

EVIDENCING UNCERTAIN CAREER PATHS AMONG OVERQUALIFIED EMPLOYEES

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ABSTRACT: *In recent years, Romania's higher education landscape and labor market have undergone significant changes due to demographic factors, modernization, economic progress, and globalization. One notable transformation is the internationalization of higher education, which requires universities to align their curricula with labor market demands. Additionally, Romania has experienced growth in the service industry and increased involvement from multinational companies. However, little is known about the employment experiences of young people in the early years following graduation. This is particularly concerning given the significant rise in the number of university graduates occupying positions that do not match their educational qualifications or skill levels and those working in non-graduate professions. This study addressed this gap by using ethnographic case study data to analyze the experiences of young university graduates working as customer support representatives (CSRs). Informed by the social constructivism paradigm, data were collected through participatory observation, semi-structured interviews, and field notes and analyzed using a reflexive thematic analysis strategy. The results challenge employers' claims of a lack of skills among young university graduates, emphasizing the need for a broader range of skills in the recruitment process and workplace. This study highlights the growing patterns of precarity affecting underemployed young Romanian graduates. The findings suggest that digital technologies used by outsourced companies deskill and diminish the dignity of CSR work, while work productivity strategies, measurement, and corporate working conditions create uncertainty in CSRs' career prospects. Furthermore, it underscores that non-collaboration remains a significant issue in Romanian work culture, complicating the education-job mismatch. By shedding light on the university-to-work phenomenon and the value of higher education in the Romanian labor market, this study contributes to the sociology of work and employment by revealing that post-university trajectories are considerably diverse and necessitate further qualitative investigation beyond the educational outcomes typically discussed in the context of graduate employability.*

Keywords: *University graduates; multinational companies; overqualification; employability;*

Introduction

After joining the EU in 2007, Romania became home to numerous outsourced companies. Multinational corporations (MNCs) have radically increased their job opportunities and altered the working conditions of their employees [Hummels et al. 2018; ILO 2022;]. The shift towards a service economy is a long-term trend already observed in Romania; employment in services accounts for 51% of the total employment [World Bank, 2021; ILO, 2023; EURES, 2023].

Romania is ranked 30th in the 2023 Kearney Global Location Index Report [GSLI]. The GSLI ranks 78 countries based on 52 metrics covering four dimensions: financial attractiveness, people's skills and availability, business environment, and digital resonance [Kearney, 2023]. Romania ranks

6th among countries operating in the Business Services Industry and 2nd place in Europe after Poland. According to the Association of Business Service Leaders in Romania [ABSL], the number of employees in the business service industry has increased by almost 30% in the last three years. Over 161,000 people are employed in 280 shared service centres [SSC] and business process outsourcing [BPO], including 64,000 university graduates within the business service sector, representing more than 2% of the Romanian working population.

The labor force employed in Romania's outsourcing sector has increased from 15,000 employees recorded in 2007 to over 161,000 employees today, according to the 2022 annual report of the Romanian Business Service Leaders' Association [GoR, 2022].

Outsourcing has become priorities for many advanced countries in the last decades [Edgell et al., 2016]. This is because outsourcing has numerous benefits, including cost savings and access to global talent, often outweigh the potential drawbacks [Milberg & Winkler, 2013]. While Romania benefits from trading with cheap labor (9.1 Euros per hour), young Romanian university graduates face career-related uncertainty on two fronts.

First, the scarcity of available graduate jobs hinders the university-to-work transition. A skyrocketing number of graduates are employed in positions below their educational and skill levels [Isirabahenda, 2022].

Second and equally critical is the work readiness of university graduates, which numerous employers claim does not fit the rapid and competitive world of work and continues to lead to the devaluation of university credentials [Broadley et al., 2020; Broadley et al., 2023; Tomlinson and Holmes, 2017; Tholen and Brown, 2017].

Beyond education-job mismatch potential public concerns, this study aims to shed light on and understand the challenges CSRs face in their university-to-work transition, which likely affects the relationship between higher education and the labor market. Drawing on two years of ethnographic case study data, we used reflective thematic analysis to examine the evidence surrounding the careers of overeducated Romanian Employees in the digitalized work world by reconsidering frontline employees' voices and insights when working as customer support representatives (CSRs), their supervisors, and managers.

Understanding skills and artificial intelligence practices in workplace

The implications of AI practices on the labor market are multidimensional and continue to be operationalized in various ways [Frank et al. 2019]. Two main perspectives characterize AI implications: numerous policymakers are optimists considering the positive side of AI practices, such as enhancing productivity and creating new jobs [Bholat, 2020; Somers et al., 2022]. Conversely, people with doomsayers' perspectives believe that AI practices cause job divergence, particularly in low-, middle-, and high-skilled jobs [Autor, 2015; Petropoulos and

Brekelmans, 2020]. Bowles [2014] highlighted that 54% of EU jobs are at risk of computerization, and many authors have predicted widespread unemployment caused by AI practices [Edgell et al., 2016].

Zuboff's book, named the age of surveillance capitalism, argued that dominant corporations can anticipate and regulate societal behavior. Private firms possess and leverage our behavioral data not only for improving services but also to accumulate a surplus of behavioral information. Thus, private companies can predict future behavior [Zuboff 2019]. While AI practice overarching concerns are likely to widen inequalities in the labor market [Harayama et al. 2021; Maclure and Rocheleau-Houle, 2021], and skill debates being a flashpoint today in the EU, little is known about how AI practices contribute to deskilling phenomena or predict skills for the future.

The EU dedicated 2023, the year of skills, to enhance relevant skills in a rapidly digitalized world and address skill shortages in the EU labor market. To hinder this issue, the EU eagerly promotes a mindset of reskilling and upskilling, helping people acquire the right skills for quality jobs (EU 2023).

In recent years, graduate employability and AI practices in the work world have become high priorities for many politicians [Siivonen et al., 2023; Lundgren Resenterra & Kahn, 2020; Eichhorst, 2020].

Given the negative consequences of the labor market, many young university graduates face complex university-work transitions and education-job mismatches [Christie, 2018; Tomlinson, 2016; Kalleberg, 2016; Burke, 2016; Nghia et al., 2020; Holmes, 2013].

Overqualification and underemployment have become distinctive experiences for recent generations of graduates [Scurry & Blenkinsopp, 2011; Soldano, 2018; Christie, 2016], and education-job mismatch presents a significant challenge because uncertainty is a feature of contemporary life [Christie & Burke, 2020; Farrugia, 2018; Heyes & Tomlinson, 2021; Cinque, 2016].

Romania maintains a relatively low general unemployment rate within European countries; however, many youths continue to experience unemployment. Despite efforts to address this issue, the situation remains unchanged. Romania is among the leading countries with the highest

underemployment rate [EURES, 2023]. The mismatch between education and jobs remains a public and socioeconomic issue [Scurry et al., 2020]. The effects of education-job mismatch have not yet been explored in Romania's labour

We named the themes before the report was written. The table below provides the sociodemographic characteristics of the participants (Table 1).

This inquiry has a heterogeneous group of

Table 1: Participants demographical details

	Gender		Age categories		Ed.Level		Field studied		
	F	M	18-25	26-33	BA	MA	Professional and applied	Humanities and Social Sciences	Formal Sciences
CSRs	12	9	13	8	11	10	4	14	3
TLs	4	4	3	5	6	2	1	4	2
Manager	3	1	1	3	2	2	1	3	1
Total	19	14	17	16	19	14	4	21	6

Source: Own elaboration based on primary data, 2019-2021

market [Pantea, 2019]. Similarly, many precarious jobs, disguised as decent employment, dominate the EU service sector, and Romania is no exception [Wiernik & Kostal, 2019].

Methodology

The initial objective of this study was to shed light on the career prospects of overeducated employees who work as customer support representatives (CSRs). Drawing on two years of ethnographic data collected via participatory observation and semi-structured interviews, we asked respondents to discuss and share their experiences of education-job mismatches and AI practices. The interviews lasted between 45 minutes and one hour. This study had detailed field and participant observation notes that were kept to document and record observations throughout all stages of data gathering [Creswell, 2022]. Semi-structured interview data were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed for common themes using NVivo software.

Using workable examples from Braun and Clarke [2006, 2018], we used a reflective thematic approach to identify critical themes and patterns in the data. I began by becoming familiar with the data collected through reading and rereading. The initial codes were generated by collating the data into groups according to their codes. After this step, I examined them, identified their patterns, and developed themes. The generated themes were verified to determine whether they accurately and relevantly represented the data on which they were based.

entry-level employees, twenty-one customer support representatives (CSRs), eight-team leads, and four managers working in the financial department of an outsourced corporation. Most of the participants completed university level (B.A., 19; MA, 14) in the Humanities and Social Sciences (21), Professional and Applied Sciences (4), and Formal Sciences (6).

The age categories ranged (from 18 to 25 (17 participants) and 26 to 35 (16 participants). CSRs were recruited, made aware of the nature of the study, consented to participate, and ensured that all names used in the research publications were pseudonyms.

Findings

The data analysis revealed several signifiers for precarious career outcomes. The following sections discuss two key themes within the scope of this study based on CSRs' experiences with digital technologies. The following sections highlight the two primary themes that emerged from the semi-structured and unstructured interviews conducted with the participants.

Skills required for Customer support representative positions

The participants revealed the employability skills and attributes required for CSR roles. They pointed out that soft skills are more important than hard skills. The table below summarizes desired employability skills (Table 2).

During the interviews, many CSRs articulated the value of soft skills in satisfying their CSR duties.

Table 2: Desired skills for CSR roles

Theme	Categories
Soft skills	<i>Interpersonal skills</i>
	<i>Positive attitudes</i>
	<i>Work-related skills</i>
	<i>Personality attributes</i>
Hard skills	<i>language proficiency</i>
	<i>Prior work experience</i>
	<i>Computer savvy</i>
	<i>Higher Education degrees</i>

Source: Own elaboration based on fieldwork primary data, 2023

The definition of soft skills differed based on context, as customer service representatives [CSRs] and their immediate supervisors often emphasized various skill components, such as interpersonal skills, a positive attitude, personality traits, or job-related abilities. The narrative provided by one female team lead effectively conveyed a comprehensive comprehension of essential soft skills.

'Interpersonal skills play vital roles in customer support daily activities. Candidates with approachable personalities are service minded and conscious. The job seeker's attitude towards work, towards life in general, towards those around him, and the motivation to take a job. – (Anita, 28years old, TL)

While Anita's comments more broadly demonstrated the value of soft skills for an ideal CSR candidate, Mihai specified that communication skills are vital to customer support for daily activities.

'CSR post fits someone who can communicate and deliver a clear message to the customers. I would say that communication skills are the number one thing the employer pays attention to. The best candidate must be the more talkative, a person who likes to interact. – (Mihai, 25 years old, CSR)

Similarly, the combined quotes from the CSRs also highlighted positive attitudes toward credible candidates:

'Jobseeker who has an approachable personality, service-minded & conscious. Recruiters saw the fact that I was curious and optimistic"; 'I believe my lack of emotions and sincerity supported my candidacy. I am a

dynamic, honest, and serious person to have.' 'I can negotiate. I am not introverted and could not adapt to the team.' (Combined quotes from CSRs).

This quote demonstrates another soft skill that comes from personality traits: honesty, extroversion, and being mindful. The inability to possess such soft skills can cause a great deal of stress for CSR, mainly because it is instrumental to the practical, emotional, and physical features of CSRs, their direct managers, and customers.

Although numerous CSRs mentioned soft skills as their most desired CSR role, hard skills also marked their comments. Hard skills include proficiency in foreign languages, computer proficiency, previous work experience, and higher education credentials.

The manager mentioned that they preferred computer-savvy and proficient candidates in one or two foreign languages.

'We (recruiters) check ability on basic knowledge like email and computer operating knowledge, mainly Microsoft Office package. In addition, we looked for candidates with knowledge of one foreign language, such as English, French, Spanish, or Italian. My group works with French and Italian customers, and employees are supposed to know French or Italian. It was undoubtedly the level of understanding of the language. – (Eva, 30 years old, Manager)

A few quotes mention higher education credentials, that is, tertiary degrees held by employees. Combined narratives highlighted this:

'it matters to have a higher education degree. You can hope that the qualities are acceptable in the 80 per cent range. 'I do not think what I learned mattered much because they generally looked at being at the university as not nearly what I studied. 'The CSR post is a junior position, and the university field attended is not necessarily applicable. – (Combined quotes from CSRs/TLs/Manager).

On one hand, this combined quote articulates that the university serves to signal candidates' abilities. On the other hand, recruiters widely consider university credentials but never mind the university's subject undertaken by the candidate. The CSRs mentioned that previous work

experience serves as an indicator of jobseekers' hard skills. In line with this, CSR highlights the relevance of prior experiences.

'A candidate who worked before, preferably in a similar customer support category, matters. A job seeker who worked in the Call Centre was familiar with such a work environment. In general, candidates with some experience could be a significant surplus.' – (Eva, 24 years old, CSR)

Behind prior experience, TLs and managers added another interesting angle, as they considered a lack of previous work experience among numerous recent graduates. Employers mentioned checking jobseekers' university involvement, volunteerism, and extracurricular activities. A manager emphasizes checking their university experience, internship, volunteering, exchange, or work-based apprenticeship. (Elisa, 30 years old, Manager)

Employers in Romania frequently prioritize less hard skills when selecting candidates for customer support roles. These skills are valued because they enable candidates to fulfil the responsibilities of CSR positions effectively. The absence of hard skills may hinder a candidate's ability to contribute positively to a productive work environment, efficient teamwork, and, ultimately, the organization's success. However, employers often underestimate the importance of hard skills, believing that they are not crucial to customer support.

CSRs' work-lived experiences

There were wide variations in the respondents' levels and fields of education. CSRs from the humanities and social sciences are more likely to be pessimistic about their career outlooks and the impact of AI practices. Working in multinational companies reflects confusion, discomfort, and unease in numerous CSRs activities.

"The working conditions are the same in almost all call centers. After recruitment, there was a first month of excitement, and everything was good and normal. Then there is a downward trend of capping and dissatisfaction followed by high employee turnover, whereby few who pass through these cycles have the best chances to get a promotion." – (Luiza, 26 years old, TL)

Some CSRs were confused about the reality of their work and employment. For example, the following quotes highlight how modern workplace offices are friendly, but working conditions are stressful, and collaboration between employees and employers is skeptical.

Despite having a good workplace (physical office), the volume of duties was stressful. The management never adequately noticed our hardships and underappreciated our efforts. To be honest with you, we deserved fair treatment'. – (Ana, 23 years old, CSR)

CSRs were demoralized mainly by the higher emotional labor they were supposed to manifest in their work duties. For example, the following quotes highlight how CSRs deal with emotional labor in daily job activities to ensure customer satisfaction.

'I hate pretending to be happy while I am dying inside. Customers make me angry; I have other calls, and I am supposed to hide that I am sad. Moreover, my assigned customers never tolerate when I follow the company collection strategy. My team leader asked me to push them to pay for past-due invoices.' (Andra, 23 years old, CSR).

In the quote, Andra was not only stressed by the customer but also faced an additional challenge in her role as a team lead to ensure work productivity, which could potentially disturb her emotional labor. Back-office employees recognize the issue of controlling and displaying positive emotions towards customers, and their emotional support is often met with skepticism.

'These CSRs have different problems than we do. They work intensely, owing to the complexity of their customers. CSRs are supposed to be emotionally stronger than ours. They deserve little something.' – (Ben, 26 years old, TL)

CSR duties were repetitive and tiring, although they expected multinational companies to be a good starting point for their professional careers. Additionally, the high workload and teamwork among colleagues remain inconsistent.

'The customer support journey is tiresome; you are replicating your tasks frequently;

customers are never satisfied despite efforts I use to serve them on time. Ingroup collaboration can determine whether a company's objectives are the same for all employees and managers. Still, work pressure is high as you handle big portfolios beyond your imagination.' – (Eric, 27 years old, CSR)

CSRs reportedly face job instability due to a lack of control over work organization and execution, and ongoing challenges related to personal and professional development.

'Practically, our job duties are less specific, and we do not have far-reaching control. Our supervisors did not seem ready to rectify this issue. I still confront problems related to managing my personal and professional development.' – (Ines, 23 years old, CSR).

In addition to a stressful working environment, CSRs reported that outsourced companies' working strategies and performance tools complicated their daily tasks, leading to dissatisfaction. For example, handling unattainable work targets facilitated by AI hinders CSR productivity. Below is a crucial financial target that the Cluj team needs to focus on.

As we approach the end of the year, management has approved this target, which is key to our team's performance. We aim to reduce the unpaid balance by \$500 million by December 24, 2019. The price is set at \$1,000 for each group member, as determined by the Director of Customer Financial Services.

While CSRs focused on reducing the unpaid balance, they overlooked other critical financial priorities for the Cluj team, such as continuing daily collection activities to prevent non-due invoices from becoming overdue. Senior CSRs recognized that the \$500 million target might be unrealistic given the current economic conditions, which include unresolved disputes due to invoice errors, tax increases and exemptions, and customer payment behaviors, such as some customers having agreements to pay upon receipt of payment. Furthermore, the set price of \$1,000 for each group member created inequities in workload and accountability within the team. The quote below highlights the unattainable targets that CSRs face:

'Last week, we reduced 42 million USD, but

today we are adding new millions in such an ageing bucket. Reaching this target is likely to be a daydream. There is limited autonomy in the design and execution of daily tasks. We are trying to push the boundaries of what is possible.' – (Tudor, 24 years old, CSR)

In addition to challenging work targets, CSRs highlight the complicated, exhausting, and uncertain nature of their work journeys, often feeling unheard. They also discuss issues of deskilling and low work dignity, despite their expectations that multinational companies would provide a solid foundation for their professional careers.

'If you ask me what I expected with this post, my answer completely differs from what I face now. However, CSR also has several disadvantages. I am unhappy that my manager rarely understands the importance of my contributions. In executing what they have planned, how I daily organize my job tasks, what to communicate to the customers, and how I may resolve some customer claims.' – (Petru, 24 years old, CSR)

The job mobility schema makes it difficult for CSRs to escape from overqualified positions. Departments such as HR and Legal are known to be inclusive mid-level posts where all employees with university degrees seek opportunities. However, this was not the case, as the MNC management had different plans.

'The CSR position has been my first post-university experiment. I had an interview for redeployment but had no chance to get a professional post within this company. The skills I already have are usually not all helpful.' – (Monica, 26 years old, CSR)

For the managers below, consider that recent university graduates are not ready to work because their expectations are beyond what MNCs can offer.

'Many CSRs work only for a stable monthly income; they arrive, complete their hours, leave, and continue their lives. Honestly, they will not manage and remain in the company.' – (Rafa, 28 years old, Manager)

Rafa's comment is based on his belief that many CSRs are primarily motivated by the desire for a stable monthly income. He is skeptical about their personal engagement and job satisfaction, and he predicts that this lack of personal engagement will make it difficult for them to retain their jobs in MNCs. This observation is intriguing because it reveals the underlying motivation behind quiet quitting.

There is a false perception that multinational companies create a favorable working environment. CSRs experience inflexible working hours, considering the time difference between Romania and USA customers. See for instance below quote:

'Our working approach is slightly unusual. I work for an extended time to match customer time, and our Romanian days off are not in line with our clients' holidays'. – (Daniel, 23 years old, CSR)

It is interesting to note that the effects of MNCs and their use of artificial intelligence in daily CSR work duties have had a more significant impact than anticipated.

"I learned from such an entry-level opportunity that multinational companies target profits at all costs, and I understand how hard it is to work in the real world. Recently, I discovered that my dream would not come true, even if I kept pushing it. I must undertake coding courses in my future career to avoid becoming a loser. This city (Cluj-Napoca) is an IT professional. – (Marius, 24 years old, CSR).

CSRs experience arrays of leaveism that is, they continue to work to finish daily tasks that they do not complete during regular working hours. CSRs often work on leaves or weekends to catch up. They utilize the allocated time off, such as flex hours and rest days, to take time off.

Discussions

The primary focus of this study was on two themes. The first was the skills required for CSRs, and the majority agreed that soft skills matter more than hard skills in the digitalized world of work. Second, CSR experiences with education-job mismatches, in which most participants provide essential narratives. Table. 1

shows the desired skills and attributes of the CSR position. The direct observation shows that recruiters consider interpersonal skills, positive attitudes, personality traits, or job-related abilities to constitute a significant segment of soft skills. However, respondents mentioned soft skills loosely and more broadly because soft skills are considered human-centered or people skills that are tricky and complex to define. For example, in the context of CSR roles, overeducated employees are never bad about their attitudes towards CSR work. However, they are not ideal CSR candidates because of their mismatch with the field and level of education. Of course, they communicate well, as proven by the university they attend, can adapt to the rapidly changing world of work, take on leadership, and have personality attributes and positive competencies developed from the university and in their lifetime.

Beyond soft skills, this study highlights job candidates who possess technical skills interchangeably with hard skills. Accumulated human capital, experience, language, and computer proficiency are significantly related to customer support. However, it was discouraging to find that most participants revealed that job applicants' hard skills had no crucial value as soft skills. Equally, this study highlights that some technical abilities are vital, mainly communicating well and operating computers. The results of this study are consistent with the findings of extensive studies in the customer support industry (Poster 2007; Mircandani 2012; Taylor and Bain 2005; Alfadda 2019). They reported in their studies that customer support for employees' language and computer abilities is worthy of consideration. Hard and soft skills are equally crucial for ideal customer service representatives (CSRs) to achieve a balance that enables them to deliver the highest-quality experience. However, what maintains such hard skills at low levels of attention remains puzzling for social science researchers.

The findings of this study echo the results highlighted by many experts in human resource management (HRM) and the sociology of work, who see soft skills as more essential and needed to achieve full human potential in the workplace (East & Dean, 2019) because of the increasing automation of repetitive tasks; many businesses no longer rely on hard skills to complete repetitive tasks (Chavan, 2018). This study corresponds with the results of previous studies in general; for

instance, Tomlinson (2012) emphasized that technical skills are insufficient, and Bhati (2022), Vasanthakumari (2019), Cinque (2016), and Laalo et al. (2019) reported that in the current era, soft skills are more valuable than technical abilities.

Another exciting aspect is the gender of CSR. Females dominate CSR posts because, in customer-facing activities, they possess more soft skills than men (Edgell et al. 2016). Gender dominance was noticeable in this ethnographic case study. Female CSRs often exhibit stronger emotional and social competencies than male CSRs do, which play a crucial role in CSR. Mathies and Burford's (2011) study in Australia accentuated the relevance of competencies that encompass empathy, conflict management, organizational awareness, adaptability, and teamwork. They found that frontline service staff believe that key aspects of good customer service include listening skills, customer satisfaction, and service provision, and females tend to excel in actual service interaction and emotional outcomes.

Jensen's (2012) findings support this observation, indicating that many females in CSR roles possess significant advantages in interpersonal skills required for effective communication, interaction, and collaboration with individuals and groups. Through extensive interviews with call center managers and agents, Hultgren (2017) highlighted how women exhibit greater adherence to language rules and prescriptions, making them well suited for call center positions. Her study, which explored the working culture and practices of call centers in Scotland and Denmark, concluded that female call center agents, guided by their managers, were more likely than males to acknowledge customer issues, use names, encourage future contact, and end with a personal touch, such as having a good weekend.

Friginal (2009) emphasized gender differences among agents in an offshore call center in the Philippines, revealing that female agents tended to use more politeness markers and markers of respect, including apologies.

To date, the transition from university to the labor market for numerous young university graduates has been complex, marked by confusion due to the mismatch between the aspirations of university graduates and labor market realities (Furlong et al., 2017; Farrugia, 2018; Christie &

Burke, 2020; WB, 2020). The relationship between higher education and employment is questionable (Chesters et al., 2018; Siivonen et al., 2023).

In Romania, the competition among scarce graduate jobs is still vivid, as the capability of the Romanian labor market to absorb this number of graduates remains problematic (Vallas & Christin, 2018; OECD, 2022; World Bank, 2020; Eurostat, 2022).

Outsourced companies are excellent modern workplace offices designed to boost employee innovation, address new business challenges, and solve complex problems.

The customer support industry exemplifies a fast-paced sector characterized by high-pressure environments that push employees and their supervisors to be more productive.

Management always wanted CSRs to go beyond expectations, while failing to appreciate and adequately reward their work performed by CSRs. However, their working strategies that target high productivity hindered CSRs' performance, aggravated emotional labor, disallowed career paths, limited personal and professional development, and increased work pressure, resulting in CSRs' job instability and high turnover.

CSRs' work-lived experiences with such an organizational culture predominantly directed toward high performance are detrimental to employees' morale, well-being (Teo et al., 2020), and work-life balance (Pearce, 2022), thus resulting in quiet quitting; that is, CSRs drop in employee engagement and discreetly disengage from their current roles, depending on CSR work dissatisfaction.

For instance, it was common to see signs of quiet quitting that took various forms, such as CSR's unwillingness to attend planned group/team meetings and huddles, less contribution to teamwork targets, and lack of passion, to name but a few. The findings of this study echo Scheyett (2022), Klotz and Bolino (2022), and Harter (2022), who advanced the concept of quiet quitting and referred to deliberate decisions made by employees to avoid expending any additional effort in the workplace to preserve their energy and achieve a more harmonious balance between their professional and personal lives. Additionally, talent mismanagement characterized daily CSR roles, and CSRs experienced leaveism to a great extent.

Conclusion

This study investigates the employment experiences of young Romanian university graduates working as customer support representatives (CSRs) in the context of significant changes in Romania's higher education landscape and labor market. Using ethnographic case study data, the study challenges employers' claims of skill deficiencies among graduates and highlights the growing precarity affecting underemployed young graduates. The results suggest that digital technologies used by outsourced companies deskill and lower CSRs' work dignity, while corporate working conditions create uncertainty in their career prospects. The study emphasizes the complexity of the education-job mismatch in Romania and the need for further qualitative research on diverse post-university trajectories beyond graduate employability. In conclusion, by examining the research question, what are the work-related experiences of overeducated Romanian employees working as CSRs in outsourcing companies? Based on some of the views and perceptions of CSRs and their direct supervisors regarding CSR career prospects, there were several other notable observations, particularly concerning the context and gender dynamics. The scope of this study precludes a comprehensive exploration of the skills required for CSR roles and work experience.

The careers of overeducated young employees in Romania seem to be progressing, but overall, they remain with complex hindrances, leading to uncertain careers due to their precarious features. Recognizing the importance of soft skills in today's workplace is crucial, as they enhance job performance and play a critical role in personal growth, career advancement, and overall well-being. Similarly, hard skills, particularly the ability to communicate well and operate computers, are also vital. However, it was discouraging to find that most participants revealed that job applicants' hard skills had no crucial value as soft skills.

Romania is among its strongest competitors in the outsourcing arena. This is because its advantageous position enables it to provide various outsourcing solutions tailored to the diverse needs of international companies, thereby making it an attractive option for businesses seeking to optimize their operations and reduce

costs. Outsourcing plays a substantial role in promoting economic growth, bringing in investments, and nurturing specialized knowledge and infrastructure in Romania. However, this also diminishes the skill level of customer support employees, particularly for routine tasks.

AI practices have a positive impact on the Romanian labor market. However, the negative implications of AI practices on graduate employability remain poorly understood.

The results revealed that entry-level positions, such as CSR posts, had significant effects on the job stability, satisfaction, and career progression of young university graduates, and that these posts contribute to the precariousness of their careers.

This qualitative enquiry highlights that the world of work and employment is going through turbulent and crucial times influenced by AI practices. Having 2023 as an EU skill year is a good start; however, this approach is limited because it addresses the effects rather than the causes. These results indicate the need for further investigation of talent management for young university graduates with decent career prospects. Such studies should aim to elucidate the relationship between education and employment by examining frontline employees' workforce experiences. It is desirable to conduct additional research that can shed light on the factors contributing to the disparity between education and job markets and provide valuable insights into the challenges that recent graduates face as they transition from university to work.

Implications

Our results show a mismatch between the aspirations of university graduates and labor market realities, echoing the myth of a promising career within multinational companies (MNCs). This situation is problematic because underemployed graduates continue to face complex issues. Equally important is that it is not work readiness that allegedly prevents young university graduates from succeeding in the labor market; rather, it is the potential of AI to revolutionize the world of work. This rapidly changing and unpredictable landscape, driven by AI practices, underscores the need for further qualitative investigation to fully understand the complexities of the university-to-work transition and the value of higher education in the labor market.

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