, who worked in the same organisation. Although the model of [Super and Jordaan \(1973\)](#) would suggest that this is the exploration stage, the concept of exploration in terms of career interests is not particularly relevant in this instance. The entry into the jute industry was influenced by family and labour market conditions rather than any personal exploration of interests and careers.

Between 1971 and 1983, he worked in the jute industry for over a decade. Although Social Cognitive Career Theory emphasises individual self-efficacy beliefs as a driver of career development, Mr. S.K.S's career progression during this period was shaped mainly by structural factors such as limited job mobility, family industry connections and few alternative career pathways ([Lent et al., 1994](#)).

Around 1979, while still employed in the jute industry, he began contributing to his brothers' newly established family business, Shiva Batteries. As he described, "during the day I would go to the export office, and early morning and in the evening I would work at the battery business" (translated from Hindi), gradually increasing his involvement until he transitioned fully into the family enterprise between 1979 and 1983. This overlap reflects the flexible nature of careers in family businesses, where people move between roles rather than follow the linear progression proposed by [Super and Jordaan \(1973\)](#).

From around 1983 to 2005 he worked full time in the family battery business, managing accounts, factory operations and workflow. While this stability resembles [Super and Jordaan \(1973\)](#)'s establishment stage, it was driven less by deliberate career planning and more by family obligation, suggesting that establishment in family business contexts may follow a different logic than the individual-centred model Super envisaged.

Around 2005 the traditional battery trade began to decline due to technological changes, affecting the viability of the family business. During this period his son established a tea tasting and trading venture, and as it gained momentum he decided to close the battery business and support the new venture. On the surface, it would appear that the events of the case represent the use of the Boundaryless Career Concept, which suggests that the response to economic changes is to shift careers and industries ([Arthur and Rousseau, 1996](#)). However, in this case, the change was not in response to economic changes but rather in response to the family and business relationships. The change is better understood through Career Ecosystem Theory, which highlights how career development is shaped by interconnected social and family relationships ([Baruch et al., 2015](#)), with the family itself functioning as the central career ecosystem.

He has been involved, in an advisory capacity, in his son's tea trading business since around 2010. While this resembles [Super and Jordaan \(1973\)](#)'s maintenance stage, the role blends ongoing involvement with a gradual reduction of responsibility, making the boundary between maintenance and disengagement difficult to define clearly.

He is now in his early seventies. He has reached the stage of semi-retirement. Although he is no longer involved in daily operations, he occasionally visits to provide advice and stay connected with the business. As he explained during the interview, people from his generation "prefer to stay active rather than sit at home" (translated from Hindi). This reluctance to fully withdraw from work suggests that the disengagement stage described by [Super and Jordaan \(1973\)](#) may not always represent a clear or voluntary transition in practice.

When reflecting on his career, Mr. S.K.S emphasised the importance of consistent hard work, honesty and maintaining strong relationships with people. As he explained during the interview, "If you work honestly and stay committed, people will trust you and business will continue" (translated from Hindi). He also highlighted the importance of balancing education with practical experience, noting that education provides knowledge while real work teaches individuals how to apply that knowledge in practice.

Career Aspirations

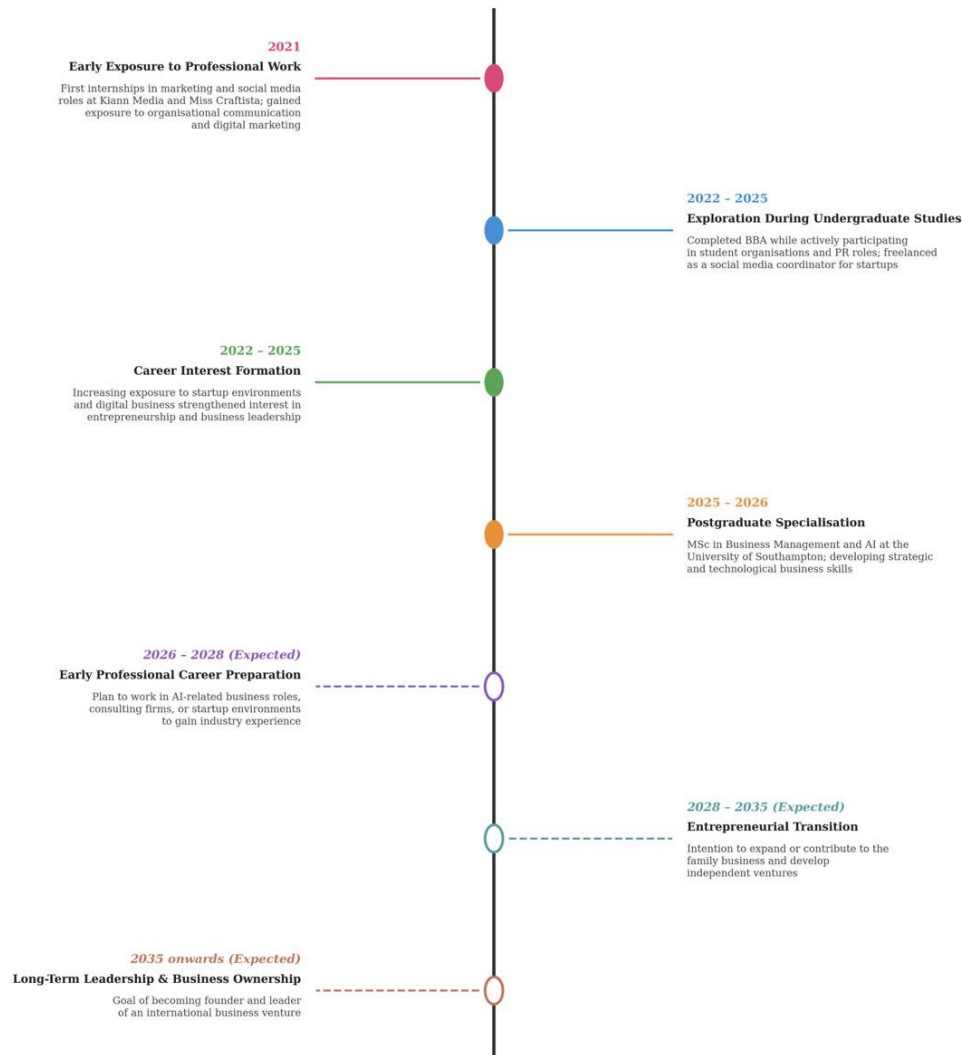


Figure 2: Career aspiration timeline of the author.

Using Figure 2 as a reference, the following section outlines the anticipated stages and long term direction of the my career aspirations.

My initial career aspiration was influenced by my internship experiences in marketing and digital content creation in 2021. According to Social Cognitive Career Theory, these early experiences helped form my initial career self-efficacy and interests (Lent et al., 1994). However, these opportunities were also influenced by internships available within my social and educational networks, illustrating how early career experiences are shaped by both motivation and structural context.

As I studied for my Bachelor of Business Administration from 2022 to 2025, I developed interests in communication, marketing, and organizational activities through academic and extracurricular

experiences. This period aligns with Super's exploration stage. In terms of [Holland's \(1997\)](#) RIASEC framework, the fact that I prefer to work in a role that requires persuasion, leading, and interacting with others indicates an enterprising-social personality trait, which has remained consistent in the types of career opportunities that I pursue.

During my time at the University of Southampton completing my Master's course, I started to focus my studies and thoughts more towards the business and technology interface. Serving briefly as a Course Representative also developed my communication skills in a university environment. This stage is aligned with Human Capital Theory, which indicates that investment in higher education can lead to a greater knowledge base and skills that can lead to a higher potential return in a career ([Becker, 1993](#)). However, in a technology-driven industry that is rapidly changing, qualifications can become obsolete very rapidly ([Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden, 2006](#)), therefore continuous learning and adaptability remain important.

My personal aspirations for a career are also closely linked to my interest in industries related to technology-based industries. Additionally, I am motivated by a need for autonomy in terms of decision-making. This orientation reflects [Schein's \(1990\)](#) Entrepreneurial Creativity career anchor, which emphasises independence and the desire to create and develop new ventures. However, I also believe that this is a potential aspect of my personality that is linked to having been raised in a business-oriented family environment. This is an interesting issue to explore further, as it challenges Schein's argument that career anchors are actually discovered. There is a potential argument to suggest that they are also linked to family background.

Looking ahead, my anticipated psychological contract with future employers is likely to be a transactional contract, not a relational one ([Rousseau, 2001](#)), and will be based on expectations of skill and career progression, not loyalty. This is a direct contrast to the relational contract that supported Mr. S.K.S's career, and it is also a contrast that is seen in terms of a generational shift that is discussed further in the comparative analysis that follows. In terms of [Super and Jordaan \(1973\)](#)'s career stages, I am currently transitioning from exploration toward establishment.

Comparative Analysis of the Two Careers

Career Anchors and Psychological Contract

One important difference between the two careers can be understood through [Schein's \(1990\)](#) concept of career anchors. Mr. S.K.S's career appears to reflect a strong Security and Stability anchor. His career remained closely tied to family enterprises, long-term relationships and the local business environment rather than movement across different organisations. In contrast, my own aspirations reflect Schein's Entrepreneurial Creativity anchor, characterised by a desire to create and manage independent ventures.

In terms of Holland's (1997) RIASEC framework, Mr. S.K.S's career reflects a conventional-enterprising orientation, characterised by structured, business-focused roles within established family enterprises, whereas my own orientation leans more strongly toward the enterprising-social types associated with leadership, persuasion and interpersonal engagement.

These differences also reflect contrasting psychological contracts with organisations. Mr. S.K.S's career followed what [Rousseau \(2001\)](#) describes as a relational psychological contract, based on long-term commitment, loyalty and mutual obligation. When asked whether workers in his era changed jobs frequently, Mr. S.K.S noted that "most people stayed in the same job for many years" (translated from Hindi), reflecting how deeply the relational contract was embedded in the labour market culture of that period. By contrast, my anticipated career path reflects a more contemporary psychological contract in which individuals expect opportunities for learning and development but do not necessarily intend to remain with a single organisation for their entire career. [Rousseau \(2001\)](#) describes this as a shift in the employer's obligation, where Mr. S.K.S expected continuity and mutual loyalty in return for commitment, today's workers expect investment in their development and employability, accepting that long-term job security is no longer part of the deal.

The stability of Mr. S.K.S's psychological contract was eventually disrupted by external forces. The decline of the traditional battery business due to technological change represents what [Akkermans et al. \(2018\)](#) describe as a career shock, forcing an involuntary career adaptation. Mr. S.K.S himself recognised this broader shift, observing that "people used to do the work, but now machines have come, and in five years computers will do everything" (translated from Hindi).

This recognition of technological obsolescence serves to further illustrate the role of extrinsic economic factors, rather than personal career decisions, in effecting the significant change in his career path. His reaction, in support of the new generation's tea trading enterprise, serves to further illustrate the collective, rather than individual, nature of career shocks in the family business.

Agency and Structural Influences in Career Development

Another important difference concerns the interplay of individual agency and structural forces. Mr. S.K.S's entry into the workforce was heavily influenced by structural factors such as family connections and local industry conditions in Kolkata.

In contrast, my own career path seems to demonstrate a higher level of individual agency, particularly through international education and exploration of different professional avenues. However, it must be noted that such agency is also enabled through structural advantages, such as a family background that is business-oriented and a sense of access to international education. The distinction between structurally shaped and self-directed careers becomes less clear, as models such as the Protean Career concept ([Hall, 2004](#)) emphasise individual self-direction without fully accounting for the enabling role of social and economic privilege.

A further difference appears in the way skills are developed. Mr. S.K.S gained experience largely within a single organisational environment, gradually progressing from operational work to managerial responsibilities. In contrast, contemporary workers often develop employability through varied roles across organisations. The Employability Framework highlights how individuals strengthen their career prospects by building transferable skills and adaptability through diverse experiences ([Fugate and Ashforth, 2003](#)), while the Self-Perceived Employability Model suggests that individuals actively accumulate such experiences to increase their perceived opportunities within competitive labour markets ([Rothwell and Arnold, 2007](#)).

This difference in skill development is reinforced by changing educational requirements. Mr. S.K.S built a successful career with a Bachelor of Commerce degree, which was sufficient in his business environment. In contrast, contemporary labour markets increasingly demand advanced education and specialised knowledge, reflecting what [Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden \(2006\)](#) describe as the need for continuous competence development to maintain employability.

[Derr et al. \(1986\)](#)'s stage model also applies differently across the two careers. Mr. S.K.S

progressed from an apprentice role in the jute industry to a mentor and sponsor role advising his son's business, though this progression occurred entirely within the family context. My own anticipated path is likely to follow a similar progression from apprentice to independent contributor, but across multiple organisations rather than within a single family enterprise.

Limitations and Adaptability of Career Theories

One of the recurring themes throughout the analysis is that theories of careers developed in Western organisational cultures must be carefully adapted when applied to other cultures. [Super and Jordaan \(1973\)](#)'s well-defined stages of a career assume that individuals progress through exploration, establishment, and maintenance as separate phases. However, Mr. S.K.S's career demonstrates that in family business contexts these stages frequently overlap, with exploration shaped by available family connections rather than individual choice, and establishment driven by obligation rather than deliberate career planning.

Likewise, [Schein's \(1990\)](#) model of career anchors assumes that they are individually discovered through professional experience. However, based on the comparison undertaken in this study, it seems possible that they are also inherited or socially constructed based on family or cultural exposures, as is also evident in my own entrepreneurial orientation. This is not to dismiss these theoretical frameworks but to indicate that they are likely to have greatest explanatory value when used in conjunction with more contextual models such as Career Ecosystem Theory ([Baruch et al., 2015](#)).

Conclusion

This assignment has explored the differences in career development across generations through a comparison between Mr. S.K.S's career and my own anticipated career path.

The analysis also highlights the limitations of applying theories of careers in various cultural contexts. Even though theories like Super's Career Stages, Schein's Career Anchors, and Rousseau's Psychological Contract offer good analytical tools, they were originally developed on the basis of Western labour markets, which are based on a strong assumption of individualistic agency. The career of Mr. S.K.S also indicates that when family networks, industries, and economy dominate a particular context, these theories need to be adapted, not blindly applied. This also indicates a need to explore how theories of careers address non-Western experiences of careers.

At the same time, the impact of globalisation and internationalisation of education on careers in developing economies, as seen in my own experience, also indicates a potential to apply Western theories of careers, though they would still not explain the experiences of previous generations.

Also, reflecting on my grandfather's career has helped shape my attitude to my own aspirations. His advice to the younger generation reinforces this perspective: "make full use of this time, focus on education from every angle, but also gain practical experience" (translated from Hindi). Understanding these differences has encouraged me to think more critically about how personal ambition, family influence and broader economic conditions interact in shaping career development.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Details

Interviewee: Mr. S.K.S (grandfather of the author)

Date: 14 March 2026

Location: Conducted via video call

Duration: Approximately 25 minutes

Language: Hindi (translated by the author)

Recording: Audio recorded with the consent of the interviewee

The interview was conducted as part of the primary data collection for this study. The purpose of the interview was to explore the career experiences of an individual who began working during the late twentieth century and to understand how career development, opportunities, and motivations differed from those of the current generation. The interview was semi-structured, allowing the author to follow prepared questions while also asking follow-up questions where relevant.

Appendix B: Interview Schedule

The following questions guided the interview with the participant:

1. When and why did you start working?
2. What was your first role and how did you obtain that opportunity?
3. What skills were most important for your work during the early stages of your career?
4. What was the working environment like during those years?
5. How did your education influence your career opportunities?
6. Why did you decide to leave the jute industry and join the family battery business?
7. How did the battery business begin and what were the main challenges in building it?
8. How important were relationships with suppliers, customers, and partners in your work?
9. What does a successful career mean to you?
10. What differences do you observe between your generation and the younger generation in terms of careers and work expectations?
11. What advice would you give to young people starting their careers today?