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CONTENTS

MANAGEMENT theory

ASYMMETRIES OF THE EU SINGLE MARKET EFFECTS IN THE POLISH ECONOMY

Dariusz Nowak, Penka Shishmanova, Emil Tzanov..... 5

MANAGEMENT practice

CRITICAL FACTORS OF CAREER PERSPECTIVE AND CAREER MANAGEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A MULTI-CRITERIA SWARA APPROACH

Jurica Bosna, Zoran Mastilo, Adis Puška 25

THE ANTIDISSIPATIVE APPROACH TO OPTIMISING THE COSTS OF HOTEL BUSINESSES

Olena Sushchenko, Margaryta Boiko,
Myroslava Bosovska, Mariia Kulyk 41

LINKING CAREER EXPECTATIONS AND INTERNAL MARKETING: INSIGHTS FROM HIGHLY SKILLED PROFESSIONALS

Violeta Rapuano, Ausrine Greiciute-Soloveje, Rasa Rudaitiene..... 62

FINTECH'S ROLE IN IMPROVING ACCESS TO FINANCE FOR SMALL BUSINESSES IN UZBEKISTAN

Azam Akhmedov, Mariana Petrova,
Izzatulla Levakov, Mukhtorjon Makhmudov..... 88

THE GROWING ROLE OF SOVEREIGN WEALTH FUNDS IN MANAGING FOREIGN EXCHANGE ASSETS

Ivaylo Mihaylov 109

LINKING CAREER EXPECTATIONS AND INTERNAL MARKETING: INSIGHTS FROM HIGHLY SKILLED PROFESSIONALS

Violeta Rapuano¹,
Ausrine Greiciute-Soloveje²,
Rasa Rudaitiene³

Abstract: This study examines how highly skilled employees in finance and IT sectors perceive the importance and fulfilment of career-related internal marketing (IM) practices in knowledge-intensive organisations.

A quantitative cross-sectional study was conducted using the “employee-as-customer” framework. Non-parametric statistical methods were applied to assess perceived importance and fulfilment of IM practices and to compare differences across employee groups by gender, age, tenure, organisational size, and work arrangement. The findings reveal a pronounced misalignment between employee expectations and organisational practices. Supportive leadership, a positive work atmosphere, work–life balance, transparent HR processes, and employment security are rated as most important, yet show the largest fulfilment gaps. Intrinsic and learning-oriented career aspects are valued more highly than traditional promotion pathways. Subgroup analyses indicate that women emphasise flexible career options and perceive lower leadership support; younger employees seek both career advancement and job security; fully on-site employees report lower fulfilment than hybrid or remote workers; and larger organisations demonstrate higher overall fulfilment.

The study advances internal marketing theory by linking career expectation fulfilment to organisational attractiveness and employee retention and provides practical insights for tailoring IM strategies to diverse employee groups in knowledge-intensive contexts.

¹Social Inclusion and Leadership Research Laboratory, Mykolas Romeris University, e-mail: violeta.rapuano@mruni.eu, ORCID: 0009-0000-6282-6383

² Social Inclusion and Leadership Research Laboratory, Mykolas Romeris University, e-mail: ausrine.greiciute@mruni.eu, ORCID: 0009-0003-7582-7563

³ Social Inclusion and Leadership Research Laboratory, Mykolas Romeris University, e-mail: rasa.rudaitiene@mruni.eu, ORCID: 0009-0002-1759-9796

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Introduction

Operating in a rapidly changing labour market, organisations face a growing need to develop and maintain internal environmental factors that strengthen employee engagement and alignment with organisational goals. In this context, internal marketing is understood as a strategic process that helps align employee behaviour with the organisation's mission, fosters motivation, and ensures the delivery of high-quality services (Xu et al., 2023; Raeisi et al., 2020). Empirical studies indicate that employee job satisfaction and motivation are closely linked to an organisation's ability to address employees' needs and expectations (Sahibzada et al., 2024). Therefore, internal marketing practices—such as clear communication, managerial support, appropriate working conditions, and reward systems—become essential instruments for ensuring organisational effectiveness (Panigyrakis & Theodoridis, 2009; Nemteanu & Dabija, 2021).

Learning, development, and capability enhancement have received considerable attention in the internal marketing literature (Sun et al., 2020; Cruz et al., 2020; Nguyen & Ha, 2023). Among these measures, career opportunities are increasingly emphasised as a significant factor shaping employee motivation and long-term engagement (Bennani & Hassi, 2024). Some authors even propose incorporating these practices into internal marketing measurement scales (Yildiz & Kara, 2017). However, despite the theoretical rationale, empirical studies examining the role of career expectations and opportunities within the internal marketing context remain highly fragmented. There is a particular lack of research assessing how the career expectations of different employee groups are addressed within organisations and how the fulfilment of these expectations may contribute to the effectiveness of internal marketing. This gap limits both the advancement of internal marketing theory and organisations' practical efforts to respond to employee needs. To better explain this gap, we view differences between what employees expect and what they receive as a sign that the organization's internal offer to employees does not match their needs.

Therefore, we use career-related expectations as criteria to evaluate how effective internal marketing is for different employee groups.

Meanwhile, the field of career studies continues to be dominated by individualised career concepts—such as boundaryless and protean careers—which emphasise autonomy, proactivity, and continuous employability enhancement (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Briscoe & Hall, 2006). These concepts have gained prominence alongside increased talent mobility, intensified globalisation processes, and the rapid expansion of remote and hybrid work arrangements (Sullivan & Baruch, 2009). Although contemporary employees enjoy greater autonomy in managing their careers, their opportunities remain strongly influenced by organisational human resource practices and culture. Thus, careers become a linking mechanism between individual aspirations and organisational efforts to foster a supportive career environment. Nevertheless, research that integrates insights from individualised career theories with internal marketing practice and examines how organisations can respond to diverse employee career expectations, remains insufficient.

Given these circumstances, it is evident that addressing employees' career expectations represents an important but insufficiently examined dimensions of internal marketing. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to assess the importance of career expectations and the extent to which they are fulfilled among highly qualified employees in Lithuanian financial and information technology sector organisations, considering employees' demographic and professional characteristics, and to substantiate the need to apply individualised career development as an internal marketing practice.

The Importance, Objectives, and Practices of Internal Marketing

Internal marketing (IM) first emerged in academic literature in the late 1960s as a means of ensuring service quality by focusing on employees within the organisation. Berry (1981) was the first to conceptualise employees as internal customers, a notion subsequently deepened by Jones (1986), Piercy and Morgan (1991), Rafiq and Ahmed (1993), among others. From a contemporary perspective, IM is understood as a strategic process aimed at aligning employee behaviour with the organisation's mission, fostering motivation, and ensuring the delivery of high-quality services (Xu et al., 2023; Raeisi et al., 2020).

IM focuses on meeting employee needs and motivating them to pursue organisational objectives, and the literature identifies several key goals. The first is the identification of employee needs and expectations, as well as the recognition of differences between employee groups (Sanchez-Hernandez & Grayson, 2014). The second is the development of strong internal relationships grounded in employee well-being and organisational values (De Bruin et al., 2021). The third is the formation of an integrated, motivated, and organisationally committed employee community through improved internal communication, work performance, and engagement (Goncalves & Pais, 2025).

IM is based on the principles of reciprocal exchange, whereby the organisation invests in employees' qualifications, careers, and well-being, while employees reciprocate through their knowledge, motivation, and high-quality performance. This approach enhances employee satisfaction and motivation to pursue organisational goals (Qaisar & Muhamad, 2021). Empirical studies show that IM practices positively influence job satisfaction, motivation, organisational commitment, organisational culture, and organisational citizenship behaviour (Vieira-dos Santos & Goncalves, 2018; Raeisi et al., 2020; Teetzen et al., 2023). Furthermore, IM can improve customer service quality, customer loyalty, and organisational reputation, thereby strengthening a competitive advantage (2021; Sun et al., 2020). Employees thus become the organisation's direct "face" and intermediaries between the organisation and external customers (Kaur & Sharma, 2015).

To achieve IM objectives, organisations may employ a variety of practices, including clear internal procedures and policies (Panigyrakis & Theodoridis, 2009), the physical work environment (Kaur & Sharma, 2015), work flexibility and work–family balance (Cruz et al., 2020), remuneration and motivational systems (Nemteanu & Dabija, 2021; Goncalves & Pais, 2024), career opportunities and training programmes (Bennani & Hassi, 2024; Yildiz & Kara, 2017), managerial support and employee involvement in decision-making (Sohail & Jang, 2017; Yil), and effective internal communication and articulation of organisational vision (Sun et al., 2020; Nemteanu & Dabija, 2021).

These practices not only enhance employee satisfaction and motivation but also strengthen an organisation's ability to achieve its objectives and ensure high-quality service provision (Snell & White, 2009; Hosen et al., 2024). Research demonstrates that IM is a direct predictor of positive organisational commitment, professional satisfaction, and overall life satisfaction (Hosen et al., 2024). Yildiz and Kara (2017) propose an eleven-

item IM measurement scale encompassing physical working conditions, workload balance, articulation of organisational vision, training, career opportunities, fair treatment, transparent communication, employee involvement in decision-making, and reward mechanisms. Career opportunities as an internal marketing practice are further emphasised in the study by Bennani and Hassi (2024).

Despite the recognised importance of IM and the wide scope of existing research, a notable gap remains: the examination of career expectations and their fulfilment within the context of internal marketing is limited. This area warrants further investigation, particularly in assessing how organisations can better respond to diverse employee career expectations, enhance engagement, and improve organisational performance.

Employee Careers and Career Expectations

The issue of career opportunities within organisations has become particularly salient considering rapid labour market transformations, advancing digitalisation, and the expansion of hybrid work models (Hartung et al., 2025; Callanan et al., 2017; Verma et al., 2025). These developments are reshaping both the nature of work and career trajectories, thereby increasing the importance of employee individuality and its recognition. Consequently, it is essential to analyse the various factors that shape employees' career development. Different contexts and personal characteristics produce unequal opportunities and expectations, meaning that careers can be understood as multifaceted processes influenced by cultural, demographic, and sector-specific conditions.

Cultural context exerts a significant influence on employees' career success. In some cultures, greater emphasis is placed on learning and development opportunities, whereas in others financial rewards or social recognition are more highly valued. Understanding such differences enables organisations to adapt career and reward systems to specific employee expectations, thereby supporting targeted motivational strategies and strengthening employee loyalty (Balin et al., 2024; Benson et al., 2020; Coetzee et al., 2022).

Throughout their lives, employees hold different self-perceptions and perform various career roles (Chang et al., 2023; Shi et al., 2023; Low et al., 2016; Ran & Cinamon, 2023). These roles and self-perceptions help employees identify their position within the organisation and determine how

they can most effectively contribute to organisational goals. Organisational roles are shaped through interactions with colleagues, whereas self-perception reflects an internal outcome of accumulated personal experiences. Together, these elements influence decisions regarding contribution to the organisation and the choice of career incentives (Low et al., 2016). In this respect, organisations increasingly emphasise employee flexibility and continuous development, offering in return not job security but opportunities to build experience and remain competitive in the labour market (Callanan et al., 2017).

Self-perception naturally evolves across career stages, making protean career orientation particularly relevant. This approach encourages employees to shape their own career paths based on personal values and long-term success (Callanan et al., 2017; Low et al., 2016; Ran & Cinamon, 2023). However, such an individualised perspective creates challenges for organisations, as career trajectories become non-linear and unpredictable—especially in protean or boundaryless careers, where employees may intentionally alter or skip certain career stages (Briscoe et al., 2006; Lapointe et al., 2019; Kim et al., 2025).

Demographic factors also influence career opportunities. Gender remains significant in shaping career trajectories and access to leadership roles. Research indicates that women's careers are often constrained by patriarchal organisational culture, societal expectations, unequal distribution of family responsibilities, and persistent stereotypes (Halrynjo & Mangset, 2022; Taser-Erdogan, 2021; Chang et al., 2014; Hudson Breen & Leung, 2020). Age is another important determinant: older employees tend to focus more on meaningful work and deepening existing competencies, whereas younger employees prioritise acquiring new skills and making horizontal career transitions (Van Woerkom, 2024).

Sector-specific characteristics further affect career opportunities. For example, in the financial services sector, career success is typically associated with stability, clearly defined trajectories, and rigorous evaluation criteria. In contrast, the IT sector places greater emphasis on work flexibility, hybrid arrangements, and individualised human resource practices (Coetzee et al., 2022; Verma et al., 2025). Such sectoral differences enable organisations to adopt tailored career management strategies aligned with employee needs and the specific demands of the work environment.

In summary, employee careers and career expectations are closely linked to internal marketing, as career opportunities within organisations shape employee motivation, commitment, job satisfaction, and loyalty.

Organisations that effectively adapt career management practices—considering demographic, cultural, and sector-specific differences—are better positioned to meet employees’ expectations while simultaneously enhancing organisational competitiveness and service quality.

Theoretical Framework and Research Logic

Drawing on the “employee-as-customer” perspective, internal marketing posits that organisations can enhance employee engagement by consistently implementing internal marketing practices. In this context, identifying and fulfilling employees’ career expectations is viewed as an integral component of internal marketing and as a form of “internal value” delivered to employees. Employees’ assessments of the extent to which organisations meet these expectations provide an important indicator of whether internal marketing is effectively enacted in practice.

It is also important to note that the literature increasingly emphasises the complexity and contextual nature of internal marketing, reflected in the emergence of the concept of the internal marketing mix (De Bruin et al., 2021). The internal marketing mix encourages organisations to combine different internal marketing practices, taking into account employees’ unique needs, ensuring coherence and interaction among components, and configuring an appropriate bundle of practices to comprehensively address employee expectations (De Bruin et al., 2021).

Given that organisations and employees differ, career expectations are shaped by multiple factors, including age, organisational tenure, gender, and the sector in which employees work. Internal marketing does not prescribe a single set of practices that fits all employees; therefore, organisations should recognise heterogeneity across employee groups, identify their distinct needs, and respond by applying context-appropriate internal marketing practices.

Following the internal marketing mix view, we argue that organizations should configure bundles of career-related practices rather than rely on uniform solutions, as different employee groups assign different priorities to the same practices. Accordingly, the present study adopts a segmented internal marketing perspective and examines how perceived importance and fulfilment vary across gender, age, tenure, organizational size, and work arrangement.

The following research questions are proposed:

1. Which career-related internal marketing (IM) practices are the most important to employees in knowledge-intensive sectors?
2. To what extent are employees' expectations regarding career-related internal marketing practices met in knowledge-intensive sectors?
3. How do the perceived importance and fulfilment of career-related internal marketing practices differ across employee groups defined by gender, age, length of employment, organization size, and work model? To realize the research questions mentioned previously, we formed a research scheme of our study (Figure 1).

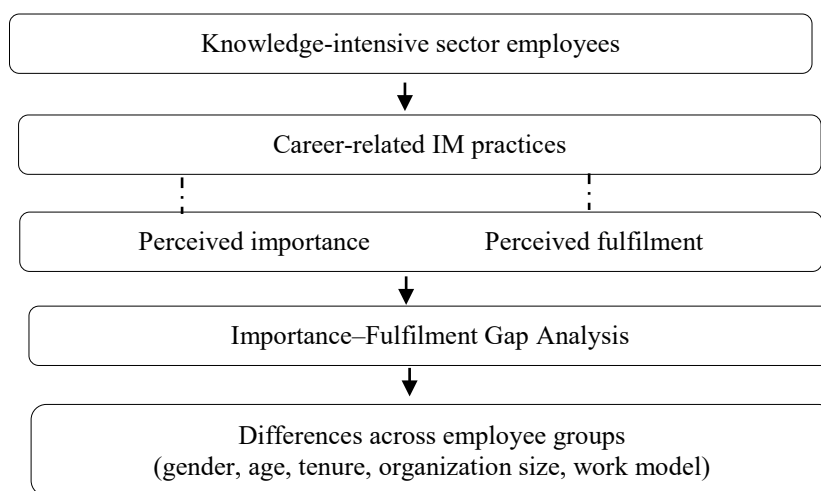


Figure 1. Scheme of the research.

Methodology

Study Participants and Data Collection Procedure

Survey respondents were selected according to the following criteria:

- the company was registered and operating in Lithuania at the time of the study.
- organisations from the information technology and financial sectors were selected due to their high level of technological advancement and innovation.
- the sampling frame was restricted to highly qualified specialists whose work is directly related to the fields of finance and information technology.

Data collection for this study took place between August and November 2023. Data was gathered using an online questionnaire, which took approximately 15 minutes to complete. All participants were informed about

the purpose of the study. Participation was voluntary, and confidentiality of responses was ensured. In total, 302 employees from financial and technology companies took part in the survey. The sample characteristics are presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Distribution of respondents by social and demographic characteristics

		Number	Percent
Gender	Men	80	26
	Woman	222	74
Age group	18-24	39	13
	25-34	108	36
	35-44	115	38
	45-54	29	9
	>55	11	4
Tenure in organization	< 1 m.	73	24
	2-3 m.	100	33
	4-9	74	25
	10-30	55	18
Organization size	< 50 employees	61	20
	50-250	93	31
	>250	148	49
Work arrangement model	Remote	16	5
	Hybrid	223	74
	On-site (office)	63	21

Instruments

The study assessed thirteen career-related expectations (e.g., job security, interesting and development-enhancing work, opportunities for professional growth and self-realisation). The measurement instrument was developed based on the works of Craig and Hall (2006), Krumboltz (2009), Clarke (2013), Sullivan and Baruch (2009), Akkermans (2021), Baruch and Rousseau (2019), De Vos and Van der Heijden (2017), among others.

Respondents were asked to evaluate each expectation on a five-point Likert scale, indicating:

- the extent to which the expectation is personally important to them, and
- the extent to which the organisation fulfils that expectation.

Thus, each expectation was measured along two dimensions using a five-point Likert scale: importance to the respondent, and fulfilment by the organisation.

The reliability of the instrument was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. For the importance dimension, the coefficient was 0.834, and for the fulfilment dimension, 0.908.

Data Analysis

For comparisons between two independent samples involving ordinal variables, the Mann–Whitney U test was applied to determine differences between gender groups.

For comparisons among three or more independent samples—specifically across age, organisational size, tenure, and work arrangement groups—the Kruskal–Walli's test was used. Pairwise post-hoc comparisons were conducted using the Bonferroni correction.

Statistical significance was established at $p < 0.05$.

Research Ethics

The study followed established ethical principles. Permission was obtained from the participating organisations prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, and all respondents were informed about the study's purpose and their right to withdraw at any time. Data were collected anonymously via the Qualtrics platform, stored securely, and reported only in aggregated form to ensure confidentiality.

Research Results

The study examined respondents' career-related expectations and the extent to which these were met by their organisations (Table 2). Respondents rated the personal importance of various career aspects and their fulfilment at work. The highest importance was assigned to a positive work atmosphere, managerial support, work–life balance, transparency in HR processes, and job security. Learning opportunities, interesting work, and a supportive organisational culture were of moderate importance, while formal career advancement opportunities were rated as least important.

Discrepancy analysis revealed notable gaps between importance and fulfilment, particularly regarding transparency in promotion and remuneration, as well as managerial support, job security, and work–life balance. In contrast, expectations related to employer reputation, access to career information, and horizontal career opportunities were comparatively well met, despite being rated as less important.

Table 2
The Most Important and Least Fulfilled Employee Career Expectations within the Organisation

Expectation	Mean	Standard Deviation	Difference (importance to the individuals vs. fulfilment by the organisation)
A pleasant and friendly work environment	4,66	0,653	0,51
Supportive managers	4,64	0,683	0,64
Opportunities for work–life balance	4,62	0,701	0,57
Fair and transparent promotion, remuneration, and other human resource management processes	4,59	0,742	0,84
Job security	4,49	0,691	0,57
Interesting and development-enhancing work	4,48	0,747	0,51
Growth- and development-oriented organisational culture	4,44	0,788	0,56
Opportunities for learning, professional development, and self-realisation	4,29	0,857	0,55
A strong employer reputation in society	4,27	0,857	0,03
Support in career development matters	4,01	0,992	0,46
Promotion opportunities	3,94	1,114	0,5
Access to information about career opportunities within the organisation	3,81	1,146	0,3
Horizontal career opportunities	3,49	1,192	0,03

In the second stage of the analysis, career expectations and their organisational fulfilment were compared across demographic groups. Gender analysis showed that most expectations were similarly important for women and men; however, horizontal career opportunities, career-related support, and work–life balance were rated as more important by women ($p < 0.05$) (Table 3). While no significant gender differences were found in organisational fulfilment of these expectations, women reported receiving less managerial career support than men, despite assigning similar importance to it.

Table 3
Differences in the Evaluation of Career Expectations by Gender

	Career expectation	Gender	N	Mean rank	Mann-Whitney U	p
How important it personally	Opportunity to change positions within the organisation by acquiring different competencies (horizontal career)	Men	80	125,16	6634,000	0,003
		Women	222	158,62		
	Support regarding career development matters	Men	80	125,13	6632,000	0,002
		Women	222	158,63		
	Opportunities for work–life balance	Men	80	125,48	6659,000	<0,001
		Woman	222	158,63		
How well the organisation fulfils it	Supportive managers	Men	80	168,06	7156,500	0,025
		Woman	222	143,74		

Differences in personal career expectations were also examined across age groups (Table 3). Promotion opportunities were found to be significantly more important for younger employees than for their older colleagues (18–24 years, $p = 0.013$; 25–34 years, $p = 0.010$). Employees in the 25–34 age group stood out from older groups (35–44 years, $p = 0.020$; 45–54 years, $p = 0.007$; >55 years, $p = 0.001$) as having the highest expectations regarding promotion. Notably, the youngest respondents (18–24 years, $p = 0.013$) also exhibited higher expectations for vertical career advancement compared with the oldest participants in the study.

Age was a differentiating factor in the perceived importance of information about career opportunities. Employees aged 25–34 rated access to career-related information as more important than those aged 35–44 ($p = 0.006$) and 45–54 ($p = 0.005$). Regarding fulfilment by the organisation, this group reported a lower level of fulfilment, indicating more frequent lack of information compared with employees aged 35–44 ($p = 0.034$).

Differences were found in the importance attributed to job security. Employees aged 18–24 and 25–34 rated job security as more important than those aged 45–54 ($p = 0.025$; $p = 0.010$). No significant age-group differences were observed when evaluating how well the organisation ensures job security.

Table 4
Differences in Personal Career Expectations by Age Group

How personally important it is	Career expectation	Age group	N	Mean rank	χ^2	p
	Promotion opportunities	18-24	39	163,85	30,060	<0,0001
		25-34	108	177,32		
		35-44	115	135,65		
		45-54	29	117,41		
		>55	11	73,73		
	Receiving information about career opportunities within the organisation	18-24	39	156,20	10,898	p=0,028
		25-34	108	168,83		
		35-44	115	136,68		
		45-54	29	122,80		
		>55	11	140,23		
	Job security	18-24	39	165,45	9,840	p=0,043
		25-34	108	151,26		
		35-44	115	155,89		
		45-54	29	115,28		
		>55	11	119,23		
How well the organisation fulfils it	Receiving information about career opportunities within the organisation	18-24	39	147,11	11,822	0,019
		25-34	108	137,22		
		35-44	115	170,29		
		45-54	29	128,93		
		>55	11	126,18		

Participants' career expectations were also analysed according to organisational tenure (Table 5). The analysis revealed that employees with shorter tenure (<1 year, $p < 0.001$; 2–3 years, $p < 0.001$; and 4–9 years, $p = 0.007$) demonstrated higher expectations for vertical career advancement compared to those who had been working for 10–30 years. However, when assessing the extent to which the organisation fulfils this expectation, no significant differences were identified. This indicates that, in the organisations studied, promotion opportunities are perceived similarly by employees regardless of their tenure length.

The findings also showed that, although employer reputation is generally equally important to both shorter- and longer-tenured employees, those with the longest tenure evaluated their employer's reputation most positively.

Table 5
Differences in Career Expectations by Organizational Tenure

How personally important it is	Career expectation	Employment duration	N	Mean Rank	χ^2	p
	Promotion opportunities	< 1 year	73	165,60	17,149	0,001
		2-3 years	100	162,68		
		4-9 years	74	148,56		
		10-30 years	55	111,17		
How well the organisation fulfils it	Employer's good reputation in society	< 1 year	73	157,15	9,912	0,019
		2-3 years	100	154,01		
		4-9 years	74	126,23		
		10-30 years	55	167,64		

Career expectations differed by organisational size (Table 5). Employees in large organisations (>250 employees) reported higher career expectations than those in smaller organisations, particularly regarding interesting and development-enhancing work, work environment, managerial support, and employer reputation. In terms of fulfilment, employees in large organisations more often reported receiving information about career opportunities ($p = 0.06$; $p = 0.02$), access to horizontal career moves ($p = 0.019$; $p = 0.011$), and promotions ($p = 0.032$) compared to employees in smaller organisations. Employer reputation was also evaluated more positively by employees in large organisations than by those in the smallest organisations ($p = 0.023$).

Table 6
Differences in Career Expectations by Organisation Size

How important it is personally	Career expectation	Organisation size (no. of employees)	N	Mean rank	χ^2	p
	Interesting and development-enhancing work	< 50 employees	61	135,58	6,089	0,048
		50-250	93	145,72		
		>250	148	158,30		
	A pleasant and friendly work environment	< 50 employees	61	126,48	12,452	0,002
		50-250	93	147,16		
		>250	148	162,31		
	Supportive managers	< 50 employees	61	125,45	11,001	0,004
		50-250	93	151,65		
		>250	148	159,94		
	Good employer reputation in society	< 50 employees	61	125,29	7,710	0,021
		50-250	93	153,76		
		>250	148	158,70		

How well the organisation fulfils it	Information about career opportunities within the organisation	< 50 employees	61	129,95	16,276	<0,001
		50-250	93	131,12		
		>250	148	169,74		
	Horizontal career opportunities	< 50 employees	61	132,33	11,877	0,003
		50-250	93	135,15		
		>250	148	167,41		
	Promotion opportunities	< 50 employees	61	138,41	6,064	0,048
		50-250	93	138,36		
		>250	148	167,41		
	Good employer reputation	< 50 employees	61	126,66	7,124	0,028
		50-250	93	151,93		
		>250	148	159,28		

In the study, differences in career expectations were also examined according to the work arrangement model (Table 7). The results revealed that employees working in a hybrid model place significantly greater importance on a growth- and development-oriented organisational culture compared to those working remotely ($p = 0.042$), as well as on managerial support compared to employees working on-site in the office ($p = 0.017$).

Table 7
Differences in the Importance of Personal Career Expectations Depending on the Work Arrangement Model

How personally important it is	Career Expectation	Work Arrangement Model	N	Mean Rank	χ^2	P
	An organisational culture that fosters growth and development	Remote	16	107,50	9,415	0,009
		Hybrid	223	157,27		
		Office	63	134,26		
	Supportive managers	Remote	16	126,20	7,557	0,023
		Hybrid	223	156,30		
		Office	63	133,19		
How well the organisation fulfils it	Promotion opportunities	Remote	16	162,63	9,120	0,010
		Hybrid	223	156,49		
		Office	63	121,40		
	Access to information about career opportunities within the organisation	Remote	16	195,20	18,376	<0,001
		Hybrid	223	156,79		
		Office	63	112,46		
	Horizontal career opportunities	Remote	16	152,17	17,730	<0,001
		Hybrid	223	160,94		
		Office	63	110,31		

	Interesting and development-enhancing work	Remote	16	147,93	9,107	0,011
		Hybrid	223	157,87		
		Office	63	122,33		
	Pleasant and friendly work environment	Remote	16	148,33	9,009	0,011
		Hybrid	223	157,70		
		Office	63	122,85		
	An organisational culture that fosters growth and development	Remote	16	137,70	25,270	<0,001
		Hybrid	223	162,94		
		Office	63	103,49		
	Learning, professional development, and self-realisation opportunities	Remote	16	128,97	16,037	<0,001
		Hybrid	223	161,21		
		Office	63	114,96		
	Work–life balance opportunities	Remote	16	151,20	8,182	0,017
		Hybrid	223	157,26		
		Office	63	123,71		
	Supportive managers	Remote	16	136,97	16,965	<0,001
		Hybrid	223	161,12		
		Office	63	113,34		
	Fair and transparent promotion, remuneration, and HR management processes	Remote	16	170,40	14,523	0,001
		Hybrid	223	158,51		
		Office	63	114,59		
	Good employer reputation in society	Remote	16	155,67	12,404	0,002
		Hybrid	223	158,49		
		Office	63	118,24		

Differences in the evaluation of how organisations fulfil career expectations were observed across work arrangement models. The most pronounced differences were found between on-site and hybrid employees. On-site employees evaluated vertical ($p = 0.009$) and horizontal ($p < 0.001$) career opportunities, work interestingness and developmental value ($p = 0.008$), organisational friendliness ($p = 0.008$), and growth-oriented culture ($p < 0.001$) less favourably. They also reported fewer opportunities for learning and professional development ($p < 0.001$), greater work–life balance challenges ($p = 0.013$), lower managerial support ($p < 0.001$), and less positive evaluations of organisational reputation ($p = 0.001$) and HR process transparency ($p = 0.001$). Employees working remotely ($p = 0.002$) and in hybrid models ($p = 0.001$) reported being better informed about internal career opportunities than those working exclusively on-site.

In summary, the results of our study can be represented through the Career-related IM Model for Knowledge-Intensive Sectors (Figure 2). Based

on the full sample's assessments of (1) how personally important each career expectation is and (2) the extent to which it remains unmet within their organisations, three clusters of career-related internal marketing practices were identified:

High-priority career-related internal marketing practices comprise those elements that employees consider most important and most insufficiently provided in organisations.

Medium-priority practices include aspects of moderate personal importance and moderate fulfilment gaps, capturing the role of growth- and development-enhancing work content and organisational culture.

Low-priority practices relate to formal career pathways, career-related information, and the organisation's overall attractiveness.

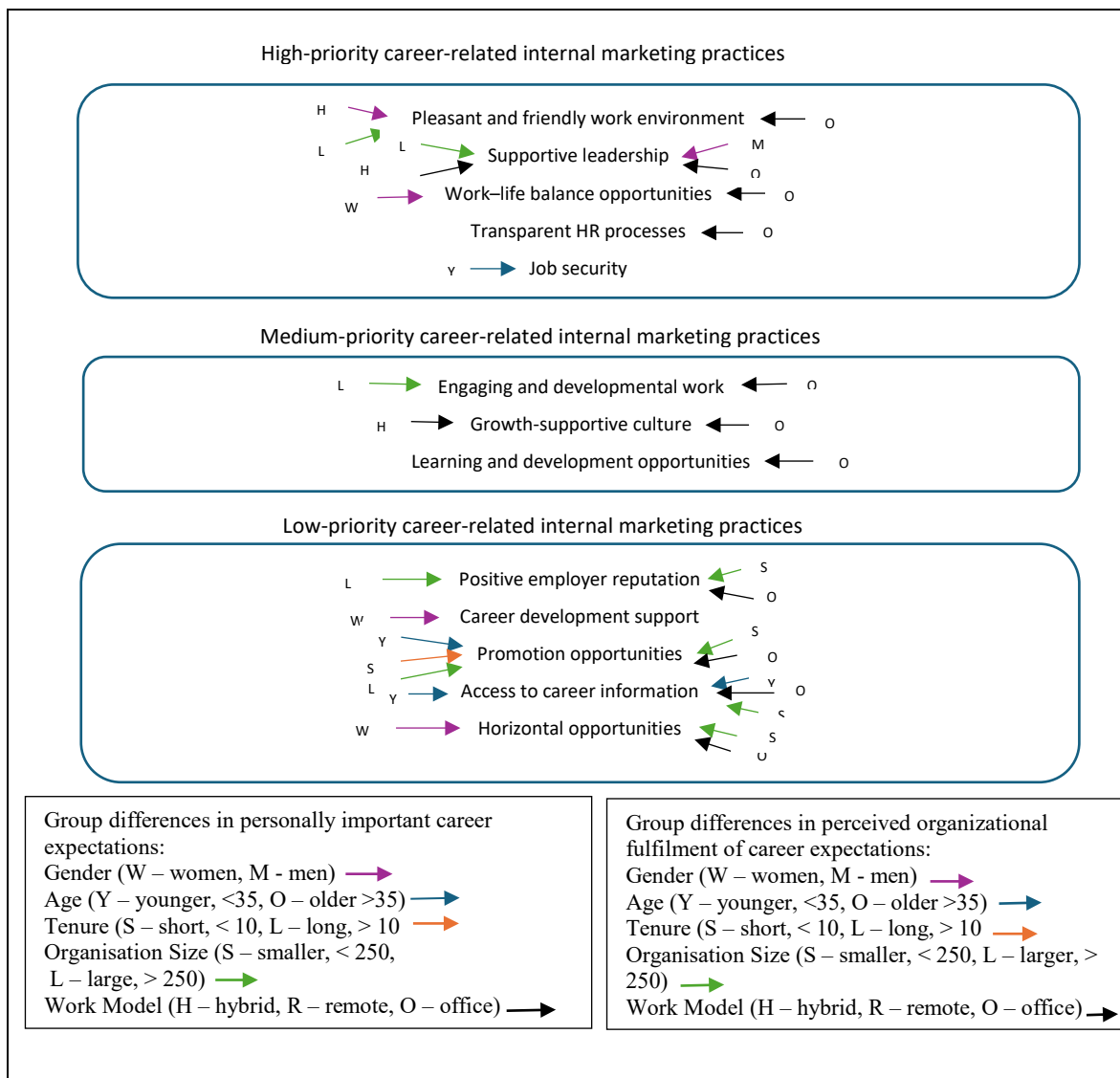


Figure 2. Career-related IM model for knowledge-intensive sectors (based on study results)

The model also integrates variation across demographic and professional employee groups. The left side illustrates which career-related IM strategies carry the highest importance for different groups, whereas the right side shows which groups experience the greatest shortfalls in these practices. In this way, the model reveals how the importance and perceived fulfilment of career-related IM practices vary across different employee groups, highlighting both priorities and gaps that organisations need to address.

Discussion and Conclusions

The present study investigated the career-related expectations of highly skilled professionals in the Lithuanian finance and IT sectors and the extent to which employing organisations meet these expectations through internal marketing (IM) practices. By adopting the “employee-as-customer” logic central to IM (Berry, 1981; Lings & Greenley, 2010), the findings reveal a clear shift in the internal value proposition that organisations provide to remain attractive in a knowledge-intensive context.

Employees assigned the highest personal importance to five relational and psychological factors: (1) a pleasant and friendly work atmosphere, (2) supportive leadership, (3) work–life balance opportunities, (4) transparent HR processes, and (5) employment security. Strikingly, these same five dimensions exhibited the largest expectation–fulfilment gaps, confirming a systematic misalignment between what highly skilled employees most want and what organisations currently deliver. In contrast, both vertical advancement opportunities and horizontal moves ranked among the lowest-priority needs for the overall sample, with correspondingly smaller gaps.

A second major finding is that respondents placed markedly higher value on intrinsic and learning-oriented dimensions than on traditional markers of advancement. Both vertical advancement opportunities and horizontal moves ranked among the lowest personal priorities for the overall sample – confirming a strong protean/boundaryless orientation in which subjective success is driven by meaningful work and mastery rather than rank (Briscoe & Hall, 2006).

Although opportunities for upward or lateral movement scored lowest in the sample, this does not necessarily imply that employees no longer value career progression. Rather, it suggests a shift in emphasis: many knowledge workers appear to prioritise meaningful work, supportive relationships, and

the ability to grow in ways that feel personally significant. Recent studies indicate a similar trend, showing that well-being, psychological safety, and relational resources increasingly shape how individuals interpret career success in evolving work contexts (De Vos et al., 2020; Walsh et al., 2023).

However, an important nuance emerged: although vertical advancement was not a high personal priority, its perceived absence still generated a noticeable fulfilment gap – significantly larger than the near-zero gap for horizontal moves. This suggests that even when employees do not actively seek promotions, the complete lack of credible vertical pathways can function as a negative internal marketing signal, eroding trust in the organisation's fairness and long-term commitment to talent.

Subgroup analyses revealed theoretically meaningful subgroup differences:

Gender: Women attributed higher importance than men to horizontal career opportunities, career support, and work–life balance. These findings align with prior research linking women's preference for flexible career arrangements to the unequal distribution of family responsibilities (Halrynjo & Mangset, 2022; Taser-Erdogan, 2022; Chang et al., 2014; Breen & Leung, 2020). Women also reported lower fulfilment of supportive leadership, suggesting that organisational structures may limit the realisation of flexible career opportunities and women's professional development.

Age: Employees aged 18–34 demonstrated stronger expectations for vertical career progression and promotion-related information than older cohorts, while also assigning higher importance to job security. Together, these findings indicate that younger employees seek both a clear career path and employment stability in the context of economic uncertainty and early-career competition. This challenges recent claims of a shift toward boundaryless and horizontal careers (Woerkmom, 2024; Van der Heijden et al., 2022) and instead suggests the persistence of hierarchical career expectations early in the career (Super, 1957). Moreover, the higher importance attributed to job security among younger employees contrasts with traditional assumptions of age-related increases in security needs (Ng & Feldman, 2010), highlighting stability as a key internal marketing mechanism for engaging and retaining younger talent.

Organisation size and work arrangement: Larger firms (>250 employees) elicited both higher expectations and higher perceived fulfilment across multiple dimensions, reflecting greater IM resource availability. Most dramatically, fully on-site employees rated nearly every dimension

significantly lower than hybrid or remote workers, indicating that mandatory office-return policies function as powerful negative internal marketing signals.

Theoretical contribution and proposed model. By linking career expectation fulfilment to internal marketing effectiveness, this study extends internal marketing theory beyond its traditional focus on training, rewards, and communication (Rafiq & Ahmed, 2000) to include contemporary career priorities. Based on the findings, a model of career-related internal marketing is proposed that emphasises differentiated approaches across employee groups (Fig. 2) and provides a framework for future comparative research across sectors and countries.

Practical implications. Organisations in knowledge-intensive sectors should prioritise supportive leadership, transparent HR processes, work–life balance, a positive work environment, and employment security. Targeted measures are particularly relevant for women (e.g. mentorship and family-supportive practices) and early-career employees (combining visible career paths with stability). Larger organisations may serve as benchmarks for smaller employers. Where feasible, flexible work models should be expanded, and organisations should ensure that on-site employees receive comparable support, communication, and development opportunities to hybrid or remote workers. In addition, organizations should ensure that managers and employees discuss career matters more regularly in order to identify changing expectations and respond to them in a timely manner. Another important recommendation is to increase the transparency of internal organizational communication so that career opportunities, development prospects, and personnel decisions become more visible and easier for employees to understand. Finally, organizations should periodically assess how the career-related expectations of various employee groups align with reality, as this would allow for more accurate identification and adaptation of internal marketing practices and help prevent employee dissatisfaction with their work.

Limitations and future research. The study is limited to two sectors, shows a strong female bias (74%), and includes a very small fully remote subsample, restricting generalisability. The cross-sectional, single-source design raises common method concerns and limits causal inference. Future research should adopt longitudinal, multi-sector designs, incorporate objective career-practice indicators, and include cross-country comparisons (e.g. Baltic, Nordic, and Central European contexts).

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