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LIGHTS - Human/Well being

Managing work in the age of chronic transition

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Laetitia MIMOUN
ESCP Business School

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Laetitia Mimoun*

ESCP Business School

Abstract

In a contemporary era of increased uncertainty, marked by increasingly polarized societies, fast-changing technologies, a threatening climate crisis, and economic volatility, employees are rethinking what work means and many are embracing careers defined by ongoing transition rather than stability. Drawing on research on chronic liminality (Mimoun & Bardhi, 2022), this impact paper shows how flexibility, self-transformation, and even precarity have become value-driven career choices, reshaping recruitment, retention, and leadership expectations. This IP provides recommendations for employers to better understand and design working environments for chronic transition, rather than resisting it. This can equip them to navigate generational change and build resilient, values-aligned organizations.

Keywords: meaning of work, precarity, flexible work, chronic uncertainty, humanistic leadership

*Associate Professor, ESCP Business School

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Employers cannot escape the fact that our contemporary era is defined by instability (Weir, 2026). Wars and geopolitical tensions reshape global supply chains overnight. The climate crisis generates both physical risk and moral urgency. Technological disruption alters industries faster than organizations can redesign roles. Economic uncertainty and inflation erode long-held assumptions about career security. In this environment, stability is no longer taken for granted (Alfes et al. 2022; Atanasova et al., 2022). Rather, it is seen as unattainable and possibly undesirable (Mimoun & Bardhi, 2022).

When the external world becomes unpredictable, people rely more heavily on values to guide their decisions (Mimoun, Lapostolle & Schmitt 2025). Employees and potential recruits increasingly require answers to questions such as: What kind of life do I want to build? What trade-offs am I willing to make? What does success mean to me in uncertain times? For employers, this shift matters deeply (Stolzoff, 2026). We are not merely witnessing generational preference changes or shifting labor market conditions. We are observing a broader transformation in how individuals understand work, identity, and security.

We draw here on research by Mimoun and Bardhi (2022) that introduces the concept of chronic liminality, a recurrently activated state of transition experienced when individuals engage in frequent, nonlinear changes across work and life. In this qualitative study of flexible workers in global cities, they show that many professionals are not temporarily “in transition.” Rather, transition itself has become a way of life.

Understanding this phenomenon is essential for employers navigating diversity, generational change, and shifting expectations of work. If we misread flexibility as impatience or instability as lack of commitment, we will fail to attract and retain talent (Mimoun & Bardhi 2022). If we romanticize flexibility without recognizing its costs, we risk creating environments that amplify burnout and inequality (Sharifonnasabi et al., 2024). To manage effectively today, leaders must understand how flexibility reshapes the meaning of work and how valuing flexibility structures career decisions and trajectories.

Flexibility and the changing meaning of work

Work as ongoing transitions & self-transformation

While chronic liminality was originally developed to explain how consumers navigate ongoing uncertainty through flexible identities and repeated transitions (Mimoun & Bardhi 2022), many of its dynamics increasingly characterize contemporary work and careers. Organizational research on new ways of working (e.g., gig working, agile working, algorithmic working) similarly shows that employees are experiencing work as a continuous process of adaptation marked by shifting roles, flexible arrangements, project-based work, and evolving professional identities rather than stable linear careers (Alfes et al., 2022). Working environments may therefore be increasingly characterized by a broader orientation toward uncertainty: repeated transitions become normalized and self-transformation becomes an expected form of employability. In organizational settings, this translates into employees seeking work as a platform for ongoing growth, identity experimentation, and mobility, while organizations increasingly rely on agile, flexible, and less stable forms of employment. Chronic liminality thus provides a useful lens for understanding why many workers no longer view stability as the primary marker of career

success, but instead value adaptability, continuous learning, and alignment with personal values.

Specifically, Mimoun and Bardhi (2022) describe chronic liminality to qualify liminality under conditions of perpetual change. The individuals they studied frequently changed jobs, projects, housing arrangements, and even social environments. These transitions were not one-time rites of passage; they were recurring cycles. In traditional career trajectories, liminality, the in-between phase between two professional phases, was temporary. A person moved from student to employee, from junior to senior, from outsider to insider. In contrast, chronic liminality reflects a condition in which the “in-between” is continuously reopened.

For employers, this means that many professionals do not view their careers as a linear progression toward stability. Instead, they see them as modular sequences of experiences designed to develop skills, networks, and identities. Roles are chapters, rather than destinations. This orientation is not accidental but reflects broader structural conditions. As the world is increasingly perceived as being constantly in the throes of geopolitical and technological crises, individuals internalize flexibility as a necessary competence. The ideology of flexibility (Mimoun & Bardhi, 2022), widely promoted in media and organizational discourses, frames constant reinvention and skill acquisition as markers of success. In this context, professional stability may feel less like security and more like stagnation.

The research shows that flexible professionals engage in continuous skill development, self-reflection, and identity experimentation. Work becomes not merely a source of income but a platform for becoming. For many younger and mid-career professionals, work is evaluated through the lens of growth (Reid et al., 2023): Will this role expand my capabilities? Will it stretch me? Will it enable me to reinvent myself?

This reframing changes employers' assumptions. Promotions and salary increases remain important, but they are insufficient. Employees may leave well-compensated roles if they perceive developmental stagnation. They may accept short-term contracts if they see them as transformative. In uncertain times, self-development becomes a shield against risk and skills are a portable security.

Reframing precarity as agency

One of the most striking findings in Mimoun and Bardhi's work (2022) is that some individuals reinterpret precarity as a source of perceived freedom and autonomy. Rather than viewing unstable work arrangements as purely negative, they may associate flexibility with independence from rigid organizational structures, greater control over time, and opportunities for self-exploration. In organizational contexts, this can mean employees will prefer project-based work, hybrid arrangements, or cross-functional mobility over traditional long-term career paths (Atanasova et al., 2022). For some professionals, especially those with transferable skills and economic resources, flexibility becomes a way to preserve agency in uncertain environments.

However, it is important not to romanticize precarity or assume that instability is universally desired. Organizational research on new ways of working shows that flexible and non-standard work arrangements are also associated with job insecurity, reduced protections, and career uncertainty. Many workers experience ongoing transition and perpetual change not as an aspirational lifestyle but as a structural necessity shaped by

economic volatility, technological disruption, and weakened employment security. What appears as “choice” may therefore also reflect adaptation to constrained conditions.

Distinguishing between employee preference and structural pressure is therefore critical for employers. Some employees actively seek mobility and reinvention, while others may still prioritize predictability and stability. These differences are shaped not only by generation, but also by socioeconomic background, family obligations, career stage, and tolerance for risk. The managerial challenge is not simply to promote flexibility, but to design forms of flexibility that preserve security, dignity, and inclusion across diverse employee needs.

What this means for employers

This shift can encourage employers to rethink their employer value proposition. Indeed, traditional employer value propositions emphasize stability, long-term growth, and security. While these remain important for many candidates, they do not capture the aspirations of those oriented toward chronic transition. Employers must ask: Are we presenting ourselves as a stable harbor when some candidates are seeking a platform for movement? Existing research suggests that many professionals value skill accumulation, autonomy, and identity expansion (Mimoun & Bardhi, 2022) as well as the opportunity to live across international networks, keeping relocating options always available (Sharifonnasabi et al., 2024). Recruitment messaging should therefore emphasize opportunities for internal mobility, cross-functional projects, and continuous learning. Instead of “Join us for life,” the message may become “Grow through us.”

In addition, employers should acknowledge that nonlinear careers are not necessarily a weakness. Chronic liminality often produces nonlinear CVs characterized by frequent role changes, diverse projects, and unconventional paths. Organizations that penalize such trajectories risk excluding adaptable, resilient candidates. The study identifies skills developed through chronic transition: resilient optimism, adaptability, and self-preservation (Mimoun & Bardhi, 2022). These translate into change readiness, emotional resilience, and self-directed learning, precisely the capacities required in volatile environments. Employers should shift from screening for tenure to assessing adaptive competence. In an unstable world, the ability to navigate uncertainty may be more valuable than uninterrupted continuity.

At the same time, organizations must not romanticize precarity. Flexibility can be chosen or imposed: some workers embrace instability; others experience it as constraint. Recruitment and HR strategies must recognize that structural inequalities, when they offer flexibility without support, can also exacerbate insecurity (Sharifonnasabi et al., 2024). True inclusivity requires differentiated options, pathways for those seeking mobility and for those seeking stability.

Practical advice in an age of chronic transition

1. *Manage for value diversity:* Avoid reducing differences to generational stereotypes. Instead, map value orientations within your workforce: security-seeking, flexibility-seeking, purpose-driven, achievement-focused. Design career architectures that allow movement between these orientations. Diversity is not only demographic; it is motivational.
2. *Create structured flexibility:* The research shows that individuals assert control over time and resources to manage ongoing transitions. Organizations can mirror this by

offering structured flexibility: time-bound rotations, skill sprints, internal gig platforms, and sabbatical programs. Flexibility should be intentional, not chaotic. Provide mobility within a framework.

3. *Balance reinvention with consolidation:* Continuous self-transformation can be emotionally costly. HR leaders should not glorify constant reinvention. Build periods of consolidation where employees can deepen expertise and recover from change fatigue. Psychological safety is as important as opportunity.
4. *Protect security while enabling autonomy:* Flexibility without safety breeds burnout. Ensure that hybrid models maintain access to benefits, transparent compensation, and predictable progression criteria. Autonomy should not come at the expense of dignity.
5. *Anchor work in shared values:* In times of war, climate crisis, and social fragmentation, employees seek ethical clarity. When institutions feel unstable, values become anchors. Articulate and enact organizational values consistently. Align business strategies with broader societal concerns. Demonstrate integrity in decision-making. Values provide coherence in chronic transition.

Conclusion: managing for liminality

We are living in an age of chronic transition in which flexibility is not merely a lifestyle trend but an adaptation to liquid modernity and structural precarity. Employers cannot eliminate liminality. Nor should they attempt to return to an era of artificial permanence. Instead, they must design organizations that make transition livable, meaningful, and inclusive. This requires recognizing value diversity, offering structured flexibility, protecting security, and anchoring work in shared purpose. It requires reading nonlinear careers as strength and understanding that identity and work are increasingly intertwined. In uncertain times, people do not simply seek jobs. They seek alignment between their values and their lived experience of work. Organizations that understand this will not only attract talent, they will build resilient communities capable of navigating whatever uncertainty comes next.

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