

New Skill Requirements and Young Workers in the Professional World with the Covid-19 Global Pandemic

Asst. Prof. Çiğdem Sema SIRMA

Başkent University

csemapolat@gmail.com

ORCID: 0000-0002-0839-2390

Abstract

The Coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2), which emerged on December 31, 2019 in the People's Republic of China, has been declared as a global epidemic by the World Health Organization. Countries primarily aimed to reduce the spread of the epidemic so that health services would not be disrupted and loss of life would be prevented. In addition to the health measures taken, countries have also taken actions to maintain the balance of income distribution and ensure the continuation of judicial, educational and working life. It can be said that the physical distance and closure, which are at the beginning of the measures taken, affect the professional world differently on a sectoral basis and change the expectations of employees and employers. In this process, concepts such as remote work, online work, working from home, flexible working, which are often used interchangeably, have quickly entered our lives. The use of various applications that already exist has also become widespread with Covid-19. Individuals in professional life faced the risks of losing their jobs, changing their personal rights and income insecurity. Employees needed to follow the transformation of professions and jobs and new skill requirements have emerged according to this transformation. The epidemic affects individuals in different ways according to age and chronic disease status. This effect varies according to working conditions along with the risk of catching an epidemic. On the other hand, although young people differ from the rest of the population in terms of their ability to adapt to the changing dynamics of business life and technology, they have encountered various disadvantages such as the limitation of job opportunities, lack of technological tools and equipment, working conditions, and not being able to benefit from national and international internship opportunities, especially in the Covid-19 process. From a sociological point of view, this paper discusses how the changes in the social structure accelerated by Covid-19 affect professional life especially for young employees.

Keywords: *Youth, Employment, Talent, Covid-19 global pandemic (SARS-CoV-2), Unemployment, Digitalization*

Introduction

In professional life, not only adult men and women but also the population including the elderly, young people and children are considered as manpower (Dickinson et al., 2020, p.20). Demographic characteristics of individuals in professional life, such as age and gender, may differ according to the development level of countries along with the stages that societies go through. With the onset of the Industrial Revolution, children and young people worked as cheap labor in factories. The youth period, which is included in the chronological life periods, encompasses a process that consists of a series of procedures to prepare the young person for the adult roles. Youth period is considered as a transition period, which is mostly handled with the transition from education life to business life, from the family home of origin to their own home (ILO, 2021).

Together with industrialization and technological progress, the age range covered by youth is increasing (Gottlieb and Lienhard Heinsohn, 1973, p. 250). For statistical purposes, "young" is defined by the United Nations as individuals between the ages of 15- 24. In this study considers the youth age range as 18-24 and from a sociological point of view, it discusses how the changes in the social structure accelerated by Covid-19 affect professional life especially for young employees. Today, 1.2 billion young people between the ages of 15 and 24 live worldwide. This rate constitutes 16% of the world's population. According to the results of the Address Based Population Registration System in our country, as of the end of 2021, the total population of Turkey is 84 million 680 thousand 273 people, while the young population in the 15-24 age group is 12 million 971 thousand 289. The young population in our country constitutes 15.3% of the total population (TUIK, 2022).

Literature

The period of youth, which is considered as a transition from childhood to adulthood, has various difficulties. Young people who want to be economically independent are willing to take part in professional life. International Labor Organization (2018) specifies the ways for young people to enter professional life as follows: in leisure time (before / after school hours, on weekends or holidays), to gain experience (apprenticeship, internship), by completing or leaving compulsory education, in family businesses (paid or unpaid) and alongside young employers and young freelancers (ILO, 2018, p.10). Young people may encounter various obstacles both in starting and continuing their professional life. First of all, young people may find it difficult to find a job that generates a high income, has a reasonable entitlement to leave, and is suitable for the education the young person has received. Another important challenge faced by young workers in professional life is that they do not have the bargaining power of more experienced workers (ILO, 2018, p.11). On the other hand, high rates of job changes and unemployment have long been considered a feature of youth labour markets (Breen, 1992, p.113).

Young people need to have various equipment in order to overcome the obstacles and take part in professional life more easily. Education is among the priority equipment here. The level of education of a young worker plays an important role in his transition to stable and decent work. Higher levels of education and training and work experience during education facilitate the transition to the labor market (ILO, 2020a, p.14). In addition, young people with

high levels of education were generally found to be less involved in informal employment (ILO, 2017a cited in ILO, 2018). Young workers with lower levels of education, by contrast, tend to stay in the same job despite difficult working conditions (EU-OSHA et al., 2017 cited in ILO, 2018, p.13). In addition, a \$1 investment in a child's education can yield up to \$5 in lifetime. On average, an additional school year can mean 9% higher lifetime earnings and in some cases up to 15% higher earnings (Card 1999 cited in Weforum, 2022 p. 4). On the other hand, after secondary education, higher education is no longer a guarantor of employment and regular sources of income. The main reasons for this situation include the limited number of decent jobs, inefficiencies in job and candidate matching mechanisms, and differences between job seekers' skills and the skill sets that employers expect. For this reason, many qualified young people can be pushed into professions that can be performed by young people with lower levels of education (ILO 2020a).

In addition to the education that young people have received, technological changes are also important for young people to take part in professional life. Especially since the 1970s, the rapid change and transformation in technology has had different reflections on the professional world. Technological change is considered as one of the most driving forces of the business world because it creates new jobs for the next period, increases the productivity of companies and workers, and enables governments to develop policy implementation areas. In addition to the above, it is stated that if it leads to the loss and/or transformation of existing jobs, it can also have an impact on inequalities between workers and countries (ILO, 2020a, p. 126). According to Prensky (2001), the individuals who make up the digital age process are divided into two as digital natives and digital immigrants. Digital natives are individuals who are born into technology and use technological devices as part of their daily lives (Prensky, 2001, p. 2). As "digital natives", young people tend to adopt new technologies early (ILO, 2020a, p. 126). The Global Employment Trends report addresses the opportunities and challenges created by the technological advances of the "Fourth Industrial Revolution" for young people in the labor market. Paradoxically, young people are enthusiastic early users of new technologies, but they are most concerned about the possibility of their jobs being replaced by robots and artificial intelligence. However, there is widespread concern in both developed and developing countries that these technologies may not lead to the creation of new, better-paying jobs (ILO, 2020a, p.14). In all countries, on the other hand, under-skilled and low-skilled young people are at risk of being displaced by automation than young people with higher qualifications and skills. In

addition, it may be more difficult for many young people in low- and middle-income countries to take advantage of digital technologies (ILO, 2020a p. 126-128).

Since 2019, the risks brought by Covid-19 have been added to the existing problems in working life, the risks and disadvantages brought by rapid change and transformation. Economic consequences of the Covid-19 crisis and the ensuing economic recession, there are consequences in the social and health fields (Bambra et al., 2021, s. 5). The closure of schools due to the Covid-19 pandemic has led to a loss of more than one and a half years of school stay on average. This is expected to lead to a 3.9% decline in lifetime incomes and a loss of up to \$17 trillion globally (Weforum, 2022, p.4).

Based on experience of other crises such as Ebola, Zika, and the 2008 financial crisis, and current knowledge of the Covid-19 outbreak, it has been found that epidemics and economic crises can have a disproportionate impact on certain segments of the population. For example, gender inequalities in working life have been exacerbated (ILO 2018 cited in Meester and Ooijens, 2020, s. 7). Labour market statistics alone do not reflect the impact of the pandemic on young people. Covid-19 mitigation measures such as physical distancing, curfew, telework or distance learning have also prevented young people from meeting their peers, attending events and strengthening their social capital (Wadsworth, 2006, p.2).

Domestic unemployment is expected to remain above pre-Covid-19 levels at least until 2023. The number of unemployed in 2019 was 186 million and is estimated to be 207 million in 2022. The ILO report also warns that the overall impact on employment will be significantly greater than the figures indicate, as many people have left the workforce (ILO 2022). release date is January 17,2022. For example, the Covid-19 pandemic and the ensuing economic and employment crises have put pressure on the labor system in the United States. Service workers have lost their jobs, especially with low-income workers. It is not certain that employees who have lost their jobs will return to work (Orrell, Bishop and Hawkins, 202, s. 1).

When the employment statistics in Turkey are examined, it is seen that the economic decline felt since 2018 not only ends a period in which an upward trend is observed in employment figures, but also causes the loss of up to 700,000 jobs. This picture affected young people the most. The number of young people involved in neither education nor employment soon increased from 21.9% (2018) to 23.5%, and unemployment figures increased from 20.3% (2018) to 25.4% (2019). With the Covid-19 pandemic, the number of young people who are

neither in education nor in employment has increased to 27.1% (November, 2020) (TUIK cited in ILO, 2020b)

Education and labor systems are not designed to keep up with the pace of change in professional life. Therefore, workers have difficulty finding jobs that match their skills, while employers have difficulty filling open positions. During the economic crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, changes in the labor market are happening faster, while millions of workers are questioning their careers in uncertainty (Orrell, Bishop and Hawkins, 2020, s. 7). Young people who work harder than adults in precarious and informal jobs are among the vulnerable groups most affected by the Covid-19 pandemic (ILO 2020b) In other words, the Covid-19 pandemic has made it difficult for young people to access quality education or decent work, and has deepened the problem of youth unemployment. Studies carried out by the International Labour Organization show that 1 in every 6 young workers has stopped working due to Covid-19 (ILO 2020c). Cheng (2020, s. 1) also emphasized that youth, women and low-educated workers, who are among the disadvantaged groups, are more affected by the sudden negative effects of the Covid-19 epidemic on employment and are left out of the partial recovery. For this reason, it is necessary to take various measures to repair the existing problems in working life and to prevent the problems that may occur. At this point, education is also important. It is stated that in order to include young people in professional world, policy measures should focus on three main youth groups. These interventions are; for the transition of young people in education to the working world, for young people who are already in the labor market; and interventions to cover young people who have lost their jobs due to new technologies, including those in neither education nor the labor market. It is also important to equip young people with life skills (e.g. communication, teamwork, etc.) and technical skills that are in high demand, which increase their overall employability. In non-technical roles such as customer service or sales, for example, job applicants are increasingly expected to have digital skills (ILO 2020a, p. 128-129). On the other hand, new technologies can be used to encourage youth entrepreneurship and young people to start their own businesses. Technology-based solutions facilitate young people's access to markets and market information and enable them to acquire financial, entrepreneurial and digital literacy skills (such as online courses and coaching, mobile learning apps and digital training materials) (Weidenkaff and Witte, forthcoming cited in ILO 2020a p. 132).

Universities should review the content of their current undergraduate education and train competent human resources with multidisciplinary graduate programs that will combine Health and Engineering Sciences (YOK, 2019, p. 44)

Digitalization; It is defined as the process that includes social and technical aspects that undergo changes across all sectors at the individual, organizational, social and global dimensions (Legner et al., 2017). In other words, it refers to the use of tools that transform analog information into digital information. Digitalization involves a variety of complex technologies, some of which are still in the early stages of development and use. In the context of work and the workplace, digitalization in its current form means the increasing use of cloud computing and regulation tools as well as internet-based applications on different platforms in order to facilitate remote access and collaborative work. While the speed of digitalization has increased since the beginning of the Covid-19 global pandemic, the use of digital technologies by businesses has created more opportunities for those who continue to work from home. Digitalization can lead to significant changes in the way existing employment and workplaces are organized, but also major changes toward new skills requirements, labor standards and employee satisfaction (ILO, 2019 cited in ILO 2020d p.8). However, digitalization is not at the same level due to the lack of technological tools that enable broadband internet connection and remote working (ILO 2020d, p. 8).

With the elimination of equality of opportunity in education and digitalization in professional life, another point that needs to be emphasized is the concept of skill. Skill means the gains that individuals "get" from education and experience. As skills are acquired, employees apply these skills to their jobs by demonstrating competence and performance. Therefore, the skills acquired individually and the resulting competencies form the building blocks that come together to form job roles and job task areas. In other words; skills are like the DNA of the labor market; they are the building blocks of how individuals, professions, employers, industries and regions function and grow. Therefore, the aim is to help each employee identify the "skill DNA" or "skill shape" that forms the basis of their employee profile (Coffey 2019 cited in Orrell, Bishop and Hawkins 2020, s. 9). Young people's learning to solve problems by communicating in teams and gaining digital skills are among the important ways to ensure a smooth transition from school to work by harmonizing the education they receive with the expectations in the labor market (Meester and Machteld, 2020, p.8) The political measures taken should be part of an integrated strategy to create decent work for young people.

An integrated policy framework should include macro, intermediate and micro level interventions. For example, macroeconomic and sectoral policies that encourage investment in key sectors as well as research and development are required to foster innovation and create jobs in new sectors while increasing productivity (ILO, 2020a, p.17)

It is important to update education, training and vocational curricula to take into account labor market trends, such as the increasing importance of digital and social skills. Making the necessary updates to the expectations of the labor market plays a role in improving the transition of young people from education to business life (ILO, 2020a, p. 17)

The concept of lifelong learning encompasses formal and informal learning that combines basic skills, social and cognitive skills (such as learning to learn), skills required for specific jobs, occupations or sectors, from early childhood and basic education to adult learning. While higher education involves more than the most skills needed to work, it is also about developing the skills needed to participate in a democratic society. It provides a way for young people and unemployed individuals to be included in labor markets. At the same time, lifelong learning has a transformative potential. Investment in early learning can facilitate learning later in life, broadening the options for future generations, and providing intergenerational social mobility (ILO, 2018, p. 30).

U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics has indicated that the occupations whose employment is projected to decline between 2020 and 2030 are office and sales personnel due to the risk of automation and the prevalence of online shopping. Along with home health and personal care aids, those who work in the health sector, software and related fields (Software developers and software quality assurance analysts and testers) and market researchers are stated as the occupations where employment will grow the most (BLS 2021).

Theoretical Background

Societies' use of natural resources and their relations with natural resources undergo changes in the historical process. In the sociological sense, there are various explanations for the changing position of information and the inclusion of technology in all areas of daily life. Especially since the 1970s, it can be said that the technological transformation in post-industrial society has brought about many changes.

When the characteristics of post-industrial society are examined; changes in information, the position of information and the sources of access to information are

remarkable. Digitalization is becoming widespread in all areas of life. One of the first theorists to use the concept of "information society", which is closely related to the concept of post-industrial society, was Daniel Bell. Bell (1976) argues that something radically new in the field of technology has emerged in post-industrial society. The changing relationship between science and technology defines the information society as the corporatization of research and development activities through institutionalization and the articulation of the developing economic structure as a normal part of the business organization (cited in Akarçay, 2011, p. 116). Over the past four decades, science and technology has focused on language and knowledge. Computer languages, communication technologies, information storage and data banks are examples of this. It can be said that these technological transformations have significant effects on information (Lyotard, 1999, s. 317 cited Görgün Baran 2011, p.62-63).

Conclusion and Evaluation

In the context of the stages that societies go through, skill sets such as the educational equipment and professional specialization experience required to take part in working life also change. Especially in the industrial society, there have been changes in the knowledge that young people need to have in order to take part in working life. With the rapidly digitalizing society after the 1970s, adaptation to technology and technological literacy have become increasingly important. After the 2000s, it is understood that especially coding and data processing information has gained importance and new professions have emerged in the context of this information. Within this information, it is important to update the training curricula depending on current developments. For example, considering the importance of coding from the preschool period, it is thought that it is necessary to ensure that coding lessons are included in school curricula. On the other hand, due to the social changes experienced, it should be ensured that young people can be employed in new professions by increasing their technology literacy. In order for young people to take part in working life, their creativity should be developed and supported financially. Differences in the level of development of countries are reflected in young people as inequality of opportunity. For this reason, it is important to eliminate the inequalities that young people may encounter in their use of technology in the rapidly digitalizing society structure. It is important to ensure that young people stay in working life and to support themselves with necessary courses and trainings so that they can be employed according to their professional skills after education. Thus, young people will be able to renew themselves through

lifelong learning. In the formulation of policies, it is important to take into account the individual differences of young people (learning speeds, differences in recruitment time) and the level of development of countries.

Updating the course contents in universities according to the expectations of the job market will facilitate the transition of young people to working life and accelerate their transition to working life in the workplace. It is thought that easy adaptation to working life will increase the productivity of the young person at work. The fact that young people benefit from national and international internship and student mobility programs during their university years and take part in NGOs voluntarily push them to have an idea about what awaits them in the market. Thus, young people have the opportunity to develop by seeing both their strengths and weaknesses.

There are inequalities in terms of access and use skills in technological tools. Young people need to be given access to the internet for free or at low prices. The problems of ownership in technological products (computer, tablet, smartphone) must first be solved. Young people should be provided with free or more affordable internet access. Reducing taxes on technological products (computers, smartphones and tablets) can be considered.

Following the development in information technologies and ensuring that the transformation in the professions is reflected in the expertise of young people is also critical for the economic growth of countries. Since the 1970s, the situation of encountering increasingly digital social dynamics due to the rapidly changing social structure has led to radical changes in some professions and the emergence of new employment areas with new professions.

All lecturers in the education level are required to update the course content according to the periodic conditions. Providing transformation and artificial intelligence applications in education from the first stage of education will increase the employability of young people. Societies in which all kinds of inequality of opportunity (education, economy, social life and digital) are eliminated will be a society in which the life satisfaction and quality of life of individuals increases economically, socially and politically.

References

- Akarçay, E. (2011). Sanayi sonrası toplum Daniel Bell, in A.G. B., Editor. S. S. Editor, *Çağdaş sosyoloji kuramları* Eskişehir, 2-29.
- Bambra, C., Lynch, J., & E. Smith, K. (2021). Pandemic precarity: Inequalities in the economic crisis. *The unequal pandemic: COVID-19 and health inequalities*. Bristol University Press, Policy Press.

- Breen, R., (1992). Job changing and job loss in the Irish youth labour-market: A test of a general model. *European Sociological Review*, 8(2), 113-125.
- Cheng, C. (2020). Pushed to the margins: The unequal impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on marginalised Malaysian workers. *Institute of Strategic and International Studies*, 7 (20), 1-6.
- Dickinson, F., Dickinson-Bannack, M.E., Azcorra, H., Castillo-Burguete, T., and Méndez-Domínguez, N. (2020). Commonsense preparedness for uncommon adversities. *Human Ecology Review*, 26 (1), 19-30.
- Gottlieb, D., & Lienhard Heinsohn, A. (1973). Sociology and youth. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 14 (2), 249- 270.
- Görgün Baran, A. (2011). Postmodern Sosyal Teori. A. Görgün-Baran ve S. Suğur (Ed.), *Çağdaş sosyoloji kuramları İçinde* (s. 50-75). Anadolu Üniversitesi.
- International Labour Organization. (2018). *Genç işçilerin sağlık ve güvenliğinin iyileştirilmesi*. https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_protect/---protrav/---safework/documents/publication/wcms_625223.pdf
- International Labour Organization. (2020a). *Global employment trends for youth 2020: Technology and the future of jobs*, https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/---publ/documents/publication/wcms_737648.pdf
- International Labour Organization (2020b). *Genç İstihdamı*, <https://www.ilo.org/ankara/areas-of-work/youth-employment/lang--tr/index.htm>
- International Labour Organization (2020c). *Youth and Covid-19 impacts on jobs, education, rights, and mental well-being survey report* https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_emp/documents/publication/wcms_753026.pdf
- International Labour Organization (2020d). *COVID-19 ortamında ve sonrasında uzaktan çalışma uygulama kılavuzu* https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---europe/---ro-geneva/---ilo-ankara/documents/publication/wcms_759299.pdf
- International Labour Office. (2021). *Youth and COVID-19: Access to decent jobs amid the pandemic*. https://www.ilo.org/ankara/publications/research-papers/WCMS_771428/lang--en/index.htm
- International Labour Office. (2022). *WESO Eğilimler 2022*. https://www.ilo.org/ankara/news/WCMS_834462/lang--tr/index.htm.
- Meester, J., & Ooijens, M. (2020), *COVID-19 impact on the value chain* — conceptual paper [CRU Policy Brief].
- Orrell, B., Bishop M. M., & Hawkins, J. (2020). A road map to reemployment in the COVID-19 economy empowering workers, employers, and states. *American Enterprise Institute*, 1-18.
- Prensky, M. (2001). Digital natives, digital immigrants, *From On the Horizon*, 9 (5), 1-6.
- Türkiye İstatistik Kurumu. (2021). *İstatistiklerle gençlik*, <https://data.tuik.gov.tr/Bulten/Index?p=Istatistiklerle-Genclik-2021-45634#>
- United Nations, *Global issues youth*. <https://www.un.org/en/globalissues/youth>.
- U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, (2021). *Projections overview and highlights, 2020–30* <https://www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/2021/article/projections-overview-and-highlights-2020-30.htm>
- Wadsworth, T. (2006). The meaning of work: Conceptualizing the deterrent effect of employment on crime among young adults, *Sociological Perspectives*, 49 (3), 343-368.
- World Economic Forum (2022). *Catalysing Education 4.0 Investing in the Future of Learning for a Human-Centric Recovery Insight Report* https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_Catalysing_Education_4.0_2022.pdf
- Yüksek Öğretim Kurulu (2019), *Geleceğin Meslekleri Çalışmaları*