

Psychological Prerequisites for Precarious Employment

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Abstract

Introduction. The study was carried out at the intersection of two research fields – precarious employment psychology and employability. The aim of this study is to identify the psychological characteristics of individuals engaged in precarious employment. **Methods.** The study population comprised 748 subjects (mean age = 31.03 years, min – 20 years, max – 45 years), of whom 48.13 % were men and 63.5 % had higher education. The study used the following diagnostic tools: (a) the Employment Precarity Index, (b) the Forced Employment scale, (c) the Perception of Barriers to Career Development scale, (d) the Attitudes Toward the Speed of Social Processes inventory, (e) the Involvement in Information and Communication Technologies in Work Activities questionnaire, (f) the Personal Flexibility at the Labor Sphere scale, and (g) the Vocational Identity scale. **Results.** All psychological prerequisites examined in the study (attitude toward the speed of social processes, involvement in information and communication technologies, personal flexibility, vocational identity) were closely related to the level of employment precarity and psychological well-being related to labor and profession. The use of the method of correlation pleiades made it possible to isolate the most significant psychological characteristics that correlate with precarity and psychological well-being – vocational identity and personal flexibility. The lower their scores, the more individuals feel the forced nature of their employment and barriers to career development, the higher the likelihood of their precarious status in the labor market. A comparison of employees engaged and not engaged in precarious employment showed that representatives of the first group have lower awareness of social acceleration and higher rejection of it; they are significantly less involved in information and communication technologies and have significantly lower scores in labor sphere flexibility and vocational identity.

GENERAL PSYCHOLOGY, PERSONALITY PSYCHOLOGY, PHILOSOPHY AND PSYCHOLOGY

Groups of employees differ in terms of their financial status, education, and experience of unemployment. **Discussion.** The results obtained are of theoretical and practical importance. The scope of psychological characteristics of individuals is expanded, helping them overcome uncertainties in the labor market and thus improve the quality of employment.

Keywords

precarious employment, precarity index, psychological well-being, vocational identity, personal flexibility, quality of employment

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Introduction

This study was conducted at the intersection of two relatively recent fields of research. One of them focuses on the study of precarious employment. This concept captures the current and expected instability of various aspects of labor relations. Signs of precarity include casual or short-term employment, low or unstable income, unpredictable work schedule, forced part-time employment, limited labor and social rights, lack of on-the-job training opportunities, etc. Such employment can cause threats to individuals' social integration and psychological well-being (Toshchenko, 2018, 2021; Sizova, Leonova, & Henze, 2017; Benach et al., 2014; Lewchuk, 2017).

A previous review of psychological studies of precarious employment (Diomin, 2021) enables us to make some generalizations. First, uncertainty in the labor market is seen as a background and factor in the activity of human labor and as a projection of global instability. Secondly, most studies document a reduction in psychological well-being in precarious employment conditions, which can be interpreted as a problem in adapting to new employment phenomena. Thirdly, although the number of people involved in precarious employment is increasing, the psychological prerequisites and mechanisms for adapting to unstable employment forms are not yet sufficiently studied.

Another direction focuses on the study of employability. The concept has no clear definition, and its content has changed in recent decades, depending on the context of

its use and the theoretical position of scientists (Thijssen, Van der Heijden & Rocco, 2008). In the 2000s and 2010s several employment models have been proposed.

One of the first widely discussed models in the framework of the *dispositional* approach is a combination of professional identity, adaptability, human (education) and social capital (Fugate, Kinicki & Ashforth, 2004). According to the authors, employability is an active form of labor adaptation that enables employees to identify and realize career opportunities and facilitates the movement between employment within and between organizations. Although employment ability does not guarantee actual employment, it increases the likelihood of obtaining employment and improves its quality (Fugate, Kinicki & Ashforth, 2004).

In a subsequent paper, Fugate & Kinicki (2008) clearly highlighted their commitment to the dispositional approach, considering it the best in uncertainty and frequent changes in the labor market. Five components of the dispositional structure of employability have been identified, including psychological stability (optimism), career motivation, proactivity in labor and career (according to the content of the corresponding scale, this is preoccupation with labor and career) were added to identity and adaptability (renamed as openness to change) (Fugate & Kinicki, 2008).

Several models of employability are implemented in the context of *resource* approach. Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden competence model (2006) is based on the fact that competence is a valuable resource for an organization and ensures productivity and competitiveness. In addition to professional knowledge (experience, competence), the structure of employability includes foresight and optimization (focus on professional self-development and increasing competitiveness), personal flexibility, corporate identity, balance (finding a compromise between career and personal life, between the interests of the employer and individual interests) (Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006).

Forrier et al. (2015) proposed a procedural model implying that employment change increases *movement capital* – an analogue of the dispositional model of Fugate et al., represents a complex of human strengths that helps solve career problems. Movement capital enhances the perceived employment opportunity, which in turn encourages further job-to-job transitions. As a result, a dynamic chain is created linking the main aspects of employability (Forrier, Verbruggen & De Cuyper, 2015). A. Forrier turns to L. Hobbfall's theory of resource conservation and points out that people with lower employability are more likely to find work in the secondary labor market, which may have a negative impact on future employment opportunities, as negative employment has a negative social and psychological impact on people (Forrier, De Cuyper & Akkermans, 2018).

When studying graduate employability, they actively use the concept of identity (Tomlinson, 2012). M. Tomlinson proposed the combination of identity and personal capital, and identified five capitals (human, social, cultural, identity-related, and psychological) (Tomlinson, 2017). The idea was productive and in particular enabled researchers to describe the structure of graduates' career readiness (Wallis, 2021).

GENERAL PSYCHOLOGY, PERSONALITY PSYCHOLOGY, PHILOSOPHY AND PSYCHOLOGY

One of the most important unresolved problems in employability research is individuals' adaptation to unstable and precarious employment (Forrier, De Cuyper & Akkermans, 2018; Green et al., 2013). According to recent publications, attention should be paid to socially and psychologically vulnerable groups of population, and to the psychological well-being of people with different levels and structures of employability. Until now, research has been conducted in well-educated groups from developed economies (Akkermans & Kubasch, 2017; Forrier, De Cuyper & Akkermans, 2018).

Consequently, there is a lack of knowledge of psychological factors and mechanisms to be included in precarious employment studies. Precarious employment is also understudied in employability studies.

Research purpose

Based on the analysis conducted, the purpose of the study was to identify the psychological characteristics of individuals engaged in precarious employment. We believe that, on the one hand, the composition of these characteristics should take into account the progress of employment research, such as professional identity, and that they should correspond to the characteristics of the employment institution in today's socio-historical conditions, such as the variability of the labor market (corresponds to personal flexibility), rapidity of employment processes (Rosa, 2003; Ulferts, Korunka, & Kubicek, 2013; corresponds to the attitude to the speed of social processes), and saturation of employment with information and communication technologies (corresponds to involvement in information and communication technologies). In the conceptual framework of the study, we also included indicators of psychological well-being related to profession and labor, believing that this is important not only for identifying the characteristics of individuals' inclusion in precarious employment, but also for understanding and assessing the quality of employment in the labor market (Kuchenkova, 2019, 2022; Sizova, Leonova, & Henze, 2017; Benach et al., 2014).

Research hypotheses

First, we assume that employment precarity and individuals' psychological well-being related to profession and labor are closely related to the attitude toward the speed of social processes, involvement in information and communication technologies (hereinafter referred to as ICT), personal flexibility, and vocational identity.

Secondly, it is expected that workers engaged in precarious employment and those who are not engaged may differ from each other in terms of the severity of these characteristics.

Methods

Sample

The sample comprised of 748 subjects (mean age = 31.03 years, min – 20, max – 45), of whom 48.13 % were men and 51.87 % were women; 63.5 % had higher education; 37.3 % were in regular full-time employment; for 20.86 %, the contract (agreement) had a fixed end date in 1-3 years; 20.72 % were in temporary employment lasting less than one year; 21.12 % were in casual short-term employment. The median value of the financial status of the families of respondents was 4 points on a 6-point scale.

Diagnostic tools

Employment precarity was assessed using the Employment Precarity Index, a scale containing 13 items and measuring a set of actual and expected characteristics of individuals' employment which include:

- duration of the employment relationship (varying from regular employment to casual short-term employment)
- unstable wages
- unpredictability of work schedule
- forced part-time employment
- difficulties in individual labor and social rights
- imbalance of power interpersonal relations
- lack of on-the-job training opportunities

To obtain a total precarity score, the scores for all items were summed up. The scale has undergone psychometric validation (Diomin, 2022). The higher the scale score, the higher the level of precarity.

Forced employment is one of the aspects of individuals' psychological well-being related to profession and labor. We used the force scale from the Psychological Structure of Employment Questionnaire (A. N. Diomin, D. Yu. Pivkin, 2014) which contained four items, each requiring an answer from 1 to 7 points. Items have two poles (for example: "This job matches my dreams" – "This job is very different from what I dreamed about"). The mean score on the scale was calculated.

Perception of barriers to career development is another aspect of individuals' psychological well-being related to profession and labor. J. Holland, D. Daiger, P. Power considered it in the My Vocational Situation instrument as an important addition to vocational identity. The corresponding scale was modified into Russian (Diomin, Sedykh, & Sedykh, 2017). Each item required an answer from 1 to 4 points; the mean score on the scale was calculated.

GENERAL PSYCHOLOGY, PERSONALITY PSYCHOLOGY, PHILOSOPHY AND PSYCHOLOGY

The Attitude Toward the Speed of Social Processes questionnaire includes two scales – awareness of social acceleration (cognitive component – 3 items) and rejection of social acceleration (affective component – 6 items). Responses range from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The mean score for each scale was calculated (Diomin, Stepanova, 2023).

The Involvement in Information and Communication Technologies in Work Activities questionnaire includes 16 items that form the affective and motivational component of involvement (experience of positive emotions, interest, pleasure when using ICT), the operational component (consistency, active use of ICT in professional activity), preoccupation (focus on the technological environment, immersion in it when using ICT). Each item on the questionnaire must be rated from 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree). The total engagement score was calculated as the average of the sum of all scores (Diomin & Zykova, 2023).

Personal flexibility at the labor sphere was measured using the Personal Flexibility scale (Van der Heijde, Van der Heijden, 2006), a modified Russian-language version (Diomin & Kireeva, 2022). The scale includes six items, which are rated on a 5-point rating scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree); the mean score on the scale was calculated.

Vocational identity was measured using a modified Russian-language version of the scale from the My Vocational Situation instrument. According to J. Holland, vocational identity refers to the clarity and stability of individual goals and self-perception related to career. Items are rated on a 4-point rating scale from 1 to 4; the mean score on the scale was found.

The following question was also used, "Have you ever had periods (a month or more) without work? (1 – no, I haven't; 2 – yes, I have (write down how many such periods there have been)). The answer indicates the experience of unemployment, which correlates with the experience of precarious employment and may have adverse long-term effects on individuals (Diomin, 2022; Sizova, Leonova, & Henze, 2017; Giudici & Morselli, 2019).

Statistical methods

When analyzing the data, we used correlation analysis (Spearman's ρ ; method of correlation pleiades); Mann-Whitney U-test and Fisher's φ -test for comparative data analysis.

Results

Table 1 shows the results of a correlation analysis of the psychological and social characteristics of the surveyed workers. All psychological characteristics included in the study (attitude toward the speed of social processes, involvement in information and communication technologies, personal flexibility, vocational identity) are closely related

to the level of employment precarity and psychological well-being related to profession and labor.

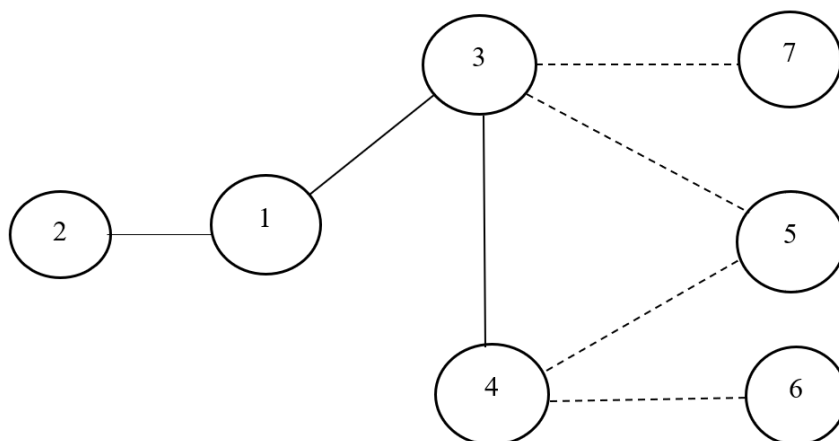
In psychology, different methods of analyzing correlation matrices are used, including the method of correlation pleiades (Sukhodolsky, 1972), the method of determining the indices of structural organization (Karpov & Karpov, 2018), and the sum of correlation coefficients (Tolochek, 2023), in which importance is attached to the number of identified close correlations.

It is logical to consider this parameter as a sign of the structure-forming status of a variable and as a prologue for a deeper interpretation of the results.

The table does not include age, gender, marital status; they have only 1 to 3 significant relationships with other variables. The largest number of connections have the precarity index, forced employment, perception of barriers to development, financial situation, involvement in ICT, vocational identity, level of education (significant connections from 11 to 9 with an average value of 9). Since correlations of different error levels are presented in the matrix (from $p = 0.05$ to $p = 0.0000$), following the method of correlation pleiades differentiation (Sukhodolsky, 1972), we identified variables with the closest relationships for this sample size ($p \geq 0.362$). Figure 1 shows the corresponding correlation pleiades.

Figure 1

Correlation pleiades differentiation (contains the closest relationships between variables)



Note: 1 – precarity index; 2 – type of contract (duration of employment relations in which casual employment has the maximum score); 3 – forced employment; 4 – barriers to development; 5 – vocational identity; 6 – flexibility of the individual at the labor sphere; 7 – family financial status. A solid line refers to a positive dependence; a dotted line refers to a negative dependence.

GENERAL PSYCHOLOGY, PERSONALITY PSYCHOLOGY, PHILOSOPHY AND PSYCHOLOGY

Table 1
Correlations of employee psychological and social characteristics

N°	Employee characteristics	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1	Precarity index	1.0	0.60**	0.25**	0.40**	0.31**	-0.10*	0.12**	-0.17**	-0.19**	-0.30**	-0.23**	-0.35**
2	Type of contract	1.0	1.0	0.15**	0.14**	0.12**	-0.04	-0.03	-0.09*	-0.05	-0.06	-0.10**	-0.15**
3	Experience of unemployment	1.0	1.0	1.0	0.18**	0.10**	0.05	0.01	-0.01	-0.03	-0.13**	-0.13**	-0.11**
4	Forced employment	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	0.41**	-0.13**	0.13**	-0.26**	-0.26**	-0.46**	-0.18**	-0.37**
5	Perception of barriers to development	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	-0.10*	0.22**	-0.16**	-0.36**	-0.67**	-0.14**	-0.32**
6	Awareness of acceleration	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	-0.05	0.19**	0.23**	0.04	0.04	0.14**
7	Rejection of acceleration	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	-0.15**	-0.21**	-0.23**	-0.07*	-0.07*
8	Involvement in ICT	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	0.17**	0.12**	0.16**	0.15**
9	Flexibility at the labor sphere	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	0.32**	0.04	0.18**
10	Vocational identity	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	0.17**	0.30**
11	Education	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	0.27**
12	Family financial status	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0

Note: * – 0.05; ** – 0.01.

The composition of the pleiade reproduces the following main blocks of variables: characteristics of labor relations (general precarity, type of contract); psychological well-being related to profession and labor; prerequisites for engagement in precarious/non-precarious employment (vocational identity, personal flexibility at the labor sphere, financial status).

In the next stage of analysis, polar groups were identified based on precarity and psychological well-being. To do this, we first transformed the raw scores into standard scores and assigned z-scores to them, which made it possible to identify the following scoring ranges: 'low', 'below average', 'average', 'above average', and 'high'. Given the quantitative composition of the groups obtained, we decided to combine the 'low' and 'below average', and 'above average' and 'high' ranges.

As a result, two pairs of 'ideal' polar groups were formed. The first group included those with a high level of precarity and, at the same time, a high level of forced employment (42 subjects); they opposed a group with a low level of precarity and a low level of forced employment (19 subjects). The second pair included people with a high level of precarity and a high level of perception of barriers to development (n = 54); they contrasted with a low level of precarity and a low level of perception of barriers to development (n = 21). We consciously formed two pairs of groups because we used two indicators of psychological well-being. Their combination made the analysis excessive.

Tables 2 and 3 present the results of comparing polar groups using the Mann-Whitney U-test.

Table 2

Comparison of a group with a high level of precarity and a high level of forced employment with a group with a low level of precarity and a low level of forced employment (Me)

Employee characteristics	High level of precarity, high level of forced employment (n = 42)	Low level of precarity, low level of forced employment (n = 19)	U	p-value
Awareness of social acceleration	3.33	4.33	258.5	0.028
Rejection of social acceleration	3.33	2.67	210.0	0.003

GENERAL PSYCHOLOGY, PERSONALITY PSYCHOLOGY, PHILOSOPHY AND PSYCHOLOGY

Employee characteristics	High level of precarity, high level of forced employment (n = 42)	Low level of precarity, low level of forced employment (n = 19)	U	p-value
Flexibility at the labor sphere	3.25	4.0	146.5	0.000
Vocational identity	2.5	3.64	58.0	0.000
Involvement in ICT (total score)	2.73	4.01	140.5	0.000
Financial status	4.0	5.0	107.0	0.000

In addition, the proportion of subjects with higher education is very different – 43 % of respondents with high precarity, 89 % of respondents with low precarity (Fisher's ϕ criteria used, $p = 0.001$) and 71 % of respondents with unemployment experience (Fisher criteria used, $p = 0.0001$).

Table 3

Comparison of a group with a high level of precarity and a high level of perception of barriers to development with a group with a low level of precarity and a low level of perception of barriers to development (Me)

Employee characteristics	High level of precarity, high level of perception of barriers to development (n =54)	Low level of precarity, low level of perception of barriers to development (n =21)	U	p-value
Awareness of social acceleration	3.67	4.33	327.0	0.004
Rejection of social acceleration	3.33	2.33	244.0	0.000
Flexibility at the labor sphere	3.5	4.33	249.0	0.000
Vocational identity	2.21	3.71	10.0	0.000
Involvement in ICT (total score)	2.84	4.0	303.5	0.002
Financial status	4.0	5.0	135.5	0.000

Both groups differ greatly in the proportion of subjects with higher education - 37 % for those with a high level of precarity versus 76 % for those with a low level of precarity (using the Fisher's φ criterion, $p = 0.002$), as well as in the proportion of subjects with experience of unemployment (74 % vs. 19 %; using φ -Fischer's criterion, $p = 0.0001$).

Employees engaged and not engaged in precarious employment differ in all psychological characteristics and indicators of financial status, education, and unemployment experience.

Discussion

The results presented in tables 1-3 and Figure 1 confirm the hypothesis. Precarious employment, psychological well-being of individuals and psychological characteristics arising from the analysis as prerequisites for employment constitute a complex of closely related phenomena; precarious and non-precarious employees differ significantly in psychological characteristics.

Let's consider some aspects of the results obtained.

Getting into the number of structure-forming variables of ICT involvement and professional identity is very remarkable. In the first case, the spread of ICT in the labor market, which facilitates and accelerates the solution of many professional tasks, is a competitive factor that increases prospects for professional development and reduces uncertainty in the labor market, increases the level of adaptation and increases the capital of labor mobility (Forrier, Verbruggen & De Cuyper, 2015). In this context, it is natural that involvement in ICT negatively correlates with the Precarity Index, the perception of barriers to development and the experience of forced employment.

The structure-forming status of identity corresponds to its role in regulating behavior in various spheres of life, including the labor market. Professional identity is one of the two psychological prerequisites of precarious/non-precarious employment that have entered the correlation pleiade. It is closely related to indicators of psychological well-being rather than to the Precarity Index. This is consistent with the results of an earlier study that professional identity has a greater predictive validity in terms of psychological well-being than in terms of employment status and behavioral characteristics (Diomin, Sedykh, & Sedykh, 2017).

Reardon & Lenz, discussing the scientific heritage of J. Holland, pointed out that professional identity helps make the right decisions in situations of uncertainty (Reardon & Lenz, 1999). The results of the study can supplement this conclusion. The reverse relationship between vocational identity and uncertainty of employment is realized taking into account the current psychological well-being related to profession and labor. It is not a coincidence that both variables (forced employment and the perception of barriers to development) are cores in the correlation pleiades.

This addition supports the authors' position, who consider it important to take into account the psychological well-being of a person when investigating precarious employment (Kuchenkova, 2019, 2022; Sizova, Leonova, & Henze, 2017; Toshchenko, 2021, 2022; Benach et al., 2014).

The existence of vocational identity and personality flexibility in the core correlation pleiade confirms not only the content of the employability model (Fugate, Kinicki & Ashforth, 2004; Fugate & Kinicki, 2008), but also considerations regarding the effectiveness of combining identity with the willingness to respond to changes in employment and profession (Wallis, 2021).

The 'identity – flexibility' link is a strong dispositional construction, which can have a direct or indirect influence on individual activity related to employment.

The results of the comparison analysis of the polar groups confirmed the results of the correlation analysis; they clearly demonstrated the differences between the employees engaged and those not engaged in precarious employment. These differences relate not only to vocational identity and personal flexibility, but also to the speed gaps (acceptance-rejection of social acceleration) and the digital gaps (different levels of involvement in ICT).

On the basis of the results of the study, we consider it desirable to work with a more comprehensive understanding of employment quality. Initially, many authors considered it through the prism of the presence/absence of status-related and behavioral signs of precarious employment (Holman & McClelland, 2011; Van Aerden, Moors, Levecque & Vanroelen, 2015). A more complex structure includes a combination of status-related and behavioral characteristics and their cognitive assessments that are implemented to predict employment in the coming months or years (Diomin, 2022; Lewchuk, 2017). The first and second components are symmetrical, closely related to each other and are embodied, in particular, in the Precarity Index scale. Taking into account the correlation dependencies, an additional component of employment quality can be added to the two components of employment quality – affective employment assessments (psychological well-being related to profession and labor). Although this component is more mobile and autonomous, it also plays an important role in complementing and concretizing the first two components. This understanding of the quality of employment strengthens the importance of the dispositional construct of 'vocational identity/personal flexibility at the labor sphere for regulating individual behavior in the labor market.

Comparing table 2 and table 3 and the content of the correlation pleiade enables us to draw a methodological conclusion that the two indicators of psychological well-being related to profession and labor (forced employment and the perception of barriers to development) can be exchanged and used separately. It depends on the tasks that are being fulfilled.

In general, the results of the study show specific psychological characteristics that are very likely to be accompanied by changes in the quality of employment of a person.

In dealing with psychological variables, we should not forget the social characteristics of employees that affect their employment. We are talking mainly about family financial status and education level (both variables are structure-forming; financial status is also a part of the core correlation pleiade).

Conclusion

The research hypotheses were confirmed. All psychological characteristics (attitude toward the speed of social processes, involvement in information and communication technologies, personal flexibility, vocational identity) are closely related to: a) the level of employment precarity and b) psychological well-being related to profession and labor.

GENERAL PSYCHOLOGY, PERSONALITY PSYCHOLOGY, PHILOSOPHY AND PSYCHOLOGY

The use of the method of correlation pleiades enabled us to identify the most important psychological characteristics combined with psychological well-being and employment precarity. This is vocational identity and personal flexibility at the labor sphere. The lower their indicators, the more individuals feel the forced nature of employment and barriers to career development, the greater their precarity in the labor market.

The use of the polar group method enabled us to compare the psychological characteristics of employees engaged in precarious employment and those not engaged in precarious employment. The first have a lower sense of social acceleration and a higher rejection of it. They are significantly less involved in information and communication technologies, have less flexibility at the labor sphere and have a blurred professional identity.

The results obtained are new and of theoretical and practical importance. First, ideas about the psychological conditions of precarious employment (in addition to its effects) are developing. Secondly, the scope of an individual's psychological characteristics is expanding, helping to overcome uncertainty in the labor market and thus improve the quality of employment. This is important for recruitment policies, staff development and advice for people seeking or changing jobs.

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Conflict of Interest Information

The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.